

FOUNDATIONS

A happy-ever-after romance



THE WALSHES
book group



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FOUNDATIONS

KATE CANTERBARY

VESPER PRESS

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ABOUT FOUNDATIONS

Fall in love. Get married. Have a baby. Live happily ever after.

That was how it was supposed to go, right? Love and here comes the bride and babies and forever.

But sometimes, forever has a strange way of sorting itself out.

Like a post-baby dry spell with no end in sight—unless a naughty schoolteacher pulls on her fancy panties and takes matters into her own hands.

Foundations is the *Underneath It All* (Matt and Lauren) novella featuring *Six Years Later*, the happy-ever-after novella originally published in *The Walsh Brothers* plus the *Jenga, Cocktails, and Cookies* novella originally available only to Kate Canterbury's newsletter subscribers, and two additional bonus scenes.

For pumpkin spice and pervy girls

BEFORE YOU DIVE IN...

If you need some tunes to set the vibe, check out Kate's [book playlists on Spotify](#).

Join [Kate Canterbury's Office Memos mailing list](#) for occasional news and updates, as well as new release alerts, exclusive extended epilogues and bonus scenes, and cake. There's always cake.

If newsletters aren't your jam, [follow Kate on BookBub](#) for preorder and new release alerts.

PART I

PREFACE

Six years after Matthew and Lauren met in *Underneath It All*
Three years after the end of *Necessary Restorations*
Ten months after the end of *Thresholds*
Between the last chapter and epilogue of *Missing In Action*
Between the last chapter and epilogue of *The Magnolia Chronicles*
Between the last chapter and epilogue of *Before Girl*
Three months after the last epilogue of *Coastal Elite*
One year before the start of *Boss in the Bedsheets*

LAUREN

THE TEXT MESSAGE ARRIVED EARLY, barely past seven in the morning.

Andy: I'm coming over with my camera and I have the costumes.

Andy: Props too.

Andy: Do you think 17 pumpkins is too many?

Andy: Never mind. I don't care if it's too many. I'm bringing all of them.

Andy: Also, I have vodka.

Andy: And that cinnamon-sugar rim mix.

Andy: Because the only time I lick a rim is when it's covered in sugar and spice.

I BARKED out a laugh at her messages as well as the wild shifts in our lives. Not long ago, Andy and I cherished our lazy Saturday mornings. We wouldn't have texted each other at this hour unless it was to announce the previous night's choices were coming back to haunt us.

But here we were, a world away but still right around the corner from the women we used to be. And these new-but-totally-the-same versions of us were dressing my three-month-old baby in a load of seasonal outfits this morning and photographing every inch of it. The baby and the themed photo shoot were new. The apple pie mules we planned to mix up when the baby

tired of our antics and went down for a nap were the same.

"What are you laughing about?" Matthew rolled over, pressed his face to my belly.

I drove my fingers through his hair. A touch of silver shined in the morning sun. Also new. "Andy's coming over. We're taking the autumn photos I told you about." He murmured something indecipherable into my skin and wrapped his arms around my waist with a throaty growl. God, those growls. "Didn't catch that, babe."

He lifted his head, saying, "It's too early for photos."

I looked to the bank of windows bathing our bedroom in warm light. We'd moved into this suburban Boston home a little less than four months ago but there were days when I expected to wake up in our old loft and see the waters of Boston Harbor right outside.

"Don't worry," I said, kneading the back of his neck. "We won't dress you up or pose you in a pile of leaves."

"Thank god," he murmured. He leaned into my touch, squeezed me tight. "Feels good." He pushed my t-shirt up with his chin and pressed a kiss above my belly button. Silvery-purple stripes reminded me a baby grew strong and healthy under that skin. Those were also new.

"What time did Madeleine get to sleep?" I asked.

Matthew took the late shift last night. We traded off. It was better when everyone operated with an insufficient amount of rest. We couldn't have one of us cheery and chipper while the other went full zombie. Also, we could swing this setup. Matthew was in the office on a reduced timetable and I wasn't due back at school for another week. This routine worked while we inched Maddie toward a consistent schedule and us back to our previous lives. If such a thing was possible.

I had my doubts.

"Around two," he replied, his scruffy cheek raking over my skin. "She fought it. Hard. Kept dozing off then waking herself up. Stubborn little girl." He laughed, kissed my belly again. "Wonder where she gets that."

"It's a mystery," I mused.

"If that's what you want to call it."

I ran my nails over his scalp. He growled against my skin, a low, rumbly sound I hadn't heard enough of recently. Even with my parents helping out since Maddie's arrival and bunking in our guest room, we didn't get nearly enough alone time. What little time we had was dedicated to catching up on

sleep. Our bundle of joy brought us a great many gifts and blessings but she hated keeping to her bedtime.

She had to be coaxed to sleep, trapped in it. She never went willingly and if she sensed that we meant for her to sleep, she revolted. Demanded a change, a feeding, a burp, a cuddle. Anything but a restful, uninterrupted night.

Matthew pushed up on an elbow, craning his neck to see into the bassinet at the foot of the bed. Finding it empty, he returned to his spot on my belly, asking, "Did she run out for coffee? I hope she remembers how I take it."

"My mom took her for a walk," I said, running my fingertips over his shoulders, down his spine. "She usually takes the long way around on the weekends."

It was my indirect way of saying *please fuck me straight through the mattress before I die of sexual starvation*.

After six years with this man, I knew how to ask for the things I wanted. To be fair, I'd known how to ask since the very first night but that was a different story. I knew and I'd never held back before. But our lives were different now.

Everything, it was upside down. All new.

New house, new baby, new roles. We weren't the same Matthew and Lauren anymore. We were husband and wife, mom and dad. The roles we'd known for the past six years were transforming and nothing we did during my pregnancy actually prepared us for this.

For the time and patience necessary to recover from childbirth.

For the losing battle of breastfeeding.

For sleep schedules and growth spurts and the endless piles of laundry. *So much laundry*.

For the seismic shift in the ways we met each other's needs.

This was a new era for our relationship and I wasn't the only one stumbling through it.

I didn't know how to ask for the things I needed right now and Matthew didn't know how to touch me anymore. He treated me like the most fragile glass in the world, a Fabergé egg of a wife. He hesitated when I reached for him. He stayed on his side of the bed unless I dragged him over to mine. He restricted his kisses to my tummy and kept his growls from turning into filthy demands.

Despite the sting of this shift, we loved each other more than I thought possible. It was more intense than ever but it was an intensity founded in distance. We gazed at each other from across the room in awe, as if to say, *Look what we made. Look what we have. Look what we are. Look at where we are now.*

We had a good thing going here. We had a healthy, mostly happy baby and a roof over our heads and enough family to keep us fed and supported through the toughest of times. And yet it would be great if we could teach each other what we needed and how to give it. How to find ourselves again.

"Have I told Judy how much I appreciate her taking the dawn shift? Because I do," he replied. "I'm going to miss that when your parents leave at the end of the month."

Not capitalizing on the empty house, are you?

Sigh.

"I believe you've mentioned it," I said. "I'm sure Ellie will be great in the mornings too. She's not my mom but I'm really excited she's going to spend the band's hiatus year with us."

"And Tiel," he added, still speaking to my belly.

If only he'd scoot a little lower.

"And Tiel," I agreed. "She's going to love having her best friend in town again." I brought my hands to his shoulders, pressing deep into his muscles. Massaging but also directing him toward an area of common interest. "My dad went with my mom and Maddie. On the walk. We have the place to ourselves."

"That's why it's so quiet." Matthew pushed up on one arm, staring at me with drowsy eyes. "Do you want to shower first? Or should I get in there?"

I slapped my hands against the sheets. The man I married *never* would've asked that. He would've tossed me over his shoulder and marched into the bathroom because we were showering together. My husband, the caveman and water conservationist. "No. I need—I mean, no," I replied. There was no hiding the irritation in my voice. "No. That's not what I'm saying. Why aren't you—what do I have to do?"

Matthew blinked at me, stifled a yawn. "What's wrong, sweetness?"

You're suddenly immune to my charms and I'm going crazy without you.

I didn't say that. I wanted to but—but what if it was different for him too? What if he still loved me but after seeing six different people stick their hands in my vagina, he wasn't especially excited about visiting there himself?

Maybe his attraction was waning after watching lactation consultants tugging at my nipples like competing dairymaids. If any part of that was true, I wasn't ready to hear it.

I gathered my hair in my hands, twisted it into a messy bun. "I don't know. Nothing."

He shifted closer. "No," he said, drawing the word out. "Tell me." I reached for my hair again but he caught my hand in his, lacing our fingers together. "Tell me."

I started to ask for all the things I needed, the things I wanted to feel with him again. But I stopped myself. This conversation wasn't a quick one and we had to talk before we got back in the saddle. We didn't have time to do both. This morning was not our own but the evening offered a range of possibilities.

"I want to go out tonight, just the two of us," I said. "And I don't mean out for coffee or salads like usual. I'm talking about an actual restaurant where we sit down and *then* place our order."

Our current rendition of date night involved a midday trip to Starbucks or Sweetgreen while Maddie napped. It was a tiny tragedy but it had been all we could manage at first. I didn't like leaving the baby for long and until now, I hadn't felt capable of putting myself together for the evenings-out scene. I was good with athleisure wear and forgiving summer dresses but anything beyond those pushed my limits. And my energy.

But that ended here. I was putting on real, non-maternity clothes. A nice pair of panties and a bra too, and not one of those breakaway nursing getups. I was washing and blow-drying my hair. A full face of makeup. I wasn't stopping at tinted moisturizer and lip balm. No, I was going all the way to contoured cheeks and shaped eyebrows.

And I was seducing my husband tonight if it was the last thing I did.

I tipped my chin up, fortifying myself in this course of action. "I'm sure my parents wouldn't mind watching the baby."

"Okay," he replied. "And then you'll tell me what's bothering you?"

I reached for him, urging him closer—*come closer closer get on me closer*—until he kneeled between my legs and braced himself over me. I knew he wasn't going to give me his weight, not even if I asked. He had it in his head that I was going to shatter and nothing I did changed his mind.

"I miss you," I confessed, gazing up at him. His brows knit together. A frown tugged his lips down. He didn't understand. "I miss you and I want to

spend some time with you. That's all."

"I miss you too." He leaned down, dropped a kiss on my forehead. Everything inside me clenched at the pure sweetness of that one kiss but there was no pleasure in clenching around nothing. "You talk to your parents. I'll make reservations." He traced a line from my brows down my nose. "Do you want to see a movie or do anything in addition to dinner?"

I shook my head. If it meant getting time together, we could sit in the car in an empty parking lot. We didn't need any distractions. "If we're watching a movie, I'd rather do it in bed with you."

Where I can get my hand down your pants without breaking any public decency laws.

"Okay. I have to meet Patrick to walk through some properties but I'll make the plans." He sealed the promise with another forehead kiss. "I wish you'd tell me what's wrong."

"Isn't missing you enough?" I asked.

"Yeah but," he replied, his voice trailing off. "I'm right here. Like always."

I nodded but couldn't gather the right words to explain my struggle to find my way in this new version of us. Maybe I was the only one struggling. Maybe I was the only one missing the people we used to be together.

"Are you worried about going back to school?" he asked. "It's all right if you need more time. Don't rush it. Like I've said a hundred times, you don't have to go back until you're ready. I don't want you pushing yourself."

Of all the complicated questions, he had to ask that one. I was scheduled to return to school in one week, starting off with mornings and then transitioning to full days. This was the first time in more than a decade where I'd missed the first day, the first month, and most of the first quarter of school.

And I couldn't find an ounce of regret.

I'd planned for my maternity leave. Of course I had. If there was one thing I did to an obnoxious degree, it was planning. But even though I'd positioned my co-deans Drew and Tara to run the school flawlessly, I'd struggled to imagine myself not being there. In the months leading up to Maddie's birth, I wasn't certain I'd actually stay away. Through it all, I assumed I'd return early. Three months seemed like an eternity and I knew my parents were coming to help and Matthew was taking time off and my sisters-in-law were always there for me and—and I'd just go back to work

when school started in September. There was no need to wait until mid-October.

Then Maddie arrived and nothing seemed more important than her. I loved this little girl like I couldn't believe. I wanted to snuggle her all day, every day. I hated the idea of leaving her and there were moments when I couldn't imagine doing it. But there were also moments when I couldn't imagine staying at home another minute. I wanted to witness every second in my daughter's new life but I also wanted my work.

More than anything, I didn't want to feel guilty. I wanted to feel good about my choices without focusing on the sacrifices inherent in them.

"Lauren," Matthew murmured, nudging my inner thigh with his knee. There was a time when that nudge would've served as the first and final warning before he seated himself inside me. I knew without a doubt this nudge wasn't that kind of warning because he didn't do that anymore. "What's going on in there, sweetness?"

Smiling, I shook my head. God, this man was too good. Too patient. Even after all these years and all this post-partum sexual deprivation, I wondered what I did to deserve him. "No, I'm not worried about going back to school." Thinking better of it, I added, "Not much."

He studied me, his eyes narrowed. "Have I told you how much I love it when you keep things from me until the exact moment you're ready to share them and I've lost the last shreds of my sanity worrying over you?" He nudged my thigh again. *Oh my god, fuck me already.* "Because I do, I fucking love it."

I ran my hands up and over his flanks to his shoulders. How did every part of him get harder while I softened? "That works well," I replied, "because I happen to enjoy it when you're crazy. Do you remember when you were crazy enough to show up at my apartment with my underwear in hand?"

"Do I remember," he murmured, rolling his eyes at the ceiling. "That move was epic. You should've seen me, wandering through Beacon Hill while looking for your apartment, your damn underwear burning a hole in my pocket. I felt like a bona fide pervert, as if someone was going to stop me at any moment and ask if I had women's lingerie on me. But I was completely convinced it was the right thing to do."

"Sounds confusing," I said, laughing.

"You don't know the half of it." He looked away, his unfocused gaze falling on the door to the adjoining bathroom. It stood ajar, yesterday's towels

and a questionably clean—and totally boring—bra suspended from the interior hooks. "That morning when I woke up—and you weren't there—I didn't know what to do with myself. I walked around the loft thinking I'd met the most amazing woman in the whole damn world, the one who was going to turn my life upside down, and she'd slipped through my fingers." He blinked, turning back to me. "Don't leave me again. Okay? Whatever it is that's bothering you, give it to me. Let me fix it for you. Because I need you, sweetness. I need you, Maddie needs you, my entire family needs you. You're our glue. We'll fall apart without our glue."

I nodded, forced a smile through a surge of unbidden tears. Goddamn these hormones. They didn't quit, not even when the baby was good and born. "I'm not going anywhere," I said. "Don't worry about anything."

Matthew reached down, brushed the tears from my cheeks. "It's what I do, Lauren. Let me do it."

"There are a lot of things you do," I replied. "Worrying is only one of them." I ran my knuckles down the center line of his chest. Couldn't get more obvious about my bleating need for dick if I hung a sign over my head. "Since I have you here, I could use a refresher on some of your other skills, Mr. Walsh."

He pointed up, toward the ceiling. "I ripped this house apart and rebuilt it for you. Gave you plenty of bookshelves too. Between that and the industrial-grade worrying, you've got the best of me."

He was *working* at ignoring my advances. He was *trying*. That was so depressing. "There's more to you than stress and houses."

I was *this* close to whipping off my t-shirt and asking him to take me hard and fast and remind me what it felt like when we lost ourselves in each other. *This* close.

But the front door banged open downstairs and with it came a chorus of my parents, Andy, and our baby daughter, screaming her little blonde head off.

Matthew sighed, pressed his face between my breasts with a growl, and murmured, "I'll take this one. You hit the shower."

"Tonight we're—"

"I heard you, Lauren," he snapped as he climbed off me. "I know. I'll handle it."

