

Sweet Addiction
Book Three

Sweet Obsession



New York Times & USA Today Bestselling Author

J. DANIELS

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SWEET ADDICTION
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Sweet Obsession

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This book is dedicated to my amazing street team, J's Sweeties.
You ladies rock my socks off.



Sweet Obsession is a standalone novel in the Sweet Addiction series, and crosses over with the Alabama Summer series. Chronologically, it is set after Sweet Possession and between All I Want and When I Fall.



BROOKE

“Fuck yeah, baby. You ready? Huh? You ready to come all over this cock?”

I dig my nails into Paul’s shoulders, arching my back off the bed. My breath hitches. “Yes, God . . . fuck, don’t stop.”

“Fuuuck.” He squeezes my hips while he pounds into me. Sweat beads up on his brow, on the dusting of hair coating his chest as he throws his head back, filling the condom with a groan, the cords in his neck straining.

My own orgasm follows seconds later.

“Coming!” I yell, closing my eyes as that sweet heat burns down my spine, exploding into a thousand stars between my hips. I lock my ankles behind his back, keeping his firm body pinned between my legs, his cock exactly where I need it while I ride this out. My body hums, my thighs shake against his skin.

God, I love sex. I mean really, who doesn’t love this right here? I’d consider giving up cupcakes for this.

I grind my hips against his pelvis as a life without salted caramel icing flashes in front of my eyes.

Chocolate chip cheesecake. Red velvet. White chocolate raspberry.

Okay, maybe not cupcakes, and maybe not this sex. I’ve had to tag myself in a few times.

“Greedy girl,” Paul murmurs, sliding his hand between my tits. He pinches my nipple.

“Mm,” I purr, slowly peeking up at him as that perfect ache settles, leaving me sated.

A lazy smile beams down at me, but blurs into something indiscernible as Paul’s spent body suddenly collapses on top of mine.

“Lord, move off.” I rock my hips, shoving against his shoulders. “Asshole. You’re going to kill me.”

He laughs, rolling onto his back and pulling off the condom with a satisfied groan. He ties it off. “Goddamn, I don’t think I’ve ever filled one of these this much before. My dick might need a week to recover.”

Mm. I guess I’ll take that as a compliment.

Go, Brooke. Wreck those penises.

I stand from the bed and grab my clothes off the floor, dressing hastily as Paul treads to the bathroom. Slipping into my heels, I spin to grab my clutch off the nightstand and run straight into a bare chest.

“Oh, hey, sorry,” I mumble, shifting my weight on my feet. “Just grabbing my stuff.”

He squeezes my hips, bunching the material of my dress in his hands. “Where are you going? Stay for a little while.”

“Can’t. I need to get home.”

“We can order take-out or something. Are you hungry?”

“I already ate.”

His brow furrows as his grip on me loosens, then vanishes completely. His shoulders drop. “Why do I feel like I was just used?”

A laugh rumbles in the back of my throat. I move past him, picking up my clutch. “I had a nice time tonight. Maybe I’ll see you around.”

“And do what? Is this going to happen again if I do see you? ‘Cause if I’m being honest, Brooke, I’m not really feeling the love right now.”

I lift my head to look at him. His dark eyes are suddenly unsure. He looks

wounded.

Wow, really? Didn't peg you as a clinger, Paul.

Securing my clutch under my arm, I plant a brief kiss on his cheek, whispering, "don't act like you didn't know what this was."

As I pad toward the door, my heels tapping against the hardwood, I wait for that moment to hit me where I feel remorse, or regret. Anything to make me turn around and reassure this man, but it never comes.

I don't feel bad for this. I never feel bad after having an orgasm, even if some of them are brought on by my own efforts. And really? Why should I feel bad? He came. A lot, apparently. Enough to make him gaze at that condom like a proud father cradling a newborn. We're both walking away from this experience satisfied, even if I am technically the only one walking.

Regret? Remorse? Fuck that noise. I'm Brooke Wicks, and I love sex. A lot of it. I don't see any problem with my hit it and quit it philosophy. I'm doing what I want with the men I want to do it with.

Period.

Hand on the doorknob, I turn and give Paul one last look; a sweet one. "Good night."

His eyes, lost in focus, slowly lift to meet mine. "Yeah . . . yeah, good night."

With little resistance, I slam the door shut, smiling at the sound.

A hard, satisfying bang.

Nope. No regrets here.



I step inside the condo, shutting the door behind me and setting my keys and clutch down. Two sets of eyes peer curiously at me over the back of the couch.

Let the interrogation begin.

"Yes?" I ask, pulling my heels off and setting them by the door.

Billy turns around, throwing his arm behind Joey. "Well?"

I limply shrug. "Five."

"That's it?" Joey's back goes rigid. His eyebrows meet his blonde hairline. "On a scale of one to ten, he was a five in bed? Are you fucking serious?"

"Oh, I thought you were asking me how big he was."

Billy clears his throat, his wide eyes roaming the condo uncomfortably.

I look between the two of them. "Seven. Extra point for the dirty talking."

Joey grimaces, waving me over. "A seven with a dick smaller than your vibrator? God . . . you poor, poor baby."

"I know. I was going to bail when I saw it, but then I thought I'd see what he could do. You know me . . . always the team player. Plus, it was pierced."

I round the couch and sit on the end next to Joey, who by the look on his face, is visualizing a pierced dick. Billy mouths the word "no" when he's given an inquisitive stare, prompting a low laugh to push past Joey's lips.

I twirl a chunk of hair around my fingers.

Mm. Out of the two of them, I'd peg Joey to be the one with the barbell through his junk. Billy wears too many suits, and don't lawyers go through metal detectors when they go to court?

I can't see him wanting to explain his Prince Albert every day to security.

My body forms to the soft leather as I relax, head tilted back, my gaze on the ceiling. "He got all clingy on me when I was leaving. Full-on puppy-dog eyes and everything. I wasn't expecting that."

"Humph. Are you sure he didn't have a vagina?"

I scoff at Joey. "I think I would've noticed. I was all up in it."

Billy stands and grabs the large, half-empty bowl of popcorn off the coffee table as Joey and I share a laugh.

"You want to watch a movie with us? We just started *The Best Of Me*."

I smile up at Billy. "Nicholas Sparks? How very gay of you."

He feigns a laugh, hand flattening on his chest. "Hilarious, Brooke."

"Oh!" I shift onto my knees so that I can look between the two of them as

Billy moves into the kitchen.

I almost forgot!

“You are both about to be so, so proud of me. I went to Agent Provocateur today, and didn’t spend a dime. Not one cent! Do you have any idea how difficult that was? I started shaking like a crack addict when I saw the new spring line.” I hold my hand up, beaming when Joey high-fives me. “I even tried on stuff. What I did today, the restraint I showed, is seriously unheard of for me. I should actually go back to the store now and buy something to celebrate the fact that I didn’t buy anything earlier.”

I go to get up and Joey grabs my wrist, tugging me down. We share a teasing look.

“Kidding, they’re closed, obviously, but seriously, how great am I doing with my spending? My bank account is looking awesome lately. Give me a few weeks, and I should be out of here.”

Getting evicted from my apartment two months ago was probably the lowest moment in my life. Well, that and the cum-shot gone wrong in New Orleans.

I swear my eye twitches occasionally because of that mishap.

After I found the notice taped to my door, I flipped off my landlord and weighed my options.

My overbearing parents—God, no, I’d rather get my teeth drilled, or Juls.

I love my sister, I do, but I can’t live with her. Besides, her and Ian are in tiny-tot land. She’s popping out a kid every nine months it seems. They need their family space. I need to not have to explain to my four year old nephew why Aunt Brooke has things that vibrate in her bedroom.

My landlord gave me one week to get out. I thought I was screwed. I was ready to deal with the ramifications of living under my father’s roof again. I’m sure he would’ve tried to tag me with a curfew, even though I’m twenty-five, haven’t had a curfew since I was seventeen, and mastered the art of sneaking through my bedroom window when I used to live there. However,

these two amazing men saved the day and offered me a place to crash. The three of us have gotten close since I started working at the bakery, me and Joey especially.

Who would've thought me and Joey would become besties? I hated that bitch growing up.

Billy hands me a daiquiri. His eyes, warm and kind, stay glued to mine as he moves to his seat. "You know we don't mind you living here, right? We're not kicking you out, Brooke. There's no rush."

"Ha!" Joey smirks, his eyebrow arching playfully as he settles against Billy's side. "No, we're not, but I would like to fuck loud eventually. I'm all for you kicking your shopping addiction if it means we can go back to trying to break the sound barrier."

I swallow my mouthful of daiquiri quickly before I spit it out. A quick chill runs through me. "Please. I have to wear those giant noise-canceling headphones when you two go at it, and I can still hear you begging, Joey. You don't know how to be quiet."

"Oh, and you do?" Joey rolls his eyes, lifting his own glass. "You're loud even by yourself, Brooke."

"It's not my fault I'm amazing. Ask Paul. He can confirm that."

Billy grabs the remote, a tense wave passing over his features. "Can we start up the movie and get off this topic? I had no idea you could hear us."

"Everyone can hear you." I point at the wall behind me when he turns his head and eyes me cautiously. "Mrs. Kessler caught me in the elevator last week and asked me if you two were remodeling in here. Something about you yelling 'give me a hammer.' You should've seen her face when I told her you were actually saying hummer."

Billy closes his eyes, groaning. "Jesus Christ."

"No wonder that old bitch has been giving me strange looks lately." Joey waves a dismissive hand in front of his face. He shifts about on the couch. "Fuck her and her moss covered vagina. My sex life is fantastic, and I don't

care if the entire state hears my baby asking me to suck him off. We quiet down for no one.”

I pull my glass away from my lips, laughing as Billy rakes a hand down his face, noticeably uncomfortable.

He’s so different from Joey. The complete opposite, actually, but they complement each other perfectly.

Especially in the bedroom. I hear a lot.

“I told you both I would only stay here until I had enough money saved up to move out. I love you guys, but I need to get my own place again. Our combined hair-care products are overtaking the condo.” I cock my head with a pout, shifting my gaze between them. “But I will miss the sleepovers. You’re such a sweet little spoon, Billy. All soft and cuddly.”

He frowns. “There’s nothing about me that’s little, Brooke. Or soft,” he pauses, grinning. “Haven’t you heard?”

Warmth floods my cheeks.

Sweet Lord. Did Billy just insinuate . . .

“No, there is definitely not,” Joey proudly affirms, cutting into my thoughts of R-rated antonyms. He squeezes Billy’s thigh. “Was that a hard ‘no’ on the dick jewelry? Any wiggle room on that?”

The movie begins playing. Apparently, Billy’s answer was final.

Joey’s lips brush against my hair as I swallow another mouthful of my daiquiri. “How was it with the piercing? Honestly,” he whispers.

Typical Joey. Needing to know all the tricks of the trade. I am shocked he hasn’t been down this road himself, though.

“The one spot that’s hard for some guys to hit,” I begin softly, bending my finger in a rhythmic motion. Our eyes lock. “He didn’t have any problem.”

Joey slowly leans back. “Damn it. Am I seriously missing out?”

“Shh.”

We both glance at Billy, then resume whispering closely.

“I know for a fact he hits all your spots just fine. As do the neighbors across the street.”

“True. But I love trying new things with him. Maybe I could get it done.” Joey looks down at his lap, the corner of his mouth pulling tight. “That shit could go south, though. Really fuck up my perfect form. Not to mention it probably hurts like a motherfucker.”

I press my lips to the edge of my glass, murmuring my next words when Billy tilts his head down and glares in my direction. “Want me to call Paul and ask? He’s probably staring at his phone expectantly.”

Joey smiles. “He loved you, Brooke. How could you walk out on what you two shared?”

Oh, my God.

“Please.”

“I’m sure he was seconds away from proposing. Or at least suggesting you move in with him.”

I shake my head. “He was oddly fascinated with his own semen. That living arrangement would never work.”

Seriously. Did he even flush that condom? Is there a chance he set it aside to frame it instead?

Gross, Paul. You’ll never get a girl to stay that way.

Joey bumps his shoulder against mine, pressing his weight into me. “That’s kind of hot, actually. But . . . okay, I have to know. Was it a barbell? Or one of those stud things? Oo! Did he have it going down the shaft?”

The noise from the TV abruptly cuts off. Silence fills the condo.

Billy leans forward, elbows resting on his knees, the look he reserves for moments when Joey and I go off on dick tangents at the dinner table ghosting across his face.

I clear my throat, lowering my glass. “Hi, hey there, little spoon. Sorry, we’ll be quiet.”

His eyes, steady with doubt, shift to Joey and soften marginally.

There it is. Sweet Billy. No one else looks at Joey like that.

Mindful to the fact that the only way to keep his husband on the couch with us and not locked in his office, going over documents that can surely wait until tomorrow is to shut up and watch the movie, Joey slides over and plucks the remote out of Billy's hand.

The movie resumes playing.

I tuck my knees against my chest as the two men at the other end of the couch dissolve into each other, recommencing the intimate embrace they always share. The closeness that stills the two of them, even Joey, who is nearly impossible to silence.

I sip leisurely on my daiquiri, my thoughts on piercings and poor, poor Paul, struggling to find the perfect spot to display that condom.



The sidewalk is already busy at a quarter after eight Monday morning as I make my usual trek down Fayette street, carefully juggling four coffee orders, my over-sized Coach bag, which just so happens to be the purchase that sent me over my spending limit two months ago, *worth it, it's fabulous*, and the design binder I took home on Friday of Dylan's.

I wanted to organize some of the notes she had penciled in over the past several years and make things more legible, pretty even. I used textured paper and script font. The letters and thank you cards she received since opening the bakery that had been stuffed into the back pocket for keepsakes are now laminated and on display for clients to read in a section titled 'Sweet Testimonials.'

I'm honestly not sure how Dylan will take my modifications to the only thing she seems to study more than her husband. The thought of her hating what I've done, the one thing I haven't cleared with her beforehand that involves her business, causes me to miss the giant crack in the pavement I'm usually careful to step over.

"Ow, shit!"

The binder goes down first, followed quickly by my Coach bag.

But the coffee? Ha! Not today, city of Chicago.

As I bend down, securing the leather strap on my shoulder, the binder pinched between my fingers, a car horn sounds and I lift my gaze to the street. Traffic clears. My eyes roam the row of shops on the west side of Fayette, until landing on one I haven't seen before, or maybe, I just haven't noticed.

No, this has to be new. I would've noticed this.

Sandwiched between a florist and a family-owned candle shop, the words Hot Yoga scream against the brick front in burnt-orange lettering. A simple logo swirls in the corner below the 'a'.

Yoga?

"Yoga?"

I straighten and stare a little longer at the new business, which just so happens to be in direct line-of-sight from the bakery.

That's almost laughable. Here, sweat your ass off, then skip across the street and stuff your face. Maybe we could go in with the owner and have some sort of a coupon-deal worked out.

Five sessions and you get a free cupcake?

I swallow down a giggle.

Look at me, all business savvy, trolling for ways to pull in new customers while helping to promote other local enterprises.

I should seriously run for president.

The door chimes as I step inside the bakery, the scent of sugar now mingling with the aromatics wafting from the four coffees in my hand. With an exhaustive sigh, I set the cardboard carrier on the glass display case, followed by my bag and the design binder.

Dylan perks up from behind the counter when she sees the latter.

"There it is! You know I tore this place apart this weekend looking for that? What the hell, Brooke?"

I flatten my hands on the glass, then hesitantly nudge the binder. “I, uh, did some reorganizing. I hope that’s okay.”

Her face remains expressionless. I take in a shallow breath.

Rule number one of life: Don’t piss off your employer, especially if that employer happens to be Dylan Carroll. She’s been known to go a little slap happy.

Moving closer, she flips back the cover, then a few more pages, running her finger along the edge of the new font. Silently judging, meticulously studying every alteration I’ve made. She halts at the back where the testimonial section begins.

I wipe a hand across my brow, relieved when I don’t feel the sweat I fear I’m releasing.

“Mm.”

I lean closer, staring at her mouth, the small crinkle in her nose. “Mm?”

God, why the hell didn’t I ask permission first? Could she fire me over this?

After what feels like the longest seconds of my life, she looks up at me, narrows her eyes, then smiles. “I love it. Brooke, this is . . . surprisingly thoughtful of you.”

My mouth falls open. *Surprisingly?* “Hey, I’m thoughtful! I do stuff for other people all the time. Take last week when Ryan wanted that Elsa dress and Reese was on the brink of losing his ever-loving mind looking for it. Who stepped in and saved the day? Huh? Who almost got arrested at Target? You?”

She laughs, tucking her long blonde hair behind her ear. “I know. I’m just kidding.”

My spine straightens with pride as I pluck my coffee out of the carrier. “Well, you’re welcome. I’ll take that raise whenever you’re ready.”

She cocks her head with a glare. I take a step back. *Easy, Rocky.*

The door chimes, followed immediately by Joey’s booming morning

voice.

One volume. The man has one volume.

He hooks his thumb over his cashmere covered shoulder in the direction of the window. “Did you see the yoga studio across the street? What is that mess about?”

“Not just yoga,” I correct him. “*Hot* yoga. Lots of sweaty women with camel toe, being forced into ungodly positions.”

Joey makes an amused sound in the back of his throat. “Sounds like somebody’s high school years.”

“Yours?” Dylan throws out, resting her hands on her swollen belly. “Didn’t you wear an alarming amount of spandex back then?”

Joey spins the carrier on the display case, tugging out the cup with his name scrolled on the side. “I’ll ignore that jab, since you’re carrying Joey Jr.”

“His name isn’t Joey Jr.”

“What?” Alarmed eyes flick between myself and Dylan. “Okay . . . Joseph? I’m fine with that.”

“I’m afraid not.”

I smile against my cup. “Excellent. We’ve settled on Brookes then? Suck on that, McDermott.”

Joey glares at me over the top of his cup. I glare right back, laughing a little.

Dylan gently sighs. “Sorry. We’re going with Blake. That’s the name we both like.”

“Who’s we?” Joey squawks, his face suddenly two shades redder. “I don’t remember that name being on the table for discussion. And I definitely don’t remember receiving a phone call, asking my opinion before you started getting shit engraved.”

“Why do I need to call you? And engraved? Really, Joey? Who got anything engraved?”

A soft noise comes from the kitchen, followed by the familiar quick

tapping of tiny feet on tile.

Joey sweeps his free hand around the shop. “I’m sure there’s something around here with that name already on it. Is it possible to fill out the birth certificate before the birth? Has Reese figured out how to do that?”

“Joey.” Dylan exhales exhaustively. “Fucking relax, all right? You haven’t heard the middle name yet.”

“Momma!”

Ryan comes barreling into the shop, her dirty blonde hair pulled up into two little sprouts on top of her head. Wearing a polka-dot dress and rainbow tights, she bounces up and down behind the counter, her hands grasping at the air.

“Momma, wook! Wook at my pwetty dwess.”

Dylan laughs, leaning down to kiss the top of her head. “You look so pretty, baby. Did Daddy let you pick out your clothes?”

“Uh, huh. Wook. My shoes, Momma. I wove dem.”

I risk a glance at Joey, catching the quick work of his finger along his cheek, no doubt catching a tear.

“You okay?” I ask quietly, stepping closer as the tiny voice continues to shout up at her mother.

He hesitates, then gives me a sly smile, mischief dancing in his crystal blue eyes. “Middle name. Did you hear? Suck on that, Wicks.”

“Whatever.” I shove against his shoulder, moving him a few inches away.

Not that it matters much to me. I was only tossing my name into the ring to rile up Joey.

Success.

“Aunt Bwooke!”

I turn around, set my coffee on the glass case and rest my hands on my knees. “Hey, girlfriend. I love your dress.”

