



wicked

envy

THE
*Wicked
Glorse*
VEGAS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SAWYER BENNETT

Wicked Envy

(The Wicked Horse Vegas Series)

By

Sawyer Bennett

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PROLOGUE

Avril

Seventeen years ago...

“I WONDER HOW he does it,” Andrew says as we watch Dane make his way through the crowded bar toward us.

“You mean manage to attract every female within a fifty-mile radius?” I ask.

Andrew snickers before draining the last of the beer in his mug. When he sets it back on the scarred tabletop, he gives me a pointed look. “It’s that weird facial hair thing he has going on. Chicks love that for some reason.”

I laugh and look at Dane again. He is without a doubt the best-looking man I’ve ever known. Tall, built, and every college girl’s dream. He wears his dark hair a little short on the side, a little long on top, and has that weird but very cool goatee/soul patch thing going on that’s really hot. But if I’m honest, that’s not really what attracts the women. I know Dane Hawthorne better than any female who’s vying for his attention right now. He’s got a razor-sharp wit and a near genius-level IQ that makes him infinitely more attractive than just the face and body that God gave him. When you look into his eyes, you can see that he’s a man who is going to be at the top of his game—whatever game he eventually chooses to play in his life.

Of course, the rumor is that he is crazy wicked good in bed and he’s hung like a racehorse. I wouldn’t know even though he’s one of my closest friends. We’ve never gone there, and that’s totally for the best. Would ruin the friendship, you know.

Andrew is my other closest friend. It’s been that way since our freshman year at Berkeley. Dane, Avril, and Andrew—the Three Musketeers.

Dane shoulders his way through a throng of starry-eyed women, easily carrying three draft beers in his large hands. He sets them down on the table and takes the stool he had vacated not ten minutes ago to go buy the next

round. Even though we're all juniors, Dane is two years older than me and Andrew because he didn't start college right out of high school. Rather, he spent two years traveling across the United States and Europe, living out of a tent or in cheap hostels so he could experience all the things in life that were out of his imaginable reach because of the way he grew up in the foster-care system. He financed the trip by saving every dime he'd ever earned by working part-time after school, and that was probably an indication of how determined he could be.

Not only does that mean Dane is of legal age and can buy alcohol for us, but it means he is infinitely more mature and worldly than Andrew and me. It still amazes me sometimes that Dane seems to derive some type of pleasure from being such close friends with us two geeks, but I'm very secure in his friendship with us.

"Three fresh beers for my best friends in the entire world," Dane says with a grin as he grabs the mug closest to him. He holds it up in a toast to us, and I can tell by the sparkle in his eyes that he's well and truly on his way to getting drunk.

So am I for that matter. It's how we blow off steam at the end of a week of hardcore studying.

"Cheers," Andrew says, and I follow suit and pick up my beer so we can all tap our mugs together in the center of the table.

"Any idea which woman you're going to take home tonight?" Andrew asks Dane before taking a large slug of his beer.

Dane turns and lets his eyes scan around the crowded bar. He looks bored and un-enthused, but Andrew and I both know he'll bring home one of the women in here. In addition to being best friends, the three of us are roommates, and we are well accustomed to hearing screams of pleasure coming from Dane's bedroom several times a week. It used to embarrass me, coming from a pretty conservative mid-West upbringing, but now I just ignore it.

To my surprise, Dane shrugs and turns to look at Andrew. "I don't know. They're all starting to look the same to me."

I snort, and then start laughing. "Dane Hawthorne... you are so full of bullshit. As long as girls are pretty and don't talk too much, they are more than intriguing to you."

Dane actually looks offended. "You make it sound like I'm not very

discerning.”

Andrew and I cock identical eyebrows at our friend.

“What?” Dane grouses as his gaze flicks between the two of us.

A grin breaks out on Andrew’s face as he puts his forearms on the table and leans toward Dane. “Listen, you are one of the most brilliant people I know. But you are also kind of a whore, dude. It’s okay, though. Avril and I still love you.”

I can’t help but laugh as the look on Dane’s face gets even more confounded. Before he can even try to defend himself, I reach across the table and pat his forearm. “We do still love you,” I assure him. “Even if you are likely to die from some sexually transmitted disease.”

Andrew bursts out laughing and slaps his hand on the table. He looks at me with mischievous eyes and says, “But then Dane would just probably go ahead and invent the cure to whatever disease he had.”

I nod enthusiastically. “No doubt about that.”

That goes back to Dane being one of the most brilliant people I know. Every professor at Berkeley in the chemical-engineering department has a keen eye on Dane Hawthorne. He’s already patented a drug-delivery system in the form of a patch that will transmit data wirelessly back to the patient’s doctor so the levels can be adjusted.

“You two can bite me,” Dane grumbles. “And I’m hereby revoking my invitation for you two to join my company when I raise billions in venture capital to change the world.”

Andrew and I look at each other across the table and grin even bigger. We don’t take him seriously at all. He’s not put out by our teasing because Dane has too much of an ego. And while neither one of us doubt he will be more successful than one could ever imagine, we also don’t put any stock into his declarations that we will be along for the ride with him. While I’m a chemical-engineering major same as Dane, I don’t have grand aspirations of changing the world. I just want to do research and make a decent living. Andrew is a molecular-biology major, and he’ll probably go on to medical school when we graduate. It saddens me that we will eventually part ways, and this best friend thing the three of us have going on will probably dissipate.

I take my first sip of the beer Dane had handed me and enjoy the cool carbonation sliding down my throat. I wasn’t a beer drinker until I came to

Berkeley and met Dane and Andrew my freshman year. I was more of a wine drinker since that was what my parents always had at home and was easiest to steal.

After I set my mug down and push off the barstool, I wobble a tiny bit once my feet hit the concrete floor. Andrew reaches out to steady me. “Are you drunk?”

I shrug. “Probably. We’ve been drinking for a few hours.”

“Got your sea legs now?” he asks as he squeezes my elbow once before releasing me.

I give him a mock salute and smile. “I’m perfectly fine. If I’m not back in five minutes, send in the cavalry.”

“Are you sure you don’t want one of us to go with you?” Dane asks.

I give him a soft smile and bat my lashes. “You are both very sweet, but I’m perfectly fine going to pee by myself.”

Before either one of my best friends can say another word, I manage to turn flawlessly, and without even stumbling, head toward the bathroom.

Fortunately, the line is not very long, and it only takes a few minutes to do my business. As I wash my hands, I take an appraising look at myself in the mirror. I should’ve brought my purse to freshen my lipstick, which is worn off except around the edges. My eyeliner is running a bit, so I use a paper towel to wipe the smudges away. For a moment, I wish I had done something different with my hair other than throw it into a quick ponytail, but I do think the new crop of thick bangs I just had cut into my blonde hair makes me look a little bit more hip than normal.

If you were to line Andrew, Dane, and me up and ask someone to identify the link between the three of us, it would not be superior good looks by adding me into the group. While Dane is all dark and mysterious with his cool goatee, Andrew has the quintessential surfer dude look of Southern California. His dark blond hair is highlighted with his sun streaks, but he wears it cropped very close to his head. He loathes shaving, so he always fluctuates between a five o’clock shadow and a full beard. His warm brown eyes hide his keen intelligence and give him more of a puppy dog sort of look.

Me? I’m just a plain, average girl with a good brain, a kind heart, and a sense of humor that appealed to those two morons, so I gelled with them very quickly.

While Dane is the man-whore in our group, Andrew “Puppy-Dog Eyes” Collings has women trying to catch his attention for another reason. That’s because Andrew is the type of man who is looking for true love. He’s the romantic out of the three of us, and he’s been dating the same girl, Claudia, since high school. She goes to UCLA, and I actually like her quite a bit. I figure Andrew will be popping the question to her before we graduate.

Having fixed my eyeliner, I wipe the rest of my lipstick off. It’s more effort than I would usually put in because tonight is nothing more than coming out to drink with my two best friends. I’m not looking for a boyfriend, and I’m not looking for a hook up. So, what does it matter what I look like?

I walk out of the women’s restroom and try not to worry too much about the way my head is swimming. I’ve got quite a high tolerance for alcohol—which is needed when you have friends like Andrew and Dane—but I realize I haven’t had anything to eat since breakfast this morning. I had a huge oral presentation today for my differential equations class, and I had to work through lunch to finalize it.

“Avril... you are looking smoking hot tonight,” I hear from behind me.

Before I can turn, a large, meaty arm surrounds my waist and pulls me into a sweaty armpit. I manage to pull my head back and look up into the drunk, leering face of Jordan Massie, also a chemical-engineering student.

I grimace and try to pull out of his hold. “Let go, Jordan.”

Not only doesn’t he comply, but his grip tightens on me before his other hand comes to squeeze my ass as he pulls me to his front. His words are sloppy and slurred, indicating he’s shit-faced. “Come on, baby. Tired of you always teasing me.”

“I do not tease you, jackass. You are vile and disgusting, and your breath always smells like fermented cheese.”

This does not deter Jordan, but I really didn’t expect it to because he’s so drunk. I try a more reasonable tact.

“You had better let me go before Dane and Andrew see you.”

This gets his attention. Everybody knows Dane, Andrew, and I are a threesome. Granted, we are strictly friends, but we always do everything together. They are both overprotective of me. Jordan would not be the first guy they’ve had to put in their place when we are out.

Jordan’s gaze slowly spans the bar before coming back to me with a

malicious twinkle. “I don’t see your two boyfriends. Maybe they already left.”

For a split second, I have a moment’s worry. But then I realize that’s ludicrous as they would never leave me here alone. Jordan must not have seen them sitting at our table. Still, I turn my face that way only to be utterly shocked when I see the table is occupied by other people and Dane and Andrew are nowhere around.

Jordan seems to be emboldened, and his hand drops lower on my ass as he tries to push his fingers between my legs. He tilts his head to put his mouth near my ear and says, “What is it with you and those two guys? Do you fuck them both at the same time?”

With a growl of indignation, I slam my hands into Jordan’s chest, but he’s twice as big as I am and doesn’t budge an inch. He just grins down at me as he pulls me in tighter to the front of his body, and I can feel his dick pressing into my stomach.

And then... he’s gone.

Just gone.

“Come on, Avril,” Andrew says as his hand engulfs mine and he starts pulling me away.

My eyes search the area. I see Dane punching the crap out of Jordan, who is on the floor and trying to cover his head with his arms.

“But... you have to help Dane,” I yell at Andrew as he pulls me through the crowd.

Andrew laughs. “Does it look like he needs help?”

I watch as Dane lands a solid punch to Jordan’s nose, and blood sprays. But then that vision recedes as Andrew pulls me out of the bar.

My two heroes.

I love these guys.

I hope we never lose this friendship.

CHAPTER 1

Dane

I SWIPE MY identification card to open the heavy glass doors of Caterva BioTech. It's still an hour before everyone will start trickling in, a diverse group of scientists, programmers, research assistants, and other support staff. Still, I'm probably an hour behind my partners.

Avril will have arrived first, usually by six AM. Andrew wouldn't have been far behind, but he likes to stop by his favorite coffee shop on the way in and flirt with the cute barista there. Or, at least, that's the last I'd heard. His love life has been on the decline lately.

I'm usually not far behind them. But this morning, I'd gotten waylaid by a frisky redhead who insisted on starting my day with a fantastic fucking blow job, and who was I to say no?

I don't bother with turning the lobby lights on. There's enough dawn light coming through the wall of glass on the eastern side of the building to guide me to the elevators. I swipe my card again and ride up to the fifth floor, which houses the executive offices. The first floor comprises the lobby, cafeteria, and employee break room, which is outfitted with a variety of plush couches, TVs, arcade games, and nap rooms. Second and third floors are all research and development. Fourth floor houses administrative and support staff. The fifth floor is comprised of the executive offices, marketing, and additional conference rooms, including a huge board of directors' hall with a custom-built table that seats thirty.

It's as Silicon Valley as you can get without leaving the Nevada desert. Caterva started out in the Bay area because the biotech industries tend to cluster together in areas that are already known to be replete with scientific talent, a plethora of venture capitalists, and elite research institutions that continually accept the brightest in the world, who, in turn, produce discoveries, patents, and technologies that can be commercialized. Three-fourths of the biotech companies in the United States are concentrated in

Boston, San Francisco, San Diego, New Jersey, and the Research Triangle in North Carolina.

But after Caterva got its initial funding to move forward, I wasn't all that tied to California. Neither were Avril and Andrew once they joined me, so they were totally willing to move our operations. We looked long and hard but focused on Nevada because of cheap land, no state income taxes, and very little governmental red tape to cut through. We weren't the first biotech company to move to the state, but we are the largest as of now.

The lights are all on when I exit out onto the fifth floor. I cut left off the elevator to head clockwise around the perimeter of the office space. My office is to the right, but it's my habit every work morning to walk by Andrew and Avril's offices to say hello. It's not just a courtesy I'm bestowing; I truly love my best friends turned partners, and I like starting my day by seeing them. Call me a bit of a sap, but they're the closest things I have to family, and I never take that for granted.

I come to Avril's office first. I'm completely surprised to find the lights still off, meaning she hasn't arrived yet. It's shocking, actually. I think I can count on one hand the number of times I've beaten Avril into the building since I brought her into the company fourteen years ago.

Pushing past her office, I head down to Andrew's and I can see as I approach from the long westward hall that the lights are on in his office. Maybe Avril is in there with him.

His door is open. When I stick my head in to say good morning, I'm once again shocked not to see Avril. Andrew is behind his desk, sipping on his coffee and reading something on his computer screen.

"What's up, man?" I say, and his head pops up. An easy smile comes to his face because that's just the way Andrew is. Happy, chill, and hardly ever in a bad mood, I kid you not.

"Morning," he says cheerily.

"Avril's not in yet," I reply, stepping fully into his office.

"Weird, right?" Andrew says, but he doesn't seem overly bothered. "Maybe her alarm didn't go off or something."

"I guess," I say with a shrug and decide not to worry about it. It's still an hour before the main doors open, and it's not like we have set work hours for the executives. We all work upward of eighty hours a week, so no one gives a fuck if you decide to have a lazy morning.

Except... that's not like Avril.

Andrew doesn't respond, but that's only because our attention is taken by the sound of our phones chiming with simultaneous texts. I pull my phone out of my pocket while Andrew nabs his from the desk. I see it's a text from Avril addressed to us both.

Won't be in today.

Andrew's gaze snaps back to me, and his eyes are immediately filled with concern when they lock with mine. Avril has never—and I mean never—just taken a day off without some type of long-term planning. She's never taken a sick day, once working through the flu while puking at her desk. Never taken a mental-health day. Never played hooky to go catch a ball game. She's not just the hardest-working woman I know, but the hardest-working person.

Period.

Sometimes, I think she should be the president and CEO of this company rather than just the chief operations officer, because she's just that fucking phenomenal.

"I'm going to her house," Andrew says as he pushes from his desk chair.

"I'm coming with you," I say without hesitation as I turn for the door and precede him out of it.

No way in hell Avril can possibly think to send a text like that and we wouldn't come running, although I know she's going to be pissed when we show up on her doorstep.



AVRIL LIVES IN Summerlin. I know the area well because my house is also in this suburb, but mine is much larger and cost a few million more. Andrew doesn't like a lot of space and prefers a condo in the city, but he spends ample time at my house or Avril's nonetheless.

Andrew pulls in first, and I park right behind him. We drove separately because circumstances might require one of us to stay and one of us to get back to the office.

Avril's house reflects her personality. Modern, sleek lines and minimalist design. Built of brown stucco and stacked stone, it looks like someone laid three levels of different-sized boxes on top of one another. Her landscaping is almost "barren" with her front yard comprised of brown gravel and a few

cacti. The only nod to any real color is her swimming pool in the back, which she religiously swims in morning and night for exercise.

Given the simplicity of design, it really stands out that there are three large suitcases on the front porch, several boxes on the concrete walkway leading from the driveway to the front door, and a pile of clothing dumped near a large agave plant off to the side of the front porch.

“What the fuck?” I hear Andrew say as I step out of my car. His eyes sweep the front yard for a moment before they narrow determinedly on the front door. He pushes past me. Before he can even reach the front porch, the door opens and Avril comes out, carrying another large box through.

She sees Andrew immediately and comes to an abrupt halt.

And then she sways backward slightly, seemingly corrects herself, only to sway forward a bit. Her eyes look glassy and bloodshot. The thick crop of blond bangs that normally come down to her eyebrows is slicked back with sweat, the rest of her hair pulled into a lopsided ponytail.

“What are you two doing here?” she asks, and the aggressiveness in her tone doesn’t hide the slightest of slurs.

“Are you drunk?” Andrew returns, his face aghast at what he sees. Neither of us can remember the last time we’d seen Avril drink to excess. Was it college?

“Unfortunately, I’m sobering up,” she replies dryly and drops the box on the front porch. She then turns around and walks back inside.

Andrew and I quickly follow her in. Avril heads straight to a wet bar that separates the kitchen and living room in the open-space design. She starts pulling glasses out from underneath—wineglasses, martini glasses, beer mugs—and drops them unceremoniously into a box on the floor. Each one shatters as it meets gravity.

“What the hell is going on?” Andrew practically growls as he goes to Avril. He catches her wrist before she can toss another glass into the box.

Even through the glaze in her eyes, I can see a tinge of fire starting to flicker. Still, her voice is somewhat controlled as she says, “I’m cleaning out some stuff.”

“Looks like it is most of Jamie’s stuff you’re cleaning out,” I observe as I stroll over to the box on the floor and look inside at the shattered glass. It’s Jamie’s personal bar set he brought when he moved in with Avril almost two

years ago. He likes to entertain and have all his friends over whenever possible.

“Pretty much,” she says with a snicker that in no way sounds amused, but rather bitter. She reaches for another glass, but Andrew deftly takes it from her hand. After sitting it on the bar, he grabs onto her elbow and steers her into the living room. Right to the couch where he gives her a tiny push on her chest to make her fall onto the cushion. Avril immediately slumps back with a sigh, and that tells me she has no fight in her.

I move to stand on the other side of the coffee table opposite of her while Andrew sits down beside her. He lays a hand on her shoulder and squeezes. “Talk to us, Av. What’s going on?”

Her head drops, which conceals her eyes, and she sighs. Twirling her fingers around one another while holding her hands on her lap, she says, “I caught Jamie cheating on me last night.”

“Fucking prick,” I mutter as I round the coffee table to sit on the edge, my knees just inches from Avril’s.

Andrew’s face goes red with fury. “How did you find out?”

Avril raises her face, and her gaze looks a little sharper. “I wasn’t due in from my trip to San Diego until today, but I managed to get out early. When I got in last night, he was right there in our bed.”

“Cunt,” I mutter, because prick is too nice.

“He was with a girl who couldn’t have been more than twenty-one if she was even that old,” Avril says softly, gaze dropping back down. “All smooth skin and bendable limbs.”

“I’ll kill him,” Andrew vows, his hand going from Avril’s shoulder to curve around the back of her neck.

He pulls her into his side, and she capitulates. I envy the physical affection Andrew and Avril have always been able to show each other over the years a little bit. It’s totally platonic, but there’s something intimate about it. It’s caused some sparks of jealousy that he has just a slightly better connection with her than I do in that respect, but I try not to let it bother me too much. I’m simply incapable of that type of outward affection, although I love Avril deeply. Just as I love Andrew.

Sadly, having been raised for years inside the foster system, bouncing from house to house with families that didn’t really want me but just the money they got for taking care of me, I was never taught how to hug.

Or cuddle.

Or have whispered conversations with a confidant.

Those things are painful for me. I know because I've tried to do them, and it's just not something that falls within my natural abilities. So, I try to compensate by letting my two best friends and business partners know how much I like them, respect them, and depend on them. I don't hold myself back when we're together or alone, having told them all my secrets about the way I grew up long before we all graduated from Berkley. I'm better with simple words of affirmation than I am with touching or sentiments.

And because they know me so well, they didn't try to hug it out with me when they heard some of the worst of it. Andrew merely gave me a light punch on the shoulder and said, "Made you stronger, dude."

Avril smiled at me in that understanding way and said, "Don't let your past define you. But also, only be true to yourself."

Those words were cryptic and at odds, but I've followed that advice as best I could over the years.

"Where's Jamie now?" Andrew asks.

"I made him leave last night, of course," Avril says. "Told him I'd have his stuff ready to pick up by the end of the day. When I closed the door behind him, I hit a few bottles of wine while I packed."

"So, you're just throwing it all out the front door?" I ask with a chuckle. For the first time, I see Avril's lips curve up slightly.

"I didn't tell Jamie what condition his stuff would be in," she tells me with a sly smirk. "Just that it would be ready for him to pick up."

Then she shrugs. "I was really drunk when I started packing his stuff up and carting it outside. You two are sort of downers, and now I'm losing my buzz. I probably need another drink."

"No, you don't," Andrew and I say at the same time.

Avril purses her lips and whines. "Not fair."

"I'll make some coffee," Andrew says as he pushes off the couch. "Then Dane and I are going to stay and help you finish. Then you're coming into the office so you're not here when he picks up his stuff."

"There's not much more to do," Avril says as she stands with a regretful sigh. "Just his musical instruments upstairs."

Jamie Priest considers himself a proficient musician and plays in a local band with a bunch of other stuffy white-collars who think it makes them

marginally cooler. Avril had been dating Jamie for over three years. It's the first time since I've known her that she's been in love. In college, she seemed too awkward, and then she was just too devoted to Caterva to bother to date seriously. But in the last few years, she's settled into her own. When she was introduced to the talented plastic surgeon by a mutual friend, it didn't take her long to fall.

Personally, though, I sensed something wasn't right because otherwise that fucker would have proposed to her by now. I'm sorry... but if you date a woman like Avril for three years and live with her for two of that without moving it to the next stage? Well, someone's not fully invested in the relationship.

Avril would have said yes in a heartbeat because she's more than once lamented her advancing age—although I roll my eyes at that since she's only thirty-seven and that's by no means decrepit—and that she wants to have children at some point before her ovaries dry up. Jamie knew she'd say yes, too, so it's telling he never asked.

“You good with staying here?” I ask Andrew as I follow him and Avril into her kitchen. “I'll head back into the office and cover.”

“Sure, man,” Andrew says lightly as he starts to work her state-of-the-art espresso maker. Another pinprick of envy hits me that Andrew is far more at home in Avril's house than I am, and it's just sort of naturally assumed he'll be the one to take care of her.

But I don't let that consume too many of my thoughts because I can be her white knight in a different way. It won't be visible to her or Andrew, but it will make me feel fucking fantastic.

I intend to be here when Jamie comes to pick up his stuff, and he's going to regret I'm the one he's dealing with.

CHAPTER 2

Avril

I WALK TOWARD Andrew's office. It's a Friday night, and I would ordinarily be spending it with Jamie. Of course, that was my old life. Since I dumped his personal contents on my front lawn three days ago, I've been telling myself I have great things ahead of me. And while I believe my own hype, it doesn't stop my chest from aching over the way he betrayed me.

I honestly thought he was *the one*. I clearly couldn't have been more wrong.

About ten feet from the open doorway to Andrew's office, I hear Dane's deep baritone voice from within. "Come on, buddy... You have got to get back up on the horse. Your dick is going to shrivel up and fall off from lack of use."

I choke down a sharp laugh, positioning myself just to the side of the doorjamb so neither of the men can see me. I have no qualms with leaning against the wall and eavesdropping on my two best friends discussing their love lives.

"It's not like I'm celibate," Andrew tells Dane.

"Oh yeah," Dane says with just the right amount of snark. "When's the last time you got laid?"

Andrew doesn't respond, but I can hear him shuffling papers around on his desk.

Dane gives a bark of a laugh and taunts his friend. "Just as I thought... You can't even remember the last time."

I can absolutely imagine the look on Andrew's face. A mixture of disgruntlement and pure embarrassment. It almost makes me feel sorry for him. But honestly, over the years, it's become sort of a tradition for Dane to egg Andrew on and try to push him out of his comfort zone. I suppose that applies to sex as well.

“You’re coming with me to The Wicked Horse tonight,” Dane says. “It’s high time you experienced the best debauchery that Vegas has to offer.”

“I don’t need a sex club,” Andrew grumbles. “I’m perfectly fine finding a woman on my own.”

“No doubt you are,” Dane says in a somber tone. “But why not go somewhere where it’s a lot easier?”

At this point, I decide to help Andrew out of his discomfort so I push off the wall and walk into his office. I pretend not to notice Andrew’s flaming-red face as he visibly wonders if I was listening to them. Dane just shoots me a wink as I plop down in the chair next to him.

“How are you doing?” Dane asks me gingerly, and it’s not a general request. He wants to know how I’m really doing.

I give a nonchalant shrug. “I’ve moved on.”

Dane turns in his chair and leans toward me, placing an elbow on the armrest. “For all outward appearances, sure. The last three days you’ve shown up to the office earlier than ever, produced brilliantly flawless work, and you did it all with a smile on your face. But I’m asking again... How are you doing?”

I grit my teeth because I don’t want to talk about Jamie. While I know Andrew and Dane have the best intentions and they are truly only worried about me, it’s a complete embarrassment that my relationship failed and I didn’t see it coming. And I am not about to tell them that because I still haven’t figured out what I’m going to do about these terrible feelings Jamie has caused within me. Because in addition to the sadness and heartbreak, I am pissed. I’m so angry with Jamie right now for doing something so stupid to ruin us that I’ve had a low burning in my stomach that won’t go away.

“Come on, Avril,” Andrew adds. “Lay your pain out. There’s nothing you can’t share with us.”

This is true. I would share most anything with either of these men. Being my best friends is not just a title. They are the two beings I trust most in this world. They are as close, if not closer, to me than family.

But just because I love them dearly does not mean I want to share my feelings with them right now, particularly when my anger is at the boiling point and I’m more likely to erupt like a volcano. My friends don’t need to see that because it serves no purpose and besides, I’m tougher than that. After

I can process and figure out my mistakes, the anger will go away. Because let's face it... I'm as angry at myself as I am at Jamie.

And the best way to avoid sharing with my buds is to deflect.

I turn my gaze to Andrew and give him a little smirk. "I'd rather continue the discussion about you not getting laid in at least a century."

Dane makes a pointed cough into his hand. Andrew glares at him briefly before turning back to me. "Since when are you two so interested in my sex life?"

"Dude," Dane says as he leans back in the chair and casually crosses one leg over his other. "You are my best friend. Why would I not care about your sex life?"

"I care about your sex life, too," I say with a somber nod of my head. "It makes the world go 'round, so you need to jump on that ride."

Andrew's mouth drops open in astonishment, and I'm sure it's because he thinks this is awkward territory to talk about given the fact I'd caught Jamie in bed with another woman just a few days ago. But honestly, I've pretty much determined the sex wasn't broken in our relationship. Our sex life was active and very healthy. I'm adventurous and Jamie had a smile on his face most nights he went to bed, so I know it's not from a lack of sex.

A quick look at Dane shows me he already knows this is a fact—that sex does make the world go 'round. I suspect this is because of his membership to The Wicked Horse. It's an exclusive sex club here in Vegas that he's belonged to since it opened three years ago. It's not like he boasts about his conquests there because, honestly, we don't have time to talk about that shit. But he doesn't keep it secret either, and it's never bothered me. I'm pretty sure it's never bothered Andrew either, or at least it didn't until Dane invited him to go just now.

"Andrew," I say to get his attention. "You should go to The Wicked Horse with Dane. I mean, why wouldn't you take advantage of that?"

"I don't know—" he hems, but Dane cuts him off.

Leaning forward, he puts his elbows on his knees and looks at Andrew across the desk. His eyes are filled with an earnestness I've seen often from Dane. He's such a genuine person. When he gets that look in his eye, you really listen to what he's saying. "Trust me, buddy. It's a liberating experience. Walking in a place like that, knowing it's filled with nothing but likeminded people. You can't imagine the freedom of knowing that what

happens in that building will make you feel better than you've ever felt before. Knowing when you walk out of that building, your life goes on the same but your smile is bigger, your strut cockier."

Andrew snickers at this, but I'm a bit awestruck by Dane's words. He's not done yet, and his voice lowers an octave. "It's hedonism without guilt. It's unshackling yourself from inhibition. It's about truly discovering exactly who you are, and, more importantly, you'll come out liking what you find out. When you let go like that, all of your troubles will just seem to melt away."

Discovering who you are?

Liking what you find out?

I stare long and hard at Dane as he watches Andrew for his reaction to his pitch. I don't know if Andrew was moved by those words, but I sure as shit was. Over the last three days, the only thing I've been able to determine with any certainty is that I don't know who I am. I mean, I know certain things. I'm intelligent and a savvy businesswoman. I adore my career. I care about those close to me. I have a good life.

But past that, I'm not sure what else there is that makes up Avril Carrigan. Just three days ago, I was head over heels in love with someone.

Today... I question every single emotion and feeling I had for Jamie. I know there is something I missed, and I have to figure out what it is about me that didn't let me see the truth. It would certainly take a psychologist to peel away the layers of Jamie Priest so I can figure a lot of these questions out. But since the breakdown in our relationship came from him having sex with another woman, I'm thinking there may be another way to figure things out.

At the very least, if *The Wicked Horse* is as liberating as Dane makes it out to be, I should come out of there with my self-worth rebuilt. While Jamie didn't destroy it, he sure as shit took a sledgehammer to it and left some pretty big dents.

"I'll go with you," I say as I sit up straighter in my chair.

Dane's head snaps so hard to the left to look at me, I swear I hear his bones pop. His eyebrows draw inward deeply. "You are absolutely not coming with me."

"Yeah, that's not a good idea, Avril," Andrew chimes in.

I look to Andrew, and then back to Dane. Keeping my voice calm and level, I say, "I hope you two realize how misogynistic and sexist you are

being right now.”

Dane’s expression only turns harder but to Andrew’s credit, his gaze lowers away from mine in shame.

“We’re being protective, not sexist,” Dane says authoritatively.

I lean back in my chair and cross my arms over my chest, giving Dane my most sarcastic glare. “Oh, really? You want to protect me in a place that is all about liberation, freedom, and self-discovery? Sounds very dangerous.”

“Come on, Avril,” Andrew says quietly, and I turn to find him leveling a direct look my way. “It’s not a place you need to go. You’re vulnerable right now. That’s all Dane means by protecting you.”

I’m not sure why this infuriates me, but I know that gender bias plays a significant part. I can’t recall another time that the fact I am a woman kept me from doing the same things my best friends are able to do.

Sure, Andrew and Dane are very different when it comes to our friendships. Andrew is the guy I can talk to about personal stuff. Not that I wouldn’t talk to Dane about personal stuff and have done so when all three of us were together, it’s just that over the years, Andrew has been the one who has become my personal confidant.

On the other hand, Dane is the one who pushes me to be my best. He’s always been the one to affirm and validate my abilities, praising me right when it was needed and gently correcting my course if I was sailing in the wrong direction. Dane was my own personal ego booster.

Despite these differences in our friendship, not once have I ever felt excluded until now.

I stand up from my chair and look down at Dane before angling my body so I can include Andrew in my line of sight. My gaze sweeps back and forth between the two men as I tell them exactly how it’s going to be. “Not once in the history of our seventeen-year friendship has either of you made me feel less than equal to you. This was especially so, Dane, when you invited me to join Caterva with you. You handed me a high-powered executive position, and you did it without an ounce of hesitation over the fact that I’m a woman.”

Dane is one of the most brilliant men I know, and I can see by the look on his face he knows where I’m going. He tries to derail me with a bored roll of his eyes. “You surely can’t compare your place in the board room to a sex club.”

“I most certainly can,” I snarl. “The mere fact that you seem to think I’m

worthy of one but not the other makes me ashamed of you. It's completely sexist."

The asshole—who is also still my best friend regardless—doesn't even look slightly abashed.

Andrew stands from his chair and walks around his desk. Without hesitation, his hands go gently to my shoulders and he gives me a reassuring squeeze. "Avril... it would just be weird."

I give Andrew a brilliant smile and a tiny poke on the chest. "Bingo. It would absolutely be weird. If that's the reason why you don't want me to go, that's legit. I'm not relishing looking at your man bits or have you staring at my woman bits."

Dane's voice is droll when he says, "I take offense to you referencing my dick as merely 'man bits'."

I turn to give Dane a very pointed look. "I've actually seen your dick, Dane. Senior year I walked into our apartment to see you fucking some bimbo on the couch. Trust me, there's no mystery there."

With a smirk, Dane replies, "Then you'll have no problem admitting that I deserve to be referenced to as more than just 'man bits'."

I don't bother responding to Dane as he does not need me to fuel his ego. He's the most confident person I've ever met in my life. I do know he's well hung, and he has the proof between his legs.

I turn back to Andrew, because he's the one I can share personal stuff with. "Come on, Drew. Let's go take a look at this place and see what it's all about. You and I don't even have to do anything. We can just stand around and be embarrassed. It will be fun. We can have a good laugh about it later."

I can tell I have Andrew hooked by the nature of the smile he bestows upon me before lowering his face and shaking his head in amusement.

Turning to Dane, I merely raise my eyebrows at him in question.

His return look is flat and nowhere near amused the way Andrew's is. He regards me silently for a moment before standing out of his chair.

"I'm going to take a pass," Dane says as he turns toward the door.

I'm stunned and more than a little put out by how much me going to a sex club seems to bother Dane. He's willing to take Andrew but not me, and that's just not fair. I can do nothing other than chalk it up to Dane refusing to acknowledge that the services of The Wicked Horse should be equally available to me as they are to him and Andrew. For the first time in our very

long friendship, I have a small kernel of doubt within me that Dane Hawthorne may not be as high up on a pedestal as I have put him.

“If you change your mind,” I call out to him. “You know where to find us.”

Dane throws a hand up to at least acknowledge my last statement, and then he disappears out the door.

CHAPTER 3

Andrew

“WE’RE SERIOUSLY DOING this?” I ask Avril as I tip the pint bottle of vodka back and take a healthy slug. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and pass the bottle to her.

“We’re seriously doing this,” she says confidently as she takes the liquor from me. She’s leaning back against the trunk of her car as she’d swung by to pick me up from my condo. We’re now hanging out in a parking garage beneath Onyx Casino, getting fortified by vodka.

“Looks like we’re Ubering back to my place tonight,” I say to make small talk. “You get the couch.”

“I always get the couch when I stay with you,” she replies.

Which is true. Avril has stayed with me on various occasions, particularly when we worked super late and she didn’t feel like making the trip home. Or sometimes when Jamie was out of town at a seminar and she didn’t want to be alone. I have a one-bedroom condo and even though I always offered her the master bedroom, she’d never take it.

But that’s just Avril. She’s not prissy or demanding. Not an entitled bone in her body. She’s a woman who’s fine sleeping on the couch with just a blanket and a pillow without a need for more.

It’s why I’m still infuriated over what Jamie did to her. She’s putting on a brave face for sure, but if I know Avril—and I do—she’s both hurt and seething mad. I’d even bet that she’s probably more mad than hurt, and I have to assume that’s driving a lot of the reasoning why we’re both standing here tonight, on the verge of entering a sex club.

Avril passes the bottle back to me, and I shake my head. She shrugs and puts the cap on before pushing away from the car. She tosses the mostly empty liquor bottle into the backseat, and then locks her car. Turning to me, she squares her shoulders and says, “Let’s do this.”

“Let’s do this,” I say in agreement, and we start walking to the elevator that will take us up to the forty-sixth floor, which houses The Wicked Horse, Vegas’ premiere private sex club. I can’t believe we’re fucking doing this.

“Wait,” I say as something occurs to me, and I come to a dead halt. Avril stops and turns to face me, her head tilted in question. She’s wearing a very un-Avril like dress of blood red that fits her body like a second glove, and I have to admit it looks fucking fantastic on her. “If one of us decides to hook up with someone, the other can’t watch, okay?”

“Deal,” she says with a grin, and then wrinkles her nose. “Because... ewwww.”

I let out a sigh of relief, and I have to note I’m not sure why this was bothering me. Sure, Avril’s my best friend, but I don’t think of her as a sister. I don’t get grossed out when I think of her naked, and I’d be lying if I said there haven’t been times over the years I may have had a wickedly dirty dream about her.

I think I’m mostly feeling awkward because I know deep in my heart there is nothing that would ever prevent Avril and me from crossing that line. We already know each other so well. We’ve shared so many things with each other that there is no mystery as to who exactly the other person is. Both of us respect the shit out of each other.

We love each other the way best friends can.

But I don’t look at her like she’s a sibling, and despite her declaration of “ewwww” just now, I don’t really think she feels that way about me.

Which makes tonight actually dangerous in a place like this. I don’t want to watch Avril because I’m afraid of what I might want, and it always brings up the age-old question... If friends cross that line, will it ruin the friendship?

Not willing to take that chance.

“Okay, let’s go,” I say and turn toward the elevator. Avril starts walking alongside me, the click of her high heels echoing in the garage. She crosses her arms almost protectively across her chest while holding a tiny black clutch purse in one hand, and I know her so well I know that move has nothing to do with nervousness. She’s just cold.

Without a word, I put my arm around her shoulder and pull her into me, my hand curving around one of her bare arms to help warm her up. She snuggles in, and we walk in perfect cadence with each other to the elevator.

I push the button, and it takes a few minutes for the car to arrive. Before

we step in, Avril pulls slightly away from me so she can look up to catch my eyes. “No matter what happens in here tonight, it doesn’t change how we look at each other tomorrow, right?”

“Right,” I tell her confidently, because I don’t care if she’s here to get her rocks off. Good for her, I say. She’s been hurt and she’s pissed, and if she can spend just an hour or so tonight getting lost in good feelings, that would make me happy. I didn’t have the satisfaction that Dane had of landing a solid upper cut into Jamie’s stomach on Wednesday when he came by to pick up his stuff. I wasn’t surprised Dane had lurked on Avril’s porch waiting for Jamie to show up, and not surprised he punched the douche.

Avril, of course, knows nothing of the justice Dane dispensed. Just as she doesn’t know the extent of the damage Dane did to Jordan Massie’s face our junior year at Berkley. That’s just the way Dane handles things.

We all have our roles. While I’m the one that will ward off the chill when Avril’s cold, Dane is going to be the one to exact vengeance on her behalf, and she’ll never even know it happened.

The three of us through thick and thin.

When Dane came up with a venture idea his senior year in college to create a machine that analyzed a pinprick’s worth of blood for hundreds of diseases, no one thought he was crazy. Not me. Not Avril. And not any of the professors he ran the idea by.

By the time he graduated, he was well on his way to raising capital to begin research and development. He offered Avril and me immediate positions with his company he’d named Caterva BioTech, selling his own patch patent he’d already developed to fund positions for us.

But we weren’t quite ready to take active seats. Dane wanted Avril to get her MBA, and he wanted me to go further in my molecular-biology education. Avril officially joined Caterva as the chief operations officer the day she graduated with her MBA, and I joined two years later after I finished my Ph.D. in molecular biology as Caterva’s chief scientist. My designation didn’t mean I knew the most about blood analyzation, but it did mean I oversaw the research and design of the machine we were trying to create. Fast forward five years, and we had a product being beta tested on the market and Caterva was a Fortune 50 Company. Dane offered us tremendous stock options, which made us insanely wealthy and increased our personal stake in the company.

I mull over our history together as we take the long elevator ride up to The Wicked Horse. In all the things we've been through together, I never imagined I'd be coming to a sex club with Avril so we could both get our rocks off.

But Dane was right. I've been in a fucking dry spell, and I work so damn hard it's impossible to meet women. Besides, I've been burned enough times by "love" that I just don't have it in me to try for something that requires work. My experience has been it's all for naught, or at least that's how I started to view things after Claudia and I broke up after almost four years together through college.

When the elevator doors open, I'm not surprised by what I see. We step out into what looks like an upscale bar with dozens of beautifully dressed people mingling around with drinks in their hands. It's exactly what I expected when Dane told me that this place was high end. The five-hundred-dollar per night entrance fee if you didn't have a yearly membership ensured that the people within this club probably shit gold bricks.