MATTHEW

I TAPPED the stone foundation with a flathead screwdriver, looking for signs of deterioration before moving to another section. "I'm not the only one who can assess a foundation. You are also capable of doing this work," I called over my shoulder to Patrick. "Nothing especially technical here."

"But I enjoy your sunny disposition," he replied, his attention focused on the gas and water lines running through the basement's rafters. "And you're managing this project now."

I groaned, scowling at him. "Dammit, why?"

Patrick circled his mechanical pencil at the empty space. "This is a great property. It's a gift. I'm certain you can see that, even in your current state of extreme sleep deprivation."

"It's getting better."

It sounded like a whine. It was a whine. I was whining about being tired and I was tired because my kid didn't sleep at night. I was whining over my precious little girl and her difficulty in making sense of the outside world and that made me an asshole.

An asshole who didn't notice his wife struggling until she was crying into her pillows.

An asshole who watched her cry but couldn't think of anything beyond stripping her down and owning her luscious body.

The kind of asshole who seriously considered fucking his wife until she talked about her problems. And then fucking her some more to solve them.

An asshole who then yelled at his wife over making date night plans because he throbbed for her like a bad habit.

Such a goddamn asshole.

"It's better," I added. "It's improved in the past few weeks. I think we're on the upswing."

I sounded more confident than I felt. A sliver of me believed I'd be walking the halls with Madeleine on my shoulder until she was nine. Maybe longer. That sliver wanted to rage against the injustice of newborn sleep schedules.

The rest of me wanted nothing more than my wife all to myself. I couldn't look at her without a wall of emotion coming down on top of me. Love wasn't even the word for it anymore. God, no. I was a hundred miles past love. What I had for this woman lived in my bones and blood. I'd sooner bleed myself dry than fall out of love with her. I wanted to get lost in her, surrender to her, consume her from the inside out.

But I was losing my mind without her. That was how it felt—like we were separated. Between her parents, visitors, and Madeleine, someone was always between us, always stealing my wife away from me.

Yeah, I lumped the baby in with that lot. She was the sweetest thing in the entire world and my heart still caught in my throat when she reached for me but I envied the attention she demanded from Lauren. I adored our little girl. I treasured the place she'd claimed in our life. I had no regrets. I also wanted my wife back.

"Is that, uh, is that normal?" he asked. "Shannon's kids never had trouble sleeping."

"Of course not," I replied. "They're Shannon's kids."

"Fair point," he said. "Have you asked Nick's opinion?"

I rolled my eyes with a scoff. Nick Acevedo heard from me morning, noon, and night. I hadn't managed to go a single day since Madeleine's arrival without consulting the good doctor. "He's billing me now."

"As he should," Patrick replied. "It looks good down here. Let's go upstairs and work out a budget."

I followed him up the stairs, muttering, "Still not convinced I want to deal with this place."

"You do. It's an easy project that won't take much handholding and you'll get it done in four, maybe six weeks. You can manage this half asleep," Patrick said as he stepped into the kitchen. He pointed at the cabinets and appliances. "Everything must go."

"Everything," I agreed. "I told you, things are looking up. She got five full hours last night. It's the longest she's slept so far. That's something."

Patrick shook his head, his eyes wide and unblinking. "I can't imagine how that's anything but I'll take your word for it." He tucked his pencil behind his ear, leaned against the countertop. "How do you—you know—how do you *handle* that? Marriage-wise."

"Oh, you're asking if I'm having sex?" I asked, a sharp, manic laugh in my words. "No. No, not at all."

My older brother blinked at me. Blinked again. "What?"

I leaned against the opposite countertop. "Not since before Maddie was born."

"Not even"—he motioned toward me in what I assumed to be a gesture suggestive of all the interactions on the periphery of sex—"some"—another vague hand movement—"or a little?"

"No," I said with a brisk shake of my head. "I don't know what that was supposed to imply but no, I'm not having any of it."

He folded his arms over his chest. He had the balls to look mortified. Now, *this* guy was the asshole. "Is that normal? How long is it supposed to be?"

I scratched my chin as I considered this. "The doctor told Lauren to wait six weeks before, you know, anything. That just didn't seem like the right amount of time to me."

I'd experienced powerlessness before. Growing up under my father's roof guaranteed it. Yet that was nothing compared to standing by while my wife suffered and screamed through hours of slow, hard labor and one futile round of pushing after another where she literally broke herself while I watched. I'd been powerless—*useless*. I couldn't forget the silent tears rolling down her cheeks or the sweat-dampened hair clinging to her forehead or the doctors and nurses speaking in hushed, urgent tones before announcing it was time to go, time for the operating room, time to get the baby out.

No, six weeks wasn't enough to heal. It didn't matter how much I wanted Lauren, how much I sensed myself caving without her. She needed more time and I needed to deal with that. And I would, regardless of whether it was incrementally killing me.

Patrick held up a hand. "I do not need the gory details. I get more than enough of them from Shannon."

"It's good you two are close like that."

"Shut up," he murmured. "Isn't this kid—what?—three months old now? That's a lot longer than six weeks, Matthew. I'm no expert but when I saw

Lauren last weekend, she seemed—"

"Watch yourself," I warned.

I didn't expect Patrick to step out of line but I couldn't help myself anymore. I wanted to protect my wife and daughter from everything. Every fucking thing. The Commodore and I didn't agree on much but I understood him now. I understood it all, loud and clear. His priorities were my priorities. I wanted to build a stone fortress and lock my girls inside it, and I was capable of wanting that without diminishing any of their strength. I couldn't fathom a woman stronger than Lauren but that didn't mean she had to rely on herself all the time. I could be strong for her.

Hell, it was the only thing I *could* handle for her. Pregnancy, childbirth, nursing—I watched it all from the sidelines. And now, when we couldn't find more than five waking minutes together, something was troubling her and I couldn't solve that either. Here I was, useless all over again.

"Sturdy," he said eventually. "She seems sturdy. She didn't look like she was falling apart. She looked like she could handle some—"

"I said *watch yourself*," I interrupted. I scrubbed my hands over my face. Goddamn, I was the one falling apart here. "She's just now feeling better after the"—I cupped my hands in front of my chest because this conversation would only improve with more crude gesturing—"the breastfeeding thing. The infection."

"Andy told me about that. How does that happen?"

I shook my head. "I don't know, dude. Milk ducts and clogs and—I don't know. But it was terrible and I legitimately thought she was dying."

"What did Nick say about that?"

I paced the length of the kitchen, opening cabinets and glancing under the sink. "He said she wasn't dying. Told me to buy some cabbage."

"Okay," Patrick said slowly. "But that's improved? It's not—they're not—still infected, right?"

"Right," I said. "She had to stop breastfeeding for a few weeks. It was painful and she wasn't producing enough"—another crude gesture because why stop now?—"and Maddie went through a growth spurt at the same time so we had to supplement. The baby wasn't thrilled about those changes."

"Yeah, I'm sure she had a lot to say," Patrick remarked. "I'm no expert but it sounds like you're afraid of having sex with your wife."

"I am not afraid of having sex with my wife," I snapped.

"I'd be afraid," he said with a shrug. "If Andy went through all that giving

birth and then the breastfeeding thing and a baby who wouldn't sleep on top of it all, yeah, I'd think twice before returning to the scene of the crime." Another shrug. "Then I'd probably get over it."

"Oh, yeah?" I asked. "You'd get over it? You'd just tuck that shit away and throw her on the bed?"

He ran his hand over the back of his neck. "I'd get a vasectomy first. Then, after an appropriate amount of recovery time, I'd throw her on the bed."

I didn't say it but the thought had crossed my mind. Often. At least once a day since bringing Maddie home from the hospital. I didn't mention it to Lauren because we barely had time to discuss anything outside of the baby's sleeping, eating, and diapering requirements. I wish someone had told me my life would one day revolve around the frequency and form of my child's poop. I wish I'd known. I wouldn't have done anything differently but I would've been prepared for this new, poop-filled chapter in my life.

Aside from those issues, I didn't want to open the conversation about having another baby. My mother-in-law kept talking about the next one as if that kid was already on the way. Every time she brought it up, I was certain Lauren was going to shoot fire from her eyes.

We'd had all these ideas about moving to a big house outside the city and filling it with kids and dogs. Those ideas sounded crazy now. Straight up crazy. We rarely slept at the same time because we'd carved the night into shifts. We didn't have time to talk—*really* talk—without her parents or my family in earshot. And I was terrified I'd break her, hurt her, push for something she couldn't bear. After everything she'd been through, it seemed inevitable.

I needed her time, her attention, her warm body beside me. I needed *her*. If filling our house with kids meant forfeiting any of that, I didn't know how I'd ever make anything but a selfish choice. Perhaps our love was limitless but our time was not. And I wasn't sure I could watch Lauren tear herself apart all over again.

"I can't believe you've survived this long," Patrick said. "On all counts. No sleep, no sex. I don't understand how you're functioning."

I barked out a laugh. "I'm not. Isn't that why you're lobbing me this softball project?"

"I'm giving you this property because we don't know what else to do about it and you need something that won't demand a ton of time," he replied. "Not sure if you remember but you knocked out so many projects before the

baby arrived, you cleared your schedule straight through to November. That's why we've only sent structural reviews your way since you came back to the office a couple of weeks ago."

I glanced from side to side. "I don't need to be here right now?"

"I'm not saying that at all. I want this property off the books," he replied. "But if you want to take it slow and nap in your office this month, you have the flexibility to do that."

I stared down at the grimy linoleum tiles. Once upon a time, they'd been white. Age and time and wear had turned them gray, black at the seams. "Good to know."

"You also need to get that kid to sleep right fucking now."

"Don't I know it," I replied with a laugh.

"Why is it so difficult? You just"—he swept his arm to the side—"put the kid in the crib. Right? Then she falls asleep. It's not that complicated, Matthew."

I gave him a tolerant grin. One of these days, I'd stand in another drafty Dutch colonial and tell him to put his tiny baby in the crib. Simple as could be. With any luck, that baby would make a habit of spitting up on him and *only* him. "Believe me, man. It's easier said than done. Your time will come and then you'll know how it is."

He shot me a scowl. "We'll see about that."

"Come on," I cried. "Andy's at my house right now, dressing Maddie in costumes and arranging her with cute pumpkin props. You're gonna be right there with me, tired and miserable and then feeling like an ass for being miserable because your kid is the most amazing thing in the world. And you're going to be afraid of breaking your wife after she broke herself to give you a baby. You're going to be there any day now."

Patrick stepped into the adjoining dining room. "That's a conversation I'll have with my wife, but thank you for your input."

"Yeah, you say that but all I hear is 'You're right, Matthew. You're always right,'" I called after him. "Try it. Say, 'You're right.' See how that feels." I crossed the kitchen into the dining room, and found Patrick staring at the light fixture. "You know I'm right."

"You're not right," he mumbled. "Go home. Get reacquainted with your wife. But do everyone a favor and pull out this time."

I waved him off. "As enticing as that sounds, I'm not letting you set the budget without me. Not if I'm managing this property."

Patrick rocked back on his heels with a sigh. "I can do this without you."

"I know you can. I told you that ten minutes ago. But since you dragged me out here on a Saturday morning and then announced I was running this show, I'd like to participate in the budgeting process," I replied. "And I need your advice on something."

He headed into the living room, shaking his head as he went. "It's not difficult. When the time comes, you just...pull out. Seriously, Matthew. You'll get the hang of it. I do it all the time."

"Really? That's it?" I asked, the sarcasm thick in my words. "That's not the advice I need, asshole. Lauren's parents are looking after Madeleine tonight. We're going out. Alone."

He turned, hitting me with a skeptical glance. "You're asking for sex advice?"

"Oh my god," I hissed. "No, Patrick. I need you to recommend a restaurant. For fuck's sake."

He flattened his hand on the wall, leaning there for a second as he stared at the battered hardwood floors. "Oh. All right. That makes better sense. What do you have in mind?"

I shoved my hands into my pockets. "Not sure. Nice atmosphere, good food, quiet enough that we don't have to yell to hear each other. Fancy but comfortable."

"Got it." He tipped his head to the side, nodded. "Are you ready? You're going to want to write this down."

I pulled a pen from my pocket. Clicked it open, then closed. "Go ahead, Optimus."

"Stop it with the pen, Jugger."

Clicked it six more times in rapid succession. "I don't have all day."

"If you're going to be obnoxious, you can ask Riley for advice," he said.

Another six times. "Riley takes his fiancée out for sandwiches. I need to do a little better than that. Nothing served in a plastic basket, you know?"

"Then ask Sam," Patrick replied.

"The list of things Sam doesn't eat is longer than what he does and I'm not taking Lauren out for a fuckin' smoothie bowl." Another click. "I guess I could just call your wife. We all know she's the one with real taste."

Patrick reached for his pencil and scribbled in his notebook. "Go ahead," he murmured. "I'm just cutting your budget in half."

"Hey." Another click. "I'm waiting on you, man. You've got all the info

and I'm ready to hear it."

"Abstinence has turned you into a dickhead," he muttered.
Family. It didn't get much better than this.

LAUREN

"AM I SUPPOSED to drink the rest of this by myself?" Andy asked, a slim finger pointed toward the pitcher of spiced mules between us.

I glanced at my mostly full copper mug and responded with a shrug. "I've been off the sauce for almost a year. I need some time to build up my tolerance."

"That's fine and everything," Andy replied, "but I can't be the only drunk one here. It's awkward. It's strange. It gives people the wrong idea about me."

"I don't know, Andy. I think holding my newborn baby in one arm while pounding hard liquor with the other gives people a pretty bad idea too."

She held up her hands as if to flick away the thought of anyone judging a new mother.

"Do you think Madeleine will let us dress her up in the turkey costume? What about posing in the roasting pan? I brought carrots and celery and sage to make it look authentic. She'd look so freaking cute with a bunch of sage in her chubby little fist." Andy tilted her head to get a better look at the baby sleeping on my shoulder. "We could line the pan with a little blanket. It would be just like putting her in the bassinet."

I glanced at the assortment of props splayed over my kitchen island. I hadn't noticed the roasting pan until now. "Let's skip that one," I said with a quiet laugh. "I need her to sleep now so she'll be on the right schedule tonight."

Andy topped off her mug. "What's happening tonight?"

Without conscious thought, I let out a lengthy sigh. "Matthew and I are trying to get out of the house for a bit. Dinner and...whatever."

She glanced at me over the rim of her mug. "That's what we call it now?"

'Whatever?'" When I didn't reply, she continued, "Is this where I'm supposed to inquire about sex after childbirth? It's still good, right? Tell me it's not a mine shaft. I can't handle that."

"You can inquire," I said. "I don't have any insight on the matter since I haven't had sex after childbirth."

Andy gasped, pressed her hand to her breastbone. "No. *No*, not you."

"Me," I replied with a grave nod. "It doesn't make sense but when I think about it, I understand how it happened. First off, twenty-six hours of labor followed by a C-section meant my lady business was closed for the season. Real talk, I didn't want anyone in my amusement park that first month. Most of the second month too."

"Understandable," Andy murmured, raising her mug in salute.

"Then the double case of mastitis took me down for another week or two. And don't forget, this kid refused to sleep at night until recently. By recently, I mean Tuesday. If we didn't have my parents here to help out, I wouldn't have noticed the shortage of sex in my marriage because I would've been crying right along with the baby."

"Wow," she breathed. "Wow."

"Yeah." I took a small sip of my mule. It was delicious but my head was already soft and loose from the liquor, and I couldn't have that. I didn't want to sleep through date night.

"What did Shannon say when you told her about this dry spell?" Andy asked.

I busied myself with straightening Maddie's blanket. "I haven't told her."

Andy laughed. "Somehow, that doesn't seem like a barrier to Shannon knowing everything."

