

CASSIE COLE



NANNY

— FOR THE —

ATHLETES

A REVERSE HAREM ROMANCE

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1



Beth

Sitting in the front row of a hockey game was one heck of an experience. The thunderous clash of sticks, the crisp slice of skates on ice, and the deafening roar of the crowd enveloped me as I followed the dark puck across the playing surface. And when one opposing player checked a member of the St. Louis Blues into the glass two feet next to me, I could practically feel my own bones rattle from the hit.

“Oh yeah!” my boyfriend Trip exclaimed next to me. “These seats are amazing, aren’t they, Beth?”

“They are,” I agreed. It was the third time he had brought up how nice the seats were. I wasn’t a hockey fan, but I had to admit it was a fun sport to watch live. There was lots of action, especially when the players threw down their gloves and got into an impromptu boxing match on the ice. It was only the first period, and we had already seen two such fights.

The woman to my right leaned over and asked, “First time sitting so close to the action?”

“Was it that obvious?”

“You’ve been wide-eyed all period!” she replied. “I thought you were going to scream when Logan got checked into the glass.”

“It’s my first time going to a hockey game at all, actually.”

The woman on the other side of her leaned over to look at me. “Seriously? You’re a hockey virgin?”

“Sitting on the ice is a hell of a way to experience your first game!” the first woman said.

Trip cleared his throat. “The tickets were expensive, but totally worth it.”

“We’re lucky enough to know one of the players. So our tickets were free.” She pointed to one of the Blues players, a grizzled looking man who was casually skating across the ice. “That left wing is my brother, Logan.”

“Your brother is Logan Landry? The Toronto Terror?” Trip asked. “Woah.”

Right about that time, Logan raised his stick in both hands and used it to hit an opposing player in the chest. He fell to the ground, and Logan loomed over him like he wanted to start a fight. One of the other players came flying into view, shoving Logan and then tossing off his gloves. Logan threw his equipment down and raised his fists to fight, which drew an excited roar from the crowd.

“He learned that right hook from me,” the first woman said proudly.

“It must be so cool being the sister of a professional hockey player,” Trip said.

“Mostly, he’s a pain in my ass,” she said with a laugh. “But yeah, it has its perks. I’m Emily, and this is Leslie. What do you two do?”

“We’re business analysts for Anheuser-Busch,” Trip replied.

“I bet *that* has nice perks,” the second woman, Leslie, said.

“Plenty of free beer,” Trip said with a grin.

I cleared my throat. “I *used* to be a business analyst for them. I actually just quit my job to start my own business.”

Even though I was looking at Emily, I could feel Trip rolling his eyes behind me.

“Exciting!” said Leslie. “What kind of business?”

“My grandmother left me her house in her will. It’s on a sizable piece of land, several acres actually, so I turned it into a dog boarding service. There’s a big fenced-in field where the dogs get to run and play all day.”

“It’s a big risk,” Trip said casually.

“I’ve always wanted to take care of animals,” I explained, giving Trip a sideways glare. “And my desk job was soul-sucking.”

Emily and Leslie exchanged an excited look. “I don’t believe in fate, but that’s hard to deny,” Emily said.

“We were *just* talking about this!” Leslie agreed.

I frowned at them. “What am I missing?”

“My brother is always looking for someone to watch his dogs,” Emily said. “He has four of them.”

“And *my* brother,” Leslie added, “plays for the Colts. The NFL team. They had a dog-nanny in Indianapolis who would watch all the players’ dogs whenever they were out of town. Someone with a huge farm and lots of open land. But since the Colts moved to St. Louis a few months ago, they’ve been struggling to find a replacement.”

“Oh! Let me give you my card.” I reached around in my purse and came out with the flimsy rectangle. “Here you go.”

Leslie took the card. “Lizzy’s Dog Boarding. Do you mind if I have a few cards? I can pass them around to the team.”

“That’s actually the only copy I have. It’s the sample the printing company gave me. But I’ll have more soon! They’re supposed to arrive next week.”

“Beth paid extra for priority shipping,” Trip muttered. “Even though business cards are pretty much useless these days.”

“Clearly they’re more useful than you think.” I pointed to the card. “That’s my personal number. Tell them to reach out any time. Or swing by! I’m there most days.”

“Except for when you’re sitting in the front row of a hockey game,” Emily smiled.

I chuckled nervously. “Oh, don’t worry. The dogs back home are in good hands.” I turned and gave Trip a look, warning him to stay quiet.

He must not have gotten the message, because he said, “Beth hasn’t had much business yet. I told her it can take months, or *years*, for a small business to become profitable...”

I elbowed him in the ribs, which shut him up. It was one thing to be overwhelmingly negative about my new business in private, but when we were in front of others...

“I’m sure the business will do great,” Leslie said, shoving the card in her pocket. Then she screamed, “Come on, ref! That was high-sticking! Open your fucking eyes!”

“Sorry,” Emily said. “My fiancée can be a little intense. Especially when her future brother-in-law is on the ice.”

Leslie squeezed Emily’s thigh. “Just being supportive.”

“I know, and I love you for it.”

We watched the remaining eight minutes of the first period. When it ended, and the players skated off the ice, Trip stood up and asked, “I’m getting a beer, do you want something?”

“A white wine, please. Thanks!”

When he was gone, I turned to Leslie and said, “It must be exciting, your brother playing for an NFL team that just moved into the city.”

“We were excited to get the team, and even more excited that my brother would be playing close to home. But most fans seem to hate the Colts for switching cities again. They got blown out earlier today, and there were a *ton* of boos raining down from the crowd.” She shook her head. “Lots of players on the Colts have dogs, though. Especially the bachelors that don’t have family to watch them.”

“Your brother Braden treats his dog like his baby,” Emily said. “Like, he legitimately uses a baby voice with the dog.”

“Logan is worse!” Leslie said with a laugh. “He adopts a new stray practically every month.”

“He has a soft spot for runaways,” Emily said in a strange tone.

Leslie put her arm around her fiancée. “He does.”

“Well, no matter how many dogs he has, we should be able to accommodate them,” I said. “All of my equipment arrived last week. I have twenty extra large kennels, and room for sixty if I ever want to expand. But as long as the weather is nice, they can play outside all day. They’re only kenneled at night when it’s time to sleep.”

“And you don’t have *any* customers yet?” Emily asked.

“We’ve had customers! Just none that are overnight.” It was only *slightly* a lie, since I’d had one customer, rather than *customers* plural.

Before I could explain more, I got a text from Trip:

Trip: Can you come get in line with me? I’m at the beer stand outside our section.

Me: Do I need to? I’m doing some good networking for my business.

Trip: The line is really long, so I want to go ahead and buy two beers for myself now. And there’s a limit of two beers per customer.

Me: Don’t worry about my drink then. Buy two for yourself. I’ll get more beers for us next period :-)

“Do you two have dogs?” I asked.

“We actually met at a dog park,” Leslie explained. “Her Husky was humping my Belgian Malinois.”

“Best wingman I’ve ever had,” Emily said.

“Huskies are great... as long as they get enough exercise,” I said.

“Tell me about it,” Emily said. “Yukon—that’s his name—becomes a drama queen if I don’t take him for his morning run at precisely six in the morning. Starts howling and tugging on my sweatpants.”

“Yukon takes after his owner,” Leslie chimed in. “Emily gets cranky when she doesn’t exercise, too.”

“I do not!”

“Shh, have a treat,” Leslie said, shoving a beer at Emily’s face. The two of them giggled together, and I joined.

“What’s so funny?” Trip asked, sitting down with a beer and a white wine.

“Nothing. I thought you were getting two beers?”

“I didn’t want to *not* get you something.” Then, under his breath, he added, “I’d never hear the end of it.”

I shot him a confused look. *Why is he acting like a toddler tonight?*

The second period began, and we settled in to watch the game. Halfway through the period, when Trip was done with his beer, I said, “Here, I’ll go get you another one so you don’t miss any of the game.”

“No, you can stay,” he said. “I don’t want you to miss any of the game, either.”

“Are you sure?”

“These are great seats, Beth,” he said with a tinge of condescension. “Just wait until the period is over.”

A few minutes later, when there was a timeout, I turned to Emily and said, “If you don’t mind me asking, how much did the dog-nanny in Indianapolis charge?”

She turned to Leslie, who answered for her. “The normal fee was something like fifty dollars per day. But these NFL players spoil their dogs. Most of them spring for all the extras: nail clipping, baths, extra play time, special rawhide treats.”

I turned to Trip. “I told you the extras are where the money is!”

“You can definitely overcharge on some of those,” Emily said. “These players make *so much money*. They’re happy to spend some of it on their dogs. Especially the single guys.”

“Can we talk about your business later?” Trip snapped. “I’m trying to watch the game.”

I gestured at the ice. “It’s a timeout. They’re just standing around.”

“Actually, it’s about time we got home to our dogs,” Emily said.

“It was nice meeting you!” Leslie added. “I’ll definitely pass your card along to my brother and his teammates. They’ll be thrilled to find a proper dog-nanny.”

After they left, I let out an excited little shiver. “This is going to be huge for my business. Thank you for buying these seats, sweetie.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and didn’t look at me. “They were just being nice to you. They aren’t really going to give your card to NFL players.”

“They seemed genuine.”

Trip snorted. “Sure.”

“What’s the matter with you?” I demanded. “You’ve been in a pissy mood all night.”

“I’m pissed because I paid for these nice seats and you’re spending the entire time chatting with the lesbians next to us.”

“We talked like twice,” I said defensively. “And it wasn’t even during the game. It was in between periods.”

Trip shrugged.

He’s just in one of his moods, I thought, sitting back in my seat and thinking about the two women. If it panned out, it would be the jump-start my business desperately needed.

This day turned out so much better than I expected.

2



Christian

This day turned out so much worse than I expected.

It was Sunday night, and Braden and I were sitting on the couch in my apartment in downtown St. Louis. There were a lot of things I didn't like about having my job move from Indianapolis to St. Louis, but my new place was one of the positives. I loved the high ceilings, exposed brick, and industrial elements like steel beams and the tall windows that offered a breathtaking view of the city skyline and the gateway arch beyond.

But even the comfort of my loft couldn't calm me down on this Sunday night. Especially having to listen to the ESPN broadcasters discussing the games of the day.

"...third-largest loss in franchise history," the broadcaster was saying in a tone of surprise and disgust. "The only blowouts worse than the Colts 63 to 10 loss today were the 1962 Baltimore Colts loss to the Chicago Bears by 57 points, and the 2011 Indianapolis Colts loss to the New Orleans Saints by 55. Today's defeat, paired with the team's 0 - 4 start to the season, have many wondering if this is karma for the franchise changing cities yet again."

On the couch next to me, Braden let out a curse. "I don't know why they're blaming us, the players. It's not like *we* chose to move the team to St. Louis."

"I don't know."

"Besides, St. Louis got screwed ten years ago when the Rams moved to Los Angeles. This city deserves a team way more than Indianapolis."

“Yup.”

On TV, one of the other talking heads was saying, “There’s so much about the move that doesn’t make sense, Scott. Even the team colors are a head-scratcher. Orange and white? That doesn’t line up with the past NFL franchises in the city. And the colors don’t even coordinate with the other St. Louis teams, like the Blues and Cardinals.”

“The players don’t seem to have the same fire, either,” the first broadcaster agreed. “Quarterback Christian Baker looked strong early in the game, but in the second half he seemed like he was just going through the motions without caring. And then—”

I switched over to the baseball channel. They were showing highlights from the Cardinals playoff game. “At least one city team is doing well,” I muttered.

“Man, the fans are ruthless,” Braden said, scrolling social media on his phone. “They’re joking about sending us back to Indiana. One guy wrote...” Braden chuckled and shook his head. “Let’s just say it’s an off-color joke about aborting the team before we reach full term.”

My German Shepherd, Heidi, jumped onto the couch and laid down with her head in my lap. I scratched her behind the ear and said, “Don’t doomscroll social media. Especially after a loss.”

Seeing Heidi jump up on the couch, Braden’s dog Pickles climbed up too. There wasn’t much room, so she was half-sitting on Heidi, who ignored her with the impassivity of a saint.

“I can’t help it! I want to connect with the fans,” Braden argued while continuing to read his phone. “The fans are the reason we’re even paid to play this sport. I don’t want to just pretend they don’t exist.”

I shook my head, but said nothing. It wasn’t worth arguing with Braden. He was my best friend, and my top wide receiver on the field, but he could be an airhead sometimes.

Okay, he was an airhead *all* of the time. He was like the human manifestation of his Golden Retriever. But that's one of the things I loved about him.

"It's days like today when I miss her the most," Braden said softly.

The change of subject caught me off guard. "Yeah. Me too." The pain was still fresh, like a piece of glass rolling around inside my heart, causing new wounds every time I moved.

In my lap, Heidi let out a long sigh through her snout. "I know you miss her too," I whispered. Out of all the women who had come and gone in my life, she was the only one Heidi liked. It made me wonder if things would have been different if the team hadn't moved to St. Louis.

The front door to my loft opened and Logan, Braden's brother-in-law, came striding in with two boxes of pizza. "Food," he barked, reinforcing his reputation for short sentences. His auburn hair was damp and slicked back, and his left eye socket was a gnarly shade of purple and black.

"Oh *hell yeah*. I'm starving." Braden twisted and jumped over the back of the couch to meet Logan at the door, opening the top pizza box and immediately shoving a slice in his mouth. "Nice shiner," he said while chewing.

Logan sneered. "You should see the other guy." Pickles and Heidi went trotting over to say hi to Logan. He looked at them and snarled, "Why does he get to bring his dog to pizza night?"

"Because Pickles is well-behaved," I replied. "And he only has one dog."

"Mine behave themselves."

I gave Logan a skeptical look.

"Well, three of them do," he grumbled while putting the pizza down in the kitchen. "I don't have to bring Loki."

"Two dogs in my apartment is already a lot," I said. "I don't want my hardwood floors getting scratched."

Logan picked up both pizza boxes again and unceremoniously dumped them in the trash can. “Oh no. I just remembered that I forgot the pizza.”

“Bro!” Braden said, pulling the boxes out. “Don’t deny me pizza just because Christian loves his apartment so much. Collective punishment is against the Geneva Conventions.”

Logan and I exchanged a look. “Braden? When did you learn about the Geneva Conventions?” I asked.

Braden brushed off the boxes and grabbed a second slice. “One of the journalists covering the Colts mentioned it today on Twitter. He said a loss like that should be a violation of the Geneva Conventions. So I looked it up. Did you know there’s, like, a whole *bunch* of stuff you can’t do during war?”

“Don’t pay attention to social media,” Logan grumbled while opening a beer from the fridge.

“I already tried to tell him,” I said while getting my own pizza. “He refuses to listen.”

Logan sank into the recliner next to the couch. “The fuck are we watching baseball for?”

“We were avoiding SportsCenter,” I said.

Logan changed the channel. “It’s hockey highlights, now.” He let out a long growl. “Fucking Blackhawks.”

“Why are you complaining? You won,” I pointed out.

“Refs broke up my fight with that cunt Vasili. I only got to knock one of his teeth out.”

“It must be nice playing for a franchise that isn’t unanimously hated,” Braden said, returning to the couch. Both Pickles and Heidi immediately sat on their haunches in front of him, watching intently while he ate.

Logan downed half his beer in three long gulps. “Fuck what the people say. Most locals are glad to have football back in St. Louis.”

“Based on what they’re saying online,” Braden replied, “they aren’t glad at all. I have a hundred DMs from fans

ridiculing me for dropping that pass in the third quarter. As if I wasn't fighting double coverage the whole time."

Logan's close-cropped red beard made it tough to tell, but I knew the man well enough to recognize the *tiniest* hint of a smile. "I bet you're used to men sliding into your DMs and negging you," he said to Braden.

"He could turn off DMs from accounts he doesn't follow, but he chooses not to," I added with my own smile. "I think he likes getting *ganged* up on by random dudes."

"Sounds like it," Logan agreed.

"Hey, no judgment here," I quickly said. "If getting harassed by the entire male population of St. Louis is the only way you can get an erection, that's cool. This is a safe space for you, Braden."

"Man, fuck you guys," Braden said with a laugh. He broke his pizza crust in half, and tossed one piece to each dog. "I've got plenty of women in my DMs. *Plenty*."

"Are they pissed you dropped that third quarter pass, too?" I asked.

"Nah, bro. They're thirsty. Check this chick out."

He held out his phone to show me. I took the phone from him and clicked on the profile. "Uh, Braden? This is a catfish account."

"What? No it's not."

"It is a catfish," I insisted, "because that's a photo of Gina Lynn. The porn star."

Logan leaned over to look and began chuckling. Braden took back his phone and frowned at the screen. "Maybe it's actually her, but she's using a fake name so horny internet guys don't bother her."

"Sure," Logan said with a rumbling laugh. "And maybe the Colts make the playoffs this year."

Both of us turned and gave him a look.

"Sorry," he muttered. "Low blow."

Turning back to Braden, I said, “It’s okay, buddy. You’re an NFL wide receiver. I’m sure there are plenty of fans who would love to go out with you. Fans who are women, and definitely not scammers living in Siberia.”

Braden held up a middle finger while scrolling on his phone.

“There we go,” Logan said, cranking up the volume on the TV. “My fight with Vasili.”

We watched as Logan and the Blackhawks player circled each other on the ice, fists raised like boxers. Logan dodged the first swing, then returned a wicked right hook that sent a spray of sweat flying into the air in slow-motion.

“Did your sister teach you how to hit like that?” Braden asked.

“Yes,” Logan replied, completely serious. “She did.”

“I shouldn’t have joked,” Braden said. “Leslie has told me stories about Emily. If half of them are true...”

“All of them are true,” Logan said. “The way we grew up...”

He trailed off, then reached into his jeans to pull out his cell phone. He frowned at the number, then tentatively answered it with a brusque, “What?”

I got up to get another piece of pizza. And another beer. I usually kept a clean diet during the season, but after today’s loss, the beer was comforting. Besides, it wasn’t like it would make a difference. After starting 0 - 4, our season was pretty much guaranteed to be a failure.

“What is it?” Braden was asking Logan. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Logan lowered the phone and stared straight ahead. “Remember Caroline?”

“Your college girlfriend?” Braden asked. “The one with the tattoo sleeve, who popped your cherry?”

Logan nodded somberly. *Uh oh. Something’s wrong, I realized.*

Like his dog Pickles, Braden was oblivious. “How’s she doing these days?” he asked.

“Bad,” Logan replied bluntly. “She’s dead.”

3



Beth

Dead, I thought while staring at the phone on the kitchen counter. *This business hasn't begun yet and it's already dead.*

I had been staring at the phone for an hour, trying to make it ring by willpower alone. I had given my card to those women at the hockey game on Sunday. Now it was Thursday, and I hadn't gotten a single call inquiring about dog boarding. I went over to the old phone, picked up the receiver, and made sure there was still a dial tone.

"That's what I deserve for getting my hopes up," I muttered. "Maybe Trip was right."

Hank, my Chocolate Lab who was laying on the kitchen tile, let out a long sigh on my behalf. Next to him, the tiny Yorkie named Princess grunted in solidarity. If business ever picked up, I didn't intend to allow boarded dogs to come inside the main house. But for now, Princess was the only customer I had—and it was only a daytime boarding while her owner was at work.

Not if business picks up, I told myself. *When. Positive thoughts only, Beth.*

I started to make myself a cup of tea, but stopped when I heard car tires rolling up the long gravel driveway to the house. Excited, I hurried outside with Hank and Princess close on my heels.

My late grandma's property was a big open field surrounded on all sides by tall pine trees. It was a gorgeous October day, with a pleasantly warm sun that balanced out the chilly wind stirring the treetops all around. Even though I had inherited it

all from my grandma two months ago, it still didn't seem like *mine*. I felt like I was a temporary caretaker watching over the property until she returned.

Any excitement I felt disappeared when I saw that it was Trip's truck rumbling up the driveway, and not a potential customer. Then a different curiosity filled me. What was Trip doing here? I hadn't seen him in person since the game, and we had only exchanged a few brief text messages. Was he coming to apologize to me for what happened?

"Hi," I said as he hopped out of the truck. "I didn't expect to see you here in the middle of a workday."

"I decided to swing by on my lunch break," he said. "For an apology."

The tightness in my chest faded away. He *was* here to apologize, rather than stubbornly ignoring me all week.

"I'm really glad," I said with a smile.

Trip hugged me, and for a few brief seconds it was comforting to be in his arms. Then he pulled away and said, "Okay. Go ahead."

I blinked. "Huh?"

"You can apologize now."

"Me?" I blurted out. "Why would I apologize?"

"For your behavior at the hockey game," he said, as if it were obvious. "Why else did you think I came here?"

"I thought you were going to apologize to *me*."

He chuckled. "Is this a joke?"

"You owe me an apology for the way you demeaned me at the game. You were rude to me. You belittled my business in front of strangers. Honestly, you haven't been even the *least* bit supportive since I quit my job and started this business."

"Look around, Beth," he shot back. "You've only had one customer since you opened."

I glanced to where he was looking. Princess was sitting in the middle of the field a hundred feet away, staring at us. The wide expanse of open field made her seem even smaller than she already was.

“How much are you getting?” Trip demanded. “Twenty bucks a day? That’s a whopping six hundred dollars a month! Almost enough to pay for one fourth of the mortgage on this place.”

It was actually fifteen dollars a day, and Princess was only boarding on weekdays when her owner was at work. But Trip didn’t need to know that.

“I’ve been open less than two weeks. These things take time to grow. I’m taking an online class on Facebook advertising this afternoon.”

Trip shrugged. “Whatever. I didn’t come here to argue about your poor life choices. Are you going to apologize, or not?”

I struggled not to laugh in his face. “I don’t have anything to apologize for. I barely chatted with the other fans at the game, and it was mostly about business.”

Trip set his jaw in that stubborn way of his. “If you don’t apologize...”

“What?” I demanded. “If I don’t apologize, then what?”

“Then I don’t even know if we should be together.”

The unexpected words hit me like a sledgehammer. We had been together two months. Long enough that I thought we had potential. Trip had his faults, but overall I was happy with him.

But if this was the kind of person he truly was...

I had never been afraid of being single. I could take care of myself in between relationships. Some of the happiest times of my life were when I was single. And now, standing on the edge of a major life decision, the thought of losing Trip didn’t scare me at all. He had been emotionally manipulative like this before. And if he was acting this way after just two months together...

“You know,” I said, “maybe that’s for the best.”

Trip recoiled in surprise. “Um, what?”

“Maybe we shouldn’t be together,” I said, my certainty growing with every word. “You aren’t supportive of me. You’re throwing a temper tantrum about a freaking hockey game.”

“The tickets were expensive.”

“I told you I didn’t care where we sat,” I said through gritted teeth. “*You* insisted on spending way too much money on those seats. I would have been happy sitting in the nosebleed section.”

“I wouldn’t have taken you at all if I’d known you would spend the whole game ignoring me.”

I let out an annoyed groan. “I chatted with them for maybe five minutes total. And most of that was in between periods! I don’t want to be with someone who treats me like a child, and doesn’t support me, and shows up in the middle of the day to give ultimatums. So yeah, maybe we aren’t right for each other.”

I could tell that Trip wanted to back down. He had puffed himself up and expected me to kowtow to him, and now that I was resisting, he didn’t know what to do.

“If I walk away, we’re done,” he said, doubling-down on his ultimatum. “You can’t come crawling back to me when you need help.”

I stood my ground and said nothing.

“Suit yourself,” he said, and then got in his truck and drove away.

I went back inside and cried at my grandma’s kitchen table. Hank curled up at my feet, and Princess leaped up into my lap to snuggle. It made me feel less alone.

But deep down, I realized something important: I wasn’t that sad. Trip was showing me who he *really* was, and I was grateful to learn that now rather than farther down the road. I was only crying because breakups were emotionally damaging, even when they were for the best.

It would have been easier to deal with if my new business was doing well, though.

The business wasn't my only issue right now. I wiped my tears and looked around the kitchen. From here I could see into the adjacent dining room. To my left was the den, and a guest bedroom beyond that. All of them were filled with cardboard boxes and stacks of junk. I hadn't realized how much of a hoarder grandma had become in the last few years. We had always been close, and went out to lunch every single Saturday, but she had rarely invited me to her house. She always made excuses why we needed to meet somewhere else.

It would take weeks working around the clock to get rid of all the junk in the house. And once that was done, there were approximately a *billion* other little things that needed to be done to make this place more livable: ripping out peeled wallpaper, replacing rotten floorboards, installing a new HVAC system. I had thought of it as a fun project to work on while I started my new business. Now, it felt like a Sisyphean task.

And that wasn't even touching on the mortgage issues. Grandma had done a cash-out refinancing on the house in order to pay for medical bills, which meant locking into a high interest rate on a house that no longer had any equity. Even worse than that, the house prices in the area had dropped since the refinancing, meaning the house was worth less than the loan.

I can't think about that right now, I told myself while petting Princess. *One problem at a time.*

Suddenly, I heard car tires crunching up the driveway again. Hank bolted out the doggy door. Princess and I followed more slowly. "That was fast," I said to myself. "I didn't expect Trip to change his mind so quickly."

But when I walked outside, it wasn't Trip's truck in the driveway.

4



Beth

The car in the driveway was a blue Jeep 4Runner. Hank ran up and barked excitedly, while Princess stayed close to my leg, waiting to see what was going on.

“Hank, come here,” I said, calling the dog back to my side.

My breath caught in my throat as the man stepped out of the Jeep. He looked effortlessly stunning in a charcoal Brunello Cucinelli suit, exuding a magnetic charm that was impossible to ignore. The suit clung to his athletic frame in all the right places, emphasizing broad shoulders and a chiseled chest, a subtle testament to the strength beneath the fabric. His confident stride, along with a calm certainty in his dark eyes, radiated an air of strength and leadership.

Who is that?

Behind him, a black-and-tan German Shepherd hopped out of the car. The dog started to lope forward toward Hank and Princess at my side, but then the man *clicked* twice with his tongue. The dog immediately circled back around to its owner and sat patiently on its haunches.

“Good girl, Heidi,” the man said in a deep, commanding voice. Then he turned to me and said, “She’s friendly, if it’s all right for her to say hi.”

Heidi the German Shepherd was still sitting politely, but her tail was swishing on the gravel with barely-contained excitement.

“Sure! Hank loves other dogs.” I glanced behind me, and saw that Princess had run back up on the porch and was

watching from a safe distance. “That’s Princess, one of the dogs boarding with us right now. She’s shy, but gets along with bigger breeds.”

The man made another clicking sound with his tongue, and Heidi came trotting up to us. She and Hank circled each other, sniffing butts and checking each other out with wagging tails. Once their introduction was over, I crouched down to say hi to her. She gave me a few investigatory sniffs, but then she and Hank went running off into the field together to play.

“Don’t take it personally; it takes a while for Heidi to warm up to strangers,” the man said. “Is this Lizzy’s Dog Boarding?”

“It sure is!” *A customer! I have a customer!* “I’m not sure if I have you on the schedule for today, but we do take walk-ups.”

Up close, I saw that the man’s face was a study in rugged handsomeness. His jet-black hair framed a square jawline, accentuating the sharp angles of his face. Strong, expressive eyebrows arched over his dark, penetrating eyes, adding depth to his gaze. Those eyes held a certain intensity, and they seemed to carry the wisdom of experiences beyond his years. His skin, lightly bronzed by the sun, further enhanced these striking features. As he smiled, his lips revealed a set of perfect, white teeth that radiated confidence and warmth.

He looks familiar. Why does he look so familiar?

“My name’s Christian.”

“Nice to meet you, Christian! I’m—”

“Let me guess: Lizzy?” he asked with a small grin.

I chuckled. “Yes. Well, sort of. My name is Elizabeth, but I go by Beth. I was named after my grandma, who went by Lizzy. She used to own this property before I turned it into a dog boarding kennel, so I decided to name it after her. Sorry, I’m rambling. Heidi seems really sweet! I love German Shepherds.”

“Best dog I’ve ever had.” Christian slid back the sleeve of his suit jacket to look at his watch. “Braden was right behind

me. I must have lost him at a light...”

“Is that him?” A cherry red Mazda Miata convertible was driving down the main road in the distance, then turned onto my driveway. The top was down, and a Golden Retriever was standing up in the passenger seat with its paws up on the edge, tongue lolling out in a wide canine smile.

“That’s him,” Christian said, waving.

Before the car came to a complete stop, the dog jumped over the edge and came running up to me. It didn’t just wag its tail—its entire back half wiggled back and forth as it rubbed against my legs.

“Oh you’re such a sweetie!” As soon as I crouched down, the dog began licking my face and neck.

“Woah, Pickles! You gotta ask permission before going to first base, buddy.” The man who hopped out of the convertible had a relaxed and carefree demeanor, in stark contrast with Christian’s intense calm. His sun-kissed, tousled hair was a shade of golden blond, and it seemed perpetually windblown, giving him an approachable and laid-back look. Unlike his suited friend, he was dressed in a simple, well-worn T-shirt and a pair of faded jeans that looked like they’d lived a full life. His playful blue eyes sparkled with mischievousness and were framed by a scattering of freckles on his nose, hinting at countless days spent under the sun. With an infectious grin that showcased a hint of dimples, he exuded an easygoing charm. I liked him immediately.

The Golden Retriever suddenly turned his head toward the field where Heidi and Hank were playing. Then he took off at a dead sprint to join them. Up on the front porch of the house, Princess cautiously watched all of this.

“His name is *Pickles*?” I asked with a laugh. “That’s got to be the best name for a dog I’ve ever heard.”

“Matches his personality. It was extra funny when he got out of my backyard a few months ago, the weekend I moved in. I ran around my neighborhood shouting his name. Pickles! PICKLES!” His warm smile widened further. “My new

neighbors probably thought: *man, this guy is really into pickles.*”

“This is Beth,” Christian said. “She runs the boarding kennel.”

“Shit. Forgot my manners. I’m Braden.”

His hand was *enormous*, and completely enveloped mine as we shook.

“You forgot more than your manners. Why aren’t you suited up for the flight?” Christian asked. He sounded like an older sibling chiding a younger brother.

Braden rolled his eyes. “I brought clothes. I’m gonna change at the airport.”

“There are photographers at the airport. Go change now.” He turned to me. “I’m really sorry to ask this, but can my lazy teammate change clothes inside?”

“Go ahead. But please don’t judge me for the mess,” I added. “I’m still getting this place livable.”

Braden groaned, but went back to retrieve a bag out of his car.

“Normally we prefer clients book in advance,” I explained, “but you’re in luck, because today we can accommodate walk-ups.”

“Actually, we don’t need boarding today,” Christian replied. “We just wanted to come by and check it out first.”

“This place is dope,” Braden said over his shoulder. “There’s way more room than the boarder we’ve been using since moving to St. Louis.”

Christian nodded. “This is more like Brandi’s kennel in Indianapolis.”

“Yeah, totally.” Braden disappeared inside my house.

Indianapolis. The city triggered a memory. “Wait a minute. Did you hear about me from...” I trailed off. I couldn’t remember the names of the women at the hockey game. “Um.

They were a nice couple, I met them at a Blues hockey game. They were, uh..."

"Lesbians?" Christian gave me a small smile. "Emily and Leslie?"

"That's them! I gave them my card."

"Leslie is Braden's sister. That's how we heard about you."

"You're football players. For the Colts." I examined Christian with new eyes. He was at least six-foot-four, and looked *very* sturdy underneath his suit. I should have known the moment he got out of his Jeep.

"That's us," Christian admitted. "We have a road game against the Steelers this weekend, so we're headed to the airport. Hence the suit."

Hank, Heidi, and Pickles went sprinting past us along the fence, wagging their tails happily.

"You're taking your dogs with you to the airport?"

"We're stopping by the regular boarder before that," he replied. "But your kennel was on the way, so we swung by here first."

"You should leave them here!" I said. "Board them with me instead."

Christian ran a hand through his dark hair, which fell back into place perfectly. "I don't know. We're already booked with the other boarder..."

"You said you don't like that boarder," I insisted. "I have a lot more room for the dogs to play here. One second, let me grab you a print out of all the services we offer."

I hurried up to my house with Princess right next to me. I had spent much of last night working on a flier that listed all the extra services I offered, and had a copy printed out. It wasn't the final draft, but it was good enough to show Christian.

If I can snag their business today...

I hurried through the door and into my kitchen, then stopped in my tracks. In the dining room straight ahead, Braden was nude. Well, not *totally* nude—he was wearing a pair of boxer-briefs and nothing else. But the underwear was tight enough that I could see the long outline of his junk, a sight which took my breath away as much as seeing the lines and ridges of a body covered with corded muscle. His thighs were like powerful tree trunks.

When he saw me, he flinched. “Shit, sorry!” There was a suit bag hanging off one of the dining room chairs, which he grabbed and used to cover himself. “I was changing into this.”

I tore my eyes away from him and pointed. “The bathroom is over there!”

“Yeah, I saw that, but...” He smiled awkwardly. “There’s a bunch of dog food in there. So I thought I would change in here real quick.”

Crap. The dog food bags. “I forgot I put those in there. I’ve been trying to clean this place, so I’ve been shuffling everything around...”

My cheeks felt hot, and I was about to die of embarrassment. So I grabbed the services sheet off the dining room table and hurried back outside.

“Here are our services,” I told Christian. “With all the rates and whatnot. Sorry that the formatting is screwy; I’m still working out all the bugs in Photoshop.”

“You all right?” Christian asked. “You seem flustered.”

“Braden was, uh, changing clothes in the middle of the dining room.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake...” He sighed. “Hey, I’m really sorry about that. He didn’t mean anything by it, I swear. He’s a lot like Pickles: he’s kind of clueless sometimes. If you felt threatened...”

“No!” I quickly said. “It wasn’t anything like that. He was totally innocent. I just wasn’t expecting to see a nude football player when I opened my door.”

Braden came outside with his suit on, which was charcoal gray. “Fuck! I’m sorry. I didn’t think—”

“It’s fine, really,” I insisted. Making a big deal about it was worse than the actual event. “Like I was saying, that’s our list of services.” An idea came to me, and I seized on it. “And I’m running a special deal today only. Your first boarding is completely free.”

Braden perked up like a dog who had spotted a cat. “I like free.”

“We will of course pay for the boarding,” Christian said, glaring at his teammate.

“Hey, woah, relax Chrissy. I was going to insist on paying. I like this place.”

Christian turned to the dogs in the field, who were now wrestling happily. “I think they like it here, too.”

“You *think*?” Braden asked. “Buddy, it’s as clear as a glass of Brita-filtered water. They fucking *love* it here. Pickles usually whines when we take him to the other kennel, but he’s so happy here that he’s not even paying attention to me.”

“All right,” Christian agreed. “We’ll board them for four nights, and pick them up Monday morning.”

“Great! Wait here while I print out the intake forms.”

I practically skipped back inside. *I’ve got my first two big customers. Take that, Trip!*

5



Beth

The first step in boarding new dogs was to verify all of their vaccine information. For most new customers, I would insist on verifying this ahead of time, but I made an exception since Christian and Braden were headed to the airport—and since I desperately wanted their business. Fortunately, the vet I called verified that Heidi and Pickles were both up-to-date on their shots.

When my business became busier, I would then need to ensure that the new dogs got along with all the others I was boarding. Fortunately, with just Hank and Princess already here, it was clear that there weren't any issues.

The dog kennel was a converted garage that had been renovated with heating, air conditioning, and better insulation. It was inside the main fenced-in field, next to a smaller fenced area where I could separate dogs if need be. I had moved one of grandma's old rocking chairs out onto the front of the kennel, which allowed me to relax outside while watching the dogs play.

The weather was going to be perfect all weekend, which made it easier since I could let the dogs play continuously. And play they did! Hank, Heidi, and Pickles chased each other around the field, sprinting in long strides. Then they came up to the front of the kennel, which was shaded and had bowls of water for them to drink from. After panting in the shade for twenty minutes, Hank popped up and went running out into the field again—which encouraged Heidi and Pickles to quickly follow. Even Princess popped up and watched them as if she wanted to join in on the fun.

Running a kennel was a lot of work, but it was infinitely easier when all the dogs got along together. If some dogs couldn't behave themselves, and tried to hump other dogs or pick fights, I would need to seclude them in the smaller enclosure, and rotate them out into the main field area by themselves. That would inevitably happen—when you got enough dogs together, there were always *some* who didn't mesh well—but for now it was nice to see the three boarded dogs and Hank so happy together.

Princess's owner picked her up that evening. "Looks like you're getting more business already!" she said. "Good for you. This place is too big to take care of *just* Princess."

"Tell me about it!" I replied. "Soon, I'm going to need to hire some help. Bye, Princess. See you tomorrow!"

I moved Hank inside and then fed Heidi and Pickles in the kennel. Both of them wolfed down their food, then went back out to play some more. A few hours later, when it was time for bed, both dogs happily went into their kennels and collapsed into bed. They were exhausted from playing all day, and were *still* wagging their tails. Inside the house, Hank was already upstairs in the dog bed in my bedroom, snoring loudly.

"That's a good start!" I said while climbing into bed. "Lots of tired, happy dogs."

I had cameras all around the property, including inside the kennel. I opened the app on my phone and checked on them—Pickles and Heidi were both fast asleep. I set my alarm for the morning and started to put my phone down on the bedside table... then I opened a browser instead.

It's okay to be a little curious.

Christian Baker was from Petersburg, Virginia. He played college for a small state school, putting up big numbers before getting drafted into the National Football League. He was a backup for three years before starting after the Colts' primary quarterback was injured. Scouts were skeptical that he would find success in the NFL, and it seemed that they had been proven right so far.

Braden Clark, meanwhile, was from Pasadena, California, and was the star Wide Receiver for UCLA. He won the Heisman Trophy his senior year, which went to the best college football player, making him only the fourth wide receiver to win the award. He was grinning widely in all of his Wikipedia photos.

Curiosity got the best of me, because next I searched their names plus relationships. There was almost no information listed, except that Braden had briefly dated a supermodel in his first year for the Colts. I found a photo of Christian with a woman on his arm at a black tie event, but that was the only time it was even hinted that he had a girlfriend.

I shook my head and put my phone away. They were my customers. Even more important, they were my chance at getting a lot of new business if they told their teammates about my kennel. I shouldn't be thinking of them in a romantic way, especially so soon after breaking up with Trip.

But as I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep, I couldn't stop thinking about Braden standing in my dining room without any clothes on, a statuesque god of lean muscle.

Now that I had some actual dog clients, my days went by much faster. I woke up early Friday morning to let Pickles and Heidi out, then sipped my morning tea in the rocking chair while they sat together in the grass with Hank. I gave them all the extra services that I usually charged for. I trimmed their nails, and brushed their fur, and gave them the good—and expensive—rawhide treats. I didn't mind that I was doing it for free; it gave me something to do, and I wanted to treat the dogs as well as possible in the hopes of getting their long-time business.

Another service I offered was text message updates. My plan for most customers was to send photos of the dogs once per day, but I decided to spoil the Colts players and sent them updates Friday morning and again Friday evening.

Me: Here's Heidi taking a nap after three hours of playing with Hank.

Christian: She looks pooped. Thanks again for taking such good care of them.

Me: It's my pleasure!

Braden was a lot more excited about the updates.

Me: He's having so much fun playing in the grass, he doesn't want to come inside for dinner!

Braden: PIIIIIIIIIIICKLES

Braden: He loves rolling around on his back like that. Sorry if he gets grass all over your place!

Braden: And poop. He's really bad about accidentally rolling around in poop when he's excited.

Me: No poop yet! But it's all right, because I'm going to give him a bath Sunday before you pick him up.

Braden: Oh snap, he loves baths. He gets all wiggly and happy.

Me: He's all wiggly and happy now! Check out this video.

Me: [video attachment]

Me: He and Hank have been playing all day!

Braden: Atta boy, Pickles! Making friends wherever he goes. A serial killer could break into my house and Pickles would roll over and show them his belly.

Braden: Seriously, you're the best. Way better than the other boarder. Keep the photos coming! I really miss that goofball when I'm away.

Me: With pleasure :-)

Saturday was just as easy as Friday; when I wasn't giving the dogs special attention, they played with each other in the field. On Sunday, I carried my laptop out to the kennel and put it on a TV tray next to my rocking chair so I could stream the noon football game between the River City Colts and Pittsburgh Steelers.

I knew almost nothing about football. I got my degree from a small college that didn't even have a football team, so I never got to experience college football, either. The extent of my knowledge was that the team was trying to move the football down the field until they reached the end zone, where they would then be awarded between three and eight points, depending on some factors I didn't understand.

It was surreal watching the game televised on CBS featuring two men I had met in person. Especially Christian: when the Colts had the ball, the camera zoomed in on his face between every single play.

Heidi and Pickles must have been familiar with the sound of football, because they came running over and laid down near me as soon as I turned the game on. Hank didn't really know what was going on, but he came over and hung out in solidarity with the pack.

Thankfully, the TV broadcasters did a good job of educating ignorant viewers like me. Apparently the Steelers had a really good defense, which meant Christian and the rest of the offense had their work cut out for them. And sure enough, they seemed to struggle in the first two quarters. Christian got tackled by the opposing team many times; I held my breath after one particularly gruesome hit, but he still got back up. They had to punt the ball a few times, which the broadcasters assured me was bad.

Late in the second quarter, it almost seemed like they were going to score a touchdown. But when Christian threw the ball to Braden, he let it slip through his fingers instead of catching it. Braden took off his helmet on the sideline and patted his

own chest, and I didn't need to be a lip reader to see that he was saying: "My bad. That's my bad."

They were losing 17 - 3 at halftime. I wasn't sure if that was really bad or just *kind of* bad, so I decided to take some photos of the dogs and send them to both players with the caption: "The gang is all rooting for you, even Hank! Beat those Steelers!"

I was only half paying attention in the second half because I was brushing the dogs and then bathing them inside the kennel. But the broadcasters sounded excited, and the score got closer and closer every time I checked.

17 - 6.

20 - 6.

20 - 13.

23 - 13.

23 - 20.

23 - 23.

Braden was right: Pickles *loved* getting a bath, and wiggled so much that it was tough to rub the shampoo into his coat. When I was done and drying him off with a towel, I heard the broadcasters going nuts outside.

"Touchdown! Touchdown Colts! They only needed a field goal, but that pinpoint pass from Christian Baker to Braden Clark gives the Colts a commanding lead with just twenty seconds remaining on the clock!"

The other broadcaster chimed in, "I've got to say, Baker looked like a completely different quarterback in the second half. That's a sign of good coaching, to make adjustments like that at halftime."

"I'm pretty sure I caused that by sending them motivational dog photos," I joked to Pickles. "With your help, of course."

Pickles panted happily at me.

Later that evening, as I was preparing to give the dogs their dinner, Christian called me. "I know we're supposed to pick

the dogs up tomorrow, but would it be possible to get them tonight?” he asked.

“Of course,” I replied. “Why, is something wrong? Are you worried about them staying here?”

“Nothing like that,” Christian replied. “We just miss our dogs, and our flight lands earlier than we expected.”

In the background, I heard Braden say: “Ask her about Pickles! Just ask her!”

Christian sighed and said, “Braden wants me to ask if Pickles rolled around in any poop today.”

“Nope!” I replied. “I poop-scoop daily, and even if I didn’t, the field is really big.”

“Tell her to stay vigilant!” Braden insisted in the background. “Pickles likes to lull you into a false sense of security, then BOOM! You go to pet him and get poop all over your hand.”

“Braden says—”

“I heard him,” I said with a laugh.

The two men pulled into the driveway around eight o’clock that evening. In the future, I planned to have a strict window when dogs could be dropped off or picked up, but for now I didn’t mind making an exception for my only two overnight customers. Pickles and Heidi came running over to the fence next to the driveway, barking and running back and forth excitedly for their owners.

“That’s a good sign,” I said when Christian and Braden got out of their cars. “It always makes me smile when they’re *happy* to see their owners.”

“Pickles loves me, but not as much as I love *him*.” Braden leaned over the fence so the Golden Retriever could lick his face. “Yes I do. I love him more than football. Or pizza. That’s right! More than pizza!”

“She’s all soft,” Christian said while petting Heidi over the fence.

“I gave them baths today. They also got brushed every day, and had their nails trimmed. I also gave them each a rawhide chew around noon each day; I buy them in bulk, so if you ever want to pick some up, I’ll sell them. When I have the kennel storefront up, I mean.”

“It sounds like you were in good hands,” Christian told Heidi. He opened the gate. “Ready to go home?”

She barked once, then went sprinting off toward the middle of the field. Pickles and Hank took off after her.

“And *that’s* a good sign,” Braden said, nodding after the dogs. “When they don’t even want to go home, you know the kennel is a good one.”

“They can run around while we settle up. Do you take credit card?” Christian asked me.

I waved a hand. “I told you: the first boarding is free.”

Christian’s dark eyes narrowed. “I can’t *not* pay you. Not after you took such good care of them.”

“Sure you can!” I replied cheerfully. “You can repay me with your continued business. And by spreading the word to anyone else you know who needs boarding services.”

“We were planning on doing that anyway,” Christian said. “Come on. Let me pay you.”

I shook my head. “Your money’s no good here this time.”

“Can we make it up to you in another way?” Braden suddenly asked. “We’ve got that thing next Saturday we could take her to.”

Christian frowned. “I didn’t think about that.”

“It’s some charity event,” Braden said, smiling at me. “They let us bring a guest. There’s lots of fancy food and drinks, and a bunch of other celebrities will be there.”

Is he asking me out? Braden’s smile was so warm and inviting. It made me feel like I was the only woman he’d ever smiled at before. Which, of course, was a ridiculous feeling

since he was a rich and famous athlete who could have anyone he wanted.

“Yeah, maybe,” I said. “I’ll think about it.”

6



Beth

After Braden and Christian picked up their dogs, I was worried that business would be quiet until their next road trip. Which apparently was two weeks away, because the Colts played at home this Thursday night, and then had a bye week.

But my worries proved to be unfounded. Two other players from the Colts showed up on Monday with their dogs, asking questions and checking out my setup. Five more trickled in on Tuesday. By Wednesday, I had half a dozen customers for daytime boarding, as a means of testing how their dogs liked my place before using me for an extended trip.

Cha-ching, I thought while processing one of the reservations.

All of the Colts players were huge. There were buff running backs and enormous, round linemen. Even the kicker, who was scrawny compared to some of his teammates, towered over me. It was such a strange feeling watching ESPN highlights of their tight end in the evening, and then checking in his Labradoodle the next morning.

But as impressive as all of these athletes were, none of them caused the weightless stomach feeling like Christian and Braden.

All of this was a fantastic distraction from my personal life. After a few days of silence, Trip began bombarding me with texts. First he suggested getting back together and forgetting all about our fight. Then he asked me to meet for coffee to talk things over. Then he *demand*ed that I respond to him, because I owed him a chance to make things right.

I ignored all of the texts. After all, *he* was the one who gave *me* an ultimatum and then walked away. I didn't owe him anything, and I certainly didn't have the energy to deal with his nonsense while the rest of my life was quickly becoming busy.

But there were other texts I didn't ignore.

Braden: Hi dog lady! How's business?

Me: I don't think I've ever had someone call me "dog lady" and mean it in a positive way!

Braden: lmao

Me: But yeah, business is good! I've had people coming to check us out all week.

Braden: Good. Chrissy and I have been pushing everyone on the team to use you.

Me: I don't want them to feel pressured!

Braden: Nah, it's the GOOD kind of pressure. Like finding the best pizza joint in town and insisting everyone try it.

Braden: Speaking of pizza, I've been searching for a good slice. New York style. Any recommendations?

Me: Hmm. There's Joey's Pizza close to downtown that's pretty good. Another one is Sal's Pizzeria on the west end. I haven't had it, but I've heard it's good.

Braden: Already tried Sal's. Couldn't stand the sauce. Tasted like rat vomit. But I'll try Joey's for sure.

Me: You know what rat vomit tastes like? ;-)

Braden: I've got a powerful imagination! And trust me: it tastes BAD.

Me: Lol, I'll take your word for it!

Braden: Hey, have you thought any more about coming to that charity event on Friday?

Me: Was that a serious invitation? I thought you were just being nice.

Braden: Just being nice? What else would we be, assholes? We're definitely not assholes.

Braden: I take that back. Chrissy can be moody after a bad loss, but he's the quarterback so there's always more pressure on him. So are you in for Friday?

Me: I'm on the fence. The problem is I can't leave the dogs here alone. I've been looking at resumes for part-time help, but I haven't hired anyone yet.

Braden: Tell you what. I'll put you down as a 'yes' because I'm confident you'll hire someone in the next couple of days.

Me: Hah, okay. But don't get mad if I can't get someone to cover by then!

Braden: I don't get mad! It's all good!

I smiled while reading the texts. Braden made me feel good about myself. He had an infectious personality, even while just texting.

But I wondered what his intention was for the invitation. Was it meant as a date? Or was he truly just being nice to the person who was now dogsitting for Pickles? I wished there was an easy way to find out, but that wasn't something you could just come right out and ask. It would make everything awkward.

I glanced at the stack of resumes on my dining room table. *We'll see if I have hired someone by then.*

That afternoon, while I was brushing one of the dogs in the field, a big black SUV came rolling up my driveway. I tucked the dog brush into my pocket and walked over to the fence to greet the man that was stepping out of the driver's door.

Before I could get a good look at the man, he opened the back door and four dogs came pouring out of the car. They were all mutts of varying sizes and colors. A Shepherd mix, a Lab mix, and two Chihuahua-sized dogs with underbites that left their teeth sticking out.

"Look at all of you!" I said when I reached the fence. One of the smaller dogs was keeping his distance, but the others were at the fence wagging their tails and sniffing me. "Come here, little guy! I don't bite."

"Loki's an asshole," the man said in a deep voice that reminded me of a rock slide. "He'll warm up to you. Maybe."

I stood and got a good look at the owner of the dogs. He stood tall and rugged, his chiseled facial features partly obscured by a short, well-maintained beard that was the color of charcoal. I saw with surprise that he had a black eye, but he seemed to wear it like a badge of honor, and it added a touch of grit to his already mysterious demeanor. He leaned forward and gripped the top of the fence with strong, weathered hands, causing the bulging muscles in his arms to tighten in a way that made my ovaries twitch.

I was suddenly vividly aware that I was a woman who was alone here, on a piece of property that was so large that the neighbors were nearly a mile away. If I screamed at the top of my lungs, they *might* hear me. Or they might not.

I'm not afraid of him, I told myself. I'm just intimidated. Which is dumb, because he brought his four dogs. Someone who is dangerous wouldn't do that. Would they?

"You Lizzy?" he asked in that rumbling voice.

"I'm Beth, the owner," I replied with a smile. "How can I help you?"

“Need boarding,” he said bluntly. “I booked online. Logan Landry.”

“Oh, right! I saw that reservation this morning. It’s for seven days, is that correct?”

His gaze was intense. “Right.”

“Okay! Let’s get them into the field to make sure they get along with all the other dogs.” I opened the outer gate that led into a smaller pen adjacent to the main field. “Who’s who?”

Logan started pointing. “Odin. Heimdall. Freya. And…”

“And the asshole is Loki,” I finished.

Logan’s lip twitched like he wanted to smile, but managed to stop himself. “Loki. Get on with it.”

The little Chihuahua mix trotted through the gate. The other dogs I was boarding noticed the commotion and came running over, greeting the new dogs just as I opened the inner gate.

“Be nice,” Logan growled. “No cunty behavior, Loki.”

Despite the brusque way he addressed them, I could tell Logan had a lot of love for his dogs. A flicker of concern crossed his dark eyes as he watched them interact with the other animals. Only when it was clear that they all got along did he visibly relax his grip on the fence.

“I like how you named them all after Norse gods.” I nodded toward Logan’s face. “How’d you get the black eye?”

He turned to look at me, then said, “Workplace disagreement.”

I laughed. “What kind of workplace allows employees to get into fist fights? Unless you play…” I trailed off. *That’s* how I knew him. He looked different without a helmet on, but I definitely remember the beard and intense look in his eyes.

“You’re the hockey player!”

Logan grunted in what sounded like agreement.

“I was at the game on Sunday,” I explained. “I saw you get into a fight. I guess that’s how you got the mark, huh?”

While staring intently at his dogs playing in the field, he answered, “Guess so.”

“I’ve got to say, it’s refreshing seeing your dogs,” I said.

He frowned at me. “Why?”

“A lot of my clients—most of them, actually—are professional athletes, and they always seem to have purebred dogs. It’s nice to see some mutts, too.”

He grunted again. “Got a soft spot for strays. Loki! Cut that shit out.”

The Chihuahua mix was about to mount a Dachshund, but immediately stopped and laid down when he heard his owner’s voice.

“Little asshole,” Logan chuckled. “Do I need to sign anything?”

“You already filled out all their intake forms, but I need you to sign a few documents. The office is this way.”

Logan came through the gate and followed me over to the kennel building. His four dogs immediately peeled away from the others and followed him in a pack. It reminded me of a mother goose leading her babies.

He’s definitely a good owner, despite his bluntness.

“Here’s the standard waiver,” I said while handing him a piece of paper to sign. “I already verified their vaccines with their vet, so we’re all good there.” I picked up four sheets of paper from another stack on my desk. “These are the extras we offer here. If you want to add them onto your dogs’ stay—”

“All of it.”

I gave a start. “There’s a lot of services on here, are you sure you don’t want to take a look and make sure...”

“All of it, for all four dogs.” He idly scratched one of the mutts behind the ear. “Is there anything else?”

My office wasn’t very large, especially with the four dogs that had followed us inside. It meant Logan and I were uncomfortably close together. He towered over me, sturdy and

resolute, like a brick wall. “Um. I had a question about the food. On your intake form, you wrote that they have a special diet?”

“It gets delivered every night,” he answered. “I gave them your address.”

Food that gets delivered? What is he feeding them?

I smiled. “Usually, we charge extra for special feeding requirements. But since this is your first—”

“That’s fine,” he rumbled. “Cost doesn’t matter.”

“Okay then.” I grabbed another form. “If you don’t mind, can you write down how much food they get? Just in case I get confused.”

He took the sheet of paper and a pen and bent over the desk to write it all down. I glanced at his arms bulging out of his T-shirt; it was impossible not to look at them, but I made myself stop.

He’s a customer. What if the roles were reversed?

Suddenly I heard a familiar sound out in my driveway. I poked my head out the door and groaned at what I saw.

Trip.

7



Beth

I shouldn't have been surprised by Trip showing up here randomly. In fact, I had kind of expected it when I started ignoring his texts. But of course, he had to show up *now*, while I was dealing with a customer.

"I'll be right back," I said, leaving the kennel.

I strode across the field with a cluster of dogs by my side, playing and nudging each other as we went. Judging by his clothes, Trip had come on his lunch break. He opened the gate into the smaller enclosure, and then came into the larger field area.

Although I hadn't expected it to happen *today*, I had prepared for this confrontation. Trip was going to ask me to get back together with him. He was going to be on his best behavior, full of apologies and promises. He would be gracious, and tell me I was right about everything. He would insist that he could be a more supportive boyfriend in the future.

But it was too late for that. I had seen the *real* Trip, and it wasn't the kind of man I wanted to be with. I cleared my throat and prepared to stand my ground.