We step up to a podium where a woman as beautiful as a cover model greets us. "Good evening. Do you have reservations?"

"We do," I say, and I pull my phone out. The Wicked Horse has become so modernized, evening passes are purchased online with a bar code to show at the door. The woman behind the podium scans my phone, which shows two passes I'd purchased today after Dane walked out of my office. Avril and I decided to just get online and buy the damn things so we wouldn't puss out. I paid for them, which Avril didn't raise a stink about, but she'll most likely leave a check on my desk on Monday to reimburse me.

The woman takes a few moments to explain the club and the rooms that are available, as well as the policies. Much of it I already knew because Dane has never held back from sharing his exploits here. If there's one thing Avril was right about today in the office was that she is treated differently because she's a woman. Dane would never share that shit with her, and I suspect it's why he bailed on us tonight.

We're offered a guided tour, but we decline, figuring we are really coming tonight just to gawk and have a good laugh. Avril buys us vodkas on the rocks. With our highball glasses in hand, we start to head toward the double doors on the far end of the room that will lead us to the various rooms that people can have sex in.



MY COCK IS aching, and I'm so fucking horny that I want to just whip it out right here and rub one off. But that would be stupid when there's such an abundant supply of pussy for the taking. I got over being embarrassed by my hard-on over half an hour ago when Avril leaned over and whispered in my ear, "Andrew... I'm not sure if it makes me a slut or what, but I'm definitely getting laid tonight."

I had to laugh at her, but I was also relieved. Watching so many sex acts going on as we walked the various rooms had a profound effect on me. I'm stirred beyond lust, and all I can think about now is fucking.

I walk into The Orgy Room, my eyes scanning the dim interior. There are recessed lights in the ceiling that shine down on the various pieces of furniture that are in use, holding writhing naked bodies as they fuck. I don't see Avril, which is a relief because we promised each other we wouldn't watch the other. My eyes do land on a blonde I had talked to earlier. We flirted, she overtly invited Avril and me to a threesome with her, but I declined because... well, hell no to a threesome with Avril there.

Just no way.

But Avril and I decided to part ways out on The Deck, both determined we were going to make good use of the money that was spent to get us in these doors.

I make my way over to the blonde, and she's smiling at me in a way that says she still wants to spread her legs for just me alone.

"You came back," she says huskily when I reach her. "And you're alone."

"That way I can focus just on you," I tell her. She likes that answer, and I know she does because her hand comes down to palm my erection.

CHAPTER 4

Dane

IF I'D KNOWN how torturous this would be, I would have stayed home tonight.

But the thought of Avril and Andrew walking around The Wicked Horse on their own had me worrying.

Okay, let's be honest. The thought of Avril at The Wicked Horse is what worries me. Andrew can hold his own, and besides... if it was just Andrew, I'd be right down there alongside him right now as he got his dick sucked by a curvaceous blonde.

I'm watching the action from a private club within the private club that I belong to. It's simply entitled "The Apartment" as a nod to the fact the space was the former living quarters for the owner of the club, Jerico Jameson. He decided to convert it into a private club where, for an additional yearly membership, you can come and hang out in a more secluded, personal atmosphere. There is fucking going on in The Apartment, but not as much as in the other rooms. The membership in here is limited to just fifty slots, and you cannot bring non-members in without prior permission. There's an application, and you have to provide references. Since I'd been one of the founding patrons of The Wicked Horse, it was a given I'd get entrance.

For the most part, I come in here when I want to get away from the skin slapping and groans of release. Sometimes I'll come here first to enjoy a drink in the quiet.

Other times, I'll join a poker game that always seems to be going on. In fact, I'm thinking about joining the next game that starts.

But for right now, I'm staring at large, high-definition screens that are on a wall in what was probably the living room of Jerico's apartment. There's a screen for The Orgy Room, The Silo, The Deck, and The Waterfall Room. Each screen is split into four, with various cameras around each room providing different viewing angles.

I rarely pay attention to these screens because if I want to watch the action, I'd just go into one of those rooms and be up close and personal with it. But because I knew Avril and Andrew were coming tonight, I've been watching the screens more closely than I'd like to admit.

They came in almost an hour ago, and I held my breath as I awaited their reactions every time they entered a new room. I knew Andrew was turned on because I could see his erection pressing against his pants, but I couldn't tell with Avril.

Not at first.

But then I noticed how she squirmed and kept nibbling on her thumbnail nervously as she watched what was going on. She and Andrew hardly spoke to each other, but I expect it just had to be fucking awkward.

I mean... we're as thick as thieves, but in a million years I can't imagine watching Avril have sex. It would just be wrong.

So very fucking wrong that I know it would feel right, so that is exactly why I told them I wasn't coming out with them tonight. When it comes to sex, I like doing all the bad, wrong things because that is how I get my true kicks. Sharing that side of myself with Andrew wouldn't bother me at all, because as dudes, I've shared stories of my conquests with Andrew, and when he wasn't in a committed relationship, he would share his stories with me.

It's what dudes do. I'm pretty sure women do that with each other as well, but I can't imagine Avril and I sharing that.

Wrong, wrong, wrong.

Which is why I'm wondering what kind of evil prick I am that I'm watching her right now on the screen for The Deck. She and Andrew split up not long ago, and I took that to mean they decided they were going to fuck tonight. The thought horrified and titillated me—to think of Avril going out on a limb like that. She's not a big risk taker, and I know she's being fueled by all kinds of deep emotion right now.

Even though I want to turn my eyes away, I can't. She's been standing near the plexiglass walls that look out over the Vegas night, flirting with Kynan McGrath. He zeroed in on her the minute Andrew left her side, and I can't say as I'm surprised. The huge blond Brit who now owns The Jameson Group—formerly Jerico's private security organization—is well known in

The Wicked Horse. He's charming, funny, and a fucking stud, and I've never seen a woman turn him down.

By the way Avril's smiling at him, tucking her hair behind her ear and letting him skim his fingers down her bare arm, I know they're going to fuck and I don't like how it makes me feel.

I should turn away. Go play poker.

My head swivels, and I look over my shoulder. It appears a new game is getting ready to start.

But I turn back to look at the screens, my gaze coming to rest on The Orgy Room where Andrew wasted no time in hooking up with someone. The chick sucking his cock is taking her time about it, and Andrew looks on the verge of blowing. But I've been with that woman before, and she's a torturous tease. She's not going to let him come in her mouth.

My eyes go back to The Deck. For a moment, I can't locate Avril. But then from another angle, I see her following Kynan as he leads her by the hand from The Deck straight into The Orgy Room.

I pick them up on the same screen I'd been watching Andrew, and I hold my breath to see if they notice one another. I'm betting they didn't want to share fuck space, which is why they split up.

Kynan leads Avril to the opposite corner of the room from where Andrew is, and my gut tightens as he doesn't even hesitate. He pulls her right into his arms and kisses her passionately. I watch as her body melts into his while her fists clutch onto his shirt. He drops one hand to her ass and squeezes it, and a bolt of lust shoots straight through me, making my dick start to swell.

Just fucking great.

Turn around, Dane. Go play poker.

My eyes flick to Andrew, and he has the woman's hair clenched tightly in his hands while his hips flex in and out. His eyes are closed, and the muscles in his neck are straining.

I look back to Avril. Kynan now has his hand between her legs. He has at least two fingers inside of her by the way she's rocking and tilting her hips.

Fuck.

Back to Andrew. The blonde now has his cock in her hands, and she's putting a condom on him. There's a hot kiss with a slip of the tongue, and then Andrew's spinning her around to bend her over the back of a chaise lounge. He fists himself to line up, and then he drives into her deep.

My cock jumps in response.

Fuck.

Back to Avril, and Jesus... Kynan has her pushed back against a wall with her skirt hiked up over her waist. He drops to his knees, pulls one of her legs over his shoulder, and presses his face into the lace panties covering her pussy.

My cock starts leaking.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“Would you like another drink, Mr. Hawthorne?” I hear from beside me, and I turn to see Lucy standing there. She’s a gorgeous brunette with huge tits.

“I’d rather you suck my cock,” I practically rasp out.

Her eyes grow hot and her smile licentious. “Would love to.”

My eyes go back to the screen as she drops to her knees in front of me, efficiently pulling my dick out. I groan when her hot mouth takes me in, watching as Kynan pulls Avril’s panties to the side so he can tongue her clit. Avril’s head falls back and her hips gyrate against his mouth. One of her hands comes to the back of his head, and I can see her pulling him tighter to her. Just watching her take that little bit of control has me needing to come so bad. I let my own hand drop down to the woman before me and I grip her hair, slowing her movements a bit. She easily complies. To give myself a little bit more of a breather, I glance back to Andrew.

And holy fuck... his eyes are pinned on Avril and Kynan across the room. He’s seen her. By the look on his face, he’s as turned on as I am by watching her getting eaten. His jaw is locked, his eyes lasered onto the scene across the room, and his hips are punching hard and deep into the woman he’s fucking from behind. It’s almost as if with each stroke in, he’s imagining it to be Avril underneath him, and that is so fucking wrong.

Just as it’s wrong for me to be imagining that it’s my mouth between Avril’s legs or her mouth on my cock.

My balls start to tingle as I turn to look back at Avril just as she orgasms. While there’s no audio on the feed, her mouth opens and I can tell she lets out a scream of release as she gyrates her face against Kynan’s mouth. And then he’s up and pulling a condom out of his pocket. Avril’s hands work hungrily at his fly. When his dick is freed, she snatches the condom from him to roll it on.

I glance back at Andrew, and he's plowing into the blond while his teeth are biting down into his lower lip. His eyes are hungrily watching Avril, which prompts me to look back that way so I can see what he does.

And Kynan is lifting her up and wrapping her legs around his waist so he can lower her onto his dick. He does so slowly. When he's seated, his mouth finds Avril's in a punishing kiss as he presses her into the wall. She threads her hands into his hair and kisses him back with as much bruising force.

Kynan then starts to fuck her. His pants sit below his ass, the muscles flexing with every deep stroke in. He's a big dude, so I know Avril is stuffed to capacity. Her head falls against the wall and lolls to the side while he fucks her slowly and deeply. She looks like she's in subspace, her face completely awash with pleasure.

So much pleasure that a surge of jealousy rages through me. I'm not sure if I'm jealous that Kynan's fucking her or that she's feeling so fucking marvelous in this moment.

Suddenly, Avril's eyes open and her head lifts. As if she sensed him in the room, she looks across the sea of writhing bodies and her gaze meets Andrew's. I can see the shock on Avril's face, and then a flash of mortification. But then Kynan drives deep into her, and the pleasure is back.

But she doesn't take her eyes off Andrew.

My gaze flicks back and forth between them as I release my hold on the brunette's head so she can go faster on me.

Andrew fucking the woman hard from behind, Avril getting fucked hard by Kynan.

Both staring at each other almost defiantly.

Kynan moves faster, and I can see Avril tense up. Once again, her head falls back and her eyes squeeze shut as she comes. I look to Andrew. He's planted himself deep with his head thrown back while he groans out his own release.

And then I explode in the brunette's mouth with a loud groan.

Fuck, I feel utterly filthy for what just went down. While the woman on her knees before me laps up the rest of my semen, I can't help the wicked grin that spreads across my face.

CHAPTER 5

Avril

IT'S MONDAY MORNING, and I'm stewing in my office. I know Andrew's here because I peeped out my door and saw his office light on.

I'm pissed because he didn't come to say good morning to me, which means he's still feeling all kinds of awkward and put off by what we did at The Wicked Horse on Friday. I took an Uber home that night, longing for my own bed. Before we parted ways out on the sidewalk in front of The Onyx, I made him promise me that it was all cool.

I'd pulled him into a hard hug before releasing to look him in the eye. "Promise me that we're good. That this doesn't change anything between us."

He'd smiled, and it had seemed so genuine. He put both his hands to my face, bent down to peer into my eyes, and said, "It changes nothing."

Liar.

And I'm tired of wondering what he's thinking. I push up from my desk chair and march out of my office. With my eyes narrowed on his door, I think about what a revelation The Wicked Horse had been for me. I may not be any closer to understanding why Jamie did what he did, but I came out of there understanding a lot about myself.

I learned that I truly didn't understand sex. I mean, my sex life has been good for the most part, and I truly believe I satisfied Jamie. But I don't think I really understood the importance of it until Friday night. Like a mystery being unveiled, I walked out of that sex club realizing the potential for pleasure was limitless and didn't have to be sought only in the confines of a relationship. I guess it provided me solace that at least I still had the ability and power to seek and achieve intimacy and pleasure in other places, albeit unconventionally.

Without bothering to knock on Andrew's door, I push it open and brace against whatever expression he'll give me.

He looks up, and I get a flush of embarrassment followed by guilt, because he knows that I know he's hiding from me. His gaze quickly goes to his computer screen, and he says, "I'm in the middle of something, Avril. Can it wait?"

No. It can't.

I walk right up to his desk and pull the power cord free from the back of his monitor.

"What the hell, Av?" Andrew snarls as he looks up to me.

"Don't," is all I say.

His eyebrows pull inward. "Don't what?"

"Don't break your promise to me," I tell him softly. "You promised we were good."

"We are good," he says, but even I can hear the lie in his voice.

Stepping back, I smooth my skirt down and take a seat in one of his guest chairs on the opposite side of his desk.

Clasping my hands in my lap, I lean forward to look him in the eye. "You remember that New Year's Eve party our senior year?"

Andrew's eyes darken to the color of slate. "Yeah... why?"

"I kissed you at the stroke of midnight. And you kissed me back."

"I remember," he murmurs. "And then you kissed Dane. And he kissed you back."

"We were drunk and stoned," I remind him. "But we laughed about it the next day."

"Little different," he mutters.

"Aha," I say as I come up out of the chair and point an accusing finger at him. "You *are* totally regretting what happened at The Wicked Horse."

Andrew's face flushes, and he stands up from his chair. "Well, fuck, Avril... watching some guy fuck you is a little different than a drunk midnight kiss."

I shake my head. "It's not so different. Friday night, you and I were high on sex and lust and we acted on it. Sure... the acts were more intimate, but the point is... you're letting it change something between us."

Andrew gives a sigh and scrubs his hand over the scruff on his face. His eyes are troubled, and that pains me. "Aren't you weirded out by it in the slightest? Don't you regret doing something so impetuous and bizarre?"

I turn away from Andrew and walk over to the windows to look out over

the city. It's chilly and gray outside, but the weather doesn't match my mood. I learned too many things this weekend that have simply lit a fire in my gut. One of the things I learned was that I was completely turned on by watching Andrew. He'd watched me back, but rather than disgust me, it... intrigued me?

Crossing my arms over my chest, I keep my gaze out the window. "You know what I regret? I regret spending years of my life not knowing my value as a woman."

"Avril," Andrew chastises, but I give an impatient wave of my hand.

Turning back toward him, I clarify, "I'm not talking about equality or my worth in the boardroom. You and Dane never saw me as less than you in that respect. But I am talking about my worth as a female."

"Is this about Jamie?" Andrew asks.

I shrug. "Maybe. Partly. But mostly about me."

"I don't understand."

Walking back around his desk, I sit back down in the chair again. Andrew follows suit, leaning his forearms on the top.

"Andrew," I share with him in a low tone vibrating with revelation. "Friday night... I had power. Not a better type of power than what I wield in my career, but a power that's important all the same. A power I never knew I had."

"Sex," he says hesitantly.

"The power to seek it for myself and for no other reason than to make me feel good about myself," I clarify. "Dane was right. It was liberating. When I walked out, I knew myself better, and Andrew... God help me... but I felt good about what I did in there. I felt alive and so no, I have no regrets at all. In fact, I went back again on Saturday night."

Andrew's eyes stare at me wide and unblinking. When he finally talks, his voice is raspy. "You did?"

I nod enthusiastically and laugh. "Figured if Jamie was out getting some exciting sex, why shouldn't I?"

"So, this is what? All about getting back at Jamie?" His expression is guarded, but I see the worry.

Shaking my head, I blow that idea off with another wave of my hand. "Of course, it's not about getting back at Jamie. He would never know what I did.

It's about feeling good. I realized when I woke up Saturday... I was craving to go back. I wanted to feel good, and sexy, and powerful again. So, I went."

Andrew slumps back in his chair, bringing his elbow to one of the armrests so he can place his chin in his palm while he studies me. Finally, he asks, "Were you like... with the same guy?"

"No, I wasn't," is all I tell him. I don't even know the name of the guy I was with, and I don't care to. I only know that he fucked me from behind out on The Deck, and it was fantastic.

The silence is heavy between us while Andrew just stares at me. At least he's not looking at me like I'm an idiot, but I can tell he's learning something new about his friend that he never in a million years thought he'd find out.

"What happened Friday night..." I say softly, and his eyes focus in on mine. "Did that hurt our friendship?"

"You mean am I going to toss away seventeen years of friendship because we happened to watch each other have sex with someone else?"

I nod with a sly grin.

"No," he says with a sigh. "Of course not. It's insane how many times I've inadvertently seen Dane having sex with someone, and I've never thought twice about it. I just need to put you in that same category, I guess."

I can do nothing but nod my agreement with his sentiment, because that was the best I could hope for. I don't share with him, however, that I do think the friendship has changed.

I remembered Friday night and the way Andrew and I stared at each other while we were in the throes of sexual pleasure with other people. We refused to look away from each other in embarrassment, and that right there changed everything.

It strengthened my feelings for Andrew. It tightened my bond with him. It made me respect him even more that we could share something so wild and uninhibited, and still sit here right now validating our friendship is as strong as ever.

Friday night at The Wicked Horse changed everything between Andrew and me, but I don't think he realizes the extent of it just yet.

But I do provide him with a hint. "In your office Friday, when we discussed going to The Wicked Horse and Dane was clearly bent out of shape about me going?"

"You just caught him by surprise," Andrew says to defend his friend. I

can't help but smile because that's something the three of us do routinely... rush to the defense of one who is pitted against another.

But then my smile turns sober, and I tell Andrew the truth. "It was the first time I felt excluded by the two of you."

"He didn't mean it—"

"Being in The Orgy room with you Friday night... as we shared all that was good, consensual, and fulfilling. It was nice to share that with you, Andrew."

Not unexpectedly, Andrew blushes but his smile in return is genuine.

"It truly showed me that I could be equal to you in all ways," I add on softly. "And as we're able to sit here now and talk about this, and you're not looking at me like I'm crazy... well, it means everything to me."

Andrew stands up from his chair and comes around the desk. His eyes stay pinned on me the entire time, even when he squats down by my knees. He takes one of my hands and squeezes it. "There is nothing that you could do that would ever make me look at you differently, Av. And I mean nothing."

I've never been an overly emotional woman, really only crying during sad movies or over injured animals. I definitely have a temper, but I've been fortunate that it usually manifests into icy but collected deliberation before I act in response.

Well... except for the getting drunk and dumping Jamie's stuff on the front lawn. I guess that day I acted as a truly betrayed woman whose heart was hurt and whose pride was deflated.

That was then though, and this is now, and my eyes mist up slightly.

Leaning forward and pulling my hand away from Andrew's, I give him a hug. He stands up, and I have no choice but to stand as well since my arms are wrapped around his shoulders.

He reciprocates by engulfing me in his embrace and rocking me back and forth. With a last squeeze, he lets me go and we step back from one another.

Andrew gives a little cough, drops his gaze, and then looks back up at me. "So... um, I better get back to work."

"Me too," I say with a smile. "Thanks for the talk."

"Yeah... sure."

I turn for the door but before I reach it, Andrew asks, "Are you going back?"

My hand freezes on the knob as I twist my neck to look at him over my shoulder. "I am. Are you?"

Andrew shrugs. "Maybe. Not sure."

"If you liked it," I tell him candidly. "You should go back."

To my surprise, the doorknob twists under my hand from someone on the other side. A quick knock and the door is opening, so I step back. Dane pokes his head in, looking at me first, then Andrew, and then back to me.

"Good morning," I say with a bright smile.

"Morning," he says, returning one that's not as bright and is actually almost hesitant. "Good weekend?"

"Fantastic weekend," I tell him. I give a wave to Andrew before stepping past Dane into the hall. I call back to both men. "Talk later."

CHAPTER 6

Dane

“UNLESS THERE’S ANYTHING to discuss, let’s get out of here,” I say as I look around the conference room. It’s nearing eight PM, and I just finished up our quarterly meeting for Caterva’s technology advisory board.

While my idea to change the face of blood analysis was pioneering, it was also an uphill battle. I didn’t seek further education after getting my B.S. in chemical engineering, but I knew if I was going to push the idea forward, I’d need to stack my advisors heavily around me. The technology board is replete with pharmaceutical executives, diagnostics experts, and university professors. Andrew co-chairs the board with my former Berkley professor, who is the senior faculty scientist at the school’s national laboratory.

It takes another half an hour for everyone to give farewells and handshakes until we meet again. Most are flying out this evening, which is par for the course. We’re not social friends, and they all have other careers they attend to when not acting as my advisors.

When the last board member leaves, my gaze turns to Andrew, who is stuffing the meeting materials into his backpack. The chief scientist for a major biotech firm and he still walks around with a ratty NorthFace backpack. While I’m in an expensive tailored suit, he’s happy in jeans, a long-sleeved t-shirt, and some Vans, but I don’t give a fuck what he wears or how he transports documents. I only care that he’s in this company with Avril and me.

“Want to grab some dinner tonight?” I ask, and his head pops up. “I bet Avril is still here working. Let’s go grab some sushi.”

“Avril’s gone,” Andrew says and looks back down to the table to grab a small binder that he slips in his backpack. After he zips it up, he looks back to me and shocks me down to my bones. “She’s going back to The Wicked Horse tonight.”

“What?” My voice comes out slightly high-pitched from surprise at that statement.

Slinging his backpack over his shoulder and then shoving that hand into a jean pocket, he gives me a look that’s almost accusing. “You apparently created a monster.”

“I created a monster?”

“Well, the club created a monster,” Andrew mutters. “She went Friday, loved it so much that she went back Saturday. And she shot me a text a little bit ago to tell me she was going again tonight.”

“What the fuck?” I murmur as my gaze drifts off to the Vegas skyline lit up with a million sparkles.

“She invited me to go,” Andrew says, and my head snaps back to him.

“As in to be... with her at the club?” I ask for clarification. While I personally know that both Avril and Andrew had a good time Friday night, I never would have taken either one as repeat visitors. And while I know the way they stared at each other while they were fucking forged some type of new bond, I didn’t think it would extend any further.

Andrew shakes his head. “No, not like that. Just as friends, and to do our own thing.”

“Jesus,” I say in disbelief as I sink down into the closest chair to me. I stare blankly across the table.

“I’m worried about her,” Andrew says, and he appears in my line of sight by taking the chair opposite me.

“Why?” I ask hesitantly.

I figure that’s what they were talking about yesterday morning in his office because there was a seriously heavy vibe in the air when I opened the door. I knew that shared experience would have changed something, and I’ve been worried about it. I’ve also been replaying in my mind how fucking sexy it was watching them that night, and I know something’s changed within me, too.

I just don’t know what exactly.

“Is that club dangerous?” Andrew asks, refusing to answer my question.

I shake my head. “Not at all. Completely safe. Good security. There’s never been a problem to my knowledge.”

“I don’t like it,” Andrew says softly.

“Don’t like what?” I push at him. “The club itself or the fact you and

Avril shared something intimate and it's messing with your mind?"

His eyes narrow on me, as there's enough confidence in my statement that I know what I'm talking about. "How do you know what we shared was intimate?"

"I was there... in a smaller private club. I saw you two on a video feed."

"Fuck," Andrew mutters as his gaze drops from mine. His embarrassment couldn't be any clearer. "This is so fucking complicated."

"How is Avril?" I ask. I can see Andrew's bothered, but I want to know about Avril, since she's the one I've always stepped up to the plate to protect as a woman. I don't see her as lesser or weaker, but I do have an inherent need to make sure she's looked after.

Always have for as long as I can remember.

Andrew's gaze lifts back up to meet mine. His voice is flat. "She's completely in love with that place. Went on about how liberating it was, and she found a new power or something like that. But I think she's just wanting to even the score with Jamie."

"She's not like that," I assert.

Andrew sighs. "Yeah... I know. It's just easier to believe that rather than accept that she's turned into a sex kitten or something overnight."

And I see it.

Clear as day on his face.

The door has been cracked open, and Andrew is now looking at Avril in a completely different light. He wants her.

"Did you know that you and Avril both came at the same time Friday night?" I ask, and it gets the intended reaction I was driving for. His body jolts as his eyes narrow and his teeth grind together.

"Goddamn it, Dane," Andrew growls. "You watched the entire thing? I thought you just meant you'd seen us walking through the club or something."

I lean forward and tell my best friend the truth so he quits hiding from it and can deal with it. "I watched the two of you fuck other people while staring across that room at each other, and I did it while some chick was sucking my cock. I fucking blew my load right along with you two."

And shit... just saying those words causes my dick to start to swell, because it was one of the hottest things I'd ever seen in my life.

"You were turned on by what *you* were watching," I tell him softly but

assuredly.

He stares back at me unblinkingly, but his jawline is tight with tension.

“I was turned on, too. You’d have to be dead not to be aroused by it.”

Through clenched teeth, Andrew says, “I never wanted to think of her that way.”

I lean forward on the table, clasp my hands to give him a pointed look. “Buddy... it was never my intention either. It’s why I was against the idea to begin with. But that ship has sailed.”

“So what?” Andrew says aggressively as he also leans forward, pressing his palms into the table. “I just put it out of my mind? Pretend it didn’t happen?”

“If that’s what you need to do,” I tell him with a nod. “Or... you accept it and move on.”

“Move on?”

I don’t answer right away so I can collect my thoughts. I have the power to settle Andrew down, or I have the power to make him consider something different. I choose to go different because I know Andrew. It will kill him to pretend because he’s the one with the biggest conscience of the three of us. He has to confront his guilt and realize there is nothing wrong with what he and Avril did that night.

I know I sure as fuck don’t feel guilty about it, although I am a little relieved that Avril seems to be taken with the club.

“Andrew... the three of us have the strongest base of a friendship that anyone could imagine,” I point out. “We’re business partners. We admire and respect one another. We support each other. While I really didn’t want Avril in that environment, mainly because she was fresh off a breakup, it’s done and I’m frankly a little glad. I’m glad you’ve both seen a part of my world that you knew about, but never really understood. But since Avril is going back, and inviting you, I think she understands it quite clearly. There is no wrong within that club. And I think she proved to you that she can leave that behind and step back into our normal routine outside of that place.”

With a huge sigh, Andrew scrubs his hands over his face. His gaze comes back to mine, and I can still see the warring within. “I hear you, and I’ll think on it. But thanks for talking to me about it. Knowing you’re not all that weirded out is a little stabilizing.”

This relieves me... the fact his stance is opening. I think he’s in for a

world of hurt if he denies to himself that he wants Avril. He may not act on it, and probably won't, but he can't pretend it's not there. That would not be good for anyone.

I give Andrew a confident smile so he won't ever guess I have my own turmoil. While I'm not weirded out and don't feel an ounce of guilt, I am most definitely feeling something. Thank fuck Andrew doesn't ask me my exact feelings because I wouldn't be able to lie to him.

God fucking help me... I want Avril, too.

While I know Andrew is probably going to go home by himself tonight, because he just doesn't have it within him at this point to accept his feelings, there is no way in hell I'll be able to stay away from The Wicked Horse knowing Avril's going back.

I don't intend to act on anything. At the most, I'll watch from the anonymity of The Apartment. But I'm very much looking forward to watching Avril continue to expand her horizons.

CHAPTER 7

Avril

I DON'T BOTHER with much more than a cursory glance around at the people in The Social Room—the area just outside the entrance lobby of The Wicked Horse. While I've learned many things about myself over the last few days, one of the most enlightening is that I'm not a mingler.

The Social Room is where people come to engage in conversation, flirt, and have a cocktail before they get down to the business of what they really came here for. I'd observed many people in this room that first night, and what I realized is it's crowded with those who aren't sure what they want. It could be they're nervous, or maybe they're undecided.

But in reality, it's for those who don't have fearless initiative, and that's something that I've never had a short supply of.

Or... it's for people who are looking for their prey, I think as my eyes catch a tall figure standing at the end of the bar, and I realize it's Dane.

He's nursing what looks to be whiskey while his eyes sweep the room hungrily, no doubt looking for his next conquest.

Not that it would be much of a conquest. I can't imagine any woman would ever say no to him. He's even more gorgeous at thirty-nine than in his college days, although he still wears his dark hair a bit long and messy on top with that Tony Stark-esque goatee. The fact there's a little silver in the beard at the corners of his mouth and at his temples only makes him sexier in my opinion.

I consider ignoring him, but then his eyes meet mine and his lips curl up in a smile of recognition. My stride falters. Before I know it, I'm heading his way. It's probably necessary for us to have a talk if we're going to be frequenting the same place to get our rocks off.

Dane gets the bartender's attention as I approach. I know by the time I reach him, he'll have ordered me a red wine.

“Fancy meeting you here,” I say as I put my clutch on the bar top, followed by my elbow as I turn to face Dane. There aren’t any stools at the bar, so as to encourage people to move around and engage.

Dane’s eyes travel down my body, and I have to wonder what he thinks of the slinky sapphire dress that comes barely past my ass and has a plunging neckline. He’s only ever really seen me in business suits at the office and jeans on the weekends, minus an occasional evening or cocktail dress for a formal event.

When his eyes meet mine, he says, “Nice dress.”

“You like?” I ask cheekily as I do a slow spin.

I get immense satisfaction over the darkening of his hazel eyes as I come around to face him, as he’s just found out there’s virtually no back to the dress.

“Look at you, Avril,” he says in a husky, appreciative voice. “You’ve fucking blossomed.”

I can’t help but laugh and smack him on the chest before I chide him. “Don’t make me self-conscious. You know this isn’t my usual fashion statement.”

“You’re definitely making a statement,” he commends, and the resulting flush of pleasure from the appreciation in his tone surprises me. I’ve never cared before if Dane or Andrew thought me attractive.

Okay, wait.

That’s not exactly true. There was a time when I’d first met Dane our freshman year that I was as boggled by his looks and charm as all the other freshmen at Berkley. Make that sophomores, juniors, and seniors as well. When we’d been paired as lab partners that first semester, I could barely talk to him because I was afraid I’d start drooling.

But then I quickly realized that I wasn’t the type of woman who attracted Dane. While he was most definitely the kind that pushed all my buttons, I wasn’t sexy, buxom, or sexualized enough for what he wanted.

That ultimately all worked out because from a lab partnership was born a friendship that became quite strong. We met Andrew that first semester in a science club we’d joined, and well... the rest is history.

The bartender brings my wine, and I take a sip before I look back up to Dane. “Did Andrew tell you I was coming back here?”

Dane nods, and I can tell by the look on his face that Andrew probably

also spilled his worries to Dane.

“Are you going to try to talk me out of this or make me feel bad about it?” I challenge.

I get a quick, easy laugh in return as he shakes his head. “Avril... you have my full support to be here.”

“You didn’t want me here at first,” I remind him. He at least has the grace to look chagrined.

Leaning toward me, Dane gives me an understanding look. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to exclude you. I wasn’t sure it was the right thing for you so soon after breaking up with Jamie, but it appears I was wrong.”

The way my shoulders drop in relaxation, I hadn’t realized I was so tense or how important his answer would be to me. I let out a breath of relief and then admit to Dane, “Andrew’s a little bent out of shape about it.”

Dane nodded. “He is, but I told him to accept it and move on.”

“He swore it wouldn’t change our friendship,” I muse as I run my finger over the top of my wineglass.

“It totally changed the friendship, Av,” Dane says, and I blink in surprise as my eyes come back to his.

“What do you mean?” I ask, the fear in my voice evident. I knew it had changed, but I’m afraid Dane knows something more than I do.

“Relax,” he says soothingly as his hand comes to rest on my shoulder, which is bare except for a tiny spaghetti strap. His warm palm on my skin makes me shiver. “The friendship is intact and strong. But there’s no unseeing what he saw that night.”

My body jerks slightly, and Dane’s hand squeezes my shoulder in return. “He told you the details?”

Dane’s eyes glitter with something I would say was dark amusement and his words cause my belly to flip. “I was watching you both. From a private club within that I belong to.”

The immediate heat that flushes from my chest, up my neck, and into my face warms me from within at the realization that both of my best friends watched me have sex. My heart thuds with the realization that I’m slightly turned on by this fact.

Rather than mull over my embarrassment, I tell Dane what I told Andrew yesterday. “It’s empowering. I liked it, and I’m going to continue to come

here. In fact, I bought a membership. I don't think Andrew has quite reconciled any of this, but I hope you can."

Dane gives a gallant nod of understanding. "Avril... you are a grown, beautiful woman who has always been empowered. You're just exploring a part of yourself that maybe you ignored."

"So, you don't look down on me? Think this is whorish?"

Throwing his head back to laugh, Dane lets me know he finds that ludicrous. When he captures my eyes again, he shakes his head. "Avril... if I thought women coming here made them whorish, I'd never get laid. I think the women who come here and explore their sexuality is the best fucking thing that ever happened to me. Takes a lot of the hard work out of connecting with someone, you know what I mean?"

I know exactly what he means. It's why I don't bother mingling with the people in here. I'm allowed to be a confident woman looking to have an amazing sexual experience, and there are hundreds of likeminded people in here all wanting the same thing.

Dane picks up his whiskey and knocks the rest of it back with a huge swallow. He pushes his glass away and shakes his head at the bartender to indicate he doesn't want another.

He looks back to me and steps in so we are toe to toe. My head has to tilt back so I can maintain eye contact. "One word of advice, though."

"What's that?"

"Compartmentalize," he says simply.

"Excuse me?"

"Keep this separate from the rest of your life," he explains. "What you do in here is filled with intimacy by the nature of what you're doing, but when you walk out those doors, it's done. The single people in here aren't looking for relationships. The swinging couples in here aren't looking for a permanent third. Everything in here is fleeting and temporary, so don't let your heart get tied up."

"The last thing in the world I'm looking for is a relationship," I immediately deny, and that's the complete truth. One of the things I've enjoyed the most about my experiences so far—outside the stellar orgasms the likes of which Jamie never gave me—was that I didn't have to worry about that person when I left them behind.

"I hear you," Dane says kindly. "I believe you. But the longer you're

here, the more you'll start developing a friendship of sorts with some of these people. Just remember that's all it is. Fucking and friendship."

"Friends with benefits," I say dryly. "I think I can master that concept."

Hell, I'd done that plenty of times before over the years as I never quite had the time or the inclination to devote to a true, committed relationship until I met Jamie.

Dane bends down to peer at me a little more closely, seemingly wanting to make sure I believe what I just said. I stare back at him resolutely.

Then he surprises me with a kiss to my cheek and a murmur in my ear. "Have fun tonight, Av. I know I'm going to in The Silo tonight."

An unbidden, maybe even unwelcomed, throb hits me between my legs at the thought of Dane in The Silo. It was beyond surreal the way Andrew and I watched each other Friday night, but in reality, we didn't see much in the way of details. There was a woman in front of him obscuring his goods, and Kynan was definitely covering most of me. The intensity of sharing that experience was all in the face and how that pleasure manifested itself there.

I don't even think to say goodbye to Dane as he pushes past me, although I do turn to briefly watch him walk through the doors that lead to the back rooms. When he's gone, I turn back to my wine and sip at it lightly for a few minutes as I turn to stare at the liquor bottles behind the shelf to discourage anyone from coming to talk to me.

Dane watched me that night as well. He was somewhere in a private room, watching on a video. Tonight, he didn't act affronted or weirded out by it. Oddly, for the man who didn't want to invite me here to begin with, he seems completely okay with me being here now.

I also wonder if that means he's as open to me watching him as I apparently am to the way he watched me, because it never crossed my mind to chastise him for that or worry it would impact the friendship.

Tilting the glass to my mouth, I take one last swallow of wine before pushing the half-empty cup away from me. I don't need any fortification, letting my power and initiative drive me forward. Snagging my clutch off the bar top, I turn toward the doors that will lead me to The Silo.



I'D ONLY BEEN in this room once that first night I came here, and it was only to watch the action. But this room out of all of them fascinates me beyond measure. It's circular with glassed-in rooms around the perimeter where people can have sex. There are fetish rooms, rooms with sex machines, and even rooms that are just mattresses or other furniture to have sex on. It's where people who want to put on a show and draw a crowd go. The purpose is to titillate and spread the lust around a little.

My eyes scan the rooms, which are all in use. The first room has a raised dais with a silk-covered mattress. In the center are three men having sex. One on his hands and knees while he gets fucked from behind and sucks the other guy's dick. They're all three gorgeous, ripped, and tattooed, and I spend a few minutes watching because it's erotic as well for some reason.

But then I move along the perimeter, checking out the other occupants. I'm intrigued by the one of a woman suspended from a harness in the ceiling while two guys fuck her at the same time, one to her front and the other from behind. As I tilt my head, I realize that both of their cocks are in her pussy at the same time and my eyes go round with the realization that it can happen.

I had no clue.

My eyes go to the woman's face. She is completely blissed out, moaning and screaming and begging for them to go harder.

Damn... I feel a surge of wetness hit my panties, and I become instantly inflamed with lust.

I spin around, looking at the other patrons in the room. Most are mingling, a few are fucking on some of the couches, or even up at the bar. I don't see Dane, so I continue to walk the perimeter of the rooms, checking out the other inhabitants.

All of it inciting within me a burning need for something.

And then I see him.

Dane... in one of the rooms with a woman and another man.

Dane Hawthorne, my best friend and business partner... gloriously naked with chiseled muscles and a very erect and impressively huge cock. I stare at it without an ounce of contrition. He's stroking it languorously while he watches the other man and woman fuck for a little bit. The guy is on his back and the woman's riding him with abandon. Dane watches the couple, his eyes burning with hunger.

I step up to the glassed window, completely unabashed to be watching.

There are others watching same as me, and it's only fair... seeing as how Dane watched me Friday night.

Dane is pure male perfection as he walks over to the couple and kneels behind the woman. From out of nowhere, he has a condom on and a bottle of lube in his hand. With a large palm to the woman's back, he pushes her forward until her hands hit the mattress by the other man's shoulders.

I watch fascinated, turned on, and even slightly horrified as Dane spreads the woman's ass cheeks so he can pour lube. My heartrate accelerates as he starts to finger her ass... one finger, then two, and finally a third.

Holy shit. The woman writhes and cries out, completely having lost the ability to move on top of the other guy. No worries, he's just fucking her from below by thrusting his cock inside her.

And then my throat goes dry as Dane lines the head of his condom-covered cock up to her ass, and slowly pushes his way in. There's no working back and forth, moving in and out. He just pushes in, inch by inch of his huge cock disappearing inside the woman.

I feel my own ass pucker in abject sympathy. While I'm very curious as to what that feels like, I'm betting there's quite a bit of pain with it.

Couldn't tell by the woman's face, though.

She's groaning, chewing on her lip, eyes bright with passion as the two men dominate her. Both set up a rigorous pace within her body, and I stare in wonder at the cocks moving in and out of her.

A sudden image flashes before me, me sandwiched in between Andrew and Dane, and my sex actually spasms from the thought. The reaction of my body so surprises me that I'm jolted away from the carnal scene before me.

I spin around, my panties soaked and my need high.

I need to find someone to fuck and fast.

My eyes sweep the room and then lock on another man who is staring at me. He's very handsome with dark red hair, a beard, and piercing blue eyes. He crooks a finger at me, and I can tell by the look on his face he knows I need something.

By the way he's beckoning me to him, I know he can give it to me.

CHAPTER 8

Andrew

3 weeks later...

FABRON LEMAIRE SITS ACROSS the table from me, calmly cutting into his steak while he goes right to the chase. Before he spears the piece, he glances right to Dane, left to Avril, then back to me because it's my language he's speaking.

"My imaging cytometer is unparalleled and FDA approved. I'm confident we can adapt it to your analyzer," he says in his heavy French accent.