"Also true but I don't think it occurred to her this would be an issue," I replied. "Think about it. This is *not* a problem Shannon's encountered in her marriage. She was pregnant with her second baby by the time the first was three months old. If she had any trouble coming back after either of those deliveries, I haven't heard about it."

"Maybe she'll take more time after this next one arrives in February," Andy said. "Or maybe she'll be finished after three."

"I can't imagine more than one. I might be with Tiel on this topic. One and done," I said, laughing. "But I think Maddie is turning the corner with her sleep schedule and that means good things for everyone."

"And you're going out tonight for dinner and whatevering," Andy added.

"Good things for everyone."

"That's the plan," I said. "I'm just going to tell him I'm ready. Maybe hike my dress up and hang some flashing lights. That's all I can do because my subtle hints haven't worked."

She stabbed her finger at me. "Maybe he's staying away from your amusement park because he thinks the rides are still closed. That is a fair and valid assumption. I can see Patrick grappling with that issue. He'd wait until I had a permit from the city. I mean, he requires written notice from me when shark week is over. If I don't say something, he'll stay away for a full month. He doesn't mind but he knows I don't like sex during that time. But he'd never ask for an update on my period. It's just not his style." She tipped her mug toward me. "Maybe it's that."

"Or maybe we aren't the people who have sex just about every day. Not anymore," I said, hating the sound of those words. It wasn't about the sex itself. It was the intimacy. The closeness that was more than hugging, kissing, holding each other. It was the way we knew each other, and it'd always been that way. "Things have changed. Our time together is different. Our priorities are different. Maybe we're a different couple now." I pursed my lips as I glanced down at Madeleine, not wanting to cry again. "Relationships change."

"Don't say that," she warned, still stabbing that finger at me. "Don't you dare say that because if you can't have a kid and keep it together, I don't have a shot in hell of doing it."

I waved my hand at the hot mess that was my house. Even with the help of my parents and my best friends, it looked like the aftermath of a baby supply store explosion. It would only get worse once my parents left. "I don't have anything together. I've showered, put on clean clothes, and kept this baby dry and fed. That's the best I can do right now."

With a hum, she settled her feet on the ottoman. "But you're going back to work next week. Right?"

After a pause, I said, "Yeah, I'm back part time starting Monday. I'm working mornings until—"

"Don't kid yourself. You'll be there all day," she interrupted with a knowing smile. Perfectionists knew how to spot each other in a crowd.

"Yeah, probably," I admitted. "Or not. I don't know how it's going to go yet. I don't know how I'm going to feel about leaving Maddie at home. I'm having—I'm just not sure about anything yet."

Andy's lips turned down in a deep frown as she considered this. She sipped her drink and stared at the baby, then said, "The one thing I've realized in the past few years is that it's tough balancing it all. And I say that as a person with very little in need of balancing."

"Torsion," I murmured.

"Hmm? What was that?"

I smiled, shook my head. "Nothing," I replied. "Go ahead. I was just thinking out loud."

"I have Patrick and my job and that's it. We don't have kids or pets or any extraordinary family commitments. I have a couple of succulents but I can't call those commitments. I don't have much on my plate so I don't have much business complaining about the struggle of finding balance but it's legit."

"It is," I agreed. "I want to be able to do it all and do it well. I want to be a great school leader and a sexy wife and an awesome mom, and I want to spend time with my friends and accomplish more than showering and dressing and being tired each day."

"But sometimes showering and dressing *is* doing it all," Andy said. "As I'm coming to see it, balance requires a flexible view of success. Sometimes I have fifteen or twenty active projects and getting through the week without chucking my phone out the window is the best I can do. Other times, I can plan a dinner party, go to pedicure night, get in enough yoga to keep me sane, *and* give Patrick the attention he needs, all while keeping a handle on my properties and watering those succulents." She refilled her mug again. "It's all about how I choose to define my version of doing it all. It's whatever I want and 'all' doesn't have to be consistent. My all today doesn't have to be my all tomorrow."

"Yeah," I said. "And tonight, my definition of doing it all begins and ends with my husband."

She glanced down at her left hand, adjusting the diamond sitting on her fourth finger, the new wedding band behind it. "I might do the same thing."

I put my hand on her forearm. "I'm going to put Maddie down. Help me pick out something to wear, okay?" I glanced down at my yoga pants. "I don't know what looks good anymore and I'll die before I put on another maternity dress."

She topped off her mug and stood. "This is not a problem," she said. "You have something I don't which is boobs for days. You also have ride-or-die sexy lingerie. You can make those puppies look *good*. I'm talking Victoria's

Secret runway show good."

"I'm not sure my lingerie still fits." I cringed. "My rib cage is a little"—I held hands apart, miming my new width—"not in the same place it used to be."

"Doesn't matter," she replied with a wave of her hand. "We'll stuff them in. We'll make it work. You have some coconut oil, right? That always works. If all else fails, we pack up the wee babe and take her shopping."

"All right," I said with a slow nod.

"Then we move onto shoes," Andy continued. "You, my friend, are the queen of Come Fuck Me heels. You could wear those things with a ratty old bathrobe and he'd sit up and take notice."

"I haven't worn heels in five months," I admitted. Another cringe.

"It's just like having sex which is not unlike riding a bike," Andy replied. "It doesn't matter how long it's been because you'll remember how to do it once you start."

"That's...encouraging," I murmured.

"We've got the fundamentals: boobs, lingerie, shoes," she said. "The rest is easy."

"Can that be the theme? Easy?" I asked.

Andy frowned. "As in convenient or slutty?"

"How about a little of both?"

"Yeah, totally," she said, nodding. "Comfy-slutty is my favorite look."

I STARED at my reflection in the mirror, not certain I recognized the person looking back at me. It wasn't the body stuff, not entirely. But some, yes. My curves were curvier now. Rounder, wider, fuller, more substantial.

I looked different. I *was* different.

When I looked closely, I saw the physical changes but also the ones beneath the surface. I was stronger than I'd ever imagined possible. I trusted myself and my instincts more than before. I was whole, my body beginning to feel like my own again rather than parts lent out for others to use. I was a mother and a wife and woman, and I could be all of those. I wasn't limited to one.

I wasn't panicked at the idea of leaving Madeleine with my parents. Not

that I ever worried about leaving her with them but I had a good feeling about this night. Worst case, we'd arrive home to my dad singing "My Girl" while rocking her and my mother rearranging another room because we'd done it "wrong."

Surviving three full months with my parents in my house was another accomplishment. I loved my parents, I really did, and I hated feeling ungrateful. My mother was wonderful and we were lucky to have her help. I wasn't sure how we would've managed without her. But honest to god, she had a true excess of opinions on all topics. It was difficult to deflect all of them while also caring for a newborn and recovering from major surgery plus hours of labor. Never mind the exhaustion and the husband who wasn't into me anymore.

My father was equally wonderful. For all his gruff ways, he adored his granddaughter. Between him and my mother, they saved our sanity by taking Madeleine's early morning feedings. But my father also wanted Matthew dead. Perhaps not *dead* but he still hit my husband with more than enough hairy eyeballs to make his position clear. He wasn't printing Team Matthew t-shirts any time soon.

I smoothed my hands over my dress, cocking my head to study the new flare of my hips, the swell of my breasts. If Andy was to be trusted, there was no mistaking the headline here: I was looking for some sexytimes.

More than that, I was ready for those sexytimes. But it wasn't just sex for the sake of a getting laid. No, I needed to be close to Matthew in a way only I could. It took me a long time to get to this spot, longer than it took Tiel or Shannon, but I was here and I wanted to be wanted again.

In the hallway, I heard Matthew say, "All right, Miss Madeleine. I need you to help me pick out a nice shirt. Do you think you can do that?"

He stepped into the bedroom with her cradled against his chest and my heart thumped right into my throat. There was nothing hotter than a good man who was also a good father. Nothing in the world. Now that I thought about it, that explained a significant portion of my sexual frustration. He was the best father I could've asked for my baby. I knew it from the start and I knew it now, with his big hands holding her tiny body, her bottom in his palm, her fingers gripping his t-shirt.

It damn near knocked me over.

"Come here," I said, my words as tight and choked as I felt.

"Say hi to mommy," he whispered as he stepped toward me. He looked

me over, a quick up and down, but turned his attention back to the baby without reaction. Not even an arched eyebrow. *What was I doing wrong? What was it going to take?* "She looks extra pretty tonight, doesn't she?" He glanced at me again, meeting my gaze with a grin. "Maddie agrees. She just told me. She also said you're going to need to put on a scarf and a jacket if you think her grandfather is letting you out of the house like"—he shot a pointed look at the cleavage I had on display—"that."

I didn't respond, instead folding them both into my arms. Maddie cooed and wiggled between us. I had it all. Right here, this was everything.

Matthew pressed a kiss to the crown of my head. "It's a good thing you have the baby as a shield," he murmured.

I ran my nails along his flanks, across his lower back. "Why is that?"

I tilted my head to look up at him. I'd expected a lazy grin. I found his lips pursed in a harsh line, his eyes stony. His nostrils flared as he drew a breath. He seemed angry but—but it wasn't anger behind his eyes.

"Why, Matthew?" I asked, driving my fingertips into his soft tissue the way he liked.

He looped his arm around my waist, gifting me with a deep squeeze. "You're beautiful," he replied, his lips on my temple. "That's all I meant. You're so fucking beautiful it hurts."

That was it. That was *it*. This was ending right here, right now. No conversation needed. Just action.

"Set Maddie down," I ordered. "Put her on the floor with the quilt or in her bassinet. She's not going anywhere, she doesn't even roll over yet. Just come help me in the closet for a minute."

Matthew hit me with a furrowed eyebrow. "You want me to help you. In the closet."

I stepped back, held up my hands. "This is not one of those times when we have an elaborate conversation," I replied. "Put the baby down and get in the damn closet."

"Yeah. You got it. All right, okay," he muttered to himself.

I didn't stick around to watch, instead marching straight into our walk-in closet. I traveled the distance of that narrow room, my hands on my hips and my elbows brushing the precise line of Matthew's starched dress shirts as I went. If I kept moving, I'd keep my nerve but if I stopped, I was *stopping*. I'd lose my steam and let it all go because it was too easy to believe I'd changed, we'd changed, everything had changed, and we'd never be the same again.

Since I wasn't interested in bidding farewell to this moment, I continued pacing even when he stepped inside.

"What—what is happening here?" He caught my hand, whirled me around, and tugged me into his arms. "What's going on?"

And that was when I attacked him. I backed him against the full-length mirror, tore his belt right off, and dropped his zipper as my knees hit the floor. "I'm doing something I've been thinking about for months." I blew out a breath and yanked his jeans and boxers down. His hard cock sprang free. I glanced at his length and then up at him. "Please don't pretend it hasn't crossed your mind."

"Lauren, get up," he said, reaching for me.

I batted his hands away. "Say it, Matthew. Tell me you don't want me to suck your cock right now. Say it and then I'll get up."

He stared at me with the same stony eyes and harsh twist to his lips he gave me not more than two minutes ago. His hands curled into fists, his breathing quickened.

"Say it," I repeated, running my palms up his legs, back down again. My thumbs brushed his inner thighs, the tender spots around his base. "Say you don't want this. Say you don't want me. Say it and I'll stop."

I treated him to another minute of teasing while his erection bobbed between us. "Of course I want you," he said with a rough whisper. "Of course I—oh, *fuck*."

His words vanished when I took him into my mouth. I kept my fingers wrapped around his base as I stroked him with my tongue. He tasted perfect. Like he always did but somehow better because it'd been so long and I missed him so much.

"This," Matthew started, the word fuzzy, as if he'd spoken it while asleep, "will be over quickly."

"Mmhmm," I murmured around him.

His head banged back against the mirror. He growled, he swore, he babbled incoherently.

Yeah, I knew what I was doing.

Then my mother showed up. "What is going on in here?" she cooed. It took me a second to realize she was using that tone because she was speaking to Madeleine. "Lolo? Are you in the bathroom, honey? I won't interrupt you. I know how you are about privacy."

One time. One time I'd asked her to stop inviting herself into the

bathroom to carry on a conversation while I used the facilities. Now, I was the one with the privacy issues.

"Lauren, Lauren. Sweetness. Lauren, your mother's in the bedroom," Matthew whispered. He cupped his hand around my chin but I didn't stop sucking. He traced his thumb around my lips. "*Fuck*. Fuck, sweetness. Your mother *cannot* see this."

I leaned back on my heels, slowly dragging my tongue over the underside of him. "Then tell her we'll be out in a minute."

"Lolo?" my mother called. "Honey, I promise I won't go in there but I think Madeleine's ready to eat again. She's making that angry-hungry face. Do you want me to give her a bottle?"

"Lauren," Matthew hissed.

I went right on stroking his cock, treating him to quick kisses on each down stroke. "You handle it. I know you can. I know you want to." My words whispered over his crown. "As you can see, I'm rather busy."

"Lauren's getting dressed, Judy," he called. I edged closer, taking him all the way to the back of my throat this time. "I'm just—oh my god—I'm helping her with a necklace. A really...really fucking...amazing necklace. That's *allllll*."

There was a pause on the other side of the door. I had to imagine my mother was inventing some explanations of her own while I was busy deep-throating my husband. "All right," she said eventually. "Should I feed Madeleine? She's about half an hour ahead of schedule."

I hummed around him in agreement. *Yes, give her the bottle now. Yes, fuck my mouth like you mean it. Yes, lose your damn mind on me because I need to know you still feel this the way I do.* Another hum followed by a tentative jerk of his hips. I drove my nails into his ass, showing him how to take what he needed.

"Yes!" he cried, his body searching for the right rhythm. "Yes, yes, oh my god, *yes*. Give her—give her whatever she wants."

Another pause. Then, "Let's go downstairs, just you and me. We'll have a nice bottle and some girl talk." Her words faded away as the bedroom door snicked shut.

"You." Matthew's fingers drove through my hair, tightening around the strands, gripping. "You." I gazed up at him, my lashes fluttering while I waited for him to finish that sentence. Finally, he said, "You don't know what you're doing, sweetness."

I dragged my lips down his length, twisting as I reached the head. I teased him there, the way I knew he loved but also hated. "Yes. I do."

Since I wasn't interested in conversation, I took all of him, pushing past the point of comfort and reflexes. My eyes were watering now, sure to leave streaks of mascara behind. But I didn't care. It didn't matter if I looked like a hot mess or I had to start this face from scratch in order to leave the house. It didn't matter how I looked at all. It wasn't the dress or the bra or the face that turned him on. It was me, taking what I wanted, giving what he needed.

It was always me.

I dug my fingers into his ass, my nails pressing into his skin as I worked him over. His grip on my hair tightened. He tipped my chin up, whispering, "You filthy little cocksucker, you better be ready to swallow."

And just like that, my husband was mine again.

MATTHEW

WELL. That was unexpected.

I brushed my fingers over Lauren's lips, smiling at their rosy flush. "May I ask what I did to deserve that?"

She rubbed her cheek against my upper thigh. "Since when do you have to deserve it?" she asked. "Can't you just want it and that be reason enough?"

Also unexpected. Apparently, I'd spent too much time worrying and yawning, and mentally preparing for a vasectomy and missing our former life. During that wasted time, I'd failed to recognize my wife needed my attention.

Until she took matters into her own hands—and mouth.

Tapping a store of energy I didn't know I had, I scooped her up and hauled her into my arms. When was the last time I'd held her like this? Like she was my personal fuck doll, filthy and fragile and all mine? Too long. I didn't have an exact answer but I knew it'd been too damn long. "And what do you want, sweetness?"

"I wanted that." She pressed her lips to mine, all sweet and sunshine. As if she didn't have the taste of me on her tongue right now. "And now I want you to take me out for the night."