Ryan spins, fanning the material out around her.

“Daddy says I’m his pwincess. He’s wetting me dwive to Nana’s today.”

She dances away, twirling in circles around the shop.

“Is that so?” Dylan puts her hand on her hip just as Reese steps into the room, diaper bag on his arm, baby carrier in his hand, guilty as shit grin on his face.

Mm. Busted.

“What’s that?” he asks, his voice catching. Looking between his two girls, a cooing sound from the carrier draws his attention down. He smiles at Drew, *Lord, the man is whipped*, then focuses back on Dylan. “I never said that.”

“Sure you didn’t.” She lifts her head up, welcoming his kiss. “Brooke got your coffee.”

“Mm. Might not need it. I’m wide awake after that little shower session this morning,” he mumbles all too loudly against her mouth.

“Good Lord,” Joey says, almost groans, from my right.

I turn my head, expecting to see him still standing next to me, engaged in this conversation since I’m positive he just reacted to it, but instead I find him staring out the glass window, intently fixated on something.

“What’s up?” I ask, joining his side, sucking the warm mocha off my lips.

My eyes follow his across the street, widen, then nearly pop out of my skull and roll around on the floor.

The door chimes, and I think I hear Reese’s faint goodbye, Ryan’s more animated one, and something Dylan says, but honestly, a fucking meteor could strike the earth right now and I wouldn’t notice.

I inhale sharply. Maybe a little too sharp. My hand flattens on the window pane, steadying myself when I start seeing double of the man standing outside the yoga studio. I blink once, then once more, hard, waiting for him to suddenly up and vanish into a cloud of smoke.

He can’t be real.

He seriously can’t be real.

A mirage, that’s what this is. I’m not standing in the bakery, on the verge

of licking the window like some mental patient. I'm in the desert, dying of thirst, my throat raw as I struggle to stay alive. I look up and this man, my hallucination in the distance, is beckoning me closer with promises of clean water and wild sex.

Two resources I'd be a damn fool to pass up. It's all about survival in these elements.

I bite my lip through a groan when the man places his hands on the back of his head and gazes up at the yoga sign on the building.

My God, he's the owner, he has to be. With that body? He's practically a walking advertisement for Abercrombie and multiple orgasms.

My eyes sweep over the length of him, slowly, before settling on the ass to beat all asses. Even from this distance, that thing would stop traffic in Times Square.

"I, for one, am suddenly very interested in hot yoga," Joey remarks under his breath.

I whip my head to my right. "You're married, and I'm calling dibs."

"Dibs? What are you, ten?"

"What are you two looking at?" Dylan asks from somewhere behind us. "Can one of you lazy asses finish filling the display case, or am I the only person working today?"

What am I looking at?

Sex. That's what I'm looking at.

I look down, giving a quick once-over of my outfit before I make my move.

Black v-neck tee, skinny jeans, and . . . *fuck!*

Sneakers? Why am I wearing sneakers today? There is nothing sexy about the Nike swoosh. And my thoughtless choice of footwear definitely isn't doing anything for my legs.

I spin around and march past Dylan toward the kitchen. "I need to borrow some shoes."

“What?” she asks.

“What?” Joey echoes in the distance, but I’m already halfway up the stairs, too focused on my mission to answer either one of them.

Pumps. I need pumps. Something with a heel.

Shoes are flying everywhere as I rummage through Dylan’s small closet. How she manages to fit her and Reese’s clothes in this thing, along with her gorgeous selection of handbags and other accessories is beyond me. They are in serious need of a bigger space, but I get it. She likes living above her bakery, and Reese will do anything to make her happy.

With this third baby coming though, one of them might have to start sleeping in the bathtub. No way is another crib fitting in this loft.

“Oh, hello pink.” My hands close around a delicious pair of Steve Maddens. I toe off my sneakers and remove my socks.

Maneuvering carefully down the stairs, I re-enter the bakery, now three inches taller. Dylan and Joey take notice immediately.

“Help yourself to my wardrobe, Brooke.”

Her sarcasm isn’t lost on me.

“Will do.”

I grab an empty bakery box and slide the display case open, reaching inside.

Joey nudges against me. “Do you really think he’s going to be staring at your feet, Miss Cleavage?” His words are muffled by the mouthful of danish he’s devouring.

“I always feel more confident in heels.”

“And the cupcakes?”

“It’s a gesture. Welcome to the neighborhood, now let’s go get naked and eat these off each other.”

Dylan laughs quietly. “I think it’s sweet. What’s that saying? The fastest way to a man’s cock is through his stomach?”

“Mm, I don’t think that’s right,” Joey says, laughing. “Although, how

many apple turnovers did Reese consume when you two were dating, but not dating, but totally dating?”

“Shut up.”

I straighten and close the box, rounding the counter and heading for the door. “Right. I’d say wish me luck, but we all know I don’t need it.”

Their remarks, if they have any, are lost amongst the traffic from the street as I step outside. I wait not so patiently for a break to cross, shifting on my feet, taking quick bursts of air into my lungs.

Why am I suddenly nervous?

Because you’re about to suggest a night of scandalous indecency to a man who looks like the definition of the word ‘orgasm.’

Ridiculous. He can’t be *that* hot. I’m sure some of his attractiveness will soften the closer I get.

Like a mirage. He’ll vanish before I can touch him.

Steadying the box in my hands, I quickly pad across the street.

Determined.

Mildly apprehensive.

One hundred percent turned-on.



MASON

I did it.

Holy fuck, I actually did it.

Linking my hands behind my head, I gaze up at the sign I had installed yesterday. The morning sun strikes against the sharp edge of the letters, deepening the richness of the color.

My chest swells with pride. My stomach flips wildly, reminding me of my nerves and the giant risk I'm taking doing this.

Contradicting reactions battling for dominance. Equal in strength, I'm the perfect blend of fearless and frozen.

This is official, scary as hell, and quite possibly the biggest thing I'll ever do. I've dreamed of owning my own studio for years, since I first started instructing. The passion I have for this, the drive, it's there, but bloody hell, so is the worry I'm in way over my head. Never did I imagine I'd actually get this opportunity. And here I am, starting this new venture in a city completely foreign to me.

I pinch my eyes shut through a slow inhale.

This has the potential to be amazing, my greatest accomplishment, maybe the only fucking thing I'll ever do that'll mean something.

I have the potential to completely fuck it all up.

Right, mate. Way to stay positive.

“Admiring the view?”

My arms fall heavy to my sides. My eyes fly open.

“I gotta say,” the low, velvety voice behind me continues. “I really don’t blame you. I’ve been doing my own fair share of staring this morning.”

I turn my head, intrigued.

A woman, obviously, I knew before I turned around I’d be coming face-to-face with a woman. Only not *this* woman. Never in my wildest imagination could I conjure up this vision as she steps up to join me on the footpath, then stumbles forward the second our eyes lock.

“Oomph!”

I reach out, gripping her elbows and taking her weight. Her skin feels electric. “All right there, sweetheart?”

Steadying herself, she slowly lifts her head, her lips parting as she stares at my mouth with the strangest look. A mixture of intrigue and disbelief.

“You’ve got to be shitting me.”

I exhale a laugh. “I never quite understood that expression. What exactly does ‘shitting me’ mean? Seems like a bad thing, yeah?”

“Bad?” She smiles, just the slightest, dangerously slow pull of her lips, as if she’s already planned out this interaction and is ten steps ahead, waiting for me to catch up. “No, not bad, just didn’t think it was possible you could get any hotter. Then, boom, you have to go and open your hot Australian mouth and completely blow my mind. ‘Shitting me,’ in this case, is a very, very good thing.”

“But, it could also be used negatively.”

“Of course. If you dropped your shorts and I discovered you were in the process of going through gender reassignment surgery. In that unfortunate scenario, my ‘you’ve got to be shitting me’ would carry a whole new connotation.”

“Ah, well, I assure you,” I begin, leaning closer. “That wouldn’t be the

case.”

Her eyebrow arches. “Prove it.”

“You’re serious.”

She tips her chin up, waiting.

Jesus Christ. This little thing could destroy me.

Drop my shorts, right here? No, obviously I wouldn’t, but fuck if I don’t want to maybe pull her inside and shock her a little. Show off my cock to a woman who looks like she’s ready to eat me alive.

A soft laugh erupts from her. She’s amused. I feel like I’m watching a wolf circle an innocent flock of sheep.

Eyeing up one very tempted sheep in particular.

Dimples, possibly the only cute thing about her, draw my attention from one side of her face to the other, and then my eyes can’t seem to stop roaming over her features, drinking her in. Dark, soft curls. Large hazel eyes. Her skin, olive and pink in the cheeks.

Now I’m the one doing my own fair share of staring. I clear my head and look down, realizing then I still have my hold on her.

“Sorry.” I let my hands fall away. “I’m Mason, by the way.”

“Brooke. And no need to apologize. I’d never complain if your hands were on me.”

I almost step back, if only to keep myself from pulling her into my arms and testing that theory. Groping a woman I just met in broad daylight isn’t normally a desire I find myself battling against.

But it’s never been *this* woman challenging me.

“Is that so?” I ask, smiling. “You’d never complain? No matter what I was doing?”

“Mm. Only one way to find out.”

I grip the base of my neck. “Christ. I fear I’ve just met the devil. Figures she’s a woman.”

“Ah, but does the devil come bearing gifts of delicious treats?” Brooke

flips back the lid on the box in her hands. She holds them away from her. “I made them myself.”

The pride in her voice is unmistakable. A sweet warmth coating her words, giving me a glimpse of the woman behind the shameless exterior. Possibly the real, true version of herself.

I see you, Brooke.

I look down at the four cupcakes, sliding my hand over hers so we’re both now holding the box.

Maybe she needs help holding it.

Maybe I just want to feel her skin against mine again.

I stare into her eyes. “If they’re laced with poison, then sure. I imagine not many men being able to resist a beautiful woman with baked goods. The devil is notoriously both dangerous and alluring, is she not?”

“So I’ve been told.”

“From previous victims?”

“Victims?” She laughs, throwing her head back and revealing the graceful line of her neck. “You make me sound like a man-eater. I’m not *that* bad. Here.” Her finger dips into the frosting, then slides into her mouth.

Her eyes close through a moan.

Jesus fuck.

I press a hand to the front of my shorts.

When was the last time I got hard in a matter of seconds? When I was eleven and I saw my first pair of tits? I’m normally way more disciplined than this juvenile display I’m exhibiting, but shit if that isn’t the sexiest noise I’ve ever heard in my life.

She pulls her finger from her mouth. Our eyes lock. Saliva pools on my tongue, and I force a swallow before I actually start to drool.

“See? Can’t be poisoned now, can it?”

I smile, and her eyes quickly dart to my mouth. “I suppose not.”

She allows me to take the box. I close the lid and study the logo.

“Thank you. I’ll enjoy these later.”

“I’d like to enjoy you now.”

My eyes widen. I nod in the direction behind her. “Don’t you need to be getting back to work?”

She shrugs. “I can spare a few minutes.”

“A few minutes? You wound me, Brooke. Give a guy a little credit, yeah?”

A grin twists across her mouth. *Christ, that mouth is wicked.*

“Okay. How long do you need?”

“With you?” I slowly move my eyes over her body.

This is the first time I’m really appreciating every gorgeous inch of her. The swell of her breasts, the black material of her top stretching, barely confining, and in the end, making me ache with a need I’m not sure I’ve ever felt. The gentle curve of her hips I want to splay my hands across, then move over, grip, and dig my fingers into. She’s shapely and soft. Delicate and dangerous.

How long do I need? I could look at her for a lifetime.

“Mason.”

My eyes re-focus on her face, the amusement in her eyes. “Mm?”

Shit, how long was I staring? Who’s the wolf now?

“Hey, Brooke!”

A voice cutting across the street jolts my attention off her. Brooke turns her head. I lift mine to see a man holding the bakery door open, leaning his head out. He doesn’t look too pleased.

“Hurry up already. You’ve got that birthday cake to work on today, remember? It’s getting picked up at ten and Dylan is swamped.”

“Shit,” Brooke mutters. She spins back around. “Sorry. My few minutes are up.”

Damn. She needs to get back. I have a ton of shit to do myself, but I’m not done with this one. Not by a long shot.

“What are you doing tomorrow night?” I ask.

“Why?”

“I have my first class at seven. I’d love to see you.”

Her arms cross over her chest. She tilts her head with a smirk. “Private class?”

I frown, then glance back at the sign. “Honestly, I hope not. If this is going to work out for me, I’m going to need a good amount of interest. I handed out a bunch of fliers this weekend.” I turn back to her. “Do you think it’s too much to expect at least a handful of bodies on my first go?”

Not that I wouldn’t mind having a one-on-one session with Brooke, but I do have a lot riding on this. There is no back-up plan.

“You personally handed out these fliers to women in Chicago?”

I nod. “And men.”

I spent my entire Saturday going in and out of shops at the mall, standing outside of the local market like a bum seeking a hand-out. The women I talked to seemed at least partially intrigued. The men, not so much.

I had several papers crumpled up and tossed into the rubbish bin directly beside me, while I watched.

She runs her gaze down my body, then slowly back up. Her eyes, dark and mischievous. “I don’t think you’re going to have much of a problem packing the house.”

“Brooke!” the urgent voice calls out again.

She whips her head around. “Jesus! All right! Go eat another danish!”

The man glares at her, then mumbles something I can’t make out over a car-horn in the distance before fleeing into the shop.

Brooke turns back around, her curls bouncing against her top as she shakes her head.

I shift the box to my left hand, holding out my right. She takes it immediately. “Tomorrow night then?”

Her hand gently squeezes mine. “Maybe.”

She stares up at me. I stare right back, running my thumb along her skin.

“Are you going to let me go?” she asks.

A strange pressure tightens around my chest.

I keep my hold on her, maybe even securing my grip a little firmer.

Try and run, little sheep.

My lip twitches. “Do I have a choice?”

“No.”

“No?” I release her hand, but only to pinch her chin between my thumb and finger. I lean down, slowly inching closer. “But what if I don’t want to let you go?” I ask quietly. “What if I can’t?”

Her eyes focus on my mouth, an inch away from hers. “Too bad. I’m not giving you an option.”

“Do you always decide how this works?”

“Yes,” she says, her voice now a whisper.

I know she’s expecting me to kiss her. The way she’s wetting her lips, tilting her head up to meet mine. The urgency of her breath.

I could kiss her, God knows I want to, only . . .

I’ll want more. More than just a kiss. More than she’s been offering me since she made her existence known.

I force her face to turn left and slide my mouth to her cheek. “Tomorrow night. Seven o’clock. Don’t make me come looking for you.” I press a chaste kiss to her skin.

She looks up at me as I lean back and drop my hand. Her eyes narrow. “You better deliver.”

“I always do.”

I watch in a daze as she crosses the street. Her ass, this perfect heart-shaped entity, makes me rethink my decision to go a day without tasting her. I imagine peeling her out of those jeans and pressing my lips against her skin. The quiet slap of her body against mine as I bounce her on my . . .

Jesus. Again with the hard-on?

I carry the bakery box inside and upstairs to my loft, adjusting my cock in the process.

Juvenile. If she bent over, you probably would've busted a nut right there on the street.

Standing in front of the rubbish bin, I hesitate, look down at the box in my hands, then glance over at the fridge.

Brooke made these. And fuck, how sexy was she when she made that declaration? Her voice vibrating with pride, then melting to something softer.

I don't eat stuff like this anymore. I don't even keep it in the house. My lifestyle transformation seven years ago included a major re-haul of my eating habits. Out of sight, out of mind has always worked best for me. I haven't eaten a cupcake in . . . actually, I can't even remember the last time I ate a cupcake.

But she made these. She was so proud showing them off.

Decision made, I stick the box on the shelf in the fridge, concealed by condiments.

I palm my phone and send Tessa, my closest friend from where I just moved from, a quick text.

Me: Just met a woman who might have bigger balls than you.

She responds within seconds.

Tessa: Doubt it.

I chuckle in the silence of my loft. Seeing the three missed calls from my mum, I dial her number as I slump down on the corner of my bed.

"Hello, sweetheart. How are things?"

"Great. You know, settling in. The studio is beautiful, Mum. You'd love it."

"I'm sure. No issues with anything? It's okay if there is. You know, a lot of major corporations fail in the beginning, or at least have little mishaps. Doesn't mean they aren't meant for greatness."

My mum worries. Especially when her youngest child lives nearly sixteen thousand miles away.

“No catastrophes yet. Give me a day or two.”

“Oh, Mason.” She sighs heavily.

I smile, resting my elbows on my knees. “How’s Dad and Ellie?”

“Good. Ellie just got a new job at one of the markets near her home. She seems to like it.”

“Yeah? That’s great. Tell her to call her little brother when she gets a minute. I miss her.”

Two quick beeps of a car horn sound somewhere outside the building. I pad to the only window in my loft and spot a delivery truck parked below.

The equipment I ordered.

“Hey, Mum, I need to get off here. I’ll talk to you soon though, yeah?”

“I love you, sweetheart.”

“Love you.”

I disconnect the call and slide my phone back into my pocket.

The mats, towels, and wedges I ordered all arrive within a few hours of each other. I sign the slips the drivers provide and set about organizing everything, then re-organizing.

Having seven sisters has made me meticulous with arrangement.

The studio itself is gorgeous, with bamboo flooring I had installed before the move. The hardwood that was originally in here never would’ve worked for the humid conditions I’m anticipating. The wood would’ve swelled and cracked. I probably would be out a couple thousand replacing it.

Not an option for me at the moment. Between my lease and the rent I’m paying for the loft above the studio, the flooring, the equipment for class, the sign . . .

It’s fucking ridiculous how expensive an aluminum sign costs. Highway robbery at its best.

I take to the footpath after grabbing a quick bite to eat.

Apple slices and some almond butter. The last of my stash of what I brought from Alabama. I jot down a note to pick up another jar, along with a few other items.

The sky is warm and clear. The street noisy, a steady line of traffic obstructing my view of the bakery. Of the window I want to peer inside, once, just one glance to see Brooke in her element.

Joggers move past me on the path, ignoring the hand I hold up to stop them, my other clutching the stack of fliers. Everyone seems tuned into their own world, the music pumping through their headphones, and ignoring everyone around them. I'm not sure how many fliers I ended up handing out over the weekend, but I drew up two hundred.

My stack feels light.

Good sign. Possible bad sign if they all ended up in the rubbish.

I step inside a small bookstore a few businesses down from mine. Old editions are propped up on display in the window. *Wuthering Heights*. *To Kill A Mockingbird*. *Moby Dick*. The woman behind the counter lifts her head at the sound of the bell.

"Good afternoon."

"G'day, Miss. How are you?"

She slides her glasses back on her nose, grinning. Her silver hair is cut shorter than mine and spiked on the top. "I'm terrific. What can I help you with today?"

I pass a flier across the counter. "I just opened up a studio just down the way there. First class is free, if you're interested. It's tomorrow night. Have you ever tried yoga?"

She shakes her head, laughing as she sets the flier down in front of her. "Oh, Lord no. I don't think I can make my body move like that anymore. I'm nearing sixty."

"It's really easy. God's honest truth. It's more about the breathing than anything."

I hear her pick up the flier again as my eyes fall to a photo aside the computer.

“Is this your daughter?” I ask, picking up the frame.

“Yes, that’s my Amber. She’s beautiful, isn’t she?”

My mouth twitches as I study the picture. I look up at the woman. “She is. Would she be interested in attending a class?”

“Oh, um, maybe. I could ask her. She’s busy tomorrow night though.”

“That’s all right.” I set the frame down and grab a pen, turning the flier over. The ink saturates the paper. “Here’s my number, and email. I check that daily. Stop in and see me or give me a call. We’ll work something out, yeah? I’d love to have her.”

