



MY FORBIDDEN
Crush

AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR
FLORA FERRARI

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MY FORBIDDEN CRUSH

AN AGE GAP, CURVY GIRL ROMANCE

A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS, 325

FLORA FERRARI

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

MY FORBIDDEN CRUSH

I've always been lousy at keeping secrets, and this one is the mother of all secrets.

My best friend Lucy likes to hint she has a secret bigger than the one I'm keeping, but there's no way she knows, right? I have to keep it to myself. It's just too crazy.

See, I've kinda crushed, more like obsessed, over her dad, Bowdie, who is also my dad's best friend. Talk about a double whammy.

If there was ever a recipe for trouble, it's a couple of eighteen-year-old girls with deep, dark secrets and one giant man we are trying to keep the secrets from.

What if he *did* know my secret? What if he felt the same way? It would mean the end of decades of friendship, but could it mean a lifetime of happiness? Which would I choose? Which would you choose?

**My Forbidden Crush is an insta-everything standalone insta-love romance with a HEA, no cheating, and no cliffhanger.*

NEWSLETTER

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CHAPTER ONE

B eth

“Will you *keep* it secret, though, if I tell you?” Lucy asks me with a knowing look. She’s my best friend, and we’ve been living on top of each other, sharing the same room while her dad’s been working overseas.

I pout when she asks me, pretending to be shocked she’d even have doubts about sharing a secret with her bestie. Though I’m aware of my track record as much as she is, I’m already shifting my fingers to my chest. “Cross my heart,” I promise her, hoping she doesn’t pick up on the gulp of dread that goes along with it.

I can’t keep my mouth shut for five minutes. It’s a bad habit, but Lucy’s news is big. I can see it broadcasting on her features—news so big I know she’s having second thoughts about telling me, let alone anyone else, especially her dad. The dad of hers that I gulp extra hard about every time I hear him mentioned these days, more so now that he’s coming home.

Lucy twists her pursed lips while eyeing me sidelong and humming to herself as she weighs things in her mind.

“Are you gonna tell me or not!?” I finally whine, lifting a pillow from my bed and tossing it at her. She catches it easily, but instead of throwing it straight back or launching into a pillow fight like usual, she hugs it to her chest and chews at her lip. It makes me feel a pang of worry that goes beyond my own little secret I can barely admit to myself. It’s that constant,

obsessive habit I have now. That stupid game I play in my mind and lose every time—having a forbidden crush on her dad, but that’s not what’s eating at Lucy. The thought of her dad and I would make anyone laugh out loud because it’s ridiculous. Her dad, Dr. Bowdie Bigg, is a successful doctor twice my age.

Plus, anyone who wants to joke about his name changes their mind when they set eyes on him. He’s not exactly the typical dad-bod, over-forty-type guy. Bowdie looks like a linebacker because he used to be one, so it’s not unusual for people meeting him for the first time to remember their manners, look up when they speak to him, and do as they’re told.

I know Lucy can become *unhinged* occasionally, losing her temper in a way that most people can’t or probably shouldn’t. Despite all his professional credentials, it’s clear to see which side of the family she gets it from. Lucy’s dad, Bowdie, is also the most handsome, sweet, and caring man alive. So, a man like that and a heavyset, curvy girl young enough to be his daughter isn’t gonna happen. Not in this universe, anyway, but I’ve got rising emotions of a different kind.

“Lucy, what happened?” I venture, not meaning to jump to conclusions. She has a turbulent history with her boyfriend, Josh. It’s been on again, off again, and she’s only known him for a few months. Her secret should be her relationship with him, but I can see something bigger upset her in a way that even her fiery temper can’t handle anymore.

“Did Josh—? Did he hurt you?” I ask, feeling the sting of her expression as she narrows her eyes and looks at me, instantly on the defensive.

“No, Josh did not *hurt* me,” she says hotly. “I told you that one time he got mad was just one time. It was a mistake,” she says without convincing me, looking more and more like a girl who’s decided not to tell her best friend her secret after all.

I know what I saw that day. I saw it with my own eyes. I still shudder to think what might have happened if I hadn’t walked in. As much as I used to like Josh, I can’t stand being in the

same room as him after that day. Something about him gives me the creeps, but Lucy's smitten, and Josh is perfect in her eyes when he's not acting psycho, which is often lately.

"Lucy—" I start to say, wanting to apologize but also remind her of a few things, but the muffled knock on my bedroom door interrupts us.

Dad.

"Come in if you're good-looking!" I chime, and only after Lucy recovers herself. We're a couple of girls who wanna have the sleepover that never ends, and for the most part, that's what it's been until today. No matter what's going on, we always keep up appearances for my dad. It's his house, and he's let Lucy stay with us rent-free for six months, feeding her and putting up with all our nonsense.

Now her dad's coming back, so she'll move back home. Worse than that, I'll have to actually *see* her dad, which gives me a feeling I know it shouldn't. It hurts and confuses me because I know he could never feel like I do about him.

The door swings a quarter way open, and in a split second, I feel all my insides tied up in a knot. It's not my dad. It's Lucy's dad, Bowdie. He's a couple of days early. His dark eyes dart to mine as I feel them getting wider, my mouth hanging open, making me look like a moron. He creases his brow and has a brief look of concern, almost the same look Lucy had just a moment ago. It's supposed to be a happy occasion, so I wait for Lucy's shrieks and squeals at seeing her dad back home again, but she stays silent.

An awkward silence fills my entire room as I find myself wanting to go to him—to hug him and have him hug me back. Instead, I sit cross-legged in my sweatpants and T-shirt with a hole in the pits, gaping at him like he's from another planet, which I guess he kinda is. The perfect man—the ruler of the planet "HOT."

"Daddy!" Lucy sniffs, forcing a smile and lifting herself with some effort. She's half my size, but whatever's on her mind

has her almost bent over double like a little old lady as she struggles to put on a more cheerful welcome for her dad, doing a poor job of looking excited to see him. The thrill in my chest at seeing him makes up for it if I could somehow let him know how I feel.

“I-I thought I’d surprise you,” Bowdie murmurs. “I flew in a couple of hours ago,” he adds, looking directly at me and making butterflies start churning. A slight sound escapes me, and I feel a flush of heat in my groin. My chest instantly stiffens as the deep sound of his voice vibrates through me, plucking every heartstring as it does, adding to the intensity of the sudden and inappropriate state of arousal he’s given me simply by existing.

My dad appears behind him, craning his neck to see past his best friend. “What’s the matter, Bo? Girls not recognize ya because it’s been so long?” he asks, nudging his way into my room and making Bowdie take a firm step closer to my bed.

His eyes are still on me, and the resting pant bulge of an eighteen-hour flight only inches from my face makes me gulp hard again before I feel my face flush and my mouth dry up, every bead of moisture in my eighteen-year-old body flooding to the one place I need touching right now.

“Lucy? Beth? What’s the matter?” my dad asks, his cheerful expression falling as he studies all three of us, saving his most puzzled expression when he looks at his best friend, Bowdie.

“Daddy!” Lucy exclaims a little more convincingly, shifting her mood for a moment. Suddenly, she’s happy to see her dad and gushes that it’s a shock to see him so soon *and* unannounced.

“I thought we’d keep it a secret. Your dad coming back early, I mean,” my dad observes, glancing toward me and then at his best friend for what feels like the hundredth time. The thought maybe flashes in his mind, but only briefly before it vanishes. I know what he’s thinking. It’s the only thing I know I’ll ever truly wish for because I know it could never happen.

No, of course not! As if my best friend would be making eyes at my daughter. She’s young enough to be his daughter.

The longer I stare, transfixed by Bowdie's gaze, I swear I can't help seeing the same thought in his mind, but in reverse. Or am I just losing my mind?

CHAPTER TWO

Bowdie

The hospital director was stunned. My clinical trial patients and fellow research team were even more so. I signed a two-year contract and bailed after six months. It cost me more than some professional reputation, too. They don't hand out research grants and expect the head of research to quit on the spot without good reason. The hospital already told me they'd be taking legal action for breach of contract.

Thanks for playing, Doctor Bigg, but we'll have all our money and then some back now. Thank You!

I've got a reason, and money be damned. They can have every cent of mine if they want. I couldn't go one more day, one more second, without *her*. It's stupid. I know it is. I'm having a midlife crisis, and all this will become painfully clear once I'm stateside again—once I see the girl I've somehow convinced myself all this is really about.

Beth... my daughter's best friend and my best friend's daughter, to boot.

At first, it was her friendly hug goodbye at the airport when I left. I was ashamed for two weeks, even seeing a therapist in a foreign country. I spilled my guts about how hard a girl young enough to be my daughter made me, and she still does, more than ever.

It only got worse, or maybe that's better, from there on. Lucy's always sending me selfies of the pair of them. I called Lucy most mornings, always hearing what she and Beth were doing and knowing Beth was feet away during each call. I could never get to speak to or see her unless Lucy was in the shot, making one of her stupid faces and clowning around, pictures I had to edit her out of and keep in a separate file in my phone I still pretend doesn't exist.

All photos of Beth. Just Beth, to begin with, anyway. Then there were the others. There were photos I edited to put myself next to her. Photos I look at every chance I get, always trying to stop the urge and fight this feeling, but it's too late.

It was too late the second I left for London. The longer I spent two feet away from Beth, the worse I felt by the day, so I quit. It was Brad's idea, Beth's dad, that we keep me coming back early a secret, but it's only another deception on my part. I came back early because I paid a small fortune to share a private charter flight, so I didn't have to wait extra time to see her again—another expense, but it's only money.

It should make me mad to have some girl make me act like a teenager again at my age. If I'm not careful, my career and reputation will be over. All over some stupid crush I have because she hugged me half a year ago. Now pulling my dick raw five times a day while thinking of her isn't cutting it anymore.

I had to come back. I couldn't and still can't face another night alone without seeing her. I've come around the world and haven't even showered or changed. I dropped my luggage at the front door as soon as I got here, needing to see Beth. Needing to...

What? I dunno. Tell her I *want* her? Tell her she's all I can think about day and night and that the past six months have been a living hell?

Brad thinks I'm just as eager to see Lucy as he'd be to see his only daughter. So he doesn't flinch when I make a direct path to Beth's room, wanting to surprise them both. As much as it pains me to say it, I'm looking forward to seeing Beth's

reaction to our little surprise more than Lucy's. Worse than that, my supposed "surprise" has Lucy and Beth looking at me as if I'm from another planet, clearly interrupting something between them.

The air is already thick with something—the long silence made worse when Brad spots me unable to take my eyes off Beth. I can't stop myself. It's taken every ounce of sheer will not to go mad the whole way back home. Now she's within my reach, and it hits me like a rock that I can't even touch her. I can't hold her like I need to and how she needs me to. Lucy finally snaps to her usual self, breaking the weirdness with the "welcome home" her dad deserves.

If she only knew what I was thinking about doing to her best friend—right there on her bed.

I'm glad to see Lucy again, of course. I tell her so, but dammit, if I can't keep my eyes away from Beth. As I hug my daughter, I stare at Beth and think I see a wounded look, just enough to give me hope as if possibly, Beth might actually—

Just stop it, Bowdie! She's eighteen, and she's not interested.

"I-I was gonna go out, is all," Lucy finally says, breaking my churning thoughts.

"Huh?" I ask, holding her back so I can look at her. "I just got here. Where were you going?" I ask her, both of us lapsing into father-daughter mode as if I'd never left. I've just walked in the door, and now I'm asking her why and where else she suddenly has to be that's so important.

It's not a great start to my homecoming, and Lucy doesn't appreciate my attitude. "You mean *am* going," she corrects me with a fierce look of defiance.

"I just arrived from a six-month—" I start to inform her, feeling my irritation rising, but she's quicker off the mark, speaking over me.

"And I made plans long before you walked in!" Lucy says in a way that's just a bit too loud for my liking.

I exhale loudly, reigning in my real frustration, embarrassed now because Lucy's making me look like a fool in front of

Beth.

“Lucy? I’m sorry,” I murmur, almost grinding out the words until Brad pipes in, doing good work to break the tension in the air.

“Alright, alright,” he says cheerfully. “Bowdie’s had a long flight, and you two girls don’t handle surprises like ya used to. I get it, but can we all calm down?” he reasons aloud.

Lucy looks at her feet and me. Of course, I’m staring at Beth again, frozen to the spot and flushed red in her round cheeks. The T-shirt she’s wearing hugs her curves and ample chest that she hurriedly covers with folded arms. She catches me red-handed, peeking, but as I said, this is getting out of control and nothing like I imagined.

“Lucy?” Brad asks, drawing my attention from the only thing I’ve come three and a half thousand miles to see again. I look over at Lucy, who seems suddenly pale, almost gray. She opens her mouth to say something before her hand shoots over it, and she pushes past Brad and me, racing for the bathroom. The door slams and the sound of her throwing up should have me going after her making sure she’s okay.

Beth moves first, shooting off her bed and giving me a final snapshot in my mind—the space between her legs in her sweatpants and the moving shapes of her breasts under her T-shirt. I almost let out a low groan before I feel the jolt of Brad’s hand clapping heavily on my shoulder.

“That went well,” he sighs, “but trust me, buddy. I’ve had six months of those two together, and I gotta tell ya, they’ve been nothing but angels, mostly.”

I turn and face him, almost not recognizing him, feeling like I’m in a nightmare where I can see and hear Beth but can’t touch her. I can’t be with her the way I know I need to be.

“You look like you could use a drink,” Brad announces. “Welcome home, Dad!” he adds with a hint of his trademark sarcasm, clapping my shoulder again, almost humoring me into thinking my bizarre frame of mind must be from the flight. With both hands on my shoulders, he pivots me toward

the kitchen, both of us purposefully ignoring the sounds from the bathroom.

We both know from experience that if a teenage daughter wants your help in the bathroom, she'll tell you. If she doesn't, then stay the fuck away.

"Lady problems, most likely," Brad observes, making me wince. As a doctor, it's just a habit to get annoyed by some of the stuff people come out with, even my best friend.

"How the hell is vomiting a *ladies'* problem?" I challenge him angrily and again, only feeling annoyed because it means another minute I can't spend looking at Beth if she's in the bathroom with Lucy.

Brad's got the hide of a rhino and only chuckles to himself knowingly. "Six months," he says to himself, opening the refrigerator and pulling out a couple of beers as if he's the world authority on all things "ladies."

I should show a bit more respect. Brad had Lucy here for a long time, and not once would he accept my attempts to pay her way, even though she has her own cards I pay for, which I hope she's been using so Brad hasn't struggled. Brad does fine. He got into sports medicine when we were in college. I was on the fence between a football career and medicine. I picked medicine after Lucy's mom, Cathy, got sick. We were just dating back then. Lucy wasn't even a thought. I was young, dumb, and naïve enough to believe that I could cure her—save her, even at the end.

Having a beer with my buddy should be something I crave as much as seeing my daughter—popping the top and clinking the bottle, creating a poor attempt at a smile as he welcomes me home again. I can't help thinking how extra bitter and cold the beer is in my mouth. I don't enjoy it as Cathy's memory flashes in my mind along with the now-permanent tape of Beth.

"She'll be fine, Bo," Brad assures me, jutting his chin to the back door, urging me out onto the porch overlooking the yard that leads to a wooded creek. At first, I figure it's to give the girls more privacy. The sound of dry heaving isn't exactly a

welcome home soundtrack, but once we're outside, I can see Brad's face with concern.

"I just wanted to let you know... and this is hard for me to say, Bowdie," he starts to say in a low, confidential tone, making my guts twist into a guilty knot. A cold sheen of sweat dots my brow.

He knows. Of course, he fucking knows! Any fool could see the way you've been ogling her.

In a moment, I'm prepared for the "keep your goddamned eyes off my daughter" speech, but it never comes.

"What is it?" I rasp, feeling my throat drying up despite taking another pull from my beer.

"It's-it's just that... Well," he says, looking uneasy.

"Brad," I tell him firmly, signaling to spit it out.

"They're just at that age, I guess," he muses. "Boyfriends, I mean, and well... I just—" he starts to say, but I've already got him by the collar.

"What do you mean she's got a fucking boyfriend?" I snarl, shocking Brad and only surprising myself that I haven't grabbed his throat and choked him because I'm so mad. A surge of rage courses through me at the thought of it.

The unthinkable... Beth with a boy. Fuck! Beth with anyone except me. It's not gonna happen!

"Hey... Hey! What the fuck, Bowdie!?" Brad says swiftly, holding both his arms out in a display of instant surrender, but it's hard for me to let it go, to let him go.

"I just figured you oughta know," he explains, my eyes wild and my free hand balling into a fist.

"I thought you'd rather hear it from me than Lucy," he says meekly. "Just as well, if this is your reaction to her having a boyfriend. Jesus, Bowdie!" he exclaims, haughtily freeing himself from my grip and readjusting his collar before stepping back inside, shaking his head to himself.

Lucy? A boyfriend?

Six months ago, that would have been my biggest fear as a parent, that and her getting knocked up, but I've had other things on my mind since then. The only thing hearing that Lucy has a boyfriend makes me feel is a new kind of panic.

Oh, thank fuck for that, but if Lucy has one, then who's to say Beth doesn't either?

In a split second of a New York minute, I'm flinging the screen door open with a bang, spinning Brad by his shoulder to face me.

"And Beth!?" I gasp, feeling all my sanity about to leave me for good if it turns out to be true. If Beth has feelings for anyone else, there's no telling what I'd be capable of the way I reacted just now. If Beth already has a boyfriend, I'd have to do the unthinkable.

"And Beth, what?" I hear her ask with concern and suspicion, shifting my gaze to see Beth standing in the hallway by the kitchen.

CHAPTER THREE

Beth

Dad tries to brush it off, but I can see something happened between Bowdie and him in a second. Lucy's pretty much told me to leave her alone, and now it looks like these two are having their own problems. This is not the Bowdie Bigg fantasy I've been having for months on end, and it's not how I want to face the reality of it being just a fantasy, either.

"It's nothing, sweetie," Dad smiles, "How's Lucy? Is she alright?" he asks with genuine concern.

Bowdie only gives me a dark look before he moves toward me, but seeing him look past me, I know to get out of his way. His huge frame fills the hallway as he reaches the bathroom door in four long steps, knocking gently and murmuring to Lucy.

"And Beth, what?" I challenge my dad instead, moving into the kitchen, not just wanting but needing to know why Bowdie was even saying my name right this second.

"I was just trying to let Bowdie know... about Lucy and Josh," Dad whispers with gritted teeth, keeping his voice low and looking like a man who wished he'd said nothing.

I feel a wave of relief. If Bowdie's mad at Lucy, it must mean...

No. No, you don't, Beth. Don't go telling yourself that, and don't freaking say it!

It must mean he loves me.

I know. Lame, right? This is the stuff I've told myself for so long. My motor mouth is hard to switch off the things I've been telling myself for so long if only to stop feeling like I'll wither completely unless I can be with Bowdie somehow. That was my mind when he was away. Now that he's right in the hallway, I can see how dumb and dangerous this fantasy is. Until now, I had no idea how much of my emotions I've invested in this—invested in him—heart and soul. I can feel it.

Dammit, this is gonna hurt. This forbidden crush of mine. My dirty little secret. Okay, maybe my *second* dirty little secret, but anyone with eyes could see that a girl my height with curves meant for someone a foot and a half taller is most likely a virgin. An eighteen-year-old who still lives with her dad and has a bunk bed with pink blankets, for Christ's sake.

What hope in hell did I think I'd ever have with a real man like Bowdie? But he got so mad because he thought I was the one with a boyfriend. There I go again. It's such a perfect fantasy. I can't let it go.

Bowdie reappears in the doorway, making me lose all my courage about telling him or announcing that I do not have a boyfriend, in case anyone was wondering. As usual, I gum up when I look into his eyes. His creased mouth at an angle to his chiseled, unshaved-for-the-day jawline makes my mind completely blank.

"Lucy wants to be left alone. She'll be fine," Bowdie remarks, glancing at my dad before he puffs his cheeks and lets out a long breath.

"You gonna stay for dinner?" my dad asks, more accustomed to the high level of drama that can unfold late in the afternoon on a Wednesday, especially with two young ladies in the house. Though for the life of me, I have no idea what's up with Lucy all of a sudden.

"Of course, but I'm buying," Bowdie asserts, making my chest hurt when he turns away, keeping his eyes down and away from mine as if he can't stand to look at me now, making me wonder exactly what he and dad were arguing about all over

again. They both seem to have moved on, sipping beer and discussing takeout options while I try to process how my day could get any worse, even though it's the highlight of my year to see Bowdie again. I wish it could just be the two of us.

"I can drive!" I almost shriek, desperate to find a way to be alone with Bowdie, to know for sure if it's just me or my overactive, hormonal brain playing tricks on his hot and cold routine. I mean, looking at me like he did and then ignoring me. Maybe I am losing my mind.

"We'll just get takeout, honey," my dad murmurs, flipping a sheaf of menus pinned to the fridge with magnets. "Unless you want to take us all out to a fancy restaurant?" he grins, deliberately teasing Bowdie, who again twitches his head to almost look at me. I can see the muscles in his neck, tempering his head down at the floor.

"Takeout's fine," he rasps, rubbing the back of his neck and shifting across the kitchen, stepping out onto the porch again.

"Don't mention Josh, okay?" Dad murmurs in my ear, passing by me to join his best friend with his hand in his back pocket, fishing for his phone to order food.

I don't think I could ever eat again if this lump of lead in my gut is all I'm gonna be left with. Is it possible to die a virgin? I mean, has it ever happened? I suppose not. I'll probably be the first.

The sound of the front door closing rapidly jolts my attention, making me swivel my head from left to right. "Lucy?" I call up the hall, taking slow steps with my head cocked, hoping someone hasn't just let themselves in, but the bathroom door is open, and after checking my room, I see it's empty. With quick steps, I reach the front door, pulling it open and sticking as much of myself out into public view as I dare.

