



Pretend

WITH MY

BROTHER'S


BEST FRIENDS

KAI LESY

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PLAYING PRETEND WITH MY
BROTHER'S BEST FRIENDS

A CONTEMPORARY REVERSE HAREM ROMANCE

KAI LESY

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DESCRIPTION

NEEDED: Three make-believe boyfriends! Must be tall, dreamy — and ready to teach me how to kiss.

I'm a 29-year-old virgin.

No boyfriends. ZERO second dates. I'm virtually UNDATEABLE.

And with the big 3-0 approaching, I can't keep pretending all is well.

After shedding tears before my brother's best friends, they devise a brilliant plan to fix my problem.

Their game plan? Pretend dates, kissing lessons, and even sexting tutorials!

Say hello to Noah, the HOT childhood crush-next-door.

Alex, the towering hockey player with a playful wit and impressive biceps

And Jack, the older silver-haired divorcee... who also happens to be my brother's team coach.

But as things heat up, it feels like we may be passing the point of no return...

Touches linger, and passionate kisses send butterflies dancing inside my heart.

They've prepared me to win a man's heart, and now it's time to put their advice to the test. Three times over!

My brother would totally freak but I've got to follow my heart... *right?*

But first, I need to face my biggest challenge yet and tell my brother's best friends our dating lessons are about to change into something entirely unexpected! Ooooh baby!

This is a sexy, stand-alone reverse harem romance filled with humor, danger, and generous amounts of love. It also contains blistering hot MFMM, ménage fun times, in single and multiple partner scenes so HOT they're bound to melt your kindle! HEA guaranteed.

This is annoying.

It's the third date I've had this month that has ended in a long, awkward silence leading absolutely nowhere. I don't know what it is about me that doesn't quite click with these guys. Maybe I'm too socially awkward after spending most of my twenties with my head buried in archaeology and anthropology books.

Maybe I'm completely unfit for the dating scene and therefore destined to become a single old lady with an army of fluffy cats and one too many antiques in the house. Or maybe I'm just picking them wrong. I mean, I haven't really had any opportunity to learn about men, to interact with them beyond the scope of academic or professional performance. The irony here being that I was raised mostly by a man and that I, myself, have helped raise another man since my mom died when I was just a kid.

I've been surrounded by men my whole life, yet I seem to know very little about what they want in a woman.

"Don't say it's hopeless," I tell myself as I walk through the door, letting it shut behind me with its usual creak and clank.

The door is as old as me. The house had just been built when my parents moved here almost twenty-nine years ago. Dad was still in his prime, a dashing and record-breaking hockey player, a star of the NHL and the sun of my mom's life. They settled here in Lansing, Michigan, because I was a

young bun in the oven, and it was conveniently close to the headquarters of the Lansing Devils—a rising force in the league at the time. I slip out of my black boots and stop to look at myself in the foyer mirror.

A critical eyebrow pops up. Maybe this wasn't the best choice of outfit. I thought I'd be more comfortable in something I'm used to wearing, so mom jeans and a white shirt with short boots and loads of gold-brushed bracelets felt like a good idea. But then I got too comfortable and pulled my long blonde hair up in a loose bun. I should've just let it flow so it would bring out the blue in my eyes. I'm never on the skinny side but I like my curves, so why do I always manage to bungle it? I see everything there in the mirror. I see myself and like myself just the way I am, yet I have to play this part whenever I'm dating, I have to be different. Or so I've been told.

"It's not hopeless but it's in the ICU at this point," I sigh, and proceed to remove the jewelry, then toss it in a turquoise porcelain catch-all I picked up at a Navajo-inspired art exhibit in Phoenix, Arizona.

My phone pings. There's a message from Hayley, my best friend. She wants to know how the date is going. She thinks I'm still out with the guy, which would make sense since it's barely six in the evening. I can't bring myself to tell her this one failed, too. She's always so hopeful and upbeat about it, while I'm only getting more tired.

"Ugh..."

Barefooted and disheartened, I trudge across the living room and work my way through Dad's secret stash of fine whiskey. It's been a long time since we buried him, but I still haven't found the strength to clear the place out of these last few remnants of him. My brother Kyle and I repainted the place last year—one room at a time whenever he came around for the weekend—yet neither of us has had the heart to actually put some things away or to do a yard sale that would probably fetch us a pretty penny considering how much of Dad's stuff could be considered memorabilia.

For now, however, I put that thought out of my head and go back to feeling sorry for myself while I pour a double shot of smoked whiskey into a crystal tumbler. Since it's such a nice evening, I have decided to enjoy my drink on the back porch in my favorite rocking chair. There's nothing I love more than a late April evening as the magnolia tree in the backyard sheds the last of its pink petals.

I used to sit in my dad's lap in this chair. Gosh, sometimes I feel like he's still here, hiding his pain and trying to take care of Kyle and me. I've been a caregiver my whole life, and I'm now becoming convinced that it has taken me away from important moments on the romantic side of things. I've never been kissed. Other girls my age are already getting engaged or married or having their first kid. Meanwhile, I'm still struggling to get past the first date.

Movement by the fence separating my place from the neighbor's captures my attention. I glance away from the amber liquid swirling in my glass to find him looking at me. This man screams sex appeal and danger beneath that friendly, boy-next-door type of smile.

"What's up, neighbor lady?" Noah asks with a crooked grin.

Good grief, it's enough to send my blood pumping hot through every vein in my body. I've always had a thing for Noah, but I've never had the courage nor the opportunity to do something about it. Truth be told, the fact that he and my best friend briefly dated sort of put him in the "Don't touch" box that's in the back of my head. I've got a couple more gentlemen just like him in there, albeit different personalities altogether.

"Nothing's up," I reply dryly. "Just having a drink."

Noah jumps over the fence. He rarely uses the gate but that's okay. We've been neighbors for fifteen years now. "I'm not buying it," he says, coming over and taking a seat on the steps of the porch.

"I guess I'm that transparent," I sigh and get up to join him. "Did you just get off work?" I ask, noticing specks of

dust and woodchips still hanging in his messy brown hair that's just long enough to cast a shadow over his wild green eyes.

“Yeah, it's been a long day. I had a last-minute order that required a more hands-on approach.”

“I thought all woodwork was hands-on,” I try not to chuckle.

Noah works as a carpenter or as he prefers to be called, a high-end woodworker for a luxury furniture manufacturer here in Lansing. It's always been his passion, and I have seen some incredible pieces come out of his hands.

He shrugs and inches closer, a smile lingering on his delicious lips. It's hard for me to focus when he's like this—playful, enticing, yet somewhat reserved and always respectful. “It usually is, but this one was more hands-on than usual. The client wanted some changes made to a standard desk from our ash wood line. It involved customizing the drawers in a way that took a little bit longer than I'd hoped. I usually get off around noon on Fridays.”

“Yeah, I remember. Did it come out nicely, at least?”

“Always.”

We look at each other for a moment without saying a word. I think it's part of why I like Noah so much. There's never an awkward pause between us. We can always just sit together in silence without feeling the pressure of conversation in order to be comfortable around one another. Then again, we practically grew up together. I watched him become the tall, dark, and handsome stranger that he is today—though I didn't really notice until the last year of high school when he showed up at my doorstep with a bright purple corsage, determined to take me to my senior prom, even though he'd already graduated a couple of years earlier. He said I shouldn't miss out on such important moments. I should've listened to him more since then.

“Enough digressing, though. You're not okay. What's wrong?” he asks.

“Just another terrible date, that’s all,” I tell him. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

“You whipped out ol’ Jensen’s whiskey, Maeve. It’s clearly something serious,” he replies. And he’s right. But it’s not in my nature to complain about these things. It’s not like he can do something about my inability to keep a guy for more than a couple of hours.

I take a deep breath and another sip of whiskey. “I feel like I’m not good enough to be out there, dating, that’s all. I’ve spent so much time studying and working and taking care of Kyle that I have literally neglected myself. I’m a woman and I don’t even know how to act like one.”

“Ah, I see,” Noah says, nodding slightly. There’s barely any space left between us at this point. I feel his shoulder gently pressed against mine but I can’t bring myself to move. I wouldn’t want him to stop or to pull away. His warmth pours through me and it feels too good. “It’s complicated and I get why you feel the way you do, Maeve. It’s not weird, though, and it’s not wrong, either. Considering what you went through over the years, it’s actually natural and understandable. Think about it.”

“Think about what, specifically? That I sacrificed my entire personal life for everything and everybody else, and now I can’t even date a guy without him cutting it short on account of a fictional emergency?” I scoff.

“You lost your mother when you were just seven years old. You had a baby brother to raise. A father who tried his best but couldn’t meet your needs on his own. And then he died, too, and you had to become Kyle’s legal guardian so he wouldn’t go into the foster system precisely when he needed a family the most. And you had your own future to focus on. Your career. Your goals. Dating and meeting someone and being with someone simply didn’t fit into your busy schedule because that was the hand you were dealt, Maeve. It doesn’t mean it’s over for you. If anything, you’re only just getting started.”

“Noah, I’m almost twenty-nine years old and I’ve never even been kissed.”

Well, that came out before I filtered it. He stills, the green pools of his eyes softening and gradually darkening into something downright incomprehensible. My skin tingles all over as his lips part, ever so slowly. “You’ve never been kissed?”

“Nope.”

“We do need to address that. It’s a problem.”

My temperature is spiking and I’m pretty sure it’s not because of the whiskey. What’s going on here? I’ve never seen this side of Noah before. I feel as though I’m sitting next to a panther that’s about to pounce on me, yet all I know is that I’m looking forward to feeling his fangs as he sinks them into my flesh. The hairs on the back of my neck prickle as he leans closer. I feel his breath on my lips, and I don’t know what to do. I’m paralyzed and yearning.

“I should’ve kissed you that night at the senior prom,” he whispers. I can almost feel his lips brushing mine, ever so subtly. Heat gathers in my core as I hold my breath. “I figured you were too young, and I was just happy to be there with you. Remember?”

I nod slowly. He smells of wild musk and leather and just a hint of sandalwood. “No one invited me,” I manage. “So you stepped up and made sure I didn’t stay home that night.” I’ve been crushing hard on him ever since.

“That’s right. I had no idea you’d never kissed anyone, I’m surprised.”

“Surprised?”

“A gorgeous woman like you, Maeve? You’d break a thousand hearts with one snap of your fingers if you set your mind to it. I know you’ve got it in you. I can almost...” he comes even closer, practically invading my very soul as his cheek touches mine. “...smell it on you.”

I shudder, liquid heat expanding between my legs. I keep my knees tightly together as I struggle to sit upright, fearful

that I might scare him away. Turns out I have that effect on men as of late. Just one more second, and he could kiss me. I'm dying for him to kiss me, to make me unravel in all sorts of ways.

Just then, Nala, my brother's golden retriever, decides to break it up as she swoops in through the back doggy door and rushes over, a huge smile on her face and a wagging tail letting us both know that she's here for all the cuddles and attention that we have to give.

"Nala, you lazy princess," I mutter as I scratch her floppy ears.

Noah laughs and strokes her back as she sits between us on the porch. "She was sleeping upstairs in Kyle's bed again, huh?" he asks me. The darkness in his eyes still lingers, but the twinkles of joy in Nala's presence soften the shadows. The moment is gone. For now.

I nod. "She does that whenever he's due to come home for the weekend. I didn't know dogs had a specific track of time but it's like she's counting the days or something," I tell him.

"Maybe she is actually counting the days in her own way. We don't give dogs enough credit."

"Yeah, I wouldn't hold my breath considering she still runs in circles just to catch her own tail."

We both laugh as the sound of the front door opening and closing prompts Nala to bark and rush back into the house. Noah and I follow, hearing several familiar voices. Kyle is home after spending a week in Grand Rapids where his team, the Lansing Devils, practice. As soon as we reach the living room, I find myself heating up again, this time at the sight of Jack, Kyle's coach, and Alex, his teammate. They're both different but each devastatingly handsome and attractive in their own way. And the way they light up when they see me is something I'll never get enough of.

"Hey, Sis!" Kyle exclaims, then throws his arms around me.

He's tired and sweaty and wearing the baggiest training suit he could find, but I'm always happy to see him. It seems like only yesterday that I was fixing his mac and cheese dinner and monitoring his homework while Dad drank his sorrow away in the den.

"You're home early," I tell him. "I wasn't expecting you til later."

"I could say the same thing about you!" he says. "Weren't you supposed to be on a date? Wait, what's with the whiskey? What happened?"

His good humor fades as he measures me from head to toe, but I feel like a deer caught in the headlights and I've already told Noah enough about my situation. I don't want Alex and Jack dragged into this, too. "It's cool, it's nothing. He wasn't that into me, I wasn't that into him. These things happen," I try to brush it off.

"She just needs some practice," Noah says, half-jokingly.

I'm already thinking about practicing on him. Over and over and over again. Alex chuckles lightly, drawing my focus to his big brown eyes. They're playful but the way he smiles speaks of danger. The spicy kind of danger I've been craving since I realized I've been single and untouched for far too long. He wears his blonde hair cut short with a deep fade on the sides, which further brings out his square jaw and that adorable dimple in his chin.

"Aw, look at that, our Maeve is all grown up," he says.

"Hey, keep your paws off my sister," Kyle replies, and we all know it's just banter but I can't help but appreciate my little brother right now. He's seven years younger than me, yet here he is, trying to be my protector although I doubt I need protection from these three guys who have been close to us for quite a while.

"Don't worry, kiddo," Jack chimes in, laughing. "Every beginning is hard until you get the hang of it."

"Are you talking to me or Kyle?" I ask.

Jack raises an eyebrow, and it's the sexiest expression I've ever seen on this man. While Noah and Alex are in their early thirties, the Lansing Devils' coach is what Hayley normally refers to as a silver fox. He's in his forties, with short, salt and pepper hair and eyes a smoldering black that can see right through me, somehow. I always feel naked under his gaze. "I'm talking to you, young lady. It's about time you got your head out of that museum and into the dating game," he says.

"Except she absolutely sucks at it," Kyle sighs.

"Dude!" I snap, my cheeks burning.

"What? It's true. Hayley said so," he shoots back.

"Oh, great, so everybody knows now," I exhale a sharp breath and go over to the liquor cabinet, determined to pour myself another drink.

I can feel Noah's eyes following me before he even speaks. "It's not the worst thing to happen, Maeve. You're going out to meet guys, yet here we are, three guys willing and more than happy to help you get better at the game. Right, fellas?"

"Absolutely," Jack adds, a broad smile illuminating his tanned face.

I turn around to stare at them while Kyle laughs it all off and proceeds to play with Nala instead. Anything pertaining to my romantic aspirations usually goes in one ear and out the other with my brother, and I can't exactly blame him. He's twenty-two and one of the youngest hockey players ever recruited into the NHL. He takes so much after our dad; he's literally the spitting image of the legendary Jensen Williams. Therefore, Kyle has no time nor any energy left to pay attention to much of my personal life. It's okay, though. That's my business, anyway, especially since I've been secretly drooling over his friends for years.

"I think you're right, coach," Alex tells Jack, then looks my way. "I think we could help Maeve get any guy she wants."

While I'm not sure what to make of these statements, I'd be a liar if I said I wasn't intrigued. Just standing here and

watching the three of them looking at me in a new sort of way is exhilarating enough already. I guess they've seen me as the bookish museum-loving big-sister Maeve for so many years that they practically forgot I'm also a hot-blooded woman.

It's going to be a weird evening, considering the topic at hand. I'm not used to this kind of attention.

We move the conversation into the kitchen as soon as the pizza arrives. Kyle has made Friday night pizza a religion of sorts, and no one really complains—especially me, since I don't have to cook. I offer the guys some whiskey from Dad's reserve. Jack and Noah gladly help themselves, while Alex sticks to his ice-cold Coke. He and Kyle don't usually drink since they need to be in top shape throughout their practice weeks.

Playoffs are right around the corner, and the Lansing Devils have a real shot at qualifying for the first time in four years.

We leave Kyle in the living room with Nala, who rarely leaves his side when he's around. There's a baseball game on, so my kid brother is pretty much oblivious to anything else going on in his vicinity, which means I get to spend a bit more time with these three gorgeous gentlemen.

"Alright, so first things first," Alex says as we each work our way through the pepperoni and extra-cheese pizza that dominates the island counter in my kitchen. "Guys respond best to confidence, Maeve. I mean, you're a gorgeous woman, you're the total package, to be honest... but if you don't radiate that from within, it's hard to get a man to actually click with you on the same level."

"Maeve also has a minor handicap here of being super intelligent and highly educated," Jack adds. "A lot of men tend to be intimidated by this, but it's actually a good thing. It means you don't have to waste your time trying to impress

some mediocre stooge who's more inclined to be afraid of not being enough for you than to actually learn from you."

"And there's also the question of having a game of your own," Noah tells me. "Little gestures and lines to pepper in at the right moment. Men are highly responsive to a woman's micro-expressions and body language. You can say a lot with just your eyes."

I nod slowly, drinking in every word. "I doubt I said much to this guy today. I'm pretty sure he invented a family emergency just to get away from me."

They laugh, but Alex is quick to offer more insight. "I think you need more self-confidence at this point," he says. "For me, I get a lot of my good vibes from my workouts. The gym is like a temple where you go to worship and nurture your body. The strength that comes from training sort of translates into this insane self-confidence I mentioned. With or without a guy, Maeve, you need to treat yourself the very best that you can, and that's precisely when the good ones are going to start showing up."

"I see. Well, I've only ever gone jogging. I mean, sure, I've played enough hockey with Kyle growing up, but only as a hobby, a family pastime," I reply.

The corner of his mouth ticks subtly as he holds back a smile. "We could train together. You only need a couple of sessions per week to see decent results fairly quickly that will help keep you strong in the long run."

"Besides, this online dating thing is a hot mess for our era," Alex says. "You're better off meeting new people at the gym, Maeve. At least there you know you've already got one interest in common, which is this notion of self-care and self-love. It's why most people go to the gym, anyway."

"I agree with Alex on this," Jack says. "People tend to be disingenuous on the internet. They create personas, fictionalized versions of who they'd like to be, and it gets tiring to play that role deeper into a relationship. I honestly don't think you're the problem here."

“Precisely. So, how about it, Maeve? Would you like to train with me a couple times a week?” Alex asks, smiling broadly.

How can I say no to this six-foot four-inch mountain of a man with broad, muscular shoulders and thighs that could effortlessly crush a whole melon between them? Maybe the whiskey plays a part in my decision-making process tonight, but I’ve spent too much time putting myself second. I need to put myself first from now on.

“You know what? You’ve got a deal,” I tell Alex. “We’ll train together. Thank you so much. I’m actually looking forward to seeing how this turns out. I do need the self-confidence.”

Jack leans over the counter to get a better look at me. “Is that what you wore for your date today?”

“What’s wrong with it?” I ask with a shrug.

“Shirts and jeans don’t inspire much,” he says. “Especially for a first date.”

“I had some nice boots and bracelets to give the whole thing some pizzazz, though.”

Noah shakes his head. “Are you looking to date college grads or real men?”

“Ouch, that was brutal,” I mumble, only partially amused. Then again, the truth is never comfortable. “I didn’t really feel inspired to wear something else. I’ve been going on these dates for a while and they never go anywhere. Why go through all that dressing up and makeover trouble for a guy who’s not going to stick around, anyway?”

Jack smiles gently, making my heart flutter frantically, the rhythm throbbing in my ears as I pour myself another shot of whiskey. “Maeve, the way you dress should be for you, not for the guy you’re dating. The purpose of a little black dress and a pair of shiny, sexy pumps isn’t to impress *him*, it’s to bring out the best and most feminine version of *you*. I’ll be honest with you, we tend to want to do more for women who inspire us to rise to their level.”

“And me showing up in jeans and a T-shirt isn’t exactly inspiring,” I conclude with a heavy sigh.

“Exactly. I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you let me take you out shopping one of these days? I’ll show you some stores that might be better suited for your particular style and age. You don’t have to sacrifice your personality and what you like in order to look hot, you know. I realize that sounds strange coming from a hockey coach but I was married to a fashion designer who was very particular and very skilled with a keen eye for style. I suppose I picked up some tricks of the trade, so to speak, along the way.”

“That sounds nice, actually. Thank you, Jack. It’s so thoughtful of you,” I reply, blushing once again. “Might as well change my wardrobe and try some new stuff, too. I may even surprise myself in the process.”

“Of course, and we could stop by a restaurant, too, and practice some conversation starters, some do’s and don’ts for a first date. The kind of stuff you should know going forward,” he says. “You’re a brilliant and beautiful woman, Maeve. Most guys would thank every star in the universe to get a chance with you.”

Another blush.

Noah raises a hand as though we’re in class. “Speaking of flirting style, I could teach you a thing or two about body language, like I said earlier.”

Right. Earlier when we almost kissed. My pulse starts racing at the mere memory of that fleeting snippet of time. I love Nala so much, but I really wish she would’ve just stayed upstairs in Kyle’s bed for another frickin’ minute. “Okay,” I manage, my voice barely a whisper at this point.

“I mean it. There’s a lot a guy can pick up on what you subliminally deliver. I will gladly teach you everything you need to know.”

“You could be my dating coach,” I giggle, trying to let go of some of the tension rapidly unfurling in my loins as I take a seat at the island counter and ravage another slice of pizza—

anything to stop myself from drooling over him, and over Alex, and over Jack. Sheesh, I'm a never-been-kissed virgin rapidly walking into her thirties and I'm already greedy. How about we start with one guy, Maeve?

The guys exchange glances. I sense curiosity and interest as all three then briefly glance at my brother. Kyle is still deep in the game, Nala half-asleep by his side. I doubt he even heard one word of the entire conversation we just had. Surely, he'd have an opinion about his friends chiming in to upgrade my dating game. He can be overprotective sometimes. Or maybe he just can't let go of his sister yet. Either way, I need to do this. I need to spread my wings and soar for once.

"Gentlemen, what would you say if all three of us became Maeve's dating coaches?" Jack offers, nodding at both Noah and Alex. "It seems to me like we each have something to offer. What do you think?"

"It sounds reasonable," Noah replies. "It does make it easier to focus on one aspect at a time without overwhelming Maeve all at once."

"And it also gives her an opportunity to spend time with other men before she goes out to date others," Alex concludes, though he doesn't seem too happy about that last part. Or maybe I'm just imagining it. In the end, he, too, nods in agreement. "Yeah, I'm down. What do you say, Maeve?"

Their eyes are fully dilated and fixed on me. I'm getting goosebumps all over and trying to keep a straight face while I ponder this unique proposal. In hindsight, I was looking forward to having only Noah as my dating coach, but I've got three of them willing to help me now. I'd be an idiot to turn them down, especially since Jack made a good point—each has something unique to offer. And I'm hungry for more out of this life.

"It seems like we're on to something," I say, prompting the three to smile delightedly.

Ever since I was a kid, I dreamed of working for the Lansing Museum. Our town may not be listed among the cultural giants of North America, but our collection of Native American artifacts is noteworthy, to say the least. Each year we have scholars that come to study our collections, some all the way from the Smithsonian Institute. We've even loaned some of the pieces to special exhibits across the United States. So, professionally speaking, I'm a proud and happy anthropologist. It took some years and considerable sacrifices, but it was worth it. I like where I am and what I'm doing. There's room for me to grow, too. Maybe that's why the concept of dating has finally settled at the center of my consciousness. I feel like I'm ready to take things to the next level.

The only problem is I'm clearly a "noob" and I need all the help in the world. Thankfully, I've got Alex, Jack, and Noah ready and willing to support me. Therein lies the second problem, because I find each to be particularly and dangerously appealing, and I've known them for long enough to understand what kind of men they are. The flames run high and hot.

"How was your weekend, honey?" Margo asks as she comes into the back office.

We're in the east wing of the museum this week, going over new artifacts discovered at a recent archaeological dig near Owosso.

“It started out as a hot mess but it seems I’ve got my ducks back in a row now,” I reply with a smile as I set a tray of bones aside. “You know about my dating woes, so you understand my plight.”

“Yeah, it gets harder the older you get,” Margo says. She wears her black hair braided into a single tail, her high cheekbones and dark brown eyes giving her a certain grace and poise I’ve not seen in other women. Then again, the Saginaw Chippewa ladies are renowned for their beauty and wisdom, and Margo is no exception. She doesn’t show her years, either. I only hope to carry myself the way Margo does when I’m her age. “But you keep at it. Don’t chase. Let them come to you. Sure, give all the signals you want to give, but remember that the flower doesn’t chase after the bee.”

“Ah, yes. Thank you. I’ve got that part down, though. It’s the getting past the first date part that still eludes me.”

She smiles gently. “Give it time, honey. You’re still young and you’re beautiful. You’ll find someone who appreciates you the way you deserve.”

I sincerely thank her and turn back to my work. After a few moments, Margo offers a nod of appreciation. “You’re on the right track, here. Keep at it, and I might just consider taking you with me to Mount Pleasant later this year.”

My heart practically swells with joy and anticipation. That’s close to her reservation in Central Michigan. Margo has never invited anyone from the museum to go back home with her. This is truly an honor and a gigantic privilege, yet all I can do is bite the inside of my cheek, terrified I might squeal with joy if I so much as open my mouth. “You’re serious?” I manage.

“You’ve proven yourself,” Margo chuckles. “Relax. It’s no big deal. I just got off the phone with one of the elders and I might be able to bring in some pieces on loan for the autumn exhibit. But I’ll keep you posted. I haven’t had confirmation from everybody just yet.”

“Even so, thank you, Margo, I wholeheartedly appreciate it.”

“Let’s just hope it leads somewhere concrete. I have plans for our tribal heritage, but I need to get the elders to understand that this stuff belongs in the museum in order for us to raise any kind of awareness. We’ll keep working on this settler camp in the meantime. So, you’ve got a young male, huh?”

“Yeah, I’m just about to gather more pieces from the loose box,” I reply. “The femur should give me more information.”

She points to the binder we’ve got set up next to the work desk, where we jot down every finding and observation to later compile into a full and comprehensive report. “It’s all written in there, right?”

“Absolutely. I’ve taken macros, too.”

“Great. I’ll go through my emails and take on the female that was buried with your fella, there,” she says, holding back a smile. “As for your second date conundrum... think about it this way. Maybe there’s no second date because they’re simply not meant to be in your life.”

I can’t help but scoff. “It can’t be that simple.”

“Why not?” Margo says, her silver and turquoise bracelets jingling as she sits behind her computer. “It can’t be forced, whatever it is. If you have to work hard to get a guy to like you, to get him to stick around, then he’s not going to stay. Love should be effortless. Organic. Natural. You hang out, you want to get to know one another. It shouldn’t feel like a job interview.”

“Gosh, it’s precisely how my dates have felt thus far,” I sigh deeply.

“Then they just weren’t meant to be. You move on and you keep trying. The right guy usually shows up when you least expect him,” she says.

It sounds so simple and easy. Am I the one who overcomplicates everything? Am I chasing wild horses when I should just go about my business and let love find me? Maybe Alex is right in that sense. The gym could be a great place to start. I can work on myself while investing time and energy

into my health and well-being and maybe even meet some new people there.

“I feel like I’ve been missing out on so much,” I tell Margo, occasionally glancing her way. She’s still sifting through emails, but I know I’ve got her full attention on the matter. We don’t always engage in personal issues, though we’ve come to know each other well over the years. I respect her experience and her opinions. Not once has she steered me wrong professionally, so why not learn to trust her a little bit more on the personal side of things, too? “The funny thing is... I’ve got dating coaches, now. Thanks to my neighbor, my brother’s hockey coach, and his teammate.”

Margo stills and gives me a curious look. “Three dating coaches?”

“Noah, my neighbor, remember him? I must’ve mentioned him before.”

“You most certainly have,” she replies with a knowing smile.

Her answer shouldn’t surprise me. I’ve been carrying that torch for ages. “He offered to help me spruce up my seduction game,” I say. “Then there’s Jack, my brother’s coach. He’s going to help me refine my style, some restaurant etiquette, that sort of thing.”

“Do you mean Jack Bogdanovich, head coach for the Lansing Devils?”

“Yep.”

Margo laughs lightly. “Holy hell, girl, you’re playing in the big leagues already and you don’t even know it. And who’s the third lucky bastard?”

“He’s on the team, actually...”

“That’s bold. What does your brother think about it?”

All I have is a shrug. “It’s my personal life, right? Shouldn’t it concern me and me alone?”

“Yes, but they’re men he knows.”

“They’re just my dating *coaches*. I’m not actually dating them.”

Again, she laughs, and I’m not sure what to make of it. Or maybe I do, but I am nowhere near ready to admit it. Fortunately, Margo doesn’t insist on the topic, choosing to answer some emails instead before she tackles a second box of bones collected from the Owosso dig site. Hours roll by while I keep busy with my young settler’s remains, continuing to study and take notes for the binder.

By six o’clock, I’m ready to leave for my first gym session with Alex. For some reason, my heart is beating a little bit faster than usual, and I am feeling really excited about going, seeing him again so soon after Friday evening.

“Alright, Margo, I’m heading out to the gym,” I tell my boss and mentor as she looks up from her settler’s remains. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

“I do wonder which one you’re going to fall for first,” she replies just as I grab my bag and phone and open the door.

“Which one who?”

“You’ve got three hunks teaching you how to ace your dating game. That can’t possibly end well,” she giggles. “Especially for a brilliant creature like yourself who is only just now discovering the perks of womanhood. We’ll see. I’m gonna hold my breath for you.”

I laugh and blow her a kiss, then head out.

Yet her warning lingers in the back of my head as I cross the museum’s parking lot to get to my car. Margo does have a point, especially since I can’t exactly deny that I’m attracted to not one but all three of the men. I’m curious, too. Which one am I going to fall for past the point of no return? Which one will end up breaking my heart or filling it to the brim? The uncertainty has its own degree of enticement.

* * *

THE LOCAL GYM on the south side of Lansing is much smaller than the one at the Promenade Mall—which is usually recommended for beginners such as myself, but Alex thinks I'll get a lot more out of this place since there are fewer people around.

“It's easier to get distracted when you're surrounded by a lot of people,” he says during our warm-up session. “You need a place that's close to home and easy to reach despite the weather.”

“Wow, you're pretty religious about this stuff,” I say, smiling.

We're rotating our arms, facing each other and mirroring movements along the way. I like the way his blue shorts hug his muscular thighs without being too tight, and the loose white shirt he's got on gives me a good glimpse of his rippling pectorals to give me sexy dream material for the next week or so. Alex is highly disciplined and devoted to his workouts. I admire him for it, to be honest. The scar under his left knee tells the story of an injury that he hasn't fully healed from—I can see him wincing when he spends too much time with his full body weight on that leg.

Kyle did mention that Alex has been struggling during practice but that physical therapy was helping him get farther along. As an anthropologist, I can study a man's posture and movements and understand what his issues are. In Alex's case, I reckon he may never return to his pre-injury performance, but I wouldn't dare bring it up in conversation. He usually just says he's perfectly fine and moving on, unwilling to address it further. It's clearly a sensitive topic, and so I've learned to steer clear.

I like the way he steals glances at me whenever he thinks I'm not looking, but the gym walls are fitted with a multitude of floor-to-ceiling windows. Granted, I see other guys watching me too, but I seem to care very little about them.

“Fitness is a second hobby of mine these days,” Alex says. “Alright, give me three sets of ten sumo squats, first. Legs apart, toes pointing outward. Yeah, like that.”

I can feel the muscles working with each movement. I'm also a little self-conscious considering my dark grey tights are, well, really tight and probably showing most of my curves in motion, but I need to put that thought out of my head and focus on my form. Alex is so kind and patient with me, the least I can do is follow through and let him help me get healthier and stronger and infinitely more confident.

"That's very good, Maeve, keep it up, four more to go," he encourages me every step of the way while I have a hard time not losing myself in those big, brown eyes of his.

Soon enough, the rest of the world ceases to exist. Alex keeps me focused on my workout, and every time he gets closer to help with my form during a particular exercise, I find myself breathing faster, my skin tingling whenever we accidentally touch.

I'm working my back muscles now, pulling a bar down as Alex adds more weights with each set. "You really know your stuff," I manage between an inhale and a ragged exhale.

"Did you think you were the only one with a deeper understanding of the human body?" he laughs, his bright white teeth shining under the LED lights above.

"Oh, I'm more of a bone lady," I reply with a dry chuckle.

"Good, it means I can still teach you a thing or two. I'm honored," he says.

"And I'm doing my best to be an obedient student here."

"I can see," he replies, his gaze darkening for a moment as I get up from the bench and do a couple of stretches since there's enough tension gathered between my shoulder blades to make me feel like I'm about to crackle and fall apart. "You've got more strength than I expected. I started you off with lighter weights but you're pulling past fifty pounds now. Well done, Maeve."

I offer a subtle smile as I follow him across the hall. "Thank you. I'll probably feel everything in the morning."

"You'll have trouble with the stairs when we leave."

“It starts early, then. The body’s payback for this sort of labor.”

Alex laughs. “Yeah, the first couple of weeks are going to be a little rough. Training day is usually bearable, but by nightfall you’ll be paying for every set. It’s a good sign, though. It means you’ve done the work. Sore muscles means you’ve got micro-fissures in the muscle tissue, and those need a little bit of time to heal. So, we’re working on your legs and back today, and we’ll focus on your chest and arms on Friday. That way, there’s balance.”

“Yes, sir,” I reply in a dramatic tone of voice.

Gradually, I can sense a delicate balance forming between us. He’s less tense than when we first started, and his gaze is intensely fixed upon me. It’s enough to send my blood pumping as I do the treadmill under his watchful eye. He plays with the controls, changing my speed and incline to keep my breath short at all times but he also keeps the conversation going—though I’m sometimes too focused on not flying off the treadmill and fail to register the depth and meaning of his questions.

“So, how come you’ve never been kissed before?” he asks at one point.

I almost trip but manage to keep my chin up and my dignity in one piece. “You know how I’ve been focused on everything else but myself. We’ve already had that conversation,” I remind him.

“Yeah, but still. It does boggle the mind a little bit. Not even like a little kiss? A peck? Wasn’t there at least one guy in college that you had the hots for?”

There was, and his name is Noah. Then again, he’s my neighbor, not my college sweetheart, so I’m not exactly lying here. “Nope. No one in college. I just never had enough focus for any kind of romantic endeavor, which is why I need to catch up now.”

“Don’t worry about that. Catching up is easy,” Alex replies, his gaze dropping on my breasts. I suppose they’re

bouncier than usual, considering the speed he's having me keep up with.

"It's not just the physical side of things that I want, Alex. I want romance and candlelight dinners, I want to settle into my feminine energy for once and have someone take care of me instead of—"

"Instead of you taking care of everybody else. Yeah, I get it."

He glances to the side, somewhere behind me, and frowns slightly. I follow his gaze in the wall mirror that's in front of the treadmill and notice a couple of guys lifting dumbbells and watching me at the same time. Alex doesn't seem too happy about it, though I certainly don't mind a smidge of external validation, especially now, at a time when I'm coming into my womanhood, so to speak. I actually think it's kind of cute, especially when Alex moves around and blocks their view for about twenty seconds before he comes over to the other side of the treadmill and fiddles with my speed settings again.

"Well, at least I know my ass looks good in these tights," I giggle, trying to lift some of the tension still gathered in his furrowed brows.

"Can't blame the guys, can I?"

I shake my head, feeling my cheeks heat up under his intense gaze. "Thank you for being here with me, Alex, for helping me through this. It's really hard to get started, though, isn't it?"

"Oh, it'll get worse before it gets better," he says.

I like how his gaze subconsciously lingers on my behind and thighs. He's not aware of it, and when he realizes what he's doing, he quickly looks away and then back up at my face, smiling softly. But I spot the smoldering embers in his eyes and the subtle biting of his lower lip. His body speaks for him, I suppose, and I need to start paying attention to these microlessons, too, even though he's not aware that he's already teaching me more than he had originally planned.

The rest of the cooldown is mostly casual conversation, and I love every second of it. It's the first time that Alex and I get to spend time alone. We're getting to know each other, slowly but surely, and I am fascinated by the multiple layers that build him up. There's more beneath the surface that I'm tempted to get through to. I can see the doubt in his expression whenever he talks about his knee surgery and the recovery process. It's a sensitive subject so I don't push him, but I am getting curious.

The drive back home is relatively quiet.

He keeps stealing glances at me more frequently than before, and my heart keeps jumping and trudging around in my chest like it's somehow suddenly loose. I notice the fullness of his lower lip and the dark red tinge in the middle—he's been biting it a lot, especially during our gym session. Whenever he sees me looking at him, however, he holds my gaze for a second before going back to the road ahead. Fortunately, there's not much traffic to deal with but we keep hitting every red light along the way.

"You were talking about your recovery earlier," I say when he pulls up outside my house. "And you seemed kind of down... Is there anything I could possibly help you with?"

He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly as he carefully chooses his words. "Maeve, you're a kind woman, a good-hearted woman. If your nature were enough to heal me, I'd be skating circles around Kyle without a single hiccup. Unfortunately, the body tends to start working against us after a certain age."

"A certain age? You're still in your prime."

"Not for hockey, I'm not. Not for the league, anyway," he turns the engine off and leans back into his seat as he looks at me. "I'm getting closer to my expiration date, and the coach and I... well, we both know it."

"It's a slow recovery, then."

"Excruciatingly slow. It was a torn ligament, it required surgery. I just thought I'd bounce right back. But it's been two

months since I've hit the ice again, and I'm still slow. There's this nagging pain just underneath my kneecap; I usually ignore it, but the more weight I apply, the worse it gets."

I give him a long, thoughtful look, my mind firing in every which way. "Have you considered that maybe you could've used a couple more months off before going back on the ice?"

"Yeah. But we have a real shot at the playoffs this year. I don't want to miss any of it."

"You're ambitious, I'll give you that."

"And you're one of the youngest and brightest anthropologists in the state. Don't think I didn't look you up from the moment we met," Alex replies, smiling broadly.

Laughing lightly, I get out of the car and grab my gym bag from the backseat. It's such a beautiful and warm night. There's a timid moon rising in the east, almost full and pearlescent against the darkening sky. "You did your homework, huh?" I remark.