The woman takes the flier and the pen, then shakes my hand. “Okay. That sounds great. I’m Trish. Welcome to the neighborhood.”

“Mason, and thanks. Everyone seems . . .” I pause, my mind racing to Brooke.

Those eyes, hungry and calculating as she circled me, sizing me up.

After a hard swallow, I continue. “Friendly. Very friendly.”

Trish chuckles softly, dropping her hand. “That we are.”

I wave on my way out, tucking the remaining fliers against my body.



BROOKE

“I’m going to run out for lunch today,” I announce as I secure the lid on a container of icing and slide it on the shelf in the fridge. I close the door. “Is it okay if I take forty-five minutes instead of thirty?”

Dylan glances up from the worktop. “You’re buying lunch? What happened to packing every day to save money?”

“I did pack.” I grab my bag off one of the stools and pull out a can of soup. *Progresso, Italian Style Wedding*. “See? I’ll heat this up when I get back. I need to get something to wear to yoga tonight.” I set the soup on the wood.

Me, buying work-out clothes. Seems ridiculous. My idea of cardio has never involved clothes.

“You can borrow something of mine if you want.”

“No, thanks,” I reply, sliding off my apron and hanging it on the hook by the fridge. I grab my bag and slide the strap up my arm.

Dylan sticks her hand on her hip, the fingers of her other hand drumming the wood. “What exactly are you planning on buying? I have a ton of running shorts and T-shirts. And we’re the same size, practically. Save your money and just borrow something.”

“I’ve seen the clothes you wear when you go running. Your tops barely

give the illusion of breasts, and I plan on highlighting mine tonight.”

I also plan on leaving the tags on whatever I end up buying. Wearing an outfit for an hour, or less, depending on how long it takes Mason to kick everyone else out and strip me naked hardly classifies as a non-refundable purchase.

“Oh.” Dylan smiles. “I see. Really, Brooke. Why don’t you just save yourself the hassle and walk over there naked? I’m sure what’s his name won’t mind.”

“Walk over where naked?” Joey steps into the back, eyeing up the bag on my arm curiously.

Shit.

He raises an eyebrow. “Going somewhere?”

“No,” I lie to the man who for the past two months has taken it upon himself to monitor my spending. “Just . . . putting this up front.”

“She’s going to buy an outfit to wear to yoga. Something that gives the illusion of breasts.”

I whip my head around and glare at Dylan. “You have a big mouth, you know that? And I hardly need an illusion.”

Please. My biggest asset has never failed to get me the attention I want, when it’s showcased properly. Dylan’s baggy T-shirts are a tragedy to the female race. She has always had a killer body, but she looks like a potato with legs in those things.

Joey takes a step back and blocks my exit. Dylan chuckles off to my left.

“Really? What happened to saving up so you can move out?”

“I’m planning on returning it tomorrow,” I explain, stepping closer to him. “This is a necessary purchase in the name of sex. Sacrifices have to be made. Besides, I read somewhere that if you don’t use your credit card at least once every few weeks, the banks assume you’ve died and will close down all your accounts. I’ll lose my savings if I don’t go through with this.”

My eyes evade his, roaming casually around the shop.

I don't understand why I have to explain one freaking purchase to either one of them. I'm an adult, for Christ's sake. I've been extremely disciplined the past two months. The only thing I still buy is our morning coffees, and I never hear either one of them riding my ass about that. One calculated credit card charge isn't going to kill me. And hello! Are they both not hearing the plan I have to return this shit tomorrow?

A throat clearing grabs my attention. Joey stares at me for a long second, his thick shoulder wedged against the door frame. "You don't read."

I throw my head back. "Ugh. Whatever, I'm going. I'll be back in forty-five."

"Thirty."

I look over at Dylan. She smiles around the spoon in her mouth.

I roll my eyes. "Fine. Thirty."

Damn it. It's going to take me at least ten minutes to get to the mall. A girl who has never once shopped for a sports bra needs ample time to peruse. Do they even come in cup sizes? Is it a one size fits all deal?

Joey moves toward the worktop, freeing up my exit. "I'm going with you tonight."

My feet skid to a halt in the doorway. I crane my neck to look at him. "Excuse me? What's that now?"

"Going with you," he repeats dryly, grabbing a spoon and dipping it into the vat of frosting Dylan just whipped up. He tastes it, makes an appreciative noise in the back of his throat, then looks over at me. "Billy will be at the office until God knows when. I'll be bored sitting at home. Plus, I'm intrigued. Hot yoga. Even hotter instructor. *You*, trying to get his attention while working out for the first time in your life. Sounds like a good time for Joey."

My teeth clench.

Oh, great. Like I need more people to shove out the door tonight for some much needed privacy.

I stare at the side of his big, nosy head. “You know, when you talk in third person, you sound like an idiot. Especially during sex. *Joey’s so close. Joey’s going to come.*”

Dylan gasps, her mouth stretching into a ball-busting grin. She shoves against Joey’s chest. “Oh my God. Please tell me you don’t do that. That’s fucking awful, Joey. Jesus!”

“I do not do that!”

“*You make Joey feel so good. God, suck Joey’s . . .*”

I purse my lips when his eyes flash with the threat of revenge.

Shit. Tonight. Yoga. He could seriously derail my plans to get some if he refuses to leave.

“Kidding. Totally made that up.” I curl my fingers around my shoulder strap. “I’m out. See you in forty.”

“Thirty!”

I smile at the two voices behind me.

“My time starts when I get to the mall. Later, bitches!”

The shop door chimes, drowning out their protests.



I grab my things out of the dressing room and move past the racks of clothes in the direction of the registers.

My left hand holds the items I’ll be purchasing.

Light gray fitted pants, white tank, and pink sports bra.

My right, the items this store needs to just go ahead and burn. There’s no way in hell any woman looks good in these obnoxious patterns. And the one pair of pants made me itch so bad, my thighs are flushed in streaks of pink from my nails.

Who works out in a wool blend? Why is that material even an option?

I keep the clothes separated as I drop them on the counter.

“I’m keeping these. Can you put the rest back for me? I’m on a time crunch.”

“Sure thing.”

The woman behind the counter begins scanning the tags. I glance at my phone, noting the time.

1:16 P.M. I might just make it in thirty.

A paper taped to the back of the computer monitor grabs my attention as I’m slipping my phone away.

Hot Yoga with Mason King.

I quickly read the information, my eyes focusing, locking in on certain key words.

Deep healing.

Deep stretching.

Deep breathing.

Deep. Deep. Deep.

A throat clears. The woman behind the counter points at the flier. “You should’ve seen the guy who dropped that off. He had this accent,” she pauses, mouthing the word “wow.” I quietly laugh as she grabs a bag and drops my purchases to the bottom.

Wow is right.

The memory of Mason’s accent sends a pulsing current through my body, warming my blood with a delicious heat that pools between my hips. His voice was deep and rich, a bit husky.

Especially when he lowered it and moved his lips against my cheek.

“Don’t make me come looking for you.”

My pulse thrums below my ear. Again, I focus on certain words, maybe the only words I want him to say.

Make me come.

“I’d shove my husband in front of a bus for a man with an accent.”

I startle at the woman, my mouth falling open. Blush creeps up her face.

“Easy, Barb.” I squint at her name-tag. She laughs with a hand to her mouth. “When I hear on the news about some poor man who met his

untimely death getting run over by a Greyhound, I'm going to know exactly where to point the cops."

I hold out my credit card and she takes it.

She shakes her head through a grin. "I'm just saying. You should've seen him. Heard him. If I didn't think I'd break a hip, I'd take his class."

She swipes my card and hands it back to me with a receipt to sign. I slide my card back into my wallet. After scribbling my name, I glance once more at the flier.

The handwriting is surprisingly neat. All capital letters, evenly spaced. Most men I've noticed have atrocious handwriting. Joey's penmanship looks like a person in the midst of a seizure taking a pen to paper. But not Mason's. Even his attempt to replicate his sign on the top of the page is more than an attempt. It's spot on in design. The letters perfectly bolded, the lines sharp.

"Here you go."

I look up and take the bag Barb is holding out for me. "Thank you. I'll tell your future husband you said hello at his class tonight."

Her face burns a deep red. Stuttering, she responds with, "O-Oh, I was just kidding. Really. I would never leave my husband, let alone kill the poor man. He's lovely. We've been married for seventeen wonderful years. Sure, he doesn't always remember to take out the trash, but Lord knows he makes up for that with his grilling skills. The man could give Bobby Flay a run for his money. Have you watched his TV show? It's very entertaining."

I smile at how flustered poor Barb has become. Her words flying past her lips a mile a minute.

Like you're any better. You nearly face-planted at the sight of Mason.

"Relax," I chuckle, stepping back and ignoring my ridiculous inner thoughts.

Clearly, it was the heels, not his stellar physique that made me stumble. I was in a hurry and trying to avoid getting hit by traffic. He just happened to look back at me the exact second I lost my footing.

Coincidence. That's all it was. Not directly related to his perfect, fuck-me face.

"Your secret is safe with me. I won't say a word," I reassure her.

Turning, I move past the next woman in line and make for the exit.

An animated voice calls out behind me.

"Look! This is the class I was telling you about. God, that guy. I almost vomited all over him when he spoke."

Stopping next to a rack of water bottles, I look over my shoulder in the direction I just came from. The other chirpy blonde chimes in next.

"I've never been this excited to work out before. We need to get there early so we get a good spot. I want front row. Prime viewing seats."

I laugh under my breath.

Jesus. Okay, so Mason has an effect on *every* woman. At least all the ones within the Chicago city limits.

Get there early? Fight other bitches off for prime viewing seats? I'm not worried about either one of those.

I'll have the best view of Mason *after* class is over.



Joey approves my purchase as soon as I get back to the shop. Not that I needed him to, but it is always a nice ego boost when your fashion savvy friend announces how flawless you're going to look in an outfit that leaves very little to the imagination. He then lamely suggests I go back to the store and return the items before they get torn from my body after he gets a look at the receipt I forgot about.

I stow the items away and pretend not to hear his rantings. Talk of creditors, addictions, and something about his car payment costing less than my yoga pants go on around me as I busy myself with work.

Dylan leaves after we close up for the night to eat dinner with Reese's parents. I think I'm in the clear when Joey slips out of the shop and heads in the direction of his car.

Good. One less person to get rid of later.

Grabbing my bag, I head upstairs to get changed.

A nervous energy buzzes through me. My skin feels hot at the thought of Mason's hands on my body, his lips moving over mine. Questions swirl in my head as I hastily get dressed.

Is his touch gentle? Will he use my body like he has a right to it? I'm sure he's a disciplined guy, his physique gives that away, but does he always maintain a level of control when he fucks? Or is that the only time he allows himself to be reckless and unrestrained.

Do I want him that way? Rough and wild? His hands moving me how he wants. Taking what he needs.

As I'm securing my hair back with an elastic band, the loft door swings open, snapping my attention off the wall mirror.

Joey appears in the doorway, now dressed in workout clothes and sneakers.

I'm quickly annoyed at the sight of him, until he whistles appreciatively at my outfit and motions for me to spin.

"Well, you look ready for sex."

I give him a sly smile. "That's what I was going for."

Joey moves to stand beside me. He smiles at my reflection. "There's a line half-way down the block for his class."

I meet his gaze in the mirror, my hands frozen in my hair. "What?"

"Yup."

"Half-way down the block? Seriously?"

"Yup."

Scowling, I grab his hand and head for the door. "Let's go."

Fuck! What if the class is already full? I knew Mason would have a crowd at this thing, but *that* many people? If I have to wait another fucking day to bang this guy . . .

I don't even allow myself to finish that thought as we walk outside. I

refuse to entertain that possibility.

Joey locks up and joins me on the sidewalk.

“See?” He gestures across the street at the parade of women, his palm outstretched in the air. “I almost ran over three of them when I went to park.”

“Maybe you should’ve.”

That would’ve been ideal. At this rate, if I go to the end of the line I’ll be lucky to get in on a class next week.

Joey grabs my elbow and pulls me off the sidewalk after a truck passes. “Nervous?” he murmurs, dropping his head.

I slowly look over at him. “Of?”

“I saw how flustered you were after talking to him yesterday.”

“What? No I wasn’t.”

I think back to the minutes in the shop which immediately followed that interaction.

My quick consumption of a cupcake. Hardly the breakfast of champions.

I shake my head. “You’re delusional if you think I was affected in any way by a kiss on the cheek.”

“Or an accent.”

I nod. “Right.”

“Or the body of a Greek God. No way would you have reacted to a combination of the three.”

I glare up at him. “Why are you here again?”

He smiles.

Excited chatter fills the air around us as we step up onto the sidewalk. The line forms just outside the door and continues in front of the large studio window, completely obstructing my view of the inside.

“Excuse me?” A woman at the front of the line points behind her. “The line begins back there, around the corner.”

“That’s nice,” I reply, pairing my sarcasm with my fakest smile. I look up at Joey. “I’m good right here. You?”

He stretches his arms above his head. “Fantastic.”

The woman scowls, then turns to her friend. Behind her, the door opens and Mason steps outside.

Hushed “oh, my God’s” and “that’s him” are spoken. People further down the line step out to get a better view of the man captivating everyone’s attention.

God, he’s practically edible.

Dressed in loose shorts that hang low on his hips and a sleeveless tee, Mason surveys the crowd with wide, stunned eyes.

Did he really not think he’d have much of a turn-out? Does the man not own a mirror?

He steps further out onto the sidewalk. A hand flies through his blonde hair. “Evening, ladies. This is quite a shock.”

Joey obnoxiously clears his throat.

Mason acknowledges him with a quick, apologetic nod, then our eyes meet. The air leaves my lungs. He looks like he wants to say something, possibly walk over to me, *please, God, walk over to me*, but he shows restraint and instead, levels me a stare that has me contemplating public sex.

I gather a shaky breath. Joey chuckles next to me.

“Shut up,” I whisper.

Mason turns back to the crowd. “Right. Unfortunately, due to building capacity, I won’t be able to squeeze all of you in tonight. But, I’m a man of my word. You will all get your free lesson. Check out the class times on the door, yeah? First twenty-five in line get to attend tonight. I hope to see the rest of you at another class.” He motions for me and Joey to come forward.

“Hey, they aren’t even in line,” someone calls out from the crowd.

“They signed up yesterday,” Mason explains, keeping his eyes on me as I move closer. He holds his hand out to Joey. “Sorry, mate. Didn’t see ya standing over there. Good on you for coming.”

Joey shakes his hand. “I usually don’t go unnoticed. You’re clearly

straight.”

Mason smiles, shifting his eyes to mine as he drops his hand. “Hello, gorgeous. How are you?”

“Ready to collect.” I grab Joey’s arm and lead him inside, looking back at Mason over my shoulder.

He pulls his gaze off my ass when two women walk over to him.

I claim a mat in the center of the room and toe off my shoes and socks.

Joey does the same next to me. “Christ, it’s hot in here. I’m about to take off my shirt.”

Mason steps into the room, closing the door behind him.

“Me too,” I murmur.

That should help get things moving in the right direction.

After adjusting the thermostat on the wall, Mason moves to the front of the class. The room goes silent.

“Right. Everyone ready to get started?” he pauses, smiling at everyone’s enthusiasm. “The most important thing to remember in my class is I want you to take your time. Understand that you have the rest of your life to make this perfect, yeah? Yoga is a great way to improve flexibility and strength, but also, it benefits the mind and the spirit. I want you to concentrate on your breathing. Breathe through every pose. You might not get everything today, and that’s all right. I’m here to help you. If you need to step away and get a quick drink, or if you’re feeling like you need a break, take it. It’s going to get very warm in here . . .”

“It already is,” Joey announces, fanning his face. “Any objections if I start stripping?”

A few women giggle. Others make similar comments about the temperature in the room.

“By all means.” Mason reaches behind him, grabs his shirt, and pulls it off with one hand. He tosses it aside. “I hope nobody minds. I normally don’t wear a lot of clothes when I do this.”

“Oh, dear God,” someone behind me murmurs.

I stare at the hard lines of Mason’s body. The thick cuts of muscle in his arms. His broad, lightly-tanned chest.

He wants me to concentrate on breathing while he looks like this? What is he fucking crazy?

The man has an eight pack. Eight. Pack.

He looks directly at me. “Ready?” he asks, tilting his head with a coy grin.

I nod, a lot. Joey elbows me and I finally get myself under control.

Mason leads the class through a few basic breathing exercises. Thank God. I can’t seem to remember how to properly work my lungs anymore. With the slowly rising temperature in the room, Mason’s glorious body, and the knowledge of my impending orgasm minutes away, it’s a wonder I’m not getting rushed to the hospital by ambulance for lack of oxygen to the brain.

“Now, release the hands and come out onto all fours,” Mason instructs.

“Hello,” Joey whispers. “All fours, yes please. I should’ve dragged Billy to this.”

I lift my head and watch Mason.

“Hands underneath the shoulders. Knees underneath the hips. Inhale, drop the belly, and look upwards.”

Our eyes lock.

“Exhale, push the floor away, and look down at your navel.”

My spine arches. I close my eyes and hold the position.

Mm. This actually feels really good.

“Inhale, look up.”

He smiles. My hand nearly slips out from under me.

“Shit.” I wipe my hand on my pants leg, removing the sweat that’s built up on my palm.

“Stop distracting him. I’m really into this.”

I narrow my eyes at Joey.

“Last time. Exhale, press away.”

I drop my head and slowly breathe out.

The next series of poses doesn't allow for eye contact, so I'm able to get through those without any difficulty. Sweat beads up on the base on my neck and down my spine. My muscles are loose and warm.

I feel amazing. I'm actually really enjoying this.

Several women have to step outside to get some air while others gulp water from the cooler in the corner. I don't need a break. I don't want one either.

Mason instructs everyone to lie on their backs. He moves between the mats, his voice growing closer.

“From here, bend the knees, place the feet on the floor. I want you to lift your hips off the mat. Try and reach for your heels with your fingers.”

He looks down at me as I struggle to grab my heels. With a huff, my back hits the mat.

“Little help?” I smile up at him.

He drops down to his knees beside me. “You're doing great. Have you done this before?” he asks, grabbing my hips, his fingers pressing into my back.

“Nope. First time. I'm very motivated to please my instructor.”

His mouth twitches in the corner.

“Ready?”

“Oh, hold on. Not yet.” I grab the hem of my shirt and strip it over my head, leaving me in only my hot pink sports bra.

His lips part with a rushed exhale. He looks beautiful, eyes wide and wild.

“There. That's better. I was burning up in that.”

I watch his neck roll with a swallow, the heavy bob of his Adam's apple I want to run my tongue over and taste. His hands shake as they move over my skin to resume their grip.

“Devil,” he whispers, leaning down and lifting my hips. “Stay after class.”

Yes.

His hands leave me. I hold the pose as he moves around the room, meeting my gaze every few steps.

Twenty minutes later, I’m practically bouncing on my feet as the class dismisses. I wave to Joey as he slips out the door, then take a moment to fix my disheveled pony.

I shouldn’t bother. It’s about to get a whole lot messier.

Holding my discarded tank, I wait for Mason on my mat as he walks a few stragglers to the door. He closes it and turns the top lock. Taking his shirt, he wipes it across his face, removing the sweat.

“Great class,” I tell him as he walks toward me.

An honest observation. I never thought I’d actually enjoy working out, let alone yoga.

His mouth stretches into a proud smile. “Yeah? I thought it was all right. I was a bit nervous.”

“Why? You made it easy. Nobody seemed to have trouble keeping up.”

“Except you.” He stops in front of me, looking between the shirt in my hand and my face. “Or, was that just a ploy to get me to touch you?”