"Luce!?" I half call out.

Now where the hell would she have gone?

CHAPTER FOUR

Bowdie

“Sorry, Brad,” I murmur once we’re alone on the porch again, wondering just how long it is before I have to use the same words with my oldest friend to explain something else—not that I’d be sorry, only sorry I didn’t claim her sooner.

Jesus, man, give it a rest, will ya!?

“Just had a lot on my mind lately. The research project. Y’know...” I volunteer, hoping it’ll be enough to explain my outrageous behavior so far, but Brad is a true friend. We both know we’ve weathered bigger storms than an awkward homecoming. We’ve seen each other bent way more out of shape in our twenty-plus years of friendship, but his response still surprises me.

I mean, his level of interest throws me. “Why *did* you come back so soon, Bo?” he asks, looking concerned in a clinical way, even leaning in a little. He peers at me like I’m an open wound that needs stitching. “I heard you quit the whole project and broke a two-year contract without notice. Is that true?” he asks me point-blank. Not a suspicious tone or look from him, but he is too curious for me to have an answer on the fly that doesn’t involve the words “fucking” and “your daughter” in the same sentence.

I feel my jaw moving, open and closed, but I don’t know what to say. Brad crimps his mouth, looking away to the yard as his mind goes somewhere I can’t anymore. “I just thought...” he

finally says. “I just thought the research was everything to you for Cathy.”

It should tug at my heart, give me a stab of guilt, or at least make me feel all that pain mixed with the love I had for her, but for god’s sake, it’s been seventeen years. I think about her every day, but it’s a constant reminder of how fragile life is and how we can’t save everyone and live forever—how I failed the one person I swore I would save. I promised her I would, and I couldn’t in the end. I was a young doctor and a younger man. I thought I could change the world just by having a can-do attitude.

“It’s an incurable disease, Brad,” I remind him. “Research is really just showing how little a chance *anyone* has against it,” I add, returning his clinical air. A ripple runs through my stomach as it hits me how I feel nothing inside when I think of her now. It’s like a dream that became a nightmare, watching what you love be eaten away until there’s only a shell. That’s how Lucy’s mom, Cathy, was when she died.

I tried to keep her alive, even long after she passed, with the research and the belief that we’d find a cure or treatment, but I’ve said all my goodbyes and hurt all that I can. I made my peace with Cathy’s death a long time ago. Lucy was just a baby when it happened, so it’s not as if she even has a memory of her mom. Is a man supposed to live his whole life in torment long after the pain’s healed? I don’t think so. I know Cathy wouldn’t want me wasting whatever time I have left by living like a monk walking on eggshells for the rest of my days.

“Sorry, big guy,” Brad says suddenly, “I didn’t mean to... How about we just talk about better things, huh?” he adds, clearing his throat a little, giving me an “all clear” look as he forgives my unprofessional and bizarre performance in his house today. That’s what friends do, right? They forgive and forget. They move on.

“Like dinner?” I ask, my mouth peeling wide once it pegs that he suspects nothing about what’s really been eating me up from the inside, not just since I walked in the door. This has been festering for six months, but if Brad has no clue I’m

aching for his daughter, half the battle is won. I just have to get used to being “normal” when Beth’s around. I can’t just imagine myself on top of her every time she’s in the room.

You just got off to a shaky start. Been here five minutes, so take a breath and slow down.

“I’ve had a hankering for ribs all week,” Brad grins, eager to fulfill his promise and talk about better things.

I nod approvingly, even though food is the last thing on my mind, but dammit, if Beth isn’t the first thing out of my mouth and the only thing I want in my mouth right now. “What about Beth?” I hear myself asking aloud. “I mean, does she like ribs?” I add to cover myself.

I know Lucy would eat the rib straight off an animal, but it’s clear to me when I say it that my effort to think or say anything that isn’t all about Beth is gonna be more challenging than I thought.

“Uh, Beth usually gets a salad when we order out,” Brad observes casually, making me frown.

Salad!? How the hell is she supposed to sustain herself on rabbit food? A growing girl needs meat and lots of it. I’m sure I can tempt her to have some of mine when it arrives if all she wants is a *salad*.

“What was that?” Brad asks, his head tilting rapidly as we hear the front door banging. My instinct is to go check it out—my first and only thought being Beth, of course—but it’s not my house, and she’s not my daughter. Brad moves past me with a sidelong glance, telling me as much though he’s used to a man my size kinda filling up all the space and taking charge whenever anything unexpected happens—even something as innocent as a door banging in the house. I’m forced to let Brad go first, which causes my jaw to clench. My whole body suddenly tenses as Beth reappears in the kitchen.

“What’s goin’ on, honey?” Brad chimes. “Someone else here?”

“Lucy must’ve stepped out for some air,” Beth says, giving an awkward-looking shrug. Brad’s eyes shoot straight at me as he

turns, waiting for me to react.

I make a point of keeping my eyes on Brad, eventually shrugging myself. “Probably not a bad idea,” I remark, not meaning to sound like Brad should join Lucy and take a walk.

“We’re ordering ribs,” Brad announces with forced cheerfulness. Beth crimps a smile and nods while I fish my phone out of my pants, speed-dialing Lucy. It goes to voice mail, and I make a point of leaving her a message. “Hey, Luce? I’m worried that you’re unwell and just taking off like that. Gimme a call or come back to Brad’s house, please,” I clip, sounding every bit the father I try hard not to be with her.

If she’s ill, I don’t want her wandering about. I also don’t want any more excitement today. Coming home was supposed to be a happy occasion, and I’m already wondering if I should’ve stayed in London as if six more months of obsessing over her best friend would help. Yeah, right.

“We could go look for her,” Beth suggests, but Brad quickly dismisses the idea.

“She’s fine,” he sighs. “Like you said, she just went out for some air. She’ll be back before you know it. Bowdie, how about you freshen up and get changed, huh? You must be aching for a hot shower and some clean clothes after your trip.” I feel my mouth curling down into a frown. “Bathroom’s free now,” Brad adds, giving me the impression he’s telling me to go hose myself down, not just suggesting it.

“You’re probably right,” I reluctantly agree, sniffing my pits through my shirt. I always hate it when Brad’s right. A shower and change shoulda been the first thing I focused on when I arrived. So, grabbing my smallest bag by the front door, I do as I’m told. I listen closely to catch every word Beth says as she and her dad discuss takeout and all of us having a night in, playing board games, of all things.

Jesus.

I can’t stay still with Beth anywhere near me for a full minute. The prospect of hunching over for hours on end, rolling dice, and moving plastic pegs around seems insulting compared to

the night I'd rather spend with his daughter, rolling her about instead and thumbing her peg until she comes as hard as I know I have to right now. As the saying goes, doctors make the worst patients, and following my friend's advice, I peel myself out of my shirt and pants after making a face when I have to close and lock the door of the tiny bathroom.

In case she sees, but that's the whole point. I want her to see what she's missing. I want her to see what I have for her.

My arousal slaps loudly against my abs as I undress, making me groan. It's as if my body senses shower time is also the time to let off some steam of my own as well as from the shower head.

Beth time, but no, I can't. I won't. Not only will I not yank off in my buddy's bathroom, but I also won't waste a drop of what I have simmering in my loins. I don't know how I'm gonna do it. Hell, I don't even know if it's what Beth wants.

Her eyes tell a different story, though. I know when a girl's just glancing and checking out a man's crotch.

I'm gonna find out. I have to. Otherwise, I'll lose my mind, and once I discover what she wants, I'm gonna make sure every stroke of my manhood is only inside her from now on.

I need to let her know I'm interested without actually saying it. I'll tell her and see how she reacts.

Easier said than done, but I am known for pulling the odd miracle now and then.

CHAPTER FIVE

B eth

The sound of the shower running is all the cover my dad needs to ask me everything he can't with Bowdie in the room. Try as I might, I can't help growling in annoyance when he starts up about Lucy.

I love Lucy. She's my best friend, but I'm also allowed to hate how she acts occasionally. God knows, sharing a room with her for six months is enough to drive anyone to distraction, and today of all days, with her dad coming home so soon, she's picked a fine time to have one of her little "episodes." It's something my dad's not only picked up on, but he seems to think it's something I've done.

"You wanna tell me what's going on between you and Luce?" he asks point-blank, returning the takeout menus to their home under a large medical company logo magnet on the fridge door.

I don't have to fake my puzzled look and risk being as much a diva as Lucy's being today. I don't hide my irritation, either. "Why don't you ask her yourself?" I exclaim angrily, clenching my jaw. "I'm sick of you always asking me what's up with her, Dad. If you ever took the time to look, you might see I have enough problems of my own!" I declare passionately, hearing how stupid my outburst sounds as it echoes back to me off the kitchen walls.

“Hmm,” Dad hums to himself knowingly, his cheek pinching and brow wrinkling. “You don’t have a job. You have no expenses or responsibilities and get to stay home all day doing whatever the hell you want, and *you’ve* got problems?” he fires back with a double dose of sarcasm. His eyes widen as he delivers his ultimate “Dad has you pegged” speech.

It hurts whenever Dad puts it like this, and only because I know he’s right, but what else am I supposed to say? That I’m madly in love with Bowdie and wish I could be sent to live with *him* for six months instead of having his brat of a daughter helping herself to all my stuff? Plus, Lucy snores and worse. Any man who shares a bed with her will have to keep a window open if he wants to have enough air to breathe and keep living before morning, but I know what my dad’s getting at.

He could sense the moment Lucy and I were having just as Bowdie arrived—her *big secret* that she was priming me to keep quiet about. The secret she never got to tell, and now she’s taken off to who knows where.

“Sorry, Beth,” Dad mumbles, running both hands straight back through his short hair as he puffs out a breath of exasperation. “It’s just... Well, Lucy’s never been sick the whole time she’s been here, and the second her dad shows up, she’s got Montezuma’s Revenge,” he exclaims.

“I think that’s different, Dad.” I educate him. “She was throwing up, not spraying diarrhea,” I add, which is about as much medical speak as I can manage with my high school diploma.

“Beth!” Dad scolds me, screwing up his nose and reminding me why he picked sports medicine over being a “proper doctor,” as I like to call it. He hates the sight of blood, so anything else shooting out of the human body is enough to make him squirm.

“Is it that Josh guy?” he asks, giving me a weird jolt in my belly. Even the mention of that creep is enough to set me on edge.

“Like I said, Dad, I really don’t know *what’s* wrong with her. Can we change the topic, please?” I ask until it occurs to me that if Lucy has taken off, then it’s most likely her dad will soon go out looking for her, which means less of her dad for me. Being stuck playing board games, eating ribs, and listening to Dad belch beer all night isn’t part of my Bowdie fantasy.

I need to make sure I keep Bowdie here somehow. Get him alone so I can... I dunno. What *would* I do? Ask him out on a date? Hurl myself at him and hope for the best?

Nope, that’s a stupid idea.

Or I could... It hits me like a thunderbolt—a brain wave so unique and incredible it just has to work. I sway on the spot for a moment, fluttering my eyes maybe a little too much, but it’s enough to catch my dad’s attention.

“Beth?” he asks, scrutinizing my sudden and feigned attack of dizziness.

“Y’know what, Dad? I don’t feel so great,” I lie, “I think I might go lie down for a while.”

My poor dad, but I need to do this. It feels like the only way I’m gonna get Bowdie alone is if I can call for him from my sick bed. He is a doctor, after all. He is a *proper doctor* in all the right places if his resting pant bulge is anything to go by. He’s just the man a sick girl needs to slip something under her tongue... to take her temperature, of course.

My dad’s technically a doctor too, but I haven’t sprained a hamstring. I’ve got some sudden and incurable disease. It’s the burning heat Bowdie gives me between my legs, so who better to help fix it? I know. It’s a half-baked plan that could very well backfire or not happen at all, but I have to think of something to draw a little more attention to me from Bowdie if he’s ever gonna find out how I really feel about him.

The screen door creaks, making both Dad and I pivot our heads. “*Lucy!*” my dad cries with relief. “We were just talking about you. Are you okay? Beth said you were throwing up,” he stammers, not sure how he should approach things once he

notices her red eyes and sniffing nose—the picture of a girl who’s been crying way more than she’s been throwing up.

“I’m fine, Mr. Peters. Really, I am. I just had to go for a walk and get some air. I’ll be all right,” Lucy says weakly, making me roll my eyes for real this time before they narrow with annoyance.

“And perfect timing, too,” I pipe in, making sure she catches my mood, but it’s useless. Lucy doesn’t look like she cares about anything right now. She’s miles away from the Lucy who wanted to share her innermost secret with me about a half hour ago.

“I think I’ll just grab some things and head home if that’s alright,” she murmurs, focusing on my dad instead of me. “I can always come back for the rest, and thank you again for having me stay for so long.”

“You don’t have to *leave*, Luce. We’re all gonna have dinner together and have a game night,” my dad says, sounding hurt, making me half wonder if he doesn’t have a thing for Lucy himself.

Nah, he’s just itching to beat us all at his favorite board game. I know he is, and he wants to spend the evening with his best buddy, catching up over old times and sucking beers while I just quietly go insane.

Not everyone’s harboring a forbidden crush, Beth.

The thought makes me wince as I even try to picture my dad and Lucy together. Much like my original feelings regarding my chances with a man like Bowdie, it’s laughable. Like no way, no how, kinda laughable, which makes my shoulders slump and my sick feeling real as I discover I don’t have to act so hard anymore. I feel sick to my stomach, so maybe curling up in a ball in my bed really is the smartest thing to do right now.

“I dunno,” Lucy murmurs, shrugging and making an uncomfortable face, finally hugging her elbows until my dad plays diplomat.

“Well, I’m not trying to tell you what to do, Luce. Just saying that we’re all gonna make a night of your dad’s coming home, so it would be great if it were all four of us,” he sighs, the strain of his “day off” so far making him look like he’s worked two weeks straight in an afternoon. Usually, when Dad makes his plans known, and it includes all of us, Lucy plays along, but something is different about her.

She wrinkles her nose and shakes her head. “I think I’ll just be going,” she says, but Bowdie’s deep voice makes us all jump, and I gasp when I turn and see him filling the door frame. He’s wearing nothing but a towel and a thousand drops still making tiny rivers across his rippling, chiseled body. He has a tan that makes me wonder if he’s ever been to London at all.

I start panting involuntarily. That rising need I mentioned earlier feels like it just broke the yolk, and the space between my legs is so wet it feels like I’ve been used to dry Bowdie after his shower—something I’d be willing to submit myself to any day of the week.

“Going where?” he asks, his clear but serious-looking eyes on Lucy’s. The stern tone in his rich, natural baritone voice gives me an extra shiver, a cherry on top of my cherry if you will.

Dad looks uneasy, maybe not just at the sight of his best friend nearly naked in his kitchen. I can’t think of or know any man who wouldn’t feel more than a little humbled seeing Bowdie Bigg in nothing but a towel.

Lucy squirms because anyone with eyes could see Lucy’s in some kind of trouble. Her dad, being away so long, is the one man who is bound to overreact and make a bad situation worse, aka the reason Lucy wants whatever’s eating her kept secret.

Lucy meets her dad’s authority head-on, with no sign of giving up soon. “I just wanna go home, Dad. I feel sick, and I wanna go home. Don’t you get it? Or have you been trying to raise the dead again? Staring into a microscope while the rest of the world tries to get on with their lives!” she says it so clearly but so harshly that it’s like a knife cutting through the air, and with every slice of what it cuts, I can see fall from Bowdie’s face.

My dad signals me to follow his lead, and we exit rapidly through the living room so Lucy and her dad can “chat.”

“Did I miss something?” my dad asks aloud. It sounds like he’s talking to me, but when I look over at him, he’s asking himself. Eventually, he catches my stare. “I mean, six months ago, Bowdie was.... He was fine. Now he’s... I dunno what he is, but whatever he’s got, it must be catching. Lucy used to be so...” He wants to say something but stops himself.

“It’s not our place to say anything, honey,” he reminds me. “Why don’t you go hang out in your room, and I’ll let you know when the dust settles?”

From the rising flow and ebb of intense voices from the kitchen, I actually agree with my dad for once. If Lucy’s ready to go blow for blow with her dad, best of luck to her. I’m starting to feel in too deep again, and Bowdie still doesn’t know how I feel. I can’t help but gnaw at my lip once I flop onto my bed, my bedroom door closed as I imagine if I could be with him, let alone should be.

He’s just so... mature... and big.

Rich and handsome.

Big...

I wheeze another long sigh at “big,” recalling how he looked just now in nothing but a towel he made look like a washrag. It was so tight and small on him, and I can now say for sure those were not pleats in his pants earlier. The man is *big*... everywhere.

The fantasy I’ve been building in my mind for six months spills over. With my room all to myself for what feels like the first time in ages, it isn’t long before I feel my hand slipping down the front of my sweatpants.

Right now, they’re plenty wet, but not with sweat.

CHAPTER SIX

Bowdie

Lucy's meltdown does more than snap me out of my obsession with her best friend, for a while at least. Hearing her say something so hurtful about her mom and knowing it's about the lowest blow anyone could give me, I should be as upset and angry as she is right now, but it only makes me realize I have neglected her these past few months. Hell, she couldn't even tell me herself that she has a boyfriend.

Or maybe she tried, and you just never listened. You were always obsessing over Beth and asking about her every time you spoke to Lucy over the phone.

Lucy's more grown up now than when I left, doubly so for Beth. It's what I thought she wanted—me working away and reluctantly agreeing for her to stay behind. If it weren't for Brad's suggestion for Lucy to stay with Beth, I would never have agreed to Lucy remaining here alone in our house. The distance and not being here has made her see me in a different light. I match her raised voice and have a solid reply for everything she's having a go at me for, but it's clear something else has upset her.

I hold back on playing the boyfriend card, not wanting to pour gasoline all over her hostile mood and not wanting to go down that rabbit hole, not yet anyway. I'll quiz her about her boyfriend when the time's right, which isn't today. I can feel that much already.

Lucy would never usually bring up her mom's death like that, especially as a weapon against me. No, something else has happened, but Lucy isn't the kind to kiss and tell, so to speak. I have to let whatever it is eating her go for now and let her come to me when she's ready. If she's coming out swinging with comments about her mom, then I sense her real problem is bigger than keeping the fact she has a boyfriend from her old man.

She simmers down after a while, and we both grow quiet, not feeling the need to be ashamed or embarrassed about a little shouting match but mindful of the fact it's Brad's house. We have kinda made him retreat someplace until our dust settles.

"Lucy, we can go home. I just think it's only polite to stay for dinner and whatnot, especially seeing as Brad's looked out for you for so long. It's the only thing he's asking. Just a few hours?" I ask, giving her my best puppy dog eyes. I feel a bit more like a rat because all I'm trying to do is buy a few more hours with Beth, living for a moment we can truly be alone so I can... Well, I haven't decided what to do about it yet, but I'm so close I can sense how badly she needs what I want to give her. I'll be goddamned if I leave her out of sight longer than needed, in case she gets any stupid idea about running off with some boy like Lucy.

Beth's a special girl, and she needs the special touch—a real man with the maturity, experience, and security I can offer her. I don't look at Beth and see an awkward grope or a guilt-laden one-night stand. I see me and her together, always together, from now on. It's not as if I can explain all that to Lucy. Beth doesn't even know yet. So it's crystal clear how much I need to be around Beth more than ever, even if it is over ribs and a board game. It's better than being thousands of miles away, losing my mind because I can't stop thinking about where she is, what she's doing, or even what she's wearing.

I know it's nuts, but that's been my world for six months, and today... tonight feels like I've been let out of that prison. If I'm being selfish by putting that need over Lucy's tantrum, so be it. There's gonna be a higher price to pay if she ever finds out, anyway. I don't see Brad taking kindly to the idea, either.

As easygoing and even goofy as he can be, Brad's no slouch when it comes to sticking up for his daughter, especially if his best friend here is trying to stick it *up* his daughter.

Lucy's eyes close, and she crimps her mouth. She's fighting some invisible battle inside herself that would usually make me laugh if she wasn't so obviously torn up about something. Maybe a night of family and friends will bring her to the point where she wants to let me help.

"Fine," she murmurs, "but I meant it, Dad. I feel unwell and would really like to go home and curl into a ball for a few days."

I hug her, letting her know I'm here. "Even when I'm not here, Lucy, you can come to me about anything. You know that," I remind her. Stroking her hair back and wiping the tears off her cheeks, I peck the top of her head. "Now let me get changed, and we can see if these ribs are as good as Brad says."

It takes a while, but Lucy looks more her usual self after another trip to the bathroom while I hunt down Brad, reemerging with a look of determination and excitement about tonight's plans. At least we're all here.

At least I can see Beth a little longer.

When it is time to go home? Well, I'll have to cross that bridge when I get there. Right now, it's time for some damage control after a rotten start to my coming back. I hear a little shrieking and carrying on from Beth's room, convincing Brad and me that although it got off to a bad start, it's sure still good to be home again.

After sitting down to a meal that Brad promises I won't forget, I can't help agreeing, but not because of the food. Sitting at the table with Beth right next to me is like a gift. Her leg under the table rests against mine a couple of times, which she's quick to move away once she realizes, shooting me little apologetic glances. Shy and even embarrassed, she'd be a fool to deny it if she doesn't feel what I do when her body's near mine.

Brad wants to talk shop about what I'm gonna do now that I'm home and with no research to... well... No research to research, I guess. I'm more interested in sitting here and seeing Beth's interest in maybe more than just using me as a leg rest. Having been away so long, the entire dinner conversation is drawn out of me by Brad and even Lucy. She's almost her usual self, but there's a look in her eyes I've never seen before, or maybe it's because she's just grown up so fast. She's already a young woman in the half year I've been gone.