"Here." He handed me a slip of paper."

"What's this?" I frowned. "Sixteen hundred dollars for hockey tickets... Trip, what is this?"

"My receipt from the game," he said, pursing his lips. "Your half is eight hundred."

"Wait a minute... are you asking me to pay for my ticket?"

“Of course I am,” he replied. “I’ve got Venmo or PayPal, but I’ll take a check if that’s easier for you.”

I sputtered a laugh. “I’m not paying you, Trip.”

“Why not?” he demanded. “You *owe* me. If I had known you would break up with me a few days later, I wouldn’t have taken you.”

I threw up my hands in frustration. “You’re the one who broke up with me! And I didn’t want you to spend that much money on tickets. I can pull up the text message where I said I would be happy sitting in the nosebleeds.”

Trip rolled his eyes and took a step toward me. “This is just like you. Taking advantage of me, and then turning around and pretending like it’s *my* fault.”

I took a step backwards. “Trip...”

“That’s called gaslighting, Elizabeth.” He continued walking forward while I backed away. “You’re gaslighting me. But that only works on weak men. I’m not going to allow you to do it. So here I am, asking for what’s mine. And I’m asking politely. I could take you to small claims court, but I’m trying to do this the easy way. For your benefit. But it’s never been easy with you, has it?”

The dogs were gathered around me now, curious about the new visitor. “Trip, I think you should leave.”

His voice began rising. “You’ve always been difficult, even when we first started dating. You don’t like any of the same things I do. You never even *tried*. Because you’re a selfish person. All you care about is *your* life and *your* future. You even bailed on the logistics convention, forcing me to go alone.”

“I didn’t bail on you, Trip! My *grandma died*,” I shot back at him.

“See, that’s the thing about you,” he said, practically spitting every word. “There’s always an excuse. Well, I’m not taking it. I’m not letting women like you abuse me anymore. Do you *hear* me, Elizabeth?”

Tears were welling in my eyes, which frustrated me even more. I shouldn't have allowed his words to get to me, but they still felt like a dozen knife wounds, each deeper than the last.

“Do you?” Trip demanded. “Answer me!”

“What's the problem?” Logan growled behind me.

Trip glanced over, then did a double-take. “Holy shit. You're Logan Landry! Dude, I've got your jersey in my closet.”

Logan's four dogs came trotting over. As soon as Loki got within a foot of him, Trip cursed and raised his foot like he was going to kick the dog.

“Loki!” Logan snapped, and the dog hurried back to hide behind his owner.

Trip shook his head and pointed. “You know, you ought to be more careful with what dogs you allow to be boarded here. That's your problem, Elizabeth: you don't think ahead. You act with your heart rather than being *logical*...”

Without warning, Logan grabbed Trip by the collar of his shirt and threw him back against the fence. “Leave, *now*,” Logan snarled.

“What?” Trip asked. All sense of confidence had left his voice.

“You heard me,” Logan bit off. He reminded me of a Pit Bull that was an inch away from attacking. “If you make me repeat myself, you'll fucking regret it.”

He shoved hard, sending Trip tumbling backward over the fence. He landed in the dirt next to the driveway, sending up a cloud of dust.

“What the fuck, man?” Trip said in a shaky voice. “I'm, like, your biggest fan.”

“I'll be your biggest regret if you're still in my sight in five seconds,” Logan said. “One...”

He didn't need to count to two. Trip practically fell over himself scrambling to his truck. The engine roared, and then

Trip rolled down the window. “I’ve never seen a celebrity act like such an asshole to their fans.”

Rage flared in Logan’s eyes. “I don’t remember asking you a *goddamn thing*.” He opened the gate.

That simple motion terrified Trip. His truck tires spun in the gravel as he flew down my driveway and onto the main road.

Logan shook his head and turned back to me. “The fuck kind of a name is Trip?”

“He’s the third,” I explained, wiping away a tear. I wasn’t going to let myself cry. “Jonathan Sutton III. Trip is short for *triple*. It’s a pun, or something.”

Logan grunted a reply, and bent down toward his dogs. “If you see that cunt again, you have my permission to bite him,” he told them. “But only him, and just this once.”

I laughed at how *attentive* the dogs seemed, as if they could actually understand what Logan was explaining to them. “Thanks for, um, defending me.”

Logan’s eyes softened for a brief moment as he regarded me. Then they turned to steel again. Or something colder, like iron. “Didn’t do it for you. That asshole almost kicked my dog.”

“Let’s, uh, go look at your forms to make sure I didn’t forget anything.”

As I walked back to the kennel building, I couldn’t believe that I felt unsafe around Logan.

8



Logan

“He picked the wrong guy to mess with,” Christian said in the passenger seat.

Braden leaned forward from the back seat. “I know, right? It’s like he’s never seen Logan Goddamn Landry pick a fight before.”

“We’ll make a gentleman of you after all,” Christian agreed.

“Didn’t do it for her,” I insisted. I was in a bad mood for a whole bunch of reasons, but the black suit I was wearing was currently at the top of my list. It was scratchy. I hadn’t worn it in a while; I preferred to don one of my grey suits when I had to dress out on game day. But a grey suit wasn’t appropriate today.

“Sure,” Braden said, patting my shoulder. “Whatever you say, big guy.”

I let out an annoyed growl. I wasn’t some fucking knight in shining armor. I didn’t uphold chivalrous intent, and I sure as hell didn’t go looking for helpless women to protect from douchebags.

But I hated bullies. They were always fearless when they picked on someone smaller or weaker than them. Putting someone like Trip in his place felt like therapy to me.

It did feel good to help that woman. Beth seemed like a sweet person. Dog lovers always were. Not to mention how fucking gorgeous she looked in jeans and a T-shirt smeared with dirt from playing with the dogs.

I shook off the thought and said, “You didn’t have to come. Especially with a game tonight.”

“That’s the best time to come,” Christian said slowly. “Since we have a game tonight, we don’t have practice this morning.”

“And we don’t have to report to the stadium until two.” Braden reached up and squeezed my shoulder. “We’re here for you, man.”

“I’m fine,” I said for what felt like the hundredth time. “I haven’t seen her in seven years.”

“Still, though.”

“Isn’t this a distraction?” I suggested. “I try to relax as much as possible on game days. I sure as fuck wouldn’t be going to the funeral of someone I didn’t even know.”

Braden was always quick to laugh, and he did so now. “I tune out all the distractions when I’m on the field, man. Clear mind, clear sight. Don’t you do the same on the ice?”

No, I don’t, I thought to myself. When I was on the ice, I channeled all the anger in my life, like a magnifying glass focusing the sun’s rays into a superhot beam. I took all the pain and struggle and suffering from my past and let it *drive* me. I wouldn’t be the great player I was without that.

When I didn’t reply, Braden changed the subject. “What’d you think of Beth?”

“It’s a good kennel.”

Braden shook his head. “I wasn’t asking about the kennel. I was asking about *her*. What’d you think?”

“Don’t see how that’s relevant.”

“Braden’s got a crush already,” Christian said. “He thinks she has potential for... you know. More.”

“She texted us photos of Pickles and Heidi during the game on Sunday,” Braden explained. “They were all sitting nice and polite, in front of a laptop with the game on, and the caption said: *the gang is all rooting for you, even Hank!* It definitely

motivated us. Chrissy especially. He balled out after reading her text at halftime.”

“What happened to tuning everything out on the field?” I asked.

Braden shrugged. “I mean, I tune out all the unimportant stuff. Texts from a sexy lady don’t count.”

Once again, an image of Beth popped into my head, jeans smeared with dirt and her blonde hair all disheveled above a hopeful smile.

“You don’t shit where you eat,” I said emphatically. “If you go out with her and it ends badly, then you lose her boarding services.”

“It’s fine!” Braden insisted. “It won’t be awkward.”

I glanced over at Christian, who looked less confident than his teammate.

“We’ve been looking for someone like her since Indianapolis,” Braden went on. “Someone willing to be shared —”

“I don’t want to talk about this right now,” I barked. “I’ve got too much on my mind.”

“Right, right.” He squeezed my shoulder again. “We’re here for you, buddy.”

I clenched my teeth, but wasn’t *too* annoyed. Braden was more of a Golden Retriever than his dog Pickles, happy and enthusiastic no matter the situation. He was a good friend, even when he was pissing me off.

That was still a strange feeling: having supportive friends. My sister and I grew up without any friends or family we could rely on. Even now, having known these two guys for half a decade, the urge to send them home and do this alone was strong.

They’re more than just friends at this point, I thought. They’re the closest family I have. Even without Emily and Leslie getting married and cementing the bond.

We pulled into the parking lot of the funeral home and went inside. It was like stepping into another world. Soft, muted lighting cast a gentle, soothing glow over floral arrangements and rows of pews. An air of quiet respect permeated the two dozen guests who lingered in the space with hushed conversations and whispered condolences.

I hated it.

“This was a mistake,” I said. “Let’s go.”

I tried to turn around, but my friends put their hands on my back and nudged me forward. “We drove half an hour to get here. The least you could do is stay for a few minutes,” Christian said.

“The casket is over there,” Braden said, pointing.

“Don’t want to see the body.”

There was nobody around that I recognized, but I drew plenty of stares. They didn’t recognize me from my days dating Caroline, because that only lasted a few months. They knew me—or *thought* they knew me—because I was the most famous player for the Blues. On most days, that kind of recognition annoyed me. Today, it was insufferable.

“Excuse me,” a woman said, stepping up to me. “Logan Landry?” A little girl in a black dress and white bow stood behind her, staring down at the ground.

“I’m not here to sign autographs or take selfies.” I walked up the aisle between the pews to get away from her and the other guests who undoubtedly wanted something from me. That took me in the direction of the casket, which was up on a pedestal at the end of the room. Once I was moving in that direction, I decided I might as well take a look. It was just a body.

The casket was plainly built, the kind that was only out on display to convince customers to buy the more expensive ones. I forced myself to walk right up to it and peer inside.

There she is.

Sorrow welled up inside me at the sight of Caroline. She looked so much like I remembered, and yet totally different at the same time. I didn't know if that was because of the years taking a toll on her, or all the makeup and chemicals used to make it appear that she was only sleeping.

"Caroline..." I breathed. She was my first love. The first person I ever allowed myself to trust, other than Emily. A chaotic flurry of emotions swirled inside of me at the sight of her, and not just because I had lost my virginity to her in college. In the back of my head, I had always wondered if she was *the one*. Fuck, I didn't even think I believed in that, but if it existed then it was Caroline. My hand reached out to stroke her cheek, but I pulled it back. If I touched her icy skin, it would ruin the illusion.

According to the phone call I had received last week, the cause of death was some sort of overdose. That surprised me. She rarely drank alcohol back in college, let alone harder drugs.

What happened to you, Caroline? I wondered.

The emotions were swirling faster, like a tornado that would rip me apart from the inside. I started to turn away from the casket, which is when I saw the little girl in the black dress and white bow standing next to me.

"Was she your friend?" the girl asked me.

"No," I replied. "Not really."

She cocked her head at me. "Then why are you here?"

"I don't really know."

"That's silly," she said. "You should know why you do something before you do it."

"Life isn't that simple."

She frowned up at me again. "Why not?"

I sighed. Of course I would have a fucking kid pestering me at the worst possible moment. The worst part was that I couldn't tell her off the way I could with anyone else.

“I knew her a long time ago,” I finally said. “Back when I didn’t even know who I was. She helped me figure it out.”

“That sounds like friends to me,” the girl said simply. “Why didn’t you stay friends?”

“She dropped out of college,” I explained. “And then we lost touch.”

“Oh. Okay.” The girl thought about it for a few seconds. “That’s sad.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “It is.”

Before she could ask me any more questions, I turned and walked back to the front of the funeral home. Christian and Braden were standing by the refreshments table, sipping on cups of lemonade and chatting with two guys who looked like football fans.

“We’re leaving,” I told them without slowing down.

Braden put down his cup. “You’re not staying for the burial?”

I walked outside into the cool October air and loosened my tie. It was warm inside, and sweat was beading on my neck. I took a few deep breaths and felt my heart begin to settle.

“Excuse me? Mr. Landry?”

I whirled to find the woman from earlier walking toward me. “This isn’t the place to ask for an autograph, or a selfie, or whatever you want,” I barked at her. “Can’t I have five fucking minutes to myself?”

Undeterred by my comments, she smiled politely. “I don’t want any of those things. Mr. Landry, I’m a case worker for the Missouri Department of Social Services. I’m here to discuss another matter...”

She said some more words in a very specific order, and my brain went numb. Her lips kept moving but I heard nothing; it was as if the entire world had the volume turned down. That little girl in the black dress and white bow was hiding behind her, peeking out at me with curiosity. I knew that look. My

sister and I had that same vacant stare growing up after our parents died.

Now that I knew what to look for, I could see Caroline in the little girl. The dark hair. The dimples. The way she frowned while she was concentrating really hard on something. She looked like she was six or seven, which meant the timeline matched up.

“Wait a minute,” Braden exclaimed. “Our boy Logan is a *father?*”

9



Beth

“Wow,” I said, staring into the cardboard box. “These dogs eat better than I do!”

The delivery man dropped off the food for Logan’s dogs that evening. If not for the dog-related packaging all over the box, I would have assumed it was human food. Packed in ice were four vacuum-sealed containers of food, each one labeled with the dog’s name. I picked up the package for Heimdall and gazed inside: it was a mixture of rice, green beans, carrots, and big chunks of steak. Each package was enough for two meals for each dog, dinner and breakfast tomorrow morning.

I had always used high-end dog food, both for Hank and for the boarded dogs, but this was on a totally different level. The informational pamphlet that came with the food boasted that it was tested on humans!

When it was time for dinner, I put Logan’s four dogs and the five other dogs I was boarding into their separate kennels, then gave everyone their meals. The smell of steak and fresh vegetables was thick in the air, to the point that the other five dogs ignored their kibble and watched the lucky four eat. I decided I would need to feed them separately from now on to keep the others from getting jealous.

I spent my spare time Thursday morning going through resumes and conducting phone interviews. At lunch, I put all the dogs away in their kennels and drove to Costco to get more supplies. My business had gone from nonexistent to busy so quickly that I was running out of all the supplies I needed.

That evening, the Colts were playing the Cowboys at home. I thought it was weird for a football game to be played on Thursday night, but apparently that happened sometimes. “The Colts finally have a win under their belt,” the broadcaster said as the game began. “Was last week a fluke, or can they keep the momentum going against a stacked Cowboys team?”

I had never cared about professional sports before, but now that I knew several of the players, I found myself rooting extra hard for the Colts. When I saw Christian make a pass, I thought about Heidi the German Shepherd. When Braden leaped into the air to snatch the football with one hand, I couldn’t help but think about Pickles, the derpy Golden Retriever. And when one of the Colts linemen rolled around on the ground with a leg injury, all I could think about was his Pomeranian named Herbert, who he affectionately called Bertimus Maximus when picking him up from the kennel.

I was only half-watching the game on my laptop while brushing the dogs, but it seemed like the Colts played well. They kicked a field goal near the end of the game to take the lead, and when I checked again a few minutes later, they were celebrating their win on the field.

Wanting to share the victory, I created a group text with both of them. They were busy with the post-game stuff, but they finally responded to me while I was getting into bed.

Me: Two wins in a row! That’s a great start!

Christian: Our record is still only 2 - 4, and in last place. But it feels good to win a couple.

Braden: Don’t listen to Mr. Negative Pants over here. I’m fucking PUMPED UP.

Me: You should be!

Me: And I don’t want to take all the credit, but you’re undefeated since boarding your dogs with me.

Christian: Good point. I think it's fair to give you maybe 5% of the credit for our two wins.

Braden: The other 95% of the credit goes to me. Did you see that sick ass one-handed catch I made today?

Me: I did! That was so cool!

Christian: Notice how he conveniently ignores who threw the pass to him.

Braden: Bro, you overthrew me! I wouldn't have had to make that panty-dropping catch if you hit me between the numbers!

Christian: You were in double coverage. Overthrowing you was the only way to make sure I wasn't intercepted.

Braden: Hell yeah. They're always double-teaming me because they know I'm the real threat out there. And I STILL make dope ass plays.

Me: I'm far from an expert, but I think you're both very good at playing football. I hope you guys are celebrating tonight.

Braden: SPEAKING OF CELEBRATING. Are you still coming to that charity event with us tomorrow?

Me: I don't know. I have a new employee starting tomorrow, and I'm not sure I should leave her alone for long.

Braden: But there's tons of free food and booze! Don't you want free food and booze?

Christian: It's only a few hours. Three, max.

Braden: And it'll be great networking for your business! You can pass out your card to everyone there. Chrissy and I will talk you up to everyone. Like wingmen, but for dog boarding.

Braden: But also, there's food and booze, of the FREE variety. Which is the best kind.

Me: LOL

Christian: We don't want to pressure you into something you're not comfortable with. If you can't go, no big deal.

I was already on the fence about it, but the point about networking for my business was tempting. A five minute conversation at a hockey game had resulted in a *lot* of customers this week. How much business could I generate during a three-hour event?

Me: Will the food be served in tiny, bite-sized portions?

Christian: The food will be excruciatingly small. You'll eat ten mini cheeseburgers and still be starving.

Braden: I usually slip a twenty to one of the waiters to make sure they keep the trays coming.

Me: Smart.

Christian: When you've gone to as many of these events as we have, you pick up some survival skills.

Braden: But the alcohol will be served in regular, adult-sized glasses.

Me: Okay, you've convinced me. But if the helper I've hired turns out to be incompetent, I might have to

bail.

It's just for business, I told myself. Nothing else. They're just two customers of mine.

Two swoony, chiseled, *famous* customers.

My new hire was a college girl named Suzie who only had morning classes, which allowed her to work afternoons and evenings most days. She had experience at two other dog boarding places, and even worked at a dog grooming shop during the summer when she was a teenager. As soon as I let her into the main field area, I saw that she was the perfect employee. All the dogs came running up to her, and she was calm and affectionate, hugging and petting everyone while laughing happily.

“This is the way I want to die,” she told me. “Smothered under a pile of dogs!”

I spent the rest of the afternoon showing her the ropes around my property and familiarizing her with the schedule. Since she had plenty of experience at other boarders, the training was as smooth and seamless as possible. The only issue was she kept calling me Ms. Foster, which made me feel old, but otherwise she was as perfect of an employee as I could have hoped for. But that created another problem.

It meant I had no excuse not to go to the charity event.

I wanted to go, of course. But the amount of work and stress required for a woman to go to a formal event was significant. The guys said they would pick me up at six, which meant I had to start getting ready at four. While Suzie handled the dogs, I showered, shaved my legs, and did my hair. After half an hour of deliberating, I finally settled on one of three dresses that were appropriate for the occasion: a midnight blue, off-the-shoulder gown with a flowing A-line skirt, adorned with delicate sequins around the bodice.

“Suzie!” I called, walking outside. “It’s not on your list of responsibilities, but can you zip me up?”

“Ohh, you look fancy!” she said, joining me at the fence. I stayed on one side of it to keep the dogs from messing up my dress. “When you said you were going out tonight, I assumed it was to a bowling alley or something. Where are you going looking so nice?”

“It’s some charity event,” I explained. “I don’t really know.”

She looked puzzled. “You’re going to a party and you don’t know what it’s for?”

I laughed. “When you say it like that, it makes me feel dumb.”

“No judgment!” She reached across the fence and tugged on my zipper. “Hold still. It doesn’t want to slide up.”

“I haven’t worn this in years,” I said. “The zipper might be stuck.”

I felt Suzie pinch the fabric together. “I don’t want to rip it...”

Right about that time, a stretch limo came rolling up my driveway. I groaned. “They’re early! I still have to put on jewelry, too...”

“Wowza,” Suzie said. “You’re even fancier than I thought, Ms. Foster.”

“Call me Beth. And I promise I’m usually more casual than this.”

The driver got out and opened the back door. Heidi and Pickles leaped out and came running toward me happily.

“Heidi, stay!” Christian snapped as he got out of the limo. Immediately, the German Shepherd halted and sat on her haunches. Pickles took a few more steps toward me, looked over his shoulder at the other dog, and then stayed a respectable distance from me. But his entire body continued wiggling as if he could barely contain his excitement.

“I didn’t realize the dogs were coming!” I said.

Braden emerged from the limo. Like Christian, he was wearing a tuxedo with a bow tie. “Is it cool if they stay here

while we're gone?"

"We'll pay, of course," Christian added.

"That's not a problem at all. Suzie, can you get them situated?"

"Sure thing, Ms. Fos—err, Beth," she replied.

"We had to pay the driver extra to allow the dogs in the limo." Braden grinned. "He's worried about fur."

"So am I," Christian muttered. He had a lint roller in his hand and was rolling it over his black pants.

"How long are they staying?" Suzie asked.

"We'll pick them up tonight," Braden replied. "Probably ten, maybe eleven o'clock?"

Suzie glanced at me. "Your documentation says no pickups after six."

"These guys get an exception," I told her.

"What, are you the mayor or something?" Suzie asked.

Braden barked a laugh. "Me? Mayor? No way. I hate making decisions. I'd rather work out all week and then catch footballs on Sunday."

Suzie's eyes suddenly widened. "Wait a minute. *That's* how I recognize you!" She turned to Christian. "And you're... you're..."

"They play for the Colts," I explained.

"Ohmygosh," Suzie breathed. She looked more terrified than excited. "Nobody is going to believe this."

"Better get a selfie, then!" Braden put his arm around Suzie across the top of the fence. "Snap a couple. I look *great* in a suit."

"He's modest, too," Christian smirked.

"I call 'em like I see 'em," Braden replied, eyes cutting over to me. "Damn, Beth. You understood the assignment. You're a smokeshow in that dress. If you don't mind me saying."

I felt myself blushing at the compliment. “Speaking of this dress, would you mind zipping me up?” I asked Christian. “I think the zipper is stuck.”

“Happy to. Hold this.” He handed me the lint roller, then stepped up behind me. His fingertips brushed lightly across my skin as he took hold of the zipper and gently pulled it up without any issues. His breath stirred in my hair; he was a *presence* behind me, tall and powerful.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Mind returning the favor?” He turned around to show me his back. “I think I have dog hair on me.”

“A little bit,” I said, running the lint roller up and down his jacket. I could feel the broad back muscles underneath, as unmovable as stone. “There, you’re fur free now.”

“Anything on my pants?” he asked, lifting up his jacket.

He didn’t mean it in a sexual way; he was legitimately trying to make sure he looked presentable. But with his jacket hiked up, his ass was *right there*. The perfectly-tailored pants hugged both cheeks perfectly, strong and chiseled.

“You’ve got a little bit...” I lightly ran the roller from the top of his butt down to his thigh. “Okay, now you’re good.”

“My turn!” Braden said cheerfully. He turned around and stuck his butt out like an Instagram model. “I can’t have all this *cake* ruined by booty fur.”

I laughed and repeated the favor for him. While Christian’s butt was normal sized and chiseled, Braden’s ass was *thick*. Still strong and muscular, but definitely popping out a lot more in the tailored pants. Especially with the pose he was doing.

“I can help, too,” Suzie offered with wide eyes.

“I think I got it all,” I said.

“You sure?” Braden shook his ass back and forth.

“Positive,” I said, feeling my blush return. I handed the lint roller off to Christian. “I need to run inside and grab my jewelry and purse.”

Tonight's going to be a fun night, I thought while I retrieved my things.

10



Beth

“Don’t worry about getting any fur on your dress,” Braden said when we were inside the limo and on the way. “Victor, the driver, pulled out a mini vacuum cleaner and got it all up while you were inside. You the man, Victor!”

Through the little divider, the driver flashed a thumbs-up.

I gazed around the interior: there were multi-colored LEDs around the top, and an ice bucket next to a bottle of champagne between two of the seats. “I’ve never been in a limo before. There’s so much room.”

“We’re picking up two of our teammates on the way,” Christian said.

“Hopefully by now you’re not star struck by professional athletes!” Braden added, elbowing me gently in the side. “Unlike Suzie back there.”

I groaned. “Sorry if she was too much. She’s only been working for me for six hours.”

“She seemed good with Pickles,” Braden said. “She has my full confidence.”

“Who else is going to be at the event tonight?” I asked. “Anyone I know?”

“There’s eight of us from the Colts,” Christian explained. “Six players, and two coaches. A few members of the city council will be there, too.”

I thought about Logan Landry shoving my ex over the fence. “No hockey players?”

Braden chuckled. “Doubtful. It’s an after school youth football charity. You expecting someone?”

“One of my new customers is a hockey player,” I said. “He has four mutts staying with us.”

“Black beard?” Christian asked. “Kind of rough around the edges?”

“Looks like he is perpetually biting into a lemon?” Braden added.

“That’s him! Logan Landry.”

Christian chuckled. “I thought I saw Loki over by the kennel. I could spot his snaggle tooth a mile away.”

“Logan’s my brother-in-law,” Braden explained. “His sister Emily is engaged to my sister Leslie. And yes, if you’re wondering: I got a lot of mileage out of calling her Leslie the Lesby when we were younger.”

“Oh, yeah! I met both of them at the hockey game. And my introduction to Logan was... eventful.”

Both of them frowned. “He wasn’t a dick, was he? Usually, he’s more polite around women,” Christian said.

Laughing, I said, “He was definitely a dick, but in the best possible way. My ex-boyfriend showed up and made a scene, so Logan threatened to knock his teeth out.”

“That’s not just an idle threat,” Braden assured me. “I’ve seen him do it. Logan lives for that kind of thing.”

Christian nodded. “He didn’t have the best childhood. Took him a long time to work through his issues.”

“He’s working through some new issues this week,” Braden added. “He found out—”

Christian shot him a look. “What’s the one thing Logan hates more than anything?”

Braden’s smile disappeared. “When people gossip about him behind his back. Shit.”

“No worries, you didn’t say anything. And even if you did, my lips are sealed. I’m good at keeping secrets.”

“He really is a good guy, deep down,” Braden insisted. “Like a jolly rancher stuffed inside of a jalapeño.”

“Try five jalapeños,” Christian said. “It takes a long time to get down to his sugary interior.”

“Good to know.”

We picked up two Colts linemen next. They lived in a gated neighborhood with houses that were the size of castles. Their dates looked like supermodels with fake boobs and Brazilian butt lifts, and they gave me *very* long looks when introductions were made. I started regretting coming; it was difficult to feel like I belonged when those two bombshells were in the same ride as me. I was grateful that Braden had to scoot over next to me, because he blocked their view of me during the ride.

“You good?” Braden asked.

“I’m great!” I answered.

He flashed me a warm smile before turning back to say something to one of the linemen.

The charity event was held at the Grand Hall at Union Station, a converted section of the train station. It was bookended with 65-foot arches, with intricate frescoes, gold leaf detailing, and art glass windows. As we exited the limo and walked inside, a sign on the wall boasted that the room had been restored to the original style from its 1894 opening.

I was nervous about all the attention I would get as we went inside. A professional photographer snapped photos of us before we were admitted into the ballroom. The sound of classical music from a four-piece orchestra was drowned out by the buzz and chatter of at least two hundred guests that milled around the space with drinks in hand. Many of them turned to openly stare at us as we entered. It was impossible to forget that I was here with Braden and Christian, two of the most famous athletes in St. Louis.

“Braden and I have to go check-in with the event coordinator, and then make our rounds among the guests,”

Christian told me. “Make yourself at home. Mingle, and enjoy as much food and drinks as you want. I’ll come check on you in a little bit. Cool?”

“Works for me!” I said.

“If you need anything, come find us,” Braden said with a dashing wink.

Once they were gone, I wandered around through the ballroom. People must have noticed that I arrived with the two football stars, because I drew long glances as I weaved through the crowd to the bar.

But after getting a glass of white wine, nobody looked twice at me. I even seemed to be invisible to the wait staff, as I had to practically wave in one’s face to get them to stop and serve me a mini-quiche. No matter how good I looked in the dress, it must have been immediately obvious that I wasn’t *with* either of the players. The other guests probably thought I was one of their agents, or publicist.

So much for being nervous about all the attention.

For a little while, being invisible was a relief. I nursed my glass of wine and had two more mini-quiches, and three other appetizers served on toothpicks. Braden was right: I felt like I could eat a hundred of these and still not sate my appetite.

I made my way over to a display table that was positioned against one wall and spent a few minutes learning about the charity. They sponsored after-school football leagues for at-risk teenagers in the St. Louis area, with specialized classes to learn new skills and even coaching strategies. As I looked around the room, I noticed that many teenagers benefiting from the program were in attendance, ranging from age ten to sixteen and looking sharp in their own tuxedos. I wondered if Braden and Christian really believed in this program, or if they were required to attend.

Yet after wandering around for nearly an hour, I began to wish I wasn’t so invisible. I tried joining a few clusters of conversation, but the topics were exclusively related to football and modern high school programs—two things I had

zero experience in. I always stood there without anything to contribute, hoping someone would turn to me and ask what I did for a living. But nobody did.

After my second wine, I pulled out my phone and considered calling Suzie to make sure everything was okay back at the kennel. The only thing that stopped me was that I didn't want to seem like I was hovering. If my business was going to be a success, I needed to learn to delegate responsibilities and trust that they would be handled. Besides, I had given Suzie my personal phone number on a sheet of paper in the office. If she needed anything, she could reach me.

When I put my phone back in my clutch, I noticed the stack of business cards there. I had ordered them with next-day shipping to make sure they arrived before this event, but I hadn't given any away. Heck, I hadn't even *spoken* to anyone at the party except for the bartender and two waiters.

The longer I stood by myself in a corner, the more I began to feel sorry for myself. It reminded me of my Senior Prom, when I went by myself and nobody asked me to dance. Nobody knew me here, which should have saved me from any humiliation, but I still couldn't help but feel like a loser.

I began to think about all the things I could have been doing if I had stayed home. I needed to sit down and figure out how to run ads for my business. I still had to create a Google Maps account and register my business, so customers could find me if they ran a search. I was running low on all sorts of supplies, but now that I had some good cash flow, I needed to stock up on dog food, bones, treats, and special canine shampoo. Not to mention all the renovations that needed to be done to my grandma's house. Once I cleaned out all the stuff she had hoarded, there were still a million small upgrades that needed to be made to make it livable. Things I had put on the back burner while I focused on getting the boarding business up and running.

Maybe I should just leave.

I hated to ditch Christian and Braden, but I wasn't sure what else to do. They were both on the other side of the room, laughing with one of the linemen, his supermodel date, and two teenagers from the program. I didn't want to bother Christian, especially at an event like this. And he hadn't checked in on me like he promised he would.

Certainty grew within me, so I finished my wine and made my way toward the entrance to retrieve my coat. "Not having a good time?" he asked while taking my ticket.

I shrugged. "I guess it's not my style."

The coat check guy disappeared into the closet. A moment later, Christian appeared by my side and tugged on my sleeve. "Hey! Are you leaving?" he asked with a puzzled smile.

"Um, no. I was just checking to see if I left my lipstick in my coat pocket."

"Here you are, ma'am!" the coat guy said, holding up my coat with a big smile. "Sorry you didn't have a great time at the event."

I winced and turned back to Christian. "Okay, yes. I was about to call an Uber."

"What? Why?" he asked. "Are people not receptive to your business?"

"That's the thing... I haven't talked with *anyone*," I replied. "I tried joining a few conversations, but mostly people just ignore me. I don't really belong at an event like this."

"Shit." Christian handed my coat back to the attendant and guided me back into the room. "Why didn't you come talk to me?"

"I didn't want to be a bother."

"I'm sorry. I thought this night would be a lot more fun, but it's mostly work for me and Braden. Not that we don't enjoy this sort of thing, but we're kind of on the clock. We've been trying to put in some face time with everybody here."

"It's okay!" I said. "I wasn't blaming you."

He accepted two glasses of wine from a nearby server and handed one to me. “Being a quarterback is so much more work than what you see on the field. I’m a leader. The face of the team. When we lose, I get most of the blame. When we win, like in the last two weeks, I get most of the credit. Even when I don’t deserve it. The whole thing is exhausting, and the pressure is enormous.” He sighed, and I could see just how exhausted he was as he gazed around the room. “There’s even more pressure since the Colts moved to a new city. Half the fans are cheering for us, but the other half are rooting for us to fail because they think we’re villains. Sometimes I miss Indianapolis.”

I put a comforting hand on his arm. I had always assumed professional athletes had extremely cushy lives. I never thought about the kind of pressure they felt.

Christian gave himself a shake, then turned back to me. “Sorry. I’m rambling. You really haven’t talked to *anyone* here?”

“Just the bartender and two servers. Which, if you really think about it, are the people that truly matter.”

He grinned, then put a hand on my back and guided me forward. “Let’s fix that. Theresa! I want you to meet someone. This is Beth Foster. She’s the unofficial dog boarder for the River City Colts, and I know you were just telling me about your Cocker Spaniel...”

For the next ten minutes, Christian introduced me to a bunch of people that he had met. It turned out that he wasn’t ignoring me all night—he was scouting all the rich donors to the charity who also had dogs.

Braden came over shortly after that and asked, “What’s up, Beth? Making friends?”

“Beth didn’t get to do much mingling tonight, so we’re making up for lost time.”

Braden got a determined look in his blue eyes. “I’m on it. Give me a stack of cards.”

I handed him some cards, and then he went hurrying off into the crowd. Like a paperboy with a new route, he made sure everyone had a card, stuffing them into every pocket he could find. He even slid one into the rear pants pocket of the president of the charity organization, giving him an emphatic smack on the rump afterward, which drew a few laughs.

“I would *love* to send my two Vizslas to you while we’re in Ibiza,” one well-spoken woman was telling me. “I do have to warn you: they’re quite high energy.”

I put on my best smile. “That won’t be a problem. My kennel sits on four acres of land. There’s lots of room for the dogs to run and play and get all their energy out.”

“And if I wanted you to work them individually?” she asked. “Perhaps taking them on daily jogs?”

“That’s... something we can certainly discuss!” I replied. “The cost for such a service...”

She waved a gloved hand. “No matter the cost, my Vizslas simply *must* have private service. May I have three extra cards to give to the other members of the St. Louis Women’s Club?”

“Of course!” I said, handing her a stack.

“Beth!” Braden was waving at me from across the room. “We’ve got a whole pack over here who needs boarding *next week*.”

Christian grinned at me. “Better go snag them.”

11



Beth

“I can’t believe we gave away all of my business cards!”

We all laughed in the limo while passing around a bottle of champagne. It was the second one we had opened since leaving the event. Rap music blared in the limo, and the LEDs around the ceiling were flashing in different colors in time with the beat.

“My boy Braden was all over that shit,” one of the linemen said. “He was moving around like a running back, trying to cover as much ground as possible.”

“I’m good at following directions,” Braden said with a huge grin. “Give me an assignment and I’ll get to work.”

“Well, I appreciate all the help,” I said after taking another swig from the bottle. “Hopefully I get some new customers.”

“How did you become a dog nanny?” one of the linemen’s dates asked.

“Yeah!” Braden said. “What started it all?”

“When I was a teenager, I babysat around my neighborhood,” I explained. “We lived in a dense neighborhood, so I had lots of customers. I was booked out *weeks* in advance, and sometimes babysat for multiple families on the same night. Then one summer, one of the families I babysat for asked if I could watch their dog while they were on vacation. Then another family heard about that and asked me for the same thing. Pretty soon, I was babysitting dogs as much as humans. And I learned that I liked dogs a lot more. So eventually, I stopped babysitting and focused only on pets.

Don't get me wrong—I *loved* babysitting. Especially if it was just one kid at a time. But there were lots of nights where I was watching half a dozen kids at once, which gets *really* crazy. Dogs are much easier, especially when you're dealing with more than one."

"Besides, parents get bent out of shape if you stick their toddler in a crate," Christian said with a small smile.

Braden barked a laugh. "That might be the funniest thing you've ever said."

Christian frowned. "You act like I never make jokes."

"You do, but they're usually not funny."

The linemen roared with laughter at that. Christian pretended like he was going to throw the bottle of champagne at them.

The music switched to a new rap song, and the two linemen started singing along while dancing in their seats. Braden stood up—which was more of a crouch in the limo—and began twerking in his suit. One of the other women reached over and slapped him on the ass, so I leaned forward and did the same thing. My palm made a satisfying *smack* against his butt.

The Colts had won their game last night, and the charity event was a lot of fun. Everyone was having a good time—me included. It helped that I was working with a really nice buzz.

We dropped off the linemen, and then it was just the three of us remaining. Braden and Christian relaxed into the seats across from me.

"Before I forget, I want to thank you," I said.

Christian cocked his head. "For what?"

"For helping push my business. And for inviting me along in the first place. The last month..." I trailed off, unsure if I should unload on them emotionally.

"What?" Braden insisted.

“The last month has been tough on me,” I explained. “First, my grandma died. I inherited her property and was afraid that I wouldn’t be able to afford the property taxes on it. Then I took the leap and started my own business, which has been a lot more stressful than I expected, since I quit my day job to do it. And then my personal life...” I smiled. “Let’s just say it was really nice to get out for a night.”

“We’re glad we pestered you into coming,” Christian said.

Braden scoffed. “I didn’t pester her. I persistently reiterated our invitation.”

“And I’m glad you did,” I replied, hefting the champagne bottle. “Cheers.”

I took a swig, then offered it to Christian. He reached his hand out, but we were too far apart, so I stood up and leaned toward him. At that exact moment, the limo made a right turn—which threw me forward. Caught off guard, I very nearly went flying into the tinted window.

But Christian caught me first, and I fell down into his lap.

“Woah now,” Christian said. “Careful.”

Feeling foolish, I giggled and started to apologize. But Christian’s blue eyes were piercing me, and he was just so damn *dashing* in his tuxedo, even with the jacket removed. Maybe especially because the jacket was off, revealing the dress shirt fabric pulled taut by his bulging muscles. I gazed back at him, and we shared a moment.

And instead of letting the moment pass me by, I leaned in to kiss him.

12



Beth

Christian met my kiss halfway, lips grinding hungrily against mine. Champagne bubbles moved from his mouth to mine as the kiss deepened, little pinpricks against our joined tongues.

Oh my God. I'm kissing a member of the Colts. I wasn't even a football fan, but after spending the evening watching a room full of donors fawn over the quarterback, it added a layer of excitement to what I was doing.

Christian pulled back and smiled at me. "I ought to give the driver an extra tip for that sharp turn."

I glanced at the front of the limo; the privacy screen had been raised. Embarrassed in spite of that, I said, "I'm so sorry! I'm tipsy, and—"

"No," Christian said, the word a command. "Don't apologize. I'm the one who kissed you."

"I think you kissed each other," Braden said.

I had forgotten about the other player next to us. "Sorry! This must be really awkward for you, sitting there while we make out..."

His grin somehow deepened. "Awkward? Fuck no! I like watching."

"He likes joining in, too," Christian said.

"Hell yeah I do."

It took me three heartbeats to realize what they meant.

"Oh. *Oh!*"

“Do you want to kiss Braden?” Christian asked.

I glanced at Braden, and the answer was an overwhelming *yes*. Both of them were so gorgeous, and fun, and had helped my business get running. The only thing stopping me was the fact that the three of us were together. No matter what they said, it seemed strange to kiss one in front of the other.

I bit my lip. “I...”

Braden must have read my mind, because he cupped my cheek with his broad hand and pulled my face toward his. The kiss was rougher than Christian’s, and more eager. A soft moan escaped my throat as his tongue writhed against mine.

I can’t believe I’m kissing Braden, too.

I was still sitting in Christian’s lap, and he made sure to reiterate that fact by grabbing my ass with both hands. I lowered more of my weight onto his lap, straddling one of his muscular thighs and grinding against it while kissing Braden.

Their separate colognes mixed together in my nose, an aroma of masculinity and strength. Was this really happening? Was I kissing one man while sitting in the lap of another?

“She’s a better kisser than I imagined,” Braden said, grinning at me while caressing my neck with his thumb. “Not that I imagined you to be *bad*, but...”

“Is this all right?” Christian asked. “If you’re not comfortable with this...”

I responded by practically throwing my mouth at his in another ragged kiss. He recovered from his surprise and squeezed my ass harder in his hands, moving me back and forth against his thigh, adding wonderful friction through my panties. Braden’s lips were on my neck, kissing and nuzzling, pulling aside the dress strap to find my collarbone.

God, this felt so good. We were buzzed, and reeling from the fun night out, and had a limo driving us home. There was nothing to worry about in the world except their two bodies folding around mine, a sexy football player sandwich. I had never done anything close to as scandalous as this before. It

had been so long since I'd had any kind of adventurous sex at all, let alone a threesome!

"You're hogging her," Braden said, grabbing me and pulling me over onto the limo cushion. He maneuvered until he was on top of me, sinking between my legs until I felt his hard length through his tuxedo pants, warm and stiff against my panties. I hiked my dress up and spread my legs for him, allowing him to push harder against me, grinding back and forth as his hungry mouth found mine again.

This is heaven, I thought as the music thumped in my ears. *Pure heaven*.

Then Braden was sliding down off of me until he was on his knees on the floor of the limo. I gasped as he pulled my thong aside and began rubbing my pussy up and down with two fingers.

"You're soaked," he said, grinning up at me.

"Can you blame me?" I shot back at him.

"No, I can't," he replied. "But I can make you wetter."

He held my gaze for a moment longer, then lowered his eyes and began licking my pussy. Up and down, left and right, in and out—it was like he was trying to taste every bit of me. Devouring me like a meal he was starving for. I let out a long moan, which Christian promptly silenced with a kiss. His tongue rolled in my mouth while Braden's moved between my legs, licking me from both ends at the same time.

I arched my back as I savored what was happening to me. Two chiseled football players, more famous than I could ever imagine, were sharing me in the back of a limo. Even if I had someone to tell, nobody would ever believe me. I still wasn't sure I believed it myself.

As Braden slid two fingers deep into my wet folds, I fumbled with my hand for Christian's pants. I found the zipper and pulled it down, plunging my hand inside until I grasped his thick cock through his underwear. He made the most delicious groan, deep and lustful, lips curling into a smile against mine as I began to stroke him through the thin fabric.

A hand pawed at my chest, squeezing my breast and pinching my nipple through the dress, and with my eyes closed I couldn't tell if it was Christian's hand or Braden's—a fact which heightened the pleasure to new, more intense levels.

“Give me your cock,” I demanded of Christian.

He grinned and said, “You've already got a strong grip on it.”

I shook my head and sighed as Braden's tongue swirled around my clit. “Bring it here. Closer.”

I pulled him up toward me, and his eyes widened as he realized what I intended. He knelt on the seat next to me, threading his stiff cock through the hole in his pants until it was out in the open. Dicks weren't exactly pretty organs, but Christian's was thick and gorgeous, an extension of his powerful personality. I grabbed his ass with one hand and pulled him toward me, taking the tip of his cock in my mouth.

“Fuck me,” he groaned.

“Wait your turn,” Braden paused to say. “I've got first dibs. *After* I make her come at least once.”

I tried to tell him that it wasn't that easy for me, that orgasms only came after a *lot* of foreplay, but he dove back into my wet slit and made me forget all about it. His fingers continued sliding in and out, twisting in a corkscrew motion while he licked and sucked on my clit in alternating efforts.

I wanted to devote more energy to the blowjob I was giving Christian, to make him feel as good as I did, but it was impossible to focus with Braden's face buried into my pussy. Even still, Christian was tilting his head back and loving the way I moved my lips across his cock. And when he slid his fingers into my hair and squeezed ever so slightly, guiding me back and forth, the dual stimulation was more than I could handle. My orgasm began building, a rising tide of pressure that shocked me. Unable to contain myself, I clenched my lips around Christian's tip and stroked his shaft, faster and faster as my climax neared.

“Don’t stop,” I said, taking my mouth away for just a second. “Don’t stop, yes, just like that, *yes*.”

Braden was good at following directions; his fingers pumped into me steadily while his tongue circled my clit. I grabbed a handful of his blond hair the way Christian was squeezing mine and I held his face against me as I started to come, small fireworks of pleasure at first but rapidly building into a more grand finale.

I was crying out loudly then, which Christian quickly muffled by shoving his cock back in my mouth. I accepted him eagerly, practically screaming around his thick length as the orgasm ravaged my entire body, curling my toes and arching my back on the limo seat. Everything went bright and hummed, so loudly that I couldn’t hear the thumping of the music. The only sensations I could process were Christian’s cock in my mouth and Braden’s fingers and tongue on my sex.

As I came back down, my vision and hearing returning, Braden rose from his spot on the floor. He pulled my face away from Christian and gave me a long kiss, allowing me to taste myself on his lips.

“I want you,” he breathed, blue eyes sparkling in the overhead LEDs. “I *need* you. I’ve never needed anything more in my life.”

I want him too, I realized. I want so much more than just oral. I want everything with them.

There was no other answer I could possibly give—I bobbed my head in a frantic *yes*.

13



Beth

Braden unzipped his pants and let them fall to his ankles; he wasn't wearing any underwear. His cock wasn't as thick as Christian's, but it was longer, and he quickly procured a condom and wrapped himself. Christian slid me lower on the limo seat, then pulled my legs wide for his teammate.

"Fuck," Braden groaned while sliding the tip into my drenched slit. "You feel amazing, even with just the tip."

"I want all of you," I breathed.

Still gripping his cock in a fist, Braden smirked. "What if I want to tease you a little?"

I responded by grabbing a handful of his tuxedo shirt and yanking him forward. The entirety of his cock filled me as he fell forward, causing both of us to cry out in surprise and pleasure.

"Jesus," Braden breathed in my ear.

I wrapped one arm around his back and let the other grasp the back of his neck. "You're almost bigger than I can handle."

"Want me to go slow?"

I answered him by rocking my hips back and forth against his cock, urging him on.

Christian rumbled a laugh and said, "I don't think she wants it slow."

Braden began fucking me, pulling back halfway before plunging deep inside again. The pleasure was intense so soon after my orgasm, and I could tell another aftershock wasn't far

away. I reached over and found Christian again, grasping him by the shaft and stroking faster to make up for lost time. All the while, he held my legs spread wide for Braden.

“That’s it,” Christian purred. “Fuck her like that. She loves it.”

Braden lowered his head to my neck, kissing my collarbone as his breathing intensified. I made myself open my eyes to take in everything happening around me: the tall wide receiver covering my body with his and pumping between my legs, blond hair swaying with every erotic thrust. The quarterback urging him on, powerful arms bulging in his tuxedo sleeves while spreading my legs wide as I jacked him off. The scenery outside the windows wasn’t moving; we must have been stopped at a light. Thank goodness the windows were tinted.

The sight of our erotic threesome, paired with Braden’s cock, were enough to throw me into another orgasm. It was quicker and more intense, like the strike of a match rather than a steady burning lantern. Even still, my cries echoed through the limo as I wrapped my legs around Braden tightly, holding him against me while clenching my inner muscles around his girth.

Then Braden was pulling back and pumping into me again, increasing speed in a way that told me *he* was close. I twisted my head and found Christian’s tip again, taking it and sucking while swirling my tongue around his crown. If Braden was going to come, I wanted Christian to do the same. I desperately needed both of them to reach their intense climaxes at the same time, an explosive finish to cap off an amazing night.

Suddenly, there was a sound on the intercom: “Mr. Baker?” the driver said. The divider was still closed, though.

“He can’t hear us,” Christian said. “Not unless I press the button.”

“Someone is coming,” the driver said.

Yeah, I thought, drunk on pleasure. All three of us.

I nearly jumped as something smacked against the glass window down near the end of the limo. The pounding continued, so we all turned to look. It was difficult to tell because it was dark outside, but it looked like a woman was smacking her palm against the window.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “That’s Suzie!”

“We’re parked in front of your house,” Christian said, peering out the other window.

“Beth?” Suzie said, voice muffled by the glass. “Beth, we have an emergency! Beth!”

All three of us cursed and scrambled to make ourselves presentable. That was easy for me; all I had to do was adjust my panties back into place and pull my dress down. But I was breathing like I had just run a mile, and my face looked red and sweaty in the window’s reflection.

“Go ahead,” Braden said while scrambling to pull up his pants. He didn’t even take the condom off. “We’ll meet you in a minute.”

I walked down to the end of the limo and opened the door, sliding outside quickly so I could shut the door and prevent Suzie from seeing what was going on inside. She didn’t even try to look; she was practically jumping up and down with panic.

“What is it?”

“The dog food!” she exclaimed, jogging away from the limo. “I went to feed the dogs, but they got into the food closet. They tore open the bags and dragged them all over the field, and now I can’t get them back in...”

I rounded the limo and saw the chaos in the field. Bright yellow bags of dog food were scattered everywhere, and torn pieces of paper were drifting across the ground in the wind. Some dogs were chowing down on piles of food, while others played tug-of-war with the remnants of the bags. I ran over to the gate and let myself into the field. Hank, my good boy, was not participating in the food frenzy—his ears were flat on his head and he gave me the most pathetic “I didn’t do it!” face. A

few feet next to him, Christian's dog Heidi was sitting on her haunches and watching the chaos.

I picked up a nearby bottle that was chewed up. "They got into the shampoo, too?"

Suzie let out a distressed groan. "Oh no! I didn't even see that!"

"Holy shit," Christian said as he joined us. The bulge in his pants seemed obvious to me, but Suzie didn't notice. "That's a good girl, Heidi. Good girl."

"Pickles!" Braden shouted. "PICKLES! Come!"

The Golden Retriever jogged toward us, a thick elk bone between his jaws. He wagged his tail when he reached the fence and greeted us.

"Pickles is innocent," Suzie explained. "It was that little Chihuahua mix that started it."

"Loki?" Christian asked.

Suzie nodded. "He slipped into the storage room when I wasn't looking and tore holes in most of the food and treat bags. Then he grabbed my cell phone! When I chased him to get it back, all the other dogs went into the closet, and..." Exasperated, she gestured at the field.

"Why didn't you call me!"

"I did!" she replied, holding up her phone. The screen was smeared with mud. "I started half an hour ago and haven't stopped!"

"Clearly you dialed the wrong number." I sighed and turned back to the two men. "I need to change into better clothes to fix this. You two can take your dogs home. Thank you both for a wonderful night."

I hurried inside and changed into clothes that I didn't mind getting dirty. I was frustrated with Suzie for not being able to handle things while I was gone, and annoyed that I didn't get to finish my evening with Christian and Braden. Just when things finally seemed like they were going my way, I suffered

a huge setback like this. God only knew how much damage the dogs had caused in the storage room.

When I went back outside a few minutes later, the limo was still there. It was dark, but I could see the white dress shirts of Christian and Braden walking around in the field, picking up pieces of dog food bags and toys. The only dogs still in the field with them were Pickles, Heidi, and Hank.

“They helped corral the dogs inside,” Suzie said. She was holding an armful of toys and bones. “Heidi helped shepherd them into the kennels.”

“She’s a good girl,” Christian said while bringing a handful of trash over to the gate. “Once she realized what we were doing, she went into shepherd mode.”

“Pickles helped!” Braden added. “Or, at least, he didn’t hurt anything. Which is a win all on its own.”

Pickles barked twice in agreement.

“Your tuxedos are filthy,” I moaned. “You didn’t have to stay and help. I could have cleaned up my own mess.”

“Who cares?” Braden said with a smile. “Chrissy can buy us new tuxes. He’s making twenty-four million this year.”

“Holy shit,” Suzie whispered.

“You’re making eight million!” Christian replied.

Braden nodded emphatically. “Exactly! I’m practically in the poor house compared to you.” He dropped off a bag of trash and grabbed another empty trash bag from a roll by the gate. “I saw some pieces of a shampoo bottle over in the corner. We’ll get out of your hair after that.”

He winked at me and hurried off. Christian followed him, with Heidi and Pickles right on their heels.



Braden

Holy fucking *blue balls*, Batman.

I'd been interrupted while getting my groove on before. The first was in the back seat of my Ford Taurus, parked at the end of the high school parking lot after prom. Then there was the summer I was visiting my college girlfriend and had to climb out the window when her dad came home from work early. The following semester, someone started a fire by burning popcorn in the dorm microwave while I was in the middle of round three with my girlfriend and another couple. Having a foursome interrupted by a fireman knocking the door down was not what I would call a *fun bedroom surprise*.

But all of those experiences paled in comparison to the blue balls I felt after leaving the limo.

I didn't know what it was about Beth, but I was drawn to the woman from the moment I laid eyes on her. I'd been thinking about her every night since we first dropped off our dogs at her kennel. And although I didn't really expect anything to happen tonight after the charity event, and despite Christian insisting that we don't do anything to pressure Beth, a small part of me had hoped something *would* happen.

Riding a nice champagne buzz, her pussy felt like heaven as it tightly gripped my cock. She was loving every minute of that limo ride—the excitement at having a threesome with us couldn't have been more obvious. Her excitement poured over into my own emotion, fueling the lust that I felt as I drove my cock into her over and over.

“Fucking dogs,” I grumbled.

In the back of the limo, Pickles raised his head to look at me.

“Not you. And not Heidi, or Hank. But all the other dogs are jerks. Cockblocking jerks.” I glanced at Christian. “We should have asked Beth if she wanted to get a nightcap inside.”

“She was stressed out,” he replied, shaking his head. “And she still had a lot of work to do with the boarded dogs.”

“Still...”

“The moment passed,” he insisted. “Maybe there will be another chance, but not tonight.”

Deep down, I knew he was right. Sometimes magic happened, and once it was gone there was no way to get it back. But still, I desperately wished there was a way to continue what we had started.

“You want to go somewhere to watch the Niners game Sunday?” Christian asked. “Since we’re playing them the following week, I want to see what kind of blitzes they try. I’m going to need extra protection in the pocket.”

“I’ve got plenty of protection,” I said with a grin.

“Huh?”

“I said I’ve got plenty of protection.”

“I heard what you said. But I don’t understand.”

Sighing, I gestured at my crotch. “The condom is still on. I never took it off. It’s not funny if I have to explain the joke.”

Chuckling, Christian said, “Sorry. I still have my mind on what we were doing in the limo half an hour ago.”

“Maybe we can find another charity event to volunteer for? Try to reproduce the evening.”

“We can just rent a limo and dress up if we wanted to do that,” he replied.

I shrugged. “She’s the real deal.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “She is.”

“You think she’ll be interested in what we have in mind?”

“I don’t know,” Christian admitted. “A random threesome is one thing, but a deeper commitment...”

“She should know what she’s getting into. And what we want long-term.”

“Sure, but we don’t want to scare her off, either.”

“Yeah.” I sighed again. “I’ll tell you one thing, though.”

“What’s that?”

“She absolutely *loved* it tonight. And I guarantee you she wants to do it again, and she’ll be thinking about that the rest of the night.”

“You’re probably right.” Christian pulled out his phone and frowned at the screen. “Hey, what’s up, Logan?” After a few seconds, Christian’s eyes widened.

“What?” I asked.

“Yeah, that’s not a problem,” Christian said. “We can help however you need. Right. Okay. Yeah, no problem.”

“What is it?” I asked as he hung up.

“It’s Logan’s daughter, Claire,” he said slowly. “It looks like he’s getting custody. And he needs us to pick her up from the social worker tomorrow before he gets back from his road game.”

15



Beth

“I’m sorry!” Suzie kept saying. “I’m so sorry!”