I shrug. “I don’t think I need a ploy. I think you want to touch me.”

“I do.”

“And here I am. Touch away.”

His eyes, the color of autumn, do this shift from playful to something else, something darker.

Make me come.

My fist tightens on my tank.

All too soon his smoldering gaze is gone, swiftly darting across the room.

“I need to shower. Will you wait? My room is just upstairs. I’ll be quick.”

I stare at his profile, a bit confused.

Shower?

Once again, the ‘why bother’ question fills my head. We’re about to mount each other. I, for one, plan on utilizing every hard surface in this studio. It’s 90 degrees in here, and my entire body is coated in a light sheen of sweat.

Everybody has their routines during sex. Maybe Mason likes to start off freshly washed?

“Yeah, okay. Hurry though.”

He gives me a curt nod and takes to the stairs.

Mm. He lives here. Strangely, that thought hadn’t crossed my mind. Even though Dylan lives above her business, I hadn’t considered Mason having the same situation.

I pad about the studio for two, three minutes, maybe.

Curiosity gets the best of me. Or maybe I’m too horny to wait any longer.

I quietly slip upstairs.

I’ve always loved shower sex.



MASON

Warm water hits the back of my neck as I drop my head between my shoulders.

With a soapy hand, I stroke my dick. My free hand braces my weight on the wet tile.

Brooke. Brooke. Brooke.

What the fuck am I doing?

I could be feeling her tighten around me right now. Roaming my hands over her soft curves. Licking the sweat off her tits while I palm her arse and lower her onto my cock.

Instead, I'm jerking off to thoughts of her like a desperate juvenile.

Fuck, but if I don't . . .

I've been fighting off an erection since I saw her on the footpath. That struggle intensified when I got a view of the back of her, and then she had to go and strip in the middle of my fucking class.

She has me and she knows it.

I pinch my eyes shut.

She is so incredibly beautiful.

Barely any makeup. The glow of her skin from exertion. Her hair, tousled and slick with sweat.

My hand works faster. I rock my hips.

God, I need to come.

I want to talk to Brooke. I want to know her, and I'd really love to do that without my dick being hard and without the overwhelming desire to bury myself balls deep mudding up my thoughts.

When was the last time I couldn't get through a single conversation with a woman without imagining what she would look like wet and begging beneath me?

I'm not that guy. I sure as hell don't want to be that guy for Brooke. And I won't be . . .

I just need to get this ache out of my body.

My thighs tense beneath me. I take a moment to rub my thumb over the head of my dick, mingling the water and precum. I let myself moan. The quick slapping of skin echoes off the walls of my small bathroom.

I remember what she felt like as I held the slender curve of her hips. She was smooth and warm. Sweat pooled in the dip between her collarbones.

"Holy fuck," I gasp, my hand working furiously now.

If only she knew what I was doing. What I was thinking. How close I was to . . .

"Mm. Need a hand with that?"

My eyes flash open at the sound of a voice at my back. Equal parts wicked and sweet. Stilling my hand, I squeeze the base of my dick and look over my shoulder.

Brooke peers inside the small opening in the shower curtain, smiling, her gaze lingering on my arse.

"Shit." I wrench the handle and cut off the water. *Fuck . . . fuck! I probably look like such a fucking wanker.* Covering myself as best as I can, I turn to look at her. "Brooke, I . . ."

She slides the shower curtain back.

Good fucking Christ.

My mouth falls open. My breathing quickens. Brooke, now completely naked, stands before me, proudly showing off her insanely sexy body as she leans against the wall. Calculating smirk twisting across those sexy as fuck lips.

I can't pull my eyes away. I knew she would be a fucking sin to look at, but I had no idea . . .

Her full tits sit high on her chest. A faint blush spreading over them. Her nipples, a dusty pink, hardened and ready for my tongue. The soft flare of her hips. Long, shapely legs. Her bare . . .

My cock jumps against my hand.

She lifts her leg to step inside the small shower with me.

"Whoawhoawhoa." I shove the curtain open further and reach for two towels. "Here. Fuck, please put this on. I'm . . ." I struggle to speak, to secure my own towel around my waist while holding one out for her. The cotton brushes against my cock and I moan.

I was so fucking close. Why didn't I lock the door?

She laughs softly, lowering her foot. "Why the hell would I do that? And why are you covering up? Turn the water back on and fuck me."

I step out of the shower. "I think maybe we should talk a little first."

"Talk? Yeah, okay. Were you not just jerking off thinking about me?"

"No, I was. I was, I just . . ."

"Then what is there to talk about?"

I give up on wrapping the towel around my waist and hold it against my cock, offering her the other one. "Please, Brooke."

I need her to cover up. I can't hold a conversation with this woman with her tits out.

Speaking of tits . . .

She crosses her arms underneath them. They bounce a little and I bite back my moan.

"Do you want me or not?"

“I want you,” I answer quickly. *God, isn't it obvious?* “Trust me, Brooke, I want you, but maybe we could take this a bit slower, yeah?”

“Slower? Why? I want to fuck you. You clearly want to fuck me, based on your massive erection, which bravo, by the way. He's beautiful.” She takes the towel from me and drops it on the floor, inching closer. “You came up here to jerk off to thoughts of me. I know you didn't finish. How close were you?”

“Close.” I step back. My hip hits the sharp edge of the sink.

The wolf circles her prey, ready to attack.

“It would be a shame to stop now, don't you think? I hear blue balls are a bitch.”

I grab her wrist when she reaches for me. “Brooke.” My voice is much softer now. I sound weak. I *feel* weak. I'm so close to saying fuck it and bending her over the sink.

She stares up at me. Her thick lashes flutter closed before she steps back out of my grip. Anger flares to life in her eyes. “What is your problem? What the fuck is this?”

Damn it. She is pissed, clearly, but the way her gaze avoids mine and scatters about the room, she's feeling something else too.

Rejection? Does she not see how difficult this is for me?

“If I were to fuck you right now, then what?” I ask, although, I fear I already know the answer to this. She's moving way too fast to want anything real with me. “What would happen after, Brooke?”

“After?” Her eyes slowly find mine.

“Yeah, after. What would I be to you?”

She breathes a laugh, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear. “If you think it'll be weird for me, you're wrong. I can handle casual sex. I'll even wave to you if I see you out. It won't be awkward.” Her gaze lowers to my towel. “You're still hard, by the way.”

“I'm aware.”

It's bloody painful.

She leans back against the wall. Her calculating smirk returns. "Tell me you don't want to fuck me right now."

"I can't do that," I reply, briefly glancing down at my raging hard-on that's tenting the towel. I lift my head. "Look, I want to fuck you, but I want to know you, Brooke. I can't do a meaningless fuck. That's not me. And I don't want that with you. Why don't we get dressed and go get something to eat. Talk a little. I want to know about you."

She stares at me for several seconds. The silence between us grows deafening.

"You're serious."

"Very." I straighten my spine. My chest suddenly feels tight. "Go out with me."

Blinking several times, she turns away. "You've got to be fucking kidding me." She snatches her clothes off the sink. "You're actually shooting me down right now."

"I'm not . . ."

"This is unbelievable," she mumbles. She pulls on her pants, then slips her top over her head, leaving her bra and panties off.

I don't try and stop her. If I am going to walk around the city with Brooke without an erection, she's going to need to be clothed.

Of course, knowing she's wearing nothing underneath those fucking pants could cause a bit of an issue. And her nipples . . . God, this might be torture.

Her hand turns the doorknob. "Thanks for the class. It was surprisingly fun." She storms out into my living space, leaving me behind.

"Hold up a second. Let me get dressed."

I head for my dresser, still pressing the towel against my cock. Brooke takes to the stairs without looking back at me.

"Brooke!"

She disappears to the first level.

“Fuck.” I don’t bother drying off. Grabbing a pair of boxers, I tug them on, then pull some shorts out of the drawer. Water drips down my face to my neck. I wipe it from my eyes.

She’s not waiting for me. She doesn’t want to go for a walk and let me find out about her. She feels rejected, which is entirely my fault. But with Brooke . . . even if I give in and fuck her for the sake of fucking her, I’ll feel like the biggest tosser on the planet. Sure, it’ll probably be one of the hottest romps of my life, maybe even *the* hottest, but then it’ll be over. She clearly won’t want anything else to do with me.

“I’ll even wave to you if I see you out.”

Wave to me? Fuck that. I want a lot more than a bloody wave from her.

My feet beat against the wood as I dash down the stairs, only to step out into an empty studio. I swing the door open and move outside, hoping to catch Brooke, but the footpath is quiet. A street lamp flickers in the distance as I dart my eyes left, then right. The bakery is dark across the narrow street that separates my business from hers.

I push a hand through my wet hair. Frustration burns the back of my throat.

I refused her.

I refused the knockout I can’t stop thinking about.

I drop my head back and stare up at the stars. My groin throbs.

Blue balls? Can’t be all that bad, can it?

Blue balls are, in fact, the worst fucking thing I’ve ever felt in my entire life. Brooke might as well have taken a jackhammer to my nuts before she stormed out. I feel ready to explode. My legs barely get me up the stairs before I’m whipping my dick out and squeezing it roughly.

The pain is indescribable. The urge to fuck burns like a wild-fire in my veins.

Even as I move my hand over my dick in the silence of my loft,

frantically chasing my orgasm, I'm getting no relief. Everything is so sensitive. I squeeze harder, stroke faster. It hurts to do this. It hurts not to. I want to scream.

I need to come. Goddamn, I need to come.

I'm sure I could wait this out. It can't stay like this, can it?

That unnerving fear has me reaching down and cupping my balls with my free hand. I roll them between my palm. My thoughts race to Brooke standing outside my shower, leaning against the wall, pressed *against* the wall. Her tits, her arse, her smooth pussy I want to nuzzle with my mouth.

My breath hitches. *Fuck! Finally!*

With a strangled groan, I come all over my hand and stomach. The ache between my thighs dissipates.

A familiar satisfaction settles over me, but will it last? Will I ever be truly satisfied until I have Brooke in the ways I *want* to have her? Which includes every filthy act of depravity I can think of.

I sag against the mattress as I reach for my discarded towel from earlier and wipe myself clean.

My eyes close. I listen to the beginnings of a storm in the distance. The low rumble of thunder.

I hope she isn't walking home.

Sleep evades me most of the night as my mind refuses to settle. My body is spent from class, from my orgasm, but I'm restless. My cock slowly grows hard against the sheets. I ignore it and roll over, rubbing it into the mattress.

The morning sun rises too early. Light burns across my eyelids, and I make a mental note to pick up curtains or some shit to keep my room dark when I need it. I hope to God this isn't any indication how every sexual encounter involving Brooke, fantasy or not, leaves me.

I'm not going to be able to teach six classes a day if I'm up half the night. Coffee. I need a fuckton of coffee.

I get dressed and head outside, pulling on my sunnies. The footpath is wet

from last night's rain, and the air is a bit sticky. I avoid the puddles as I head south on Fayette, my eyes glancing back in the direction of the bakery until I can no longer see it clearly. A little shop on the corner across the street grabs my attention, and I jog between cars and step up onto the curb.

I pull the door open and step inside, inhaling a lungful of the delicious scent.

My glasses get pushed back on top of my head. I freeze. A body I'd have to be dead not to recognize stands a few feet ahead of me, leaning against the small counter as she waits for her order.

Her perky arse sways as she moves her hips to the beat of the song playing softly overhead.

I move closer, smiling. "Brooke."

Her head whips around, then the rest of her turns to face me.

My eyes rake over her tiny form.

She's in jeans again, tight on her hips and legs. Her red shirt dips low in the front to reveal a generous amount of cleavage. And on her feet, runners, an old pair of Nike's.

Her hair is up, pulled back into a dark, messy knot, with a few pieces framing her face.

She raises an eyebrow. She looks agitated. "What are you doing here? Did you follow me?"

I almost laugh at her suggestion, but decide against it when she shows no sign of her question being a joke.

"What? No, I like coffee. I'm here for coffee. This was purely a coincidence." I take a step toward her. "You left last night. I wanted to talk to you."

"Talk," she laughs. "There's that word again. Did you have fun *talking* after I left?"

My brow furrows. "Uh . . . to who?"

She eliminates the space between us. Her hand flattens against my chest

as she stands on her toes to get as close to my ear as possible. I inhale her perfume. Some sort of berry scent. It's light and sweet.

"Did you finish getting off after I was gone?" she whispers.

My hands form to her hips. I drop my head, brushing my lips against her hair. "Yeah. I had to."

"Mm. So did I. You were amazing in my head. I came all over my fingers."

"Fuck," I groan. Not meaning to, my fingers squeeze her hips, hard enough to possibly bruise her. I move my hands to her back.

God, she feels good against me.

"Me too. I . . ." My words trail off.

Am I really doing this? Am I about to confess to this woman how hard I came last night in the middle of a fucking coffee shop?"

She leans back to look up at me. "It's a shame we couldn't have handled that shit together. A damn shame." She slaps her hand against my chest and spins back around, leaving me reeling.

I grab her elbow. I'm not done with this conversation. "Hey."

"What?" Her voice sounds distant. She barely turns her head to acknowledge me.

The bloke behind the counter carries over four coffees before I can get her attention again.

"Here you go, Brooke. Sorry about the wait."

She steps forward. I move quickly to grab the carrier, being sure not to completely shove her out of the way in the process. Only the side of my arm bumps against hers.

"I got these. Did you pay?" I ask, reaching blindly with my other hand for my wallet.

"What?" Eyebrows pinched together in confusion, she tries to grab the carrier. Her height difference from mine doesn't allow for it. She really is tiny without those heels.

With an exasperated huff, she jumps with her hand in the air. “Yes, I paid. And can you give me that please, you big tree?”

“I said I got it. Come on.”

“Come on? I thought you were getting coffee.”

I shrug, looking down at her. “I’ll come back.”

Her hand slaps against her thigh. With a shake of her head, she moves toward the door. “Fine. But there’s a crack in the sidewalk and I’m not going to tell you where it is. If you fall, that’s on you.”

I stifle my laugh, following behind. “Fair enough.”

We walk side by side on the busy footpath. People move in a blur around us. Brooke keeps her arms tightly crossed against her chest and her gaze locked ahead of her. Mine wanders between the path ahead and her profile.

“How tall are you?” I ask, breaking up the silence after only standing it for a whole ten seconds.

She looks over at me. “I don’t know. 5’2”, I think. Why?”

“Just curious. You threw me off with your shoes the other day, when we first met.”

“Mm.” She turns her head.

My mouth curls up in the corner. “You were right about blue balls. Bloody awful, that was. I thought I was dying.”

A small laugh erupts from her. She quickly conceals it with a cough. “Well, that was all your doing.”

“Actually, it’s yours. I can’t stop thinking about you.”

“*Thinking* about me,” she repeats, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear. “But, you don’t want to *do* anything with me. You turned me down.”

“I want to do a lot with you.”

I wait until she glances in my direction before I continue. Her eyes slowly reach mine.

“A lot, Brooke. You have no idea how much I’ve thought about doing things with you. I just want to know you first. Spend some time with you.

Like this. I like talking to you.”

“Crack.”

“What’s that?”

She points ahead of us. “Crack. Right there. Watch out.”

I look down, careful to step over the jagged edge of the concrete that protrudes a good five centimeters from the flat plane.

Fuck. That would’ve been one hell of a fall.

“I thought you weren’t going to warn me,” I ask through a grin.

She shrugs. “I don’t feel like going back for more coffee. You would’ve spilled it.”

“Ah, okay. I thought maybe it was because you care about my well-being, or something. My mistake.”

She stops walking. I look back over my shoulder.

“What is it?”

“Are you married? Is that it?”

Confusion pulls my brows together. “Do you think I’m married?”

When have I given her the impression that I was married?

She hits me with a sturdy glare as she marches directly for me. “I don’t know, that’s why I’m asking. You aren’t wearing a ring, but not all married guys wear their rings, especially ones who like to jerk off to the idea of other women. Is that you?”

I stare at her, long and hard. Is she fucking serious with this? I grab her hand and pull her in the small alleyway between two businesses.

“What are you doing?”

With a hand to her hip, I guide her back against the brick wall. Chest to chest, I look down at her, trying to contain my anger at this bullshit back and forth while I balance these stupid fucking coffees.

“Do you really think I’m married? Is that the kind of man you think I am? One who cheats on his wife?”

She tilts her head up. “I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking. It wouldn’t

be the first time some married guy tried something with me. Although, I doubt any of them would've rejected me the way you did. Was that your guilty conscience talking last night?"

What the fuck?

I bend down, inching closer. "I am not married. If I was, I never would've invited you to my class because I wouldn't have been able to keep my eyes off you. Fuck, Brooke, the way we flirted that first day, that wouldn't have happened. I told you I'm not interested in a quick fuck. I don't do that anymore. I'm not some young kid fucking around. I want more than that." My hand slides higher on her waist, fitting to her curves. "Give me more."

She blinks heavily, then looks back up at me with round, doleful eyes. Her head shakes ever so slightly. "Do you have any idea how embarrassed I was last night? How awkward I felt? I was naked, Mason, and you rejected me." A rush of air pushes past her lips, blowing against mine. "You *rejected* me."

Fuck. I hurt her. I hadn't meant to. I would never.

"Brooke."

Her gaze lowers to a spot on my shirt.

The pain in her voice, paired with that wounded look she's trying to hide from me tears through my reserve.

I tilt my head down. She lifts hers at my sudden movement, gasping as our mouths slide together, searing into a kiss. It's hot and wet, almost painful as we both reveal our desperation. My body presses her to the brick. She parts her lips with a groan as her warm hands wrap around my neck, fingers twisting in my hair and tugging. My tongue moves into her mouth, tasting, gliding against hers. I palm her arse, wishing I had use of both hands right now so I could properly do this.

She sucks on my lip, then bites it, smiling when I bend further with a moan.

"You're a good kisser," she says against my mouth. "Really good. Must

be the accent.”

I laugh, licking along the seam of her lips, swallowing her taste. Savoring it.

“I want you, Brooke. Do you see now?”

“Mm. I think.” She tugs the hair at the base of my neck when I try and lean away. “No, wait, don’t stop.”

I drop my forehead to hers. Her hand relaxes.

“Do you want more?” I whisper, staring at her mouth, her eyes, the cute little wrinkle in her nose.

She nods, biting at her bottom lip.

“Me too. I want more of that, of everything. Try it my way.”

“Try it *my* way. It involves nudity.” She attempts to wiggle closer.

I press against her hip, keeping her pinned to the wall.

“Mason,” she moans as I bend and kiss her cheek. My mouth moves to her ear.

“I could fuck you right now, up against this brick wall while anyone could walk by us. Would you like that? Would you come for me?”

She shudders. Her hands fit to my waist.

“Oh, God,” she whispers.

I kiss the skin below her ear before continuing. “It would be amazing, and I want that, I do, but my way, which involves feelings and knowing someone, trust me . . . it’s better. It’s so much better, Brooke. I want you to really feel me. I don’t just want a hard fuck in an alley and then nothing. I can’t do that.”

I slowly lean back. My hand falls away from her body as I watch the rapid rise and fall of her chest.

Is her heart pounding as much as mine? I fight the temptation to ask.

I gaze at her. Her cheeks are flushed. Her hair is falling out of the hair-tie it was *haphazardly* contained in.

She looks beautifully undone.

“Try it my way,” I insist again.

Please. I want this with you.

She sucks at her bottom lip as she thinks it over, her gaze flicking between my eyes and my mouth. With a soft grunt, she pushes off from the brick and snatches the carrier out of my hand. Her feet quickly carry her away from me.

The hell?

“Is that a yes?” I call out, turning my head to watch her.