"We would need to run some initial tests," I tell him, unwilling to commit anything based on just how well his patent has worked in standard hematology analyzers.

"I'm willing to do that," he says with an affirming nod, "but I'd want my own scientists involved."

I'm shaking my head before he can finish his demand. "Impossible. Everything is done in a sealed laboratory."

"I'll sign a non-disclosure," he insists.

"We're not about to let a competitive company into our labs to work on this. You wouldn't want us poking around your secrets."

"Then offer me a partnership," Fabron says. By the gleam in his eye, I know this was top priority in this meeting.

My eyes slide to Dane, who looks amused as he sits back casually in his chair. Fabron turns to look at him as well. "Dane... you know my company's reputation. My patent is solid. While I don't understand the technology you've developed so far, I'm confident with the little you've told me that my cytometer is what you need to push forward with FDA approval."

Dane leans forward and tells Fabron, "We've got our own people developing a cytometer. Why shouldn't we just stick with that?"

Avril gives my leg a slight kick under the table, and I turn to look at her. I do this knowing I can tune Fabron and Dane out at this point. As the CEOs of their respective biotech companies, we're getting close to the nitty gritty. When Fabron wants a partnership interest, it pulls it off my plate and puts it squarely on Dane's.

Avril gives me a pointed look, and I can see the question in her eyes.

Will Dane bring this guy into the company?

I shrug and look back to Fabron as he extols his company's virtues to Dane. Fabron is in his early fifties, but he looks about ten years younger. He got his education in the States and then went back to his home city of Paris to open Révéler Biotech, where he's been pioneering the methodology for disease detection for his country.

"Well, why wouldn't I want to partner with Caterva?" Fabron asks. "You're one of the most talked about biotech firms in the world. Your board of directors consists of three U.S. senators, a five-star general, and a former secretary of state. The entire world has their eyes on Caterva because if your machine can be vetted and ultimately approved, you're talking about changing the entire way the medical industry diagnoses disease. It's worth billions."

"Tell me something I don't know," Dane says with an easy laugh. He likes Fabron and had originally approached him to sit on the advisory board, but he couldn't commit due to some other familial obligations he had going on at the time.

"You have one of the keenest scientific minds heading up your R&D," Fabron says as he gives a pointed nod of respect toward me. His gaze goes to Avril, and his eyes warm slightly. "And your chief operations officer is smarter than either of you men, as well as being undeniably beautiful."

I roll my eyes because that's just Fabron being French and a flirt. He's never made it a secret how much he finds Avril to be attractive on prior visits, but he's sincerely attracted to her mind as well. To my surprise, Avril doesn't blush as I would expect. She's never been that great about taking an honest compliment about her looks.

Instead, she meets his gaze with a steady one of her own, her lips curled up slightly in amusement. "Votre flatteur est inutile."

Fabron laughs and points to me and Dane as he says, "Je ne cherche pas à te flatter c'est la vérité. Viens travailler pour moi. Tu seras bien plus heureuse

qu'avec ses deux prétentieux.”

“I hate that you know French,” Dane mutters.

“What are you two saying?” I ask Avril with a good-natured smile.

Because she’s an overachiever, she stuck with her language studies of French long after she’d satisfied her requirements in undergrad. She’s done extensive traveling for pleasure throughout the country, and that’s normally where she takes her vacations each year.

Avril puts her elbows on the table. With a laugh, she waves at Fabron. Her voice is dismissive yet slightly flirty. “I told him he didn’t need to flatter me. He told me he spoke the truth and then offered me a job.”

Dane laughs, but I can tell the humor doesn’t entirely reach his eyes. He leans toward Fabron and claps him on the shoulder. “My friend... here you are trying to do business with me, but you want to steal one of my most-valued partners and friends? That’s not exactly the way I’d advise you to proceed.”

Fabron chuckles and nods at Dane. He shoots a quick glance at Avril and inclines his head. “Avril... I meant every word I said, but only if I can’t convince your partner to bring me on to help you at Caterva. If he doesn’t, all bets are off.”

Interestingly, Dane’s face hardens over those words because while I think Fabron may be joking, clearly Dane takes that as a threat.

Luckily, Avril diffuses the situation. “Well, I’m actually very flattered you find me worthy of your company, Fabron, but I’m pretty confident when I tell you there’s nothing you could ever offer me to leave these two—what did you call them? Peacocks?”

Fabron lets out a hearty laugh, but doesn’t look even slightly chagrined he must have called us peacocks in French to Avril, or that she outed him to her partners.

That’s my girl.

But Dane and I laugh right along with them because when it boils down to it, we all like Fabron. He’s a brilliant entrepreneur, his company is one of the most revered in the world, and he’s got an impeccable reputation for fair dealings. On top of that, our venture capitalists have been pushing us hard to consider bringing him into the company.

The dinner continues, and we move away from business. We’ve known Fabron for years and have socialized with him at conferences. Avril’s even

visited him and his family in Paris on occasion to stay with them when she traveled.

I wonder if she'll still do that, because as it turns out, the familial issues that kept Fabron from joining our board was that he and his wife went through a very contentious divorce. I'm thinking his newly single status and the appreciative gleam in his eye when he called Avril beautiful was to be expected.

I wonder what Fabron would think if he knew that Avril went to a sex club to get her kicks nowadays, and she probably wasn't interested in having a long-distance love affair with a Frenchman.

We've not really discussed The Wicked Horse since that one and only day in my office. I have not gone back, and Avril hasn't invited me. I know she's still going though because Dane told me that he sees her there on occasion. I've wanted to pump him for information, but I haven't worked up the guts to do so.

I mean... what would I ask?

Do you watch her?

Does she watch you?

Are you two fucking?

I shake my head to dispel that. There's no way they're fucking. I'd be able to tell, and when the three of us are within the boundaries of our professional relationships with each other, we are just the same as we ever were. I can detect absolutely no change in Avril and Dane's relationship, although I'll grudgingly admit that Avril seems happier and more relaxed at work. I wonder if that's because she's getting her world rocked frequently at a sex club.

The meal winds down, and Fabron invites us for some drinks in the hotel bar where he's staying. Avril declines, citing an early morning meeting she has with the head of our marketing department, but Dane and I agree. It's what you do in business, and as of the end of the dinner, nothing's been decided.

Nothing will be decided tonight, but I know Dane will want to have as much discourse with Fabron as possible, and there's no better way to do it than over drinks so tongues get a little loose.

When we're situated in the bar and our cocktails sit before us at a low table set in a corner, Fabron picks up his gin and tonic and gives it a

thoughtful stir. When he looks to Dane, he says, “I really want to make this happen, Dane. My company could be very good for your company.”

Dane nods respectfully. “There is much that we both could gain from an alliance, Fabron. But I am treading very carefully. Please don’t be offended by me taking my time with this proposition.”

“Of course,” he says lightly... almost dismissively, but I know damn well he’s not given up. He’ll bring the conversation back around before the evening’s over. But when he decides to change subjects, he does so with a flourish. He looks between the two of us and says, “I know you two have an incredibly tight friendship with Avril. And while we are friends, yes, we aren’t close friends. I’m curious... is she still seeing that doctor she’d been dating?”

My eyes meet Dane’s. Ordinarily when a man would try to pump information about Avril of a personal nature, we’d laugh it off. But if I was wondering whether something’s changed since she started going to The Wicked Horse, I have my answer now. Dane’s look to me is the one I’m giving him.

Oh, hell no, this French bastard isn’t going to make a move on Avril.

“She’s still dating him pretty seriously,” I find myself lying right to Fabron’s face. “I expect they’ll get married sooner rather than later.”

“They’ve been together several years, oui?” he pushes. “I’m surprised he hasn’t asked for her hand yet.”

Dane throws his own question in to Fabron. “How have things been going since your divorce?”

Fabron wrinkles his nose before taking a sip of his drink. “The divorce was contentious, and not because we fought over the crystal. She wanted part of Révéler Biotech, and well... that just wasn’t going to happen. I’m very glad that it’s resolved now.”

“Well, look elsewhere other than at Avril,” Dane says pleasantly enough, and one could even mistake his smile for amusement. But I know my friend well enough to know he’s standing up as Avril’s protector.

Fabron shrugs. “Plenty of beautiful women in the world. But very few as smart as your Avril.”

Dane bristles visibly because now the threat is not only to our friend, but to our COO. I can tell he’s not liking Fabron’s interest whatsoever, and I

can't figure out what bothers him more... the personal interest or his interest in her professionally.

As for me, I'll admit I'm equally bothered by both, but I don't have the right to be bothered by one of them. What Avril does with her personal life isn't any of my business anymore. I sort of took Dane's advice. I decided to accept what happened at The Wicked Horse that night, and I've decided to move on.

I'm just not sure where moving on will take me.

CHAPTER 9

Dane

I MANAGE TO wind down our conversation with Fabron after about an hour, claiming I've got to get up early like Avril.

But like Avril, I'm also lying about that being the reason for leaving.

Avril didn't back out of drinks with Fabron because she had an early morning meeting. She's always in early, no matter how late she stays out.

Avril, like me, wanted the evening to end because we both had intentions of going to The Wicked Horse tonight. For the past three weeks, we've run into each other there on occasion. We sometimes converse, but most often we try to ignore each other. Not because it's awkward—as peace has been made with the fact that we're friends and partners who share the same sex club—but mainly because I think we both subconsciously realize it's dangerous to become too involved with each other while there. I've watched Avril from afar these last few weeks, and she's become more bold and adventurous. She's opened herself up to the experience and doesn't shy away from much of anything. It's sexy as fuck but also messes with my mind because there hasn't been a time I haven't watched her in action and didn't want to get in on it.

But I've stayed back and removed, and we carry on as professionals and friends when we're outside the club.

The reason we want to go to the club tonight is because it's the quarterly masquerade event. Four times a year, people dress in elaborate masks to give an air of secrecy, and help to entice new members to join because of the anonymity. It's also where you will see some of the kinkiest, dirtiest, rawest fucking around, because there's something about putting a mask on that empowers you even further. You'll do things with that mask on that you wouldn't ordinarily do. I know this for a fact as I've pushed my own boundaries at these masquerade events, even went bisexual on two notable occasions.

Not that I need a mask to be intimate with a man. It's just that it's normally not my preference, pussy being the queen of all that's holy when it comes to me getting off. But the masquerade event is a time where I can veer off from my normal and try something different, and once it included having a guy give me a blow job and on another occasion, I fucked some dude. I have to say, I still prefer a woman's ass to a man's any day, but it was fun and I blew my load hard on those two occasions.

Avril asked me about the masquerade a few days ago, wanting to know if it was worth attending. I told her it was indeed, and some of that may have been self-serving. While I may never have my hands on Avril—which, let's face it, that's the smartest thing—I have very much enjoyed watching her in action. I've also very much enjoyed when she's watched me. I've fantasized about Avril, but that's about as far as it will ever get taken. She seems content doing what she's doing, and well... I guess I am, too.

The Wicked Horse is packed this evening, but I expected it. I've got on a simple black mask and rather than wear my normal dress pants and shirt, I dressed down in ripped jeans and a tight t-shirt. Not that it will hide who I really am from those who know me well in this club, but for those who don't, it gives me some power over them.

I find Avril in The Silo and she's entranced by something happening in one of the rooms. She has on a gauzy white blouse that hangs off one shoulder, and a pair of shorts that reveal the bottom part of her ass. She's got on a white lace mask over her eyes that would never do a damn thing to mask her identity from me. I know the shape of those lips and the curve of her jaw. I could recognize the lobes of her ears from a cold lineup. And that hair, with those bangs that hang just low enough to enhance her blue eyes, are all classic Avril to me and I'd know her anywhere.

Those gorgeous eyes are pinned hard to the glass before her. I had heard Jerico was going to have a sex machine brought in tonight and as I step closer, my groin tightens painfully by what I see.

Inside one of the glass-walled rooms is a machine that has a thrusting dildo that pushes through an opening in the leather seat. A woman is straddling the seat, and the dildo is pounding in and out of her. She's magnificent in a complete headdress type mask of blue peacock feathers. I normally wouldn't recognize the man in the room as he's wearing a complete

leather head mask, but I happen to know it's Walsh Brooks. He's the one who told me about the sex machine and that he'd be unveiling it.

My eyes cut to Avril as she stands nearer to the glass than me. By the way she's shifting from foot to foot, I can tell she's more than turned on by what she sees. The woman gets fucked by the dildo until she's screaming out an orgasm, and then Walsh has her off the machine and pressed up against the glass window where he starts fucking her hard.

It's erotic as hell and my dick reacts accordingly, although it really starts thumping when I see Avril reach up and tweak her own nipple in response. I stifle the groan that comes out but still mutter "Fuck," to myself.

There have been many times I've wanted to fuck Avril, but it's been easy to keep my distance because it's a bad idea.

But if she were to turn and look at me right now.

If she were to beckon to me in the slightest.

I'd throw every principle out the window to get inside her.

I actually breathe out a slight sigh of relief when Kynan suddenly appears beside Avril. He didn't even bother with a mask, which doesn't surprise me. He doesn't give a fuck who knows or doesn't know him here. After a short whisper in her ear, she smiles up at him and nods. I watch them walk hand and hand out of The Silo, and yeah... I follow.

They end up on The Deck, which sits forty-six floors above The Strip. The flooring and walls around the deck is acrylic plexi thick enough to keep us safely suspended but clear enough you can see the dazzling display of Vegas lights all around and below us. It's an adrenaline rush to fuck out here, especially if you have the slightest fear of heights.

I walk up to the bar and order a drink as Kynan leads Avril over to an acrylic chaise. It's chilly outside, but The Deck is adequately filled with outdoor space heaters that blow deliciously warm air on your naked body. It's still cool enough to pucker nipples, but the heaters make it completely comfortable to be naked out here.

Sucking whiskey through my teeth so the ice rattles against them, I watch as Kynan kisses Avril with knowledge. He's had her more than once. In fact, he's probably her go to guy. I sometimes wonder if she's developing feelings for him, but she will also fuck other guys. She knows he obviously fucks other women, but it's clear watching them both now... they do share a bit of a deeper level of intimacy than she shares with others.

When they're naked, Kynan fists Avril's ponytail and puts her on her knees before him. I love watching Avril be submissive, because it's the antithesis of everything that she is. My fucking dick goes rock hard when Kynan takes her mouth, and he's not overly nice about it.

But Avril's turned on, and even though she's struggling not to choke on his cock, I about lose my shit when I see her put her hand between her legs to play with her clit.

Christ, this was a bad idea. Tonight, I'm hornier than usual and I keep playing with fire the more I watch Avril.

I take another hard swallow of whiskey, intent on finishing it off and leaving. But when I lower the tumbler away, I find Avril's eyes pinned on me while Kynan fucks her mouth. Her mouth is stuffed full of cock, but the way her eyes soften for a moment before they start to burn with a focused intensity tells me in one clear statement that she likes the fact I'm watching her.

It's the same fucking look she gave Andrew that first night.

It's also pointed because while she knows I've watched her before, she's never given that look to me.

Kynan notices her eyes are on me, and he turns to look over his shoulder. His gaze focuses on me and his lips curl up into a mischievous grin. The fucker gives me a wink and then turns back to Avril while pulling out of her mouth.

Squatting down before her, he starts to whisper into her ear. The entire time, she never takes her eyes off me, but when Kynan finishes whatever the fuck he's saying, she gives me a sensual smile.

My entire body tightens when Avril lifts a hand and crooks her finger at me, beckoning me to join them.

Beckoning me to get in on this action, and most definitely with her.

I should turn and walk the fuck away and do it quickly. I'll explain to Avril later that it's just a bad idea to cross that line and that we'd regret it.

But rather than walk off the deck, my legs start moving in their direction. I've been watching Avril for almost three weeks now, and there hasn't been a single goddamn time that I haven't fantasized about me being the one fucking her. She's never invited me, and I've never imposed.

That's all changed tonight.

Kynan stands when I reach him, but Avril remains on her knees looking

up at me. My hand comes out, and I grip her chin between my thumb and forefinger. “Are you sure about this?”

She gives a slight nod, but I see the answer in her eyes. She wants this as much as I do, consequences be damned.

“Outside of this club,” I tell her. “We stay the same.”

“We stay the same,” she whispers back to me, and then my cock swells even more when she licks her lower lip as her gaze drops to my crotch.

“We stay the same,” I affirm once more as I unbuckle my belt and unzip my pants.

My breath freezes as Avril’s hand comes up to help free me. When her warm skin touches mine, a shudder ripples up my spine over how surreal it all is. My best friend and business partner squeezing my dick, and I don’t think I’ve ever felt anything better.

“Sit down,” she murmurs as she nods to the acrylic chaise behind me. I oblige and spread my legs.

Avril scoots along the acrylic, and I wonder if her knees hurt. I can’t tell by the look on her face because the only thing I see is the hunger in her eyes as she strokes me.

I start leaking pre-cum from my dick, and I can’t help but groan when Avril touches the tip of her tongue there to taste me. She closes her eyes as if she’s savoring, and then her mouth is open wide and she’s pulling me in deep.

Holy fuck, it feels good. I know Avril can suck cock because I’ve watched her, but having those full lips wrapped around my length while she looks up at me with those baby blues has my balls already tingling with the need for release. Her touch is almost magical, and it reminds me of our senior year in college when we kissed at midnight. We were drunk and high and out of control, but her mouth on mine was fucking amazing. Avril didn’t act like it meant a thing, and she kissed Andrew as well, but fuck if I didn’t think about that mouth for a long time after.

And now my cock is in her mouth, and she is sucking me like a goddamn pro. She’s tackling my dick like she tackles everything in her life—with absolute dedication, focused power, and blind ambition to complete her task. It’s the best damn blow job of my life, and I’m not a fool. I know it’s because it’s Avril.

Avril’s body lurches slightly. She drops one arm to the floor to lean

forward while the other one strokes and squeezes the base of my erection while she blows me. Kynan's on his knees behind her now with his thick cock covered in a condom. He's spreading her legs, and he reaches a hand down. I can tell the minute his fingers push into her because she groans against my dick and those eyes flutter closed in rapture.

Kynan fingers her for a few moments before lining his dick up. He looks at me as he pushes into her from behind, and Avril lets out a long, vibrating moan that almost has me exploding in her mouth if it weren't for the fact she stopped moving on me so she could relish the feel of Kynan entering her. Her mouth goes lax and my cock just pulses as it lays gently against her tongue.

With his hands at her hips, Kynan sets up a quick pace, thrusting hard enough to jam her forward onto my dick each time. Avril seems a bit lost for a moment, stuck between the feeling of a man fucking her and the desire to make me come with her mouth. I help her get re-oriented by taking her face in my hands and pushing my hips up. The minute the tip of my cock hits the back of her throat, she blinks her eyes to focus and clamps her mouth down on me.

Pure fucking bliss.

Avril getting fucked from behind while she sucks my cock with the twinkling lights of Vegas around us gives a magical, otherworldly sort of feeling to the evening.

The closer Avril gets to coming, the harder time she has keeping her eyes on mine. When they flutter closed, I move my gaze to Kynan. He's thrusting hard and fast into her, his breaths coming out in hard pants. He manages to give me a wicked grin before putting his finger in his mouth to wet it. My balls pull in tight as he uses a thumb to pull one of Avril's ass cheeks to the side. Without missing a thrust into her, he shoves his index finger up her ass.

Avril screams against my cock as her entire body shudders in ecstasy, and it's my undoing. My dick erupts as I start to come in her mouth. She somehow manages to work her throat, swallowing as I give it up.

"That's goddamn hot," Kynan mutters as he slams into her a few more times before groaning out his own release.

Avril gives a tiny moan, which vibrates through my entire body, ending in my chest where it clenches tight as I take in the aftermath.

Kynan removing his finger from her ass, his cock from her pussy. Avril's eyes closed as she pulls off me, giving a little lick to the tip of my dick.

A satisfied smile spreads on her face, and when she opens her eyes, they're pinned right on me. "That was amazing."

So fucking amazing, yet I have no words I can even give her to convey that. Instead, I tuck my dick in my pants as Kynan moves in behind her to give her an embrace, pulling her up so her back is to his front. He stares at me curiously over her shoulder, but Avril's the only one I care about.

My hand comes to her face where I press my palm to her cheek. "We good?"

"We're good," she says with a confident smile. "See you in the office Monday."

I stare at her a moment, making sure I can't see any doubt or recrimination in her eyes, but she seems happy, satiated, and confident.

Maybe we are going to be okay.

Leaning forward, I brush my mouth against her temple. "See you Monday, Av."

"Bye, Dane," she says softly as I push off the chaise.

"Later, dude," Kynan says. As I move past them, I hear him murmur to Avril. "Wanna go for another round?"

I don't hear her response, but the sound of her sweet laugh punches me in the gut. I want to stay for another round, but I can't, and I sure as shit don't like her getting another round with Kynan for some reason.

Christ... I knew this was going to complicate things.

CHAPTER 10

Avril

FOR ALL MY talk to Andrew and Dane about not being weirded out by my shenanigans in a sex club, I find myself completely weirded out.

Saturday night at the club with Kynan and Dane was the most amazing sexual experience of my life. That night was so surreal, starting with that woman on the dildo machine in The Silo. Just watching that had me so worked up and wet that as soon as Kynan got me out on The Deck, he made me come with just a few strokes of his fingers down in my panties.

Then he put me on my knees.

With his cock in my mouth, fresh off a stirring orgasm and the power flowing through me, it was provident that Dane would come out there and watch.

I have to wonder would I have ever had the guts on my own to invite Dane to join us, and I think probably not.

But Kynan whispered just a few wicked words in my ear. “Look at Dane. Look at how much he wants you. Invite him to play with us.”

And I was beckoning him over.

It was amazing. The feelings both of those men produced in me were overwhelming, and I was completely lost to passion that night. But having Dane in my mouth... touching him so intimately and in a way I could have never imagined, that right there is what made it the most amazing experience ever.

But now I’m weirded out, and I’ve hardly been able to look at Dane this morning. We’ve been in meeting after meeting, and I’ve kept my eyes averted. I’ve typed on my laptop, pretending to make fastidious notes. When I’ve had to address people in the meeting, I did so without ever looking at Dane.

Kind of like I’m avoiding looking at him now as John McEntyre, our chief financial officer, goes over the quarterly reports with me and Dane. I

follow along by keeping my head bent over the table in the small conference room we'd commandeered for the meeting. I know I'm being cowardly, which is the exact opposite of how I was acting Saturday night when I let two men have me at the same time.

The memory of that causes my face to flush, and I risk a peek up at Dane across the table from me. John's voice drones on about fiscal anomalies, and my gaze moves up slowly.

My entire body jerks as I find Dane's hazel eyes pinned on me, and they convey so many emotions all at once. Without him ever needing to open his mouth, he's saying many things to me.

About damn time you looked at me.

I expected better of you. You said we were good.

I knew this would complicate things.

But it doesn't have to.

And Christ but I want to bend you over this table and fuck you hard.

Yes, his expression tells me all those things. He's angry, confused, and filled with lust even as we sit here listening to our CFO talk numbers.

As my gaze drops back down to the printed reports, I press my legs together under the table, the sudden rush of wetness reminding me that despite how weird I feel about things, my body still very much wants Dane.

John goes on for another twenty minutes. Dane asks a few questions but I refuse to look at him while he speaks.

When the meeting wraps up, I quickly gather my stuff to head out the door behind John, but Dane brings me up short with a few commanding words. "Avril... I need to see you in my office to go over a few things."

"Can it wait?" I ask as I straighten the reports, which is a lame excuse of a thing to do to avoid eye contact.

"No, it can't," he says, and then he turns for the door. When he's gone, I let my breath out in one massive rush, but it only amplifies the way my heart is pounding.

I could ignore Dane because it's not like he can just fire me for insubordination. That's not how our partnership works.

Or I could polish my brass lady balls and go down to confront the awkwardness I'm feeling.

With another sigh, this one regretful but resigned, I tuck my materials under my arm and head down to Dane's office. The door is closed, and his

secretary looks up at me with a smile.

“Mr. Hawthorne’s expecting you,” she says pleasantly, but I feel like I’m marching to my doom.

I manage to give her a confident smile back before I turn the knob to push his door open.

My eyes go to his desk, but Dane isn’t there. I step in and as I’m moving to shut the door behind me, Dane is revealed, standing right there. He pushes the door shut, his hand closing over mine on the handle.

I feel like my heart is thundering in my chest. We stare at each other for all of two seconds before his hands are on my face and he’s pulling me to him for a kiss.

I groan so loudly I’m worried his secretary heard me and yet that doesn’t stop my fists from gripping his shirt to pull him closer to me.

“Fuck,” Dane whispers into my mouth before filling it with his tongue.

He kisses me with brutal aggression, and I know he’s partly pissed I’ve been refusing to look at him. He’s pissed because I made things weird today, and I suspect he’s also bent out of shape over the fact he’s feeling compelled to kiss me right now.

Dane moves a hand to the back of my head where he wraps it around my ponytail. He kisses me deeper for just a moment before pulling on it so our mouths disconnect. I get a glimpse of wild eyes before I drop my gaze.

“Fucking look me in the eye, Avril,” he growls.

I want to look at him, but I can’t. I’m so afraid I might see condemnation for inciting him to act in a way he might be regretting right now.

“You’ll fucking look at me,” he warns before he releases my hair, and then he’s lifting me in his arms. He walks over to his desk but rather than sit me on it, he places me on my feet. I wobble slightly, almost falling as my knees go weak when he roughly yanks my skirt up.

My chest starts heaving over his aggressive demeanor and my sex starts to throb. Somewhere deep inside of me, there’s a tiny voice telling me to put a stop to this, but I ignore it. As much as I’ve fallen prey to the lust inside The Wicked Horse, this is a million times more seductive, and the danger makes it even more appealing to me. That voice tells me my friendship with Dane is at risk, but my body shuts that shit down fast in its reaction to the man.

Heart racing, lungs barely functioning, and with soaking wet panties. A

tremor of fear over us getting caught is also added into the mix, and I feel like I'm ready to explode.

Dane easily picks me up and sets me on the edge of his desk. Leaning into me, he reaches past me to push his laptop back, but otherwise, his desk is pretty pristine. He's got a little bit of OCD in him. One of my favorite pastimes is to come in and mess his desk up sometimes before he gets into work by turning stuff slightly to drive him nuts.

He puts a hand to my chest and pushes me down until my back hits the desk. Then he's yanking my panties down my legs, only bothering to pull them free of one leg. I can feel the lace resting over the top of my foot.

In all this time, I've refused to look at Dane's face. I've concentrated on the feelings instead.

But when his hands go under my thighs and he pulls my legs wide, my eyes snap up to him.

"Looking at me now, aren't you?" he taunts with anger and defiance of the precarious position he's put us in at this moment.

"Dane," I say softly, but then gasp as he drops to his knees and works my legs over his shoulders.

I can't bear to watch because I know the image will ruin me so my eyes go to the ceiling.

"Look at me, Av," Dane whispers, and I can feel his breath blow over my flesh. A shudder ripples through me at his proximity, but I refuse to take my eyes off the ceiling.

My hips shoot upward when I feel his tongue press lightly against my clit, which contrasts starkly to his domination of me so far. I grit my teeth to keep from whimpering and close my eyes. Bracing for his mouth to attack me, my entire body goes rigid with anticipation.

Instead, I feel his hand back in the center of my chest for just a moment before he's fisting the material of my silk blouse and pulling my torso off the desk. My eyes fly open in surprise and then go to Dane as he kneels between my legs.

His eyes are burning and his skin flushed. Tilting his head to the side, he brushes the corner of his mouth against the inside of my leg and that stupid, rock-star goatee tickles slightly. My leg jerks from the touch, and that causes Dane to give me a salacious smile.

"You watch, Avril," Dane says as he gives me a little shake where I'm

suspended from his grip on my blouse. “Put your fucking elbows on the desk, spread your legs wide, and you watch me eat your pussy.”

I suck in a lungful of air, and I can feel my heartbeat pulsing in my clit. My eyes are locked onto Dane’s, and right now, I’m not sure it’s possible to look away.

“You watch your best friend eat your pussy,” he continues. “Just the way I watched you suck my dick. You watch and you be okay with it like you promised.”

“Dane,” I say again softly, but this time, it’s with apology for the mess I’ve created.

“Just watch,” he says more fiercely. “You opened this door, I walked in, and, apparently, I’m not walking back out. So just watch.”

His last few words come out almost as a plea if I’m reading him right, and because he’s my best friend and there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for him, I can only nod my acquiescence.

“Good,” he murmurs just before pressing his lips to my clit.

“Oh, God,” I moan as my hips jerk from the sensation. Dane releases his grip on my shirt and before I can fall back, I plant my elbows into the desk so I can stay tilted enough to watch him.

The pleasure is beyond intense and because I’m so worked up by Dane’s aggressiveness, I can feel an orgasm already starting to bubble.

I have no control over my body and my hips start flexing to meet his tongue, writhing desperately for more contact from him. He won’t give it to me, though, moving his mouth and lips to deny me more than the soft licks and sucks he’s giving me.

“Please,” I beg him for more.

Instead, he pulls his mouth away and his eyes come to mine. “Christ... what are we doing?”

I blink in surprise over his moment of doubt when he’d just been so sure. Before I can say anything though, he shakes his head and mutters, “Never mind. We’re doing what feels good.”

And then he dives back down, and this time I don’t have to move an inch to get more contact. He attacks me with purpose, and that’s to get me off hard and fast.

I’m caught in a maelstrom, my brain warring with my body. I know Dane is right there with me, yet there’s no hesitation in him right now. He devours

me whole with his mouth, works my clit magically with his tongue, and when he presses two fingers inside of me, my hips shoot up as my back arches with pleasure. The orgasm thunders through me, and I bite down hard on my lower lip so I don't scream. It doesn't stop the long, low moan that filters through my teeth, and Dane groans in response to me.

He lifts his head to look at me, the expression on his face somber and defiant. "I'm not going to apologize for that."

"Why should you?" I retort harshly, because I also detect a bit of admonition in his tone as if I caused all of this. "I just came spectacularly."

Dane gives a sigh as he stands and stares down at me. I feel completely vulnerable with my skirt around my hips and my legs spread wide before him. So, I push at his chest for him to back up, and I slide off the desk. Dane turns from me as I manage to awkwardly get my underwear on and push my skirt back down. I have to tuck my shirt back in, wondering how presentable I actually look. Will I pass muster when I walk by his secretary on the way out?

I head for the door, but I'm stopped with Dane's hand on my elbow.

Looking over my shoulder at him, I merely cock an eyebrow.

He sighs again and pulls on my arm so I'm forced to turn and look at him.

"I'm sorry," he says gently, and every bit of fight and tension seeps out of my body.

There's no hesitation. I merely step into his body and wrap my arms around him. Dane's never been one for hugs and cuddles, but to my surprise, he reciprocates. It's the easy hug of a friend—albeit most friends don't press their erections into your belly.

I try to ignore that, though, and ask him, "Are we going to be okay?"

Dane gives me a squeeze before pulling back so I'm forced to look up at him. "I don't regret that. Or what we did two nights ago. I wanted it badly, and it was better than I could have imagined. It's just sex though, Avril. And you're the one who wouldn't look me in the eye today, so maybe you're the one who needs to figure out if we're going to be okay."

Turning inward, I focus in on the feeling low in my gut. Yes, there's an uneasiness, but when I truly reach deep, I don't feel regret.

"I'm okay," I tell him, keeping my eyes locked on his so he knows it's the truth. "No regrets."

"And going forward?" he prompts, which causes me to pull back slightly

from him.

“I hadn’t thought that far,” I admit. “What would this be? Friends with benefits?”

“Best friends with benefits,” he clarifies with a wry smile.

Even though Dane just gave me one of the biggest, strongest, and longest orgasms of my life and my body is telling me to accept, I have to pause. It’s one thing to prowl The Wicked Horse to indulge in all my fantasies in a guilt free, leave-it-all-behind-when-I-walk-out-the-door kind of way, but can I really do that with Dane?

I already love him as my best friend and the risk is that I would end up loving him as something more. It’s a huge risk because Dane isn’t built to love back so completely.

His mom died in childbirth. After five years of living with a drug addict father who neglected him, he was placed into the foster care system. As such, Dane is a solitary man. He has trust and abandonment issues. He’s thirty-nine years old and has never once been in a committed relationship. If I fell for him, it would not be returned.

The question is, can I prevent myself from falling for him...

“Let me think about it,” I tell him.

“Of course,” he responds almost politely, but what he’s really conveying is there are no hard feelings if I can’t go forward with this.

CHAPTER 11

Dane

“ANOTHER ROUND?” THE bartender asks and I nod, taking my wallet out. While he moves to get three cheap draft beers for us, I look over my shoulder at Andrew and Avril joking and laughing with each other. My gaze scans the interior of the dive bar we decided to come to tonight as the nostalgia was running high. Avril, Andrew, and I had been invited by our alma mater to speak to an entrepreneurial faculty board on how to develop and support students.

Rather than fly back to Vegas, the three of us decided to take an afternoon off to walk around campus, meet up with some old professors, and to have a few beers at one of our favorite haunts. We’ve been here a few hours now, and it’s a bit of a transport back in time. We haven’t discussed work, but reminisced about the good times the three of us had while going to college.

It’s like it always used to be, yet it’s not.

Not when I’m looking at Avril differently these days.

She told me three days ago she wanted to think about our sexual future together, and I gladly afforded her the time. Avril knows what no-holds-barred sex is like now, with the freedom to indulge without any guilt or consequences. Whether she can continue that with me remains still to be seen.

And while I’m not pushing her for an answer, I’ve been hopeful she’d decide soon so I can either press forward with getting to know every inch of her body, or I can go back to the way things were. I’ve been to The Wicked Horse every night since I ate her pussy on my desk, waiting to see if she’d show. I spent most of the time in The Apartment playing poker and watching the video feeds.

She never came. I left at the end of each night doubting the merits of my suggestion we keep fucking each other.

I told her the truth. I have no regrets about what we've done because I'm not a regretful kind of guy. I'm not careless with my friends' emotions, but Avril is the one who invited me to play first. She also willingly played the second time at my demand, so I know she was all in. She's also a smart woman, and she knew the limited confines by which we could be together.

So, no... no regrets about her. I'm confident if she chooses to move on, our friendship won't even take a hit.

But Andrew is a different matter.

Avril and I haven't discussed how this could affect Andrew. Or if he should even know about it. It's a sticky situation, but I can't worry about that right now. And it's not like Andrew isn't fully aware of Avril's newfound desires at The Wicked Horse. He shared an intimate moment with her. Not as intimate as the two of us had, but it put a new spin on the friendship.

The bartender sets the mugs down and makes change for me. I leave him a five-dollar tip and carry the brews back to the table we're occupying. We're the oldest patrons in here by far. We've gotten a few side looks from students, which I find to be amusing.

As I set the beers down, I hear Andrew say with a roar of a laugh as he slams his palm on the table. "Remember that time Dane got caught fucking the quarterback's girlfriend in one of the men's bathroom stalls?"

Avril laughs and nods. "And the quarterback broke his index finger punching Dane and couldn't start for the next three games?"

"Oh, shut the fuck up, you two," I growl, but I'm grinning on the inside. God, I was a fucking manwhore back then, willing to fuck any wet pussy. Since then, my tastes are a little more discerning. When I'm not getting my rocks off at the club, I've got several go-to ladies who make great dates to functions and give amazing blow jobs as well.

"You've not changed over the years," Andrew says as he continues to laugh good-naturedly, his words slightly slurred. We've been pounding the beers tonight. "Just now getting it in a sex club."

My eyes cut to Avril's, and I see her watching Andrew with the same surprise I feel that he's brought up the club. He's not mentioned it once since the last time we talked about it, which was over a month ago. I'm not sure if he knows Avril and I've been regularly going and running into each other.

He certainly has no clue that we've been intimate together.

"Speaking of sex clubs," Andrew continues, not for a moment noticing

Avril and I went still the moment he brought The Wicked Horse up. “I’m thinking of going back. Figured if my two buds are going, why shouldn’t I, right?”

Avril looks to me. I can see the worry there, but I’m not sure what the worry is for.

That she and I might be fucking there one night and Andrew walk in?

Or perhaps it’s just a general worry that Andrew says he’s going to go for no other reason than Avril and I are getting our kicks there. That’s absolutely the wrong reason to go to a sex club because not everyone’s frame of mind is built to handle it. Andrew’s the lover and dreamer of our group. He’s the one who wants marriage and kids. Had his last girlfriend not so thoroughly broken his heart when she left him about six months ago, he might have ventured into some serious dating by now to try to find his soul mate.

I give Andrew a slight punch to his shoulder and a huge grin. “Come on, buddy. Drink up. We got better things to talk about than sex.”

“Nothing’s better than sex,” Andrew says in disagreement. “But I wouldn’t know since I’m not getting any lately.”

“I don’t think you’d get much from The Wicked Horse,” Avril says to Andrew, and our gazes slide to her. “You’ve never been a one-night-stand kind of guy. You fuck with your heart, Drew. There’s no place for heart in a sex club.”

I have to grit my teeth so my jaw doesn’t drop over Avril’s insanely accurate wisdom, not only about our buddy but about the people who go to a sex club. Sure, there are loving, monogamous couples who go there to engage in public sex or to swing, but for the most part, the single members just go to fuck and forget about it.

Andrew winces, giving a pained look to Avril. “And you’re okay with that?”

Avril looks down to her beer a moment as if she’s contemplating the right words. When she looks back up, she takes a tiny breath and says, “I’ve found a side of me I didn’t know existed, Andrew. I found it that night you and I first went there. And I think you know deep down that while it might have been a pleasurable experience, it’s not really who you are. Otherwise, you would have been back by now.”

The truth of Avril’s words slam into me, and I suddenly realize... she’s so much more like me than Andrew is. I realize all too clearly that it’s not a

guy or girl thing. You're either into dirty fucking or you're not, and Andrew just isn't.

Avril's eyes come to me, and she sees I get it. I can also tell by the look in her eyes that I have my answer from her.



THE DOOR OPENS just a second after I knock, which means she was waiting there for me. She steps backward as I walk into her hotel room, shutting the door behind me. I'm slightly drunk, as is Avril, but it's not going to change a thing.

"Best friends with benefits, right?" she says in a husky voice.

I nod as I advance toward her. "And the benefits are just that... benefits. Nothing beyond."

"Still maintaining a perfect balance of professionalism by day and dirty fucking at The Wicked Horse by night," she returns with a sly grin as she takes another step backward.

"We're not at The Wicked Horse right now," I point out as I take one long step to wrap my hand around the back of her neck.

Avril's head tilts back, and she looks at me with those large, blue eyes filled with nothing but confidence in the choice she's made. "I suppose we can make a few exceptions."

I give her a smile before leaning down to press my mouth to hers. She moans and opens, letting my tongue inside. I waste no time as seduction isn't necessary. My free hand pops the button on her jeans before it dives down the front, my middle finger sliding through silky wetness before plunging in deep.

"Yes," Avril whispers as her hips tilt inward to pull my finger in deeper.

I lift my mouth from hers, pumping my finger in deeper. Her face is awash with pleasure, eyes fluttered closed to savor the feeling. Pulling my finger out, I press it over her clit and start to rub in small circles. Avril moans, and I watch her face contort as she bites at her lower lip.

My finger moves faster, and her hips respond, bucking and gyrating against me.

So hot.

"Dane, I'm going to—"

She comes with a cry as her eyes fly open and lock with mine, looking almost stunned by how fast that just happened.

“Goddamn it,” I growl as I continue to rub against her sensitive clit. “Get naked, Avril. Please hurry so I can do that again.”

She blinks a few times, and then she’s pulling my hand out of her pants. Clothes start flying as we race to full nudity.

And then we’re on the bed and my tongue is back in her mouth while her hand grips my cock to stroke it. I can’t help thrusting against her a few times before realizing that’s just not enough.