“It’s fine,” I replied. Again. I was taping up one of the few dog food bags that was still mostly intact. We had enough to last two more days, at least. “It’s partly my fault for writing down the wrong number on the contact sheet.”

“But I never should have let it get to that point. If I hadn’t left the storage door open...”

“*Suzie*,” I said more forcefully. “Let’s drop it. Okay? I’m not going to fire you.”

“You’re... you’re not?”

“No,” I replied. “As long as this doesn’t happen again.”

“Oh, I promise it won’t! I’ll always be careful from now on!”

“I’m sure you will.”

“Did you at least have fun tonight?” she asked.

I set the bag of food in the corner and wiped my hands. “I really did. Hopefully it results in a lot of new customers.”

“Your limo was parked there for a while,” Suzie said. “I kept waiting for you to jump out and help with the dogs. I hope I didn’t interrupt anything...?”

Oh, you interrupted something all right. My very first threesome.

“I think we’re all done here,” I told her. “You can clock out for the day.”

“Thank you for not being mad, Ms. Foster.”

“I’m still a *little* mad,” I said, adding a smile to take away the sting.

Suzie gave me an awkward hug, then hurried out to her car. After she drove away, I went back inside the house with Hank. It was nearly midnight.

What a night.

With all of the chaos at my kennel, I hadn’t had a chance to process what had happened in the limo. As I climbed into bed, it all came back to me. Falling into Christian’s lap and then kissing him. Braden cupping my cheek and pulling me into a different kind of kiss. Giving Christian a blowjob while Braden went down on me. Being shared back and forth between them. It had happened just two hours ago, but it didn’t feel real.

Before tonight, I had never really had a positive view of threesomes. They seemed like the kind of fantasy *men* had, not women. But after taking part in one, I felt totally different. I wished we hadn’t been interrupted.

And I wanted to do it again.

Reliving the erotic energy from the limo, I slid my fingers into my panties and touched myself. It didn’t take long to bring myself to a quick, shuddering orgasm, my back arching as I gasped all alone.

Yet as I relaxed into my pillows, I began to think about the night in a totally different light. On the limo ride to the charity event, the linemen had dates with them—except they weren’t really dates. I had overheard one of the guys referring to them as *groupie hoes*. Women for them to do what they wanted with, and then discard.

Was that how Christian and Braden thought of me?

Suddenly, I was terrified of being thought of that way. Not only because I didn’t want to be that kind of woman, but because it might affect my business. Many of their teammates were my customers, boarding their dogs with me. I didn’t want

to get a reputation among them; they might think the guys were only patronizing my business because of sexual favors.

Ugh. What should I do?

When I woke up, I had a group text initiated by Christian:

Christian: Had a great time last night, Beth. Sorry about the situation with the dogs. Hope everything's all right now.

Braden: Pickles has pooped four times this morning. So I'm pretty sure he ate a lot of that dog food once Loki tore it all up.

Me: We got the dogs under control. Thanks again for your help with all of that. And sorry we got interrupted in the limo. I hope you two didn't go home sexually frustrated!

Braden: I DEFINITELY had blue balls last night. But that's all right. It was still a great time ;-)

Christian: It just means we'll have to pick up where we left off. Want to get dinner this week? Mondays and Tuesdays are usually good for our schedule.

Braden: Tuesday's better for me. Monday night I'm staying in and watching the football game.

Me: This week probably isn't great for me. Can we talk about it when you drop your dogs off before your next road game?

Christian: Sounds good.

Braden: See you then! Pickles misses you already. And not just because he, like, ate a whole shitload of dog food.

Braden punctuated the conversation with a photo of Pickles laying on his back in a human bed, belly exposed. Also in the photo was Braden's chiseled leg, nude all the way up to the thigh. The sight of it sent an excited shiver up my spine.

I need to tell them we should keep it professional. That's the best thing for everyone.

On Sunday, Logan pulled up my driveway in his big black SUV. That was a surprise; he wasn't supposed to pick up his dogs until Monday. I wasn't sure how to broach the subject about Loki's behavior with him. I wasn't very good with confrontation, and Logan was one of my first customers since handing out my business card at the hockey game. Fortunately, I didn't have to bring it up.

"Heard about what happened," he said bluntly while approaching the gate. There was a healthy scowl plastered on his face as the dogs came running up to the fence. "You're a little shit, you know that?" he said to Loki.

"Yeah, he's earned his name," I said with a grimace. "I thought you weren't picking them up until tomorrow?"

"Plans changed," he growled. He didn't seem annoyed at *me*, but at whatever situation had caused him to come back early. "How much damage did the little shit cause?"

I shrugged. "It wasn't *too* bad. A few bags of dog food, a crate of bones, three bags of chew toys..."

Logan clenched his jaw and pulled his phone out. After a few taps, he shoved it back in his pocket. "That should cover the damages, with a little extra as an apology. Come on, you mangy fuckers. There's someone at home I want you to meet."

He opened the gate. Loki, Heimdall, Odin, and Freya ran across the driveway and hopped into the open door of his SUV. Logan closed the gate and walked away without another word.

My phone chimed in my pocket. It was an alert from Venmo: Logan had transferred \$5,000 to my account. I stared at the number for several seconds before it sank in.

“A *little* extra as an apology?” I asked.

“I’ve got another road series next week,” he said. “I’ll drop them off Sunday, and pick them up Wednesday.”

“Um. Okay. Just make sure you book it online so I have a record.”

“No time,” he said. “Sunday to Wednesday. Is that a problem?”

“Nope!” I replied, thinking of the money he had just transferred. “I’ll manually put it in the system.”

He nodded once. “Good.”

And then he drove away.



Beth

Players for both the Blues and Colts visited my kennel throughout the week. A lot of them were doing daily doggy daycare, dropping their dogs off early in the morning and then picking them up that afternoon. That was my favorite kind of customer because it meant I didn't have to keep them overnight.

Suzie continued apologizing to me every day she showed up for work. By Friday, I snapped at her and threatened to fire her if she said "I'm sorry" one more time. I felt bad about it, but she started acting normal again after that.

I also got plenty of new customers from the charity event. Only a few of them needed kennel services this week, but at least a dozen booked reservations online for later in the year—especially around Thanksgiving and Christmas. Soon, my calendar was looking pretty full.

My business might just survive after all.

The Colts were going out of town for a road game on Sunday, so many of the players showed up Saturday morning to drop their dogs off before their flight out. One of the linemen that was in the limo with me dropped off his Boxer, appropriately named Colt.

"I heard about what happened the other night," he told me with a smirk. "After the charity event."

I froze. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah, Braden was telling the entire team about it. His brother-in-law's dog got into the dog food, huh?"

Relieved that he wasn't talking about the limo threesome, I laughed and said, "Oh yeah. Tore a bag open, and then distracted Suzie so all the other dogs could get in there. Tore the place up. Dog food and toys everywhere."

The big lineman chuckled and scratched his dog's ear. "Colt's a good boy. He doesn't get into trouble. The other day, my daughter threw one of her chicken tenders on the floor. Landed right next to Colt. He froze and waited for me to take it away because he knew he wasn't supposed to eat it."

I bent down and greeted the dog. "He sure looks like a good boy! I'll take good care of him. Have a good trip, and good luck tomorrow!"

Other players came and went over the next hour. I was beginning to think the two Colts players I was anticipating the most wouldn't show up, until eventually their two cars pulled up together.

"Pickles! Heidi!" I said excitedly as the dogs came running up. "My two favorite customers."

"I think Heidi missed you," Christian said. "She started whining excitedly when she realized where I was taking her." He looked dashing in his suit, a sight which immediately reminded me of the way he looked in a tuxedo in the limo, crouched on the seat next to me while I reached inside his pants, my fingers grasping onto his hard length...

"Pickles is definitely happy to be here," Braden added. "That's definitely a good sign compared to the *last* dog boarder we used."

"I always like to hear that!" I gestured at him. "I see you remembered to get dressed *before* coming here, so you won't need to use my dining room."

Braden gave me a boyish grin. "You sound disappointed that you won't get to walk in on me changing."

"Easy there, tiger." Christian shook his head. "Sorry for my teammate's manners."

"Hey! I have tons of manners!"

There's my opening. Might as well jump right into the subject. "I actually wanted to talk to you about what happened in the limo last week..."

"Oh, fuck!" Braden said. "Did we mess up? The last thing we wanted to do was pressure you into anything..."

"No!" I said. "You didn't do anything wrong. I *loved* it."

Christian smiled. "I thought you did at the time."

"But I've been thinking about it," I went on. Why was this so hard? "And I don't think I want that to happen again."

"Oh." Without his smile, Braden looked hurt. "Okay. Yeah. No problem."

"Mind if I ask why?" Christian said gently.

"I just don't want to be a random hookup, or a groupie, or whatever pro athletes have. I want to be valued for my business, and not just because I slept with the two of you. And since a lot of your teammates are my customers, I don't want them thinking less of me. You know?"

The two men shared a look. Braden even looked relieved.

"There's something we should tell you," Christian said slowly. He glanced at his watch. "We don't see you as a groupie, or a random hookup, or whatever it is you're afraid of."

"Totally!" Braden chimed in. He really did seem like a Golden Retriever. "I want to, like, take you out on a date. And another date if that goes well, and then another date after *that*..."

"I think she understands the concept of dating," Christian muttered. "But Braden is correct in spirit. I feel the same way. You're not just some groupie, like the dates the linemen brought to the charity thing."

I frowned. "I'm confused. There's two of you, and one of me. What do you propose: that you *both* date me?"

I laughed, but Christian remained totally serious. "Actually, yes."

“What? I was just joking.”

“We’re not,” Braden said.

I looked back and forth between the two of them. “I’m going to need you to explain what you mean.”

Heidi let out an impatient bark. Pickles was also wagging his tail excitedly. I had forgotten all about them. I opened the gates and let them into the field, where they went sprinting off to join the other dogs that were having a good time.

“We’ve done this before,” Christian said, crossing his arms and leaning against the fence. “Our ex-girlfriend in Indianapolis.”

“With Logan, too,” Braden chimed in. “The three of us dated her at the same time.”

“Logan was more long distance though, since he was living in St. Louis. He would drive three hours to meet whenever he was free. And in the off season he rented a place in Indianapolis.”

“The *three of you* dated the same girl?”

“It was great!” Braden said. “We didn’t plan it that way, but it just sort of happened. And we were happy.”

My mouth was hanging open, so I closed it shut. Were they being serious? Three men dating the same woman? It felt like I was having a prank pulled on me.

“You couldn’t have been that happy if you broke up,” I pointed out.

Christian grimaced. “That’s the thing. We only broke up because the Colts were moved to St. Louis. Our ex didn’t want to do the long distance thing, so we ended it.”

“But she was already doing the long distance thing with Logan,” I said.

“Exactly!” Braden answered. “She said it was already breaking her heart to do that with *one* partner, and she knew she couldn’t do it with all three of us. Even if we would have the entire off season together.”

“We tried convincing her to move to St. Louis, but she didn’t want to uproot everything.” Christian spoke plainly, but his voice was tense with emotion. “We had only been dating a year, and apparently that wasn’t enough to make her switch cities.”

“It’s tough to up and quit your job,” I said numbly. Nothing they were saying was sinking in yet. “Believe me, I know.”

“She worked remote,” Braden replied, looking down at the ground like a kicked puppy. “Ever since COVID. She could have worked anywhere.”

“Doesn’t matter now,” Christian emphasized. “That’s our situation. You seem really cool, and we both like you. We’re not just trying to have a threesome in the back of a limo.”

“Although we were very much trying to do that!” Braden said.

“I hope this doesn’t scare you away, but I would understand if it does,” Christian said. “We wanted to be honest with you.”

“Okay. This is a lot to process.”

“Take some time to think about it. And if you’re not interested, that’s all right, too.” Christian glanced at his watch again. “We need to get to the airport. Take good care of Heidi, all right?”

“Of course!”

Christian hesitated, then leaned in for a hug. My body fit perfectly against his, especially as he folded his arms around me. He squeezed me tight against him, then let go and turned away before anything more could happen.

“Take better care of Pickles,” Braden said as he approached for a hug. “Give all of Heidi’s treats to him and I’ll pay you extra.”

I glared at him. “I don’t play favorites.” I lowered my voice and added, “Although Pickles is the bestest boy.”

“That’s all a guy ever wants to hear.” Braden reached for a hug, but then tilted his head and came in for a kiss. I could have turned away, but being so close to him, I couldn’t resist

the taste of his lips again. What started as a peck on the lips quickly turned into a deeper kiss, our lips churning together as he put a hand on my lower back and pulled me in close. Close enough to feel the growing bulge in his suit pants.

“We agreed not to do that today,” Christian muttered.

Braden finally pulled away. “Relax, Chrissy. I’m just sweetening the deal and reminding Beth what she’s missing.” He winked at me. “Bye, Pickles! Be a good boy!”

The two of them walked back to their cars.

“Wait,” I said.

They turned around and paused, waiting.

“When you invited me to the charity event. Did you think we would hook up in the limo on the way home?”

Both of them shook their heads at the same time. “I didn’t intend to make a move on you,” Christian explained. “And I didn’t think anything would happen. But I kind of hoped something would.”

“Ditto,” Braden said.

As I went back to the kennel to brush the dogs, a big smile spread across my face. I was relieved that they didn’t think of me as a random hookup. They wanted more. It sounded crazy—heck, it *was* crazy. Dating two guys at the same time, two guys who knew about it and intended to share me both emotionally *and* physically. Was that something I wanted to try?

The smile refused to leave my face all day, which felt like the answer to my question. And as I fell asleep that night, I kept replaying the limo threesome in my head, over and over.

Logan showed up the next day in his big black SUV. He opened the door and the four dogs came pouring out, barking and running up to the gate, tails wagging.

“There’s my troublemakers,” I said, opening the gate to greet them. “Are you going to make my life a living hell today, Loki?”

“He’d better not,” Logan grumbled. I realized who he reminded me of, now: Roy Kent, the grumpy soccer player from *Ted Lasso*.

“I talked to Braden yesterday,” Logan said.

A lump formed in my throat. I had spent the last day thinking about dating both Braden and Christian, but I didn’t even consider Logan. Was he interested in the same sort of arrangement, the way they’d had with their ex? He was undoubtedly sexy, in a gruff, dangerous kind of way, but I didn’t know him as well as I knew the other two. Yet a ball of excitement was quickly forming in my stomach as I waited for him to continue.

“This whole business.” He gestured around the field. “He said you started as a babysitter when you were younger, before switching to dogs?”

“That’s right,” I replied slowly. What did that have to do with the whole three-guys-dating-one-woman thing?

“Good.” He turned back to the SUV, stuck two fingers in his mouth, and whistled.

A little girl hopped out of the vehicle. She was maybe six or seven years old, and had her dark hair tied in two pigtails. She was wearing a backpack, and walked toward me with her head down while gripping the shoulder straps.

“This is my daughter, Claire. Say hi to the nice lady.”

Claire stared at me, expressionless.

“It’s so nice to meet you!” I said. “I’m Beth.”

“Uncle Braden will pick you up tonight,” Logan told her. “Be good for the nice lady. Do your homework.”

And then he started to walk away.

What?

“Wait a minute!” I said. “This is a dog boarding business. I can’t watch your daughter.”

Without slowing down, he replied, “You just told me you’re a babysitter.”

“I *was* a babysitter. That was fifteen years ago.”

“It’s like riding a bike.” He climbed into the car and tapped on his phone. “It’s just until tonight. I Venmo’d you some cash. If it’s not enough, we can talk about it when I pick up the dogs on Wednesday.”

“Logan...” I said as he started the engine. “Logan! What the hell?”

He rolled down the window and glared at me. “Watch your language around the kid.”

I stared in disbelief as he backed out of the driveway, pulled out onto the main road, and drove away.

When I turned around, Claire was still standing there holding her backpack straps against her chest. She looked at me with an expression that matched Logan’s best scowl.

What the hell am I going to do?

**Beth**

Like two animals that had stumbled upon each other in the forest, Claire and I stared at each other for several seconds. I didn't know what to say to her. Despite my babysitting experience from ages ago, I wasn't *great* with kids. I was a lot more comfortable with dogs.

Our standoff was interrupted by my phone chiming. It was a \$500 Venmo transfer from Logan. In the transfer notes, he put a baby emoji and a prison emoji.

Five hundred bucks to babysit a kid for the day? That was an extremely good deal. That was more than my expected revenue for dog sitting today. I was still furious with Logan for dumping her on me, but that made it a lot more palatable.

“Hi, Claire. My name's Beth.”

“I know. You already told me,” she said grumpily.

Yep, she's Logan's daughter all right.

“I guess I'm going to be taking care of you today. Logan said you have homework to do?”

She nodded.

“Let's get you all set up inside. Come on.” I extended my hand for her to take, but she just stared at it. I definitely preferred dogs over children.

We went inside and I showed her to the dining room table. I had been using it as a work desk, so it was covered with stacks of invoices and documents for my business. The room was also filled with cardboard boxes of my grandma's clothes that

I needed to donate. I quickly moved some boxes out of the way, then cleared off an open space for her on the table.

“You can do your homework here. What are you working on?”

She set her backpack down and pulled out an activity book for practicing writing the alphabet. “They took away my old homework and gave me this.”

What does that mean? Maybe she switched schools or something. “Um. Okay. Are you hungry at all?”

“Logan bought me lunch on the way here.”

Interesting that she called him Logan instead of dad. “If you get hungry, there are turkey sticks and granola bars in the pantry. There’s also yogurt and string cheese in the fridge. And if you need anything, I’ll be right next door in the field, or in the big kennel building. I’ll check in on you in a little while. Sound good?”

Without answering me, she opened the book and put her head down to read.

I let out a long sigh as I returned to my *actual* job. I had a long list of things to do today: clipping nails, brushing fur, poop scooping the field, and then I had four customers who had paid extra for me to bathe their dogs. And since several dogs had been dropped off this morning, I was behind schedule.

But as I started working, it was difficult to focus. I kept glancing over at my grandma’s house—*my* house, I reminded myself. There was a kid in there. Logan’s kid.

I didn’t know the hockey player very well, but it was difficult for me to imagine him being a father. She was quiet, but seemed like a precious little thing. Why hadn’t Logan made better arrangements for her? He knew he was going to be out of town last week when he booked his four dogs here. Heck, he probably knew *months* ago when his team’s schedule was announced. This shouldn’t have been a surprise.

I wondered if the mother was in the picture. She certainly wasn’t married to Logan, since he had just been in a

relationship with the same woman as Braden and Christian. Maybe this was a custody thing, where the mother was supposed to have Claire this week but ended up dumping her on Logan at the last minute. That made the most sense, and would explain why he didn't have any better options besides dropping the girl off with his dogs at my kennel.

I was still annoyed by the situation, but I had a little more sympathy when considering that there was probably a deeper reason.

"Hey, Ms. Foster!" Suzie said when she arrived to work half an hour later. "Got out of class early today. Figured you'd need help with the Sunday rush."

"You have no idea," I said. "There's a task list on the clipboard in the kennel. I already finished the first two items, but everything else needs to be done."

She flashed me a thumbs up. "I'm on it. And I promise not to let little Loki get into the pantry. Heh."

I forced a smile; she had made that joke every day since the incident. "I'll be right back."

I went back inside the house to check on Claire. She was still sitting at the table where I had left her, tapping her fingers and looking bored.

"How much of your homework have you done?" I asked.

"Most of it," she replied.

"Let me see." I peered over her shoulder. "Claire. You were on this same page when I left you earlier. You haven't done anything."

"It's hard," she complained.

I sighed. "Maybe you can come help me with my job. Do you like dogs?"

"No," she said emphatically.

"What do you like?"

"I don't know."

I gritted my teeth. Stubborn kids were more frustrating than stubborn dogs.

The task on the page was to copy a lowercase L repeatedly on five lines, then five more lines with the uppercase version. “You do know how to read and write. Right?”

Claire gave me a glare that would have made Logan proud. “Duh. I’m not a baby.”

“Then why haven’t you done this part yet?”

“I don’t know.”

I took her pencil. “Here. It’s *super* easy. You draw a lowercase L like this. See? It’s just a straight line!”

She squinted at the page in concentration. “Oh.”

“Now you try.”

She took the pencil and repeated the simple vertical motion.

“See? That was easy!”

“I guess.”

I glanced at my watch. I was even more behind schedule than before. “I need to get back to work. But I’ll come check your work soon. When I get back, I want you to have done this whole page, and the next page, too.”

Instead of agreeing, Claire said, “Can I ask you a question?”

“Um. Sure.”

“Why is there so much old people stuff here?”

The bluntness of the question made me laugh. “This was my grandma’s house.”

“Where is she?”

I smiled sadly. “She passed away. Now it’s my house.”

“Oh.” Claire stared down at the table. She looked like she was going to cry.

“It’s okay!” I said. What was the best way to explain this to a child? “My grandma was lucky to live a nice, long life.”

Claire still said nothing.

“Practice your homework. I’ll be back to check on you in a little bit.”

I returned to the kennel, a little more relaxed about having a child unsupervised in my house. I took over the nail clipping from Suzie and sent her out into the field to poop scoop. It had to be done twice a day, both because the dogs went to the bathroom a lot, and because the more careless animals ran through piles of it when they were playing. Returning a dog that smelled like poop was bad for business.

When I was done clipping nails, I grabbed my dog brush. Three dogs were getting baths today, which required brushing beforehand. Before I could start, Suzie came up to me with a puzzled look on her face.

“I just went inside to pee.”

“That’s fine,” I told her without looking up from the poodle I was brushing. “You don’t need to tell me whenever you take a quick break. I trust you.”

“Yes, but... did you know there’s a little girl in your dining room?”

I chuckled. “Yeah. It’s a long story.”

“Is she...?”

“She’s not mine, no. And I didn’t expect to babysit her today. This is the only time this will happen.”

Suzie relaxed. “Ah, okay. She looks like she’s having a lot of fun.”

I hesitated. “Fun?”

“Yeah,” Suzie replied. “She’s playing dress up. You know, with all those boxes of clothes in there.”

I dropped my brush. “She’s playing with my grandma’s clothes?”

**Beth**

My dining room looked like a bomb had gone off, except with clothes instead of shrapnel. The cardboard boxes were empty in the corner, and all of my grandma's clothes were scattered on the floor, the dining room table, and in the adjacent living room. Claire was wearing a fur coat that was longer than she was tall, high heels, a wide-brimmed sun hat, and a pair of Jackie Kennedy sunglasses. She was stomping up and down on the floor in a circle.

Seeing my late grandma's belongings being used so carelessly filled me with sadness and anger.

"Claire! What are you doing?" I demanded.

"Dancing!" she replied, stomping around to some music that only she could hear.

I hurried over and took the fur coat off her. "These aren't your things, Claire!" I said, barely containing my anger.

"I know. They're your grandma's."

"Exactly!"

"But she's dead." Claire was suddenly angry, sticking her chin out at me stubbornly. "And dead means she's *never* coming back. So she doesn't care if I play with them."

Something in the way she explained it made me pause. "Claire, what's wrong?"

She turned away from me. "Nothing."

I crouched next to the girl and put a reassuring hand on her back. "You seem upset. Why?"

“Your grandma is dead. Just like my mommy.”

I gasped. “Your mommy is dead?”

Without meeting my eyes, Claire nodded.

“Oh no, I’m so sorry. How long has she been gone?”

I was expecting the answer to be *years*, so Claire’s answer shocked me: “Last week.”

It all made sense, now. This was the reason she was so angry and uncooperative.

“Oh my God. Claire, I’m so sorry.” I hugged her, but she remained stiff and unresponsive. I couldn’t blame her. And I definitely couldn’t leave her alone.

“Do you want to stay in here doing your homework,” I asked, “or would you rather come help me take care of the dogs?”

“I don’t like dogs.”

“I know, but maybe you’ll enjoy seeing how a dog boarding business works! It’s *really* complicated, and I bet a smart girl like you will understand it. Unless you would rather stay here and do your homework...”

“Okay!” she said. “I’ll watch you work.”

“But first, we need to put away all of my grandma’s clothes back where they belong.”

We spent a few minutes cleaning up the clothes, then I led Claire outside. Suzie was scooping poop near the kennel, so I introduced her to Claire.

“It’s nice to meet you, sweetie!” Suzie said.

“Don’t call me sweetie,” Claire snapped. “You’re not my mom.”

Suzie glanced at me. “Okay, you’re on your own.”

I led Claire into the kennel and put her in my office chair. Then I retrieved Sassy, the French Poodle who needed a bath today before her owner picked her up this afternoon.

“Some dogs love getting baths,” I explained to Claire as I worked. “Others *hate* it. That’s why we always clip the dogs into this harness before we work. It keeps them in place so they can’t run away.”

As I rubbed shampoo into the Poodle’s fur, Claire watched with round, curious eyes from across the room. I lathered the shampoo, then rinsed the dog off, and finally towed her dry before using a blow dryer to finish the job.

“Some dogs hate the blow dryer, but Sassy doesn’t mind.”

“She seems nice,” Claire said, although she still made no move to get closer.

“Do you want to help me dry her off?” I asked.

Claire shook her head.

I finished up Sassy and put her back in her kennel so she would be all ready to go when her owner picked her up. Then I collected the next dog from the field, a mutt named Rocco.

Once again, Claire watched intently from across the room while I bathed the dog. She swiveled in the chair, spinning around and around, but always kept her eyes on what I was doing with the dog.

Halfway through bathing him, I had an idea. “Claire? Can you help me real quick?”

She paused her spinning to look at me suspiciously. “What kind of help?”

I nodded toward the bottle on the table. “I can’t reach the shampoo. Can you hand it to me?”

She looked at the bottle, then at the dog, then at the bottle again. “Do I have to?”

“You don’t have to do anything. But it would *really* help me out, and I would be *really* grateful.”

After a few more moments of thought, she hopped down from the chair and approached. Rocco was too busy enjoying my fingers in his fur to notice as Claire reached for the bottle, clutching it in her small fingers.

“Here,” she said, handing it to me.

“I can’t grab it. I’m all soapy.” I showed her my lathered hands. “I need you to squirt a little bit on Rocco’s back.”

Claire’s mouth hung open. “But I *can’t*.”

“Sure you can. Just a little squirt of shampoo, then you’re all done. I bet you can do that.”

“But what if he bites me?”

“Rocco is a *very* good boy,” I said. “I promise he won’t bite you. But he might lick you.”

“Eww.”

“I’ll make sure he doesn’t lick you, either,” I said. “Go on. I only need a little bit of shampoo. Real quick!”

Claire took a tiny step forward, then another. She extended the bottle of shampoo as far out as her arm would hold it, then squeezed out a big dollop of purple shampoo onto Rocco’s back.

“It smells fruity,” she said.

“It’s plum flavored! But don’t eat it!”

That got a smile out of her.

“Perfect!” I said as she put the shampoo bottle back down. “Thank you so much for helping me. I don’t know *what* I would have done if you weren’t here.”

Rather than return to her chair, Claire watched me work on Rocco up close. And when it was time to rinse him off, I convinced her to grab the shower handle and pour water all over him. She even laughed when Rocco shook his body and sprayed water everywhere.

When Rocco was clean, I dried him off and unclipped him from the harness. He jumped off the table and wagged his tail while circling Claire, who no longer seemed afraid.

“See? Dogs are nice!” I said.

“This one is nice,” she admitted.

“What about your dad’s dogs? They’re nice, too.”

“*Logan’s* dogs are loud.” Claire made sure to emphasize his name. “They give me a headache.”

“They can be loud *and* nice,” I explained.

“Maybe,” she replied skeptically.

Claire helped me with the next dog, too. While we worked, I asked her small probing questions. She didn’t know what happened to her mom. She met Logan for the first time at her mom’s funeral. Her mom had been adamantly against pets in her house, which probably explained why Claire was so cautious around them. She also told me that she liked playing outside more than inside.

When the last dog was bathed, I told Claire, “I need your help with something else,” and led her out into the field. She followed without protest about being near all the other dogs. Sometimes fears were only real when you acknowledged them. Two dogs came running over to us, but then peeled off and went sprinting out into the field again.

“What’s she doing?” Claire asked, pointing.

“Suzie is poop scooping.”

Claire giggled. “That’s silly.”

“It is silly. But it’s something we have to do twice a day.”

“Can I help?”

“Sure!” I quickly retrieved the second poop scoop and bucket. “You have to get all of it, until the field is perfectly clean. It’s like an Easter egg hunt, but with dog poop instead of eggs.”

Claire frowned up at me. “What’s an Easter egg hunt?”

“You know. When you run around looking for eggs. From the Easter bunny.”

She scrunched up her face. “That’s dumb. Bunnies don’t lay eggs.”

“Yeah, no, I mean...” I laughed nervously. “Have you really never heard of the Easter bunny?”

Claire shook her head.

“But you know what Easter is, right?”

She shook her head again.

Oh my God. Where did this kid grow up?

I had so many questions, but I didn't want to seem like I was interrogating her. “It looks like Suzie started on the left side of the field, so you can start on the right side. When the bucket is filled up, bring it back here and empty it into this trash can. Sound good?”

She nodded.

“All of these dogs are *really* friendly,” I assured her. “But if you get scared at all, just yell for me or Suzie and we will help.”

Claire immediately got to work, scooping up a nearby pile and then sprinting to the next one. I watched her for a minute to make sure she was okay. She flinched whenever some dogs ran near her, but otherwise she seemed totally fine.

I went back inside and turned on the football game. The Colts were winning 14 - 10 at halftime, which put a smile on my face. With the game on in the background, I took care of some little tasks: updating the files for the dogs that had been bathed, verifying two new reservations that had been booked online, and ordering a new shipment of dog bones. Then I completed all of Sassy's check-out paperwork for when her owner picked her up. Every few minutes I peeked out the window to make sure Claire was fine. I was pleasantly surprised when I saw her crouched down, petting Loki.

She just needed a little experience with dogs to get over her fear.

The Colts were in the fourth quarter now, and the game was tied 24 - 24. The camera zoomed in on Christian while he was in the huddle, discussing the next play with his teammates. I even caught a brief glimpse of Braden.

“Oh, close game,” Suzie said, poking her head in after dumping off her bucket. Heidi was standing at her side, tongue

lolling out of her mouth.

“Should they win this game?” I asked.

Suzie shook her head. “They were underdogs today. It’s a miracle they’re not losing by twenty points.”

“Can the Colts keep their win streak going?” the announcer was saying. “They’re hoping to get within field goal range here to avoid going into overtime.”

Suddenly, there was the unmistakable sound of Claire shrieking. I leaped up from the chair and ran outside, with Suzie close on my heels. Claire was over in the right corner of the field, surrounded by most of the dogs. She continued screaming while they barked at her insistently.

I took off at a sprint, panicked thoughts filling my head. If she got bit, that would be awful for everyone involved. It would terrify her for the rest of her life, and Logan would probably be furious with me. I did *not* relish the idea of being on his bad side. Then there was the effect it would have on my business. If word got out that a child was bit while at my kennel...

There was a blur of black and tan fur as Heidi shot ahead of me at full speed. She reached the corner of the field first, inserting herself between Claire and the other dogs. She ran back and forth, pushing the other dogs back and clearing some space for Claire to breathe. She barked at the other dogs, not in an aggressive manner, but in a way that warned them to leave the girl alone.

“Claire!” I said when I finally reached them. “Are you okay?”

With her hands clutched to her chest and tears running down her cheeks, she nodded.

About that time, Pickles joined us. The Golden Retriever smiled around at everything and everyone, happy to be part of whatever was going on.

“What happened?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I gave Loki a treat, and then all the other dogs wanted some, but I didn’t have enough to share, so they started barking, and I thought they were going to eat *me...*”

“A treat? What treat?” I realized she was holding something in her hand. The wrapper to one of the turkey sticks in my pantry.

Now it all makes sense.

“No!” I said in a commanding voice. “Get away.”

The dogs kept circling us. They weren’t aggressive, and I never felt like we were in danger, but they were *very* eager to get some of the turkey stick. And Claire was still whimpering. Heidi continued pacing back and forth, trying to create a protective perimeter around us, but she was increasingly having to snap at the other dogs to keep them back.

Just when I was getting frustrated with the situation, a Mercedes pulled off the main road and drove up my property. Hearing the sound, one dog turned and ran over toward the gate. Another dog followed, then another, until all of them were running in a large pack across the field.

“I’m so sorry about that,” I quickly told Claire, bracing her by the shoulders. “Are you okay?”

To my immense surprise, she let out a giggle. “That was scary. But fun. It’s like they thought I was dinner!”

She was terrified of dogs, and now she’s laughing about almost getting eaten? Kids are more resilient than we give them credit for.

“They just wanted your turkey stick,” I explained. “Especially after you gave some to Loki.”

“If you think about it, people are like big turkey sticks,” she said. “We’re full of meat!”

I laughed with her. “I guess we are. Let’s get you back inside. I think you’ve cleaned up enough poop for today.”

19



Braden

“Hell yeah. Let’s fucking go. Boswell, give me some skin. You *know* I saw that huge tackle on third down on that last drive.”

I walked up the airplane aisle high-fiving my teammates and shaking hands. It was a funny thing, being a professional athlete. There were a lot of perks. We got paid millions of dollars per year to play a game. We were as famous as movie stars—if not *more* so. After all, Brad Pitt released just one movie a year, whereas I was on TV for three hours every single Sunday from September to January.

Yet despite all of that, nothing was sweeter than the taste of *victory*. It was infectious, like a virus. But, like, a *good* virus, spread through high-fives and dirty jokes. Right now, our flight home was a super-spreader event. My teammates played cards and listened to music. One lineman was twerking in the aisle ahead of me, and only got out of the way when I gave him a big smack on the ass.

Our record was now 3 - 4. We were still in last place in our division behind the Jacksonville Jaguars, Houston Texans, and Tennessee Titans. But despite that, three straight wins felt pretty damn good.

“Who wants to celebrate tonight?” I asked.

Andre, one of the Defensive Backs, jumped out of his seat. “Come on, Braden. You know I’m always down for a few sips. Especially if you’re paying!”

“Hell, count me in!” our Running Back added.

I loved when our game was scheduled in the early slot. It meant we finished early and could get home at a reasonable time Sunday evening. Sometimes that meant relaxing on the couch and watching the late game, but sometimes it meant going out and celebrating into the late hours.

“Are you forgetting something?” Christian asked me.

“The only thing I’m trying to forget is that touchdown pass I dropped in the second quarter,” I replied. “Keep feeding me the ball, and I promise it won’t happen again.”

Christian looked unamused. “I’m talking about Logan’s daughter. We’re supposed to pick her up and watch her until Logan can figure something out.”

I sat down in my seat. “Oh, right.” For the past week, my sister Leslie and her fiancée Emily—Logan’s sister—had been helping take care of Claire. But the two of them were in Spain for the next couple of weeks, leaving Logan scrambling to find someone to watch his daughter.

His daughter. I still couldn’t believe Logan was a dad. That was like finding out my dog Pickles was a chess grandmaster.

Thinking of Pickles and Claire reminded me of where both of them were right now: at Beth’s kennel. “Oh, right!” I said in a totally different tone. “I forgot we get to see her tonight!”

“For a brief moment while we pick up the dogs and Claire, yes,” Christian replied. “And because I’m such a good friend, I’ll help you with her tonight. We can have a sleepover at my place.”

“That’s... really nice of you, man,” I said. “I’m lucky to have you as a friend.”

Christian smirked at me. “I’m doing it for two reasons. One, Logan asked me to make sure you don’t fuck it all up.”

“That makes sense.”

“And two, I want to keep you from feeding Claire marshmallows and candy for dinner, and keeping her up all night watching scary movies.”

“Hey! Horror movies made me the man I am today.”

Christian gestured. “I rest my case, your honor.”

I rolled my eyes, and he laughed and punched me lightly in the shoulder. That was another good thing about winning. It meant we could laugh and make fun of ourselves without any of the sting.

“I just hope I don’t have to put Heidi away,” Christian added. “Logan said Claire is terrified of her.”

“At least that makes sense, since Heidi is a scary German Shepherd. Claire is also afraid of Pickles, who is about as dangerous as an airline pillow.” I flicked the pillow that Christian had around his neck.

“Heidi is a perfect angel, and I will not allow any slander in her name.”

“She’s a very good girl,” I told him reassuringly. “But she *looks* like Bellatrix Lestrange, a heartbeat away from murdering you.”

“Keep slandering my girl,” Christian said, “and I’ll spend next week’s game passing the ball to Montez instead of you.”

I held up my hands. “As I was saying, Heidi is a perfect angel who has never done anything bad in her life, and who looks like she just wants to cuddle.”

Christian nodded with satisfaction.

We landed, collected our things, and drove over to Lizzy’s Dog Boarding. Christian was in his car in front of me, and he drove as “conservatively” as my blind grandpa. No, conservative wasn’t the right way to describe Christian’s driving. He was downright *cautious*. Like he had a baby in the back seat and was afraid to go the speed limit on the freeway.

The sun had already set, but there were bright halogen lights on the kennel that illuminated half of the field with harsh light. When we pulled up the driveway toward the kennel, I saw Claire running through the field. A herd of about a dozen dogs was chasing her, and she was squealing and flailing her arms.

What is she doing in there? She’s terrified of dogs!

I parked my car and jumped out without even turning off the engine. When I reached the fence, Claire saw me and came running in my direction. I stretched out my arms over the fence.

“Jump! I’ll lift you over!”

But when Claire reached me, I realized her squeals weren’t fearful. She was *giggling*. She turned around and crouched down, allowing the herd of dogs to lick her face.

“They like me!” she announced. “I’m their *favorite*.”

I shared a confused look with Christian. “Uhh,” he said. “Are you okay, Claire?”

She answered while trying to pet all the dogs at once. “I’m more than okay. I’m very okay. I’m *very very* okay.”

Heidi and Pickles came up to the fence to greet us, tails wagging excitedly. Yet when we passed through the gate and approached Claire, Heidi turned around and pushed through the pack of dogs until she was standing in front of Claire, blocking the girl with her body. A protective stance.

“I guess you won’t have to put Heidi away tonight,” I said.

“Hi!” Beth said as she came out of the kennel building. “I was inside with one of the other dogs and didn’t hear you pull up. Congrats on the win today!”

Seeing Beth filled me with an excited tingle. She was wearing overall jeans that were streaked with mud, and her hair was pulled back in a ponytail that looked like it had been loosing strands of hair all afternoon. Yet there was no more beautiful sight to my eyes. It was like she had a magnetic pull to her that drew my eye, tugging on my soul.

I’ve got it bad for this girl. And I barely know her.

“We’re celebrating tonight!” I found myself saying. “Want to go out and get some *drinks*?”

“Drinks?” Christian said. “What about...”

Smiling at Beth, I said, “One second,” and put an arm around Christian to lead him out of hearing distance. “Come

on man. I need this.”

“I’m just as interested in Beth as you are.”

“I know! But you’re so much better with kids than I am. You’re the *good* uncle. I’m the *fun* uncle. I’ll break all of the rules and let her do whatever she wants. And then Logan will be mad at both of us.”

Christian exhaled out of his nose, like a bull. “You’re going to take her out with the team?”

“With whoever wants to go out and celebrate. Yes.”

“And then what?”

I shrugged. “Who knows!”

He stared at me for three long seconds. It was the same face he had when trying to decide if we should try a wacky trick play in football. “Okay. But you owe me.”

I patted him on the cheek. “Add it to my tab.”

“The tab is getting long. Eventually you have to settle up!”

“So what do you say?” I asked, turning back to Beth. “Drinks on the town with me and the guys, while Christian watches Claire?”

I could see the excitement in Beth’s eyes. She wanted to say yes—and not just to a date. It was immediately obvious that she wanted to pick up where we left off last week.

But then she hesitated. “I’d love to, but... I’ve got to get all the dogs ready for bed, and update all their paperwork. Most of your teammates are picking them up first thing in the morning, so I have to do all of that tonight.”

“If you’re making an excuse because you don’t want to go out, then I totally understand and respect that,” I replied. “But if that’s the only thing keeping you from going out, then I can stay and help. It’ll go faster with two.”

“I’ve been helping!” Claire announced.

“Yes, you’ve been my amazing helper.” Beth turned back to me. “It’s not just an excuse. If we can get everything done

relatively quickly...”

I clapped my hands and then began rolling up my sleeves. “All right, then. Claire, can you get Pickles and Heidi ready to go? Uncle Christian is going to have a slumber party with you tonight.”

“What’s a slumber party?” she asked.

I shared a look with Christian. This poor kid.

“It’s only the most fun thing in the world,” Christian said. “We’re going to put pajamas on, and make a blanket fort, and eat popcorn.”

“As long as we don’t watch sports,” Claire said. “I *hate* sports.”

Christian deflated a little bit. I grinned at him and said, “You guys are going to have a blast.”

“Yeah!” Claire agreed. “A blast! What’s a blanket fort?”

“It’s a fort made of blankets. I’ll show you how to build one when we get home.”

“You have to *build* it? Like a house?”

Christian laughed. “Yes, but it’s really easy. I’ll show you. It’ll be fun.”

And Beth and I are going to have even more fun picking up where we left off.

**Beth**

I hadn't expected to go out tonight. In fact, I had *really* been looking forward to finishing up what I was doing and relaxing on the couch with a glass of wine or three. The idea of showering and putting on makeup and getting dressed made me wince.

But with Braden standing there, grinning at me like he had all *sorts* of fun planned, I couldn't possibly say no.

"Thanks for your help today," I told Claire. "Can I get a hug?"

"Hugs are only for family," she said.

"That's not true! Friends hug, too."

She shook her head. "No. Hugging is *only for family*." Claire wasn't saying it from a place of trauma; she was simply stating a fact, like the sky was blue. Once again, I wondered what kind of environment she had been raised in.

"I'm your Uncle Christian. Do I get a hug?"

"You're not a *real* uncle," she replied while they got into the car with Heidi and Pickles. "You're just a pretend one."

"Oh. Okay then." Christian gave me a smile and a wave. "You two have fun. But not *too* much fun."

"No promises!" Braden replied with a huge grin. As soon as they were gone, he turned to me and rolled up his sleeves. "Put me in, coach. Tell me what needs doing."

First, we fed the dogs dinner. That involved herding them into their individual kennels, which wasn't *too* difficult since

they were all excited to eat. Braden helped by throwing the giant bags of dog food over his shoulder and hauling them around to each kennel for me. Where I usually struggled with them, he hefted the weight with ease. Soon, the kennel was silent except for the sounds of kibble being devoured.

“Now I try to wear them out before bed,” I explained as the dogs wolfed down their food. “It’s important to get all their energy out so they sleep through the night. Not to mention one last chance to go potty.”

“And after that?” Braden asked.

“After that, I’ll take care of all the paperwork for the dogs being discharged tomorrow morning. That should take about half an hour.”

Braden clapped his hands together. “Here’s the plan. You go ahead and get started on the paperwork. While you do that, I’ll play with the dogs and wear them down before bed.”

“You called me the coach, but you’re calling your own plays,” I said with a teasing smile.

“Quarterbacks do that all the time. *Calling an audible.*”

“I thought you were a Wide Receiver?”

He shrugged. “Don’t tell Chrissy.”

I went into the office and began the paperwork. I offered a paperless system, but most customers wanted a paper copy. I couldn’t wait until that trend died and everything was digital. I had bought my printer on Facebook, and it was constantly giving me trouble.

I heard shouting out in the field, so I got up and gazed out the window. Braden was jogging around the field with the dogs stretched out in a long train behind him. He abruptly changed directions, catching the dogs off guard and sending them into a frenzy of barks. Eventually, he turned around and spread his arms wide. The dogs overcame him like a tidal wave, but he laughed and shouted and wrestled with them on the ground.

He's like a little kid. Happy and carefree. It reminded me of a term I had seen online: *himbo*, the male version of *bimbo*. He was extremely hot, but also very easy to please. And *eager* to please, just like his Golden Retriever, Pickles. I had to remind myself that he had played in a professional football game that afternoon, and was still running around to help me.

I was finishing up my paperwork when he returned to the kennel. Sweat glistened on his tan skin, accentuating the muscles of his forearm and neck. "Everyone is back in their kennels," he said, running his fingers through his blond hair. "Loki tried to get in the closet again but I stopped him. Little shit." He said it with a smirk.

"I really appreciate your help! Without you, I wouldn't have even *started* the paperwork for another half hour."

"My motivations are partly selfish." He casually planted a hand on the wall and leaned against it, a move that was probably calculated to make his arm muscles bulge as much as possible. "But I did feel bad for you. It sucks having Claire dumped on you at the last minute, without any warning."

"Seems like Logan did the same to you guys. When did you find out you'd need to babysit Claire tonight?"

Braden snorted. "He texted us *during the game*. We didn't see the message until the game was over and we were getting ready to fly home."

"Is Christian going to be fine watching her alone?"

"Oh, totally. Chrissy has a soft spot for kids. He always stays longer than everyone else after the game, signing autographs and taking selfies with all the kids. He definitely wants several children of his own someday." Braden scratched his cheek, then winced when he realized it was muddy.

"You're a mess after wrestling with the dogs," I pointed out.

"Yeah. Mind if I get a shower before we go out? Just let me grab my suitcase..."

I checked on the dogs in the kennels, then led Braden inside my grandma's house. I still thought of it as *her* house, even

though it was mine and I was actively living here now. I wondered if that feeling would ever go away.

“Wow,” Braden said when we walked past the dining room. “It looks like a Goodwill in here after their holiday sale.”

“Claire decided to play dress-up. I kind of feel bad because I got mad at her for going through my grandma’s stuff.”

“She seemed fine when we picked her up.”

“Except she refused to give me a hug goodbye,” I muttered.

Braden shook his head. “Nah, that wasn’t about you at all. She’s got some issues. I know it’s rude to speak ill of the dead, but her mom was a real wacko.”

“Yeah, what’s up with that?”

“It’s a long story. I’ll tell you all about it when we go out.”

“The bathroom is there to the right of the dining room,” I said, gesturing. “I’ll shower when you’re done.”

Braden looked around the bathroom. “Is there not another one in the master bedroom?”

“There is, but it has one of those walk-in tub things to prevent someone older from falling. Hopefully I don’t need to use that for a *long* time.”

Braden set down his suitcase and chuckled. “Sometimes I feel like I’m one rough tackle away from needing a shower like that. I know a lot of former players with bad knees, bad backs.”

He started to close the door, but left it open a crack. Enough to give me a sliver of a view as he began stripping. I quickly turned away and asked, “Do you want a drink before we go out?”

“I’ll have whatever you’re having,” he called as the water began to run.

“Even if that’s wine?”

“I’m not picky!”

I went into the kitchen and retrieved a bottle that was chilling in the fridge. The door to the bathroom was to my right, just in my field of view. The sound of the water changed tones, and I imagined it running over Braden's perfectly-chiseled body. Washing away the sweat and grime, covering him with clean moisture.

To cover the sound of the water, I turned the kitchen television on. The channel was ESPN, and they were showing highlights from the Colts game that afternoon. Christian had the ball, scanning the field for an open receiver. He ducked away from an opponent's grasping arm, then threw a lob into the back of the end zone. Braden was open, and reached out to catch the ball, but it passed through his fingertips. If he had jumped, he would have caught it easily.

"Thankfully, that dropped pass by the normally flawless Braden Clark didn't matter, as the Colts went on to win..."

It was surreal seeing Braden on TV after he'd spent the last hour helping me with the dogs. And now he was showering in my bathroom, twenty feet away. I changed the channel to what I expected to be the local news, but instead they were showing the Blues hockey game. Logan Landry had just scored a goal, and was skating around the ice in celebration. He passed the opponents' bench, staring them down as he did so. That enraged two opposing players, who climbed over the wall and tossed down their gloves to fight.

Logan was sharing a woman with Braden and Christian. Would he want to share me, too? It was an overwhelming thought.

"I hate to be a bother," Braden called, "but do you have an extra washcloth? There's already one in here, but I don't want to use yours."

"One second!" I went to the linen closet down the hall, retrieved a washcloth and a spare towel, and returned to the bathroom. Steam was filling the small space. I placed the towel and washcloth on the sink next to the shower door.

"Here." The shower door opened and a large palm reached out. "Hand it to me."

I did as he asked, trying my best to avoid looking into the shower. But that was impossible, and my breath caught in my throat.

Steam. Muscles. Tan skin. A bare ass cheek. When we had almost hooked up in the limo, he never removed his shirt. This was the first time seeing him *totally* nude.

I blinked and turned away. “I’ve got your wine out here when you’re done.”

“Cool, thanks!” There was a long pause. “Hey, Beth?”

I felt my pulse quicken. “Yeah?”

“You don’t have to wait until I’m done to shower. There’s plenty of room in here. If you want. Not trying to pressure you or anything. Otherwise, I’ll be done in a few.”

**Beth**

My voice caught in my throat. Was he suggesting what I thought he was suggesting? The sound of the water running seemed louder now, drowning out the hockey fight on TV.

We could shower together. And probably more.

I felt frozen in place. I was excited by his offer, and desperately wanted to say yes, but my feet felt frozen to the ground. Why was I so scared?

The first move is always the toughest. Sure, he had invited *me* into the shower with him, but it required me to actually make the move. And thinking about it was much easier than actually doing it.

The water continued running. Braden began humming to himself, the sound echoing off the tile.

I allowed myself a long swig of wine for liquid courage, then took a step forward in the bathroom. Then a second step. My body was on fire with desire, eager to finish what we had started in the limo, and even more eager to start something new with the gorgeous professional football player in my shower.

Braden let out a groan. “I didn’t realize how sore my muscles are. The hot water feels great. I might stay in here until the hot water runs out. Sorry, not sorry.”

I realized what made me like Braden the most: he wasn’t intimidating. Despite being a famous athlete, he was like a totally normal guy. Friendly, and kind of goofy, but approachable. I was simultaneously buzzing with energy at the

thought of joining him, but also totally at ease with him as a man.

Deeper into the bathroom I went. If Braden heard me undressing, he made no comment. I paused with only my underwear on, then unclasped my bra and took off my panties. One deep breath, then another.

The steam surrounded me as I stepped into the shower. Braden was standing under the stream of water, his broad back to me. The muscles expanded and contracted as he ran his hands over his hair, sloughing off the water.

When he turned around, I was greeted by an absolute tapestry of muscle from his neck to his navel. Smooth pecs and washboard abs filled my vision, almost distracting from the long cock hanging in front of him. His muscles rippled as he finished washing his hair, then opened his eyes and smiled when he saw me.

I tensed, waiting for what would happen next.

“Let’s get you cleaned off.” Braden squirted some extra body wash into the washcloth, then took my hand and began scrubbing the dirt off my arm. He did the same with my other arm, then ran the cloth over my neck.

Slowly, all the tension melted out of my body as he washed me. There was something incredibly sensual about the act that banished all of my nervousness. And just like any other kind of foreplay, soon my body was buzzing with lust for him. He gently spun me around and began scrubbing my back. His cock was hard, and brushed against my ass cheek, sending new flutters of excitement through my torso.

“I hope you didn’t have blue balls after the limo ride,” I said.

His laugh rumbled in my ear. “I went home and immediately jacked off. Didn’t even need porn, because I could still remember you so vividly.”

“I still feel bad. I want to make it up to you.”

The washcloth paused. “I’m listening.”

Mustering up all of my sexual courage, I turned around and leaned close, like I was going to kiss him. His body was hot and hard, and I allowed my stiff nipples to brush against his chest. He closed his eyes, preparing for a kiss, which is when I dropped down to a crouch in the shower.

While Trip and I were dating, sex had felt one-sided. He *demand*ed blowjobs, insisting they were a vital part of our relationship. And on the other end of things, he rarely went down on me, insisting that he just didn't enjoy it.

But things felt completely different with Braden. I could still picture him on his knees in the limo, face buried between my legs as he made me come. I didn't feel like I owed him a blowjob—rather, I was eager to return the favor and make him feel as good as I did. I was excited to do it.

Braden's sigh was music to my ears as I took hold of his rock-hard dick and began stroking him. I flicked my tongue out teasingly, tickling his tip before running it up and down his hard length. And when I finally wrapped my lips around him and *really* began sucking him off, his groan echoed off the tile walls.

"I've been dreaming about this for a week."

"So have I." I grinned lustily up at him before returning to my job.

His fingers laced into my hair and guided me up and down. In the right context, I *loved* going down on a man. It made me feel sexy and powerful. Doubly so since Braden was a famous football player who had probably dated supermodels.

A week ago, that thought might have made me self-conscious of my abilities. But today, it was empowering.

Soon, Braden was thrusting into my mouth with every stroke. I increased my efforts, speeding up while keeping my lips wrapped tightly around his skin, taking as much of his shaft as I could without gagging. I wanted to make him come, to know that I could get him off so easily, the way he had gotten *me* off in the limo.

"You're gonna make me come," he rumbled.

I moaned around his cock and moved faster.

His fingers tightened in my hair, and I was certain he was about to explode in my mouth, but then he pulled my mouth away. "I'm not ready to come yet."

"Why not?" I asked. "You don't have to come just once."

He pulled me up into a standing position and crushed his lips against mine, kissing me roughly. I pressed my breasts against his chiseled chest, slick from the water between us, desperate to feel his warmth.

Then he spun me around and kissed the back of my neck.

"Take me," I breathed. His cock was pressed against my ass cheek. I wanted to feel it inside of me, to take all of it to completion this time.

"I don't have a condom in here."

"Then let's go find one."

His lips curled into a smile against my neck. "Not yet. I'm still having fun with you."

Braden's hand curled around my hip and across my navel until he reached my clit. I moaned as he rubbed me, slowly at first, but quickly building up the pace.

I shoved my hips back against him, still waiting for him to fill me from behind, condom be damned. His stiff cock wedged its way between my cheeks, sliding up and down as he touched me. His shaft was grinding against my back door, his tip *barely* brushing against my tight rear entrance with every forward thrust. He was teasing me, and teasing himself at the same time, and in the moment it felt *amazing*.

"Take me, Braden," I groaned as his fingers continued pleasuring me. "Take me however you want. I'll do anything with you."

"Anything?" he groaned, breath hot on my ear.

I bit my lip and nodded. Electric energy was building between my legs, spreading in all directions as it sped up. Braden thrust harder into me, fucking my ass cheeks like a

hotdog in a bun, using his free hand to grab my hip and hold me against him. Every time his tip ground against my tight little ring, a new wave of pleasure struck me, fueled by the memory of a night long ago.

“Come for me,” he demanded, his voice a whisper and a shout all at once, cutting through the steady roar of the water. “Come. *With*. Me.”

His cock began trembling between my cheeks, and that realization drove me over the edge. I arched my back and cried out as my orgasm began, rising and climbing as his fingers maintained their demanding pressure on my clit. Braden’s free hand moved up my chest, squeezing one breast and holding me against him as his own climax raged, cock twitching and shooting his warm load all over my lower back and ass.

Braden clung to me possessively, practically holding me up, until finally my body went limp in his arms.

**Beth**

“Are you sure you don’t want to go out and celebrate?” I asked.

Braden was stretched out on the couch, and I was laying back against him while we watched the late football game. Both of us had put on underwear after showering, but hadn’t bothered with the rest of the clothes. The dogs were all settled in the kennel, except for Hank, Heidi, and Pickles, who were scattered across the floor of the living room.