"How else am I going to get to know a woman like you, Maeve? Your brother is one of my closest friends. It's not like I could just... come up to you," he replies, barely able to look me in the eyes. It's an interesting and surprising shift from earlier, and it speaks volumes.

Is this his way of telling me he likes me? Good grief, how do I respond? Luckily, he already coached me on this during our gym session. Focus on the physical, at least to help the ice thaw a little between us.

"You could just come up to me. I don't bite," I tell him. "You're never going to know unless you try." Alex is speechless, though it wasn't my intention. Seconds pass in heavy, strangely loaded silence until I manage to try and change the subject in my usual, awkward manner. "Anyway, thanks for the first session, chief! I'll see you again on Friday!"

"See you..."

I think he wants to say more but nothing else comes out. I feel his eyes on me as I walk toward my front porch, heat

rising and bubbling in the back of my throat as I wonder *had I missed something?* A signal he gave me and I failed to seize the opportunity? No, he would've said something, he would've done something. Maybe it was all in my head and Alex is just being friendly, trying to tell me that he likes me, that he takes an interest in me.

“Maeve, hold on,” his voice has me spinning on my heels right outside the front door—and just in time, too, as his lips catch mine in an unexpected kiss.

I instantly find myself melting and opening up to welcome his affection. I moan softly as he cups my face and deepens the kiss, our tongues clashing and our bodies coming closer, closer, until I'm pressed against his muscular frame. He holds me tight, fingers digging into my hips as he stops for a second, only to catch his breath as I lose myself in his dark eyes.

“You never know, right?” he whispers, his lips puffy and slick.

This time, I'm the one who initiates the kiss, already hungry for more, so much more that my senses have completely abandoned me. I don't know what's happening or who's even in control at this point, but I do know we both want this. Badly. His ragged breath tickles my skin as he trails soft kisses down the side of my neck.

I manage to pluck the house keys out of my jacket pocket just as he stops to nibble on my earlobe, sending a plethora of shivers down my spine. My nipples perk against the fabric of my sports bra, and his hand comes up in time for his thumb to brush over it and cause liquid heat to pool between my legs as I get us both inside. The foyer is dark and quiet. My bag hits the floor.

He grunts harshly, looking at me with a hunger in his eyes that I've never seen before. “I don't want us moving too fast,” he says, “but it's hard to hold back with you looking like this, Maeve... it's been hard to hold back for a couple of years now.”

“Why didn't you say anything?” I mumble, my palms resting on his chest. God, I love how his muscles tick

anxiously beneath them. His heart throbs ferociously, in unison with mine. “I’ve not been indifferent, either...”

“Yeah, I can see that now,” he replies, his gaze wandering up and down my body as he licks his lips. “You have no idea what kind of woman you are, do you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Let me show you,” he says.

He comes closer, the air between us crackling with electricity as he peels my top off first. He takes a few seconds to admire my bare skin, then carefully helps me out of the bra, as well. His shirt is the next item to hit the floor, and I get to see him in his full, athletic glory for the first time. He’s had tank tops on before, and I’ve caught glimpses, but this is a completely different experience altogether. Alex has a powerful, volcanic vibe emanating from within, and I didn’t even realize it until this precise moment.

His muscles are neatly stacked, well-rounded and toned. Every flex makes my heart stop, and as soon as he takes me in his arms and damn near crushes me against his chest, I become water and bubble up, goosebumps dancing across my skin as he kisses me again. I’m soft and hot, he’s hard and strong and sizzling with desire.

Before long, his kisses move from my lips down to my collarbone. He nips the skin gently, playfully, prompting me to straighten my back just as his mouth closes around my nipple, the pink areola responding to his kiss. I can barely stand upright as I throw my arms around his neck and tilt my head back, basking in this simmering sun that is Alex Parish.

“You taste like summer,” he says as he moves his focus to my left breast, one hand coming up to feel the flesh, to fondle and squeeze and enjoy every inch of me.

“Don’t stop,” I whisper as his teeth graze and tighten, as he devours me relentlessly until I lose my balance altogether.

I don’t even register the moment my tights reach the floor. But I do register his fingers deftly pulling my thong down. I’m naked and aroused and burning for him. He stops to look at me

once more, and I feel like a goddess who's about to be worshiped in all the right ways. A smile stretches across his lips as he kisses me deeply, profoundly, hungrily even.

"Let's take this upstairs," I say, my voice barely a scratch.

I take his hand, and he follows me up the stairs, his gaze never leaving my ass.

"I have been wanting to do this for so long," Alex says as we reach the bed and he turns me around to face him. He's buck naked and hard and absolutely gorgeous. "I've dreamed about this moment..."

"So have I," I reply, smiling.

His hands roam up and down my body as he takes his time getting to know me. Every inch of skin, every muscle, every curve and dimple... it's all his to enjoy for as long as he desires as the fire in my belly burns hotter and brighter. I end up on the bed with him keeping my legs up and spread as he dives between my wet folds. The feel of his tongue sends jolts of electricity through my entire being as I moan from the insane pleasure that he's giving me.

He licks and suckles softly. He tests the tender flesh and then his fingers work their way inside me. First one, then two, and at the third one I'm stretching and lifting my hips as he intensifies the movement while relentlessly teasing my clit. My breath leaves me as I unravel in his mouth. I cry out his name, over and over, but he never gives me a moment's respite. He sucks every drop of my own pleasure that I have to give, my insides rippling outward until I'm ready for more.

"Take me," I say, my voice ragged and broken.

"This would be your first time, Maeve," he pauses to look at me, his lips glimmering with my arousal. "Are you sure you wanna take things that far?"

"I've been missing out on something incredible," I tell him. "Yes, I want this. I want you. All of you."

I mean every word. I've never been so sure of anything before in my life. I like Alex more than I ever thought I could, and the more time we spend together, the more I learn and

discover about him, the more I want him. He nods once and comes up, his whole weight pinning me down. His full frame dominates me, and I surrender wholly as I wrap my legs around his waist.

“Oh...” I gasp as I feel the tip testing me gently.

There’s an ache in my core that only he can satisfy, so I raise my hips again to meet him just as he slides inside and oh, damn, he’s so big, so thick, so perfectly matched. “Damn it, you’re so tight,” Alex growls, doing his very best to hold back.

It hurts just a little as he goes deeper, but the pain soon turns to something sweeter, spicier even as I get used to him. Every thrust becomes a pulse between us. Our breaths break in unison as we find a rhythm. Soon enough, he’s pumping into me, harder and faster as he kisses me hungrily. The temperature rises as he holds me tight, yet he still manages to slip a hand back down there to tease my tender little nub into another frenzied orgasm.

Only a few strokes are left as he consumes me, as I come apart once more and melt into the cotton bed sheet. “You’re incredible,” he says, panting as he pounds me into oblivion. “Maeve, you’re perfect...”

“Oh, Alex... Yes!”

I almost cry with pure joy as I feel him coming, as I feel his heat spreading through me, as we become one on an evening no one thought would end so beautifully. I feel myself tightening around him so I can squeeze every drop of his passion, every spark of this devastating wildfire that has taken a hold of us. We’re covered in sweat and basking in the laziest afterglow, but neither of us dares to move.

No, we’re only just getting started, and I’m loving every single sensation.

Having three dating coaches isn't as daunting as I imagined it might be. Then again, that was just the doubt in my head, that tiny demon that seems to relish taking the joy out of everything new that I wish to try. I'm still reeling from that mind-blowing lovemaking session with Alex. Neither of us saw it coming yet neither of us could stop it from happening, either. We took our sweet time throughout the night, and he was incredibly patient as he claimed me repeatedly. By morning I was spent, but I loved it. I loved the way he made me feel, as though I was the only woman in the world, the only woman he ever truly wanted.

We agreed to keep things private between us, on account of him being a family friend and Kyle's close buddy and teammate. I don't mind it. Besides, I'm technically single and training to ace the dating game altogether. What Alex and I do in the privacy of my bedroom is our business and nobody else's. It's not supposed to have an impact on my long-term goals, or so we tell ourselves. I'm only just getting started, anyway. Alex thinks I should get out and explore more before I decide to settle or stop somewhere, and I agree.

Of course, the thought of him does creep up on me when I least expect it, but then my first date training session with Jack comes along, and I find myself in an entirely different universe altogether. We're at the mall, on the top level where the finest fashion brands line up along the open hallway with their neatly decorated and illuminated window setups. Italian, French, American styles combining to create stunning and enticing designs. Dresses, skirts, bomber jackets, sassy heels, and

naughty lace lingerie. Twinkling gold and diamond jewelry sets. Fine perfumes and glossy makeup kits. Colorful hair accessories and extravagant bags. A discerning sartorialist's dream unraveling before me as I follow Jack from one shop to another until he finds one he thinks would suit me best.

"Here we go. Let's try chic first," he says as we walk in.

The interior is mostly beige marble and off-white walls, with minimalist racks that bring out the color and sparkle of each proposed outfit. Silk and satin dominate the texture range, while red, orange, and creamy white define the overall palette. I never thought I'd find myself in a place like this. I've always been a jeans and tees kind of girl, but mostly because I was stuck in a comfort zone over the years. *No more*, I tell myself. Change is sorely needed, and I've got a dashing silver fox gentleman here who's eager to bring out the best in me.

"Oh, they have my size aplenty," I conclude as I walk past a rack of short cocktail dresses and notice the size tags.

"Maeve, your size was never an issue," Jack replies, his eyes warm and kind as always. "You're a beautiful woman with curves in all the right places. All we have to do is accentuate what you already have, and I promise you every guy you come across will move mountains for you."

I can't help but laugh. "That's insanely optimistic but thank you."

"It also happens to be true. I'm a man. I see what I've got in front of me, so I'm just telling it like it is," he replies, the shadow of a smile fluttering across his handsome face. Yet I also notice a bit of sadness in his gaze, a subtle hesitation as he looks away from me and chooses to focus on a short ivory dress made with delicate layers of silk and tulle. "Why don't you try this one on first?"

A sales assistant comes along with a pleasant smile and a little too much sweet perfume. "Hi there, welcome to Toussaint's! How may I help you today?"

"Oh, thank you, but I'm a regular customer here," Jack tells her. "I know my way around the racks. We'll let you

know if we do need assistance, though.”

She nods politely and goes back to the counter.

“What could I possibly wear this for?” I wonder aloud as Jack hands me the dress.

“Obviously, a date night,” he says, trying not to laugh.

“I don’t think I’ve met a guy who would take me to the kind of place where this piece would actually work,” I giggle but take the dress anyway and disappear into the dressing room.

Jack stays close, settled on one of the lounge sofas while I change out of my jeans and tee and squeeze into this marvelous work of couture fashion. Putting it on isn’t as hard as I thought it would be, the zipper easy to reach. I’m flushed and rather nervous when I come out to show Jack, but the look on his face tells me it hits all the right spots and it hits them hard.

He stills, unable to take his eyes off me, his lips slightly parted as he measures me from head to toe. My heart is pounding as I await his verdict. He says nothing, instead getting up and going into the shoe area, coming back with a pair of zirconia-encrusted pumps that coincidentally match the dress perfectly. “Put these on,” he says.

“Okay.” I slipped on the shoes. “How’s this, then?” I ask, slightly struggling to stay upright on six-inch heels. A lifetime of flats has returned to haunt me with a vengeance.

“Stunning. Absolutely stunning,” he says. “I would date you.”

“Heh, you’re just being nice.”

Jack comes closer, his glare darker and simmering with the kind of fire now burning in my loins as his breath tickles my lips. “I’m being perfectly candid with you here, Maeve. I keep telling you that you’re completely unaware of the effect you are having on me. Maybe I’ll have to show you in order to convince you.” He pauses, carefully measuring my reaction then pulls back, walks away, and returns with another dress and a different pair of shoes. “Try these on, next.”

Like the good student that I am, I retreat into the dressing room and do as I'm told. Meanwhile, my blood's rushing every which way as I try to process this burning feeling that Jack gives me. He's got a way of looking at me that completely disarms my defenses. I don't dislike it. I'm quite tempted, actually. But I'm also wondering what Alex might think of this dynamic that's brewing between us. I remind myself that everything we're doing here is meant to be free and casual, so I put the second dress on and give myself a moment to admire it in the mirror.

It's a gorgeous deep red skater's dress that perfectly complements my hourglass figure. The shoes are a matching red and half-an-inch taller than the previous pair, yet the sole is curved well enough to make them feel more comfortable.

I come out wondering what Jack will think of it until I realize that I already like this combination. I don't really need his opinion. Perhaps this is the next step in my feminine awakening. I'm definitely loving every moment.

Jack's jaw nearly hits the floor. "Holy shit, this is you," he says. "It screams Maeve."

"How are you so knowledgeable about women's fashion?" I laugh to conceal yet another major blushing episode. "You're better at this than most of the ladies I've ever met."

"I had a demanding wife," he replies, his humor slightly fading. "She loved shopping and putting on the best of things, and so I spent most of my life with her catering to her every need, learning about her favorite brands and why she liked them. In retrospect, while the marriage itself ended in disaster, I did come away with a surprising amount of experience, I guess, even in this department."

"Roxanne, right?"

He nods once. I turn around to give him a full view of the outfit before he hands me a third dress and some strappy sandals.

"Mind if I ask what happened between you two? Alex said you used to be a power couple of sorts," I add, hesitating just

outside the dressing room as I analyze his expression. There is grief in his dark eyes, but there is also a sense of... relief.

“It was good until it wasn’t. We fell in love when we were really young, and neither of us took the time to explore the world and other people before we got married. And then we had Trent. Raising a kid put some things in perspective, but it also brought out the worst in Roxanne. She was never meant to be a mother, to be honest. I don’t know why she insisted on keeping full custody when I was the one who practically raised him alone,” Jack says. “We’d been drifting apart for years.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. How often do you see your son nowadays?”

“Not nearly enough, unfortunately. His birthday is next week. Nine years old, and I haven’t been there for a lot of things over the course of his life. The amount of travel my profession requires doesn’t allow me to spend as much time with him as I’d like to. And Roxanne often finds a way of messing up our scheduled outings. Sometimes, I feel like she does it on purpose, just to keep me away from him.”

My heart breaks to see him like this, but at the same time I’m secretly honored that he has chosen to share these intimate details with me. Truth be told, most people wouldn’t even be aware of what Jack is going through if they saw him out on the ice. He’s the team’s leader, the alpha, the dominant one who keeps his men in check and spends every waking hour bringing them closer to the playoffs than they’ve been in past years. Hockey is his life. I remember watching him play before his retirement, and I was entranced by his grace and agility. Dad was like that too, and Kyle isn’t too far behind. I guess it’s why Jack took such a liking to my brother.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell him and go back into the dressing room.

By the end of the shopping session, I’m coming out of the mall with eight different bags, each loaded with a minimum of two outfits, complete with shoes and high-end jewelry to match. Needless to say, I’m hyped up and eager to wear these

as soon as I get the chance—I only need a proper date or ten for that.

“Thank you so much for this,” I say as we walk over to Jack’s black SUV, parked in the massive open-air parking lot behind the mall. At least it’s nice and sunny outside. The evening nip will arrive eventually, but for the time being I’m going to enjoy the golden warmth on my face. “I never really saw myself wearing such a different style.”

“It’s my pleasure, Maeve. You deserve the best,” he says. “Come on, let’s load these in the car and take you on a practice coffee date.”

“A *what?*” I ask.

He laughs as we reach the SUV and he puts my bags into the back. “A practice coffee date. Although I haven’t really gotten back into the dating game myself since the divorce two years ago, I have been paying attention and I’ve managed to pick up on the trends.”

“So, the coffee date is a trend?”

“Yes, it’s a safe bet of sorts. It’s become quite popular with the prevalence of online dating today. Generally speaking, the two people going on the date don’t know one another that well. So instead of committing to going through a whole dinner and movie kind of thing, you can just go out for coffee and gauge it there,” he says.

We get in the car and drive uptown to the Emilie Brasserie, which happens to be one of Lansing’s poshest coffeeshops and also home to the best regional coffee ever grown on this earth.

“Listen, I’m going to have to wire you some money for this whole thing,” I tell Jack as we settle at a round table out on the terrace. It overlooks the park slope, treating us with a view of rolling, green hills and blossoming magnolia trees beneath a perfect, blue sky. “The dresses, the shoes, the coffee, the whole shebang.”

“No way,” Jack replies firmly. “I said it was my treat, and I meant it’s my treat.”

“But all of this stuff... Jack, it’s expensive,” I say, utterly flustered and unsure of how to react to such kindness and generosity.

“Don’t worry about it. You’ve been such a good sister to Kyle, and Kyle in turn, has been such a rising sun, such a force for the team. You deserve good things, and I am happy that I am able to give you a shopping spree day. I honestly don’t mind.”

I lower my gaze, though I can still feel his eyes drilling holes into my soul. Having Jack’s full attention is like getting a little too close to the sun yet being unable to pull away. I may end up burning for this small and guilty pleasure but damn it, I’d rather go up in flames than to have him stop looking at me like that.

“You’re too kind,” I whisper.

“And you’re too good for most of the assholes out there,” Jack replies bluntly.

A waitress brings us coffee and sugar-glazed biscuits shaped like hearts, along with sparkling fruit water and a dessert menu. Seeing as it is the afternoon, the café offers a five o’clock-tea-style option with artisan cakes and special teas alongside their regular menu items, so Jack and I agree that the Mad Hatter Tea Party variety is something worth trying.

We start talking about his divorce and how his marriage to Roxanne gradually fell apart. The more he shares about it, the clearer it becomes that she only married him for his fame and glory. Once he got into his late thirties and became more of a father figure instead of a hockey star, she began to lose interest. She would go to parties and charity events without him, pitch reality shows where she’d be the leading character, and she’d even auditioned for a part on the reality show *Real Housewives* to get more press attention.

It is becoming obvious that there is nothing Roxanne loves more than showing up in viral clips and social media posts. I have a feeling she had Trent more for the photo opportunities than anything else, because it sounds like the kid barely sees

her at home. From what Jack says, he knows his nanny and schoolteachers better than he knows his own mother while in the meantime, he's gradually being turned against a father who bends himself over backwards to try and spend quality time with him.

"The law tends to favor the mother, and with my extensive travel schedule during the season, it makes a hard case for me to have sole custody," Jack concludes as the cakes arrive. "And therefore, I need to prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that Roxanne is an unfit mother. Rumors and a couple of tabloid pics aren't enough."

"It's awful how she keeps using your child as a bargaining chip," I sigh deeply. "Poor Trent is growing up in a terribly toxic environment."

"I'll never stop fighting for him," Jack says. "He's my son, and I swore to myself that I would do whatever it takes to get full custody."

"If there's anything I can do to help, please, tell me," I reply. "I know a lot of good psychologists and sociologists in fields adjacent to my line of work. Margo has a couple of great contacts for child development, given the struggles that most indigenous kids deal with on a daily basis on reservations, so she might be able to help, too."

Jack's hand reaches across the small table and gently covers mine. The feel of his skin makes me tingle much like it did with Alex, and shivers start running down my spine. I'm surprised by my own arousal, but I can't be entirely shocked—I've had plenty of naughty fantasies late at night about this man being in my bed. "I'll say this again, Maeve, you're a good woman and you deserve the world at your feet."

"And you, too, Jack," I reply, smiling. "Any woman would be lucky to have you in her life. Roxanne is the one who's missing out the most. In fact, I doubt she ever truly appreciated you and she definitely didn't deserve you."

"There was a time when I probably would've disagreed, but now, I do see your point. Enough about my marital woes,

though,” he chuckles lightly. “Let’s talk about dating etiquette.”

“Don’t you mean pre-dating etiquette, since this is just a coffee date?” I laugh.

“Ah, you catch on quickly. Well done, young apprentice.”

* * *

I NOTICE as we get closer to my place, the atmosphere between us begins to subtly shift. The change is almost unnoticeable at first, accentuated only by a heavy silence. I’m hot for the guy, and my panties can tell that story well enough, but I dare not say or do anything to give it away. I keep thinking about Alex, and that mild pang of guilt won’t let me go.

Jack keeps his eyes on the road until we pull into my driveway and he looks around, noticing the empty front yards of my neighbors. “Huh... I expected more people to be out at this hour, given what a great day we’re having,” he says. “Michigan doesn’t always get such tender springs, you know...”

“I agree, but it’s still a weekday,” I pause and check my watch, “at this hour, most of them are at work or in school. Hence the apocalyptic abandonment we’re witnessing.”

“I don’t think I mind it much, considering what’s been on my mind for the past few hours,” Jack says, his gaze slowly yet deliberately moving back to me. I recognize the fire in his eyes, the muted desire that is about to be unleashed.

And I want it. In this moment, in this very moment, I want it. “What’s been on your mind?”

“I’ve been wondering what your lips taste like.”

“Why just wonder?”

His lips arch into a devilish grin. “Don’t play with fire unless you’re ready for the heat.”

“I’m more than ready,” I whisper.

He reaches over and gently grabs me by the back of my neck. His hold is firm but not demanding. He pulls me close and kisses me. My core expands like a swelling sun, the light bursting through me until I am incandescent. His tongue is curious and playful, but he lets me open up to him first, giving me room to test him. I like the way he tastes—strawberries and cream and sweet tea.

His fingers dig in, sensually massaging my nape as I moan softly against his lips.

I bring my hand up to caress his face, my fingers enjoying the feel of his salt-and-pepper stubble and the sharpness of his cheek. I can't help but imagine the rest of him in all his naked glory as he takes me to new heights of previously undiscovered pleasure. Jack picks up on my secret desire pretty quickly, keeping me close while his other hand finds my breast.

“Oh, Jack,” I breathe in sharply as he squeezes, not caring much for the fabric of my tee nor the lace of my bra. He pinches the nipple, prompting my back to arch toward him.

“You were made for this,” he says, nibbling my jawline as his hand then makes its way down, fingers tracing the curve of my hip before they unbutton my jeans.

Whatever this is, I don't want it to stop. I don't even care if anybody can see us. It's crazy and exciting and I'm so aroused, I'm ready for him right here, right now. “This is dangerous,” I manage, but he kisses me again.

“I don't care,” he quips before he slips his tongue into my mouth. All of my nimble defenses fade as he drives me mad.

My hips buck as I spread my legs, oblivious to the mild discomfort of my position in the passenger seat while he sneaks his hand into my jeans and deep in my panties, only to find me slick and eager for his touch.

“Maeve, you vixen,” Jack chuckles as he pulls his head back to look into my eyes. “Don't move, don't say a word,” he adds, fingers now sliding between my folds.

I hold my breath as he finds my swollen nub and applies pressure with his thumb, index and middle finger going deeper until he finds my very core. My pulse gallops to new heights as he works me into a tumbling, devastating orgasm. I quiver under his touch, three fingers now stroking me deftly, the heat rippling outward as I unravel further.

My heart is pounding as he watches me come, as his hand never leaves me, never stops teasing and flicking and stroking until I'm wetter than ever. It takes a minute for me to return to the surface of the earth, our gazes locked as I catch my breath.

"Wow," I mumble.

"I love that sound you make when you come," Jack says with a broad smile. "I want to hear it again but with me inside you."

"We'll have to make that happen."

"Oh, we will. Don't doubt it for a second. I intend to give you everything."

"Is that a promise or a threat?" I giggle as he pulls his hand back and licks his fingers slowly. "That's so fucking hot..."

Jack raises an eyebrow playfully. "You taste better than I imagined. And no, it's not a promise, or a threat."

"What is it, then?"

"A fact. An unavoidable inevitability."

Be still, my beating heart, this man will eventually break me down into itty bitty pieces and then reconfigure me into something else entirely. I wouldn't even dream of stopping him. Jack can do with me as he pleases.

All I can do is smile as I get out of the car, surprised to still be able to walk after what just happened. I grab my shopping bags from the back, and he offers to help me carry everything into the house, but I can't, because if I do, I'll take him inside and finish what we just started. The thought of Alex is returning with a petty vengeance, now... I just can't.

"Thank you... for everything," I tell Jack.

He drops a kiss on my lips and watches me go inside before he gets back behind the wheel and drives off. I'm still hot and horny as hell by the time I drop the shopping bags on the floor and walk over to the kitchen for a glass of water. My throat is dry, but everything else is deliciously wet. Jack just turned me on and sent me on my merry way.

What a fabulous tease he is.

Of course, what's a proper arousal without a smidge of guilt?

The idea of taking a steamy shower while thinking of Jack sounds wonderful at this point, but I can't stop myself from worrying about how Alex might react to this. Again, I remind myself that we're not exclusive, that I'm just getting started and catching up on everything that I have been missing out in the past few years. I am aware that I don't owe anybody any explanation, and I also understand that Jack is a discreet gentleman. He would never do or say anything to disrupt this ecosystem of friendship and support that we've all built around my brother Kyle.

But still...

My mind is wandering back and forth a lot. There's not enough cold water on this earth to quell the kind of thirst that I'm dealing with. Yet I might find comfort in the presence of the one man who has always stood by my side ever since we were kids. Noah. I wonder what he's up to. I check my watch again and remember it's one of his days off from the woodshop.

Maybe he could give me some insight on how to handle Jack and Alex. Jack *or* Alex. Wow, my head's a frickin' mess but my heart is singing two different songs. Make that three. As I go into the backyard and look over the fence, I find Noah relaxing on a lounge chair on the edge of his indoor pool, gorgeously naked. Oh God, this is the first time I've ever seen him like this, and I can't look away. Screw any issues I had

about Alex and Jack... my brain just burst into flames because all I can do is stare.

He's... big. Although he appears to be in a rather relaxed state, he's getting bigger. Thicker. He touches himself, ever so slightly, just enough to get more of that hot blood of his down there until he's fully erect.

I'm licking my lips now, still slick from Jack's touch. Oh, this is so wrong. So crazy.

Noah slowly turns his head and gives me a sleepy, sexy smile. He gestures for me to come over.

I gasp upon realizing that he's been aware of my presence the whole time. Quickly, I walk over to his yard and enter the enclosed pool area.

Unable to think of anything else I mutter, "I'm sorry, clearly you're having a private moment."

"Maeve, come join me."

The way he says it makes my skin prickle everywhere. I've always known Noah to be warm and patient, kind and ever so friendly, yet the tone of his voice just now turns me on in ways I didn't think were possible. And given the kind of crazy and amazing day I've had so far I have to wonder... maybe this is just part of the whole thing. Maybe my crazy and amazing day hasn't ended yet.

"Are you sure?" I ask sheepishly.

"I wouldn't have asked if I weren't sure," he replies, eyes closed as he soaks in the steam from the enclosed heated pool and the sensations he's giving himself. "By the way, have you watched any of the movies I recommended the other day?"

He's talking about several indie and classic films that are particularly loaded with erotic scenes and the cinematic kind of lovemaking that I've often dreamed about experiencing on my own. I've seen all of them—there was one in particular that surprised me among the recommendations, mainly because it's focused on a dominant and a submissive and the way he conquers her, the way he gets her to kneel before him and beg for him to take her in every which way possible.

Admittedly, I've imagined what it would be like for someone like me to be in her skin. That specific thought led to a rather heated self-care session under the steam shower.

"Yup. I've managed to watch a couple of them," I lie, though I'm not sure why.

"Which ones?"

He never looks at me. I'm sure he knows I'm looking at him and then some. His body is tight and toned, though he's tall and lean and not at all like Alex or Jack. Noah has the appeal of a ridiculously sexy tennis athlete, with long limbs and muscular calves, his broad shoulders rounded and his arms almost begging to hold me. His messy brown hair covers his forehead, and I love how some of it curls around the temples. His lips are full and soft pink. He licks them slowly as he awaits my answer, yet he still doesn't look at me.

The air between us feels thick, the tension almost palpable. When did we get to this point? How did we reach this dynamic? Not that I mind—I've been hoping for it for so long, it's like a dream come true. I don't really know how to handle myself; my fingers are fiddling behind my back and my pussy feels so wet, I might start gushing soon.

"I've seen *Dream of Me* and *True Dominance*," I finally answer. Of all the titles, the one with the Dom and the Sub just had to roll off my tongue.

"Great picks," he replies. "What did you think of the latter?"

"It was cool. I liked it."

"Liked it?"

"Okay, I loved it. It was enticing and intense, the story built up well between the main characters."

His eyes pop open, and I inhale as though I'm about to plunge into the pool, my cheeks broiling as beads of sweat gather along my eyebrows. There is something going on here, something I've never experienced before yet something I already can't get enough of. It's insane and I don't want it to stop. In fact, I'm dying to figure out where it leads.

“Do you understand the chemistry between the dominant and the submissive?” Noah asks, his gaze finding mine.

I exhale sharply. “I think so.”

“She’s a powerful woman, isn’t she? Independent, gets things done on her own, doesn’t really need a man,” he says. “Yet she *chooses* him to be a part of her life, so he takes his sweet time with her. He lets her open up and blossom under his attention.”

“Yeah, I got that from their relationship,” I reply, though my mind keeps bouncing back to the spicy scenes rather than the meaningful dialogue.

“Gradually, he gets her to submit. Slowly but surely, he finds the weaknesses in her armor but he doesn’t exploit them. He just helps her rediscover herself in ways she never imagined were even possible for a woman like her. She’s been in her masculine energy for so long that she has no idea how to be in her feminine energy—she doesn’t know how to be led and inspired by the man who is determined to be her everything.”

I’m starting to notice a double entendre here—or perhaps it’s just my wishful thinking. Either way, I eat up his every word, struggling to maintain eye contact as he keeps touching himself. I see the tentative smile dancing on his handsome face, aware that he knows exactly what this is doing to me.

“She doesn’t mind submitting if she feels safe,” I say.

“Take your clothes off, Maeve. This steam is great for the skin,” he replies.

“Wait, what?”

“You heard me. Undress, and lay next to me. It’s what I meant when I asked you to join me.”

I think about it for a moment and I cannot bring myself to refuse or resist. It’s as if my heart and my body have just made a pact to push me deeper down the rabbit hole. I came over here to maybe find comfort in Noah’s company, not to... do whatever I’m about to do. But it’s also been a fantasy of mine for so long, I can’t resist.

“I’m not going to ask you again,” he adds in a sexy and dark, commanding voice.

Oh, good grief, I am already his in every possible way, why am I even fighting this? I get out of my jeans and tee, my feet bare on the warm stone that frames his custom-built pool. At least I’m wearing a matching bra and panty set of white lace and satin bows, but he doesn’t want any of that, either.

“All of it. Off,” he says.

I’m nervous but way too excited to stop, so I take my bra off, then my panties, trying not to faint as I observe his gaze darken into an abyss in his silent analysis of my body. He licks his lips once more—this time slower, more deliberately.

“Like what you see?” I ask, not sure where the words came from since my brain is practically a screaming void under his intense gaze.

“Very much so,” he says. “Come here.”

I freeze, unsure of what Noah means with his request. “Come where?”

“Closer,” he replies.

Shuddering, I take a few steps until I stand next to his chaise lounge, naked and vulnerable and his for the taking. “Okay,” I whisper.

“Kneel.”

It’s an order, and I am compelled to obey. There’s this mischievous side of him that I’ve never seen before, a side I’m dying to discover and lose myself into completely, so I kneel beside him. He looks at me, and I drown in the wild forest of his eyes.

“How does it feel?” Noah asks. “To submit to me?”

“I like it. It’s different...”

“Good. Now, get up and climb on top of me.”

I feel my eyes bulging like giant marbles. It makes him smile. “Are you sure?” I ask.

“Aren’t you?”

“Is this part of the coaching?”

“Of course. I promised I would teach you everything I know, but that means surrendering to me with every inch of your perfect body and every sparkle of your wonderful soul, Maeve. So, I’ll ask you again. Are *you* sure?”

I nod slowly.

“Then do as I ask,” he says.

I climb on top of him but I’m not quite sure how to position myself since we’re both naked and I’m still dangerously slick from Jack’s earlier treatment. Noah picks up on my hesitation and firmly grabs me by the hips, then sits me right on top of him. I feel his throbbing erection pressing into my simmering folds, nerve endings screaming as his fingers dig into my flesh and beckon me to move, to rub myself against him.

“That’s it,” Noah says, his breath uneven as he admires my full breasts. “Touch yourself. Start at the top.”

Slowly, I bring my hands up and massage myself just like I would if I were home alone in my bed, thinking about him. I pinch my nipples, gently at first. “Like this?” I ask, feeling his hardness as it yearns to fill me to the brim.

“Pinch harder.”

The slight discomfort is sweet, delicious even. I gasp with sheer pleasure as I grind myself against him, harder and faster as the head of his erection applies the perfect pressure against my aching clit. “I need more,” I tell him.

“Not yet. Harder.”

“Ah!” My nipples are red and perky, like ruby gemstones that send trillions of heatwaves through my whole body.

He reaches around me and grabs a handful of my hair, giving a gentle tug. I cry out but don’t stop him as his other hand comes up and takes hold of my breast, squeezing and kneading it in his large, rough palm.

“How does this feel?” he asks.

“Incredible... Oh, it’s incredible... Noah, I need more...”

“Not yet,” he says again. His grip on my hair goes a bit tighter, forcing my head to tilt back. I can’t see him anymore, but I feel his hand traveling down my body until his thumb finds my center, now swollen and begging for release. He teases but stops just as he feels me getting closer to the edge.

“Noah, please,” I’m begging him. I can’t take it anymore.

“Will you be a good girl?”

“Yes, I swear...”

“Will you do everything I ask of you?”

“Oh, yes, please... Yes, I will do anything you ask of me...”

“Good. I’ll hold you to it.”

He shifts under me, though I barely register the movement. He spears me with his full length and I tremble like a leaf in the wind as his monstrous cock goes deep, stretching me beyond my wildest dreams. His thumb resumes its torture, clearly he has no intentions of stopping. Instead, he plants his heels into the chaise lounge and pumps me hard and fast.

I’m breaking down and falling apart as he still holds me by the hair, as he still pulls back while thrusting himself in, harder... harder... deeper... so deep that I don’t want it to stop. The orgasm that washes over me is explosive, my hips sway frenetically against him, welcoming every push and every ripple, the wetness dripping down his muscular thighs as he revels in my ecstasy.

“I’m not done with you yet. Come here,” he says, not even a minute after I finally catch my breath, still bursting and popping like corn kernels on an open fire.

I’m on the chaise lounge, on my belly, my legs together as Noah takes me from behind. He has my wrists in his grip, but it’s his other hand that sends shocks through me as he trails it down the front of my body, finding my clit and furiously

rubbing it. He rams into me, merciless and dominant, over and over as I beg him to keep going.

“Don’t stop, don’t ever stop,” I manage, my soul crumbling as I give myself wholly to this dark shadow that has been living inside Noah for so long.

“I’m only just getting started,” he says and plunges into me again.

The unbearable heat surges through me as I reach the pinnacle of yet another mind-blowing orgasm. He takes all of me, hard and fast, relentless and harsh, possessive and strangely loving at the same time. I welcome him, clenching tightly as I feel him getting closer to the edge. The deflagration that follows has me spinning out of control.

I feel like a runaway train with no brakes. My sense of morality has been twisted into a yoga-inspired tantric pretzel. My mind is constantly split between the affection and the attention of three men who have come to occupy an alarmingly large space in my life in a relatively short span of time. My body, on the other hand, is singing like the happiest mandolin—songs of sexual liberation and feminine awakening, of spoiling and indulging oneself like a veritable hedonist because life is too short for us to concern ourselves with what we shouldn't be doing.

Dad used to have a saying—he'd rather regret the things that he did and not the things he didn't do. I just never imagined I'd be living by those words with such relentless passion. Granted, Alex, Noah, and Jack are making it incredibly easy for me to give into their temptation, over and over again. So far, I've been bouncing between Alex and Noah's beds. The former is always hungry for me; passionate and deeply physical, possessive but only in the confines of our private space. The latter leads me into a darker and sweeter path, he's calculated and possessive in an entirely different manner. And then there's Jack, who's been flirting with and teasing me ferociously for the past couple of weeks. None of them know of the spicy details that have emerged between us, they're all still focused on the "date training." Alex and Noah have both declared that the mind-blowing sex is just practice.

I would've liked to agree.

But even I have to admit... it's not as cut and dry nor as simple. I'm catching feelings for each of these incredible men. What I cannot find in one, I will absolutely devour in the other, and while I have yet to experience Jack's full level of intimacy, something tells me he's the piece de resistance of this peculiar menagerie of mine. All I wanted was to get better at my dating game. The bittersweet irony is that I'm definitely getting better; I'm just not that interested in meeting other guys anymore.

How could I be, when my body is constantly ablaze under Alex's touch, when my nipples are deliciously sore from Noah's playful pinching, and when my heart flutters under Jack's appreciative gaze? This is insane, and it probably isn't going to end well, yet I can't seem to stop. If anything, I need more. I *want* more. I want all three. Do I want all three at once, though? No, that's not possible. Is it?

The last thing I want is to cause any kind of strife between them, particularly given each of our bonds to Kyle.

"Where's your head at?" Jack's voice pulls me back into the real world. I've been tuning out a lot lately, albeit for good reason.

"I'm so sorry. I just have a lot of things on my mind," I say with an apologetic smile.

And I'm not lying, either. Noah knows he wasn't my first, and he has said so, specifically. He said he doesn't mind, but I could tell he wasn't too happy when he figured it out. On the other hand, Alex wants to keep it casual, and for the most part we do just that, yet he's always guarding me during our gym workouts—visibly displeased by the attention that other men have begun shifting my way.

"Clearly," Jack says, his laptop open on the table between us. We're seated on his penthouse terrace overlooking our gorgeous town, tree crowns now blowing up green and pink and soft white under the spring sun's warm kiss. "You haven't liked any of your online dating matches so far, and you've got plenty to choose from."

“I know, I know. Don’t get me wrong, they’re all handsome and their profiles seem interesting enough,” I sigh deeply. “It’s just that... I don’t know, I’m not getting a spark from any of them.”

“Well, I may not be an expert dater myself, Maeve, but I doubt you’ll find any spark on the internet. That usually occurs when you meet them. Like in old-school dating.”

“I know but none of them inspire the will in me to do that.”