I flip her onto her back, planting one hand on the mattress by her head. She guides me to her entrance and when the head nudges against her wet folds, I can’t control the hiss of pleasure that escapes my mouth.

We stare at each other, and this is the point of no going back from this dangerous game we decided to play with each other.

Bringing my other hand to her face, I cup her jaw and bend down to peer at her. “I trust no one in this world more than you. Do you want me to put a condom on?”

Avril’s eyes go warm and she gives me a sweet smile. “You don’t need to with me. I trust no one more than you, so you tell me we’re good to fuck bare, we’re good to fuck bare.”

God, just hearing Avril drop the word “fuck” in that throaty, sexy way is almost unbearable. But she’s given me the all clear. No other words are needed between us, and I thrust into her with a hard punch of my hips.

Avril’s back arches, and she cries out from the invasion. Her pussy is tight, wet, and hot, and may be the best thing my dick has ever felt in its life.

It scares the shit out of me that it’s quite possibly the best pussy I’ve ever felt in my life because it’s Avril’s pussy. Because I know the woman behind this pleasure.

Avril opens her eyes and smiles at me, tilting her hips a little to encourage me to move.

Beautiful eyes.

Always thought so.

Filled with trust that what we’re doing is okay and won’t hurt us down the road.

I hope to God she’s right, because I know before I even come that things have once again changed between us.

CHAPTER 12

Avril

DANE IS INSIDE me, and I'm having a hard time processing that.

My best friend and business partner, Dane Hawthorne, is inside of me.
Fucking me.

Well, not quite fucking me yet. My hips flex up, trying to draw him in deeper, yet he just stares down at me.

"What's wrong?" I ask as I raise my legs to press them into his ribs.

"Nothing," he assures me with a smile and makes a small rotation of his hips.

And oh wow... that feels amazing.

"More," I tell him, eager to see this through to the end. I'd given this some serious damn thought over the last few days. I sat on my couch each night, drinking wine and debating the pros and cons of agreeing to a sexual relationship with my friend. I knew the outcome could be disastrous, and it was the reason I couldn't decide right away.

But ultimately, I decided to put faith in Dane. I decided to trust our bond. Our friendship extends seventeen years, and it hasn't all been unicorns and roses. We've helped each other through some tough times, and I trust that we'll both be diligent in making sure we don't hurt the other.

Dane still doesn't move any more than that tiny rotation of his hips, and I press my hands to his chest. "Dane?"

His eyes roam over my face briefly before coming back to lock with mine. He gives me a smile. "You're beautiful."

My entire body flushes warm from the compliment, because not once in seventeen years has Dane ever said anything that intimate to me. I've sucked his dick, he's eaten me out, and yet him telling me I'm beautiful cuts straight through to my heart.

I let out a quavering breath over the magnitude of what those words mean, and I'm not sure what Dane sees on my face, but he rears back a bit.

Shaking his head slightly as if to clear it, he pulls out of me so suddenly I cry out from the emptiness. I think for a moment that he's had a massive change of heart, but then he's picking me up and tossing me back down so my head is at the foot of the bed now. He then flips me roughly to my stomach.

I barely get my bearings before he's pulling me up by my hips to my hands and knees, and without a word of explanation, he plunges back into me from behind.

"F-u-u-u-c-k," he groans as his pelvis presses tight to me.

I groan in response because he feels impossibly huge from this angle, and I'm stretched to capacity. My head falls forward because I feel suddenly weak as a kitten, and from the realization that Dane is now fucking me from behind right after calling me beautiful, so I know it hurts for him to look at my face.

But then my head raises because Dane's got his hand fisted in my hair, and I gasp with surprise as I realize he's faced us toward the large mirror on the wall above the dresser.

And there I am... arms locked tight, legs spread, and my breasts swaying with hard nipples as I stare at my reflection.

And there's Dane, right behind me with his big muscular chest and ripped abs and his cock stuffed inside of me. Our eyes lock in the mirror, and he mutters, "Fucking beautiful."

I'm entranced from the heat in his voice, but that quickly breaks as he brings his other hand to my hip for leverage.

Then he fucks me, and he does it without mercy. Big body heaving against me, his cock hammering my wet pussy, and hitting something very deep inside of me. My tits are jiggling, and I hate to even think of what my ass looks like from his perspective, but God help me, it feels so damn good.

"Harder," I manage to moan through panting breaths, and I watch as Dane's expression turns dark and fierce.

A feral smile breaks free on his gorgeous face and he gives a wickedly dangerous laugh. "That's my girl."

Bringing both hands to my hips, Dane pulls his length out of me in one long, slow move that's torturous in its teasing. Before his head pops free, his fingers dig into my hips, and then he's slamming back into me so hard the slap of our skin on each other sounds like a thunderclap.

"Shit," I cry out because whatever he just hit inside me has been secretly

protected from any other man.

Dane doesn't take my curse to mean I'm hurt, but rather reads pleasure from it, because he does the same thing again. Long, slow withdrawal, teasing every nerve ending inside of me, then one brutal punch back in that hits that sweet spot.

I groan with each thrust.

I curse at him because it hurts so good.

I beg him not to stop.

I beg him to go faster.

He gives me nothing but that unbearably sweet withdrawal, and that ferocious invasion back inside of me. For every time he hits that spot, he's marking his claim there.

With only a few of those powerful thrusts, my sex starts to cramp from within. I know the mother of all orgasms is starting to build within me. I need release so bad that I lift a hand to put between my legs, but Dane's gaze on me in the mirror catches it.

"Don't," he barks at me, and my hand drops back down. "I'll give it to you when I'm ready for you to have it."

"God, Dane," I moan pathetically as my head drops down. "You dirty, sadistic fucker."

He chuckles even as he withdraws and slams back in, causing the flame to burn brighter in me.

Every single thrust. Every grunt he makes.

I get a little closer until I'm teetering on the edge.

And then he slows down just a little so I won't topple over, but the flames won't extinguish either. He keeps me on the precipice, and I can't figure out if this is torture or just painful pleasure.

Dane's neck muscles contract and his grunts appear to come from deeper in his chest with each thrust. He seems focused and determined on reaching some goal, but I can't figure out what it is since he won't let me fall.

And then he does something I'll never forget for as long as I live.

Dane slams into me and plants deep. He slides a hand from my hip to the front of my pussy, and he flicks my clit with his finger. That extra bit of stimulation is all that I need, and I explode with such force that I scream.

I watch in the mirror with my mouth open wide as my pleasure ripples through me, and feel a second orgasm tear free as Dane's hands come to my

hips and he closes his eyes. Without even taking another thrust, and almost as if he was waiting on my orgasm to be his catalyst, he starts to come inside of me.

Jaw clenched, eyes squeezed tight, and a long, low moan rumbles out of him. I can feel his cock pulsing inside of me as he unloads with quiet force.

Dane pulls me tighter to him by my hips and sucks in oxygen through his nose as his eyes open to meet mine in the mirror. A slow smile spreads on his face, and he hums out his satisfaction. "Mmmmm."

"Indeed," I murmur, giving him a smile in return.

Leaning forward, Dane brings his arms around my chest and pulls me up until I'm just on my knees in front of him. The length of his cock is still buried inside of me, and I don't ever want to lose that feeling.

With a squeeze, Dane rests his chin on my head as he looks at me through the mirror. "I need a few minutes to recharge and then we're going again."

My sex clenches, and he laughs because of the power his words have over me.

With one arm banded over my breasts, Dane lets his other hand slide down to the front of my pussy where he draws a lazy pattern of circles through my pubic hair. Our eyes stay locked on each other in the mirror.

"We're good, right?" he finally asks.

"We're good," I promise.

"You'll look me in the eyes at work, right?" he prods.

"And when I'm sucking your dick," I reply tartly.

He rewards me with a pinch to my clit, and I buck so hard his dick slides free. Dane gives a sigh of regret, but says, "Just as well... we probably do need to talk for a minute."

Dane drops us both to the bed, and flips me so I'm facing him. He brushes the hair away from my face, not because it needs to be done but because I can tell he's gathering his thoughts. When he focuses back on me, he says, "You remember when my dad came to our apartment?"

I tense slightly as the memory isn't all that nice, but I nod.

"Then you know," he says softly.

My heart clenches tight, because yes, I really know what's at the core of Dane.

And it's nothingness.

When we were starting our senior year, Dane and I were at the apartment

studying. I can't remember where Andrew was—probably class or something—but I was on the couch and Dane was sitting on the floor with a textbook opened on the coffee table.

At that time, everyone knew Dane's genius and foresight was going to be history making. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that he would reach the ultimate success in whatever path he chose. This was not only because he was brilliant beyond imagination, but he also had a driving ambition that is possessed by few people. And this was quite remarkable given the fact that he had no stability growing up. He was removed from his drug addict father's care when he was five and put into the foster system as he had no other family members. He was shuffled from house to house, never staying in one place very long.

You'd think a bright, good-looking boy like him would be adoptable, but apparently not. Dane never got into trouble for the most part, and the fact that even being a good kid who was brilliant in school couldn't make him appealing to a family weighed on him hard.

He grew up relying only on himself and refusing to trust in another for help.

Until that day his dad showed up.

I'd opened the door to find a middle-aged man with short, dark hair and hazel eyes standing there. In hindsight, the resemblance to Dane was uncanny, but I really couldn't see it at the time. I just saw the nervousness on his face when he asked, "Is Dane Hawthorne here?"

I looked over my shoulder, and Dane's head popped up. I stepped back from the door so he could see the visitor, and Dane knew who he was instantly.

His entire body froze rigid and his eyes turned dark as he stared at the man. Neither of them said a word as they held unwavering eye contact for a few agonizingly awkward seconds.

Finally, the man said, "Dane... do you recognize me? I'm your father."

My entire body jolted from those words, and my head snapped back to look at my best friend. For the first time since I'd known him, I saw pure pain swimming in those hazel eyes. Dane swallowed hard and then turned his head slightly to look at me.

His voice was raspy but clear. "Avril... get rid of him and tell him not to come back."

Now why Dane couldn't just say that to the man who was claiming to be his father, I have no clue, but I also never questioned his request. I positioned myself fully in the door again, giving my back to Dane and becoming his protector for the first time.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I said, "You need to leave. You're not welcome here, so don't come back."

"But if I could just—"

I leaned to the side and grabbed the baseball bat by the door. It belonged to Andrew, and I wielded it in front of me. "I will bash you over the head if you don't leave."

The man's mouth drew downward into a saddened frown, and he tried to look past me inside the apartment. I raised the bat, and he took a few steps back.

"I'm sorry," he said as he held his hands up for a moment before reaching back for his wallet. "I know this is hard on him. I just wanted to reconnect."

I remained silent with a glare firmly in place as he pulled something from his wallet. He reached out and handed it to me, but I refused to take it. So instead, he bent over and put it in on the concrete by my feet. "That's my business card. I live just a little north of San Diego. I do home inspections and got my life back under control. Been clean for several years. I just wanted to reach out. I think about him all—"

I never heard another word because I'd backed up and shut the door in his face.

When I turned back to Dane, he looked up at me and simply said, "Thank you."

I just nodded as I put the bat back in its place. I sat on the couch and continued studying, even though my heart was pounding so hard. I couldn't imagine what Dane was feeling, but I knew it had to be something close to debilitating because he would have never in a million years asked me to protect him. The fact that he did tells me it was a pain he simply couldn't confront.

I remember the next day, when I stepped outside the apartment, the card that his father left was gone. I had no clue if it blew away or if Dane picked it up, but he and I never spoke of his father again.

Not until just now while my body is still tingling from the orgasm he gave me. And when Dane says, "Then you know," what he really is doing is

reiterating the boundaries of what we have together.

Dane isn't capable of love or attachment. He doesn't trust easily, and as much as he trusts me as his best friend, he'd never trust me with his heart. He's a solitary man who has made it through the first thirty-nine years of his life on his own, and he intends to do that for the next thirty-nine and beyond.

He's making sure I really understand he has nothing to give me but what's between his legs.

Leaning forward, I press my lips against his for a soft, reassuring kiss. When I pull back, I look him right in the eye and tell him what he needs to hear. "Yes, I know."

CHAPTER 13

Dane

THE LIMO PULLS up to the front of Andrew's condo. We'd just flown in from San Francisco on the early flight, and he's still looking green around the gills. While Avril and I were burning excess alcohol off in her room, Andrew apparently hit the mini bar to keep his drunk going.

Andrew groans as he pushes forward in the seat opposite me. Avril's sitting beside him with a smirk on her face. It's completely fascinating to me how easily Avril and I can turn off the sexual attraction when we are around others. Well, "turn off" might not be the right words. Maybe "mute" would be more accurate, but still... when we all met down in the lobby this morning for the car service to take us to the airport, it was business as usual between the three of us. She and I kept up a running chatter while Andrew listened in with half an ear and winced periodically from his hangover headache.

"Drink lots of water and take some aspirin," Avril says as she pats him on the shoulder before he slides along the seat to exit.

He turns back to her and rolls his eyes. "I'm just a little hungover. I'm going to be working today."

"Just from the comfort of your bed wearing your jammies, right?" I can't help but tease.

"Fuck off," he mutters and slides out the open door being held by the driver. After he steps out onto the sidewalk, the driver goes to the trunk to pull out his carry-on and Andrew ducks back down to look into the car at us with a somber expression. "Next time all three of us go back to Berkley together, we are never—and I repeat never—going out drinking like that."

Avril laughs and pointedly reminds him, "You wouldn't feel this bad if you had laid off the wet bar in your room."

"But those bottles were so little," Andrew explains with a lopsided grin. "They looked harmless because they were so tiny."

All three of us laugh, and Andrew gives us a wave before shutting the door. Avril settles back into her seat, crossing one leg over the other. She and I are headed into the office, and we dressed this morning accordingly. Avril has always worn business attire to work, same as me. It's funny, because I know she's personally more comfortable in jeans like Andrew, but I think, as a woman, she doesn't ever want there to be any room for employees or other executives to think her less capable because of a casual dress code.

Not that I would feel that way. Avril could wear a paper bag as a dress and still rock a boardroom meeting with her star power.

Her head is bent over her phone and her thumbs fly across the screen as she's no doubt answering probably two dozen emails she's received since we landed. We're all attached to our phones, but Avril is all business on hers, while Andrew and I will sometimes fall prey to surfing for pleasure.

"Our one o'clock just got cancelled," Avril says without looking up at me, her voice brisk and efficient. Such a difference from her throaty cries last night.

My dick twitches over the memories. By the time I left her room last night, there wasn't an inch of her skin I hadn't licked or bitten, and I keep waiting for a flood of guilt or regret to hit me.

But it never comes and it's either because I'm soulless and without conscience, or there really isn't anything wrong with what we're doing. I mean, what's private is private, and our professional life seems to be carrying on without any problems so far.

"Dr. Lane just emailed us a new research proposal," she advises me as she looks up. "I'm sure Andrew will read it and give us his thoughts."

"Sounds good," I say as I pull out my phone from my inside jacket pocket. I unlock the screen and pull up my calendar, checking to see what I have on the agenda for tonight.

Dinner, pick Sharon up at 8PM

Shit. I totally forgot about that.

While I frequently visit The Wicked Horse, I still do occasionally date, especially when it's an airline stewardess who can do amazing things with her tongue.

I glance up at Avril, who still has her attention on her phone.

We haven't discussed exclusivity and given the fact that we are both members at a sex club, I'm not sure what's expected in this situation. She's

not like any other fuck I've had in the club because... well, she's Avril.

I open my mouth to bring it up, because it's a discussion we need to have, but then it hits me.

I don't want Sharon tonight. I'd rather be balls deep inside Avril tonight... or any night for that matter.

Without an ounce of hesitation, I shoot a quick text to Sharon. *Sorry. Something came up. Will have to cancel tonight.*

I don't ask for a raincheck, which is what I would have normally done, because I don't foresee wanting to cash it in any time soon either.

Amazing.

Lifting my head, I look at Avril again. She's got her shoulder-length hair pulled back in a low ponytail, her trademark thick bangs hiding her eyes as she works her phone. Taupe pencil skirt that comes to her knees and a lavender blouse. Her matching suit jacket is on the seat beside her.

Chief operations officer of Caterva, my best friend and a consummate professional businesswoman.

She's also sexy as hell, and I want to fuck her.

As if she can feel me staring at her, Avril's head lifts slowly and she tilts her head, "What?"

"Come sit on my lap," I say with a grin.

She jolts and twists her neck to look at the driver behind her as the glass separating us is down. Her head snaps back my way. "Excuse me?"

I start unbuckling my belt. "Come sit on my lap. Ride my cock."

Avril's entire face flames red, and she glares at me as she jerks her thumb over her shoulder at the driver. "Now's not a really good time."

Laughing, I tell the driver as I start to roll the window up. "Drive around the block until I tell you otherwise."

"Yes, sir," I hear him say as his eyes look at me through the rearview mirror briefly before the dark glass seals shut.

"Jesus, Dane," Avril grumbles as her eyes drop to my hands. "You're such a spectacle."

I unzip my pants and pull my cock out, stroking it to full hardness. Her eyes go wide as she watches.

"Don't act all offended, Av," I tease her. "You fuck in front of a lot more people at The Wicked Horse."

“But not during business hours in the middle of the morning in front of our limo driver,” she grumbles, but her eyes dart back down to my cock.

“The glass is raised,” I tell her. “We’re private.”

Not really, as the glass isn’t all that dark and I’m pretty sure this car isn’t soundproofed, but whatever.

“Lift your skirt,” I order as my thumb circles around a drop of precum leaking from the tip of my dick. “Pull your panties off and get yourself wet.”

She stares at me a moment, but I’m not surprised when she does what I tell her. My breath catches as she wiggles her hips to get her tight skirt up. Rather than take them off, though, she gives me a defiant look and just slips her fingers down the front of pink cotton panties that are sexy in their simplicity.

I can tell the moment her fingers touch her clit because she shudders slightly. I, in turn, groan when she whispers, “Already wet. What do you know?”

“Come here,” I growl as I release my cock and lean across to grab her. She lands straddled over me with her hands on my shoulders and her head bent to look down between us.

I pull the crotch of her panties aside and run my finger through her lips, and fuck yes... she’s soaking wet already. Just from the thought of doing this.

“I love how reactive you are,” I murmur as I push a finger inside of her. Avril’s hips tilt and her hand comes down to grip my cock. She strokes it a few times which feels fucking fantastic, but her pussy would feel better. I slip my finger out of her and put my hands on her hips, urging her down onto me.

Avril guides me to her entrance, rotating her hips so that her pussy rubs against the sensitive tip. She slowly lowers herself onto me, panting from the effort as she stretches and then molds herself around me.

She makes a humming noise in the back of her throat when she bottoms out, and her head falls forward so that her forehead is touching mine. My eyes close, and I feel her breath on my face as she starts to move.

Up and down, her hands pressing hard into my shoulders for leverage.

Tight. Hot. Wet.

Avril.

“Feels good,” she breathes out softly.

“So fucking good,” I agree as I tilt my head to kiss her.

I keep my hands lightly on her hips, not helping or encouraging. I want

her to set and keep the pace, and I want her to get me off all on her own. I also want to see if she can get herself off on my cock, but if she can't, I'll help her along.

Avril rides me slowly as we kiss. I'm vaguely aware of the car making right-hand turns every so often, and there's no telling how many times we ride around that block while Avril fucks me.

But then it feels too good, and my balls start to tingle. My instincts war with the need to come and the need for her to get there first. I want to take her by the hips and slam her up and down on me, but I also want to feel that pussy contract around me in pleasure.

Avril pulls her mouth free of mine and moans, "I'm so close, Dane."

Thank fuck.

I watch as her face contorts and her breathing goes ragged. She starts to move faster until she's bouncing crazily on my cock, each thrust down pushing me closer and closer to the edge. My hand even starts to move from her hip, thinking to help her along with a flick to her clit but then Avril starts whimpering and then chanting. "So close. So close. So close."

I watch her face, fascinated by the glazed over irises and the red flush up her neck. She sucks her bottom lip in between her teeth as if she's concentrating, and then boom... she stiffens and throws her head back, crying out a lusty scream of release that I know fucking good and well the driver and half of Vegas heard.

Her pussy squeezes my cock and I lose it right along with her, growling out every curse word in the book as I start to come inside her. Avril starts thrusting lightly again as her orgasm begins to fade and I can barely take the movement on my over-sensitized but completely satisfied dick. I take her by the hips and hold her down on me, feeling my cock jerk a few more times inside her.

"Jesus," I mutter as she falls forward against my chest, resting her head on my shoulder. My arms automatically wrap around her back, and I squeeze her to me. "That was fucking unbelievable."

"You're such a bad influence on me," she whispers, but I can hear the satisfaction in her voice.

We stay like that a few moments, but then Avril's pushing off me. My cock slides free and she curses as she falls back onto her seat, legs spread wantonly wide. "Shit... I need something to clean up with."

“Uh-uh,” I say as I lean forward and pull the crotch of her panties back in place. “I like the idea of my cum soaking into those panties and you being wet the rest of the day.”

“God, Dane,” she says with a laugh as she pulls her skirt down. “I really had no idea you were such a pervert.”

“No idea you were one, too,” I return with a pointed look.

“Touché,” she grumbles.

I push the button to the glass divider. When it rolls down just a few inches, I tell the driver, “You can take us to the office now.”

“Yes, sir,” he says. When his eyes meet mine in the mirror, I can tell he’s turned on as fuck. I bet he’ll have to go whack one off after he delivers us.

I roll the window back up and make quick work of tucking myself in. By the time I have my belt fastened, Avril’s sitting back calm and collected, working her smartphone as if nothing just happened.

That impresses the hell out of me, and it validates that what we’re doing is cool. We can go back to business as usual.

“Wicked Horse tonight?” I ask, and her eyes snap up.

“That wasn’t enough for you?” she asks with a grin.

“Not by a long shot, and if you let me, I’ll come by your office later today and fuck you,” I tell her sincerely.

“No,” she says with a shake of her head. “Not in the office again. Boundaries.”

I sigh, but she’s right. It’s too much temptation, and it blurs the lines. “Ten PM then?”

“Sure,” she says casually as she stares at her phone. For some reason, that rankles me. I think I’d much prefer her to look me in the eye so I can see how torturous the wait will be. Instead, Avril’s showing me that she can separate the personal from the professional.

I should be overjoyed by that, because this means it can work. I haven’t considered how this thing will end, but maybe it doesn’t have to. Maybe this will be enough for us for a very long time.

CHAPTER 14

Andrew

I KNEW THE chances of seeing Avril or Dane here tonight would be high. I knew that I risked walking into a room and seeing them experience the ultimate in pleasure, but when I walked into The Orgy Room not a minute ago, I didn't expect to see them together.

The Orgy Room is dimly lit with focused ceiling lights that beam down on the various pieces of furniture where people have sex. Once your eyes become accustomed to the lighting, it's easy to see what goes on. I had walked the perimeter of the room, checking out the action.

I knew I wanted to come tonight to give this another shot. I wanted to do it because my two best friends are finding something here that makes them happy, and well... I want happy. It's something that has eluded me over the years as I've waited to find the right woman. I'm thirty-seven and it hasn't happened yet, so I figure it's time to try something new.

Avril and Dane don't think I'm cut out for this lifestyle, and I don't know if they're right or wrong. I just know I have to try or else I'll always wonder.

Nothing, however, could prepare me for seeing Dane and Avril together. There's a reclining double chaise lounge, padded with thick vinyl, and they are both completely naked. My first instinct is to bolt out of here, because I feel like I'm intruding on something intensely personal. But just as quickly, I dismiss that because nothing can be intensely personal when you're fucking in a room known for its orgies.

Entranced, I watch as they kiss and fondle each other. They must have just gotten started. Dane has his hand working between her legs and she's stroking his cock, which is rock hard.

My cock is rock hard I realize as I continue around the edge of the room to get a different view.

I feel completely weird as I find a place against the wall where I can lean against it and watch. They're ten feet from me, completely immersed in each

other, and my dick feels like concrete. I'm reminded of that night weeks ago when I watched Avril get fucked, and I wonder what the hell is wrong with me that I can be so turned on by that. Watching her with Dane is a million times more intense.

I should be running away and pretending I never saw this. Not sure how I'll look them in the face on Monday at the office, but that's not enough of a risk to have my feet moving. Instead, they stay firmly planted while I squeeze my hands into fists to prevent myself from jacking off.

As much as I'm fascinated and turned on, there's a tiny kernel of jealousy starting to brew deep down as I watch Dane's fingers pumping in and out of Avril. She and I shared something that night we watched each other, and it was outside the bonds of just friendship. It was sexual. There was a connection, but I never would have thought to act on it. I'm not sure whether I hate Dane or admire him for pushing past something I couldn't.

But really... I can't hate him or her. They're both enjoying what they're doing, and I can tell by the way their hands are moving and the way they are kissing that this isn't the first time they've been together. They obviously have a connection, and the only way I could ever begrudge that is if our friendship gets ruined.

It might. But it might not.

All I know is I'm rooted to the spot, unable to look away and knowing when I do finally jack off or fuck someone else in here, I'm going to come harder than I probably ever have before.

Neither of them seem to be in a hurry to get off, slowly and lazily touching each other, and it's driving me crazy. I consider finding someone in here to fuck, just so I can get off, but then I'm surprised when Dane rears up and spins Avril so her back is along the reclining portion, which has her facing me. Dane spreads her legs wide. My eyes go straight to her pussy, which is glistening wet. My view is immediately obstructed as Dane drops to his stomach and presses his face right into her. My cock jumps as Avril's back arches in pleasure, and I have no choice but to adjust myself, stroking myself lightly over my jeans.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Dane's head moves back and forth as he eats Avril's pussy, and it's the most erotic thing I've ever seen. My mouth waters, and that little kernel of

jealousy expands a tiny bit. Part of me wants to clap Dane on the back, but the other part wants to pull him off her so I can get her off with my tongue.

It takes no time at all and Avril's head shoots up as her hands go to Dane's head where she fists chunks of his hair. She cries out her release as her hips rotate to create more friction between his mouth and her clit. He keeps at her, and I can hear her say "stop" as she pulls on his head.

And as soon as his head lifts to look at her, Avril's gaze shifts past him to land directly on me. It happens all in an instant, but it seems like I watch it in slow motion.

Her eyes go wide with shock followed by a flood of guilt within those blue irises. I only get contrition for a second at most before flames leap in her eyes as she realizes I just watched Dane eat her out and there's a part of her that likes it.

Avril murmurs something I can't hear, but Dane does, because he's pushing up and turning to look over his shoulder at me. There's no guilt on his face at all, but I see an openness I'd expect if I were to walk into a bar to meet him for a long overdue drink together.

Leaning to the side so she can see past Dane, Avril then does the absolute unthinkable. She lifts her arm, turns her palm upward, and holds it out to me. Her eyes are hot and fevered. When I glance at Dane, I can see he's turned on by the prospect of what Avril is silently offering me right now.

She's beckoning me to play with them, and my conscience finally decides to rear its ugly head. I move to take a step backward only to be brought up short by the wall to my back. Dane's face turns troubled, and Avril pushes off the chaise to walk toward me.

My eyes roam all over her body as she comes my way, my first completely unfettered view of her as I couldn't see much of her body that night we both fucked other people in here. She's stunning... breasts heavy with tight nipples and cropped blond hair on her pussy that's slightly darker in the middle because it's wet. My cock starts aching as she gets closer, and I feel like a deer caught in the headlights.

Avril steps right up to me, and my eyes come up to meet hers.

"Please join us," she whispers, and I don't mistake the plea in her voice. I'm not sure if this is out of guilt they've been caught or she truly wants me, but I'm so fucking horny at this point, I'm not sure I even care. Somewhere

in the back of my mind, something is screaming at me to move cautiously and take heed, but this is Avril standing in front of me.

A woman I've loved for a long time in the same way that Dane has loved her.

The look in her eyes is asking me to love her in a different way right now.

"Is this wrong?" I ask her.

"It's not to me," she murmurs, and I want her to touch me so bad. If she touches me, my decision will be made.

She doesn't, though, and I know she wants me to walk on my own accord the rest of the way.

I look past her to Dane. He's now standing beside the chaise, his erection standing tall. Nothing about the woman whose pussy he just ate inviting me to join them is turning him off. He gives me a nod, telling me it's okay.

But nothing about this is okay.

My two best friends.

My two best *platonic* friends.

Standing naked and asking me to join them.

"Fuck it," I mutter just as I reach out to pull Avril to me. She comes easily and steps right into my body, her lips coming straight to mine.

I groan when her tongue breaches my mouth, and my hands go to her ass to pull her against my erection. Avril sighs. It sounds like happiness to me, so I choose to believe I am making her happy.

She works her hands in between us, opening my jeans. When her hand wraps around my cock, my knees go weak. My eyes start to roll, but Dane stepping up behind Avril makes them pop wide. He wraps his arms around her, one hand going to a breast, the other going between her legs. Avril's hand tightens on my dick, and she strokes me hard as Dane fingers her.

"Kiss me again," she whispers, and I do without hesitation.

I'm so worked up I'm surprised I'm not spilling in her hand, but the entire scenario is so surreal, I'm having a tough time even processing the feelings.

"Let's go back to the chaise," Dane says in a low voice. Before I know it, he's pulling Avril by the hand that way. She, in turn, takes my hand in hers, regretfully letting go of my dick. The three of us walk in a line back to the furniture that's just begging for something dirty to take place on it.

Dane, being Dane, takes control and pushes Avril toward the chaise. He positions her head near the low reclining portion so she's on her hands and

knees. I watch mesmerized as he runs a hand down her back, dragging his fingers through the crack of her ass to play lightly at the back of her pussy.

I groan when Dane gives a light slap to the inside of one thigh, then another, prompting her to spread her legs open.

“Fuck her,” Dane tells me softly, but it sounds menacing to me. Like he owns her and he owns me at the same time.

And yet... I can't help myself.

One knee goes to the chaise, and then another as I position myself behind Avril.

She cranes her neck to look at me over her shoulder, giving me an encouraging yet sexy smile. “Andrew... I want it.”

That's all my body needs to hear as it takes over the power and control from my brain. I push my jeans down a little and take my cock in my hand. When I press it to her slick opening, a shudder of pure pleasure rips up my spine, and I don't give a single fuck about one consequence.

I brace with one hand to her hip, and I feed myself into her slowly. Avril's head drops, and she moans her appreciation of my gift. Holding still within Avril's cunt, I watch as Dane walks to the head of the chaise and takes Avril by the chin. She opens her mouth willingly, and Dane's huge cock disappears inside. My hips jerk in reaction to watching as Avril is filled with us both, and I start to move within her.

My movements begin slow, but as Dane increases the pace with which he fucks her mouth, I find myself moving to match him. Avril moans around the cock in her mouth and her pussy flexes around me, causing me to practically see stars. I bring my other hand to her hip and start to pound away inside of her, each stroke causing me to fall further and further into a haze of lust and boiling need to come. In this moment, it matters not that they're my best friends or that we're doing the dirtiest thing imaginable.

All I care about is coming. When Dane throws his head back and groans out his release while lodged deep in Avril's mouth, it's all I need for my cock to start spilling what seems like buckets inside of her. I come hard, and my head spins from the exquisite pleasure of it. I've never experienced anything like it before, and I know it's because there's something infinitely filthy about fucking your best friend while your other best friend fucks her at the same time.

Dane pulls his cock out of her mouth and leans down to give her a hard

kiss. I stay planted within her, satisfied beyond measure, and yet wondering where in the fuck we go from here.

CHAPTER 15

Avril

I STEP OUT of the elevator and turn right, heading down to Andrew's apartment at the end of the hall. While he was all in the moment with Dane and me last night, after it was all said and done, he jetted out of there quickly, citing he was tired and still a bit hungover from the Berkley trip.

Dane and I recognized it for what it was, and that being he was just as wiggled out as I was when it first happened between Dane and me. I've texted him a few times today, and he's answered all bright and cheery sounding—or as much as you can read emotion into texts. But he wasn't actively engaging me, and that means he's out of sorts. I know him well enough to know he needs some validation right now.

So, I'm spending my Saturday afternoon working to put Andrew's head back on straight, and I can't think of anything more important than that. I even called Dane and he offered to come over as well, but I think Andrew just needs to hear it from me. He and I are the ones who have a stronger emotional connection, so we can speak the same language once I get him to open up.

I knock solidly three times and wait for Andrew to open the door. He does so without hesitation and doesn't look surprised to see me. But then again, he wouldn't. He would know without a doubt I'd never let him stew about anything that could cause him distress, and I'd be the first there to help him get through it.

He stares at me with a blank face, and I use the opportunity to appreciate just how good-looking Andrew is. While Dane may have been the one who made all my girly parts sigh years ago with his perfect face and body, Andrew just has that all-American good guy kind of look. He's the one you know you want to bring home to meet Mom and Dad because his looks are so wholesome.

"Gonna invite me in?" I ask with a smile.

His look back is sheepish, and he steps back from the door. "Yeah. Sure. Of course."

I walk into his apartment, and it looks like it always has. Totally a bachelor pad with clothes on the floor, empty plates on the coffee table, and the TV turned on to ESPN. He has his backpack on the couch with his laptop opened and sitting beside it, so I know that meant he was working. We're all always working whether we're at the office or our homes.

"Want something to drink?" he asks as he pads over to the couch. He's got on a pair of black track pants and a gray UC Berkley t-shirt, which fits his solid frame a little too well. It reminds me of the power of his body as it was behind me and in me last night, and I loved the feel of it.

Loved it even more that I had Dane at the same time, and I'm not sure what type of woman that makes me.

"I'm good," I reply as I follow him to take a seat beside him on the couch. He reaches for his laptop as if he's going to continue to work, but I put a stop to that right away.

I touch his arm lightly and say, "We need to talk."

Andrew's head turns slowly, his look wary. "What's to talk about?"

Okay, so he wants to play dense. I don't have time for that.

"We need to talk about the fact you fucked me doggie-style last night in a public place while I sucked Dane's cock," I tell him crudely, and Andrew actually winces.

With a sigh, I stand up from the couch and round the coffee table to stand before him. He watches me quietly and still on guard.

"The first time Dane and I were intimate," I start off by saying so I can present him all the facts. "I was completely freaked out the next day. I'd thought I'd ruined a friendship and a business partnership. I couldn't even look at Dane the next day, but he wouldn't let me stay that way."

"I'm looking at you right now," Andrew says in a low voice.

"But you're still confused about this," I say with certainty. "I know because you're so much like me, and I know how I felt."

Andrew leans forward on the couch, elbows to his knees. His voice is dry and tinged with a bit of anger. "And just how did you get past it? What exactly did Dane do to ease your conscience?"

I don't hesitate in the slightest. "He laid me on his desk, ate my pussy, and made me watch him. Then he told me to get over it, so I did."

“Just that easy?” he asks sarcastically.

“No, it wasn’t easy,” I tell him softly. “But I learned how to accept it and appreciate it. What we have is a gift, Andrew.”

He snorts. “A gift?”

“A gift,” I reiterate. “Three people who are tightly bonded, who care for each other, and who are as close as family. And we can share a deeper level of intimacy. Granted, it’s not conventional, but it’s something to be cherished.”

Andrew stands up from the couch and as he advances on me, he asks, “So what’s your solution, Avril? Did you come over here with your sexual charms to make it all better for me?”

I shake my head. “Not my original intention, but I’d welcome you into my body if you wanted that.”

Andrew stops in his tracks and curses as he scrubs his hands over his face. “Why did you have to fucking say something like that?”

“Because it’s the truth,” I tell him as I take a few steps to bridge the distance between us. I take his hands in mine. “That first night at The Wicked Horse, when we watched each other, I wanted you from that moment. I didn’t know I had this side to me, Andrew, but I know it now. I’m not ashamed of it. For some reason, it feels just right to me and I’m not going to ignore that.”

“You mean having sex with different men?” he asks me hesitantly.

“That’s how it started. I was exploring my sexuality. And that exploration led me to watching you, then being with Dane, and then being with you both, and I liked it more than I should. There’s something about what we did last night that speaks deeply to me, and I can only assume it’s because we have this amazing foundation of friendship. It just made everything better, and it all seemed so right. Didn’t it feel a little right to you?”

Andrew lets out a pent-up breath and the expression on his face is pained. “It felt both very right and very wrong.”

“And the wrongness of it is part of what’s right,” I tell him, and he jolts from my words. I can see I’ve hit the mark. It’s the dirty, taboo element of what we did last night that he most enjoyed.

Same as me.

“I don’t want anyone else,” I explain so he knows what this is. “I want you, and I want Dane. But wanting isn’t enough. We all have to be okay with this because if one of us isn’t, then it all has to stop. If you can’t envision this

working, or you can't envision me with Dane, then it's over. We all stop, and we go back to just being the greatest of friends who took a risk and realized when it was time to get out."

Andrew's eyebrows draw inward. "So, we what... have a ménage relationship? Which I'm not even sure that's the appropriate term, but the three of us are together?"

"Maybe," I say without any real idea if this is right. "I guess. We could all be together, or we could be with each other individually at times."

"How does that even work?" Andrew says with frustration as he pulls his hands from mine. "I mean... do we all sleep together at night? And how the fuck do you explain that shit to your conservative parents at Thanksgiving? 'Oh, hey, Mom... we'll all sleep in my bedroom together because we're all about the triple loving'."

"I don't know, Andrew," I admit with defeat. "I just know I want to be with you and Dane. I know Dane wants it. The question is, do you? If you don't, that's okay, and we work super fucking hard to make sure this friendship stays strong. But if you do, I only think we can take it one step at a time."

"It's just sex though, right?" he pushes for clarification, but I can't say for sure.

"That's a big part of it. But you and I both know it's better than just regular sex because of the bond we already have. So, it's definitely something more."

Andrew shakes his head as if he can't believe we're even having this conversation. His eyes heat with anger. He turns away from me, takes two steps, and then spins back around. "This is fucking insane, Avril. Last night... no goddamn words to describe it. Best fucking experience of my life, and yet, I'm betting most people would think that was some whacked shit."

"It's considered quite normal in The Wicked Horse," I murmur. "That's what that club is all about."

"But we're not in The Wicked Horse right now, are we?" he says in a low, rumbling voice as he steps back up to me. His hand comes to the side of my neck, fingers sliding to the back. "You said you'd welcome me into your body. That seems like an entirely different animal than us having a dirty threesome in a sex club."

I have to tilt my head to look up to him, and I hate the conflict I see in his

eyes. I want to make this okay for him, but I don't know how to at all. I just know he needs to decide what he wants to do.

"Do you want me to stay or do you want me to go?" I ask.

His eyes bore into mine and he swallows hard, but he remains silent as he looks at me. With a sigh, I step to the side to push past him, but his hand grabs my arm and he spins me back around.

Anger contorts his face, but I also see a heat in his eyes that has nothing to do with his raging emotions. My belly flips with recognition of what he wants.

"Guess I want you to stay," he mutters as he takes my wrist and pushes my hand against his crotch. He's hard as a rock, and my entire body trembles with anticipation.

"Let's go in your bedroom," I suggest.

Andrew shakes his head furiously. "Not there. Right here."

This causes my heart to clench, because there's no doubt Andrew doesn't want me in his bedroom because that's too intimate. I know him, and I can see by the determined look on his face that if he's going to jump into this with Dane and me, he's going to do so with the idea in mind that this is truly only sex to him. I know that's the way he's choosing to protect himself, and that's okay by me. I want all our hearts protected.

Andrew's kiss hits me like a thunderstorm, rolling through me in booming waves. In moments, our clothes are gone and we've stumbled backward onto the couch. Andrew shoves his computer and bag to the floor without a care, and then presses his big body down onto mine. Somehow, he works his hand in between us, his fingers playing between my legs until I'm a squirming mess.

He breaks a hot kiss to look down at me. "Last night... we didn't use protection."

"I'm on the pill, and Dane and I are safe. I assume by you sticking your cock in me last night, you were, too. Because I trust you."