“You kidding?” he asked while caressing my arm. His other hand was holding a wine glass. “I just wanted to hang out with you. I don’t care if it’s at a club or here.”

“But what about your teammates? Weren’t you meeting some of them out?”

“Fuck them,” he cheerfully said. “I see those guys all the time. But I don’t get to make love to Beth Foster very often.”

“I hate to point this out, but we still haven’t had actual sex to completion.”

He twisted my head around and gave me a long, deep kiss. “Give me ten minutes and we’ll fix that.”

I giggled and rested back against him. He was more comfortable than any recliner. “As long as you don’t discard me and move on to the next bimbo.”

Braden stared at me for a moment. “Do you think I’m going to do that?”

I didn't, no. Not really. But I still said, "I don't know. You could probably have any woman you want. Like those women in the limo. The linebackers' dates."

Braden's body trembled as he laughed. "I've dated a bimbo or two before. I've known a lot of friends who've dated them. And let me tell you something about them, Beth: they're boring."

I chuckled and said, "Somehow, I doubt that."

"They can be attractive, sure," he admitted. "But the thing about women like that is they think they can coast by on their facelifts and fake boobs. They have no personality, and they're not interesting. They're like..." He gestured at the TV, where the trailer for a movie was playing. "They're like a Michael Bay movie. They cost a lot to produce, and there's tons of action, but everything else about them is boring. There's no plot. That's totally different from a woman like you."

I twisted and gave him a playful glare. "Are you saying I'm not hot enough to be boring?"

Braden stuck out his tongue at me. "You're hot as fuck. I was into you the first time we met. And it's a natural beauty, which is the real deal. Some of those *bimbos*, as you called them, look downright terrifying without makeup. No, you're definitely hot enough to be bitchy about it, if you wanted. But you're cool as hell, which only makes you hotter."

The compliment filled me with warmth and validation. "It's good to know that I can get away with being a lot bitchier. It's tough to gauge one's own bitchiness threshold."

"You have *so much* room for bitchiness! Save it up and unleash it when you really need to." He lightly kissed the back of my head. "It's funny, though. I barely know you, but I'm really into you. I hope it's not weird if I bluntly tell you that."

I grinned. "I like hearing that. It's better than playing games and pretending to be less interested. But if you want to know more about me, ask away."

"Let's make a game out of it. You ever play *Two Truths and a Lie*?"

“We played that when I started my office job,” I replied. “It was our dumb supervisor’s way to try to build teamwork.”

“Oh. Well if you think it’s dumb...”

I twisted around so I could face Braden. “The *supervisor* was dumb. The game is a good idea, especially right now. You go first.”

He sat up straighter and squinted in concentration. “Okay, here goes. Three facts, one of which is a lie. I was born on Christmas. I was a Quarterback in college. And I had a pet iguana when I was a teenager.”

“Hmm. That’s easy. I remember reading that your birthday is in December. The part about being a quarterback is a lie. You were a Wide Receiver at UCLA.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Have you been stalking my Wikipedia page?”

“It’s possible that I did some research on you after you first boarded your dogs. I’m right, aren’t I?”

Braden grinned mischievously. “You didn’t read my history thoroughly enough. I was a Quarterback at Fresno State my first two years before transferring to UCLA. Then I was a Wide Receiver there for my final three years.”

“I’m confused. That’s five years total.”

“I was a red-shirt freshman at Fresno State. I didn’t actually play. That allowed me to have an extra year of eligibility.”

“So you were a Quarterback for only one year, and a Wide Receiver for three. Which means that is the lie.”

He wagged a finger in front of my nose. “I didn’t say I was *mostly* a Quarterback in college. All I said was that I was one. Which I was. It’s a true fact. You know, the game isn’t fun if you argue.”

Sighing, I said, “Okay, fine! Then what was the lie?”

“I was born on December 26. A day *after* Christmas. A few hours after midnight, actually. My mom claims she tried to

keep me in as long as possible so I wouldn't have to share a birthday with a holiday. Your turn."

"Okay." I thought for a few moments. "Every time I've gone to a hockey game, I've sat in the very front row. My middle name is Taylor. And I've never gotten a speeding ticket."

"Elizabeth Taylor? Like, the famous actress?" Braden shook his head. "I don't think your mom would name you that. In fact, I *know* your grandma's name was Elizabeth. This place is named after her: *Lizzy's Dog Boarding*. That means you were named after her, and not an actress. Yeah, that's definitely the lie."

"Nope!" I said happily. "It's the truth. Mom was a huge fan of her movies, so she gave me that middle name. Although yes, I was technically named after my grandma."

"I know you sat in the front row of the hockey game where you met my sister," he said, puzzling it out. "And I'm guessing that's the *only* game you've ever been to, which makes that statement true. So... speeding tickets?"

"I've gotten *one* speeding ticket," I admitted. "Driving home from a really bad date two years ago. I was going two miles over the speed limit, but the cop still gave me a ticket! Two miles!"

"Surprised you didn't bat your eyelashes at him," he said. "You're definitely hot enough to get out of a ticket, is what I'm saying. Super hot."

"I get the picture," I said, shoving him playfully. "Your turn. Wait! No."

"No?"

"First, tell me the backstory about Claire's mom. What's up with that?"

Braden blew air out his nose and sank back into the couch cushion. "It's a sad story. Her name was Caroline. She popped Logan's cherry back in college. He had it bad for this girl, and thought she was the one even though they had only been together a few months. Suddenly, without warning, she broke up with him and dropped out of college."

“Because she was pregnant?”

Braden grimaced. “Logan didn’t know that at the time, but yeah. Fuck, he didn’t know it *until her funeral last week*. That’s when he met Claire.”

“Claire told me that part. How she didn’t even meet her dad until the funeral. That’s so sad.”

“It gets worse,” he warned. “After dropping out of college, Caroline joined a spiritual group that lived on a compound in the middle of nowhere. Basically, a cult full of hippies. They grew all their own food, and lived off the grid. She gave birth to Claire there, and she was raised in that environment.”

A horrific thought came to me. “Wait. Claire’s mom, Caroline. The way she died. She didn’t, like, drink the Kool-Aid or whatever, did she?”

Braden burst out laughing. “You should see the look on your face right now! Nah, she didn’t drink Kool-Aid. None with poison in it, at least. It was just a regular old aneurysm that got her.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” I said. It felt strange being grateful that someone *only* died from a surprise aneurysm.

“Without Caroline there to take care of her, the rest of the cult turned her in to Child Protective Services. Then CPS tracked Logan down and notified him about the situation at the funeral.”

“How’s he taking it?”

“Not great. The whole situation is pretty shitty, actually.”

“I don’t blame him.” I tried to imagine how I would feel if I randomly found out that I had a seven year old daughter. I shivered at the thought.

“What’s going to happen to Claire?” I wondered out loud. “Is he going to... keep her? Or give her up for adoption? I don’t know what the law requires in a situation like that.”

I felt Braden shrug. “I’m not sure either. In his defense, he took her in without hesitation. Spent ten grand at Ikea: a Disney bed, matching bedsheets and pillows, clothes, school

supplies, backpacks, Nintendo Switch, everything. It came at a really shitty time, though, since he's been traveling for work. Lots of away games in a row. But he's doing his best. Better than a lot of guys would in his situation. I'd be a fucking *mess* if that happened to me."

"I was literally just thinking the same thing about me." I shook my head. "Thanks for filling me in."

Braden smirked. "Oh, I'd like to be filling you in all right."

I giggled and turned back around to rest against him. "Let's get back to the game. I think I want to know more about you before we go for round two."

"Fair enough. I'll up the stakes by making the game sexy." He leaned forward and kissed my neck. "I lost my virginity when I was thirteen. I've never had sex in public. The first time I had sex, it was anal."

"Ohh, that's a tough one," I replied. "It's either your first or third statement. Umm. Thirteen. That has to be a lie, right?"

"I was thirteen, and my babysitter was fifteen," he revealed.

"What!"

"She asked if I wanted to touch her boobs, so of course I said: *yes please*. Then she let me touch her other places."

"So the lie was about anal sex, then?"

He shook his head. "My babysitter was saving herself for marriage. She was a good Catholic schoolgirl, with the skirt and stockings and everything. So..."

"So you convinced her to let you stick it somewhere else?" I asked with a laugh.

"Hey! It was *her* idea! She came prepared, with lube and everything! I only lasted like three little pumps. She told me I was really good at it. In retrospect, she might have been lying to me." Braden thrust his hands in the air. "YES! Go! Go all the way!"

We paused to watch the touchdown on TV.

"Sorry, I got distracted," he said. "Okay, where were we?"

“We were laughing about how you lost your virginity. I guess the lie was about never having sex in public, then?”

“Ferris wheel. My summer home from Junior year.” He sighed wistfully. “I definitely lasted more than three pumps that time. Your turn. Two *sexy* truths, and a *sexy* lie.”

I sat upright and pondered my options. I had a *really* good one, but wasn't sure if I should use it.

“Whatever you're considering saying,” Braden said with a knowing smile, “I think you should just say it. Don't hold back.”

“Well, in that case.” I finished the rest of my glass of wine and set the glass down. “Before last week, I'd never had a threesome before. I hate the taste of semen. And third... the hardest I've ever come was during anal sex.”

Both of Braden's blond eyebrows shot up. “Wow, you didn't hold back at all.”

I refilled my wine glass from the bottle. “Nope! Now guess.”

“I believe that you've never had a threesome before our sexy limo ride,” Braden said slowly. “And I believe that you hate the taste of semen. Which means the anal sex is a lie.”

I grinned over the top of the wine glass. “Nope.”

He gasped. “Oh snap, Beth! Dropping truth bombs in here.” He sat up and crossed his legs underneath him, then took the bottle of wine from me to refill his own glass. “Let's hear the story. Spill *all* the details. Leave nothing out.”

“All the details? Okay. I was a slacker in high school, so although my SAT scores were great, my GPA was too low to get into a big state school. I had four backups to choose from...”

“Okay, maybe leave some things out,” Braden replied.

“College boyfriend,” I said. “Marcus. He and I were terrible for each other, but we had *amazing* chemistry in the bedroom. It was the first relationship where we were both comfortable

trying new things together. Every position imaginable, handcuffs...”

“And sticking it in new and exciting places,” Braden finished. “Most women aren’t into that. How’d he convince you?”

Ignoring the way my cheeks were heating, I grinned lustily. “It was my idea. I’d seen it in porn before, and wanted to try it.”

“And it blew your mind.”

“Not at first,” I said with a chuckle. “The first time we tried, it hurt too much. I think we rushed into it. But we tried again a week later, and took our time, and he got me nice and relaxed...” I sighed happily at the memory. “It was incredible.”

Braden shifted underneath me, and I felt the hard length of his cock through his underwear. “Damn, that’s hot.”

“Yeah. It was. But we broke up soon after that and I never got to do it again. Since then, I’ve never been comfortable enough with a guy to talk about that fantasy.”

“Why me, then?” he asked, gently wrapping an arm around my waist and kissing my back.

“Well, you brought up anal first,” I explained. “And the way you were grinding against me in the shower... it reminded me of it.”

His lips nibbled on my earlobe, breath tickling across my skin. “I don’t want to do that tonight, but in the future... let me know. We can have a lot of fun.”

I sighed back against his body. “I’ll think about it.”

“Speaking of thinking about it, I’ve been *thinking* about what I want to do with you for the past ten minutes. And after hearing your story, I’m as stiff as a two-by-four.”

“I noticed.”

He pushed me forward and spun me around until I was laying on my back on the couch. After quickly shimmying out

of his underwear, he retrieved a condom from his pants on the floor and deftly rolled it on. Then he covered me with his body, and I spread my legs so I could feel him ground against my pussy through my panties. His kiss was passionate, something he had clearly been thinking about.

“We’ve barely played the game,” I said with a fake pout. “You hardly know anything about me.”

“I know enough,” he said before kissing me harder. His hips gyrated against me, the tip of his cock pushing the fabric of my panties into my already drenched lips.

Playing hard to get, I said, “I don’t even know your favorite color. What if it’s something I don’t approve of?” I don’t know if I could be with a man whose favorite color is, I don’t know, yellow.”

Braden frowned down at me. “Yellow is a great color.”

“Name three great things that are yellow.”

“Bananas, duh,” he said, nuzzling at my neck.

I reached down between my legs and pulled my panties aside, then took hold of his cock between my fingers and guided the tip into my pussy. “Name two more.”

“Squash,” he breathed, pushing forward half an inch.

“Squash isn’t great. Squash is mediocre.”

“Cheese.”

“Mmm hmm.”

“Fuck, you feel amazing,” he gritted out, putting a little more weight into his thrust. But I was having fun drawing it out like a game, so I put a hand on his chest.

“That’s only two.”

Braden planted a muscular arm next to me on the couch and bit his lip. “Um. Yellow paint.”

I shook my head. “You can do better.”

“Honeycomb,” he finally said, eyes brightening. “Lemons. Daffodils.”

“You’re a quick thinker when you’re motivated.”

“When *this* is the motivation?” He drove into me slowly. “You’re damn right I am.”

I draped my arms around him, savoring the feel of his powerful back muscles. “Still, though. Yellow...”

“Actually, green is my favorite color.” He paused to kiss me while moving up and down gently, making love to me rather than anything rough. “I went on a lot of hikes when I was younger. Trees, forests, meadows.”

“Mmm hmm,” I purred.

“And now, green is the color of the football field,” he added, his cock still pumping with a steady rhythm. “Especially when I catch a pass and dodge a defender. All I see is open green field between me and the end zone. There’s nothing sweeter.” He bent down to kiss my breast. “*Almost* nothing. What else do you want to know?”

“Nothing,” I replied, wrapping my legs around him. “I’ve heard enough. Just kiss me.”

Braden grinned down at me, and then gave me my wish.



Christian

I had one of the most luxurious mattresses in the world. It was custom-made in Switzerland, with a mixture of memory foam and recoil-resistant springs developed by scientists at the European Space Agency. It cost roughly the same amount as a brand new, fully-loaded Ford F150. Transporting it from Indianapolis to St. Louis had required a team of four movers, and the exterior windows of my apartment had to be removed so it could be lifted up into my bedroom by a crane.

It was all worth it because, as a professional athlete, sleep was one of the most important parts of my life. I got strong in the gym, and honed my skill on the field, but it was at night on that mattress when my body healed itself. In fact, I wore a specialized smart watch that tracked my sleep every night and helped me ensure I was getting the proper amount of deep sleep. I loved my bed more than I loved anything else in my life, except for Heidi.

But I woke up Monday morning on the floor of my living room. Chairs had been rearranged to hold up blankets and sheets to create a fort, and the floor was scattered with pillows. Half the pillows belonged to the nice widow across the hall; she graciously let us borrow them when Claire insisted we didn't have enough. Which was funny, because she didn't even know what a blanket fort was until I explained the concept to her. Like all seven year olds, she developed very strong opinions quickly.

The girl was sound asleep to my right, snoring softly, with an arm draped over Pickles. Heidi was laying flat on the far side of Claire, snout resting between her two paws, facing the

front door. She seemed to understand that small humans required extra protection.

I spent several minutes motionless as I watched Claire sleep. I didn't want to disturb her. Children were so precious at that age, and I had a deep desire to let her rest as long as possible.

I had always wanted kids. Being around Claire helped reinforce that desire. After one night with the girl, I was willing to forget all about my expensive Swiss mattress and have as many blanket fort slumber parties as she wanted. Even though she wasn't my child, I could feel my fatherly instincts kicking in. The urge to protect her from anything, great or small. To nurture and guide her. It was a primal instinct that had existed in humans as long as humans had existed themselves. A purpose in life beyond just throwing touchdowns and accumulating money.

Our ex in Indianapolis had wanted kids, too. The future was something she was never shy about discussing. Even though we'd dated less than a year, it felt like we were starting to plan a life together. Her, me, Braden, and Logan.

But she didn't want to move, and she refused to do the long distance thing. And now she was only an ex.

I was over her. We all were, even Logan, who had taken the breakup the hardest. But sometimes, especially when I watched Claire sleeping so peacefully, I wondered what might have been if the Colts had never moved cities.

I found myself wondering if Beth wanted kids. Some women didn't have that desire, especially these days. She loved dogs, so much so that she *might* not want children. But she seemed like she had done a good job watching Claire, even for only a day.

I shook my head and muttered to myself, "What are you doing, Christian? It's too early to think about that. You haven't even gone on a real date with her yet."

Even though I barely made any noise, it was enough to cause Claire to stir. Pickles, who had been waiting patiently,

immediately sat up and began licking her face. Claire giggled and pushed him away.

“Morning, sleepy head,” I said.

“What’s a sleepy head?” she asked while rubbing her eye with a fist.

“Someone whose head is sleepy. Duh!”

“*All* of me is sleepy, not just my head,” she patiently explained.

“Oh, okay then. Are you hungry? Do you want breakfast?”

Suddenly she was wide awake. “I want McDonald’s! Bacon, egg, and cheese biscuit!”

“Logan told me you had that for breakfast yesterday,” I replied. “And the day before that. And the day before *that*.”

“It’s what I like. Have you *had* McDonald’s before, Uncle Chrissy?”

“You should call me Uncle Christian.”

“Why? Uncle Braden calls you Uncle Chrissy.”

“If you call me Uncle Christian, then I promise we can get McDonald’s.”

She concentrated as if this was a crucial diplomatic decision. “Okay, Uncle Chris... tian.”

I thought about what it must have been like growing up on a hippie farm, completely disconnected from the real world. The first time she’d had McDonalds, or any fast food for that matter, was when the social worker picked her up. When she had revealed to me that she didn’t know her birthday, because nobody on her farm celebrated birthdays, my heart felt like it was being ripped in two.

I’ll get you McDonald’s every morning. I don’t even care if I’m spoiling you.

We got dressed, took the dogs for a walk in the park across the street, and then drove to get breakfast. She insisted we eat inside so she could play in the McDonald’s Playpen while we

waited for our order. I watched her go down the slide over and over, squealing happily every time. She had probably never been on a slide before a week ago.

“When are we going to play with the dogs?” she asked while we ate.

“We can take them to the dog park when we get home. Heidi likes to catch the Frisbee.” I paused. “Wait. Do you know what a Frisbee is?”

“Of course I do,” she replied in her high-pitched voice. “But I’m not *talking* about Heidi and Pickles. I’m *talking* about all the *other* dogs.”

I frowned. “The dogs at Beth’s kennel?”

“I want to go play with them. And clean up their poop. It’s called *poop scooping*, and it’s very important.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to go to the park? Or watch a movie? I don’t have to be at football practice until tomorrow, so we have the whole day free...”

“No! I want to play with the dogs! And Beth! Don’t you want to see *Beth*?”

Since she had come into Logan’s life, Claire hadn’t shown much interest in anything. Not surprising since the poor girl had lost her mother, the only family she had ever known. Seeing her suddenly excited about *anything* seemed like a step in the right direction.

“Yeah,” I said. “Let’s go see Beth.”

I tried texting Beth to make sure it was okay that we stop by, but she didn’t respond. It was seven-thirty by the time we got to Lizzy’s Dog Boarding, and her business didn’t *technically* open to customers until nine. Hopefully, she wouldn’t mind.

The first thing I noticed was that Braden’s cherry red Mazda Miata was still parked in the driveway. That didn’t surprise me, but it caused a little pang of jealousy. Not in a bad way, though; I was glad their date went well, and I was used to sharing. I was looking forward to it, if this whole thing worked out.

As long as I get my own private time with Beth.

Beth came walking out of the kennel building on the left. She frowned in our direction, then grinned when she recognized me and Claire. Behind her, the herd of dogs came pouring out of the building and went running across the field to play.

Before I could wave to her, Braden came walking out of the house in front of us with a pot of coffee in one hand and two mugs in the other. He was shirtless, and wearing only gray sweatpants. Even his feet were bare.

Claire squealed when she saw him. “Uncle Braden!”

“Morning!” he said.

“It’s fifty degrees out,” I said, breath misting in front of me.

Braden beamed. “I know, right? I love this time of year. Feels great!”

“What are you doing here, Uncle Braden?” Claire asked. “Did you and Beth have a sleepover like Uncle Chrissy and me did?”

Braden chuckled. “We had a sleepover, but *not* like you and Chrissy.”

I shot him a glare. “Dude...”

“Beth needed help with the dogs,” Braden explained. “We spent the whole time *working*.” He shot me a wink.

Claire scrunched up her face to think about that. “That makes sense. The dogs are a *lot* of work. I know, because I helped yesterday.”

“You sure did. I heard all about it from Beth.”

“I told him how you were such a good helper,” Beth said while coming through the field gate. “What are you two doing here?” The last part was more to me than Claire.

“Claire wanted to come help some more,” I explained with an apologetic grimace.

“That’s so nice of you!” Beth crouched down to hug Claire. “Why don’t you go put your stuff inside while I talk to Christian?”

“I’ll keep an eye on her,” Braden said, putting the coffee mugs on a fencepost. “I’ll give you a piggy back ride.”

“What’s a piggy back ride?”

“Oh man, we have *so* much to teach you.” Braden crouched down. “Hop on. Hang on around my neck and I’ll carry you.”

Claire jumped onto his back and clung to him like a monkey. She yelped happily as he stood up and walked toward the house.

“You want some coffee, kiddo?”

“No!” I snapped. “She can’t have coffee. Sorry, Claire.”

“What?” Braden asked, looking offended. “I was joking.” Then he whispered to Claire, “You can have just a sip.”

I sighed as they went inside. Beth shook her head too, then turned to me. “Claire was helpful yesterday, but I wasn’t expecting this to become a daily thing. I’m kind of worried about liability. We almost had an incident yesterday. If one of the dogs snaps at her or something... well, I don’t know how any of that works.”

“It’s not ideal,” I admitted. “But she was excited to come here. It was the first thing she mentioned this morning. Well, after getting McDonald’s.”

Beth winced and glanced back toward the house. “Christian...”

“Look, I know it’s not the best situation,” I admitted. “But she just lost her mom. She’s been gloomy about almost everything for the past week... everything *except* coming here to see you and the dogs. I wouldn’t ask if it didn’t seem like the only thing she’s been excited about. We can convince Logan to pay you for another day of nannying, or whatever you want to call this. That way it’s a win-win.”

Beth sighed, but I saw the gleam in her eyes when I mentioned the money. I knew she was still trying to get the

dog boarding business up and running, and every penny helped.

“And I’ll make it up to you by taking you out tonight,” I added. “That way it’s win-win-win.”

Beth’s eyes *really* lit up at the prospect of dinner. “I need to see if Suzie can stay late.”

“And if she can’t, I’ll make Braden do it,” I said. “He’s good at following directions.”

Beth smirked and glanced back at the house. “Braden’s a lot of fun, but I don’t know if I would trust him to watch the dogs for an evening.”

“Yeah, I knew it was a bad idea as soon as the words left my lips,” I admitted. “But if Suzie can stay late, we’ll go out tonight?”

She nodded. “Yeah. We’ll go out tonight. With one stipulation.”

“Name it.”

“I don’t want to go anywhere fancy,” Beth said. “No clubs, or Michelin star restaurants, or anything like that. Just a regular date.”

I smiled. “A regular date sounds perfect.”

The front door swung open and Braden came jogging outside with Claire clinging to his back. “Coffee is gross!” she immediately announced.

I sighed. “Braden, dude?”

“She’s joking! I didn’t give her any coffee.” But then Braden whispered, “Dang, girl. You said you would be cool.”

“I’m very cool,” Claire said simply. Then she added, “Uncle Braden, what does cool mean?”

“You seriously don’t know what cool means?”

“Like, cold? Because I’m a little cold.”

Braden groaned. “Yeah, we have a lot to teach you. But first... a piggy back stampede!”

He opened the gate and carried Claire out into the field. The dogs came running up, chasing Braden as he sprinted across the field at a breakneck pace. Claire bounced on his back, screaming—and laughing—the whole time.

“Yeah,” Beth said with a smirk. “I’m not trusting Braden with the kennel tonight.”



Beth

Christian went home soon after dropping off Claire, but Braden stuck around all morning. The Colts usually had the day after a game off, and he insisted he had nothing better to do than hang out with me, Claire, and the dogs.

Throughout the morning, the other Colts players who were boarding their dogs trickled in to pick them up. Braden—who was wearing a shirt by this point—came over to greet them as they did, with a seemingly unique handshake for each player.

“I’ve never seen Gunner this happy,” one of the players told me while picking up his Pit Bull. He was a big guy, one of the Defensive Backs. “Usually he tucks his tail between his legs and pouts the whole way home, but after staying at your kennel, he looks like he doesn’t want to leave. You’re the real deal, Lizzy.”

“Lizzy was my grandma,” I explained. “But I’m glad Gunner had a good time! He’s a sweet boy.”

The Defensive Back crouched down to hug his dog. “Did he get a bath? He smells real nice, but I didn’t order that.”

“He ran through something nasty in the field, so I went ahead and bathed him with the other dogs,” I explained. “Don’t worry—there’s no extra charge. He was so easy! He didn’t fuss at all.”

He turned to the dog. “You wiggle and whine every time me and momma give you a bath. I don’t know how Ms. Beth does it, but we’re bringing you here every time I’m gone.”

His comments made me grin all through lunch.

Suzie arrived soon after. She took one look at Braden in the field with Claire, scooping up poop, and turned to me.

“Did Braden freaking Clark spend the night here?” she asked, leaning in as if to gossip. “He’s wearing sweatpants. Wait. Is Christian Baker here, too?”

I laughed nervously. “No, of course not. Christian dropped Claire off this morning because she wanted to help with the dogs.”

“Oh, okay.” She didn’t acknowledge that I hadn’t answered her question about Braden, but she chuckled. “I don’t know why I asked. Both of them... haha. Nobody’s that lucky!”

If only you knew, I thought.

Despite being a tiny little thing, Claire was surprisingly helpful with Braden’s assistance. The two of them walked around scooping up dog poop until the field was cleaner than it had ever been when my grandma was alive. It was adorable watching the tall, muscular Wide Receiver following her around like a personal assistant, cleaning up whatever she pointed to with enthusiasm and vigor. It was hilarious to me that a seven year old was ordering around a multi-million dollar athlete like he was a maid, but Braden never complained or showed any hint of annoyance.

“We’re heading out,” Braden told me around four in the afternoon. “I’m taking Claire to see the new Disney movie. The animated one.” He leaned in close to whisper. “She’s *never been to a movie theater*. Can you believe that?”

“Poor thing,” I said. “Make sure to splurge on the large popcorn and soda.”

“I’m an AMC Rewards member. That little girl is getting one of every single type of candy they have.” He grinned. “I had a great time last night. And today, even though I’ve spent all my time with Claire.”

“You’re really good with her.” I smiled up at him, then said, “You’re going to make a great father someday.”

“I hope so! As long as I’m better than my own dad, I’ll call that a win.” He glanced over his shoulder, then grabbed hold

of the back of my head and pulled me into a passionate kiss. The suddenness of it, and Braden's palpable *desire* for me, took my breath away. I was gasping when he finally released his lock on my lips.

"Something for you to think about until we see each other again." He gave me that boyish grin of his. "Later, Beth. Have fun with Chrissy tonight." He put his fingers together and whistled. "Pickles! Heidi! Let's go!"

Claire said goodbye before leaving, but she still insisted hugs were only for family. I wondered what she would think if I told her that getting a piggy back ride was basically the same thing as a hug, but I didn't want to ruin that for her—or for Braden.

Suzie was happy to stay late for me, saying that she could use the extra hours to help replenish her beer fund. That gave me extra time to prepare for the date. It felt strange getting ready to go out with one man tonight, while I had gone out—or rather, stayed *in*—with a different man last night. It felt even stranger because last night had been *so amazing*. I was still buzzing from my evening with Braden, and his goodbye kiss had left a deep impression in my emotions. It made me wonder why I was even bothering to go out with both of them, rather than focusing solely on Braden.

We'll see how tonight goes, first.

My mind changed when Christian picked me up for our date. He was wearing jeans and a tight-fitting Colts polo shirt, with leather boots and a matching brown belt. He was a different kind of sexy than Braden. Calmer, more resolute. The leader of the Colts, with the full weight of responsibility on his shoulders. A sexy shiver ran up my spine.

"You look beautiful tonight," he said with a small smile.

I gave a little spin. "That's nice of you to say, even though I'm in jeans and a T-shirt."

"Sometimes simpler is better. You're every bit as beautiful as you were in the dress at the charity event. Maybe even more

so.” He looked like he wanted to kiss me, but then opened the passenger door of his Jeep for me.

Suzie gave us a big wave from the other side of the fence.

“So, where are we going?” I asked as we began driving.

“The fanciest steakhouse in town,” he replied, deadpan. “Don’t worry, this place only has *one* Michelin star.”

I playfully glared at him. “You’d better be joking.”

The tiniest little smile touched his serious lips. “I promise I’m joking.”

“I’m glad you took my request seriously,” I said. “I was afraid you’d show up in a suit and try too hard to impress me.”

“I’m glad you were serious with your request,” he replied, the muscles of his right forearm taut as he gripped the steering wheel. “Part of me was afraid you *said* one thing, but secretly wanted a fancy night out.”

“God, no. I like getting dressed up for a night on the town sometimes, but usually I prefer casual.”

“Noted. You’ll like where we’re going, then.”

“Give me a hint?”

“Nope,” he said bluntly. “You’ll see when we get there.”

I was genuinely clueless about our destination until Christian pulled into the Spare Times Bowling Alley. “Bowling!” I blurted out when he parked the car and turned off the engine.

“Is this *too* casual?” he asked.

“No! I love it! I haven’t been bowling in *years*. You’re not, like, super good at bowling, are you?”

“Nope,” he replied. “I used to play for fun when it wasn’t football or baseball season, but I’m not very good at all. It’s still fun, though.”

One strange aspect of my relationship with Christian—and Braden—was that I saw them as normal guys, rather than the superstar athletes that they were. It was easy to forget that they

were some of the most recognizable people in the country. I was rudely reminded of this fact as soon as we walked inside the bowling alley. A middle-aged guy who was leaving the building stopped in his tracks and gawked at Christian. One teenager over by the arcade interrupted his buddy's game to shake him by the arm and point. The friend complained about his game being ruined... until he saw us. I heard one of them say, "No freaking way!" as we passed.

By the time we got to the check-in counter, there was a small crowd around Christian. I might as well have been invisible. Christian held up his hands to calm the people down.

"I'll make a deal with everyone," he announced. "For the next five minutes, I'm all yours. You can take as many selfies as you want, and I'll sign any autographs. But you have to promise not to post anything about my location until after we're done bowling. That way we can bowl in peace. Deal?"

Everyone agreed, and Christian stepped aside to appease his fans. While he did that, I paid for our bowling lane.

"What size shoe do you wear?" I asked him.

"Size fourteen!" Christian shouted above the crowd. "I'll meet you over there in a minute!"

The teenage clerk retrieved our shoes and slapped them down on the counter. "Your total is twenty-six fifty. Are you, like, his date?"

I wasn't sure how to respond, so I handed him my credit card and said, "I'm just a friend."

He looked me up and down, then glanced over at Christian. "Huh. Lane fourteen."

I knew what he was thinking: I wasn't hot enough to be dating a superstar like Christian Baker. It didn't bother me. Braden's compliment was still firmly ringing in my head: I was hot as fuck. That kept my self-esteem higher than it otherwise would have been.

"I was going to pay," Christian said when he finally joined me. "This date was supposed to be my way of thanking you for allowing Claire to help at the kennel."

“You can pay for the food!” I said cheerfully. “And the beer. This date does include beer, right?”

“Yes ma’am,” he said, sitting down behind the bowling terminal. “I’ll place the order after we enter our names.”

“I already did!” I said. “You’re up first, Chrissy.”

I tried to suppress my grin as he looked up at the scoreboard and saw his name: CHRISSY. But as soon as he glared at me, I lost control and fell into a fit of giggles.

“Just for that, I’m not paying for beer,” he said.

I scoffed. “Wow. The famous Christian Baker is a cheapskate. I’ll be sure to tell your fans over by the arcade all about this when we leave.”

He held up his middle finger at me, which only made me smile wider.

“Nice, the hockey game is on,” Christian said, gesturing to the ceiling-mounted television next to the scoreboard.

“Blues are winning against the Edmonton Oilers, two-to-one,” I said. “The announcer said Logan scored one of the goals.”

“Nice.”

“I haven’t bowled since I was a little girl,” I explained while we put on our bowling shoes. “My grandma used to take me on special occasions.”

“You were close to her?” Christian asked.

“She pretty much raised me for most of my life. My mom died when I was six.”

Christian paused while tying his shoes. He let the laces fall limp and put a hand on my leg. “Beth. I’m so sorry.”

I shrugged. “It was a long time ago. I’ve already worked through all my issues. I guess that’s why I sympathize so much with Claire, since she lost her mom around the same age.”

“What about your dad?”

“He divorced my mom when I was a baby. He didn’t want kids. He’s alive, as far as I know, living out in Minnesota or Wisconsin or something. Stop looking at me like that. I’m not a broken toy.”

He bent back down to tie his shoes. “I’m extremely lucky. I grew up with both my parents. They were about as perfect as a kid could ask for, always loving and supportive. I know how privileged I am, especially when I hear about your childhood, or Braden’s, or Logan’s.”

“How did Braden grow up?”

“His parents divorced when he was a kid. They had split custody. His father lived a few hours away, and would take Braden on the weekends. That got complicated when he started playing football. It was a messy custody situation.” Christian shook his head.

“And Logan?”

There was a commotion on the television that drew our attention. One of the Blues players took a hard hit by the opponent. Logan reacted by skating across the ice and throwing a punch. Another opponent came up behind him and grabbed his arms, which only made Logan angrier. By the time the referees broke up the fight, Logan’s helmet was off and he looked like he wanted to fight the entire team. The sight was sexier than I wanted to admit. I had never been into the bad boy demographic, but now...

There’s something about an angry bearded man that is so attractive.

“I probably shouldn’t talk about Logan’s past,” Christian said.

“Oh? Is it bad?”

“It’s not great,” he replied, standing up and testing his shoes. “But it’s probably best if I let him explain it himself. Okay, a pitcher of beer. What else do you want?”

“Chili cheese fries, please!” I watched Christian tap the order into the computer. “Since you brought up Logan... I have to ask. Is he involved in whatever this is? Because

you've mentioned your old arrangement with the woman in Indianapolis, and you've said that you and Braden want to share me." I paused to make sure there was nobody who could overhear in the lane behind me. "But is Logan part of that?"

Without looking up from the computer, Christian asked, "Do you want him to be part of it?"

"I asked you first."

He smirked. "Your answer affects *my* answer."

I thought about it for a moment. None of this was normal. It was totally new to me, but they were used to it. And since they had been totally honest with me about everything, I decided that I owed them the same.

"When I met Logan, he was dropping off his dogs for boarding. My ex-boyfriend Trip showed up, and we got into a fight. Logan intervened, and practically threw him over the fence. Afterwards, Logan claimed he acted that way because Trip almost kicked his dog, but I could tell he was being protective of me. It was..." I struggled to find the words. "I'm not *unattracted* to Logan, I'll say."

Christian gave me a knowing smile. "Yeah, Logan's got a way about him. He doesn't protect a lot of people, but when you're one of them..." He shook his head. "Thanks for giving me an honest answer. Logan hasn't said much to us about the whole thing, but if he acted that way around you, then I can promise you he's interested. But he's been hurt before, so it might take him some time to find a way to show it. Braden and I have talked about that a lot. We're worried about him." Christian hit another button on the computer, which made a satisfying beep. "Okay, the food is ordered. Let's bowl."

"You're up first, Chrissy!"

He stuck his tongue out at me, a gesture that seemed all too childish for the series quarterback. He selected a bowling ball from the rack—a sixteen pounder, the heaviest weight—and stepped up to the line.

"No pressure," I said. "Just ignore the dozen fans to our right who are watching."

“Compared to eighty thousand fans in a stadium, this isn’t bad.” He held the ball, cradled in his left hand, in front of his face, and then took six slow steps forward. He lowered the ball in an arc to his right, pulling it back, and then sent it forward. The motion was so smooth that the ball made almost no noise as it made contact with the alley, rolling down the lane with just a hint of curve. It struck just to the right of the first pin, making explosive contact. When the noise and chaos died down, no pins were left standing. The screen above us announced that Chrissy had gotten a strike.

“You said you weren’t good!” I protested.

Christian smiled to himself as he returned to the seat next to me. “I guess my definition of *good* is skewed.”

**Beth**

Christian's opening strike was hard for me to follow, and I promptly rolled the ball into the gutter. My second roll was better, but it still only knocked down seven pins.

"You just needed a warm-up frame," Christian said. "I think you're going to crush me, now."

"You're being awfully friendly to the opponent who wrote Chrissy into the computer," I said.

"If you think that's bad," he said while picking up his ball, "you should hear the trash talk I get on the field every Sunday."

"I bet I can do better."

He snorted. "Trust me. That's not a competition you can win. I've heard some truly vile things."

As he lined himself up and began to bowl, I yelled, "You bowl like my grandma!"

His bowl was almost perfect, just like the first frame, but this time one pin remained. He turned around and gave me a smug look. "I'm begging you not to try to compete with the defensive linemen who try sacking me."

"Okay, fine," I said. But as soon as his ball returned and he prepared to make his next shot, I said, "Christian Baker? More like Christian *Faker*."

This time, he started laughing as he swung the ball. It dropped out of his grasp and landed on the ground with a *THUD*. I had to cover my mouth to stop from giggling.

“See! I can compete!”

Christian picked up his ball before it could roll down the lane. “You’re going to get us in trouble!”

“You’re the quarterback of the River City Colts. You can get away with a lot.”

“On the contrary. If some random guy makes a scene at a bowling alley, it doesn’t make the news. But if I do it, my face is printed on the front page of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch with the headline: *Colts Quarterback Kicked out of Bowling Alley.*”

“I’ll stop if you admit that my trash talk was effective.”

He lifted his chin defiantly. “Never.”

“So be it.”

This time, I didn’t say a word as he bowled. But he was obviously *expecting* me to, and that anticipation was enough to ruin his concentration. His ball rolled wide of the last pin.

He spun around with fire in his eyes. “Oh, you’re mean.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked innocently. “Is this environment more intense than a stadium with eighty thousand fans?”

He pointed at me as he walked back down to the seats. “Okay, that’s it. No mercy from this point forward.”

I hopped up and retrieved my ball. “Bring it on.”

For the next few frames, the two of us were locked in life-or-death combat. I called him names like *Chrissy Prissy* and *Weak-wrist Chris*. I wiggled my butt seductively while bowling. When I was done and we passed each other, I let my fingers drag across the front of his jeans in a gentle caress. A few frames later, while we were both sitting down next to each other, I outright grabbed his dick through his jeans and gave it a firm squeeze. To my immense disappointment, Christian bowled *better* with a semi-erection.

We paused when the food and beer arrived. He shoved a French fry in my mouth, and I responded by smearing chili on his face. We laughed and drank our beer and had a great time.

“Okay, I surrender,” I said after the first game was over. “You destroyed me. I couldn’t even break seventy points.”

“Want some help?” he asked.

“I think the only help I need is to use the gutter-guards,” I said.

Christian picked up my bowling ball and hit the button to start a new game. “Come here. I’ll show you a small adjustment you can make that will help. Stand right here.”

I obeyed, accepting the ball from him. He put his hands on my hips, positioning me in just the right way facing the lane. I felt his body lean into mine, his arms wrapping around my own forearms, molding me into a certain stance.

“Like this,” he breathed into my ear. “Hold the ball here, in front of your face. Left foot ahead of your right. Good. Just like that.”

His grip lingered there on my body, a familiarity in his touch as if I belonged to him. The way a football player holds a piece of his equipment. Then he stepped back.

“Go ahead.”

I had to shake off the erotic nature of the interaction as I prepared to bowl. I stepped forward, lowered the ball, and then released. It rolled down the lane, almost perfectly straight, and struck the first pin.

“Strike!” I said, jumping up and down. “I can’t believe it worked!”

“You doubted me?” he teased.

“I doubted your intentions. I assumed you were doing that stupid thing you see in Hallmark movies, where the guy mansplains something to the girl, but like, in a sexy way as an excuse to touch her.”

Christian smiled. “That was my primary goal. But I’m glad the advice worked, too.”

We finished our pitcher of beer and the second game around the same time. Christian still beat me handily, but I bowled a

respectable 109. As we left the bowling alley, a few fans called out to Christian to wish him luck on Sunday against the Tennessee Titans.

“Do you ever get sick of it?” I asked. “Being recognized everywhere you go?”

He smiled. “Never. At least, not yet. I’ve only been in the league four years. Maybe in another decade I’ll be sick of the attention.”

As soon as we stepped outside, Christian groaned. There was a truck parked over on the right, with the driver door open. It was dark outside, but the parking lot lights allowed us to see the photographer standing behind the car door, snapping photos of us with a telescopic lens.

“Now *that’s* something I’m sick of,” he muttered. “I wish I knew who leaked the info inside. And after I spent five minutes taking selfies with them.”

“Should I cover my face?” I asked.

He took me by the hand. “Only if you want to try to remain anonymous. Come on.”

Christian led me across the parking lot to his car while the photographer snapped away. We got inside and he quickly drove out of the parking lot.

“Well, that was a lot of fun!” I said. “Even ignoring the way it ended with the photographer.”

“The night’s not over, yet,” he said. “We have one more stop planned.”

“Where?”

“You’ll see.”

“I swear, if you take me to a fancy restaurant...”

Christian chuckled to himself, but said nothing else.

We drove east through downtown St. Louis, past the ballpark where the Cardinals played, with the Gateway Arch looming overhead. We turned north, continuing on until we

reached a hulking stadium that blocked out a huge portion of the sky.

“The football stadium?” I asked.

Christian remained silent as he pulled onto a private ramp that tilted down underneath the structure. He scanned a badge to get past a gate, then parked next to an elevator where a man wearing a Colts rain jacket was waiting.

“Got everything set up for you, Mr. Baker,” the man said, holding out a fist.

Christian bumped it with his own fist. “I appreciate you coming down here to help.” He pulled a \$100 bill out of his pocket.

The man immediately shook his head. “Your money’s no good here. Not after what you did for Julian.”

“Then consider me in your debt,” Christian said.

The man pressed a button, and the elevator doors opened. “The way I see it, I owe you a lot more favors before we’re even, Mr. Baker.”

Christian clapped him on the arm and said, “We’ll see about that.” We stepped into the elevator and the doors closed.

“What was that about?” I asked.

“That’s Matty, one of the stadium managers. I did him a favor last month,” Christian replied casually.

“What kind of favor? Who’s Julian?”

“His son. He has a rare immune disease. I called in some favors to a hospital in Indianapolis to get Julian admitted to a special treatment program. He’s responding well to it.”

“That’s amazing!”

Christian shrugged awkwardly. “I don’t really want to talk about it.”

If it were anyone else, I would assume this was false modesty. But Christian seemed genuinely uncomfortable talking about the favor, so I dropped it.

The elevator opened up to a long hallway with cement floors. I followed Christian down to the end, and then we turned right and walked out of a tunnel onto the field itself. The massive, cavernous stadium interior seemed to spread out around me as I stepped onto the fake grass field. It seemed dimmer than how it looked on TV, like only half the lights were on. There was an eerie hollow feel to the space, like we were in a cave, miles underground.

“This is really nice,” I said.

“When the Rams were here in St. Louis, they played in an old multi-purpose stadium called The Dome at America’s Center. It was nice when it opened in the nineties, but it was a dump by the time the Rams moved to Los Angeles. When the Colts moved here, part of the deal was that the city would demolish The Dome and build a newer stadium. This is what they built. It’s beautiful. State-of-the-art in a lot of ways, while still maintaining an historic feel.” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I get shivers every time I step onto this field.”

“I don’t blame you. I’m in awe just standing here, and it’s empty!”

He led me out toward the middle of the field. “This place is really something when it’s full of fans. When the ball is hiked to me, and I drop back to pass, I feel like a god. Or a gladiator. Their cheers and wails rain down on me, the personified voice of an entire city. Demanding excellence. Demanding victory. And when they don’t get it...” Christian snorted. “I hear their anger. I take it all in, and make it part of me. I use it to do better the next week. It’s what *fuels* me.”

He almost seemed like he was talking to himself. When I was certain he was finished, I asked, “Why did you bring me here? Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I want you to know who I am, Beth. I’m a lot of different things to a lot of people. All of us are, to some extent.” He swept his arm in a wide arc. “But when I’m here, on the football field, with eleven opponents trying their best to kill me on every single play? That’s when I’m truly *me*. And it

was important to me that you understand that, and really *feel* it, here on the field. Not just from the perspective the television cameras show.”

Suddenly, I realized this wasn't just a first date gimmick. He wasn't trying to impress me by using his influence to sneak me into a stadium when nobody else was here. He was trying to be truly vulnerable with me in a way that men rarely were.

Over to my right, on the sideline, was a cart full of footballs. I ran over there.

“Where are you going?” Christian called.

I retrieved a football and brought it back to the middle of the field. It seemed so much larger than it should have been in my hands. “I want to catch a touchdown.”

The corner of Christian's mouth curled up in a smirk. “You what?”

“I want you to throw me a pass,” I insisted. “Pretend it's a game. Show me how it's done.”

He raised a dark eyebrow. “Are you sure you can catch it?”

“I played softball for two years. I think I can catch a football, as long as you give me a nice, easy pass.” I tossed the ball underhand to him.

“Okay.” In his broad hands, the ball looked tiny. “Go long.”

“No! I want you to do it like this is a real game. From the snap. Pretend all those fans are booing you. Let it fuel you.” I grinned, and Christian grinned back at me.

“I can do that. The play starts when the Center hikes the ball.” He placed the ball on the ground. “Crouch over it, and place one hand on the ball.”

“You just want me to bend over,” I teased.

“You said you wanted to pretend this was a real game, from the snap. So you have to snap me the ball.”

I glared at him, then stood over the ball. I bent down into a crouch with my ass sticking out. “Now what?”

He stepped up behind me. Close enough that his arms were brushing against my ass. “I place my hands down here, open wide to receive the snap. When I say the word hike, grab the ball and throw it backwards into my waiting hands. And then go running forward like a receiver.”

“But you have to do all the gibberish, too.”

“Gibberish?”

“Before the ball is snapped, you always call out a bunch of random words,” I said. “It sounds like gibberish to someone like me.”

Christian chuckled. “I promise to do all the gibberish. After the ball is hiked, I want you to run an *out route*. Run forward for two seconds, then make a ninety-degree turn to the right so that you’re running straight toward the sideline. That’s when I’ll pass the ball. Ready?”

“Ready!”

I felt him crouch down with me. “Down, set, blue fourteen... hike!”

When I heard the magic word, I tossed the ball backwards between my legs, then sprinted forward. *One Mississippi*, I counted in my head. *Two Mississippi...*

I dug in my heel and turned right so that I was moving perpendicular to the field, directly toward the sideline where the cart of balls was. I twisted to look back at Christian, who was throwing the ball. It soared through the air, a perfect spiral, hanging in the empty space for an impossibly long time. I put up my hands to catch it...

...and the ball passed through my fingers and smashed into my face.

There was a flash of white, and then my head hit the ground with a thud.



Christian

I barely threw the ball!

It was the slowest I could possibly toss it while still maintaining my accuracy! Peewee football players put more strength behind their passes than this! Beth got her hands up to catch it, but she was a heartbeat too slow.

Like an assassin's bullet taking out an Archduke, the ball struck Beth directly in the nose and knocked her out.

"Beth!" I cried out, sprinting to reach her limp body. She was groaning when I fell at her side, her blonde hair splayed out like a halo against the green turf.

"You promised... to give me... an easy pass..." she moaned. It sounded like her nose was clogged.

I helped her into a sitting position. "That was as easy as I could have thrown it. You're supposed to use your hands to catch it."

She gave me a hurt look. "I tried!"

Beth was clutching her face with both hands. I gently pulled one hand away so I could get a better look.

"Is it bad?" she asked.

Blood was gushing out of her nose. "Um... no?"

Her eyes widened. "Why did you say it like that?"

"Let's get you taken care of. Come on, up you go."

I wrapped an arm around her and led her down the tunnel toward the medical room. I flicked the lights on, then guided

her to one of the examination tables. After sitting her down on the table, I began opening drawers and cabinets.

“I’m bleeding!” she suddenly realized.

“Only a little.”

“My hands are covered in blood! Oh my God!”

“You’re going to be fine,” I insisted. “I’m pretty sure your nose isn’t broken.”

“How do you know!” she wailed.

“Because I’ve seen about a hundred broken noses in my years.” I turned and flashed a smile over my shoulder. “And your nose is as beautiful as ever.”

“If you’re trying to be comforting after assaulting me with sporting equipment, it’s not working.”

“I’m sorry.” I dabbed at her nose with some gauze. “Seriously though, it’s not bad. Despite the blood.”

“Stop talking about the blood! I’m trying to pretend it’s all still inside of my body, where it belongs.”

I laughed, and she chuckled through the pain. She wasn’t *really* upset, which made all of this easier. After cleaning up the blood, I fetched a pack of ice and gently held it against her nose.

“There’s almost no swelling, but this will help.”

“Thanks,” she muttered. “You probably think I’m hideous, now.”

“You’re more beautiful than I’ve ever seen you.”

Beth rolled her eyes. “Yeah, right. So much for getting laid on this date.”

I chuckled. “Was that on your mind?”

“No,” she said, pouting. A few seconds later she added, “Yes.”

I removed the ice pack. “I’d still do you.” I planted a very tender kiss on her cheek. The skin was cold to the touch.

“Sure,” she said skeptically.

“I’m serious.”

“Prove it.”

I kissed her on the cheek again, then along the side of her neck. She let out a long sigh as I kissed a trail down to her shoulder.

“You’re not seriously interested in getting sexy with me, are you?”

I continued planting kisses on her neck and shoulder. “You challenged me to prove it. That’s all I’m doing.”

“There’s a huge difference between kissing me and *doing* me,” she pointed out.

I had been thinking about Beth since that night in the limo. I’d been outright fantasizing about every single way I wanted to make love to her, in exquisite detail. I had plans for tonight, plans that involved making love to her deep into the night, when the stars were out and the world was quiet and our bodies were joined endlessly.

But plans changed depending on the circumstances. That was a fundamental part of football. And it was time for me to change the play that had been called.

I peeled off my jacket, then pulled my shirt over my head and tossed it aside. Beth’s eyes widened as she took in my bare chest, her gaze raking over my skin like a caress.

“Want me to stop?” I asked.

She bit her lip and shook her head.

My desire rose rapidly as I removed her clothes: shoes, socks, jeans. I wanted her desperately, *needed* her more than I had ever needed a woman before, but I made myself go slowly. I brushed my lips against hers, taking care not to touch her nose, and slid my fingers into her panties. Beth arched her back on the table as I found her wet slit, rubbing it in a circle and coating her juices all around before sliding a finger inside.

“I can’t believe you’re still attracted to me,” she moaned.

“More than you’ll ever know.”

Once her shirt was off, and her bra removed, I paused to take in the sight of her breasts. They were a perfect handful, soft and warm in my palm, the nipples already hard underneath my thumb. Beth squirmed under my grasp, two fingers in her pussy and two more squeezing a nipple. Any thoughts of her nose were long gone, dispelled by my erotic touch.

Now she can truly enjoy what I want to do to her.

My zipper went down quickly, and then my cock was out in my fingers. I coated it with Beth’s natural lubrication, then slid the tip into her waiting lips. I intended to go slow, to tease it out, but as soon as we were joined together by even the slightest amount, I lost control. Moving with animal-like instinct, my thighs contracted and I drove into her, filling her to the brim.

The two of us gasped together in the medical room, eyes glued together, savoring the partner in our arms.



Beth

I wasn't prepared for Christian to give me every inch of himself all at once, but the moment his tip slid inside me, I knew what I wanted. And he must have wanted it too, because he lost control of himself, dropping that composure that was usually painted on his face, and drove his cock into me until he had nothing more to give.

Both of us cried out in the medical room, muscles tensed and bodies connected.

But we didn't jump right into the act. We kissed slowly, passionately. Like two lovers who had all the time in the world. As self-conscious as I was about my nose, Christian was good at distracting me. His kiss, his sensual touch, his palpable *need* for me—all of it made me forget about my nose. Although he was tilting his head in such a way that he didn't bump up against it.

He reached a hand underneath my body to cup my ass, squeezing it with need. I slid a hand around his own bare hip, feeling the chiseled muscle flex as he ground his cock into me. I could sense his desire, and knew that he was holding himself back from *really* fucking me.

Then he surprised me by pulling me off the table, spinning me around, and bending me over.

“Ohh!” I said as he kissed along my spine, moving down to the small of my back. He paused and squeezed my ass cheek again, and I could feel him taking a moment to admire me.

He planted a kiss on my left cheek, then my right, then spread my legs wide with his thighs. He leaned over and put

his hands over mine. I held my breath as I felt the tip of his cock touch my outer lips. He guided it around with his hips, then pushed forward with the tiniest amount of pressure, burying the head inside the shallows of my pussy.

But no deeper.

I was desperate for him, especially after receiving *all* of him before. I craved it with a desperation that would entertain nothing else: I had to have him inside me, every inch of him again, right fucking now.

“Hurry,” I said. “Fuck me.”

Christian gave up trying to hold back: he lowered his entire body onto mine, plunging his cock all the way inside.

Yes.

His moan drowned out mine as he planted a palm on my back and pinned me down on the medical table, his lips kissing the back of my neck. “Feel good?” he whispered in my ear.

I responded by grinding my ass up against him, begging him with my body. Christian planted his feet and began pumping with awakened strength. The pressure from this angle was intense, but I was wet and ready. He moved steadily for the first dozen strokes, making love to me while still holding something back. But soon his motions became frenzied, driving himself into me harder and faster and yes, *deeper* with every drive, as if he were trying to knock the table over with his thrusts.

“Fuck,” he groaned. “Fuuuuck.”

My eyes rolled back into my head as I neared my sudden, forceful climax; the euphoric waves washed over me as his cock spasmed inside, filling me with his hot load.

“*Ughhh,*” he moaned into my ear, pushing me down with all his weight while he came. I clenched my pussy lips as tight as I could for him because I wanted him to feel every inch of me, inside and out, as he trembled and was spent.

“Now do you believe me,” he breathed into my ear, “when I said I still think you’re smoking hot?”

I twisted to smirk at him. “Well, you *did* spin me around. Is my nose that hideous?”

Christian looked surprised for a moment, then realized I was joking. “It had nothing to do with your nose.” He gave my ass a smack, sending a quick, sharp pain across my skin. “It had everything to do with *this*.”

After cleaning up and putting our clothes on, we walked back out onto the field and put away the football that had nearly broken my nose. Christian slipped his fingers into mine; it felt right to hold hands. Sensual and public in a stadium so large, even if it was currently empty. As we exited toward the tunnel that led to our car, Matty came walking out with a big grin on his face.

“I got a video of it!” he said, holding up a thumb drive.

Christian glanced at me, then asked, “Really?”

“Yes, sir! Saw the whole thing on the cameras. Downloaded it to a flash drive so you can watch it later when you’re in the right mood.”

I paused. Were there cameras in the medical room? Had this man watched us *have sex*?