Jack laughs wholeheartedly, and I love the sound of his guffaws, the subtle creases at the corners of his eyes, the deep expression lines hidden beneath his trimmed beard. Gosh, my fingers itch from this unspoken urge to run them through it. “It’s the downside of online dating, I suppose,” he ends up conceding. “We all play a part online. We display our best photos and we do our best to offer the kind of bio that makes a potential partner swipe right on us. It’s kind of like preparing for a job interview. Or an exam.”

“Exactly. And there’s a kind of pressure about the whole thing that I honestly do not enjoy. I go in with the intention of finding a mate. Their intentions may vary, but the pressure is the same. The endgame is more or less the same, and it’s based on physical attraction, on potential compatibilities—not on creating and building a friendship, a relationship.”

“I agree,” Jack says with a shrug. “But it’s still the fastest and easiest way to meet somebody new these days.”

“What if I don’t really want to meet somebody new? What if I like the people I’ve already met, the people I’ve already built a rapport with?” My voice fades as I notice a long shadow coming over his dark eyes.

He blinks slowly, so slow in fact, that it makes my heart stutter. “What are you trying to tell me, Maeve?”

“I’m not sure. It’s kind of weird but yet at the same time it isn’t, given what we... did in your car,” I manage, unable to look him in the eyes anymore.

Instead, I glance back inside the penthouse, admiring the minimalist white wood furniture and perfectly polished hardwood flooring, the creamy sofas and pale blue glass coffee table, the ajar door leading into his bedroom—I only caught a glimpse of the massive master bed with its mahogany headboard and beige silk sheets. The white walls with framed photographs hanging here and there. The potted Amazonian plants with leaves as big as a dinner plate. The open plan kitchen with its red acrylic floor and grey marble countertops. Everything in this place feels stylish and luxurious but also practical and simple. It's a lot like Jack if I think about it.

And here I go, thinking about Jack even more when I'm trying to distract myself from doing just that. I'm desperately trying to avert my eyes from his scrumptious physique and smoldering gaze. "I'm sorry," I mumble. "It's just that... I've never felt this way before."

"Me, either. It's not supposed to be a bad thing."

"Then what's happening here? Is it all part of the date training?"

He shakes his head. "I'd be lying to the both of us if I said yes. It's more than that. I feel it, you feel it. I just don't know how to handle it, considering how it might affect our future. And then there's Kyle—what will he think of his coach and sister getting it on?"

"Getting it on?" I raise an eyebrow.

"*Getting together.* I'm trying to keep the tone light and breezy here so as not to scare you away," he laughs lightly. It's contagious. I can't help but chuckle as he reaches around the table and takes my hand in his. "I made it clear in the car that day how I feel about you. I don't do that with just any woman who crosses my path. But you've been on my mind for so long, I can't remember what my life was like before you popped into my view."

"Wow, Jack. I'm really not that special..."

"But you are," he says firmly, and gently pulls me up from my seat, beckoning me to sit in his lap, instead. "You're

beautiful, more beautiful than you give yourself credit for. Your curves drive me crazy. Not a day goes by that I don't wonder what your thighs might feel like wrapped around me, and I have to admit, all these workouts with Alex are clearly starting to pay off."

Settled in his lap, I feel myself stiffen for a few seconds, feeling him hard against my core. The fact that I'm wearing a tight knitted tube dress isn't helping, either. I am practically glazed over his growing erection, my panties already soaked with desire.

"Thank you. I admire you, physically speaking. Most men your age don't give their bodies the level of care that you give yours," I tell him.

"You're so kind, courteous and eloquent, not to mention clearly educated," he adds, one hand resting on my hip while the other comes up to touch my cheek. "Ridiculously smart, which makes you ridiculously sexy. Maeve, you're the whole package. Any one of these guys should thank every god in the universe for putting you in their path, and that's the mindset that I want you to carry."

"Ah, I see we're still in the coaching phase," I giggle and roll my eyes.

Jack knows I'm kidding, of course, but then his hand moves from my face to my chest, cupping one breast through the dress fabric and causing a hoarse moan to escape from my throat as he squeezes, tighter and tighter until I shift and grind against him. "We're way past the coaching phase, darling," he whispers. "I'm probably going to burn in hell for what's about to happen, but I don't want to deny myself anymore."

"I don't want you to deny yourself, Jack...."

If anything, we'll both enjoy eternity in a blazing fire, but I don't care. I'm a free woman. He's a free man. And my feelings toward him are as intense and as colorful as what I am already experiencing with Alex and Noah. Jack's way of handling himself lights up all the right spots inside of me.

“We really shouldn’t do this,” he says without much conviction.

“I don’t really care,” I reply. I don’t know where this attitude came from, but I absolutely adore this bolder version of myself. I kiss him, hard on the lips.

He opens his mouth and welcomes my tongue as I explore the sweetness awaiting. He tastes like coffee and cream, of sugar and a smidge of vanilla syrup, yet the flames he’s stirring in me are spicy and peppered, sharp and aggressive. It’s a strange and sweat-inducing combination. It’s also highly addictive.

“You’ve been getting some practice in, haven’t you?” Jack chuckles lightly.

I pause and look at him, but he just shrugs and kisses me again—this time, hungrily, possessive, aching for more. I feel his cock twitching against my core, begging for the layers of fabric between us to magically disappear.

“It’s okay, Maeve. I don’t mind you getting your training wheels on, it only serves to bring out the woman inside you, the woman I desperately want,” he adds as he trails kisses down my neck. His hand is insistent on my breast, pulling the knitted dress down to reveal the dainty lace cup and the pearlescent flesh trembling beneath.

He tugs on the bra, releasing my nipple against the crisp morning air. It quickly perks up just as he wraps his lips around it and starts suckling... I’m about to fall apart, holding on to him. He’s got one arm around my waist to keep me in place, but his left hand is free to roam.

His first stop—my thighs. He gently spreads them apart, fingers tracing upward along my curves, thousands of electrical spikes dancing across my bare skin as they reach my panties.

“Oh, Jack,” I gasp and bite my bottom lip as he feasts on my breast.

Only the sun exists, shining down from above, and the soft spring breeze makes me shiver ever so slightly. It’s alright,

though. The heat he's inducing between my legs counteracts every single chill as he pulls the lace panty to the side for full access to my dripping wet pussy.

"I love how hot and wet you get for me," he says, watching me intently as he slides his index finger deep inside.

My naked breast looks so pale against his tanned cheek. He kisses it again and follows up with a middle finger down below. Soon enough, he's working me into a shattering whirlwind, his thumb flicking my tender nub until I suck in a ragged breath and let the tension unload into a sea of iridescent ripples.

"Don't stop, Jack, please," I moan, my ass rubbing against his erection while he squeezes every drop of liquid pleasure from me.

When the fourth finger goes in, and I'm stretched beyond my known limits, I feel my head fall back as I beg him for more. He finger-fucks me through to a second and unexpected orgasm, trillions of colors exploding before my eyes as I come undone, my hips swaying to meet his every thrust.

"That's it, darling, give me everything you've got," he growls.

I obey his command, giving him all of it, droplets of pure passion sliding down my thighs until there's enough of an ache between my legs that I feel as if I might crumble if I don't get every inch of him inside me. But that's not where this is going. No, not yet. For every bit of pleasure Jack has just given me, I feel obliged to give him something in return. Something intimate and precious that I've already tried with Alex and Noah.

"I want to know what you taste like," I whisper in his ear, still trembling in the aftermath.

Jack gives me a burning look but doesn't object when I get off his lap and down on my knees, my hands eagerly unbuckling his belt and unbuttoning his jeans. His eyes never leave my face as I look up at him, his engorged member throbbing against my soft lips. It's thick and veiny and

marvelously long. For a moment, I worry I won't be able to do it.

“Take it slowly, darling,” Jack says, running a hand through my long, blonde hair. The airy curls frame my face as I open my mouth and wrap it around the tip of the head first.

I taste the salty precum on the tip of my tongue. I need more, so I take him deeper, relaxing the back of my throat like Noah taught me. Maybe I should feel guilty about this, but all I feel is immense pleasure upon hearing Jack's guttural moan as I suck him harder... harder and faster.

It gets easier after a point, and I feel him getting even bigger as our gazes lock tight on one another. His breath is uneven and raspy, his chest rising chaotically as I devour him, as I pleasure him the way I know he deserves to be pleased. He's pumped up and almost ready for a release, so I pull back but grip him tightly to make sure he doesn't come just yet. I want this moment to last.

“You're a natural,” Jack smiles broadly, the hunger in his eyes darkening as I mirror his expression. “Or you've been practicing.”

“What if it's both?”

“I don't mind it one bit. But it might become a problem in the future.”

“How so?” I ask, ready to take him on again. His cock throbs in my hands, fired up and eager to feel my lips and tongue once more.

Jack's smile fades slowly. “I might get addicted to you, Maeve.”

Before I can say anything, we both freeze at the sound of a ringing doorbell. I let him go and he jumps from his seat and immediately puts himself back together, running a hand through his hair for good measure. I need another couple of seconds as he helps me up and assists me with my own disheveled clothing.

The doorbell rings again.

“Were you expecting anybody?” I croak, realizing I’m still ridiculously horny and flustered. This wasn’t supposed to happen, and as it turns out, I’m really not a good thinker in the midst of panic. Fortunately, Jack seems like he’s got it under control. He gently puts me back in my seat, coffee cup right under my nose.

“No. But we’ll get over this hurdle in one piece,” he says. “Take some deep breaths, drink your coffee, and don’t worry about a thing.”

“Okay.”

He moves toward the lounge area with a deep sigh, checking his watch.

“Coming!” he shouts when the doorbell rings a third time. “Hold on!”

Oh, shit, it’s Roxanne. I hear her cussing him out as soon as he opens the door. If the terrace floor could open right now and swallow me whole, I wouldn’t dare to object.

“What the hell, Jack? I’ve been ringing for ten minutes!” Roxanne snaps.

“I was out on the terrace,” Jack replies bluntly, but then his voice changes. His tone softens. I stretch my neck to get a better look and see the nine-year-old boy poke his head out from behind his mother. “Trent!”

“Daddy!” the kid exclaims and jumps in his father’s arms.

Jack is understandably surprised but happy to see him, so he scoops Trent into a tight hug while Roxanne looks out and spots me in my chair. She’s a beautiful woman in her early forties, dressed in a crimson pencil skirt and semi-transparent cream-colored silk shirt. I can see hints of black lace lingerie underneath. Her heels are high, way too high for me to even consider ever wearing, and her gold bracelets jingle with every motion. She flicks her rich black hair back as she gives me a disgusted look.

“Wow, Jack, bringing women home, now?” she sneers.

I'm compelled to get up and go in, if only to try and prevent a conflict. Roxanne's skinny frame stiffens upon my approach, but Trent just looks at me and smiles broadly as soon as his father sets him back down. "Hi," I manage and clear my throat, trying to sound as soft and as harmless as possible. "I'm Maeve. Just a friend..."

"Yeah, you all say that" Roxanne scoffs and rolls her eyes before deciding to completely ignore me, aiming her venom at Jack. "This is your weekend with Trent, and you bring a woman home?"

"Okay, Roxy, take it down a notch," Jack warns. "You said you weren't bringing him over today. What changed?"

"Life, Jack. Life! I've got an event to attend later on, and I figured our son could use some quality time with his father."

"Daddy, can I go play?" Trent asks, but Roxanne pulls him back, placing a firm grip on his bony shoulder. "Mom..."

He's in obvious discomfort but it's not my place to intervene. Jack, on the other hand, is bordering on furious at this point. "Of course you can, kiddo," he says, prying him out of his mother's grip. Once Trent is in his room, Jack turns back to Roxanne. "You've been doing this for far too long and it needs to stop. You can't just dump him off whenever having a kid is no longer convenient for you."

"Oh, so you don't want to take Trent for the weekend?" Roxanne hisses.

"I didn't say that. I will happily spend today and tomorrow with my boy," he shoots back. "A little bit of a heads up would've been appreciated, that's all. As for Maeve, she's my guest this morning so I would kindly ask that you behave."

Roxanne gives him the motherlode of scowls. "Behave? What do I look like to you, Jack? A golden retriever?"

I was going to say she looks like a bitch right out of hell, but again, not my place. I am horrified just thinking that this sweet boy has this creature for a mother.

"Dad, can I have pancakes for breakfast?" the kid asks, coming out of his room with a comic book in his hands.

Jack nods. "Of course! Blueberry?"

"Yeah, you're not having breakfast yet," Roxanne cuts in and grabs Trent, moving to leave. "We're coming back later, honey."

"But Mom!"

"Roxanne, what are you doing?" Jack protests. I can see the helplessness in his eyes and it's killing me. I can also see that everything Roxanne does is solely for the purpose of hurting him. She barely gives her own son a moment's worth of attention. "This is my weekend with him and I will not allow you to mess that up."

"Lose the floozy first, and I'll bring Trent back over," she says.

"Excuse me?" I hear myself gasp.

How did Jack ever love this woman? What drew him to her? What made him marry her and have a child with her? Granted, she is beautiful, I will give credit where nature and fitness trainers and plastic surgeons intended, but her character and attitude is absolutely atrocious. Especially seeing her display it in front of her son.

"Enough, Roxanne," Jack says. "You will not speak to my guest in *my* home like that."

Roxanne's eyes flashed a malevolent look my way then narrowed, searing a hateful glare through Jack.

"This is what's going to happen," Jack begins. "I am going to drive my guest home and you are going to take Trent out to breakfast. I will call you when I am home and you can bring Trent back over then. Text me when you get here and I will come down and get him."

"Fine," Roxanne finally says with venom. "Come on, honey, let's go," she says to Trent in a much sweeter and clearly fake tone.

"I'll see you in a bit kiddo!" Jack says as he ruffles Trent's hair and gives him a broad smile.

“Okay, Dad, can’t wait!” Trent responds then bounds out the door. I’m always amazed at the resilience of children and in this case, grateful for it. Trent seems like such a sweet kid and I can only hope his mother’s meanness doesn’t wear off on him.

Once Trent is out of earshot, Jack hisses to Roxanne, “Don’t think for one second I am going to let you continue these games with our son. Make no mistake, Roxanne, I am going to file for full custody.”

With one final evil glare, Roxanne turns to leave, shutting the door loudly. The silence that follows is painful and awkward. Fury twitches in Jack’s temple, his jaw clenched as he takes a couple of deep breaths. He closes his eyes for a few seconds, trying to keep himself calm while I sharply exhale, genuinely relieved that the vile woman is gone. I’m not one for conflicts, but were it not for the kid, I would’ve given her a piece of my mind. The sheer disrespect that emanates from her is unfathomable.

And right in the eye of that awful storm are Jack and his innocent son.

Jack offers to drive me home not long after Roxanne's tempestuous departure. He's clearly and understandably in a sour mood, but at least he's going to spend the rest of the weekend with his son. He explains that this isn't the first time she's done something to hurt both him and Trent, and that the boy is already showing signs of emotional damage. Jack says that Trent has become more isolated and less talkative, choosing to immerse himself in books and building model airplanes in order to spend as little time with his mother as possible.

"Not that Roxanne minds," Jack says as he drives his SUV through my neighborhood. "She's got a babysitter that spends more time with him than she does. I can't prove it in court yet, but I know she is neglecting him. I'm pretty sure the nanny knows Trent better than his own mother. I'm in the process of gathering all the facts I need to get him away from her. It'll be tough during the season with all the travel, but I'll make it work. My boy deserves better. It kills me that he has to stay with her for now."

"This is hurting you deeply," I conclude.

He gives me an apologetic look. "I'm sorry you got dragged into this, Maeve. The last thing I wanted to do was scare you away."

"You didn't scare me away," I reply. "I'm just... Honestly, I'm just sad that people like her exist and that they have the power to hurt people solely for the pleasure of it."

“I apologize for the way she treated you.”

“Jack, you’re not responsible for her actions,” I tell him, shaking my head. “There’s no need for you to apologize.”

His lips stretch into a soft smile, and I’m dangerously close to getting hot and bothered again. Roxanne sort of knocked the fire out of me earlier, but now that we’re alone once more, I can’t help but crave his touch. It’s not okay, though. I feel bad. His life is complicated enough as it is, and I would hate to cause any further inconvenience. I don’t like it, I don’t like troubling him, and I certainly don’t like standing in the way of any impromptu time that he could spend with a son he already barely sees.

“Maybe we should leave the coaching for a while,” I add after a long pause. “The date coaching, I mean.”

“Why?” he asks, his eyes on the road. The way he grips the wheel tells me he’s carrying a lot of tension, his knuckles are almost white.

“You’ve got enough to deal with,” I reply. “My poor dating life isn’t exactly a priority, Jack. And I really don’t want another episode like this morning to happen with Roxanne almost walking in on us.”

Jack chuckles dryly. “She doesn’t have a key to my place. You don’t need to worry about her actually walking in on us, Maeve.”

“You know what I meant.”

“I do, and I don’t agree. Respectfully, of course,” he says, pulling up outside my place.

I can’t take my eyes off him. The rest of the world has a persistent tendency to dissolve into nothingness whenever I’m around Jack, particularly when we’re so physically close to one another. The last time I sat in his car like this, he brought me to previously undiscovered peaks of absolute pleasure. The memory of that encounter sparks the fire in my loins, and I clench my knees tightly together as I prepare to get out.

“I do enjoy our time together. And I will forever be grateful for your advice, not to mention all your gifts,” I say,

trying to pull my gaze away. “But I don’t want to be the cause of any trouble that might make it even harder for you to see Trent in the future. Plus, I know how busy you are with the team.”

“Maeve, I’ve got that under control.” He’s irritated, and I wonder what it is that’s causing this state. Is he just frustrated about Roxanne’s terrible timing, or is he upset at the idea that we may no longer see one another anymore? Maybe I should just ask, but Jack’s hand finds my knee, and he squeezes gently. “I don’t want to stop seeing you. You’re literally one of the best things that have happened to me since my marriage went to hell. Why would I let Roxanne take you away from me, too?”

“Jack...”

“Tell me. Do you really want to end it?”

My hesitation is all he needs to grab me by the back of the neck and pull me into a kiss. I moan against his lips, mine parting instinctively to let his tongue in. We taste each other, my senses coming alight as my heart drums loudly between us.

“Jack...” I manage, but he kisses me again.

I would ride him right here, right now, but I worry about his future—especially about his future with Trent. He may have it under control for now, yet women like Roxanne always find ways to make life harder. I wouldn’t be able to live with the guilt of having been a tool for that woman’s own devices.

My blood simmers as his fingers playfully brush over my earlobe, sending tingling sensations down my back and all the way through to my core, but I manage to find the strength to pull myself away and get out of his car.

“I’m sorry, I don’t want you to get hurt because of me,” I mumble and shut the passenger door behind me. Tears are quick to work their way up to my eyes, stinging hotly as I rush toward the porch with one hand already fishing for the keys in my purse.

I’m so distraught that I don’t register anything around me until it’s too late. Jack catches up and kisses me for the third

time. My knees weaken instantly but he holds me tightly in his arms, pulling me into him as he devours the last of my defenses. Damn it, I thought I'd be stronger than this, yet all he had to do was be a smidge more persistent. His cologne invades my consciousness, filling my mind with snippets of emerald greenery and mountain wilderness, while my panties become drenched with desire.

There is a sudden need for release rumbling through me, and my bedroom is just a few steps away. This is beyond dangerous.

"I'm not done with you yet, Maeve," Jack replies hoarsely as he pauses to look into my eyes. "And judging by your response, it's plain to see you're not done with me, either. Why ruin this? Why end it before we get to the best part?"

"It's just..."

I want to tell him that I'm afraid. That I've already gone all the way with two men that I'm deeply drawn to, and that I'm terrified of doing the same with him, only to lose all three in the process. I've never felt this way before—not for a single person, let alone three. It's all so new to me. It's different and exhilarating at the same time, but there are also repercussions for this type of adventure, especially when these men are bound to Kyle and me in one form or another. It's my guilt, my fear of the unknown that are actively darkening my thoughts and my desire to lose myself in Jack's arms.

"Maeve? Coach?" Alex's voice has me jumping out of my skin as I push Jack away and whirl around to find Alex getting up from the rocking chair on my porch. He looks so lost and confused, holding flowers and a bottle of champagne as he tries to make sense of what he just witnessed.

"Oh, Alex..." It's all I can say before words abandon me completely.

I'm so screwed. So hopelessly and irrevocably screwed.

And the stern look on Jack's face isn't helping, either. This is it. The moment I've been dreading the most.

“**W**hat’s happening here?” Alex asks, his brown eyes wide and searching my own for answers.

I stand frozen like a deer in the headlights of an oncoming pickup truck swerving straight at me, but Jack appears to be surprisingly calm and composed. The polar opposite of me, come to think of it. I’m now inclined to repeat Alex’s question. What *is* happening here, exactly?

“What are you doing here?” Jack asks Alex.

“Well, remember the conversation we had the other day?” Alex replies, then looks at me.

“You were talking about Maeve?” Jack asks, sounding almost amused. “Okay. Come on, let’s all go inside and talk about this.”

Alex just nods slowly and waits for me to lead the way. I look at Jack, who gives me a warm and reassuring half-smile, and I somehow find the wherewithal to pull the keys out of my purse. I make my way up the porch steps and unlock the door, well aware that Alex and Jack are about to join me inside. My heart’s thundering like a midsummer storm out at sea, the blood raging in my veins as my own conscience continues to relentlessly berate me.

I go into the living room, trying to find a place to sit where I won’t feel so exposed and vulnerable, but there’s not a single corner in this house to shield me from my worst fear. Not anymore. I glance at Alex and notice the deep frown between his eyebrows. He’s aware that Jack and I are intimate to a

certain degree. Jack seems surprised, as well, but nowhere near as apprehensive. If anything, I might be inclined to think he's slightly entertained by this conundrum.

"Okay, so here is where we stand," Jack speaks first. "Maeve here has been on the receiving end of both our affections."

My jaw drops.

"Oh God," I groan and collapse into the armchair, briefly comforted by its cozy and familiar plushness. "This is so embarrassing..."

"Maeve, come on, you're a single and independent woman," Jack chuckles. "Neither of us has any right to tell you what to do and who to do it with. Right, Alex?"

Alex doesn't have an answer, though. He just stares at me.

"I'm so sorry," I blurt out, tears stinging my eyes.

"What for?" Jack asks. "Alex? Talk to me. Do you agree that Maeve doesn't owe either of us an explanation?"

"Well... I guess," he mumbles, his shoulders dropping. "I was actually here to try and make it official. I was going to talk to Kyle, too."

"Let's leave Kyle out of the conversation for now," Jack replies smiling, carefully approaching me. I don't know why, but I seem to be getting smaller. "Okay, so... since we're here together, can we all have an honest and open adult conversation about this?"

The question sounds reasonable enough for both Alex and me to nod affirmatively.

"I feel weird," Alex sighs, putting the flowers and the champagne on the side table next to him. "I came here to talk about us, Maeve." God, the ache in his voice is breaking me.

"We can talk about the two of you, but we can talk about the two of us, as well," Jack replies, his gaze fixed on me.

I scoff. "I just screwed up big time, what's there to talk about?"

Jack went on. “So, here’s how I see things, and correct me if I’m wrong. Part of me suspected it might come to this, though I didn’t know exactly when. Maeve, you’ve become attached to both Alex and me, right?”

“Um... Yeah...”

“Physically and emotionally, right?”

“Yes.”

“I think each of us has something to offer Maeve,” Jack says as he looks over at Alex. I suspect she’s been having trouble picking one or the other because we’re both satisfying her in a certain way. Am I wrong, Maeve?”

I shake my head. “I’ve never been in this type of situation before...”

“You’ve got feelings for her,” Jack says.

“I do,” Alex agrees.

I’m melting in my chair. I can’t bring myself to get up and go to Alex because I fear the feelings I have for him will betray me. I’ve got feelings for Jack. I’ve got feelings for Noah. Damn, that itch I needed to scratch got scratched a little too much, and now look at me. My cheeks must be as red as strawberries, and I can feel beads of sweat dripping down them as I try to figure out where this conversation is going.

“So do I,” Jack says. “And as long as Maeve wants me, I’m here. How about you, Alex?”

“I’m confused,” Alex replies.

“I know, and I’m trying to simplify the entire situation. We have no obligation to one another, but we do have emotions running deep and the utmost respect,” Jack says. “All I’m saying is that if you want to keep seeing Maeve, I won’t mind. And as long as Maeve wants to keep seeing me, too, I won’t mind that, either.”

I’m genuinely stunned by Jack’s proposal, but I can’t find the energy to reject it. Morally speaking and according strictly to certain societal norms, I shouldn’t indulge in such an idea. But then again, considering the age we’re living in and my

own feelings toward these wonderful men, I have more reason to say yes to both Jack and Alex if they're okay with it.

"I'm sorry, are you sure about this?" I ask, looking at Jack.

"Of course. We're all adults here, Maeve," he smiles, then looks back at Alex. "I'm fine with sharing a goddess. What about you?"

Alex takes another minute, but I don't see a shadow of doubt on his handsome face, just hesitation. I know the wheels in his head are turning, and understandably so. "Jack, we're going to have to keep hockey and Maeve completely separate," he finally says. "Like you said, when we're on the ice, you're my coach and I'm your player. Everywhere else, I'm perfectly okay with being more... informal. Especially where Maeve is concerned."

"Really?" I mumble, my skin tingling all over.

"I want you. Every little bit of you," he says, his gaze warm like molten chocolate.

Jack chuckles softly and runs his fingers up my forearm. It's enough to get another fire started in my loins, the flames further amplified by the speed with which Alex's eyes darken with pure desire as he watches us.

"I don't mind the idea of both Alex and me getting to enjoy you at the same time," Jack says, his focus shifting from my body to my lips. "Would you like to try that, Maeve?"

I've lost my words again. I've lost my ability to react altogether as Jack gently helps me up from my chair and pulls me close. His hands wander up and down my dress, fingertips touching and pressing and feeling everything along the way—every curve and dip, every hint of lingerie stretching underneath, every goosebump caused by his shameless seduction.

"I did not expect this," I finally manage to say.

"Me either, but here we are," Alex sighs and joins us.

For a couple of seconds, I'm tiny and helpless between two men who deeply desire me. One of them brought me flowers

and champagne, while the other won't let anybody or anything get between us. Noah comes to mind, but the guilt quickly flutters out of my brain as Alex's hands join Jack's in exploring my body. A moan escapes from my throat as Alex squeezes my breast through the fabric, feeling the soft flesh surrender to him. Jack does the same to my ass, and I'm compelled to raise my hands, resting each on their shoulder as they touch me.

"This is so strange," Alex says, licking his lips.

"But neither of us can stop," Jack replies and plants a kiss on the side of my neck.

I'm so turned on, I might explode in only a handful of seconds. There's no point in fighting this any longer. They want me, and I want them. We have so little time to live on this earth, why spend it being afraid of the things that bring us true pleasure and joy? I have no solid reason to resist. No will to, either.

Jack peels off my dress. It lands on the floor, a shapeless mound of black fabric. They don't even need to discuss the details of how this is going to play out—Alex moves behind me, kissing my bare shoulder, his tongue trailing wet down my back. Jack removes my bra, giving himself a moment to admire my full breasts before kissing each with great care and dedication.

I'm spinning out of control, my head tilting back as I try to breathe, a million sensations storming through me as pleasure drips down my thighs. I'm so horny that my panties are virtually soaked through. I'm so wet; there's a sweet ache unfurling between my legs...

"Don't stop," I whisper as Alex kneels behind me and hooks his fingers into the delicate lace bands clinging to my hips. He kisses my bottom, biting into the skin as he pulls the fabric down. "Ah... Yes..."

Freedom. My pussy hums with desire as he spreads my cheeks and digs his tongue deep through my slick folds. I bend over slowly to give him better access. He groans harshly as he licks me, his fingers coming up to find my clit swollen and in

desperate need of attention. I've had my eyes closed for a hot minute, and as I open them again, I see Jack slipping out of his jeans. His cock is huge and ready for me.

His lips find mine, and we kiss. Hungrily. Ravenously. Desperately. Alex inserts his thumb inside me, leaving his index and middle finger to tease my pink little nub, overloaded with hyper-stimulated nerve endings. Jack leaves sloppy kisses down my neck, then takes one nipple in his mouth while stroking himself.

This is insane, but I love every second of it. I'm curious. I'm dying to know where it leads.

"Tell us what you want," Jack demands, looking deep into my eyes.

"I love the way you tease me," I manage, my hips moving as Alex's thumb finds my g-spot. "Oh, oh... I'm so close..."

"Spread your legs farther apart," Alex tells me, and I do as I'm told. He flicks my clit while his left hand focuses on my tight, dripping pussy. One finger. Then two. By the third, I'm stretched and needing more, panting as I hold on to Jack's shoulders. My nails bite into his skin, but he doesn't mind.

Instead, he sucks on my right nipple so hard, teeth grazing until the sensation expands throughout my whole body. Alex finger-fucks me into unadulterated madness, and I cry out in ecstasy as the explosive orgasm shatters me to the core. Jack smiles as he comes back up and kisses me, drinking my moans of pleasure, while Alex stretches me with his fingers, making me shudder and melt at the same time.

"Come here," Jack says as he sits on the sofa, his cock throbbing furiously. "Both of you."

I look back at Alex, and he smiles. "Go on, baby," he whispers.

"This is amazing," I murmur, biting my lip as I try to kneel. Alex stops me.

"No, stay standing."

I nod once and bend over, peering into Jack's eyes as I take him in my mouth. His lips part and he sucks in a breath while I attempt to get as much of him in as possible. My throat muscles relax instinctively, but I'm compelled to pull back and gasp as Alex takes me from behind. I feel him so deep, so big and rock-hard, filling me completely.

Hunger comes over me, and I lick the shaft of Jack's bulging cock, practically drooling and tasting every magnificent inch before I start sucking again. Alex thrusts himself into me, his hands keeping my hips in place, while mine rest on Jack's muscular thighs. I'm not sure when all the clothes vanished off our bodies, but we're naked and in fierce need of one another.

"Take it all... Just like that," Jack coaxes me, running a hand through my long, flowing blonde hair. I make eye contact as I suckle the head as though I've just come across the tastiest lollipop. It sets him off, and he lifts himself up to meet me while Alex takes me harder, deeper, faster.

Alex's right hand sneaks around and between my legs, finding my core in need of release once more. I can barely breathe, yet I can't stop, either. I need Jack in my mouth, and I need Alex inside me. I need both of them so badly, I can't control myself. They're both possessive yet tender, passionate and sweet, rough enough to make me tremble yet gentle enough to make me come easily.

I use my hand to satisfy Jack while I keep my lips wrapped around the tip, the salty taste of precum tickling my tongue as another climax rocks me to the core with Alex pumping me viciously until my knees give out. I hear my guttural moans unravelling across the living room and barely register the moment when Alex and Jack switch places.

It happens so fast, yet my body is quick to respond. Thousands of colors burst in my eyes as Jack fucks me from behind. Alex sits back and welcomes my lips around his gigantic erection. I can taste myself all over it, and it's so frickin' hot, it immediately sends me into a gluttonous frenzy. I lick and suck him with everything I've got, using both hands to stroke him up and down, while Jack stretches me wider,

taking his sweet time with my tender pussy until I'm ready to break down again.

Minutes go by, sweet minutes spent enjoying everything they have to give me.

"You look so beautiful like this," Alex says to me.

Our eyes meet, while Jack's ragged breathing grows faster. He takes me hard, deeper still. I clench myself around him and welcome his hand on my clit for a third round. He's persistent, I'll give him that, but I'm so aroused, so unleashed at this point that his work is damn near effortless. I feel Alex's cock twitching in my mouth, too. He's ready. I want to feel him, all of him, so I deep-throat faster until he lets go and comes.

I drink every drop and swallow, squeezing him of his essence and begging Jack to give it to me. "Right there, Jack, yes... Yes! Right there, yes!"

"Damn it, Maeve, you're so fucking tight," Jack manages, holding my hips tightly.

I clench as his fingers finally reset me in my entirety. We unravel at the same time. I'm still licking pearls off Alex's tip, my gaze locked onto his as Jack spills his seed inside me, and I scream with raw passion, the third orgasm causing my very spirit to disintegrate. Sweat pours down my skin, my thighs trembling as Jack comes down from the heavens.

The afterglow finds me on the floor, sandwiched between Jack and Alex. The three of us are breathless and glistening, trying to register every millisecond of this sweet madness while already eager to go again. We've all snapped in the best possible way, and there is no turning back from this encounter. There is no undoing what we just did.

My jaw is sore. My lips are plump. My pussy aches deliciously. And my heart is so full of light and thunder and hope that this is only the beginning. That we're just getting started. Judging by the hazy looks in their eyes, it's clear to me that Alex and Jack are thinking the same thing—we are definitely going to be exploring this further.

To my astonishment, I can't get Noah out of my intimate life even after I've taken things to such a whole new level with Jack and Alex. I don't even want to, truth be told. The guilt is hard to carry around sometimes, but every moment I spend with them dulls it out until I only have a broad smile on my face and a quiver in my legs. They're incredibly addictive, and they treat me like a queen. I see Jack and Alex separately these days, but we do get together in threesome fun once in a while, too. Late at night on the weekend when they're both out at hockey practice with Kyle, however, I've made a habit of sneaking over to Noah's place. He's always ready for me. As soon as he hears or sees me coming from his bedroom window, he's ready.

I get off on this, I have to admit. It's a hard pill to swallow, but I can't go on chastising myself over it, either. One way or another, I'm going to have to find a way to reconcile these three dynamics—just not today. Not right now. The devil on my shoulder keeps pushing it into the next day, then the next. It's probably going to blow up in my face eventually, yet I am unable to stop so I might as well enjoy the ride. It's a fantastic ride. It's so fantastic, in fact, that I haven't had the time nor the desire to meet other men. The irony stings even harder as I realize that I've barely made time to see the few close friends I have here in Lansing.

Hayley has been busy focusing on her own projects over the past couple of months, but our friendship isn't the kind that needs constant communication in order for it to work. We could go months without seeing one another, yet whenever we

meet again we always manage to pick up right where we left off.

We finally got together on a Sunday afternoon at my place. I'd managed to do some cleaning around the house earlier, having found some articles of lingerie lost between the sofa cushions from my last rendezvous with Jack and Alex. My heart still thuds whenever I think about the last time the three of us were together—it was incredibly intimate and slow, tantric even.

For now, however, I am focused on Hayley. She brings over some hot apple pie, fresh out of the oven, and I offer vanilla ice cream and prosecco in return. The resulting feast has us both giggling out of our minds on the sofa while reruns of one of our favorite procedural shows on TV plays in the background. We used to spend every weekend like this when Dad was still around, and Hayley would often help around the house if she saw I was getting overwhelmed with anything, particularly when Kyle was still in middle school.

“It’s been so long since we’ve actually sat down like this,” I tell her. “You’re looking great, by the way. Have you done something to your hair?”

Hayley usually wears her caramel brown hair in a loose bun on the top of her head, but she’s donning generous curls today, soft waves that complement her hazel eyes and full lips. She’s tall and more on the skinny side, wearing a teeny-tiny tank top with tight, white-washed jeans. Hayley still turns plenty of heads; she’s a very attractive woman. Had she not been so passionate about digital marketing, I reckon Hayley would’ve made a fortune on the fashion runway.

“Oh, I just had enough time to stop by the salon for once,” she laughs, taking a spoonful of Madagascar vanilla ice cream straight from the tub. “You, on the other hand, are positively glowing. What have you been up to?”

“More or less of the same,” I reply, smiling shyly.

We message each other almost every day, but it’s usually just funny memes or the occasional work update. She lives across the street yet work takes her out of Lansing more often

than before, especially since her marketing agency landed the prestigious Romanoff family as a premium client.

“Girl, do I look like I was born yesterday?” Hayley laughs, narrowing her eyes at me. “You’re up to something. Something pretty spicy, judging by the blush in your cheeks. You need to spill and update your bestie right now!”

I chuckle softly and pour myself another glass of prosecco. I’ve lost count of how many I’ve had so far but it’s Sunday Funday. Besides, I get enough cardio from my three men to keep me in a constant calorie deficit regardless of how full my plate is. The thought makes me grin but I manage to hold it in as I give Hayley a warm look.

“Okay, I’ll be honest, I *have* been getting into some things lately,” I tell her. “We’ll get to me in a little bit, though—I might need more prosecco in me before I come clean with my sins. Tell me about you, first! Your life has been so exciting lately!”

“Not as exciting as I make it seem on social media,” Hayley says. “That’s just for impressions and clicks. But yeah, it’s been crazy good in the past couple of months.”

“You landed the Romanoff account, congratulations! I thought they were working with this big uppity marketing firm from Detroit.”

She nods once. “They were, but I gave them a good pitch and they saw the value in working with someone more local, considering they’re still living in that king-size Victorian mansion just a couple of miles out of town. I get to work with them in their home offices, of which they have four, mind you.”

“Well, yeah, four for each Romanoff influencer, right?”

“Mmm-hmm. The mother, Anastasia... by the way, I still try not to shudder when I say or write her full name for the press releases. I mean, what was Gammy Romanoff thinking, right?” We both laugh for a hot second before she tells me more about her recent work. “So, Anastasia’s got her wellness brand that’s really taking off. The hubby, George, he’s into

some serious real estate development that's drawing big money in from other states. I'm telling you, if we manage to bring in enough buyers for his developing properties, this guy is going to remap the whole of Lansing in under a decade."

"That's pretty cool, actually. I'm so proud of you for taking them on!"

"Thanks, babe, it means a lot," Hayley says. "Oh, and then there's Ivo Romanoff—the sexy fitness guru and George's younger brother. I can't say I'm surprised that he chose to move away from his family's business. When you're old money like these folks, you can pretty much do whatever the hell you want. But Ivo is really knocking it out of the park with his brand, and he's about to open a gym in Detroit, too. I think sometime in the summer."

"And you've got Lara Romanoff, too, right?"

Hayley rolls her eyes. I'm inclined to do the same. "Still the same entitled little princess we both remember from high school," she says. "But she does listen to me, so I guess she's grown up a bit since we last saw her."

"She was such a mean girl."

I remember all the teasing, the pranks she had her boyfriends on the high school football team unleash upon those she considered ugly or awkward or inferior. I was on the receiving end of a couple of those until Kyle came into his growth spurt and became the first junior high schooler to knock Dash Armstrong, the star quarterback, right down on his ass with a single left hook. I prefer leaving the past where it belongs, but I doubt people like Lara Romanoff ever truly change.