Andrew gives me an understanding nod before his mouth is back on mine. He kisses me with long, slow swipes of his tongue while he massages my clit with his thumb. Finally, he pushes up to take my legs in his hands. He spreads them wide and pushes me up slightly before plunging his cock into me with one solid thrust to the root.

Then my best friend, Andrew Collings, fucks the breath out of me. He

makes me come twice before he presses his face into my neck and groans out his release.

And it's beautiful to me.

CHAPTER 16

Dane

I SILENTLY COUNT Andrew's reps as he strains to complete the chest presses. He's going for a triple personal best, and my hands hover over the bar to help him should his muscles fail. With a long grunt causing every vein to stand out on his forehead, he pushes the third one up and I help him rack the weight.

"Good job," I praise as he sits up to straddle the bench, swiping the towel from the floor and wiping his face.

Andrew and I work out together three times a week at Caterva's gym. Every Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday, with Sunday being chest, shoulders, and core. Usually after, we'll head up to our offices to put in a good day's work, where Avril will already be chugging away. It's how it's always been... three hard-working people who don't know what a forty-hour week looks like.

My motto has always been work hard, play hard, which is why I'm a member of The Wicked Horse. Looks like that's becoming Andrew and Avril's motto as well. Avril called me last night after she left Andrew's apartment and told me everything they talked about.

She also told me everything they did together, and it was enough to get me rock hard thinking about it. I want the three of us together again and soon, but I also need to check in with Andrew to make sure he's truly okay with this.

"Avril told me about last night," I say, and his head snaps around to look at me. He seems guarded at first, but then he lets out a sigh as he pushes up from the bench.

"This is some crazy shit, brother," he says with resignation. "But I couldn't say no to her last night."

"I'm glad you didn't."

"So, it doesn't bother you that I was alone with Avril?" he asks, his eyebrow cocking with skepticism.

I open my mouth to give a resounding “not a bit,” but snap it back shut as I take stock of a tiny bit of apprehension squeezing my chest. Yes, last night when Avril told me about what they did, I was turned way the fuck on. But I was also a little bit envious that I wasn’t there.

I also spent some time wondering if Andrew got her off better than I did, or if she enjoyed swallowing his cum more than mine. Then I immediately felt guilty for even having lewd thoughts about my best friend.

Pushing those thoughts out of my head, I give him a smile. “It’s good, man. We’ve been clear what this is, and we’ve set the boundaries.”

“Do the boundaries include other men and women in this scenario?” he asks, and now I’m the one to blink in surprise. It hadn’t occurred to me to discuss exclusivity because I had just assumed it was a given. When three close friends decide to fuck each other in a three way without protection, that just implies to me that none of us are fucking other people.

“It’s just us,” I tell him firmly.

“Avril said she only wanted the two of us. Both together and alone,” Andrew tells me.

“Then it’s just the three of us. No one else.” That sounds right, except I can’t ignore the immense feeling of relief I just felt sweep through me when Andrew told me that Avril wanted us individually as well. Because while her taking both of us night before last was hot as fuck, I want her very much alone as well.

Andrew moves over to the shoulder-press machine, and I follow behind him. I think he’s on board, but there’s one thing I have to know exactly where he stands on. “Are you okay with the individual times together that Avril seems to want?”

I think I’m asking the question because Andrew’s the one whose heart stands the biggest risk of getting confused in all this, but in all actuality... I’m asking because I already know I’m going to have to put some major effort into not being jealous over Avril and Andrew being alone.

My legs practically give way on me when Andrew turns to look at me and slowly shakes his head. “I can’t do the individual.”

“What?” I ask in pure disbelief. I mean... why the fuck would he not want Avril in his bed alone?

“Because when it’s the three of us together, I can pretend that it’s just friendship. That it’s just the three of us doing everything together like we’ve

done for seventeen years. Anything past that, and it gets too confusing.”

Jesus fuck, but he’s nailed it.

The big fucking problem in all of this.

I don’t know what to say, so I adjust the weights on the press and sit to straddle the seat. Before I can take the handles though, Andrew asks me, “What about you?”

My eyes raise to his. Because there’s no way I can lie to him about this, I tell him a truth that’s very painful for me to admit. “I like the individual. The connection. I’ve never had that before and it’s scary, but it also feels comfortable because it’s Avril.”

Andrew’s eyes round with surprise, because for all the years he’s known me, he knows I’ve never felt for a woman the way I’m admitting to now.

“Dude... are you sure this is a good idea?” he mutters.

“Yes,” I say without hesitation. “As long as you’re okay with me having alone time with Avril if I want it.”

“This is so fucked up,” Andrew rasps out. “I’m okay with a threesome because that seems the most impersonal to me. You’re okay with the threesome and you want time with her alone, because you’re feeling something you’ve never felt before. And Avril wants us both in any way she can have us. This spells fucking disaster.”

“Want to stop?” I ask.

Andrew tilts his head back and looks at the ceiling a moment before giving me his answer. “No. I can’t turn away from that type of pull... the things the three of us could do together. The things you and I could do to Avril together. But I’m worried about you, Dane. You’re the one walking dangerous territory.”

I brush his concerns off even though I know they’re legit. “It’ll be fine. We’ll be good.”

Andrew stares at me without saying anything, so I grab the handles of the press and push upward, starting my reps. When I’m done, he makes a slight adjustment on the weights and completes his.

As we’re switching, he catches me off guard again. “When we go to Paris, are we just going to stay in one room together?”

I practically drop the weight, and have to heave it back up. I keep my gaze on the opposite wall while I finish my reps. When I lower the press back to neutral, I say, “I hadn’t thought about it. Probably not.”

“We could just get a suite,” he suggests.

Jesus, I can't believe he's thinking about this. I'm the one worried about having alone time with Avril, and he's planning out the best way for all three of us to fuck while we're in Paris next week to visit Fabron's company. He extended an invitation to us as a means of transparency. He's going to give us an inside look at his technology, hoping to prove to us he's very serious about joining forces.

“That's fine,” I mumble, immediately castigating myself for thinking about Avril. Separate rooms would mean I'd have more individual time with her, and it's not good to be thinking that way at all.

How in the fuck I've become Andrew in this situation and he's become me is beyond any logic I can fathom. I suspect it's because Avril and I do share that one thing that I don't have with Andrew, and that's her knowledge about my father coming to see me and how that affected me.

Andrew knows the general story that he abandoned me and I was raised in the foster system. He knows things such as I'd never really celebrated holidays. The first time I was invited to Thanksgiving at his house, it was totally awkward for me. Granted, over the years, I'd been invited to spend time at both Avril and Andrew's family homes, and I'm very fond of their families. But Andrew also knows, same as Avril, that my lack of experiences accompanied with some abandonment issues is what keeps me guarded and closed off from wanting a relationship or a family of my own. I don't need fucking counseling to know that's true as I'm a pretty self-aware guy.

Avril knows more about the situation, though. She's the one who was there the day my dad showed up out of the blue at our apartment. She's the one who saw my reaction. She's the one I had no choice but to show my vulnerability to, and she's the one who stepped up to the plate to protect me.

Avril's the one who, when it was all over, didn't force me to talk about it. She respected my need to keep that private, and I was more grateful to her for that than anything.

Except there's one other thing that had set Avril apart from Andrew over the years, and she doesn't even know I know about it.

It was toward the end of our senior year at Berkley, and I needed some post-it notes. I was fresh out but as is the way of good friends and roommates, I knew I could borrow some from either Andrew or Avril. They

weren't home, but we were freely allowed to borrow stuff from each other. Andrew's room was closest to mine, but he didn't have any.

Avril's room was neat and orderly, without anything out on her desk. I started rummaging through her drawers. In the last one I found a stack of post-its. I also found a folder that had the name "Lyndon Hawthorne" written on the tab.

My father's name.

I couldn't help myself. I pulled it out and opened it up, stunned to see several pages of notes all in Avril's handwriting. She had apparently tracked my father down at some point after he left and had his whereabouts, including an address and a phone number. She also had a sheet of paper entitled "Pros and Cons" and it looked like a list she wrote out debating whether or not to turn this information over to me.

Some of the pros were things like "will help him heal" and "he can have a family one day". Those fucking words made my nose sting as I realized she was keenly aware of my walls caused by my father when he abandoned me.

The cons were things like "maybe it's too late" and "he didn't ask me to nose around in his business".

At the bottom of that sheet was a line that read: "Conclusion: I don't know what to do."

I flipped through more of the documents, which included a criminal record check on my father showing he'd spent some time in prison for drugs, as well as notes from phone calls she'd made to people to check him out. It looked like he did home inspections or some shit like that, and she had pretended to call for references from people he'd done work for. I remember they were all good things like "dependable" and "on time" and "good quality work for good price".

I must have sat at her desk, reading over everything three, maybe four, times to soak it all in. I wasn't pissed she'd done it, but rather amazed she would think to. When she pushed him out of the apartment, I didn't give him another thought, but she had.

Avril had ultimately decided not to tell me. From what I could make of her notes, she had done all that research within the first few weeks after his visit. She'd held onto that information for months, apparently having decided not to share it with me.

It was that knowledge that made me realize I loved her for the first time.

It had become clear that the bonds of our friendship were forged in steel, and that Avril cared about my entire well-being.

I never told her I found the information. I put it back in her desk, borrowed the post-its, and went on with my life.

I have no clue if she still has it, but for the first time in years, I wonder if perhaps it was foreshadowing the very circumstances I find myself in. There's something deep within me that wants more from Avril than what we've discussed. It's at war with my need to avoid relationships, yet I find myself now thinking about that damn folder with information about my father.

Completely wondering if maybe now is the time in my life where I'm supposed to confront that shit.

CHAPTER 17

Avril

MY DOORBELL RINGS, and I walk—uncomfortably—to the front door. When I pull it open, Dane and Andrew stand there. Dane has a bouquet of flowers, and Andrew has a half-gallon of ice cream.

“Okay, that’s just awkward,” I tell the men as I eyeball their gifts. I turn and walk back into my house, knowing they’ll follow. “This isn’t a date.”

Dane grins, and Andrew snickers before saying, “No more awkward than the way you’re walking right now.”

I twist my neck to glare at him. “Yeah, well... you have a huge ass plug in you and see how you’re walking.”

“Poor baby,” Dane croons as he closes the door, but he doesn’t sound sympathetic at all.

The jackass wouldn’t either, since I’m quite sure this whole ‘make Avril as uncomfortable as possible while anticipating tonight’ idea was his.

Our workday had started off regularly enough. I made it to the office first, followed by Andrew and then Dane. You’d never have known by the casual way we greeted each other that the three of us had been fucking all night at The Wicked Horse. In fact, I’ve been with either Dane or Dane and Drew together every night since my evening alone with Andrew, and it only gets more exciting as every day passes.

The only thing that’s a little weird is that Andrew bugged out one night so it was just Dane and me together, and it was amazing. He and I played with the dildo machine at the club, and then he came back to my house and stayed the night.

Although today started normal, it didn’t stay that way. That’s because at about three o’clock this afternoon, Dane and Andrew showed up at my office door and closed it behind them. For a moment, I thought we had some very confidential business to discuss.

That was dispelled when Dane pulled out a butt plug, held it up, and said, “Take your panties off.”

My response. “Oh, hell no.”

“Tonight’s the night, Avril,” he said in a smooth, low voice that caused my pussy to tingle from the promise in it. I knew what he meant by the plug in his hand—that tonight I was going to have both of them in me at the same time. I’d asked about it, and I was promised it would be done right.

“We’re starting your prep a little early,” Andrew said, and the wicked look on his normally wholesome-looking face made my legs shake.

So. I ended up bent over my desk with my skirt hiked up, my panties pulled down, and Andrew’s fingers playing with my clit until I orgasmed. Dane pushed the lubed plug in my ass at that moment, and I thought I was going to die.

“Don’t take it out,” he’d warned me, and I had to admit... it felt good. It wasn’t overly large and it was so dirty that I was wearing it to a four o’clock meeting. The knowing looks Andrew and Dane kept shooting me made my panties wet, and it was difficult to concentrate.

Things got a little more uncomfortable when Dane showed back up at my office door at five o’clock. He gave me no choice but to assume the position over my desk while he fingered me to an orgasm. As the first tremors started, he pulled the plug out of me. I had to bite on the palm of my hand to stop from screaming.

He wasn’t done, however.

He merely replaced that plug with a larger one, and as I groaned out my discomfort when I stood back up, he merely gave me a quick kiss on the mouth and whispered, “You need this so you can handle my cock in your ass tonight.”

I almost combusted right there.

The men insisted we do tonight at my house. While every other night has been at the club, tonight was special because man was going where no man had been before in my body. I was nervous as hell and they both knew it, so I was relieved we’d have some privacy in case I chickened out the minute Dane tried to impale me with his huge dick.

The plug had been uncomfortable to wear, and I actually left work a little early because I was cranky and horny at the same time. So, while Andrew and Dane veer off to the kitchen to supposedly put the ice cream in the

freezer and the flowers in a vase—which, admittedly, was as sweet as it was weird—I head into my bedroom because I don't need much seduction tonight.

I'm ready.

Making quick work of removing my clothes, I position myself in the middle of my bed with my legs spread and my fingers playing between my legs when they walk in. Both stop just inside the door and stare at me with burning eyes. The need among all three of us is almost tangible, and I hoarsely order them to get naked.

They comply readily and there is nothing sexier than watching two gorgeous, ripped men with huge erections taking their clothes off. Knowing that both of those cocks are going to have me at the same tonight has my pussy already slippery and my ass muscles pulsing around the plug.

When the last of the clothing hits the floor, I roll off the bed and walk up to Andrew and Dane. I step in between them, one to each side of me, and take a cock in each hand. I start stroking, tilting my head first to kiss Andrew, then over to Dane. Both men groan into my mouth. When I pull my lips from Dane's, I drop to my knees in between them.

I stroke Andrew's cock while turning to take Dane's in my mouth. His hips punch forward at first contact and I almost gag, but he pulls back slightly and I adjust. I suck at him for several moments, keeping a nice pace on Andrew's dick with my hand.

Then it's Andrew's turn to get my mouth and he whispers, "Fuck," as I take him inside. I grip Dane hard with my hand as I know he likes it a little rough, and he hums approval from deep in his throat.

I alternate back and forth between the two, so lost in what I'm doing I'm barely aware of one of them pulling me up to my feet. Opening my eyes, I see it's Dane and before I know it, I'm flat on my back on the bed. My legs are pulled open, and I cry out as both men take turns tonguing my clit. I push up to my elbows to watch, fascinated that these two purely heterosexual males are sharing something so intimate. Their mouths don't touch but they come awful close, and I would kill to have them kiss each other.

When Andrew sticks three fingers inside of me and Dane sucks hard on my clit, my first orgasm tears through me and my hips shoot off the bed. When they land back on the mattress, the plug in my ass jostles and it sparks my orgasm harder.

“She’s ready,” Dane says confidently. Because I’m completely boneless, I can only gasp as I’m pulled back up off the bed. I fall into Dane’s arms, vaguely aware of Andrew taking my place in the middle of the bed.

His eyes are dark and needy as he lays spread-eagled on his back.

I gasp again as Dane spins me toward Andrew, but I need no encouragement from here. I crawl onto the bed and over Andrew’s body, straddling right over his beautiful erection. We stare at each other while I use my hand to guide him into me, and I’m so wet and loose from that orgasm I take him all the way to the root with a single push down.

“Fuck yes.” Andrew groans and his hands come to my breasts. He squeezes and plumps them as my hips rotate a little, then his fingers pinch and pull at my nipples. He knows that drives me crazy, so I start a frantic little bounce up and down on his cock. Every time my ass hits his pelvis, it jostles the plug around inside of me and that feels fucking amazing.

Until it’s gone.

Dane is behind me. With skilled fingers, he pulls the plug out and I hear it hit the floor. I know what’s coming, yet I can’t stop wildly riding Andrew’s cock, driven to go faster by his own heavy breathing and muttered curses of pleasure.

“Hold still,” Dane says roughly as his hands come to my hips to pin me in place. “I don’t want you getting him off yet.”

Andrew lets out a grunt of either acknowledgment or annoyance, I’m not sure. Dane’s hand goes to the middle of my back and he pushes me forward until my torso is on Andrew’s with my breasts mashed to his chest.

Our mouths are just inches apart, and I smile down at him. “Hi.”

“Hi.” He grins back. “You feel good.”

“So do you,” I tell him back with a gasp as I feel Dane squirt lube on my ass. I involuntarily contract with fear and Andrew either feels it or sees it on my face, but he brings his hands to my cheeks.

He pulls me to him and kisses me slowly, and I become lost to that for sweet moments. Then I feel the silky, blunt head of Dane’s cock against my ass and my head pops up with surprise and, yes, more fear.

“Easy, Av,” Dane whispers to me from behind. “I’m going to go slow. You tell me to stop at any time.”

I nod and focus on Andrew’s beautiful face. He smiles at me reassuringly and says, “You are so fucking sexy, Avril. I want to come inside you so bad.”

His words completely melt me, causing me to relax. Dane must feel it because he pushes forward and the head of him pops inside of me. I feel the burn, but it dissipates quickly. I'm suddenly thankful for that plug in my ass all afternoon.

"Jesus, she's tight," Dane says, and I know he's speaking directly to Andrew. "Man... just wait until you feel this ass."

Andrew groans and impatiently thrusts his hips up, driving his cock into me deep.

"Oh." I gasp as my forearms go to the mattress and my cheek presses against Andrews. I can't move really, impaled from below by Andrew and behind by the tip of Dane's dick inside me.

"Just hang on for the ride," Andrew tells me and I nod my head, feeling the stubble on his cheek rub against my skin.

Dane presses further into me, and I'm stretching, burning, and then feeling the most amazing fullness. It's almost indescribable, but I feel complete in a way that I didn't know was missing.

Andrew stays still while Dane continues to sink his cock into my ass. When his pelvis presses against me and I'm completely stuffed, my head lifts as I moan in pleasure. "Oh, God that feels good."

"You good, Av?" Dane asks me, but all I can do is furiously nod my head. I'm full of man, and I'm actually dreading the emptiness when this is over. I try to move up and down on Andrew, but I'm pinned in place by Dane's cock.

"Don't move," Dane says. "Let us do the work, okay?"

"Okay," I whisper, and then my mouth is occupied with Andrew's tongue again. He starts thrusting upward into me with short, gentle strokes, which starts Dane moving. He pulls out almost to the tip before pressing in deep again.

I cry out into Andrew's mouth, and he sucks it down. My lips go lax. I can't even concentrate on kissing Andrew with the sensations going on below my waist. Both cocks moving, rubbing against each other through the thin flesh that separates them. Andrew breathing harshly, and Dane grunting every time he thrusts inside me. Pretty soon, our skin is slapping together and the headboard is knocking hard against the wall. The air in my lungs seems frozen, and my fingers claw into the bedspread as I can do nothing but feel

the sensations. I'm overwhelmed by how good it all feels, and my head starts spinning.

My orgasm catches me by surprise, bursting apart so violently I cry out. Tears start falling freely from my eyes because it feels so amazing, and it goes on and on as both men continue to fuck me mercilessly.

I feel on the edge of blacking out, feel myself start to fall under, but then another orgasm hits me. This time, I scream from the force of it.

"Fuck yes," Dane growls and starts hammering into my ass.

"I'm fucking coming," Andrew groans as he pushes his hips up and his cock starts pulsing inside me.

Dane drives so deep that he pushes both me and Andrew down into the mattress and groans out his release as well in typical Dane fashion, which means uttering every curse word known to man while he grinds into my ass.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God," I chant over and over again as my orgasm continues to just lazily ripple through me and both men are emptying themselves into my body.

It's beautifully terrifying as I don't know that I can ever have anything measure up to that again.



NO, THERE'S NOTHING weird about laying in my bed with Dane on one side and Andrew on the other. We're propped up against the headboard, watching some old Seinfeld episodes and sharing the ice cream.

The haze of sex has long since dissipated, and we've been discussing business.

Fabron and his desire to join Caterva to be exact.

This actually makes me very happy because it shows we are all able to compartmentalize what we're doing between the bedroom and the boardroom, even though we are discussing business in a bed while naked.

When my phone rings, I thrust the ice cream at Andrew and roll slightly over Dane to reach for it. His hand comes to my hip to steady me, and it could be a platonic sort of move except he gives me a small, affectionate squeeze as I settle back against the pillows.

Looking at the caller ID, I don't recognize the number but can tell it's local. I connect and put the phone to my ear. "Avril Carrigan."

“It’s Jamie,” I hear my former boyfriend say, and he immediately adds on, “Please don’t hang up.”

I sit up straighter in the bed and can feel Andrew and Dane’s eyes on me.

“What do you want?” I ask, the surprise in my voice evident. I hadn’t heard a word from him these last six weeks since we broke up.

“I’ve been wanting to call you,” he says in what I’d almost describe as a fatigued voice. “Picked up the phone a dozen times, but figured you wouldn’t talk to me.”

“I’m not sure I should be,” I tell him truthfully.

“I’m just so sorry, Av,” he practically gushes. “I didn’t get a chance to say that, but I need you to know that. For the pain I’ve caused you. I love you, and I never meant to do that—”

At this point, I pull the phone away and hit the speaker button. It’s not like I wouldn’t recount the entire conversation to Andrew and Dane anyway.

“—I swear it was a one-time only thing. I was so stupid, and selfish, and I was missing you because you were away.”

Dane gives a disgruntled grunt, and it’s loud enough that Jamie goes silent. Then he asks hesitantly, “Am I on speakerphone?”

“You are,” I tell him as I settle back down into the pillows.

“Who’s there?”

“Andrew and Dane,” I respond in an even voice, even though I want to laugh over the thought of if Jamie could get an eyeful of me right now. “They came over to watch some TV and hang out.”

“Oh... well, um... can we talk privately?” he asks irritably.

“It’s just not a good time,” I tell Jamie.

“When is a good time?”

“Probably never,” I return. “It’s over, Jamie. I’ve moved on and so should you.”

“I’d still like another chance.” His voice is soft and regretful, and there’s a part of me that responds to it. I think I needed the apology more than I care to admit. “People can come back from these sorts of things. We could go to ___”

“She said she’s not interested.” Dane leans toward the phone and growls. “Grow a ball sack and move on.”

“Fuck you, Dane,” Jamie retorts into the phone. “You don’t speak for her.”

“No, I speak for myself,” Dane snarls. I turn to look at Andrew, who has a smirk on his face. “And hear me when I say... if you get within fifty feet of her, I’m going to whip your ass again.”

“Again?” I say in astonishment as my head whips around to Dane.

He doesn’t even look at me, but reaches over and pushes the disconnect button on my screen.

“Again?” I repeat to Dane with a raised eyebrow.

Dane shrugs and leans against the headboard. “I might have imparted a goodbye message to him when he came over to pick his stuff up.”

My head turns back to Andrew. “He didn’t?”

“He did,” Andrew says simply and digs the spoon back into the ice cream. “He’s always the one who beats up the guys for you, Av.”

I turn back to look at Dane, and his eyes are soft but intense as they lock onto mine. “Anyone that hurts you gets hurt in return. Simple as that.”

And wow, does that make my heart flutter.

CHAPTER 18

Dane

OH, THE BENEFITS of flying a private jet to Paris. It's not the first time all three of us have traveled internationally together. We've attended biotech conferences over the years in so many different countries, I can't even remember them all.

We always flew private because when you head a thirty-billion-dollar company, you can afford such niceties.

Large comfortable seats, gourmet food, and top-shelf liquor. There's even a large couch that can fold out into a bed if necessary, and I've not been able to stop thinking about getting Avril naked and on said bed.

The current downside to flying private is that we also have our own dedicated stewardess who hovers nearby in case we need her. I know Avril likes to be watched at The Wicked Horse, but I seriously doubt that applies right now.

Besides... she's in work mode, and I know this by the serious look on her face as she scowls at a document that she and Andrew have been arguing about for the past twenty minutes.

"It's not within the current budget to add these research positions," Avril says for probably the third time to Andrew. They're sitting opposite me in captain's chairs that swivel, angled to face each other.

Andrew rolls his eyes. "For Christ's sake, Avril. You help control the purse strings to millions of dollars in venture capital. Cut loose a few million and let me double down on our efforts to develop the imaging cytometer."

"How about you having some patience?" Avril snaps. "You do realize we're going to Paris to meet with Fabron and look at his cytometer up close, right? He's going to give us confidential access in the hopes of forging an alliance with us."

"We don't need another partner," Andrew retorts. "There's a developer out of Denmark I've got my eye on who can get us what we need."

“I said no,” Avril grits out. “Learn to accept it and respect my position.”

“Learn to loosen your grip a little,” Andrew throws back at her. “Control freak isn’t a good look on you.”

“Bite me, Collings,” Avril snarls.

“Been there, done that,” Andrew growls back. I want to laugh, but I can’t when I see the look on Avril’s face.

It turns red and her eyes blaze with fury. “Don’t you dare fucking bring sex into this.”

My eyes flick past the two of them to the stewardess, who has her back to us in the open galley. I’m sure she’s getting quite the earful.

“Dane,” Andrew says calmly, and my eyes snap to him. “Where do you weigh in on this? You know we are far from a done deal with Fabron. Chances are we’re going to come out of there knowing jack shit and we’re going to need to move on development.”

“The matter of a month or so isn’t going to kill him to wait for it,” Avril says to me, and my gaze goes to her. What does it say about me that I don’t give a fuck about their argument, but I’d kill to go down on her right now.

I shake my head and hold my hands up to make the peace, but Andrew’s apparently not done. He turns in his chair to look at Avril. “You know, I don’t know what your problem is but it seems like every proposition I put before you, you shoot it down. You do realize I’ve got more education than you when it comes to the science of what we’re trying to do? You do realize, Avril, that this is about science and yet you don’t fucking give me an ounce of respect for it.”

“Well, maybe if you didn’t act like a brat ninety percent of the time, I’d be able to give you a little more respect.”

I wince because that was harsh and unprofessional, and things are way out of hand. “Avril,” I say in a warning voice. Her head snaps my way, eyes blazing so fiercely my mouth snaps shut.

“Why don’t you bite me too, Dane?” she snarls, and then pushes out of her seat. She walks past my chair and into the bathroom behind us, slamming the door shut behind her.

I look at Andrew, and I can see satisfaction on his face that he got the better of her emotions as he stares at the closed bathroom door.

“You’re a jackass,” I tell him.

He looks back to me. “She started it.”

“Fucking mature,” I say as I undo my seatbelt and get up.

I’d like to say that this is an unfortunate result of the three of us venturing into intimate territory, but sadly, these arguments have happened on a few occasions in the past. Both of my partners are passionate people, and it’s why I wanted them on this journey with me. They take their jobs seriously, which can ignite sparks because the chief operations officer can often be in direct conflict with research and development. It’s a fine line they both have to balance on, and they’ve had meltdown arguments before.

When I reach the bathroom, I give a soft knock and test the door handle. It’s unlocked, so I take that as permission to enter since Avril doesn’t say anything from inside.

The luxury of a private plane designed for international flight is a decent-sized bathroom with a shower and vanity. I find Avril with her hands gripping the sink, staring in the mirror at herself.

“He pisses me off so bad,” she says in a low voice as she looks at me through the mirror. “He’s a child. Well, a man-child.”

I think to myself she wasn’t thinking that last night when he had her ass, but I know it’s not the time to bring it up. So instead, I step up behind her and wrap my arms around her stomach. I pull her up so she settles back into me and as I look at her in the reflection, I ask, “What’s really going on?”

Avril sighs and brings her hands up to rest over my forearms, leaning her head back on my shoulder. It’s an intimate embrace. Definitely not one we would have ever found ourselves in before we started fucking each other, and shit if I don’t like being able to hold her like this in comfort. Doesn’t mean my dick isn’t slightly hard from the knowledge that we’re secluded away in this bathroom and I could bend her over the sink, but that’s not why I came in here.

“He doesn’t respect my position and always makes me feel like shit if I have to say no to one of his requests,” she mutters. “And I get the distinct impression that now that he’s fucking me, he thinks he can get away with that shit even more.”

I release Avril so fast she gasps, and then gasps again as I spin her around. Taking her by the shoulders, I put my face right into hers and tell her in a low, menacing voice. “Don’t go there, Av. What happened out there has happened countless times between the two of you. That has nothing to do with what we’re doing in our private lives.”

Contrition immediately softens her face and her head falls forward to rest on my chest. She sighs and says, “I know. I’m being such a bitch, and I have no clue why.”

I wrap my arms around her again, this time to squeeze her. “It’s just what you two do. You bicker like siblings.”

She gives a giggle and lifts her head up. “How come you and I never fight like that?”

“Because I’m the boss and you can’t treat me that way,” I say with a grin.

To this, she responds by going quickly to tiptoe and planting a fast kiss on me. “You’re a jackass just like Andrew.”

Big mistake putting that mouth on me.

My arms tighten around her and kiss her back, but mine’s not fast. Instead, it’s slow and deep and there’s no mistaking what I want when I grind my cock into her.

“Dane,” she whispers, all throaty and needy.

“Christ, I fucking want you so bad,” I mutter as I drag her skirt up her thighs. “Want me to call Andrew in here?”

She shakes her head. “I’ll make it up to him.”

I push past the surge of jealousy over her need to keep us both on even ground with her. I should be happy I have her alone now, yet I’m already envious of her making this up to him. Which is weird, because to my knowledge, Andrew hasn’t been with her alone since that one and only time at his apartment. The past four nights, Avril and I have been at the club and Andrew only joined us two of those nights. The other nights, he begged off with “too much work to do” but I actually know he’s keeping some distance. Andrew told me he only wanted the threesome as it was the best way for him to keep the intimacy between him and Avril to a minimum. Andrew... protecting his heart, and I’m wondering if perhaps he didn’t have the right idea since I spend too much fucking time thinking about being with Avril.

Making quick work of my pants, Avril manages to free my cock, which is stiff and aching for her. She strokes me while our mouths work at each other. Because I know we shouldn’t stay too long in here, I spin her around so she can brace against the sink.

“Ass out,” I tell her. She lowers her torso parallel to the floor and arches her back so her ass is tilted beautifully in the air.

“Hurry,” she says in an urgent tone.

Pulling her underwear to the side, I expose the back of her pussy, which is glistening wet for me, and I don't hesitate putting the head of my cock right there.

She's tight and not ready other than being soaked, so I work my way into her with short thrusts, going deeper each time.

Avril lifts her head and stares at me in the mirror. When I lodge myself all the way in, she gives me the sexiest smile I've ever seen on a woman. Narrowing her eyes slightly, she challenges me. "Now fuck me hard, Dane. Make me see stars."

So I do.

Thirty thousand feet in the air, I fuck her so hard my balls ache from slapping against her. Avril holds nothing back, moaning loudly and calling out my name. No doubt in my mind the stewardess and Andrew can probably hear us, but I'm past giving a fuck. All I need is for us both to come hard.



AVRIL PROCEEDS ME out of the bathroom, and I follow her down the short aisle back to our seats. She steps in front of Andrew, who is surfing on his computer, and he doesn't spare her a glance.

The stewardess is still in the galley. As I sit down, Andrew says dryly, "Was that as good as it sounded?"

"Better," Avril says prissily, and I shoot her a glare. She shrugs and looks out the window.

"Nice," Andrew mutters in a voice that says her comment was anything but.

"Okay, you two," I say in exasperation. "As owner of this company, I'm telling you to both grow the fuck up right now."

They shoot me twin glares, but I ignore them. "Andrew... we're not approving additional developers until after we meet with Fabron. Depending on how it goes this week in our talks, we'll revisit it."

Avril's smile turns upward in satisfaction. I wipe it right back off when I say, "Avril... I want you to go ahead and start the process to move the money over into the R&D budget because, in all honesty, my gut is telling me that we should develop our own cytometer and we might as well get the money rolling."

Andrew's now the one smiling like a Cheshire cat.

"Now kiss and make up," I say slyly, hoping it will break the tension, but Avril merely huffs and looks out the window again.

Andrew mutters, "Better things to do with my mouth."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," I growl. "Why don't you two go into the bathroom and fuck and make up then?"

Avril's face flushes, and Andrew's glare at me burns brighter. I wait to see what they will do because if Andrew wants to be with her, she won't say no.

Instead, he says softly, "Not in the mood."

Christ, I'm not sure what it says about me as a friend, but I'm flooded with relief that he's not taking this opportunity. That, as of now, Avril in part continues to be just mine.

But that doesn't mean I don't want to fix things between them. I know they'll get there on their own because those two never stay mad at each other for long, but I feel like all of us could use a reminder of just how special our bond is regardless of the stellar but filthy sex.

"Remember when Claudia broke up with you?" I say, and Andrew's eyes shoot back up to mine. I can see Avril's head turn slowly my way, but I don't look at her. "Avril dropped everything to be by your side. I thought you would be inconsolable forever, but you weren't and it's because of Avril. She stayed by your side, wallowed in your grief, and babysat you through drinking binges. She spent weeks pulling you out of your funk."

The minute Andrew's eyes soften, I turn my attention to Avril. "And you remember when your brother died? Andrew dropped everything to fly back home with you. He stayed by your side over a week and refused to leave you alone until you were able to come back to work."

Avril's eyes get slightly moist, and I know I don't need to say anymore, but I do.

"We've been through deaths and breakups and illnesses together. We've had the highs of launching this business and the lows of people telling us it would never work, and right back to the highs of creating a technology that will change the world. We work sixteen, seventeen, fuck, sometimes twenty-hour days and we do it together. We pull our hair out in frustration, we buck each other up with pep talks, and we've been doing this shit for seventeen

years strong. So, drop this petty shit because I don't like my two best friends being mad at each other."

They stare at me a moment, chastised and moved by my speech. Avril's head rolls to the left to look at Andrew, and she murmurs, "I'm sorry."

He repeats the same action but to his right, and he smiles at her. "I'm sorry, too."

"Friends?" she asks as she holds her hand out to him.

"Always," he says as he takes her hand, bringing it to his lips to brush a kiss there.

CHAPTER 19

Avril

FABRON'S HOUSE IS ostentatious but then again, so is Dane's. I guess it's a prerequisite when you head up a major biotech firm and you're worth billions.

I'd had the pleasure of staying here twice in my travels through France. Fabron Lemaire was charming then, as were his wife and children. He's even more charming now that he's divorced, and we've been friends on a personal and professional level for years.

He hands me another glass of champagne, and I take it without hesitation. It's only my second and Fabron is easy to talk to and flirt with, although neither one of us takes it very seriously. Truth be told, Fabron would rather have me come to work for him than he would for me to warm his bed, and I know Dane would take more offense to that than anything. I think that's why Fabron flirts with me shamelessly in front of Dane and Andrew, so they really don't catch on to how much he'd like to put me in charge of Révéler Biotech's operations.

"How is Melisant?" I ask Fabron as we stand by the fireplace in his great room. He's having a party of the upper crust of Paris, but mostly other people in the biotech industry. Andrew and Dane are off networking and mingling, as we usually split up at these types of events.

"She's angry and bitter," he says with a shrug. "Luckily, the kids are old enough that they don't believe her lies about me."

"I'm sorry," I say with a wince. "I guess divorce is never pretty, right?"

"I've moved on and hopefully so will she one day," he says gallantly. "I want her to be happy."

"I like Melisant," I tell him honestly. "She was always very gracious to me."

"She admired you a great deal," he says with an affectionate smile. "Your intelligence and your ambition. She saw a lot of herself in you, except she

married her way to the top while you worked your way there.”

I don't know what to say to this, so I take a sip of my champagne and search through the crowd for either Dane or Andrew. Last night when we'd arrived, we all crashed in our respective beds in our suite, trying to sleep through the jet lag. But tonight, we're all going to be together, and I know this because Dane told us as we left the hotel for Fabron's party, "I've got something special in mind for tonight. Are you both up for an adventure?"

I immediately assured him I was, and he laughed before he kissed me. Andrew grinned with good nature and jokingly grabbed his crotch. "I'm always up."

It's been hard to concentrate on anything else but whatever it is that Dane has planned for when we get back to the hotel, I know it's going to be really good.

"You know my job offer to you is a very serious offer, Avril," Fabron says quietly, but it causes my attention to snap back to him with unfiltered focus.

"You have a very competent COO," I say dismissively.

"Not as competent as you," he returns. By the look on his face, I know he's dead serious. "Dane is obviously the driving force behind Caterva and Andrew is a brilliant scientist, but that company is held together by you. Those men have no clue the amount of balls you have to juggle every day just to keep things running."

"They know quite well," I say in their defense, but it does make me wonder. Andrew with his petulant demands and Dane dismissing my concerns over Andrew's demands.

"Maybe, maybe not," he says neutrally. "But I would double your salary, give you hefty stock options, and make you co-chair of our board of directors with me."

I blink at him in surprise. "You're serious about this, aren't you?"

"Indeed, I am," he replies bluntly.

"But I just thought you were flirting with me," I say with a nervous laugh.

"My dear Avril," Fabron says as he steps in a little closer to me. "My offer to you, first and foremost, is for a job with my company, but you aren't wrong in recognizing my flirtations. I'm very attracted to you, and I would certainly welcome pursuing a relationship with you. We'd be a power couple that would shock and awe the entire city of Paris."

Another nervous laugh pops out, because he's throwing me for a loop. A sincere job offer that would include a higher position within a biotech company with an insane pay increase, as well as telling me he's attracted to me.

"Just think about it," he says as he takes a step back, and that little move has me looking at him in a different way. Fabron is confident, intelligent, charming, and extremely handsome. Any girl would be crazy not to consider his offer, yet I see nothing of value in it for me.

Giving him my most gracious smile, I place my hand on his forearm. "Fabron... your offer is incredible, both on a personal and a professional level. The professional I would be crazy not to consider because I'm a businesswoman and I have as much ambition as my partners. But the personal... I'm actually involved with someone and—"

"Ah," he says with a knowing look and a tone that matches. "Dane is a lucky man."

"What?" I practically screech and then lower my voice as I lean in toward him. "What would make you say that?"

Fabron chuckles and places his hand on top of mine, which is still resting on his forearm. He gives me an affectionate squeeze, and then a pat. "Because I can see it when he looks at you, and Avril... you look right back at him the same way."

"But we don't do that," I sputter.

"You do," he says firmly. "You're not hiding it from anyone. Your partner Andrew sees it as well. I just wasn't sure how serious it was, but now I have my answer."

My head spins at the implications, and I don't dare tell him that Andrew not only knows, but he's fucking me as well. What's throwing me is the fact that we're obviously, well... obvious about it.

Shit.

I look blindly around for Dane so I can pull him aside and tell him we're being obvious.

"Avril," Fabron says to get my attention. "There's nothing wrong with being lovers with Dane. It happens all the time in companies, especially when you're working in such extreme circumstances together."

"I know," I say, but my voice is quavering with absolutely no confidence. I'm not sure why this is bugging me so much, but I think it goes deeply to

some insecurities I must have as a woman in a man's world. Will people think I have my position because I'm fucking the boss?

I shake my head because that's ridiculous. Fabron is just making a lucky guess.

"Ah," Fabron murmurs, and I see his attention is on something behind me. "Here he comes now, and he looks none too happy for me to be talking to you so intimately."

I brace because he means Dane.

Rather than be abashed, Fabron takes the opportunity to step in closer to me and brushes his lips across my cheek. "While romance may not be in the cards for us, chérie, I'm very serious about the job offer. It's yours, if you want it."

And then he's gone, and Dane is turning me to face him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I say, but Dane just cocks an eyebrow at me. I roll my eyes and lean into him. "Fine. Fabron knows we're fucking each other."

Dane's chin pulls inward with surprise. "You told him?"

"No, I didn't tell him," I snap before taking three long swallows of champagne. My voice sounds semi-hysterical when I add, "He said he can tell by the way we look at each other. How in the hell are we looking at each other, Dane?"

A mischievous smile breaks out on his face, and his hand drops down to take my free hand. "Well, if it's any consolation, all night I've been thinking about what I want to do to you when we get back to the hotel, so maybe he's just seeing that."