Beth's quiet, though, and I try to include her in everything I say. Every time I open my mouth, I look at her, trying to make the most of this time. I hope it just looks like I'm having dinner with friends and my daughter, but inside, I feel like a king courting his should-be, will-be queen. My head's almost dizzy with how alive, happy, and yeah, maybe even the twenty years younger Beth makes me feel. On a couple of occasions, the pair of us ask Brad to turn the A/C up because it gets so hot in here, but Brad and Lucy look at us like we're kidding.

"We're practically shivering over here," Lucy says, glancing at me sidelong, and just like what happened with Brad, I see the thought play out in her mind—her best friend Beth with me. She even shakes her head slightly, dismissing the idea she thinks she just had. Really, I think anyone could pick up on the static charge of chemistry between Beth and me. I know I can, and the longer we sit so close, the more I'm convinced she's not only feeling it but also wanting more of it, just the same as I am.

Sitting right across from her father and my daughter should be enough to make me push it to the back of my mind, but I know I can't. I can't, and I won't. It might sound crazy, but this is proof right here. Sitting with Beth and feeling like I'm in a magic story book, my heart is as swollen as some other parts of me. That's what she does to me naturally, just by being her. It's the one thing that makes me want to make her mine from now on... for good... forever.

I couldn't care anymore if she's half my age or twice my age. If she was a hundred, I know I'd feel the same. *She'll be mine*, I tell myself. The thought brings me more relief than anything.

I already want tonight to end with me living the dream of having her forever.

Once I notice Lucy giving me stranger looks than Beth's dad dares to, I realize I'm grinning like a madman, my napkin in my lap like a pitched awning. The ache in my jeans for Beth is almost something I'm proud of, even though I have to keep it a secret—for now, at least, especially around the others. If Beth saw? I think that would make me harder than I am now, if that's possible. The dinner ends with Brad commenting on Beth having hardly touched her food.

"You still feeling unwell?" Brad asks, making my brow crease as I turn to face Beth.

"Are you sick?" I ask her sternly, annoyed because she didn't mention it. I am a doctor, after all. She might need a thorough examination. So, thinking on my feet, I quickly shift my tone to concern instead of obsessiveness—the kind protector, unlike the one in my jeans that wants to punish her maybe a little first. She should've told me, though.

"I'm fine," Beth squeaks, creasing her mouth and shrugging. "I felt a bit off before, but I had a little lay down while you and Lucy were—" she starts to say, but I've already raised my hand. I press my palm flat against her forehead, my other hand gently seizing her wrist.

"Oh, for god's sake," Brad guffaws, stifling his "five beers and three pounds of ribs" laugh. He thinks I'm kidding, but I'm not.

The touch of her skin on mine has both of us gripped by something that should surprise me more, but it doesn't. She feels perfect under my touch. The smoothness and softness of her skin against my weathered-looking hands are sublime.

She's perfect and a very obedient patient, I perceive. I feel her little sound more than I hear it, the vibration of her evident arousal humming through her body. My throbbing pulse in my ears picks up on her most important vital sign—that she's ready. She's ready for a real man to show her how good it feels to be a woman, and now I know for sure. Now I know I'm not

imagining things. I'm already greedy to touch more of her... to taste her.

"You're burning up, Beth," I lie, although not entirely untrue. "Your pulse is all over the place," I murmur, feeling my serious doctor's face tell anyone who could even try to doubt me that it's true.

Brad shuts his noise down, instantly concerned for Beth. Lucy groans. "Ummm, hello? I was yanking my guts up earlier, and where were you two doctors then?" she asks with a high air of disbelief.

I squeeze Beth's tiny, plump wrist, trying not to groan myself when she plays along, fluttering her eyes and swooning a little. After it intensifies, it's clear she's not faking anything.

She's not ill, not in the conventional sense. This girl needs a real man inside her... stat!

CHAPTER SEVEN

Beth

Trying to even think about food is impossible while being so close to Bowdie. My stomach feels like a butterfly park. I remember the same man bouncing me on his knee when I was just a little kid, but that was years ago. Now everything's different. I'm different. If this feeling pouring off him is anything to go by, I know he's gotta be feeling the same way.

I get so close to a repeat of what I had to do myself in my bedroom earlier that it almost frightens me. Almost, but right here at the dinner table with Dad and Lucy opposite? It's surreal, but I can't help surrendering to it. I need to let Bowdie know somehow what he's doing to me, but I think he's one step ahead of me. At least, I hope he is.

If all this is just part of some forbidden crush fantasy disorder, I'd better see a different kind of doctor and have my head examined. Once he touches me for real, though, once I feel his hands on me, I almost give a convincing enough performance that I really am coming down with something serious.

Lucy doesn't buy it. Even my dad's giving me a weird look and has to put his two cents in. "As your doctor and your father, Beth," he drawls, shifting forward just enough to feel my head and make me go "ahhhh" before he huffs with satisfaction.

"You're fine, Beth," he says, almost sounding disappointed, but Bowdie isn't so quick to let it go. He opens his mouth to

say something, but Lucy cuts him off. His hands fall from me instantly, making me miss them already, even though they're only inches away.

"Dad, you're embarrassing yourself and me," she says cuttingly, glancing at the half glass of wine Bowdie hasn't touched before giving me the same look.

My dad turns his head, looking shocked she'd say something like that, and only because it's clear he can't see it. He can't feel the same thing I know Bowdie and I feel. I wish Lucy would lay off her dad today of all days. If nothing else, it's cramping my style having her *and* Bowdie in the house right now.

"I-I'll be fine," I murmur, excusing myself and wobbling up the hall to the bathroom, having to sit down as soon as the door's closed. I fight the urge to relieve myself in a way I need to right now, but I end up with my face in my hands, considering my future and the rest of this evening.

If he wants me, then he should just say so. I'm only eighteen. I don't know how to go about any of this stuff.

I'm not sure if it's a guy thing or because I'm only eighteen, but my dad doesn't seem to notice the extreme effect something or *someone* is having on me, but Lucy notices. She gave me the same look she shot her dad after scolding him for how he was acting, but her look hurt me because why wouldn't a guy as handsome and successful be interested in me? Even if he's not, it's pretty bad when my best friend doesn't even wanna entertain the idea of me being with a perfect ten of a man, let alone anyone else.

I wait for her to bring up Josh but then recall that her dad doesn't know about him yet. The knowing smile that spreads across my face is just enough for her to see before I come in here after leaving the table. From what I heard Lucy and her dad arguing over earlier, it sounds like she wants to go home for good, which is fine by me.

Six months of her day in and day out and the thanks she gives me is the “as if you’d have a chance anyway” look? I love my bestie with all my heart, but part of what makes our friendship so strong is that it can weather moments like tonight when I wish she were on a cargo ship to Fiji instead of in our house.

What if Bowdie is interested in me? Could our friendship stand that test? Not to mention my dad...

By the time I splash some cold water, practically feeling like it’s steaming off my flushed face before rejoining everybody, I still don’t know how I will get through the rest of a “wholesome” evening with family friends. My mind wants to go places far from wholesome, and there’s only one man I want to join me there.

Lucy has the dishwasher stacked, and my dad’s already warning Bowdie he’s about to get his ass kicked playing some board game that isn’t his usual highly competitive, real estate-based one. It’s some game where you have a card saying who you are stuck on your head and have to ask questions to see if you can guess who you’re supposed to be. Great. A “worse than charades” type deal that will involve lots of my dad carrying on and all of us play-acting and pretending, precisely what I don’t feel like doing anymore.

Bowdie asks if I feel better as soon as he spots me, and although I nod before he’s even finished, I can tell he isn’t trying so hard to ignore me like he was earlier today. I feel embarrassed again, feeling childish for getting upset when he wasn’t looking at me every five seconds, but I like it. I love it whenever he looks at me, even if it’s only for a moment.

With all that “accidental” leg touching over dinner, I get brave enough to let him watch me as I sit next to my dad, who yanks me down next to him, instantly making Bowdie look deflated and annoyed. I feel the loss too, but it would look weird if I was suddenly glued to the man in front of my dad, even though that’s the only thing I want.

I don’t care if I’m gonna look like a fool. I promise that tonight, I’ll find out if Bowdie is interested in me in that way or if I’m only imagining it. All I need now is a way to do that.

Dad lectures us on the rules of the game. Each of us has to write a person's name or place on a card. The cards get shuffled, and then we get handed a card, which we stick to our heads without looking at it. I know, riveting night in, right?

When I see Bowdie with his name on the card he sticks to his forehead, I know I might have a way of finding out how interested he may be in this curvy girl half his age who happens to be his best friend's daughter. My mind's blank when dad appoints me first to go first, urging me to ask a question about who I am in the game.

Blundering my way through the first round, Dad and Lucy seem to forget about anything awkward over dinner and have a secret passion for this game.

"Am I a place?" Dad asks, all of us giving a resounding "no" before he gets to ask for two more clues.

When it's Bowdie's turn, I feel my stomach tighten. My mind suddenly floods with the million things I'd love to know about him, but I have only one real question. I doubt he'd offer that one up as a clue. He does pretty well at this game. Better than I do. Maybe he and Lucy played it more than we did growing up.

"Am I a man?" he asks.

"Yes!" we all say.

"Am I famous?" Hmm, kinda, but not in the game.

"Do I have a romantic interest?" is his third question, which sets my heart pounding. It makes Lucy and my dad wince a little as if bringing up anything to do with his first wife, and the fact he's never been with anyone since could be a hurtful thing to say.

They both go quiet, and Bowdie looks at me quizzically. His mouth curls into a half-smile as he asks me directly, "Do I? Is there someone special in my life?"

It's the closest I can get to finding out, so I seize my chance.

"Umm, you might. If you do have someone special, you're kinda quiet about it." I volunteer, drawing a burst of applause

from my dad and Lucy.

“Good reply, Beth!” Dad notes aloud, taking another swig from his beer and looking like he’s enjoying this game a little too much.

“Am I a doctor?” Bowdie asks for his last clue question, each of us getting to ask another if we get one right. When we answer “yes,” his face peels into a wide smile. Keeping his eyes on mine, making me feel like his smile is all for me, he asks me, “Am I Dr. Bowdie Bigg?”

The game is over. My dad groans, annoyed he didn’t get to guess who or what he was first. And me? I got all the info I needed. Sealed with a smile, I know who I’m gonna see in my dreams tonight.

It’s late by the time my dad works us through another three board games, and he’s the only one not yawning. It’s a big deal for him to have a day off with Bowdie over, so we all try to humor him, but once it’s past one in the morning, Lucy winds things up again. Dad’s a little unsteady on his feet and commenting he has work in the morning. He reluctantly agrees that tonight has been “the best night ever.”

It’s clear that Bowdie’s going home now. Lucy is adamant that she’s going with him, taking me aside as my dad and her shoot the breeze by the front door, saying their farewells.

“Luce, you never told me what’s going on,” I urge her in a whisper. “I get it you wanna go home, but if there’s something else bugging you...” I start to say. She crimps her mouth shut, physically showing me that whatever it is, it’s her business and not something she’s willing to share with her bestie.

That, mixed with the fact Bowdie’s leaving, is enough to make me feel a mixed bag of emotions as I join my dad to wave goodbye to them both in the driveway. Bowdie’s rental car gleaming in the driveway makes me wonder why he hurried to get home. Maybe he does have a romantic interest, and perhaps it isn’t you, Beth, but my heart swells with a thrill in my chest when Bowdie moves over to me as dad helps Lucy with some of her things into the trunk.

“There is someone, Beth, and I think you know who it is,” he rasps, leaning down, the words like honey in my ear and sending a flush of heat straight to the one place that swells every time I think of the man.

“I’ll be back tomorrow to pick up the rest of Lucy’s things,” he announces casually, ensuring my dad hears. I already feel my knees trembling.

“Beth’ll be home. Won’t you, sweetie?” Dad drawls, giving me a goofy but pleading smile.

“Oh, I’ll be here,” I answer instantly, already counting the seconds by the time Bowdie’s car peels away down the street. I know he’s watching me in the rearview mirror for as long as he can, making me the last one in behind my dad before he shuts the door for the night.

I’ll be here, Bowdie, and I’ll do whatever you want.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Bowdie

The house is still the same. It's empty of many things Lucy's gonna need, like food. Me telling her to go on a shopping spree tomorrow to buy whatever she needs and wants doesn't even seem to lift the strange mood she's been in since I arrived.

She stabs a few nods and only hums her replies, obviously having other things on her mind. As soon as we're in the door, she heads straight for her room, leaving me, my luggage, and the bags she's brought back from Beth's lingering in the foyer. I tell myself it's because it's so late, but Lucy's always been a night owl. I know tonight, even minus the jet lag, there's no way I can sleep myself.

Pacing the rooms, I notice the maid service's fine job keeping the place immaculate. Everything just feels so... empty, especially my bed, by the time I surrender to the idea of trying to sleep. It's the place I told myself a thousand times I'd prefer to be when I was working late on research in London or missing home.

Tonight, it feels cold and sparse, though—empty of the only thing I know could ever make it feel right, which is having Beth here with me and neither of us doing any sleeping.

I stare at the ceiling until the gray dawn of light paints a strip between the curtains, feeling my hands sliding toward my still-aching erection over and over. I know it would be as useless as

lying here alone, kidding myself that I can sleep. The only thing to stop me from having a fit of frustration is knowing that I've got the perfect reason to see Beth again today. So, I'm out of bed as soon as it's daylight. The sounds of Lucy knocking about upstairs make me wonder if she slept either. Her face at the breakfast table tells me she didn't.

I order some breakfast from the nearest place that delivers. Both Lucy and I pick at our food, leaving me to make conversation. All the while, I can't stop glancing at the clock on the wall and counting the seconds until I see Beth again.

"You get any sleep?" I eventually ask her, making her face contort before she lashes out at me.

"I'm trying to get things cleaned up around here. That maid service did a terrible job. The state of my room—" she snaps, making me frown.

"The place has never looked cleaner, Lucy," I remark instantly, but it looks like every time I say anything, she's gonna tear me a new one, so I decide to stay quiet. I work hard to conceal my emotions, which is the complete opposite of Lucy's cranky pants this morning.

"I was gonna head over to Beth and Brad's," I let her know once we're done eating in silence, and I'm doing the dishes by tossing the takeout packaging into the trash.

Lucy only shrugs, "Whatever."

I would ask her to come along, expect it of her even, but it's clear from her frosty reply that she's not interested. It makes me wonder if she and Beth had some kind of falling out.

"You got plans today?" I ask, wincing as soon as I do, already forgetting how mad she is for no reason, while I've got nothing but reasons to smile bubbling through my brain.

"I'll just stay here," she murmurs. "I still feel—"

"You still feel sick?" I ask, which is a Dr. Bigg reflex question, but Lucy's never been one to want me anywhere near her if she is unwell. She always takes care of things herself with her own diagnosis and doctor. She sighs loudly, giving me a cautionary look, and then I remember.

An eighteen-year-old daughter with hormones at an all-time high. Just let her be, Bowdie. She'll come to you for help if and when she needs it.

She's her father's daughter, all right, so with a signal of surrender with both my palms flat in the air, I shower and get ready. It pains me a little that Lucy doesn't confide in me like she used to.

My top teeth gnaw at my lower lip. I feel cheated about how slow time is going this morning. Lucy's not the only one with raging hormones here, ya know? Seven thirty... hardly the time to show up at Beth's to collect the rest of Lucy's things. She's probably still asleep.

The thought of her alone in a bed, wearing next to nothing, sleeping, makes me hard as a beam in seconds, but no, I'm not wasting another drop of my seed down a drain hole. It's her sweet little pussy I wanna fill with it. If the look in her eyes last night is anything to go by after I told her, yes, I do indeed have a romantic interest. The very thought makes me shudder with excitement. I feel a need from her, too, pulling me to her like there's an invisible thread already connecting us.

I leave as late as I can, and even though Brad's place is a half-hour drive, I still pull up before he's even left. He's not even running late. He's just stepping out his front door as he heads off to work and showing no ill effects from the beers he had last night, fortunately. Brad likes a brew, but he keeps it special by only enjoying a little too much rarely.

"Whoa! I thought you just left?" he quips, beaming a best buddy smile and clapping his hand on my shoulder. He squeezes me too, and I'm not sure if that, mixed with his almost maddening grin, is a warning or if he really is still glad to see me after so many months away.

"I figured I'd—" I start, ready with my raft of excuses, but even I've forgotten just how prompt I am with things—first to arrive and last to leave. So, it's not so unusual for me to turn up so early, but without Lucy?

“Where’s Luce?” Brad asks casually.

“Uh... she’s tidying up her room. The place is spotless, but she thinks it’s dirty,” I remark, the word “nesting” suddenly blooming in my mind.

“She always likes to keep things tidy,” Brad observes, glancing at his watch. “I’d love to stop, but...” he says with raised brows, the knowing look of a man with work waiting.

“Sure thing. Maybe I’ll catch you later?” I ask, fishing to find out when he’ll be home. I already imagine I could have his daughter on her back for the whole day uninterrupted.

“It’s a late one for me, so maybe tomorrow, or better yet. How ’bout you and Luce come over Saturday? We can have a barbecue, and it’ll give Luce some time to settle in back home,” Brad suggests, forever the voice of calm reason and cheerfully ignorant of the plans I’ve hatched in my mind for Beth.

“Sounds like a plan,” I readily agree, unable to stop myself from asking about Beth.

“She up?” I quiz Brad, my eyes scanning the whole front of the house, searching for signs of her.

He shrugs and slaps my shoulder again. “I doubt it. Why don’t you go wake her up? She’s bound to listen to you,” he says with a wink, meaning most people do as I ask because of my size. If he only knew...

I fight the smile that wants to play on my lips, keeping up appearances as I wave goodbye once he pulls out of the driveway, my cock already tingling to attention in my jeans. My mind’s already going to places it probably shouldn’t, but a promise is a promise. I’ve come here today to get Lucy’s things, but I’ve also come to stake my claim on what I decided months ago should be mine.

She *WILL* be mine—the decision I made last night—no matter the consequences.

Beth...

The front door's unlocked, and I let myself in. The refrigerator's hum and the ticking mantle clock are the only signs of life in the place, but I can feel her. I can sense Beth already. If my dick as radar is anything to go by, she's definitely here.

I could help myself to the coffee Brad's made, but my instinct is to go straight to her room. Passing the open bathroom door that shows the mirror still foggy from Brad's morning routine, I know she's not there.

Her closed bedroom door at the end of the hall looks like my final obstacle, but dammit, if I don't freeze up just when I should take charge. It's a bad habit from being a dad myself, I guess. All the "What the hell are you thinking?" and "She's half your age" arguments churn in my mind as I will myself to turn the knob on the door once I inch close enough.

I'm not just gonna barge in and throw myself on top of her, but I still can't help having a niggling doubt. Hoping she fully understood what I said last night. I *do* have a romantic interest, and it's her, and by romance, I mean her bouncing on my fat cock until she screams my name. Filling her with a baby of our own is what I really want.

All of her... forever.

Clearing my throat once my weight makes a board under the carpet squeak, I rap on her door gently, already turning the knob before she replies.

CHAPTER NINE

B eth

I haven't slept a wink. I need to pee, and if I finger fuck myself any more thinking about Bowdie, I'm gonna take the skin off.

For a curvy girl nobody would look twice at, I've done more "self-service" in one day than a buffet does in a month. However, I never feel satisfied because it's not Bowdie's fingers, mouth, or something else I know the good doctor is packing.

When I hear the telltale rumble of his restored Mustang as my dad's leaving for work, I feel like I shoulda been up earlier—way earlier if I wanted to make myself anywhere near presentable for the man. Holding my breath, I feel my heart pounding and my pulse singing in my ears as I will him to kick the door down, flip me on my belly, and claim me like the animal I've become. The eighteen-year-old virgin me also has a healthy dose of "What am I thinking?"

I know how bad it would hurt if he rejected me, and I've got all this wrong in my mind, but thank heavens for youthful impatience.

"Daddy?" I hear myself squeak, wondering where the hell that came from. At least it makes it *sound* like I think my dad came back for something, and it signals Bowdie that I'm awake. He can come in more than just my room anytime he damn well likes.

I'm burrowed under the covers but can hear the doorknob turning. I can feel Bowdie in the doorway long before I catch his trademark scent—a cologne I know you can only get in exotic, far-off places. Once it hits my senses, I feel myself relax.

“Beth?” he half whispers in a deep, smoky tone that makes me mew as I feel my legs press together. I already feel wet from his scent, and knowing he has me at a disadvantage, being semi-dressed in my bed, it's a wonder I'm not whimpering. Stretching myself out like a cat, pretending I'm just waking up, I still can't bring myself to look at him yet.

I know my morning face by heart. It's always a blotchy, puffy thing like an old pillow that stares back at me from the mirror most mornings, hardly the sight that would or should drive a man like Bowdie Bigg to distraction. When I hear the floor creaking under his weight as he stands over me, I know I've bitten off more than I can chew.

Without even having to look, I know he wants what I want. All I have to do is tell him so, but I need more than ever for him to take the lead, me being so virgin and all, and trying to tell myself anything could ever happen between us.

“I've come for... Lucy's things,” he says in the same gravelly tone, grinding out the words as if he knows it's a lie, and either of us could deny this chemistry between us a second longer.

I want to peek, nod sleepily, and point out what stuff belongs to Lucy, but as soon as I look into those eyes again, I'm gonna be a puddle in my bed. I'll be incapable of anything except having him hold me the way I need it.

“Beth?” he asks me after a long silence, maybe figuring I've done the teenage thing and just gone back to sleep, which ordinarily I probably would have if it was anyone else.