"She's still a bitch," Hayley snorts a laugh. "She pays well and her beauty line is selling like hot cakes down at the Lansing Mall, though. She's trying a smarter-than-Paris-Hilton kind of approach on social media these days. I didn't think it would go well, but she's getting thousands of followers every day, so, yeah, I found myself speechless when I went into her analytics last night. Guess I owe her a discount or something

for proving me wrong.” She pauses and gives me a hard stare. “Have you spoken to Noah lately?”

“Almost every day. You haven’t?”

“I’m just wondering if he’s told you.”

“Told me what?” For a moment, I feel my stomach tighten. Hayley and Noah may have been an item once, but that’s ancient history y now. They stayed friends and whatnot, yet whenever Hayley mentions him, I still worry they might be rekindling something. Of course, that’s just the insecure little demon inside of me that ruminates on such nonsense. I can’t stop my body from reacting, though. I can’t stop my mouth, either it seems. “Don’t tell me you two are back together.”

Surely, he would’ve told me. I haven’t sensed a dip in his affection toward me, if anything, we’ve only gotten more intense as of late, on a deeper, more emotional level.

“What? No!” Hayley croaks, almost insulted. “No, Maeve. I’ve been trying to get him to branch out on his own. You’ve seen how talented he is with that custom woodwork that he does. And you know he hasn’t been the happiest with that company he’s working for right?”

“Yeah, we talked about it a couple of times, but he usually just brushes it off and says it’s a phase, that it’ll pass. He likes the stability of a full-time job, I guess.” I can’t ignore the relief that washes over me, now knowing Hayley coming back into his life isn’t actually happening.

“Well, I think I’m almost through to him,” she says. “I could use your help, though.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Hayley refills her glass with more bubbly and scoops another lump of ice cream from the tub, taking turns to enjoy both. “He could do so much more with his own brand, Maeve. He already has the space for it. I’ve even found him an additional workshop unit just a few blocks east of here. The rent is dirt cheap, he could easily afford it. I offered to help him out with everything related to marketing and social media until he gets the business off the ground and give him a

generous discount if he continues to work with me. But he's hesitant, and it's such a shame because I truly believe he could be really successful if he gave it a chance."

"Okay, so how can I help?"

"Maybe you could talk to him. Maybe another voice pushing him in the right direction might help Noah make that decision that could change his life for the better. He'd have more artistic freedom, as well. Think about it—he is immensely talented, he's a hard worker, he's always a stickler for details and deadlines. The clients love him, and I know for a fact that many of his firm's returning customers keep asking for his expertise on new pieces."

I think about that for a few moments. Hayley makes plenty of sense here. Noah is an exceptional woodworker and I've known him since before he even learned the craft. He is incredibly passionate and devoted to every piece he makes, and I've seen his personal work, too. It would be a shame for him to linger in a place where he feels like he's not evolving anymore, but I also understand the fear of the unknown. Change can be traumatizing when you're used to comfort and stability.

"With someone like you by his side, he's going to be insanely successful," I concede. "Listen, I can definitely talk to Noah about it, but you know I can't promise anything."

"I'm not expecting you to change his mind completely," Hayley says. "But I've almost got him. I think he just needs another nudge or two to finally take that bold step forward."

"I'll talk to him. Anything for my best friends."

"You're the best," she replies and leans over for a brief hug.

I'd missed these moments of ours. It's always been just the two of us against the world. Hayley and I were inseparable throughout high school. We did theater and softball together. We had more than half of our classes together. And we've always been neighbors. No wonder our lives have been intertwined for as long as I can remember. I only wish we

could see each other more often—alas, adulthood has changed some things, including our ability to effectively manage whatever spare time each of us has left. Granted, I’m busy with three strapping men and a blossoming career in anthropology, while Hayley runs her own marketing brand and rides the exciting wave of freelancing that comes with its expected ups and downs. Time is quite a commodity for the both of us.

“Oh, speaking of bold steps forward,” Hayley gasps, her eyes wide with amusement. “And going back to Lara Romanoff for a hot second. Guess who she decided she’s going to marry?”

“I’m not up to speed with the personal lives of our local socialites,” I laugh.

“Alex Parish.”

My jaw drops. My gut has been punched by something hard and invisible. I swallow back an entire heap of discomfort and try my best to appear neutral as I subtly request more details. “Alex Parish, Kyle’s teammate?” I ask innocently. He’s never mentioned Lara in any capacity.

“Yep.”

“How did she set her sights on him? Are they an item already?” Ugh, my insecurities are popping right back up, rearing their ugly heads and ruining the entire moment as I struggle to keep a straight face. It’s hard, especially given how close Alex and I have been.

Hayley shakes her head. “No, she saw him at a game last month, and apparently crushed on him; she then immediately informed her girlfriends that that’s the guy she’s going to marry. There’s even a hashtag going viral because of it. It’s ridiculous.”

“Does Alex know?” I wonder aloud.

“I’m not sure. Lara did go up to him after the game. I was there with the rest of her family for photo-ops and whatnot. They talked for a bit, and she came back with a smug grin on her face, but that’s about it,” Hayley replies.

I feel my brow furrowing, the hole in my stomach getting bigger. Is this jealousy? Why wouldn't Alex tell me about Lara? If the whole internet knows, why leave me in the dark? I may be just assuming here, but still... I don't like this feeling, and I'm definitely going to address it the next time I see him. There are moments when I can't shake the sensation that it might all fall apart on its own, without me lifting a single finger. I can't believe that what I've been doing with Alex, Jack and Noah is meant to last.

"Hey," Hayley pulls me out of my grim thoughts. "What's going on with you?"

"What? Nothing. I think I've had too much prosecco," I say with a smirk.

"I'll take that, then," she cackles and snatches the bottle from the coffee table, holding it close to her chest like a favorite plush toy. "Now, talk to me. What have you been up to? Please, let it be good trouble."

Suddenly, I'm not sure I want to continue this conversation. I can't name names for sure, yet Hayley's input might help me figure some of this out, especially if there's anything remotely possible between Alex and Lara Romanoff. The thought makes my insides squirm, but I try to shake it off as I look for the right words to convey the past couple of months.

"So... here's the thing. I've been seeing this guy—" I start but Hayley is quick to explode with sheer joy.

"Oh, yes! That's the kind of news I've been hoping for! Who is he? Dish, dish!"

"Hold on," I reply with a patient smile. "I've been seeing this guy, and we're private about it because... well, we're not sure where we're going with it."

"Okay..."

"Thing is... I've been seeing two other guys, as well."

Hayley's eyes nearly pop out of their sockets. "Maeve. Three guys?"

“I know, I know, but hear me out. We’ve actually had threesomes, and it’s been amazing. Each of them excites me in a different way. These other two don’t mind sharing me, and holy hell, I certainly don’t mind enjoying both of them at the same time. But there’s still the other guy and I have deep feelings for each of them, so... I don’t quite know how to proceed. It’s all so new and strange to me.”

She listens to me quietly as I give her more details without hinting at who these men are. I do my best to avoid anything she might eventually be able to use to later identify them, focusing on our dates and private moments, instead. Once I’m done, I wait for her to say something. It seems to take forever until she does, though I can’t exactly blame her. I’ve just dumped a ton of shocking information in her lap.

“And to think you started the year out as a virgin in your late twenties,” Hayley ultimately quips, prompting us both to double over with laughter. Within a snap, all the tension I’ve been harboring in my shoulders dissipates, and I find myself relaxing in my friend’s loving company. “Maeve, I’m gonna be honest here. I’m surprised. No, surprised doesn’t even begin to cover it. I’m shocked, but I’m also impressed. And proud. You’re really catching up on lost years here, aren’t you?”

“I guess you could say that...”

“It’s crazy,” she adds.

I can’t help but agree. “I know. I didn’t expect or plan any of it, I promise.”

“But it happened, and now you feel like you’re in too deep. Am I right?”

“I’m not sure. I mean, I like it. I like each of them differently, and I don’t know what to do. Do I keep going? Do I stop? Do I stick with one? If so, which? I’m so lost here, Hayley...”

She gives me another hug. This time, her hold on me lingers, and I can almost feel her love for me seeping through and warming me up like a blanket in the middle of winter. “I

know, honey, and I am doing my best to understand what you're going through. Think about it this way," she says. "All three have agreed to not be exclusive, right?"

"Sort of, yeah. They were only supposed to help me get my dating game up a few notches."

"Right, but then the lessons turned into real playtime," she giggles. "The fact remains, though. You're officially a single woman who's seeing multiple men, including two at once. As spicy and unorthodox as that may sound, it still keeps you in the clear. Unless one or two or all three demand exclusivity, you shouldn't feel guilty about any of it."

"You make it sound so simple and reasonable."

"It's the truth, honey. You enjoy everything for as long as you can. See where it leads. Love has a way of growing organically, of settling in when you least expect it. And if two of them are already more than happy to be with you in a threesome, who's to say you can't spring for a foursome if you get the other guy involved, too?" A devilish grin lights up her pretty face, and I'm not sure if she's serious or not. "Hey, you never know."

I end up shaking my head. "He's not much into sharing. I mean, he hasn't asked me to be exclusive though, either."

"Then there you have it. Maeve, you are young and going into an incredible stage of your life right now. You deserve good men beside you. Good friends. A good soulmate. A good husband. You've been in survival and caretaker mode for so long, it's time for you to just sit back and enjoy whatever the universe has decided to give you. It may be weird and unlike anything you've experienced before, but I'm sure there's a lesson in there, somewhere. Until you figure out what that is... frankly, I say go with the flow and get as much out of this as you possibly can. Just try not to fall in love with all three dudes at once. That's a recipe for disaster."

And that right there is what scares me the most. I may have already fallen in love with all three, and I don't know what to do with myself anymore. The thought of losing any of them—not to mention all three of them—is enough to riddle my

already foggy mind with enough anxiety to turn me inside out. I dread the idea that Noah will learn about Jack and Alex. Or that they'll learn about me and Noah. Or that Kyle will somehow pick up on what's going on and blunder it all to hell.

Hayley talks plenty of sense, and I hang on to her every word, hoping it will help me sleep better at night. But I sleep best in Jack's arms. And Alex's. And Noah's. I know it's only going to get harder for me now, so I absolutely need to figure out how I'm going to fix this before it breaks beyond repair.

Or I could just enjoy the ride for a while longer, like Hayley suggested.

Maybe brace for the inevitable when I do see it coming.

There's no easy way out of this.

The following week I fly out to Ottawa with Kyle. The Devils have made it to the playoffs. It's been a long time since the team has made it this far, and I couldn't be prouder of my little brother since he was responsible for two of the three goals scored at the last game. Alex scored the winning goal, and I was more than happy to reward him for his hard work. He loves getting spoiled after a game, and I certainly don't mind the hunger in his eyes whenever he shows up at my place after kicking ass on ice.

Jack is equally thrilled about this development, of course. We talked for hours over the phone the other night, trying to figure out how to find time for one another during the Ottawa trip. It's awkward as hell since the three of us are keeping this secret from Kyle, but we all agreed not to push the envelope if the situation is difficult to manage. We could always organize an escapade of our own with just the three of us after the games, though I have to admit I'm kind of thriving in the suspense of getting hot with my men while pretending we're just friends in front of everybody else.

The four-and-a-half-hour flight to Ottawa is smooth. I've been here before with Kyle, given his hockey passion—training camps, college games, the occasional summer trip when we felt like we needed a change of scenery. One of the reasons why we like this city so much is because Dad used to fly us out here all the time, and every time we visit, we both feel like he's still with us in a sense.

I join the team on a designated shuttle that takes us to the Lotus Hotel, the team's usual choice of accommodations for these trips. Jack stays at the front with the assistant coach and the team doctor, while I hang out at the back with Kyle and Alex, the rest of the guys laughing and trading dirty jokes against the scenery of a rising metropolis. It's amazing how a place can change over the years, yet it can still feel the same whenever we return.

"Dad would've loved this," Kyle says at one point.

"Oh, he would've absolutely come along for this ride," I reply with a warm smile. "I miss him, too, Kyle. Every day."

He gives me a long and deeply sad look. "Do you think Mom would've been happy that I'm in the league?"

"She would've been so proud of you. Imagine if she had a Facebook account. The whole thing would be blowing up right about now, and she would've tagged you in everything."

It makes him laugh, mainly because he's always getting tagged into victory photos and funny memes to the point where he's had to turn all of his social media notifications off.

"She would've found a way to make sure you got every bit of accolades," I add. "Mom isn't here, and neither is Dad but I'm here. And I am so proud of you, kid, proud enough for all of us put together. Don't ever forget that."

"And I'm proud of you, too," Alex chimes in from the seat in front of us, turning around and sitting up so he can see us both. "You're finally starting to get better than me."

"I'll be skating circles around you in no time, old man!" Kyle quips.

Alex laughs and steals a knowing glance from me before he nods at my brother. "You know the drill for the next week, right?"

"Rest, sleep, eat," Kyle replies.

"And no hanky-panky," Alex shoots back. "I've seen you with the ladies, you dog! Don't wear yourself out, I'm serious. We've got two games we have to play here before the next two

at home. We don't take four games, we're out in the first round."

"I know how the playoffs work, bro. And I could say the same to you," my brother says.

Again, Alex does his best not to look my way but our eyes still meet for the briefest of moments, and my cheeks catch fire as I pretend to check my phone for new messages. I can feel his presence weighing down on me, much like the way he pins me against the wall when he's hungry for more. It is hard to keep my head screwed on right when we're so close to one another yet unable to touch.

"Nah, I'm saving myself for after," Alex says. I resist the urge to raise my gaze from the phone while I scroll through messages from Hayley that I've already read.

"Oh, you've got a special lady waiting for you?" Kyle chuckles. Good grief, he's so oblivious, it's almost comical. "You didn't tell me! Who is it?"

"No one I'm ready to talk about yet, bro. But you're right, she's absolutely special."

I can't do this anymore. I look up and find Alex smiling at me, while Kyle responds to a few more congratulatory text messages. It's been a turbulent couple of days since the last game. Everybody has been reaching out to let us know how proud they are, how proud our dad would be. It's a bittersweet feeling to have to answer all these well-meaning folks, particularly since Kyle and I are the ones who miss him the most.

"Although I might break my own word and find her tonight," Alex adds.

"Whoa, she's here in Ottawa?" Kyle asks, somewhat amused.

I'm frozen in my seat, trying my very best to retain whatever is left of my composure. "Kyle, if Alex doesn't want to share the details of his private life, I'm sure you can respect that."

“Hold on, sis, ‘cause this is juicy. I heard Lara Romanoff is flying out for the game,” he says, looking at Alex. “Is that your special lady? Lara frickin’ Romanoff? I mean, she’s already tootin’ the horn all over her social media that you’re the greatest hockey player that ever lived.”

“I will never tell,” Alex shoots him a grin. “But I will enjoy watching you stew in your own juices for a while.”

Hearing Lara’s name dampens my mood with the speed of a hammer coming down on a nail. My good humor flies out the window while I keep my lips pressed into a tight line and flip through her Instagram account, only to find photos of Alex from the last game, accompanied by flattering hashtags. I’m irked and then some, though Alex doesn’t seem to notice. The guys go on with their banter while I glance ahead and spot Jack talking to the team doctor.

He looks my way, only the slightest side-eye to acknowledge my presence, but then he pays attention and sees my growing discomfort. A frown takes hold of his handsome face, a deep crease drawn between his brows. What I wouldn’t give to just lose myself in his arms right now. Jack would make every drop of anxiety within me disappear with the slightest touch.

I shouldn’t be jealous of Lara Romanoff, I really shouldn’t. Alex is with me, and we’re sharing this beautiful thing with Jack, too. But each mention of her name reminds me how the world around us still exists, how other people could still swoop by and do permanent damage to us if we’re not careful. Alex is a free man with plenty of choices, and Lara is only one of them. He chose me for now—and the “for now” is something that scratches away at the inside of my brain, an earworm that got in too deep.

* * *

AS SOON AS we arrive at The Lotus, I find myself temporarily distracted by the beauty of this place. It’s a high-end venue with over 200 rooms, sprawling throughout an Art-Nouveau-

style building with plenty of stained glass window decorations and brushed brass lighting. It smells of velvet and roses, of French wine and hot chocolate, a mixture of aromas that twirls in the back of my throat and makes me smile.

We're all gathered by the reception area, and the guys are their usual loud and chatty selves, while Jack and the team doctor go through the reservation roster with the strawberry blonde receptionist. Her red blazer and white silk shirt match the hotel's interior style—bold and passionate that doesn't skimp on good taste. Even the name tag mimics the brushed brass of the chandelier hanging overhead—her name, Penny, engraved in dramatic black.

"I sent out all the invites I had," Kyle tells me once we get our room keys, and the concierge proceeds to load our baggage onto the cart. We both know that he'll go ahead and put everything in our rooms, so Kyle is careful to leave him a decent tip. "It's not just Hayley who couldn't make it," he adds. "Uncle John and Aunt Lisa are out in the Poconos this weekend, and they paid for the trip in advance so they couldn't cancel, but they said they're gonna be watching the game tomorrow."

"That's okay, I think we've got enough on our plate here, already," I reply. "Entertaining additional guests wasn't on my to-do list, anyway. I came here to root for my baby brother."

"That's so sweet of you, sis, but you know I'm going to be busy with the games and practice in between. I just didn't want you to be here alone," he says.

I wasn't going to be alone, though I can't exactly tell Kyle why without arousing suspicion. Jack and Alex are both planning to come see me later—Alex even confirmed via text, not long after the whole Lara Romanoff conversation. I think deep down he is aware of my discomfort where she's concerned, but maybe he just doesn't know whether it's a real issue or not.

"You don't need to worry about me," I reply, then look over my shoulder to see that Jack and Alex got their room

keys and baggage handled, as well. “I’ll find a way to keep busy while you’re training.”

“Nah, you’re gonna have company,” Kyle grins, his eyes lighting up as he looks somewhere near the hotel’s main entrance. “Someone got on another flight to Ottawa for this...”

I follow his gaze and find myself paralyzed as I see Noah coming in, duffel bag on one shoulder and a soft smile on his face. His black jeans and tight shirt complement his athletic figure, further reminding me of the sexy strength he usually exerts upon me during our most intimate moments. Noah came to Ottawa for the game; he has no idea about what is going on between Alex, Jack, and me. God I feel like such a jerk. Panic threatens to set in as I force myself to smile. How much longer can I keep up this charade? It is so unfair to Noah and I hate keeping this from him.

“Well, I didn’t see that coming,” I say, hearing the tension in my own voice.

Kyle welcomes Noah’s approach with his arms wide open. “I’m so glad you made it, brother.”

“Anything for you, bro!” he replies, giving him a brief bear hug before he turns to smile at me. “Good to see you here, Maeve. Always your baby brother’s number one fan, huh?”

“Yeah, you know me—I can scream louder than any of his cheerleaders,” I quip, struggling not to fall apart on the inside.

He leans in to kiss my cheek in a platonic fashion, and I’m unable to move as he whispers in my ear. “I love the way you scream.”

And there go both of my knees as I give him a timid smile and pretend he didn’t just give me a miniature orgasm in front of all these people. The moment drifts away quickly as Jack and Alex notice Noah and come over to shake his hand. They’re all joking and chatting about the games and Kyle’s incredible evolution on ice, while I nod politely and smile and pray for the earth to split open and spare me of this muted embarrassment.

“I hear it’s gonna be a tough series,” Noah says, looking at Kyle. “The Mavericks have been killing it in the past couple of seasons.”

“Yeah, but they can be overconfident. We’re hungrier for the win.”

“We’re going to beat them into a pulp, and then we’re doing a victory dance, right, Coach?”

“Remember what I keep telling you, boys,” Jack laughs lightly. “Play for the love of the game, not for the prestige. Everybody remembers the winning team, but very few remember the details of how the game was won.”

I nod in agreement. “Yeah, plus you’ve still got a lot of games to play before you make it to the finals. Gotta take it one game at a time.”

Kyle grins “How good would the Stanley Cup look in Lansing though?”

The guys exchange glances, but ultimately they all agree. “It would look fantastic,” Jack concedes with a heavy sigh.

“Right?” Kyle is satisfied with his reaction.

I’d laugh if I didn’t feel like a mouse facing many cats. I’m keeping secrets from each of these men. I am keeping secrets from people who have been nothing but good and kind to me. Affectionate. Caring. Tender. I am keeping secrets from my brother. We’ve always told each other everything, yet here I am, standing before him and pretending that everything is okay. It’s honestly starting to make me feel like a horrible person.

Noah gives me a long look, a curious glance loaded with questions. He can read me better than most people, and he can tell I’m uncomfortable. He withdraws from our small crowd, nodding at the reception area. “Fellas, lady, you’ll have to excuse me, but I need to get checked in. I’ll see you all later,” he says.

“See you later,” I mumble as Noah walks past me.

Some of the tension leaves from the tight cluster between my shoulders as soon as he walks away from us, but I still feel crushed by the burden of secrecy with Jack, Alex, and Kyle standing so close to me. This is going to be a difficult week, to say the least. I might as well pull back now and hide in my room for a while.

“I need a shower.” It’s pretty much the only thing I’m able to say as I turn to make my way over to the elevator.

“Hold on, I’m coming, too. Our rooms are on the same floor,” Kyle rushes after me.

I’d thank him for the reminder, but that’s not exactly a fact I’m thankful for. This whole thing I’m doing feels more wrong than ever before, because I realize I am head over heels for my three men while simultaneously hiding things from them. I used to be so open, so brutally honest at times.

And now, I’m trying to figure out how I’m going to get my healthy and much needed dose of intimacy with all three of them. Margo has a saying: “There’s a special penthouse reserved in hell for people who keep secrets.” This saying, of course, was meant for a completely different context, and yet I still find use for it here.

I'm in the hotel's swanky lounge, nervous and nowhere near better than earlier, a flurry of emotions bumbling through me like drunken bees. I stare at the third dry martini in front of me, listening to the smooth jazz-influenced house music blaring through the state-of-the-art speakers, trying to immerse myself into the moment and briefly forget about this hot mess I've gotten myself into.

I am seated in a leather sofa located in the farthest corner of the room where it's dimly lit. I feel like a shadow on the wall, unseen and unheard as I wait for the martini's effect to kick in. I may need a few more to numb myself properly, though. It's been a rough day.

The guilt is eating away at me, but at the same time, I'm longing for a moment of intimacy. In an ideal universe, Noah would be perfectly happy sharing me like Jack and Alex already are. That's an improbable and wild dream, however. And the fact that I'm still trying to navigate this like it's not going to blow up in my face is making me think I might be just a smidge delusional. Or hopeful. Hopelessly hopeful if there even is such a thing.

I feel the eyes of other men on me as they walk past my table. My dress is short and tight, a glimmering beige design that Jack helped me pick out, which I've paired with matching color Louboutin heels with their signature red soles. I should feel powerful and sexy as hell, considering all the training that my three men have given me thus far, yet I only wear this stuff for their delight and theirs alone. Nobody else interests me, not

even for a simple coffee date. I've turned a couple of guys away, already. There's a bit of a singles mixer going on at the lounge tonight, but it was the only place where some privacy while enjoying drinks was guaranteed, and it's close enough to my hotel room to make it easy for me to slip away virtually unnoticed. Or so I thought, but my cleavage seems to be drawing more focus than I'd expected.

"Dear universe, give me strength and wisdom," I whisper to myself as I see Jack and Alex coming into the lounge, both of them looking absolutely scrumptious.

Alex is wearing jeans that hug his thighs and a dark blue polo shirt tight enough to show off his broad shoulders. His brown eyes scan the room, quick to find me and darken into a shade of sensual black. Jack, on the other hand, wears black pants and a pale grey shirt that is custom tailored to complement his athletic figure while not taking away from his handsome face and dazzlingly dangerous gaze. They both see me now, and I can feel their lust stretching its tentacles across the room, eager to slip between my thighs, to turn me inside out.

I have no idea where Noah is, but I couldn't resist coming down here to meet with Jack and Alex. That penthouse in hell is starting to sound like a guaranteed fate.

"There you are," Jack exclaims as they both walk over and join me on the black leather sofa. "Looking incredible, as always." He drops a quick kiss on my cheek, lingering for a few seconds with his lips pressed on my skin.

Alex smiles. "And you smell fantastic. Is this the fragrance I got you last week?"

"Mmm-hmm," I nod meekly, every pore on my skin tingling with delight as they eye me up and down appreciatively. "It's one of my favorites, actually."

"Good to know," Alex replies.

Jack motions for the waiter to pop by and orders a round of drinks. His choice is the Godfather, always, while Alex settles for a virgin Mojito. As an unspoken rule, no alcohol is to be

consumed the evening before a game. Technically speaking there's not supposed to be any sex before games, either, but this wouldn't be the first time that he's been eager to break that rule, which he now refers to as obsolete and downright antiquated.

As soon as the waiter returns with our drinks—another dry Martini for me—I begin to relax a little. It was getting kind of lonely here with just my thoughts.

“Where's Kyle?” I ask. “Still training?”

“No, he turned in early. Probably playing video games in his room.”

Jack's hand works its way up the side of my thigh, partially hidden by the fabric of my dress and the fact that we are sitting so close together. I pull in a breath, my eyes darting all over the place as I try to figure out if anybody can see us. It's still the darkest corner of the room, but anxiety is a fickle thing when you're keeping secrets from the world. “We wanted to have you all to ourselves,” he whispers in my ear, then plants a series of kisses along the side of my neck.

“You two are going to be the death of me,” I mumble, knowing I can't do much about it. Not that I want to. How could I, when Alex puts his arm around me, positioning himself in a way that has his muscular shoulder practically covering me as he takes hold of my breast and squeezes. “Oh, damn...” I hiss when Jack's fingers start fiddling with my panties, pulling the cream lace fabric aside.

We're hidden from sight at this point, although I really hope no one gets close enough to our location anytime soon. I hold my breath as I feel Jack's index finger sliding between my slick folds. I've been on fire for a while now, just thinking about them. No wonder my body is primed and ready for everything they have to give me.

“Are you sure about this?” I ask.

He and Jack take turns touching me. The last of my defenses melt away and I let the river of raw passion wash me downstream. Alex's hand dips into my dress and he finds my

nipple, pinching it between his thumb and forefinger. I feel a jolt of sensation directly to my clit where Jack is furiously teasing me.

Jack has two fingers inside me as he works my tender nub with his thumb. Electrical storms gather between my legs as he works me into a silent frenzy. I can't scream. I can't say anything. All I can do is try to sit still and let the orgasm shatter me into a million pieces, but my hips move against my will, my wet pussy grinding against his hand.

"Oh, God," I manage, holding on to both of them as I feel the climax coming straight for me like a freight train.

"Come for me," Jack says, smiling and licking his lips as he watches me with hooded eyes. Alex covers my breast then proceeds to knead the other one, giving it the same naughty treatment. As soon as his thumb flicks my nipple, Jack intensifies his strokes, going deeper and harder until I shudder and fall apart in their arms.

The orgasm takes forever, or so it seems, as the entire lounge disappears into sweet darkness. Nobody else matters, nothing else exists, except my body dissolving between Jack and Alex's ropes of muscle. My hands slide down their sides and settle on their bulging erections. They're both huge and stiff and eager to claim me.

The ripples of decadent pleasure blast through me as I come down from the heavens, my spine tightening as my core bucks, desperate for so much more. "We need to take this upstairs," I say, my voice broken and uneven as I struggle to recover my breath.

"I'm not done with you yet," Alex growls and discreetly moves me to his lap.

I'm lifted and settled into his lap without anybody even noticing we're here, and it's astonishing for me to observe how much I can actually get away with tonight. I hear Alex's zipper go down and within seconds, I feel him inside me, locked and loaded and stretching me beyond belief.

"Touch yourself for me," Jack says.

He turns himself sideways in front of us in order to block any curious patrons but he does it in a way that appears we are just enthralled in conversation. He's got his other hand on his cock, stroking it slowly and watching me as I move against Alex's throbbing monster now plunging up into me. I do as I'm told, spreading my legs a bit as I bring my hand down and give my ultra-sensitive clit attention. My fingers move faster, flicking and pinching and teasing until I feel another orgasm coming through.

I'm clenched tightly around Alex, whose grunts intensify, becoming music to my ears. He's close to his own pinnacle while Jack goes harder on himself. We're barely moving, barely making a sound, cloaked in the semi-darkness and the loud music. Each moment we spend like this is one moment closer to the edge of danger. The three of us are so into it, though. The adrenaline coursing through me only serves to amplify my arousal, though Alex's sheer size and girth do plenty of work on their own.

"Don't stop," Alex says. "Don't stop, baby, just like that."

I feel a smile tugging at my mouth as I clench myself tighter, knowing how much he loves it when I squeeze him like this. Jack bites his lower lip as he watches my hips swaying, his hand going faster. I keep working on my own peaks of pleasure, sensing thunder just around the corner. We're so close to the edge, so close to disaster, yet every damn second is worth the risk.

Something makes me look up and across the lounge. Maybe the hairs on the back of my neck tickled me the wrong way. But when I look up I instantly see Noah coming into the lounge with Kyle. Instantly, I'm paralyzed stiff. I can't move a muscle. It's too late for Alex. I feel him coming inside me, his seed filling me to the brim. He's too deep to let go now. A peculiar ache unfurls in between my legs as I feel my orgasm slipping away and melting into guilt.

Jack is also busy watching me as Alex pumps me hard, the last few thrusts before he returns to the mortal plane. They don't see what I see. They don't see Noah's head turning. Kyle hasn't spotted us yet, but Noah certainly has.

His gaze darkens. His jaw clenches. I can almost feel the vein twitching in his temple. Kyle is utterly oblivious, as usual. If he sees us now, it's over. It's all over and there will be nothing left for me to try and fix, so I can only stay frozen in time, waiting for Noah's reaction. This is it. The moment I'd dreaded the whole time has finally arrived.

"Maeve," Jack says, but I can't even look at him.

Noah manages to gently pull Kyle out of the lounge, despite my brother's protests. He gets him out of sight, and all I can do is breathe a gargantuan sigh of relief as Alex gingerly repositions me back on the sofa, careful to set my panties and my dress straight before he zips himself up. "That was something else," he chuckles softly, covering my burning cheek with kisses. He tastes the tear now rolling down my face as my harsh reality sets in. "Maeve, what's wrong?"

"Maeve," Jack says again.

I look at him and notice he's stopped. I'm not sure if he saw them or if he's been staring at me unaware of anything else. I've lost all track of time, but that moment of eye contact with Noah felt like an hour's worth of torment and agony. He must be furious. The betrayal. The embarrassment. My skin boils as I understand what just happened, as I truly understand how badly I just screwed up.

"Maeve, are you okay?" Jack insists.

"I'm so sorry," I manage to say before I get up, grab my purse and hotel room key, and run out of the lounge. For weeks I've been putting this off. For weeks I've been trying to find the right way to tell Jack, Alex, and Noah that I've given myself to all three and that I would love nothing more than to be theirs. All of theirs, forever.

That intention has just been shattered like glass against a concrete wall.

My mind is darting every which way, delving from one worst-case scenario to the next, for I've created plenty of those lately, given the circumstances. But the one thing that really

hits me is the fact that Noah had the presence of mind to shield my brother from what he just saw.

What a good man I've let down.

I look around for Kyle and Noah as soon as I leave the lounge. I *need* to talk to Noah. It's the only thing I can think about, and I know I cannot let the situation fester and turn into something much uglier. I feel horrible about all this, I have to at least apologize, to try to explain what happened and maybe earn his forgiveness, if nothing else. I don't want to lose him, though.

My phone rings but I switch it to silent. Jack is trying to call me so I take a second to text him, telling him we can talk later. I wander through the hotel's lobby area, trying to figure out where Noah might've taken Kyle. My only comfort—if I can call it that—is the fact that my brother didn't see anything. I know it would break his heart, not to mention be extremely awkward and difficult to explain.

It has taken a while, but I finally spot Noah and Kyle by the hotel's gift shop. Shaking like a leaf and working on my composure, I walk over and try to smile, if only to keep my brother out of the loop. I've already hurt one person tonight; I can't bear the thought of hurting the single most important guy in my life, the young man I've worked so hard to help raise in the absence of our parents.

“Hey, guys,” I say as I approach them.

Kyle looks up from a postcard display and he's as pale as a sheet of paper. Oh, God, Noah must've told him. My stomach churns, nausea threatening to throw out most of what I had for dinner. “Hey, sis,” he replies, beads of sweat dripping down his face.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

Noah has an arm around his shoulders. “He’s nervous about the game tomorrow. We were playing video games in his room, but our guy here got in his head and couldn’t sit still.”

“Oh...” I sigh, silently thanking Noah for not blowing my cover.

I can tell he is definitely angry, yet he’s holding out for Kyle’s benefit. “Yeah, I was so excited earlier, but now it’s starting to sink in,” my brother says, running a hand through his hair. “What if we don’t win?”

“He’s been going on and on about this for the past hour or so, and now it’s turned into a panic attack” Noah adds, his gaze never leaving me.

“Dude, you’re gonna be fine,” I try to comfort Kyle. “You’ve got this, the team’s got this. You guys have worked so hard all season.”

Kyle gives me a pained look. “I wanna make Dad proud.”

“He was always proud,” I say, trying not to cry. I’ve wiped most of my tears away, but I feel plenty more coming. “Don’t doubt that for a second. No matter what happens, he *will* be proud of you, beyond the confines of time and space. Do you hear me, Kyle?”

“I hear you.”

“Why don’t you go upstairs, try to relax, and hit the hay early?” I say, then look to Noah. “Do you think we could talk for a moment?”

Kyle groans, covering his mouth to prevent a gag from unraveling his nerves into a puddle on the floor. “I think you’ve got better things to do tonight,” Noah says. “Clearly. Don’t worry about anything, I’ll take care of Kyle.”

“Noah, please—”

“I said I’ll take care of Kyle,” he cuts me off, his tone harsh and unforgiving. It cuts through me like a knife, but I can’t blame him and I can’t insist, either. Not with Kyle being in such a vulnerable position. Truth be told, I’m not the best

person to comfort my brother tonight, even though I would absolutely stick by his side if he asked me to. “You go back to what you were doing, Maeve. We don’t need to talk about anything.”

And there it is. The dismissal I’d been fearing. The cold shoulder. My stomach sinks as I watch him take my brother over to the elevator. Kyle gives me a weak wave as the doors slide open with a ding.

“See you in the morning, sis.”

“Yeah,” I murmur, watching them get in.

As the doors close, as I catch that last glimpse of Noah’s angry eyes, is precisely the moment that I know I’ve lost him. I know I’m never going to get him back because... why would I? I don’t deserve him, I have been keeping such a huge secret from him, lying by omission. We’d agreed that we weren’t exclusive, but I shouldn’t have made such a spectacle of myself earlier. I should’ve kept to the confines of my hotel room. Or Jack’s. Or Alex’s. I should’ve stayed away from that lounge, damnit.

No, actually...

I should’ve just told Noah that I was seeing the two other men. That I have fallen in love with him, but that I’ve also fallen for Jack and Alex. That my heart is split in three and that it can’t function without them. He’s gone, though. I don’t know how I’m ever going to repair this crack I’ve senselessly caused purely because I couldn’t resist temptation. It’s too late, now. I can’t fix what I’ve broken. I can’t undo what happened tonight.

My chest hurts as I clutch it, tears freely falling as I completely ignore the hotel guests passing by. I see them looking at me and I think one of them asks if I’m okay, but I quickly walk away before more people notice the state I’m in, before others see the fool I’ve managed to make of myself. I furiously press the elevator button and as soon as it reaches the ground floor, I rush to get in before anybody else.

The awfulness envelopes me mercilessly as I let go of myself and cry my heart out all the way up to the fifth floor. The shame swallows me whole, tearing me to shreds. If there is one thing I'm remarkably good at, it's punishing myself.

I should have never let it come to this.

* * *

AS SOON AS I get to my room, I take my dress and lingerie off and get into the shower. I keep the water cold as I let it wash over me, causing my skin to prickle with discomfort. I deserve it. I deserve the chills running down my spine and making my legs shake, my teeth clatter and my broken heart shrink into something akin to a dried-up walnut.

Shaking my head in dismay, I pat myself dry with a towel and hide in the plush warmth of a bathrobe, courtesy of The Lotus. There's soda in the minibar, so I help myself to a can, allowing a chilled sweetness to fizzle down my throat. I find chocolates in a decorative bowl on a side table, so I devour a handful as I sit down and flip my laptop open. I don't usually take my work with me when I'm travelling with Kyle, but I'm expecting an email from Margo regarding a possible archeological dig near the main Chippewa reservation.

To my delight the message I was expecting is in my inbox—a welcome distraction from tonight's phenomenal fumble. Reading it carefully, I realize that it's a good opportunity to pull myself out of the entire dynamic for a while, since the dig site has been yielding surprising results. According to Margo's email, we're looking at new artifacts that we might be able to authenticate and even bring back to the Lansing Museum. Normally, the reservation would have the first right to keep them, but with Margo being part of the community, she wants to speak to the tribal elders about a potential collaboration.

I keep reading the message over and over, wondering whether I should accept her offer to visit the dig site for a few weeks. We'd be lodged at a motel within the reservation, and I would be a guest of her tribe. That alone is a tremendous

honor. Besides, I would love an opportunity to delve deeper into their unique culture, to observe their customs and traditions up close.

It would be a healthy way to distance myself from Jack, Alex, and Noah. I've already hurt one, the last thing I want is to do or say something that would hurt the others as well. My conscience is hammering my soul hard, crushing it under its weight as the sum of my previous choices makes me realize I've been quite selfish and even worse, self-indulgent. Maybe this is the right thing to do—just walk away from everything and pull myself together. Come back with a fresh mindset, end it with Jack and Alex, and spend some time nursing a heart I've managed to break on my own. And maybe try my luck at dating again when I feel ready. It sounds reasonable enough, but this same fractured heart is refusing to let go of Jack and Alex. They're still with me.