I pull my hand from his and smack his chest. "Stop joking. If he noticed, everyone else probably has too."

"Avril," Dane chastises me. "Relax. Fabron was probably just yanking your chain, but even if he wasn't, so what? I've got no problems with anyone knowing I'm fucking you."

"Well, I do," I grit out. "I don't want people thinking I slept my way to the top."

"You're already at the top," he points out. "Were there long before you started taking my cock."

I want to be offended by his crude words, but sadly, they turn me on. I am taking his cock regularly, and I love it.

What I don't love is the smirk on his face, so I decide to wipe it off. "He offered me a job. A serious offer. Co-chair of their board and double whatever you're paying me. He didn't even ask what you're paying me."

I thought my words would just irk Dane to some extent, so I'm not prepared for the dark fury that overtakes his face. "I'll kill that fucker. I told him you were off limits."

"Dane," I say with a nervous laugh. "You can't prevent other businesses from offering me jobs."

"He wants more than you working for his company," he says confidently, and well... yeah, Fabron admitted that. But, because I do like and admire Fabron and I don't want Dane to beat his ass, I try to soothe his ruffled feathers.

"Relax," I murmur as I look up into his darkened eyes. "I would never leave Caterva. That company is my life."

"You better not," he growls, but his eyes lighten slightly to an olive green. "I'll hunt you down and spank your ass hard when I find you."

I snicker and look around at the room, spotting Andrew talking to a group of people who look like research folks. There's a certain geek vibe coming off them.

"Think we could go ahead and leave?" I ask Dane as my gaze comes back to him. "I'm anxious to see what you have planned tonight."

Dane's lips curve upward, and I get a flash of his white teeth. "Let's go get our sidekick and head back to the hotel."

"Is that what Andrew is?" I ask with a laugh, thinking the moniker is cute as all get out. "A sidekick?"

"You haven't fucked him alone since that first time, have you?" Dane asks as we start walking through the crowd toward Andrew.

I jolt slightly with not only this realization, but by the tone of Dane's voice. There's something about this fact that is important to him.

"I haven't," I admit. "But it's just because we plan on a threesome but he begs off sometimes, right?"

Dane stops in midstride, and I do the same. We turn to look at each other, and Dane brings up a hand to cup my jaw. Bending down, he whispers, "I love fucking you with Andrew. It's hot as all get out. But I like my alone time with you, Avril, so I'm not overly bent out of shape when Andrew doesn't join us."

Dane's words hit me like a ton of bricks, sucking all the air from my lungs. I've never heard him talk with such emotion, and there's something about this moment that strikes me deep. Something in my heart shifts, and I wonder if Dane is possibly opening himself up. Could he possibly be lowering his walls a bit?

And if that is the case, how is my heart going to respond? There's been an adequate distance between us all, and Andrew has been taking all of this in surprising stride. But if Dane were to let his heart become involved, the meaning of that would change everything for me because all I've ever wanted for my friend was him to experience what love is.

I never thought he'd be open to it, but now it might be attainable to him and that makes me look at Dane in a different way.

CHAPTER 20

Andrew

DANE HAD TOLD Avril and me to get started when we got back to the hotel suite, and I'd had just enough champagne in me that I had no problem with that. Avril and I went to her room and got naked really fast. While I'd been avoiding alone time with Avril, I guess technically her sucking my dick right now while Dane's in the other room doesn't quite count since he'll be in at any moment.

And fuck, Avril gives amazing head. She's a woman who enjoys it, humming and moaning all over my cock as she works me with her mouth and hands.

"Slow down," I have to murmur a few times to her with a restraining hand on her head, but she doesn't listen to me. She does the opposite and brings me too close to the edge, but I'm not ready to let go yet. Dane said he had something special planned for us tonight, and I'm saving up my load for that.

I gently grip onto Avril's head and pull her off me. Her eyes are glazed, and she licks at her swollen lips. She's completely pliant when I pick her up and turn to place her in the middle of the bed. One of her hands rests on her flat belly and the other near her head. She looks sexy and gorgeous. It's a pose that should be painted and put above her man's bed, but that would not be my bed.

Grabbing her ankles, I pull her to the edge of the bed. After dropping to my knees, I drape her legs over my shoulders. I want to get her off before we get going, because I have a feeling that whatever Dane has planned she needs to be ready for it. I know I'm already primed.

Just as I put my lips to Avril's pussy, I hear Dane walk into the room. He stands behind me, and I can feel the weight of his stare on us. I glance up to see Avril's eyes closed and she's lost to my mouth. The more I move against her, the more her hips rotate and buck as she builds up.

Dane walks to the side of the bed, and I see he's already naked, cock fully hard. He leans over and runs his mouth over Avril's breasts while I eat her out. She moans and urges me to go faster. I keep my eyes pinned on Dane as his teeth bite into a nipple, and she cries out in both pleasure and pain. When I pull her clit into my mouth and suck on her, she explodes with a scream, her hips wantonly gyrating in a silent plea to prolong her pleasure.

God, that's fucking beautiful. When this is eventually all over for us, I'm probably going to miss making Avril come the most.

Dane straightens, and I give Avril a last lick before I stand up. We both look down at her, and she's already wrecked. She gives us a lazy, satisfied smile with her gaze resting on Dane.

"Let's see what you got," she purrs. Apparently, she's not that wrecked.

Dane responds by scooping her up, and Avril laughs in delight as her arms go around his neck. Dane's eyes are shining as he grins back at her, but then he looks to me and nods at the bed. "On your back, Andrew. Feet on the floor."

I don't hesitate. I sit at the bottom of the bed and lay back, taking my dick in hand and stroking it. I have to raise my head off the mattress to watch as Dane comes to stand in front of me with Avril in his arms. He sets her down on the floor and tells her, "Straddle Andrew, reverse-cowgirl style."

Yeah, that's what I'm talking about.

"Reverse cowgirl?" Avril asks, and I laugh over her naivety. She's taken us up her ass, fucked numerous times in a sex club, and has no clue what reverse cowgirl means.

Dane just smiles at her indulgently before giving her a soft kiss on her mouth. When he pulls back, he says, "Straddle Andrew but face me at the end of the bed. He'll be staring at your gorgeous ass while you fuck him."

My cock leaps at the thought, and I give it a hard squeeze at the base so it calms down. It starts leaking as Avril crawls onto the bed and straddles me as Dane requested. She cranes her neck and looks over her shoulder at me. "You good, Drew?"

"Going to be better once I'm inside you," I tell her with a grin.

"Let's remedy that then," she whispers and turns away from me. Her head bows so she can look down at my dick, and I release my hold on it so she can take it in her tiny hand. She strokes me a few times, which feels fucking amazing, and then positions herself right over the head.

I grit my teeth as she sinks down onto me, all that tight wet heat overwhelming me. She huffs out a breath when I'm planted deep and then shivers as I drag my fingers up her spine lightly.

"Now fuck Andrew," Dane tells her, his voice gruff. I lean my head to the side and see he's stroking his own cock while his eyes are locked onto where Avril and I are connected.

I groan as Avril rises, her pussy dragging up the length of my dick before she pushes back down slowly. My hands go to her hips to steady her, and possibly to make her go faster at some point, but for now, the slow pace works for me. I stare at her ass, watching my cock appear when she rises up, and then disappear when she plants back down.

Dane's legs bump into mine, and I lean to the side again to see him kissing Avril. Her hands rest on his shoulders and she uses him for leverage to move on me, but they never break the kiss. It goes on and on, and it's sensual to watch.

When Dane pulls his mouth from hers, he says, "Andrew... I'm going to have Avril lean back a little. Give her some support."

Without thought, my hands go from her hips to her upper back where I press my thumbs on either side of her spine while spreading my fingers across her ribs. Avril leans back, stretching her thigh muscles to capacity. I imagine from the front, she looks amazing with her legs spread wide and my cock stuffed inside of her.

To my surprise, Dane comes onto the bed. His powerful legs spread and straddle my thighs, knees pressed into the mattress and dick sticking straight out. I lean farther to the side to see him raise his left leg to plant his foot beside my thigh.

I about lose my shit when he looks at Avril and says, "I'm going to fuck your pussy at the same time as Andrew, okay?"

"Oh, God," Avril groans as her head falls back briefly before it pops back up. "Can we do that? I mean... can I do that?"

"Of course, you can," Dane says as he leans his hips forward and presses the head of his cock to her opening. I can feel it on the part of my shaft that became exposed at the base when she leaned backward, and I bite back a groan. It's the first time another man's cock has ever touched me, and I'm torn between being turned on and repulsed.

Avril sucks in breath as Dane presses the head of his cock down harder

against my shaft, right at her opening. Just when I don't think this can possibly work, I can feel him slip inside of her. His cock slides against mine as he pushes in deeper.

"You okay?" Dane asks Avril in a strained voice. Sweat pops out on my forehead as I hold absolutely still, not wanting Avril to be uncomfortable.

She nods her head and murmurs, "So full. Feels good."

Dane dips his hips, and I feel his cock now sliding all the way along the underside of mine as he pushes fully inside of Avril.

"Jesus," I mutter as I just take in the sensation. The tightness is almost overwhelming, as is the feel of another man's dick against mine.

"Don't move, Andrew." Dane groans as he slides out a little before pushing back in. "I don't want to hurt Avril."

She moans and says something unintelligible.

Fuck that feels good, his dick rubbing against mine, the head hitting the sensitive underside of mine. I'm not going to have to move. Dane's going to be able to get me off this way, and I'm no longer repulsed by it. I want it bad.

"Mmmm," Dane hums as he pulls out and pushes back in.

Avril and I make corresponding grunts of pleasure as Dane's cock makes us both feel good at the same time.

Once he's assured that Avril is good to go, he starts moving faster. I concentrate on holding Avril up, who's gone completely boneless on top of me, and the feeling of the underside of my cock being stroked by my best friend's cock.

Avril starts panting harshly, followed by tiny whimpers. It's her cue she's getting close, and Dane starts going a little harder. My balls start to contract as pleasure coils low in my gut. I squeeze my eyes shut and just concentrate on the feel. Then I just let go, letting out a bark of a curse as I start to come. My hips raise up slightly but I don't want to throw Dane off, so I just tilt my head back and strain through the release that keeps going on as Dane continues to fuck Avril and me.

Avril's head starts thrashing as she hovers on the verge of an orgasm, and Dane wraps one hand around the back of her neck. He forces her head up so she looks at him, and for a moment, I feel like an intruder. Their eyes are locked on each other as Dane fucks her harder. Her breaths come out in gasps as she gets ready to fall, and finally when Dane whispers, "Give it to me,

Av,” she cries out with such abandon I know she’s never going to forget this feeling as long as she lives.

Dane strokes hard a few more times, still torturing my spent but half-hard dick, then his head falls onto Avril’s shoulder as he groans deeply while he comes. Avril whispers harshly in his ear, a repeating chant. “Dane, Dane, Dane.”

I let my head fall back to the bed, replete with an incredible orgasm but more aware than ever that this will never be for me what it is for Avril and Dane.

CHAPTER 21

Dane

“**Y**OU LOOK LIKE you were born to live in Paris,” I observe as I watch Avril sipping on her coffee. We’re sitting at an outdoor cafe, not far from the hotel, and enjoying the afternoon.

Avril has on a pair of dark skinny jeans, an off-the-shoulder sweater, and a fashionable silk scarf around her neck. The big round sunglasses she has pushed onto her head make her look like a movie star, and I could stare at her forever it seems.

Andrew, Avril, and I toured Révéler Biotech after breakfast with Fabron. I’d woken up in Avril’s bed with her. Andrew left it at some point in the night, and I understand he’s making some sort of statement about his place within our threesome. I just don’t know what the exact statement is, and I need to talk to him about it.

But that’s not happening this afternoon. Andrew decided to stay at Révéler with Fabron today, and Avril and I decided to just walk around Paris. She’s been here far many more times than I have. Because she speaks French, she ends up playing more tour guide for me than anything.

She looks up from her phone and smiles. “I love this city so much.”

“You should visit more,” I tell her. “You don’t take enough time off during the year.”

“So says the pot to the kettle,” she says with a laugh. “How about we just open up a Caterva division here and I’ll head it up?”

I grin and pick up my coffee, but before I take a sip, I point out. “If you lived here, you’d have to put up with Fabron chasing you all over the city.”

Avril snorts, and I’m shocked when she admits, “He made his play last night.”

I lower my coffee back to the table. “He offered you a job. You told me.”

She shakes her head. “He offered me more. He made it clear with no vague flirtations he wanted a relationship with me.”

My stomach tightens and jealousy burns within me. Not quite the same jealousy I've been experiencing when Avril is with Andrew. That's a very mild jealousy that's usually outweighed by how turned on I am by the way she gets off on having two men. The sin is called envy, and I can overlook it when it's all about Avril being pleased.

But I can't overlook Fabron not only trying to hire away my COO, but also showing interest in her personally.

Before I can say anything though, Avril is laughing at me. "Oh, man... the look on your face. I would not want to be Fabron and be anywhere near you right now."

"You're fucking taken," I growl—somewhat petulantly.

"I already told him that," she assures me, then looks back down to her coffee. "But that's when he told me he knew it was you by the way we were looking at each other."

Grunting an acknowledgment, I pick up my coffee and take a sip. So Fabron can see I want Avril. Big fucking deal.

"He didn't see that with Andrew, though," Avril says thoughtfully as she stares off across the Rue to a large outdoor market.

No, he wouldn't have seen that with Andrew because Andrew has been the one out of the three of us who succeeded in compartmentalizing himself. He's kept his emotions in reserve, and here we were thinking he'd be the one who would get hurt.

"Andrew's pulling back," I tell her, and her eyes come back to mine. I see worry and—is that relief?

"I noticed that, too," she says, but then lowers her eyes almost as if she is too shy to continue.

"What is it?" I encourage her.

When she looks back up, her cheeks turn a little red. "Last night was intense."

"Understatement," is all I say with a smile.

She smiles back, but it's almost contrite looking as she ducks her head back down. "There was a time last night... near the end. It was just the two of us there."

I don't say anything because I know what she means. I felt it, too, but I'm too much of a coward to voice those thoughts. She doesn't seem to notice my reticence to give credence to her, as she continues on.

“I mean... Andrew was inside of me. I was on top of his body, and he felt amazing. It all felt amazing. But at the end, it was just me and you.”

And still, I can't say anything. It's not that I don't know what to say, it's that I'm afraid to say what I should. To admit there's something deeper there between us than we had anticipated. I can't out myself to her because I'm not ready to handle the consequences if I do.

She looks back up to me, almost expectantly, and my throat closes off even more. Her eyes go round with alarm as she takes my silence to mean something ominous.

“Oh, God,” she says nervously. “Was that totally weird for me to tell you that? I mean... I know we're supposed to keep this all separated, and I probably should have just kept my big fat mouth shut. Forget I said anything, because it's probably just me inventing stuff in my head, and you know I get that way when—”

“I know about the information you dug up on my father,” I blurt out to stop her crazy rant. It was adorable for two seconds, but it needed to end.

Avril's eyes get even more round as they fill with guilt and her jaw drops open. She does nothing but stare at me in shock.

“Near the end of our senior year,” I say to get it off my chest. “I was looking for post-it notes, and I went into your room. Found the folder in your desk drawer.”

“Dane,” she says and her voice is pained. “I am so sorry. I know I overstepped my bounds—”

I hold up my hand and shake my head. “I'm not mad about it. On the contrary, it's probably the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me in my life.”

“I shouldn't have gotten in your business.”

“Avril... you chased my father away with a baseball bat because I couldn't do it. *That* was the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me. You getting more info on him was the second nicest, because I know you were hoping something good would come of it.”

“I never gave it to you, though,” she murmurs. “I really struggled with what to do.”

“I know,” I say as I reach across the table and take her hand in mine. For as close as we are, for as dirty as we've fucked, I've never done something as intimate with a woman as holding her hand during a profound conversation.

“I read all your notes... the list of pros and cons. I’m glad you didn’t give it to me.”

“You are?”

“Yes... because I’m fine without knowing anything about him.”

Avril can’t hide the slight tinge of disappointment in her eyes or the way her lips draw down. It tells me she’s been secretly harboring some romantic notion that I might reconnect with my father and be able to heal or some shit.

She gives a little cough and pulls her hand from mine. The cool air on my palm seems foreboding. “Well, then... I’m glad I kept that stuff to myself.”

“Still,” I say as I reach back across the table and take her hand again. I give it a squeeze and hold onto it tight. “Thank you. You hold top honor for the person who has done the two nicest things in the world for me.”

Avril blushes again, and I’m finding I kind of like that look on her.

One last squeeze to her hand and I let it go. “What do you want to do next? A museum? A boat ride? Gorge ourselves on chocolates?”

Avril laughs and looks at her watch. “We have a few hours before we have to meet Andrew and Fabron for dinner. I’m up for anything.”

Ordinarily, I’d prefer to take her back to the hotel and spend the rest of the afternoon in bed, but I surprise even myself by saying, “Let’s just walk around. Maybe do some shopping.”

Avril cocks an eyebrow at me. “Dane Hawthorne... wants to go shopping?”

I shrug before standing up from my chair. Even though tipping isn’t necessary in Europe, I can’t help but throw down a few euros. It’s an American habit I apparently can’t break while I’m here.

“Come on,” I say as I hold my hand out to her. “I’ll buy you something pretty.”

“I don’t need anything pretty,” she says as she takes my hand and stands up. I don’t let her go, but guide us past a few other tables to get us to the sidewalk.

“Stop being so practical, Av,” I chide as I pull her hand up and tuck it into the crook of my elbow. We stride lazily away from the cafe together, looking every bit a couple. “We’re in the most romantic city in the world. I want to buy you something pretty.”

“I’d rather have chocolate,” she says with a laugh. “Or a croissant. Or some other type of pastry.”

I can't help but laugh, too.

I have no clue where Avril and I will end up in the future as it's all very murky and I'm unsure of myself. But there may come a day I'll look back on this moment and realize this was our first real date.

Of course, I keep these thoughts to myself. Voicing them out loud only gives credence to them, and I'm not ready to admit that's where I want this to go just yet.

CHAPTER 22

Avril

I HEAR THE front door open as I'd told Dane and Andrew to just let themselves in. I'd decided to cook dinner for them tonight, though I spent way too much time at work trying to figure out if it was cool to do it. Up until now, our sexual experiences have just been that. They started in the club but when they moved to my house or the suite in Paris, they were still just sexual experiences. The only exception was the afternoon Dane and I spent together there, shopping and just hanging out.

I liked that a little too much, but it all balanced out as the next two nights were just the regular old threesome stuff together. Which makes me snicker at the thought of a threesome now being par for the course in my life.

The last night was interesting. I have found I like anal sex very much, and it was Andrew's turn to take my ass. We assumed the same position as the first night we tried it, except this time Dane was on the bottom. Every time the three of us have been together at the same time, we've all orgasmed pretty much at the same time together.

But that last night, I watched Dane carefully, and this was made easy by the fact I was riding his cock and able to look down on his face. I have no clue if Andrew knew it, but I saw it clear enough. Dane made himself hold out for his orgasm until after Andrew was finished. After Andrew came in my ass and pulled out of me, Dane rolled me to my back and fucked me hard until I came again and he came with me. It was an overt sign of possession, and yeah... I'm sure Andrew saw that.

How could he not?

Dane walks into my kitchen. If I thought the man looked good in a suit, he looks even better in jeans and a pullover. He smiles at me as I chop some bell pepper before walking around the kitchen island. I'm stunned when he pulls my knife out of my hand so he can draw me into his arms, whereby he

kisses me so deeply and with such passion I want to crawl up his body and mount him.

When he pulls back, I whisper, “Wow. What was that for?”

“Because I fucking felt like it,” he says with a shrug and releases me. He snags a piece of red bell pepper and pops it in his mouth with a wink.

I grin and turn back to the chopping. “There’s an open bottle of red on the back counter.”

Dane pours us each a glass while I finish the last of the chopping.

“What are you making?” he asks as he sets my glass on the counter beside my cutting board. His walk back around the kitchen island to sit on one of the stools is casual and confident, like he belongs there. I’m not sure what it says about this crazy situation I find myself in, but damn if I don’t really like the way Dane acts like he belongs in my kitchen.

“A southwest chicken pasta.” Glancing at my watch, I muse out loud, “Wonder if Andrew will show up?”

Tonight, I’d invited them to my house rather than the club. Dane was a resounding “yes,” and Andrew was a lukewarm, “If I can get out of work in time, sure”.

“He was still at the office when I left,” Dane says, but then his eyes harden as they go to my kitchen nook table. “Who are those from?”

I turn to look that way, having forgot about the flowers I found on my doorstep when I got home. I’d put them on the table after looking at the card, and then promptly forgot about them as I started dinner. Looking back to the cutting board, I say, “Jamie.”

“And you don’t think it’s poor form to have a man over to your house for dinner and some fucking, while your former boyfriend sends you flowers?” Dane says quietly, but there’s no mistaking the anger in his voice.

My eyebrow lifts as my eyes widen for a moment in surprise, then narrow at him. “Excuse me?”

His head nods toward the flowers. “I don’t need to repeat it.”

I put my knife down on the counter and glare at him. “Well, I’m sorry if your sensibilities were offended. I just set them down there as I was in a hurry to get dinner going. I’d intended to throw them away like the others, but—”

“Others?” Dane growls menacingly, and my level of offense over his reaction increases.

And then... it melts away, leaving a bubbly warmth behind as I realize that this is nothing but pure jealousy, and I wonder if Dane has ever really experienced it before. He doesn't seem to be handling it all that well.

"You're taking this awful personally," I remark, and now Dane's eyes narrow at me.

"He hurt you," he grits out from across the counter. "Of course I'm taking it personal."

"They're just flowers, Dane," I tell him with a smirk. "I didn't ask for them, and I don't want them."

"Then you won't mind if I throw them away," he mutters, getting up to head to the kitchen table. I don't say a word as he picks the flowers up, vase and all. He takes a moment to read the card, scowls, and then turns to the garbage can to throw them away.

When he's done, his eyes come to me and I try to wipe the smile off my face. It's not fast enough, and he grouses, "I'm not jealous."

"If you say so," I tell him with a serious look.

His eyes darken, and he strides toward me. My heart rate speeds out of control the closer he gets, and then he's on me. Hands in my hair, mouth hot on mine as he kisses the amusement right out of me.

Moaning, I press into him and feel his length hardening against me. With a hand fisting my hair, he pulls his lips from mine just enough to whisper urgently, "I need to fuck you right now."

"Staking your territory?" I murmur, and I get a hard slap to my ass for my temerity.

I yelp but push harder into him, because that actually felt good.

"Mmmmm. Someone likes getting spanked." His hand rubs my ass as he kisses me again, then he's pulling my skirt up. I'd not had time to change after work, merely kicked my heels off in the foyer.

Dane spins me and bends me over the counter where I rest my forearms. He yanks my panties down my legs, and I step out of them.

"Spread 'em, baby," he says roughly, and I do.

"What about Andrew?" I ask hesitantly, wondering what it would look like for him to walk in on this.

"He's late," Dane mutters as his hand rubs my bare ass. "His loss."

"But what if—"

My words are cut off as his hand cracks against my skin. I involuntarily

flex my hips inward to get away from the pain, even as my pussy contracts in pleasure.

He slaps me again on the other ass cheek. Before I can even gasp over that strike, his hand comes down right on my pussy.

I shriek, “Jesus... Dane,” and then I’m groaning as he sinks two fingers into me.

Chuckling, Dane teases me, “Three slaps and you’re soaking wet.”

I groan again and my head drops down in shame, but not really. God, that felt good.

My pulse fires crazily when I hear Dane’s zipper come down, and then he’s pushing his cock right inside of me. He thrusts hard and deep, and without giving me any time to appreciate the fullness of him, he starts fucking me fast. Pressing his fingers to my clit, he hammers into me. It takes no time at all for me to explode as I cry out his name. Dane keeps thrusting, grunting with every stroke until he grinds out his release with a long groan of satisfaction.

Rather than pulling out, Dane wraps his arms around my shoulders and pulls me up slightly. He puts his mouth to my ear and says, “I really am sorry Jamie hurt you. It pisses me off seeing him try to make amends and for more reasons than because I’m the one fucking you now.”

I smile and bring my arms up to rest over his. His cock is still long and hard inside me for now. “Did he really hurt me, though? I mean... within a few days, I was fucking Kynan, then you. I’m currently fucking my two best friends. Did he hurt me or free me?”

The rumble of a chuckle vibrates from Dane’s chest into me. “If I believe he freed you, I’m going to have to send the fucker flowers myself to thank him.”

I laugh as Dane pulls out of me, and then watch him with way too much affection raging through me as he squats down to help put my panties back on. When he pulls them up over my hips, he presses his lips to the center of them for a brief moment before looking up at me.

“You’re not free,” he says as he looks up at me, giving my hips a squeeze.

“I’m not?”

“You have me and Andrew.” His voice is soft, but there’s uncertainty there when he says “Andrew”.

“He’s over half an hour late,” I tell Dane as he pulls my skirt down into place and then stands up to face me.

His hands come to my shoulder, and he bends so his face is closer to mine. “We need to cut him loose.”

My eyebrows draw inward as a stab of pain hits me in my gut. “We can’t. It’s cruel.”

Dane shakes his head. “Avril... he wants us to cut him loose. You know it’s true.”

I shake my head, but Dane’s hands to my face catch my attention as he moves even closer into me. “He gave this a try, and he kept his distance. But what’s happening to you and me is something different, and we didn’t plan on this. I know Andrew... he’s not here right now because he’s sending us a message.”

“A message?”

Dane nods. “He sees what’s going on between us, and yes... there is something happening between you and me that neither of us thought would happen. I think he’s telling us that we need to pay attention to it.”

My heart plummets even as a small dose of relief sweeps through me. I think he’s right, but there’s still some doubt. “How do we know that for sure?”

“We don’t,” Dane says grimly as he brushes his lips across my forehead. “But I’m going to talk to him and find out exactly what he wants and needs.”

I jolt in surprise. “Right now?”

“Yeah,” he says softly. “I need to know I’m calling this right.”

“And if you are?” I ask hesitantly. “What does that mean for us?”

Dane presses his mouth to mine briefly. When he pulls back, I’m torn over the mixed emotions on his face.

Fear, excitement, vulnerability, hope.

“I have no clue what it means for us,” he says. “But we’ll figure it out.”

CHAPTER 23

Dane

“**W**HAT ARE YOU doing here?” Andrew asks with surprise after he opens the door to his apartment. “You should be at Avril’s.”

“I was there. But you weren’t so I figured we needed to talk.”

Andrew smiles and there’s nostalgia within it, so without him ever saying a word, I know coming here was the right thing.

“Come on in,” he says as he steps back.

I’ve been in Andrew’s apartment countless times, usually to watch sports on a weekend or to attend some impromptu dinner party he threw together. Andrew’s a social creature and has a ton of friends.

It’s small by my standards and way too confining for me. But it’s quintessential Andrew with pop art decorating the walls and bright-colored furniture.

I follow him into the living room and see he’d been working. He’s got his laptop on the coffee table and papers spread out all over the table, floor, and couch.

“What are you working on?” I ask as I take a seat in a navy-blue club chair.

“Just some beta reports,” he says with a resigned sigh as he takes the couch.

“And you chose that over having a threesome with Avril and me?” I ask him.

His smile doesn’t falter, but there’s no humor in his voice. “I just can’t.”

“Can’t get it up?” I push at him crudely so we don’t waste time beating around the bush.

Andrew rolls his eyes. “I can’t complicate things anymore.”

“You’re complicating things?”

Sitting forward on the couch, Andrew looks at me with such seriousness I feel like he’s getting ready to give me his resignation from the company or

something. “I don’t know if you and Avril are even aware of it, but there’s something deeper going on with you two. I know Avril enjoys me in her bed with you, but she also wouldn’t miss me there either.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” I tell him carefully. Because Avril would most definitely miss him. She cares for him, and the sex is stellar. Hell, I’m going to miss him there.

“Regardless,” he says dismissively with a wave of his hand. “Whatever is happening between the two of you, it can’t be taken lightly. It’s one thing to be casual about what we’ve been doing, but it’s turned into something different with the two of you. Am I right?”

With a sigh, I sink back down into the chair and press my fingers to my nose. When I look back to him, I admit, “I’ve never felt this way about a woman.”

“What way?” Andrew asks, now the one pushing back at me.

A feeling of panic rises within me, because my feelings have been all over the place the last few weeks. Everything is so new and uncharted.

“I think about her all the time,” I tell my best friend, hoping that by releasing the words out into the open, I can at the very least try to make sense of things. “And not just sex. I wonder what she’s fucking watching on TV before she goes to bed, or if she sings in the shower.”

An amused smile slowly creeps onto Andrew’s face, but I ignore it.

“I’m jealous as fuck that douche Jamie sent her flowers. I want to knock the crap out of him again.”

Andrew nods. “Wouldn’t argue with you there.”

“I was jealous of you,” I admit in a low voice, my eyes dropping down to where my hands rest on my knees.

“I know,” Andrew says, and my eyes snap up to him.

“How could you know?”

“I just know,” he returns with a shrug. “I just feel it when I’m with you two, and it’s so evident when we’re in bed together.”

“So, you think your participation with us will what... hurt what Avril and I are building together?”

“Maybe,” Andrew says. “Maybe not. You both are into the sex club thing, so maybe you’ll find a third to join you there at some point. But if you want my advice, you need to concentrate on the two of you first. Because it could be disastrous if this falls apart.”

He doesn't have to tell me that. It's the thing that worries me the most. If I break Avril's heart somehow, the friendship is going to be ruined, not to mention our working relationship. It will change everything.

While I was pretty sure Andrew was done with this when I came here, I really wanted more than anything to get his advice. "I'm not going to lie to you. There's a part of me that wants you to stick with this, because it will prevent things from developing with Avril and me."

There.

I said it.

My real fear has been voiced.

Andrew nods. "Yeah... I stay in the bed with you two, and things aren't going to go very far between you."

I shoot him a sheepish smile. "So stay with us. There's no rush on things."

"Coward." Andrew smirks back at me.

"I don't know what the fuck I'm doing," I grouse as I push up from the chair. I start pacing his living room. "I don't know how to be in a relationship. I don't know how to count on someone. I don't know how to be there for someone."

"That's bullshit," Andrew says bluntly. "You've been in a relationship with Avril for seventeen years. That's what friendship is... a relationship. You've counted on her time and time again when it comes to your business. You've been there for her before, most recently when Jamie cheated on her. You know how to do it all; you just have to figure out how to apply it to these new circumstances."

He's not telling me anything I don't know. I'm fucking smart enough and self-aware enough to understand my issues.

What I'm really afraid of is not me breaking Avril's heart, because I can figure this shit out for sure.

I'm afraid she's going to break my heart, and I don't want to feel that pain again. I felt it when I lost my father, and if it was so easy for a father to lose his son, then I stand an even greater risk with Avril. She's not my flesh and blood.

"Get over your trust issues," Andrew advises as I look out the windows to the Vegas night skyline. "They shouldn't apply to Avril. She'd never hurt you."

Fuck, I know this deep down inside. I know it, I know it, I know it.
Still can't get rid of the almost claustrophobic fear.

"It's really very simple," Andrew says, and I turn to face him. "Cut it loose like you did me, and both of you move on before it gets really complicated. Or take a risk for what could be the best thing you've ever had in your life."

I know that, too.

Avril could be that for me.

The woman who protected me from my father, and then tracked him down in case I ever changed my mind about him.



I DON'T GO back to Avril's after I leave Andrew's. I send her a text to tell her I had a good talk with Andrew and I'd explain everything to her tomorrow. She responds back with nothing but a heart emoji, and that causes me discomfort. It feels good and bad at the same time.

When I get to my house, I boot up my laptop and kick back in my favorite recliner with a glass of scotch. I pull up Google and type in my father's name, Lyndon Hawthorne. I get 372,000 results, and the first page is nothing but Facebook profiles.

My cursor hovers over the first result, and I know I could potentially click on it and see his face. I'd recognized him without any doubt that day he'd shown up at my apartment, and it's because I could never forget what the face of abandonment and betrayal looked like. I could never forgive a man who loved drugs more than his own son.

Should I even confront that? Would it make a difference?

I think about the man I am today, and the success I've made of my life.

That *I alone* have made of my life.

I exit out of Google and shut my laptop. I don't need to confront him or know more about the bastard. It's enough to know he was weak and I am strong.

Strong enough to push forward and see what will develop between Avril and me. I want her and I'm not ready to let her go. I know we can only go forward, so that's what I'm going to do.

I pick up my phone from the table resting beside me and pull up Avril from my contacts. She answers on the second ring. “Hey, stud.”

My lips curl up in a smile and my chest fills with warmth. “Can I come over?”

“Is it bad?” she asks with worry. “What happened with Andrew?”

“No,” I tell her. “It’s not bad, and it will take me all of five minutes to reassure you of that.”

“You could do that over the phone if you wanted,” she points out.

“I don’t want to come over to talk about Andrew, although I will. I want to come over to be with you.”

“You were already with me a few hours ago,” she replies pertly. My palm itches to spank her ass again.

“And I want to be with you again,” I say smoothly. “And probably again after that and before we go to sleep. And once more in the morning when we wake up. And then again after breakfast.”

Avril laughs. Christ, I love that sound. I’ve heard it for seventeen years, but it never sounded so good before. “So you’re going to sleep all night with me?”

“That would make it easier to have sex with you in the morning,” I say dryly.

This is a big deal for us, because sleeping all night together in each other’s arms is a deeper level of intimacy. It in no way compares to her, Andrew, and me all sleeping in the same bed because we wore ourselves out with fucking.

“I have an even better idea,” I say impulsively.

“What’s that?”

“Let’s go away this weekend. Catalina Island or Tijuana?”

“I’m not going to Tijuana,” she sniffs into the phone.

Laughing, I tell her, “Okay. Catalina Island then. And I’ll be over to your house in about fifteen minutes.”

“I’ll be naked and waiting,” she says and disconnects the phone.

I make it to her house in ten minutes.

CHAPTER 24

Avril

I KNOCK ON Andrew's office door but don't wait for him to grant me entrance. I never do, just as he barges in my office whenever he wants.

He smiles when he looks up at me, and I'm so grateful he's made this easy on me. That night a few weeks ago when Dane went to talk to Andrew, Andrew sent me a text. It was simple and beautiful and I've never loved him more.

I'm backing out, Av. It's right for everyone. There are big things ahead for you and Dane. Best friends always.

We, of course, talked about it over the past few weeks, but there was never a moment of discomfort, awkwardness, or regret. If anything, we'd become closer simply because we weathered through something that was complex, emotionally charged, and full of terrible risk to our friendship.

Because Andrew was the friend out of the two of them that I gossiped with and we shared matters of the heart, it was beyond easy to have him become my confidant when it came to Dane. We didn't talk about sex because what I had with them together was sacred, and what I have with just Dane is sacred, but we've talked about everything else.

I think Andrew is finding perverse joy in watching Dane fumble about on how to be a boyfriend. It's amazing when you think about it... Dane never having been in a committed relationship. I mean, Drew and I both have been through several relationships over the years, so we're seasoned veterans.

But Dane is struggling at times. For instance, after we'd spent a weekend at Catalina Island and then the next consecutive four nights at either his house or mine, he mistakenly assumed on the fifth night that he would go out with some friends to dinner without telling me. Now, yes... I assumed we would do something together, but I also didn't begrudge him a night out with others. What I did have a problem with was when I walked down to his office at the end of the day, his secretary was the one who informed me of his plans.

Let's just say when he showed up at my house that night, long after dinner and drinks were over, I wouldn't open the door to him and he learned an important dating lesson.

Be considerate when making plans and communicate said plans to your significant other.

For the most part, however, I've been in a constant state of bliss. I'm in a relationship with a man I've loved for a very long time, I'm having the best sex of my life, and I'm starting to see a long-term future with Dane.

I think he might be seeing something similar, but I can't be sure. We don't talk about our feelings, but rather communicate with actions in the bed. The sex has changed somewhat. It's become more intensely personal. More kissing. More touching. More eye contact. More whispered words of affirmation.

Dane has opened up to me more. There's easy affection like cuddling on the couch or talking late into the night while we face each other in the bed. We talk about silly movies or we debate politics even though we're pretty closely aligned on many issues.

All of it makes my heart sing, and there's no doubt I've passed the point of no return with Dane. I want him in every way possible, and I can only hope that as time goes on, he wants the same.

"What's up?" Andrew asks as I sit down in his guest chair and settle back in.

"The board has approved the funds for hiring three additional developers," I tell him. "So, you're cleared to make the hires."

After a lot of debate and advice from board members, weighing the pros and cons of bringing in another partner, it was mutually decided by unanimous vote that we would not offer to bring Fabron into the company so we could have access to his cytometer. It will take us a bit longer in the development phase, but we felt the wait was worth the autonomy we'd keep.

Dane told me Fabron took it graciously, but I expected nothing less of him. He's a gracious man and a professional. I would never in a million years tell Dane that Fabron emailed me not long after to let me know that nothing changed on his end. I still had a job with his company if I ever wanted to make Paris my home.

Of course, I politely declined again. I couldn't imagine in a million years ever walking away from Dane. The company... potentially, but never Dane.

“Want to go out and drink a few beers to celebrate?” Andrew asks.

“Sure,” I say with a smile. “Dane’s got a dinner meeting so that works perfectly.”

“And if he didn’t have a dinner meeting?” Andrew asks with a sly grin.

I give him a tiny glare, but there’s no real heat in it. I can take Andrew’s teasing. “Then he’d join us for beer.”

“What if I just wanted a bestie night with you?” he continues. “Get in our jammies, cuddle on the couch, and watch old movies?”

I give a wave of my hand. “He’d be totally fine with that.”

“No, he wouldn’t,” I hear from the doorway and turn over my shoulder to see Dane walking in. “He’s fine with everything but the cuddles. You have a cuddle partner already.”

Andrew snickers, and I can tell he saw Dane in the door the entire time and was baiting him. Dane doesn’t give him a look, though, just marches straight for me. My heart trips a little as I take in the pure intensity of his stare. We haven’t seen each other all day at work, and he looks starved.

He proves, however, that just a soft kiss is all that’s needed when he bends over the back of my chair as my face tilts up so my lips can meet his.

“You two are fucking adorable.” Andrew chuckles, but neither of us look at him. Instead, Dane gives me another kiss before straightening.

“What’s up?” I ask as I turn in my chair to take in all of his yumminess. I always used to be so amused when I’d watch women react to Dane whenever they were in his presence or when he walked by. I figured over the years, I’d gotten use to how gorgeous he was so it didn’t affect me, but now I know that’s not true. I had no reason to look at him that way, but I do now, and it affects me deeply every time I even look at him for a moment.

“Saw you two sitting in here and just thought I’d stop by to give you a kiss,” he says with a smile.

I swear I have to grip the armrests of the chair so I don’t swoon into a dead faint. Dane has said a lot of dirty, erotic things to me that cause my body to react, but something sweet like that from a man who’s not used to being romantic could be the death of me.

“So, it’s beer for you two tonight?” he asks as he puts his hands in his pockets.

“Just a few,” Andrew clarifies. “I’ve got an early meeting tomorrow.”

Dane turns his gaze to me. “Can I come over tonight after my dinner

meeting?”

“Of course, you can,” I say as my face turns warm just thinking about it, and with a tiny bit of embarrassment that Andrew is privy to us planning an evening together. He hasn’t shown the slightest indication that he’s missing the relationship the three of us had, and in every way seems tickled pink that Dane and I are making a go of this.

Dane jingles some keys in his pocket before pulling them out. I watch as he works a key off the ring and hands it to me.

“What’s this?” I ask as he places the warm metal in my palm.

“My house key,” he says casually, but my head actually swims a little from the implication. “You can give me one of yours tonight.”

“That’s kind of bossy,” I say tartly, but he just grins back at me.