“I don’t know.” She gives me a playful smile over her shoulder. “Is it?”

A laugh rumbles in my chest.

Little devil. Do you think that answer will satisfy me?

I sag against the brick after she disappears around the corner. My head falls forward. I look down at the erection pleating the front of my shorts.

“Fucking persistent bastard, aren’t ya?”

I adjust my cock and get out of the alley, heading back in the direction of the coffee shop.



BROOKE

Okay. Okay okay okay.

That was just a kiss. A kiss, Brooke. Stop walking like you just had your vagina smashed.

Pushing my shoulders back, I continue down the sidewalk with the coffee carrier, losing the obnoxious spring in my step. It's hard not to bounce a little. My skin feels like it's vibrating. A continuous pulse moving over my flesh, sending a delicious shiver up my spine and down my limbs.

Darting my tongue out, I taste my bottom lip.

It's swollen, sensitive from Mason's assault. Or mine. I wasn't gentle when I kissed him back. I went at him like a woman deprived, which is exactly how I should *still* be feeling, only . . .

That was, hands-down, the best kiss of my life.

It wasn't just the way he worked his mouth, it was the filth spilling out of it. The soft murmurs against my skin about how he *could* fuck me. How he wanted to, only . . .

He wants more than that. More than a hard fuck in an alley.

Feelings and knowing each other.

More.

My head grows heavy. Am I seriously contemplating this request?

After the way things ended last night, I was dead-set on waving bye-bye to the prospect of Mason and jumping on the next willing and available dick. No man has ever turned me down before. Ever. Definitely not one where we're both already naked and his cock is at full mast. But Mason . . . he *refused* me. Straight up, with my tits out and everything. I was angry and confused. Hurt. God, I didn't want to admit that, but I was. I wanted him. He obviously wanted me. I drove home like a mad-woman on a rampage.

A mad, horny woman on a rampage.

That problem was handled immediately.

After experiencing one of the quickest, most satisfying orgasms of my life, go figure, I gave into the enticing idea of sleep, but tossed around most of the night.

Again, I was baffled. Who passes on this kind of opportunity?

It's not as if I've never been pursued by the men I've slept with for the prospect of more. Take clingy Paul, for example. He definitely didn't want me to dine and ditch his ass the other night. But cases like that have always transpired in the aftermath of sex, not before.

Never before.

Who is this guy?

I empty my mind of that question, of the kiss I shouldn't be obsessing over as I step inside the bakery.

The chime rings out through the small space.

Joey and Dylan are talking closely behind the counter. Whispering, in fact. They both glance up at the sound of my entrance.

"Good morning, sunshine," Joey practically sings.

I barely glance in his direction. He's way too cheery for me right now.

"Hey. They've stopped serving that caramel ribbon crunch you like so I got you a macchiato instead. I hope that's okay." I set the carrier on the display case and look up at Dylan.

Please be okay. I don't feel like walking back there.

A soft smile pulls at her mouth as she steps closer. “That’s okay. That’s okay. I’ll drink caramel anything, sweetie. Thank you.”

My brow pinches together in response to the strange tone in her voice, to the nickname.

Sweetie?

“Why do you sound like that? Did someone die?” I ask, looking down at her outfit. Shouldn’t she be in all black? Who wears pastels when they’re in mourning?

Dylan plucks her coffee from the carrier. “No. And how do I sound?”

“Like someone died.”

Joey makes an amused sound in the back of his throat as he reaches for his coffee.

“Nobody died. I heard about last night,” Dylan confesses, leaning her hip against the counter. She looks tragically sorry for me. “*All* about it. Are you okay? That must’ve been crazy awkward.”

Oh, terrific. That’s why they were whispering.

I glare at Joey, who simply blows me a kiss before taking a sip of his coffee.

Bitch.

I take in a deep breath. “I’m fine,” I tell her, which isn’t necessarily a lie. If she would’ve asked me that question last night or any time before my interaction with Mason this morning, then I’d be lying.

Joey lifts a skeptical eyebrow. “You’re fine? You devoured half a cheesecake last night, Brooke.”

I wince at the memory.

God, I seriously need to get a handle on my sweets consumption during moments of distress. Or, at least eat them discreetly. I publicly tore up that cheesecake like it owed me money.

Shrugging off my pathetic behavior, I grab my coffee and take a sip. “I was hungry. I didn’t have much for dinner. And really, last night wasn’t a big

deal. I'm over him."

I was unfortunately never even under him.

"Oh, well that's good to know, since there's a chance he's about to walk right in here."

"What?" My head snaps in Dylan's direction, then toward the front of the shop.

My eyes go round. Mason walks past the large window and reaches for the door. The grip on my coffee tightens.

What the hell is he doing?

"This should be interesting," Joey murmurs as the chime sounds overhead.

I swallow uncomfortably, nearly choking on my own saliva.

Mason steps inside the shop, his hand now carrying the coffee he obviously went back for. He levels me with a perfectly casual smile, as if he didn't just have his tongue in my mouth five minutes ago, then immediately notices the other two bodies in the room.

"Ah, it's good to see ya again, mate. Didn't catch your name yesterday."

Joey takes Mason's hand into a firm shake. "Yeah, you seemed a tad bit distracted with the chick next to me." He shoots me a quick, cheeky glance, then turns back and jerks his chin. "It's Joey."

I smooth down the front of my shirt as the three of them exchange introductions. My cleavage pops out another inch. Completely accidental and not at all done for his benefit.

Mm. Maybe he'll notice *tomorrow* when he stops chatting up my friends.

Mason gestures at Dylan's belly. "When are you due?"

"A month. I'm hoping for sooner though. I'm so sick with this one."

"This one? Don't tell me you have more than one already. You look too young to be a mum."

"Ha!" Dylan's face lights up. Her hands form to her belly. "Oh, my God. You just became my second favorite male."

Joey whips his head to the left, his eyes wide with alarm. “Second favorite? Excuse you?”

I cough into my fist, breaking up the gab fest I’m in no way a part of. Three pairs of eyes train on me as I slowly retreat toward the kitchen.

“I guess I’ll just go get to work, since there’s apparently no need for me to hang around up here.”

Mason’s mouth pulls down.

I quickly regret my half-serious remark as his noticeable remorse tenses up his features.

God, why do I even care? And am I seriously irritated that he’s taking a moment to be polite? What is wrong with me?

He takes a few steps in my direction. I halt at the corner of the display case.

Dylan pushes against Joey’s shoulder, urging him to walk. “Come on. I need your help with something in the back.”

“You never need my help,” he snaps, then smiles back at her before the two of them slip into the kitchen, leaving Mason and I alone.

I move my coffee to my other hand. I’m suddenly feeling restless and too hot to drink such a warm beverage.

Mason gives me a lazy smile as he slowly advances. “Little devil. You ran off.”

My feet shift underneath me.

Jesus, his voice. Like honey coating the back of his throat. Sweet and warm. His words slow to leave his tongue.

I force my mouth to close.

Oh, my God. How long was it gaped open for?

Barrier. I need a barrier.

“Can I help you with something?” I ask, swiftly moving behind the display case. I set my coffee on the back table and fold my hands neatly on the glass. “Your stalker level is quickly rising, you know. First the coffee

shop, now you're coming to my place of business. Should I alert the authorities yet?"

Mason cocks his head with a curious smirk, then moves to stand directly across from me. "Wait until I find out where you live."

"What?"

He chuckles. "Relax, gorgeous. I'll keep it professional, yeah? No house calls until you invite me."

"Mm." I cross my arms under my chest. "Don't hold your breath on that happening."

He smiles, then tips his cup back, taking a long swig of his coffee. His eyes never leave mine.

To keep myself from staring back like a hungry little fiend, I grab a bakery box and open the display case. My hand closes around a pastry.

He leans over, head tilting down to watch me. "You look cute back there, ready for work. How long have you been doing this?"

"A few years," I answer, not looking up. "It started out as something temporary. I needed a job after getting fired from my old one and Dylan needed an extra hand during wedding season. I honestly wasn't expecting to like it as much as I did. But almost immediately everything just seemed to click. I love the artistic side of it. The design process. How everything comes together. I don't know. It's not like I'm curing cancer or anything, but cupcakes seem to make people happy. I think happiness is therapeutic."

I straighten with the box and set it on the case. Lifting my head, I lock onto Mason's gentle stare.

"What?" I ask.

After a beat, he softly replies. "Nothing." He leans forward and looks down into the box. "What's this?"

"Um, it's," I shove the box closer to him. "It's pastries I made. Here. And a cupcake for later. Red velvet. The icing is amazing."

He studies the contents as if I've just offered him the greatest gift in the

world. I remember him having this same look when I gave him the treats the other day outside his studio.

Maybe he really likes dessert. Maybe it's a delicacy over in Australia.

Setting his coffee down, he fits the box between his hands, then lifts his head. His eyes appear darker under the bakery lights. "You never gave me an answer. I need an answer, Brooke."

"Why?"

"Because I'll go bloody crazy if you don't give me one."

"Bloody crazy? Not just regular crazy? I'm picturing a massacre."

He shrugs. "Say yes and no one gets hurt."

I laugh, reaching up and pushing my hair behind my ear. "Wow. First stalking, now you're threatening murder? You better be careful, pretty boy. I'm not so sure how you'd hold up in prison."

He stares at me. The corner of his mouth lifts. "What are you doing tonight?"

Joey emerges from the back at that exact moment. I'm certain the queen of gossip was listening to every word of this conversation. If it was anyone else, I'd take his timing as purely coincidental.

"She'll be at The Tavern with a bunch of us after we close up here. It's a little bar we like to frequent. You should come. I'm sure they carry Fosters."

I narrow my eyes at Joey as he comes to stand beside me. He gives me his biggest smile.

"Yeah, I don't drink Fosters, mate. Not a lot of us do."

"Really?" Joey turns to Mason with a hand to his chin, scratching along his stubble. He looks deeply perplexed. "Well, don't I feel like the world's biggest ass."

Mason grabs his coffee and the bakery box. "No worries. You can buy me a round tonight to make up for that little blunder." He trains his eyes on me, stepping back. "And you. I'll see you later, yeah?"

Damn it. I try, really, *really* try not to smile, but he throws on that damn

‘yeah’ at the end of his sentence, and I can’t help it. It’s cute. I like it.

Luckily, I don’t give him the chance to see it.

I duck down behind the counter, looking busy. “Mm. Yeah, all right. See ya,” I call out as I stare at the gray speckled tile on the floor.

The door chimes. Joey crouches down beside me.

“What the hell are you doing?” he whispers, searching my face.

“Working.”

He glances around the tiny corner I’m tucked into. “Yeah, okay. What was all that talk about giving him an answer? An answer to what? Did you not tell me something last night?”

I straighten and shove past him, moving into the kitchen. “You are lucky I tell you anything, Joey McDermott.”

Snatching my apron off the hook, I join Dylan at the worktop.

My mind begins cataloging possible outfits for tonight. I’ll definitely be wearing heels, that’s for sure. Mason seems strangely intrigued by our height difference.

Maybe he normally dates taller women?

Oh, my God. Why am I even thinking about what kind of women he dates? That damn kiss has left me stupid.

Joey claims one of the stools, pouting. “Brooke is holding out on us, Dylan. Can you please explain to her that there are no secrets within these walls?”

Dylan keeps her eyes on the frosting she is piping, flatly replying, “Brooke, you know the drill.”

I secure the apron string around my waist, ignoring them both.

Screw that. I don’t need to divulge anything.

Joey slaps the wood, then stands. “Fine. I’ll just go ask Mason myself.”

I grip his forearm. “Heyyy, that’s . . . not necessary. I’m sure he’s busy.” I press against his shoulder until he’s seated again, then I start to pace around the room, suddenly no longer able to stand still. My palms begin to sweat.

Damn it. I'm about to recollect this morning, that goddamn kiss.

“Uh, okay, so, you know everything that happened last night. Nothing new to report there. I was getting our coffees and Mason walked in, looking all . . . whatever. You saw him. He explained to me in a very private alley a few blocks down that he wants more with me. Like talking, and . . . dates, I guess, before all the sex stuff. He wants to know me first. How crazy is that?”

I chuckle awkwardly. Everyone else remains silent.

Crickets. All of a sudden, I'm surrounded by crickets.

I do another lap around the room. “So, that's basically it. He asked me if I can give him that. More. I didn't *really* answer. I mean, I kind of did. Not really. Oh, and he kissed me. On the mouth.”

“As opposed to . . .”

I snap my head up to look at Joey, then drop it into a quick nod. “Right. That's it. That's all that happened.”

Dylan sets her piping bag down. “I take it the kiss was good? You seem a bit wound up.”

Good?

No. It was fucking phenomenal.

I limply shrug as I grab two baking racks off the shelf.

I've confessed enough sins today. They don't need to know how wet I got from fifteen seconds of making out.

“I like him,” Joey beams, resting his chin on his hand.

“Me too,” Dylan smiles at me. “Brooke?”

I set the racks on the worktop. My next words come as I keep my head down and my hands busy. “You know what I like? Working. Getting a paycheck. Orgasms are also nice, which I doubt come with *liking* this guy, so, no. I don't *like* him. How many special orders do we have today? Three? We need to get started. *I* need to get started. And God, I need to eat something before I collapse.”

I shuffle up to the front and murder a cupcake.

Brown sugar praline. It never stands a chance.



I'm the last one to arrive at The Tavern later that night. I decide to blame my lateness on the traffic, not the forty-plus minutes I spend getting ready, or the pacing I do around Billy and Joey's condo.

"Traffic? What traffic? It's not rush-hour."

My sister Juls quickly calls me out on my lie after I explain my tardiness. I pretend I don't hear her as I slowly sip my Long Island and gage the crowd. Imagine Dragons pumps through the speakers overhead. My foot taps along to the beat.

Ian returns with a few beers for the table. "Two dollar beers. I fucking love college night."

Reese reaches for his mug, his other arm permanently fixated around Dylan. "Don't you feel old being here with this crowd? I feel like everyone's looking at me like I'm a chaperone." He tugs at the knot in his tie, loosening it.

Joey chuckles. "Uh, no. They're looking at you 'cause you're a DILF."

Reese frowns. "A what?"

"A DILF." Dylan rests her head on his shoulder, grinning. "Dad I'd like to fuck."

"Get the hell out of here," he mutters, lifting his beer to his mouth.

"You're sexy, Reese. Own it." Joey holds up his mug. "You know who else is sexy?" He quickly kisses Billy. "Besides my baby."

I swirl my straw around in my glass. A group of women giggle obnoxiously at the next table. One of them nearly falls off her stool.

The drinks must be flowing over there.

"Brooke."

My eyes lift to Joey's. "What?"

"I asked a question."

"So?"

He gapes at me, then sweeps a hand in front of him. “So . . . would you like to let the table know who *you* think is sexy? Everyone is dying to hear what you have to say.”

Jesus. He is laying it on thick tonight.

I stand and smooth the hem of my dress down. No need to partake in this conversation.

“Me. I think I’m sexy as hell.” I blow Joey a kiss. “Be back. I’m going to hit up the ladies’.”

Joey rolls his eyes, mumbling something under his breath before he turns to Billy and engages him in conversation. I move past them, heading for the crowd I need to get through to reach the restrooms.

“Nice shoes, Brooke. Am I going to be getting those back any time soon?” Dylan’s voice at my back halts me.

I spin around, glancing down at the pink Steve Madden’s I have yet to return. They work amazing with this dress. With my legs. In all honestly, it would’ve been a tragedy not to wear them.

Lifting my head, I limply shrug. “I figured I’d break them in for you since your feet are too swollen to wear heels right now.”

Dylan’s face falls. She glances down at the black strappy sandals on her feet, grumbling, “I’m so over being pregnant.” She whips her head around. “This is it, Reese. Three and we’re done. No more kids.”

Reese leans back to look at her, a deep frown line setting in his forehead. “What? I thought we had agreed on four. What happened to that?”

The look that creeps across Dylan’s face has my feet firmly planted where they are, willing to stick around for another minute. It also seems to pull everyone else’s attention across the table.

Juls with her wide, curious eyes as she slowly brings her drink to her mouth. Joey, grinning enormously, drumming his fingers on the table and practically crawling across it to get a better view. Billy and Ian both take another route and reach into their pockets for their phones, deciding it’s best

they look busy and uninterested in Reese's potential demise.

I bet everyone seated at this table has had this 'don't fuck with me' look directed at them at one point. I know I'm familiar with it. Back when I first started working at the bakery I saw this look quite a lot.

And Reese? His ass has definitely seen it.

Turning on his stool, Reese gently smiles at Dylan before moving in for a kiss. "Love."

She pushes against his chest. "I'm sorry, are *you* the one carrying a watermelon around twenty-four seven? Are you giving up sushi and fantastic fucking footwear for nine months? Mm? No, you're not. You can eat what you want, you aren't bloated and sweaty all the time, and your downstairs region isn't going to be pushing out a human. I've been pregnant for the last four years. Four years, Reese. Do you have any idea how exhausting this is for me? I got up eleven times last night just to go to the bathroom. Did you know that?"

He caresses her face. "I only counted six."

Through clenched teeth, she leans closer, grunting, "It was a hell of a lot more than six. Maybe I should start waking you up every time, that way you can experience some of this misery with me."

"You can do that."

"Ugh!" She bats his hand away. "Would you stop being *you* for five seconds? It's making me want to have another kid."

Laughing, Reese grabs her face and kisses her. Dylan seems to melt against him, letting go of her anger, maybe even her conviction on the subject. They break away from each other enough to breathe, but keep their foreheads pressed together, Reese's hands cradling Dylan's face and hers holding his wrists. Their eyes remain locked as if they're sharing this silent moment, conveying unspoken words, and I take that as my cue and remember why the hell I got up in the first place.

I melt into the crowd and push my way to the back hallway. The restroom

is cramped and smells like a cross between the fragrance department at Macy's and an ashtray. My nose burns as I apply a light sheen of gloss to my lips.

God, I hate cigarette smoke. Can't these bitches here read? There's a no-smoking sign posted every ten feet.

Tugging the material of my dress away from my body in hopes it'll air it out a little, I drift through the bar, making my way back to my friends. A tall figure standing next to the table halts my progression.

Mason has his hand on the back of my chair as he converses with the group. His dirty blond hair is carelessly tousled, maybe a bit wet. I can't tell from this distance. He wears a fitted blue T-shirt and jeans, and as he reaches across the table to extend his hand to Reese, the material stretches over his ass and lean thighs. A hint of flesh peeks out from above his waistband.

Fuck. Okay, he's here. He's here, and he looks like *that*.

Change of plans.

I cut a hard left through the crowd and grab a stool at the bar.

No way am I going to sit at that table with seven pairs of eyes on me like I'm some sort of freak-show exhibit. Joey is clearly already on a mission to embarrass me tonight, and I haven't had nearly enough alcohol to tolerate his obnoxiousness yet.

I wave over the bartender. "Give me something. Not beer. Something . . . girly. Or wine. I don't care. Surprise me."

The older man smiles, then turns and grabs a glass.

I set my clutch on the wood, fiddling with the contents. Phone, cash, keys, license, lip gloss. A warm body presses against my back.

"Little devil. You're hard to find."

A shiver runs through me as his breath moves against my hair. I turn my head, then tilt it back.

Mason moves to stand beside me. I fight the urge to grab his face and molest him.

It's a struggle.

I wet my lips. "Hey, hi. Did you just get here?"

Obviously, I already know the answer to this question. Way to act like you haven't been watching for him, Brooke.

He smiles and slowly sinks onto the stool next to me. "I did. Class ran over a bit. I had to shower, find the place. Why are you over here and not with your mates?"

I risk a glance in their direction.