“It’s really not bad, if you don’t mind me saying so,” Matty told me. “It’s a little red, that’s all.”

“Oh, the football that hit me!”

“Of course.” Matty frowned at both of us. “What’d you think I meant?”

“Nothing,” I replied, laughing. “I thought I could catch a pass, but apparently I’m not very talented.”

“It’s tough against a pro like Mr. Baker! Even when he gives you an easy pass.”

“He threw it hard!” I insisted. “Much harder than I expected.”

Matty exchanged a look with Christian, then said, “Of course, ma’am.”

We took the elevator back down to the parking level and got in Christian’s car. “I’m glad you showed me the stadium,” I told him as we left. “I didn’t realize what it feels like being down on the field. Even without fans, I have a better appreciation for the kind of pressure you’re under. Thank you, Christian.”

“And thank you for the sex,” he replied while struggling to hide a grin.

“I bet that’s how you get all your ladies. You wound them with footballs and then take advantage of them while they’re injured.”

Now he did grin without restraint. “Like a bow hunter bagging a buck. Wow, it’s still early. Do you want to come over to my place? You could stay the night.”

The invitation sent a thrill up my chest, but I shook my head. “I need to relieve Suzie at some point. And I’m just not comfortable leaving the dogs alone at night yet. Maybe when my kennel is more established.”

“Fair enough.” Christian drove for a few seconds, then said, “Do you want *me* to stay the night with *you*?”

I glanced at him. “Are you inviting yourself over?”

“Of course not,” he answered. “Unless you want me to, in which case yes, that’s exactly what I’m doing.”

I reached over and caressed his chiseled thigh through his jeans. “Actually, I would like that.”

“We’ll need to stop at my place and pick up Heidi, if that’s all right. I could probably leave her at home, but I’d need to come back early to let her out...”

“No! Of course you can bring her. You might not know this about me, but I love dogs.”

“Whew. I was wondering about that.” He stopped at a red light and pulled out his cell phone. “Here. I’m making a note: Beth likes dogs. Braden will be relieved to hear it.”

We drove several blocks west of the stadium to a nice condominium building. Christian parked the car in the garage next door, and we took the elevator up to the fourteenth floor.

“Woah, this is nice!” I said as we walked inside.

“It’s not bad,” he replied. “I like it.”

Heidi ran up to Christian, but then immediately came toward me when she saw me. “Hi, Heidi! Hello! I’ve missed you!”

“Nice to see you too,” Christian muttered.

I scratched the German Shepherd behind the ears. “Don’t take it personally. All dogs love me the most.”

“Do you want dinner?” Christian asked.

Heidi jerked away from me and began circling her owner excitedly. Christian grinned at me with satisfaction.

“Fine. She loves you the most.”

Christian fed Heidi, then we leashed her up and took her down the elevator. “I’m jealous of your condo. Being downtown must be nice.”

He chuckled and said, “I’m actually jealous of *your* place.”

I snorted. “Wait a minute. Are you serious?”

“Sure. You’ve got a few acres of land. You’re out away from the city, where you have peace and quiet. If I ever get to sign a long-term contract with a team, I want to buy a piece of land away from the city.”

“That sounds nice, but my situation isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. When one dog barks, they *all* start barking, and they usually don’t stop for several minutes. I’m currently boarding a purebred Chow that wakes up and barks at dawn, every single morning, like a damn rooster.”

“And he’s at your place right now?”

“Yup.”

“So he’ll be doing this first thing in the morning?”

“Almost certainly, yes,” I said.

The elevator door opened at the street level. “You know, on second thought I might just stay here tonight.” He held the door open for me. “Thanks for the date! I’ll see you in a few days...”

“Oh shut up!” I said, grabbing his arm and pulling him out of the elevator. “You can’t promise me a night of cuddling and then change your mind.”

He let out a dramatic sigh. “Very well. But I can’t be held responsible for my morning grumpiness when this dog wakes me up before my alarm.”

“I’ll make it up to you with breakfast.” That thought made my stomach rumble, so I said, “Are you hungry? Those bowling alley fries weren’t enough food for me.”

“I’ve definitely worked up an appetite,” he said with a smirk. “What kind of pizza do you like?”

“Pepperoni, with extra cheese.”

“You hear that, Heidi?” Christian said. “Either Beth knew what my favorite kind of pizza is, or she’s literally the perfect woman.”

I smiled happily as we got into the car.

**Beth**

I woke up feeling weirdly disoriented. I had slept *really* well, to the point that I was extra groggy when I heard the Chow barking out in the kennel at the crack of dawn. I rolled over and blinked when I realized there was a man in bed with me.

Right. Braden. He slept over.

But as I wrapped an arm around him, I noticed that the hair was dark, not blond. A few heartbeats later I remembered.

Christian stayed over last night. Braden was the night before.

I paused to acknowledge how absolutely bonkers the situation was. I'd slept with two different men on consecutive nights. And they weren't strangers: they were best friends. Not only that, they were cool with the situation. It was their idea!

I usually preferred sleeping alone. I was a light sleeper, so every time my partner rolled over or snored, it woke me up. Back when I was dating Trip, I took a lot of lunchtime naps because I was sleeping so poorly at night.

Yet I didn't have that problem with Christian. I had slept through the night without waking once. Come to think of it, I got a great night's sleep with Braden, too. Maybe I just needed to find the right partners to sleep with.

The Chow was still barking every few seconds, so I quietly exited the bed without disturbing Christian and got dressed. Heidi and Hank, who had been sleeping by the foot of the bed, got up and followed me outside. By the time I made it to the

kennel, most of the dogs were up and stirring. I let them out into the field to do their business, then prepared to serve them all breakfast.

“Good morning, beautiful,” Christian said.

I grinned at the sight of him standing in the doorway, wearing sweatpants and a Colts hoodie. His dark hair was messy from sleep, and he looked so *cozy* with his hands in the pockets of his hoodie. His presence gave me a warm, safe feeling.

I could get used to having him and Braden around.

“You’re a sexy sight yourself,” I said, giving him a kiss. “I was trying to let you sleep longer.”

“My body naturally wakes up at six every day.” He pulled me into a long hug. I closed my eyes and inhaled his scent.

“There’s a pot of coffee inside. You can relax and hang out while I take care of the dogs.”

“I could help.”

“That’s sweet, but I’ve got it taken care of. I don’t want you thinking you have to earn your keep whenever you stay over.”

There was a clipboard hanging from a nail on the wall with “TO-DO LIST” written in giant font. Christian leaned in to read the list, then retrieved the hose from the coil on the wall. Without another word, he began hosing down the kennels where some of the dogs had gone to the bathroom during the night. The floor was all cement, with drains positioned every ten feet, which made for easy cleaning.

I smiled as he quietly went to work. It was wonderful having a partner that helped without me needing to ask. I loved that take-charge attitude.

I thought about that more as I went outside to refill the outdoor watering trough. All my exes had required a lot of begging to do even the simplest of chores. One time, when Trip’s parents were visiting and I was making dinner for them, I asked Trip to chop a zucchini. The task should have taken three minutes, but he groaned and complained and did a poor

job. By comparison, Christian and Braden seemed eager to help. I wanted to make sure I didn't take advantage of that, but it was a stark contrast to the kind of men I usually dated.

I froze when I saw a truck pull onto my property. *Speak of the devil...*

All the dogs went running over to the fence to chase the truck as it drove up my driveway. When it stopped by the gate, all the dogs turned and sprinted back out into the field, except for Logan's dog Loki, who remained at the fence barking at the truck.

"Good boy," I said, reaching down to scratch the dog's ear. "I like your instincts."

Trip hopped out of the truck. He should have been on his way to work in a shirt and tie, but he was dressed more casually today. "Hello Elizabeth," he said, scowling down at Loki on the other side of the fence.

He knew I hated being called Elizabeth, but I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing me annoyed. "What do you want, Trip? I have a lot of work to do today, and zero time to deal with your bullshit."

Trip raised his chin a little higher. "I'm here to collect the money you owe me."

I sputtered a laugh. "For the hockey ticket?"

"That's right," he said stubbornly. "I told you I would give you a week, and it has been precisely seven days."

"I don't remember you saying that."

"Then you have a poor memory."

I allowed myself to smirk. "I remember you demanding money from me, then ran away the moment Logan Landry gave you a mean look."

"That's not at all what happened, so please do not try to gaslight me."

In the past, Trip's way of rewriting history would have infuriated me. But I was in such a good place now that I could

only laugh. *I won't let his petty manipulation ever bother me again.*

“What’s so funny?” he demanded.

“You. You’re funny. All the tricks you used on me? I see right through them, now.”

“Are you going to give me the money you owe, or not? I’ll even settle for taking half of it now, if you need more time to get the rest.”

“Why do you need this money so badly?” I asked. “At first, I assumed you were being petty. But now it feels like more than that.”

His eyes hardened. “I... am currently unemployed.”

I couldn’t stop myself from snickering. “Seriously? You lost your job? What happened?”

“I asked Marilyn out,” he replied. “And she reported me, because apparently she’s a snowflake who can’t take a compliment.”

Now I *really* wanted to laugh. Marilyn was eighteen years old and had started working at the company straight out of high school. “You asked her out *once*, and she reported you?”

Trip shifted his weight. “Well, I asked her out a couple of times. She was *obviously* playing hard to get. But then she flipped out and reported me.” He sneered at that. “I was trying to make you jealous. To show you that I have lots of options. If you hadn’t dumped me, I wouldn’t have been asking her out.”

“Oh, right. It’s *my* fault you harassed your barely-legal coworker.”

“You owe me,” he insisted, crossing his arms like a petulant child. “If you write me a check, I’ll leave you alone.”

A different, less confident version of Beth would have given in just to get him off my back. But I was a different woman, now. I knew he wouldn’t leave me alone no matter what I did. And I wasn’t going to allow myself to be bullied.

“Trip, I’m going to make this very clear.” I leaned across the fence. “Fuck *all* the way off.”

“Wow. I didn’t expect you to be a bitch about it.”

“Kennels are ready for breakfast,” Christian shouted behind me. When he saw me talking to Trip, he started walking in our direction, with Heidi at his side.

“What the... that’s Christian Baker!” Trip turned his confused gaze toward me. “How do you have so many celebrities here?”

“Lizzy’s dog boarding is really taking off,” I replied. “Just like I told you it would.”

Trip must have noticed what Christian was wearing, because he abruptly said, “Did he spend the night?”

“That is none of your business,” I said sweetly.

“Are you *fucking* him?”

“I don’t owe you anything for the hockey ticket,” I replied, “and I sure as hell don’t owe you any other explanations about my life.”

“Everything okay?” Christian asked, stepping up next to me. Heidi, sensing the tension, became stiff while staring at Trip through the fence. There was an aura of quiet danger between she and her owner.

“Everything’s fine,” I replied. “This guy was just leaving.”

Trip looked like he wanted to say more to me, but hesitated. The incident with Logan was likely fresh in his mind.

“I believe the lady asked you to leave,” Christian said. He was calm, but intense as he gripped the fence bar with both hands and stared directly at Trip.

My ex turned around and got back into his truck. He made a three-point turn, then rolled down the window before leaving. “The Colts suck. They never should have left Indianapolis.”

“Thanks for the information,” Christian said as Trip drove away. Only then did Loki stop barking, and Heidi relax.

Christian grunted. “So that’s the ex Logan told me about.”

“What’d he tell you?”

“That you used to date someone who is real *cunty*. His word, not mine. But I have to say, based on my brief interaction, it’s an accurate description.”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “We only dated two months. I honestly don’t know what I saw in him.”

“Don’t beat yourself up. Every bad relationship is like a path leading you to the right one. I’ve had my fair share of bad girlfriends, trust me.”

“I’d *love* to hear about them,” I said.

“The next time you get a few beers in me, I just might tell you about some of them.” He glanced toward the main road. “Do you wish I had beaten up Trip?”

“No,” I replied. “But if he keeps pestering me about that damn hockey ticket, I just might take you up on that.”

29



Beth

Christian hung out for another hour, then had to leave to take Heidi home before football practice. He gave me a very long kiss goodbye, like he was giving me something to remember. And it worked, because I was floating on cloud nine all through lunchtime.

“You’re in a good mood,” Suzie said when she arrived at work. “I could hear you whistling from across the field.”

“I *am* in a good mood!”

“It wouldn’t have anything to do with the football-playing gentleman who you came home with last night, would it?”

“It’s possible that the two things are related.”

I waited for her to comment on the fact that I had gone out with Christian and Braden on two consecutive nights, but she only grinned at me. “Live your best life, Ms. Foster!”

I was in such a good mood that I didn’t remind her to call me Beth.

That afternoon, we gave baths to Logan’s four dogs: Loki, Heimdall, Freya, and Odin. They were clean and dry when Logan arrived to pick them up. And when the passenger door to his SUV opened, it was Claire who hopped out.

“Hi Beth!” she said, hurrying through the gate like she was late.

“Hello! I wasn’t expecting to see you today.”

“I made Logan bring me. I wanted to make sure you were doing a good job.” She ignored the herd of dogs that were

wagging their tails around her and ran into the kennel.

“You’re right on time,” I said when Logan got out of the car. “They’re freshly bathed and groomed. Loki was even easier to handle now that he’s used to us.”

Logan came through the gate and crouched down to greet his four dogs, who swarmed around him excitedly. Then he rose and said, “I was an asshole.”

“Huh?”

“Shouldn’t have dumped Claire on you,” he said, voice more gravelly than ever. “Didn’t have a lot of options. And I’m dealing with my own shit. But that still doesn’t make it right. Sorry.”

Behind me, Claire emerged from the kennel with a poop scoop in one hand and a bucket in the other. She immediately set out to clean the field.

“I was mad when you did it,” I admitted. “But Claire ended up being a lot easier than I thought. She’s a sweet girl.”

Logan stared at me with hard eyes, and I felt myself drawn to him. His presence was powerful, like an exotic animal that might behave unpredictably. Now that he was here, standing in front of me, I couldn’t stop thinking about the situation with him and the other two guys. How they shared a woman, and wanted to do the same with me.

“How was your trip?” I asked.

“Bad,” he said bluntly. “Lost to Seattle and Calgary, and tied against Vancouver and Edmonton.”

“At least you got to go home, right?” I said. “To Canada?”

His eyes were unreadable as he stared at me. “I’m from Toronto. Edmonton and Calgary are shithole towns filled with shithole people.”

“Ah, sorry. I keep forgetting how *big* Canada is.”

He grunted. “Got plans tomorrow night?”

“Um. Not really. I do have to watch the dogs here...”

“I don’t mind working late!” Suzie suddenly spoke up. She was sticking her head out of the kennel, where she must have been eavesdropping. “Go out. Have some fun. I’ve got it covered here.”

“I guess I’m free,” I told Logan.

He pulled a ticket out of his pocket and handed it to me. “We play the Dallas Stars. You’re sitting at center ice. Front row.”

“I want to go to a game!” Claire squealed.

“Your aunt will take you another time,” he replied.

“Okay!” Claire went right back to scanning the ground for poop.

“It’ll be fun to see a game now that I know you.” Deep down, I felt vaguely disappointed. I had thought he was going to take me out on a date. Watching him play hockey would be fun, but it wasn’t really the same thing.

“You can take a photo in the front row and send it to that dumb cunt of an ex,” Logan explained.

I grinned. “You know what? That sounds amazing.”

“He’s a dumb *what?*” Claire asked.

Without missing a beat, Logan said, “Dumb mutt. Like a dog.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Gotta watch your mouth now that there’s a kid around.”

He clenched his jaw. “Don’t remind me. Braden will pick you up before the game.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Claire!” Logan called. “Time to go.”

“But I haven’t picked up any poop yet!”

“You can do that next time.”

She slumped her shoulders, but returned the equipment to the kennel. “Bye, Beth,” she said grumpily while leaving.

“Can I get a goodbye hug?” I asked.

“Hugs are only for family,” she said.

Logan grunted, and held my gaze a heartbeat longer. Then he nodded and got back in the car.

See you tomorrow.

“Seriously, I’m happy for the extra hours,” Suzie said when I returned to the kennel. “You can stay out as late as you want, as long as I’m getting paid.”

“How late is too late?” I asked.

Suzie shrugged. “I don’t know. One in the morning? Maybe two? I get to sleep in the day after tomorrow, so I can stay here late.”

I laughed. “I was thinking ten or eleven. I’m definitely too old to stay out until two.”

“You’re not that old, Ms. Foster.” She looked me up and down. “You’re like, thirty-three, right?”

“Twenty-eight,” I said a little too defensively.

“You should totally be staying out late! Have fun. Don’t worry about the kennel.”

I was a nervous bundle of excitement the rest of the afternoon and the entire next day. Braden and Christian had made their interest in me clear, but Logan was far more reserved. Giving me a ticket to the game might have been a romantic gesture, or he might have simply been apologizing for dumping Claire on me.

And then there was the fact that Braden was coming, too. I wasn’t sure *what* to think of that.

The Wide Receiver picked me up later that evening. Suzie gave us a big wave and insisted that we have a good time.

“Hopefully she doesn’t let the dogs go wild again, like the night in the limo,” Braden said as we got into his Miata.

“She’s gotten the hang of everything.” I held up my phone. “Besides, we installed a new security system. There are

cameras all over my property. I can check on the kennel whenever I want.”

“Nice.” The leather creaked as he leaned across the console toward me. “By the way: hello.”

“Hi.”

His hand slid along my cheek, cupping my face as he leaned close enough to kiss me. My body came alive at the touch of his lips, urgent and needy. Even though he’d spent the night just three days ago, it felt like so much longer.

“Now that’s out of the way,” he said with a grin, “I need you to try something for me.”

He handed me an opaque plastic bottle. It was a dark brown, similar to a bottle of chocolate milk, except the label said: ALPHA MILK.

“What’s this?”

“This company wants me to sponsor their new athletic drink,” Braden explained. “They sent me a huge box of the stuff. It’s packed with protein for post-exercise recovery. Try it.”

I opened the top and gave it a sniff. It had a jumble of competing smells, making it difficult to discern what the flavor would be. I took a sip, and barely managed to swallow it down.

“Ugh, Braden!” I sputtered. “This tastes like someone mixed vodka with spoiled chocolate milk.”

He grinned. “That’s pretty much what it is. Except for the spoiled part.”

I looked more closely at the label. “Ten percent alcohol by volume?!”

“Fuck yeah!” he replied excitedly.

All I could do was stare at him. “Why would there be alcohol in a post-exercise recovery drink?”

“To get a good post-workout buzz.” His enthusiasm was waning. “It seemed like a cooler idea when my agent

explained it to me.”

I patted Braden on the thigh. “Sweetie. You can’t sponsor this stuff. It’s horrible.”

“Damn, all right,” he muttered. “That sucks, because they were going to give me like two million just to slap my name and face on some advertisements. I wouldn’t even have to do commercials.”

“Two million *dollars*?” I stared at the bottle in my hand. “Nevermind. Forget I said anything. Take the deal.”

He frowned at me. “But I don’t want to endorse something that sucks. I want people to trust me.”

“For two million dollars,” I said, “you can hire someone to personally apologize to every person who ever buys this stuff.”

Braden laughed. “Dope. Thanks for being my guinea pig. You ready to watch some hockey?”

“I’m glad I’m not going alone,” I admitted as we began driving. “I’m not a *huge* hockey fan, although it will be fun watching Logan play now that I know him better.”

“These seats are great. Logan always has access to two front-row tickets,” Braden explained while driving. “If he wants more than two tickets, we have to sit farther up. Christian mentioned coming, but I told him to stay the fuck home so we can sit in the front.”

I laughed. “Makes sense.”

“Besides, he got to hog you the other night. It’s my turn.”

Since the topic was brought up, I decided to ask a probing question. “I’m surprised you guys are so cool about... dating me at the same time. You joke about being jealous and stuff, but you don’t seem *legitimately* jealous.”

“We’ve had some practice. We know how it works, and we know ourselves by now. Sharing a girlfriend is great. When I’m busy, one of the other guys can spend time with you. If Logan’s out of town, we get you all to ourselves.”

“I guess that makes sense,” I said. “Does that mean Logan’s... interested?”

He shrugged. “He invited you to the game, didn’t he?”

“Sure, but that’s to *watch* him. That’s not really a date.”

“The date part comes after the game. He has something planned. Wouldn’t say what. You might have noticed this already, but Logan is kind of a private person.”

“I have noticed that, yes.”

The stadium where the Blues played was called the Enterprise Center, with a big green Enterprise Rental Car logo out front. It looked more like a convention center rather than a sports arena, but then again, I didn’t have much experience with these kinds of places.

When Trip brought me to the game a few weeks ago, we parked in a lot five blocks from the stadium. Tonight, Braden pulled into a gated section next to the stadium where a valet stand was located. He handed the keys to the attendant with a twenty dollar bill, then led me right up to the front entrance of the arena, where lines were forming to go through metal detectors.

Remembering my experience with Christian at the bowling alley, I steeled myself to be inundated with fans requesting selfies. But nobody recognized Braden as we waited in line. He was somewhat incognito in jeans and a blue hoodie with the Blues logo on the front, but his face and messy blond hair were still totally recognizable.

We passed through the metal detectors, then scanned our tickets at the gate and walked inside. Now that we were through security, I was *certain* he would get noticed. But the fans just streamed all around us without giving him a second glance.

“Let’s get some beer before going down to our seats,” he said, jumping in line for a beer stand.

“I have a question,” I said carefully. “And I don’t know how to ask it without making things awkward.”

“I’ve had half a chubby since I kissed you in the car, yeah,” he replied. “Is it that obvious?” He glanced down at himself. “Nice, the fold in my jeans covers it up.”

“Not that!” I said with a laugh. “My question will make me sound like more of a bitch.”

“You have my full, unconditional permission to ask any question, bitchy or otherwise.” Braden held up his palm. “I swear it on my honor as someone who catches a ball for a living.”

“It’s kind of related to that, actually. When I went bowling with Christian, everyone recognized him and wanted autographs and selfies. But we’re here, at a crowded sporting event, and nobody has noticed you.”

“There’s a little boy at our three o’clock who might be on to me,” Braden said while staring straight ahead.

I glanced over. Sure enough, a boy was frowning really hard in our direction while holding hands with his mom.

“But yeah, there’s a massive difference between being a Quarterback and a Wide Receiver,” he explained. “Everyone knows my name, but I’m not shown on every play of the game. And when I do make a play, I’m wearing a helmet. Sometimes the networks show me on the sidelines, but it only happens after a big play.

“But the Quarterback? He’s the face of the franchise. Christian is currently in three different local television commercials. The networks *always* show him sitting on the sideline when the other team has the ball. The Las Vegas gamblers know everything about him. If he has even the *slightest* limp, it’s major news.”

“I’ve never watched much football, so I never thought about the different levels of fame,” I admitted. “That must be tough, being best friends with someone who is way more famous.”

Braden barked a laugh. “Hell no. I fucking *love* it. I’m comfortably rich, but I can still fly under the radar at most places. It’s the best of both worlds.”

We reached the front of the beer line and placed our orders. As Braden paid, the server said, “Hey, you’re... you’re that guy.”

“Sure am.” Braden winked and held a finger to his lips. “Don’t tell anyone.” When we walked away, he told me, “I get a lot more interactions like that. People recognize me, but don’t know from *what*. It’s pretty dope.”

Inside the arena, the two teams were skating on opposite ends of the rink, taking warm-up shots at the goals. We walked down to our seats, which were almost identical to the ones I had sat in with Trip. That made sense; Logan had probably given the same two tickets to Leslie and Emily, who I met that night at the game.

“I’ve been given exactly one instruction for the night,” Braden revealed. “Logan says we have to take a selfie to make your ex jealous.”

“Yes! My ex has been a real asshole lately, so it will be nice to post this online and watch him flip out.”

We turned so that our backs were to the ice. Braden put an arm around me, and extended my phone with his other arm. Just before he snapped the photo, a Blues player skated up to the divider behind us and gave a snarling smile. Braden snapped the photo then turned around, laughing.

“There he is! Go get ‘em, Logan!”

Logan locked eyes with me, and for a brief second his game face softened. He tapped on the glass twice with his fist, and then skated away, barking commands to one of his teammates.

“There. Photo posted to Instagram. I hope Trip loses his mind.”

“Trip. What a stupid name.” Braden casually put his arm around my waist. “Now we can enjoy the game.”

“Yes, we can!” I said, enjoying the way his palm felt against my hip.

30



Logan

“And now the starting lineup for your St. Louis Blues!” the announcer boomed. “At center, from Clinton, Ontario, Ryan O’Reilly!”

I stood in the tunnel underneath the stands, gently tapping my hockey stick on the ground. I hated this part of the game. We were all warmed up and ready to go, but now we had to stand around and deal with the pageantry bullshit that came with the game.

“At left wing, the Toronto Terror, Logan Laaaaaandry!”

The crowd roared as I stepped out onto the ice and began skating. I gave a few quick kicks, building speed as I circled the outside of the rink behind our goal, then lined up at center ice for the National Anthem.

I tapped my stick while staring down the opposing players from the Dallas Stars. I didn’t have a grudge against any of their players, but their forward had a reputation for picking fights.

I fucking hope he tries something.

At the end of the National Anthem, “...and the home of the brave,” the crowd replaced the word “brave” and all shouted, “BLUES!” at the top of their lungs. As soon as that happened, I took off skating again.

I didn’t care about pageantry.

I didn’t care about patriotism.

I didn’t care about sportsmanship.

I was here to play hockey, and God have mercy on anyone who got in my fucking way.

As I made my final pass around the rink, I slowed down while passing center ice. Braden gave me a goofy wave, but Beth only smiled. I gave her a smile back—or at least what I considered a smile. Maybe it was less of a glare than I normally wore. She was sipping on a large cup of beer, like a real hockey fan.

I didn't know how to act around women. Everyone always said, "Just be yourself!" but that rarely worked for me. Acting like myself scared off most women.

With our ex, it was easy. Weirdly so. All of my jagged edges fit seamlessly with hers, like two pointy puzzle pieces. Before that, I never knew two people could *get* each other like that.

She got along with Braden and Christian, too. Even though we were sharing her, the three of us had different relationships with our ex. Braden and her were fuck-buddies who had a powerful physical relationship, but not much emotional connection. I was on the other end of the spectrum, madly in love with her with all of my heart, with our physical relationship coming secondary. Christian was somewhere in the middle, a little bit of both.

When we all broke up a year ago, I thought that was it. That I'd been given my one chance at a perfect relationship, and now I would never find another woman who I could be myself around. But I had felt something that day I met her at the kennel, and that feeling had only grown with every encounter since then.

A feeling of hope. A feeling of *maybe*.

I wondered how Beth would shake out. I didn't know if the two of us would mesh, and if I could allow myself to be vulnerable around her. But I knew there was a chance, and that was more than I had expected in the past year.

Enough of that. It's time to play hockey.

The hockey season was 82 games long, not counting the playoffs. It was a marathon, not a sprint, so a lot of players

tried to conserve their energy—both physical and emotional—for the long haul.

Not me. I always played tough, every period of every game, whether we were up two goals or down five. I had a reputation for that kind of passion. It's what made me a sought-after player in free agency.

But tonight, I dug deeper than usual and put extra effort into my game. I sprinted to track down loose pucks and checked my opponents into the wall. I held nothing back. I was drenched with sweat during every player change, and guzzled Gatorade while waiting to go back out on the ice.

I didn't have any goals to show for it, but I did have two assists—which occurred when I passed the puck to someone who then immediately scored. I also got into a gnarly fight in the third period after grazing one of the Stars players. And as luck would have it, the fight occurred right in front of where Beth and Braden were sitting. The two of them shouted enthusiasm and banged on the glass while my opponent and I threw fists. After knocking him to the ice, I skated over to the penalty box with a victorious sneer on my face.

It was nice having someone in my corner. It made me feel like I was fighting for more than just this game.

Originally, I intended to meet Beth outside after the game. But I was so pumped up from our win that I texted them and told them to meet me in the locker room. I told the security guard that I was expecting them, and then I hit the shower.

When I walked back to my locker with just a towel around my waist, Beth and Braden were waiting for me. Braden was chatting about football with some of my teammates, while Beth kept her eyes on the ground and tried not to seem out of place. She was absolutely adorable, bashful around a room full of half-naked men, her blush deepening every time she glanced up for a moment.

Her cheeks grew especially crimson when she looked up and saw me approaching. And then she smiled, the sight of which twisted something behind my ribs. In a good way.

I hope the rest of the night goes the way I want it to.

31



Beth

I was surrounded by *naked men*.

Chiseled, gorgeous naked men.

Braden took it in stride, probably because he was used to this sort of environment. But I was most certainly *not* used to it. Everywhere I looked, I saw bare skin. Most men wore towels or underwear, but plenty of others strode from the showers to their lockers wearing nothing but their birthday suit. If I did a Google image search for “Hot naked men” the results wouldn’t have been as scintillating as the sight in that locker room.

And then one of those men was standing right in front of me. Except it wasn’t just any man: it was Logan, wearing only a white towel that was drooping precariously down his hip. His right hand was wrapped in medical tape, but it was the rest of him that drew my undivided attention.

“Enjoying the view?” he asked in that deep rumble of a voice.

“No! I was just admiring your ink. I didn’t know you had a tattoo on your ribs.”

Logan stared at me a few seconds, then said, “I meant the view in here.” He gestured around the room.

“Oh.” I giggled nervously. “There are a lot of naked men in here. I’m trying to be respectful, though.”

“Fuck respect. If I were in a cheerleader’s locker room, I wouldn’t be staring at the floor. These guys like the attention.”

“Amen to that!” Braden held up a palm, but Logan refused to high-five him. After a moment, Braden put his hand down. “You hurt yourself?”

Logan looked at his bandaged hand. “Just bruised. Happens all the time.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t get in so many fights,” I said.

Logan chuckled as if that was a joke.

“You should warn a guy before bringing a lady around,” another player told Logan. He smiled at me and said, “I would’ve groomed myself first.”

“Nobody wants to see your tiny excuse for a pecker, Jonesy,” Logan barked at him. “Keep moving. Your locker is way the fuck over there.”

Jonesy laughed like it was a joke, but he obeyed Logan’s command.

“Braden knows a few of the guys, and I thought you’d like seeing the locker room,” Logan explained to me. “Feel free to hang out in here while I get dressed, or I’ll meet you out in the hall.”

Before I could say anything, Logan turned toward his locker and let the towel drop. My jaw dropped. His chiseled little booty was less tan than the rest of him, but it was a beautiful sight. The entire nude length of him was for that matter, from his calves and thighs all the way up to his broad, hulking shoulders.

“Yeah, I’ll just wait...” I trailed off, then peeled my eyes away from him and hurried out into the hallway. The security guard there smiled at me like he knew what I was thinking.

I don’t see what the big deal is. It’s not like I was drooling or anything.

When the guys emerged from the locker room, Logan had an extra pair of skates in his hand. He was wearing slacks and a hoodie, and his face was still red from exertion during the game.

“Have you ever skated before?” he asked me.

“No, never.”

“Good time to learn.” He shoved the skates at me. “These should fit. I borrowed them from Jonesy. His feet are fucking small.” He chuckled at that.

“Are you sure? Am I allowed?”

“You’re allowed because I say you are,” he said simply.

“Come on!” Braden said. “It’ll be fun. And if you fall on your butt, well, I promise not to laugh.”

“I can’t make that promise.” Logan’s lip twitched in a hint of a smile.

Feeling determined, I said, “I don’t intend to fall at all. And I promise to laugh when *you* hit the ice.”

I went back into the locker room and put the skates on. Most of the team were dressed or gone by this point.

“Don’t you have to do post-game interviews in the media room?” Braden asked.

“I told them I was busy tonight,” Logan replied.

When we all had our skates on, we walked out to the ice. The rink was empty except for a man driving the Zamboni machine. The skates had protective covers on the blades, which Logan removed from his before showing us how to do the same. Then he stepped onto the ice and began gliding across the rink effortlessly. He floated over to the Zamboni machine and handed the driver what must have been some cash, because he immediately turned off the vehicle and climbed down off of it. We had the entire rink to ourselves, if you ignored the janitors cleaning the stadium seats all around us.

Braden was next, each step clumsy and unstable. “Have *you* ever skated before?” I asked him.

“A few times,” he replied while concentrating as hard as he could. He looked like he was one sneeze away from falling on his face.

I was extremely nervous as I followed them. I expected to immediately begin slipping and sliding around. But the skates fit my feet well, and I had a surprising amount of balance. As I began to move, I found the motions intuitive and easy.

“Hey! Look at me!” I said.

Logan stared at me in shock. “You’ve skated before.”

“Nope!” I replied while making a turn. “But I used to roller blade a bunch.”

“Doesn’t count,” Logan said.

“Sure it does. It’s totally the same kind of motion.”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Oh yeah? Then how do you explain *this*?” I picked up a little speed, then made a sharp turn. I was still a little shaky, but my confidence was growing with every stride.

“She’s way better than I expected,” Braden said. He was still taking little baby steps on the ice, walking more than skating.

“Did I ruin your plans?” I asked while skating alongside Logan. “Were you hoping I would be bad at this, so you would have to hold my hand?”

“No,” he replied, glaring at me. “Well. Maybe.”

I reached out and took his hand. “I can pretend to be a helpless damsel if it’ll make you feel better.”

His fingers tightened in mine, and he grinned. “I like a woman who can take care of herself.”

I grinned back at him, and the two of us skated around the rink for a while, hand-in-hand. It was freezing out here on the ice, but it was also peaceful.

I glanced over at Logan, who was as strong and stoic as a Roman statue as we glided across the ice together. I felt totally comfortable in his presence, even though we weren’t talking. It didn’t feel like we *needed* to speak, which was nothing like how I usually felt around guys. Especially guys who might be interested in me, and vice versa.

After ten minutes of skating, I said, “I bet I could totally play hockey. Do they have women’s leagues? Like, for amateurs?”

“They do, but it’s a lot harder than it looks.”

“Feels pretty easy to me.”

He gave me another half-playful glare. “Skating is only half the game. You have to do that *and* handle the puck.”

“Bring it on!” I said.

Logan let go of my hand and skated over to the benches, where there was a rack full of hockey sticks and other equipment. He retrieved two, and a puck, and returned to me.

“If you can score a goal from center ice, I’ll be impressed.” He shoved the stick into my chest.

“You’ll be impressed?” I said while accepting the stick. “You’ve got to give me more incentive than that.”

“Yeah!” Braden said from across the rink, where he was still moving as slowly as a grandmother with a cane. “You’ve got to sweeten the pot!”

“If you can score a goal, I’ll...” Logan scowled. “I’ll think of something.”

I stuck out my hand. “Deal.”

He shook my hand, then tossed the puck down on the ice, right in the middle of the big Blues logo, which was roughly in the middle of the rink. I lowered my stick and tested the feel in my hands. It was heavier than I expected, made of sturdy wood or some kind of carbon material.

I turned to face the goal. It seemed much smaller from this distance, but I was determined not to let that bother me. I moved the puck back and forth with the stick, getting used to the motion and weight. Logan was right: doing this was much harder than simply skating around.

Finally, I lined up my shot and slid the stick across the ice.

During a game, the puck moved so fast that it was difficult to see at times. But when I hit the puck, it slid across the ice

with about as much speed as Braden. Logan and I froze as we watched it move across the ice, black on cloudy white.

When it hit the back of the net, I tossed down my stick and threw my hands in the air. “GOAL! Can you flash all the lights and blow the horn like in a real game? Because I just scored a goal. With the puck. Like you said I couldn’t.”

Logan slowly clapped his hands. “Yeah. Okay. I’m impressed. But it’s easy while standing still.”

“Oh, so now you’re moving the goalposts.”

He smiled smugly at me. “Just pointing out the difficulty of my profession.”

“I bet she can score while moving!” Braden shouted.

“Yeah!” I agreed. “I’ll score while skating!”

Logan nodded once. “Let’s see it. Start all the way back there, skate across the ice until you reach this face-off circle, and then shoot.” He drifted a few yards toward the goal and tapped his stick on the ice where a red circle was.

“With pleasure,” I said confidently.

By the time I skated to the far end of the rink, Logan had retrieved the puck and had sent it in my direction. I stopped it with my own stick, then began skating forward. Logan and the other professional hockey players maneuvered the puck skillfully, but I had to gently push it out in front of my skates over and over. When I reached center ice I pushed the puck too far forward, and I had to pick up some speed to catch up with it. Now I was moving fast, as fast as I had ever skated in our warm-up. The face-off circle was growing rapidly, with the goal just beyond it.

When my skates crossed over the red paint, I turned my stick sideways and fired. It was a faster shot than the first time, and less perfect too, but it still barely landed in the goal.

“She shoots, she scores!” Braden shouted.

I raised my stick high while doing a victory lap. I didn’t say a word to Logan; I just grinned widely while skating circles around him.

“What now?” I demanded. “Going to give me another, more difficult challenge? Or have I satisfied your requirements?”

“I’m pretty satisfied,” he admitted. “Fuck, I’m *impressed*.”

I held the stick horizontal across my body and skated directly at Logan. “Then you’d better start thinking about how you’re going to pay me for such an impressive feat.”

Before I could crash into him, he caught my stick and brought me to a stop with ease. “Already thought of it. I’m cooking you dinner.”

A few feet to our left, Braden gasped, “WHAT!” He quickly lost his balance, skates sliding back and forth cartoonishly, before he fell backwards and landed on his butt. He let his head rest back against the ice and groaned.

“Go ahead. Laugh at me. You promised you would,” he said.

“I fully intended to, but now it just feels mean.”

“Like kicking a three-legged puppy,” Logan agreed.

I laughed at that, and Logan gave me a rare laugh too. Braden held up a single middle finger, and we laughed even harder, voices echoing throughout the arena.



Beth

Christian lived in a luxury condo in downtown St. Louis. From what Braden had told me, he lived in a similarly-luxurious loft building that cost twice as much as my monthly salary when I was working a day job.

Logan, however, lived in a neighborhood that was firmly middle-class. It was a simple three-bedroom house with paint that was peeling and a small yard. It was nice and quaint, but not what I would have expected from the formidable hockey player.

“*This* is where he lives?”

“He bought it with his signing bonus when he first joined the NHL. He doesn’t want to move. Says he’s happy being in one place.” Braden shook his head. “It’s probably because... Eh, we should just go inside.”

I didn’t want to push him to tell me, but I was also extremely curious about Logan’s upbringing. I followed him up the driveway and through the front door.

It was chaos the moment we walked inside. Logan’s four dogs started barking and came sliding around the corner to intercept us in the foyer. They stopped barking when they saw it was Braden and me, but they still wiggled and jumped up excitedly, even little Loki.

Claire came around the corner next. “Beth!” she said, running straight up to me. For a moment I thought she was going to hug me, but then she remembered herself and stopped just short. “I’m glad you’re here. This is my new home. It’s where Logan lives, and now I’m living here, too.”

“I know! That’s so exciting.”

“It’s nicer than my mommy’s house. It only had one room, and lots of spiders. But the yard is small, so we can’t have lots of dogs like you.”

“Four dogs is still a lot,” I said, following her down the hall and into the kitchen. A familiar face was sitting at the kitchen table, chatting with Logan. She smiled when she saw me.

“Emily, right?” I said, pulling her name from my memory. “It’s nice to see you again! Where’s your fiancée?”

“At home. She spent the day trying wedding cake flavors,” she said, rolling her eyes.

Braden scoffed. “You let Leslie do that all by herself?”

“I have to fit into a wedding dress next April. A day of tasting cakes would set me back *weeks*.”

“You could taste them and then spit it out,” Braden suggested. “Or send me instead! I would’ve skipped the hockey game to eat cake all day.”

“Braden, you can go...” Emily paused to cover Claire’s ears. “...fuck yourself.”

“I can, and I do!” he said with a big grin.

“He’s not even my brother-in-law yet and he’s already acting like...” She covered Claire’s ears again. “...like a little shit.”

Braden gave her a shit-eating grin. “I’ve had years of practice, future big sis.”

“I wanted to thank you for spreading my business card around,” I told Emily. “The kennel is thriving thanks to you.”

“Yeah, you definitely seem like you’ve got your hands full now.” Emily glanced at Logan and Braden, then winked at me.

I felt my cheeks grow hot. I guess she knew about the *situation* I had with the three guys.

“Thanks for watching Claire,” Logan said, hugging Emily.

“Anytime.” Emily punched Braden on the shoulder. “Later, football bottom.”

“What? I’m a *Wide Receiver*,” Braden replied, rubbing his shoulder.

“Exactly.” She winked at me one more time. “You guys have fun tonight.”

When she was gone, Logan asked Claire, “Did you eat dinner?”

“We had crafty mac!” she squealed. “Do you know what crafty mac is, Logan?”

“You mean Kraft Mac and Cheese?”

“That’s what I said. Crafty mac,” Claire replied, as if she were the adult speaking to a child. “Auntie Em cut hot dogs into it. Have you ever had a hot dog, Beth?”

“Of course,” I replied. “Have you never had one before?”

“No,” she replied in that same condescending tone. “I *just told you* I had hot dogs in my crafty mac. You need to listen better.”

“Oh, sorry. I’ll try to pay attention next time.”

Claire swung her head in a nod.

“It’s about time for bed,” Logan said, looking at his watch.

“Want me to read you a bedtime story, kiddo?” Braden asked.

“OKAY!” Claire sprinted upstairs, tiny feet banging loudly on the wooden steps.

“Appreciate it,” Logan said.

“I’m only doing this because you’re making me dinner too. Right?”

“Right.”

Braden pumped his fist. “It’d better be good if it’s going to top crafty mac.” He glanced at me while heading for the stairs. “Although I don’t know if Logan has ever cooked anything more complicated than that...”

Logan gave the middle finger to Braden's back.

"Do you cook a lot?" I asked.

Logan opened the fridge and pulled out a large pack of raw chicken breasts. "I get by."

I eyed the raw chicken. "You don't have to do anything special for me."

He removed his hoodie and tossed it onto a chair, then washed his hands in the sink with soap. "I know."

Visions of food poisoning danced through my head as Logan cut open the chicken and began preparing it. "Can I help at all? I make a good sous chef!"

"There's sliced ham and Swiss cheese in the fridge," he said. "I also need mustard and mayo. On the door."

I opened the fridge and retrieved all the ingredients. "Is the backup plan ham and Swiss sandwiches?"

He turned to look at me. "Why would I need a backup plan?"

"No reason."

"Mix the mayo and mustard together." Logan grabbed a red measuring cup out of a cabinet and set it down in front of me. "About a cup total, I guess."

"You guess?"

"Once that's mixed, add garlic powder, onion powder, and some ground pepper."

"How much?"

"Eyeball it. Whatever looks good."

I wasn't an amazing cook, so the idea of *guessing* on the ingredients horrified me. But he was busy preparing the raw chicken, so I followed his instructions and mixed everything in the bowl.

While I did that, Logan opened a package of Ritz crackers, crumbled them with his bare hands, and dumped them onto a

metal baking sheet. He stuck that in the oven and turned the broiler on.

Oh no, I thought. He's mashing a bunch of random ingredients he has on hand, like a chef version of MacGuyver. I shuddered to think of what the result would taste like.

Next, he covered each chicken breast in plastic wrap and pounded the chicken with a steel meat tenderizer until each breast was as flat as a pancake. His shirt fit him snugly, allowing me to admire the corded muscle in his arms while he hammered the chicken on the counter.

"How's the sauce?" he asked.

"Um. I think it's ready."

He took out a spoon and tasted the sauce. "Almost perfect. A little more garlic powder. Don't be shy."

"Yes, chef," I replied with a grin.

When the sauce was done, Logan removed the plastic wrap from one of the chicken breasts and said, "Ham. Two slices."

I handed him two slices of ham, which he carefully placed onto the flat chicken.

"Cheese."

I gave him two slices of Swiss, which he layered on top of the ham. Then he gripped the chicken and rolled it into a spiral. His fingers dug into the meat as he ensured it was rolled as tightly as possible.

"Take the breadcrumbs out of the oven," he said over his shoulder. "Oven mitts are in that drawer."

"You mean Ritz cracker crumbs?" I teased.

"Same thing."

The crackers, which were pale yellow before, were now golden brown. Their delicious fragrance filled the kitchen.

Then Logan dipped the chicken spiral in the sauce until it was totally coated, then rolled it in the toasted breadcrumbs. "The trick is to toast the breadcrumbs first. Gives it a better

crunch.” Finally, he skewered the breast roll with two toothpicks and placed it on a second baking sheet.

“Now you try,” he said.

“Me?”

“It’s simple,” he said. “I did all the hard work for you.”

He stood very close to me while I took the next flattened chicken breast and copied his movements. “Good. Space it evenly,” he said. “Roll it tighter. Dig your fingers in. You don’t want any air in there or it won’t cook as evenly.”

His physical presence, deep voice, and soft breath on my skin excited me, but I tried to focus on the task at hand. When I was done, I had a prepared chicken breast that almost looked as good as Logan’s.

Together, we completed the remaining breasts until all seven were held together with toothpicks and waiting on the baking sheet.

“Is this some secret recipe?” I asked.

Logan shook his head. “Chicken Cordon Bleu.”

“Oh! That’s what this is? I’ve never had it.”

Logan put the baking sheet in the oven, then went to the sink to wash his hands. “Growing up, my sister and I didn’t have a lot of books. There was one we read over and over, because it was the only book with pictures. It was about a boy who went to France to learn how to cook. The first thing he made was Chicken Cordon Bleu. Cordon Bleu means *blue ribbon* in French.”

“Blue ribbon, as in first place?”

Logan nodded. “The recipe won an award at a cooking contest a long fucking time ago. Anyways, we must have read that book a thousand times. Ten thousand times. Chicken Cordon Bleu became like a mystical dish to us. Something magical, like unicorns or dragons. As soon as I got older, I learned how to make it. Whenever I’m hungry, it’s my go-to meal.”

The stairs creaked loudly as Braden came down and joined us in the kitchen. “Whatever you’re making smells good.”

“I didn’t ask you,” Logan grumbled.

“You didn’t, but I’m telling you. It smells *great*. I think you might actually know what you’re doing.”

“Logan’s never cooked Chicken Cordon Bleu for you?” I asked.

Braden frowned. “Chicken what now? Logan, I didn’t know you spoke French.”

“I don’t.”

“He’s never cooked for me,” Braden told me. “I’m kind of offended.”

“I only cooked for myself and Emily,” Logan said curtly. “She took care of me growing up, so I tried to take care of her by cooking. We didn’t trust anyone else.”

“Let me get this straight. We’re the first people you’ve ever cooked for, other than your sister?”

Logan’s back was to us while he washed his hands at the sink. He paused for a moment, the faucet running loudly.

“I’ve cooked for one other person,” he said softly.

I started to ask who, but it immediately became obvious to me. *Their ex*. Suddenly I felt honored that he was cooking for me.

Does he really like me that much?

We heard a pattering of footsteps on the staircase, and then a pajama-clad Claire appeared in the kitchen doorway. “Logan, I want you to read me a bedtime story.”

“I already read you one!” Braden said.

“Yes,” Claire said. “But now I want *Logan* to do it.”

Braden rolled his eyes. “Wow. I was just foreplay for the main event, huh?”

Claire tilted her head back to look up at Braden. “What’s foreplay?”

“Yeah, Uncle Braden,” Logan said. “What’s foreplay?”

Braden gave me a panicked look, then said, “It’s... uh... it’s when you play with four different people. First you played with Auntie Em, then you played with me, now Logan...” He trailed off as he realized his explanation was falling apart.

“I also played with the dogs,” Claire said. “That’s four.”

“Right! Exactly. Four-play.” Braden sighed with relief and leaned in to whisper to me: “I stuck the landing.”

“Barely.”

Logan dried his hands and glanced at his watch. “All right, I can read you a bedtime story. Beth, can you prep the salad? It’s in a bag in the fridge. There’s a serving bowl in the cabinet next to the stove.”

While I prepared the salad, Braden went outside to make a phone call. The salad only took a minute to prepare, so I wasn’t sure what to do with myself next. Wondering if Logan wanted help with Claire, I decided to go upstairs. The steps creaked loudly, even when I walked as slowly as possible. There were two bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs, and Logan and his daughter were in the first room on the right.

The room was full of all the things he had bought for Claire: a Disney Princess bed with matching bedsheets and pillows; a bookcase filled with at least a hundred books; backpacks, and a painting station, and a little desk covered with colored pencils and construction paper. Logan was sitting on the edge of the bed, facing away from me while reading from a book.

I paused in the doorway and watched him for several minutes. He was so good with Claire, even though he didn’t know he had a daughter until two weeks ago. His normally-abrasive voice was gentle, and he stroked her hair tenderly with one hand while reading the book held in the other.

This is true masculinity, I thought while watching. It’s not about being strong, and getting into fights, and proving your manliness. It’s being able to show a softer side for the people you care about.

Claire's eyes were sagging heavily; she would be asleep soon. Logan kissed her forehead and closed the book, then stared down at her for a while.

Before I could be seen eavesdropping on the precious moment, I went back downstairs, making sure to put my weight on the very outside of each step so that it didn't creak.

"That was my agent," Braden said to me when I returned to the kitchen. "PepsiCo is offering me a sponsorship to do a bunch of commercials for Lays. You know, the potato chips."

"Oh cool!"

"It's not cool, because I don't like Lays," he argued. "If it was Doritos, I'd be all over that shit. I can demolish a bag of those in one sitting. But Lays suck."

"You don't have to like the product to do commercials for them," I pointed out.

He gave me a funny look. "Beth. How dare you. I'm a man of honor and integrity! I won't spread my legs for PepsiCo just because they offered me eight hundred grand."

I gasped. "Eight hundred grand? As in, *dollars*? For that kind of money, I wouldn't just spread my legs. I'd hop on top and do all the work."

Braden slid an arm around my waist and pulled me close. "Yeah you would."

"Settle down you two," Logan said. "Save it for after dinner."

After dinner. Does that mean Logan intends for us all to have fun later? I was still unsure what kind of evening this was.

When Logan took the chicken out of the oven, he cut them into inch-thick slices. They reminded me of cinnamon rolls, except made of meat, with the cheese melting out of the middle. Logan pulled out a bottle of white wine, then served us at the table.

"Holy shit, dude," Braden said. "I seriously didn't know you had this in you."

“Shut up.”

“With pleasure.” Braden took a big bite of chicken. “Oh my *God*. Why did you wait so long to make this for us?”

“Because you’re making a big deal out of it.” Logan sat down and cut into his own meal.

For a few minutes, we were silent while we enjoyed the meal. It was absolutely delicious, one of the best dishes I’d ever had in my life.

“I like this dish,” Logan explained, “because it’s not just one thing. Chicken is always sitting on the plate, all by itself. But this has layers to it. A crunchy exterior, then chicken, then ham, and finally cheese. Each ingredient compliments the others, creating a complex dish that is better than the individual ingredients by themselves.”

“Like a complex relationship!” Braden chimed in. “Especially one that involves more than two people.” He winked at me.

“Thanks for bluntly saying it, dick,” Logan grumbled.

“I’m really glad you made this for us,” I said. “Seriously, thank you, Logan.”

The big hockey player hunched over his plate and shrugged while eating.

When the meal was done and we were clearing the table, Braden asked about leftovers. “No leftovers,” Logan replied.

“What do you mean? There are four chicken breasts left.”

“They aren’t for you.” And then, to Braden’s horror, he carried the tray of food into the laundry room where the dog bowls were. All four dogs were waiting there, as calm and quiet as photographs. Logan placed a rolled chicken breast in each bowl, and the dogs quickly began wolfing it all down.

“Your dogs eat as well as we do,” Braden said. “Talk about spoiled.”

“Thanks for your opinion, but I didn’t ask for it.”

“Hey, I’m just saying. Don’t let Pickles see this, or he’ll never forgive me for feeding him kibble twice a day!”



Beth

Once the table was cleared, Braden opened the back door and let all the dogs out. “Come on, let’s work off some of that energy. That’s right. You spoiled Norse gods got an extra special meal tonight. Logan treats you better than his best friends.”

“Because I like them more,” Logan called from the kitchen.

“He says that, but he doesn’t mean it,” Braden told the dogs. “I’m totally his best friend. He likes me. Everyone does. And soon I’m going to be his brother-in-law. Which means you little fuckers will be my... um... nieces and nephews?” The door closed, cutting off his conversation with the animals.

I went into the kitchen and began washing dishes. “You don’t have to do that,” Logan told me.

“One person cooks, another cleans. That was always the rule in my house.”

Logan crossed his thick arms and stood next to me, but didn’t argue.

“I think it’s sweet how well you take care of your dogs,” I said. “I’ve seen spoiled dogs before, but they’re usually purebreds. It’s rare to see someone spoil a bunch of mutts.”

“That’s the problem,” he growled. “Purebreds get all the special treatment from their owners. Strays and mutts deserve just as much love, but they rarely get it.”

“Ain’t that the truth?”

“I’ve got a soft spot for strays,” he told me. “I guess because my sister and I were kind of strays ourselves.”

When he didn’t elaborate, I decided to fill the silence with my own background. “It’s not the same thing, but I kind of know how you feel. My mom died when I was five. My dad wasn’t in the picture, so I went to live with my grandma. I was lucky to have her—so lucky. I realize that now, but at the time, I was really bitter about my situation.”

One of Logan’s dark eyebrows rose. “Yeah?”

I nodded. “My friends all had their own parents, obviously. Two of them. Even my friend Casey, whose parents were divorced, still *had* them, even if she only got to see her dad on weekends. Compared to that, my grandma felt...”

“Inadequate?” Logan offered.

“Exactly. Inadequate. Which wasn’t fair, because she was *amazing*, and gave me a much better life than I ever could have hoped for. But as a child, and especially a teenager, I didn’t appreciate it. I was jealous of all the other kids, even my close friends. Why did they get to have two parents, and I didn’t have *any*?”

Logan took the cleaned dish out of my hand and began drying it with a towel. He held it carefully in his bandaged hand. “Sometimes, no parents is better than bad ones. Emily and I bounced around foster homes. Most foster families in Canada already had a bunch of kids, so we always felt like outsiders. Like a dinner guest who showed up after everyone was already seated at the table. Then there were the abusive ones.”

He very carefully placed the dried plate in a cabinet.

“We had this one foster family. The father’s name was Rick. Religious man. Not like, the loving Jesus kind. I’m talking Old Testament, pissed off God kind. His punishment for everything was the belt.”

“Oh.”

Logan’s voice was quiet, but intense. “Got in trouble at school? He’d give me the belt. If I made a sloppy pass at

hockey practice? The belt was waiting when I got home. If Emily sneezed and I didn't immediately say *bless you*, well, the belt made sure I didn't forget next time." He took the next plate from me and held it in a white-knuckled grip. "Thing is, the belt was only for me and Emily. Their other three kids, all biological, he never raised a hand against. It was like they were perfect and pristine, so he was careful not to break them. But Emily and I? He could be as rough as he wanted and it wouldn't matter, because we were already broken."

I put down the plate I was washing and turned toward Logan. He didn't look angry, or even sad. He just seemed... resigned to the way his life had gone. Somehow, that made my chest hurt even more than if he had shown real emotion.

I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him tightly. "I'm so sorry, Logan."

"Not trying to get sympathy," he said, not hugging me back.