For how long, though? How long before they find out about Noah? I should tell them. I should just come out with it and see what they say. Again, my reasoning seems sound, but my instinct is determined to hold on to what I have yet to lose. Because that's the uncomfortable truth, I don't want to lose them, as incredibly selfish as it feels to admit that.

A knock on the door quickly pulls me out of my thoughts. I close the laptop and promise myself that I will think about Margo's offer.

I open the door and pause at the sight of Alex and Jack standing in front of me. The subtle smell of cologne comes off Jack as he smiles. "Hey, babe."

"Where did you run off to? You haven't called either of us back," Alex says, frowning as his eyes search my face for an answer.

I don't have a good one for him. Not tonight. "I'm sorry. Something came up. I wasn't feeling well, either. I'm sorry I left you both there."

"We were only just getting started," Jack replies and shows me a can of whipped cream. "We snagged this from the bar on our way out. They use it for some of their shots, apparently."

Alex chuckles. “He paid the bartender fifty bucks for it.”

“What’s it for?” I make the mistake of asking, though part of me already knows.

“Let us in and we’ll show you,” Jack says.

I step aside and they enter the room. I have no intention of letting them stay but I want some privacy while I talk to them. I shut the door and lock it although I am not expecting any other visitors, of that I am certain.

“Guys, listen,” I begin. “I truly am so sorry for running out on you like I did. I didn’t feel well all of sudden and it felt as if the walls were closing in on me; things became super claustrophobic and I needed some air.

What we did in the lounge was unlike anything I’ve ever done before, hell, unlike anything I could’ve ever imagined. It was amazing, yes, but I guess I panicked.” Both Alex and Jack were looking at me with so much care and concern in their eyes, it made turning them away that much harder. “This trip is so important to Kyle and I want to be in top shape to cheer him on tomorrow, not to mention the two of you. We’ve had quite the adventurous evening already and I really think it’s best that we call it a night and all of us get a good night’s rest.”

Jack speaks first. “You’re right, Maeve. Speaking as a coach and a former player, I know how important it is to get enough rest and downtime during the playoffs. What happened earlier was so damn exciting and sexy... I guess both of us just wanted it to continue.”

“But we understand where you’re coming from,” Alex chimes in. “I have to admit, it’s disappointing but it’s the right decision.”

I am so relieved I feel as if I might cry all over again. Although another romp with these two incredible men would surely be delicious, I know I’m doing the right thing. After tender hugs and gentle kisses, Jack and Alex leave me and go back to their rooms.

I am so mentally and physically exhausted that all I can do is shrug off the cozy robe and slide between the sheets, hoping

that sleep will come easy and my dreams will spare me the
nightmare of my current reality.

I t's game day and I've barely slept.

The arena is packed with people. Thirty-thousand fans have come for this game, the team colors stridently splashed across the rows. Red and black for the Lansing Devils; orange and blue for the Ottawa Mavericks. There are more supporters from Ottawa obviously since they are the home team, but the Devils are pretty well represented. I'm uber-proud to say that a lot of the Devils' gains come from Kyle's remarkable talent.

Watching him glide across the ice reminds me so much of Dad that I have to contend with countless shivers running down my back whenever he hits that puck. We're in the middle of the second period already, and it's a tight score so far.

Jack is constantly shouting at the boys, mostly code words so as not to give away a single part of their strategy. Alex keeps Kyle safe whenever they go on the offensive, while the defense clumps tightly together as soon as the Mavericks get a hold of the puck. The crowd roars and cheers in fierce turns as the puck changes possession from team to team.

"Woo-hoo, Alex, you go, baby!" I hear Lara Romanoff screaming a couple of seats over.

She brought her posse of bleached-blonde friends along. Lara is wearing a tight red top with black jeans and a Lansing Devils scarf draped over her shoulders, her lips glistening with crimson gloss and her blue eyes persistently set on Alex. She watches his every move, while the rest of her group clap their

hands and whistle and try to blend in. They don't really fit with this crowd, but the team needs all the support they can get.

"That's right, baby!" Lara shouts, throwing her hands up when Alex scores a goal.

The whole arena is in an uproar, and I try hard to vibe along with them but I find myself bothered by her presence. I didn't talk to Alex about her, mainly because he never mentions her or her social media activities.

By the stroke of bad luck or perhaps karma, Noah happens to be seated next to me in the seat to my left. I can sense the heat from his gaze and I turn to meet his stare.

My stomach tightens as a smirk dances across his lips. Good grief, he's gorgeous even when he's pissed off, and I am positively helpless sitting so close to him. "Does it bug you?" he asks, pulling my focus away from the game.

"Does what bug me?" I reply.

"Watching Alex get all that adoration. I'll bet you she'll try to get into the lockers to see him. Everybody is talking about them getting together."

It's like a punch in the chest, but I feel like I deserve his sting. The calmness in his voice tells me he is in perfect control of his emotions, despite the shadows in his eyes. Yet I do not allow his words to get to me. I don't want to give him any more satisfaction, not when the only thing I wish for is to have him back in my arms, to be his good girl once again.

"Noah, we both know things are not okay," I say, taking a deep breath. "I made a horrible mistake, and I am fully aware of how hurt you must be."

"We were never exclusive," he replies dryly, crossing his arms.

"No, but I should've told you." I insist. "Please, tell me, what can I do to make it up to you? You didn't deserve it, and I don't want to lose you... or your friendship."

Noah scoffs. “Why? Your other friends looked like they were taking good care of you. Whose friends are they exactly? I don’t think they’re Kyle’s friends, considering the three of you are keeping him in the dark about it.”

“Whoa, hold on there,” I reply, a sense of irritation coming over me. “We were hiding our relationship from Kyle so as not to hurt him. What difference does it make to you?”

“I’m just wondering where your limits are,” he says. “I understand that you’re just coming into your own, sexually speaking, but I think you’re pushing things well overboard. You could’ve at least found yourself a couple of guys who weren’t also part of Kyle’s close circle.”

“This isn’t fair,” I mumble, my face heating up.

Lara shoots up from her seat when Alex scores another goal. “Yes! That’s it, baby! That’s my man, right there! You go, Alex!”

“You didn’t really think things through when you welcomed them into your bed, did you?” Noah asks bluntly.

I let a heavy sigh roll off my chest and shake my head slowly. I can’t even enjoy the game anymore, and something tells me it’s only going to get worse. Fortunately, Noah doesn’t insist. He takes my sullen silence as an answer and goes back to watching the game. By the end of the second period, Lara is already tweeting about ‘her man’ and what a great player he is. I know because I’m following her on social media as a method of subconsciously torturing myself.

Kyle waves at me on his way to the locker room for intermission, and I wave back, smiling broadly to let him know I’m here, supporting him no matter what. The score is still unbearably tight, and I can see Alex getting tired. He’s been having trouble on the ice, especially when flanking my brother to keep their opponents from ramming into him.

Intermission seemed to fly by and the third period has started.

The minutes roll by in a plethora of tense gasps and hysterical cheers whenever the puck gets close to the goal.

“Go, Alex! Go, Alex!” Lara keeps shouting. I try to hide my irritation but I must not be doing a very good job of it.

I’m so lost in my own thoughts that I don’t even realize the game has ended until the whole Lansing Devils’ bench jumps up, cheering and screaming with absolute joy. I’m confused for a brief moment, I’m looking around and trying to figure out what just happened. But now I see the scoreboard. The Devils have won the first game. Almost instantly, my heart is inundated with sheer joy as I spring from my seat and join the crowd as we applaud our team.

“Yes! That’s my baby brother, right there!” I shout and wave at Kyle.

He is overwhelmed as he slides onto his knees. Alex and the rest of the team are huddled together, hugging and patting each other’s shoulders, high-fiving and laughing. Jack steps on the ice and rushes to be with the boys as some of the Devils fans pop open cans of confetti.

“They deserve this,” Noah says, smiling broadly but not looking at me. He’s talking to me, though.

“Yes, they totally do,” I manage, my voice barely audible in the constant roar of an overexcited crowd. “Excuse me,” I make my way past him, about to descend the steps leading down to the ice when Lara Romanoff flies ahead of me, giggling like a schoolgirl.

Cautious, I slow down and let her go first, wondering what she’ll do once she reaches the ice. Her posse follows her along, snapping photos and videos from every angle. I keep a straight face as I stop and watch Lara skip past the tech staff and some of the players, headed straight for Alex. There’s a tightness in my chest, an invisible hand gripping my heart, and claws digging in slowly to give me just enough of a reprieve before it crushes me completely.

Alex doesn’t even see her coming. She throws her arms around him and bam! Kisses him right on the lips. Kyle turns beet-red, his eyes wide as he looks away. Jack is equally surprised, though I recognize the dismay in his gaze as he immediately glances upward toward the bleachers, probably

searching for me. What really bothers me is that as soon as Lara is done kissing him, Alex laughs, his cheeks pink as the others cheer him on. He even has an arm around her waist, though maybe it's only just to keep her from slipping on the ice.

I'd drop her ass in an instant.

"That's got to sting," Noah says. I didn't get as far away from him as I'd thought.

He's right, though. It does sting. I've lost Noah, and now I see Alex slipping through my fingers as Lara lets her friends take pictures of them together, red and black confetti raining down from above. A classic rock song comes on, the sounds of drums and guitars roaring throughout the arena to symbolize the fiery victory that the Devils just scored, while the Mavericks mumble their congratulations and skate off the ice, headed for the lockers to likely mull over their loss.

Oddly, I am just as defeated.

"I've had enough," I say and look to Noah. "I did you wrong, but I never meant to hurt you. This is the universe's way of telling me I'm not fit to be in a relationship. I'm done with all of it. It's too much, I can't take it anymore."

He frowns, a look of concern shadowing his gaze. "What do you mean you can't take it anymore?"

"I'm out of here. I'm done."

He tries to come after me, but I move quickly through the crowd as more people try to go down the stairs to congratulate the players. I should be joining them. My brother would want nothing more than to see me rushing toward him, to have me hug him. But I'll be with him later. Right now, I can't be anywhere near Alex or Noah, or Jack, for that matter. It's all too much. Lara's circling the corpse of what I thought could grow into a relationship, but how foolish was I to even think that such a dynamic could actually work?

Me and Alex and Jack and Noah.

What a silly dream to have when I couldn't even tell them the truth. I've bitten off more than I can chew, and there's

something heavy stuck in my throat. A mixture of guilt, sadness, heartache, and frustration as I finally understand that it's never going to work out. I've hurt Noah, and now Alex has unwittingly hurt me. It's only a matter of time before Jack leaves a bruise of his own.

I need to get out of here. I need a moment to breathe and to prepare for something else. That Chippewa project is starting to sound more and more like the perfect escape from everything. I need to put some serious distance between myself and the three men who have captured my heart as it shatters into a million pieces with only myself to blame.

It's been a month since I've ended all contact with Jack, Alex, and Noah. They've all been trying to reach me—by phone, by text, by email. Each has knocked on my door more than once, but I have kept them at bay. I never answer. I sent each a text only to ask them to respect my decision to move on with my life, without any further explanation. Alex has tried to explain that Lara's kiss meant nothing. Noah has attempted to restart the conversation, apologizing for his bitterness during the game. Jack is anxious and confused since he didn't actually do anything.

Even Kyle has asked me more than once why I'm avoiding the guys. I'm guessing they've asked him about me enough times to have him wondering, but not enough times to have him thinking we had something going on, at least, I hope so. It doesn't even matter at this point. I've picked different gym hours, I drive myself to and from work, I'm focused on my career and health, and for the first time in a while, it feels like I've got a good handle on myself and my life.

My nights are cold and lonely, despite the warming spring. Summer is just around the corner, and soon enough, I'll be going on my work trip with Margo. The Chippewa elders have agreed to let us work the dig site and authenticate every piece found, and they're even inclined to lend us at least half of their cultural treasures for the Lansing Museum exhibit—this, of course, means that Margo and I will be able to write that book together. I'll be a published anthropologist in no time.

But life is so empty without them.

My gym workouts feel faded and weak, even though I'm making good progress on the weights. I'm partially regretting that I've chosen to pick different hours from Alex's. I'd gotten used to him spotting me whenever I went farther during an exercise, so it's become difficult to gauge how much I can push myself without getting hurt. It's a lonely journey, lonelier than my previous perception of singlehood because at least before I had no idea what I was missing out on.

My mind is constantly foggy, too. Thoughts run amok, randomly disturbing my consciousness. Intimate moments and memories of our many times together. All the fun we had. The deep conversations. The safety I felt in each of their arms. I'm haunted and trudging through each day like it's a mission just to survive into the evening, where an empty bed awaits. And in this split-second, I feel my elbows caving under too much weight. I'm struggling with a bench press and the steel bar will crush my throat if I don't swiftly put it back on its support system.

A pair of hands appear in my field of vision. Gloved hands. Strong, muscular forearms.

"Hold on, I've got you," he says.

My heart skips a few beats, my soul excitedly swelling as I expect to see Alex. Hoping he might've figured out that I've switched hours. But it's not his voice. I look up and see a stranger. He's handsome, albeit not exactly my type. He's nowhere near as appealing to me as Alex or Jack or Noah.

"Thank you," I mumble as he takes hold of the bar and safely gets it away from me. "I don't know what happened, my elbows gave."

"It's too much weight, probably," the man says. "But it's okay, I've been there. It can be daunting when you're on your own and still in the beginning of your fitness journey."

"What an idealistic term. Fitness journey," I reply.

"It is what it is. The end results make us forget the hard labor that comes before it."

I sit up and turn around on the bench so I can get a better look. His brown hair is cut short with a smooth fade on the sides. His hazel eyes scan me, checking every inch of me with a mixture of admiration and curiosity. Dimples form at the corners of his mouth whenever he smiles, and he's clearly a regular at the gym, judging by his muscular build.

"You're right, I guess," I say, smiling softly. He's being nice. I might as well act like a human being and not sit here, sore and nursing my emotional wounds like it's the end of the world. "And thanks again for spotting me. I think I need to take a break for today."

"I'm Darren, by the way. I've seen you around this past month, but I wasn't sure if you needed any help. You seemed to be doing pretty well on your own," he says, offering a hand.

I shake it firmly and stand up. The ground spins beneath me but I manage to stay upright. I must be dehydrated. "Yeah, I've gotten the hang of the weights and the routines that work best for me."

"Did you have a personal trainer before?" Darren asks.

I nod once. "I've got a different schedule now, though."

"It's cool. It would've been a shame to give up because of your work hours," he says. "You're clearly getting some results."

"You think so?" I don't know why I'm so self-conscious all of a sudden. There are days when I feel like I've gained weight, days when I feel bloated and heavy, particularly in the past couple of weeks. I haven't checked the scale, but I figured I was just tired while also gaining muscle mass. Alex did warn me I'd bulk up a little bit, though I didn't mind the idea—my curves are only getting more pronounced. "Sometimes I get the feeling I'm not getting any results whatsoever."

Darren shakes his head, chuckling lightly. There go the dimples again. "Trust me, I can definitely see some new cuts on your arms and shoulders, especially. You're putting in the work and it shows."

“You’re too kind, thank you.” I check my watch, unsure of where this conversation is going to lead. Maybe he’s just being nice, and I’d like to leave the door open for future conversations. Just not today. Today, I’m more miserable than yesterday, and my body isn’t helping. “Listen, I have to go. Work starts soon. Shower, change of clothes, you know the drill.”

“That’s cool,” Darren replies. “Listen, I usually come in at around this hour. I can spot you in the future if you need me. It’s no trouble.”

“I’ll see you next time,” I reply and walk out of the gym headed straight for the showers.

My head’s throbbing. It takes more effort than usual to peel the workout clothes off me. I think my leggings are getting tighter. I take a quick shower and change into my regular work outfit. I haven’t worn any of the sets that Jack bought me. I’ve slipped back into my comfort zone, my mousy neutral style that helps me disappear into a crowd rather than stand out.

Walking out of the building, the hot air hits me like a fiery oven’s breath. I’d almost forgotten how useful air conditioning can be in a place where people sweat their asses off. The workout was supposed to make me feel better. Instead, I’m more fatigued, blinking slowly as I head across the parking lot to get to my car. Alex and I used to have long conversations here. It would take at least half an hour for him to even get the engine started.

I wonder how his knee is doing. His athletic performance was dwindling despite all his effort and the hours in physical therapy. I worry about him, even now. Maybe Lara can keep him company and offer him the solace he needs. Here I go, being bitter and unreasonable again. I’m the one who broke everything off. This is my solitude, my decision, my purgatory.

Once I leave the parking lot, however, I get the sense that I might’ve made a mistake. It’s too late, though. I can’t un-ring that bell.

The inevitable happens on the following weekend when Kyle comes home from Lansing. We spent the first part of Saturday together, catching up over a hearty breakfast. I've had quite an appetite lately, and he'd be a fool to mind it since it means a nearly endless supply of maple-drizzled pancakes and crunchy bacon, scrambled eggs, and a luxurious fruit salad on the side. The Devils are still in the playoffs, so he is understandably stressing over performance issues—not so much his performance but rather Alex's.

“They're coming over, by the way,” Kyle tells me as I wash the dishes while he rubs them dry with a towel and puts them back in the cupboards.

“Who is?” I ask, trying not to look at him.

“Alex, Coach Jack. Noah, too. I haven't had all of us together at the house for a while, now.”

He's been respecting my wishes on the matter, much like the guys. I've blamed everything from an incomprehensible workload to physical exhaustion, headaches, and any other excuse I could think of to try and keep everybody out of the house while I heal from emotional wounds of my own making. It has been frustrating, but they haven't been too persistent, thankfully.

I can tell my brother is worried, however. “Maeve, what's been going on with you lately?” he asks after I say nothing for several minutes. “You've been a recluse, avoiding everybody. Did something happen?”

“No, nothing like that. I’ve just been really crazy busy at work with that Chippewa project,” I reply, focusing on the last of the bowls in the sink, my gaze stuck on the soap bubbles that capture some of the sunlight coming through the window.

“I can’t remember if you decided whether to go on that trip or not.”

“I’m going. Margo is waiting for me to set some dates for the whole thing, but I’m not ready to put anything in stone. I don’t want to miss the playoff games.”

Kyle sighs deeply. “You’ve been working so hard for my sake. For your career. For everybody else except yourself. Have you considered just... I don’t know, taking a vacation?”

“Easier said than done.”

“Not that hard, considering that I’m a functional adult these days,” he quips with a cool grin that fades as soon as he tries to approach the sensitive subject again. He’s not sure what’s sensitive about it, but he knows there’s something there, regardless of what I say in opposition. “Besides, Alex has my back. The coach, as well. And Noah’s just next door. I won’t burn the house down while you’re gone, I promise.”

“It’s not worth the insurance payout,” I shoot back, half-smiling. “Maybe this whole Chippewa project will be an opportunity to get out of this place. You may be right. I might need a break.”

“Maeve, that wouldn’t be a break. That would still be work.”

“I know...”

The door opens, and I freeze as soon as I hear the familiar voices echoing through the house. Jack. Alex. Noah. And Hayley. She came along, too. It’s one of our usual gatherings. Well, usual as in before I got intimate with three of the kindest and most wonderful men on this earth. I’m the one who ruined it, and I’m the one who walked away in a fit of anger and frustration. I can barely look them in the eyes when they come into the kitchen.

My heart is pounding, everything inside me shifting. It's as if an earthquake rocks me to the core as I'm reminded of who we were, how we used to be, and what has now become of us. I'm not even sure how I'm able to smile and pretend like everything is okay when I glance up from the sink, wary of Kyle and Hayley. Hayley knows I've been sleeping with three different men but she is unaware of their identities. Kyle knows nothing. He cannot know.

"Hey, guys," I manage, my stomach broiling. A lump forms in my throat, and I can taste the sourness working its way up.

"Hey, Maeve," Jack is the first to speak, giving me a cautious smile. His eyes search my face but I remain steady under my façade. "It's been a while. How have you been?"

"Oh, fine, just fine. Really busy," I reply.

Noah stares at me intently, while Alex's gaze bounces between me and Kyle. Good grief, this is so tense and awkward. It feels awful. Noah stares intently, a muscle ticking subtly in his sharp jaw as he slowly unpacks a bag of snacks he brought over. It's supposed to be just the six of us chilling in the living room, rewatching the playoff highlight reel in preparation for the next round. Jack gives me a gentle nod and takes the USB stick over to the large wall-mounted TV we keep in the lounge area.

"I'll just go ahead and get the tapes set up," he says.

Kyle exchanges a few laughs and handshakes with Noah and Alex, then joins Jack by the TV, eager to watch the whole thing again. I think he's seen it about ten times already—and every time he finds something else he could've done better, something else he's going to do better next time. Meanwhile, Alex goes over to the fridge and takes out some drinks, though it's mostly non-alcoholic stuff. Lately, I can't even stand the smell of wine or beer in the house, so I've made sure to switch it up to flavored water and fruit juices. But it's the slight limp in Alex's leg that has me worried more than my disgust for anything that might have alcohol in it.

"What's going on with your knee?" I ask.

Hayley pops by to kiss my cheek, then grabs a couple of empty bowls for Noah's snacks as they both work on prepping the grub. I feel as though I'm watching a movie from the outside, from the back of the theatre and so far removed that I can't even hear what the characters are saying to each other. I see awkward stolen glances and sad smiles and faded eyes. I see people who have been nothing but kind and sweet to me, people I have been pushing away to the point where I'm now stuck in some form of drowsy darkness, unable to pull myself out and drag myself back into the real world. A different kind of movie is playing in my head, a compilation of memories that have my heart turning and twisting most painfully.

Alex has been talking for the better part of a minute but I tuned out without even realizing it. "The doc says I shouldn't risk playing the next round," he says, "but I can't do that. I have to be there."

"Didn't he suggest more physical therapy?" Noah replies. He's been paying attention, whereas I'm just nodding and frowning to make myself seem like I'm participating in this conversation. "Or was that the coach?"

"No, I told Alex to rest more," Jack says from the living room. "He just won't listen, and now he's hurting."

"Hey, I'm going to get better. I know it. I just need a little more time."

Hayley raises an eyebrow. "What if you do something worse to your knee during the next round? What then, huh?"

"I won't," Alex insists. "I've got this under control."

Somehow, I doubt that to be true. He was stubborn before the knee injury and he got even more pigheaded after the surgery. Hayley makes a good point. If Alex pushes himself too far, if he gets on that ice and ruptures the same ligament again, his career will be over. He is still in his athletic prime with at least five more years to go before he considers retirement. Much like Dad and Kyle, Alex is exceptionally resistant to long hours of physical effort—or used to be—before the injury.

“Have you considered taking it easy during practice?” I hear myself asking, genuinely worried for his well-being. “You could still play but exert yourself less with the training.”

Alex starts carrying the soft drinks into the living room, barely looking my way. “I’m fine, Maeve. Really. There’s nothing for you or anybody else to be worried about. And what do you care, anyway? It’s not like anyone here has actually seen you in the past few weeks.”

“Hey, she’s been crazy busy,” Hayley cuts in, my best friend coming to my rescue.

I’m not surprised that he’s lashing out. The knee issue is a sensitive subject for him; add that with my decision to walk away and I’m sure it hasn’t made things any easier. I’m aware that Lara Romanoff was just pushing the envelope, but the truth is I can’t see a sustainable relationship with him or any of them, not without full transparency and acceptance of each other.

“Maeve has a big project coming up,” Kyle says from the living room, looking at me. “Tell them about the Chippewa reservation, with Margo...”

“Oh, it’s just a new exhibit we’re working on,” I reply, finishing up with the dishes. My hands shake as I reach for a towel to dry them with. A peculiar heat spreads through my stomach and up my back, causing me to break into yet another cold sweat. “A new dig site was discovered. We’re looking at the artifacts found there and working on writing a book about the Indigenous folk who lived in the area prior to colonization.”

“That sounds incredible,” Jack says. “What’s your role in the whole thing?”

“I’ll be assisting in the authentication process with Margo. Each object they unearth will pass through a spectrometer study. We’ll be taking small samples for that. Then there are the existing archives for the entire region which we’ll need to revisit and amend accordingly. It’s a complex job that will require my presence for longer than I had originally

anticipated,” I reply, doing my best not to look any of them in the eyes.

I can faintly hear Hayley grumbling in Alex’s ear. “You need to be nicer to Maeve. She’s got enough on her plate.”

“Sorry,” he mutters, glaring down at the coffee table before he rearranges the soda cans for the third time.

They must’ve been talking about me, though I’m not sure in what exact context. I’m not sure any of it matters anymore. I’m just so... exhausted. And queasy. Everybody has gathered here for a fun Saturday watching the game footage, and all I’m good for is sulking and broiling in my own emotional misery.

“You’re looking kind of pale,” Noah says as he comes up to the kitchen counter. I’ve been idling behind it for a couple of minutes, trying to figure out what to do next. I don’t want to be here anymore.

“I’m okay,” I mumble.

“You’re not okay, Maeve. What’s been going on with you lately? If it’s about what happened in Ottawa, I need you to know I—”

“I don’t wanna talk about it!” I snap and move away from him. All I need is for him to hold me, for the three of them to hold me, to kiss me and to tell me that everything is going to be okay. Yet it’s pure fiction. I cross the living room in a rush, the bitterness of nausea burning my throat. “Sorry, guys, I’m going upstairs. Too tired.”

Hayley follows me but she stops at the bottom of the stairs. “Are you sure, honey?”

“Yes, thank you. You guys have fun,” I manage, tears already bursting from my eyes as I disappear into my bedroom and lock the door behind me before I head straight for the ensuite bathroom. Five minutes of puking my guts out later, my stomach hurting and cold sweat dripping from my forehead, I begin to worry. “The stress is too much,” I tell myself.

I take a cool shower and slip into a pair of soft, teal-green jammies, then check my phone. To my surprise, there’s a

message from Darren. We exchanged numbers the last time we saw each other at the gym, and now he's asking me out on a coffee date. Tomorrow.

Listening to the voices down below, I can tell that the guys are watching the highlight reel. Hayley laughs at something on the screen then Jack says something that makes everybody laugh. Kyle roars as he revisits his favorite goal of the series.

“Did you see that? Did you see me go all top shelf on him? Come on, that was pure gold!” he says.

“Alright, alright, take it down a notch,” Jack cuts in, still chuckling.

I move away from the door, drawn back to my bed by the dull pang in my heart. I should be down there with them, but I'm no good at pretending that nothing happened. Out of respect for my brother I can't sit there in good conscience and pretend I'm okay when I clearly am anything but.

I am hoping that the Chippewa project will distract me and keep me busy enough so that I can recover and heal and get over the guys. Right now I just need to get some rest and clear my mind. Who knows, maybe I'll get back into the dating life, too. I've learned enough in my 'lessons' to know my way around men and dating, I might as well put that knowledge to good use.

“Why wait, though?” I murmur and pick up my phone.

I text Darren back and let him know I'm fine with a coffee date tomorrow. It's killing me to be without Jack, Alex, and Noah, but maybe another man to sweep me off my feet is precisely what I need to get over this hot mess of my own making. Maybe I just need a fresh start with somebody new.

Sunday gets worse.

Physically, I am not okay. I've slept about ten hours yet I still feel as though I've been run over by an eighteen-wheeler. Nausea has become a permanent companion, especially in the early morning. There are smells and flavors I can no longer stand, so breakfast was quite the challenge until I settled for a couple of slices of toast with butter and honey since that was pretty much the only combination I was able to keep down. That and a ton of water. Coffee felt like too much of a challenge at sunrise, so I saved it for my date with Darren.

The most boring date I've ever been on.

We're half an hour into it at a riverside café downtown. The view is lovely, huge willows with lush crowns pouring down over the crystalline water, emerald grass bending under the soft breeze, and wild roses popping here and there in bursts of red and orange. It's one of my favorite times of the year, despite the hot afternoons. The community pool is open later, so I plan to take advantage of that since I'm no longer jumping over the fence to dip my toes in Noah's pool. Regardless, I plan to maintain my no contact policy with all three of them.

"So, what good movies have you seen recently?" Darren asks.

It's been quiet between us for a few minutes. A few long and awkward minutes. "Oh, I've seen a couple of dramas. One of them won an Oscar last year if I remember correctly. But I

can't say any of them has really stayed with me," I tell him, smiling gently.

He looks rather dashing in his jeans and white shirt, the latter snugly fitting his bulky arms and shoulders, but there is absolutely nothing romantic between us. I can't sense a single spark, not even a smidge of physical attraction—at least not on my end. Darren is an absolute gentleman, and the coffee here is great, yet I feel lonely while sitting with him.

"You're looking a little pale," he says. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I think I might be coming down with something, but I can manage," I reply.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Have you seen a doctor yet?"

I shake my head. "Nah, we usually just walk it off in my family."

"Would you like to get something to eat? They have the best scones here, by the way."

The mere idea of food in my mouth makes my insides turn over. "No, thank you, I think I'm fine with just coffee for the time being. So, Darren, tell me, what is it you do for a living? I never asked."

I never cared. I still don't care, but this is the first date I've been on since my triple breakup. All that "training" with the guys needs to start paying off, so I try to put some of their teachings to the test here. Darren is the perfect subject, truth be told. Kind, patient, courteous and reserved. I wonder if he is as bland in bed as he is over a coffee date.

"I'm an accountant, actually," he says, slightly amused. "I'm not that passionate about the job itself but it pays the mortgage and the bills, so I try to keep a couple of hobbies and weekend activities to make up for my unimpressive career."

"There's nothing unimpressive about your choice of work," I reply. "Every job has purpose and meaning. We don't all have to be rocket scientists or—"

"Or stellar anthropologists like yourself," he briefly interrupts me with a playful wink.

“Or... yeah... I guess, thank you. We don’t all have to have this fancy job title in order for our lives to mean something. As long as you’re happy, that should be all that matters.”

Darren nods his approval. “It’s nice to hear you say that. My previous dates have let slip that I’ve got a boring job. It may be boring, but they didn’t need to rub it in.”

We both laugh lightly as the waiter comes over with fresh ice water. My eyes light up at the sight of the clear glass pitcher, ice cubes dancing in the sunlight as he sets it on the table. Darren thanks him, then proceeds to pour me a glass. I practically inhale two glasses before I feel sated, prompting him to raise his eyebrows.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asks.

“This is the third time you’ve asked.” I’m starting to feel irritated. Impatient. Skirting past bored and delving into annoyed. “I’m okay.”

“Forgive me,” he says. “I’m just worried. I hope you’re not coming down with anything serious.”

“Thank you for your concern, Darren, really,” I say, checking my watch. It hits me that there is somewhere else I’d rather be at this point. Anywhere else but here. Anywhere. Alex’s bed. Noah’s pool. Jack’s car. Anywhere but here. Even my bed feels stale and cold without them. I can barely look at myself in the mirror these days. To say I’m miserable would be an understatement. I thought time healed all wounds, but it’s taking forever on my end. Worse even, I’m wasting Darren’s time. I think we both know it’s not going anywhere, but he is simply too nice to say anything. Maybe I should cut it short before I snap at him again and further embarrass myself. “I’m sorry... I think I need to go home. I’m really just not feeling well.”

As if summoned, the nausea returns with a vengeance, wrapped in a sour ball in the back of my throat and eager to unfurl. I’ve either accidentally manifested it or there is definitely something wrong with me. Either way, it’s my signal

to get up and jump back in my car before I make a literal mess in this lovely riverside café.

“That’s okay, Maeve. We can do this another time,” Darren says.

“Yeah.” Not really, no, but I will let him down easy later.

“Are you okay to drive?”

“I think so. I’ll manage, don’t worry about it.”

“Let me walk you out, at least.”

I’m close to tearing up here. He’s been nothing but kind and patient, and on any other occasion I would’ve appreciated him a lot more than I do right now. It’s a shame, really. I used to dream about nice guys asking me out, going on a date with one who doesn’t want me exclusively for my body. Then I remember I had three men who made me feel like a whole woman, and I threw it all away. Shaking my head, I get up and grab my purse, then try to walk out as gracefully as possible.

“I’m fine, Darren. You sit back and enjoy the rest of your coffee. It would be a shame to let it go to waste,” I tell him with a forced smile.

As soon as I turn away from him, however, my conscience takes hold and tears roll down my cheeks. I somehow manage to leave the café behind, taking a moment to feel the summer wind blowing through my hair and to listen to the sound of water flowing before I get in my car. My throat burns as I turn the engine on and make my way onto the main road. I’ve been dealing with this stomach issue for a couple of weeks, now. It’s taking forever to clear out of my system.

“Oh, shit,” I mumble as another possibility hits me. “No way. No fucking way.”

There’s a drugstore a couple of blocks east of my house. I stop there and head straight for the women’s healthcare section. I grab a few different pregnancy tests since Hayley mentioned once that there could be false positives or negatives with these things, so I need to be sure. A hundred percent sure. I’m shaking like a leaf as a different kind of future emerges before me. I don’t even have confirmation yet, but the scenario

is already there, tendrils of a potential reality coming around in new colors, intertwining and raising my anxiety levels. I've been a caregiver to Kyle my whole life. I thought I was done with that, for a while, at least.

Walking over to the counter, I measure each breath, inhaling deeply as I work to keep the nausea under control. Oh, God, what if I'm pregnant? Who do I tell? Hayley. But she'll want to know who the father is. Hell, I don't even know who the father is! It could be any one of them. Another deep breath. I need to calm down until I take the test. I don't know anything for certain at this point.

"Hi, there, how can I help?" the pharmacist greets me with a faded smile.

"Just these," I mumble and hand over the pregnancy tests.

"Okay."

The look she gives me only serves to exacerbate my awkwardness and the horror of a possible future of single motherhood. *Deep breath, Maeve. It's going to be okay.* I take cash out of my wallet to pay.

"Maeve?" a dangerously familiar voice paralyzes me just as the pharmacist bags my stuff.

Slowly, I turn my head to see Alex coming up behind me. He's got a couple of ointments and heat packs in his hands, likely for his knee. *Fuck.* What are the chances I would run into him here? He looks so good in his white tee and grey gym pants. It's clear he's been spending more time in the sun and his skin is catching a gorgeous cinnamon tan that only serves to bring out the golden specks in his brown eyes. It's also making his hair lighter, particularly along the temples. I bite my lower lip and offer a faint nod.

"Hey," I manage, horrified that he might see the tests before they're all in the bag.

The pharmacist seems to pick up on my sudden discomfort and decides to hurry things up as she slides the bag across the counter and tells me how much I need to pay. I give her the cash, and she quickly returns the change and receipt as I take

my things and clutch them tightly against my chest. Alex tries to talk to me just as I walk past him.

“Hold on, Maeve. What’s been going on with you lately?” he asks.

“Next customer,” I hear the pharmacist say.

“Nothing, I’m just busy,” I tell Alex, then nod toward the counter. “Your turn. Go on.”

“No, no. Maeve. Seriously. The way you suddenly ended things. The way you’ve been avoiding us. It’s hurtful as hell and I don’t understand why you’re acting like this,” Alex insists.

I’m feeling sick in my heart and sick to my stomach. I’m desperate to get home and take the test so I can finally understand what it is that I’ve been dealing with, what it is that I *will* be dealing with if I get three positive tests in a row. As I look Alex deep in the eyes, I am reminded of how sweet and patient he can be. But I need a different kind of energy for this conversation if I’m to get out of this pinch with my dignity intact, so I give him a scoff and a harsh scowl for good measure.

“I’m sure you’ve got better things to do than chase after me, Alex. Especially with Lara Romanoff hanging off your arm all the time,” I hiss and walk out.

“Next customer,” I hear the pharmacist call out again.

Alex could run after me, but he’s got stuff to buy, so I take advantage of these extra thirty seconds and rush to my car. I get behind the wheel and screech out of the parking lot, desperate to get to my truth sooner rather than later.

One is showing a cross. The other two, being a different brand, are showing two lines. All three are telling me the same thing. I am absolutely pregnant and petrified as I stare at the test sticks in the bathroom sink. The queasiness makes more sense. The fatigue. The lower back pain. The cravings and the sensitivity to certain smells. Now that I think about it, it has been a while since I've had a period.

There is a new life growing inside me, and I don't know who the father is.

I can barely stand my reflection in the mirror.

Ironically, I thought I was lonely before taking the tests, yet the feeling has only become stronger since the confirmation. I'm alone in the world, my soul empty and my heart filled with all sorts of regret while an unborn child grows. Holy crap, I am so not ready for this. It was supposed to be fun. Pure fun. Discovering my body and my guilty pleasures. Exploring my sexuality and what it means to be a woman. Enjoying aspects of life that I had put on hold for far too long. It wasn't supposed to lead so quickly into motherhood.

I know I have options. I know I can do whatever I want.

But deep down, I already understand my position and what my heart truly desires. What hurts is that I also understand that this is a road I'm going to travel alone. I've been keeping Noah and Alex and Jack at bay. I've been pushing and pushing and doing my damndest to preserve the distance between us.

They're trying to move on with their lives, now. Or maybe they have moved on already, and I'm the only sucker still lingering in the memory of what was. Either way, a baby isn't on the table for them. It never was.

We were casual, or so we'd told ourselves. No strings attached, yet we were longing for one another. Hell, Jack and Alex were happy sharing me if it meant keeping me instead of losing me. Noah wasn't happy about it, though. I broke his heart, and then I broke my own. I walked away and excised myself from their lives altogether. There's no way I'm walking back in with a baby bump and zero certainty with regards to the father's identity. My pride wouldn't take it.

"What the hell am I going to do?" I ask myself.

In the absence of an answer, I toss the tests in the small garbage bin by the toilet and proceed to thoroughly wash my hands and face with lavender-scented soap and cold water. Once I'm dry and slightly calmer, I go back into my bedroom and check my phone. Alex texted me.

You're impossible to talk to these days, Maeve.

I'm tempted to respond, but I leave him on read. Instead, I send Hayley a text. In this entire storm, she has always been a source of comfort, a subtle guiding light even when the storm clouds gathered overhead and threatened to suffocate me.

I'm sorry I was such a pain yesterday, I write. Not in a good mood. You okay?