I shift under the covers, moving them back so he can see my face. Dammit, if my eyes don't dart to the one place they shouldn't, making me gasp when I see just how interested Bowdie is in this curvy, half-his-age girl. His face shifts for a split second, almost recoiling at my reaction, but my low purr

of excitement mixed with disbelief at the sight of the thick line of arousal in his jeans makes him pause before he grins.

“Hi,” he finally says, lowering his gaze to meet mine. “I’m up here...” he adds, making me bite my lip and flush a deep red, but not with shame or embarrassment.

If Bowdie’s so confident he can walk into my bedroom sporting that, why should I be so shy and self-conscious? Umm... maybe because he looks like something out of a magazine and like... well... I don’t look anywhere near as good as he does, morning face or not. Even at my best and in a darkened room, I’d still be anxious about a man of his caliber seeing my dimpled skin in places—the “curves” that have a life of their own when they’re not strategically held in place.

Far from tearing off the covers and jumping on top of me, Bowdie seems satisfied that he’s made his point. He’s showing me long before either of us says a word that yes, he is interested in me in that way, and how do I let him know I feel the same? How would I do best to let him know?

“I-I gotta pee,” I announce, moving so quickly out of my bed and straight past him that I feel like I’ve blown it already. I really do have to go, and if anything else is gonna happen down there, I need to make some room and be sure I’m morning fresh, so to speak. The silence that follows me to the bathroom is still there once I’m done. I can’t help kicking myself and thinking I’ve sent Bowdie all the wrong signals so far.

He’s in the kitchen, pouring coffee when I rejoin him, minus one throbbing erection, which makes me half wonder if I wasn’t dreaming.

“I-I just really had to—” I start to say, but he smiles, pouring two cups and passing one over to me.

“Maybe we should start over, huh?” he offers, motioning me toward the table with a jut of his chin. I gulp hard, feeling like maybe I’m in some kind of trouble or maybe he’s gonna tell me it was just a random guy thing—him having a raging hard-on as he stood over me, but it’s nothing like that.

“Just tell me you didn’t only come over just for Lucy’s things,” I blurt out, deciding to take charge, at least of my own feelings, so it doesn’t hurt as much if he is gonna give the let-down, all-a-terrible-misunderstanding speech.

Bowdie quickly dispels my doubts, giving me the same intense look as he shakes his head with conviction. “No. No, that’s not why I came over at all, and I think you know that, Beth,” he says in a deep, knowing tone.

I feel like I need to pee again, but it’s not that at all. It’s something else, like a “turned up to eleven” version of the tingling itch he gives me inside. Only now, it feels like some kind of emergency for one of us if he doesn’t do something about it and soon, but being a mature man—a real man—Bowdie’s not the type to just hurl himself at a girl. I’m not sure if it makes him as horny as it’s making me but sensing what he wants to “talk about” only makes me feel like I’m slipping and skidding in my seat as my arousal boils over with his every word and glance.

Either being a glutton for punishment this level of excitement gives me, or maybe just so I can hear him spell it out for me, I hear my thin, tiny voice ask him innocently, “Then what else could you have come for?”

“And so early,” I add, really hamming up the innocent angle, just to alert him to the maybe not-so-obvious fact that I’m a virgin and have no idea what I’m doing.

Bowdie’s eyes narrow a little, moving down my over-sized T-shirt I use as pajamas. He growls with satisfaction once he sees what I feel, my nipples getting so hard it would be pointless to pretend I don’t know what he means.

He sniffs and takes a long sip of his coffee, keeping his eyes pinned on my now-heaving chest. The sound from the vinyl of my chair makes a sound as my slick wetness slides over it, making me let out a little sound of my own. He lets me stew for about a full minute. Slowly sipping, watching, and bringing me so close to climax, I end up shaking my head in disbelief that any man could have this power over anyone, let

alone me, and that it could feel so good, but it can't end here. It mustn't.

Sliding his chair back noisily from the small breakfast table designed for two, his eyes only leave mine long enough to look down at his lap. That thick line I saw before seems even bigger, and a dark circle bleeding into his denim from the swollen head of his manhood tells me more than words ever could.

"Come here," he rasps.

As much as I thought I'd mess things up if it ever did happen between us, I move with what I consider graceful agility for a girl of my abilities. Standing shakily, I inch closer to him, watching that bulge get even bigger every second before his hands reach for me.

The charge from his body to mine makes me swoon as I fight to stop my eyes from rolling back, sure I'm about to climax right this second, the exact second it takes for him to pull me onto him. I feel the hardness of his strong torso smashing into all my sleepy, wobbly softness. I'm pretty sure I'll never sleep again, not until he's had his way with me, and if my first time has to be on the breakfast table? I couldn't care less. A man like Bowdie could take me behind the back of a dumpster, and it wouldn't matter. I'd still feel the same because I know I'm right once his strong mouth presses over mine.

I know I love him, and I always have. He's the only man who's ever gonna have me the way I know he wants me.

CHAPTER TEN

Bowdie

I should be seeing the face of my own daughter and the eyes of my best friend, Brad. I should be hearing their voices screaming in my conscience *NO*, but the only thought and feeling in my body and mind with Beth is a resounding *YES!*

Feeling her body against mine for the first time, my mouth greedily over hers is my real homecoming. She's what I traveled across the globe for, abandoning a research contract and a ton of other things. I did it all because I knew then, like I know now, that my life wouldn't have any meaning without her, without us, just like this and always.

If holding her close, kissing her like I feel she wants to be kissed, is my reward for throwing everything else away, then I win, but the longer I hold her, the more I feel her hands running over me like mine are all over her. I know this is just the beginning, and considering I'm recently unemployed, that leaves us all day.

It's not just any first kiss between a man and his girl. I can sense it's her first proper kiss, not only because I feel her teeth knock against mine and even wince a little when she bites my lip. Maybe that's how much she's wanted to kiss me all along, but my clinical training and the iron-rich taste of blood in my mouth tell me it's because she's a virgin.

An inexperienced girl being led on by an older man... That's how other people might see it, but in no time, she finds her

own when it comes to getting to know me via my mouth. It's also clear from her roaming hands, heaving chest, and the sounds she's making that she isn't doing anything she doesn't want to.

I've pulled her onto my lap. My hand slides firmly up the inside of one of her already quivering thighs, making me growl low with satisfaction when I discover instantly how wet she is and that she's naked under her over-sized nightshirt. My thick digits instantly probe her sodden, tight little slit, making her gasp, jump, and then growl in reply. She quickly opens her legs wider and shifts herself to buck against my fingers. I'm surprised she doesn't seem to mind my being inside her so fast.

My thumb presses hard on her nub of a clit, already proudly standing at attention as much as my manhood is, making her shoot her head back suddenly, breaking contact with my mouth. Seeing the reason, seeing her eyes close as she runs a blood-red tongue over her lips, is enough for me to want to show her I can do more than pleasure her with my fingers.

"Bowdie," she coos dreamily, snapping her eyes wide and making an "O" shape with her mouth as I move my fingers further inside her. I waste no time slowly churning them in a come hither motion that has her grunt in shock and then purr louder.

Her eyes rest on mine as she hums in tune with her rising arousal, my own twitching in my jeans and what feels like a river of precome pouring from me. I'm primed to fill her, but this tight little virgin cunt is gonna need some training before it takes every inch and the girth of my aching cock inside her.

I want her to feel how good it is, but I certainly don't want to hurt her. Beth's a bigger girl than some her age, but everyone, and I mean everyone, is small when they're next to me. Having her right in my arms, on my lap, with my fingers stretching her wide and deep, I take my time pleasuring her and warming up the oven, so to speak. Little virgin Beth has plenty of heat already cooking. I can hear and feel her breaths getting quicker with an almost pleading tone in her whimper, letting me know she's close.

“You wanna come, don’t you, Beth?” I ask her in a deep tone, sounding almost as concerned about her need to finish as she is. Damn, I could have her so close and finger fuck her all day.

“I can finger fuck you until you come on me,” I rasp, noting the stab of her head and the shudder in her moan of reply. “Or I can lick you until you come all over my face. Would you like that?” I croon, feeling her pussy tighten and twitch against my fingers as if the very words could make her come for me.

“Or... or you could do both,” she recommends with a sudden jolt and another loud gasp. I move her easily with my free arm so she’s up on the table, her legs navigating their way over my shoulders as I pry her legs wider, swearing to myself when I see her virgin pussy for the first time. In seconds, I’m still finger fucking her already creaming slit, taking a moment to inhale her scent before forcing my grin from the lips that want to taste her for the first time.

The same hand I’ve lifted her over to the table with scrapes palm side flat, firmly all over her belly and up under her flimsy pajama wear, greedily cupping and squeezing one of her stiff nipples breasts. Those nipples are like bullets and as hot and sensitive as her clit. Once the three-way connection between my mouth, her clit, and her nipples is complete, it’s like pulling the pin out of a grenade. I want to explode.

“Bow-Bowdie!” she gasps, gripping my hair so hard I grunt, not minding one bit how hard she wants to grab, scratch, or bite. As long as she’s moaning and about to come with that river I’m dying to taste, she can pull my damned hair out by the roots if she has to. She croaks as she tries to say my name, but there’s time for that. Her first climax, courtesy of a real man’s tongue and hands, can be however she likes it.

In a millisecond, I know she’s done, unable to hold back the tidal wave of her arousal as it peaks, flooding my mouth with the rich taste of her sweet, virginal essence. Her whole body stiffens before she shudders uncontrollably. The deep hum of my groans vibrates through her, sending her over the edge into an orgasm that looks, feels, and tastes like she’ll remember it forever.

“Good girl,” I praise her, proud of her and wanting her more than ever. I’m also satisfied in a way I never knew I could be without even having my dick anywhere near her perfect little hole, winking at me as she rides little aftershocks.

I’m far from done, though, and going back for more. I feel her hands tugging at my hair. Her shivered breaths and still convulsing pussy command my full attention. I feel it as much as she does. Kissing her is like nothing else, and keeping her chest busy with my hands, I move my mouth and face from her creaming valley, eagerly seeking her mouth.

Tasting her mouth and her pussy at the same time makes me groan harder, trying and failing not to kiss her too hard or squeeze her too rough. She matches every ounce of pressure from my grip, showing me she might be a virgin, but that doesn’t mean she’s made of glass.

When we come up for air, she’s trying to say something. She’s trying to tell me she’s a virgin, but her mouth only opens and closes. Her eyes are misty with post-climax emotions—eyes I kiss closed and return to her mouth. She doesn’t need to explain anything. She’s perfect, and having staked my claim, I feel like that’s how things will be from now on.

Beth and Bowdie... perfect... the way it should be.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

B eth

I could've died happy if he'd just kissed me. That would've been enough, said no girl ever after a tongue-lashing like that from a man like Bowdie. I want his kisses. Hell yeah, but I want his mouth right where it just was and those huge, fuck-me fat fingers filling me until I want to burst all over them.

Bowdie's woken up more than just my need to not be a virgin anymore. He's turned both keys and given the codes for thermonuclear-sized orgasms and lots of 'em. After I try to hold it as long as I can, not knowing I could come so hard so soon, I think I'd literally lose my mind if he didn't give me a minute to let the longest and hardest climax of my life ebb a little before he starts over.

Tasting myself on him might have sounded gross if Lucy had described her and that man-child, Josh, doing the same, but with Bowdie, it's the most natural, beautiful, and hottest thing I've had in my mouth all day if I do say so myself.

I understand now why I was so eager to finger fuck myself like never before. It's as if my body somehow knew that today was "F" day with Bowdie, loosening myself up and making sure I could take him. If his thick and insanely long fingers are anything to go by, Dr. Bigg is big by name as well as by nature. I used to swallow every time at the thought, but that other part of me? It can hardly wait now.

Trying to tell him I've never done this before just doesn't come out like I'm screaming it in my mind. My body's too busy trying to scream his name for real, but Bowdie seems to know what I mean, belaying all my doubts and worries. I forget all my self-conscious silliness every time he touches me, especially when he does whatever he's doing to make me want to do nothing but this all day, every day, forever if possible, please.

It already feels like forever, just this feeling and having him so close to me. I really should be dreaming. As the mother of all orgasms subsides in me a little, the kitchen comes back into focus. The table underneath me is where my dad probably just ate his breakfast. My best friend's father is wearing my creaming orgasm like a little milk mustache.

It all snaps back into focus so fast I almost lose the feeling. I almost feel as if I've done something wrong, but that's something I know could never come from Bowdie or me. It would only be other people who could never understand.

"What's the matter?" Bowdie asks, suddenly concerned, glancing over his shoulder once my eyes dart around the room instead of focusing on his.

"I-it's just... Where's Lucy!?" I suddenly gasp, clutching my chest as if I have a chance of covering it. My legs are still splayed across Bowdie's hulking chest, and his hands are gripping parts of me nobody's ever seen, let alone touched.

I don't mean to put a dampener on things, but it hits me like a bucket of ice water, what we just did. I mean, what we're doing. Maybe it's just me so used to having Lucy as my shadow. I'm asking all the wrong questions a little too late, but Bowdie seems to feel the same once he picks up on my sudden agitation. "She's home... *nesting*," he adds with a wry smile, making my ears prick for a reason other than hearing she's stayed home instead of coming with him for her things.

"*Nesting*?" I ask him, pouting when he shifts my legs down so I don't look like a complete dissection specimen on the table, even though if I was painted green, I could pass for a frog the way my legs are. "Why would you say that?" I add, making

him groan before he runs his hands through his hair and holds them over his eyes.

I've got my own Lucy theories, but hearing Bowdie say she's "nesting" makes me wonder how much he knows about his daughter and Josh. Even though he's quick to shrug and brush it off, it really stands out in my mind for some reason.

The secret my own best friend couldn't tell me? Maybe, but without meaning to sound like a complete, selfish bitch, right now, who cares? Even that's not a hundred percent true.

It's obvious I've kinda killed the moment by mentioning her, but Bowdie seems just as aware of our surroundings as I am. Heck, he was even drinking coffee from my dad's own mug.

What would Dad say if—

Gulp.

What would Dad say if he saw the two of us right now?

"Dad never comes home during the day," I'm quick to volunteer, not wanting the inevitable to ruin something that's only just started. "I want this... I want you, Bowdie," I'm quicker to add, surprising myself with the need inside that has me clutching at him and begging him in my mind not to stop. Not now, not ever.

I feel his huge hands on both my shoulders, easing me back. The sight of his still rock-hard erection only inches from me only makes this worse for me, in a way. I know I have a need, but this man needs that thing drained before it injures him. I'm sure of it.

"Just tell me you want this, Beth," he says earnestly, thumbing my round, flushed cheek with his thumb, the same thumbprint etched on my clit's memory for all time. "If I've been too forward... If you don't want..." he says, changing his mind about his choice of words each time until I do the only thing I can think of to stop his talking. I lean up and kiss him again. He grunts and hums low until it becomes a growl of frustration. His half-smile and shaking head tell me he's not mad. He just wants this to be perfect. I know Bowdie's a perfectionist. That's how he built his career.

“I do want this,” I whisper hoarsely, “I want you... I want... I want everything,” I confess, hoping he knows how much I mean it when I run the flat of my palm up and down the front of his jeans, making him groan and then chuckle out loud as I feel all that heat flooding back to my groin.

“You’re not making this easy, Beth,” he cautions me, bringing out the naughty side of me that figures, why not? Why not just have him take me right here, right now?

I told myself he could have me anywhere, anytime, and there’s no time like the present. Despite his own obvious need, I know he wants to show me more than just stars when I close my eyes and feel this giant dick of his erupting inside me. Bowdie’s an older man who probably appreciates the finer points of romance, like dinner and a walk on the beach first. So, I can’t help wondering if he can even wait in his present state of arousal.

I mean, I did take biology, and anyone with an internet connection over eighteen should have a pretty fair idea about how all this stuff works. Still, that doesn’t include this feeling of wanting to be close and just being together. The part of it all that makes the touching and kissing even more special.

I want it all—having someone to spend time with, stare at, or goof around and do nothing with. Bowdie doesn’t have to do anything more than he already is doing to win my heart.

“I just want your first time... our first time to be... special,” he finally rasps, clenching his jaw and almost losing his train of thought as I accidentally discover the tip of his zipper. I work it down slowly, sitting myself up properly on the edge of the table with him in front of me, really wanting to at least take a peek at what all this fuss is about.

“Beth,” he cautions me without trying to stop me. “Are you even... Can you understand what I’m...” he trails off, groaning with resignation mixed with animal lust. He moves his huge hands over mine to help me help him out of that cotton prison that had Dr. Bigg cooped up in for so long, just itching and aching to be free.

It's a thrill like nothing else, and my heart is like a rabbit's in my throat. My mouth is dry, and my hands are so shaky I can barely—

Whoa!

Like. Fucking. Whoa!

Bowdie's cock springs free, and even with both my hands, I can't grip it all the way around. Its length reaches my face, instantly painting me with a smear of his precome as he groans, gripping each side of my head and stroking my hair. He makes that face I'm guessing I made when he put his mouth on me for the first time. "My room's only up the hall," I remind him, sucking air in sharply as I gaze in awe at his erection and feel myself gape in anticipation. I'm already willing myself to take every inch of this bad boy, even if it means needing a special chair to sit in from now on.

Even though his thick, stiff organ flexes and twitches in my changing grip, Bowdie tenses up, making my eyes lift as I tilt my head to see his face. "Beth," he murmurs, groaning as I make sure he sees me swipe a few fingerfuls of my own wetness from the fresh flood the sight of his engorged cock up close has given me. Bowdie watches my hand as I lightly trace a heart on his swollen tip. I hope he can make it out before my whole hand coats him in my essence.

Using his own lube, which is running freely and mixing with mine, his perfect cock is gleaming and pulsing as I pump his thick shaft slowly with one hand. With my other hand, I run my palm over the smooth head of what must be the most beautiful penis in the world.

His groans get an edge to them. I hear his molars lock as his jaw clenches. His arousal swells more, signaling me it's time to repay the favor—the gift he's already given me today. My breaths are swift, but Bowdie sounds like he's just run a marathon, growling my name, gripping my hair hard, and tugging my face back to look up at his.

"Oh, fucking hell, Beth," he groans.

Last warning, and no, I'm not gonna stop. My hands move frantically, trying to cover as much of his hot, fat dick faster and faster. I feel another climax of mine rising, my boiling clit on a hair trigger as the fabric from my nightshirt teases me like a miniature Bowdie tongue.

I whimper out loud. Once Bowdie sees that his getting off is getting me off for the second time, it's all he can take. Focusing hard, I know I don't wanna miss a second of this, as if anyone could miss it. The guy's dick is probably visible from space.

With one final gasping grunt and growl as he says my name again, Bowdie's organ erupts, twitching and jerking violently in my hands as if it has a life of its own, painting me for real this time with thick, hot ribbons of his seed. The sight and sensation of it make me rigid as my hands grip him tighter, squeezing him until I feel my own volcanic climax being the only thing to slow my pumping hands.

We both swear loudly. Bowdie's knees actually shake, and his whole body quivers in time with my own. His orgasm is as intense as it is plentiful, and it's a taste I crave already when I feel a rivulet of his still boiling seed slip into my mouth from my cheek.

"Holy fucking shit," he gasps, gripping me and then the edge of the table to steady himself, my own climax having turned me into a moron as well as gluing me to the spot as my insides shudder uncontrollably.

"Uh-huh," I manage to wheeze after a time, both of us sharing a look that only two people who share a moment like this could understand.

Yes, now I understand what all the fuss is about. If it's the right guy, and knowing Bowdie's the only guy I'll ever do this with makes it more than just special. It means I'm his now, marked in a way I know I'll remember and cherish until I die.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Bowdie

It's better than anything. My deepest desire to have her know how I feel is as much a relief as her draining my balls, though I tried to warn her. Nothing so far has gone how I imagined it would, which is good because it is better. It's better now that she not only knows but can see and feel for herself just what she does to me. She knows what I can do to her and how we can join the two forever.

We can have this whenever we want.

The thought's cut short by the reality of our situation, but not long enough or anywhere strong enough to make me or Beth want any of this to end. I want her to know that her first time will be a little over the top. I dunno. Maybe not so over the top... a five-star suite, dinner, and a show. Perhaps just have dinner and go straight to bed, but it will be memorable. It won't be just having her yank me off at the kitchen table in her dad's kitchen. Although, I gotta say, if I'd known it would be like this, I would've been flying back much sooner. There's no way I would've stayed in London another minute if I knew how Beth felt, too.

I feel a mix of pride, satisfaction, and, as much as I hate to admit it, shame, not because of what Beth and I have done, but because it's in my best friend's house, right on his damned kitchen table, for god's sake. That's what I mean about

wanting it to be special in other ways, but Beth doesn't seem bothered one bit.

She cooing little sounds and even blowing on my still twitching dick as if it's a giant birthday candle, reminding me again that her room is just feet away and that we have all day. My impulse thought is that maybe I'm too old to have the sex drive that could keep up with a freshly aroused vixen like Beth. She doesn't just like it. She fucking *loves* it. I can tell, but my own arousal that won't quit isn't showing any signs of giving up either, even after redecorating Brad's kitchen for free.

"You can take me someplace special *after*," she announces with a purr, slowly working my shaft again, looking like a girl who wants to play with her new toy a lot longer. She makes me groan aloud as I wonder why I'd fight it a second longer.

I scoop her up in my arms, making her squeak. The six steps to her room are a blur before I toss her onto her bed, already devising ways to position and claim her. Beth's writhing on the spot, tugging her nightshirt down tight between her legs, making her tits press so hard against the thin fabric I think I know where my mouth can start this time.

Her phone springs to life, lighting up my peripheral vision. The name "Lucy" is in big white letters on the screen, matched only by the shrill and distorted ringtone of some song only a girl Beth's age could know. If ever there was something to kill a moment, this is it.