I chased her lips. I wasn't letting her go that easy. "Lift up that skirt and I might."

Lauren shook her head. "No time. We have reservations."

"You're wrong about that. There's always time," I replied. I set her down, turned her to face the mirror. I pointed to either side of its thick, wooden frame. "Hold on."

She reached forward while I tugged her hips back, flipped her skirt up. A

dainty pair of panties greeted me, frilly and lacy and feigning innocence. "These are nice," I said, dragging a finger along the edges. Across her back, along her hip, down the curve of her ass. *Down down down.* "Too nice to ruin?"

She barked out a laugh, her breasts heaving as her shoulders shook. I fucking loved this mirror. The closet wasn't bad either. One of these days, I was going to congratulate myself on the design of this place. "Don't even think about it," she warned.

I reached between her legs, running my knuckles over the silky fabric separating me from her skin. "What should I think about, Lauren?" I asked. With my free hand, I moved her hair to one side. Leaned forward. Kissed her neck. Nipped her shoulder. "Should I think about sliding my hand under these panties? What about getting on my knees and licking you straight through them? Or should I pull them to the side and let you watch yourself getting fucked?" I wrapped her hair around my palm. "Tell me, sweetness. What should I think about?"

She dropped her head down, sighing as my knuckles traced her clit. "All of the above," she said. "But first, whichever you can accomplish in the least amount of time. I just need to get there and get there really fast. My mother will find a reason to come up here again and I won't handle things as well as you did. Great job, by the way. Remind me to put on a necklace or the jig will be up." She glanced at the mirror, met my gaze there. "Also, I've been looking forward to this night out all day. We're not missing our reservation."

"Okay," I murmured to myself. I hadn't walked into this closet with a Hail Mary at the ready but I wasn't leaving without a score. "All right. Here's what we're doing." I yanked her panties down, careful to keep the delicate fabric in good condition. I turned her, positioning her against the mirror just as she'd positioned me. Then I hit the floor. "Keep that dress out of my way."

"I know the drill," she said, a hint of laughter in her words. I dragged my hand up her thigh, then hooked her leg over my shoulder. I kept my hand locked around her other leg, as much for her stability as mine. I stared at her creamy skin and soft folds for a long moment, both chastising myself for staying away and wondering how it was possible for love to grow by orders of magnitude, even after six years. "I guess the question is whether you remember it too."

I blinked out of my thoughts, shooting her a feral grin. "I remember," I promised. Then, "Please stop me immediately if anything hurts."

She layered her hand over the one I had stationed on her leg. "I always do."

I didn't give myself another second to overthink. I bowed my head, brought my tongue to her clit, and pushed two fingers inside her. The resulting sound was not one of pain but I still went easy on her. No biting, no hard thrusting, no teasing at her backside. None of that until specifically requested. But fuck me, did her body feel good. My god, I loved the pulse of her clit against my tongue. And the taste of her, Jesus Christ. Nothing better.

"Oh my god," she whispered, her hand curling around my collar. "I'm—you were right about this being the fastest route because I'm—oh my god, I've missed this so much and don't stop and don't stop and don't stop—and *ahhhh*."

As if I could forget.

I licked her through the last tremors of her orgasm, kissing and sucking until she pressed her legs together and said, "No more. Please. I won't want to leave if you keep going and I really need us to leave."

I kissed her leg down to her knee before helping her step into her panties. "I don't know what's going on here," I said as I straightened her dress, "but I like it. More, please."

I tugged my shirt over my head, wiped the fabric over my damp lips. But I didn't stand up. Couldn't. Not with this view.

She pinched the dress between her fingers. "Yeah? It looks good?"

"You know that's not what I'm talking about." I batted her hand away from the fabric. "I love it when you're bossy. When you're *dirrrrty*. When you don't give a fuck whether your mother is in our bedroom while you're sucking my cock. When you remind me to get my head out of my ass and put it between your legs."

She glanced away, a smile tugging at her lips. "It's nice to hear you say it."

I pushed to my feet. "I'll say it any time you need to hear it." I traced her deep-cut neckline. "But I was serious about needing a scarf and jacket if you think the Commodore is letting you out of the house like this."

LAUREN SURVEYED the hip farm-to-table restaurant, nodding to herself.

"This is a big improvement over The Red Hat." She glanced back at me with a sweet smirk. "You've stepped up your game."

I held my arms out wide. "How could I not? In the eternal words of my brother, I was shambles back then."

She pushed her hair over her shoulder, tucked it behind her ear. "You were not shambles." She stared at the water goblets between us, her gaze unfocused. "God. We were so young. So young." With a laugh, she shook her head. "And eager. As if we had to conquer the world then and there, before it got away from us."

"I was concerned *you* were going to get away from me," I replied.

She traced the base of her goblet, her finger traveling the circumferences once, twice. "That was never an option. Not really."

"Finally. The truth comes out," I muttered.

"I just...I just didn't know how to manage all the big things in my life," she admitted, her words turning a bit wistful. "It felt like all or nothing."

"But I love that about you," I said. "I love that you dive in head first. I love that you don't do anything halfway because you just don't know how." I reached for her goblet, moved it to the side so I could lace my fingers with hers. "I love that you made me work for it."

"Let's not get carried away." She smiled down at our joined hands. "I barely recognize that version of us anymore."

"Do you miss it?" I asked.

"Parts of it, yeah. I miss being self-involved, you know? Focusing only on my interests and goals, and negotiating with myself about buying fancy underwear and eating chocolate for breakfast like those were important decisions. Being the center of my universe and worrying only about myself. You can't be self-involved when you get married, when you have a baby. You stop being the center of your universe. You have other universes." She gave me a shy smile. "But I don't miss feeling like I didn't know what I was doing. It's not like I know what I'm doing now," she said, laughing. "But it's different. Somehow."

"It is different," I agreed. "I know you'll be there every night when I come home." I jerked a shoulder up. "Unless you're out drinking with Shannon."

"There's not too much of that happening now that she's pregnant. Again." Lauren gave a tiny, bewildered headshake. "I don't understand how she does it. We have one and we're shambles."

"I know," I replied, more emphatic than strictly necessary. "She's fielding

a basketball team like it's nothing and we're falling apart with one little insomniac on our hands."

"Maybe that's all we need," she said, squeezing my fingers. "One little insomniac."

"What about five kids and two dogs, like we discussed?"

"Say that again and I will stab you with this spoon," Lauren replied, her free hand curling around the cutlery.

I reached across the table, prying the silverware from her grip. "I was joking," I said. "It was a terrible joke. Awful timing. Wrong tone. Forgive me."

Her lips twisted with doubt. "Really?"

"Yes," I replied, patting the tabletop as if that gesture would add credence to my words. "I'll do anything you want. Sweetness, you know that. But god help me, my world fell apart the day Maddie arrived. Watching you—not being able to do anything to help you—my world *collapsed*. And then they put our little girl in my arms." I shook my head to ward off the wave of emotion accompanying that memory. "I held her and my world came back together."

"And you don't want to do that again." She stared at me, her gaze intent, as if she was digging through everything I'd said to unearth the truth.

"I'll do anything you want," I repeated. I meant that. Even if I wanted Lauren all to myself, I'd sooner die than deny her anything.

The waiter arrived to take our drink orders and discuss the evening's featured dishes but Lauren never stopped staring at me.

Once we were alone again, she said, "We don't have to decide anything right now. Regardless of my mother's suggestions, we can wait. Revisit this topic in a few months. Maybe a few years." She lifted a shoulder. "Maybe... not at all." She glanced away. "But please don't tell me you'll do whatever I want. Tell me what *you* want."

I leaned closer to her, moving everything out of my way. Plates, napkins, goblets, everything. I didn't want anything between us right now. "I want you," I said. "I want *you*. Nothing else matters to me."

"Says the man with blowjob brain."

"Yeah, that's accurate," I replied. "But I knew that before you dragged me into the closet."

"There was no dragging. You went there willingly," she remarked.

"Because I want you." I took both her hands in mine, squeezed as if I

could send my words through her skin and into her heart because that was where I needed them. "There was a time when we talked about five kids. The house, the kids, the dogs. The whole damn thing. We were doing it, nothing was going to slow us down. And it made sense too. I'm one of six, you're one of three. Siblings are a way of life for us."

"I know," she said softly, almost mournfully, her brow crinkling. "That's why—that's why this is difficult."

I shook my head. "How many cousins does Maddie have now? Three? Another on the way?"

"As far as I know, yes," she agreed. "Andy was drunk this afternoon so I don't think she's on the list. Erin's holding off another year or so. Tiel says she's out of the game."

"And how many weddings do we have coming up?"

"Several." She stared at the reclaimed wood table for a second. "Magnolia. After everything she's been through, that girl deserves the biggest party. I can't wait for that wedding. And Riley. The Walshes take over Tahoe. That's going to be a time. There's Jordan and April's wedding which will be crawling with Navy SEALs. I wonder if she's decorating her own cake." A squeak sounded in her throat. "And Wes and Tom. I'm sure they'll make it official sooner or later. I'm not rushing them. I'm just happy Wes is alive and fully recovered."

"That's a lot of weddings."

"It is," Lauren agreed. "I'm excited. I'm excited for the things to come."

I nodded. "And the babies. Maddie has plenty of cousins and more on the way. She doesn't need a load of siblings to have a big, loud family. We don't have to make more babies just because we thought it sounded like a good idea at one point. We can love the one we have, and love each other." I rubbed my thumb over the backside of her rings. "I've missed you so much. I can't lose you again."

"You won't lose me," she replied. "But I'm afraid you'll forget how to love me like you're *in love* with me. That was how I felt, Matthew. Like you didn't see me, didn't want me, didn't need me the way I needed you."

I studied her as if I hadn't seen her in years. I saw the same green eyes flecked with gold, the same blonde hair she passed onto our daughter, the same sweet smile with a dash of sin. It reminded me of the first time I'd set eyes on her. A crisp autumn day, a dilapidated church, a pair of leopard-print heels. I'd loved her right from the start. I'd loved her and chased her and kept

her but this woman right here—the one who held my world in the palm of her hand—she was the one who kept me.

"I'll never let you feel that way again, sweetness," I said, lifting her hands to my lips. "Never."

LAUREN

THE DRIVE HOME from dinner was quiet. Matthew kept his hand on my thigh while he drove and I kept my hand wrapped around his forearm. This was good. This was everything I needed.

Our life was different now and we were different too but when all the layers of adulting and marriage and parenthood slipped away, we were the same people we'd always been. All the things swirling around me—the new house, the new kid, the new roles—didn't change anything. Nothing that truly mattered.

And nothing beat the power of giving a good blowjob.

Matthew pulled into the driveway, squeezing my thigh when the car stopped. "How was that for an evening out, Mrs. Walsh?"

I glanced up at our suburban house, the one Matthew tore apart and rebuilt just in time for Madeleine's arrival. "It was perfect, Mr. Walsh. Thank you for indulging me."

"I look forward to indulging in you soon." He pointed at the dashboard clock. "By my estimation, we're looking at one more feeding tonight before Maddie will fight her way to sleep. I'll take this shift if you promise to wear nothing but those little panties to bed. And listen"—he brought his hand to my face, running his thumb over my lips—"if I do ruin them, you'll just have to replace them."

I lifted a shoulder. Let it fall. I hadn't shopped for fancy undies in ages. Not since functionality became my primary goal. "I guess I could do that."

"Yes, you can," he replied, his thumb on my bottom lip. "Now, let's get to work. I will do whatever it takes to get inside you within the next hour."

"You have a high-level plan," I said. "But we need to talk logistics before

we go anywhere. We can't have sex with the baby in the bedroom and we haven't transitioned her into her room yet."

"Lauren," he started, exasperation thick in his voice, "she's not going to...*notice*. She doesn't understand object permanence. She won't understand what we're doing and it's not like she's going to remember either."

"Matthew. Seriously. Assuming she sleeps through it, I don't want her first word to be cocksucker."

"I guess that's reasonable," he said with a shrug. "Where does that leave us? The shower? The closet?" He rapped his fist against the steering wheel. "Better yet, we'll put the bassinet in the bathroom."

"This sounds like the beginning of a blog post recounting the awful ways couples made time for each other after the baby arrived."

"Sweetness, I designed every inch of this house. That bathroom is fully insulated and ventilated. It's as secure as any other room under this roof. There's not a single reason why she'd be anything but safe in there."

"It just sounds bad," I said. "Locking our kid in the bathroom to have sex is not a precedent I want to set."

"I never said a word about locking her in there," he muttered. "Just wheel her in and close the door halfway. Not even fully shut. Just enough for—for her to have a normal vocabulary."

"Sure, sure," I agreed. "But this is the sort of thing one of us will accidentally mention and then we'll be the people who lock the baby in the bathroom. I don't want to be those people."

"Would you rather be the people who drive out to one of my vacant properties and have sex in the backseat until the local police roll up with sirens and flashlights? Because we don't give Sam enough shit for that."

"No, thank you." I gazed at his hand on my leg, the tiny circles his thumb drew on my inner thigh. "So, assuming we slide her bassinet into the bathroom and leave the door unlocked, are we prepared for that? Do we have any"—I peeked up at him—"condoms?"

"I love that you just shy-whispered 'condoms' but ripped my pants off and inhaled my cock, like, a couple of hours ago." He rubbed a hand over his forehead, laughing. "As a matter of fact, we have a fresh supply as of this afternoon," he said. "Even better, Patrick was kind enough to explain the mechanics of pulling out."

I held up a finger. "That doesn't always work."

"Go ahead and tell him that," Matthew replied. "I won't be revisiting the

conversation."

"I'll save that action item for tomorrow," I said. "All right. We're going inside, feeding the baby, and then—"

"We know what we're doing, Lauren." He unlatched my seatbelt. "Come on. Let's go do it."

MATTHEW

NEW YEAR'S **Day**

"YOU'RE GOOD AT THIS," Max Murphy grumbled, glaring at the tower of wooden blocks on the long kitchen table between us.

Around us, the annual New Year's Day party Lauren and I hosted at our home was in full swing. Teachers from her school filled the kitchen and family room along with my siblings and their families, our friends, and a handful of strays we'd collected along the way.

Like Sebastian Stremmel. That guy was a stray if I'd ever seen one.

This tradition started years ago, back when Lauren's entire teaching staff could fit in a small booth for a holiday brunch. Then, as her team grew and their needs changed, that brunch shifted from before Christmas to after Christmas. In recent years, it shifted again to accommodate more growth and more change, settling on New Year's Day. Brunch was replaced with a potluck lunch; Secret Santa gifts were replaced with a cookie swap. To keep the brunch spirit alive, they added a wine component to the swap last year.

Now that our worlds were irreversibly entwined with my sister-in-law Tiel teaching music at Lauren's school and Patrick's assistant Dylan Eaves sharing an apartment with Jaime Rouselle, the first grade teacher, we'd decided to go all the way and make this event a Bayside School-Walsh Associates holiday gathering.

"That doesn't sound like a compliment," I replied, laughing.

"I mean," Max started, shaking his head at the tower, "you're a

professional engineer. I'm an elementary phys ed teacher. All I'm saying is I'm going to think long and hard the next time you invite me to play any game involving structures and shit."

"I'll do some laps around the block in track shorts if you want to exact your vengeance. You can time me too," I offered.

He gave me an impatient frown as he tapped a middle column block out of place. *Bad choice, my friend.* "There's nine feet of snow out there and it's thirteen degrees. The last thing I need is my boss hollering at me because I was the reason her husband froze his nuts off."

I glanced across the room to find Lauren standing behind the kitchen island, our daughter Madeleine perched on her hip while the baby gnawed on my wife's necklace. It was some sort of felted wool or some other material safe for teething infants. Madeleine wasn't about to choke on a precious gem.

"Speaking of your boss," I started, tipping my chin toward the kitchen, "who is she talking to?"