A minute later, she replies. *I'm cool, honey. Don't worry about it. Exhaustion? That time of the month?*

Yeah, and then some, I lie, thankful she's not here to see the look on my face. I could never properly lie to Hayley, anyway. The mere feat of having kept this secret of the identity of my three lovers from her has been the accomplishment of a lifetime, but I doubt I'm able to hide it for much longer. Somebody I trust and love needs to know, and it cannot be Kyle. He's too close to all three, and I doubt he'd understand the entire dynamic, anyway. *When are you*

home this week? I was thinking we could hang out for a bit without the guys.

Friday night might work. We were supposed to have an event with the agency but the client canceled, Hayley writes.

Cool, we'll watch a movie and eat peanut butter and chocolate ice cream.

I thought you hated peanut butter.

It dawns on me that this is yet another pregnancy craving. Hayley is right. I was never partial to peanut butter, even when mixed with chocolate. Kyle used to be crazy for Reese's, especially around Halloween when I'd take him trick-or-treating around the block, but I just never got a taste for them. Yet here I am, drooling over precisely that combination. Next thing you know, I'll be dipping pickled gherkins in strawberry jam in the middle of the night. Why the hell is my mouth watering?

I shake the thoughts away and get in bed. It's early, still. Barely four in the afternoon, though I'm not sure where the hours have gone since my coffee date with Darren. Maybe I've been so distracted with all these pregnancy tests and completely lost track of time. My head is a cluttered mess. I had plenty to deal with prior to the result; it feels even more crowded now in-between my ears if that's even possible.

It's starting to grow on me, I text Hayley instead.

I'm just so tired of constantly fighting my own fears and emotions. Perhaps it's time for me to simply let go, to embrace everything that is currently working its way through me. Perhaps there is a light at the end of this tunnel.

One way or another, I know I will pull myself back together. I will raise my head and greet the next day with a smile on my lips. I will meet Margo in our office in the Lansing Museum, and I will begin the logistic preparations for our trip to the reservation. I will immerse myself in the fruits of my professional labor, I will join the archaeologists on site and I will work for as long as my body can hold me. My mind will be filled with plans for the future and ways in which I will

do my best to provide for my child, while my heart will make room for a mother's love to grow and settle in.

It's not all lost, but it's not all pink roses either.

It is, however, hopeful and true. I am pregnant, and I will carry my torch alone.

It's the only way I know how.

Hearing Kyle's voice booming from downstairs pulls me out of a heavy and disturbing dream. The last thing I remember before waking up is me standing in front of a crib, my baby cooing and glancing up at me while Jack, Alex, and Noah keep trying to get into the house—either through the door or the windows, all of which I've locked. The symbolism doesn't escape me, but I don't have a moment's thought to properly process what my mind is telling me as I drag myself out of bed and downstairs to find my brother rummaging through the freezer while on his phone.

"Yeah, man, I'm heading out first thing in the morning, so we could still grab a couple of cold ones tonight if you're game," he says.

I have no idea who he's talking to, but I wasn't expecting him back today. With everything that's been going on, I'm not sure I'm even able to entertain his presence in any way. It probably doesn't make me a good sister, but I've done worse behind his back. What he doesn't know can't possibly harm him, right?

"Hold on, Maeve's here," Kyle says as soon as he spots me, guilt etched into his features as I catch him peeling the plastic seal off a tub of peanut butter and chocolate ice cream. He hangs up and puts on the biggest grin he can muster. "Hey, Sis... I thought you were out on a date."

"And I thought you were headed back to Grand Rapids today." I nod at the ice cream tub. "You'd better leave me some. I've been thinking about it all morning."

Kyle chuckles and closes the freezer door, then brings the tub and a couple of bowls over to the island counter. “I will always share with you, Maeve. Especially since you’re the one keeping the fridge and freezer stocked with all this good stuff.” He pauses and frowns as he notices the flavor on the packaging. “I thought you hated peanut butter.”

“Meh. Let’s call it an acquired taste and not delve any deeper into the issue.”

“That’s fine with me,” he says and starts scooping all that goodness in two generous portions, while I take a seat behind the island, watching him intently. “How are you feeling?” he asks.

“Just tired,” I reply, my shoulders dropping. “Even a nap isn’t helping anymore. I think I need a vacation.”

“I’ve been telling you that for the past couple of months.”

“I know.”

“Yet you’re going on that work trip, instead,” he says, shaking his head in dismay. “I swear, if Dad were here, he’d probably lock you upstairs just to make sure you’re taking time off for yourself.”

“I’d likely just work from my bedroom.”

“He’d take the laptop away.”

“I’d climb out the window,” I laugh.

Kyle would like nothing more than to keep the atmosphere giddy and lighthearted, but he’s been worried about me, and this seems like the perfect opportunity for him to try and gauge me once more. “I’m a grown man, Maeve. I know it’s a weird thing to affirm, but maybe you need the reminder.”

“I’m well aware.”

“And I’m also not an idiot. I know there’s something going on with you. Something you’re not sharing with anybody, not even with Hayley, your beloved bestie,” he says, licking the back of his spoon. “Damn, this is good...”

I nod in agreement, already working my way through my bowl. Whatever is in the peanut butter and chocolate combination, it's doing a fabulous number on my stomach—not to mention my senses. It beats everything else I've tried to soothe my frayed nerves and injured ego.

"I'm just going through a rough patch, but it's nothing I can't handle. I promise I'll reach out to you first if I need help."

"Would you at least tell me what it's about? The guys are worried, too."

"I'll bet they are," I mumble, the dagger twisting in my heart once more. "I need to work through it on my own. If I get stuck, I'll let you know."

"And you know I'm here, no matter what."

"You're here until morning, then you're off to Grand Rapids because you have games to prepare for. You guys are so close to the Cup finals. Don't distract yourself with my stuff, okay?"

Kyle's brows furrow tightly. "Don't ever put yourself second in my life, Maeve. Hockey means nothing if I can't take care of you."

"You don't need to take care of me," I insist with a warm smile. "Just relax, and enjoy the rest of your evening, alright? I'm fine. I promise."

He stares at me for a good minute or so, then finishes his bowl and dumps it into the sink. "Okay. I'll keep my eyes on you in the meantime," he says. "But for now, I'm gonna hit the shower. Alex is coming over to watch a movie."

"Don't you have practice tomorrow?" I croak, suddenly aware that one of the possible fathers of my child is coming over. For Pete's sake, I barely escaped him back at the drug store, and now he's on his way here? Why won't the universe stop messing with me?

"Not tomorrow. We've got massage therapy tomorrow, so I can splurge on a brewski or two tonight," Kyle replies and goes upstairs.

I pause and listen to the water running in the main bathroom, Kyle's off-key singing. I run a hand through my hair, the decadent taste of chocolate and peanut butter melting on my tongue. Closing my eyes for a moment, I revel in the last spoonful of ice cream and give myself all the time in the world to savor it to the fullest.

Memories of my last moments with Alex and Jack come back to hit me over the head like a brick. Their hands running up and down my body, their mouths marking my skin, tongues trailing wet kisses while their eyes search my face, their souls feeding on my raw ecstasy. Suddenly, Noah's fingers are running down my spine signaling that I'm getting lost between mementos, but I don't mind. My heart is aching, and so my mind is trying to help me cope with their absence.

I don't even register the tomblike silence surrounding me as I take a deep breath and rinse the bowls and spoons before I dump them into the dishwasher. Since Alex is coming over, I'd rather be upstairs, locked in my room pretending to sleep even though every fiber in my body is screaming for him right now.

"Maeve," Kyle comes downstairs, looking as pale as a sheet of paper as he holds up one of my pregnancy tests. "What is this?"

The blood freezes in my veins. "What the hell were you doing in my bathroom?"

"I needed some of your micellar water," he replies, then waves the test closer to my face while I take a couple of steps back. "What is this?"

"What does it look like?" I snap and cross my arms, defenses coming up before any reasonable argument can form in the back of my head.

"There's three of them, all positive," he says.

"Then you know what they are."

Kyle sighs deeply. "Is this why you've been so... weird, lately?"

"Honestly, bro, it's none of your business and I'm not comfortable discussing it with you. Not now, not today. Please,

just respect my privacy.” I snatch the test from his hand and drop it into the kitchen bin. “And keep your hands off my stuff.”

“Maeve, this is serious. You’re pregnant, and I’m your family.”

“Kyle, damnit, it’s not your burden.” I cry out, holding my tears back as best as I can. “It’s my issue and I’m doing everything in my power not to crumble and fall apart while I deal with it. Nobody can help me, not even you. Only I can help myself, but I need time to process everything and plan ahead.”

“Maeve...”

“End of discussion, Kyle. Focus on hockey, focus on the playoffs and on your career. We’ve worked so hard for you to get this far. Don’t let it be in vain.”

Kyle is about to probe deeper, determined to get more information out of me. In this instance, the sound of the front door opening would fill me with relief since it would lead to a much needed interruption, but as soon as Alex announces himself loudly and joins us in the kitchen, I realize I’m screwed and then some.

“Hey, guys. Hey, Maeve,” he says, his gaze lighting up at the sight of me with a mixture of wariness and longing. “What’s up?”

“What’s up is that we’ve got a pretty serious situation here, and I don’t know how to get through to my sister,” Kyle says, never taking his eyes off me, completely unaware of the devastating effect that Alex’s presence has on my senses.

“I don’t understand,” he says, giving me a curious look.

I turn to Kyle. “Don’t even say—”

“She’s pregnant,” my brother decides to further complicate my existence, since I’m unwilling to give him the details of my precarious situation. Thank the stars Dad isn’t here anymore, because he’d have this boy by the ear and a boot up his ass for good measure. “Maeve is pregnant and she won’t tell me anything about it.”

I let a deep breath roll off my chest as I offer Alex a weak smile.

It's all I can do, given the stunned expression that captures his face when his eyes find mine.

He knows what this means. He knows more than Kyle, and I'm pretty sure the cat is about to jump out of the bag and pee everywhere at this point. I've lost control of a runaway train, and it was only a matter of time. Why did I even think myself capable of keeping everything in? It only took a twist of fate and a minute's worth of glancing down at the garbage bin for the whole truth to come out.

"Maeve," Alex says. "Is this true?"

"Yeah," I whisper, unable to find any other words to say. I've got nothing. Abso-frickin'-lutely nothing besides my own shame and multitude of fears.

"Whose is it?" he asks. "Mine or Jack's?"

I hear the air wheezing out of Kyle's lungs. Oh, God.

"Alex, please..." I manage, a whole new kind of horror washing over me.

"Whose is it?" Alex snaps, no longer caring about Kyle or anyone else hearing us.

I can't exactly blame him, but I fear it will only lead into something infinitely worse that I won't be able to control nor mend. Not that I was able to do much before, truth be told. It's simply a matter of scaling the disaster back, damage control. Judging by the ashen look on my brother's face, however, it is becoming painfully clear that there will be no scaling back—I am helpless before the catastrophe that is about to unfold.

“**W**hat the hell are you talking about, Alex?” Kyle blurts out, anger blaring red in his cheeks.

I’m a spectator of a circus of my own making, unable to speak or even move as the tension thickens the air between us, cutting the air supply altogether. Alex tries to ignore my brother and focuses on me, waiting for my answer, but I don’t have one. And Kyle lacks the patience to sit on the sidelines anymore.

“Maeve, what is going on here?” my brother turns his focus on me.

All I can do is give him a disheartened look and sigh deeply, my shoulders slumping as the shame comes over to pinch every inch of my skin until I’m as flushed as a boiled beet. It’s enough to send Kyle into a furious frenzy as he grabs Alex by the shirt and yanks him out of the kitchen.

“Kyle, stop!” I cry out.

“You son of a bitch!” my brother growls and shoves Alex.

“It’s not what you think!” Alex pushes back, far too confused and irritated to put up with Kyle’s ignorance of our affair. “I can explain.”

“What’s this about you and Jack and Maeve, then?”

“Kyle, stay out of it, please!” I try to get him to back off but he just ignores me. He’s not really interested in hearing anything about it. He’s just angry, realizing that we’ve been

intimate without his knowledge and in utter secrecy. “My private life is mine, Kyle and none of your business!”

“These are my friends!” he hisses. “What the hell is wrong with you, Maeve?”

“Don’t even think about putting this all on her,” Alex cuts in. He is struggling between chivalry and dismay as he processes the news of my pregnancy.

I’d like the earth to simply split open and swallow me whole already. I’ve prayed for it more than once in the past few months; it’s high time it happened. I can’t take it anymore. It’s too much all at once and my senses are burned and overloaded.

“Alex, were you banging my sister?” Kyle asks, his eyes wide with horror.

“Hey, watch your mouth!” Alex shoves him again, this time with enough strength to have my brother stumbling backward and almost falling down.

“Fuck you. I’ll talk however I want in my house. Were you fucking my sister? And why did you ask about Coach? Was he fucking her too?”

It’s my turn to get angry. “Kyle, that’s enough!”

“I don’t think it is, Maeve,” he retorts and shifts his focus against Alex. “Dude, you’re my friend! Jack is my coach! *Our* coach! You screwed my sister? What in the world is wrong with you?”

“Does Maeve seem unworthy or unlovable to you?” Alex replies.

“She’s my sister!”

“She’s not a nun!”

Kyle’s temper flares out of control and he swings his arm out and tries to punch Alex.

“Stop it!” I scream, though it’s far too late.

Alex ducks and rams into Kyle, the two of them spilling out into the backyard. They’re pulling and pushing, kicking

and punching, cursing and shoving at each other. Neither wants to hurt the other, but the fury and the shame dripping from the edges of the situation are simply too much to take. The only thing I can do is sob and beg them to stop, over and over.

Kyle's lip splits, blood dripping down his chin. He manages to clock Alex in the jaw which I'm sure will leave a bruise. I try to get between them, but I'm thrown back and land on my ass, thankful for the soft lawn as I feel the earth spinning with me at the very center.

"You knocked up my sister!"

"We don't know that yet!"

"Right, because maybe my frickin' coach is the father! Are you hearing yourself?" Kyle shouts.

"Please, stop!" I'm wailing, knees tucked against my chest as tears flow freely and I am lost in the middle of this emotional tornado. I'm responsible, and I can't stop it. I can't control the damage, and the helplessness is simply too much to bear. "Please..."

Everything happens too fast for me to even register when Noah jumps over the fence and gets between Kyle and Alex. By then, my brother's tee shirt is torn to shreds and stained with blood, while smudges of dirt and grass streak down Alex's ragged jeans. Noah must've heard the ruckus, but his presence only serves to complicate things because he is about to find out the truth, as well.

"Jesus, take the wheel," I hear myself mumble, my eyes red-hot.

"You two need to take a couple of steps back," Noah's voice thunders across the backyard. I'm pretty sure we've got neighbors watching from their windows at this point, since the whole scandal has become extra loud and public. Might as well brace for the impending doom. "What is the matter with you two?"

Kyle winces as he tries to speak. His left eye is starting to swell. I didn't even register when Alex clocked him, but it will

be bruised and ugly looking soon enough. “Maeve is pregnant,” my brother says, nowhere near done with my dirty laundry.

“Maeve?” is all Noah can say as he looks at me, understandably stunned.

Oh fuck. This is about to get even more complicated.

“Is it mine?” Noah replies.

There it is. The last piece of the puzzle for Kyle to really sink his teeth into. The look on my brother’s face is priceless, though. Shock. Dismay. Horror. Confusion. I didn’t think he could experience so many layers at once, but here we are. Alex’s isn’t too far behind as his gaze darts between Noah and me. He’s putting two and two together, as well, and the picture he’s coming up with doesn’t make him happy.

“Well, then, this is my exit,” I say, having abandoned the last of my senses. My brain has finally shut down, and this is the only way I know how to cope. “I’m going to leave you guys to it. There’s no way I’m sticking around for anything more.”

Noah tries to stop me but I pull myself from his grip, then grab my phone, purse and keys from the living room and walk out the front door. Kyle, Alex, and Noah come after me, but I can’t even hear them anymore. There is too much explaining to be done. Too much judging. Too many questions. I’m too tired. My body needs rest, my baby needs some peace and quiet, and I don’t have a reasonable answer for anybody at this point in time.

“Maeve, damnit, talk to me!” Noah calls out as I reach my car.

I turn around to see my brother and his friends watching me in sheer disbelief. “You three knock each other’s teeth out, for all I care. In fact, you know what? Call Jack over and make it a foursome while you’re at it. I’ve had enough. Yes, I’m pregnant, and no, I don’t know who the father is.”

“Are you serious?” Kyle croaks.

“Yes, Kyle. I’ve been with Alex, and I’ve been with Jack. I’ve been with Alex *and* Jack since they didn’t mind sharing and I didn’t mind being shared. And I’ve been with Noah, too. So yeah, my sexual revolution began and ended swiftly. No, I don’t want to share any of the lurid details. It is none of your business. It’s nobody’s business but mine, actually. I just want to be left alone.”

“We should talk,” Alex descends the front porch steps, but I respond by opening the driver’s door of my car, keys jingling in my hand.

“Please, just... leave me alone. I’m done. I’m absolutely done. I’m sorry for everything, but I need time to sort this all out” I say and get behind the wheel.

I briefly catch a glimpse of Noah running after my car, but it’s too late. My wheels are screeching out of the driveway and onto the road as I get myself as far away from my own home as possible. I have no idea where I’m going or what I’m going to do in the next couple of hours, but the idea of spending the night at a hotel isn’t the worst, given the current circumstances. Jack will be notified soon of my condition. He will want to talk, as well, so I take advantage of a long stoplight to turn my phone on silent mode as I contemplate which hotel to settle in until my brother and Alex head back to Grand Rapids.

There’s the Chippewa project coming up soon. Margo is expecting me in the office tomorrow, first thing in the morning. I’m hungry. I’ve just devoured half a tub of peanut butter and chocolate ice cream, but I’m still hungry. The little guy or gal is starting to require more nutrients, growing strong in my belly and forever altering the very fabric of my existence. I take a deep breath and turn right.

The Southern Bend Inn will have to do for this evening. I’ll figure everything else out tomorrow.

The Saginaw Chippewa reservation in Mount Pleasant is the perfect hiding spot for me. About ten miles north, nestled between two clusters of deep green woods and just before the creek bends southward, is the archaeological site that sources our future Lansing Museum exhibit. For the past couple of weeks, Margo and I have been working extensively with the experts here to identify and authenticate every single item that they dig up.

“Here, eat something,” Margo says as she joins me in the lab tent. The east side has a clear plastic window, and I can see the archaeologists working with a couple of indigenous boys gradually revealing a set of complete bones—yet another fantastic discovery made this week that only proves this settlement was a lot bigger than we originally thought. But it’s the wonderful-smelling kabob wrap in Margo’s hand that gets my full attention for a whole moment, my mouth instantly watering as a cascade of flavors teases my senses. “I had mine, but you nearly skipped lunch again, and we’re not doing that anymore, remember?” Margo adds, nodding at my now visible bump.

“Thanks, boss. It smells incredible...” I reply, gently peeling the wrapper off the top half. I get a whiff of shredded beef, smoked paprika, garlic, onions, Cajun fries and sauerkraut, among other familiar scents of cheddar cheese, barbecue sauce, pickled gherkins, and spicy mayonnaise. “Damn, you had them put everything in it, didn’t you?”

We usually get these delicious beasts from a small diner in Mount Pleasant—a specialty they only serve in the summer when they open the beer garden with its outdoor barbecue. It has been our go-to place for lunch and dinner while working the dig site; the hotel we're staying at offers a pretty decent breakfast buffet we've been hitting every morning before we head out. The lady in charge of the cafeteria makes sure there's always a bowl of fresh fruit for me every single morning, along with a pitcher of green jasmine tea.

"You need to eat, so yeah, I had them put everything in it," Margo replies. "What are you working on?"

"I'm halfway through authenticating a cutting tool," I tell her as I pull my swivel chair away from the worktable and back to my computer desk. The last thing I need is for any of this marvelous food with its many juices and spiced sauces to drip onto archaeological treasures. "I think we're definitely looking at attempts in agriculture here," I add, nodding back at the main binder.

"This place was a whole lot bigger than we thought, huh?" Margo replies, settling into her chair. "A town, maybe?"

"Could be. It depends on how much more we discover. What are the preliminary scans showing so far?"

She nods with genuine surprise. "About three square miles of possible structures underneath."

"So, definitely older and larger than Mount Pleasant itself?"

"That's the assumption thus far. It's what the elders believe, as well. They're always talking about the 'ones who lived here before us,' as they respectively call them."

It has been an incredible experience for me so far, not to mention for Margo. She is over the moon to have taken over a project as big and as full of surprises as this one. Nobody expected the settlement to be so much bigger than what we had originally anticipated, yet the more we dug, the wider its confines seemed to get, leading everyone to believe that this part of Michigan was much more populated by the Indigenous

People than what we knew from the historical archives left behind by the first colonists.

The work itself is extremely detailed and highly taxing, but at the end of the day, both Margo and I are able to gather enough evidence for one hell of a book on Native American anthropology, with a new focus on the Saginaw Chippewa population of this region and what their world was like prior to the English coming over. We're getting glimpses of a unique way of life and a society that was much greater and infinitely more complex than even the local folks were aware.

"The elders are having a field day with the copies of our notes," Margo chuckles as she pours herself a mugful of coffee from my thermos. I made sure to fill that up at the hotel buffet before driving over. I don't mind the green tea, but small amounts of coffee won't hurt me or the baby. The secret, my OB/GYN says, is moderation. "With everything they had that was passed down from previous generations they still had no idea of how vast this place was."

"I am beyond honored to be a part of this, Margo. I'll never be able to thank you enough."

"I wouldn't have worked with anybody else on this, honey," she replies, smiling softly. "Besides, I like how it has kept you busy and distracted enough, considering what you're dealing with. How is the baby coming along?"

I take a deep breath but don't speak again until I scarf down the rest of my kabob wrap. After washing it down with some cool water, I give Margo a lazy smile. "Growing and always hungry," I tell her, almost laughing. "I have no idea what life is going to be like for us, for me. I am terrified and battling daily anxieties, but there is something about this little one growing inside me that sort of..."

"Gives you purpose?"

"More like much needed balance. Like no matter what happens, no matter how I fare in the world and in the years to come, it's going to be fine. I think I'm getting tranquility out of this whole mess, and I never expected such a weird contrast."

“How so?” she asks, raising a curious eyebrow.

I can’t help but giggle. “It’s like the baby knows. Whenever I feel overwhelmed or worried about the birth or raising a child on my own, this wave of warmth sort of washes over me. As if my own body is taking over to tell me that we’ve got this. The brain may be the overthinker, but the body always knows better. I forget that, sometimes.”

“How is your brother doing these days? Still mad at you?”

I exhale sharply and drink more water before I answer. It’s a sensitive topic for me, but Margo has been by my side since she first learned about the pregnancy. “He’s still mad, yeah, but he’s also worried, so he texts me all the time, asking to talk. I keep telling him I’m busy and that we’ll talk when I get back. Though, honestly, I dread the very idea. It’s all so... exhausting.”

“I can’t blame you. Three guys. Geez, Maeve, you really went into the deep end on that one.”

One night after the dig, Margo and I sat down in the lounge of the hotel and she drank too much whiskey before we each retired to our rooms. She told me stories from her adolescence that made my skin crawl and my very soul shudder. She’s been through hell and back—she’s a survivor of some truly awful situations, and she was about to spiral into a wealth of self-pity and depression when I decided I needed to switch things up a bit and draw her focus away from her own ghosts. So, I told her about my ex-lovers and how I didn’t know which one was the father, about how I missed all three equally, and about how my decisions have impacted my brother’s life as well.

“Hey, I had an itch and I scratched it three times, what can I say?” I reply.

“Have you considered a DNA test for the baby?”

I shrug lightly. “I’m not sure if I want to do that unless it’s to simply screen for possible genetic issues or whatever. But certainly not for paternity purposes. I don’t think I want to know, to be honest.”

“Have any of them been in touch?”

“Repeatedly, but I keep sending their calls to voicemail and leaving their messages on read. After that fight back at the house, I’ve decided to stay away until the fires cool down a bit. I think Kyle has spoken to all three... I don’t know, Margo, it’s way more complicated than it was supposed to be, and I’ve got this tiny human growing inside me that needs my full attention and minimal stress.”

Margo smiles, leaning back into her chair. “Oh, honey, I totally get it. I’m just fascinated by your ability to fall in love with three guys at once.”

“They each have something unique and wonderful about them. But it’s still crazy. Unrealistic. How did I even think I would be able to pull it off? It’s impossible to keep such a relationship going, and I should’ve known better. I simply didn’t want to give up on any of them. I was selfish, and now I’m paying the price.”

“Two of them were fine with sharing you, though. Why couldn’t you talk to the third one about it, too?”

I shake my head slowly. “Noah is a dominant guy. A possessive type. He wanted me all to himself.”

“But he didn’t want you two to be official.”

“No. Not yet anyway.”

Margo scoffs. “That’s bullshit. Either he wants you or he doesn’t. Or he doesn’t want you enough for a relationship. For him to be mad that you didn’t stay exclusive when you weren’t officially together, well, sorry, but that’s just plain bullshit. You shouldn’t feel guilty about any of this, honey. If he wanted you all to himself, he should’ve put a ring on it.”

“I guess. I still feel bad since I never told him about Jack or Alex. He saw us getting it on at the hotel lounge and figured it out.”

She laughs so hard, she nearly falls out of her seat. “By the stars, Maeve, you sure pack a whole lotta spice for a bookworm who stayed a virgin deep into her late twenties...”

“This was me catching up,” I can’t help but giggle, one hand cradling my baby bump. “But hey, there’s a price to pay for that, as you can see. Nothing comes cheap.”

“I think you’ll love every second of what comes next.”

“I hope so.”

Truthfully, I’m looking forward to motherhood. I wish I didn’t have to do it alone, but this is the road I’ve chosen because I’ve overcomplicated my love life past the point of any possible untangling.

A few hours later and after conferring with our archaeological colleagues, Margo and I decided to take our most recent discoveries and bring them over to the Chippewa elders hall in the Mount Pleasant reservation. It’s a show of respect to have them receive the artifacts before we start logging them separately for the museum exhibit.

The elders’ hall is a massive structure built on thick wooden logs and a heavy stone foundation, with the textile layers coming over the thatched roof which was recently reinforced with isolating materials. The outer design still resembles the classic teepee aspect, but the building itself is much taller and sturdier than the original. Inside, the electrical circuit has been set to fit each support pillar with a metal sconce, and there’s also a massive pendant descending from the very center of the ceiling.

All the seating is focused around the middle of the hall, comprising mainly of sofas, armchairs, and ottoman stools covered with natural brown leather and animal furs. “Some of these are over a hundred years old,” Margo whispers as she notices me staring at one of the chairs. “And every object you see exhibited on these walls goes back at least three centuries, if not more.”

“It’s incredible,” I murmur as I let my gaze wander all over the place.

The elders’ hall feels homey but demanding of my utmost respect and reverence at the same time. The color scheme is earthy and warm, yet the architecture and seating layout is

heady and imposing. The elders themselves consist of five men and women in their late seventies and eighties, clad in the traditional Chippewa dress, their long greying hair elegantly combed into single braids hanging over each shoulder.

I've met them before, but every time I come here I find myself overwhelmed by the weight of entire generations still resting on their shoulders. It's quite the duty to preserve a culture as precious and as complex as theirs, particularly against a formerly European backdrop that once sought to completely annihilate the First People of America. I bow politely as Margo raises her chin and smiles at the elders.

"We've brought new items for you," she says, pointing at a table where she has already laid out various cutting stones, some clay pieces that were once part of pottery and crockery, and several shards of polished glass which we've identified as possible tools since they were clearly man-made and not natural occurrences. "Once you approve and add them to the inventory, Maeve and I would like to have them shipped directly to the Lansing Museum for additional preservation, as well as for the exhibit itself."

"That shouldn't be a problem," Wayne, one of the elders, replies. Leaning into a cane, he takes a couple of steps forward to have a better look at the objects. The spark in his dark brown eyes speaks of curiosity and fascination, as though he is being reconnected to much older versions of himself, people long gone whose prints still linger in this world. "I see the glass pieces. They're interesting... What would they have been used for?"

"We're not sure, to be honest," Margo says. "We've found iron and stone for cutting and crushing, but the glass doesn't quite add up just yet."

"I'm inclined to think they might've been tools, as well, perhaps for carving or etching patterns onto leathers," I suggest. "We'd need a particulate analysis if we manage to collect anything from the sharper edges in order to better understand their purpose. But we're positive they were used for something specific within this community."

“And you’re certain they’re all linked to the same settlement?” Flora, another elder, asks, a soft smile stretching across her tanned face.

“Yes, one hundred percent,” Margo replies. “It’s much larger than we thought. In fact, Dr. Dumas thinks we should expand the dig site even farther once we confirm with our terrain scanners. We’re aiming for the end of the week before we send all the paperwork out to the state government for their approval.”

“We’re looking at something extraordinary here,” I feel the need to add. “An enormous community gathered along the Chippewa River, big enough to rival most mid-sized towns in Europe around that same period of time. We didn’t think it was possible for this particular region, but it has become increasingly clear that your ancestors found a way to bring multiple tribes together in a functional and peaceful arrangement that spanned several square miles.”

“I agree with Maeve’s assessment,” Margo says. “Given the time period we’re studying here, witnessing such a large setup is truly unprecedented.”

Wayne seems impressed, and there is hardly anything in this world that can still surprise this old fox. “Would you say it will make your Lansing exhibit all the more appealing to a wider public?”

“Absolutely,” Margo answers without hesitation. “We’ve already polled the locals in Lansing and in the surrounding cities, and we even have a couple of volunteers currently surveying folks in Detroit for that purpose. With some appealing visuals and a sturdy media campaign, I reckon we’ll attract enormous crowds when the time comes.”

I’m about to say something about the benefits of a social media campaign, aware that Hayley might be more than useful for this specific endeavor, but the earth starts moving counterclockwise and against my senses. It’s a strange sensation, and I’m surprised that nobody else is aware. I look around in utter shock, wondering why no one else is falling over as the world shifts around me.

“Maeve!” I hear Margo cry out in panic.

I catch glimpses of the elders rushing to my side. My head is as light as a feather, but my ass still hits the ground hard. My lower back hurts, and pain shoots up my spine as I roll over to the side. Beads of sweat trickle down my face as everything before me turns hazy, colors melting and combining into a pitch black that makes no sense.

What’s happening?

My question remains unanswered as I pass out.

I'm walking in a dream that doesn't really feel like *my* dream, but rather like I'm a guest in someone else's. A little girl with long blonde hair walks beside me holding my hand. Her hair cascades down her back in waves of gold and honey, her hazel eyes riddled with specks of green and amber and her cheeks covered in cinnamon freckles. She smiles, and I find peace in that smile—the kind of peace I haven't felt in a long time.

We're moving along the surf, the ocean gently lapping at our bare feet. Whenever we stop, our toes sink into the brown sand, and we listen to the seagulls guffawing overhead. There are two suns in the sky—one white and bright, the other dwindling and red. What a weird view to behold.

“Where am I?” I hear myself ask the little girl.

“Does it matter?” she replies, appearing much wiser than I thought. “Do you feel like you belong here?”

“Wait, I know where I am,” I gasp, recognizing the shambled pier at the far end of this secluded beach. “It's that place in Rhode Island where Dad took Mom and me just weeks before Kyle was born. What are we doing here?”

“I don't know. We're in your dream,” the girl says. She can't be older than ten.

I stop walking and turn toward her. “You look familiar. But you're not me, are you?”

“Nope,” she shakes her head.

“Who are you, then?”

“Who would you like me to be?”

Part of me already knows the answer. She’s how I imagined my daughter would look like, if I were to give birth to a girl and without the father’s identity revealed. The more I stare at her, the more I see each of them in her. Alex’s warm gaze. Noah’s sharp cheeks. Jack’s full lips. My chin and nose. Little bits and pieces of me and them that somehow found the perfect harmony and created her, my future child, manifested by my weathered subconscious. My weirdo brain knows no bounds, obviously.

I have so many questions for her, but I’m aware that every answer would stem from my own subconscious. They wouldn’t be real answers but rather wishful thinking on my part. I wonder why my dream is taking place in Rhode Island. Surely it has something to do with my inner child, and the fears I have for the impending birth. It will change everything in my life. When Kyle was born, he changed everything in my life even though I was just a kid myself.

Maybe that’s what this is all about—the idea of change and how I will sculpt my life into a new mold, something completely different from what I had initially wished for myself. My eyes peel open as I leave the dream behind, realizing that I’m simply scared of the numerous unknowns headed my way, but that I’m the one who chose this path. I’m the one who pushed everyone away so that I might carry my burden alone.

Except a child doesn’t need to be a burden. A child needs to be a source of love and joy and wonder. When Kyle was growing up, I missed Mom the most. For the briefest of moments I think I resented him, only a little bit, only enough to feel miserable later down the road when I realized that he was missing out on so much by not having Mom around. At least I’d been raised by her for a little while. He wasn’t that lucky and has no memory of her so I became his surrogate in a way. My child deserves more than just one parent. The more I think about it, the clearer it becomes. My child deserves more

than just this broken single mother who is too proud to reach out to the three men she still loves.

Something needs to change, and that change needs to start with me.

Tears leave my eyes as I look up and see neon lights. White squares coming together to form a ceiling. The smells of disinfectant and rubbing alcohol stinging my nostrils. The sound of a machine beeping steadily as it picks up on my pulse. I realize where I am.

“Took you forever,” I hear Margo, her voice trembling as she sits beside me.

Slowly, I turn my head to find her next to my bed, sitting on a rather uncomfortable looking stool as she holds my hand, thumbs gently rubbing my knuckles. She’s holding back tears, doing her best to appear cool and calm while I come to. “Hey, you... Did I faint?”

“Oh, honey, you scared the shit out of everybody. I’m pretty sure Wayne had a mini heart attack when he saw you go down.” She laughs, but it’s not genuine laughter. It’s loaded with concern, and I feel awful to be the cause for it.

“I’m sorry...”

Margo shakes her head. “You have nothing to be sorry for. But you do need to take it easy until the baby is born. You weren’t supposed to overexert yourself the way you did. Then again, there’s a lot your OB/GYN told you not to do that you went ahead and did anyway.”

“I guess I’m in trouble, now.”

Margo sighs before speaking in a soft tone of voice. “Maeve... I know you weren’t expecting this baby, and I know it can be a terrifying experience. I also know that you’ve gone through tremendous changes in the past year. You’re dedicated to your job and this dig and that is admirable. But you need to back it down a bit and allow yourself some rest.”

I nod and give her a warm smile. “You’re too good to me, Margo. And you’re absolutely right. I plan to give everything I

have to my baby and that starts with providing a safe and healthy place for he or she to grow.”

“I am well aware that I’m too good to you,” she says with a wink and a smile. “You need to worry about yourself for once, Maeve. You’re always going on about your independence, how you can fix your own crap, handling everything silently on your own without asking for any outside help. Well, tough luck, kiddo, because that stops now. You are not alone. You will never be alone. But in order to move forward you need to first admit that you need help.”

Margo is right, it’s about time I admitted it, truth be told. I’ve been soldiering on for far too long, and now my body has pulled the emergency brake. It’s only a matter of time before something worse happens. I certainly don’t want my child to grow up without a mother, like Kyle and I did. I have plenty more days left in me, and I plan on spending them being the best mom I can be. It’s hard to recognize one’s own vulnerability, especially when I’ve conditioned myself to always be strong and self-sufficient, but sometimes you just... grow tired of it all. Sometimes, I just wish I could lay back and let somebody else take the lead.

“Hayley is the only one who knows where I am,” I tell Margo after some deep thought. “I should call her and have her come over so you can go back to the dig site and keep cataloguing our findings. We need to move forward with the exhibit.”

“About that...” She gives me a strained and awkward smile. My stomach churns as I wonder what it is that she’s about to tell me. “Hayley isn’t the only one who knows.”

“Huh?”

Margo shrugs innocently. “Well, honey, you collapsed and scared the bejeezus out of me, so I thought your next of kin needed to be notified in case something worse were to happen.”

“Oh, no...”

“Yeah, your brother is outside.”

My blood runs hot and cold at once. Shame grips me by the joints, stiffening every fiber in my body as I try to adjust to this new reality. I'm not helpless, but I'm not helping myself, either. If anything, I've been doing myself and my baby quite the disservice, so it's high time for me to set my pride aside and ask for help.

Margo leaves me alone for about a minute before she tells Kyle he can come in. As soon as he steps through the door, relief washes over me. I should be ashamed, but all I feel is a sense of comfort to have my brother close again. The look on his face tells me he has been worried sick, his skin pale and dark shadows nestling under his blue eyes. His hair is a frizzled mess and I'm pretty sure he slept in the waiting room, judging by the creases on his tee shirt.

"Hey, Sis," he says, a shy smile testing his lips as he closes the door behind him.

I open my arms and beckon him for a hug. "Get over here."

"Oh, good," he chuckles and rushes in, wrapping me in a warm and seemingly endless embrace but also careful not to squish me too hard. "I'm so sorry, Maeve. Had I known, I would've come here sooner. I would've tortured Hayley for information, if needed."

"Whoa. Had you known what?" I ask as he pulls back and sits in the stool that tortured Margo until moments ago.

"That you're having a risky pregnancy," he says, running a hand through his messy hair. "After Margo called, I got a hold of Hayley and she explained everything. You've been keeping a lot of secrets, Maeve..."

I let a deep sigh roll out of my heavy chest. "I have, and I'm sorry. I was so convinced that I could handle everything on my own."

"But you don't have to."

"I don't. You're absolutely right. But the way this whole thing came out... it was so messy and ugly and misunderstood. I hated making you all angry, I hated confusing everybody

further. Walking away felt like the easier way out, and so I took it because I didn't want to be a burden on anyone. I'm sorry, Kyle. I just... I thought I could handle it."

My brother cups my cheek with one hand, kindness radiating from his eyes. "Maeve, you've spent your whole life raising me, taking care of me, taking care of Dad, too, when he couldn't take care of himself. I've told you before and I'm going to say it again because it clearly bears repeating. You are not alone, you have me. I'm a grown ass man perfectly capable of protecting you, of making sure you have everything you need."

"You're supposed to have a life of your own, kiddo."

"You are a part of my life, damnit. Deal with it. Besides, you're not getting rid of me that easily. I may be a hot-headed doofus sometimes, but I love you more than anything and anyone else in this world. I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere."