"I know. But still. I know how tough it can be growing up in a bad situation. Heck, mine wasn't even that bad compared to yours."

Slowly, he returned the hug. His arms were large and strong as they tightened around me. He took a deep breath, then let it out slowly, stirring my hair.

"Feels good to say it all out loud," he whispered. "I've never told anyone."

"Not even... her?"

"No. I was afraid to."

"Afraid of what?" I asked.

I felt him shrug in my embrace. "Being too open. Scaring her. Making her think I was soft."

"Oh Logan. There's nothing soft about showing vulnerability."

"Still. Doesn't come easy."

The hug went on. Logan made no motion to let go.

"What happened to Rick?" I asked.

“One day, when I was big enough, I fought back. Smashed him in the head with a lamp while he really laid into Emily. We were sent to another foster family after that.” He let out a low growl. “I think about smashing that lamp against his skull a lot. It created a whole bunch of new problems since we had to move again, but it solved *one* problem. I think part of me believes I can solve all my problems that way. That mentality is imprinted deep into my mind. Is that fucked up? Am I a monster?”

“Of course not,” I said. “You’ve shown restraint.”

“How so?”

“You’re an adult now. You could track down Rick and get even with him, but you haven’t.”

“Only because I can’t,” he grumbled.

“Why not?”

He pulled away and grinned down at me with true happiness. “Because the fucker died four years ago. Only time I’ve ever cheered for cancer.”

I laughed, and then despite everything, so did Logan. His hands lingered on my back, holding me in a half-embrace. We gazed into each other’s eyes, a sense of understanding growing with every passing second. It was like I could read his mind, and he could read mine.

Logan lifted me by the waist as if I weighed nothing, putting me down on the kitchen counter with my legs hanging off the side. His gaze grew in intensity, and that same sense of mental connection returned.

Then I realized: *we both want the same thing. And we want it badly.*



Beth

Logan's gaze moved down my face, along my chest and then to my jeans. Slowly his eyes drifted over my legs, then back up, lingering at my navel and breasts before locking eyes once more.

And for once, instead of feeling self-conscious about my body, I felt confident. I could feel the desire in those dark eyes of his.

All of my worries melted away. Trip still lingering in my life, my business, fixing up my grandma's house to live in, and my individual feelings for the three men in my life. Suddenly those concerns had been yanked out of my brain, and the relief from it was a wonderful vacuum into which I wanted this gorgeous man's body to fill.

I wanted this. I *needed* this. And I hadn't realized it until tonight.

"God, you're beautiful," he said, hands touching my hips, feeling rather than grabbing. As they moved up my side I could feel the medical tape still there, so I took his right hand in both of mine and lifted it to my lips, gently kissing the knuckles before finding the end of the tape. I kissed along his wrist and arm while peeling the tape from his knuckles, extending his arm so I could press my lips against his bicep, which bulged and flexed as I touched it and sent a flutter between my legs.

While I did that, he leaned in and kissed the side of my neck. He was more gentle than I would have expected as he

moved down to my shoulder, nuzzling against my collarbone, and I sighed into his hair.

The last bit of tape finally came away, and I let it fall to the ground. His knuckles were purple, but I didn't care.

And then his kisses grew more hungry, and his arm wrapped around my body. He let out a desperate sigh as he wrapped both arms around my body. I gasped as one hand moved over my blouse to cup my breast, appreciating its weight while he kissed my neck. I involuntarily wrapped my legs around him, squeezing him close, already beginning to fantasize about what would come next.

His bruised hand wedged down between us, unclasping the button frantically and pulling down the zipper. Lightning bolts of pleasure filled me as his fingers searched down into my panties, finding my sensitive place. "Ohh," I moaned as he rubbed my clitoris, both fingers hot from the bruise. I surged upward beneath his touch, letting him know that it was good, *so good*, oh my God was it good, and I felt his hot breath on my neck as he petted me.

He ran his other hand through my hair, finding the hair tie keeping my hair up and tossing it to the ground. As my hair fell down my shoulders he pressed his face into it, inhaling me deeply in a way I'd never felt. "God, I love how you smell," he rumbled, the deepness of his voice once again making my knees so weak that I was grateful to be sitting on the counter.

"You too," I breathed. "I love how you *feel*."

I felt him smile against my neck as he rubbed my clit faster. Then he moved his hands deeper until his finger was sliding up against the wet lips of my sex, letting the palm of his hand rub against my clit. Then his finger curled up and in, pushing inside my pussy, making me inhale sharply at the sudden intense feeling.

"You like that?" he demanded into my hair.

I tried to answer, but all I could do was close my eyes and moan.

His finger pushed to the second knuckle then moved in a circle, widening my walls and hitting every nerve, all the while rubbing his palm against my special place. He finger-fucked me for what felt like an eternity, a wonderful eternity with his lips still kissing a trail along my neck, until he finally slowed, then stopped.

“I want you,” he whispered in my ear.

“What about Claire?” I made myself ask, even though I wanted nothing more than to ignore our surroundings and surrender to this man.

“The floorboards are loud,” he rumbled. “We’ll know if she wakes.”

I bobbed my head *yes* because I didn’t trust my voice to speak.

Logan grabbed a handful of my hair and pulled me into a rough kiss. I had a perfect view of him pulling his shirt over his head, all the muscles in his core practically popping out in the contrast of the dim light. Then he pulled my jeans off, taking the panties with them, while I lifted my ass off the counter to let them slide off. While he did that I removed my blouse and bra, revealing my breasts. He admired my nude body, taking me all in, and for once I wasn’t self conscious. I could see how desperately he wanted me, and in that perfect moment I wanted him just as bad.

“You have the most captivating curves,” he said, and his words washed over me like tingling waves.

He bent over to slide his pants off, revealing his bulging cock. I came alive at the sight of it, thick and stiff and on the precipice of filling me. The chill of the room disappeared as Logan’s hot body covered me like a blanket of muscles, his thighs rubbing against my thighs and his chest against my chest. He pressed his pecs into my breasts, feeling them with his own chest, and his face stopped when it was mere inches from my own.

A lusty smile spread across his face, and damned if I couldn’t stop myself from kissing him.

He responded quickly, shoving his tongue in my mouth and letting it dance with mine. I spread my legs wider, practically begging him to continue, because I could feel his throbbing cock pressing against my pubic hair and belly, and I wanted it *inside* of me, filling me, warming me until I moaned and trembled. And then just when I couldn't take it anymore, when I was close to breaking our kiss to beg him to do it, he pulled back with his hips and allowed his cock to slide down, the head brushing past my clit until it slid down to my lips. He took a moment to rub it up and down, coating the head with my juices, and then pushed forward.

“Ohh,” I moaned into his kiss. Logan was big, probably the biggest I'd ever had. But he moved slowly, a few millimeters at a time, and that familiar ache turned into the familiar ecstasy as he jabbed me deeper and deeper, until he was halfway inside, then three quarters, then pushing the last bit as if he couldn't control himself, breaking away from my kiss to gasp, eyes widening in his own pleasure.

“Oh fuck,” he panted. “You feel so *good*...”

I kissed him again, and ran my hand through his dark hair as I savored the feeling of him filling me completely. I let my other hand run over his shoulders and then his back, exploring the ridges and grooves of his muscle. We kissed passionately, slowly, not in any hurry while we remained joined at our sex and lips.

My hand reached his ass, and I couldn't stop myself from giving the meat a squeeze, and then he flexed it so hard that it instantly turned to stone under my palm.

“You like that?” he demanded, looking at me through eyelids heavy with lust.

I ran my other hand down until I was grabbing his tight ass with both hands. “What do you think?”

“I think I want to take you into the bedroom.”

Before I could give my opinion on that, Logan lifted me into the air. With a firm grip on my thighs, he carried me into the bedroom on the first floor. He stayed inside me the whole

time, each step bouncing me enough to feel like delicious little thrusts. I had a backwards view of the room as he carried me: doorframe, walls, dresser. Then I was falling back, or rather Logan was falling forward with me, and I yelped as we landed on the soft bed.

“I wouldn’t drop you,” Logan said.

“I didn’t think you would. But then I remembered your hand is bruised, and you might lose your grip...”

“You’re thinking too much,” he teased. Then he said, “The only thing you should think about is *this*.” He slowly pulled his ass back, allowing his cock to slide out of me agonizingly slow, one tiny grain at a time. I bit my lip as he smiled, pulling out all the way until it was just the tip of his cock inside, and I squeezed his ass tighter with my hands.

“Don’t leave me,” I said.

Logan rumbled with soft laughter. “I couldn’t leave you right now if I tried.” Then he rotated his hips in a circle, allowing the head of his cock to roll around inside of me, pressing against each of my inner walls. The sensation was incredible, a wonderful tease, and based on his breathing it was driving him wild with lust too.

And then, suddenly, he thrust back inside.

It was a steady push, not too fast, an inch at a time until his base was pressed against my pubic bones and his cock was as deep inside of me as it could go. The pleasure was so great that it forced all the air from my lungs, and he was gasping too, his broad chest heaving against mine while his eyes drank deep from my pleasure.

He pulled back, all the way until I was certain he would fall out of me, but stopping again when just the head remained. And instead of lingering he pushed back inside immediately, a little bit faster this time but all the way to his base, then pulled back once more.

In and out he moved, faster and harder each time, until he was slamming his cock into me so hard it sent jolts up my spine. He kissed me, a quick peck to taste my lips, but then

pulled back to stare into my eyes. I couldn't look away, and all I wanted to see was him, the pleasure of the expressions on his face while his breathing increased.

I squeezed his ass harder as if I were guiding his thrusts, demanding that he fuck me harder, and harder, and soon we were both panting and groaning in the darkness.

The back door opened, and I heard the clicking sound of dog nails on the wooden floor. For a moment I panicked about Claire. But then Braden appeared in the doorway beyond Logan.

“Oh, shit,” he said with a huge grin. “I guess I was outside with the dogs for a while. Want me to leave the two of you alone, or...?”

For a brief moment, I wondered what Logan wanted. He hadn't gotten a chance to be with me by himself yet. And as much as I was loving it, the thought of Braden joining us sent a sexy tingle up my spine...

Without hesitation, Logan said, “Get the fuck in here. And close the door.”

Braden immediately pulled his shirt off and tossed it to the ground. “Don't have to ask me twice.”

“I wasn't asking,” Logan replied. Then he grabbed my legs and dragged me to the edge of the bed, twisting me sideways so that my head was near the edge too. Like it was a well-rehearsed plan, Braden knelt and kissed me deeply, rolling his tongue against mine without preamble.

“She likes that,” Logan rumbled while steadily fucking me. “I can feel her clench around my cock while you kiss her.”

“I know what else she'll like.” Braden's pants were on the ground in the blink of an eye, and then he was guiding his cock into my mouth. I took it eagerly, savoring my new naughty lifestyle where one man wasn't enough. I needed *two* cocks filling me at the same time.

Braden let out a long groan that filled the room. “I've been thinking about this all night.”

“Hurry up,” Logan said. “You’ve got catching up to do.”

“At this rate? I’m not going to last long.”

Their banter was like a sexy soundtrack for our threesome. I gripped Braden’s cock with one hand and stroked him in time with the motion of my lips. The bed rocked gently with Logan’s thrusts, but not enough to bang against the wall. Not *yet*.

“Fuuuck,” Logan grumbled, pushing as deep inside me as he could before pulling all the way out. “I’m already close.”

“Come for me,” I begged. I was suddenly desperate for it knowing he was close. “I want to feel you coming inside of me.”

“Soon.” He knelt down to suck on my nipple, then rolled onto his back on the bed. He pulled me on top of him, and I thought he wanted me to ride him... until he continued pulling me up until I was straddling his face in the sixty-nine position.

“Ohh,” I moaned as he devoured my pussy with his mouth. I could feel how hungry he was for me, and it drove me wild. “That feels good.”

“You know what to do,” Logan vibrated into my sex. I thought he was talking to me, so I bent over his cock and began swirling my tongue around the tip, but it was Braden who responded to him.

“Been looking forward to that, too.” He climbed onto the bed, around behind me. Both hands squeezed my ass cheeks, fingertips digging into my flesh. And then, as eagerly as Logan was devouring my pussy, Braden began eating out my ass.

It was sudden, and unexpected. I felt my body tense up, which made both of *them* tense. But then all the surprise melted out of me, and I relaxed, and I realized that this felt *amazing*.

“Oh my God,” I said while their dual tongues pleased me.

“Mmm hmm,” Logan said.

“You have such a gorgeous ass,” Braden paused long enough to say before diving in again.

I’d never gotten a rimjob before. I knew it was kind of a meme about how the younger generation ate ass, but I had assumed it was a joke. It was never the kind of thing I expected to like.

Thank goodness we showered after ice skating.

Soon all self-conscious thoughts disappeared, and I was able to savor exactly what the two of them were doing to me. Eating me out at the same time. I tried to focus on Logan’s cock, keeping him close to that orgasm he said was near, but I struggled to think about anything else except their two tongues.

“I want to fuck you so badly,” Braden murmured. I realized he was stroking himself while licking my behind.

“Me too,” I breathed. “Fuck me. *Please.*”

Braden picked me up, turned me around, and placed me on top of Logan’s cock. I was soaked beyond belief by now, and his massive cock filled me with ease. While I started to ride him, Braden went around behind me, standing at the edge of the bed. He wrapped his arms around my torso, squeezing my breasts and holding me against him while he kissed the back of my neck. I arched my back; I could feel his hard length against my ass cheek.

Is he going to do it? I wondered. Is he going to try to fuck me in the ass? The thought made me nervous, but it turned me on more than I expected. I realized I *wanted* to try it. Braden, and Logan, and Christian made me want to try so many things that I would have always thought taboo. But with them, I was curious. I wanted to explore.

“My turn.” Braden lifted me off Logan’s cock, then immediately filled my pussy from behind. He gripped my waist tightly and fucked me doggy style, skin slapping against my skin while I rested my head on Logan’s chest. The big hockey player slid a hand down between us, finding my clit and pressing into it roughly. I let out a long groan at the

pleasure that created, and the orgasm that I felt rising within me.

“That’s enough,” Logan finally said, pulling me forward. As soon as Braden’s cock slid out, Logan guided himself up into me again, then began fucking me from the bottom while Braden held me in place.

I felt my climax continuing to build, stronger and stronger with every thrust and kiss and moan. Yet I couldn’t stop thinking about that forbidden thing I wanted, that thing I knew Braden wanted, too. The old me, the bashful Beth, wouldn’t dare ask for something like that because it might be embarrassing. But the new me...

“That thing we discussed,” I said to Braden over my shoulder. “I want to try it.”

Braden gave me a puzzled look. Then his blue eyes widened with realization.

“You sure?”

I bit my lip and nodded.

“What’s happening?” Logan asked, still thrusting up into me with steady pulses.

“I need lube,” Braden replied. “Same spot?”

“Left drawer,” Logan agreed.

Braden rolled across the sheets to one of the bedside tables. He rummaged around, then made a satisfied noise as he returned to us.

“You...” Logan stared up at me. “You’re into that?”

“I think so,” I replied. “I want to try. You guys *make* me want to try new things.”

Logan closed his eyes and groaned, then made himself slow down. Finally, he pulled out of me, then pulled me toward his lips for a kiss. While I was resting on his body, Braden knelt behind me. One palm caressed my lower back, fingers curling around one hip to hold me. I felt the tip of his cock slide up and down my pussy, slick with lube, before moving higher.

There was a pressure as it pressed against my rear entrance, and for a heartbeat I was certain this couldn't work. He was too big, and I was too tight, and it would certainly hurt if—

Without warning, the tip slid inside. I gasped, surprised by how easily it had happened.

“*Fuck*,” Braden groaned. For a second I was afraid he might come then and there, but he only kissed the place between my shoulder blades. “Does that hurt?”

I purred and said, “I don't think so. Just go slow and easy.”

I wasn't lying for his benefit. The sensation was strange, but it created an incredible indirect pressure on my internal walls. Like he was fucking my pussy from the inside-out.

I knew I was going to love this as much as him.

“Ohh,” I sighed as he pushed deeper. Just a fraction of an inch at a time, gentle and loving. Logan stroked my hair and kissed all over my face—on my forehead, and cheeks, and nose, and chin—to help me relax as Braden's hard meat penetrated deeper and deeper. With each push I could feel the lube coating me more, making it easier.

Soon it felt so good I was closing my eyes and moaning like I was alone.

“Fuck me,” I whispered.

Braden pulled back, every bit as slow, then pushed forward again. His hand grabbed my hip for leverage while he made love to my ass, his cock pushing a little bit deeper with each thrust. The pressure on my vaginal walls was *incredible*, running up and down and up again. I wondered how much of his cock I could take.

I couldn't wait to find out.

Logan started kissing me passionately from the front, and his hand slid between us to rub my clit again. It was like lighting a fuse; suddenly I was groaning and bucking against Braden's cock, then *screaming* as my orgasm came with shocking abruptness, hard and fast and quick, winking out as

quickly as it had arrived. Logan grinned wolfishly while drinking in the sight of my pleasure.

“Holy fuck,” I breathed.

“Your ass feels *amazing*,” Braden said, pumping faster.

Even in the afterglow of my climax, everything felt so fucking *good*. I was like a machine for pleasure that had been turned on and wouldn't stop until my batteries ran out of juice. I reached between us and grabbed Logan's cock, pulling him toward me. Rubbing the tip into my pubic hair, then down in between my lips.

“Can you handle that?” he rumbled.

“Go slow and we'll find out.”

He scooted down to get a better angle, taking my upper leg and lifting it to give himself more room. I guided his head in between my lips and he pushed inside. I reached back and put a hand on Braden's hip, and he paused with his cock halfway inside me, waiting.

Gazing up at me, Logan squeezed my thigh and began to push inside.

It felt like any normal penetration at first. Then he was deep enough for me to feel the extra pressure from Braden. I sucked in my breath, waiting to see how it felt. It was mildly uncomfortable... For a moment. Two or three heartbeats.

And then both of them were inside me at the same time, and a wave of ecstasy at the realization took over.

“Oh God,” I groaned.

Logan clenched his eyes shut. “*Fuck*, you're tight. Tighter than before.”

“If that's even possible,” Braden agreed.

I moved my hips to urge them on, because as good as it felt just savoring the feeling of two cocks inside me at the same time, I wanted to *feel* them fuck me. Braden returned to the same pace as before, sliding in and out of my ass with wonderful smooth lubrication. I could feel my inner walls

wedged between him and Logan's wide cock in my pussy, like two bodies grinding against each other with a bedsheet in between them.

When Logan finally began to move, the pleasure was indescribable. He timed his backstroke with Braden's forward stroke, each of them pumping in time with one another like the pistons of an engine. I closed my eyes and let my senses take in everything: Braden's chest pressing against my back while my breasts rested against Logan's muscular form. I moaned loudly, wanting them to know how good it felt.

"Fuckin' Jesus," Braden moaned into my shoulder blades. "I'm close."

"Come for me," I demanded. "Come in my ass."

He groaned in response, my words raising his pleasure an order of magnitude. I twisted my head around to stare at him, drinking in his ecstasy. He looked like he was dying, face full of shock and surprise and almost pain, the pain of a pleasure that was so good you thought you might pass out. His hand tightened on my ass cheek as he thrust as hard as he could, pushing as deep as deep would go until I felt my asshole tightening around the base of his shaft, every inch of him inside me.

"Holy *fuck*," he gasped, eyes rolling back into his head. "*I'M. COMING. OHH. FUUUUUUCK.*"

I screamed with him as another orgasm climbed up my spine and paralyzed me with pleasure. Braden continued roaring as he pushed as deep as he could and held it there, cock spasming inside my ass, squirting load after load deep into my forbidden hole.

I couldn't keep watching his pleasure though because Logan grabbed a handful of my hair and yanked my head back around to kiss me. He fucked my pussy faster and faster while Braden continued coming, sweat rolling down his face and matting his hair. His tongue danced with mine as his thrusts became quick and jerky, and then his arm trembled in my hair and he made a noise deep in his throat as his dick began to tremble.

“Beth,” he whispered, eyes wide. For a heartbeat, he was open and vulnerable beneath me. “Oh God, *Beth...*”

He groaned as he came, spurts filling my pussy while he continued thrusting. He slowed gradually, his entire body rolling like muscular waves against my breast, a wall of hard masculinity crushing me between him and Braden until my body collapsed, spent.



Beth

“I wish we had leftovers,” Braden said to my left. “I’m *starving* now.”

“Shut up,” Logan muttered to my right.

“There would’ve been plenty of leftovers if the dogs didn’t eat all of it,” I said, egging on their little argument.

“Right?” Braden agreed indignantly.

“I fed you. Be grateful.”

Braden rolled his eyes. “I’m just saying, I took the dogs out and worked off a bunch of their energy while you and Beth started without me...”

Logan let out a long sigh. “There’s popcorn in the pantry.”

“Score!” Braden leaped out of bed and started for the door. He paused, returned to put some pants on, then strutted into the kitchen.

“He’s such a goofball,” I said.

“Yeah,” Logan muttered. “I can’t decide if I love him or hate him. Sometimes both.”

I rolled over until I was cuddling against Logan. “You guys love each other. Christian, too.”

He glared up at me. “Doesn’t mean I have to admit it.”

“Fine. But I know the truth.” I rested my head against his chest. A few seconds later, the sound of popcorn popping drifted in from the kitchen.

“So, all of this,” Logan said. “You’re fine with it?”

“*Fine* with it?” I snorted. “This is a dream come true. I always thought I would want just one man, but this arrangement with the three of you is...”

“Special?” he finished for me.

I nodded against his chest. “It’s special.”

We lay together quietly, listening to the sound of the popcorn in the microwave.

“Sorry if I came on strong,” Logan said. “Taking you to a game, then bringing you home for dinner, and... more.”

“I wouldn’t consider that strong. How do you usually ask someone out?”

Logan shrugged his massive shoulders. “I don’t know. I usually don’t.”

“What about your ex? How’d you ask her out?”

“I didn’t. She asked me out. And Braden, and Christian.”

“Oh.” I pushed up until I was looking down at his face, my hair hanging down and drifting across his skin. “I’m glad you asked me out tonight. And I’m glad you dumped Claire on me last week.”

He frowned. “You are?”

I kissed him on the lips then relaxed again, laying my head back on his chest. “She’s a sweet kid. I’m glad to know her. She’s always welcome at my kennel. Though she’s welcome to hang out without doing any chores. I don’t want people to think I’m running a dog boarding sweatshop.”

Logan’s chest vibrated with laughter. “I’ll keep that in mind. But she likes to help.” He paused. “She’s like her mother.”

“Do you want to talk about her?” I asked.

“Not much to say. She was my first love, back before I knew what love truly was. I was infatuated with her for a month or two at college, and then she dropped out without warning. I never spoke to her again.”

“Do you wonder what your life would’ve been like if she stuck around?”

“Sometimes. But it wouldn’t have worked out with Caroline.”

“Why not?”

“Because I was in love with the *idea* of her,” he replied. “It took me years to accept that. Caroline stayed perfect in my mind because I never got to *really* get to know her.”

“And you’re sure that you wouldn’t be in love with her if you two had grown older together?”

“I’m pretty fucking sure,” he said softly. “She joined a spiritual cult. She moved into the wilderness and lived in a shack without running water. I probably would’ve hated her. It’s better this way. She’ll stay perfect in my head.”

The next question was harder, but I made myself ask it anyway. “Are you worried you’ll dislike me the more you learn?”

He grabbed a handful of my hair and tilted my face up to look at him. “Easy there, Beth. It’s too early to worry about that sort of thing.”

“You’re right. Sorry.”

“But no,” he said. “I’m not worried about that at all.”

I smiled and snuggled closer to him.

My phone buzzed somewhere on the floor, and the message appeared on my watch. I twisted my wrist to look at it, and gave a start when I saw who it was from.

Trip: You posted that photo just to piss me off, didn’t you? You really are a selfish bitch.

I sighed. “Way to ruin a perfect moment.”

Logan tensed underneath me. “The fuck?”

“My stupid ex.” I chuckled. “The photo of me sitting in the front row had the desired effect. I wonder how I should respond...”

I trailed off as Logan slid out from underneath me and exited the bed. With hurried movements, he found his pants and pulled them on one leg at a time, then threw a belt on. His face was like a storm cloud, dark and full of thunder.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to teach that cunt a lesson,” he growled while retrieving a shirt.

I laughed nervously. “You don’t have to try to impress me.”

“Not trying to do anything,” he said. “I’m giving that fucker what he deserves.”

“Trip? You don’t even know where he lives.”

“447 Mockingbird Court,” Logan replied immediately.

I jerked in surprise. “How do you know his address!”

Logan sat on the edge of the bed to put his socks on. “Looked him up after meeting him at your kennel.” He glanced at me, and frowned. “What? He almost kicked Loki. So I added him to the list.”

“What list?”

“The list of guys whose ass I would love to pound.”

Braden chose that moment to return from the kitchen with a bowl of popcorn. The four dogs followed behind like he was the Pied Piper. “Woah, buddy. You might want to rephrase that.”

Logan rose from the bed, shoulders squared and hands tightened into fists. “Don’t fuck with me right now.”

Of the three dogs, Loki darted toward his owner and turned around, leaning against his ankles and facing Braden. He let out a little snarl, matching Logan’s mood.

“What the hell?” Braden asked the dog. “I just gave you some popcorn!”

Loki responded with another little growl. The other three dogs were sitting on their haunches behind Braden, hoping for some popcorn of their own.

I jumped up from the bed and wrapped my arms around Logan from behind. It was like embracing a marble statue at a museum, cold and sturdy. “Logan...”

“What?” he snapped.

I gently caressed the back of his neck. “I like that you’re acting protective of me, baby.” I tasted the pet name on my tongue and decided it fit. “But I don’t want you to go beat up Trip.”

His eyes were red and full of rage. “Why not?”

“A month ago, that text would have caused me to crawl under the covers and cry for the rest of the night. But now it just makes me laugh. I’m over Trip. He’s just some asshole I dated for two months. He doesn’t have any power over my emotions anymore. But if you go to his house and threaten him, it will let him know that he *does* have some amount of power over me. Even just a little bit. And then it will be harder to keep him out of my life, because he’ll always remember that he caused a stir with only a text.”

“Plus you’ll go to jail,” Braden chimed in. “Which would totally fucking suck for you.”

Logan shot him a glare, so Braden rolled his eyes and went back into the kitchen. Odin, Heimdal, and Freya followed him. After a few seconds, Loki glanced up at Logan and then trotted into the kitchen after them.

Logan sat on the edge of the bed. I sat next to him and rubbed his back. “Sorry for making this about me.”

“That’s not how I took it at all. I appreciate your enthusiasm to defend my honor.”

“Your ex is a bully.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I don’t know how I didn’t realize it before.”

“I hate bullies,” Logan said fiercely. He stared straight ahead, body tense despite my comforting touch. “They made my life, and Emily’s life, miserable growing up. We drew them to us like magnets. I guess we were easier targets because we were so much smaller, and poorer, than the other kids. We didn’t have parents to protect us; our foster families never gave a fuck.”

Logan was smaller than the other kids? I tried to imagine that, but failed.

“Once I grew up, I made sure the bullies at school didn’t get their way. I got a reputation for being a difficult student, for always getting into fights. But it was only because I was sticking up for the smaller kids. Forcing the bullies to pick on someone their own size.”

He shook his head. “I thought there wouldn’t be any bullies once we grew up, but I was wrong. There are more adult bullies. A lot of them play hockey. A lot of them look for fights. I make sure they pay for that.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed his shoulder, hoping the gesture was comforting. Slowly, the tension left his body.

“Sorry,” he said with a sigh. “When I see someone acting like a bully again, I just... I see red.”

“Here’s the thing you need to know about Trip,” I said. “He *loves* to make himself out to be a victim. He thrives on it. And if you went to his house and punched him, it would give him exactly what he wants. Even if he does deserve it.”

“He *does* deserve it,” Logan gritted out. Then he glanced at me with softness in his eyes. “Sorry. You’re right. I shouldn’t have...” Suddenly he seemed embarrassed by the entire thing. “You probably need to get going, right? To get back to the kennel?”

I glanced at my watch. “You know what? I’m going to ask Suzie to close everything up for me tonight. I’ll have to leave early in the morning to go home, but I think it’s worth it to sleep over. If you don’t mind.”

I could tell Logan was trying to appear cool about the whole thing, but I noticed the flicker of excitement and relief in his eyes. “Sure, you can stay over.”

“Me too?” Braden called from the kitchen.

“Bed’s not big enough,” Logan shot back.

“There’s plenty of room if we wedge Beth between us, like a sleepy Beth taco,” Braden argued.

I raised an eyebrow at Logan. “That sounds nice.”

“We can make a Beth sandwich another time,” Logan insisted.

Braden’s blond head appeared in the doorway. “Not sandwich. *Taco.*”

“We can make whichever Beth food another time.” Logan turned to me and gave me the most genuine smile I had ever seen from the hard man. “Tonight, she’s all mine.”



Braden

The best thing about three guys sharing one woman was that we fed off of each other's energy. When one of us was pulling out all the stops for Beth, it made the other two step up their game. When Logan possessively insisted that Beth was *his* tonight, it only made my desire for her stronger.

I gave her a very long kiss goodbye, then went home, already daydreaming about the next time I would get her all to myself.

When I got home and took Pickles for a walk, I gazed up at all the highrise condos and apartments in my downtown neighborhood. When the Indianapolis Colts announced the move to St. Louis, and all the players consequently were told they were moving, I resented our new city. Part of that was because it coincided with a devastating breakup. St. Louis, both the city and all of its inhabitants, represented the loss of a chance for true love. Part of that resentment translated to my performance on the field; I went through the motions, but there wasn't any *heart* to the way I was playing. And even though he would never admit it, Christian played with the same malaise.

Things felt different, now. St. Louis was the city where Beth lived, the city that had brought us together with our new lover. I had a deeper attachment to the city through Beth, and it gave me a reason to fight. A reason to play every single football game with unrelenting passion until the clock reached zero. I loved this city because I was beginning to love Beth.

And not just, like, because she let me stick it in her butt.

I chuckled to myself as I rounded the corner with Pickles, heading back to my condo. Tonight was so unbelievably hot. Thank goodness I had joined the two of them late, because even then I barely lasted a minute once I was inside Beth. The sight of my cock swallowed by her gorgeous round ass had nearly made me explode the moment I gave her my first urgent thrust. Just thinking about it again gave me half of a hard-on in my jeans.

Pickles glanced back at me like he could read my mind, tongue lolling and tail wagging as we headed home. “You wouldn’t understand. You had your balls removed three years ago.”

I had been worried about Logan, and whether or not he would warm to Beth. Tonight was a relieving reassurance. It was a good sign that he was possessive of Beth when I left, insisting that she was *his*. That meant he was into her.

A lot.

Somehow, for the next couple of days I was able to put Beth’s tight little ass out of my head and focus on Sunday’s football game against the Houston Texans, one of our division rivals. Yet despite my best efforts, the Texans were able to cover me without fail, and I only caught two passes the entire game. Fortunately, their defensive infatuation with me allowed several of my teammates to get open, and we handily defeated them, 29 - 17.

Christian and I celebrated with Beth throughout the following week, taking turns spending time with her at the kennel. That worked out, because Logan had a busy schedule of games all week. But on Friday, the three of us met for lunch with Beth at a little sandwich shop in town.

“That disguise is a little cliché,” Beth said when I sat at the corner table, joining the others.

I removed my sunglasses, but left the St. Louis Cardinals baseball cap on. “It’s cliché because it works. Nobody recognized us.”

“Now that you’re here, we can discuss something.” Christian placed his phone on the table. It was open to an article from TMZ, the tabloid.

“Photos of you two leaving a bowling alley,” I said. “So what?”

“So, it means you two need to be more fucking careful,” Logan snapped. He tapped his finger on the table next to the phone.

“*Us* two?” I asked. “These are photos of Christian and Beth. I don’t see any photos with me in them.”

“The reporter called me for a statement,” Christian explained. “She asked if Beth was seeing any of my teammates. It’s obvious who she means.”

I turned to Beth. “Okay, time to come clean. What other Colts players are you hooking up with?”

Beth was in the process of sipping on her root beer, and nearly spit it out as she laughed.

“I don’t think this is funny,” Logan said.

I spread my hands. “If you can’t laugh in life, what’s the point?”

“The point is that we need to be careful,” Christian said. “Or...”

“Or?” Logan asked.

“Or we accept that we essentially have zero privacy in our lives, and we stop worrying about it,” Christian suggested.

“Wrong,” Logan barked.

“Care to elaborate?” I said.

Logan shook his head.

“Well, that’s one point of view,” I muttered.

“This is a discussion for all of us,” Christian said. “The three of us are dating Beth.”

“We’re doing a whole lot more than just *dating* her,” I said, giving Beth a wink that made her giggle.

“Which means,” Christian continued as if I hadn’t spoken, “that the *four* of us are in a polyamorous relationship. And we’re at the point where we either hold back and try to keep this a secret, or stop caring and allow the public to find out.”

“No,” Logan said stubbornly.

I pointed at the phone on the table. “Seems like it’s already public.”

“They have a few photos, but no actual knowledge about who Beth is,” Christian said. “The TMZ article refers to her as a *mystery woman*.”

“Oh, I like that! It makes me sound exotic,” Beth said.

“We’re at a crossroads,” Christian said. “Where do we go from here?”

“Can I offer an opinion?” Beth asked.

“I guess you may,” I teased.

She stuck her tongue out at me. “Dating the three of you is great. It’s amazing, even. But it’s a lot of work. Which is totally worth it! I’m not trying to say it’s not.” She cleared her throat. “But trying to keep it a secret is going to require a whole lot of extra work. And I just don’t think I have the energy for that.”

“Do you have the energy for paparazzi showing up at your kennel?” Logan asked.

She shrugged. “I can deal with them coming around at first. But they’ll probably get bored and move on. And in the meantime, that’ll be good publicity for my business.”

“So *that’s* what this has all been about,” I joked. “Using us to get your business off the ground.”

“Damn, you figured it out,” she said with an exasperated sigh. “This was my master plan all along, to convince you to invite me to a charity event and then double-team me in the back of a limo, all so my dog boarding business would be successful.”

“You’re a manipulative mastermind,” Christian said.

“All jokes aside,” Beth added, “we don’t have to make a firm decision right now. I don’t want to change my behavior around you three just because a reporter might see.” She patted Logan on the thigh. “Let’s keep doing what we’re doing and see what happens naturally.”

“That’s a good segue into my next topic,” Christian said. “Schuster had three front row tickets in the end zone for this Sunday’s game against the Jaguars, but his family bailed on him. He gave the tickets to me. Do you three want to come?”

“I’d love to,” I said, “but I have plans this Sunday at the exact same time. Oh, that’s right—I’m *playing in the game against the Jaguars.*”

Christian rolled his eyes. “I meant Beth, Logan, and *Claire.*”

Logan sat up a little straighter. “Emily brought Claire to a hockey game the other night. She loved it. I bet she’d like attending a football game, too.” He snorted. “Even if it’s less exciting than hockey.”

I jabbed a finger in his direction. “Don’t start this again.”

“Football is boring,” Logan said, turning to face me in a challenge. “For every play that lasts a few seconds, you have a minute or two of standing around. Yawn.”

“I’d love to go!” Beth interjected. “Regardless of Logan’s opinion on football.”

“And if the cameras recognize me, and take photos of us together?” Logan asked.

Beth wrapped an arm around Logan and kissed him on the cheek. “Then they’ll see us together. It won’t be the end of the world. And if you *really* want to play it cool, I can promise not to make any public displays of affection.”

Logan made a grumbling noise deep in his throat, but finally nodded. “As long as I don’t see my face on the fucking jumbotron.”

*

I tried to play it cool, but the game against the Jaguars was kind of a big deal. They *destroyed* us at the beginning of the season in a 33 - 7 blowout, and were currently leading the division:

Jaguars: 8 - 2

Texans: 7 - 3

Titans: 6 - 4

Colts: 6 - 4

Riding a six-game winning streak, and coming off a huge win against the Texans, we had momentum on our side. We no longer felt like that lousy team that started the season with four straight losses after moving to a new city. We had some swagger in our step, and knew we had a chance to really cement ourselves as a threat to win the division. Especially with six games remaining in the season after this one.

First, we win today, I thought while warming up on the field. One game at a time.

Logan, Claire, and Beth were sitting in the front row in the back of the end zone, with the kid between the two adults. I gave them a friendly wave, which Claire returned enthusiastically. She grabbed Logan's arm and shook him, then pointed at me. When Beth was looking in my direction, I gave her a wink that she probably couldn't see.

A football hit me between the shoulder blades, causing me to stumble. I whirled and saw Christian grinning like a little kid who had pulled a prank on his best friend. I flicked him off, which made Claire erupt in laughter. But when I looked back at them, Beth was glaring at me.

Right. I need to be a better influence around the kid. I wondered how Logan was able to censor himself around his daughter.

The stadium was sold out, and it sounded like it during the opening kick-off. The crowd roared in a way we hadn't heard since moving to the city. There was an energy in the way the fans cheered today, hungry for victory.

That energy invigorated us on the first drive of the game. Christian was a master tactician behind the line of scrimmage, deftly passing the ball and handing it off to the running back. And when we were on the Jaguar's 30-yard line, he sent a deep pass my way. My legs pumped furiously; I was as fast as the wind, and just as unstoppable. I leaped into the air to catch the ball over the Jaguars defender, stumbling but keeping my footing long enough to fall into the end zone for a touchdown.

Cheers rained down on me as I got up and sprinted over to the sideline wall. It was seven feet high, but I got a running start before leaping up and pulling myself onto the edge next to the three fans I cared about the most. Other fans reached out and patted me on the arm, and back, and helmet. I ignored them and handed the football to Claire. Her eyes twinkled with excitement at the prize in her hands.

Then I tilted my helmet up far enough to reveal my mouth, gave Beth a quick kiss on the lips, then hopped down and returned to celebrate with my teammates. When I glanced over my shoulder, Logan was shaking his head in annoyance—but he was grinning at the same time.

I guess his heart isn't all black.

Christian patted me on the helmet as we jogged back to the sideline. "What happened to not drawing any extra attention to our relationship?"

I shrugged and feigned confusion. "What do you mean? All I did was give a cute little girl in the crowd a football."

As we sat down on the bench, the jumbotron showed a replay of my celebration—especially the part where I lifted up my helmet to kiss Beth. The crowd roared extra loud at that part.

"I don't remember doing any of that," I insisted. "It must be some computer-generated video. You know how good AI is

these days.”

Christian chuckled, but stared off with determination in his eyes.

The Jaguars answered with a quick touchdown of their own, and then we were back on the field. I caught two passes as we slowly marched down the field, with Christian handing the ball off to our running back on the other plays. After one especially decisive running play, we ended up on the three-yard line. On first down, we tried another running play that didn't work out. We did it again on second down, but only gained one yard. Now it was third down on the two-yard line.

The crowd was whipped into a frenzy when the ball was snapped. Christian pretended to hand the ball to the running back, but it was a fake. I had a button route to the back corner of the end zone, a route which totally fooled the defender in charge of covering me. Christian's helmeted gaze swung in my direction—he saw me. I was wide open.

But then he abruptly charged forward. He faked a throw to me, which caused two of the defenders to pause. Then Christian tucked the ball under his arm, made three long strides, and dove across the goal line for a touchdown.

I pumped a fist. “Let's gooooo!” The cheering in the stadium was so loud I couldn't hear my own voice. I headed over to celebrate with Christian, but he was running past me with a huge grin on his face. I understood what he was doing a moment later: he leaped into the crowd, tossed the football to a little boy a few rows back, and then lifted his helmet to give Beth a big kiss.

Which was *slightly* longer than the kiss I'd given her.

He gave Claire a high-five, then patted Logan on his bearded cheek before dropping back down to the field.

“That'll give the tabloids something to talk about,” he said while running up to celebrate with me.

I gave him a huge smack on the ass and laughed while the cheers rained down around us. *I love our weird little polyamorous group.*

**Beth**

“It’s a shame they lost!” I said as we left the stadium with the rest of the fans. “I can’t believe the Jaguars kicked a field goal to win it.”

“What’s a field goal?” Claire asked. She was clutching the souvenir football to her chest.

“Remember when they kicked the ball through the big yellow poles?” Logan said. “That’s a field goal. It’s worth three points.”

“Why don’t they kick the ball every time?” she asked.

“Because this sport is dumb,” Logan said, “and inferior to hockey in every way.”

“I like hockey!” Claire chirped. “The puck zooms all around. It’s fun to watch.”

Logan put his arm around her and glanced at me. “I’ve never been prouder in my life.”

We had parked our cars in the garage underneath Christian’s building a few blocks from the stadium. The original plan was to hang out at his place after the game, but after losing that nailbiter of a game, I figured Christian would want to be left alone.

Logan and I said our goodbyes in the garage, sharing a soft kiss while Claire shouted, “GROSS!”

I helped Suzie put all the dogs to bed when I got home, then went inside with Hank. I wanted nothing more than to change

into my pajamas and crawl in bed, but I had a lot of administrative work to do before tomorrow.

“They don’t tell you how much *paperwork* is involved in running your own business,” I told Hank. “I thought I would be playing with dogs all day.”

Hank responded by rolling over to face the other direction on the floor.

After an hour of paperwork, I got a text.

Christian: You didn’t want to wait for me at my place after the game?

Me: I didn’t think you would be in the mood! I know how important that game was, and it must suck to lose it at the very end.

Christian: We’ve suffered worse losses. You could’ve helped me forget all about it ;-)

Me: I’m sorry! Next time I’ll stay.

Christian: The night’s not over yet. Are you tucked into bed yet?

Me: Not yet. Why?

I winced as I waited for his response. I would have loved to see Christian tonight, but it was late, and I didn’t want to drive half an hour into the city after driving there and back once today.

Suddenly, there came a knock on my back door, so soft I almost didn’t hear it. Hank leaped up and started barking.

I froze. That couldn’t be Christian or one of the other guys; I would’ve seen their headlights through my windows as they came up the driveway. I rose from my chair and quietly walked to the door, wishing I had something to protect myself. What if it was Trip? He had been alarmingly quiet since the

text calling me a bitch. Showing up late at night like this was exactly the kind of thing he would do.

I approached the door, then relaxed when I saw who was standing on the other side. I unlocked the deadbolt and threw open the door to reveal Christian. “What are you doing here!”

With his hands shoved into the pockets of his Colts hoodie, he shrugged and said, “I’m here to see you. Duh.”

“Where’s your car?”

“I parked on the main road,” he replied. “I figured the dogs in the kennel would hear my tires on the gravel if I drove all the way up to your door. I was hoping to surprise you, but I didn’t want to *scare* you.”

I *was* scared, even if it had only lasted for less than a minute. I walked back to the kitchen table where my laptop was, my heart still racing. I intended to tell Christian that he needed to warn me next time. He needed to understand that a surprise night-time visit to a woman who lived alone was *not* as charming as it sounded.

But when I turned around, anything I’d been about to say disappeared from my mouth the moment I looked at him again. His chestnut hair was messy like he’d come straight here without letting it dry from the shower, and his eyes were narrowing intensely on me. It was the same commanding gaze I’d seen him wear on the field tonight. The look of a leader.

And as if he was reading my mind, he pounced on me.

He pulled me into his arms and kissed me, our lips locking together like they belonged there. He was so strong he held me close with ease, my breasts pressed against his broad chest, the muscles hard and warm even through his hoodie.

Christian yanked my own sweatshirt over my head like it offended him, then ran his fingers along my back, gripping the fabric of my shirt and then pulling it over my head until I only wore a bra. I tore his hoodie over his head, taking his shirt with it, and my breath froze as his muscles came into view, pecs and abs and obliques so gorgeous it was like they were painted on. I touched his chest lightly with my fingers as he

found my bra clasp, and my breasts fell out into the cool kitchen air, but then he smothered me with his chest to keep me warm as we kissed again.

His hands raced to my jeans, unbuckling the belt and clasp and then pulling down the zipper. He fell to his knees before me to yank the jeans down, and while his hands pulled them below my calves and feet he let his face brush against my thighs, kissing the skin wherever he ended up. And before I knew what I was doing I was pulling my panties off, desperate to remove their inhibition, and as I did, Christian kissed up my thigh, closer and closer, until his hair was brushing against my sex, then his nose...

“Ohhh,” I moaned as his tongue hit my clit, rolling across it in passing. I shivered and wondered how he could be so hungry for me after losing a pivotal game, but only for a fleeting instant, because then he was rising again and removing his own pants until his cock burst into view, red and throbbing with need. Christian wrapped one arm under my ass and picked me up, but instead of taking me up to the bedroom, he deposited me on the couch in the living room, and I bounced there and looked up at his statuesque body.

He lowered himself to me, kissing me sensually, then pulled back enough to look deep into my eyes.

“I’ve missed you,” he said, and my heart did a backflip.

“It’s only been a few hours.”

“I know,” he insisted. “Far too long.”

I leaned in to kiss him again, but then he twisted away from me, kneeling on the couch next to me while moving his hands down my torso until he reached my legs. Not quite the sixty-nine position; he was to my side rather than across my body. He licked along my ribs and belly button, into my tuft of pubic hair, his hot breath on my clitoris and the wetness of my sex.

He forced my legs open with his arms, which made the muscles in his back and shoulders ripple with strength, then lingered there for an eternity.

He dove into me like a starving animal who needed to taste me, sucking my entire clit and surrounding skin into his mouth, and then letting it slide out, licking past it to my juicy lips. His tongue was a whirlwind up and down my sex, hitting every nerve I had. I moaned and ran a hand along his back, enjoying the wonderful view of his chiseled ass while he ate me out. All the while he kept a strong grip on my thighs, holding them open on the couch.

I let my hand slide down to his shoulder. It was a stone boulder, potent with strength. My hand moved down his arm and back up again, savoring his smooth skin while he ate my pussy.

But I wanted to pleasure him at the same time. To let him feel what I was feeling.

I leaned forward and reached lower, down between his legs. I caressed past his balls until I found his enormous cock, hanging underneath him. I tightened my grip and began stroking, and he moaned into my pussy, which of course made me stroke him faster.

We fed off each other's energy and pleasure until finally it wasn't enough.

He pulled away from me quickly, grabbing my legs and spinning me around to sit normally on the couch. Then he spread my legs with both of his hands and lowered his body into mine, letting the tip of his cock rub up against my wet slit. I sucked in a breath as he guided it in without his hands, keeping my legs spread wide for him.

"Ugh," he grunted, concentration and sweat plastered on his face. "Beth, you feel amazing..."

All I could do was moan in return as he pushed inside with a single long, slow stroke. Everything I'd worried about that week melted away under his touch: the paperwork on the table, the dogs arriving tomorrow morning, and the Colts loss to the Jaguars. I tilted my head back and opened my mouth in a silent sigh of ecstasy when he was as deep as he could go, his thighs pressing against my thighs and his pubic hair mingling with mine.

I couldn't believe how amazing he felt. It was like the first time all over again. And judging from the look on his face, he thought the same.

He moved slowly, back and forth a few inches at a time while his face remained tense. "I need you so badly," he said, sighing while he gyrated his athletic body against mine.

"Take me," I whispered.

He moved faster and faster, a wild animal that couldn't control himself as he took what he wanted. I loved it. Letting him have his way with me was exactly what I needed, to see his desperate lust, uncontrollable in our special joining. His hard length felt stiffer tonight, like he was somehow harder for me than usual. He began to moan, and I moaned with him while pleasure cascaded through my pussy, and his eyes widened with shock and ecstasy.

"Oh my God, Beth!" he cried, staring deep into my soul. "*Beth!*"

Hearing my name on his lips almost drove me over the edge by itself. Christian gasped and trembled, fucking me hard for several climactic strokes while I pressed my hand against his chest, feeling the sweaty muscles as he finished inside of me, drinking in the sight of him as he trembled and gasped and sighed.

**Beth**

“I’m glad you came over,” I said while the two of us passed a wedge of cheddar cheese back and forth on the couch. I had strange food cravings after sex, and the sharpness of the cheese was hitting *just right*.

“Emphasis on *came*,” Christian said with a chuckle.

“I’m sorry I didn’t stay over at your place. It was such a heartbreaking loss that I really did think you would want to be alone.”

Christian shrugged. “It wasn’t that bad of a loss.”

“Are you kidding? The Colts were winning by a point. Then the Jaguars kicked a field goal as the clock expired to win the game. That’s as heartbreaking as it gets!”

“The Jaguars are one of the best teams in football,” he replied. “They destroyed us when we played them earlier in the season. The fact that we nearly beat them feels good. Not as nice as a victory, sure, but it’s still satisfying. You should have seen the locker room after. There were some disappointed faces, but more players were happy with our performance. I think it will be a shot of adrenaline for us as we go into the final stretch of the season.

“Besides,” he added, “we played incredible on offense. I had five touchdowns, including one that I ran in. Yeah, it sucks that our defense played poorly and couldn’t hold the lead, but I can’t let that bother me. I can only focus on what I’m able to control.” He leaned over and gently kissed my arm. “Having you on the sideline helped.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“Believe me or not. It’s the truth. Especially after Braden jumped into the crowd and kissed you. On the next drive, I knew I had to try to one-up him. It helped me focus.”

I giggled. “If you say so.”

“Logan seemed annoyed that he was on the jumbotron.” Christian took the orange cheese from me and took a big bite out of it. “Did he spend the rest of the game complaining about us drawing attention to the situation?”

“Actually, he laughed it off and said he knew you two would pull some bullshit like that. And then Claire asked what *bullshit* meant, and he got awkward and told her to ask Uncle Braden and Uncle Chrissy. So you can expect an inquisitive question from Claire the next time you see her.”

“Thanks for the warning.” Christian sighed happily. “She’s a good kid, isn’t she?”

“She really is.”

Christian hesitated, then said, “Logan might ask you to babysit her again next week when he’s on the road.”

I blinked in surprise. “Oh.”

“Emily and Leslie were supposed to watch Claire, but something came up and they’re going to be gone. He asked Braden and I to watch her instead, and I said I would be happy to. But Claire chimed in and said she would rather stay here with you. So, Logan might ask.”

“You know,” I said, “when he first dumped her on me, I was furious. I hadn’t babysat a child in over a decade, and I didn’t want to do it. I wanted to focus on the dogs, and my business. But after spending some time with her, I really care about Claire. I want her to have a good life, and I don’t mind helping give that to her.”

“You’re not just saying that because she helps with chores around the kennel, are you?” Christian asked.

When I let out an offended gasp, he burst out laughing.

“Just teasing you. I know that’s not the reason.”

“I opened up to you a little bit, and you teased me for it! I expect that of Braden, but not you.”

“Hey now,” Christian warned. “I can handle most insults, but don’t you dare compare me to Braden.”

“We’ll see,” I said sweetly while biting into some more cheese. “I just hope the next time we’re in bed together, I don’t accidentally moan his name.”

He turned to face me with measured seriousness. “Don’t you dare.”

“Like I said: we’ll see!”

Christian grabbed my wrists and pinned me to the couch, which caused the last crumbs of cheese to fall to the floor. He covered me with his body and smiled down at me.

“Yes, you’re much stronger than me,” I said. “But physical intimidation won’t convince me that you’re better than Braden.”

“Oh? So you need convincing?”

“Perhaps.”

Hank was sniffing around the cheese crumbs, but I stopped caring about that as Christian dove into me with renewed passion. Soon I forgot all about the paperwork waiting for me in the kitchen, and all the other items on my to-do list.

And the name I moaned several minutes later was Christian’s, loud and emphatic and with all of my heart.

**Beth**

“When I grow up,” Claire told me, “I’m going to have my own doggy business.”

We were giving all the dogs baths inside the kennel. Right now we had Princess up on the table. She was attached to a harness, but Claire was standing next to her and giving words of encouragement just in case.

“A doggy business?” I asked while digging my fingers into the Yorkie’s shampoo-filled hair. “You mean a kennel?”

“That’s what I said. A doggy business.” She didn’t add *duh* onto the end, but I could tell it was implied.

“That might be a problem. You and I will be competitors.”

“No we won’t.”

“We won’t?” I asked.

“No,” Claire insisted. “Because my doggy business will put yours *out* of business.”

“Oh, okay,” I said with a laugh.

“What’s funny?” she demanded.

“You are. You are, sweet girl.”

She scrunched her face up in thought, then shrugged it off. I smiled to myself. In the month since Claire first came here, she had filled a strange role in my life. Sometimes it felt like she was an employee of the kennel, especially when she arrived and immediately went out to scoop poop. Other times she felt like a niece. Sometimes she was like a tiny, demanding friend.

In any case, I was grateful to have her in my life. And not just as “baggage” that came along with Logan—I appreciated her for her own sake.

“Have I told you how much I like you?” I suddenly said.

“Of course you like me.”

“Why do you say that?”

She answered while continuing to scratch Princess on the head. “Because I am a *very* likable person. All the dogs like me.”

“That’s true.”

“Dogs are good judges of character,” Claire explained. “That’s what Logan always says.”

“Does he, now?”

Claire nodded. “He told me that’s when he decided he liked you. When he saw that his dogs like you. Especially Loki.”

I paused with my hand on the rinsing hose. “He said that?”

“He also said Loki hated his old girlfriend. Not my mommy. A different girlfriend who lives in Indian Anna.”

“You mean Indiana?”

“That’s what I said.” Claire rolled her eyes.

“Does he ever say anything else about his old girlfriend?”

“Not really.” Claire glanced behind her. “Who’s next? I’ll go get them.”

“Daisy, then Cooper.”

Claire turned and went running out of the kennel into the field. Except rather than normal running, she jumped from side to side, imitating the way an ice skater would move. I smiled after her.

“You hear that, Princess? The dogs like me more than their ex.”

Just as I was finished drying Princess, a lime green Hyundai pulled up my driveway. I didn’t recognize the car, or driver,

nor did I recognize the enormous Newfoundland that jumped out of the back seat when the door was opened. But there was only one reservation on my schedule for a Newfoundland.

“You must be Jackie,” I said while joining her at the gate. “And *you* must be Woodard!”

“He goes by Woody,” the woman told me. “This is a nice place you have here.”

“We have lots of room, as you can see.” I opened the outer gate, then opened the inner one to allow Woody into the field. All the other dogs came running up, circling him and sniffing him from all sides.

“I’ve got some forms I need you to fill out over in the kennel office, if you’ll follow me. Watch your step; we poop scooped twice today, but you never know what we miss.”

“I didn’t miss anything!” Claire insisted. She was crouched down petting Woody, who was easily twice her size. “I never miss any poop. I get *all* the poop.”

“You sure do,” I said.

“She’s adorable. Your daughter?” Jackie asked.

“Nope, just a helper. I’m kind of dating her father.”

“You look familiar, actually.” Jackie squinted at me. “Shot in the dark: were you at the Colts game last week?”

I gave a start. “I was, actually.”

“I knew it! That little girl was there, too. The two of you were sitting with a hockey player.”

“A friend of mine,” I said.

“Friend, or more than friend?” she teased.

I laughed it off as we walked into the office. “Woody’s vaccine records already came through, so you’re good there. I just need you to fill out the list of extra amenities, and then sign the estimate of charges at the bottom.”