Juls waves. Dylan smiles from her seat.

Oh, my God. Is Joey seriously videoing this with his phone?

"It was a bit crowded." I swivel on my stool so that Mason's body completely shields mine. "And I was trying to avoid this guy who has a tendency to stalk. You might know him. He's Australian too."

He pulls his shoulders back and looks around the bar. "Yeah? Point this wanker out. I'll take care of him. Unless he's a big fella. If that's the case, I'll sneak you out the back."

I laugh as the bartender sets my glass down in front of me.

It's a tall, skinny beverage. Something blended, with red and white slush swirling together and a pineapple wedge tucked on the rim.

"That's fancy lookin'."

I nod at Mason's observation as my hand closes around the chilled glass. I take a sip. Very tropical.

"So, was the turn-out for class today as ridiculous as last night?"

"You thought it was ridiculous?" His mouth pulls tight. He looks adorably puzzled.

"Women were lined up outside like you were handing out free orgasms." I give him a cheeky grin. "Clearly, you weren't. Unless that service was offered to everyone *except* me."

His face softens with a smile. "Nah, that's the Brooke special. It comes with dinners and private lessons. Spending time together. Friendship."

“Friendship? You want to be my friend?”

“Yeah.”

“And you want to sleep with me?”

“I want everything,” he states negligently. “Friendship is a part of it. Why wouldn’t it be?”

I shrug. My eyes fixate on the bar.

This glorious specimen of a man also wants a friendship out of this. How . . . strange.

“Are you drinking?” I ask, desperate for a subject change.

Feelings. Friendship. More.

He needs alcohol.

I glance back up to catch the quick shake of his head.

“I’m all right.”

“You came to a bar and you’re not going to drink?”

He stares at me, his eyes slowly moving over my face, then down the line of my body. “You look lovely, Brooke. Stunning, really. Has any man told you that today?”

“Um . . .” I inhale a shaky breath. “Today? No. Not today.”

“Shame. I should’ve said something earlier. I was thinking it. In the alley . . . when I came to your work. I couldn’t stop looking at you. I still can’t.”

“In the alley.” I clear my throat. Hair clings to the base of my neck. I’m burning up. “I liked the alley.”

God, I loved the alley.

Mason eyes me for a moment, then reaches out and takes the drink out of my hand. He sets it on the bar and stands, pulling out his wallet. “Go for a ride with me, yeah? I’ll bring you back here. I just . . . I want to talk to you and drive around the city. I’ve been thinking about doing that.” He throws some cash down, tucks his wallet back into his pocket, and grabs my hand.

With a gentle tug, I’m on my feet.

“You’re taller tonight,” he observes, smiling down at my shoes. “I

recognize those.”

I grab my clutch off the bar. “And you’re a bit bossy.”

His brow pulls together. He looks charmingly confused.

I fight the urge to smile as I explain. “I never agreed to go for a ride with you. You did that adorable little ‘yeah’ thing and took my drink away. Were you even going to wait for my answer? Maybe I’m not ready to leave. Maybe I want to finish my very coconuty drink and spend some time with my mates. Ever think about that?”

I think he wants to smile. I believe I see a slight twitch in his mouth, but he covers it immediately, or I’m simply imagining things.

Am I not as funny as I think I am?

“I’m sorry.” He drops my hand. His eyes roam the room. “Right. That was a bit bossy of me. Would you rather we stay here? I thought a drive would be nice. I’ll be able to hear you better. I’d like to hear you.”

A strange tightness pulls at my chest.

Shit. Even in his high-handedness, his intentions are sweet.

“It’s fine. We can . . .”

A body bumps against my back. I brace myself with a hand to Mason’s chest to keep myself from falling. His grip holds tight on my waist, tighter as I slowly lift my head to look at him. I turn to get a glance at the creep who shoved me into this tall piece of manly deliciousness.

I should thank them.

Paul sways on his feet behind me. He’s clearly intoxicated.

Whatever. I don’t hold any ill-will toward any of the men I’ve slept with. I’m sure him knocking into me was purely accidental. No doubt brought on by the alcohol. Look at him. He can barely stand.

He grabs the bar to steady himself, grinning wildly. “Brooke! Funny . . . funny seeing you again, isn’t it? God, I really didn’t think that was you.”

He didn’t think that was me? I just saw him a few days ago. How drunk is this guy?

“Uh, yeah, it’s me. Small world.” I push against Mason’s chest. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Paul keeps going.

“I thought . . . nah, that’s not Brooke. No way! She should be hanging on a street corner.”

I whip my head around. “*Excuse me.*”

“A street corner.” Paul leans closer, tilting his head with a sneer. “You know. Like a whore.”

My body goes rigid. Mason tenses behind me.

Paul, you stupid fucking idiot. You asked for this.



MASON

“You know. Like a whore.”

Brooke inhales a quick breath. Her eyes go round, taking up the majority of her face.

The fuck did he just say?

I move to get closer to this piece of shit, putting myself in front of Brooke. “Hey, fuck off, mate.”

His head jerks up, his eyes rapidly blinking me into focus. He’s barely keeping himself upright. One hand is flat on the bar, the other is clutching the stool Brooke was just occupying.

He’s so tanked he’ll probably end up falling over soon.

“No.” Brooke darts a hand out and grabs my arm, halting me. “No, let me.” She steps in front of the bastard. “I’m sorry, Paul. What exactly makes me a whore? Was it the fact that I had sex with you the other night, which I’m now suddenly regretting, or was it that you got your pathetic little feelings hurt when I didn’t want to cuddle after?” Her hand flies to her hip. “Are you sad because I didn’t want to go for round two? Is that it? Is that why you look like shit right now, Paul?”

Jesus. Brooke and this tosser? This is not some shit I want to hear about.

Paul drops his head, shaking with silent laughter. “You fucked like a

whore. What chick bails right after gettin' laid like that?"

"What guy turns into a preteen and cries about it? You're lucky I even went home with you. I had plenty of other options that night."

"Yeah . . . I bet you did." He slouches closer, his eyes gleaming. "Whore."

I move without any thought behind it, getting up in his face, jamming his body against the bar.

"Speak to her like that again and I'll put you through a fucking window, yeah?"

A small hand wraps around my elbow. "Mason." Brooke tugs my arm, but I keep the bastard pinned.

Just knowing he's been with Brooke is enough to provoke me. Hearing him speak to her like that . . . I'm not a violent guy, but I'm suddenly feeling like I could be. I could beat the piss out of this wanker and not feel any remorse. Not a shred.

His head rolls left, then right, his eyes slowly drifting closed. "Mm. Hit me. Go ahead. I-I don't give a s-shit."

He's slurring his words now. He can barely stand.

I don't need to hit him.

I swiftly back away. He isn't expecting that. Eyes wide, his feet slide out from under him and he collapses into a drunken heap on the floor, limbs sprawled like a rag doll, head slumped back against the bar. His eyes pinch shut through a groan, then he slowly topples over until he's laid out between the stools.

A big bloke moves through the crowd and steps in front of me, crouching down to grab Paul.

"Let's go, buddy. You've been cut off."

I turn to Brooke, then notice the eyes on us, the crowd that's gathered behind her who I'm certain heard every bit of that conversation, including the cruel words that fucker had to say. Brooke notices them too, her eyes darting

quickly around the room, then dropping to a spot between us.

Her shoulders pull forward, and she lowers her head, hiding behind her hair. She suddenly appears smaller.

She's embarrassed. Maybe a bit hurt. It's hard to tell when I can't see her face.

"Hey." I lift her chin with my hand. "You all right?"

She hesitates for a second, just staring up at me through those impossibly thick lashes as she slowly exhales. Her hand gently presses against my hip. I slide a bit closer, moving my fingers along her jaw and just fucking stare at her.

Christ, she is quite possibly the most stunning woman I have ever laid eyes on.

Her hair is falling out around her in dark curls, covering her delicate neck. She's wearing more makeup than I've seen her in up until this point, but fuck, she doesn't need it. The way she looked in my class the other day, her skin glowing from exertion, clean and sweaty, that Brooke has me.

Finally after taking in a deep breath, she nods slightly, just a jerk of her chin. "Yeah . . . yeah, I'm fine, but can we go? I'd really like that ride now."

I grab her hand and we melt into the crowd.

Tipping my head in the direction of the table Brooke's friends are at, I let them know we're getting out of here while she stays close to my side. It's a brief farewell. Brooke tugging on my hand has me getting her out of there before any of them have a chance to ask us what happened. She clearly doesn't want to linger. I'm not interested in making her stay. Besides, I'd rather have her alone.

We're out the door, her small hand in mine as we walk along the footpath. The sky is free of clouds, a clear blue scene speckled with stars and a bold moon hanging low.

Brooke pulls her hand back after a few seconds and wraps her arms around herself.

“Are you cold?” I ask.

The air has a slight chill to it, but I think it’s tolerable. She’s not wearing much, though. Her arms could be cold.

She shakes her head, keeping her gaze in front of her.

“I’m just up here on the left.” I tug my keys from my pocket. “The white Denali.”

“Asshole.”

“What’s that?” I turn my head, staring at her rigid profile.

“That guy. Paul. Calling me a whore because I only wanted to hook-up with him.” She breathes a laugh. “Seriously? It’s a fucking double standard. Just because I’m a woman who loves sex I’m automatically labeled a whore? What about men?”

I open the passenger door for her and she climbs inside, securing her seatbelt.

“Men can fuck anything with a pulse and women will actually find that attractive. The whole player vibe. It’s hot. It gets them so much ass,” she continues after I get in on the driver’s side. “But if a woman enjoys sex and goes out to get laid, she’s a whore. Why? What the hell is the difference?”

I run a hand through my hair after starting up the car. My fingers quickly dial down the volume on the stereo. I only want to hear her.

“Well?” She angles her body in the seat, waiting for my response.

I rub my jaw. “I’m not sure I’m the best person to answer that question, Brooke.”

“Why not? You’re a man.”

“Yeah, but I’m not running around sticking my cock into everything with a pulse.” I catch her smile as I glance over before pulling out onto the street. “I think you’re right, though. You should be able to do what or who you want.”

“Exactly.”

“He was wrong . . . saying that to you. I’m sorry that happened.”

I'm sorry I didn't knock him on his arse before he said it a second time.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Brooke watching me as I drive us into the city.

“Were you going to punch him? You looked ready to punch him.”

“I *felt* ready to punch him.” My hand curls around the wheel.

“Have you ever hit anyone? You don't really seem like the violent type. Yoga master who uses organic toothpaste. You probably recycle too.”

I turn my head. She shrugs impassively, twirling the ends of her hair around her finger.

“Well, I'm usually not threatening to toss people through windows,” I chuckle. “But, I did get into a few brawls when I was younger. Nothing major. Some neighborhood kids pissed me off and I went after them.”

“Majahhh. I love how you say certain words.”

I give her a quick wink.

“Why did you go after those kids?” she asks, her voice lifting to a mischievous pitch.

Even in the dark, I know this little devil is smiling.

“Did they steal your koala?”

I gape at her. Her quiet laugh fills the car. “Is that what you Americans think? That we keep those nasty little buggers as pets? They'll claw your eyes out the second you get close enough.”

“Would they? But they're so cuddly looking.” She hugs herself. “And so, so cute.”

“Cute. Right. Real bloody cute. I had one nearly take my head off when I was trying to pet it at the zoo once. I was only eight. That mangy bastard scarred me for life.”

“Oh, so it's just your *opinion* that they'd make horrible pets,” Brooke chuckles again. “Look at you. Giving those sweet things a bad name over here. I bet you were just a little wanker and pissed him off.”

She smiles, all big and clever, clearly pleased with herself for using that

word correctly.

I relax against my seat. It feels good talking to her like this. Easy, unhurried conversation. The delightful sound of her laugh. Her sweet dimpled face against the backdrop of the city.

I want this drive to last all night.

“Was there a bunch of you? Maybe the cute, gentle, completely innocent and non-threatening koala didn’t like crowds.”

We stop at a red-light. I shrug, looking over at her.

“The zoo was crowded, yeah. It was me and my mates, a few others gathered around. I don’t know. I’ve tried to forget about the day a koala went psychotic on me. I had nightmares for months. Surprised I didn’t need therapy after that.”

She slaps at my arm. I grab her hand before she can pull away and lace my fingers through hers, resting our joined hands together on the console. I haven’t held her like this yet. I’ve wanted to all night, in my studio, on the footpath that first day. My hand practically engulfs hers. She feels a bit tense. Her nails, dark as the night, tap restlessly against my skin.

She stares down between us, biting at her bottom lip.

“So . . . I’m guessing you aren’t a fan of kangaroos either? Did one chase you down the street or something? Kick you around a little?”

I grin, giving a gentle squeeze to her hand. She’s not pulling away.

Bit of a shock. I was expecting some resistance.

I press down on the accelerator and ease through the intersection.

“Nah. I never had a problem with kangaroos. Although, there have been some cases of rogue ones attacking people. The mums can be vicious.”

She laughs softly, gazing out the window.

“Have you always lived here?” I ask her, smiling when her fingers relax against the back of my hand. I turn us onto a side street, avoiding the pile up of traffic ahead.

“Mm. Yeah. Born and raised Chicago girl. I thought about moving to the

beach a few years back but . . .” Brooke jolts upright, leaning forward in her seat and staring out the window. She tugs her hand free and braces it on the dash. “Uh, Mason. You’re going down a one-way street right now.”

“What?”

“One-way street. Shit! There’s cars coming! Pull over! Quick! Get off the road!”

My eyes sweep the small alley I’ve turned down.

“Fucking hell.”

I was so focused on not crushing Brooke’s hand with mine, on the feel of Brooke’s hand, on *Brooke*, I hadn’t noticed the well-lit street signs posted in warning, indicating that I have indeed turned down a one-way street.

Cars are parked along either side, leaving me with little room to pull off as head-lights loom closer.

I tap the brakes.

“Shit,” she whispers, squirming in her seat, her head whipping left, then right, then behind her. “Can you back up or something? Quickly, like floor it?”

I glance in the rear-view mirror, then ahead of me once more. “It’s all right. Look up there. I can pull off a bit in front of that motorbike until they get by.”

“That’s not going to give them enough room to pass you.”

“It might.”

She groans, covering her face with her hands.

I pull ahead and squeeze as close to the motorbike and the car parked in front of it as I can get without knocking into one.

Damn. This is going to be tight.

I shift into park. “Right. See? It’s all good, gorgeous. No worries.”

A blaring horn pulls my attention off Brooke.

I roll my window down as the car at the front of the line heading our direction inches past me at a snail’s pace. Their side mirror nearly strips my

door of paint.

“This is a one-way street, you idiot!” the man yells up at me, shaking his fist as he slows to a stop.

I hold up a hand. “Yeah, sorry about that, mate. New in town. My apologies, yeah?”

His face visibly relaxes. The female passenger, I’m guessing his wife, leans over him to look up at me. She waves a quick hand. “Welcome to Chicago! We visited Sydney a few years ago on our honeymoon. Beautiful city. We had the best time.”

“Oh, my God. You have got to be kidding me,” Brooke mumbles next to me, her voice breaking with a soft giggle.

I give her a quick smile, then turn back to the couple. “Oh yeah? I’m glad to hear that. And again, I’m terribly sorry about this little blunder. I hope I haven’t ruined your night.”

The driver waves his hand dismissively. The car behind him lays on his horn.

“All right! Jesus! Are we all in a hurry?” he yells, craning his neck around to look at them. He gives me a sharp nod. “Enjoy Chicago. Watch out for one-way streets.”

“Right. Got it.”

They pull ahead and continue down the street.

The next car brushes past, this bloke settling on giving me the bird instead of a quick chat. I nod apologetically, waving a hand at his gesture.

Brooke couldn’t be more amused sitting next to me, her head back against the seat and her hands covering her face as she laughs into the silence of the car.

“Unbelievable. You could’ve done anything if it was just that one car! You could’ve blocked the street entirely and refused to move. Opened fire on them. Acted like a dick. I’m pretty sure that couple was close to offering to name their first born after you. That guy was pissed, and then . . .” she

pauses, pointing a finger at me. “As soon as you opened that mouth of yours, dropping those adorable ‘yeahs’, it was like the second coming for those people. Mason the Messiah.”

I flash her a grin as I make it out of the one-way street. “I told you it would be all right. We had plenty of room.”

“Plenty of room. Yeah, okay,” she snickers. “It was that mouth. I’m telling you. I know what that mouth does to me. Now I’m seeing it work on the general population. You have a gift, Mason. You should probably go into politics.”

I don’t hear anything after . . .

“What does it do to you, Brooke?”

An ache pinches in the center of my chest.

She slowly turns her head, then drops it back against the seat, staring at me as the city lights move over her face.

I want to continue looking at her. In the daylight, preferably, where I can really see every emotion wash over her face. The heady look in her eyes I’m hoping is there. I don’t need my attention being pulled away for the sake of safety right now, but that’s exactly what happens before she can answer me.

“Wait. Just hold on. Don’t say anything yet.”

I pick up speed and take us back in the direction we came.

We drive through the city in silence until Brooke fiddles with the stereo, tuning the station to soft rock. Coldplay and One Republic become the background noise of our night. It mellows my suddenly anxious mind, my restless body, impatient against the seat.

It takes us twenty minutes to get out of the city.

I want to reach out and take her hand again. I want her to finish what she was going to tell me, but I keep my hands firmly planted on the wheel and my questions to myself until I pull us onto a dirt path that leads to an overlook I found when I went exploring my first day here.

It’s a secluded spot. I believe there’s a few trails that lead to some

campsites, and a lake nearby. I made a mental note the other day to come back here. Discover more of it. I hadn't realized at the time I'd be doing it so soon with Brooke.

I park near a lamp post and turn my attention to her.

She smiles warmly at me. She looks like she's glowing under the amber lights provided from above.

"Wet," she whispers, angling her body, her hair spilling over the edge of the seat.

I lean closer, fitting her sweet face between my hands. "What's that, gorgeous?"

She inhales sharply as I slide my mouth against hers. Her perfect fucking lips open for me, inviting me to take her. We both moan, her hands fisting my shirt and mine moving to her neck, tangling in her hair as I tilt her head. Her warm tongue strokes along mine.

"It makes me wet," she says breathlessly between kisses. "I'm . . . so wet, Mason. God, my thong is probably soaked right now. Useless. I can take it off if you'd like."

I groan as my hand falls to her lap, then moves along the smooth, warm skin of her upper thigh underneath her dress. I press against the lace of her g-string.

Soaked.

"Yes," she moans, her head flopping back. "Yes, please, touch me. God, I need this."

I lick up her throat, dragging my teeth along her skin as I slide one finger inside her, then another. She's silky and hot. She trembles when I press against her clit.

"Mason."

"I want to take you out on a proper date," I whisper against her ear, my fingers slowly pumping inside her, slower when she starts to rock into my hand.

“Greedy little devil. You want to come?”

She groans and I suck on her lip.

“This weekend. Dinner. Say yes to me, Brooke.”

She growls, chewing on her lip. “Mm, what? Dinner? Why are we discussing dinner? Can’t you just . . . focus on one task at a time? This first. Negotiations later . . . *Jesus*.”

I bite back a chuckle. Her plea, even though it is humorous, sounds desperate all the same.

She wants this, my fingers fucking her in a vacant field under the stars. My mouth clamping down on every visible, flawless inch of her body. Maybe she’s thought about me doing this to her. God knows I have. I’ve thought about doing everything. Right now, I’m thinking about pulling her over the seat and stripping her of these clothes, tasting the soft skin between her legs. Toying with her clit while I pump my shaft against her heavy tits.

But anything with Brooke is perfect. This right here, my cock throbbing, straining against my zipper, harder than fucking steel, her breathless words against my mouth . . .