"Except the Stanley Cup Finals. You will not miss that. Not for anything."

He shakes his head, trying not to laugh. "Even in this situation, you're worrying more about me than about yourself."

"You've worked too hard for this. You have worked too hard to throw it all away because of my indiscretions. I've disappointed you, Kyle, along with your friends, our friends... I should've known better. I should've stayed away. I'm so sorry."

He takes a moment to carefully compose his response. This is sensitive territory we're treading, especially considering how I left things when I drove away from the trouble I caused. But he smiles, nonetheless, his hand never leaving my cheek. "Listen, Maeve. You and me? We're inseparable. No matter what the guys think or want, no matter how I deal with any of them, you and me... we're tight. Forever. You come first, before anyone else. Before Alex. Before Noah. Before Jack. You're my sister, and I owe you

everything. From here on out, it's the two of us, first and foremost. Got it?"

"Got it," I manage, trying not to weep like a little girl. He can be so kind and so surprisingly mature sometimes, that he reminds me more and more of Dad precisely in the dire moments when I miss the old man the most. "It's you and me, Bro, for as long as we're on this earth."

"Now, all of that being said, the doctors here have already sent your test results back to your doc in Lansing, and the final verdict is that you need a couple of weeks' worth of bed rest. No gym, no archaeological digs, just you chilling and eating whatever the heck you want and sleeping until you can't sleep anymore. Lots of water, prenatal vitamins, and some light yoga."

"Dude... you came prepared," I giggle.

Kyle glances down at my bump, lips curling into a playful grin. "I need my niece or nephew to come out of there strong and ready to take up hockey. What, did you think I'd be the only star to follow in Dad's footsteps? You could be giving birth to the next Wayne Gretzky, you know."

"Hey, he or she might turn out to be a famous archaeologist, instead."

"Right, a modern-day version of Indiana Jones. But with your sass."

"And hopefully good looks."

Kyle snorts a chuckle. "Well, considering we don't know who the daddy is yet but knowing the three possible candidates, I'd say it would be a fair bet to assume you did hit the jackpot in the looks department, since all three are total studs."

I laugh wholeheartedly, my cheeks burning hot-pink as I realize that all of the awkwardness from earlier has fizzled away. I got my brother back, and I feel safe and comfortable again. Oddly enough, all I needed to do was to admit I couldn't pull through on my own. Not anymore. "Yeah, you've got a point there. It's gonna be a good-looking kid, for sure."

“Hands down the prettiest girl if it’s a girl, ‘cause then she’ll be a carbon copy of you and Mom, for sure.”

“Oh, Mom would be over the moon right about now,” I muse, my heart aching just a little bit as I wish we could see her, as I wish she could see us together like this.

“I’m sure she’s proud of you,” Kyle replies, then gets up and rubs his sweaty palms against his jeans. “So, here’s the thing...”

I give him a troubled look. “Ugh, you’ve got that ‘I did a bad thing’ vibe about you,” I tell him, raising a suspicious eyebrow.

“Well, not bad per se, but certainly not something you would’ve gladly approved.”

“Kyle, what did you do?”

“I brought company,” he replies, then goes over to the door and opens it.

A few minutes roll in deep silence while I find myself unable to move or say anything—let alone look away from the three men who still hold my heart in their hands. Even now, I wonder... how did I let it get to this point? How did I manage to fall in love with each of them with such depth and such strength that I can barely breathe whenever their eyes find mine? It has been a lonely hell without them, and it is even harder now as I try to anticipate what is about to happen.

“So, I’m gonna leave the four of you to it,” Kyle finally speaks.

“Wait, what?” I croak, realizing that he’s about to exit the room. “No, Kyle, don’t—”

“It’ll be okay, I promise,” he replies and practically vanishes into thin air, the door closing behind him with a dull click.

And so I’m left with the three men I’ve managed to greatly disappoint, one of which is definitely the father of my baby. To say that this is awkward would be the understatement of the century. Comedy sets will be written about my situation in the future. I could probably make millions from the film and TV rights of my autobiography someday.

“Son of a...” my voice trails off as I take a deep breath, careful not to overexcite myself. I’ve been through enough already. Kyle is right; I do need a frickin’ break.

“Maeve, before you say anything,” Jack speaks first. “I need you to know that there is no conflict of any kind here

between us.”

I can only nod slowly as I take a moment to look at them.

It’s clear Jack hasn’t slept in a while. His five o’clock shadow is grungy and dark, his salt and pepper hair sticking out in different directions. His dark eyes are tired, but his lips turn into a warm smile whenever he glances my way. My skin tingles with the memory of his touch, of his toned muscles hiding underneath a black shirt, his thick thighs and narrow hips hidden under a pair of pale blue slacks. I’ve missed him so much, and he really didn’t do anything wrong. He deserved none of my distance, none of my ire. If anything, Jack was the glue that held most of me together.

Alex, on the other hand, seems infinitely more comfortable in his dark green sweats, white stripes dashing down the sides of his bulky legs. I can almost imagine myself in his arms, his broad shoulders coming around to envelop me in strength and warmth of the purest kind. I see the concern in his deep brown eyes, but I see the affection and the longing, too. He was my titan, my force of nature, my rock.

And Noah, with his seductive green eyes and delicious lips, with his messy hair and wiry frame, his dominant nature and relentless spirit... he fills me with a different kind of energy as he admires my swollen belly, likely wondering if it’s his seed that quickened inside me. I’d like that very much, but I dare not voice this thought aloud because I’d like it to be Alex’s, too. And Jack’s. At least Jack already has a son. Alex is too young to be a father. Then again, Noah may be anything but ready. They didn’t deserve this. I should’ve been more careful.

As if they can somehow read my thoughts, they move slowly around my bedside, cautious with each step. I hold my breath as I await their approach.

“We’ve been talking a lot since you left,” Noah begins. “I didn’t imagine we’d end up getting along as well as we do today, but hey... stranger things have happened.”

“I... I’m not sure I understand,” I mumble, trying so hard not to cry.

Alex chuckles lightly. “Well, after that whole circus with Kyle and me back at your house, with you leaving the way you did and none of us able to reach you, we all sat down and talked about everything. Kyle stayed out, at least for a while, since the three of us needed to work through some things first.”

“Oh, God,” I whisper.

“No, no, it’s okay,” Alex insists. “We were never really exclusive, Maeve, and we were wrong to assume you’d be only ours. I was wrong to think you’d only be mine.”

“I screwed up the most,” Noah concedes. “And I couldn’t bear the truth when it hit me in the face that night in Ottawa. Which is why I lashed out like a total idiot the next day. I made you feel terrible, and I shouldn’t have done that, Maeve.”

“But I do wish you would’ve told Alex and me about Noah,” Jack interjects, casually sitting on the left edge of my bed. He rests a hand on my knee while I keep a straight face and pretend to ignore the thousands of electrical jolts running through my body. My entire being hums in their presence, and a mere touch is enough to send my senses on a rampage. “We would’ve figured something out together.”

“How?” I ask, somewhat confused. “We were already a threesome. Would you have wanted Noah to join in?”

Alex offers a light shrug. “I said yes to Jack. Why not say yes to Noah, too, if it made you happy?”

“I concur,” Jack adds.

I look to Noah. “Would you have wanted that?”

“I still do,” he says, smiling softly. “I didn’t think I would, but the more days that went by and I wasn’t with you, I realized that it would only get worse. Maeve, I was a coward for not telling you sooner, but I’m in love with you. I’ve never felt this way about anyone before, never at this level, never with this intensity. I am honestly amazed by how much I’m willing to bend my own rules just to keep you in my life

because I can no longer imagine a future that doesn't have you in it."

He comes closer and takes my hand in his. My tears swell and promptly burst from my eyes, tumbling down my cheeks before seeping into my hospital gown. "I'm so sorry, Noah. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"No, Maeve, I'm the one who's sorry. You were understandably afraid, and I was foolishly jealous. This is an unprecedented situation," he says. "But it requires unprecedented measures, not our usual reactions. Not our usual responses. And that's because you are a truly special woman."

Jack nods his agreement once more. "We have spent the past few weeks talking about this, about you, about how it feels for each of us to be with you. And it's been agreed among all parties involved that we will never find another woman like you, Maeve. We would be complete fools to lose you, especially now that you're having our baby."

"Our baby," I say, my voice barely a whisper.

"Do you know which one of us is the father?" Alex asks, inches away from my feet, toes tingling beneath the soft white covers as his hand moves closer, his fingers eager to touch me. "Have you tested for DNA yet?"

I shake my head. "I don't plan on doing that anytime soon."

"Can I ask why?" Alex replies, a subtle smile dancing across his lips.

There's no point in lying or holding anything back anymore. Kyle has proven himself more than capable and mature enough to deal with this whole situation like the grown man that he is. And Alex, Jack, and Noah have been discussing the entire issue like adults while I've been hiding in Mount Pleasant like a scared little girl. It's my turn to rise up to the challenge and meet these men halfway, because they've already done more work than I have in order to make our relationship succeed. I was saying goodbye to them the whole

time, while they were racking their brains and laboring toward a solution.

“Because I want my baby to be yours,” I tell Alex. I look at Jack, “and yours,” and then I shift my attention back to Noah, “and yours, too. I want it to be *our* baby.”

I can't believe these words came out of me, but they did, and they rang so true, it made my heart sing. I stand by everything I just said. I want my baby to be *theirs*, not just Alex's or Jack's or Noah's. It may sound crazy and impossible, but I want my baby to have three dads, and I want to experience love in the arms of three men. One would've been perfect. Two would've been bliss. But all three can bring me the closest to heaven that I'll ever experience.

It's been a wild dream, something I've never dared say aloud, but I've thought about it more than once, wondered what it might be like. Perhaps this baby is a manifestation of that forbidden dream, of such a bold desire. And judging by how they're all looking at me, I'm starting to believe I haven't been the only one indulging in such a fantasy, either.

“It's a complicated thing we've gotten ourselves into, isn't it?” Jack laughs.

“Complicated doesn't even begin to cover it,” I reply.

Noah squeezes my hand. “I'm ready to be a dad, Maeve. Whether or not it's mine, I'm ready to have you both in my life, and I'm ready to share the responsibilities with these two men, as well,” he says, nodding back at Jack and Alex. “We should talk about this. Really talk about this.”

“Yeah, go over roles and responsibilities, especially after the baby is born,” Alex chimes in.

I'm wondering if maybe I'm still asleep, and this is just my subconscious unearthing my deepest desires, only for the real world to soon come crashing down on me. But Noah's touch feels real. His skin on mine, the strength of his hold, the quiet sense of safety that I derive from it.

“You have careers and issues of your own to deal with,” I say. “Noah, don't you have a business to get off the ground?”

Hayley said she was trying to help you branch out so you could leave your current job behind. That takes time and a whole lot of effort. Hours spent in your workshop just to get an initial furniture stock going. Wouldn't you have to hire a couple of woodworkers to help out as well? Because if you plan on doing each piece on your own, well, we'll probably never see you."

A smile dances across his face, lips twisting playfully. "I've already put the paperwork together. My accountant is filing everything next week. Jack helped me find a better workspace with enough room to fit that initial stock you mentioned. I've put out a couple of job ads, too, and I've already been getting some calls. With a little bit of luck, I'll have the business up and running by autumn. Which is perfect."

"How so?" I ask.

"Because I won't have to do everything alone. Hayley is absolutely on board with the marketing and sales side of things," he says. "If we stick to the business plan, I will even be able to offer her a more permanent collaboration contract. My point is, that I have faith in myself and in the people that I'll be surrounding myself with. It's an exciting opportunity. Not without its risks, of course, but worth it all the way. It wouldn't mean as much if I didn't have you to come back to every evening, though. Having you and a child to raise may up the stakes a little bit, but it only adds to the challenge. And you know me..."

"You love a good challenge," I giggle. He comes close enough for me to catch a whiff of his cologne—a powerful mix of leather and musk that makes my senses dance, reminding me of our last night together, his fingers running through my hair, and the way he effortlessly possessed me.

"That I do," he chuckles softly.

"What about you, Jack?" I ask, moving my attention to this second gorgeous man who still has my heart wrapped neatly around his. "If you stay with us, won't that put your custody of Trent in danger? I've had the misfortune of meeting Roxanne,

I know she's angling to hurt you some more. Won't we be a massive problem in the future?"

Jack takes a deep breath and comes around to the other side of the bed, his hand gently resting on my baby bump. His touch alone is enough to soothe my worst fears, though I'm not sure what his plan is just yet. I only know that I want what's best for him, even if it involves losing him, and I'd hate to lose him again. I've already said goodbye to him once, my soul bleeds with every farewell.

"The guys and I talked about this, and we figured that in order for it to work, we don't have to be public about it. Not while I'm having private investigators looking into Roxanne's life," Jack says. "I'm determined to get Trent back from her, and he has voiced that he wants to move in with me as well. But until I get the court to side with me, I need to be careful. You're right about that. So, for safety and privacy reasons, I'm more than happy to be with you solely in the privacy of home and away from prying eyes. Noah will be the one everyone will see as yours. I'll love and cherish you even if I can't brag about you just yet."

"You guys are crazy," I almost laugh.

"You're worth it," Jack insists and leans in to drop a kiss on my temple. His lips are warm and soft, a sweet reminder of what we had and a sliver of hope for what we may have yet again. "I'll do everything I can to keep you and the little one safe. You'll be my priority along with Trent, there's no doubt about that. Noah isn't the only one who is crazy enough about you to do this, Maeve. Can't you see? The three of us are in it for the long run, wherever this weird road may lead."

"Alex, you've been having some serious knee issues," I say after a few moments. "Kyle told me all about your struggles, and I know it's only gotten worse since the last time I tried to talk to you about it. If you really want to be in this relationship with me, with us, I need you to open up some more and let us help you. Or, at least let us support you in any way that we can. You don't have to be alone."

Alex steps over and stands next to Jack, taking my hand in his. He kisses my knuckles sweetly, and for a moment I am reminded of his titanic strength and resilience. Even heroes falter. Even athletes grow weary. It's a hard pill to swallow, a difficult truth to learn to live with, but if I'm ready to leave my comfort zone of denial and self-punishment, so can he.

"I think it's time for me to retire," he says. "This will be my last season with the team. Once the playoffs are done, I'm done. I've spoken to Jack and Kyle and the team doctors about it."

"I'm sorry," I sigh, knowing how painful this decision must've been for him.

"Don't be. The end of one career makes room for the beginning of another. And as it turns out, our assistant coach, Larry, got an offer in Toronto. They want him as the head coach."

"Oh!" I exclaim, somewhat surprised. I've known Larry for long enough to recognize his talent, though he is nowhere near as good on the strategy side of hockey as Jack.

"Yeah, they have been watching the Devils for quite a while," Jack smiles. "Granted, they made me an offer first but I turned them down and recommended Larry, instead. They sent scouts over during the series in Ottawa, and they were pleased with what they witnessed. I thought it was the perfect opportunity to make a reasonably informed suggestion to Alex on the matter."

I can't help but gasp in surprise. "Wait, so you two will be coaching Kyle together?"

The guys all laugh, while I imagine my brother's first day back on the ice with not one but two hard-ass coaches chewing him over every slip and stumble.

"He is utterly screwed," Alex says. "And he knows I won't be cutting him any slack, either."

"I'll be rooting for you all the way through," I reply and give Alex a loving smile. "I'm glad you decided to make this

change. I think it's for the better, and coaching definitely gives you room to grow professionally.”

“While also recovering properly,” Jack adds.

Alex nods slowly. “It wasn't an easy choice. I still have second thoughts from time to time, but I know it's the right thing to do.”

“Your body is telling you to slow down,” Noah says. “Besides, at this point, you're a better asset coaching the team than you are playing for them.”

“You meant that as a compliment, right?” Alex asks, somewhat amused.

“Always.”

I take a deep breath and give myself a minute to look at all three, tempted to pinch myself to make sure I'm actually awake. Not that long ago, I thought I would never experience such tranquility and happiness ever again. I thought I'd be on my own, struggling through single motherhood while pining for a past that I may never get to recreate with anyone else.

But this is real.

We spend the next hour talking about everything that has been happening since we've been apart. The details of Noah's career change and all the side quests that came with it. The work that Jack has been doing to protect his and his son's interests. The constant therapy and medical testing that Alex underwent before he ended up agreeing with Jack that perhaps a coaching position would be better in the immediate future. The work I've been putting into the Chippewa dig site and the objects that we were able to unearth and authenticate.

At one point, I start to laugh.

“You know, I actually tried dating a guy,” I tell them. They're all still gathered around my bed, taking turns to sit in the chair next to me, while Kyle is on his way to pick Hayley up from the airport. It'll be extra crowded in here soon enough. “I met him at the gym.”

For a moment, I see the shadow hooded over Alex's eyes before he chuckles dryly. "I told you—the gym is a good place to meet folks."

"What was he like? Who took the first step?" Jack asks, sliding back into his dating coach posture. It's downright adorable, and it stems from his gigantic self-confidence. Not once have I seen him react out of jealousy. He's never jealous but always devoted.

"He asked me out, actually. Well, he helped spot me a couple of times first. I was having some pregnancy symptoms though I wasn't aware at the time," I explain. "It was getting harder for me to do certain sets, but Darren stepped in. He was a real gentleman."

"So what happened?" Noah asks. "Most boring date I was ever on," I groan, rolling my eyes. It makes them laugh, and I sense the last sliver of unaddressed tension slipping out of the room. "I mean, don't get me wrong, he's super nice and chivalrous, but we didn't have anything in common. And politeness is nowhere near close enough to building the foundation of a healthy relationship. You guys taught me that."

"Yeah, and then we threw the manual away altogether," Noah replies.

"When is the baby due?" Jack changes the subject, his hand once again cradling my baby bump. I think the little one likes it. There's been less pressure on my bladder since he came closer.

"The doctor says I'm looking at early winter. It'll make for an interesting holiday season," I say.

"Well, that's another thing we wanted to talk about, actually," Jack replies, giving Alex and Noah another look. The more time I spend with them, the better I feel and the lighter my heart becomes. My future looks so much brighter. "We're all gonna be dads here, and that comes with a few roles and responsibilities for us during your pregnancy."

Alex shoots him a grin. "You're the more experienced of the three of us, so please, do lead the way, master."

“I’m okay, guys,” I manage, but none of them will have it.

“Nonsense. Clearly, you need prenatal care,” Jack insists. “You’ve been bottling yourself up, clamoring through work and unnecessary stress lately. It’s taken a toll on your body, and it will only get harder unless we find an equilibrium.”

“What are you suggesting?” I ask.

“How much longer will you be working on the dig site?” Noah inquires, his arms now crossed.

I’ve overexerted myself, and my current condition may end up jeopardizing the baby if I don’t scale back on a few things. It’s time for me to take a page out of Alex’s book and recognize when it’s my turn to move away from activities that do more harm than good.

“I guess I can have Margo ship the objects back to the museum, and I can do most of my work from there. My office is more comfortable, and it’s close to home and the clinic. I don’t really have to go through all the motions with the dig site. Not at this point.”

“It’s exactly what we were going to suggest,” Jack says. “The guys and I would like to take turns staying with you throughout the rest of your pregnancy. You shouldn’t spend your evenings alone, and the farther along you get, the harder it will be for you to move and do things you otherwise wouldn’t have a problem doing.”

Alex nods in agreement. “Then there’s the issue of making sure you take your prenatal vitamins, that you go to all your tests, doctor’s appointments and ultrasounds.”

“And we also need to make sure you eat well, that you stay hydrated,” Noah adds.

“We can do a much lighter gym workout to help keep your muscles and joints in check while we prepare for the baby,” Alex says. “There’s prenatal yoga, too. I’ve got a friend who can do house calls, she’s fantastic, you’ll love her.”

“And then there’s all the logistical stuff for the house. The nursery and crib. Diapers, formula, wipes, blankies, toys, the car seat,” Jack says. “I could go on and on but I’ll handle all

that, don't worry about it. Kyle is more than happy to assist with painting the room and putting the furniture together."

Noah frowns slightly. "There's no need to put any furniture together. I'm making the crib, the changing table, the rocking chair, and the chest myself," he replies. "Every piece of furniture that our child will need will come from these two hands."

I don't even register the tears falling from my eyes as I behold these incredible men and realize exactly how fortunate I am to have them in my life. But for a few seconds, the look on my face must scare them because they all draw closer, looks of concern casting shadows over their piercing eyes.

"Maeve, are you okay?" Alex asks.

"I'm just... overwhelmed by how wonderful you all are. I don't feel I deserve so much."

"Oh, baby, you deserve this and more," Jack says. "I'm ready to give you everything I've got. I'm sparing no expense, no time, no resource to make sure our kid is safe and happy every day of their life."

"And even then we're probably going to hover over the poor thing like helicopter parents," Noah laughs, shaking his head.

"It's just that I've been trying to work everything out in my mind, thinking I was going to have to do this alone," I say. "And now, I have to recalibrate my entire thought process because I'm not alone anymore, I've got the three of you and... and... I'm just so happy." And I'm sobbing. I am bawling like a baby and I can't hold any of it back.

Jack, Alex, and Noah inch closer, their arms cautiously wrapping around me. Their strength fills me with newfound energy, their warmth coursing through my veins and pumping through my heart as I begin to imagine my new life ahead. I find comfort in Noah's scent, in Jack's ticklish stubble, and in Alex's strong embrace.

They shower me with kisses, soft whispers of sweet lips, each leaving their mark of love on my skin. I'm imprinted

with affection and protection. I'm marked and bound, held tightly and filled with the kind of joy that many people only dream of experiencing.

"We're going to have plenty on our plates with the baby," Alex says after a while, "but I know we're going to handle everything better together."

"I love you all so much," I manage, tears still flowing from my tired eyes.

"And we love you, Maeve. Don't you ever doubt it," Noah replies.

I can't doubt it. I simply can't. I'm terrified of the many unknowns, yes. I'm scared of what may come next, of the pregnancy risks, of how drastically my life will change when I'll be in charge of preparing a new human for this strange world.

But I'm not alone.

Only a handful of people know the truth.

Kyle, Hayley, and Margo. Actually, that's less than a handful but these are the only ones I trust with my heart and my life. Kyle is my brother and my truest friend, my family and my protector. The tide has changed, and after all the years I've spent raising him and giving him everything I had so that he might grow up to be a good man, my baby brother has reached his potential and is determined to give back.

Game seven of the Stanley Cup finals is tonight and we have the good fortune to be playing on home ice.

It's been two weeks since my hospital stay, and I'm feeling infinitely better. Whether it's the prenatal vitamins, the dietary adjustments, or the fact that I'm being loved by three of the world's greatest guys I'm not sure. Whatever it is, it's working and it's giving me a gorgeous glow. There's also a constant smile on my face that I can't seem to wipe off, though I guess it's what true happiness is supposed to feel like.

"I still can't believe it," Hayley says, almost out of the blue. A couple of days earlier, I sat her and Margo down and told them everything about me, Jack, Alex, and Noah. *Everything*. About the discussions we had in my hospital room, about how all three of them want to be a father to my baby and a lover and partner to me. I need them to be a part of my life, of every aspect of my life, and that involves full transparency. These two women could be the most important part of my new family. "And nobody else knows, right?"

“Nobody. And we’re keeping it that way,” I tell her.

“Won’t it be hard for you to stomach these events? I mean, look at how the girls keep fawning over Alex,” Margo says, nodding down at the ice.

The game is about to start, and the players for both teams are skating around the ice practicing shots. Thousands of people have come to cheer them on, and that includes a throng of coeds and cheerleader types who will literally crush anybody who gets between them and the opportunity for a photo op with any of the guys.

Kyle is the star for the Devils tonight, and there are loads of ladies constantly screaming his name. I’m pretty sure I heard a couple of them proposing, but he just laughs and waves and shrugs it off, focused entirely on his game tonight. The stakes are high up in the stratosphere and if they win, they will be writing history for the team. I know Dad is smiling down from heaven.

“I’m not bothered,” I tell Margo as Noah comes through with bottled drinks and snacks from downstairs. “Oh, thank you, babe,” I say as he hands me a jumbo pack of Reese’s peanut butter cups and fizzy water. My guilty pleasures.

“We’ll have you back on egg whites and avocados tomorrow,” he replies, then kisses my cheek gently and takes his seat next to me.

The whole arena feels stuffy and overcrowded but I don’t mind it. I get to be glued tight to my official boyfriend and public father of my child—though we don’t yet know who the daddy is. We’ll find out eventually, but the guys have said they don’t want to know unless it’s medically necessary, and I plan to respect their wishes. We’ve already agreed this kid’s lucky enough to have three dads, anyway.

“So, you’re okay with that?” Margo croaks, pointing at a blonde woman who attempts to flash Alex and the boys before one of the security guards politely pulls her away and helps her return to her seat.

It only serves to make me laugh. “Oh, Margo, I have faith in my men.”

“Your self-confidence is astonishing,” Hayley mutters.

Noah smirks subtly. “I love that the most about you.”

“Thanks, babe.”

“And you? You’re fine with getting all the limelight?” Hayley asks him, raising an eyebrow.

He shrugs and puts his arm around me. Meanwhile, I catch Jack blowing me kisses from the bench. Alex keeps stealing glances but now that he’s on the ice and about to start his last game as a professional hockey player, I know he needs his space to process and revel in every second. “I’m perfectly fine with it,” Noah says, drawing my focus back to him. “As long as we’re together, I’m fine with it. Besides, the guys and I have built a special rapport. We each have a strong personality, so there have been and there will be some differences of opinion, but at the end of the day, we’re here to be with Maeve, to keep her and our incoming bundle of joy safe and happy and thriving. It’s working out so far.”

“I honestly hope it lasts,” Margo says, genuinely impressed. “And I hope you call me when you decide to make it official.”

“Well, legally it’s not possible yet,” I reply.

“Or ever,” Noah adds.

“That may be true but I’m sure we can organize something somewhere private just for us,” I say, smiling shyly. “We could exchange vows and have a small, intimate ceremony. I mean, it’s not a prerequisite and we’re fine without any of it, but it would be nice.”

Hayley pokes Noah with a finger. “You’d better put a ring on it, stud.”

“Let’s have this baby first,” he laughs and kisses my temple. Lately, he’s been much more affectionate toward me in public, comfortably sliding into his role and loving every

moment and perk that comes with it. “Personally, I’m freaking out a little bit.”

“Yeah, me too,” Margo sighs. “I think we’ll still be digging by the time you give birth, Maeve, so you’d better keep me posted. I want to be there when it happens. Plus, I need to get your maternity leave papers submitted early so there’s not a single snag standing between you and quality time with your precious little babe.”

“I’m sure it will be fine,” I say, already at peace.

Hayley groans loudly and we’re compelled to follow her gaze as she watches Lara Romanoff coming down the steps in the company of some friends. They’re wearing the Devils’ colors, cheering and waving at the guys, but it isn’t Alex she’s got her sights on this time. I see it clearly, and I don’t know what to think of it—Lara Romanoff is blowing kisses at my brother. Even more intriguing is the fact that he spots her and responds with the cutest smile he’s got. And he’s got some signature smirks for almost every occasion. Whatever Lara did to him, or whatever he and Lara have going on, it’s big enough to warrant his best side.

“Look at her, still hanging around like one of those free-the-booby girls down below,” Hayley says, eyes rolling so deep that I’m nearly blinded by the whites.

“Meh, she’s harmless,” I reply. “Also, I think she and Kyle have the hots for each other.”

“Oh, you’d better pray they don’t become an item,” Hayley warns me.

“Why?”

“It’ll make for some awkward family moments when we’re all gathered around the Christmas dinner table,” Noah graciously points out the obvious.

“I didn’t think of that.”

My phone pings. It’s a text from Jack. *Look at me.*

I do just that and find him smiling at me as he mouths an “I love you.” Moments later, the game starts, and we’re all

shouting and throwing our fists in the air, keeping our eyes on the ice below as the players take their positions.

I lose myself in the action, watching the players slide and slip, crisscross and jump over fallen comrades, their sticks swishing left and right as the war to get the puck in their opponents' net unravels gracefully at first, until someone shoves someone else. The spirits get heated quickly, and the first fight occurs.

Kyle manages to get himself out of the scuffle as the referee goes in and talks some sense into the boys and escorts one of them to the penalty box. Alex knows better than to risk a fistfight, but the younglings on his side are hot-blooded and pumped up with too much adrenaline to avoid it. My heart beats loudly as I hold Noah's hand, my eyes never leaving the game. My other hand is busy delivering Reese's into my mouth, occasionally switching for a gulp of fizzy water.

"Ladies and gentlemen, a round of applause for Alex Parish of your Lansing Devils," the announcer says, his voice booming throughout the arena. "This is his last game, but his career doesn't end here. Starting next season, he'll be joining Jack Bogdanovich behind the bench."

"Woo-hoo! Go, Alex!" someone screams from the audience.

"Congrats, Alex!"

"Alex, we love you!"

"Alex Parish, marry me!"

Laughter bursts from the seats below as a couple of teenage girls giggle among themselves. It must've taken some courage to say that out loud although I'm sure the girl knows it's only a teenager's crush. I was foolish to ever feel jealous about any of this. I'll never worry about another woman ever again, even if said woman rubs herself all over him like a cat in heat. Alex is with me, he's chosen to be with me. He was my first and we share a special bond that can never be broken. I can't believe it's taken me so long to realize his commitment to me and to us.

The thought gives me a whole new kind of comfort as I sit back and enjoy the rest of the game, constantly amused by how psyched Lara gets whenever Kyle handles the puck.

“I’m starting to think they might actually win this thing,” Hayley says, eyes as wide as saucers as she watches the game. Margo is damn near breathless, her gaze darting all over the rink much like Noah’s.

I’m equally entranced as my brother pulls an unbelievable maneuver and puts the puck in the net just as the final horn blows.

“Holy shit,” I mutter.

The entire crowd explodes in an uproar of shock and unadulterated joy. Once again, the view before me is covered with red and black confetti bombs. The Devils have just won the Stanley Cup for the first time in team history.

Noah jumps to his feet and I get up too, albeit mechanically, my jaw still on the floor while Hayley and Margo shout and cheer and hug each other incessantly.

“They won!” Noah shouts. “They frickin’ did it!”

“Oh, my God!” Hayley squeals, face red and eyes filled with happy tears.

Mine are flowing as well, as I watch my brother get squished then raised up high by his teammates. Alex is exhausted, occasionally wincing from the knee pain, but he’s in there, too. Jack rushes onto the ice, accompanied by Larry and some of the techs. The commissioner brings out the Stanley Cup and hands it to Jack and the crowd gets even louder than before. It’s all so perfectly, wonderfully, overwhelming.

“Maeve, are you okay?” Noah asks, likely noticing the shift in my expression as memories of my parents come flooding back, filling my soul with the deepest of longings.

“Yeah, I’m okay, I’m just... I wish Mom and Dad were here. Dad would be peacocking all over the place,” I laugh and cry at the same time. “And Mom... oh, if she could just see what a fine man Kyle has become.”

“You have every reason and every right to get emotional, honey,” Noah replies, taking me in his arms. I lose myself in his embrace, letting the moments roll by in cheers and squeals, screams and foghorns.

“Old Man Jensen would be exploding right about now. He’d be skating circles around them in his socks. Nothing would matter but the fact that his son led this team to a historical victory,” he says. “If anything, I’d say Kyle is on track to outskate your dad someday.”

“That would be a feat for the ages,” I say, but my mind is already racing toward that prospect.

Once all the congratulations, press conferences and photo ops are over and done with, Hayley drops me off at home, while Kyle and the guys grab a couple of post-game drinks to celebrate. They wanted me to join them, but I want them to have their guy time to bond and celebrate, especially after a win like this. Besides, I'm expecting my men to come over tonight for a private celebration of our own.

I'm nearly four months into my pregnancy, and I have to admit, this pink lace lingerie set that Jack got me from the maternity section of a high-end designer store looks gorgeous on me. The panties tie around my hips with delicate silk laces, and my full breasts stretch the sheer cups in the naughtiest fashion. The complementing babydoll pours around my waist and over my small baby bump in a way that makes me feel like I'm the most beautiful woman in the world. Then again, this sentiment may have been amplified by the bathing and pampering I did as soon as I got home.

I comb my hair in front of the vanity mirror, patiently waiting. My blonde mane flows over one shoulder, loose curls dancing in the amber light of a burning candle set by the window. It's so hot outside, but I'm loving it because I get to keep the bedroom window open late into the night. I pick out a perfume that Noah bought for me—a French concoction with end notes of lilies and roses and just a spritz of orange zest—and apply it to every part I know they will be exploring later tonight.

I hear the door opening downstairs and their voices echoing through the house. They're home.

I've left the door to my bedroom open, and the hallway light pours through, drawing a long strip of soft white across the fluffy cream carpet. I smile softly as their voices get louder. They know I'm up here waiting, ready for them.

It's our first night together with all four of us. We've been talking about it for days, but we agreed we'd give it a try after the finals, once all the noise settled down. This is it. The moment I have secretly dreamed of for quite a while. I didn't think it was possible, yet here we are. My heart is beating a mile a minute, and all of my senses have come alight. I'm so ready.

"Damn, you look stunning," Noah says as he comes through the door.

Alex and Jack are right behind him. I turn slowly on my vanity stool, my bare feet sinking into the plush carpet. Their lips twist into the sweetest smiles I've ever seen—a mixture of surprise, delight, and fiery arousal at the sight of the lingerie and my growing belly. As an anthropologist, I know this look on me turns them on because it reaffirms their masculine prowess. A pregnant woman is proof of a man's seed, after all.

"It took you guys forever to get here," I joke, brimming with the kind of self-confidence that only their love for me can provide.

"We had a lot of champagne and tequila shots to say no to," Jack replies.

One by one, their clothes start falling to the floor. Alex's shirt—his custom-made hockey tee with the Devils logo and the ten years that he dedicated to the team prior to retiring. Jack's black tee. Noah's tank top. I never imagined I'd be graced with such a sight. I've wanted it, but I didn't expect this moment to actually become reality, and that makes it infinitely hotter to the point where I'm already soaking wet and aching with desire.

"I thought you were going to celebrate tonight," I say.

“We did, but moderately,” Alex grins coolly. “Given what we knew we were coming home to, we agreed to keep it short and sweet and preserve as much energy as possible.”

“And that, Maeve, is how we’re going to make this work,” Noah adds as he slips out of his slacks. “It’s a team effort to keep our woman sated and happy.”

Jack’s pants are next. Then Alex’s. My breath gets stuck in my throat as I take a moment to admire them in their glorious nakedness. How did I stumble upon such magnanimous fortune? Noah’s wiry but gorgeously toned figure stands out in the semi-darkness, deep shadows cutting along the ropes of hard muscle. His broad shoulders and long arms make my insides quiver as I long for his embrace, now more than ever.

“I feel as though I’ve been living in a dream,” I murmur, my gaze shifting over to Alex.

By the stars, this man is hard, his cock-twitching as soon as our eyes meet. I love his bulky frame, his magnificent size and generous layers of muscle blending along every joint. There’s not an inch of him that isn’t perfect, his slightly tanned skin just adding to his handsomeness and causing my fingertips to tingle as I imagine touching him. He’s just within my reach, yet I cannot move.

“Only it’s real,” Jack says.

He’s the first to come forward, his erection catching my eye and prompting me to lick my lips. The years have been good to him, and I appreciate the fact that he still works out with the same fervor as Alex, determined to give himself a temple to call a body for the rest of his life. He reaches out and cups my face. I glance up and find him smiling softly. My legs spread, and I let a hand slip down between, fingers testing the delicate lace with silky floral motifs. I’m so slick with wanting, it’s shamelessly seeping through the fabric, glazing my fingertips.

“We’ll go slow,” Alex says as he joins us.

Noah is reluctant at first, but he finally walks over and stands before me. I’m bathed in the love pouring from their

eyes as I behold each of them in turn, letting my lips curl into a ravenous grin as they offer themselves to me. One by one, I taste my men. Carefully pacing myself, I wrap my lips around the pink, throbbing head first. Noah sucks in his breath, his pectorals twitching as he feels my mouth on him. Alex exhales sharply when I lick the pearl of precum dripping along his shaft. Jack's gaze darkens into a sea of smoldering embers as I suck him shyly at first.

Moans keep slipping from my throat as I touch myself, one hand on a tender breast and the other still down below, gently massaging my swollen clit. I doubt I will last long with the astronomically high level of arousal that I've been dealing with since the guys and I got back together. I can't get enough of them, and I am so easily excited—it's crazy.

"Come here," Noah grunts and gives me his full length. "That's it, baby..."

Instantly, I relax the back of my throat to welcome him, one deliberate thrust at a time as he runs a hand through my hair and tugs gently, playfully, just enough to get my blood pumping even hotter. Alex gets down on one knee, then takes my hand and lets it rest on his muscular back as he pulls the flowery fabric of my bra aside. He teases my nipple with his tongue first, but as soon as he starts suckling on it, I fall apart at the seams.

Jack gives me his cock once more and I take him whole, licking and slurping him like a favorite lollipop, while Noah's hand cups my other breast, index and thumb pinching the nipple through the soft lace.

"I'm in heaven," I manage.

It's all Jack needs to hear before he has me deep-throating him to the end of the world. Noah joins Alex on one knee. They each have an assignment, each lapping at a breast. The nipples are tender and flushed and much more sensitive than before. Every kiss, every lick, every nibble of their teeth shoots lightning bolts through my whole body, my core buckling for something shattering.

But my men have other plans.

“Let’s get you in a more comfortable position,” Noah suggests, and they help me up.

Once I’m on the edge of the bed, he gently nudges me, and I lay down. He and Alex go back to kissing and licking my breasts but not before my bra joins their clothes on the floor, while Jack unties the panty strings, leaving my pussy glistening with desire and all for him. His tongue slides through my folds, and I gasp, held down by Noah and Alex.

“Oh, wow,” I sigh deeply as Jack licks and sucks to perfection.

He slips a finger inside, finding me ready for whatever he’s got. But as soon as he starts suckling my clit, he adds two more fingers and swiftly works me over the edge. Noah fills my mouth with his cock, and Alex massages my breasts, pinching my nipples until my whimpers are the only sound coursing through the room.