“You two have fun and don’t get into any trouble,” Dane says as he turns for the door. He stops for a moment, turning back to point a warning finger at Andrew. “And no cuddling with my girl.”

Another wave of dizziness hits me as the words are light and teasing, but they’re also pointed. He’s laying down a boundary that any true physical intimacy between Andrew and me is done for good.

This is fine as Andrew and I are not cuddlers. We most certainly don’t do PJ parties. While we have the bond to share emotional stuff with each other, we’ve never been overly affectionate outside of hugs when needed.

“Noted, dude,” Andrew says with a snappy salute.

When Dane leaves, Andrew turns to me with eyebrows raised and awe in his voice. “What have you done to him?”

I shake my head from the mystery of it all. “I have no clue, but God, I love it. I never could have imagined he had this in him.”

“I saw this coming,” Andrew says sagely. “Saw it clearly for the first time in Paris... that first night we were there.”

My face turns beet red because since Andrew’s exited the relationship, there’s been no talk or reference to our intimate times together. He doesn’t notice or he doesn’t care, but lays it out straight to me. “When we were both inside you at the same time... he was only feeling you and you were only feeling him.”

“No,” I say quickly as that makes me feel terrible, like we’d purposely excluded Andrew.

“Avril,” he chastises me with a pointed look. “Let’s not be afraid of those

times. They were beautiful to me, but they are over and in the past. I'm grateful I had those times with you two, but I'm not looking back other than maybe with some fondness because I've watched my two best friends start to fall in love with me having a front-row seat."

The force of his words knocks the breath out of me, and I can feel tears filling my eyes.

"No crying," Andrew says sternly.

I wipe at my eyes and laugh with a quavering voice. "I can't help it. These past few months have been surreal. So much emotion and feeling. The risks we took, and thank God we came out stronger for it. Do you realize how lucky the three of us are that we did something like that, and came out not only with our friendship intact, but probably bonded tighter than ever?"

"We're lucky," Andrew murmurs. "This could have turned really bad. But it didn't, and it makes me happy to see you so happy."

My smile turns brighter. "I really am. I just never in a million years pictured me with Dane. I still have a hard time believing how things have progressed."

"He's crazy about you. That little demonstration he just put on proves it because that was so anti-Dane."

"I know."

We grow quiet a moment, and then Andrew ventures forth with a question that scares the hell out of me. "Do you love him?"

The smile slides from my face, and my heart pounds so hard I press my knuckles into the center of my chest. "How could I not? I mean, I love and care for him so deeply as a friend that it was nothing but a tiny fall for me to love him the rest of the way."

Andrew's expression softens and his eyes shine with happiness for me. "It's kind of obvious. I'm glad."

I'm glad he's glad. I'm not sure if I am, because I have no clue how Dane feels about me. It's terrifying to love someone—and I mean love him in all ways, not just as a friend—without knowing if he feels it back.

With knowing that Dane has attachment issues.

My eyes drift off to look out the window. It's gray and drizzly, and it seems like an ominous portent. This may be as good as it gets with him. Dane may never want marriage or children. While we've grown so close over the

past two months, we've never talked about that. He's certainly never broached the subject, and I'm too terrified to ask.

Too scared to hear him tell me, "I can't go that far with you, Av. While I care for you a great deal, I just don't have more in me."

"It will be okay," Andrew says, and my eyes snap to his. His voice is so confident sounding, I take immediate heart. "I feel good about this with you and Dane. I think he has what it takes to go the distance with you. You're the only woman he'd ever take that chance with, Avril."

God, I hope he's right, because I'm so invested in him right now. It would destroy me if I can't have it all with him.

"What's going on with Jamie?" Andrew asks, and I blink a few times to get online with what he's asking since the subject change was so abrupt.

I shrug. "He's texting still, but not every day. I don't understand why he can't let it go. And it drives Dane nuts. He wants to go beat him up again."

Andrew snorts. "That's just Dane's way. But honestly.... I feel a little bad for the dude. I think he truly still loves you and made a terrible mistake."

"It was a terrible mistake." I've thought about this a lot over the last several weeks, and I've forgiven Jamie. I loved him so much and he broke my heart, but I also believe this was a one-time only thing. A moment of weakness, and I definitely forgive it.

I also can't help but be grateful for it, because as much as I loved Jamie, it doesn't compare to how I feel about Dane. It could never compare to the seventeen years of solid friendship that stands as the base of our relationship. It was almost as if Jamie's lack of judgment was fated, so that it would lead me to Dane. I think I might truly believe that, and so I have no hard feelings for the man.

In fact, I almost feel bad for him because he's still hurting and I'm not. I've not only moved on, but I've found the man who I think is my soul mate.

"He just wants to see me," I tell Andrew. "He wants one opportunity to talk to me. I think I should do it, so I can tell him about Dane. So he knows there's no going back."

"How does Dane feel about that?" Andrew asks. "You know... since he wants to beat him up."

"I haven't talked to him about it," I admit with shame. "I know he won't like it, and it's just been easier to deal with Jamie's texts. Dane's got a real jealous streak."

“That he does,” Andrew says with a chuckle. “Dane’s never envied another man for anything in his life, yet he was jealous of me when we were in bed together.”

My face flames again at the mention of our past experiences together, and I really have to learn to get over that. I mean... Dane and I still go to The Wicked Horse to fuck there. Not much embarrasses me anymore, but for some reason, discussing this with Andrew does.

So, I don’t inquire as to why Andrew thinks that. I figure he just knows it, since he’s kind of known a lot of things about me and Dane before we even really knew them.

“Tell you what,” I say as I slap my palms on my thighs and stand up from the chair. “How about you and I cut out a little early and go have a beer? And let’s promise each other no more deep talks tonight. Only fun stuff, okay?”

“Deal,” Andrew says as he closes his laptop on his desk and stands. “Beer and fun stuff. Coming right up.”

CHAPTER 25

Dane

“I’LL TAKE TWO,” Avril says as she places two of the cards from her hand face down on the green, felt-covered table. She’s got a terrible poker face. The way her eyebrows are drawn inward and she’s chewing on her lip tells me of the three she kept, they’re not all that great either.

Still, I’m enjoying watching her sit at the poker table with me in The Apartment, rocking a sexy as fuck low-cut dress that rides up high on her thighs. I know she doesn’t have any panties on underneath.

Or so she told me.

We decided to hit The Wicked Horse tonight as we haven’t been in a while. The last few weeks have been about getting settled in as a couple. The newness and excitement of it, as well as the fears needing to be worked through.

But I feel good about it. I think Avril and I have something really special, and I know there’s not another woman in the world I’d ever give this a go with.

While the sex has been off the fucking charts, even though it’s been mostly just in the comfort of her home or mine and without Andrew joining us, we both decided to get a little wild tonight and visit the club. We’re agreed this will always be part of our life, but I know it won’t be a dominant part.

That’s okay by me. I don’t miss it at all when I’m with Avril, and its function now serves to ramp up the kinkiness between us if we so choose. Totally still worth the exorbitant membership cost.

The dealer replaces Avril’s cards. She picks them up and studies them, her frown deepening. She better fucking fold.

A quick perusal of my cards, and I decide to drop two as well, keeping a pair of tens and an ace. The other two men in the game make their exchanges, and finally Kynan goes. That fucker has an amazing poker face, and I suspect

that comes in handy in his line of work as a security consultant/ mercenary for hire.

Since Avril sits left of the dealer, the next bet is to her. She studies her cards, the frown never lessening, and I can't help but grin on the inside when she throws a ten-dollar chip in the pile. The bet comes to me, and I add in my ten, as do the next two men.

When it gets to Kynan, he throws in a ten-dollar chip and then picks up a twenty, tossing it on the pile.

Back to Avril, who peers harder at her cards, cuts her eyes to me as if I can tell her what to do, and then back to the cards. Finally, she picks up a twenty chip and throws it on. "Call."

I still have only a pair of tens, ace high, which isn't going to beat whatever Kynan's holding. I fold as do the other two men.

It's between Avril and Kynan, and I suspect Avril's getting ready to lose some money. I'd worry for her except I don't because she's paid very well for what she does and losing thirty dollars is nothing to her. So, I sit back and relax, watching my girl get her ass kicked when they lay the cards out.

"Interested in a side bet?" Kynan asks Avril with a wicked grin.

Her head tilts and curiosity fills her eyes. "Like what?"

"I win, you come over here and give me a blow job. You win, I'll make you come with my mouth."

Avril doesn't even get her mouth open to respond when I say from across the table, "Not going to happen."

Kynan's eyes come to mine, and I can see he's amused. I wonder if he actually did that just to bait me. He's tried to join us on the few occasions we've come here but we've declined, content on Avril and me just being together for now. By the swift reaction I just had, I think it's safe to assume I'm still not ready to share her and not sure I ever will be.

Avril also turns to look at me and says, "I can answer for myself."

"Go ahead," I say with a sweep of my hand toward Kynan. "But he already got the message."

For a moment, I think I've pissed her off, being so high handed and all, but her eyes warm, then flash hot. "I like it when you go all Neanderthal on me."

I throw my head back and laugh, picking up my scotch and taking a sip. When I put the glass down, I say, "In that case, I'll make sure to pull your

hair hard when I fuck you later.”

All the men at the table laugh, including Kynan. But his eyes are still filled with mischief when he turns back to Avril and says, “How about if I win, you have to give a sexy lap dance to your boyfriend there for all of us to enjoy.”

Fuck, but it’s endearing as Avril’s face flames red, and I know it’s not because she’s shy to get it on in front of others. I think it has to do with the fact that she can’t dance. Like as in can’t dance at all. She moved like a wooden robot any time I’ve ever seen her attempt to dance, and Andrew and I have always laughed about it.

To my surprise, though, she lifts her chin and says, “You’re on.”

Kynan grins big and lays down his cards. A flush.

Avril swallows hard, but flips her cards over. I see my other two tens laying there along with three sixes. A full house.

Kynan busts out laughing as Avril rakes the pile of chips in.

“That was sexy as shit,” I tell her as I lean over to give her a kiss.

“Agreed,” Kynan says in good nature as the dealer leans forward to rake the cards in for a new shuffle.

One of the guys stands from the table and says, “Gotta hit the head. Let’s take a five-minute break.”

The others all nod and start to stand up, using the time to stretch their legs. I wonder if I should just grab Avril, so we can head into one of the other rooms to fuck and then call it a night. I’m finding I very much like sleeping with her in her bed, because it makes for some fantastic mornings.

Avril stands up. Before I can even move, she’s crawling onto my lap in a straddle. The stretchy part of her skirt rides up, and my hands go to her thighs. My dick also starts getting hard just at the thought of her bare pussy hovering inches over me.

She puts her hands on my shoulders and leans forward to kiss me. It’s immediately hot and filled with need. I push down on her hips so she grinds against my thickening shaft, pulling my mouth from hers to whisper, “What room do you want tonight?”

“Let’s just fuck right here,” she murmurs and then kisses me again. Her tongue is aggressive as her fingers dive into my hair. She rotates her hips, and the heat of her sex even through my dress pants is searing.

“Jesus, baby,” I mutter as I put a hand between her legs. She lifts up just

enough so I can slip my index finger inside of her. She's wet and so needy that her pussy contracts hard on me.

The dealer's still sitting at the table, but I don't give a fuck. He's seen it all, as have the other guys who will be coming back.

Avril makes a mewling sort of sound as she drops her hands to my belt buckle. The kiss breaks so she can watch what she's doing, and I sit back and let her do it.

My eyes look over her shoulder, and I see Kynan's not moved far from the table. He's talking to a few of the patrons, but they've all got their eyes on Avril... most specifically her ass, which is partially bared with her skirt hiked up.

I fight down the wave of jealousy that hits me, just as I have on the few other occasions we've been in here since becoming a couple, knowing that I'll have to put up with others' eyes on her if we want the rush of public fucking. I also stay satisfied in the knowledge that I'm the only one she's fucking, and so I let a little bit of pride fill me up knowing that other men want what I have.

When my cock is free, Avril kisses me hungrily again as she shifts her knees on the chair seat, moving up to position herself. She reaches down and positions me, then with her forehead resting on mine, she lowers herself down.

Christ, it feels fucking amazing. Feels better than when I fucked her last night, which felt better than when I fucked her the night before.

Always better.

I've never had "always better". I've had great and even supremely fantastic, but none of it compared to anything I've had with Avril, and I don't know why I deserve for it to keep getting better.

But I'll take it.

She bottoms out on me with a tiny grunt and licks her lips. Pulling her face away from mine, she opens her eyes and locks them to mine as she raises up.

"I love you inside of me," she whispers as she starts to move up and down. I'm so fucking turned on by the fact she wanted me so badly she's just going to fuck me at the poker table that I can already sense I'm going to blow hard and fast.

My hand goes between her legs, putting pressure on her clit as her pussy

strokes me.

“Mmmm,” she moans when my fingers touch her. While she doesn’t move any faster, she comes down on me a little harder.

Leaning forward, Avril puts her lips near my mouth and asks, “Do you like me fucking you like this?”

I groan because dirty talking Avril is something else. Her kinky side still amazes me, and it makes me even harder within her. Sweet, sweet Avril is something more than I ever knew she could be.

“I’m going to come, baby,” she whispers as she moves on me.

Fuck, me too.

“Dane,” she murmurs as she rides me. “Dane.”

My name sounds like a prayer, and it frightens me a little even as it brings me closer to release.

Avril pushes down hard on me, rotates her hips to grind, and I feel her orgasm all around me. Her pussy squeezes and ripples along my shaft as she lets out a long, breathy moan that ruffles the hair around my neck.

“Fuck,” I grit out as my cock explodes and my hips punch up to get more of her. To crawl all the way inside of her.

I bury my face in her neck as I wrap my arms tight around her, and I come along with her like we’re fused permanently together. In this moment, despite the fact that others are watching us, I’ve never felt personally closer to Avril. I’ve never felt her inside of me the way I am inside of her.

Her next words float across me, almost not penetrating but when they do, they strike hard.

“I love you.”

My body reacts even if my voice can’t. I squeeze her harder to me, and a tiny shudder of happiness and fear mixed all together ripples through me. Her arms come around the upper part of my back, and she holds me tight. She squeezes hard and then strokes my back.

I can’t tell if she’s doing it out of affection or comfort, but the part of me that’s scared shitless accepts either.

CHAPTER 26

Avril

BEING IN LOVE and not knowing if it's reciprocated plain sucks. It's even worse being in Dane's presence at work, because I should be listening to what he's saying as he stands at the head of the board table discussing the latest testing done on our blood analyzer. Andrew stands off to the side, as he'd just finished a PowerPoint presentation on the finer scientific details.

But I'm in love and my head is in the clouds. I said those three words to Dane just under a week ago after I put on a show in front of our poker buddies. I know it wasn't the most romantic setting, but I was so overcome with emotion for some reason that I couldn't contain it. It's like my heart just couldn't hold the words inside anymore, and I released them without any real thought as to what Dane's reaction would be. I just know they had to be said.

He's not said them back, but things have changed yet again with us. We're closer for sure. He dotes on me more. Sends me sweet texts during the day, and makes love to me at night. He sends me flowers for no other reason than to say he was thinking about me, and he laughs and smiles more than I've ever known him to.

This is just so confusing, but there is nothing I can do but stay on this journey. I can't not be in love with him, and I can only hope he's going to get there one day. Not just the words, but the commitment to spend the rest of our lives together. It's my most fervent desire.

The door to the conference room opens, and I look that way because the motion catches my attention. It's my secretary, Leeza, and her eyes roam the table until she finds me. Her look is apologetic as she crooks her finger at me. Not once in the last six years since she's been working for me has she ever disturbed me during a meeting.

I slide silently from my chair. Dane's eyes come to me for a moment, but he doesn't miss a beat in his discourse.

When I make it to the door, Leeza has stepped out in the hallway. I pull the door shut behind me.

“I’m so sorry to interrupt, Avril,” she says as she wrings her hands together. “But Mr. Jared Litener is in your office, and he says it’s an emergency that required I interrupt you. He says he has to speak to you urgently. I put him in your office.”

I go dizzy with dread. Jared is Jamie’s best friend and partner in their plastic surgery practice. There is no way in hell he’d ever show up here saying he needed to speak to me urgently unless it was something awful.

My legs feel wooden as I walk down the hall, and tears are already forming in my eyes. When I open my office door, Jared turns to look at me. His face is coated in misery, his eyes bloodshot. I haven’t seen him since Jamie and I broke up, but he became a good friend to me over the years.

I try to ask what’s wrong, but my throat closes up tight. A tear slips out and falls down my cheek, but I dash it away.

Jared walks up to me and takes my hands in his. His voice is rough and coated with heavy emotion. “Jamie had a brain aneurysm.”

A choked sound obnoxiously pops out of my mouth, and Jared squeezes my hands as he continues. “Um... there was too much brain damage. He’s on life support now, but there’s no recovery.”

“No,” I manage to sob out and then fall forward into Jared’s arms, my legs going absolutely weak. For as confident as I was in calling it quits with Jamie, I never thought I’d be faced with this.

“I came to tell you because obviously Jamie would want you to know, but more importantly... he named you as his healthcare power of attorney.”

This news causes me to jerk and pull back from him. “He what?”

“A decision needs to be made,” Jared says quietly. “He had an advanced directive and living will. He’s named you as the primary to make decisions on his behalf. He named me as the secondary.”

“I don’t understand.” My voice comes out in a warble, almost slurred. “Why would he...”

Jared looks uncomfortable for a moment, but then gives a resigned sigh. “He was going to propose to you, Avril. He had all of his estate stuff done up to give it to you, and he also wanted you to make end-of-life decisions. He had it all planned out because he was so confident you two would be together forever, but then he had that moment of fucking stupidity. I know this might

not be the time to tell you this, but that woman he was with... she really came on strong to him. I know it doesn't excuse what he did, but he didn't go seeking anything. He loved you. He wanted a life with marriage and kids with you."

Tears fall freely from my eyes as I try to comprehend what he's saying. That I was so close to having everything I ever thought I wanted in life, and it was ruined by a moment of stupidity. I can't even bear to think about how I am grateful for that moment of stupidity, because it brought Dane and me together. That seems like such a betrayal to Jamie, who now lays brain dead.

"Why wouldn't he have changed all that?" I ask Jared as tears continue to stream down my face. "Why keep me on that stuff after we broke up?"

Jared gives a sorrowful smile. "He was the eternal optimist. He thought he could work really hard and get you back. He never gave up that you might at least give him a chance one day."

I pull away from Jared and flop down into one of the guest chairs. Wrapping my arms around my stomach, I bend forward and start sobbing. Jared puts his hand on my shoulder and just lets me cry. I can hear him sniffing, too, but I don't have the strength to comfort him.

I don't want this responsibility.

I sure as hell am not liking this guilt that seems to be pressing down on me. Knowing now that Jamie was going to propose, that he had a moment of weakness that ruined it all, but most of all, because it led me to a greater happiness. I didn't love Jamie the way I love Dane. How could I when I have seventeen years of deep history with him?

Finally, I sit up and look over my shoulder at Jared. "What do I need to do? What about his brother?"

Jared shook his head. "You know he's not that close to Phillip. With both his parents being deceased, you and I were the next logical choices for him to make these decisions."

I nod in understanding as more tears fall. But I really don't understand any of this. It's so unfair Jamie was taken from this earth so young and full of life.

It's not fair I have to make decisions for a man I no longer love, although I do have care and respect for the good thing we had. For the good that I know was in him.

"You know what he would want?" Jared asks me hesitantly.

I nod again, give a tiny cough to clear my throat. “Um... yeah. We talked about it a few times. If there was no chance of recovery, he didn’t want to be on life support. Same as me.”

“That’s right,” Jared says softly. Proof he really was Jamie’s best friend and knew him well. “But you’re the primary. You have to make the call. There will be forms to sign at the hospital, and I thought... well, that you’d want to say goodbye.”

I double back over as pain hits me square in the chest, and I start sobbing again. Jared squats down by the chair, rubbing my back. He murmurs words of comfort, but I really can’t hear them.

Jamie’s going to die by my hand and very soon. He’s going to die without me having given him any closure. I could have just met with him for lunch or something, and let him have his last say. I could have looked him in the eye and let him know there was no chance. Instead, he died still loving me and still trusting me to do right by him.

“What’s going on?” I hear Dane say from the doorway, and I look over my shoulder. Even through the tears blurring my eyes, I can make out the wavy figures of Andrew and Dane.

I bend back over, the sobs almost uncontrollable at this point, and I feel like I’m suffocating. Then Dane’s by my chair and he’s pulling me into his arms. I can hear Jared almost like he’s in a tunnel, telling Andrew and Dane what happened to Jamie. I bury my face in Dane’s chest and I just keep crying.



AFTER I SIGN the documents and Jamie’s heart stops beating, Jared pulls me back into his arms for one last hug. I don’t know if we’ll keep in contact, but I hope so. We just shared one of the most profound experiences of my life. While we waited for Jamie to die, we spent most of the time telling funny or endearing stories about him. We laughed, and we cried. I told Jared how bad I felt that I didn’t give him closure, and he comforted me by telling me Jamie only ever wanted me to be happy, and if I am, then he’s in a very happy place right now.

We walk out of his room and share one more hug.

I see Andrew waiting for me, leaning up against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest. His eyes are filled with sorrow and worry for me.

After Jared releases me, I turn and walk right into a hug from Andrew. He holds me tight, and I just sigh from the few moments of peace in my friend's arms. I have no more tears to give, and I'd kill for a hot bath and my bed.

I look at my watch. It's only three PM, but I'm exhausted.

"Where's Dane?" I ask as I pull back from Andrew, assuming he's getting coffee or something from the cafeteria. He and Andrew drove me to the hospital, stood by my side while the doctor explained Jamie's condition, and Dane kept his hand on my shoulder while I signed the paperwork to end his life. They both stepped out once the machines were turned off so Jared and I could say our final goodbyes.

Andrew's gaze falls to the floor as he says, "Um... he went back to handle some meetings."

I just stare blankly at Andrew, trying to process what he's saying. "He went back? To the office?"

Andrew lifts his head, and I can see by the look in his eyes even he thinks that was a shitty move. He gives me a small smile. "He wants me to take you home, and he'll be by your house a little bit later."

"Tell me you're kidding me," I practically beg Andrew.

Please tell me that my best friend, lover, and man I'm in love with didn't just abandon me in the hospital after the most traumatic experience of my life to attend "some meetings".

"I'm sorry, Av," Andrew says apologetically. "He doesn't understand—"

"Don't you fucking defend him," I cut him off with a snarl. "I can't imagine any circumstance where it's okay for my boyfriend to ditch me at a time like this."

Andrew just nods even though I know he probably has a million reasons Dane's not here. I can come up with them on my own.

He's new to this whole relationship thing.

He's confused how to feel because you're so upset about a former boyfriend.

He's never had to be your rock before, Av. That's always been my job.

None of that is any excuse.

"Just take me home," I say wearily, figuring I can deal with Dane at another time when I'm a little bit more emotionally stable. I know part of my

anger for him is just stemming from the fact that I've been overloaded with terrible stuff today. I'm sure in the clear light of day, I'll see things a little more rationally.

That doesn't stop me, however, from pulling my phone out and sending a text to Dane. *I'm really tired. Going to bed when I get home so no need to come by.*

Of course, one could say I sent that text as a test. Would he take the bait? I'm giving him not to have to deal with an emotionally fraught woman, or would he come through for me in the end?

CHAPTER 27

Dane

MY OFFICE DOOR flies open, and Andrew comes barreling through with fury blazing in his eyes. I actually expected it, so I'm braced and ready for a fight.

"What in the fuck are you doing here?" he snarls as he comes to stand on the opposite side of my desk and slams his palms down so hard it shakes.

"I'm working," I say calmly, refusing to raise my voice to match his.

"You're kidding me, right? Avril's at home, having just pulled the plug on Jamie yesterday. You didn't bother going to see her last night, but I thought for sure you could manage a little bit of time this morning to go see her."

"She texted me not to come by last night," I point out.

"You're not that stupid," Andrew growls. "It didn't matter what she texted. She needed you last night, and you bailed."

"I'm sorry if this isn't affecting me the way it's affecting you and Avril," I growl back, starting to lose my patience with his holier-than-thou attitude.

"What?" Andrew says with a jerk of his chin inward.

"I can't feel bad about a man I despised dying. He cheated on her, betrayed her, and hurt her. I'm not going to feel bad about it."

"God... you are fucking stupid," Andrew says with a laugh that holds absolutely no humor. "You don't have to feel bad about it for Jamie's sake, but you sure as fuck should feel bad your girlfriend is hurting right now and needs you."

I shrug and look over at my laptop. "She has you consoling her. That's always been what you're good at."

I'm not prepared for Andrew's hand to lash out, grab my laptop, and hurl it across the room. It hits one of my built-ins, and the screen detaches and goes flying.

"What the fuck?" I yell as I charge up out of my chair and round the desk.

“I just told you that your girlfriend is hurting and you want me to handle it?” Andrew whispers, his entire body vibrating with rage. I’ve never seen him this mad in the entire time I’ve known him.

Something seems to explode inside of me, releasing every bit of emotion I’d been holding onto the last twenty-four hours. My hands curl into fists, and I lean into Andrew as I snarl, “Well, why the fuck is she hurting? Unless she still has feelings for him. Here she is, fucking me... saying she loves me, and now she falls to pieces because that piece of shit who betrayed her is dead.”

Andrew just blinks a few times with wide eyes and takes a step back from me. His voice is quiet but strong in his belief. “You really are a moron.”

I make a scoffing sound and turn my back on him to go back around my desk. I sit down, lean back, and steeple my hands in front of me. “Love is an illusion, Andrew. It makes people feel good to believe in it, but I never have. I know it’s as fragile as glass but nowhere near as clear. Avril said she loved me, and I couldn’t comprehend it. I couldn’t say it back. Hell, I didn’t want to say it back because I was just waiting for the other shoe to drop. And now it has.”

“You know—”

“I thought I knew what it all meant,” I cut him off as I settle further back into my chair. “I thought it meant you put the person you love above all else. That you would do anything for that person. Sacrifice anything for love. But if a father can’t even do that for his own son, how could I ever believe a woman would do that for me?”

“Because it’s Avril, you asshole,” Andrew throws back at me through gritted teeth. “You’ve known her longer than your dad. How can you not fucking know this? How can you not believe in her?”

“Because I just watched her fall to pieces over another man. After she told me she loved me. Do you realize the level of trust I had to put in her just to make it as far as I did, and then in the blink of an eye, she’s mourning another man?”

Andrew sighs wearily and scrubs his hands over his face. “Look, Dane... I get that was hard to take, but cut her some slack. She had been in love with him. He died unexpectedly. And he died because she signed the papers to pull the plug. You have to let her have some feelings about it.”

Now I sigh, turning my head and looking out the window. I can’t stand to look at the condemnation on Andrew’s face. “Every insecurity I’ve ever had

about love and commitment has surfaced. Every ugly thing I ever thought about every stupid fool who chose to believe in love came roaring at me like an avalanche. I might be wrong. Hell, I probably am, but if I can't handle something like this with Avril, how can I fucking handle anything? It's just too much. I'm not equipped to—"

A knock on the door stops me in midsentence, and my throat constricts when I see Avril walking through.

She looks like hell. Her hair is caught up in a messy knot, and she's wearing jeans and a ratty long-sleeve Berkley t-shirt. Her skin is pale and there are dark circles under her eyes. My stomach clenches as I consider that much of her appearance is because she's grieving for Jamie. I held her in my arms while she sobbed out her misery and pain for another man. And every tear that fell made me convinced that her declaration of love for me was hollow.

"Were you two just talking about me?" she asks as she looks from me to Andrew. I know my face is blank because that's about how I feel on the inside, but Andrew's looks guilty as shit.

Neither one of us answer her.

She takes a few steps into my office. "I repeat, were you talking about me?"

Andrew gives a little cough and takes a step toward her. "Yes. We are worried about you."

Avril gives a cynical laugh. "I believe *you* are worried about me, Andrew," she says in a voice that quavers with anger. She turns her head to look at me. "But you, Dane... if you were really worried, you would have done more. You would have come to see me, or called me. There are a million fucking ways you could have let me know you cared but instead, you're hiding away and letting Andrew do what you should be doing."

"I sent you a text," I say. But the minute the words are out, I know how lame they are.

"Oh, yes," Avril says with sarcasm practically dripping from her mouth. "Such a thoughtful text. *Have some meetings this morning; Drew has you covered. Will come by later.* That hit me right in the feels, Dane."

Guilt clogs my throat, but my hackles stay firmly raised because now both of my best friends are attacking me. Granted, it's well deserved, but I'm

just not in the fucking mood to deal with all this.

We engage in a staring war, Avril's eyes pinned on me with a mixture of anger and perpetual hope, and it kills me. I keep mine impassively neutral, which I can tell is making her more pissed off.

Finally, she turns to look at Andrew. "Do you mind giving us a few minutes alone?"

Andrew smiles at her and nods. He walks right up to her and loops an arm around her neck, pulling her in close so he can whisper something in her ear. Whatever he's saying is resonating because she nods her head in agreement.

My chest burns when he hugs her hard, and then kisses her temple. His lips linger there for far too long in my opinion, but I keep my mouth shut.

Andrew doesn't look back at me once as he heads out the door, and I know he's beyond disappointed in me.

Oh, well... he'll get the fuck over it or he won't.

My gaze comes back to Avril, who calmly walks over to one of the chairs opposite my desk. She perches on the edge of the seat, back ramrod straight and hands clasped loosely in her lap.

She looks assured and determined. My entire body feels coiled so tight I feel like I'll burst apart at any moment.

"Andrew just gave me some good advice," she says quietly. "He told me to give you the benefit of the doubt, because this was hard on you too and you're having some issues processing. So, I'm going to do just that."

"You shouldn't," I tell her without thought. The words are cruel and meant to set the tone that I regret nothing right now.

Avril takes another breath, and although she's trying to come off as composed, her voice trembles slightly. "So, you don't think it was incredibly callous not to come check on me? Or have an ounce of sympathy for me? Or give me your shoulder to cry on?"

Fuck... of course I sympathized with her, and it killed me to see her so upset. But it killed me that she was so upset over *him*, and I can't shake that loose no matter how hard I try or how much she wants to give me the benefit of the doubt.

I lean forward in my chair, placing my forearms on my desk. I realize how much this entire scenario looks like a business meeting. Like we're discussing something extremely grave and important that could impact Caterva, yet we're talking about our lives here.

“I don’t have it in me, Av,” I tell her. As expected, the disappointment in her eyes makes me feel shittier than I’ve ever felt in my life. “I’m sorry.”

I can’t say anymore. I certainly can’t tell her how unstable I felt seeing her mourn over another man, or that my insecurities and vulnerabilities got the best of me. No way am I admitting that to her, because it makes me weaker than her and that will be my personal shame.

There is no way I can tell her I don’t trust her. That I tried, and I thought I could work with these new feelings, but the first time she showed the slightest hint of abandoning me—even if it was just to grieve for a past love—it made me question every single action and word she’d ever given me.

“So, this is it?” she asks, her voice raspy as tears fill her eyes. “We’re over and we just go back to what... being best friends?”

“If we can,” I reply, but even I know that’s not how this works. I just broke her heart, and there’s no way she’s ever going to laugh with me again the way friends should.

“We can’t,” she whispers. Despite how soft the words sound, they have the force of a steel door slamming shut on me. Something deep and painful aches in the center of my chest, but I ignore it.

“Maybe in time—”

“No,” she cuts in on me as she stands up. She looks down at me. With more determination in her voice than I’ve ever heard, she says. “Never. I knew the risks. I knew what I stood to lose by trying to make something with you. I knew that the friendship was the stake, and I was prepared to lose it because I thought you were worth trying for. But apparently, I was wrong.”

God, she was so fucking wrong.

Despair hits me, presses down upon me... turns the world gray right before my eyes. I failed her and myself, but really... I sort of felt this was the way it would turn out.

“The hurt you’ve caused me... I can’t come back from that, Dane,” she says, and the pain in my chest becomes unbearable.

Thankfully, I don’t have to face her anymore as she turns and walks quietly out of my office.

CHAPTER 28

Avril

ANDREW HOLDS MY hand as we walk to his car. The graveside service for Jamie was nice. Jared spoke, as did a few other friends. It was awkward for me to see them, and I sat in the back row to keep my distance as I wasn't sure what to say.

Hi. Nice seeing you. I'm the woman who broke Jamie's heart and then signed the documents for him to die.

Andrew squeezes my hand, and I squeeze back. He's been my rock, not only giving me the support to express my grief over Jamie's death, but also for the sudden demise of my relationship with Dane. I haven't gone back into work since I walked out of Dane's office. Andrew's been at my house during the days, working diligently from my living room. I didn't need him there, but the fact he wanted to be there for me was sustaining enough. At my insistence, he went home each night so he could have the comfort of his own bed and I could cry myself to sleep without him hearing me.

"You okay?" Andrew asks as we walk side by side over other cemetery plots toward his car.

"I'm all cried out," I reply tiredly. "Not a drop left."

My tears for Jamie were expended before I walked out of the hospital. Every tear since has been laid at Dane's doorstep, but I woke up this morning and couldn't muster a single one.

Andrew leads me to the passenger side of his car and holds the door for me while I get in. As he walks around the front, I admire his strength—not from a physical perspective—but from an emotional one. Out of the three of us, Andrew ended up being the one who was best equipped to deal with the fallout.

Doesn't mean he's not pissed as hell at Dane, though. He's cursed and vilified him relentlessly for the last three days. But he's also told me that he thinks he'll come around.

It's a nice sentiment, but one I don't share. I know Dane better than Andrew does. I know firsthand how deeply his issues with his father go. When Dane said he didn't have it in him, he meant it and I believed him.

The drive back to my house is quiet. That's the sign of a good friendship—when you don't have to fill the void with useless conversation.

Besides... I really don't have much to say. Quiet is very much what I want and need right now.

When we pull into my driveway, Andrew hesitates before turning off the ignition. "Do you want me to come in?"

I turn to give him a smile. "Actually... I do. There's something I need to give you."

"Okay," he says as he turns the car off.

I lead him into the house. After dropping my purse to the floor and kicking off my black funeral heels, I walk into my bedroom. Andrew follows and when he steps inside, he lets out a long breath of surprise.

"What's going on?" he says as he takes note of the four suitcases I have packed, along with several boxes that have been taped up and labeled.

I turn to face him, crossing my arms over my stomach. I want to be strong with my words, but they come out shaky. "I'm leaving."

"On a vacation?" he asks dubiously, but by the packed boxes, he knows that's not the right question.

Without comment, I walk to my dresser and pick up two large sealed envelopes and a smaller one. I turn back to him and hold the small envelope out to him. He looks at it like it's a bomb getting ready to detonate.

I take one more step and thrust it into his hand. "That's my letter of resignation from Caterva effective immediately."

"Jesus fuck," Andrew yells as he puts his hands on top of his head, the envelope crushed in his grip. "Av... no. This is not the answer."

"It is," I say quietly.

Andrew tosses the envelope on my bed and stomps up to me. His hands come to my shoulders, and he bends his face close to mine. "Talk to me, please. What do you need to figure out? Let me help you get through this."

My head starts shaking in denial before he finishes talking. "There is no figuring it out."

"I know he hurt you—"

"He shredded me, Andrew. He didn't just hurt me or break my heart. He

sliced me up from the inside out, and the pain is excruciating. I cannot be around him. I just can't."

"Then take a fucking sabbatical or something until you can get past this ___"

"Andrew," I say forcefully, and his mouth snaps shut. "I can't get past it. There is no getting past this type of loss for me."

"You're acting rashly," he argues, and yeah... he has a point there. But I know this is right. I can't continue to be a part of Dane's life at all. That means no friendship and no working relationship. Andrew sighs and sits on the edge of the bed. "How did this get so fucked up?"

I walk over and sit next to him, leaning over to put my head on his shoulder. The other two envelopes I need to give him are in my lap.

"There were so many risks we took." My voice is thick with sorrow and regret. "We all knew the potential consequences. We all had our eyes wide open. And I honestly thought it would be okay, you know? I even foolishly thought to myself, 'If worse came to worst and we didn't work out, I could get past it.' I mean, we're best friends. We can get past anything, right?"

"I don't know, Av," Andrew returns softly as he puts an arm around me. "I'm not in your shoes."

"I know you think I've been holed up in this house for three days mourning Jamie, but I haven't. I mean, it was terrible and tragic, but I've been thinking. Just sitting and thinking and thinking some more until my head hurts. I've been through it a million times in my mind, and Andrew... trust me, I just can't go back to being his friend and loving him like a friend. It would be too painful for me, seeing him day in and day out... loving him but it not being returned. It would crush my soul, and I'm not giving that up for anyone."

Andrew lets out a resigned sigh, and his arm tightens around me.

"I gambled, Drew," I murmur. "I rolled the dice. I went all in knowing damn well he might not be able to go all in with me. What I didn't figure out was how bad it would hurt. And it hurt because he so easily gave up. He didn't even try. Caved at the first stumbling block. His message was that I wasn't worth the effort. It shredded me to know I wasn't even important enough to try... to get past the discomfort and awkwardness of it all to him."

Andrew releases me and leans away so he can turn to look at me. "You do get he has insecurities, right? He was not handling how badly Jamie's

death upset you.”

“Of course, I know that. I know that because I know Dane. I know him probably better than he knows himself. I’ve seen firsthand the demons that chase him.”

Tilting his head, Andrew looks at me with wide eyes. “What kind of demons?”

I don’t answer him, just pick up one of the large envelopes and hand it to him. “My house is getting listed for sale next week.”

Andrew curses. “Fuck... this is really happening, isn’t it?”

I don’t respond to his question. “The realty company is going to handle putting the rest of my stuff in long-term storage. I named you as my power of attorney and the documents are in here, so you can handle the closing when the house sells. Will you do that for me?”

“Of course, I will,” he says in almost a daze as he takes the envelope. I feel terrible for how badly I’m overwhelming him right now.

I hand the last envelope to him. “Give this to Dane.”

“What is it?” he asks as he takes it.

“Something I should have given him a long time ago,” I whisper as I look at the envelope that contains everything Dane would need to find his father. “Back in our senior year at Berkley, Dane’s dad came to the apartment one day. Dane was really freaked out, and I essentially had to chase him off because Dane was sort of frozen. But the man told me his name and that he just wanted to reconnect with his son. So, I ended up tracking him down and kept the information to give to Dane if he ever wanted to find his dad. I never gave it to him, though. I kept it because I didn’t think Dane would want it. I tried to give it to him a few weeks ago.”

Andrew’s eyes travel to the envelope. “But he didn’t take it.”

“Said he didn’t want it. But I hired an investigator two days ago to update the information, and his father is in the same town working the same job. I want you to give this to Dane. He can decide what to do with it, but I shouldn’t keep it anymore.”

I stand up from the bed and smooth my dress down. My flight doesn’t leave until tonight, and I long for a hot bath to soothe the tension from my shoulders. Then I’ll be going into some comfy travel pants and a pullover as I have a long flight ahead of me.

“Where are you going?” Andrew asks as he stands up. He leans over and

picks up the other envelope that contains my resignation.

“Paris,” I tell him.

“You’re taking the job Fabron offered you,” he says.

I shrug. “I’m going to talk to him about it and see if it’s something I’m really interested in. But I will probably take it.”

Andrew steps up to me and shakes his head, his face filled with fear and doubt. “This is so impulsive, Avril. It’s not like you. It’s only been three days... you should give Dane time.”

Bringing my hand up, I touch my fingers to his cheek and smile at him. “Time won’t fix this for Dane. He’s been like this for thirty-nine years and I believe him when he says he can’t. But time will fix it for me. Time and distance is what I need.”

He doesn’t say anything for a moment, but then he asks in a choked voice, “But what about me? I don’t want the distance. I don’t want to lose my best friend.”

And I lose it right there. The tears well up fast and spill. Apparently, I wasn’t as dried up as I thought I was. I fling myself into Andrew’s arms, and we squeeze each other so hard I can barely breathe.