“Harder,” she whispers.

“More,” she begs.

I move my thumb over her clit and she arches away from the seat, gasping.

“Like that?”

She nods frantically, clawing at my arm, my shirt, the hand between her legs. Her hips begin circling, her pussy seeking friction against my palm.

“God, Mason . . . *Mason*.”

I twist my wrist and claim her mouth again, swallowing her indecent noises, the sweet way she pants my name. I want to drown in her. I want her taste to linger in my mouth, her smell to cling to the walls of my lungs.

Brooke.

How can I be so lost in this woman already?

“Perfect,” I whisper against her jaw. “You are fucking perfect.”

She turns her head to capture my mouth, biting and sucking at my tongue. I add another finger and grip the back of her neck, keeping her pinned to me.

“You’re close, gorgeous.”

“I know that,” she growls, her head rolling back, thighs spreading wider. “If you stop right now, I swear to God I will make it so you never have children. I will pin your balls to the seat with my heel.”

I laugh quietly. My cock surprisingly doesn’t react in an offensive way to that threat.

I’m too hard to care. To stop. To think.

Curling my fingers, I pump them inside her and move my thumb wildly over her clit. It only takes a few more seconds and she’s drenching my hand. Writhing against the seat, she gasps into my mouth, the pleasure tearing through her so perfectly, so exquisitely, I break the seal of our lips and lean back to get a better look.

I thought she was beautiful before . . .

“Mason,” she pants, eyes heavy-lidded, her hair sticking to her cheek as she tries to steady her breaths.

“Dinner, Brooke. This weekend. What’s your answer?”

Her eyes fall closed. “Yes,” she says through a heavy exhale. “Okay, fine, I’ll go out with you to dinner. You earned it. That was . . . worth a meal.”

The light from above catches in the corner of her mouth. It’s lifted slightly. A hint of a smile.

Fuck me. I’m so done for.

I’m suddenly grateful she can’t see me clearly. My mouth stretches into what has to be the biggest grin of my life.

I want dates with her. Dinners. Conversation. Hours upon hours of what we shared tonight.

And she said yes.

I slide my fingers out of her, anxious for a taste. A little desperate for it.

At the sound of my gluttonous moan, Brooke peeks her eyes open, then gasps and leans forward, getting an inch away from my mouth.

“Well?” she asks, an unruly gleam in her eye as her hand circles my wrist.

She wants to know how she tastes. I could describe her for hours.

I slip my fingers out of my mouth, tracing the wetness along her jaw. “I could live with my mouth between your legs, Brooke. I could die there too.”

Her eyes fill with curiosity, and something else. Fear, maybe? Have I said too much?

I pull back and grip the wheel with both hands. My head hits the back of the seat.

Fuck, I had to say that, didn't I? I couldn't just say how fucking incredible she is? How I didn't think it was possible for something to be sweet and fiery at the same time? Shit, even admitting I'm a full-blown addict after one bloody lick would've been a better response.

Why don't you just propose right now, you tosser? Really go full-blown pathetic.

“Mason,” Brooke murmurs.

I shift my attention off the endless night sky and onto her.

She reaches for her belt. I can't remember her ever taking it off.

“Can we drive some more? Maybe around here? The stars are insane right now.” She dials up the volume on the stereo, tilting her head to see out the windscreen. Ed Sheeran fills the car.

On second thought . . .

Maybe I haven't spoken out of line at all?

Relief warms my blood. I melt against the seat as I shift the car into reverse.

We drive for hours, chasing the moonlight all over Chicago. Our conversation couldn't be more random. We talk about everything. Her job, my home-life back in Australia, our favorite movies. Brooke rambles about

her family, her sister Juls and her niece and nephew. How she's living with Joey and his husband until she saves up enough for a place of her own. Sometimes we drive in silence, listening to the radio or nothing at all when Brooke grows agitated with the music selections. It's comfortable, and easy. God, it's easy talking to her. There's no awkward pauses, no need to feel like you have to keep the conversation going. She makes a few more cracks about animals native to Australia, and whether or not I kept any of them as pets.

"Yeah," I tell her, containing my amusement. "We kept a few crocs in our backyard. Mum didn't care much for the safety of her children."

She giggles into the night. The wind blows her hair around her and she tries frantically to tame it.

Fuck, she is precious.

I pull up in front of the Tavern after I catch a few yawns out of her. The footpath is quiet. It's nearing 1:00 A.M. .

I feel wide awake. Drunk and high off Brooke. Reveling in this addiction I don't want to fight.

She stares down at her lap after removing her seatbelt.

I fight the urge to drive off with her and bypass the goodbyes.

"I feel like you tricked me into agreeing to dinner," she mumbles, looking over at me with a weak smile. "That seemed very calculated on your part."

I lean across the console and kiss her cheek. "Not sure I know what you're referring to. But calculated or not, you make the best sounds when you come." I pull back, smiling at the heavy look that's in her eyes, the same one she had in the field when I slid my finger over the smooth rise of her clit.

She wets her lips, then pulls the door handle and exits the car in a hurry.

"Yeah . . . okay, well, I guess I'll see you this weekend sometime."

"I'm just across the street, Brooke. You'll see me before this weekend."

She blinks rapidly, then nods once, her hand pushing her hair off her shoulder. "Mm. Right. You need to commit to your stalker status. It would be weird at this point if you didn't follow me to get coffee, or do random drop-

ins at my place of business.”

I chuckle, resting my elbow on the console. “What are you doing tomorrow morning?”

“Working.”

“Before that.”

She stares at me with the most curious expression. It’s so sweet I want to reach out and tug her back into the car, pull her against me, feel the grin she’s fighting against my mouth.

“Sleeping,” she answers, her bold eyes searching my face.

God, what I wouldn’t give to see her like that. First thing in the morning, sleep-rumpled and soft against my sheets. Her body tucked against mine while I watch the morning light pass over her skin.

With a jerk of my chin, I clear that image out of my head before it renders me incapable of getting my next words out. “Meet me for breakfast? There’s this spot I saw the other day when I was driving around. Just down the way a bit from the coffee shop.”

“Rosie’s,” she offers with a soft voice. Her teeth run along her bottom lip. “Yellow umbrellas out front?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

“They have amazing breakfast foods. Like life-changing amazing.” She lowers her eyes to a spot between us, gathering her hair over one shoulder and twirling her fingers in it. She seems a bit unsure all of a sudden, like she can’t decide whether to bolt or stand here and continue talking to me.

“So, is that a yes?” I ask her, ducking my head a little.

“I don’t know.”

“It’s just breakfast, Brooke. You’re going to eat it anyway, yeah?”

Her eyes flick up to mine, but she doesn’t respond.

I smile, hoping to get one in return. “Do I need to pull you back in here and ask that question with my hand up your dress?”

She purses her lips, fighting it, fighting me. Her arms cross tightly under

her chest as she stands a little taller. “You’d be wasting your time.”

“Hardly.”

“You would. I’m not a multiple orgasm type of girl. It’s nearly impossible to make me come more than once.”

“Really?”

“Yup.”

“I’ll remember to remind you of that when you’re begging me for a break.” We share a brief laugh, hers a little disbelieving. I look at her straight on and bite back the urge to beg for this. “Come on, Brooke. Meet me for breakfast tomorrow. Let me have you first thing in the morning.”

She stares at me long and hard, then finally drops her shoulders with a sigh. “All right.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she answers, looking away to hide her smile. “Only because I love Rosie’s and I haven’t eaten there in forever. Nice going on your part. If you would’ve suggested any other place, I would’ve shot you down.”

I wait until she looks back at me to give her a smile. “Seven o’clock?”

She doesn’t answer, doesn’t give me any sign of agreement. With a swift hand she shuts the door and walks to her car, making sure to give me a nice view of her arse as she bends to unlock the driver’s side door.

I drop a hand to my cock, staring at her, waiting for an acknowledgement that she’s heard my time suggestion.

I never get it.

She pulls away from the curb and blends into the traffic on the street.



BROOKE

The line at Rosie's café is already wrapping around the building when I arrive this morning.

Typical, and why I didn't argue with Mason when he suggested meeting so early last night. I'm used to grabbing something to eat after I arrive at the bakery, which isn't until eight-thirty. Waking up any earlier for any reason isn't something I'll easily agree to, but if you're going to eat breakfast at Rosie's, you need to beat the crowd.

I move past the line and step inside the café, shifting my attention around the crowded room.

"Brooke." Mason stands from his seat at a booth in the corner. He looks almost relieved to see me.

I suppose I could've given him some indication last night that I was planning on showing up at seven o'clock today. But really, where's the fun in that?

He kisses my cheek when I reach the booth. "Morning, gorgeous. I went ahead and ordered you some coffee and juice. It's fresh-squeezed apparently."

I giggle as I lean away.

"What?" he asks, eyes curious as we both slide into the booth.

I take a moment to stare at him before I respond.

His hair is still damp from a shower, the curls a bit more prominent now than when it's fully dry, but still just as carelessly tousled on top of his head. Light from a nearby window catches on the stubble coating his jaw. It looks coarse, but I know how it feels against the skin of my cheek. A gentle, welcoming scratch. The crisp white T-shirt he's wearing stretches deliciously across his chest and the muscles of his shoulders.

Damn. Even at this hour, he looks amazing. Would it be weird to order *him* for breakfast?

I bring the glass of juice to my lips, swallowing a taste as my eyes slowly take their time reaching his face. "Nothing. I just think it's cute how you bring that to my attention. Like I'd send it back if it wasn't freshly-squeezed. I'm not a snob."

"I wasn't implying that." He eyes me guardedly. "I just appreciate good quality juice."

"Mm. Figures. You probably own a juicer, don't you?"

"No."

I raise an eyebrow. No way does this guy not own every health conscious piece of equipment invented.

He smiles, tasting his own juice. "I may have left it in Alabama. It was rooted. I should pick up a new one, now that you mention it."

"Ah. See." I point a finger at him. "I got you all figured out."

"Yeah? Think you know me, do ya?"

"Yup."

He leans forward, placing his hand on top of mine. "What do you know, Brooke? Do you know I thought about you until I fell asleep last night? That that's quickly becoming a routine of mine, and I'm not ashamed to admit it?"

My breaths grow heavier as I stare back at him.

Shit. What does he mean he thinks about me until he falls asleep? Sexually? Like, is he jerking off to images of me in his head before he passes

out, because I'm pretty sure that's a normal response for most men in this zip code, and not necessarily a declaration that should make my heart thunder against my sternum.

"I know you like my sounds. And that you were attacked by a rogue koala when you were a kid, which I'm still having trouble believing," I finally reply after sliding my hand out from under his and grabbing a menu.

If I let him, I think he'd try and hold my hand this entire meal.

He grins, reaching for his own menu. "I more than *like* your sounds," he corrects me, lowering his gaze. "What's good here? Anything you'd recommend?"

"Everything. I told you, this place will change your life. The pancakes are amazing. That's what I'm getting."

Our waitress arrives, placing silverware in front of us and a stack of napkins. "Have we decided?" she asks.

Mason motions for me to order as he continues surveying his options.

I hand my menu to the waitress. I barely even needed to glance at it. "I'll have the bacon and apple pancakes." My mouth stretches into a grin when Mason gives me a wide-eyed look.

Welcome to America. We put bacon on everything.

He glances once more at the back of his menu, then places it into the waitress's hand. "Eggs Benedict. And if it isn't too much trouble, instead of the hash browns, can I get double sausage?"

"Sure," she replies, stepping away with our order.

I grab two sugar packets and empty them into my coffee. When I glance up after stirring in some cream, I catch Mason's eyes on me, and I wonder how long they've been there.

He leans back with a warm smile. "So, Brooke, tell me about working at the bakery."

"What do you want to know?"

"Do you make everything you sell? Or are you strictly in charge of

cupcakes?”

I chuckle against the lip of my mug. The steam billowing from my coffee evaporates into the air. “I’m not in charge of anything. Dylan is. I just do some of the baking for her. Everything except the wedding cakes. That’s all her.”

He looks surprised. “Why don’t you do those?”

“Because it’s a *wedding* cake. I don’t want to be responsible for something people pay hundreds of dollars for. And have you ever seen a pissed off bride? No way am I risking ruining someone’s big day.” I take a sip of my coffee. “I occasionally help out with the actual assembly of the cake, but all of the big detail work I am nowhere near skilled enough to do, Dylan handles. She’s amazing.”

“I bet you could do it,” he says. “Those cupcakes you gave me looked pretty complex.”

Complex? Compared to a wedding cake? This man is crazy.

“Yeah, okay. Have you ever seen a wedding cake? I can’t do that. We don’t even take requests for them when Dylan goes out on maternity leave. She meets with brides. Not me, and definitely not Joey. He’d end up somehow weaseling his way into the wedding party.”

Mason quietly laughs before taking a drink of his coffee. When he lowers his mug back to the table, he keeps his gaze on me, so plainly attentive, as if nothing could pull his eyes away.

My hands tangle together in my lap.

Have I ever been looked at like this before? With such raw interest, and not with some blatant underlying motive to get me naked and beneath whoever is staring at me?

Probably not, unless I’m related to the person.

We talk until our food arrives, and in between my massive bites of the best damn pancakes in Chicago. Mason polishes off his breakfast minutes before I’ve even made a dent in my tall stack. He drinks his coffee and

freshly-squeezed juice while I finish off my plate, and after paying the check, he asks me what my plans are tomorrow morning.

“Sleeping,” I answer, smiling behind my glass when I pick up on his meaning. “No way am I waking up early again tomorrow. I don’t think you realize how vital my sleep is.”

He scratches his jaw. I can practically hear his mind working this out. “Okay. Friday then?”

I shake my head.

“Come on.”

“Why?”

“Because I like having you this early. And I think you had a nice time too. Stop fighting me. It’s just breakfast.”

I stare at him across the booth.

Just breakfast. Somehow, it seems like a lot more to Mason than just sharing a meal at the earliest part of the day. Will this become something regular, a routine we fall into where he orders for me before I even arrive? Not just beverages, but my food? Will he know what I like and how I like it, and on what days I want pancakes with blueberries instead of bacon?

More importantly, do I want him to know it?

I rub a hand down my face. As my eyes scan the table riddled with napkins and half-empty glasses, I spot an advertisement stuck between the salt and pepper shaker. My stomach makes an embarrassing sound as I look at the picture. *How did I forget about this?* I pinch the laminated picture between my fingers and hold it up for Mason to see.

“I’ll give you Tuesdays.”

He leans forward, taking the picture from me and staring at it. “All you can eat deep-fried stuffed French toast. Wow. Is that . . . Captain Crunch, the cereal? They put cereal on it?”

He looks adorably baffled, like the idea of using crushed up cereal on anything is the strangest suggestion.

“It’s out of this world, and extremely popular. You can only order it on Tuesdays and people will actually call ahead to secure their plates.” I snatch the picture from him and drop it between us. “You want me this early? You can have me on Tuesdays . . . only. Take it or leave it.”

He drops his elbows onto the table and presses his mouth against his hands. “You drive a hard bargain. I was hoping for multiple mornings.”

I shrug, studying my nails and the chipped polish on my thumb, looking anywhere but his face until his foot nudges against mine.

Our eyes lock. He shakes his head, then smiles at the frown pulling down my lips.

Fuck.

“Jerk,” I mutter. Of course I have to react to his phony rejection. I can’t just sit here and feign indifference. Now I look like the one who suggested this.

Well played, you gorgeous bastard. Well played.

He stands and tugs me to my feet, kissing my lips and murmuring, “I’ll take anything you give me, Brooke. Anything.”

I keep my hands tucked into the pockets of my jeans the entire walk to the bakery.



I haven’t sat down once today.

I can’t.

I’m full of nervous energy. Restless. Buzzing around my room like this is my first rodeo, and it’s not. It’s so not.

I’ve been on plenty of dates. Hundreds. Well, okay, maybe not hundreds, but enough where I shouldn’t be *this* anxious about one freaking dinner. Guys ask me out all the time, and who am I to turn down a free meal before we get down to business? I love to eat. I *really* love to have sex. Putting two of my favorite things together makes for one very happy Brooke. And hey, if the sex is lousy, at least I get an enjoyable meal out of it.

But that's just it, right there. A meal is guaranteed tonight, but I have no idea if I'm getting laid. Dinner is pretty cut and dry, but after?

What the hell is happening after?

I, for one, feel like Mason and I know each other well enough for sex, based on his guidelines. More than well enough based on mine. We've talked, information has been exchanged. He knows more about me than any other guy I've been interested in recently. But is that enough for him?

He said he wants more. How much more? How much does he want from me?

I've seen Mason practically every day this week, between breakfast, coincidental, but maybe not so coincidental coffee-shop run-ins, to the occasional treats delivery, which I can't seem to stop myself from doing. Christ, it's like a damn compulsion. Even when he pops into the shop for a brief hello I'm shoving a bakery box at him like he's one of those malnourished children you see on the UNICEF commercials.

Here! Eat this! You poor thing, you're starving!

It's his reaction that gets me. That's why I do it. He takes that box and studies my creations like they should be displayed in a museum somewhere. Like they're some precious gift. Like I'm giving him something amazing.

Call me crazy, but I'm beginning to feel like maybe I am giving him something more than just a pastry or a cupcake. Maybe he looks at my treats as another piece of me? The *more* he's after?

Yeah . . . crazy. That line of thinking right there is completely fucking crazy.

They're treats. Damn good ones. And he's just a man who enjoys his dessert.

Period.

As I'm sliding up the zipper on my black pencil skirt, my bedroom door bursts open.

Joey walks in like he owns the place, which, if we're being technical, he

doesn't. The condo belongs to Billy. But this is Joey, and I've learned since moving in here that the concept of knocking before a grand entrance is not something he is privy to.

I'm fully dressed, but it wouldn't matter. I couldn't care less if he sees me naked. But at night, when I'm more than likely to engage in a little *me* time, my door remains locked.

His gaze sweeps over my attire, slow moving and encouraging. He plops down on the bed. "You look hot to trot. What shoes are you wearing with that?"

"Those." I point to the Steve Madden's on the floor by the closet.

Okay, okay, so I seriously need to return them to Dylan. And I will.

Next week.

"Earrings?"

I hold up the silver hoops I've set out for tonight.

"Lip gloss or lipstick?"

I pull the tube of MAC's Vegas Volt out of my makeup bag and wiggle it in the air. Joey nods approvingly.

"What's this?" he asks, plucking the small gift bag off my night table.

Shit.

I move like lightning, snatching it from him before he has a chance to peer inside.

He stares at me, startled. "Jesus. What the hell?"

Clutching the bag against my chest, I hurriedly explain, "It's nothing. It's a joke between me and Mason. You wouldn't get it. Stop snooping around my room and asking me a thousand questions. God."

I toss the bag on top of the dresser.

My breaths come hurried, air moving in and out of my lungs with desperation. I probably look psychotic.

Maybe he won't notice? He's not that perceptive, is he?

"Mm." Joey lays out on the bed, tucking his hands behind his head and

crossing his bare feet at the ankles.

He looks positively delighted.

He noticed.

“Interesting. So you and Mason have inside jokes already? After only knowing each other for five days and one earth-shattering orgasm? Seems a bit fast, don’t you think?”

I roll my eyes, sliding one earring through my ear and moving on to the next.

Earth-shattering? I never said it was earth-shattering.

It was so fucking earth-shattering.

I could ride that man’s long, thick fingers every day and twice on Sundays.

“Do you want to keep him, Brooke?”

My head whips right. *Keep him? Is that what he just said?*

“Are you high right now? Do we have weed in this condo I’m not aware of?” I step closer, my voice lowering as my eyes shift around the room. “No, seriously, do we? I could really use some.”