The assault on my senses is so smooth and merciless at the same time, I can almost feel every nerve ending reacting, sensitive and receptive to their adoration. My mind expands, and I dissolve into a shuddering orgasm as Jack finger-fucks me deeper into the frenzy. I feel Noah’s veins throbbing along the shaft as I take all of him in, over and over in the sweet madness of my climax.

“I can’t feel my legs,” I say when he pulls back.

“Are you okay?” Jack asks, sounding worried.

I look down and giggle. “I meant it in a good way.”

“Maeve,” Alex says, scooching back up to look me in the eyes. He kisses me hungrily, grunting against my lips as his tongue wrestles with mine. “I love you so much, it hurts.”

“I love you, too. I love all of you,” I whisper, fighting unexpected tears.

Noah smiles and kisses me, as well. Softly, tenderly, and somewhat out of character for him, but I welcome the honeylike taste lingering on my lips. Jack comes up and helps turn me over. I’m on my hands and knees, slightly sinking into

the bed, but it's the perfect position for what comes next as Noah moves around and positions himself behind me.

Alex gets to the front, my mouth ready for him. And Jack... Jack watches, the corner of his mouth ticking as he strokes himself, kneeling beside us. He's loving this, I can see it in his eyes. I feel Noah's tip testing my entrance. I'm swollen and ready for him, juices gushing and trickling down my thighs as he slips in. Slowly at first, stretching me wholly around his monstrous cock.

I almost cry with joy as he starts fucking me, his fingers digging into my hips as I take Alex in my mouth, damn near swallowing him whole. I hear Jack's ragged breathing as he enjoys the view before him. Shivers run down my spine as I clench myself hard around Noah, squeezing him tightly with every thrust. Harder. Faster. Deeper. He knows when to stop, when to slow down, and when to give me a breather, careful and mindful of my condition.

"I don't want tonight to end," he says, and I can't help but agree.

They take turns. Noah watches next, but I insist on caring for his arousal with my hand while Alex pumps deeper down my throat, giving me short breathers in-between thrusts. Jack takes me from behind, one palm resting on my lower back as he fucks me into oblivion. When Alex takes over, I cry out in pure pleasure. He's the biggest and thickest, and it's sending me into another hard-rocking orgasm with every jolt.

I melt into the bed as I come over and over again. I'm never left to rest, and I love every damn second of it. At one point, I'm on my back. Jack gives me his cock to suck, while Noah returns to fill my pussy whole, and Alex works on my clit.

"Oh, don't stop!" I almost scream, feeling the edges of the very world around us peeling away. "Don't stop, don't stop, I beg you, don't stop!"

Noah rams into me, emboldened by my desperate pleas. I lift my hips to meet him, harder and deeper each time. Jack's moans tell me he's close to climaxing, so I bring a hand up and

grab hold of his balls, massaging them as he finally comes in my mouth. The salty taste sates my thirst, and I swallow every drop he has to give me.

“Damn it, Maeve... This is incredible,” Jack manages, running a hand through his damp hair.

They’re all covered in a sheen of sweat. Noah finds me at the top of the world as Alex flicks another orgasm out of me. This one ravages my entire being, prompting Noah to lose himself in the ripples of my ecstasy. He spills his seed inside me, then pulls away and lets Alex finish, as well.

I’m taken up into the heavens as Alex slides in. He can’t take much longer, either. I wrap my legs around his waist and keep him close, feeling his cock explode inside me. I’m so wet and overflowing with these wonderful men. It’s so beautiful and decadent and insane, yet I wouldn’t have it any other way. My breath returns, slowly but surely.

The afterglow settles in an eerie silence as I find myself wedged between them. The four of us lay in bed, basking in the darkness and in the subtle whiff of the candle in the window dying. All I can hear is an amalgam of uneven sighs, of sharp inhaleds and long exhales. My heart sings a song I’ve not heard before. A drumming rhythm bursting with love and hope and everything I’ve ever wanted to feel.

“This is something else,” Noah concludes after a while.

“Did you like it?” I ask, my voice barely a whisper. I’ve lost track of time, but it doesn’t matter. As long as the sun isn’t rising, this night has yet to end.

“I’m already priming for seconds,” he says, looking at me.

Alex chuckles softly. “And he’s not the only one, either.”

“Yeah, make that three,” Jack adds.

I’m overcome with a flurry of giggles as I revel in this moment. Their bodies glued to mine. Their souls bound to mine. Our hearts dancing across the canvas of a yet unwritten future, yet everything about tonight tells me that we’re only just getting started. They’re great together, as friends and

partners. They're incredible with me, selfless and hungry for my love all the time. It still boggles my mind, but it's real.

Jack's finger traces invisible lines down my belly, settling over the slick mound between my legs. I'm tender and slightly swollen, but definitely ready for more. "We'll go easy," he whispers in my ear.

"You've said that before," I shoot back with a devilish grin.

"I'm holding back some," Noah confesses. "You know I like it a little rougher around the edges..."

I think about it for a second, then get up and scoot down, kneeling between his spread legs. His cock stands to attention, saluting me. "I don't want us to hold back. There's a solution for every problem," I finally say.

They hold me tightly, all three touching me at all times, consuming every inch of me although somewhat slower and gentler this round, if only to keep the mother of their child safe and comfortable.

This is as comfortable and as safe as I will ever be. Making love to my three men, receiving them fully, shamelessly and mirthfully. This is my heaven.

EPILOGUE

We've spent months together, living a life I would have never dreamed possible. We've been able to keep our true relationship out of the limelight, and I've found I like that just fine.

Noah is the one I'm seen around town with, but all three of us spend as much quality time together as we can.

I've been busy cataloging all of the amazing artifacts Margo and our team have been sending from the dig and I'm loving my job even more than usual. I never knew how fulfilling my life could be, but I am grateful every day for all that I have.

The new season is in full swing and Alex is fitting in perfectly as an assistant coach. The team has had a great start and is defending their title well so far. Kyle is a goal-scoring machine and if he keeps on at this pace, he is due to set a franchise record and be listed as one of the NHL elite. I couldn't be prouder of him.

He's taken to my unusual relationship situation with the guys rather well, though there are periodic threats of ass-kicking's if I'm not one-hundred-percent happy with my men.

Though we all love spending time together, we still take moments to be alone with just two of us here and there. Noah and I spend quiet nights together when the team is on the road. When they're home, Alex and I or Jack and I spend alone time together. I do have to say, though, that my favorite times are when the four of us are cuddled together. The most memorable

night we have spent together, however, came when my water broke. It happened a couple of weeks earlier than anticipated. I was at home, preparing yet another midnight snack consisting of dill pickles wrapped in Teflon-fried slices of cheddar, and I felt it. The sudden release of pressure, the wetness spreading through my pajama pants.

Alex was watching TV. Jack was upstairs, showering. And Noah had just come through the door, eyeing the dill pickles with as much hunger as I was. He'd been working all day on his first independent orders, so I'd made sure to have extras on the plate for him before we all went to bed.

It was time.

Calls were made. Hayley had the doctor on speed dial. Kyle panicked slightly before going into protective brother mode. Jack got behind the wheel of his SUV while Alex and Noah rushed to get me everything I needed for the hospital. The birth was surprisingly smooth. Of course, it hurt like a motherfucker but I pushed through once the epidural kicked in.

I wasn't alone for a single moment. The doctor was initially taken aback to see so many people gathered in the waiting room. Jack was the first by my side when I was wheeled into the birthing room. We waited as the contractions grew closer together. Alex was with me until the doctor came in and checked my dilation, deciding that it was time to push. Then, Noah took over and held my hand throughout the whole thing.

A couple of hours later, a beautiful and healthy baby girl was born.

As my three men, my best friend, and my brother gathered around me, I was filled with so much love and hope for the future it made tears spill out of my eyes.

"What's wrong babe?" Jack asked.

"Are you ok?" Alex echoed.

"What do you need?" Noah chimed in.

I couldn't help but laugh. All three of them were so in tune with me that they practically hopped to attention the minute I so much as sniffled.

"Nothing is wrong, I am perfectly okay, and I have everything I'll ever need," I replied.

My family had grown exponentially over the last year and I wouldn't have had it any other way.

THE END

Did you enjoy this love story with the three sexy brother's best friends? Get an exclusive glance years later into their happily ever after, [HERE](#).

Craving more? Check out all the sexy standalones in my catalog [HERE](#).

COWBOY DADDIES (PREVIEW)



Two hot as sin Texan grown brothers and one lucky girl...

Whose about to get the ride of her life.

After an insane breakup I'm left with is a bruised heart and an overdrawn bank account.

Luckily, I see a HELP WANTED sign.

A bar that happens to be owned by two SMOKING HOT brothers.

Boss #1 is sex-on-legs and fun loving southern charmer,
Blake.

Boss #2 is the brooding no-frills cowboy on a mission, Austin.

They give me orders during the day.

And demand my *complete submission* at night.

I can't help but find myself falling hard for the southern
lovers.

But the cartel is nose deep in their business.

**And when a little pregnancy test reveals two pink lines,
The safety of our growing little family is all I can think
about.**

“I’m not going to be a homewrecker,” I muttered into the phone for the third or fourth time. My fist was balled up at my side as I paced my bedroom. I stopped near the window overlooking our expansive backyard and pool.

The backyard and pool that my father had paid for and provided us with before destroying our family by having an affair. I was not about to rip another family apart.

“But we aren’t happy, *cherie*. I only stay for my daughter.” Jean-Luc begged; his French accent still sexy over the phone but not sexy enough to sway me. “Besides, in France, it’s different. Affairs are normal.” ep

“I’m not French, Jean-Luc, and even if I was, I am not okay with this. And I guarantee your wife wouldn’t be either,” I said through clenched teeth. “I believe my brother is contacting her right now, in fact.”

Jean-Luc was friends with my brother, Jackson. We met in France during a family Christmas vacation. Jean-Luc had asked me to keep our relationship on the downlow due to his friendship with my brother, but once Jackson realized we were involved, he disclosed the real reason for Jean-Luc wanting to keep our activities secret—he was married and had a daughter.

Jean-Luc muttered some things in French, sounding distressed and out of breath as if he were running through his house. I made out the name of his wife.

“You’re the biggest piece of *merde* I have ever met,” I said to him as I hung up the phone.

“FUCK!” I screamed as I threw myself down on the bed and pounded my fists into the mattress.

I actually liked Jean-Luc. Love? Nah, we weren’t there yet, but he had charmed me, and I had seen potential there. I was even planning to fly back to France to visit him again, and we were talking about how we might make a relationship work long-distance.

An affair. That’s all it was.

I was his side piece.

Tears streamed down my cheeks, but not from pain. I was angrier than I had ever been before.

A knock on my door pulled me from the bed as I wiped my eyes. I knew I looked like a raccoon, my mascara streaking my cheeks. Another knock and the voice of my best friend on the other side, “Kat?”

“Come in,” I said.

Harper Olson had been my best friend for as long as I can remember. I think we met on the first day of kindergarten. She had her light red hair in pigtails and was wearing a pink dress. My mom could never get me to wear pink, a color I hated to this day.

Our friendship had survived over the years despite our lives being very different. She came from a poor, broken home with parents who essentially abandoned her as soon as it was legal to do so. We never talked about them. She’d worked hard to go to college on scholarships and climbed the ladder of academia thanks to her intelligence.

And then there was me.

My family owned many mansions, and I always had a beautiful home to live in, having every opportunity in the world to do whatever I wanted in life. I had privileges most could only dream of, and what did I do with it? I definitely wasn’t going to go to college; it wasn’t for me. I wanted to be

an artist instead—a tattoo artist, specifically—something that took my family forever to adjust to.

Harper joined me on the bed, smoothing down the black velvet with her hands.

“Oh sweetie...” she said, her own eyes filling with tears over my heartbreak. She reached out and hugged me, something I pretended to hate by making suffocation sounds but truthfully, I loved it.

Harper was my person, my best friend. The one person I could always count on to be there for me.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “For everything.”

Harper had also recently told me that she was involved with my triplet brothers. Not only that, but she was pregnant, and they were going to be together, all of them. Which one of them fathered the baby was currently unknown. The situation was an idea that sounded strange to me at first, but overall, I was a modern woman, and I could accept it.

Plus, I was going to be an aunt, which momentarily made me forget all about Jean-Luc and France altogether.

“It’s okay,” I said. “Really, it is.”

I pulled back from the hug and ran my fingers over the black, velvet blanket I had on my bed just as Harper had when she first sat down. My entire room was decorated the same way as when I was a teen. Not much had changed since high school even though I was now twenty-two years old.

Twenty-two and still living at home.

In the same room I had grown up in.

My artwork and photos of some of the tattoos I had done lined my walls, but other than that, the curtains were still the same dark purple, the decor was still a mix between goth teen and a *Nightmare Before Christmas*.

“What am I even doing?” I muttered to myself as I looked around the room.

“What do you mean?” Harper asked.

“I mean, what am I doing with my life?”

“I thought you just finished that internship to become a professional tattoo artist, right?” Harper asked.

“Six months ago, yeah, but what have I done since then?”

“You went to France...”

“For a few weeks, but what else, Harper? Seriously, I can’t think of anything of substance that I did in the last six months,” I said.

“Well, you don’t really have to do anything,” Harper replied, biting her lower lip and looking at me as if that were supposed to somehow make me feel better. “You have freedom to do whatever you want.”

“And yet I’ve done nothing. You’re working on a PhD, Jackson is a lawyer, Aiden has his security business. Nate... well, Nate handles the finances and is on the board of several nonprofits, though truthfully, I have no idea what any of that entails. And me? I’m still here, crying over a guy who always smelled like cheese.”

We both broke out in a fit of laughter then.

“I think he spent more on hair gel than I make in a year,” Harper said, only adding to the laughter.

“Oh God, his hair was so crunchy!” I cackled, remembering running my hands through it the first night we were together and how my fingers almost got stuck.

“He wasn’t that good looking, and I have a feeling his idea of art is pretentious as hell, too.”

“Oh, it was,” I agreed, rolling my eyes. “He said he never understood tattoos. Like what the fuck was I doing with this guy?”

“I have no idea,” Harper laughed.

“Before I met him, I had told myself I didn’t need a guy,” I said. “And I think I’m going back to that philosophy. I need to work on myself, figure out what I want to do in my life.”

“Don’t you want to open your own tattoo studio?” Harper asked.

“I do, but I need some more training first,” I admitted. “And the internship... well, let’s just say the owner and I didn’t see eye-to-eye, mostly because he couldn’t keep his eyes, or hands, off the women who came into his shop.”

I shuddered, remembering the way he’d hungrily eye up any and all women who entered his place of business, me included. Why were there so many sleazeballs in the industry? Women deserved to feel comfortable when getting inked.

“I’m sure you could find a shop around here. I mean, you’re Kat Bishop, just your name alone would bring people out to see you because of your family’s reputation.”

My jaw tightened.

Harper could tell something was wrong, she could always read my face.

“What is it?” she asked.

“It’s, well, I don’t want to rely on my last name to get me customers,” I said. “I’m a little tired of everything just being given to me because I’m a Bishop. I want to build something for myself for a change, you know? Something I can look at and say I earned that.”

“What do you have in mind?”

I stared past Harper at a picture I’d had above my bed ever since I was ten years old of the Hollywood sign. I had been to Los Angeles, and it was the one place where I felt like myself. I felt like home there, and no one stared at me the way they did in the middle of nowhere South Carolina.

I had always wanted to move out west, but never made a plan.

“I want to open my own studio in Hollywood one day,” I said matter-of-factly.

“You could totally do that,” Harper said.

She was right. I could do it right then and there if I wanted to. All I had to do was dig into my family's money, buy a place, and it would be mine.

But would it really be mine if I used my family's money?

"I have some money I saved up from working at the tattoo place. It's just been sitting in an account up until now because I didn't need to use it, everything I need has been covered."

"You made enough to buy a place in Los Angeles?" Harper asked, incredulous.

"No, not that much. But it should be enough to live off of for a few months until I find myself a steady job."

"I don't understand, Kat... you have a trust fund. What are you talking about, 'enough to live off of for a few months,'" Harper laughed as she spoke the words, as if it were ridiculous that I might have to follow a budget or work for my money.

Which is exactly why I needed to do it.

I knew I was privileged. I had everything handed to me. It was a nice life, but it left me feeling like I hadn't *earned* anything.

Not like Harper, who worked hard for everything she had. She had reason to be proud of her accomplishments, she had earned them herself.

"I need to do this on my own, Harper. All on my own. I need to build this up from scratch, go somewhere where no one knows my name."

"They will know your name in LA," Harper reminded me that a family like mine carried influence even across the country.

"Not if I don't use Bishop," I said.

Harper's smile wavered, and she seemed to be thinking about something for a long time before speaking up. "Kat, Los Angeles is super expensive, and while I have no doubt you could do this with your family's money, I worry about you trying to survive on your savings and whatever job you can find there. We are dealing with a cost-of-living crisis right

now; many people are struggling because everything is so expensive.”

“I know, I keep up with the news,” I said. I placed a hand on her arm and met my friend’s gaze. I smiled. “I’m not stupid, Harper. I can do this.”

* * *

“I CAN’T DO THIS,” I muttered to myself as I collapsed onto my bed. I put my headphones on to block out the street noise and closed my eyes.

“You can’t do what?” a voice called out from the bathroom of the studio apartment I was staying at in West Hollywood.

I groaned to myself; I should have checked to be sure if my roommate was there before I started on my pity party.

“I was just denied another job,” I called out to her.

The bathroom door opened and my roommate, Ruby, stepped out. She was a skinny girl with unnaturally blonde hair and a nose ring like mine. She was the type of girl I would have loved to hang out with back as a teen, but living with her? In a cramped, one-room apartment? Well... let’s just say, I missed having a wing of a home all to myself.

She sat down on the floor near my bed, mostly because there was nowhere else to sit. “Why don’t you come to El Taco tonight. I can sneak you some free guacamole.”

“I can’t, I need to stop eating so many tacos,” I said with a laugh, patting my belly, though it wasn’t just my waistline that had me saying no to tacos. I normally would have gone without a second thought, I didn’t believe in denying myself yummy food, but my bank account had other ideas. “I appreciate the offer though.”

Ruby got up and started getting dressed as I rolled over on the bed. Then it hit me. “Wait, didn’t you work this morning?”

“Not at El Taco. I picked up some mornings at Surfside Inn, they needed someone to set up and monitor the breakfast buffet, just for a couple of hours each morning.”

“And you still managed to go to your audition?”

“Yep!” Ruby said with a tired smile. “Though I’m pretty sure I flubbed it. I pronounced the medication wrong and there’s no way I could list off all those side effects that quickly.”

“But we practiced, you were so close to getting them all in under twenty seconds.”

“They needed it in under fifteen,” Ruby said as she tied her El Taco apron around her waist. “But that’s fine, I don’t really want to be the face of a medication that can cause bloody stools and leaky bowels anyway. I think that might tarnish my image.”

Ruby flipped her short blonde bob over her shoulder and fluttered her eyelashes playfully. She was a gorgeous girl with a figure that Hollywood would typically be all over. Problem was, there were a million other blonde, beautiful, skinny women with the same dreams as Ruby.

It almost felt like our odds were about even though, considering how often I heard the word “no” in my job search. Seriously, who knew it would be so hard to get a job as a tattoo artist? In Hollywood of all places?

Apparently, people weren’t getting as many tattoos right now. Or it was because I didn’t have enough experience and was essentially a nobody. It felt like most of the good studios hired by word-of-mouth. Maybe if I went by Katherine Bishop, they’d know me or somebody who did. As Kat Bijou, however, I didn’t turn heads.

I had wanted to be a nobody, but it was a lot more difficult than I’d expected.

“Alright, I’ll see you in the morning,” Ruby said with a wave.

“Morning?”

“Yeah, I’m picking up a shift at The Library, as well.”

The Library. What a name. I still laughed whenever I heard it. At first, I was naive enough to think my roomie was working at an actual library on the weekends, so I finally asked her what library was open until three in the morning.

That’s when I found out The Library was a gentleman’s club.

I waved to Ruby as she left and rolled over to stare at the ceiling. My stomach growled, so I walked over to the mini fridge and dug through the contents which included some leftovers from El Taco. I grabbed those and went back to my bed, sitting with my legs crisscrossed as I started to dive into my meal.

That’s when I noticed the green fuzz growing on the tortilla.

“Ugh,” I moaned, tossing it into the trashcan and going back to the mini fridge. Everything was old. I needed to run to the store and pick up some food since I’d need to cut back on eating out. I’d actually have to cook.

With my stomach still growling, I threw on my shoes and ran a comb through my hair. Catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror by the door, I frowned at my roots growing in. My hair was dyed black, darker than my natural color by just a smidge, but that wasn’t the issue. The issue was the dark purple sections that framed my face; you could clearly see the deep brown growing in at the top.

I grabbed my crossbody bag and threw it over my *Depeche Mode* t-shirt.

As I walked out of our studio, our neighbor Wayne waved at me. He was smoking in front of his apartment, wearing nothing but a towel. He had more body hair than he did hair on his head. I waved back to be polite, and he gave my body an appreciative, and creepy, once-over.

“Yeah, in your dreams buddy,” I muttered under my breath.

I walked down the stairs and nearly ran into Rae-Anne, an elderly lady who smoked so much weed you could get a contact high just by walking past her apartment. She was old enough to be my grandma, but she always had on something funky. Today was no different; she was wearing a neon green crop top that was three sizes too small for her ample chest and Daisy Duke shorts that disappeared into her ass cheeks. Her hair was currently a matching green to her crop top.

“Oh darling, I’ve been meaning to talk to you,” she said, standing in front of me on the stairs. “You look just like someone famous. I can’t place my finger on it... a young Doris Day?”

I looked nothing like a young Doris Day, but I smiled anyway. “Maybe! How are you Rae-Anne?”

“I’m good, just trying to buy some crystals, but they won’t sell any to me. I was hoping you might know where I could buy some?”

“Uh, crystals?” I was worried this might be a euphemism for drugs.

“Yes, healing crystals,” she said. She pulled something out of her pocket. It was a chunk of amethyst. “Like this.”

“Why won’t they sell them to you?” I asked.

“I don’t know, something about, ‘last time you were in here, you stole some amethyst from us’ or something like that, so they escorted me out.”

“Did you steal that from them?” I asked.

“Well, yes, but they had no proof,” Rae-Anne said with a sigh. “I need to find another neighborhood to shop in, I guess, since apparently they’re passing my photo around to all the local shops to watch out for me.”

“Er, wow, okay. I’m sorry to hear that. But I don’t know of anywhere to buy any crystals.”

“Well, would you like to buy one?” She held up the amethyst for me. Her eyes glazed over and the smell of weed coming off her made me cough as she stepped closer.

“Buy that one, you mean?”

“Yes, I also sell crystals,” she said.

“Oh, um, it’s very pretty, but I don’t really have any money right now,” I said.

“I get it, the cost of everything is going up. No one wants to buy my crystals anymore. Thanks anyway, Mary.”

“My name is—” I trailed off as she continued up the stairs.

My neighbors were certainly interesting.

I continued down the street. We had a corner store a couple blocks from us, which was nice since I didn’t have a car. It was one of those things I thought I could buy after a few paychecks at the job I thought I would so easily land.

As I walked past a nondescript bar, I spotted a *Now Hiring* sign on the window. I paused and checked out the exterior of the place. I had seen it before but had never been inside. There were always guys hanging outside smoking who would catcall me on the way to and from the store. Not exactly my kind of crowd. But it was a job, and it was right by my apartment, which made it pretty convenient.

Plus, I knew bartenders could make a killing in the right place with the right personality.

I checked the hours on the door to make sure they were open. Shockingly they were, considering the place was nearly empty when I stepped inside. It was a grungy dive bar with a small stage and a mechanical bull in the center of the room. A bunch of tables and mismatched chairs filled the space as country music blasted through the speakers. As I scoped the place out, I noticed two guys sitting at the bar. They looked at me as I entered. One gave me a typical once-over and a flirty smile, the other went back to his beer, uninterested.

There was a woman behind the bar dressed in typical old west attire, corset and all. She smiled as our eyes met. “Welcome, how can I help you?”

The woman was Hispanic with long, dark hair, but my eyes fell on her outfit and how her breasts were on display in the corset getup.

She cocked her head to one side as if she thought I might be lost.

“I saw the hiring sign in the window?” I said, forming it into a question and pointing toward the front.

“Oh yes, are you interested?” she asked me.

“I think so.”

She laughed. “Is that a southern twang I hear?”

“Yep, I’m from South Carolina,” I replied.

“You really should meet the owners then. Can you watch the front for a sec? Bart and Mel won’t bite, I promise.”

One of the guys waved at me. I waved back. The other continued to ignore me and stare at the TV behind the bar.

“You know what, I think I’m gonna go—” I said to the guys at the bar, thinking to myself that there’s no way a place like that made enough money to justify me having to dress in that horrible getup, when the hottest man I had ever laid eyes on stepped out from the back.

“Never mind.”

As if one sexy man wasn’t enough to entice me to stay, another walked out right behind him. *They must be brothers*, I thought to myself since they looked like carbon copies of one another.

“Hi, I’m Austin,” the first man said, holding his hand out for me. He had a crooked smile on his face and a dimple in his left cheek that nearly made me swoon. His hair was a shaggy, chocolate brown, and his skin looked naturally tanned as if he spent most of his life outdoors.

“And I’m Blake,” the other said, taking my hand that had just held Austin’s and shaking it before I could even say a word. He had a tight grip. His hair was darker than Austin’s

and longer, almost to his shoulders. He had a five o'clock shadow as if he couldn't be bothered to shave that day.

Both of them had a very thick southern accent and wore cowboy hats.

"Texas?" I asked.

"Your name is... Texas?" Austin asked, his smile wavering and replaced with a look of confusion.

Oh God, that jawline... it looked to be chiseled from stone.

"Oh no, I'm Kat, sorry. I meant, you're from Texas, right? I can tell by the accent," I said.

"Oh yes, good catch," Austin said with a smile. "And you're from...?"

"South Carolina."

"Ah, I love South Carolina. What a beautiful state. It ain't Texas but only one place is," Austin said.

What were these two Texas hotties doing working at a bar like this?

"So, Elena said you were looking for a job?"

AUSTIN

I almost came into work late that day, thinking it would be slow, so why bother? Thank fucking God I didn't.

I loved a woman with curves, and Kat had them in all the right places. She was fairly petite, especially compared to me, which only added to her appeal. A nice, curvy little goddess with a body made for sin.

Her dark hair perfectly complemented her fair complexion. The purple streaks, while unconventional and not typically my thing, only added to her sex appeal. A floral black and purple tattoo wrapped around one arm, all the way to her elbow. Two ravens on her collarbone were done in a way that made them seem to be disappearing into thin air. I thought it was nice work, even though I didn't know much about tattoos. They gave me some insight into her personality—she liked beautiful things, but also reveled in the darkness.

I could appreciate someone like that.

“So your name's Austin, and you're from Texas, huh?” Kat asked with a laugh.

“Yeah, pretty cliché, but what can I say? I didn't name myself.” I chuckled, hoping that my words didn't come out harsher than necessary.

“Oh God, I'm sorry,” Kat said, covering her mouth. “I shouldn't make fun of your name, and I wasn't. I love the name Austin. I love the city, too. I've been there a couple of times and—”

I held up a hand and Blake and I both laughed. “It’s fine,” I said. “I get it a lot.”

“Sometimes my mouth moves faster than my brain, I swear.”

She was absolutely adorable. Made me want to pick her up and carry her right upstairs to my bed.

“I’m happy to hire you right now,” I said, averting my gaze over to Blake. “But I have to ask my co-owner over here if he agrees.”

“I’m good,” Blake said as he shoved his hands in his pockets. He smiled at her, and I knew that smile. I wasn’t the only one having thoughts about this adorable little alt chick who entered our bar.

“Really? I mean, you didn’t even ask me if I know how to make drinks.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I said with a shrug. “We can teach you.”

“Besides,” Blake said, motioning out to the floor, “You’ll start on the floor, waiting tables, and Elena can show you how to do that. Not too difficult to learn.”

Elena was at the other end of the bar, chatting with the two guys sitting there. She waved and smiled at Kat.

Kat seemed to look at Elena’s attire, then ours, then back to Elena. “So, um, is this a themed bar? As in, everyone dresses like it’s the old west or can I wear whatever?”

“Is it a problem if it is a themed bar?” I asked.

Kat mulled it over, checking out Elena as she did so. She finally shook her head. “Nah, I think I can rock the look. It’s not my usual style, but I think I can make it work.”

The idea of her in a corset and the entire getup, her curvy body strung in tightly to that top, caused all the blood in my body to suddenly move south. I cursed the tight jeans and was grateful for the bar in front of me.

“Alright then, Elena can take you to the back and help you find one that fits,” I said, trying not to let my gaze move over

Kat's body, even as my imagination got the best of me. I made a point out of not treating women—especially my employees—like pieces of meat. It was a conscience decision of mine in an attempt to make up for my past.

“Sounds good,” Kat said with a smile as Elena led her to the back, leaving Blake and I to take care of the front. Not that it needed both of us, the place was dead.

Blake refilled the guy's drinks as I wiped down the bar and checked the time on my phone. A missed call and several text messages appeared on the screen. Unknown number, but I had a feeling I knew who they were from without having to open the messages.

I let out a low groan.

“What's up?” Blake asked as he looked over at me. When he saw me staring at my phone, his face fell. “Patrick again?”

“Yeah, he keeps getting new phone numbers to try and throw me off. Once I block one, he gets another. He's relentless.”

“You know it's only a matter of time before he tracks you down.”

“All the way to LA? He's not stepping foot in the state of California,” I said, slipping my phone back into my pocket. “Besides, I don't think his parole officer will let him leave the state.”

“Think he's still on parole?”

“He's always on parole for something,” I answered. “So the odds are good.”

“You know, maybe you should talk to him—”

“No,” I said flatly. End of discussion. I never wanted to speak to or see Patrick again.

Blake offered a sympathetic look and I went back to wiping the counters. He didn't know all of the details of the fallout between Patrick and I, nor did I care to speak to him about it. Patrick had been our dad's best friend, and after our dad died, he had promised to take care of us. Blake sometimes

still thought of him fondly; remembering the fishing trips and how he was the one that gave Blake his first beer when he was twelve.

All Blake knew was that he'd screwed me over somehow.

He didn't know the full extent of it, and how it nearly destroyed both of our lives and was a big reason we were in the mess we were in today, something Blake also didn't know much about. I had to protect my little brother from the bad shit in the world, even if he was closer to thirty than thirteen and was as big as a beast. I still felt the need to protect him.

I always would.

I went to block Patrick's latest number, but curiosity got the best of me. I read the text messages, each of them several minutes apart.

Hey, Austin. I really miss you guys.

You're like sons to me.

Please don't stay away, you're the only family I have.

Fuck you and your brother too, you selfish little prick, you only care about yourself.

You're just like your dad, you know that? Selfish assholes.

Yep. Sounded like Patrick. He could lay on the kindness and praise when it benefited him, but if he didn't get what he wanted, he turned downright hostile.

Blake and I didn't need that in our lives.

I looked over at my brother and wondered... he didn't know what I did about Patrick, about the lies and the deception, but he still had no contact with him, simply on my wishes alone. If that wasn't trust and loyalty, I didn't know what was.

“**T**he new girl is cute, ain’t she?” Austin shot me a look, knowing what I really meant to say. “And by cute, I mean hot as fuck obviously.”

Austin chuckled as he ran a hand over his face. “I knew you’d be into her the moment she walked through the door. All tatted up like that.”

“And her piercings. You know I’ve always been into a girl who could handle a bit of pain.” I smiled at my brother. He knew me well. He knew my tastes well too, considering he’d met every ex of mine. He had hated all of them, and he turned out to be right, but damn, many of them were fun while they lasted. “What can I say, I like a girl who is a bit crazy and wild.”

“I know you do,” Austin laughed. “She reminds me a bit of Melody.”

I scrunched up my face. “Nah, she’s ten times hotter than Melody. Seems sweeter, too.”

“Yeah, she does seem sweet.”

Austin typically liked good girls. The girly girls. Sweet, wholesome, apple pie southern girls you could bring home to Mama. So why did I notice him checking out the new girl every chance he could get?

“Admit it, you think she’s hot, too.”

Austin shrugged as he put a mug under the tap and poured out a beer. He took a big sip and offered me a satisfied grin,

but no answer to my question.

“Hey, you’ve always told me not to drink on the job.”

“Does it look like we’re working?” He motioned to the empty bar.

“Fair enough.” I grabbed a chilled mug and placed it under the tap.

The door to the bar opened and I turned to greet the newcomer with a smile. “Welcome to Desert Daniels Saloon —” My smile disappeared as I muttered under my breath. “Ah, shit.”

The man who entered the bar was all too familiar, but he wasn’t a regular. He had a bald head, and an otherwise nondescript face except for a bulging nose and a thick mustache. He reminded me of Walter White, and sometimes I slipped up and called him “Walt” which was an inside joke between Austin and me. He wore all black, including a trench coat, as if he were stuck in 1999. He carried a black briefcase.

I looked over at Austin. He managed the finances; I trusted him with that shit.

“Hey fellas,” the man said as he slipped onto a bar stool, placing the briefcase in front of him. He didn’t smile, and his voice held no warmth despite the greeting.

“Hey Hank. Can I get you a beer?” I had always learned to be amicable with people, at least until they gave you a reason not to.

“No, but you can give me my money.”

I looked at Austin again, who still hadn’t said a word. He was leaning against the bar, a serious expression on his face.

“Listen, man, we don’t want any trouble,” I said. “I’m sure if we owe you money, it’s just a misunderstanding—”

Austin interrupted me. “I paid you on time, as agreed.”

“Well, it’s time to up the payments. I don’t have thirty years to wait while you pay me off with nickels and dimes.”

“We pay you more than nickels and dimes, Hank,” Austin said, his voice low and steady, but still coming out as a growl.

“You know what I mean. I’m not getting any younger, and my daughter is talking about college next year. She’s Stanford bound and someone has to pay for it.”

“It’s not our job to pay for your daughter’s college,” Austin countered.

“No, but it is your job to pay me back as we agreed.”

“And we are paying you back, as we agreed,” Austin reiterated.

“Not quickly enough, I’m afraid. If you remember the conditions of our agreement—”

“If we fall behind on our payments for three months, yes, but we haven’t fallen behind.”

Hank’s serious face twisted into something more sinister, a smile. But not just any smile, a grin that said “Gotcha!”

“And I can change those conditions at any time.”

“No, you can’t, that’s not how contracts work.”

“It was a verbal contract, and let’s face it guys, are you really going to take me to court, knowing who you’re involved with and the conditions of which you were able to get the loan in the first place?”

I had no idea what he was talking about. I looked over at Austin whose jaw was clenched tightly, his fists balled up at his sides.

Just then the door opened, and five other men dressed in all black and wearing leather gloves strolled into the bar. They circled Hank and didn’t say a word. They didn’t have to; the threat was clear.

He just gave me a reason to not be amicable. I moved toward the other side of the bar, but Austin grabbed my arm. He looked me in the eyes and shook his head. I pulled my arm free, my fists ready and willing to connect with Hank’s face. How dare they walk into our business and threaten us?

But the look on Austin's face... I paused long enough that Hank stood up and walked toward the door, his entourage following behind.

"I expect my money to be double next month or there will be trouble," Hank called out as he exited the bar.

"Why did you stop me?" I growled.

"Because that was a fight even you couldn't win."

"Wanna bet? I've taken on six guys at once in a bar fight."

"Those guys were packing, Blake."

"And you think they would have started a shootout here, with witnesses?" I looked over at one of the guys who was asleep at the bar, face down against it. The other guy was coming out of the bathroom, stumbling over his feet as he made his way to the exit.

"There wouldn't have been any witnesses when they were done," Austin said, his voice low.

"Who the fuck are you doing business with, Austin?"

Before he could answer me, I heard laughter coming from the back. Elena and Kat stepped into the main room, all smiles and laughs, clueless to the drama that had just occurred. Elena saw the looks on our faces and stopped laughing. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, everything is fine," Austin muttered as he went to the back.

Elena and the new girl both looked at me for reassurance. "Yeah, just family drama, but everything is fine." I hated lying, but I had no fucking clue what was going on either, so what else could I say. I cleared my throat and changed the subject. "By the way, I really like your ink."

Kat's smile returned as she lifted up her arm to show off the purple and black floral sleeve. "Thanks, I'm pretty proud of this one. I designed it myself."

"Really? Impressive," I said. "I have a few, but nothing as cool as that."

“Can I see them?”

“Some of them,” I chuckled. “Some are in places I’d get arrested for exposing in public.”

“I don’t know if I’d consider this public, exactly,” Elena teased.

I stuck my tongue out at her, and she returned the gesture as she picked up our two empty beer mugs and went to work washing them, leaving me and the new girl alone to share tattoo stories.

I showed her the one on my forearm. It was a lily, gray and black, with the words *Wish You Were Here* written around it.

“For my mom, her name was Lily,” I said.

“What happened to her, if you don’t mind me asking?” Kat replied, her face suddenly serious.

“She died when I was a kid,” I said. “Car accident.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Not wanting to sour the mood with my trauma, I quickly changed the subject. “The ravens... did you design that one too?”

“I did. Ravens are my favorite,” she said, looking down at her collarbone as best she could.

“You’re quite the artist it seems.”

“Yeah, it’s something I’m passionate about, to my parents’ chagrin,” she laughed. She adjusted the uniform she was holding in her hand. It was a deep, rich burgundy with black lace details. I had to admit, it would look amazing against her skin tone.

“You know you really don’t have to wear that if you don’t want to. Jeans and a flannel with a cowboy hat would also be fine.”

Kat looked down at it and smiled. “Oh no, I’ll be fine. I actually thought I looked kinda hot in it.” She blushed after she said the words.

“I bet you do.” I leaned in closer without even realizing it.

Her face tilted up to look at me, and her eyes, dark gray and stormy, stared deep into mine. *I could get lost in the darkness of her eyes*, I thought to myself.

And in the sensation of her skin against mine.

“Good, I can’t wait to see you in it on Friday.”

She smiled up at me, a cheeky, flirty grin.

“Me too.”

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