When his hold on me loosens slightly, I manage to tell him, “I’m going to miss you so much, Drew. But we’ll talk every day, and FaceTime, and we’ll visit each other all the time. You’re not losing me.”

“I am,” he insists as he squeezes me again. “And while I understand why you’re doing this, you have to know this is a mistake, Avril. You may not see it now, but this is a mistake.”

I shake my head and press my cheek hard into his chest. As the tears drip down my face, I tell him, “The mistake was in starting something with Dane in the first place.”

CHAPTER 29

Andrew

MY CELL PHONE rings, and it takes me less than a second to process Avril's ringtone. I snatch it up and connect the call. "About time you called."

"We've talked every day," she admonishes me with a laugh.

"That's true, but you've never waited this late to call." I look at my watch and ask her, "It's what... close to midnight there?"

"The Parisians do like their late-night dinners," she says followed by a yawn. "It's hard getting used to it."

"I can't believe you've been gone just five days," I tell her as I lean back in my chair and kick my feet up on my desk. "It feels like five years. When are you coming to visit?"

Avril laughs again, and it's music to my ears. I haven't heard that much lately. "It will be a few months. But how about you come here to visit? My apartment is lovely and has a lumpy old couch you can sleep on. Oh, and I seem to have adopted a cat. He's kind of mean tempered and missing half an ear, but he won't leave and I'm afraid to kick him out now. I named him Clyde."

"Oh, good God. You're turning into a cat lady."

More laughter and I can't help but grin in response. Fuck, I miss her so bad, but if she's happy, that's all that matters.

But without seeing her face, I can't tell how genuine that laugh is. I need to see her eyes to know the truth.

"Hey," I say to keep the conversation going. "I ran into Jared yesterday. He needed to get up with you so I gave him your number."

Avril doesn't respond. After a few seconds, I have to prod her. "Av... everything okay?"

She gives a little cough and says, "Um... yeah. It's fine. He called. Apparently, Jamie's will was read and he left everything to me."

I let out a low whistle. "Everything?"

“His house, bank accounts, life insurance, and personal effects. The medical practice obviously went to Jared.”

“How does that make you feel?” I venture hesitantly.

“Like shit,” she admits. “I don’t want that stuff. I don’t deserve it. We were over and done with.”

“What are you going to do?”

Avril sighs, and I can feel the weight of her dilemma within it. “I don’t know. Give it to one of the charities he supported? Brain aneurysm research?”

“Both good options,” I reassure her. “But you don’t have to make any snap decisions. Maybe talk to Jared about ideas. You’ll figure it out.”

Another sigh from her this time, and I hear the relief in it. “You always know what to say to boost me up, Drew.”

Apparently not enough to keep her from running off to Paris and leaving her life behind because Dane’s a cowardly jackass.

“So, who did you go out to dinner with tonight? Fabron?” I ask her. I know of his interest in her, and I expected he’d make a move.

Avril snorts. “No, it was just with some people at Révéler. Talking to me about the company to help me decide. And Fabron and I are just friends. Nothing more.”

“Doesn’t have to be that way,” I tell her, not that I want her to be with Fabron, because I don’t. I just don’t want her to give up on the prospect of love.

“Did you not hear I got a cat?” she chides without addressing what I just said. “I don’t need anything more at this time.”

“Don’t give up on love, Av,” I say softly. “Look at everything I’ve been through, and I still believe it exists out there for me.”

She’s silent a moment, but then she says, “It’s still too fresh. It’s going to be a long time before I look for anything.”

The flatness in her voice worries me. “Do you need me to come and hang out with you a bit there? I can totally take some time off work.”

“No, of course not,” she reassures me. “I’m fine. I’ve got my days I’m blue, but I’m sure it will get better.”

“Yes, it will get better,” I say confidently.

“It has to,” she returns almost desperately, and my heart aches for her.

Avril yawns again and says, “I’ve got to get some sleep. Talk tomorrow?”

“Talk tomorrow,” I reply softly. “Love you.”

“Love you back,” she says and then disconnects.

She never asked once about Dane. She hasn’t asked about him during any of our other conversations either.

Which I suppose is fitting, because Dane hasn’t asked about her either. After I handed him her resignation, I watched as he silently read it and then tossed it on his desk. All he said was, “I’ll move Charlie Brent over as interim COO until we can figure out what to do.”

His words were cool and collected, but he couldn’t hide the way his hand was shaking as he read the letter.

Since then, he’s become surly and closed off, and I’ve decided to give him his space. I’m still a little pissed at him for letting Avril go so easily, but on the flip side... I still love the dude the way I love Avril. I want them both to get over this heartache. If I knew how to accomplish it, I would.

Pushing up out of my chair, I decide to walk down to his office to check on him. While I’m firmly in Avril’s corner as being the one wronged, I need to cut him some slack. Nothing he did was mean spirited or without thought. He was being truthful with her, even if it crushed her, and I have to give him some leeway.

I don’t bother knocking on his door because the last time I did, he yelled, “Come back later. I’m busy.”

I know damn well he wasn’t any busier than any other day, and I’ve always walked right into his office unless he had someone in.

Opening the door, I slip inside. He’s so engrossed in something on his computer screen that he doesn’t notice me for a moment. I take a step forward, and his head snaps up to look at me.

And Jesus Christ, he looks bad. So fucking bad. I feel like shit as I should have been paying more attention to him the last few days.

His eyes are red rimmed and bloodshot. He hasn’t shaved in I’m guessing... oh, five days. He’s wearing a wrinkled dress shirt with his tie pulled loose, and the expression on his face is as flat as a board. He doesn’t say a word to me but watches me advance on his desk.

“What are you doing?” I ask casually as I sit down.

He closes his laptop, which is odd, and says, “Reviewing some reports.”

“How do they look?”

“Fine,” he says distractedly. “You did a good job.”

I have no clue what he's talking about because I haven't given him any reports to read lately. He picks up a pencil from his desk and starts rolling it through his fingers, which gives him a place to stare at rather than look at me.

"Enough, Dane," I growl.

His head jerks up, and the pencil clatters to the desk. "Excuse me?"

"Enough," I reiterate firmly. "Get over it. Move on. You lost her, man. I know it sucks because you made a stupid fucking choice when you chose your cold black heart over a woman who loves you, but whatever, dude. You have a business to run so snap the fuck out of it and move on."

"You're an asshole," he mutters as he picks the pencil back up and starts rolling it again. The fact he's trying to ignore me pisses me off.

"No, you're an asshole. You chased Avril away. Now I don't have my best friend because you're a selfish prick who is also a coward."

Dane ignores me and turns in his chair to look out the window. He doesn't say a word in defense, and his silence indicates he's not going to engage with me.

"You need to go to The Wicked Horse and get laid, man," I tell him.

He flinches and even though he's not looking at me directly, I can see his grimace from his profile. Interesting that The Wicked Horse is distasteful to him.

"I was wrong," he says so quietly I almost don't hear him. But his voice strengthens as he turns to look at me. "I was wrong about all of it."

"What do you mean?" I ask as I scoot forward in my chair a bit to give him my undivided attention.

Dane sighs and leans back. He looks like he's aged about ten years. "My biggest fear was that Avril would abandon me. That I couldn't trust her because my dad ripped that away from me. So, I cut bait and ran. I gave her up before she could break my heart. But I was so fucking wrong. Avril didn't abandon me, nor would she have. I abandoned her. I turned out just like my fucking dad. Everything I hated about him, I turned around and did to her. I became the fucker I despise."

I want to make a ding, ding, ding sound and tell him he's won a prize for finally uttering the truth about all of this. But that would be crass and might cause him to clam back up again.

Standing up, I lean over his desk and tap my finger on the top. "Then do something about it."

Dane lifts his face to look up at me. He studies me silently, and I'm not encouraged by how dead his expression is. Finally, he says distractedly, "Yeah... maybe."

"Want to talk about it? I'll help you figure it out. I'm sure Avril—"

Dane holds a hand up and shakes his head. "I don't need to talk about Avril."

"Then what do you need?" I ask him gently. "I'm still your best friend, man. Tell me what you need."

His lips curl up ever so slightly, but there's no light in his eyes. "I need to figure this out myself. But I appreciate the offer."

I nod in acknowledgment and take a step back. "I'm here if you need me. Just call."

"I will," he says as his head rolls on the back of his chair and he goes to staring back out the window.

Turning, I head out of his office, but I am bolstered by one thing I saw in there.

Laying on his desk was the envelope Avril had me give him that contained all the information on his father. It was open and the contents were spread out.

CHAPTER 30

Dane

MY FIRST CHRISTMAS I can remember was with my father. My mom had died in childbirth, and I always wondered what it would be like to have one.

But that first Christmas was nice. I'm not quite sure what my dad did for a living but he came home dirty and sweaty every night, so I know it was some type of manual labor. I stayed with a neighbor in the next-door apartment, and he'd pick me up there. We'd then go to our place, and I'd sit in the bathroom on top of the toilet seat while he took a shower and asked me about my day.

I knew my dad didn't make a lot of money, but I don't think I really noticed. That first Christmas I can remember with him, I had a lot of presents. And by a lot, maybe five or six. They weren't overly big, but I'd never seen five or six toys all for me at once before, so it was awesome.

The thing I remember the most was my dad smiling big with each one I unwrapped.

The next year, I was in a foster home with four other foster kids. The foster mother, whose name I can't even remember because there have been so many, told us that there was no Santa Claus and, "I can't afford no presents on what the state pays me to keep you lousy brats."

I could go on and on about similar stories in the various homes I'd bounced around in, but they're all the same. By my third year in the foster system, I'd become hard and closed off. I looked at potential adoptive parents with distrust and refused to talk to them, making me virtually unadoptable.

The man I completely blame for that is my father, yet here I stand on his doorstep with my hand poised to knock on the door.

I take a deep breath and give a hard double rap. While I wait for him to answer, I take in the rundown apartment complex he lives in. It's not in the worst part of town, but it's close. I saw someone making a drug deal in the

parking lot when I pulled in, so I sort of expect to find a strung-out man opening the door.

Instead, when it opens, I see the same man who stood at my apartment door all those years ago. There's more gray in his hair and a few more lines around his eyes, but he looks fit, healthy, and clear eyed.

"I don't believe it," he says in a voice hoarse with emotion. "Dane."

I can't think of anything to say. For the million things I'd thought of on the plane or in the rental car to get here, not a single thing comes out.

"Come in," my dad says, remembering his manners. "Come in."

He backs away from the door, and I enter the small apartment. It's a one bedroom. The carpet is threadbare and the walls have holes in them, but it's clean and orderly. There's a toolbox on the floor near the green plaid couch, and the TV is on with a news program playing on low volume. It looks like I interrupted his microwaved meal, which sits half eaten on the coffee table.

I turn my gaze back to my dad, and I can see he's now extremely nervous to have me here. He shoves his hands in the pockets of his work pants and rocks back and forth on his heels. We stare at each other, not knowing what to say.

After another look around the small apartment, I ask, "So... you do home improvements?"

"Yeah," he says with a hesitant smile. "General handyman stuff. Doesn't make a ton of money but keeps me fed and a roof over my head."

That strikes me deep because I know more than anyone that people need more than just food in their bellies and a roof over their head. They need so much more.

I rub the back of my neck, feeling the tension starting to take root there. This was probably a stupid fucking idea.

"You know," I say as I drop my hand. "I don't even know the details of what you did that got me taken away from you."

My father's face goes pale, his expression pained. "Drugs, Dane. As simple as that. Coke, heroine. Whatever I could get my hands on. I started dealing so I could have access and the money to buy them. You don't remember that?"

I shake my head. "Not really. I remember being left at the neighbors for several days, and then someone just came, picked me up, and took me away."

"I got arrested," he says as his eyes hold locked to mine. "Did eighteen

months. Got out and went right back to dealing. Got arrested again, did two years. Made some great contacts in that prison stint, and when I got out, went to work for those people dealing. Third time I got arrested, I went away for seven.”

“And then you didn’t go back to dealing after that?” I ask skeptically.

“Met a woman soon after I got out. Angela. She changed my life. Saved me, I guess you could say. I stayed clean, got a good job, and when I felt I was stable enough, I married her.”

“You’re married?”

A look of exquisite pain passes over my father’s face. “She died about eight months ago. Liver cancer.”

My first thoughts go to Avril, and the thought of her dying by some consuming disease makes me sick to my stomach. “I’m sorry,” I manage to tell him.

He coughs and mutters, “She was an angel. I’ll never go back to my old ways because of her. She’s the one who encouraged me to reach out to you at Berkley.”

“You didn’t think it was a little too late by then?” I ask gruffly, anger starting to rise up within me. His whole life got turned around but mine didn’t.

“I had to try,” he says in a low voice. “And it was stupid. I should have known you couldn’t forgive me.”

“I can’t,” I say stubbornly. “You abandoned your son. That first time out of prison, you went right back to it and never once thought about coming for me.”

“I did,” he says with vehemence. “I did come for you. But I was told the process to get you back was going to take time and money and would be an uphill battle. It was just... easy to slip back into the old lifestyle to make the money, but with that came the using again.”

“Don’t blame the drugs,” I snap.

He doesn’t get exactly angry, but his eyes do narrow on me. “Do you understand addiction? Ever known anyone addicted to drugs or alcohol or gambling?”

I shake my head. Didn’t know a single soul.

“Well, don’t judge,” he says quietly. “Because addiction is a disease, and it’s hard to fight. I was weak and couldn’t fight it for a very long time. By the

time I beat it, it was clearly too late, but I never gave up hope that one day we would be reunited. That you could forgive me.”

I let out a deep breath, taking in his words. Deep down, I know they’re mostly true. I know that much of my anger is that of a little boy who stopped having Christmases.

“I know you’ve got to be so angry with me,” my father starts to say.

I spin back on him with an angry retort on my lips, but the look on his face causes it to evaporate. He looks beyond repentant. For the first time, I see him as human.

With a sigh, I rub my hands over my face. When I look back to him, I admit, “Yes, I’m angry with you. But I’m angry with myself because as much as I have loathed you throughout my life, I turned out just like you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I wasn’t there for the person who needed me the most. I let my own weaknesses and fears prevent me from being the best possible version of me that I could be.”

“A woman?” he guesses.

“*The* woman,” I confirm. “I thought you ruined my life, but if I’m honest with myself, once I reached adulthood, I had a fucking fantastic life. Any downfall here recently is squarely on my shoulders, not yours.”

“You didn’t turn out just like me,” my dad says. I blink at him in surprise, because pretty sure that’s why Avril’s in Paris right now. “It took me years to have the strength to correct my mistakes. And they’re still not corrected. But it seems like it’s not taking you that long to figure it out.”

“Took long enough,” I mutter. It’s been a week since she left, but it feels like an eternity.

“You came here to confront me, work out your anger, and have an epiphany about yourself,” my dad surmises. “I hope you achieved that. I hope you have the courage now to go after your girl.”

“I had the courage before I came here,” I tell him. “I’ve already booked a flight out of LAX to Paris that leaves tonight.”

My dad blinks in delighted surprise. “Then why did you come?”

“Because I needed to know why you weren’t there. It was the missing piece to the puzzle. For most of my life, it was just easy to believe that you didn’t love me.”

“Oh, Jesus Dane... never that,” my dad says as he steps toward me with

arms reaching out. I have to control myself not to step backward, but he comes to a halt when he senses the awkwardness of the situation. “I always loved you. Even when I was at my lowest and without hope, I loved you. In prison, I dreamed of one day getting you back. And honestly... the drugs helped to dull that pain. It was a vicious cycle I’d give anything to go back and break a lot sooner than I did, because then you wouldn’t have had to live with all those doubts.”

I want to believe him, but I don’t know if I can. He’s a stranger to me, and there’s no trust between us. I can’t just let go of over three decades of bitterness and loathing for this man, but I could try to come to peace with it.

“Maybe when I get back to the States, you and I could have dinner or something,” I suggest cautiously. “Get to know each other a little.”

Tears well up in my dad’s eyes, and he nods quickly. His voice is clogged with emotion. “It would mean everything to me.”

I stick my hand out to him, the only olive branch I can extend right now. But it’s a sincere one. He puts his hand in mine, and we shake.

But then I look down at my watch, and I know I’ve got to head out to catch my flight. Because Avril is really all that matters.

CHAPTER 31

Avril

CLYDE MAKES A noise... a moaning, keening, growling sound. He then head butts the door, and that's my cue to let him out. When I do, he trots out and down the staircase where someone will open the outer door at some point so he can make it out onto the streets.

He's been a good companion for me as he's not overly needy. He comes inside to eat late in the day, and then will sit in my window to watch the back courtyard down below. He'll sleep on the end of my bed, and then in the morning after I feed him, he'll head butt the door to go out. I don't know what he does during the day, although I suspect fighting with other alley cats may be on the agenda given he's missing half an ear and has scars on his face.

There's a million things I could do today. I don't know how many times I've visited Paris, but I've covered all the major sightseeing that should be done by a visitor. But now that I'm considering making this my permanent home, there's so much more to discover. Fabron had suggested Les Puces de St-Ouen, which is the largest flea market in the world and because it's a Wednesday, he said it wouldn't be overly crowded. But I'm not much of a shopper. I might just wander some streets and eat a good meal, although too much of that and I won't fit into my clothes. The food in Paris is dangerous to a girl like me who over eats when she's sad and blue.

And yes... I'm still so very sad and blue. It's why I haven't accepted the position with Révéler yet. I can't be making major decisions when I'm having such emotional extremes. At one moment, I think I'll be okay. It might be when I'm walking by a flower stand over on Rue Amelot, and the brightness of a sunflower makes me smile. But the next moment, I could see a young couple holding hands and I'll break down into tears over my loss.

I've already made one major decision while under extreme emotional distress, and the only thing I can do is believe that it was right. I still don't

see how I could ever stay at Caterva and see Dane day in and day out, not having what we had. Or God forbid, seeing him with another woman like at The Wicked Horse. I'm pretty sure coming to Paris was the best thing for me. I've got so much money in savings that I could stay here for a few years without working and be fine, and maybe that's just what I'll do. It's definitely an option since I'm just not sure about the job at Révéler.

It's not that I don't think I'd be a great fit, because I know I would. It would probably be more challenging to me and, of course, the money can't be beat. But I don't know if I want to stay in this industry. There's something painful about having been part of one of the best biotech firms in the world that was poised to make a major medical breakthrough, and then suddenly not being a part of it anymore.

Which brings about a slew of other options. Once word had gotten out about my resignation from Caterva, I've had a few headhunters reach out to me. There's been some interest from some other major corporations that have nothing to do with biotech, and I could start looking at that as a course for my future.

Regardless, today is about deciding what to do in Paris, the city I love and may be a permanent resident of soon. Shopping or eating?

My stomach growls and my heart calls out for a chocolate pastry.

My common sense just tells me to go for a walk, so I can at least have some exercise if I'm going to eat through my depression.

There's a knock on my door that startles me since I'm still standing with my hand on the knob from letting Clyde out. I open the door so quickly the man standing on the other side is startled and actually jumps back.

I smile, and he holds out a white box tied with red ribbon to me. "Delivery for Miss Avril Carrigan."

"That's me," I tell him as I accept the box. I don't need the stamp of the logo for my favorite pastry shop on the top to know what's inside. I can smell the chocolate croissants coming through the thin cardboard, and the warmth from the bottom of the box tells me they are fresh out of the oven.

The delivery man smiles and turns away. I shut the door and bring the box into my small kitchen, setting it on the counter.

I stare at it dubiously, figuring it's just one more way Fabron is trying to butter me up to take the position at Révéler. We've had a few dinners together, another tour through the facility, and he's had some of his executive

board take me out for some wining and dining. But swear to God, he might be able to buy me off with confectionary delights.

Deciding to practice some self-control, I take a shower. I linger over my hair and makeup, deciding if I'm going to go out walking around Paris, I'm going to look good doing it. I put on a pair of black capris, a white blouse, and a zebra-print scarf around my neck. Tying my hair back into a low ponytail and adding bright red lipstick, I decide I look the part of a Parisian resident. I slip on a pair of comfortable black flats and head toward the door where my purse hangs on a wall hook beside it.

As I pass the kitchen counter, I look back at the box of pastries. I haven't had breakfast yet, and my stomach growls loudly.

With a sigh, I give up every bit of self-control and decide to have just one. Or maybe half of one.

Torturing myself, I decide to make a cup of coffee first. This requires boiling water so I can use my coffee press, and that only makes my stomach growl harder since I'm starving for a chocolate croissant.

By the time I have the coffee pressed, poured, and adequately doped with sugar and milk, I'm practically slobbering over the box. I remove the ribbon and lift the lid.

The chocolate croissants and what look like mini-custard tarts aren't what I notice first, but rather the square white envelope. I pull it out, figuring to find a short message from Fabron telling me to enjoy them. It will be a low-pressure sales pitch. I set the card on the counter and reach for a pastry.

I make myself eat it slowly, picking up bits of crust that flake off and licking my fingers to catch drips of chocolate. I sip at my coffee in between bites, making myself enjoy the slow pace by which I'm enjoying my breakfast. My life has always been in such a frantic rush, having a million things to do and not enough time to do it in. It's hard not to just wolf it down and run out the door.

When I finish, I close the box up. I rinse my cup out and wash my hands. Strolling back to my room, I take a few minutes to brush my teeth again and reapply lipstick.

Heading back toward the door for a second time, I snag the envelope from the counter and open it. There's a card inside that's plain on the front. When I open it up, my heart immediately starts pounding as I recognize the handwriting.

I'm here. I'll be waiting at the cafe where we first held hands.

Dane

I try to suck in air, but my lungs won't work. I stumble a few feet back, coming up against one of the armchairs in my living room. Pressing the card to my chest, I stare blankly at my door.

Dane is here?

For me?

What does that even mean?

I pull the card away and read it again. I can glean nothing from the two lines he'd written. How did he even know I'd be home on a Wednesday morning and what my favorite pastry shop was? Although knowing Dane and his headstrong ways, he probably called up Fabron and demanded to know if I'd taken the job and then probably used his considerable resources and money to hack my credit card, which would show an embarrassing amount of purchases at Milo Couvreur Pâtisserie.

My mind goes to the first time Dane and I ever held hands. It was our trip to Paris with Andrew almost seven weeks ago. I was in a three-way relationship with two men, and there was something so intimate about Dane and I holding hands outside of Andrew's presence. It was almost like a dirty little secret or something, yet it was so special at the same time. It was after we had stopped at a little cafe outside of our hotel and he invited me to go shopping. We stood up from the tables and as if it was oh so natural, he took my hand in his. My heart tripped hard from the romantic gesture, and I knew I was starting to fall in love with him.

An overwhelming need for some stability courses through me, so I rush to my purse and nab my cell phone out of it. I quickly dial Andrew, not caring that it's almost one AM in Vegas.

His voice is groggy and thick when he answers. "Hello."

"Andrew... did you know Dane was coming to Paris?"

I can almost envision him sitting straight up in bed, rubbing his eyes to try to wake up. "He's in Paris?" he asks.

That answers that. Andrew didn't know.

"He just had pastries delivered to my apartment with a note for me to meet him at a cafe we'd been at before."

I can hear Andrew yawn and his voice becomes a little clearer. “He sent me a text a few days ago and said he was going to L.A. for some business, but didn’t tell me anything more.”

“Well, he’s here in Paris,” I say with utter redundancy, but probably because I still can’t believe it myself.

“Why lie about going to L.A.?” he muses. “Unless...”

Andrew trails off, and I wait for him to pick it back up. But he doesn’t, so I say, “Unless what?”

“Late last week... I went into his office to check on him, and he had all the stuff you had put together on his dad spread out over his desk.”

“His dad lives just north of San Diego, though,” I point out.

“Yeah, but if he was going to fly to Paris, the nonstops are out of LAX. He could have just flown in there and used a rental car to make a quick visit south to see him.”

This makes sense, but it still doesn’t answer the question as to why he’s here. If Andrew didn’t know he was coming, he’s going to be no help in giving me some guidance.

“What else did you two talk about last week?” I prod.

“Top secret,” Andrew says firmly. “I don’t share that stuff, and you know it.”

“What was the gist of the conversation about?” I demand angrily. “I get not sharing exact confidences, but I need something, Drew. Don’t let me walk in blind when I see him.”

“So, you are going to go see him?”

“I don’t know,” I whine. “I wish I knew why he was here.”

“What did his message say exactly?”

I hold the card out and read it to him. Andrew mutters, “Cryptic much?”

“Drew... what’s happened since I left? How did he react to my resignation?”

“I’ve been waiting for you to ask those questions every day we talked,” he murmurs.

I grimace. Every time Andrew and I were on the phone together, I had to literally bite my tongue not to ask about Dane. It made it easier for me to imagine that he’d gone on with his life and wasn’t looking backward. If I could envision that, then I could perhaps move on with my life as well.

“The resignation stunned him,” Andrew says quietly. “I went straight to

the office and handed it to him. He didn't say anything really. After that, we didn't talk about you, but he was having a really rough time. I finally confronted him last week when I saw that stuff about his dad on his desk. While I'm not going to tell you what he told me, I'd say that he's done some major soul searching, Av. You should walk out that door right now and go see him."

Lifting a hand up, I nibble on my thumbnail. It's a nervous habit.

"What if he's just here to get some closure?" I ask him. "What if he's just here to apologize and wish me well?"

"What if he's there to tell you he's the idiot I told him he was?" he counters pointedly. "What if he's ready to give you the world?"

"He can't," I whisper. "He said so himself."

"People can change, Avril. If they want to. I think the fact he flew to Paris is probably an indication that something big has changed within him."

I hedge because I refuse to get my hopes up. "Maybe."

"Just go see him," he tells me firmly. "And then call me after and let me know when the wedding is."

"I'll call you later," I say distractedly, not having any more clarity after talking to Andrew than I did before I picked up the phone.

After I disconnect, I walk back into the kitchen. Taking the pastry box, I flip the top and pull out another croissant along with two custard tarts. I put them on a plate and walk back into my living room. I choose the armchair by the window that Clyde sits in, and I curl myself up into it.

Then I eat and think about what to do.

CHAPTER 32

Dane

I TRUDGE UP the steps to Avril's third-floor apartment. I'm not in the best mood as I've sat at that stupid fucking cafe for two days now, and she hasn't showed. This morning, I decided enough was enough and came to her apartment.

If the big question to Avril is, "Will you give me a second chance?", then I guess I have my answer. Her not coming to meet me speaks volumes.

Still, I'm not leaving Paris until I see her. I've spoken to Fabron, and he's verified she still has not accepted the job he offered. He was also quite the smartass, telling me to get my shit together and either make things right, or let her go so he can work on her some more.

When I reach the top of the staircase, I look to her apartment door and the nerves hit me hard. If Avril has indeed decided I'm not worth the effort, then my life is about to get very grim after she says it to my face.

On the flip side, I'm not a quitter. Perhaps she'll tell me to go to hell, and then I'll kiss her into changing her mind.

That brings a smile to my face, and I take a step toward her door. To my surprise, it opens and an ugly as hell cat that's missing half an ear slithers through. It brushes by me and trots down the stairs. I watch it only a moment until the door shutting catches my attention.

I bolt toward it, rapping my knuckles against the gray painted wood. The door swings open, and there Avril stands. It's been almost two weeks since Jamie died. Two weeks since I've been able to hold her close and inhale her fragrance.

Her eyes are wide, and she blinks in disbelief to see me there.

I give her an admonishing look. "You didn't think I'd come to you if you weren't going to come to me?"

"I... I... I..." she stutters.

“Invite me in, Av,” I say gruffly, emotion from just seeing her clogging my throat. “We have to talk.”

She blinks again, and then steps back from the door. I survey her apartment quickly when I enter. It’s tiny and sparsely decorated, and I’m guessing she rented it furnished as is.

When I turn back to her, I notice for the first time she’s wearing a bathrobe. I’ve never seen her wear one before. She’s always been naked, and if she wasn’t naked, she was either in the shower or dressed for the day. The bathrobe sort of suggests she’s enjoying her time off from work, and that makes me glad for her. Avril’s worked so hard her entire adult life and rarely takes time off to just enjoy herself.

Avril turns from the door and crosses her arms over her stomach. Her gaze is wary, her posture guarded.

No sense in beating around the bush.

“Why didn’t you come meet me?” I ask. I just need her to tell me the truth so I can decide my next course of action. Because I haven’t kissed or touched her in two weeks... I’m thinking about perhaps just dragging her to bed. There I’ll give her many, many orgasms to wear her down so she’ll be forced to capitulate and take me back.

“You poisoned me,” she says bluntly.

My body jerks. “I what?”

“The stuff you had delivered to me,” she says with a grim smile. “I got food poisoning. I’m thinking the custard tarts.”

“You’re kidding?” I mutter in disbelief.

“Nope,” she says as she pushes past me to walk into her kitchen. I follow, which is nothing but turning forty-five degrees and taking three steps from her living room. She goes to the fridge and takes out a bottle of seltzer water. “Got sick within about four hours. Spent the rest of that day, night, and most of yesterday puking my guts up.”

“Jesus, Avril,” I say as I shake my head. “Why didn’t you text me? I could have come over and helped you.”

“Not my idea of a reunion,” she murmurs with a tiny smile.

“How are you feeling now?” I ask as she twists the top off the glass bottle in her hands.

She takes a sip and says, “Much better. I think I’ll even brave some food today, but it will not ever be croissants or custards again.”

Avril just stares at me, and I stare at her. The silence becomes slightly awkward, and I don't know what I'm waiting for. It's not like I expect Avril to do the talking as she's not the one who needs to apologize for anything.

"Can we sit in the living room?" I ask hesitantly. Which fuck... I'm never hesitant in anything I want or have ever asked for, but right now, I've never had higher stakes. My nerves are on overdrive.

"Sure," she says casually.

She goes to a chair by the window, sits on it, and pulls her feet up under her. Leaning on the armrest, she holds the bottle of water lightly in her hand.

I take the small couch that sits perpendicular. It creaks and groans when I sit on it and smells faintly like mothballs and incense. Before I can even settle down, I know immediately that I can't sit for this. I'm vibrating with so much nervous energy and need for her to forgive me, I pop right back up to my feet.

Avril chuckles, and I raise an eyebrow at her.

She nods toward the couch. "You could never sit still when you were ready to give a big presentation. You're a pacer."

My heart fucking squeezes in response, the nostalgia of how well this woman knows me hitting me all at once. Suddenly, the stakes seem so dire that I'm pretty sure my life will be over if I can't have her.

"I went to see my dad," I tell her as a starting point, which really isn't the start of my journey to self-realization.

Her return smile is sadly sweet looking. Her eyes are soft with understanding. "How did it go?"

"It went okay," I tell her as I walk around the oval coffee table to the window by her armchair. I look down at the courtyard and see that ugly ass cat sitting beside a lamppost. I turn my gaze down to Avril. "Nothing monumental, though. He filled me in on details I didn't know. Like where he was and why he never came back for me."

"Did it help to understand?" she asks.

I shake my head with a smile. "Not to understand anything about me. But it did help me to understand him."

"Is that why you came to Paris to see me?" she asks as she lowers her eyes to where her thumb is wiping condensation from the bottle.

Without thought, I reach out to put my fingers under her chin. I force her to look up at me, and the stark amount of fear mixed with a tiny dash of

yearning hope I see in there makes my legs go weak.

I give a shake of my head. “My dad had nothing to do with me coming here. I already had my reservation booked and decided to see him while I had some time before my flight.”

“Oh,” she says softly. “Then what caused your epiphany?”

“You leaving me caused it,” I tell her. I squat down beside her chair, resting my hands on the armrest. “I didn’t need any great epiphany, and I didn’t need to psychoanalyze myself. I already knew I was cowardly and weak when it came to commitments, and I already knew it was because of my dad abandoning me.”

“You’re not cowardly—”

My fingers go to her lips to press them closed. “I was. You needed me to help you deal with grief, and I got caught up in all the ways you might not love me. I let every single insecurity get the better of me, and that’s never happened to me in my life. I’ve brought a miraculous medical concept to life, raised millions of dollars in venture capital, and staked my entire life and reputation on my company, and not once was I ever insecure or doubtful about it. And then here comes this woman, who I’ve known forever, and the minute she tells me she loves me, I figure she’s going to abandon me. I didn’t even give you the benefit of the doubt, Avril. That was my huge failure.”

My fingers drop away from her mouth. She stares at me a moment before she murmurs, “I appreciate what you’re saying, but why are you here?”

“I’m here,” I say as I lean in toward her, putting my face as close to hers as I can without actually ruining my view of her beauty. “Because I love you. And I think I always have, but I was just too afraid to accept that into my life. I fucked up so bad by letting you go, and I am here in Paris, sitting before you right now, begging you to please give me another chance.”

The tiny muscles around Avril’s mouth tremble with emotion, and her eyes get shiny. “You love me?”

“Always have,” I tell her. “In a different way as friends, but that way is still there. I admire and respect you. I trust you so much but was too afraid to admit it. And now I love you in a completely new way that involves my heart and soul. Avril... I want a life with you. I want a committed relationship. I want to be the guy who is there when you stumble so I can pick you up, dust you off, and help you walk again. I want to be the man you can lean on when you grieve over ex-boyfriends. I’m ready to accept all of those challenges,

and any others you may face in your life. I'm so fucking ready, and if you don't come back to Vegas with me, I'll stay here in Paris with you. I'll sell the fucking company or give it to Andrew, and I'll be your house boy while you're the career woman. But I'm ready, and I'm here, and I really just need you to say you'll give me another chance. We can't go backward, Av. We can't just go back to being friends, and I don't want to fucking lose the friendship either, so the only way is forward."

A single tear slips from one of her brilliant blue eyes, and I watch it travel down the softness of her cheek. Avril takes in a quivering breath. When she breathes out, she says, "That's quite a speech, Mr. Hawthorne."

"I'm pretty sure groveling speeches are required in situations like this," I tell her.

Avril then lets out the most beautiful laugh I've ever heard, and it gives me hope because she finds me amusing right now.

"So, you really love me?" she asks with faux skepticism.

"It's not just about loving you, baby. It's about accepting the concept of love and opening my heart fully to it. I'm there, and I'm ready for it. I'm ready to show it to you if you'll let me."

I'm not prepared for Avril's arms to fly around my neck, nor the force of her pulling me out of my squat and over the top of the armrest. It's an awkward position, but I let her bury her face in my neck and hug the shit out of me while I try to work my arms around her in return.

"Fuck it," I mutter as I stand and lift her from the chair.

Avril's legs wrap around me, and she clings hard to me. I take two steps, turn, and sink down onto the noisy couch. I position her across my lap, and let her continue to hug me while I hold her close.

Finally, she pulls her head back and looks at me with eyes still awash with tears of happiness. I'll never mind her crying as long as there's joy shining back at me.

She nods her head, placing her palms on my cheeks. "Of course, I'll give you another shot. You're my love. I'm going to give you shot after shot, Dane. If you falter, I'm going to give you another shot, too."

"I'm not sure why you're doing this after how badly I hurt you." Apparently, I'm still plagued by some insecurities.

"For seventeen years, I've been by your side. Ups and downs and chasing your dad away with a bat. Sex clubs and threesomes and eating ice cream in

bed. You're it for me, Dane. It's you or no one, so even if things get hard again, I'm not letting go."

"I'm not either," I promise. "I swear it's us till the end."

The smile she gives me is so sweet and full of love I can barely look at it. My head tilts, and I'm the one burying my face in her neck now. I am not about to show her my naked emotion.

Not just yet.

Instead, I murmur against her skin. "Tell me, Avril. Tell me what I really want to hear."

Her hands come to the back of my head to hold me to her as she says, "I love you, Dane."

"God, I love you too," I mutter, and then press my lips to her neck. I kiss her there gently, then pull my face away so I can put my mouth on hers.

She opens up to me, and my tongue finds its homecoming alongside hers. Avril's moan slides right down my throat, and my hand slips inside her bathrobe to cup her breast.

"I fucking missed this body," I say as I pull back to stare at her. "Please tell me your bed doesn't squeak like this couch."

She laughs and nods. "'Fraid so."

"Fuck it." I stand from the couch and head toward the tiny hall where I'm assuming I'll find her bed. "The neighbors can share in the happiness of our reunion."

And I get that beautiful sound again.

Avril laughing all the way back to the bedroom.

EPILOGUE

Andrew

Three months later...

IT'S THE WEDDING all of Las Vegas and the entire biotech industry's been talking about. Mega-millionaire entrepreneur Dane Hawthorne marrying his long-time best friend and chief operations officer Avril Carrigan.

The church is almost filled to capacity. Avril's family takes up two rows on her side, and Dane just has his father sitting in the first row on his side. Lyndon Hawthorne is sitting up straight in what looks to be a new suit, although he tugs at the tie uncomfortably. He and Dane are still getting to know each other, but I can tell this is really what Dane needed to fully heal.

The doors to the back vestibule open, and Avril stands there looking radiant and happier than I've ever seen her in her life. She has on a pure white strapless dress that has no adornments on it. Her veil doesn't cover her face and only comes down to her lower back. No clue what type of flowers she holds in her hand, but they're really pretty.

The music starts, and everyone stands as Avril is led down the aisle by her father. His chest is puffed out with pride. Avril looks left and right a few times at the wedding guests, but then her face turns and she locks eyes with me. With every slow step that she and her father make, my heart beats faster. The closer she gets to me, the more chills race up and down my spine.

It takes them less than fifteen seconds to reach where I'm standing, halfway down the aisle, but it seems like an eternity. We'd rehearsed this once already with no hiccups, but still my palms sweat as her father turns her over to me. He claps me on the shoulder, and I take his place. Avril slides her hand into the crook of my elbow, giving it a slight squeeze.

"Ready?" I ask.

"Ready," she says, and we step off on the same foot as we walk toward Dane.

I glance to the left at Avril, and she's got her eyes locked on her soon-to-be husband who is waiting at the altar for us. They had quite the fight over whether I was going to be the maid of honor or the best man, and I assured Avril I was not wearing some poufy pink dress.

They compromised, which is what you should do with the love of your life who is soon to be your partner for life, and decided I would walk her halfway up the aisle to turn her over to Dane. I don't think her mom was all that crazy with the idea, ruining the tradition of a father giving his daughter away, but Avril was adamant about me being the one to give her to Dane.

The three of us are the only ones aware of the irony here.

I glance back to Dane, and like Avril, his gaze is focused and intense. His eyes run up and down, taking in her dress before landing back on her face. His expression is hungry, but not in a carnal way. No, he's starved for Avril to be hitched to him permanently, which is the reason this wedding is taking place so quickly.

When we reach Dane, I'm prepared to take Avril's hand and place it in his, but I'm stunned when he loops his arm around my neck and pulls me into a hard hug. I almost stumble into him, and then Avril's being mashed up against us as his other arm pulls her in for a hug.

The three of us huddle together, a unit of solid friendship.

Then I pull away.

I take each of them by the wrist, and then bring their hands together where they clasp tight.

Then I step off to the side, on the groom's side of course—because again, not going to be a maid of honor—and I watch my two best friends get married.

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About the Author



Since the release of her debut contemporary romance novel, *Off Sides*, in January 2013, Sawyer Bennett has released multiple books, many of which have appeared on the *New York Times*, *USA Today* and *Wall Street Journal* bestseller lists.

A reformed trial lawyer from North Carolina, Sawyer uses real life experience to create relatable, sexy stories that appeal to a wide array of readers. From new adult to erotic contemporary romance, Sawyer writes something for just about everyone.

Sawyer likes her Bloody Marys strong, her martinis dirty, and her heroes a combination of the two. When not bringing fictional romance to life, Sawyer is a chauffeur, stylist, chef, maid, and personal assistant to a very active daughter, as well as full-time servant to her adorably naughty dogs. She believes in the good of others, and that a bad day can be cured with a great work-out, cake, or even better, both.

Sawyer also writes general and women's fiction under the pen name S. Bennett and sweet romance under the name Juliette Poe.



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