Max hooked a glance over his shoulder before returning our game. "Clark's girlfriend. I don't know her name. Considering he turns them over more often than he changes his socks, it's not worth keeping up with the particulars."

"Yeah," I murmured, shooting a glance around the room to find Clark Kerrin, the history teacher. I didn't see him but the party was sprawled out across the entire first floor of our home and into the basement. "He brought someone different to the Halloween party, right?"

Max went for another block near the base. That wasn't going to work well for anyone. The trick was chipping away at the tower from the top. Any defect to the foundation was a defect to the structure.

He leaned toward me, a conspiratorial glint in his eyes. "You didn't hear it from me but he swiped on her yesterday morning. Wouldn't be surprised if he's already forgotten his new friend's name." With a sad shrug, he continued, "I probably should've done the same thing."

I tipped back my beer because day drinking was perfectly acceptable on New Year's Day. And life with an infant meant we'd both catch a nap before dinner. "How's, uh...how's that going?"

Max grimaced as he reached for his beer. "About as well as any breakup. I moved out." He shrugged, saying, "My sister's basement sucks and her pull-out couch is giving me sciatica but I couldn't give Teddy any more chances. Couldn't keep looking the other way every time he made of a fool of me, you

know?"

I hummed in agreement but I didn't know. Cheating hadn't figured into my dating history. "New year," I said. "New start."

"Something like that," he grumbled.

Silence settled between us as I removed a block from the top corner and Max snagged another middle piece. After several more turns, I asked, "What's his deal? Clark and the single-use straws. Is it about hooking up or... what?"

Hooking up was so far from my present life, it was strange to speak those words. I couldn't comprehend anything like that, much less remember living that way. One adorable, sexy, amazing, maddening, glorious woman for the rest of my life was everything I needed.

"Single-use straws," Max repeated with a chuckle. "That's funny. But yeah, I don't know for sure. It's probably about pissing off Noa."

I peered at him, not sure I understood. From everything I knew about Noa Elbaz, the English teacher, I couldn't imagine anything pissing her off. The woman seemed thoroughly unflappable. She reminded me of my sister-in-law Andy. Neither of them had patience for boys and their games.

"Okay," I replied, unconvinced.

"Yeah, I don't know," Max repeated. "But he'll do anything to get a squinty eye out of her."

I took another swig of my beer while Max kept chipping away at the tower's foundation. So many bad choices. "A squinty eye?"

"You know," he insisted, screwing up his face as if he'd knocked back a shot of lemon juice. "Squinty eye." He picked up his beer, shrugged. "I don't get it, but I don't get much about that guy to begin with. Everything with him is ancient Rome this, American Revolution that. I never know what he's talking about but I let him think I do. Drop a line from *Hamilton* just one time and he gets the wrong idea real quick."

"You're an amusing guy, Max," I said, watching as my wife made her way across the room with our daughter. Dressed in a turtleneck sweater and Christmas-y plaid skirt with dark green tights, her soft skin was completely hidden—and I couldn't tear my gaze away from her. She was beautiful but that had nothing to do with it. She'd always been more than a pretty face. She was the one who'd held space for me, even when she hadn't wanted to. She was the one who'd allowed me to drop everything I carried at the door and crawl into her comfort. She was the one who'd held me and my siblings

together when we hadn't realized we were falling apart. She was the one who'd taught me true lessons about family and love and everything else that mattered in this world.

She was *the one*, the only one.

Lauren dropped down beside me on the bench seat and I pressed a kiss to her temple. "Sweetness," I murmured into her hair.

"Caveman," she replied softly.

I let out a low growl. I wanted to wrap my arms around her and squeeze that plaid-covered ass but we kept it chaste in front of her staff. Boundaries and all. "This *skirt*. And the *sweater*."

"Shush," she replied.

Madeleine interrupted us with a screeching coo and I held out my arms to her. She wiggled toward me, but did it while clutching her mother's necklace. Prying Madeleine's fingers free, Lauren said, "Clark's today-girlfriend might know someone for our science teacher opening next year. It sounds like this guy has been teaching middle grade science in a bunch of different settings and he's super wonky about his content so he'll be perfect for us. Isn't that fantastic?"

"So fantastic," Max murmured, focused on the shaky tower. "Almost makes up for Clark bringing someone he met last night to an intimate gathering of friends and colleagues."

I stifled a laugh as I shared a glance with Lauren. "Could be worse. He could've met her this morning."

"Either way, I really wish Drew was here." She tucked a hank of Madeleine's wild blonde curls over her ear but they didn't stay.

Drew Larsen was the first person Lauren had hired and one of her most trusted team members. The guy had a lot of strong opinions and temperamental behaviors but he respected the hell out of my wife and that was all that mattered to me.

"He'd be all about this science person," she continued. "He loves content wonks. They're his people. He'd call the guy up right now and insist we conduct a video interview in the pantry. I mean, he's been worried about finding the right person since Micaela announced her husband was being transferred out-of-state and she'd be leaving at the end of the year. So much more concerned than about the fourth grade vacancy."

Max glanced around, asking, "What do you mean, *Drew isn't here*? He hasn't tasked himself with shoveling the snow off your roof or organizing the

attic? He hasn't put himself to work somewhere?"

Lauren shook her head. "He texted me a couple of hours ago saying he couldn't make it."

Max frowned at the remaining blocks. "There goes his perfect attendance record."

Shifting Madeleine to my other side, I looped an arm around Lauren's waist and pulled her closer. "This is fun," I said, my lips on the crown of her head.

"Which part?" she teased, a soft laugh puffing over my cheek. "Having forty people in the house? Better yet, forty empty bottles of wine? Or the cookie crumbs everywhere? My mother muttering to herself because she's annoyed about something I did but won't tell me what it was? Or the assortment of crying babies and snoring men?"

"All of it," I replied. "It's crazy and I never thought I'd bear witness to such a thing, let alone invite it into my house, but I stand by my original statement. This is fun."

She nodded. "You're right. It is. I'm happy this is our life."

"Me too," I said. Madeleine must've agreed because she pressed her face into my chest and laugh-shrieked for a full thirty seconds. "The baby hyena too. She's here for it." I glanced up to see Stella Allesandro approaching and I motioned to the seat beside Max. Stella was engaged to Cal Hartshorn, my brother-in-law Nick's heart surgeon buddy. "Hey, Stella. Happy New Year."

Lauren stood to hug the other woman, saying, "It's so good to see you! We missed you at Andy and Patrick's Christmas Eve dinner but I know there's a ton going on right now. Is it starting to feel like home yet?"

Stella sat and introduced herself to Max before replying, "Remind me to never move in December. It sounded great in theory but then Cal was at the hospital for thirty straight hours at the beginning and then again at the end of our moving week. We're just now settling back into some semblance of order. I barely know where I'm going, which is crazy to say since I've lived in Boston my entire life. I just don't know anything north of the city."

"The good news is, you're around the corner from us and just down the street from Nick and Erin," Lauren added.

"We are," Stella replied. "They came over and pried me away from the boxes. They've turned us on to a bunch of great little restaurants and markets in the area."

Lauren continued sharing her local favorites with Stella while I waited on

Max to select his next block. The kitchen was packed with people. Andy and my mother-in-law were busy opening and closing crockpots and consolidating cookie trays while my father-in-law stood by, waiting to collect and wash the empty plates.

Grace Kilmeade and Emme Ahlberg, aptly nicknamed the Dark 'n' Stormy sisters, leaned against the island as they sampled cookies from a shared plate. They were part of Lauren's original teaching staff back when the school opened and I'd known them ever since. Their nickname absolutely matched their vibes but they were also some of the kindest, funniest women I knew.

And they shared everything—including plates.

Patrick and Sam were passed out in armchairs near the fireplace, Patrick with his arms folded over his chest and Sam with his head lolling toward his shoulder. Sam's two-year-old son Dave was slowly, slowly, *slowly* teething and up all hours but I didn't know what Patrick was claiming for an excuse.

My favorite roof garden designer, Magnolia Santillian and her fiancé were busy studying the wall of hand-crafted built-in bookshelves and cabinets in the family room. She gestured, he shook his head. This went on for several minutes until she pulled her phone from her purse and snapped a few photos. I didn't have to hear their exchange to know all about it. They were in the early stages of remodeling the South End brownstone they'd bought on a whim a few months ago and were deep in the throes of haggling over every little decision.

If my brother Riley ever showed up, he'd intervene in that madness. Riley was nothing if not perennially late. Then again, since he'd spent Christmas in Nevada with his fiancée Alex and her family, I'd assumed they'd be on time today. Or, nearly on time. Based on the texts he'd sent while in Nevada, it sounded as though they'd had a tough time with her family and all their wedding expectations. At this rate, they'd finalize their nuptial plans in eight or nine years.

Max tapped another low brick out of place—another bad choice—while Tiel and my sisters Erin and Shannon walked in from the playroom with their husbands following close behind. Dave walked with an arm locked around Tiel's leg and Shannon's oldest daughter Abby clutched her mother's hand while Will held a squirming one-year-old Annabelle. They headed toward the table, Erin with her arms outstretched toward Madeleine.

"Come to Auntie Erin, you little honey-baked ham," she cooed, scooping

my daughter into her arms.

"Why are we constantly referring to my child as food?" I asked.

"Because she's a chunky little cupcake," Shannon said. "It's adorable. I want to gobble her up."

"Yeah, that doesn't sound right," I murmured.

My brother-in-law Will—Lauren's oldest brother—pulled out a chair and said to Shannon, "Sit down."

I was the last person to comment on anyone else's marriage because I knew how they could appear one way from the outside and function differently on the inside but it was a good thing those two had found each other. My sister would've castrated anyone else who dared to tell her what to do.

She rubbed a hand down her round belly. "I've been sitting. We are fine."

"Sit down," he repeated.

She continued rubbing her belly. "Do not order me around, commando."

"Shannon, when are you due again?" Stella asked.

"February and thank you for not asking whether I'm due right now because you wouldn't be the first person to come at me with that noise," she replied. "I have a Thanksgiving baby, a Christmas baby, and now a Valentine's baby."

"She's going for all the major holidays," Lauren quipped.

"If you don't sit down right now, I will pick you up and put you in that chair," Will said.

Before Shannon could counter her husband's ultimatum, Shay Zucconi and Audrey Saunders gathered at the opposite end of the table, Jaime, Emme, and Grace following.

"Has anyone heard from Tara?" Shay asked. She taught kindergarten and lived with the kind of deep-sprung optimism necessary for that work. "She's not here and she's not returning my texts."

Audrey gestured toward her phone. "Not returning my texts either. I'm getting really worried."

"She's all right," Lauren replied. "I heard from her this morning. She said something personal came up and she'd see us all on Monday."

"I'm still worried," Audrey said, surprising no one. She was always *very worried* about something. To cope with her anxiety, she baked. I hadn't realized it was stress-baking until I'd asked her about the volume of baked goods she produced at last year's holiday party. She'd confessed—with the

help of some of Riley's strong cocktails—she found the precision and order of baking calming. That, and something about her ex-husband hating baked goods and revenge being good for her.

"Wait a second," Max said, glancing up from another poor structural decision. "You're telling me Tara *and* Drew both skipped out on us?"

"Jesus Christ, Shannon," Will muttered. He handed Annabelle to Nick, who was all too happy to collect that little pork chop. "Sit down, would you?"

"Are we sure they're both alive?" Grace called.

"Don't say things like that," Audrey cried, pressing a hand over her heart. I didn't know how she managed to stay chill with her fifth graders but I was told she was stellar in the classroom.

"It's a valid question," Emme responded, shrugging at Audrey's outrage. "Think about it. Drew and Tara driving to and from Albany together for that training a couple of weeks ago? The first mortal wound would hit before they crossed state lines."

"For fuck's sake, peanut," Will muttered as he dropped into the chair. He looped his arms around her waist and settled her on his lap. "The things you make me do."

"If you think you're complaining, you should do it more effectively," Shannon replied.

"They won't *kill* each other," Jaime said as she exchanged a meaningful look with Audrey. "But it could get real spicy."

"Mommy and Daddy do enjoy fighting," Max added.

"Jaime's right. They wouldn't kill each other," Shay argued with a laugh. "They have friendly disagreements."

But that wasn't a theory I'd support. As co-deans, Drew and Tara didn't share anything friendly—much in the way Shannon and Will weren't *friendly*. I'd suggested as much to Lauren on many occasions and each time, she insisted I was reading the situation wrong. We had a small bet on the table despite my wife's insistence they were merely rivals. Regardless, I had a reasonably good idea what they were doing today and I'd be collecting some bragging rights soon.

"I think we should check on them," Audrey said. "Just in case."

Grace glanced into Audrey's cup, asking, "What are you drinking? Whatever it is, it's not strong enough."

Riley bustled in with his winter coat still on and beanie askew, asking, "Are we going on another secret mission? Is that what I heard? A search and

rescue?"

Lauren tossed up her hands, shaking her head at him. "Did you get lost? What-even time is it? You're lucky we didn't send out a search and rescue party for *you*."

My father-in-law poked his head into the conversation. "What's this about a mission?"

Alex pulled the hat off Riley's head, saying, "Sorry. My fault. We were walking out the door and the hospital paged me."

"I like how my husband's sleeping through this," Tiel said, shaking her head at Sam. "How the mighty party boys fall."

"You're not on call," Nick said to Alex.

"Yeah," Alex drawled. "I know. It was one of those special moments when it's a holiday and no one is answering pages, so they page the surgeon who lives across the street from the hospital."

"Is the mission at the hospital?" Riley asked. "We just came from there. Alex handled everything in need of handling."

"There's no mission," Lauren said, waving her father and Riley off. "No secret operation. No searching, no rescuing. I've heard from both Tara and Drew. They're all right. I can assure you both are alive." *And definitely in bed together.* "We'll see them Monday." *When I win this bet once and for all.*

"I'm going to text her one more time," Audrey said.

"You do that," Lauren said. "But please don't be concerned if she doesn't respond. Tara knows how to tell us if she needs anything."

With that, the group gathered around the table dissipated. Riley rolled up his sleeves and went to work mixing drinks. Lauren's parents carted Annabelle, Abby, and Dave into the playroom while Erin and Nick took turns snuggling my daughter on the sofa. Shay and Jaime convinced Audrey and Noa to join them for a game of Cards Against Humanity. Magnolia and Stella compared wedding plans, which made me realize we had several more weddings on our horizon than I'd thought. Emme and Grace returned to their shared plate of cookies. Alex, Stremmel, and Cal debated surgical techniques while they inhaled a charcuterie board. Shannon fell asleep on Will's lap. Sam and Patrick didn't stir once.

And Max knocked out the wrong brick, sending the remains of our tower crashing down between us. "Good round, man," I said, holding out my hand to him.

"I'm never playing structural engineering games with you again," he said.

"That's fair," I agreed. "It was still a good round."

He scowled at the wreckage. "This looks a lot like my life right now."

"It'll get better. You just have to put the pieces back together." I took hold of Lauren's hand under the table and gave it a firm squeeze. "Can I talk to you about something?"

As we shuffled off the bench and out of the room, Max called, "Don't mind me. I'm coming to terms with my loneliness anyway."

"This is going to be your year," Lauren replied. "I know it. You won't be lonely for long."

Max's humorless laugh faded as I pulled my wife down the hall. "About Drew and Tara—"

"Don't start," she replied with a groan.

"I've known that guy a long time, sweetness. He's got it bad for her," I said. "I'll bet you anything they're together right now."

"Anything?" Lauren repeated.

I ushered her into the den and closed the door behind us. "Anything. Name your price."

She glanced at the rug, asking, "Is it wrong that all I want is a hot bath all by myself and then a few hours of you bossing me around in bed?"