She took a pen and skimmed over the list, making a check-mark next to several of the extras. That made me happy; a

regular dog stay was profitable, but I made most of my money on the extra services.

“Braden Clark kissed you, didn’t he?” Jackie suddenly asked. “He jumped into the crowd and gave you a big kiss. Then Christian Baker copied him on the next touchdown.”

I felt the hair on the back of my neck go stiff. “Yes...”

“That’s crazy, jumping into the crowd and kissing a *random* woman.” Jackie signed the bottom of the form and gestured with the pen.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Is there a reason you’re asking so many personal questions? Because I don’t believe that you just *happened* to recognize me from the game.”

Jackie sighed and gave me a smirk. “I’m a freelance journalist. Just figured I’d ask some questions while I was here.”

I groaned. *I knew this day would come eventually.* “I’m not interested in discussing my personal life.”

“Those two football players kissed you,” she pushed. “Was it consensual?”

“Of course it was consensual. I’m not just some random woman. I know both of them.”

“How *well* do you know them? Are you dating?”

“Again, that’s none of your business,” I said.

“Because you were also seen snuggling up to Logan Landry, the left wing for the St. Louis Blues.”

“Like I said: he’s a friend.”

“Logan and Beth are *very* good friends,” Claire suddenly said in the doorway. “Sometimes they have sleepovers.”

Son of a bitch.

“Claire, sweetie, can you go fetch Daisy for me so we can bathe her?”

“Whatever you say, boss.” Claire went running off into the field.

“Look,” I said. “I’ve told you several times I’m not interested in discussing any of this. Since you’re clearly using your dog as an excuse to interrogate me, I’d like to kindly ask you and Woody to leave.”

Jackie laughed as if it were all a joke. “Relax, I’m not publishing a story about you. Not yet, at least. Just feeling around. Seeing what’s going on. And I really do need to board Woody for the week. I’m visiting my family in Pittsburgh for Thanksgiving, and your kennel has glowing reviews.” She frowned. “You’re not going to, like, take poor care of him just because I’m a reporter, will you?”

“That depends on whether or not a story ends up getting written about my love life.” I planted my palms on the desk and held her gaze for several seconds. Then I finally broke. “Okay, I can’t even joke about that. I would never take poor care of a sweet Newfie, even if he was owned by my worst enemy. But it was really shitty of you to lie to me!”

“I’m sorry for the subterfuge,” Jackie said, placing a business card on the desk. “Like I said: I have no plans to write a story about you at this time. But if things in your love life ever sour...” She tapped the business card with a fingernail. “Give me a call. There are publications that would pay a *lot* of money for a story that juicy.”

She left me standing there, staring at the card on the desk.



Beth

I spent the rest of the week thinking about Jackie The Journalist, a title which sounded like the lamest superhero in the Marvel Universe. Did she really think I would spill the beans on my relationship with my three athletes for money? I guess plenty of people did exactly that, or she wouldn't be offering.

But my relationship with Christian, Braden, and Logan was important to me. Heck, it was one of the best things in my life. I wasn't going to jeopardize that, not even for a billion dollars.

Okay, maybe a billion dollars. But in that case, the three of them would understand.

Fortunately, I had plenty of work to take my mind off her visit. Business was booming, especially during Thanksgiving. Lots of people were out of town and needed to board their dogs over the holiday, including many Colts players, since they were traveling to Detroit to play the Lions on Thanksgiving Day. My kennel was all filled up by Tuesday of that week, and I continued to get phone calls from other potential customers looking to board their dogs.

Claire and Logan came over to my place for Thanksgiving. Logan didn't have time to cook because of a noon hockey game that day, but he arrived with sliced turkey, mashed potatoes, and roasted Brussels sprouts. His four dogs, who had been dropped off earlier that day, went running up to greet him as soon as he came inside.

"The food's from a restaurant in town," he told me. "They cater holidays."

“This is my first Thanksgiving!” Claire announced while shoving a container of food at me.

“That can’t be right. Your first Thanksgiving?”

“Mommy never celebrated it,” Claire said. “Which is silly, because apparently it’s a holiday about *eating food*. And everyone knows I love food.”

“You sure do,” Logan said while giving me a quick peck on the cheek. “Although the *real* Thanksgiving takes place on the second Monday in October.”

It took me a moment to remember he was Canadian. “A holiday on a Monday? Gross,” I said, making a gagging noise.

Claire giggled. “Next year, we should have *two* Thanksgivings.”

I grinned down at her. “That’s the smartest thing anyone has ever said.”

“Atta girl,” Logan said, ruffling her hair.

Claire was adamant that we watch the Colts-Lions game, so I turned on the kitchen TV and tilted it toward the dining room table. “Now Uncle Chrissy and Uncle Braden are with us!” she said happily.

“Will they be around for Christmas?” I asked. “I haven’t checked the schedule.”

“Christmas is on a Sunday this year, so I doubt it,” Logan said. “But I’ll be around.”

“It will be my first Christmas!” Claire told me.

I turned to stare at Logan. “They seriously didn’t celebrate Christmas, either?”

“It was a cult,” Logan said, shaking his head. “They were a bunch of whackos.”

“What’s whacko mean?” Claire asked.

“It means someone who was very silly,” Logan told her.

“Oh. Okay.” She paused. “Loki is a whacko.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because he keeps licking my fingers under the table,” Claire explained, “even though I gave him *four pieces* of turkey already.”

Logan put down his fork. “Claire, you know you’re not supposed to feed the dogs from the table.”

“Yes, but it’s *Thanksgiving*.”

I grinned at Logan. “Yeah. It’s Thanksgiving.”

Logan growled, then dug into the mashed potatoes.

The Colts-Lions game was a nailbiter, and unfortunately the Colts lost at the very end of the fourth quarter. That was two close losses in a row, and the television announcers were lamenting the team after the game. “This was a very beatable Detroit Lions team. Tonight’s loss was a missed opportunity for the Colts, who are already on the bubble of a playoff spot, and can’t afford to let chances slip through their fingers.”

Over the weekend, I spent some time sitting down and going over my finances. The numbers were good. Back when I started the business, I created revenue estimates for different levels of kennel capacity. This created a range of expected income, expenses, and profit.

Right now, November was set to be *past* the high end of this profit range. My business was doing better than I ever could have expected. At this rate, I might need to think about expanding the kennel building.

“It’s a good problem to have,” I said to Woody, who was currently laying at my feet. I reached down and scratched his head. “Don’t tell your mom I’m treating you so well. She may be rude, but you’re a very good boy who deserves all the pets.”

Business remained busy even after the Thanksgiving holiday, so I hired another employee to help with everything around the kennel. His name was Ken, and he was older than I expected based on the phone interview. When he arrived on his first day, he looked like he was in his mid-forties.

“I actually just quit my other job, working in finance,” he explained while I showed him the ropes. “The stress was

eventually too much for me; I dreaded waking up every morning because I didn't want to go to work. Honestly, I just want to do something meaningful every day besides staring at a computer screen. Working with my hands, and taking care of animals. I know that probably sounds crazy..."

"Not even a little bit," I replied. "I quit my corporate job to open this place. It's a million times more meaningful than what I did before."

Ken was a natural with the dogs, and immediately got to work on the to-do clipboard hanging on the wall of the kennel. I had been afraid to hire a second employee because I didn't know how long it would take to get the business up and running, but it was a huge relief to finally have someone else here. Two employees meant I didn't have to work twelve-hour days, and could maybe even catch up on fixing up my grandma's house. There were still boxes of her belongings everywhere.

"I don't like him," Suzie suddenly said next to me.

"I didn't even hear you approach."

"I don't like him," she repeated. "There's something about his face. It's dumb."

"He has a dumb face?"

Suzie scowled across the field at him. "Yes."

"If he does anything suspicious, feel free to let me know," I replied. "But in the meantime, hiring Ken means you don't have to come in every single day."

Somehow, her scowl deepened. "Still, though."

Over the next two weeks, Ken proved to be an exemplary employee. He was better with the dogs and chores than even Suzie, which I suspected was the reason for her dislike of him. Even when nobody was around, and I was watching on the security camera app on my phone, he continued working hard without any breaks or lazy periods.

The two sports teams in town, meanwhile, weren't nearly as competent. After starting the season strong, the Blues were

now in last place in the Western Conference, behind the Edmonton Oilers and Anaheim Ducks. When I asked him about it, Logan shrugged it off. “We fucking suck. There’s no getting around it. I’m on track for a career-high in assists, though, so I’m still kicking ass personally.”

“I’m sorry. It must be depressing to play so well for a team that’s horrible.”

“Depressing?” He barked a laugh. “I still get paid way too much fucking money to play a *game* for a living. And sometimes I get to punch people. I’m not depressed: I’m fucking *ecstatic*.”

Meanwhile, the Colts problems were just as bad. Although Christian and Braden performed at an elite level on the offense, the defense continued to struggle. They had suffered several injuries to key players, and their backups couldn’t perform. The result was that the Colts scored thirty points every game... but lost because they gave up *forty*. Starting with the game I attended in person, the Colts were now on a four-game losing streak.

Making matters worse was the news later that night that the Jaguars had won their game. That meant the Colts were mathematically eliminated from the playoffs: even if they won all of their remaining games, it didn’t matter.

Christian put on a good face about it, but I could tell it was wearing him down. Braden, on the other hand, outright pouted. “I can’t believe we’re eliminated,” he said one night while we were in bed. “Over the last month, we’ve scored the second-most points in the league. Yet we’ve lost all four of those games.”

“We can’t control how the defense plays,” Christian said in the other room. “We can only focus on our half of the game. We can still try our best to win, even though we can’t make the playoffs.”

“Thanks, Captain Positive,” Braden retorted. “The next time an earthquake kills ten thousand people in Haiti, I’m buying you a ticket to Port-au-Prince. You’ll cheer them all up.”

I turned to look at him. He was grinning. “Yeah, that’s right. Who has two thumbs and helped Claire study world capitals all week? *This guy*. Ask me what the capital of Venezuela is!”

Christian walked into the bedroom. “Just try not to complain about our defense in the locker room. Negative energy is contagious.”

Braden gave him a mock salute. “Yes sir, Captain Positive.”

“I’m *positive* I’m going to outlast you tonight. We’re trying that new position, right?”

“The *Daisy Chain*? Damn right. I’ve been thinking about it all day.” Braden held an arm across his chest to stretch. “Hope you’re limber.”

Christian pulled his T-shirt off, revealing the tan skin of his chest. “I’m always ready to go,” he said before diving in.

Despite their on-field issues, my three lovers performed wonderfully in the bedroom. I was with them individually, and in every possible threesome combination, although our schedules kept all four of us from sleeping together at the same time. I began looking forward to the day that our schedules would align and I would get to experience all three of my boyfriends simultaneously. In the meantime, I took solace in the fact that I was able to help them relax and forget about their athletic problems while we were together.

I’m letting three smoking-hot athletes rail me almost every night. I’m more giving than Mother Theresa.

They leaned on me in other ways, too. Sex aside, at least one of them spent the night at my place every night. And the football players hung out and helped with the chores when they were bored.

“I don’t understand,” Ken said to Christian one day while we were hosing down the kennel floor. “If you aren’t looking for a job, then why are you coming over to do my work?”

“You *idiot*,” Suzie hissed at him. “They’re not going to take your job. They both play for the River City Colts!”

“Oh.” Ken glanced at Christian, then shrugged. “I don’t watch sports.”

“It’s nice to do manual labor sometimes,” Christian explained. “It keeps me from thinking about all the other things in my world. Does that make sense?”

“Totally,” Ken replied.

Christian picked up a bag of dog food and grinned. “You know, when the team is struggling like it is, it sounds *really* nice to quit my job and do something simple instead.”

Braden stuck his head out from the grooming room. “Don’t you fucking *dare*. I don’t want to catch passes from some other asshole!”

“That’s funny, because you called *me* an asshole this morning. When I took the last cinnamon raisin bagel.”

“Yeah, but you’re *my* asshole,” Braden clarified before ducking back inside.

Ken glanced between the two of them. “So, like, you throw a ball to him? And he catches it?”

“You really are clueless,” Suzie muttered. “I bet you sit around playing Dungeons and Dragons all day.”

Ken shot her a glare. “I’m currently in two D&D campaigns, yes.”

“Which campaigns?” Suzie demanded.

“Lost Mines of Phandelver,” he replied. “The other one is a home-brew game that I DM online for my old college friends.”

Suzie laughed derisively. “Yeah, figures. Phandelver is kiddie stuff.”

Ken rolled his eyes. “Throwing a ball for a living sounds pretty appealing right now.”

Christian smirked. “Try it when eighty thousand fans are screaming at you.”

“Can you hurry up and bring me that extra bottle of shampoo?” Braden shouted. “Woody is enormous. It’s like

washing all the carpet in our football stadium.”

“The stadium doesn’t have carpet, does it?” I asked.

“Well, no,” Braden called back. “But like, imagine if it did.”

“I’ve got it,” Suzie said, grabbing the two-gallon jug of dog shampoo. “You can sit here and brush up on your football knowledge.”

“You know what? I will!” he snapped back. He glanced at me and whispered, “I don’t know what her problem is.”

I shrugged, but deep down it warmed my heart seeing everyone together. My two employees, and two of my boyfriends. It was like I had my own little dog-kennel family; the only ones missing were Logan and Claire. After growing up with just me and my grandma, it was nice having lots of other people around. Even if they were taunting each other half the time.

“Wow, your salary is enormous,” Ken said while scrolling on his phone.

Christian shook his head. “Supply and demand, I guess.”

“Looks like you make *too* much money,” Ken added.

“A-fucking-men!” Braden shouted from the back room.

“What do you mean, too much money?” I asked. Something in the way he said it sounded strange.

“There’s an article here,” Ken explained, “talking about your future with the team. I guess the owner made some statements today about cutting costs next season?” He shook his head. “Either way, getting paid this much money to play a game...”

“Let me see that.” Christian took his phone and began scrolling.

Braden stepped out of the back room, hands covered in suds, staring in our direction with a concerned expression.

“*Christian Baker expected to be traded,*” Christian read out loud in a shocked voice, “*along with other high-profile Colts players.*”



Christian

Everything was going so well.

Until it wasn't.

"They're going to trade us?" Braden asked, aghast.

"It was an interview the owner gave," I replied, scanning the article quickly. "The trade deadline for this season has already passed, so it wouldn't happen until February."

I saw Beth wince. That was two months away.

"I'm real sorry for stirring up trouble," Ken said.

"Not your fault," I said, handing him back the phone. "I'm going to go inside and see what they're saying on TV."

Braden and Beth followed me out of the kennel and into the house. As soon as we reached the front porch, Logan's car came rushing up the driveway. He and Claire hopped out.

"I'm going to say hi to Suzie!" Claire said, running straight to the gate.

"You see what they're saying on TV?" Logan asked urgently.

"We heard," I replied.

Braden was on his phone with his agent. "No, I'm not calling about Alpha Milk! I'm calling to talk about the trade rumors. Why weren't you aware of this?" A pause. "I don't care if that's two months away! A little warning would be nice."

“Why would they trade you and Braden?” Beth asked. “You’re two of the best players. The team would be terrible without you!”

“That’s the idea,” I explained while turning on the kitchen TV. “The owner wants to dump all the expensive salaries. Then he’ll tank the team for a season or two, which will allow him to collect a few good draft picks. Then he’ll rebuild the team in a few years.”

“This is bullshit,” Braden spat, hanging up the phone. “We’re competitive now.”

“We’re six-and-eight,” I said, stating our team record. “We’re mathematically eliminated from the playoffs. And we’ve lost four games in a row.”

“Yeah, because our defense has suffered a few key injuries,” Braden argued. “The offense is strong. We’re playing better than ever!”

“Doesn’t matter if we can’t take home wins.”

“A good offense helps fill the stadium with fans,” Braden continued. “If you and I are traded, there won’t be any reason to watch the team.”

“Tell the owner, not me,” I muttered.

Beth was rubbing my back reassuringly, but I could see the fear in her eyes. Logan was quiet. That was a bad sign; he must have been fuming on the inside. This was just like last time. Our job was taking us away from the woman we loved.

Love.

I felt something strong inside my chest when I looked at Beth. The kind of feeling that was too powerful to ignore, especially when she was in my arms and our hearts were beating in sync. I hadn’t said the words, neither to Beth or to myself, but I knew I loved her. And I was certain Braden and Logan felt the same, or close enough to it as to make no difference.

What if it all went away because of a billionaire owner’s whim?

“Maybe you’ll be traded somewhere close,” Beth said hopefully. “Chicago, Kansas City, and Nashville all have teams that are only a few hours away...”

“Kansas City and Chicago already have established quarterbacks,” I replied.

“Not to mention we’d probably be traded to different teams,” Braden muttered.

There was another sound outside; a car was coming up the driveway. Beth cursed and said, “I’ll be right back.”

Logan glanced out the door after her. When I gave him a questioning look, he said, “Just making sure it’s not her cunt ex, Trip.”

“There!” Braden said. “Turn the TV up.”

I grabbed the remote and unmuted the television. The white-haired owner of the River City Colts was speaking to a reporter outside of a grand staircase with a gold banister. He was wearing a tuxedo; it looked like he was at the theater.

“I’m just as disappointed with the season as anyone,” he was saying to the reporter. “We had all the pieces in place to win the division, but we couldn’t make it happen. We’ll absolutely be making moves in the off-season to ensure we’re doing what’s best for the franchise long-term.”

“Does that mean trading some of your more expensive pieces?” the reporter asked.

“Absolutely.”

They didn’t need to call us out by name; I was the highest paid player on the team, with Braden second, and our running back third. But the reporter decided to spell it out for anyone watching.

“Are Christian Baker and Braden Clark on the chopping block?”

“Nobody is off-limits,” the owner replied definitively. “I’m not afraid to make difficult decisions, even if it means losing some of our high-profile names. Thank you.”

The reporter tried asking him another question, but the owner was already walking up the grand staircase, ending the interview.

I sighed. “This sucks.”

Logan grunted.

“It’s not the end of the world,” Braden said. “We might not get traded.”

“And it might not snow this season, but that’s pretty unlikely,” I replied. “Face it, Braden: this is a strategy plenty of teams have adopted. Trade away expensive players. Tank the team in order to get a good spot in the draft. Then rebuild the team with those new draft picks.”

“You have a no-trade clause in your contract, right?” he asked.

“A *partial* no-trade clause,” I clarified. “I can veto a trade to the Patriots, Eagles, Giants, JETS, or Commanders. But that leaves twenty-six other teams I can be traded to.”

“The season is only half a year,” Braden continued arguing. He sounded desperate. “We can still spend the off-season here in St. Louis. It’s not the end of the world if we have to be long-distance from September to January.”

“No,” Logan snapped.

“What do you mean, no?” Braden asked. “If it’s our only option, then—”

“I fucking said *no*,” he growled. His knuckles were white where he was gripping the countertop; he looked like he was going to rip it out of the wall. “No long-distance bullshit.”

I shared a look with Braden. “I don’t know why you’re upset. You just signed a contract with the Blues. You’re not going anywhere for at least two more years. No matter what happens to us...”

“Fuck that,” Logan spat. “We’re a unit. All four of us. I don’t know why it works so well, but it does, and I sure as fuck don’t want it to fall apart.”

He's become good at sharing, I thought. Never would have guessed it.

"I love her," I admitted.

"Me too," Braden said without hesitation. "Have you told her yet?"

I shook my head. "No. You?"

"Not yet. I was afraid we were moving too fast."

"If you love her," Logan practically snarled, "then you'd better fucking fight for her."

"How? If the Colts decide to trade us, there's nothing we can do."

"All I know," Logan said, "is that if the Blues were going to trade me, I'd make all sorts of hell to try to stop them."

Before we could discuss it any further, Beth started shouting outside.

Logan rushed out the door, with me and Braden close on his heels. The man who had arrived in a gold Ford Taurus was standing in front of Beth, arms crossed over his chest. Beth had a piece of paper in her hands.

"The fuck is your problem?" Logan demanded, immediately putting himself between them and getting in the man's face.

"Hey, man!" the stranger protested. "I'm just doing my job! Don't blame me!"

"Relax, Logan," Beth said. "This guy is just the messenger."

"Messenger for what?" Braden asked. "What message?"

Beth held up the piece of paper. "It's from Trip, my ex-boyfriend. He's *suing me*."



Beth

I was already dealing with an enormous personal bombshell. The news that two of my boyfriends were all but certain to be traded away once the season was over. It was like getting dumped by two guys *simultaneously*, even though they had no control over the situation.

Then I was handed papers informing me that my ex-boyfriend was even more bitter than I ever could have imagined.

Logan came storming out of the house like a German Shepherd on the attack. He immediately stood in front of me and started snarling at the poor guy who had delivered the papers.

“It’s from Trip, my ex-boyfriend,” I explained. “He’s *suing* me. Taking me to small claims court.”

Logan rounded on me. “Over a fucking *hockey ticket*?”

Behind him, the man who had served me with the court order jumped in his car and quickly drove away.

“Unbelievable,” Braden said. “I’ll write that asshole a check. Anything to get him off your back.”

I pulled my phone out and immediately called Trip. He answered on the first ring. “Hello?” he said, as if he couldn’t see who was calling. As if he hadn’t expected this.

“You’re suing me? *Seriously?*”

“My lawyer has advised me not to discuss this case with you.” I could hear the smarmy grin in his voice.

“Lawyer? *Lawyer?* This is small claims court! What’s the point in hiring a lawyer when you’re suing someone over...” I glanced at the page. “Eight hundred dollars?”

“It’s about doing what’s right,” Trip said. “I hope you regret the way you’ve treated me now, Elizabeth.”

He hung up.

I wanted to spike my phone into the ground like Braden celebrating a touchdown, but I managed to control my emotions. Still, I let out a frustrated shout that caused all the dogs in the field to come running over to the fence in a big pack.

“You okay, Ms. Foster?” Suzie asked, approaching the fence.

Ken was walking next to her, wringing his hands nervously. “I really didn’t mean to upset everyone with the trade news...”

“It’s not that,” I explained. “It’s some personal drama.”

“Oh. Okay, then.” Ken and Suzie turned around and walked back to the kennel. It sounded like they were having a heated discussion about something. I caught the words “cleric” and “paladin.”

“Seriously, I’m going to write that asshole a check,” Braden insisted. “That’ll put an end to all of this.”

“I don’t want your money. I can pay Trip myself.”

“You’re not really considering paying that cunt, are you?” Logan demanded.

“I’d rather do that than go to court over it.”

“It’s clearly not about the money,” Christian said. “Your ex is just using whatever methods he can to stay in your life. To manipulate you. If you pay him off, he’ll just find another way to punish you for dumping him.”

Logan pointed a finger at Christian. “Smartest thing he’s ever said. I’ll solve this problem by paying Trip a visit.”

“That is *not* what I was suggesting,” Christian quickly said.

“What are you going to do?” Braden asked. “Drive to Trip’s house and punch him in the face?”

Logan blinked at him. “Yes.”

Braden busted out laughing.

“You can’t solve all your problems by punching them,” Christian insisted.

Logan glared at him. “It’s worked out pretty fucking good for me so far.”

“Nobody is going to punch anybody,” I insisted. “At least, not yet. I’ll figure out what to do about Trip later. My court date isn’t until January, so I have four weeks to figure it out. And I refuse to devote any of my emotional energy to the problem until then.”

I marched back inside. My three boyfriends followed behind like scolded children.

The television was still on in the kitchen, and a sports analyst was ranting about the Colts. “This whole situation is embarrassing. A new owner buys the team, moves the franchise to St. Louis, and convinces the city to build them a new state-of-the-art stadium. Then, instead of trying to put a competitive product on the field, they immediately hold a fire sale to save money.”

“It’s not just to save money,” another analyst on TV argued. “The Colts aren’t making the playoffs, but they’re currently too good to get a good draft pick. Rather than wallowing in mediocrity, they *should* trade pieces like Baker and Clark while they have value, and rebuild around one of the upcoming college quarterbacks.”

“It hasn’t even been one full season!” the first analyst replied. “You can’t just expect sweeping success after one year. These things take time.”

“All the more reason to start the rebuild now!” the other analyst shot back.

Braden let out a long sigh, then turned the volume down on the TV. “Usually we don’t have to worry about trade rumors

until the season is over. And right before Christmas, too.”

Logan stared at the TV, but said nothing.

“We’ll figure this out,” Christian said, rubbing my back. “Nothing is certain yet, so there’s no point in worrying about it.”

“Maybe we can talk to the owner,” Braden suggested. “Convince him to keep us.”

“And if that doesn’t work, we can send Logan to threaten him,” I said.

Logan barked a laugh, but there was still an intensity to his gaze. Like he was trying extremely hard to control his emotions.

I hugged him, and then Christian and Braden joined in from the sides. The four of us held the embrace for a long moment.

“We’ll figure this out,” Christian repeated. “We’ll make it work.”

“Why are you hugging?” Claire suddenly asked from the doorway.

“Sometimes people like to hug,” Logan said.

She scrunched up her face. “I’m not stupid. Something is wrong. That’s why Logan drove us here so quick.” Her eyes grew large. “Is it about me? Have I not been doing a good job with the dogs?”

The four of us all began talking at once to assure Claire she hadn’t done anything wrong. She stood there, listening to all of it like a judge hearing arguments from lawyers.

“You’ve been *such* a big help with the dogs,” I said.

“Really?”

I bobbed my head in an emphatic nod. “I don’t know what I would do without you. I would probably go out of business!”

Finally, she appeared satisfied with our reassurances. “Then what’s wrong? Why are you hugging?”

Logan cleared his throat. “Uncle Chrissy and Uncle Braden might be playing for another team next year.”

“Why?” she asked. “Do you not like playing for the Colts?”

“We love playing for the Colts, kiddo,” Braden replied.

“Good,” Claire replied. “Then you’re staying.”

We exchanged looks.

“It’s not really up to us,” Christian said. “The owner of the team might trade us. Then we would have to play for someone else.”

Claire frowned as she considered this. “But you’ll still come visit every day, right? And read me bedtime stories?”

“We’ll visit as often as we can, kiddo,” Braden answered. “But it won’t be every day.”

“Why not?”

“We might get traded far away. Like California,” Christian said.

“California isn’t far away,” Claire said.

Braden chuckled. “Hate to break it to you, but yes it is.”

“No. It’s not.” She unslung her backpack and pulled out a geography textbook. After flipping through the pages, she showed us a map of North America. “See? California is right here. And St. Louis is *here*. That’s only three fingers away.”

“She makes a good point,” Braden said, turning away. Was he tearing up?

“We don’t know anything is going to happen,” I told Claire. “We’ll find out in a few months. So we don’t need to worry about it now!”

Claire put her book away. “Good. Because I have a *lot* of poop to scoop.”

The four of us chuckled as she went running back out to the kennel. But it was forced. Everyone was worried.

Fighting Trip in small claims court seems very small indeed.



Beth

The next few weeks were stressful for a multitude of reasons. My kennel was completely booked, and many of the customers were newcomers. Some of the dogs didn't get along with others, so we had to spend extra time keeping them apart and rotating them out into the field to play and get exercise. Even with Ken and Suzie under my payroll, and with my boyfriends and Claire occasionally helping, I began to realize I might need to put a third employee on the books.

Christmas arrived, and with it came a blizzard. Well, not really a *blizzard*, but a foot of snow fell overnight and blanketed my entire property. The dogs were fine since the kennel was insulated and had plenty of heat, but the snow complicated things in other ways. Poop was harder to scoop, and the dogs rolled and played around in the snow, which inevitably melted into their coats when they went back inside. The result was the omnipresent smell of wet dog hair. To counter that, I was forced to bathe every long-term boarder free of charge before they were picked up by their owner. That was better than returning smelly dogs to unhappy customers, but it meant more work for us.

The football players had to travel for Christmas, but I had a nice holiday at Logan's house, joined by his sister Emily and her fiancée Leslie. The holiday was delightful, especially when Leslie had too much eggnog and started telling stories about Braden's childhood.

"He was always the favorite," she complained. "I don't know why. When he was a baby, he had a bad habit of taking his diaper off and peeing all over the wall next to his bed!"

All of us were roaring with laughter by this point, even Logan. Maybe *especially* Logan.

Emily put a hand on Leslie's arm. "I think that's enough stories for tonight."

Leslie glanced at me. "Sorry. I didn't mean to ruin the magic between you and my brother. He hasn't peed on any walls in a long time. That I know of."

Logan and I agreed to spend the next month teasing Braden about this.

The Colts played a very bad New England Patriots team on Christmas, and just *barely* won the game. Christian had an awful day, throwing three interceptions. Braden wasn't much better, dropping several passes on crucial third-down plays. All of this further escalated the rumors surrounding the team's plan to trade them during the off-season.

My three boyfriends were still affectionate during all of this, but they were more distant at times. I could tell that their concern about the future was weighing them down, like an ever-present humidity in the air. We went to a New Year's Eve party hosted by one of the Colts players, and tried to be carefree as we celebrated, but it was difficult to ignore the looming problem. Every kiss we shared, every toast we made, felt like it could be the last. Whatever this strange polyamorous relationship was, I soon grew terrified that it would end before it ever really had a chance to begin.

Logan started the new year by flying to the Northeast to play a series of road games in Montreal, Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. Claire stayed with Braden during this time, and when Braden was at football practice, Claire spent time with me at the kennel.

It was a dreary, snow-threatening Thursday morning when a familiar black Newfoundland started barking in my parking lot. Jackie, the journalist, stepped out of her car and gave me a friendly wave; Woody the Newfoundland stayed in the car, but hung his head out the window, tongue lolling lazily.

“I didn’t realize we were boarding Woody,” I said. “Or is he here for doggy daycare? I usually require all daycare dogs to be dropped off by nine, but I can let it slide this time since you’re only twenty minutes late.”

“Neither, I’m afraid,” Jackie said. She looked unhappy. “I’m here on business.”

I tensed. “What kind of business?”

“Look, I hate to do this...” She shoved her hands in her coat pocket and looked around. She was avoiding looking me in the eyes, I realized. “I have to run the story.”

“I don’t know what story you’re talking about.”

Jackie gave me a level look. “Beth. Come on. I’m not trying to goad you into admitting something I don’t already know.”

I stared right back at her. “Again, I don’t know what you mean.”

“Are you really going to make me say it?” Jackie sighed. “You’re dating three of the most famous athletes in St. Louis: Christian Baker, Braden Clark, and Logan Landry. Not only are you dating them simultaneously, but they all know about it. They visit you here at your kennel. *Together*. Sometimes you meet at Christian’s condo, or Logan’s house.”

“Goddamnit,” I muttered. “I was really hoping you were bluffing.”

“Afraid not. Look, I was willing to sit on the story while I was a freelancer. I want to do *real* journalism, not tabloid paparazzi crap. But I was hired by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, and my photographer mentioned the story to their editor. They’re making me run it. *Especially* given the other news surrounding the potential Colts trades. I’m sorry, Beth. I really am.”

My initial reaction was anger, even though she seemed genuinely sorry. But that anger quickly faded into resignation. “I knew this day might come ever since our photos were taken leaving that bowling alley.”

“I promise it’s not a hit piece,” she assured me. “It’s more informational than anything. Polyamory is really trendy right now. I’d love to get an interview with you. Hear your side of it.”

“I can’t do that,” I said without hesitation.

“The story would be a lot more balanced if I had your input,” she coaxed. “You could help shape public perception surrounding the whole thing. Soften the blow, so to speak.”

Her offer was tempting. Right now, the article she was going to publish was a big scary *unknown*. But if I sat down with her and told our side of things, we could control it.

“I need to talk to my... to the guys about it,” I said. “When are you running the story?”

“My editor wants to run this in the big Sunday edition in three days,” Jackie explained. She still seemed apologetic about the whole thing. “Give me a call if you decide to talk. If I don’t hear from you by then, I’ll take that as a no. But I hope you call.”

**Beth**

“What’s the matter?” Claire asked as I watched Jackie drive away.

“Nothing,” I said, trying to inject some cheer into my tone.

“You’re sad because she decided not to drop off Woody, aren’t you?”

I turned and smiled at Claire. “That’s exactly right. She decided to keep her dog today so she could play with him.”

Claire nodded sagely. “As long as Woody gets play time. He’s a big boy, so he needs *big* play time. I finished poop scooping! Now what?”

“Now you need to work on your studies,” I replied. “Logan said you have to finish all your homework. I’m supposed to quiz you about all the US states tonight.”

“I know all of them,” Claire complained.

I squinted at her. “Prove it.”

“Alaska. Alabama.” She paused. “A bunch of others. And finally Wyoming! See? I got them all.”

There was no use arguing with her. “Go see if Ken is still bathing the dogs. If he is, you can help. But as soon as that’s done, you need to go inside and study. Deal?”

“DEAL!” she squealed, turning and sprinting back to the kennel building.

I watched her go. I wished my only worries in the world were trying to avoid doing my homework.

I felt my worries growing, so I reached for one of the sure-fire ways to make myself relax: I texted my three boyfriends on a group chat.

Me: How's Montreal?

Logan: This city kicks ass. I don't say that about a lot of cities. I want to come back in the summer, when I'm not freezing my balls off.

Me: Was that an invitation?

Logan: If you're the kind of woman who invites herself along on trips, then sure.

Me: I am EXACTLY that kind of woman!

Braden: Lame. We're stuck at practice, and it's boring.

Logan: If you're at practice, why are you texting?

Braden: Because we've finished workouts for the day. Now we're reviewing game footage of the Titans prior to this Sunday's game.

Me: If the owner wants to tank the team and trade you guys in the off-season, why even bother preparing for the game? Why not let the Titans roll over you?

Braden: Fuck if I know!

Christian: You can still try to do well and increase your value as a player. Then maybe they'll keep you on the team.

Braden: Or I'll become so valuable that they get a big, juicy return for trading me! Did you ever think of that, Mr. Smartypants Quarterback?

Christian: Do whatever you want. I'm going to give it my all on Sunday.

Braden: Even if it's your last game on the Colts?

Christian: ESPECIALLY if it's my last game on the Colts.

Logan: Beth and I were having a nice conversation before you two jackasses joined in. Why don't you argue in person and save us all some time?

Braden: Because Christian is watching game footage in the room with the other two quarterbacks, and I'm in the room with the receiving corps.

Me: Are you both coming over after practice to pick up Claire, or just Braden?

Christian: I'll come too if you want. I can pick up dinner.

Braden: Let's get Mexican! Claire is obsessed with quesadillas. Seriously, just say the word around her and she'll lose her eight-year-old shit. It's hilarious.

Me: Mexican sounds great. I'll text you what Claire and I want.

Braden: I'll tell you what she wants: a cheese quesadilla with extra "quack and mole hay." That's how she says guacamole. Shit's adorable.

Me: Oh, and there's something important I want to talk to you guys about over dinner.

Braden: Uh oh. You're totally breaking up with us, aren't you?

Christian: She's probably breaking up with YOU. Logan and I are enough for her.

Me: Sorry, but you can't get rid of me that easily ; -)

Logan: What do you need to talk about? I'll be home from my trip in two days.

Me: I don't want you guys to worry, but it's kind of time sensitive.

Braden: We'll Facetime you if it's important. And then we'll totally double-team Beth while making you watch, to remind you what you're missing.

Me: That sounds hot.

Logan: Fuck off. Nobody wants to see your pasty white ass.

Me: HEY!

Logan: I was replying to Braden.

Braden: HEY!

Christian: Ahahahahahaha. I bet you were focusing on your game footage now.

Braden: I will not tolerate any slander with regards to my behind. It's a satisfying shade of gold.

Logan: It's January. Your tan has worn off.

Braden: Shit.

Me: I still like your asses, no matter how pale they've gotten! I'll see you two tonight. And I'll call you, Logan, to fill you in.

Logan: I wish I was filling YOU in.

Braden: Holy shit, did Logan just make a joke?

Logan: I make jokes. I'm funny.

Braden: Ahahahaha

Christian: LOL

Me: HAH!

Logan: Fuck all of you with a rusty hockey stick.

The conversation brightened my mood. That was a good sign. When I was with Trip, he always had a way of taking my emotional funks and making them worse. Yet whenever I was stressed out or worried about something, my three *new* boyfriends instantly cheered me up without even trying.

That's how a real relationship should be. A partner—or three of them—needs to lift you up when you need it, not bring you down.

Two cars came rolling up the driveway soon after. One of them was Princess's owner; she was dropping off the dog for her daily daycare, and was running late because of an emergency at home. The other woman stood to the side, waiting patiently for me to finish up. There wasn't a dog with her.

If she's another journalist...

Once Princess was situated, the newcomer approached. "Hi. Are you Beth Foster?"

"I am. You're not a journalist, are you?"

She chuckled. "Maybe in another life, but no. I'm not." She smiled warmly and extended a hand. "I'm Kathy Polk. I'm a case worker with the Missouri Department of Social Services, Children's Division."

I shook her hand. "Why would you..." Then it hit me. "Oh. Oh." Relief poured into my chest. She wasn't a journalist; she was just here to see Claire.

"I've been assigned to Claire Kelenic's case," she explained. "I was led to believe she might be here?"

"Yes! Claire is such a sweet girl. It's just awful what happened with her mother."

“Yes. I’ve read her file.” She shook her head. “Sorry it has taken us so long to check on her. There was a lot of paperwork involved when her case was moved from the Canadian system. May I ask where Claire is right now?” She gazed around the property.

“She’s over in the kennel right now,” I said, leading Kathy through the gate. “I hope you like dogs.”

“I’m more of a cat person, but I appreciate dogs,” she said carefully.

We walked through the gate and four dogs that were playing in the field came loping over to us. Kathy tensed up, giving off the body language of someone who expected to be bitten at any moment. But the dogs only sniffed her for a few seconds, then went back to playing when they decided she didn’t have any treats.

“Is the kennel where Claire is studying?” Kathy asked.

“Oh no, she studies in my grandma’s house.” I pointed. “Sorry, I mean *my* house. I inherited it when she died, but I keep calling it *hers*. She just passed away last summer, and I’m still getting used to the change.”

“Then what is Claire doing in the kennel? Is she playing with the dogs all day?”

Suddenly, I realized what this woman was getting at. She was here to check-in on Claire and make sure she was well taken care of.

“Claire does plenty of playing, but she’s *very* focused on her studies,” I explained. “She’s learning so much!”

“That’s very good to hear,” Kathy said, making some notes on a clipboard that I hadn’t noticed until now. “Claire wasn’t put in school yet because she was deemed to be behind on her studies after being homeschooled in Canada. It’s important that she catch up, so she can enter the second grade later this year.”

“Like I said, she’s learning so much. She’ll definitely be ready to go to school with the other kids.”

“You’ve been assisting with her education?”

“I have, when I can,” I replied. “The materials she was given are very helpful. She’s absorbing it faster than any of us expected.”

“Any of you?” she asked. “Aside from Mr. Landry, her biological father, to whom are you referring?”

“Oh you know, it takes a village,” I said with a chuckle. Was she prying into our situation? “Logan is a wonderful father, but when he’s away, the rest of us help. Me, his sister Emily, her fiancée Leslie.”

At that moment, Claire came running out of the kennel. She grabbed the poop scoop from where it was leaning against the wall and started off into the field.

“Claire, can you come here a minute?” I asked.

“I don’t have time,” she explained impatiently. “I just remembered I forgot to check for poop over in *that* corner. Princess always poops there.”

“I’m sorry,” Kathy said, “but are you doing *chores* here at the kennel?”

“She likes to pretend like she’s helping,” I explained.

“I *am* helping,” Claire insisted. “First I poop scooped the *entire* field. Then Ken and I bathed Odin and Freya.”

“Claire, this woman is here to check on you, and see how your studying is going,” I said.

Claire stamped her foot stubbornly. “I don’t have *time* to study. I *told you*, I have to scoop the part of the field I missed.”

I laughed this off and turned to Kathy, who was scowling. “She wanted to help out around here today. I can assure you this isn’t normal.”

“That’s not true!” Claire argued. “I help every single day. I’m the best poop scooper.”

“She’s exaggerating,” I told Kathy.

“Is she?” Kathy said while scribbling on her clipboard. “Because it sounds like this girl is treated like an employee of your business.”

“I am!”

“Claire, not now,” I said, beginning to panic. “This isn’t what it looks like.”

“You said you wouldn’t know what to do without me,” Claire whined. “You said without my help, you would go out of business!”

Kathy gave me a skeptical look.

“We humor her around here,” I said with another awkward chuckle. “Claire? How about we go inside and take a look at your studies?”

“Fine,” she said, tossing down her scoop. “But let’s make it quick. I don’t have time for this shit.”

I gasped. “Young lady, we don’t talk like that.”

“Sure you do,” she replied. “Uncle Braden says that all the time when Pickles is taking too long to go to the bathroom on a walk.”

Claire walked through the gate and up to the house. I gave Kathy a hopeful smile.

She shook her head softly and continued writing on her clipboard.

**Beth**

Once we were inside, Kathy sat Claire down and gave her a standardized test to see how much progress she had made since being put into Logan's custody. I wanted to watch and see how Claire did, but Kathy made her wait until I was out of the room.

I paced outside for the next thirty minutes. *Thirty minutes.* What kind of test were they giving her? An eight-year-old couldn't focus that long on any single task, let alone a test to gauge her learning abilities!

Finally, Kathy and Claire came walking out of the house. "How did she do?" I immediately asked.

"The results of her test will be sent to Mr. Landry," Kathy said curtly. "Along with the remainder of my report."

"Ah, that's good," I said while following her to her car. "Very good."

"I'm going back to scooping poop," Claire announced. "If I miss anything, I don't want to get fired!"

"Hah hah, she's so funny. Such a precious age when they develop a sense of humor. Your report. Is it... positive? Or do we have room for improvement?"

Kathy tossed the clipboard onto the passenger seat of her car and turned to me. "That information is for Mr. Landry, the father. He's welcome to share it with you if he wishes." She hesitated. "But I will be honest, Ms. Foster: whatever *this* situation is here at the kennel? I'm not sure it's the best environment for Claire and her education."

And with that, she got into her car and drove away.

I called Logan to let him know, but he didn't answer, so I left him a voicemail. Then I texted him to tell him what had happened. Half an hour later, he sent back a single response:

A thumbs-up emoji.

If he's not worried, then I probably shouldn't be, I told myself. But a deep sense of dread had crept into me since the surprise visit by Kathy, a dread that refused to dim as the afternoon went on.

"It's probably fine," Christian said at dinner that night. "Claire's a smart girl. Aren't you, Claire?"

Claire was humming to herself while dipping her quesadilla in guacamole. "I guess," she said around a mouthful of food. "But the test was *hard*."

"Really? You told me it was easy!" I replied.

"The first question was easy," she explained. "The rest of it was hard."

"What was the first question?" Braden asked.

"My name. *Claire Kelenic*. Easy." She furrowed her brow. "The rest of the test was a bunch of numbers and shapes. I guessed on a lot of them."

"You *guessed*?"

"Why? What's wrong?" Claire asked.

Braden squeezed my leg under the table. I made myself take a deep breath. "Nothing's wrong. I'm just... I wish they had made me take the test instead."

"You probably would have failed it," Claire said bluntly. "I'll do better next time."

If there is a next time, I thought.

"I really fucked up," I said later that night after Claire was put to bed. Christian, Braden, and I were sitting in the living room drinking wine. It was an expensive bottle, one that had

been on my grandma's wine rack since 2003. I figured tonight was a good night to open it up.

"You didn't fuck up," Christian reassured me.

"I don't know. It sounds like she fucked up a little," Braden said. "What? I'm just being honest."

"You fucked up too," I said, pointing with the wine bottle. "You've been cussing around Claire."

He flinched. "No I haven't."

"Yes, you have."

"I've been careful."

"I don't have time for this shit. That's what Claire said to the lady from Social Services. And then Claire explained that she overheard Uncle Braden say that when Pickles wouldn't do his business on a walk."

Hearing his name, Pickles got up from the dog bed in the corner and rested his snout on my leg. I gave him some scratches behind the ear.

"That does sound like you," Christian muttered.

"Heh. I guess it does." Braden sighed. "Sorry. I didn't mean to make it worse for you."

"Honestly, it probably didn't matter. I already blew the interview. She probably thinks I'm using child labor here at the kennel."

"I mean, you kind of are," Braden pointed out.

"Dude," Christian snapped.

"What? I'm just being honest."

"You're being a little too honest tonight," Christian replied.

"I appreciate the honesty," I said. "When Claire first started coming here, I was happy that she got over her fear of dogs, so I let her help out a little. I never should have allowed it to turn into something she does *every* time she stays here. I should have done a better job taking care of her, and helping her study."

“That’s not on you,” Christian pointed out. “That’s on Logan for dumping his daughter here without warning.”

“The first time, sure. But since then...”

“Can we stop throwing blame around?” Braden said. “Let’s try to forget about this. We have enough problems to worry about right now. Our last game of the season is Sunday, and then we’ll probably be traded. Beth goes to court tomorrow afternoon to deal with her idiot ex-boyfriend. Am I missing anything?”

Suddenly I realized that I had forgotten to give them the other news: that the St. Louis Post-Dispatch was going to run a story about our unorthodox four-person relationship next week. That was the entire reason I asked the guys to come over tonight, but the visit by Kathy had wiped it from my focus.

“Oh man,” I said, pinching the bridge of my nose. “I think I feel a migraine coming on.”

Braden, who was sitting in the chair across from the couch, cocked his head. “You sound like you need a distraction.”

“Yes. Desperately.”

He glanced over at Christian, who smiled. “Is that how migraines work?” he asked. “You can get rid of them with...?”

“I’m willing to find out,” Braden said.

I didn’t realize what they meant until I noticed them looking at me hungrily. That look, coming from both of them simultaneously, was like a fire being stirred between my legs.

“Only if you want to,” Christian said. “If you have a migraine, we can give you a massage instead.”

“Or a massage... with our dicks,” Braden added.

In spite of everything, I laughed. And my migraine faded away. All of us were smiling now. Once again I thought about how lucky I was to have men in my life who lifted me up when I desperately needed it.

I'll tell them about the journalist later, I thought. First, it's time for some much-needed self-care.



Beth

I never outright told them that yes, I was interested in getting frisky tonight. I didn't *need* to tell them. After being together for several months, they knew me well enough.

Braden rose from his chair and joined me on the couch. His crystal blue eyes were intense as his hand caressed my cheek, fingers sliding to the back of my neck and into my hair. He kissed me slowly and passionately—more passionately than I was used to with him. Lately, Braden had been taking me rougher and faster than usual.

I cracked an eye open while we kissed. Christian was watching us from the other chair. His dark eyes drank in the sight of us making out on the couch. I could tell he was turned on.

Braden's hand slid up my thigh until his fingers brushed against my lace panties. I sighed into his mouth and spread my legs as he rubbed my pussy through the fabric. He knew exactly the right way to touch me, the perfect amount of pressure to make me crave more...

His hand and lips pulled away. "You're up, quarterback," he said while returning to his chair. "See if you can get her wetter than that."

Christian's thick cock was obvious down one leg of his jeans as he stood and replaced Braden on the couch. He grabbed my head with both hands and kissed me roughly; I loved how *eager* he was for me with just a little prodding from one of the other guys. He gripped my face possessively like he had been thinking about this all day.

I rubbed his cock through his jeans while his tongue slid into my mouth. The smell of his strong cologne mixed with the wine on his tongue made me shiver. He pushed me back into the couch cushion with his lips until his body was on top of mine. His hand raced down between my legs, unbuttoning my jeans so he could more easily rub my pussy the way Braden had. His fingers pushed against the fabric, digging into me.

“You’re *are* wet,” he murmured into my lips.

“You make me that way.”

Braden cleared his throat. “I had something to do with that, too.”

“We’ll see.” Christian pulled the panties aside and two fingers slid into my pussy. I gasped at the sudden pleasure, pushing my hips against him while he kissed me hungrily. Over in the chair, Braden was grinning while enjoying the show.

Christian fingered me roughly, twisting like he was cleaning the inside of a glass. Hitting every angle and wall inside of me. Then he pulled away from our kiss so he could look into my eyes.

“Let’s take this to the bedroom. Wouldn’t want Claire to wake up and stumble onto us.”

Braden barked a laugh. “Now *that* would be hard to explain to the social worker.”

Before I could make a joke about Kathy, Christian threw me over his shoulder like I weighed nothing.

“Damn, Chrissy,” Braden said. “You don’t need to show off for us like you’re auditioning for tryouts.”

“You might have less body fat than me,” he replied smoothly. “But my muscles are *functional*.”

I reached down and gave his ass a slap through the jeans. “I’ll say.”

Christian carried me into the bedroom and deposited me on the bed, then pulled my jeans all the way off. Braden was there in a flash to remove my shirt and bra with hurried, eager

motions. The only light in the room came from the single bedside table, but that was enough illumination for me to see the two sexy men standing before me. Two men preparing to take my mind off all the things troubling me.

Two men preparing to *ravage* me.

My body came alive underneath their ravenous gazes.

Christian grabbed my legs and *yanked*, pulling me to the edge of the bed. He slid my panties off and then went to his knees before me, kissing all around my pussy lips.

“I love the way you smell,” he whispered. “It makes me *hungry*.”

I let out a long sigh as he buried his face in my pussy. His tongue moved like it had a mind of its own, covering every inch of my inner and outer lips as he ate me out. The sight of him was beautiful: a broad-shouldered football star gripping my thighs tightly while devouring me.

“What should I do to her?” Braden asked. “Call the play.”

Christian looked up at me from between my legs. He smiled. “I think she needs a cock in her mouth.”

“I think you’re right,” Braden said with a nod. “I’ll go *long*.” He stripped his clothes quickly, hard cock standing at attention. Then he leaned over the edge of the bed where my head was, taking hold of my hair and pulling my mouth to him. I opened my lips obediently so he could fill my mouth with his hard length, pushing it as deep down my throat as he could. I moaned around it while he held my head, fingers gripping my hair unrelentingly.

Christian continued licking my pussy enthusiastically, moaning into me with a soft vibration. He looked like he was stroking himself out of sight while eating me out; I loved knowing that he enjoyed it as much as I did. Braden steadily fucked my mouth while cupping my breast with his free hand, squeezing gently. His fingers pinched around my nipple and I moaned loudly, the sound muffled by his girth.

“I think she likes that,” Braden said with a soft chuckle, which turned into a sigh of pleasure as my tongue swirled

around his crown.

“She sure does.” Christian gave my clit a final lick, then stood. “She likes this, too.”

He undressed slowly while I watched. First he removed his shirt, then his jeans and underwear until he was as nude as Braden. The two of them were beautiful in the soft light, the same yet totally different. Braden was lean and chiseled with muscle, while Christian was bigger through the shoulders. Sturdier. Both of their sexy bodies turned me on in unique ways.

How many girls are this lucky, I wondered, to have two professional football players at the same time?

Christian smiled at me hungrily while spreading my legs. He wasted no time plunging his cock into my soaked pussy, fast and eager. I clenched my lower lips around him and moaned until every inch was inside me, all the way to the base of his hard length. Braden tightened his grip on my hair and pulled my head back from his dick, allowing my pleased cry to fill the room.

Not so loud, I told myself. We can't wake Claire.

Easier said than done.

“Beth likes it alright,” Braden agreed. “I wonder what else she’s going to like tonight?”

Christian began fucking me steadily, his abs rippling with the motion. “I have some ideas.”

Braden smirked. “Me too.”

I loved the way they talked about what they were going to do to me. Talking to each other rather than me. It made me feel like I had no say in the matter. Like I was *theirs* to do with as they pleased.

I am, I thought. I am theirs.

The only thing missing was Logan. I was already having plenty of fun with these two, but I couldn’t help but miss my angry hockey lover. Despite having dozens of threesomes in every possible combination, we still hadn’t had group sex with

all four of us. Having Logan here would have completed the fantasy. I wished he would walk through the door and join us without a word.

Maybe when he gets back from Montreal, I thought while returning my attention to the two men before me.

Braden grinned down at me, then leaned in for a deep kiss. While he slid his tongue in my mouth, I grabbed hold of his cock and jacked him off, savoring the hot skin beneath my fingers.

“You want him inside you?” Christian asked while pumping my pussy, slow and steady.

“I do,” I said, and the last word turned into a long moan.

Christian looked at his teammate. “Better give her what she wants.”

He buried his cock as deep as he could, rotating his hips in a circle, and then pulled out. I felt so empty as he went to the chair in the corner and sat down. His cock glistened with my juices.

“My turn,” Braden said. He rolled me over, then climbed onto the bed with me. He grabbed my waist and pulled me up until I was on my hands and knees facing Christian. Braden slid his cock up and down between my pussy lips, teasing me with the tip.

I arched my back and pushed my hips against him. “Don’t tease me.”

“Don’t listen to her,” Christian said while stroking himself. “She likes to be teased.”

“She sure does.” Braden continued sliding his cock up and down, *so close* to giving me what I wanted without actually doing it. Then, without warning, he plunged his cock deep into me, slamming every throbbing inch into my desperate pussy.

All three of us moaned at the same time, but for different reasons.

Braden grabbed my hips with both hands and jackhammered me from behind. It was exactly the kind of rough, no-holds-

barred fucking I wanted, especially while facing Christian. His cock was large, but it looked small in his wide palm as he pleased himself, chest heaving like *he* was the one in the act rather than just an observer. It turned me on as much as the cock that was *actually* inside of me.

“Come here,” I told Christian as my climax approached. “Let me taste you.”

Christian shook his head and smirked. “I’m having fun watching.”

“Ohh, *please*,” I begged. “I need your cock, I need both of you inside me.”

He jacked himself off faster while grinning.

The way he teased me, withholding what I wanted, pushed all of my sex-buttons perfectly. I barely muted my gasps as pure pleasure filled my body, spreading out from my pussy until it tingled in my arms and legs, my fingers and my toes. Braden slammed his cock into me again and again, extending the storm of a climax that ravaged me, then he slowed as I came down from the orgasm.

“Hey quarterback, do me a favor?” he said. “There’s a bottle in my jeans. Toss it to me.”

Christian obliged him, tossing the bottle across the room. Braden caught it in the air. I recognized it as the bottle of lube we used when we *really* had fun.

I shivered with excitement.

I heard him open the bottle. Then I felt his fingers sliding down between my cheeks until he reached my back door. He rubbed lube around the outside of my hole before gently plunging inside—first one finger, then two.

I moaned as he began fingering my ass while fucking me doggy style. Soon he added a third finger to the mix. I gasped with surprise, then pleasure. Three fingers definitely meant he was warming me up...

Christian watched with obvious hunger. “How’s her ass feel?”

“It’s fucking *tight*,” Braden replied. “Like it always is.”

“Too tight for a cock?”

Braden rumbled with laughter. “Let’s find out.”

Without hesitation, he removed his fingers, then pulled out of my pussy. Instantly I felt his crown press against my ass, then slide inside with ease, my tight ring gripping it where it met his shaft. The bottle of lube clicked open again and he drizzled more onto his cock. Once properly lubricated, he pushed forward with his weight, burying more of it deeper into my waiting ass. One inch, two, then three...

“God, you’re good at this.” His fingers dug into my waist as he plunged his cock deeper into my ass.