"She knows I'm here," I murmur to Beth, who moves like lightning once it pegs how important it's gonna be for us from now on to know exactly where the others are at all times. This has been foolish in so many ways but oh so worth it in every other.

"Answer it," I urge her, already zipping myself back up as if Lucy's going to appear like a genie out of Beth's phone. I can see Beth having a similar reaction, sweeping her coverlet over herself for the sake of modesty to answer a damned telephone.

See what I mean about wanting to do it right?

About making it special?

Shut up.

Beth answers, sounding like she's just committed a murder, sounding nothing like how the two of them usually talk that I've ever heard. She goes pale, and without being able to look me in the eye, she hands the phone to me. To me! Lucy's asked her to pass the phone over instead of the usual crazy natter between them.

She'll know. Lucy's not stupid. God! How the fuck am I gonna explain this?

"Uh, yes. Hullo, Lucy," I hear myself saying in a deep baritone, sounding more like a game show host than her father. "I-I'm fine," I choke, recovering when she demands to know what's going on and why I sound so weird. "Just had something go down the wrong way," I rasp.

Beth shoots me a wide-eyed look before rolling them, falling back onto her bed in a mock faint, and covering her head with a pillow.

"Well, I asked if you wanted to come with me," I remind Lucy once she whines in my ear about taking off and leaving her all alone at home, even though it was her idea.

"Now Beth's gonna think I just abandoned her. She'll think I can't even go there myself to pick up my things!" Lucy complains as if she never stopped for breath after chewing me out over breakfast this morning.

I frown, and not just because of how annoyed I am at Lucy's timing or even the fact we're both doing something that's making more problems than it's gonna solve. She doesn't know about Beth and me. The only two people who know what's happening are in this room, and I'd like to keep it that way for now. I'm frowning because I'm not sure what's gotten into my daughter or even who the hell she is anymore. Last I spoke with her before coming back, everything was fine. Now she's just acting strange, to put it mildly... said the father who was just about to boink her best friend. I still plan to once I know I can get us somewhere we won't be disturbed.

It was stupid of me to lose control like that. It won't happen again. It can't. We need to keep it between us and just for us. No interruptions allowed.

"Lucy, what is it with you?" I ask her hotly. "I told you I was —" I start to inform her, but she talks over me. "I guess I need to know how long you're gonna be. I just needed a few things... for cleaning," she says, sounding about as convincing as my "going to Beth's to pick up your things" story, even though I do plan to go home with her stuff... at some point.

"Uhhh... Well, that depends." I muse aloud, catching on that my daughter's playing a game of her own. She suddenly needs to know when I'll be home, but why? It's reassuring, though, and I feel myself relax, which transfers to Beth's features immediately once she sits back up, propping herself on one elbow and shamelessly eavesdropping in on the call I was sure she would take instead of me.

"I was gonna go to the office after this," I tell Lucy half-truthfully. It is somewhere I was planning on visiting at some point. "I won't be back on that side of town for hours, maybe not even until later tonight," I explain.

I emphasize the words "hours" and "tonight" for Beth's benefit, too, reminding her with a sultry look that I intend to finish what we started this morning. And today. No waiting. There's no time for that. As for the rest of our days together, Beth and me? Well, that's a bridge we'll either have to cross or burn together or maybe a little of both.

The change in Lucy's tone is instant, like she's suddenly relieved, making my dad brain wonder what she's really up to or maybe she's running a fever.

My second brain, my caveman penis brain, is still swollen and throbbing for my daughter's best friend. *He* tells me everything's fine as long as he gets to plant his seed inside her. It's all the cover we need to have for the day I know we both want together. Perhaps Lucy also wants some me time to herself, having spent so much time with Beth over the past six months.

I ask Lucy if she wants me to hand her back to Beth, but she surprises us both by cheerfully declining and signing off, hanging up before Beth can even say a word to her bestie.

“What the heck was all that about?” Beth quizzes me, both of us looking at each other and acknowledging the bullet we just dodged.

“What if she’d just turned up?” Beth realizes aloud, her body rigid with alarm, but I’m not worried. I’ve got everything I need right in front of me. We just need to get somewhere a little more private.

“Do you think you can wait a half hour?” I remark, glancing down at the beam of dick I have for my girl, still swelling the front of my jeans. I hum with satisfaction as I watch her hair bounce when she nods, eyeing the one thing we know she needs.

“Then get yourself dressed,” I order her calmly. “I think I know a place we won’t be disturbed.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

B eth

Bowdie's got a point, and not just the thick, blunt one he was about to put inside me before we were interrupted—the point that we need to keep our little forbidden romance a secret if this is gonna work. Unfortunately, I can't keep my mouth shut, which happens to be my biggest failing as a person.

Since the attitude she gave me last night and calling me this morning only to brush me off and speak to her dad instead, I know one person I *won't* be sharing secrets with anytime soon. Even though she didn't tell me her big secret yesterday, I don't think you'd have to be a genius to figure out she wants to keep something to do with her and Josh under wraps from her dad and me. I mean, she's been grouchy as hell lately. Now throwing up at the drop of a hat and suddenly wanting to be alone? Plus, even Bowdie made his own observations going so far as to use the word “nesting.” He said it himself.

If Lucy can't tell her best friend she's pregnant, then who is she gonna tell? Not her dad, fresh back from London, that's for sure. Plus, do I really *want* a friend like that?

Since that Josh guy showed up, it's been a battle between Lucy and me to stay the way we were. The change in her has been gradual, but now what, especially if she's carrying that creep's baby?

I'm all in once Bowdie suggests we get out of the house to go somewhere we're guaranteed not to be disturbed. I have to

leave that part up to him between getting myself dressed and making sure the kitchen looks like a kitchen again.

Once we're on the road, I comment on how calm Bowdie seems, which makes him chuckle. He glances over at me when we stop at a set of lights, tracing my hair back from my face and making me blush.

“What’s there to be worried about?” he asks aloud, daring the whole world to prove him otherwise. “I’ve got the most beautiful girl at my side, and I’m gonna spend the day showing her just how special she is,” he says, making my lip quiver with emotion before I bite down on it.

I already feel that compulsion in me to tell... to do what I always do, and blab whenever someone asks me to keep a secret.

Lucy didn't tell you anything, remember? If there's no secret, then there's no harm in saying what you think "might" be wrong with Lucy, is there?

I'm still at odds with myself over it. I know tomorrow I won't be as mad at Lucy as I am today, and stirring up trouble for her and her dad is the last thing I want for any of us, especially now that I have my own little secret. Not so little, really. A Dr. Bigg-sized secret involving me riding him like a pogo stick rates up there with Lucy being pregnant. I mean, if she *is* pregnant. Grrr! I don't know what to do about it, and it's only moments before Bowdie picks up on my mood.

“What’s on your mind?” he asks me casually. “You still thinking about Luce?”

I nod before I can stop myself, already wanting to cover my mouth with both my hands so I don't blab what I'm thinking. Out of everyone, Bowdie's the last person I wanna lie to ever, but is not saying something the same as telling a lie, even if you know it's gonna get someone else in trouble either way?

If there was one man who'd know the answer to that, it's Bowdie. He's super-smart apart from being super-handsome, but even asking him that would kinda give away what I'm thinking. As far as I know, Bowdie's never heard of Josh and

thinks Lucy's a single, eighteen-year-old girl like me. I mean, I *was* single. Ugh! See? I don't know what to make of it.

"I think me coming home early got her a little bent outta shape, is all," Bowdie remarks, glancing at me when I stay quiet. I crimp my lips shut tight as a subtle compromise from maybe using the seatbelt as a gag.

We drive in silence, which Bowdie doesn't seem to mind. He reaches for my hand that he rests in his lap and squeezes from time to time, letting me know in his own way that everything will work out just fine. I hope it does, for both our sakes, but it sure makes it easier to think about other things being so close to Bowdie. Finally... and all in less than one day! That has to be some kind of record.

I tell myself that no matter what happens, as long as I'm true to Bowdie and myself, we can't go wrong. I also remind myself that I'm only guessing Lucy's pregnant. I don't know for sure. So, for today at least, for the next few hours, I need to put all that Lucy business outta my mind if I want to make the most of what already feels like a special adventure, Dr. Bigg style.

It's not quite all the way into the city, but on the fringe bordering the river, there's a newish five-star hotel that kinda loomed up outta nowhere over the past six months. When I see it looming up in my field of vision and Bowdie crane his neck low so he can see under the visor of his windshield, I assume that's where we're headed.

"You're still... Ya know?" Bowdie asks a little awkwardly as he glances at me again. I nod feverishly to let him know I'm still keener than ever to continue what we've started, but it seems there's just no keeping anything from him. It's like he can read my damn mind, or at least the chapter headings and table of contents. I squeeze his huge hand in both of mine, leaning over and pecking his cheek before giving the thick line in the front of his jeans a squeeze, too, *really* letting him know I'm still interested, which draws a low rumble of satisfaction from him. The deep throb of the car's motor runs through the pair of us, or is it us making the car shake? Whichever it is, I can't get enough of it, and if this is how I feel every time

Bowdie touches me, then I'm all in on however he wants to do this.

The hotel is a lot swankier up close, casting a huge shadow over the other buildings but lending an atmosphere that could be from someplace exotic like Rome or Paris. The surrounding shopping district looks a little dated and tired next to it, but it's all I can see by the time Bowdie pulls up or skids to a stop, I should say. He has to hit the brakes to avoid hitting some idiot stepping right out in front of the car. I open my mouth in a gasp of shock.

Bowdie's massive hand and arm protect me, holding me firmly in my seat and feeling way better than any airbag or seat belt as my chest bristles under his touch. It's his reaction, coupled with the idiot in question, that has my gasp turn into a groan of near disbelief.

Josh.

Even though Bowdie's stopped, Josh lays both hands flat on the hood as if he's somehow holding it back, acting like a complete dick, but that's Josh in a nutshell. His eyes lock onto mine and then follow the line of Bowdie's hand to the man driving the car he's just stepped out in front of. Seeing his beady gray eyes narrow as a malicious grin forms on his face, I know in a split second, Josh will use this against me—seeing me about to go into a hotel with Lucy's dad alone. Bowdie's hand gripping my chest right now isn't how I want Lucy or anyone else to find out about the two of us, but Bowdie's reaction shocks me the most until I realize Bowdie doesn't know Josh from anywhere. Although there's no real harm done, I feel my chest tighten for all the wrong reasons when Bowdie slams the car into park and leaps from the driver's seat, gripping Josh by the collar and lifting him off the ground.

Josh isn't a little guy, but this is what I mean when I say Bowdie is big. I've never seen him so wound up either, and I figure it must be because Josh touched his car or something—some taboo guy thing the fool's just gone and done.

“You wanna keep your eyes where you're going, you hear me?” Bowdie growls, pulling Josh closer so his nose is almost

touching.

Josh looks like a guy who may have actually just shit himself, but I don't feel like rushing to interfere when Bowdie growls words for all the world to hear that grab me by the heart as much as he's got Josh by the throat.

"You wanna look at her? Even *think* about looking at her? You've got nerve, boy. I oughta—" Bowdie snarls, making me clasp my hands over my chest, not because I'm worried about him or what he might do to Josh. I'm not even bothered too much when a security guard almost half as big as Bowdie appears, calling for some backup on a two-way radio.

It's the most heroic, psychotic, and crazy thing anyone's ever said or done for me. Because of me. I don't know why, but I almost tear up with emotion. If Bowdie can turn into a maniac just because he even thought someone was looking at me? Well, maybe he has stronger feelings for me than just wanting to use me as some plaything.

However, my swoon-worthy moment quickly turns to something else once I remember who Bowdie's got in his grip —*Josh*. The smile that plays on the guy's mouth once it pegs he's avoiding a beating thanks to security showing up is enough to make me wanna wipe it off for him myself. Bowdie exercises restraint before the security guards all caution him. Josh's eyes shift to mine, letting me know with his smug grin that he knows my little secret now. He's met Lucy's dad for the first time, but it's played out in Josh's favor because now he has something over both of us—if we still wanna be careful about being found out, that is.

Looking at Bowdie, standing so tall and tense and so damn strong, I don't think he cares less who knows about us right now because he wants what I want. He wants the two of us someplace where we can be alone. Before we even check in, it's obvious we won't be doing it in a five-star luxury hotel once a team of security guards spills out of the foyer.

Bowdie reluctantly lets Josh slip from his iron grip as we share a frustrated look. Josh, instantly a victim, which he starts hamming up, rubs his neck and asks security to call the police.

The word “lawyer” is something else I hear from him before Bowdie’s back in the car growling to himself before shooting me an apologetic look.

“I think we might go somewhere else. I hear the room service here isn’t all it’s cracked up to be,” he mumbles, trying to make light of it all as he puts his car back into gear, my hands still pressed over my heart.

Somehow we both know this is gonna be way harder to keep to ourselves than either of us first thought and now that Josh has seen us together? It’s only a matter of time before the truth is out.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Bowdie

I've never been so mad. Not since... not since Cathy died.

This is different in so many ways. I was mad as hell for years when Cathy died, but never once, not even when she was alive, did the thought of another guy looking at her set me off like this. With Beth, I feel different. Beth does something that makes me whole inside in a way that turns me hyperprotective of anything or anyone who even looks like they're hinting at interfering with what I know we have between us.

With Lucy's mom, Cathy, I was young and just going through the motions of a relationship. I love her today as much as I loved her then, but we didn't *connect* like Beth and I. I lost a friend and Lucy's mom when Cathy died, but I don't feel like I lost the missing piece of my soul. That's what Beth is, whether she knows it or not.

Beth is my one and only. I can see it now, and having to wait all this time to see it is a small price to pay, just like her dad and Lucy finding out will be, too. It seems I will have to work on reigning in my instincts. I can't go around strangling every guy who looks at Beth, can I?

Beth's not rattled either, which isn't helping. I'm supposed to be the mature, older man here. She only looks cuter by the second, hearts in her eyes as she stares up at me adoringly, her hands over her heart.

“I know another place,” I say aloud, trailing off once I realize how much is gonna be involved in trying to keep this a secret while weighing up the so-called “consequences” in my mind. I’m a straight talker. I always speak my mind. Keeping a secret about something I feel so strongly about is not part of how I’m made.

Glancing at Beth and keeping one eye on the road, she’s making that same face as before. She looks like she’s thinking about something apart from us that’s eating her, while it’s clear she’d be better off if it were me doing the eating right now.

“What is it?” I ask her sternly, not wanting or needing any other unhappy little mishaps to ruin what’s already become a challenge of being alone with Beth. It’s like the cue she needs to tell me, though. Before I know it, I hear the steering wheel groan and creak in my hands because I’m gripping it so hard, especially when she gives the shit stain I just grabbed by the neck a name.

“You know the guy?” I ask in a tone of disbelief when she tells me who we just almost ran over, my anger boiling over into my words.

“He-he’s just a guy from school,” Beth quickly adds, but now she has my full attention. I give her a firm look that demands nothing but the truth, and all of it, even if it is gonna kill me.

“He’s... Ugh! I may as well just tell you, even though she’ll freak. Lucy and Josh,” she stammers, trying to find the right words, but I connect the dots.

It’s just like Brad said, although he never mentioned a name or told me what the guy looked like, probably for all the reasons I’ve just demonstrated with my behavior. Brad, like Beth, must have assumed I’d be looking to string up the guy who wants to date my daughter, but hearing it twice now and having had the little worm in my grip? I’m really not bothered... much. I mean, if he does the wrong thing or hurts Luce in any way, then I’ll gladly finish what I just gave him a taste of, but if I’m realistic about me being with Beth, being her boyfriend is the only relationship I’m thinking about right now.

“Lucy’s a pretty girl, and she is an adult. She can date whoever she wants,” I hear myself saying to Beth, who’s mouth drops open before she narrows her eyes, playfully punching my arm and making her hand crack.

“And *I’m not pretty?*” she pouts as she shakes her hand, sucking some air between her teeth.

“You okay?” I ask her immediately, only explaining myself once I know she hasn’t hurt herself by punching me.

“You’ll never have to ask me that, Beth,” I instruct her. “You’re the most beautiful girl I’ve ever set eyes on,” I remind her, making a point to tell her every chance I get from now on until she knows it for a fact.

“What I mean is... I’m a little surprised Lucy didn’t tell me she had a boyfriend, but then again, I don’t think it’s so unusual,” I add.

Beth nods to herself as she recounts the past few minutes, seeing how “okay” I was with someone even looking at her over the news of my daughter dating the guy.

“That it?” I ask a little impatiently, hoping that’s all the big bad news I have to deal with before we can at least try to salvage the rest of our time together.

“Beth?” I ask her again, noticing her fidget and looking away awkwardly.

She finally nods. “I-I think that’s everything,” she murmurs, glancing away and out the window before giving me a look that signals she’s as ready as I am to move on from the subject.

I rumble to myself, annoyed but not angry. I’m proud of Beth for telling me and acknowledging it’s my own damn fault for flying off the handle. Even though it’s because of Beth, I can’t blame her for my own choice of actions. I can still sense she’s not telling me every little detail, but I figure there’s no point making her squirm in a bad way. Today’s supposed to be all about the two of us squirming together in a good way.

So, I'm relieved when it's Beth's only thought for the rest of the way. "Where to?" she asks airily, matching the change in mood once I crack the windows a little to clear the air between us literally.

Her question makes me smile to myself. "My office," I croon, remembering how long I used to sit there before leaving for London. I used to think about claiming her on my desk even back then when I still thought I could control myself when it came to Beth. It was a fantasy then, but I can't help feeling the thrill of satisfaction because, one way or another, I usually do get what I want.

"Your office?" Beth asks, almost whining, but it makes me chuckle because she's probably picturing a busy place filled with people... and no room service.

"You'll see," I assure her, glad when she reaches for my hand again as I drive, even more glad when she rests it in her lap this time. She lets me feel just how warm and ready she is down there. It's a subtle maneuver, but it makes me forget all about what just happened.

"Maybe *I* could help out... in the office," Beth coos, shifting in her seat and mewling a little when my fingers find the seam of her track pants, pressing firmly into her slick little valley.

"Now you're getting the hang of it," I rasp, wishing we'd gone straight to the office after all, but I was hoping to blow Beth away with a few other things first. Needs must be met, I guess. I can wow her later if she can walk straight, but her comment gives me a great idea.

"You, uh... You got any office experience?" I ask, trying to sound professional because I might have a real-life job for her if she's up for seeing me all day, every day.

"Not yet," she grins after opening her eyes wide a moment, gripping my hand with both of hers and forcing me to keep my eyes on the road as I feel my hand disappearing down the front of her pants. No underwear. Good girl.

Fortunately for me, the drive to the office is only a few blocks over the bridge, and traffic's pretty light. By the time we slip

into the underground parking, Beth's flushed cheeks and panting breaths let me know just how ready she is for her first on-the-job training session.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

B eth

The whole running into Josh thing would normally have me on edge, rattled, to say the least. Once it's clear Bowdie won't quit until he's claimed me properly as well as crafted the genius plan of having me work for him as a cover story—for a while at least—I know I'm ready. I want him more than ever, and right this minute. Maybe every minute of every day from now on.

The Bigg Research Foundation takes up the entire top floor of a glass and chrome building that makes the hotel we almost stayed in look kinda small by comparison.

“It'll be just us,” Bowdie assures me, scooping me into his arms and walking us both to the elevator once he's parked in the VIP spot in an otherwise empty parking garage.

I feel my belly flutter from the lift zooming up and knowing where we're headed. I can't help but gaze at Bowdie again. Awe kinda describes it, but there's also a feeling that we've known each other our whole lives, which kinda makes sense.

“I thought they hired you as a researcher,” I comment once we reach the top floor. Bowdie, as humble as ever, winces a little and shrugs.

“I am, but I'm also CEO of the foundation,” he says modestly, casually swiping us inside with a security pass and using his back to push open a thick glass door.

It's premium office space with that new carpet smell and a smattering of leather mixed in with the sumptuous tub chairs, formal-looking reception area, and a pair of giant wooden doors I know must lead to his office.

"We have a lot of donors, including the owner of this place," he adds. He suddenly shakes his head as he catches himself talking shop, but it really interests me.

His hand and fingers make their way between my legs as I grip him tighter, shifting my interest to more pressing things. Bowdie swipes himself in the same as he did with the entrance doors and eases the massive door with his back. The relief on his face when he hears the electronic lock snap is kinda catching.

Alone at last.

At a glance, I can see Bowdie either wants to spend a lot of time here or he used to. It looks more like an open-plan apartment in some ways, maybe because everything is so big. Bowdie's huge wooden desk, wall of computer monitors, and TV screens tell me it's not just some kind of upscale man cave.

"I've waited months for this moment, Beth," he says, making my breath catch as I connect the intense look in his eyes with why he came back early, not just why he's brought me here today.

There's a moment of hesitation, even disbelief in my mind. That a man like Bowdie would turn his entire world upside down just for me is incomprehensible.

"You-you didn't come back from London because of me, did you?" I finally ask. As awkward a question as it feels, his instant and wide grin tells me his answer, that and the warm stiffness of his arousal pressing into my rump as he holds me up effortlessly.

"I did," Bowdie rasps. "I haven't thought of anything but you since the moment I left. I couldn't focus on my work knowing you were here, and I was... Ah, Beth!" he suddenly growls

passionately, locking his mouth over mine and kissing me long and hard.

His strong hands grip me tighter, touching me the way I need in all the right places, but nowhere near as hard as what I can feel already probing my pulsing mound. It's as if all those months of his need have been channeled into his lips on mine, my body against his. The days and weeks of my own incessant fantasy spill over into something that's finally real for both of us.