I held up my hands, let them fall. "I can't see how it would be considering my dick would end up in your mouth."

"All right, Matthew. You can have your bet. I can't wait to prove you wrong."

"I'm not wrong." I wrapped my arms around her, sliding my hand under her sweater to feel the skin at the small of her back while I pressed my lips to her neck. "What did I tell you about this skirt?"

"You told me it gave you complicated feelings," she said, her lips smiling as they met mine. "Something about school girls and not being comfortable with such tawdry things."

"I did not use the word 'tawdry,'" I argued. "I've never in my life used the word tawdry. I said it made me feel a little perverted because this skirt looks like it belongs with a Catholic school uniform. That's complicated. I don't want to be aroused by the idea of high school girls."

"It seems you've uncomplicated your feelings," she said, running her palm over the erection trapped behind my zipper.

I reached under her skirt for the band of her tights, inched them down. "How long do you think we have?"

"Five minutes," she replied, her fingers working my button-fly open. "Maybe more. Depends how long Nick and Erin can occupy Maddie."

"Are you kidding me? They'd adopt her if we let them," I replied. "No, the real variable is how long it takes for your father to notice we've stepped away. He'll be knocking on this door any minute now. It's like he has a sixth sense for knowing when I want to do depraved things to you."

Lauren glanced up from my jeans. "Depraved? A couple of minutes and a house full of people is not time enough for depraved, my love. This is *get your pants down, get your cock out, fuck me real fast and real hard* time."

"Doesn't mean it's not still depraved in my head," I replied.

She paused, blinked up at me, and said, "Okay, how about over the desk?"

"I love you," I panted, marching her in that direction. "Don't forget that when I'm pulling your hair, okay?"

Bent over the surface, she laughed, saying, "I haven't forgotten in six years, Matthew. I'm not about to forget now. Oh, and I love you too."

Staring at her like this, her skirt flipped up, her tights pulled down, her ass round and ripe and right there, activated the portion of my brain responsible for unfastening my belt and pulling my zipper down as quickly as possible. "You should've told me you were naked under those tights."

"I didn't need you operating with that information while we had all our friends and family in the house."

I reached between her legs, swept my fingers over her folds and found her slick and ready. "You don't trust me?"

"I trust you just fine," she replied, arching into my touch. "It's the caveman who can't be controlled."

As I rolled a condom down my shaft—no accidents in this house—I barked out a laugh. "It's you who can't be controlled, sweetness."

She lifted her shoulders and shot me a devastating smile. "Why don't you give it a try?"

I wanted her like this—always. I wanted stolen moments with a houseful of people and rolled down tights. I wanted her dirty mouth, her dares. I wanted her meeting me every step of the way and then demanding more. I wanted this place we created where the only thing that mattered was how we fit together, where we could get lost in each other. This was what I wanted. *She* was what I wanted.

I placed a hand between her shoulder blades and pressed her down, flat

on the desk with her hips perked up like a present. Pushing inside her turned me delirious. It always did. I whispered the dirtiest words as I moved in her, all of it flying out like filthy gibberish. And she responded, I knew she did, but I couldn't hear it, couldn't interpret anything she said through the sex-drunk fog around my head. I knew only the rhythm of her body, her skin against my mine. I squeezed her hips, her waist. I dug my fingers into her soft tissue and I was there, pressing into her, and I couldn't think past the hunger for her, the *need*.

I filled her with one thrust, groaning her name as I bottomed out. I closed my eyes, focusing on her sighs and groans, and reminding myself to be gentle because this desk was unforgiving. Not that I was much better.

"Tell me what you want," I panted.

"What you're doing. This."

Nothing separated us and still I wanted more, a type of *more* I couldn't explain, couldn't quantify. "You're all right?"

"Don't stop, don't stop. I'm almost—" She slapped the desk, a muffled groan that transitioned into a high-pitched cry before swan diving into a breathy moan. I lived for those sounds, the ones that heralded her orgasms. "—almost there."

"Fuck, I love you," I said, and though it was exactly when I felt, it sounded wrong—like I was mad at her for it. The dick delirium was strong today.

"I know you do," she said. "And I love you too, caveman."

Pumping into her, my orgasm barreled down my spine, twisting my strained muscles and wiping every thought from my mind but one: my sweetness, my Lauren. I dropped my forehead to her back and offered up every obscene desire and gushing emotion I had, each presented with a kiss to her skin.

Lauren reached for my hand, turning my wrist to get a look at my watch. "Save it for later," she said. "We have less than a minute to get back before —"

"Lolo? Where did you run off to?" my mother-in-law called down the hall. "Bill, you check upstairs. Honestly, of all the times for her to disappear. She's *hosting* a party!"

"Oh my god," she groaned.

I reached for the box of tissues. "At least we had ten minutes. If all that's we're able to get these days, that's enough for me."

WHERE WERE DREW AND TARA?

Tara Treloff and Drew Larsen hate each other.

They *really* hate each other.

This would be fine except for the issue of them sharing a job title

...and an office

...and now a five-hour-long drive to a conference their boss has made mandatory to resolve their issues.

And they would've been able to muddle through all of those matters but a major snowstorm is heading their way

...and there's only one bed.

"TARA," he snapped, edging closer. At this range, I could see the flecks of gold and amber in his eyes and the individual whiskers in the ever-present shadow of stubble on his jaw. "Say it."

"THANK YOU FOR THE COFFEE." There were ten sarcastic, cutting jabs waiting on my tongue but I held back. "Thank you for remembering what I like."

"YOU'RE WELCOME." He stared at me with those dark blue eyes of his, as if he could see inside me and peer through my thoughts. Except he didn't, he couldn't. I didn't allow it. He saw only what he chose and only the worst of me.

GET *your hands on Professional Development*

WILL MAX LOVE AGAIN?

A KNOCK SOUNDED BEHIND ME, and then, "Is this a bad time?"

Oh my god. I dropped my hands and jerked out of my chair with a force that sent it crashing into a tower of stacked soccer nets. They skittered to the side, knocking over a pillar of orange safety cones and bag of softballs, sending both straight for Jory's head.

"What is wrong with me?" I panted, diving in front of him to snatch the bag and steady the cones before they flattened him on the floor. I gained control of the equipment before it could do any damage, but I'd also shaved a few years off my life.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to sneak up on you like that." Jory folded his lips together and blinked away from me. "Thanks for intervening, though. You've got some reflexes."

I settled my hands on my waist and blew out a ragged breath. "I didn't hear anything you just said because I'm still reliving the moment when a sack of softballs went flying toward your head."

GET *your hands on Orientation*

||

FROM THE WALSH FAMILY
VAULT

A VISIT TO NEW HAMPSHIRE: AN ANDY AND PATRICK DELETED SCENE

Patrick

"WHERE IS YOUR SENSE OF ADVENTURE?"

Andy eyed the fried seafood plate between us, grimacing as she lifted the beer bottle to her lips. I studied the rhythmic bobbing of her throat while she swallowed, and I immediately regretted the decision to cash in on my months-old seafood campaign to drive to New Hampshire when keeping her in my bed was an option.

She lifted an indifferent shoulder and said, "We agreed I would drink beer and criticize things."

"How is this weirder than the green pepper and fennel smoothie you had for breakfast on Thursday?"

Andy waved a hand dismissively, and reached across the white-washed picnic table for my beer. "Peppers aren't the cockroaches of the ocean."

"You're killin' me, Smalls." I shook my head and tossed another fried clam in my mouth. "So you're telling me you'll eat Korean barbeque from that nameless truck near Fort Point, where you've most definitely had kimchi that spent a few years rotting in a basement, but you won't touch a scallop?"

"Yes."

"That's weak," I murmured. "There's gotta be a better reason."

Andy considered me over the beer bottle while I ate, an eyebrow raised in challenge. "Don't you ever want to rebel against everything you knew as a

kid? Just give it all away, and say, 'no, this is *not* me'?"

My eyes drifted over her shoulder, landing on the choppy ocean just beyond the restaurant. April was not filled with gentle showers this year. "Yes and no," I murmured. "Working with my brothers and sister means that there's no escaping, but I like that, and I like them. Usually. The past few years have been hard, but I wouldn't want to do this with anyone but my siblings."

"That's the no. What about the yes?"

Andy propped her feet on my bench and tapped my thigh with her booted toe. "The yes wants to bulldoze Wellesley and never deal with it again."

Andy gasped. "Don't you dare say that about an 1880s Arts and Crafts."

"Don't tell Riley I said this, but that place is fucking haunted, especially considering we can't figure out why the walls moved in some of the rooms."

"So that adds some character. Half of the properties we deal with are haunted," she laughed, sending a curtain of dark curls falling across her face.

"You won't eat seafood because you're from Maine. How is that any more reasonable?"

"It's not, Patrick, it's not even close to reasonable. But the last thing I am is Maine." She shrugged and polished off my beer. "And I went on a field trip to the nuclear reactor up the street when I was in high school, and I'm not convinced I want fish from these waters."

"You can be Persian, and still eat clams," I offered. "Maine has nothing to do with it. Neither does Seabrook Station. But you already knew that."

We stared at each other for several beats while a worker dumped several five-gallon barrels of ice into the soda fountains, each pour roaring through the otherwise empty room.

Andy nodded, her eyes softening. I fell far into the depth of her dark brown eyes with nothing but gray skies and the deserted seacoast around us. They had a language all their own, and I could lose days staring at Andy. Every glance, stare, and flash spoke, and revealed more than any words she could say.

I held her gaze as the last bucket was emptied, and the sudden, deafening silence wrapped around us.

"Didn't you say something about this being a pub crawl?"

Andy reclined against the booth and folded her legs beneath her before sampling the square slice of pizza. "Not bad," she said, and took a few more bites.

"Finally," I muttered.

She drank her weight in beer at the three seafood dives we visited, refusing to even look at the chalk-scrawled menus, and rolled her eyes when I suggested fried dough.

Andy's first murmur sounded when I was reaching across the table for the red pepper flakes. I froze, my fingers wrapping around the plump jar as the hum slipped down my spine and around my cock, and she murmured again. Dragging in a deep breath, my eyes panned up her navy blue sweater and over her neck, landing on her eyes.

Andy was studying her pizza and didn't notice me staring. "Do you have any idea what you're doing? You must really enjoy fucking with me."

Her eyes flashed with confusion. "How's that?"

I rolled the jar between my hands to distract from the swelling behind my fly. "Um, you occasionally make certain sounds while you're eating, like you just did, and, you do it pretty frequently when we're out for lunch during the week, and um—"

"Get to the point, Patrick," Andy laughed. She grabbed the jar, stilling my hands.

My words whooshed out in a compacted mess. "You make sex noises when you eat and I want to throw you on the table and fuck you until you scream."

Andy turned, glancing at the teenage boy working the counter. He was engrossed in the UNH hockey game against UMass-Lowell. "I don't think he'd mind," she shrugged, her eyes lighting while I laughed.

"Are you serious? He stared at your tits the entire time he was taking our order."

"So what? You stare at my ass every day."

"Oh you noticed that," I replied. She tilted her head in a clear sign that she wasn't entertaining my bullshit. "What? Why not? Your ass is incredible. It's especially hot with my handprint on it. I'd like to spend some more time getting to know it tonight."

Andy frowned and picked up her pizza, quietly eating while many interpretations flitted through my mind. I knew plenty of women, my sisters

included, who could skim a single comment from a conversation and extrapolate that into a one-woman show highlighting my failings as a man. I didn't think Andy possessed that gene, but in all honesty, she wasn't telling me enough for me to make that assumption.

Maybe she was offended that I didn't explicitly compliment her tits. Or she felt harassed when I checked her out at work, and if that was the case, suggesting that I wanted to fuck her in a greasy beachside pizza joint was making matters much worse. It's possible she wasn't comfortable being spanked. It wasn't like we ever stopped and covered the basics before I grabbed her by the knee socks and fucked her into the mattress. Or she didn't appreciate my implied request for yet another night with her, and if so, it was too damn bad.

I wanted Andy in my bed, and I wasn't about to apologize for it.

"Just so I'm clear," she started slowly, gesturing toward me with her pizza crust, "you're not throwing me the table *right now*? Because I could go for that. Pizza? Good. Sex? Good. I'm not really into people watching, but he seems pretty invested in that game."

I leaned forward and beckoned for Andy to do the same. "Just so *I'm* clear, I want to see a lot more of this side of you."

GAME NIGHT: A WALSH FAMILY BONUS CHAPTER

Shannon

PATRICK AND ANDY were really fond of this weekend dinner party routine. I didn't know what to expect at first, and those two eat some strange things, but it's been fun. They were pretty adorable about it, too, with their kitchen bickering and endless recipe research. But Andy was incredible in the kitchen. We all knew I was a picky eater, but I ate anything that girl put in front of me.

Andy was a good-hearted woman, and I knew that because she didn't wait for me to start pawing around for snacks and had a dish of leftover lasagna waiting for me when I arrived. I watched the newest addition to this weekend's party from the corner of the leather sofa, my disgustingly swollen ankles propped up in front of me and a bowl balanced on my belly.

"How're you doing, mama?" Will asked. He nodded toward the bowl. "Better now that you have a snack?"

"Yes," I sighed. "It was a long ride."

"It was half an hour, peanut," he laughed. "But when Froggie's hungry, Froggie's hungry."

"Froggie is always hungry." Nodding toward the blonde guest seated on the floor beside Lauren, I asked, "What do you think?"

Andy met Val in on of her hippy-dippy yoga classes where it was cool to grunt and sweat like linebackers, and apparently thought she was prime material for Riley. I wasn't sure I agreed, but then again, I'd missed the signs

when it came to both Andy and Tiel, and I could admit that matchmaking wasn't in my wheelhouse.

But I was a little protective when it came to RISD.

"I think I'm not qualified for this conversation," Will said under his breath. He stood, and leaned down to kiss my forehead. "I'm going outside to drink beer and watch your brother work the grill."

"Good luck with that," I said. Shifting back toward the discussion around the cute coffee table Andy had saved from a property we bought a few months ago. "So what's your story, Val?"

"Jesus, Shannon," Lauren sighed.

"That's okay," Val said, waving at Lauren. "Really. I'm thirty-two, never married, originally from Colorado. I'm an account manager at an ad agency, but yoga is my newest passion and I'm working on my--"

"Who's your Batman?" I interrupted.

"My what?" she asked.

"Here we go," Andy said from the kitchen.

"Your Batman," I repeated. "Keaton, Kilmer, Clooney, Bale, or Affleck?"

"Um..." Val frowned and glanced between me and Lauren. "I don't think I have an opinion on Batman."

I gave her a rueful smile and nodded. "You can stay for dinner but it's not going to work out with Riley. Thanks for playing."

AN APRIL MORNING: A WALSH FAMILY BONUS CHAPTER

Shannon

MATT WAS TROTTING the entire group out to discuss his vision for the Mount Vernon project, despite the blood-slowing late March chill. This house was damp and drafty, and it didn't look like he'd rigged the generator yet. To make matters worse, I was nauseous and dizzy, and too bloated to button any of my trousers this morning. Don't even ask me about bras, because none of them fit. My next best option was a pair of leggings with a tunic sweater and boots, and someone was bound to notice the decidedly loose direction my clothing choices were taking. I wasn't even wearing heels. I couldn't keep this to myself much longer.

"You look like death. Were you drinking tequila on a school night again?" Andy asked, the faux-disapproval ripe in her tone. "Without me?"

Blowing several slow breaths through my mouth, I closed my eyes and thought about my bed while another pukey wave hit me. It was warm and cozy and safe in my bed, and Will was there, and if I imagined myself there right now, I'd get through this.

"It's a flu-thing," I said.

"Mmhm," Andy murmured, eyeing my baggy outfit. She stared at my boots a beat too long, but it was probably because she wanted a pair for herself. Hard-core boot whore. "Does your husband have this flu-ish thing, too?"