I moaned loudly—but not *too* loudly—as he filled me completely. All the way into my rear until I was stretched as wide as I could go. That was something we had worked up to; the first few times, I could only handle an inch or two, but now I was well-practiced at this. My pussy was on fire with pleasure, so I reached between my legs and rubbed it frantically. More moans surged out of my throat as I watched Christian watch me, still stroking himself with hungry eyes.

“I think she needs some help,” Braden said as he began fucking me slowly.

“I think you’re right.” Christian finally rose from the chair and approached. His cock slid into my mouth, but that wasn’t his primary intent—he reached underneath me and moved my hand aside so he could rub my clit himself.

Between Braden fucking my ass, Christian’s cock in my mouth, and his fingers rubbing my pussy and clit, I was in absolute heaven. The two teammates pistoned into me from both ends, ravaging me as they pleased, working together with as much skill as they showed on the football field. I closed my eyes and lost myself in the threesome and the intense ecstasy we were all in.

I never even heard the car pull up to the house, nor did I hear the door open.



Logan

Since getting Beth's text, I had spent the rest of the afternoon panicking.

When I found out that I was getting custody of Claire, a daughter I didn't even know existed, I was terrified. I wasn't scared of anything or anyone, but *that* situation freaked me out. I didn't know how to be a father. I didn't even *want* to be one.

But when I heard that a social worker had come by to check on Claire, and the meeting went poorly, I realized I didn't know what scared was. Not truly.

We had a game against the Montreal Canadiens tomorrow night, but I didn't give a single solitary fuck about that now. I took a cab straight to the airport and booked a flight home, texting my coach right as the plane took off and I put my phone on airplane mode. When I landed in St. Louis, I had fourteen angry texts from him, and three frantic voicemails.

I still didn't give a fuck. There were some things more important than a fucking hockey game.

Deep down, I knew there wasn't anything I could immediately do. The social worker had already visited, and we wouldn't get the results of Claire's ridiculous pop-quiz for a few days. Yet I couldn't sit in a different city, in a different *country*, knowing that I might lose my daughter.

Beth had given me a key to her house, which made sense considering how much time Claire was spending here. She hadn't given keys to the other two, a fact which gave me no small amount of satisfaction. I hadn't taken advantage of my

key yet, but this was the perfect time. It was late, and knocking might wake Claire. Not to mention the dogs.

I slipped inside and closed the door behind me silently. Pickles was the first to notice me, although Hank and Heidi quickly trotted into the kitchen to greet me. My four dogs must have been out in the kennel; I didn't mind, since they were such a handful. I noticed two bottles of wine and three empty glasses on the coffee table in the living room, but nobody was around.

The sound of lovemaking drifted down the hall, almost too soft to recognize. Heavy breathing, grunts, and a very low moan. Hearing it made me instantly hard. *I guess they're finding their own ways to deal with the stress of the situation.* That sounded pretty fucking good to me. I removed my shoes and tip-toed down the hall. The bedroom door was closed, and I quietly turned the knob to open the door.

The sight before me was hotter than any porno. Braden was fucking Beth doggy style on the bed while Christian stood in front of her. His cock was in her mouth and he was reaching underneath to rub her clit while she bounced back and forth between them, jerking with every one of Braden's thrusts. I felt myself grin.

Braden saw me first, his lidded gaze rising from Beth's ass to the door. "Logan?"

Everyone stopped what they were doing to look at me. Beth's eyes widened with surprise. For a moment I wondered if it was a mistake coming home early and disturbing them.

Then Christian grinned widely. "You're just in time. We've barely gotten started."

"What are you doing here?" Beth asked. She bit her lip, trying to focus long enough to hold a conversation. "Not that I'm not happy to see you, but..."

"I came back early."

"Don't the Blues play the Canadiens tomorrow?" Braden asked.

"You guys are more important than a game," I said simply.

The three of them took the news in stride. Beth was grinning, although her smile kept wavering as Braden slowly moved behind her.

“The only thing better than a threesome is a gangbang.” Christian leaned down and gave Beth a long kiss on the lips, then turned to me. “How about you jump in for a few plays.”

“I don’t like football analogies.”

“Then consider this a hockey substitution. I’m going to ride the bench for a bit.” And with that, Christian sat in the chair facing the bed.

Beth’s eyes sparkled as she looked at me, a sight that made my heart twist in a good way. “I couldn’t stop thinking about how I wished you were here. I’m so glad you came home early.”

Braden began moving behind her with a little more force. “You wanna strip, buddy? Kind of weird when you’re the only one wearing clothes.”

Beth bit her lip while I removed my clothes. I went slowly, stretching out the anticipation.

“Why don’t you tell Logan where my cock is right now,” Braden said.

“His cock,” Beth breathed, “is in my *ass*.”

Fuck, that was hot. She was taking it like a champ. I never would have guessed.

I leaned down and kissed her. “You’re getting good at that.”

“That’s what I said,” Braden sneered. “She’s got an ass that was *made* for this.” A loud smacking sound filled the room as he gave her ass a firm smack.

“Can’t wait to have a turn at it myself,” Christian rumbled from the chair, fingers moving up and down his shaft lazily.

It was then that I realized we hadn’t done this before: all three of us having sex with Beth at the same time. We’d only done threesomes. I stopped thinking about it as Beth grabbed my cock and pulled me in for a deep blowjob. Soon the only

thing I could think about was how amazing her lips felt wrapped around my cock while my best friend pumped her ass from the other end.

Christian watched from the corner eagerly while stroking himself. Despite doing things like this in multiple combinations with Beth and our ex before her, all of us were usually active participants the entire time. Having Christian watch from a nearby chair was really fucking *hot*. Like we had an audience for our depraved activities. Four was definitely better than three.

“I missed you,” Beth moaned while stroking me with her fingers. “I need you inside me.”

“I think she’s ready for that thing we haven’t done in a while,” Braden told me.

“What thing?” Beth asked.

“I slept my way through calculus in college, but the math seems straightforward to me,” Braden said. “She’s got three holes, and there’s three of us...”

Christian’s eyes widened. “Hold on, let me check your work. Yep. The math is correct.”

Beth let out a long moan, her wide eyes sparkling with excitement. “Then what are you waiting for?”

Braden and I shared a look: *this is going to be a lot of fun.*



Beth

Seeing Logan standing in the doorway was a shock. I must have stared at him for ten seconds without moving. Had my wish actually come true?

Excitement filled me at the thought of having all three of them there at the same time. I didn't even care about the reason he might have rushed home early, or the problem with the journalist, or anything else going on in our lives. All I wanted in that moment was to be shared by my three athletic lovers.

Christian returned to the chair in the corner and watched again with hungry eyes while Logan took his place.

It was everything I ever wanted. Braden and Logan fucking me from both ends while my third lover watched, stroking his cock eagerly. And then when they brought up the *next* thing we would do?

My body quivered with excitement at the thought.

They moved like it was a coordinated plan. Something they had *discussed*. Braden gave my ass one final thrust, then pulled out slowly. Logan sat on the edge of the bed and laid back, pulling me on top of him. My pussy was as wet as could be, and as I lowered myself onto his cock he slid inside easily. He leaned up and kissed me intensely.

“You feel amazing,” he breathed. “I’ve been thinking about this for my entire trip.”

His palms slid over my body, from my waist to my hips to my ass cheeks. He held me down on his cock, ceasing my

movement. Then his fingers spread my ass cheeks wide.

I felt a tingle of vulnerability at being exposed like that. Braden and Christian could see *everything* from back there. But these weren't strangers, and I trusted them completely. That made all the difference as Logan spread me as wide as he could.

I waited for Braden to fill me, but it wasn't him who approached me from behind. The bottle of lube clicked open and then I sensed Christian's large frame behind me.

I quivered with anticipation. "Sick of watching?" I asked while gazing over my shoulder.

Christian chuckled deeply. "Watching's fun. But not as fun as *this*."

While Logan spread me wide, Christian plunged his cock into my rear. Just the tip, but even that felt so *tight* while Logan's cock was in my pussy. The pleasure was great, but I tensed. We had done this a few times already, and it always took a few minutes to really warm up.

Christian's hands ran over my back, up my shoulders and down my arms. Caressing me. "Don't worry. I'll go slow."

Logan leaned up and took one of my nipples between his lips, nibbling gently. Christian continued exploring me with his hands like he was trying to memorize the curves of my body. Slowly I began to relax, and as I did, Christian's cock slid a little deeper into my ass.

I felt Christian's hot breath on my back as he exhaled. "I love being inside you."

"She's something, huh?" Braden said from the chair. "The view's great from over here."

The more I got used to being filled this way, the better it felt. I leaned forward and rested my head alongside Logan's, kissing a bead of sweat off his temple. Christian fucked my ass steadily, back and forth a few inches at a time. The ache of pressure from their twin cocks soon became an ache of pleasure, an ache for *more*. I moaned into Logan's ear as Christian went faster.

“How does it feel?” Braden asked.

I didn't have words, so I replied with a long cry of pleasure.

“What she said,” Christian rumbled. “It feels incredible.”

Soon his cock was pulling all the way back before slamming into me again. The way it slid inside me, rubbing against Logan's hard length in my pussy, hit every nerve ending in my body. My chest heaved with each filthy, sweaty thrust.

Logan's breathing intensified with mine. He wrapped his arms around me and held me close while remaining stationary underneath me, allowing Christian to do all the work. But despite his stillness a low moan formed in his throat.

“Beth,” he gasped. “I don't think I can... I'm going to... oh my *God*.”

I sat up enough to watch his beautiful face twist with shock and intense pleasure. His cock trembled and then gushed inside my pussy. I moaned with him while savoring the sight of his orgasm, every pulsing load of it, knowing that he had come solely from the friction of Christian's cock in my ass rubbing through my inner walls. Then I kissed him to inhale his quivering, animal-like pleasure.

“Holy. Shit,” Christian gasped. “That was incredible.”

Braden jumped up. “Goddamn. Can't say I've ever seen *that* before. I think it's my turn again.”

Christian pulled out and gave Braden a slap on the shoulder as they switched places. Underneath me, Logan tried to slide away but I put a hand on his chest.

“Don't leave me yet,” I said. “Stay inside. Keep me filled.”

The blond smiled wearily. “I'd stay in you forever if I could.”

Now that I was warmed up, Braden's cock slid into my ass easily. “Damn, that's even tighter than before,” he said.

“Indeed,” Christian said, out of sight.

Sensing that I could handle it, Braden was rougher with me than before. He grabbed my waist with both hands and

pounded my ass in long, complete strokes. Whether from that friction or from his own arousal, Logan never softened in my pussy. He remained harder than ever.

I'm being double-penetrated, I thought to myself while he had his way with my ass. *A cock in my pussy and one in my ass*. The thought turned me on intensely, just as it had the very first time, and all the times since. Logan moved underneath me, thrusting up into my pussy in conjunction with Braden. One pushing forward while the other pulled back. Like the pistons of a car in perfect synchronicity. The alternating combination of pussy and anal stimulation was *intense* in all the right ways. Reading my mind, Logan slid his hand between us and rubbed my clit in a circle.

“That feels good,” I breathed. “Just like that. Don’t stop.”

Braden reached forward and grabbed a handful of my hair, squeezing tight enough for me to feel it. “You want in on this, Christian?”

“When you’re done,” he said. “I want to see you fill her ass first.”

“Oh, I’m filling it plenty.”

I could hear the grin in Christian’s voice. “I want you to *fill* it.”

“So do I,” I breathed while my pleasure intensified. “Fill my ass with your come.”

Braden slammed his cock into me harder and harder. He reached around my sides and pawed at my breasts, squeezing them against me possessively. He leaned forward and kissed me between the shoulder blades, his breath hot while he fucked me more and more raggedly, losing control of what he was doing and going simply based on feel, whatever his body demanded. His breathing turned into gasps for air, short and frantic, and then his cries of ecstasy filled the room.

“I’m coming! Oh *God*, I’m coming in your ass, I’m coming...”

His voice transformed into a wordless cry as he pushed his cock as deep as it would go and shot his sticky seed into the

depths of my behind. I didn't come again, but I was close. And his pleasure alone was satisfying enough by itself.

"Wow," Braden breathed. "I... Just wow."

"I could feel it," Logan said with wonder. "I could feel him shuddering inside you."

"That's what I felt with you," Christian chimed in. "Now feel this."

He pushed Braden out of the way, then shoved me down onto Logan's chest. I felt a moment of emptiness before he slid himself back into my ass. He had gone slow before, but he had no such restrictions now. It was like he had seen Braden going to town on me and it was now a competition. He gripped my ass cheeks with both hands and *buried* his cock inside me, all the way to the base. Christian remained there, holding it deep inside me for a moment.

And then he fucked me relentlessly.

I had never felt Christian like this before. He was driven completely by lust, throwing himself into me with every thrust. But it was exactly what I wanted for the grand finale of our gangbang, the culmination of their triple-pronged love for me, and somehow I was able to take it. I gasped and squirmed with shuddering pleasure as he ravaged my ass. With Logan's fingers working on my clit my climax arrived like a meteor, scorching through the atmosphere before *crashing* into the ground with explosive intensity.

"Beth!" Christian roared as he began to come.

Logan was only seconds behind him, and the two of them created a duet of ecstasy in my ears. They continued pumping as they came, pistoning into my pussy and ass while filling both with their hot, sticky seed, never stopping or slowing down until long after they had stopped coming because *I* was still coming, thrashing and bucking between their bodies while everything went white and numb and heaven descended over me like a blanket.



Beth

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” I said while we were all splayed out in bed together. “But why exactly are you here?”

“Ouch,” Braden said.

“You know what I mean!” I insisted. “I’m *thrilled* you surprised us like this, Logan. But I thought you weren’t coming back until Saturday.”

“I panicked when I got your text about Claire and the social worker,” he replied. His low rumble of a voice was barely audible, more of a whisper. But the way we were all laying on the bed, heads together like the petals of an erotic flower, a whisper was all he needed. “I pictured her being taken away, and put with a foster family. It brought my entire life into focus. A single hockey game doesn’t mean shit compared to losing Claire.”

“You think they would do that?” Christian asked. “Take her away? Put her in a foster home?”

“Fuck if I know,” Logan replied. “But I didn’t want to sit around in another country worrying about it.”

“Won’t you get in trouble?” I asked.

“Probably.”

“And you’re not worried?”

“Only thing I’m worried about is Claire. Everything else can fuck off.”

The four of us were quiet for a while. The heat in my house turned on, a low hum in the ceiling. I listened to that, and the

sound of three sets of lungs breathing all around me.

“Did it live up to expectations?” Braden finally asked.

“What?”

“All of us together. Getting gangbanged.”

I chuckled. “Don’t call it that!”

“Why not? That’s what happened.”

“It sounds so vulgar. So naughty. So...”

“Hot?” Christian asked.

“Okay, yeah, It’s hot. And yes, it absolutely lived up to my expectations. Even though I didn’t really have any expectations for how something like that might go.”

“Glad you came home early,” Braden said, reaching over and smacking Logan on the bare thigh. “And then I’m glad you *came* early.”

Logan snorted. “Tease me all you want. I don’t care if I came quicker than normal. That shit was *hot*.”

All of us nodded in agreement.

Logan got up first and went to take a shower. I joined him, followed by Christian and Braden. It was cramped in the walk-in shower, but that added an element of humor to the entire situation. I lathered up a washcloth and helped clean my three men off, and they did the same to me, six hands rubbing soap into my skin. It was a good metaphor for our relationship in general: it was crowded with four of us, so we had to rely on each other more than a regular relationship.

After showering, Logan went to the guest bedroom to check on Claire. I didn’t intend to snoop, but I peeked in on them from the kitchen, where I had a view straight into the cracked doorway of the guest room. Logan was sitting on the edge of the bed, stroking Claire’s hair. He sat there for a long time, just staring down at his daughter.

He’s a good father, despite all of this being thrust upon him without warning. I doubt I would’ve handled this as well as him if I were in his shoes.

The four of us were cramped in my bed, but somehow we made it work—although Braden muttered about Christian kicking in his sleep. I slept deeply, surrounded by the men who cared about me. How could a woman in that position *not* get a great night of sleep?

“I already called her twice,” Logan said while we ate breakfast around the dining room table. “The social worker isn’t answering her phone.”

“Well, it *is* seven-thirty in the morning,” Christian pointed out.

“What do you need help with today?” Claire asked. “Besides poop scooping and bathing the dogs.”

I pulled my chair closer to Claire and put on a comforting smile. “We actually don’t need any more help.”

Claire looked at me like I had said the sky was made of neon pudding. “Yes you do.”

“You’ve helped us *so much*,” I said. “More than most people ever do in a lifetime! But it’s time for me to let Suzie and Ken do all of the work in the kennel. You have to focus on your studies.”

“I can do both,” she insisted. “Ken doesn’t poop scoop as good as me. He misses Princess’s poop because it’s so small, but I make sure I get it all.”

“We might get in trouble if we let you work here,” Logan explained calmly. “You’re only supposed to do your schoolwork. And a business like Beth’s can’t hire children. They have to use regular workers.”

“That’s dumb. You *need* me.”

“Maybe you can help more in the future!” I said cheerfully. “But for now...”

“*No*,” Claire snapped angrily. “Ken doesn’t poop scoop the right way. I just *told you*.”

“I know, but...”

“You’re not *listening*,” she whined. “I need to help!”

“Claire, this isn’t a debate,” Logan said a little more forcefully. “For the next few weeks, maybe longer, you need to only focus on your homework. Understand?”

Claire got up from the table and tossed a handful of bacon on the floor. “I hate you. I miss my mom!”

“CLAIRE,” Logan bellowed. “You clean up that mess *right now*.”

The four of us were stunned as she sprinted out of the room. Pickles, Heidi, and Hank came running into the kitchen to eat the bacon off the floor.

“You know,” Braden said into the silence, “I was just thinking to myself that Claire hasn’t thrown a tantrum in a while. Sorry for jinxing it.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, rubbing Logan’s back. “She didn’t mean what she said.”

Logan shrugged. “I know.”

But I could tell her words stung more than Logan wanted to admit.

“You’re a great father,” Christian said.

“Yeah! Totally!” Braden agreed.

Logan shook his head. “Doesn’t feel like it right now.”

The television had been on this whole time, and I hadn’t paid it any attention. But when I heard Logan’s name mentioned, I whipped my head around to the screen, along with the other three guys.

“The star left wing has apparently left the team in Montreal prior to their game tonight against the Canadiens,” the news anchor was saying. “When reached for comment, many other Blues players mentioned they were shocked by Logan Landry’s abrupt disappearance.”

“I’m not a good father,” Logan muttered, “and apparently I’m an even worse teammate.”

The television cut over to an interview with the Blues coach, Craig Berube. “I don’t know what happened to Logan, and I’m

working to figure that out. But any absence like this is inexcusable. Our organization doesn't tolerate this kind of behavior from our players, I can assure you."

Logan got up and walked into the other room without a word.

After tending to the dogs with Ken and Suzie for an hour, I went back inside and changed into a pantsuit that I hadn't worn since I was still working in an office. I didn't know if small claims court was as formal as a regular courtroom, but I sure as heck didn't want to under-dress for the day.

"You don't have to come with me," I told my three boyfriends. "There's nothing you can do to make it better."

"We want to show our support," Braden insisted. "We're here for you, for the big things in life and the small ones."

Logan gave a curt nod. Next to him, Claire was still pouting from the scene she'd made at breakfast.

"Besides," Christian added, "the courthouse is near the stadium. You can drop us off for practice afterwards."

"Just don't draw any attention to yourselves," I said. "I don't know what kind of judge we're going to get, but I'm sure he won't appreciate his courtroom turning into a celebrity spectacle."

The sun was rising between the skyscrapers as I drove into downtown St. Louis. The Gateway arch punctuated the skyline, looming majestically in the soft morning light. The city exuded a serene energy on this Friday morning; it was waking up, streets calm, storefronts slowly opening and pedestrians bustling about their day. The Enterprise Center, where the Colts played, loomed to our left as I pulled into a parking garage adjacent to all the municipal buildings.

My three boyfriends and Claire sat in the very back row, while I sat a little closer to the front. Christian and Braden wore baseball caps that they pulled low over their eyes, a suitable disguise. Logan didn't bother, and sat up straight with a challenging twinkle in his eyes. When I glanced back at them, Braden winked at me.

Trip was already there, sitting in the very front row. He stared straight ahead, never glancing back. I was grateful for that—I wasn't sure what kind of face I would make if he locked eyes with me.

Everyone stood as the judge entered the courtroom. He was an older gentleman with a bushy white mustache and a crown of similar white hair around his temples, bald on top. He instructed everyone to be seated, and then he called forward the first case.

Our case was fourth in line on the docket. The first case was a disagreement between two neighbors over who was responsible for replacing a fence that was damaged in a storm. The second case involved slander on social media, and the third case was a dispute about rent between a landlord and a tenant. The tenant was a woman around my age, and the judge made an off-hand comment about her wearing a low-cut top in his courtroom. I breathed a sigh of relief that I had dressed more professionally.

In every case, the judge worked quickly. It seemed that there were a lot of cases to get through today, and he was in no mood for nonsense.

Finally, it was our turn. The judge called our names, and Trip and I walked up to the two podiums before the judge. There was no lawyer with Trip; he must have been bluffing about that. Typical.

The judge put on a pair of reading glasses while reviewing the papers in front of him. Finally, he looked up at us. “The plaintiff is requesting an \$800 reimbursement from the defendant for a hockey ticket. Is this correct?”

“Yes, your honor,” Trip said with all the formality of a murder case.

“Please state your case.”

“I took my then-girlfriend, Beth Foster, to a Blues hockey game,” Trip explained. “She broke up with me shortly after this.”

“And why do you believe Ms. Foster should be compelled to reimburse you for a ticket that you purchased for her?”

Trip stood up a little straighter. “During the two months we were together, we usually split the cost of dates. You should have our Venmo records, your honor: the day before the hockey game, we got lunch at Panera Bread, and Beth Venmo’d me for the amount she owed. You’ll see countless other transactions similar to this. Furthermore, when she broke up with me, she stated that she wished she had done so a week ago. This shows that she had, um, malice aforethought. She knew she was going to break up with me, but still allowed me to waste my money.”

Malice aforethought? I struggled not to roll my eyes.

“Ms. Foster?” the judge asked. “Do you have anything to say to this?”

“Yes, your honor. I had no intentions of breaking up with Trip prior to the hockey game. It was actually his actions at the game that led to our break-up. And yes, we usually split the cost of dates, but those dates are typically under a hundred dollars. It was Trip’s idea to go to this game, and his insistence on purchasing tickets right on the ice. I even told him several times that I didn’t care where we sat.”

“Do you have evidence of these comments?” the judge asked. “Text messages, or any other form of documented conversation?”

“Unfortunately, no. I told him in person.”

“I see. Do you dispute her claims?”

“She never told me she didn’t care where she sat,” Trip replied. “In fact, she expressed delight at sitting in the front row. She enjoyed it so much that she sat in the front row *again* at a game in November. I believe I submitted photographs of her Instagram post.”

“Those tickets were free, your honor,” I replied. “A friend of mine, who is a player on the Blues, gave them to me. I would never have paid full price to sit in the front row.”

The judge sorted through the papers in front of him for a long time. At least a full minute. I wondered if I should say anything else in my defense, but I couldn't think of anything. I felt like I had a strong case.

"I will now make my ruling." The judge took off his reading glasses and looked at both of us. "Property law is well established in this country. Before our country existed, in fact—much of it was inherited from English common law. And that law is consistent with regards to cases such as this one. The ticket purchased by the plaintiff for the defendant was a gift, made without condition. This is in stark contrast to, say, an engagement ring, which is a gift contingent on an eventual marriage. The law is quite clear in this situation."

YES! I thought, keeping my face neutral. *In your face, Trip!*

"But your text message insinuating you should have broken up with him sooner," the judge continued, "leaves me to believe you were stringing the plaintiff along, squeezing whatever benefits you could from him before dumping him. Regardless of what traditional law dictates, I am fond of King Solomon style rulings. In this case, I find that the defendant must reimburse the plaintiff for half of the cost of the ticket, in the value of \$400."

He banged the gavel, putting an end to the case—and severing the final tie between me and Trip.



Beth

I was shocked by the ruling; I hadn't expected to pay anything at all. But it was only \$400, which wouldn't come close to breaking the bank. Not while my business was doing so well. I thanked the judge, then prepared to leave.

That's when I saw Trip pumping his fist and shooting a victorious smirk in my direction. He was actually *sneering!* I did my best to ignore him and walked back down the aisle to the back of my room, where my three men and Claire joined me in leaving the courtroom.

"Could be worse," Christian said when we were out in the domed entrance room. "But that still sucks."

"At least he's out of your life, now," Braden said.

"Exactly." I turned and sent my own sneer at Trip, who was walking toward the exit. "I'll never have to deal with that asshole again."

He must have heard me, or he was unsatisfied with the judge's ruling, because he abruptly turned and took a few steps in my direction. I felt my three men tense up as he approached, and Trip stopped before getting too close.

"Let's go get a snack from the vending machine," Christian said to Claire, although he was staring at Logan when he said it. The four of them walked a short distance away, though Logan kept glancing over his shoulder.

"You must be pleased with this outcome," Trip said curtly. "Pleased that you've made me resort to this."

“I don’t have any emotion about this frivolous claim or your desperate attempt to remain attached to my life like a leech,” I replied, biting off every delicious word. “I don’t think about you at all, Trip. You don’t have any place in my mind, or my life. I sincerely hope you can find a way to move on with your own life without pretending to be the victim in all of this.”

Trip’s face twisted with unrestrained rage. “I’m glad this is over. I never want to see you again.”

“You have a strange way of showing it.”

“Because you keep *manipulating* me,” he spat, eyes burning like a bonfire. “That’s what you do, Elizabeth. You manipulate people. Like a spider. A... a... a black widow. You’ve destroyed my life, and you’ll do the same to whichever of these jocks you’re dating now.”

Two months ago, his rant would have sent me into my own rage. Now I only laughed. “Take care, Trip.”

Before I could walk away, Trip said, “You’re such a *cunt*.”

Over by the security check-in, one of the guards turned toward us. “Hey, settle down...”

“You’re a *cunt*,” Trip said, taking a step closer. He was like a child who had found the right button to push. “You’ve always been a cunt, and you always will be.”

“There it is,” Logan said.

“What?” Braden asked.

“The thing I was waiting for.” Logan closed the distance in four long strides, pulled back a fist, and threw a right hook into Trip’s jaw. The blow sent him spinning away, and he crumpled to one knee, holding his face and wailing in surprise.

“Fuck that hurts,” Logan hissed, cradling his fist. “But it feels so fucking good.”

I sighed. “I wish you hadn’t done that. But it was *extremely* satisfying to watch.”

Logan grinned. “Right?”

The security guard had been approaching from the moment Trip cursed, and now he grabbed Logan's arm. "Sorry, pal. He deserved it, but the law's the law." He unclipped a pair of handcuffs from his belt. "Hey, are you Logan Landry?"

Another guard came rushing over. "Sir, do you want to press charges?"

"YES I WANT TO PRESS CHARGES!" Trip screeched. "Are you *blind*? He sucker-punched me! I'm not going to protect your new boyfriend. Or at least *one* of them. I didn't realize you were such a slut."

Now Christian and Braden took a few steps in our direction. "Say one more word to Beth," Christian said, jabbing a finger at Trip, "and you'll *really* regret it."

"Did you hear that?" Trip demanded of the guards. "They threatened me too! Arrest them!"

"That one's on you, pal." The guard turned toward the football players. "How about you two go wait outside? I'd hate to take either of you in. I have a hundred bucks on the Colts on Sunday."

"Easy money," Braden said with a smirk. "We're going to beat the Titans by twenty points."

"Seriously?" Trip demanded. "You're going to let them make threats and then *walk away*?"

"Take a step back," one guard snapped at him, "or I'll arrest you for impeding an officer."

Trip held his palms out, then walked over to a bench to sit down. He tenderly touched his jaw and yelped in pain.

The other guard grimaced to me. "We have to take him to the Fourth Street location for booking. Someone will need to bail him out."

"I'll meet you there," I told Logan. My heart went out to him standing there, hands cuffed behind his back.

"Can I talk to my daughter for a minute?" Logan asked.

"Make it quick."

Logan knelt in front of Claire, who had watched all of this happen silently. “Are you in trouble, Logan?”

“A little bit, yeah. Nothing serious. What you just saw was me losing my temper. I made a big mistake, one you should never make. No matter how angry you get sometimes, you have to find constructive ways to let it out.”

“Punching someone isn’t constructive?”

Logan shook his head. “Nope. It was a mistake. One that I promise I will never make again, especially in front of you. Do you understand?”

Claire bobbed her head, but didn’t make any move to hug Logan. He couldn’t initiate it with his hands behind his back, so he stood and allowed the guards to take him away.

*

“I knew it was a bad idea for Logan to come,” Braden said while we walked back to the car.

“Then why did you let him?” I asked.

Braden sputtered a laugh. “*Let him?* Have you ever tried to tell Logan not to do something? No thank you. I’d rather see Trip get punched than me.”

“I should have said something,” Christian muttered. “I was worried about it too.”

“Enough with the blame,” I told them. “Logan’s a grown man who made a decision himself.” I glanced at Claire. “A *bad* decision.”

She nodded. “He told me it was a mistake.”

“Yes, it was,” I agreed.

We got in the car and I plugged in the address to the Enterprise Center. “I’ll drop you guys off at the stadium before going to pick Logan up. It might take a while.”

“What’s cunt mean?” Claire suddenly asked.

Christian, Braden, and I all flinched at the same time. Braden covered his mouth, trying to suppress a laugh.

“That’s a *very* bad word,” I said. “You can never ever say that word again. Do you understand, Claire?”

I glanced in the rear-view mirror. She nodded.

“That man was a bully, wasn’t he?” she asked. “That’s why he said the bad word?”

“I guess he was a bully, yes.”

“Logan told me that bullies are the worst people in the world,” Claire explained to the car. “He said that you have to stand up to bullies, even if they’re picking on someone else. Especially if they pick on someone else. That’s what Logan was doing for you, Beth. He was standing up to a bully.”

“I guess he was,” I replied.

Claire stared out the window. “Logan’s smart. He’s a good guy, like Spiderman. Even if he said I can’t help you with the dogs anymore.”

Braden and I laughed. A few hours ago, Claire was throwing a temper tantrum and saying mean things to Logan. Now she was defending him.

That’s an eight-year-old for you.

I drove three blocks north and then turned west toward the Enterprise Center. There was traffic on this road; I was stuck at a light for three cycles without moving.

“What’s going on up there?” Christian asked.

“It’s a Friday. There’s traffic,” Braden said.

“Not like this. I rolled down my window and stuck my head out to get a better look. “Something is happening up ahead...”

The cars finally started moving, albeit slowly. I got in the right lane so I could pull into the player entrance to drop Christian and Braden off. That’s when the crowd came into view. There were a hundred people clustered around the entrance to the stadium, holding signs and chanting in unison.

“Oh my God,” Christian said. “Those are protesters. They’re *protesting the Colts!*”

Epilogue



Beth

As we got closer, I realized that Christian was right: there were hundreds of fans protesting the Colts in front of the stadium. Or, more specifically, they were protesting the Colts *owner*.

“Don’t trade our heroes!” they were chanting. “Or your bottom line will be *zeroes!*”

There were countless signs carried by the protesters. The first one I saw said:

Christian > Cash

Behind it was another one in a similar vein:

Braden > Bucks

“This is awesome!” Braden said, grinning widely at the sight. “Look at all these people who support us!”

“I like the one that says *Don’t be a faker, keep Baker,*” I read out loud.

“Wait a minute,” Christian said. “That one guy has a sign that says *legalize it*. Doesn’t he know Missouri legalized marijuana in 2022?”

“Oh, wait.” Braden squinted out the window. “He’s talking about bath salts. *That’s* what he wants legalized. Sheesh.”

“What are bath salts?” Claire asked in her innocent voice.

“It’s a type of salt you put on your food,” Braden replied.

“Oh. Okay.”

I couldn’t reach the player entrance because there were too many protesters blocking the way. Instead, I pulled over to the side of the road before we reached them.

“Is there another entrance you can use?” I asked.

“On the south end of the stadium.” Christian pointed. “We can go in over there.”

“Screw that! These people love us. I want to soak this in.” Braden leaned over from the passenger seat and gave me a kiss. “Thanks for the ride, babe.”

He hopped out of the car and walked toward the throng of people. One woman noticed him first, and then all of them were screaming and shouting with joy. In the back seat, Christian let out a long sigh.

“Soak it in!” I told him. “Sunday might be your last game playing for the Colts.”

Christian’s appearance from the car sent the crowd into a frenzy, like a pork chop thrown into a pool of piranhas. Soon they were taking selfies with anyone that could get close to them.

“Everyone!” Christian shouted, putting his hands up to command silence. “We don’t want to be traded either. We want to stay right here in St. Louis and prove that the Colts can compete next year!”

The crowd roared with approval.

“The owner might be giving up, but we aren’t,” Christian continued. “We’re going to thump the Titans on Sunday and make a statement. But your voices are important. Keep protesting! Make your opinion heard!”

They continued cheering, even as Christian and Braden pushed through to the gate and went into the stadium. After they were gone, the protester chants were a little bit louder, with a little more heart.

“What are they sad about?” Claire asked me.

“It’s a long story,” I replied. “But they really love Uncle Chrissy and Uncle Braden.”

“Good,” Claire replied simply. “Me too.”

The municipal building where Logan was being booked had parking right outside, and I was able to snag a spot. After much consideration, I decided it was bad enough that Claire had seen her dad get arrested at a courthouse. She didn’t need to go into the jail and see him released, too.

“I need you to stay here while I go inside,” I told her. “Can you do that?”

“I’ll do my homework,” she replied. “If I do all of my homework, maybe I can help you with the dogs again. Right?”

“We’ll see,” I said.

I went inside and checked-in with the front desk. Logan was currently being booked deeper inside the building, so I met with a seedy-looking bail bondsman to arrange for Logan’s bail to be paid.

I never thought I’d be bailing out my boyfriend from jail, I thought while sitting down. It’s still better than anything Trip made me deal with.

Logan was released twenty minutes later, which was quicker than I had feared. I immediately hugged him; his strong arms folded around me and held me against his broad chest.

“Are you pleased with yourself?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I scowled up at him. “That wasn’t the correct answer. I was hoping for some humility.”

“Listen, Beth,” he said in a surprisingly calm voice. “I’ve gotten in a million fights on the ice. And a lot of other fights

before that. But never in my life have I punched someone who deserved it as much as your ex.”

I held his hand as we walked outside. “I’ll admit it was satisfying to watch. But now Trip is connected to my life again. You’re going to have to go to court over this. He’s going to milk this for a long time. Trust me, you gave him exactly what he wanted.”

“I’ve got a plan for that. A way to keep him away for good.”

“No,” I snapped. “I’m not going to let you do anything else, Logan. You’re only going to make it worse!”

“I have a way out of this that doesn’t involve punching,” Logan insisted. “A peaceful solution. Maybe.”

“I hope you’re right,” I said skeptically.

As soon as we stepped outside, Claire jumped out of the car and came running up to us. Logan crouched down, and she threw herself into his arms.

“I’m sorry you got in trouble,” she said. “I love you, daddy.”

“I love you too—wait a minute. You called me daddy.”

Oh snap. She did. She’s always called him Logan.

“Because you’re my dad,” she said. “I’m sorry for what I said this morning. I don’t hate you. I just lost my temper. I love you, daddy. More than anyone.”

“Me too,” Logan said, tears welling in his eyes. “Me too.”

I felt my own chest growing tight as I watched the two of them make up. *Yeah. We’re going to be all right.*

We had to drive past the protests to get back to the interstate, so I quickly explained to Logan what was going on. “Ugh, the traffic is even worse going in this direction. I’ll turn right up here and try to go around it.”

Suddenly, Logan reached over and grabbed the wheel. “No, don’t go around. Keep going. I want to see it.”

We continued on the street toward the stadium, the chanting growing louder with every block. There were several news

vans parked outside now, with camera crews filming the protest. When we got to a stand-still, Logan abruptly unbuckled his seatbelt.

“Stay here. Daddy will be right back.”

“Where are you going!” I asked, but he was already leaving the car and running across the road.

“We don’t have time for this shit,” Claire said.

I shot her a look, but she giggled. She was definitely at the age where she liked pushing her boundaries, especially when it got a reaction out of the adults.

Logan joined the crowd of protesters, who cheered when they saw him—although not as loudly as they did for the Colts players. Logan borrowed a megaphone from the woman in charge, then climbed up on top of the fence so he could be seen by everyone.

“My name’s Logan Landry and I play for the Blues!” he announced. “We’re supposed to play the Montreal Canadiens tonight, but I left the team to come home and protest against the bullshit Colts owners. Christian Baker and Braden Clark are two of my best friends. They’re part of the heart of this city. I’m joining all of you to demand that the Colts don’t trade them!”

The crowd roared with Logan, who thrust the megaphone into the air triumphantly. Sitting in my car, still stuck in traffic, I could only laugh.

*

Saturday was busy at the kennel—lots of customers were returning from New Year’s trips and needed to pick up their dogs. After working from six in the morning until seven o’clock at night, I drove over to Logan’s place. All three of us decided to spend the night there with Logan. With everything going on, none of us wanted to be apart. It felt like an

important weekend: the final game of the season was being played tomorrow, and then our future would be decided.

Yet despite being surrounded on all sides by my athletic men in Logan's king-sized bed, I struggled to fall asleep. I tossed and turned, constantly thinking about what the future held. If Christian and Braden were traded, would we survive? I was willing to give it a try, but the realistic part of me knew long-distance relationships were tough. What if we tried it for a while, working hard to make it last... and then it fizzled out?

Then I should be savoring it while we're together, I told myself. *Enjoying every moment with them.*

There was a somber mood at breakfast the next morning. Claire helped Logan make breakfast for everyone, but the rest of us quietly drank our coffee and scrolled on our phones. I couldn't tell if Christian and Braden were contemplative because of the game today, or if they were worried about our future the way I was. I decided not to ask.

Braden picked up the newspaper and turned to the sports page. "Holy fuck! Did you see this?" he asked.

"Language," Logan snapped.

"Yeah! Language, Uncle Braden!" Claire added.

"Holy *potatoes*," Braden clarified, holding up the newspaper to Logan. "Did you see this article? It's about you!"

I jerked in surprise. The newspaper article! I had intended to tell everyone about Jackie and her story, but had forgotten about it thanks to everything else going on.

"This is my fault," I moaned. "I knew about this and forgot to tell you. I'm so sorry, everyone."

"Sorry about what?" Christian asked. "What's it say?"

Logan took the newspaper and scanned it. "Why are you sorry?"

"The journalist came to me for a story the other day. She wanted a statement about it. I told her I would talk to you guys first, but then I forgot because..."

“Because we were busy that night,” Logan finished for me, eyes twinkling.

“Because we gangbanged you that night,” Braden whispered. I kicked him under the table.

“This story isn’t what you think,” Logan said, tossing the newspaper on the table. I leaned forward to read the headline.

THE TORONTO TERROR

Logan Landry’s Humble History

“Huh?” I said. “This isn’t the story I was expecting...”

“Jackie contacted me, too,” Logan explained. “I convinced her not to run the story about *all* of us.”

“How did you do that?”

Logan tapped the newspaper. “I gave her a juicier story. I spent two hours on the phone with her, telling her my life story. Growing up as an orphan with Emily. Bouncing from foster family to foster family. Struggling with bullying. It’d better be a good story, because I told her *everything*.”

Christian skimmed the article. “There’s nothing in here about all of us.”

“That was my one stipulation. She had to keep my current personal life out of it. She warned me that they may still run the story in the future, but it won’t be for another eight months. Hopefully longer.”

“Holy... potatoes,” Braden said while reading the article. “You really opened up to her. You held nothing back.”

I got up and hugged Logan. “I’m proud of you.”

Logan shrugged. “I’m a dad now. I have to stay in touch with my emotions.”

“And never lose your temper!” Claire chimed in.

Logan reached down and ruffled her hair. “That’s my girl.”

The doorbell rang, which sent Logan's four dogs into a frenzy of barking and scrambling from the kitchen to the front door. Logan glanced at his watch, frowned, then went to answer it. When he returned, he was followed by the absolute last person I wanted to see.

Kathy Polk, from Social Services.

"Hello, Claire," she said, looking around the kitchen. "It's good to see you at home this early... and not at work." Her eyes met mine, then narrowed.

"Ms. Polk, I'm *so sorry* about what happened on Thursday," I said. "I swear, it's a misunderstanding."

Braden was on his feet instantly. "You're the social worker? Listen, it's not what it looks like. Claire used to be afraid of dogs, but visiting Beth's kennel fixed that."

"She was quiet and reserved when we first met her," Christian added. "Helping Beth with her dogs brought her out of her shell. It helped us all learn her real personality."

"Especially after her mother passed," Logan chimed in. "I don't know what's going to happen to her, but you can't put her in a foster home. I'll do anything to prevent that, even if it means quitting hockey and becoming a full-time dad. I'm deadly serious. I'll do *anything*."

Kathy put up a hand to silence us. "Claire's not being put in a foster home. Social workers aren't evil people, Mr. Landry. We just want what's best for the children, which is almost always to stay with their family."

Logan relaxed, but only a little bit. "I can focus more on her studies. We can get her caught up so she can join the other students after the summer. If I need to hire a tutor..."

"That won't be necessary," Kathy interrupted. "Claire aced her test."

The four other adults in the room did a double-take. "She *what*?" I asked.

Claire seemed oblivious to all of this—she grabbed a plate of eggs and bacon, sat down at the table, and began eating

while humming to herself.

Kathy nodded. "I'm shocked she's been able to catch up so quickly, but she has. She's a smart girl, and she's clearly in good hands with you." She gazed around the room. "All of you."

I glanced at Claire. She picked up a piece of bacon and held it under the table. Loki reached out with all the care of a heart surgeon and took it from her, then went trotting off into the other room.

"It's good for children to have hobbies, and chores," Kathy explained. "But don't let her help *too* much at your kennel. It's not a good look."

"Message received," I replied.

Logan and Kathy went into the other room to chat about Claire for a little while; I tried to eavesdrop from the kitchen but couldn't hear anything. She left after ten minutes, and then Logan returned to us in the kitchen.

"Huh," he said. "That went... well."

"I thought you said the test was hard!" I said to Claire.

She answered without looking up from her eggs. "It was hard. But I'm smart."

"But you said you guessed on a lot of questions," Logan said.

Claire shrugged.

Braden was laughing uproariously. "She must have gotten her smarts from her mom, because she definitely didn't get them from you."

Logan made sure Claire wasn't looking, then flipped Braden off.

"Good thing she didn't hear about your arrest yesterday," I said. "That might have changed her opinion about how Claire's in good hands."

"Punching someone isn't the model of good fatherly behavior," Logan agreed.

“That guy deserved it,” Claire said idly, still focusing on her plate of food. “He was being a real cunt!”

I felt my jaw drop. The others reacted the same way.

“Sorry,” I told Logan. “I meant to warn you that she overheard a lot of the back-and-forth in the courtroom.”

“Thank God you waited until after Kathy left to blurt that out!” Logan said.

Claire gave us a confused look. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Logan said, crouching down to hug her from behind. “I just love you. That’s all.”

“I know.”

*

Christian and Braden left for the stadium to prepare for the last game of the season. I gave them each an extra long hug before they left.

“Give it your all, today,” I told them. “Don’t hold anything back. Show them what they’re missing if they trade you.”

Braden gave me a wink. “Giving it my all is the only way I know how to play, baby.”

“See you after the game,” Christian told me, smiling warmly. “Love you.”

“Love you too,” I replied automatically.

It wasn’t until the door was closed and they were gone that I realized: *we just said the L-word to each other.*

Funny. It didn’t seem like that big of a deal. I loved all three of my men, and I knew they felt the same way—even if Braden and Logan hadn’t said it yet.

I went home to the kennel to take care of some work before going to the football game. When I arrived, I walked into the kennel building and immediately yelped in surprise. Ken and

Suzie were locked together against the wall, vigorously making out.

“What the hell!”

They immediately split apart. “Shit. Sorry, Ms. Foster.”

“I thought you two hated each other!”

Ken shrugged. “I hate her opinions on how many healers should be in a D&D party. But I like everything else.”

“And *I* hate how Ken insists a Paladin should prioritize holy damage.” She shook her head. “It’s like you don’t even know what a tank is.”

“Paladins can still tank, even if they have higher DPS than normal!” he argued.

Suzie rolled her eyes. “Is that what we’re going to do today? Fight?”

I laughed it off and got to work on the to-do list clipboard. I’m glad my kennel was helping other people find love, and not just me.

After a few hours of work, I met Logan and Claire at the football game. There were still protesters outside the stadium holding signs and chanting in unison, but most fans ignored them while shuffling inside.

Today, we had regular seats up in the bleachers. We didn’t need the attention that came from sitting in the front row in the end zone. Claire asked why we were so far away from the field, so Logan explained that those tickets were a lot more expensive than these ones.

“Don’t you make, like, a bajillion dollars?” Claire asked.

Logan chuckled. “I only make *half* a bajillion dollars.”

“Oh. Too bad.” Claire didn’t ask anything else about it.

As the game against the Tennessee Titans began, a lot of fans tried to get a chant going in the stadium. But it was disjointed and never got very loud. I couldn’t even tell what they were trying to chant until someone in the row in front of us joined in: “No trade! No trade!”

“At least some of the fans are upset enough to let their voices be heard,” Logan muttered.

“Too bad it’s not more.”

The Titans received the kickoff, then quickly made a fifty-yard pass that moved them halfway across the field. That took the air out of the stadium, and the fan noise grew quieter.

I hope the season doesn’t end with a whimper, I thought.

The Titans scored a quick touchdown, then the Colts had the ball. But on the third play, their running back was tackled from the side, and the ball popped out. The Titans recovered the fumble and ran it in for a second touchdown.

Within two minutes, the Colts were losing 0 - 14.

“Come on, Christian,” I whispered. “Get back into the game.”

Christian’s next pass was too long for the receiver. On the next play, he rolled out of the pocket and looked downfield... but then was sacked by one of the Titans defensive players. It was third and long.

There was no worse feeling than watching someone you loved struggle. Especially when that struggle was public, in front of eighty thousand fans—and millions more on television. The crowd stirred restlessly; I heard complaints and unhappy murmurs all around me. This was a terrible way to end the season.

It’ll be up to me to cheer them up tonight. A good partner lifts you up when you’re down.

But on third and long, Christian surprised me and everyone else in the stadium. He dropped back to pass the ball, then tucked it under one arm and began sprinting upfield. He dodged one tackle, then hurdled another defender before finally being taken down—after crossing the first down line. A small cheer went up among the crowd.

Then, on the next play, Christian hit Braden on a long pass. The tall wide receiver stiff-armed his opponent, then glided into the end zone for a touchdown.

“No trade!” a few fans began to chant again. “No trade! No trade!”

“No trade!” Claire joined in, not understanding what it meant. “No trade! No trade!”

Despite falling into an early deficit, the Colts played well from that point on. Christian threw another touchdown pass in the first quarter, then another in the second quarter. He and Braden were perfectly in sync in the third quarter, throwing two more touchdown passes between them.

After every touchdown, the crowd chants grew louder. “No trade! No trade! *No trade!*” Even Logan and I were joining in, cupping our hands around our mouths and shouting as loud as we could. The momentum built throughout the game, until every fan was on their feet and screaming until they were hoarse.

Even when the Titans had the ball in the fourth quarter, the chants didn’t end. They were constant, now. The gathered fans were of one mind, one voice on this day. After a while, I stood back and observed it all. It was awe-inspiring to hear so many people chanting the same thing at the same time. The fans thumped, wept, and chanted for our Colts, and specifically for Christian Baker and Braden Clark. If this was to be their last game playing in this city, they were going to make their unhappiness known.

“NO TRADE!” they roared. “NO TRADE! NO TRADE!”

When the Titans had to punt the ball, and Christian took the field one last time with five minutes remaining on the clock, the frenzy reached its climax. Traditionally, home fans remained quiet when their own team had the ball, to allow the quarterback to communicate the play to the other players. The Colts fans observed no such courtesy this day. The noise in that packed stadium passed beyond excitement into a kind of immense open anguish, a wailing, a cry to be saved. The chant that had started it all ebbed and flowed among the chaotic noise, until it became a back-and-forth. When one half of the stadium screamed “NO,” the other half shouted “TRADE.”

The power of it built, a kind of auditory rocking, until it felt like even the stadium foundation was being shaken to its core.

“NO”

“*TRADE*”

“NO”

“*TRADE*”

“NO”

“*TRADE*”

Logan’s phone was the first one to buzz with a news alert, but soon others around us began to chime. One by one, the fans around us checked their phones and excitedly nudged one-another. The chant that had hijacked the game faded away, and was replaced by one of pure joy.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Look!” Logan held his phone up to me. It was zoomed out on a news article, but the headline was large enough for me to read:

COLTS OWNER: Team is committed to winning. Won’t trade any key players this off-season.

“Does that mean what I think it means?” I asked.

Logan nodded, grinning more widely than I had ever seen the man.

I had resigned myself to the likelihood that two of my boyfriends were going to be gone this time next year, and that our relationship might be a casualty of their absence. Suddenly finding out that they were staying was a strange sensation. Like discovering that Christmas wasn’t canceled after all, and not only that, but Santa was coming down the chimney *right that moment* with a sack of presents to hand out.

I squealed and threw myself into Logan’s arms, although my cry was drowned out by a thousand other voices all around

me, equally ecstatic.

Claire was tugging on my shirt. “What’s happening? They haven’t scored yet.”

“Uncle Chrissy and Uncle Braden are staying!” I explained. “They’re going to be on the same team next year!”

“They’re not going away?”

“Nope!” Logan said. “We’re stuck with them.”

A huge grin spread across Claire’s face, and then she clung to me in a tight hug. I put my hand on the back of her head and savored the feeling.

“Um.” Logan tapped me on the shoulder. “Do you realize what’s happening right now, Beth?”

“What? I’m hugging Claire because—”

I cut off. I was hugging Claire. And more importantly, Claire was hugging *me*.

“Wait a minute,” I said to her. “I thought you only hug family.”

“You’re pretty much family now.” Claire let go and looked up at me. “Can I get some ice cream?”

“We’ll get some on the way home,” Logan promised.

Just then, Christian hurled a deep pass into the corner of the end zone. Braden left his feet, flying through the air for what seemed like forever, catching the ball and then landing for a touchdown. The crowd noise somehow ramped up another notch, the climax to their ecstasy. The Colts were winning 42 - 17 with only a few seconds left.

Christian and Braden walked to the sideline to a standing ovation—although the fans had all been on their feet the entire fourth quarter. They took off their helmets and pumped them in the air, egging the crowd on. The two of them embraced; there was no way for them to have received the news while they were on the field, so they must have thought it was their last play ever for the Colts.

I couldn’t wait for them to find out the truth.

Logan's hand found mine, and I laced my fingers into his. He smiled at me, and I smiled back, tears coming to my eyes. Tears of happiness.

The four of us were staying together in St. Louis. Five, if you counted Claire. We already felt like a strange little family unit, full of goals, and dreams, and love.

And I couldn't wait to see what kind of life we would build together.

Bonus Scene



Want to see how our three chiseled athletes are treating Beth in the future? Click the link below (or type it into a browser) to receive a special scene that was deleted from the original copy of the book!

<https://tinyurl.com/43h22frr>



If you enjoyed this book, you're going to love this other Reverse Harem Romance from Cassie Cole: *Shared by the Pilots*. You can [click here to buy it](#), or keep reading for a special sneak peek!



Veronica

After a ten minute wait at the lost baggage counter, I learned that my bag had been mistakenly delivered to the private aircraft terminal. “I don’t know how that could have happened!” the flustered airport employee told me.

A shuttle ride later and I was standing in the tiny terminal where all the private planes arrived into Miami. Compared to the bustle and activity of the main terminals, it was strangely calm here. Through the window I could see the tarmac, where a vintage looking seaplane stood ready to depart.

“They said it was delivered here?” the agent behind the service desk said with a frown. “Let me check the loading dock. Back in a jiffy.”

I glanced at my watch. It had been an hour since we landed. By the time I got checked into my hotel, it would be time for dinner. I needed to find a good place.

I thought about Captain Hendricks’ dinner invitation, and Dex’s reaction to learning I had turned him down. He was totally off-base about me. I didn’t *want* to be unhappy forever. I just knew what I wanted—and, more importantly, what I *didn’t* want. Having standards didn’t mean I was destined to be single forever.

I thought I would be married by now. With a baby on the way.

I shook off the thought as the door to the tarmac opened and a pilot walked in. I knew he was a pilot because he was wearing a stereotypical tan bomber jacket and aviator sunglasses. With his swept-back sun-bleached hair, he looked like Matthew McConaughey auditioning for the new Top Gun movie.

His handsome face broke into a smile when he saw me. “Where’s Freddie?” he asked in a smooth Texas drawl. “Let me guess. Another smoke break?”

“He’s looking for my bag,” I replied.

The unknown pilot gave me a long look, down and then up. “I don’t want to sound rude, ma’am, but I think you’re in the wrong place.”

“No kidding,” I muttered. “I came in on a 737 from Houston and somehow my bag was sent over here.”

The man leaned on the service counter and let out a slow whistle. “I’d be raisin’ all kinds of hell if they did that to me,” he said in that drawl.

“Yeah, well, I guess I’m a pushover.”

He grinned. “You don’t look like a pushover, if you don’t mind me sayin’ so.”

I shrugged, and steeled myself for what was going to come next. This guy was going to ask me out. I could feel it coming. All pilots were cocky, and this guy seemed more full of himself than most.

Then he leaned over the counter and snatched up a brown paper bag. “Here we go. The reason I’m here.” He turned back and gave me a half-salute with the hand holding the bag. “Hope the rest of your evening turns out better.”

He started to walk away.

“Hey,” I protested. “You can’t just take that.”

He flashed me a grin over his shoulder. “If Freddie asks, tell him Taylor stole it.”

I watched as the man—Taylor?—walked out to the seaplane on the tarmac. He tossed the bag up into the cockpit before climbing up himself.

“Yup, your bag got sent here all right,” Freddie said as he returned from the back area. “Real sorry about that. I’d love to blame it on the computer system, but truth is the guys we have unloading bags aren’t the brightest bunch.”

I pointed out to the tarmac. “That pilot just came in here and took a bag off your desk. He said his name was Taylor.”

Freddie chuckled. “That sonofabitch was supposed to pick it up two days ago. About time he took it off my hands.” He wheeled my bag around the side of the counter. “Here you go.”

“Who is he?” I asked, still staring out at the seaplane. It was beginning to taxi out to the runway for takeoff. “I’ve never seen anyone fly one of those outside of Alaska.”

“Taylor Hawkins?” He gave me a wry smile. “He’s trouble. He’s also a great sonofabitch to have as a friend. Saved my ass more times than I’ve got fingers.”

I watched the seaplane taxi out of sight, but Taylor Hawkins remained firmly in my head the rest of the night.

KEEP READING
SHARED BY THE PILOTS



Cassie Cole is a Reverse Harem Romance writer living in Branson, Missouri. A sappy lover at heart, she thinks romance is best with a kick-butt plot!

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Ranger's Risk
Shadow's Savior