It's overwhelming in one way, knowing that the man who could have anyone has chosen me. I know we feel the same way—that we'd never feel complete or happy in this life if the other was with anybody else, but how much has he given up because of me? Would a man really drop everything and fly halfway around the world just for me? It isn't long before I'm humming the answer to myself, wheezing the word between his kisses and letting him know I'm all his for the taking.

I wonder again how much of Dr. Bigg here I'm gonna have to take now that it's showtime. I can already feel myself more than ready to take everything he's got, my chest like a marching drum, my loins aching for him deep inside me as he gently lays me out on a huge, soft leather sofa. He studies me momentarily with that familiar, knowing grin twitching at the side of his mouth while the source of his deep want knowingly tugs at the front of his jeans.

Dropping suddenly to his knees and making me squawk with nervous excitement, he makes a beeline for the tree line of my virgin pussy, yanking at my sweats and tugging them down to my knees. There's an urgency to it, but I instantly discover how much I like a little roughness from such a powerful man. I return the favor by gripping his hair by the roots and tugging him further up.

"Nu-uh," I pant. "I need something else this time. Something bigger than your mouth," I moan huskily, making him growl with understanding as he stands long enough to unzip himself. I gasp again at the sight of his engorged cock. I suck air in sharply through my teeth, a wave of preclimax goodness flooding my whole body, priming my virgin hole for the

stuffing and shattering of its eighteen-year record as the driest, loneliest place on earth.

Until today, that is.

“Beth...” Bowdie croons as I feel his huge body press over mine. The insane, hot line of his erection probes my thigh, making me swoon for real, probably sounding ridiculous. It’s music to Bowdie’s ears to hear and see me making faces and moaning like a whore for him. I always pictured my deflowering as a rigid, nervous affair that I’d most likely have to pay for, but with Bowdie, everything feels so right.

My ankles and short little legs are suddenly at gymnast level as they instinctively hook around his chiseled waist. His huge hands slide up my legs, and I can already feel that smooth, stiff heat that is Bowdie in my mind from now on. He probes me gently at first, making me gasp, then swear loudly. I’m shaking my head but smiling like a lunatic because it feels so good already.

“I’m gonna go really slow, Beth,” Bowdie assures me, aware more than ever of the extreme size difference between our bodies, let alone the train-to-tunnel ratio.

“Because soon you’re gonna have a baby,” Bowdie continues, matter-of-factly, making my eyes grow wider, the fabric of my top scratching at my stiff nipples as he peels it off. I feel his tip slowly circling my clit and making me buck, instantly craving it. I’m eager for more already, and he isn’t anywhere near inside me.

Wait, what? Did he just say, baby?

“You need to take all of me so I can put a baby in you. We need to work on making sure all those babies can come out of such a sweet, little hole,” he says in a deep voice as if he’s rehearsed the lines, or maybe he likes to talk dirty.

I mean, about to fill someone’s taco for the first time, and you wanna go talking about *babies*?

But a little Bowdie... or a little Beth...

My dad’s voice almost barges in on my innermost thoughts, wailing about “protection,” safe sex, and something or other,

but with Bowdie so close like this, knowing this is it? It would be like him giving me two gifts instead of one—claiming me as his own and planting a seed I know he'll tend to for as long as we live. The thought of a dominant gene pool as solid as Bowdie's makes me like the idea more by the second if it means we get to do this more often, and by often, I mean every damn chance we get if I have my way.

My hands grip Bowdie's wrists. The tension in his arms and whole body is like a giant steel spring. His hands run up my top and back down over my belly to my waist. I grip them here, wanting him to hold me hard in case I leap off the couch or slide out from under him.

Leather is a good choice of covering, though, when he makes me this wet. I wonder if they do bedsheets in leather...

My breathing's so fast, and my pulse thunders in my ears. It almost sounds like Bowdie's underwater when he grunts and groans, stretching me wide enough to fit the swollen head of his manhood, which feels like about a mile so far.

I whimper his name, shifting my gripping claws of hands to his shoulders and back, running over the smooth muscle as he inches into me further. "Beth!" he says suddenly, a cautioning look in his eyes as his jaw clenches tight.

The flexing pressure inside me is almost too much to bear, and I cry out one last time as a girl. Feeling myself yield to him, I moan loudly for the first time as a woman.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Bowdie

She's mine. It's been less than twenty-four hours since I stepped off the plane, and now Beth's mine. For all the drama, the waiting, and the running around, getting to where we are, I still say it's destiny. We're *meant* to be together and like this... *always*.

I haven't been with a woman since before Beth was born, so it feels like the first time for me, too, and it's one I know I'll remember for the rest of my life. I'm etching every sound, flash in her eyes, and sensation of my body pressed hard over hers into my memory banks.

My mouth was running about babies, no less, but Beth wasn't faking when she said she'd take everything I had for her. I plan on making sure of it—babies, a ring, a white picket fence, the whole package... *Bigg family style*.

Before any of that, we have this. We have now. We have each other. The feeling of her butted up against me like a missing jigsaw piece makes me whole again. It's the feeling of gripping her childbearing hips and being inside her for the first time, knowing how perfect she really is. That and how goddamned tight she is, as well as how fucking cute she looks. It's only fair to say I have to work twice as hard not to finish before I even start, if you catch my meaning.

It's a passing second, the last moment of urgency between us, because now everything's as it should be. It takes a little time

and some extra control, but once Beth finds her rhythm, it isn't long before she's grinding and bucking and matching every one of my grunting thrusts and humming growls with her own wild dance underneath me.

The bliss on her features mixes with a fierce look of determination to make me happy, I know, but also to get the most out of her new toy for the first time. Long before she comes for the first time with me inside her, I can already see that it won't be her last time today either. I'll make sure of that, and this new toy of hers? It's not the kind that needs batteries or even wears out. The insane itch I've been trying to scratch myself for six months is finally getting the relief it needs.

Having torn the remaining clothes off us, Beth and I are a slippery set of sweat-sheened body parts when I feel her getting close. My seed rises in me as if it just knows. The same force that's brought us together, that's made all this possible, is running on smooth tracks.

"Bowdie!" Beth gasps, tensing up and gripping me like nothing else, her not-overly-sharp nails digging so deep I growl with pleasurable pain. I grin, hoping it's deep enough to leave a scar, hoping it does before I join her. The pair of us climax together so strongly and for so long, my release so big. It would be a wonder if she didn't get pregnant our first time.

Her quivering body jerks and spasms with her orgasmic internal convulsions, rippling from her to me and back again. It's a feeling I never want to end. In a way, it doesn't. It just kinda turns the volume down after a time, Beth shivering and gasping with little aftershocks. I stroke her hair back, kissing her everywhere and anywhere my lips land.

"Oh, Beth... I-I..."

"Jesus, Bowdie! I—" Beth calls out sharply, silencing us both as she comes a second time, drawing another intense orgasm from me in as many moments, neither of us getting to finish what we were gonna say but sharing the thought long after it subsides. The words hang in the air in the fractional space between us.

There's no real need to say it out loud. Maybe she thinks it's too soon, or maybe I'd think it's immature, but I haven't waited six months to claim her and then just grunt and lie on top of her, snoring.

No.

"I-I love you, Beth," I tell her gently, cupping her face in my palm and thumbing the single silver tear, pressing it to my lips before kissing her with it.

"I love *you*, Bowdie," she says after sniffing back a wave of emotion, finally laughing, wanting to comment on how stupid she must look or sound, but I won't have any of that.

"There's nothing about you that isn't *perfect*, Beth. Don't let me catch you thinking otherwise, understand?" I caution her, meaning every word.

She nods, crimping her lips and hugging me tight, letting me know all she needs now is for me to hold her and to watch over her while the sleep playing in her eyes takes her for a time.

I've already taken my post—to watch over her, serve her, and please her every hour of every day from now on.

So I fell asleep with her on my first watch, but it's kind of a figurative as well as a literal thing. We both jump awake with a start, a cell ringing, Beth's blaring ringtone, and a thundering banging on my office doors. It's a rude awakening after the magic we shared a few hours ago, Beth's naked body still clinging to mine as we somehow formed a human knot on the couch as we slept.

"Shit!" Beth gasps.

"Fuck! Shit!" I echo right back to her, both of us sharing the look. It's the moment we both knew had to come, but by god, did it have to come so soon? An earthquake or alien invasion would be preferable, but being suddenly disturbed causes my

clinical side to kick in. A good doctor never loses his cool in a crisis. In a second, I feel in control again.

“Cover up. I’ll answer the phone in a minute,” I instruct Beth point-blank. She gives a single nod, relieved someone could put a plan of action into her brain, the brain I may well have fucked right out of her.

Once I see her moving—scooping up clothes before discovering the bathroom—I slip into my jeans and tug a shirt on. Then I feel the annoyance at being disturbed again boiling up inside me. Throwing the office doors wide, I’m ready to deal harm to whoever dared to interrupt.

“Daddy!” Lucy shrieks, almost making me do the same.

It’s like seeing Cathy’s ghost for a moment as if the image of Cathy and Lucy are superimposed for just a second. Then Cathy’s gone, and it’s just Lucy, but that means Lucy’s... here... at my office... like right now with Beth in the bathroom.

Double-fuck!

I can see the phone in her hand, trying to call Beth, whose name flashes like Morse code, signals of stress incoming, but she doesn’t pick up. I’m hoping Beth can hear Lucy, too. If I can keep her out of sight, we might just get out of this, but Lucy’s far too preoccupied with her own emotions to even give me a second glance, least of all explaining why she’s here, let alone how she got up here.

“The door downstairs was open. I tried calling you, but you didn’t pick up,” she sniffs. Her red lids and shivering speech tell me everything I need to know. She’s upset.

So much for high-tech security...

When a girl Lucy’s age is upset, it’s usually over a boy, right? Like a certain boy I met a few hours ago... Josh. Or was it James?

“I-I need to speak to you, Dad. It’s kinda important,” Lucy says, struggling to keep a brave face, but it’s clear she’s falling apart.

I hook an arm around her shoulder, moving her toward the couch before a rapid change of direction is required. I'm not sitting my daughter on that couch, not where I just claimed her best friend.

"You sit here, and when you feel like it, you tell me what's going on," I tell her calmly, my insides playing a different tune. A part of me expects Beth to walk out of the bathroom at any moment. The silence from not knowing what she'll do is more unnerving than if she was still spread-eagled on the couch.

Lucy clears her throat and seems to regain a ton of composure, sitting up straight with both her hands and showing me her knuckles. She reminds me of those school photos they used to get every year, but she's all grown up now and no slouch at detective work once she has more time to study me and my surroundings.

Her eyes move to the couch and then to me. My shirt. My beltless jeans. My no shoes or socks. She knows. Of course, she knows! Even I can still smell the sex in the air. We were practically drowning in the stuff!

"You still jet-lagged, huh?" Lucy asks, drawing her own conclusions. "You look terrible," she adds for effect.

"Thanks, I think," I reply dryly, relieved when the conversation steers away from me, having just fucked her best friend and hiding the evidence in my office bathroom.

Before she draws a breath to tell me, I already know. Call it whatever you want—*dad-tuition*. You just know sometimes when it comes to your kids, no matter how old they are. I force my calm face, the one I know I should've practiced more when Lucy was growing up into a teenage girl. Being the father of an only daughter isn't easy, and neither is the prospect of the conversation I think I know she's about to want to have—a fine realization to have so soon after claiming the only daughter of my best friend.

"I-I've been dating a boy," she says, chewing her lip and wringing her hands together, fidgeting on the spot like she needs to use the bathroom.

The thought gives me instant panic, and only because I didn't break the little prick's neck when I had the chance earlier.

"Lucy, if he's..." I hear myself growling, my hands balling into fists and me forgetting all about calm. I almost forget about Beth in the bathroom just long enough for Lucy to shake her head rapidly, even waving her hands before I stop myself from fully erupting into a rage.

"No, no, Daddy! It's not what you think! I mean, I thought I was, but I'm not. I'm *not* pregnant, Daddy, and Josh is a fucking asshole!"

It's the best kind of slap in the face a father can hear, but it only compounds my edginess about Beth's dad and my oldest friend, Brad.

"Daddy? Did you hear what I said?" Lucy asks again, almost boasting this time when she says it louder. "*Not* pregnant!"

My mouth quivers somewhere between a smile and the grimace I might make before screaming. However, my composure is trademark when it's not flying off the handle, so in a second, I've recovered myself, asking Lucy in a firmer tone why that should be good news.

"If you're not, then you thought you were," I tell her in a somber but not altogether disappointed tone.

"What really bugs me is you couldn't tell me earlier," I confess to her, honesty being my new base character trait, right, Bowdie?

Shut up.

Lucy hurls herself at me, needing her father and a big guy who might just wanna wring Josh's neck. I feel her shivering and notice how stick-thin she is compared to Beth. I notice how cold she feels. I ask if she wants a blanket or something. The shock of her news can be quite literal. The doctor in me sets her down again, lifting a blanket from the back of a chair and draping it over her shoulders like she's at the scene of an accident, which I guess she will be. We both will be if Beth doesn't stay put.

I can see the headlines now: “*Train Wreck in Downtown Doctor’s Office. Two Dead. Authorities Baffled.*”

But Beth does stay put, and I know she must be hearing every word, despite the heavy wooden doors and thick walls. Lucy has a certain way with her announcements, especially when the news is super good or super bad, but it isn’t long before the inevitable.

Lucy wants to freshen up, making for the office bathroom without a word. My reflex is to leap right in front of her, startling her to a gasp. I guess it’s either I lie to her once and add to it or tell the truth and fall where I stand.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

B eth

Lucy showing up is just typical. It's so like her to turn up unannounced, even if she has been trying to call Bowdie and me separately for a couple of hours.

A couple of hours! Bowdie sure has plenty of miles to the gallon, but right now, it should be me in his arms, afterglow, and the rest of the day doing more of the same. I thought that was the plan, anyway, but following Bowdie's orders to the letter, I lock myself in the bathroom that's as big as our whole house.

I dress swiftly and quietly, apart from the odd wince and soft moan as I pull my pants back up, gently setting my freshly popped cherry down on the closed seat of the toilet while listening. I shamelessly eavesdrop so I don't miss a single detail. Lucy not pregnant is the biggest news, and what a relief that is. I'm assuming she didn't want to be pregnant, so the other big news I catch with a craned neck and big ears is that she finally agrees.

Josh *is* an asshole. Amen to that. About time Luce saw reason for a change.

I just hope he didn't do anything stupid when she broke it off.

I feel like I should go to her, but if I show myself now, we're gonna have one helluva lot of explaining to do, and that mixed with Lucy's announcement? It's not something anyone needs

right now. I can't help thinking of my dad and how things would be if the shoe was on the other foot. If he was finding out about Bowdie and me... If I was pregnant with his child.

Not if, Beth. When! Remember what Bowdie said about stretching you out like cookie dough to make a baby shape? Yeah, I remember. Crystal clear.

Once Lucy offloads and has her moment, there's a lot of silence and only murmurs from what I can hear until it's clear Lucy wants to use the bathroom. That's when shit gets about as real as it can right now.

My heart's in my throat, and my mind races, clutching for ideas and reasons I'd have for being in her dad's office bathroom, probably looking and smelling like he's fucked me senseless all morning.

Bowdie's deep voice travels loud and clear when he stops her.

"Ahhhh! I wouldn't go in there, Luce!" he exclaims, chuckling nervously. I can just picture Lucy's "Why not?" expression.

"I...uh... hehe... I kinda *backed up the toilet* if you really wanna know. All that airline food and being in a cramped seat for thousands of miles," he says, not holding back on the imagery that even has me making a face, glancing with disgust at the toilet though I know it's not true. The whole place is immaculate, and the bathroom smells like Bowdie—crisp and refreshing, like a forest near a waterfall.

"There's the bathroom out in reception," Bowdie explains, but Lucy knows the way.

Once I hear the office door close, I unlock the bathroom door as quickly as I dare, Bowdie's face an inch from mine as soon as I do. He doesn't tell me anything. He doesn't shush me or tell me to get out, not just yet, anyway. He kisses me. He kisses me long and leisurely before he asks me if I'm okay and if I heard everything. I nod dreamily, happy enough just to have his lips on mine again, but we really need to decide what we're gonna do about Lucy.

Do we tell her, or do we keep it a secret? If we tell, our forbidden crush turns into a full-blown "man and woman

wanting to spend every waking moment together” kind of instant soulmate relationship. Bowdie’s already decided, and whatever he wants is fine by me, although I have to admit I’m a little surprised by his response.

“While she’s busy, I want you to get fully dressed and go out as far as the elevators and wait. Once you see Lucy come back in here, then come back in,” he coaches me.

“For the job interview you mentioned when you picked up Lucy’s things?” I volunteer, proving to Bowdie that I understand the plan and coming up with a reason for my being here on the fly.

“That’s it!” he whispers, kissing me again, squeezing me as close as we dare, given the time limit. “Now hurry,” he urges me with a jut of his jaw toward the door.

Lucy could spend her whole life in a bathroom and still feel it worthwhile, but I don’t wanna take any chances, so I do as I’m told quickly and quietly. Everything goes to plan until the part where I just appear wearing track pants and an old T-shirt for my “job interview.”

Talk about a casual opening.

Then again, I’ve had my first on-the-job training this morning, and the uniform seems a little overdone. Both Bowdie and I seem to work better naked.

Lucy’s surprised to see me, of all people. She buys the whole job interview story Bowdie mentions in passing, but there’s no hiding the look in his eyes from me. He even mouths the words “I love you” to me when Lucy has her back to him at one point. Everything about our diabolical plan to keep our love a secret, for now, goes swimmingly until Lucy asks a fairly reasonable question.

“So, you got all my things from Beth’s? I might ride home with you then,” she tells Bowdie.

Normally, any other time would be fine, and yes, any other time Bowdie would have collected her things from our house, except this morning, we were kind of *busy* with other things. Bowdie grimaces, sucking in some air and making a show of

his pained expression. “I haven’t had a chance to pick up your things yet. Maybe you could go pick them up yourself?” Bowdie suggests, fumbling for his keys that should be in his pocket but could be anywhere by now.

“How’d you get here, anyway?” I ask Lucy, changing the subject while trying to sound calm and rational, even though my insides feel like they’re on a carnival ride.

She rolls her eyes to the ceiling. “*Josh* dropped me off,” she says, screwing up her face. “He got himself a job at some hotel only because he thought I was—” she starts to say, stopping herself and giving Bowdie a pleading look.

“Only because he thought I was ‘*high maintenance*,’” Lucy says, rolling her eyes again, unable to look me in mine when she says it. I guess she’s not the only one with a secret worth shedding a few white lies over.

I knew about Lucy and Josh, but I only suspected Lucy was pregnant. I never knew for sure until overhearing her tell her dad just now. It hurts that Lucy couldn’t tell me what was going on. It hurts more that she can’t even tell me after the fact that, no, she’s not pregnant. What hurts me most is knowing I’m gonna be the one doing the hurting once she finds out about her dad and me. Neither of us wants to hurt Lucy or Dad. Hell, they’re the last people we’d ever wanna hurt, but that’s just how it might happen unless they both decide how cute a couple Bowdie and I would make in the meantime.

We all stand awkwardly, me looking to Bowdie for a clear way forward and Lucy looking up at her dad, still giving him a look begging him not to tell me what he’s just found out about her and Josh.

One of the office phones on Bowdie’s desk pulses to life, and he almost looks relieved to answer it, turning away from us and murmuring in his clinical voice. That’s Bowdie, forever the picture of control in any crisis.

Lucy examines me up and down. “You all right, Beth? You seem... different,” she observes, making me flush a little, but she still hasn’t made the connection between her dad and me.

“You okay?” I ask mechanically. “About breaking up with Brad, I mean,” I explain, watching her face frown.

“I never said I was breaking up with him,” Lucy says defensively. “I just said he dropped me off,” she says, making me stifle a groan right when Bowdie turns to face me.

“Sure thing, Brad. Just here with the girls. Why don’t you come on up?” he says, shrugging with a look of disbelief as we consider how we went from having him balls-deep inside me to having the two people we’re trying to hide things from the most, both turning up within minutes of each other.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Bowdie

I guess we should be glad we got the time to ourselves we did today. I won't say I forgot how busy I usually am, but even on a day when nothing's scheduled except for Beth, it's as if the two people who can't find out are the only two to seek us out. First Lucy, then Brad. I can't help wondering, or maybe even hoping, that the two of them might somehow be up to the same shenanigans as Beth and me, but no.

Brad really is just in the area and cruising by. He noticed my car in the otherwise empty parking garage, and, like Lucy, he decided to do what neither of them had for ages and "drop by." I get it that Lucy needed to get something off her chest, and I am glad she came to me with it in the end, but probably more than anything, I'm happy she's not the one getting pregnant. That's my plan for Beth, so I don't wanna be a grandfather before I'm a father for the second time.

It's gonna be so hard on Lucy. I just know it is. Seeing Brad's cheerful face doesn't help my feelings much, and unlike Lucy, who has her own problems right now, Brad's quick to pick up on Beth being at my office. Knowing me as well as he does and as a doctor, he knows my "job interview" story is hogwash.

The girls congregate by the floor-to-ceiling windows, speaking the way girls do in low tones, their faces lined with seriousness. We menfolk chew the fat over by my desk, and I

start by quizzing Brad on why he's here, but he's more interested in what's going on here than describing his work day to me.

"You uhhh... You got somethin' going on you wanna tell me about?" Brad murmurs, stifling a grin, which means he can't be thinking what I think he is.

"What do you mean?" I ask him with a shrug. "I fell asleep," I tell him truthfully. "Jet lag."

After I drilled your daughter and made plans to make her mine forever...