I wiped some cold sweat from my brow and kept breathing through my

mouth. "He had to go down to somewhere with his private military contractor friend to do—you know what? I don't fucking know what he went there to do, but he's there—and I wouldn't be surprised if he was parachuting into Guam right now. He's supposed to be back from whichever foreign land he invaded tonight, and I wouldn't put it past him to jump out of a freaking helicopter and swim home. I'll have a motherfucking heart attack when I see him, all war-painted up, on my back porch."

"You know Guam is a U.S. territory, right?" Andy asked.

"Whatever," I said, waving a hand in her direction. "You know what I mean. He's out being a big, bad commando. Or something."

"You're in rough shape, lady," she said. "Let's skip this. You already know what Matt's going to say because you basically designed this remodel. Come on, I'll buy you some coffee."

"No, no, no," I said.

I was two seconds away from telling her that I was pregnant if for no other reason than ending this line of conversation and letting me talk myself out of vomiting. But...Will and I agreed we'd wait one more week. Just to be safe. That, and we want to tell the grandparents first. This in-law thing was new to me, but I think I liked it.

We'd started talking about names the other day. I was on the morning sickness struggle bus, sitting on the bathroom floor with my head against the claw-foot tub and Will across from me, and he said, "If it's a boy...what about James?"

I lifted a shoulder in agreement. It was the greatest amount of movement I could handle without rocking my stomach. "And if it's a girl?"

Will chuckled, and drew my feet into his lap. "I already know what you're thinking, Peanut. I like it."

We had a lot of bathroom floor conversations these days, and while they were good talks, I hated being off my game like this.

"I'm not chronically ill or dying or anything that requires special treatment. I just feel like I'm could sleep until June and my stomach is definitely sailing the high seas, but I'm going to be fine. Totally fine."

"It's good to see that you're also delusional," she muttered.

"Let's start upstairs," Matt called. "We'll make our way back down here, and review priorities in the kitchen—"

"We can review priorities over corned beef hash and scrambled eggs at Filabuster or Cozy Corner, too," Riley said. "You know, places where they

have light and heat for those of us who aren't cyborgs, Matt."

Mentioning two of Riley's favorite greasy spoons was enough to have me choking back bile. I turned away from the group and covered my mouth, breathing with my eyes squeezed shut until it passed.

"Say the word and we leave," Andy whispered. "Even bitches get sick sometimes."

I brushed off her suggestion and followed the group upstairs. I was ready for a nap when we reached the third floor, and asleep on my feet when we reached the fifth.

Instead of listening to Matt discussing the structural overhaul involved with merging two brownstones, I wandered through the attic apartment. It functioned as the servant's quarters when the home was built over one hundred years ago, and it adapted to fit various needs over time. Storage. Home gym. Playroom. More storage.

The evidence of a leaky roof was apparent, and though Matt had tarps preventing further damage, I wanted to show him the water spot blossoming from the moldings. He had plywood and more tarps covering spots all over the floor where water and time eroded the floor into a virtual marsh.

Another wave of light-headedness hit me as I turned to join the group, and I barreled straight into Riley's chest. He brought his hands to my forearms and held me while I wobbled.

"You okay?" he asked, peering down at me with a frown.

"Yeah," I said. "I think I need some air though. Maybe some water."

"Let's go outside then," he said, gesturing toward the stairs. "That way, we can sneak off and get some breakfast."

I grimaced. "Can we not talk about breakfast?"

He took a step back, watching as if I'd wobble again. When he took another big step, his boot connected with a thick twill tarp. He glanced over his shoulder, but the tarp shifted, and before I could reach out, he was falling through the rotted wood.

I didn't realize I was screaming until Patrick shook me, hard. When the dust cleared, we saw Riley, two floors below, buried beneath a heap of splintered wood, broken glass, and crumbled brick.

I WATCHED in horror as a team of paramedics wheeled Riley into the ambulance.

"I'm going with him," I said, but this time, the nausea was too much to choke back. Sam rushed to my side and pulled back my hair as I vomited on the sidewalk. This was about as awful as it could get: Riley unconscious, me puking in public, and there was nothing I could do to fix either.

"That's not happening. I'll go," Patrick said. He pointed to Matt. "You'll call Nick?"

Matt gestured toward the phone pressed to his ear and asked, "Do you think I'm ordering a pizza?"

He rolled his eyes and climbed into the back of the ambulance. "Patrick!" Andy called. "Give me your keys. We'll follow you there."

She caught the green Walsh Associates lanyard as it sailed toward her, and she towed us in the direction of Patrick's Range Rover.

The ambulance pulled out, and our doors were barely shut before Andy swung away from the curb. I groaned into my hand as another wave hit my stomach. I knew Matt was talking to Nick, and Sam was saying something while handing me an endless stream of handkerchiefs, and Andy was driving like a fugitive on the run, but I couldn't process any of that.

Dropping my head to my knees, I closed my eyes and prayed that this baby and these hormones and this goddamn day would all calm the fuck down long enough to handle things.

The ride to Mass General felt like years, but the wait once we arrived was eternal. Nick was walking into surgery when Matt had called, and was only able to send one of his interns to observe. The ER doctors banished Patrick to the waiting room once they had a quick overview of Riley's medical history,

"They didn't tell me anything," Patrick said as he dropped into a chair. "But the paramedics didn't find any bones sticking out. And he was breathing." He ran his hand through his hair and let out a long breath. "The cut on the side of his head was pretty bad, but...he's got a hard head."

"Probably didn't even feel it," Matt said.

"He'll be pissed about missing breakfast," Sam said. "And I think he was heading down to Providence tonight for a Final Four game at The Dunk."

"His ass isn't driving to Rhody tonight," Patrick said. "He'll have to settle for ESPN like the rest of us."

I sent a quick text to Will, telling him where we were and asking him to call me when he got a minute. Sam pushed a bottle of ginger ale into my hand

at one point, and I fell asleep on his shoulder shortly after.

I didn't know how long I was asleep, but I found myself roused awake when Sam tugged my elbow and I heard Patrick say, "Oh fuck."

Matt sighed. "Shit," he whispered.

Blinking to clear the fog from my eyes, I glanced around the cramped waiting room to see everyone starting down the hallway. My heart stuttered as I expected to find a doctor in blood-soaked scrubs or Nick shaking his head in that slow, sad way doctors do before they announce they did everything they could. Instead, I saw my husband was flashing his military ID at the security guard.

They let him through the sliding glass doors, and within the blink of an eye, he was kneeling in front of me. His fingers passed over my clammy forehead and down my cheeks, and he said, "What happened? Are you all right?" One hand stroked down my arm and settled on my belly. "Is the baby all right?"

"I knew it!" Andy hissed.

"We're both fine," I said, well aware that Andy and my brothers were all listening very intently now.

"Peanut," he said, his voice straining for patience, "you said there was an accident."

"There was," I said, "but it was Riley. He fell and--"

"Could we maybe talk about this baby?" Matt asked. "When are you due?"

"I'd really enjoy that," Andy said. "And yeah, I need to know when this baby is coming."

Patrick growled in Will's direction. "You got my sister pregnant?"

Will dropped his other hand to my knee. "If you're asking whether my wife is having my baby, the answer is yes."

"Stop it," Andy said to Patrick. "When is this little love child due?"

"Hate to interrupt this very special convo," Nick called as he marched down the hallway, "but I have an update. If you're interested."

He was still wearing his scrub cap, surgical garb, and sneakers, and he looked exhausted.

"How is he?" I asked. "You're going to tell me he's fine because if he's not fine, Nick, you're going to go back in there and make him fine. Got it?"

Nick shook his head, smiling. "You got it, boss." He rubbed his forehead and consulted his tablet. "The good news: he is going to be fine. He's awake,

alert, betting on college basketball, hitting on nurses, and passed a neuro exam."

"And the bad news?" Sam asked.

Nick inclined his head as he studied the tablet again. "Five sutures to his temple. Hairline fracture to his collarbone, and that's really uncomfortable. However, the most serious injury is the bruised testicles. He'll need to--"

"I'm sorry," Matt said, laughing. "He bruised his nuts?"

Nick's gaze passed over each of us and he sighed as if he knew he wouldn't be able to keep up his Serious Neurosurgeon routine. "Yes, Walsh, he did. It's very painful and will be very slow to heal. He needs to keep a cool compress on them, and keep a pillow between his legs when he's sitting. He'll need to see a urologist in a few weeks and have his sperm count evaluated."

"Bruised balls," Sam murmured. "Urologist."

"A pillow for his sack," Patrick repeated.

Will looked up at me. "Only your family."

I nodded. "I know."

"Now what about that due date?" Nick asked.

I tried to respond, but I couldn't get the words out. Something was squeezing my shoulder, and there were sounds in my ear, but I didn't understand them.

"Shannon," I heard. "Peanut. Wake up."

Blinking in the darkness, I realized sheets were tangled around my legs, sweat covered my chest, and Will was leaning over me.

"Shannon, honey, you're making me nervous. What's wrong?"

I sat up and reached for the bottle of water beside the bed. After guzzling half the bottle, I turned back to Will. "I had this dream, I think. Riley got hurt at a the Mount Vernon property...there was an ambulance...you were yelling at a security guard...I puked on a sidewalk...and Riley bruised his balls, and he needed a pillow to elevate his nuts, and...and everyone kept asking me when Froggie was due. Everyone was asking, over and over."

Will nodded and pulled me against his chest. "Everything is going to be fine, Peanut. Even Riley's balls."

THE COSTUME PARTY: AN ALEX AND
RILEY HALLOWEEN BONUS CHAPTER

ALEXANDRA

"THIS MIGHT NOT BE A GOOD IDEA," I murmured to myself, staring at my reflection in the mirror.

This leather bodysuit, it was unforgiving. And I didn't mind that, not really, but I couldn't find a stance that didn't involve propping my hands on my hips. No pockets, no layers, nothing. Just me and the leather.

And the bullwhip.

"This might not be a good idea," I repeated.

I frowned at my makeup bag. This costume wasn't going to be complete without a proper cat's eye. I could manage a great many things requiring a steady hand, but eyeliner wasn't one of them. I always came out looking like one of Macbeth's witches after a long night at a cauldron.

But this was the plan. I was decked out as Catwoman—complete with the kitten ear headband—and my Batman was due in any minute. Since agreeing to attend this event, we'd had several spirited discussions of Bruce Wayne and Selina Kyle. Their complicated love/hate relationship. The conflict between the original comics—where Catwoman was more supervillain than anything—and recent films that painted her as a salty antiheroine, forever compelled to do the right things for the wrong reasons.

Maybe it wasn't the perfect fit for us, the Selina to his Bruce, but I wasn't worrying on that tonight. The specifics of it all—how my edges fit his curves—were business best left for another day. I didn't know when that day would arrive, but I knew we didn't have to decide anything right now.

I was tucking the headband into place when the front door buzzer sounded. I clicked the lock, and then opened my apartment door, knowing Riley would make his way upstairs and inside. That boy didn't require special

invitations. Actually, he was probably due for a key of his own.

I returned to the bathroom, not convinced I'd perfected my cat's-eye or hair. Leaning over the sink, I studied the thick, dark lines on my eyelid. I couldn't tell whether I needed more or less.

"I gotta tell you," I heard from the other room, "I've gotten a lot of strange looks tonight. As if it's not Hallo-fucking-ween and everyone isn't out in costumes." There was some mumbling and stomping. "Where are you hiding, Honeybee?"

"Bathroom," I called. "Come tell me if I look like a witch."

"A witch?" he repeated. "You're not supposed to be a witch. I didn't sign up for witch. I signed up for sexy cat. Why the fuck are you a witch?"

Riley rounded the corner into my bedroom and stopped at the attached bathroom door. And there he was, in all his Batman glory. His hands were on his hips, his fingertips tapping impatiently and his waist looking impossibly lean. It made me think about wrapping my legs around that waist, curling into it in the night, pinching it, tickling it, licking it, biting it.

"Oh, Honeybee," he said on a groan. "This might not be a good idea."

"I know, I know," I replied gesturing to the mirror. "I have no restraint. I just can't stop with the eyeliner. I was trying to even it out, but I think I made it worse. I just keep adding a little more to both sides, but soon enough, my eyelids will be entirely black. It's like I was shooting for Anne Hathaway as Selina Kyle but ended up with Amy Winehouse as herself."

He shook his head once, cutting me off with a sharp wave. "I don't know what you just said and I don't think I want to know," he replied. "But you"—he dragged his gaze up and down my body—"you are fucking lethal."

I glanced down at the bodysuit, the knee-high boots, the complete absence of modesty despite being fully covered. "You like it?" I asked.

Riley leaned against the doorframe, his arms crossed and his lips folding into a tight line. "Yeah, Alex," he replied impatiently. "Of course I fucking like it."

I dropped the liquid liner into my makeup bag. "Why do you sound unhappy about that?"

He exhaled, and the sound shifted from sigh to growl. "I'm not unhappy," he said eventually. "But let me set some ground rules for this evening. All right?"

"Of course," I said, giving him an indulgent smile.

I knew what was coming. This was how Riley worked, and I loved it. All

the growly proclamations, the filthy commandments, the graphic edicts. They only came after he was nudged right into hunger and need, desire deep enough to shake his chill.

"I'm giving you one hour at this party," he said, wagging a finger at me. "One hour. Get your Instagram pics, drink whatever you want, shake your sweet ass all over the dance floor, drive me fucking crazy. But don't even think about arguing with me when I tell you it's time to go."

"What if I'm not ready to leave?" I asked. I was fighting—fighting!—back a broad grin. It was too much fun to rattle Riley when he was busy issuing demands. "What if I want to stay longer?"

"Then we'll see if your exhibitionism extends to sex in public," he replied. His eyes clinked as he smiled, and he dragged his fingertip along his jaw. "Not that I'd mind. I'd love to drag you into a corner." He jerked his chin toward me. "Mess up that hair and makeup. Get under that leather. Fuck you, but not give you what you need. Leave you wet and wanting."

"You wouldn't," I countered.

Riley gave me a placating grin. "I would," he replied easily, and I was beginning to believe him. "I wonder how long we'd stay after that."

THE AWKWARD CONVERSATION: A
HALSTED FAMILY HOLIDAY BONUS
CHAPTER

WILL

Christmas Eve

"JUST STAY THERE," I shouted over my shoulder as I crossed the bedroom. "I'll handle it."

"It doesn't need handling, Will," Shannon snapped. "I'll get it myself."

"Just stay there," I repeated, turning and holding up my hand to still her. She was standing in the doorway to her walk-in closet, wearing nothing more than a bra, panties, and sparkly silver shoes. If you'd asked me two years ago whether I'd find myself immediately turned on by a very pregnant woman, I would've said no. I didn't have any issues with pregnancy but it didn't rate in my top fantasies. Fast forward to this moment and I was salivating over my wife and furious that we were already late for this holiday party in the city because I needed my hands on her alabaster skin.

"Don't give me that face," she ordered. "It took me five full minutes to get this bra on. I'm not taking it off."

"I didn't ask you to take it off," I replied, my gaze following the rounded lines of my body. "You don't have to take off a damn thing, Peanut."

"Nope," she said, waving her hairbrush at me. "We're already late and I need to find the shrug your mother said I could borrow. We don't have time for whatever you're thinking about right now."

"I can be very efficient," I promised, pointing at her. "Stay right there."

"What you call efficiency some people call unsatisfying," she yelled as I

left the room.

"You're not going to be one of those people." I jogged down the back staircase, shaking my head as I went. When I reached the kitchen, I leaned against the island while my mother did something clever with pie dough. "I've come in search of a sweater-type-thing. For Shannon."

My mother glanced up at me, her hands still working the dough. "The shrug?" she asked.