Brad smiles and nods, tapping the side of his nose as if he's sharing some kind of inside information. "It's all right, big guy. I can see what's going on here, and if I'm completely honest, I'll pretend to act surprised when it's time," he says in a near whisper, making my heart freeze in my chest.

"Excuse me?" I ask, stunned if he knows about Beth and me already and even more stunned that he's being so blasé about it all.

"My *birthday* is coming up next week," Brad says knowingly, shaking his head and wagging a finger at me. "I'm touched you remembered, Bo. I really am, but you didn't have to organize a secret meeting to plan anything special. We can just have a ribs and games night like we did last night. That was fun, wasn't it?"

"Ribs and games," I repeat to him in a monotone, finding it hard to believe what I'm hearing. It makes me feel like keeping Beth and me under wraps might be easier than I thought. It's our guilty consciences making us feel like everyone else knows, but to Lucy and Brad, seeing Beth and me together is as everyday as the paint on the walls. Neither of them would ever suspect anything else going on, at least not so far. The two of us still know, making it harder to come clean eventually with every passing minute we pretend otherwise.

Beth's eyes meet mine across the room, filled with the same thoughts I'm fighting not to broadcast. We already want each

other alone again but feel like we're only gonna make things worse the longer we leave it. What are we supposed to do, make a big announcement?

"That's great you're not pregnant, Lucy! And yeah, happy early surprise birthday, Brad. Oh, by the way, Beth and I have been at it like rabbits all morning, and I'm already thinking about taking her ring shopping."

Beth creases her mouth. Even though we know we love each other in a way that's forbidden in the eyes of others, we do actually love each other. That's something neither of us can do anything about except enjoy it.

I try reverse psychology to steer "us" out of the conversation. "I met Josh earlier. Lucy's friend," I let Brad know, watching his features shift to concern and then amusement once he pegs that I'm okay with her having a boyfriend.

I'll leave it up to Lucy to tell the pregnancy thing to whoever she feels should know, but Brad's no dummy. He's got his own dad-tuition, but it's something so dark and unthinkable in his mind that he has to dismiss it. That's what I thought I could do until I saw Beth again yesterday for the first time in six months. After that, she's all I've wanted, and now that I have her, it seems like I'll have to keep her locked up somewhere with the two of us creeping around so we can be together.

Right this second is a great example. I have so much I wanna talk to Beth about, and here we are, having to stand apart almost like strangers because of what other people will think of us if we openly share how we feel. It's a deception I don't like, but the alternative is even worse right now, so with a glance of resignation, Beth and I have our first dress rehearsal in pretending we're not together—only for the sake of the others.

I gotta say, it's a feeling I don't like one bit. She is mine now, but only when we can truly be alone. Sharing "us" with the rest of the world will have to be gradual, although I don't fancy the chances of that happening smoothly either, but will it be worth it? Is it worth it?

Of course, she is. Beth is everything to me already. We have our whole lives ahead of us. That will most likely include tougher problems than facing what other people think, even if those people are my daughter and my best friend. They're both special people, and I love them, just not the same way I love Beth.

I know in my heart and soul that Beth and I have to be together, and it's gotta be a forever deal.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

B eth

Two weeks later...

It had to happen, I suppose, and it does. Unexpectedly and awkwardly, but with nowhere near the level of nuclear fallout Bowdie and I were expecting, not from Lucy, anyhow.

Her recent dalliance with Josh, who she's officially broken it off with *again*, saw a change in her. She became more solitary, even wanting to spend a lot less time with me without really saying why. I know it's because we're growing up and maybe a little further apart.

I've been helping Bowdie at the office, taking the job he offered, and Lucy's been busy looking for work herself. She's determined to get a place and pay her own way. Bowdie's in two minds about the whole thing, but it's what Lucy wants, especially once she comes by the office unexpectedly in the afternoon around the time Bowdie calls it a day, and I'm in my favorite position underneath him.

Lucy only sees her dad standing with me and holding me, stroking my hair and sliding his hands up and down my body before leaning in for a kiss like we always do around this time. Usually, the door is locked. That's all anyone would need to see to connect the dots, which Lucy does instantly.

She's shocked, sure, but the hurt in her eyes is worse than either Bowdie or I would have expected, let alone wished on

anyone. Bowdie keeps his hands on me, though, no longer shying away from the truth. I'm proud of my man for standing by me when we both need each other the most.

I'm proud of myself, too, because it's been a couple of weeks, and I'm finally pegging just what it means to be with someone like Bowdie. He's someone who I can be as devoted to as he is to me with none of the regular relationship "drama" that Lucy and Josh spend all their time on. They waste the gift of each other, but most likely, they're just not cut out for each other.

Lucy's shocked and hurt look turns into a disgusted one. Her eyes narrow on mine as she tries to say something but only shakes her head in disbelief before turning on her heel.

"Lucy!" I call after her, moving to follow her, but Bowdie's grip on me holds me firmly to the spot.

"I'll go," he murmurs, sounding calmer and clearer than I ever could, but it's not Bowdie who catches Lucy by the exit before she can run.

It's my dad, whistling to himself as the elevator doors slide open. His cheerful look turns just as quickly as Lucy's did as a single look from Lucy confirms all his conscious and unconscious suspicions before she struggles to push past him, headed for the stairs. It's like watching something valuable falling and about to shatter—too late to stop from smashing to the ground.

This is how it plays out. This is the moment Bowdie and I have been dreading, though we both knew every second together was hurtling us toward it. Bowdie's close enough to go after Lucy, but then my dad gives me the look. When his voice cracks with emotion, and he asks me everything with the single word, "Beth?" I know we can't pretend a minute longer. The look of our own that Bowdie and I share says more than words ever could.

"Why don't you come sit down, Brad?" Bowdie says calmly, but like Lucy, my dad's head is already shaking. He's not

ready and doesn't want to talk about anything that's gonna confirm his worst suspicions.

"Brad?" Bowdie says a little firmer, but it's not gonna happen. My dad's face is enough to set me crying. Even once he leaves, his hands balled into fists and his head doing nothing but shaking from side to side, I know it would only make matters worse if either of us went after them.

You could cut the tension in here with a knife, but Bowdie and I gravitate toward each other once we're alone again. His huge arms envelop me, and his slow, rhythmic breathing calms me as I cry at hurting two people I love, but only so I can be with the man I love more than life itself.

"That went well," I finally sniff, trying to make the best of a bad situation with an attempt at humor.

"I think it could've gone a lot worse," Bowdie observes, and I nod in agreement, comparing the hurt it causes in my gut with the pain of being alone forever if I'd never gotten together with Bowdie.

"I think you're right, but it still sucks," I murmur, nuzzling into his torso for comfort.

"Probably not a great idea for either of us to go home right now," Bowdie remarks, but it sounds a lot like one of his preloaded statements—an opening for something bigger and better that he usually has planned.

"Where is *home* now?" I ask, looking up at him and blinking away my tears as all my negative emotions are replaced with the good ones that my man oozes for me.

"I hear London's not so bad this time of year," he says, creasing his mouth and cocking his brow in question. He searches my eyes for any level of interest that tells him I'm all in on what we both know is a forever deal. For better or worse... that kinda thing. I know he's already got the "for richer" part sorted. The rest is up to me, I guess.

"I'll go wherever you go," I tell him instantly. "You know I will... always," I promise him. Bowdie squeezes me tight and breathes a long breath of relief as he smiles.

“That’s what I hoped you’d say. I figure a few weeks away might let the dust settle, plus I have had some interesting emails about the research project.”

“What is it?” I ask, trying to sound excited about his research, but it’s a little beyond my understanding.

Bowdie’s eyes flash with intensity, but not from my research question. “So, you’ll come to London?” he asks me again as if he was half expecting me to say no. I nod feverishly, not only because I have nowhere else to go. I meant it when I said I’d go wherever Bowdie goes.

He produces a familiar pair of my well-worn and still-damp panties from somewhere, which I must’ve lost during dictation this morning.

“I’ve already packed your things,” he smiles, shrugging when I snatch them. I try to look shocked, but like everything the man does, it only makes me want him more.

“So... you ready?” he asks after a slight pause, my belly jolting as I realize he’s not kidding.

“I was gonna ask you regardless of whether the others knew. The plane leaves in three hours,” he remarks, checking his watch.

“I might even have something else I need to ask, but I wanted to test the water first and see if you’d be up for London.”

“If you’re there with me, I’m all in. Yes!” I squeal, stifling a shriek as he lifts me off the ground, turning us both around, kissing me deep, and making my whole world spin all over again.

“I love you, Bowdie,” I mew into his ear, my heart thrilling in my heaving chest.

“I love you more,” he rasps, squeezing my behind and moving to the office door. The sound of the electronic lock snapping shut draws a low groan from us both.

Together and alone at last. Just the two of us, forever.

EPILOGUE

THREE MONTHS LATER

Bowdie

Okay, so maybe I was stretching the truth just a little. About London being nice this time of year? The place is a goddamned icebox. And rain? Don't even get me started about the rain.

Beth is in her element, having never been farther abroad than the next city back home. We take weeks playing tourists as well as keeping each other warm between the sheets when it's cold out, which is often in London.

The call to go back to London wouldn't have happened without Beth. If she'd said no and wanted to stay home, that's where we'd be, but she said yes to London.

And that other nagging question that I keep waiting for the right moment to ask?

Well, that's still smoldering, and with each passing day, I'm noticing that the changes in Beth are consistent with a girl her age being repeatedly loved, meaning I'm a doctor, so I know these things. After twenty-something years in medicine, I can see whether a woman is pregnant without a thorough examination. However, Beth still insists it's just all the home cooking she's fallen in love with, courtesy of our elderly housekeeper and very traditional British cook, Rose.

The research I abandoned didn't stop entirely when I flew out. Once there was a significant breakthrough the week after I left,

they kept going with unexpected, almost miraculous results. I can't say it's a "cure," but we have isolated the genes and a potential interaction with a bacterial protein that *might* cause the disease that took Cathy. It's a step forward, but there's a lot more to be done. So being in London makes sense for me right now, as well as for Beth, for so many reasons.

Brad replied to an email or two, short and not so sweet, but he still won't take my calls. He calls Beth a few times a week, and as long as she doesn't mention my name or why she's in London... Well, it's better than ignoring her. That's all I'm gonna say about that.

Lucy? I wish that one was so easy. She'll never forgive me for what I've done—for what Beth and I do every chance we get. Maybe she never will until she finds true love because that's the only way anyone could truly understand what happened between Beth and me. Beth calls her as often as she can. Sometimes Lucy picks up, and other times not. She won't answer my calls, but I still make sure the house and everything else back home are fully funded, so she's never without anything.

They arrested Josh about a month after Lucy broke up with him for good. He lost his temper in a way that'll see him doing about three to five years. I'm just glad Lucy got free of him before he was at his worst. I'm happier still, and I hate to say this, that she never carried his baby.

Today's the day. After a lot of face-pulling, a real-life dizzy spell, and no period for weeks, Beth's finally agreed to have me take her to another "proper doctor." She's a friend from the institute who is an expert in all things female and baby. I don't think Beth believes she isn't pregnant. More like she knows she is, but it's maybe a little less stressful to make out like she isn't, just until she gets used to the idea anyhow. It's a little unconventional, but I've gone along with it for long enough now. It's time for Beth to see for herself.

I wouldn't let anyone else near Beth, and it's all only on the strict condition that I'm present throughout the whole examination. I wonder why Beth wanted to put it off for so

long. Ha! As if I have some overprotective streak or something.

Dr. Lynn Bancroft has rooms close to our place, and her informal style office makes Beth much more at ease, even when the ultrasound machine gets wheeled out.

“I-I thought I was just getting a blood test or pee in a cup, that sort of thing,” she says to me in a not so happy now it’s actually happening tone of voice. I squeeze her hand and tell her she’ll be fine.

“I just want to make sure there’s nothing wrong if you’re not pregnant,” I tell her, still a little concerned that Beth won’t even accept the idea when she’s clearly showing a baby bump and acting a lot like a pregnant woman lately.

There is a blood test and some pee in a cup, but being a man of science and a doctor, I want to see our child for myself—the baby I know I planted in Beth not long ago. I know I did on our first night.

“Are you a little nervous?” the doc asks Beth. “We can keep the gender a surprise if you’d prefer,” she adds. Beth looks to me for advice as the light bulb goes on in her mind.

“Up to you, honey,” I remind her. “You’re doing all the heavy lifting.”

I leave the doctor to her business, not interfering and playing the doting partner as I hold Beth’s hand. The images I used to remember as grainy and hard to see have come a long way in the past decades. I’m not exactly sure what happens next. I remember seeing double suddenly as if there were two babies inside Beth. Then the room goes sideways and then black. Waking up or coming to a few minutes later, it’s me on an exam table and Beth holding my hand.

“What? What happened?” I ask, feeling lightheaded still.

Dr. Bancroft leans in, slapping a folder against my chest, obviously late for something else because I fainted.

“It’s twins, stud-muffin. Congratulations! I gotta fly. Emergency,” she clips, then gone in a moment.

Beth chews her lip and seems nervous, but I have to ask her myself to make sure I just heard right.

“Did she just say...?” I ask, feeling faint again, grateful to be lying down already. Beth’s head nods furiously before she finally smiles wide, relieved at the effect the news is having on me.

“You-you don’t mind?” she asks shyly, hooking her arms around my neck before I plant the biggest kiss of her life on her lips.

Mind? How could I mind?

Two babies! It’s like a dream come true, especially today because I’ve already planned to propose to Beth. I knew she’d find out we were pregnant, and no children of mine will ever be born without a proper mom and dad. It’s just that old-fashioned side of me, I guess.

So, I’m not surprised Beth’s only hang-up about being pregnant is that she isn’t married. My big ring box opening is a bit of a fizzer, only because she’s been waiting for me to ask for weeks, apparently.

“But the answer is yes?” I have to ask her. “You will be my wife, Beth?”

“And mommy to our beautiful babies!” she finally squeals, admiring the ring at a distance and finally giving me a smile that’s as beautiful as she is—my soon-to-be wife, who already has two on the way.

I just knew Beth and I would be perfect. It doesn’t get any better than this.

EPILOGUE

SEVERAL MONTHS LATER

B eth

I love Bowdie. I really do, but when I have two babies that both wanna come out at the same time, and my man Bowdie's just telling me to "*breathe?*" I call him things that even make him blush, and we've said it all and done it all in the bedroom. I draw your attention to the two babies trying to escape my belly as proof.

In between trying to breathe like he says, calling him every name under the sun, I see Bowdie's face shift when I gasp, "Where's my dad!?"

I need him just as much as I need Bowdie right now.

And Lucy... Of course, I need Lucy, but where are they?

Oh, that's right. I had a forbidden crush that ballooned into a passionate romance with her dad, who knocked me up, so...

"They'll be here," Bowdie reassures me, rubbing the middle of my back, soothing me but annoying the shit out of me at the same time before I feel like he's the sweetest man on earth all over again.

This is childbirth, people. It's complicated.

At one point, once the contractions really start, I'm sure there's a wild animal in the delivery room. One that speaks just like me and screeches "Bowdie" a lot, but he's as solid as a rock.

My rock's right where I need him, and despite fainting when he found out we were having twins, he's been the calming force between us whenever I get overwhelmed. I'm more grateful than anything that Bowdie insisted we come back to the States before I was too far along. Neither of us wanted to settle in London forever, but for me, it's important as an American to have my babies where they were made.

Plus, I missed my dad and Lucy like nothing else. I'm amazed they still won't treat Bowdie or me the same, even though they're less aggressive than they used to be about the whole thing, but I rarely see Dad. Bowdie doesn't like to talk about the fact that Lucy never visits. I thought bygones would be bygones, but even Bowdie's messages to them both that I'm in labor haven't changed their opinions about us.

I'm well into the birthing process in no time. Bowdie's strong hand grips mine. His three-day beard growth scratches my forehead as he kisses away the sweat and tears, sharing every second of what's a frightening but beautiful and amazingly painful thing all rolled up into a blur that feels like it'll never end.

Then, just as quickly as it all came on, it's over.

They're here. Our babies. Perfectly healthy, over-sized, one-of-a-kind, beautiful, darling babies.

"They're just perfect," I coo, taking one and then another into my arms, Bowdie's hands like giants compared to the tiny new lives.

"You're perfect," Bowdie reminds me, pecking my cheek and whispering he loves me. He tells me he's glad everything went safely, too.

He's smitten with the twins as much as I am. Another love at first sight we can share and cherish forever now. An actual family of my own... I can't believe it still. It's so surreal.

Little not-so-old Beth Parker, mother of two and married to the famous (in some circles) Dr. Bigg.

"I guess it's just us four then," I observe long after we've all been checked over and given the all clear, Momma and babies

resting and hubby keeping watch over his brood.

Bowdie grunts and looks out the window, but the timid knock at my hospital room door has us both looking up.

“Can we come in?” Lucy asks timidly, her eyes shining with tears before I half croak, half squeal for her to get her ass over to me and check out these babies.

My dad strolls in, trying to avoid eye contact with Bowdie, but with these babies so fresh out of the oven, all six of us are fussing and gushing over the little ones. Everything that made Lucy and Dad so mad at us vanishes like magic. The twins are like a magic spell that changes everything back to the way it was before, but better.

Now we’re a bigger family by two more with Lucy and my dad. I can tell already that Bowdie’s planning some brothers and sisters for these two. That’s something I know I could get used to if they make me feel as special as I do today.

Mom, wife, and now best friend, and daughter all over again.

EPILOGUE

TWO YEARS LATER

Bowdie

“I’ll get it!” I call out to Beth, moving toward the door, walking like a jagged robot with one kid clutching each of my limbs. They all giggle like maniacs because the doorbell rang while they’re using me as a tree house in the living room.

Beth’s just changing into something without a milk stain because her dad’s coming over with Lucy. It’s Brad’s birthday, so we figured we’d have them here, and it could be just like old times—some ribs, a few beers for Brad, and then maybe even some board games if Beth can stay up that late. Neither of us gets much sleep these days, so anything after eight o’clock is considered “late” and maybe even risky.

Mind you, it’s not exactly babies keeping Beth up all night. It’s usually me busy trying to put another one in her, considering it’s our only real alone time once the kids are asleep. Fortunately for Beth and me, they are deep sleepers,

The bell rings again, and in my best tree house giant’s voice, I boom, “I’m coming! I’m coming!” The kids shriek with laughter and excitement because they know who’s here. It’s Aunt Lucy and Grandpa Brad who spoil these kids rotten every time they visit.

Beth’s shriek from behind me as I open the door grabs Lucy’s attention straight away, and the two of them are off like a couple of teenagers, leaving Brad and me to carry everything in. I mind the kids who cling to me like koalas, still young

enough to be fascinated by everyday goings on but big and strong enough to hang on and interfere at a moment's notice. They eventually tire of us menfolk once Beth and Lucy's shrieks and laughs reach the kitchen. The kids scuttle off toward their mommy and Aunt Lucy.

I study my oldest friend, Brad, noticing how he looks around at our place and things. Not in a bad way, though. The place sure could use tidying up, but as soon as it's clean, it's only a few minutes away from being back to chaos again.

"You all right?" I ask Brad, meaning, is he really all right? Does he need anything?

He smiles and assures me he's fine and that Lucy is, too, but I know Brad's practice is fading. Since Beth moved out, he focused on the work, but there isn't a high demand for his field in town. Brad declined my invitation to be on the board at the foundation. Proud and pig-headed, I'd call it. It would help pay his bills, but he wants to do things his way, and I can respect that.

"As long as you know we're here if you do need anything," I remind him, watching him tolerate my genuine offer. It's an offer I hope he'll accept one day instead of scraping by because he's too headstrong to accept help.

"I was just thinking what a great job you're doing here, Bo," he says, flipping the top off a beer and lifting one from the cooler for me. I let him pop it, clink the glass, and set it down as soon as a two-foot-high blur of curls and laughter scuffs across my feet.

I scoop Nicholas up, cradling him and smothering him with noisy kisses before he shrieks and howls with laughter. Setting him down, he's off again, tearing after his sister or brother. They all fill the house with so much life that it's hard to feel tired or down.

"You and Beth should be proud," Brad observes.

I grunt in agreement. "I am!" I let him know. "I'm proud of Beth for every second she gives the kids and me," I tell him,

noticing her moving into the kitchen just far enough to hear me talking her up. She pokes her tongue out at me before I mouth to her that I love her.

Her hand over her heart lets me know she's just as proud of me as I am of her. The kinda cutesy romance stuff that I thought lasted a few days with most couples has lasted us years so far, and it isn't showing any signs of letting up. I'm madly in love with my wife as much as the day I first came back from London, seeing her all grown up and just needing to be taken care of.

"I guess I'll get these ribs in the oven," Brad smiles.

"And I'll get the board games out!" Lucy calls out, making me smile with a slight grimace.

"It's okay, Bowdie," Brad quips. "We don't have any games with twenty questions or anything to do with secrets or romance," he assures me.

We all laugh, and I agree that's a good idea.

"No secrets here," I admit, pulling Beth closer as soon as she's in range, nibbling her neck, and murmuring just one secret: What I'm gonna do to her when we're alone, which always makes her blush still to this day.

She loves it, and I love her. Being family now, what I love most is not having to hide the fact. It's always on show.

My perfect life. My perfect family. My perfect wife.

Our forbidden crush bloomed into the most perfect series of miracles, the biggest one being us.

Beth and me, forever.

THE END

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Turn the page to get a sneak peek >

HOT FOR MY STEP-UNCLE

CHAPTER ONE

Layla

I'm talking to myself. Not out loud. I'm not that crazy... yet.

In my head, I tell myself that this doesn't have to be awkward. Miles is coming to stay with us. My step-uncle, the man I should have *zero* feelings about. I definitely shouldn't be thinking about Mom's wedding to his brother a year ago, when Miles and I ran into each other in a quiet corner of the large garden where they held the reception.

He seemed huge as he stood over me. That's because he *is* huge, but he seemed even bigger as he stared down, his intense blue eyes fixated completely on me, his lips curved into a smirk, his body throbbing through his suit as if all his muscles were suddenly going to erupt.

It shocked me when he started to lean toward me.

"I can't help myself."

His voice was so husky. He was so close that I felt his breath on my face as he got nearer and nearer. I knew it was wrong. Mom and Noah were already married. Miles was already my step-uncle. *He* knew it was wrong too, but not right away.

First was the kiss—the most explosive moment of my life. He passionately pushed his lips against mine, and I returned the kiss, knowing I should stop. I couldn't, not when I felt his lips, the pleasure spawning within me.

His hands smoothed down my body. I know I haven't got the perfect body in the modern-day sense, but I've always been

quietly proud of my appearance. I'd always dreamed of somebody appreciating my curves.

Still, I never expected somebody like Miles to want me. Twice my age, ripped, with neat silver hair proclaiming his maturity. He's over twice my age. He'll be forty-three now. I'm twenty. I was nineteen when we kissed.

His hands found my hips and squeezed possessively. Just as I began to give myself to the kiss—throwing my arms around him, leaning up, pushing my body against his—he stumbled away.

His eyes refocused as though seeing me for the first time and only just realizing what he was doing.

"I'm sorry," he said in a tone that made me doubt his words.

Was he *really* sorry, or did he know he should've been? Did he know Mom deserves happiness, and this could wreck it? With that, he spun, walked away, and left me to wonder if I'd just imagined the whole thing.

"Layla, are you okay?"

I look up from the armchair, jolted from my thoughts. My lips tingle in memory of the contact, the closeness that won't quit.

It's Noah. My stepdad is shorter than his big brother, his hair longer and messier, but still the same shade of silver. He has Miles' blue eyes, one reason it's been so difficult to look at him this past year. Whenever we talk, my memories drag me back to the wedding, the stolen kiss, and returning to the party after throwing looks over at Miles. He ignored me for the rest of the night.

I've wondered countless times if he was drunk when he kissed me, though I didn't smell booze on him.

"I promise. Miles won't cause us any issues," Noah goes on, grinning, oblivious to the fact we already *have* caused an issue. "Once the work is done on his new house, we'll return to normal."

I nod, forcing a smile onto my face. I can't let Noah or Mom guess why I'm so quiet.

“From everything you’ve told me, Miles is a good man. I’m not worried.”

Noah tilts his head as if he doesn’t believe me, and I can’t blame him. Since Mom and Noah announced Miles had finished his work travels for the time being—he’s a building contractor, often working abroad—and that he was coming to stay with us, I haven’t slept. I’ve barely been able to *think*, except about the kiss and the sensation of his firm muscles against my hands, just for a second before he ended it and left me.

Mom walks into the living room, tying her hair into a bun. She’s just as curvy as I am, wearing a flowy summer dress and an elegant necklace that glints in the midday sun glowing through the windows.

She owns her curves, drawing Noah’s gaze as she walks across the room. That’s one reason I’ve never let myself sink into self-doubt or self-hate about my appearance.

Mom doesn’t let *hers* drag her down, so why should I?

“Miles is almost here,” Noah tells her.

“I’ll get lunch started,” Mom replies. “Are you hungry, Layla?”

Yeah, Mom, really hungry. Starving, in fact, but not for food.

Imagine if I said that. Imagine if I told the truth right now.

All I want is Miles. The kiss. To return to that moment and make it last forever, with none of the guilt of what comes after.

“Yeah,” I murmur.

Mom frowns. She’s picked up on my mood too.

“Hey.” She kneels beside me, taking my hand. “Things are going to get better at work. I promise. One day, you won’t have to put up with mean men barking orders at you. You’ll have your *own* restaurant.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I say, attempting to put some passion in my voice.

It's reasonable for Mom to assume my mood comes from work. The head chef, Graham, has been riding me hard ever since I mentioned I dreamed of having my own kitchen one day. He seems to have taken it as a personal affront.

"Now, let me make us all a delicious feast."

Mom grins, stands, and laughs when Noah sweeps her into his arms.

This is one of the worst aspects of my betrayal. I'm not able to feel excited for Mom, happy she's finally found a man who respects and loves her after years of raising me alone.

Each time they show their love, I slingshot through time to the wedding and the kiss. It was the first and last time I ever saw Miles.

Sure, I was making eyes at him all night, to where Tess, my bestie, commented on it.

"You know he's going to be your uncle, right?"

I played it off, pretending I wasn't interested, but I couldn't hide the truth from myself. The desire wouldn't go away. It still won't.

"I'm going to freshen up."

They hardly hear me, absorbed with each other. Mom laughs in pure joy—a joy I have *no* right to end—when Noah picks her up and carries her into the kitchen.

In my bedroom, I run a comb through my hair. It's wild at the best of times, but I manage to tame it. I'm tempted to change into something which shows off my figure a little more, but that would be a mistake, like the kiss was a mistake.

I can't expect Miles to want me still. I shouldn't care. I *don't* care, except I can't lie to myself.

From downstairs, I hear the doorbell and voices raised in warm greetings. It would be easier to stay up here and feign an illness. And then what? Pretend to be ill for the next couple of weeks while Miles stays with us?

I can't run from this forever.

“And you remember Layla,” Mom says when I walk down the stairs.

Miles stands in the hallway, his suitcase next to him, wearing a plain gray T-shirt that doesn't help my wayward mind. The fabric's color highlights his muscles, his broad chest, and the flat sheet of his abs.

His eyes narrow slightly when he turns to me. The corner of his mouth twitches, whether in a grimace or a smirk. I'm not sure.

“Nice to see you again, Layla,” he says, not even looking at me.

“And you,” I reply. “I hope you had a good flight.”

“Can't complain,” he grunts.

“I've made us some lunch,” Mom goes on. “I hope you're hungry.”

Finally, Miles looks at me fully. His eyes get that intense look from a year ago—the look I devoured as he leaned closer and closer, then finally pressed his lips against mine.

“Starving,” he says huskily.

I turn to avoid his gaze. I can't look at him when he's staring with so much implication.

“I'll set the table,” I say, striding through the house.

“Let me show you to your room,” I hear Noah say behind me.

My hands tremble as I lay out the plates and cutlery. Taking a moment, I close my eyes, reminding my flaring nerves what's at stake. Mom's happiness. Her marriage. Her chance at love and the life she deserves.

Everything will be ruined if Mom and Noah ever find out what happened. Worse, if Miles and I kiss *again* or do more. I can't let that happen, even if it's what every impulse in me screams for—his touch, lips, desire, his everything. All I can do is pray he doesn't want the same.

[>One click Hot For My Step-Uncle<](#)

FALLING FOR MY MOM'S BOSS

CHAPTER ONE

Madison

I carry Mom's hot cocoa into the living room, placing it on the coffee table. She lies on the couch, her hand laid across her forehead like a painting of a Victorian lady who's had enough.

"Thanks, Maddie," she says, sitting up with a yawn.

It's late, the lamps are lit, and the open curtains of our apartment are showing the lights of the opposite building. Our neighborhood isn't the best, but thanks to Mom's hard work hopping from job to job, it's not the worst either.

She has a new job that pays better than any of her previous ones. She's assistant to a man called Jacob Jennings, the CEO of a large media distribution conglomeration—websites, TV stations, radio, and podcasts all flowing from him. As an aspiring journalist, the job excited me more than her others. Then I made the mistake of looking up Jacob Jennings online.

As Mom sips on her cocoa, I drop onto the armchair, trying not to think about forty-two-year-old Jacob, with that severe look in his pale eyes. They're blue, but they almost look white as he stares at the camera, arms folded in one shot, his firm muscles straining the fabric of his suit.

His lips are flat, not smiling. Except, if I stare *really* hard, I'm sure I can see the beginnings of a smirk. Like he finds the world funny but won't grace us with a smile.

His reputation is one of honesty and integrity, which triggers even more silly thoughts in me. Thoughts like what a great couple we'd make, me with my little website, making strides

with my own projects, and Jacob at my side, fighting for the truth beside me.

“What are you thinking about?” Mom asks, laying her cocoa down and brushing her hair aside. Hers is straight and blond. Apparently, I get my brown hair from my dad, though I’ve never met him.

“Nothing,” I murmur. “Just tired.”

I can’t tell Mom about the thoughts I’ve harbored for Jacob. I can’t afford to tell her about the secret dreams which feel real... dragging my fingernails down the front of his shirt, feeling his muscles beneath, staring up at him, and seeing lust in his expression.

Yeah, right.

I’m sure billionaire CEO Jacob Jennings is just *waiting* for a nineteen-year-old wannabe journalist. I’m sure he’ll *love* how curvy I am and will *adore* my lack of experience. I bet he doesn’t have *any* supermodels or actresses or socialites and other *not-me’s* throwing themselves at him all day long.

Sarcasm takes the sting out of it, sometimes.

“Tired,” Mom repeats. “I know the feeling.”

“I’m proud of you,” I tell her. “It must be difficult...”

I don’t need to say anything else. She’s one of Jacob’s assistants, and apparently, he’s a bit of a hard-ass. *Cold* and *blunt* and *scary* are words Mom has used to describe him.

“When he asked me to collect some files for him earlier,” Mom says, “I thought I was going to melt. It’s the way he looks at me... it’s never outright rude. He’s always polite, but there’s something in his eyes...”

I swallow a ridiculous, angry response. It’s not as if I can yell at Mom for getting that weird, dreamy lilt to her tone, one I’ve never heard before. Sure, Jacob may be just a rude jerk, and that’s why Mom’s voice shakes when she talks about him. Is there something else going on? What if she *likes* him?

Mom hasn’t had much luck in dating. First with my dad, who ran out on her when she was eighteen and pregnant, igniting

my desire to become a truth seeker, to uncover mysteries. Then later, a series of boyfriends who never treated her right. Perhaps Mom thinks Jacob is going to change everything. He's the man she's been waiting for, which is fine... I have to believe that. I can't imagine competing with Mom for a man.

I've seen Jacob in a few photos online, researched him a little, and learned about his determination to always get down to the facts, but that doesn't mean these feelings nestled deep are facts.

I've never had a crush. I've never daydreamed about a man while at the restaurant, serving patrons, or while working on my budding journalist website. I've never had a man wander endlessly into my thoughts, tempting me... until Jacob.

"But the money's good," Mom goes on in a musing tone, "and it's better than the lawyer's office. Or the call center. Or the carwash."

"I love you, Mom," I say.

She leans back like she didn't expect that. Maybe it's because she can tell part of it comes from guilt, from knowing that I'm nurturing a need that would twist Mom up. Either I'm crushing on her mean bully of a boss or I'm crushing on a man *she's* crushing on.

"I love you too," she says after a pause.

"I just want you to know I'm grateful," I say. "*Really* grateful. You've worked so hard to give me a good life. Having a child at eighteen, alone, and raising her... alone. It's impressive. *You're* impressive."

Her smile is pure warmth, but then it falters.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

She stands quickly. "Oh, *crap*."

"What?" I ask.

"I left my USB storage device at work. It's got important material on it. Oh, *crap, crap*."

I normally laugh when Mom gets herself into a state like this. Not in a mean way, but it reminds me how young she is, thirty-seven, but with soft features that make her appear even younger. When she gets anxious, muttering *crap*, it's almost like she's my sister.

She's not freaking over leaving a lasagna too long in the oven or forgetting to pick up the dry cleaning. She's already walking toward her bedroom. Her exhaustion is clear in her movements, the way she drags her limbs as though she's ready to collapse any second.

"Where are you going?"

She pauses. "Where do you think? I have to get the drive. If somebody arrives tomorrow and sees I've left it on my desk... I need this job. *We* need this job."

I glance at the clock. It's nine thirty p.m. "Mom, you've got work again soon. You should be sleeping."

She scoffs. "I won't be able to sleep if—"

"I'll go," I say suddenly. "Give me your pass."

She turns, facing me fully. "Are you sure you wouldn't mind?"

"Not even a little. I love driving ever since I passed my test. It's awesome. It's practice."

Even if I hated driving, I'd say whatever was necessary to convince Mom to let me do this. She deserves a rest after working so many hours.

Jacob's company is in the middle of a merger with an online-based distribution platform, resulting in heated meetings, shouting, and long hours for all Jacob's employees... including Mom. She'll be gone early tomorrow, long before I wake up to leave for the restaurant.

"And you need your sleep," I tell her.

"What if somebody sees you?" Mom mutters.

"Is it really a big deal? I'll head in, get the drive, and leave. You told me Kelly's son came in last week to collect some work stuff for her, didn't you?"

I remember because she mentioned him as a way of hinting at my dating life. She's always probing, convinced I must have *some* interest in *somebody*. She'd freak if she learned I only have an interest in one man.

"Only if you're sure..."

"It'll be fine," I tell her.

She gives me her keycard and explains where her desk is. It's on the top floor outside the main conference room in the "pen" as she and the other assistants call it.

"I won't be long," I say after I've pulled on my sneakers and my jacket. "Get some sleep, please. You deserve it."

"Okay, but if you talk to anybody, say I forgot my phone or something. Don't mention the memory drive."

I wasn't lying about driving. Following the GPS, I savor the short journey to Mom's office.

The lobby of the building is dark, but the marble floor gleams under the softly lit lamps. At the desk, the security guard is listening to music. He lifts one earphone as I approach.

"Hi, my mom forgot her phone. Her name's Veronica Lewis. She works on the top floor as one of Mr. Jennings's assistants."

The man is older, with lines on his face deepening as he frowns.

"I'll be in and out in five minutes," I tell him.

"If this is a trick, Miss Lewis will lose her job."

"I'm her daughter," I tell him. "That's the last thing I want."

He sighs. "The security footage has captured you, so let me see your ID."

I take out my driver's license with a flare of pride, the same one I feel every time I need to show it. "I promise. Five minutes."

He writes down my details, then gestures for the turnstile doors.

I hurry through the building, to the elevators, imagining myself working for a large company like this. When the doors open, I rush across the open-plan room to Mom's desk, the one closest to the door. The memory drive is still plugged into her computer. It's an easy mistake to make. I take it out and pocket it quickly.

Then footsteps pound down the hall so loud and confident they seem to shake the walls. I turn and walk fast, but then a door off to the side opens violently.

It's Jacob, ducking his head as he walks beneath the doorframe. He's wearing a T-shirt and casual jeans, his silver hair messy as if somebody has run their hands through it. Okay, I'm imagining it's *me* who did just that.

"What are you doing here?" he says.

I realize what Mom means. His voice is *cold*. He sounds pissed. I have to play this right. I can't risk Mom's job.

>One click Falling for My Mom's Boss<

INKING THE SOLDIER

CHAPTER ONE

Kayden

There's always howling in my dreams. My service animals, Gunner and Sergeant, would never howl like that in real life.

When I was overseas, doing what had to be done with my best friends—one, then the other, since life is cruel—they were like assassins. Stalking, silent, acting only when I needed them to, but in my dreams, they howl, scratch, and sniff frantically so that I wake up to the sound of it. Sometimes, I *jolt* awake. I don't let myself think about that for long.

My alarm clock screeches, and I sit up, glancing at the time as I always do. It's five a.m. Some people think discipline comes easy to us ex-service folks, but that's never been the case in my experience. Some of us become less disciplined once we're out of the system.

The pull of the bed is real, the softness of the pillow, the mattress beckoning and telling me if I return to bed, the dreams will be sweeter.

Instead, I force myself to walk through my apartment, quickly brush my teeth, and pull on my gym clothes, folded the night before. At the door, as I pull on my sneakers, I catch sight of myself in the mirror. There's this aura around me. Haunted almost. But I don't let myself think about it.

It's time to run.

I'm waking up now, thoughts of Gunner and Sergeant drifting away.

It's easier to focus on the physical act of running, to hone in on the discipline to complete the five miles to the gym. Head ducked, no music, just my breath and the slap of my sneakers on the pavement.

Every so often, I look over my shoulder. It's not that I expect any of the alleyways, tunnels, or the entrance of the park to be hostile, but instinct drives me.

The world is dark, my chest cold as I draw in the late winter air, a taste of spring telling the world it will soon be over. There's a light sheen of ice over several cars.

As I run, I pass a man driving in a car, a young girl asleep in the passenger seat, her face pressed against the window. He's at a light red light and, when he looks at her, I can see the love there, the protection, the family.

Family.

The word bounces around my head with the pace of my running steps.

It's something I often dreamed of having, especially when I was overseas. I'd dream about finding the perfect woman to have children with, a woman who could look past my darkness and see... see what? See the potential, see my need to claim her, to make her mine, to protect her.

But she never arrived, and that's fine.

Just keep running.

Maybe she doesn't exist.

"I don't know what you expect," Connor told me once. He served with me throughout the 2000s and the early 2010s before we both retired and pursued our own careers. *"Just find a pretty girl and stick a ring on her finger. The rest will take care of itself."*

I laughed at that, though there was a grimness to it. I wish it was that easy, but there's a danger a man like Connor couldn't be aware of. He saw some action. He experienced a lot of the same sort of stuff I did, but he's able to joke it away, able to laugh at it, stick it in a box, never look at it.

That's what I do. Stick it in a box. Except I feel hollow. Often like I'm pretending.

I can't inflict that on a woman.

Finally, I reach the gym, finding Connor in the parking lot, leaning against his truck. He's a few feet shorter than me, but that's not a brag. Most people are shorter than me.

He wears his hair long these days, whereas I keep mine Marine-short. He ties his up in a man bun, his beard thick and still almost completely black despite his thirty-seven years.

He kicks away from his truck, sipping on his coffee.

"You're making me look bad, old man," he banters.

I grin and wink. Nobody would ever guess how much effort it takes to smile at my friend. Nobody needs to know. As long as I keep myself together, as long as the howling in my dreams doesn't invade my waking life, I consider that a success.

"Got to show you infants how it's done."

We laugh as we head toward the gym. I'm only four years older than Connor, at forty-one, but Marines will find any reason to talk crap. It's far better than talking about the *real* stuff.

We work our ass off in the gym like we do most mornings. We disappear into a world of metal and sweat and physical determination, gritting our teeth and growling and letting out the monster in here so we don't let it out anywhere else.

"How's the dating app?" Connor asks me on a break between sets.

I look at the clock, the timer telling me when it's time to lift more weights. My muscles are throbbing, my body pulsing in a way I like.

"The dating app," I repeat.

He chuckles, nudging me. "Don't tell me you haven't signed up. You said you'd do it. You don't remember, do you?"

"I probably said that to shut you up," I say, laughing darkly. "Some men are perfectly fine living on their own. I've got my

business. I've got... working out. I've got lots to keep me busy."

Connor frowns. "You used to talk about starting a family, is all."

"Hmm."

It's the most I can muster as a response. Connor knows me well enough not to push it, so we keep working.

After the workout, as the sun is rising, we walk out toward his truck.

"Are you going to see Marty about the tattoo soon?"

I swallow, nodding, finding it difficult to think about Sergeant. I got a tattoo of Gunner soon after he passed, but I've held off on Sergeant. Some people might say that's because of how he ended his life, the German Shepherd with that glint in his eyes, that smile even when he was growling.

"Yeah," I say. "Today, in fact. I think it's time."

"He was a hell of a dog," Connor says. "A hell of a friend."

"Yes. He was."

"You got a busy day apart from that?"

"A few one-on-one sessions."

Those are my favorite sorts. I'm a dog trainer, and part of that job is giving classes, but I'm far more comfortable working exclusively with one animal than I am standing in front of a class of people.

Connor offers me his fist. "See you tomorrow, brother."

I bump it. "And you."

Running back toward my apartment, my thighs burn and my calves ache. I run by a doorway where a man is saying goodbye to a woman, holding her, then giving her a passionate kiss.

It doesn't matter, I tell myself.

I've got my work.

I don't need a woman.

Later, I pull up outside Marty's studio. He's ex-military and the place where Connor and I get all our tats done.

The sun is at its peak now, bleeding through the thick, silver clouds, reminding me of how long I've been awake. I've already had three one-on-one sessions with dogs who needed various degrees of help.

The tattoo studio is all glass on one wall, meaning I can sit with my back against the opposite wall and get a view of the street through the cloudy design on the glass spelling Marty's name.

"He shouldn't be too long," the receptionist tells me.

I nod, watching cars pass by outside.

The buzz of the tattoo guns being used in the next room reminds me of silly, out-of-place things, especially since I retired from the military eight years ago.

"Hey, Luna," the receptionist says as the main door opens.

I look over, just to check. Check what? This stranger in a civilized city in a nice part of town isn't going to suddenly pull a rifle.

Whatever. I look, and my world suddenly changes.

The howling comes back, but it's a different sort than before, like an animal inside of me is finally free, bashing at the bars of its cage, expanding until there's nothing but shredded metal.

The woman is young, perhaps half my age. I shouldn't even be looking at her, let alone thinking about charging across the room and bringing her into my arms, holding her tight, telling her she's everything I ever wanted.

This *stranger* is the woman I used to dream about when the bullets started flying.

She's on the shorter side, her body curvy in her faded blue jeans and her punk black top. Her hair is tied up in a ponytail, giving me a perfect view of her cute features, her somehow

simultaneously shy and sassy smile, her wide eyes, and her button nose.

Turning, she looks at me, then takes a step back, like she's shocked.

Maybe she is. I'm staring at her like she already belongs to me. Because, in my mind, she does. She was mine the second she walked through the door.

>One click Inking the Soldier now<

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- *[Winter Kisses: An Instalove Possessive Holiday Romance](#)
- *[Her Ride \(Men of Valor MC\)](#)
- *[Ringin' His Bells: A Filthy Dirty Christmas](#)

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