I didn't have time for the semantics of women's clothing. "Yeah," I replied. "That."

"You know," she started, reaching for the rolling pin, "I should've picked up one for her to keep. I knew it would be the kind of thing Shannon would like." She gave the dough a pointed frown. "I'll just have to go back to Banff and get another."

"That's fantastic, Judy," I said. "Until then, where can I find this thing? We're late and I have some—uh—requirements, and I just need to get this damn thing."

She hit me with a flat stare as she rolled the dough. "It's on the bed our room."

"Thank you," I said as I darted out of the kitchen. Up the stairs, around the landing, down the far end of the hall toward the room my parents now considered theirs.

When I stepped inside, I groaned at the piles of freshly folded laundry on the bed. "Couldn't make it easy on me," I grumbled, picking up and discarding several purple items. It had to be purple. Ninety percent of my wife's possessions were purple. "This is it. If it's not, she doesn't need it. No one needs a shrug anyway. What the hell is a shrug?"

With the sweater-type-thing in hand, I turned for the door. I heard a clatter behind me, and saw several small items tumbled from the bedside table to the floor. Crouching down, I gathered the water bottle cap, golf pencil, and handkerchief. No doubt about it, this was my father's side of the bed. It didn't matter that it was too cold and snowy for golf. He always had one on hand.

I glanced around, bending to look under the bed for any other stray items I'd knocked over in my haste to get out of here. A small bottle had rolled out of reach, and I had to flatten myself on the floor to grab it.

"Are you hiding from the little miss or the little missus?" my father's voice boomed from the hallway.

My fingers closed around the bottle and I pushed to my feet. "Neither," I replied, impatience thick in my voice. "Mom has a sweater that she wants Shannon to wear with the dress she has for the party tonight." I held up my hands, one filled with the miscellany of my father's pockets and the other clutching the soft purple shrug.

"Yes, she was excited about that purchase," my father said.

Pivoting, I set the recovered items back on the table. I was ready to sprint down the hall and see about bending Shannon over the bed, but my gaze landed bottle. I jerked back toward my father.

"What the fuck is this?" I asked, pinching the empty bottle between two fingers.

"It's a personal pleasure gel—"

"That's more than enough information," I cried, dropping the bottle. It fell to the floor with a hollow thunk and bounced under the bed. I should've fucking left it there in the first place.

"It's perfectly natural for women to need a little help with moisture—"

"Stop speaking right now," I roared.

"This reaction is unnecessary," he said.

"Unnecessary?" I repeated. "What's unnecessary is you explaining lube to me. This is absolutely fucking unnecessary. Certain things don't require discussion."

"You asked what it was," he replied, slipping his hands into his pockets.

He rocked back on his heels as if we were standing around and shooting the shit about sports or the weather. As if this was a regular conversation, and not the second time we'd discussed his sex life—the one he shared with my mother while in my home—in as many days.

"It's perfectly natural," he repeated.

"That is not the point," I yelled. "The point is that—that—that I don't need to know the finer details of your sex life." I scrubbed a hand down my face. "There's always the garage apartment. I'll get you a space heater."

We had a proper in-law apartment over the garage but it was drafty and felt detached from the rest of the house. It never occurred to me or Shannon to stick my parents up there but it sounded phenomenal right about now.

"Why don't you simmer down. All right?" His lips flattened into a firm line and he shot a disapproving glare in my direction. "Go ahead to your party. Stop overreacting."

"Uh huh." I nodded. Without meeting his eyes, I edged around him into

the hallway. "I'm sure that's it. I'm the one overreacting."

"Let's keep this between us," he said.

"What?" I asked. "The perfectly natural thing that I'm overreacting about?" I didn't wait for him to respond. "Just you wait. Soon enough, Wes is going to be home and you can victimize him with your empty lube bottles and headboard banging and insistence that he simmer down. That'll be great. Really fuckin' great. I'm looking forward to the day when he gets to deal with these situations. I hope you save up some of this bullshit for him."

I marched down the hall, not looking back for his reaction. When I reached our bedroom, I closed the door behind me and sagged against it as I blew out a frustrated breath.

"Did you find it?" Shannon asked.

I pressed the purple cashmere to my face and murmured in agreement. "That, and so much more."

"Do I want to know?"

I opened one eye and found her wearing a purple dress that must've been painted on because it fit like second skin. Maybe it was better this way. I needed to get the memory of that bottle and the conversation that followed out of my head before tearing that dress off.

WALSH ASSOCIATES TAKES ON 2020

FROM THE DESK OF PATRICK WALSH

TO: Walsh Associates-ALL
FROM: Patrick Walsh
RE: Coronavirus

ALL—

Effective immediately, the Derne Street office is closed and all staff are directed to work from home. Please do not come until the office unless otherwise cleared and coordinated by Dylan and Lissa.

Work on properties in Boston proper has been halted but work outside the city is still permissible within new safety guidelines. Timelines will require substantial overhaul. Work with Tom to calibrate. Please manage budgets and client expectations accordingly.

We'll check in on Monday morning as usual. Details to come.

- Patrick

TO: Patrick Walsh, Walsh Associates-ALL
FROM: Matthew Walsh
RE:RE: Coronavirus

FINALLY. An email instead of a meeting.

TO: Matthew Walsh, Walsh Associates-ALL
FROM: Samuel Walsh
RE:RE: Coronavirus

IT ONLY REQUIRED A GLOBAL OUTBREAK.

TO: Samuel Walsh, Walsh Associates-ALL
FROM: Andy Asani-Walsh
RE:RE: Coronavirus

IN OTHER WORDS, don't expect it to happen again once this is over.

TO: Patrick Walsh, Walsh Associates-ALL
FROM: Tom Esbeck
RE:RE: Coronavirus

I'M TOUCHING base with all our contractors now. I'll have timeline updates

by property tomorrow.

TO: Tom Esbeck, Walsh Associates-ALL
FROM: Patrick Walsh
RE:RE: Coronavirus

FINALLY. Someone getting actual work done.

TO: Patrick Walsh, Walsh Associates-ALL
FROM: Samuel Walsh
TO: RE: Coronavirus

TELL me we won't resort to videoconferencing.

TO: Samuel Walsh, Walsh Associates-ALL
FROM: Patrick Walsh
RE:RE: Coronavirus

...BECAUSE THAT INSULTS your delicate sensibilities how?

TO: Patrick Walsh, Walsh Associates-ALL
FROM: Matthew Walsh
RE:RE: Coronavirus

HE DOESN'T WANT to wear real pants.

TO: Matthew Walsh, Walsh Associates-ALL
FROM: Samuel Walsh
RE:RE: Coronavirus

LIKE YOU'RE INTENDING to suit up every day.

TO: Samuel Walsh, Walsh Associates-ALL
FROM: Matthew Walsh
RE:RE: Coronavirus

I'M WEARING MORE than last season's Burberry boxers.

TO: Matthew Walsh, Walsh Associates-ALL
FROM: Samuel Walsh
RE:RE: Coronavirus

FOR SHAME! I don't wear anything from last season.

TO: Matthew Walsh, Walsh Associates-ALL
FROM: Patrick Walsh
RE:RE: Coronavirus

AND THERE YOU HAVE IT.

TO: Matthew Walsh, Walsh Associates-ALL
FROM: Samuel Walsh
RE:RE: Coronavirus

MY PRIMARY CONCERN, if you must know, is keeping eyes on Danger Baby Dave. Tiel is running video violin lessons and I'm trying to keep my child from literally climbing walls and base jumping off the beams. We found him on top of the refrigerator with an awl last night, and that was after we'd watched him fall asleep in his toddler bed. He slipped under the baby monitor motion sensors and disabled the latch on the baby gate at the top of the stairs without making a sound. How he got into my workshop to fetch an awl out of a locked tool box and then climb on top of the refrigerator remains a mystery.

What he was doing up there is another mystery.

It's easier to keep him from killing himself if I don't have to park myself in front of a screen, okay?

TO: Samuel Walsh, Walsh Associates-ALL

FROM: Matthew Walsh

RE:RE: Coronavirus

IT'S a good thing we have to keep the babies apart for a while. I really don't want my daughter learning any of your son's tricks.

TO: Samuel Walsh, Walsh Associates-ALL

FROM: Andy Asani-Walsh

RE:RE: Coronavirus

AN AWL? Has he taken up leatherwork?

TO: Samuel Walsh, Walsh Associates-ALL

FROM: Tom Esbeck

RE:RE: Coronavirus

SO THRILLED our child is an elderly lady dog whose wild streak is confined to lunging at squirrels.

TO: Samuel Walsh, Walsh Associates-ALL
FROM: Patrick Walsh
RE: Coronavirus

I SERIOUSLY BELIEVED Shannon's kids would be the daredevils.

TO: Samuel Walsh, Walsh Associates-ALL
FROM: Riley Walsh
RE:RE: Coronavirus

THAT BOY HAS some shenanigans in his blood. I do believe your youthful misadventures have officially caught up with you, sir.

TO: Riley Walsh, Walsh Associates-ALL
FROM: Samuel Walsh
RE:RE: Coronavirus

MY MISADVENTURES? If that's the case, I can't wait to meet your devil

spawn children.

TO: Samuel Walsh, Walsh Associates-ALL
FROM: Riley Walsh
RE:RE: Coronavirus

WELL, lucky for you, I can't be in the same room as my wife so there won't be any devil spawn children this year.

TO: Riley Walsh
FROM: Shannon Halsted
RE:RE: Coronavirus

ARE YOU OKAY?

TO: Shannon Halsted
FROM: Riley Walsh
RE:RE: Coronavirus

YEAH. Fine. But would it be okay if I stayed with you for a few weeks? I'm the only non doc in the joint and Stremmel said he doesn't want Alex

worrying about bringing the virus home to me even if we are staying apart. He also wants to keep the apartment building as "vector neutral" as possible, whatever that means. I seriously want to dislike the guy but he's busy running the hospital's outbreak response and being a hard ass about protecting everyone and screaming at anyone who tries to endanger his staff. It would be so much easier if he could go back to being a jerk.

TO: Riley Walsh
FROM: Shannon Halsted
RE:RE: Coronavirus

OF COURSE you can stay with us. Are you sure you're okay?

TO: Shannon Halsted
FROM: Riley Walsh
RE:RE: Coronavirus

NO. I hate this so much and I can't breathe when I think about Alex going to work and being in the middle of it. I don't want her to go to work at all.

TO: Riley Walsh
FROM: Shannon Halsted
RE:RE: Coronavirus

I KNOW, honey.

TO: Shannon Halsted
FROM: Riley Walsh
RE:RE: Coronavirus

AT LEAST ERIN and Nick get to see each other. He sits on the deck and she sits on the other side of the door every night. They talk and eat dinner together. I knew I should've bought a house with a garage I could turn into a quarantine bunker.

TO: Riley Walsh
FROM: Shannon Halsted
RE:RE: Coronavirus

DO NOT START BLAMING yourself for anything. There was no way you could've known you'd need a quarantine bunker or that Alex would volunteer to work in critical care during this...whatever it is we're living through. Just grab your things and come to my place.

TO: Shannon Halsted

FROM: Riley Walsh
RE:RE: Coronavirus

WILL you help me find a house for me and Alex?

TO: Riley Walsh
FROM: Shannon Halsted
RE:RE: Coronavirus

THERE'S nothing I'd love more.

WALSH ASSOCIATES ASSISTANTS
TAKE ON 2020

THE ASSISTANTS TELL ALL

Lissa: Watching these conversations is kind of like that scene from *The Office* where Kevin is talking about how he makes chili and it's a whole thing but then he spills chili everywhere and tries to scoop it back into the pot with file folders.

Dylan: Watching conversations like these is like being the only sober person while everyone's crying in a club bathroom at 1 a.m.

Lissa: Watching conversations like these is like the first day of warm weather when everyone opens their windows and you get to hear everything your neighbors say to each other.

Dylan: Watching these conversations is like being nine years old and having dinner at a friend's house only for the parents to start arguing at the table and no one knows where to put their eyes.

Lissa: Not that bad! They're not "daddy hit mommy at the dinner table and we're all trying to eat" bad!

Dylan: Your unresolved childhood trauma is showing again. I said nothing about daddy hitting mommy. You inferred that. All I'm talking about is when the parents would yammer about someone putting the ketchup in the cupboard instead of the fridge because doesn't he know she likes it cold rather than room temp? If he'd only pay attention to her preferences for one time in

17 years, he'd know how she liked her ketchup.

Lissa: ...because if doesn't know how she likes her condiments, he definitely doesn't know how she likes to get dicked down.

Dylan: I hate that I've picked up the phrase dicked down from you. It's such a graphic phrase. I can't help but visualize.

Lissa: That's why it's so good.

Dylan: I'm holding on to this voicemail from the Castavechias for a day or two. The power couple doesn't need to know these want to add a pool house today.

Lissa: That's smart. We don't want Patrick kicking any printers at their apartment.

Dylan: At least we're not the ones who'd have to fix his newest victim.

Lissa: Oh but we would be. We'd be busy arranging delivery for yet another device or finding an urgent care clinic taking patients during a pandemic because he broke his foot in the process

Dylan: Oh my GOD they're still going back and forth. I have to turn off my notifications until this thread ends which won't happen because this is their bread and butter. My phone is like a strobe light right now.

Lissa: Do you think they have side texts or email chains going while they do this?

Dylan: For sure. Andy and Sam. Matthew and Riley. Shannon and everyone.

Lissa: It's going to be weird working from home for...who even knows how long. The idea of working from my bed is nice in theory but I already miss my desk chair. There's no underestimating good ergonomic support.

Dylan: I've been sitting on the floor and using the coffee table as a desk. It is not great. My ass might have plenty of cushion but my hips are like "excuse me, ma'am, this isn't kindergarten."

Lissa: How are your roommates handling this?

Dylan: Leila and I are sharing the coffee table and we're happy we're not so essential we have to go into work but essential enough to not be laid off. Jaime is teaching first grade from her bedroom and being angry she can't see any of her FWBs. That hellish statement sums up her life. What about you?

Lissa: As I've said before, I don't have roommates. Boyfriend Dylan's parents are like AirBnB guests who won't leave. It's extremely unfair this virus hit at the exact time they were supposed to move on down to Florida and we were supposed to have the house to ourselves.

Dylan: Are they behaving?

Lissa: Hardly. Dyl's mother told me I was overreacting and being dramatic when I said she couldn't host her book club meeting in person. Apparently, the governor said NOTHING about book clubs. His dad didn't see why church services has to be canceled. Here I am, hiding their keys and unplugging the garage door opener and using myself as a human shield at the doors because Dyl is out there fixing electrical lines day and freaking night because people can't be without power right now and doesn't have time to deal with this.

Dylan: Wow, you are totally being dramatic.

Dylan: Kidding. Of course.

Lissa: How are you doing without flirting with the coffee guy three times a day?

Dylan: He's posting live videos on Instagram of him making coffee at home

so I get to leave cute comments about his milk designs.

Lissa: That sounds a little dirty.

Dylan: ::shrugs:: What can I say?

Lissa: No one has replied to the thread in a few minutes. Do you think Shannon ordered a ceasefire?

Dylan: Yes. I sure do.

Lissa: Do you think Sam will get his way? No Zooms?

Dylan: No way in hell. Just because he asked, Daddy will mandate it.

Lissa: Maybe they'll let us watch.

Dylan: Girl. That sounded so perverse.

Lissa: ::shrugs:: You're the one who calls him Daddy.

ALSO BY KATE CANTERBARY

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Restored — Sam and Tiel
The Spire — Erin and Nick
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ABOUT KATE

USA Today Bestseller Kate Canterbary writes smart, steamy contemporary romances loaded with heat, heart, and happy ever afters. Kate lives on the New England coast with her husband and daughter.

You can find Kate at www.katecanterbary.com