A few hits would surely mellow me out a little.

Of course, if I knew what to expect tonight, I wouldn’t be so wound up and wired. Sex doesn’t make me nervous. I own that shit. I can work it in my sleep if I have to. But dinner and the unknown with a man who would rather talk than fuck?

What am I supposed to do with that? How am I supposed to prepare for *that*?

Joey laughs under his breath. “When was your last actual boyfriend, Brooke? College?”

“High school,” I answer, picking at my thumb nail. “I played the field in college. Literally. I think I was one defender short of bedding the entire lacrosse team.”

Joey punches his fist into the air. “Go Blue Demons.”

“Why?” I stick my hand on my hip. Joey trains his eyes on the ceiling, obviously avoiding.

“Mason isn’t my boyfriend, Joey. I’m not in a relationship with this guy.”

He wiggles his body, settling between two pillows. “Then what are you doing spending time with him?”

“Hello!” I slap my thigh.

What, has he suddenly been living under a rock? He knows exactly why.

“I’m trying to have sex with him! In order to do that, I have to talk to the guy a little. Share some personal shit. Build a friendship. Then, and my God, will this be so worth it, I get to feast on that glorious appendage I’m actually concerned might not fit inside me.”

“Shut up,” Joey spits, grimacing. “How many dicks have you had? There’s no way you aren’t well prepared for a third leg.”

“Joey.”

I hold my hands out, measuring a very, *very* impressive distance between the two.

My mind becomes flooded with flashbacks, images of Mason working that gorgeous piece of flesh behind a curtain of water and steam.

He was so raw in that moment. Stripped down to the point of depravity as he sought his release. As he pursued it with urgency. Beautiful. God, he was beautiful standing there, the muscles of his back and shoulder working simultaneously. His head bowed as he slowly unraveled. The sound of skin moving over skin.

I wanted to watch him come.

I wanted to *feel* him come.

I still do. Now, maybe even more. I’m like a child who has been told they can’t have any candy.

Fuck that. I want that candy.

In my mouth.

Joey slowly sits up, mouth falling open, drool pooling on his tongue. He

looks from my hands to my face, back to my hands again.

“You’re exaggerating.”

“I would never.”

“He’s *that* big? How is he walking?”

My phone beeps on the dresser. I shrug, turning around and padding across the room.

“How the hell do I know how you boys manage to tuck and move?” I ask, swiping the phone and staring at the unknown number glowing on my screen.

“Shit. You might want to pop some Ibuprofen before you go down that road, or sit on an icepack. Numb it up a little. I’ve heard about cases where you ladies rip something. That can’t be pretty.”

I chuckle at Joey, storing away his advice because I may seriously need to consider some sort of preparation when that time comes. I’ve been with my fair-share of well-equipped men. I’ve had a few surprise me when that zipper comes down. But Mason . . .

He might take the cake on this one.

Oo, cake. I’ll definitely be ordering dessert tonight.

I move my thumb over the screen, bringing up the text message.

Unknown: Hello, gorgeous. Do you want me to come up?

I slowly lift my eyes to Joey.

He’s sitting on the edge of the bed, giving me a look that tells me exactly who gave Mason my phone number.

Why am I surprised?

He stands, stretching his arms above him. “He was adorable asking for it,” he mumbles before exiting the room.

Adorable. I’m sure. Lots of ‘yeahs’. Numbahh. Even I would’ve given it to him once he started talking.

I program Mason’s number into my phone and quickly type my response.

Me: Stalker. Do you know my blood type yet?

Mason: Working on it. Give me a few more days.

I chuckle softly.

Mason: What's your condo number? I'll come up. I feel like a tosser waiting for you out here.

Me: I bet you look sexy. A sexy tosser is better than a regular one, right?

Mason: Either way I'm an asshole.

Me: Why?

Mason: This is a date. I should come to your door. Walk you out.

I step into my heels, typing with one hand.

Me: Relax. I'll be out in a second.

Lord, the manners on this guy. Is he always like this?

The last time I was picked up at my door for a date was prom. Most guys are too busy tuning to their favorite Pandora station to bother getting out of their vehicles. Or, I don't give them the opportunity and insist on meeting them out somewhere.

The end of the night though, that's a different story.

Men will almost always walk a woman to their door. They want that invite inside. The open door offer of sex.

"I had a lovely evening. Would you like to see my mattress? It's a feather-top."

Sticking my phone into my clutch, I grab the gift bag and exit the bedroom.

Joey is standing in the kitchen, watching Billy cook something on the stove-top, his chin resting on Billy's shoulder, his arms tightly curled around his waist.

Cute. They're so domestic.

They both turn their heads at the sound of my entrance.

“You look hot, Brooke. Where are you and Mason going? Do you know?” Billy holds a spatula in one hand. His other arm wraps around Joey’s back.

I keep moving toward the door. I feel like I’m on autopilot.

“No idea. Somewhere with food. Hopefully a place that serves up a little under the tablecloth action.”

God, wouldn’t that be fantastic? A repeat of the other night as an appetizer. Mason’s massive cock for dessert.

It’s a wonder I’m not sprinting out of the building.

I wave a hand over my head. “Don’t wait up!”

The door closes behind me. I take the elevator down to the bottom floor and push through the revolving door.

Mason is parked at the curb, his tall frame leaning against his car. He’s dressed in dark jeans and a black fitted shirt with a collar. His hair is wet, a few curls spilling onto his forehead. The rest is haphazardly combed back.

He straightens when he sees me.

As I move closer, I can see that he’s shaven. His smooth, chiseled jaw is free of stubble.

He looks younger.

He looks edible.

He closes the distance between us with two long strides.

I want him to grab me and kiss me. I want him to throw me down and man-handle me in front of anyone and everyone.

Tear my clothes. Take me with desperation. Press those dirty words he likes to spill against the soft skin of my thighs.

Instead, with what has to be the sweetest smile I have ever seen, he bends and lightly brushes his lips against my cheek.

“You look beautiful, Brooke.”

I inhale a lungful of his cologne before he leans away.

Yum.

With the hand holding my clutch, I motion in front of me. “Thank you. I like this get-up you got going on. You clean up nice.”

His smile gentles. “Shall we?”

We move together across the sidewalk, his hand resting lightly on my lower back. He opens the door for me and I climb inside.

“What’s that?” he asks, poking a finger at the gift bag in my lap after he settles in his seat.

I look down at the top of the bag. A fuzzy ear peeks out between tissue paper.

Oh, my God. What am I doing? What grown man wants something like this?

I quickly stow it on the floor by my feet. “It’s stupid. Sorry. I . . . I was out, and I saw it and I wasn’t thinking and bought the damn thing. But now I’m realizing how dumb it is.”

“Can I have it?”

“What?” I turn my head. His hand is outstretched. Did he not hear me?

“Really, Mason, it’s stupid. You’ll think it’s stupid.”

“Did you buy it for me?”

“Yes.”

“Well . . . give it up then. It’s mine, isn’t it?”

He doesn’t drop his hand. It hangs in the air between us as he moves his attention between my face and the bag he could very easily grab if he wanted. It’s within his reach.

But he waits for me to pick it up and pass it to him.

I look straight ahead at the busy street. No need to watch this humiliation unfold.

Tissue paper rustles as he digs into the bag.

My hands knot together in my lap. “I saw it and it made me laugh. You don’t have to keep it. Really. I think I still have the receipt somewhere in my

room.”

A muffled, barely audible chuckle comes from my left.

“My nemesis. We meet again.”

I turn my head and watch Mason study the small stuffed koala with engrossed curiosity. He probably thinks I’m strange for giving him a children’s toy.

I am! He’s not a toddler. Why did I think this was a good idea?

I want to look away. I need to before I end up fleeing the vehicle, but I can’t stop watching him stare at this thing as if he’s actually charmed by it.

He runs his hand over the fur between the ears, chuckles again, then pats it gently on the head.

We lock eyes.

“It’s dumb,” I tell him.

“It’s not.”

“You don’t have to keep it.”

“I’m going to keep it.”

He sets the bag and koala on the floor behind my seat, then captures my lips in a fleeting kiss. “Thank you,” he murmurs against my mouth before leaning back.

“Mm. Yeah, sure.”

My shoulders drop with a heavy sigh as we pull away from the curb. I didn’t realize how tense I was during that inspection.

Serves me right.

Mason stares straight ahead while he drives, keeping one hand on the wheel and the other on the console between us. “Do you like Italian food? I saw this spot the other day when I was driving around. Giovanni’s. You ever been?”

I search my memory. The name doesn’t sound familiar. “No, I don’t think so. But I like all food. You really can’t screw up here.”

He reaches for my hand, confidently holding it between us.

The conversation with Joey in my bedroom from minutes ago plays back in my mind. Him, accusing me of dating Mason. The underlying implication that he's my boyfriend. The ridiculous 'do you want to keep him' question.

My stomach clenches.

I pull my hand away and go for the stereo, turning up the volume. A song I don't recognize fills the car. The guy sings about love and wanting. I hate it immediately. I go through all of Mason's pre-programmed stations, trying to find something I like, but also, keeping my hand busy and not idle in my lap.

"You all right?"

I give him a quick glance. His eyes are serious. "Yeah . . . yeah, I just wanted to listen to something. I like background noise. I always have music playing in my car when I drive. It's comforting."

He seems satisfied with that explanation and turns back to the road ahead.

"Is the restaurant far from here?"

If it's more than a few blocks away, I'm totally screwed. I'll look like I'm having a nervous breakdown if I scroll through stations for more than a minute. Maybe I can adjust his audio settings? The bass does seem a bit overpowering.

"Ten minutes," he replies.

Shit.

I adjust the balance, the treble and base settings. I change the station again when a song by The Fray seeps through the speakers.

I do not need to hear their shit right now.

Mason's hand circles my wrist after a few minutes of this madness. "Why do you keep fading the music to the front or rear speakers only? What are you doing?"

I hesitate responding. I'm a horrible liar.

"Um, just . . . I'm just trying to give you the best listening experience. Relax. I know what I'm doing."

I have no idea what I'm doing.

“Brooke.”

We stop at a red light. I look over at Mason, and suddenly feel guilty for pulling away from him. He doesn't look angry, or annoyed, or even like a person who just witnessed an act of insanity.

His eyes are tender, full of understanding.

I feel like I want to crawl under my seat and hide. I can't remember the last time I felt this uneasy.

“I don't have to hold your hand,” he tells me, smiling ever so slightly. “I wanted to, but I don't have to. You can go easy on my audio settings. It's okay. Really.” He moves my hand back to my lap and releases me, only to rest his hand on my thigh. “But, I do want to touch you somehow while I drive. Just a little.” He gazes at my body. “God, you look incredible. I'm trying to be decent and not throw you in the back, but it's bloody torture with you in this skirt.” He slides his hand a bit higher, inching it closer to the apex of my thighs.

Throw me in the back? Yes! I want that! Screw decency!

I suppress a moan, trapping it on my tongue. I don't want to sound too anxious, even though I'm close to jerking the wheel and pulling us off the road, which will in turn free him up to focus solely on me.

He gives my thigh a gentle squeeze. My toes curl. Desire blooms low in my belly.

“Did you wear this so I could slide my hand between your legs? I think you did. I think you wanted to drive me a little mad, yeah?”

I watch the path his hand is taking. “Yeass,” I breathe. My mouth falls open.

Yeass? Did I really just combine yeah and yes? *Think before you speak, Brooke!*

He chuckles as the car rolls forward.

I try and spread my legs, grant him access, ease the ache I'm feeling that's now pulsing with a demanding rhythm, but my legs are pinned

together, restricted by the form-fitting motherfucking material of my bloody skirt.

I grunt in frustration, until I remember the use of my own hands.

Do I mind sitting bare-assed in Mason's vehicle? Nope. Not one damn bit. And now would be the worst possible time to start feeling shameful about anything.

I grip the hem of my skirt and ease it up my legs. I'm expecting Mason to dive right in, but before I can reveal the fact that I'm going commando under this thing, he slides his hand in the opposite direction it needs to be going and thwarts my progress, smoothing out my skirt and resting his hand back on my thigh, closer to my knee, far, far away from where I need him.

"What? Come on. You can't be serious." I turn my head. His hand goes stiff when I try and pry it off my leg. "Give me your hand. I want to hold it."

His profile lifts as he stares ahead at the road. "Yeah? You want to hold it?"

"Yes."

"With what? That sweet little cunt you were just trying to show me?"

I gape at him. *Good Lord. Did he just say . . .*

That accent, paired with anything even remotely filthy is enough to put me in the record books as the first woman in history to ever have an orgasm without any touching. I am now officially the wettest I have ever been in my entire life. No panties? What a dumbass decision. If I get up and there is a damp spot on this seat, I'm never showing my face around this man again.

He briefly looks at me. "Well?"

I shoot him a steely look. "You have no proof of that. Maybe I just remembered how much I liked holding your hand . . . with my hand, pervert. Okay? Maybe I miss it."

He squeezes my thigh. "I think I'm going to keep it here. I like it here."

I slump back against the seat like a child on the brink of a tantrum. "Fine. I like it there too, so . . . whatever. Do what you want. I don't care."

I drown out his laugh by cranking up the volume on the stereo again.



By the time we park and walk to the restaurant, everything south of my waist seems to be back in check. I'm no longer ready or willing to beg for some sort of physical contact. And fuck! I should be the one driving him crazy with lust. Teasing him. Making him so fucking hard he can't see straight.

Well, the night is young, and I plan on regaining some of my feminine power and working him up. If he thinks he's getting through this meal without getting an erection, he's sorely mistaken.

Giovanni's is a dimly lit restaurant in the heart of the city. I was right, I've never been here, and I think that's because it is a lot fancier than any place I'm used to dining at. Mason checks us in under our reservation while I admire a piece of artwork on the wall. My nephew can manipulate a paint brush and create something similar. Three colors congregating in one messy swirl. I'm betting this thing costs more than the rent I couldn't afford in my old apartment.

We're seated at a table draped with a white, crisp linen by a large window. A small vase containing a beautiful arrangement of flowers sits in the center, which Mason quickly slides to the side so that we can see each other better.

I admire the mural painted on the ceiling. The chandelier lighting. The attire of the wait staff.

"This might be the nicest restaurant I've ever been to. Are you trying to get laid?"

Mason glances up from his menu. I immediately lose the smirk when he doesn't mirror my playfulness.

Shit.

A deep frown settles between his brows. He looks put off. "No. I thought it looked nice. I wanted to take you here the moment I saw it." He pauses, leaning back in his chair. "I'm curious, Brooke. Do you always go out to eat

with the expectation of sex afterwards? Do you never just sit and talk with someone? Learn about them?”

My face heats. I swear the temperature in the room spikes ten degrees in this moment.

Hello, mouth? Let me introduce you to my foot. Go ahead and eat it. You’ll be doing me a solid favor.

I grab my menu and flip it open. My gaze lowers. “No. Of course not. I was just making a joke. I’ve never been anywhere this nice before. I think the atmosphere is making me nervous or something.”

Or, its you. The way you look at me. The things you say. That could be it.

He taps his menu against mine.

Our eyes meet, and the moment he smiles, maybe a bit apologetically, I forget all about my secret agenda to tease him and get him hard underneath this table. The way Mason is looking at me . . . it’s sweet, and candid, and maybe I’ve never had a man take me to dinner without the expectation of sex, but I don’t want to admit that, and I’m also bizarrely happy Mason isn’t doing this for that same reason. I no longer want to take away from the conversation or anything else this dinner will entail.

And I also don’t want to think about how strangely okay I am with that revelation.

He jerks his chin, motioning for me to pick out my dish.

I resume looking at the menu, really focusing in on the words in front of me for the first time since I opened it. Everything is in Italian. Even the drinks.

What the . . .

My gaze travels the length of the menu, right, then back to the left. My eyes narrow. I lean closer. I have no idea what I’m reading. Well, not reading. Reading implies understanding, and that’s definitely not what’s happening here. It’s more of a guessing game, really. Maybe when the waiter arrives I can just point to the cheapest entrée and hope for the best?

Mason must sense my confusion. I'm sure it's obvious, I'm close to flipping this thing upside down and taking a go at it that way. Or pulling up Google translations on my iPhone. But before I have a chance to do any of that, my menu is stripped out of my hands.

"Hey," I protest.

Mason smiles, almost wickedly, folding the menu in front of him. "What do you like? Pasta? Seafood? Do you want a chicken dish?"

I shoot him a puzzled look. "Um . . . yeah, sure, I like pasta and seafood. I like pretty much anything except for eggplant."

The waiter arrives at our table. I sit back in my chair and watch, stunned, as Mason, who up until this moment was already killing me with his accent, fires off our orders in perfect Italian.

Holy. Fuck.

There's no stutter, no uncertain pause as he trips over a word or two. It's beautifully fluent, hot as Hell, and I'm melting in my seat at this surprising man across from me.

Seriously? Is there anything he's not amazing at?

Yoga. Being a decent person. Consuming large quantities of treats and still managing to look like a sex God.

The waiter steps away. I pry my mouth off the floor.

"You're not really playing fair," I say after I collect myself.

Mason looks at me thoughtfully, concealing his possible understanding of what I'm referring to. "What do you mean?"

"You just completely blew me away by speaking Italian. I was not expecting that."

He limply shrugs.

No big deal. Mastering a language is apparently second nature to this guy.

He runs his finger over the edge of his perfectly folded napkin. "I was a bored kid. My oldest sister visited Italy one summer, and I got into her language books she left behind. I spoke it better than she did by the time she

got back.”

Our drinks arrive, and I gulp two mouthfuls of wine before I can ask my next question.

“You taught yourself another language? How old were you?”

“Fifteen.”

“Fifteen? Mason, that’s insane,” I chuckle.

He snickers, picking his own glass up for a taste. “Is it?”

“Yes. Do you know what I was doing when I was fifteen? My entire world revolved around cheerleading and boys. I hated school. You couldn’t pay me to learn a language. That is . . .” I pause, leaning back in my seat.

Who is this guy?

“That’s amazing. You are amazing.”

He looks across the table, staring at me with an unreadable expression, stretching out the silence between us by holding up his finger when I open my mouth to speak.

My lips pinch together. I fidget with my hands in my lap, counting the seconds. I hate silence. I especially hate it when I have absolutely no idea what the other person is thinking.

And Mason is a vault right now. He’s not giving anything away.

Finally, after swallowing a mouthful of wine, he speaks. “Sorry. I have no idea what all you just said. I stopped listening after you mentioned something about you being a cheerleader. And then I spent all that time just now picturing it.”

Heat burns across my face. “Ah, you like that, do ya?”

He nods.

“I did it through college. I was an all-star.”

“Do you still have the uniform?” he asks above his glass.

Yes.

“Maybe.”

“You should wear it for me sometime.”

YES.

“Maybe.”

Now Mason is the one smirking, but this smirk is dangerous. One hundred percent alluring. A hunter who doesn't need to chase his prey. They come walking right over to him, ready to hand over their destiny without question. Without pause.

I would run at him. I am talking a full-blown sprint. There would be no walking in his direction.

“Do you like to camp?”

His rapid change of subject rips my mind out of the gutter. I had been thinking about sitting on that smirk of his.

I shake my head through a laugh. “Camp? Seriously? As in sleeping outdoors with bugs and wild animals? No showers. No toilets. Just you and nature? Is that what you're talking about?”

He smiles. “That's the textbook definition of camping, yes.”

“Then no. Not at all. But you know what I do like? Air conditioning. Civilization. Beds. I love beds.”

“Beds are good.”

I rest my chin on my hand. “Aren't they? God, they're so good. I'm not restricted to beds though. I can work with anything.”

Mason lifts an eyebrow.

I can go into detail, right now, about how I'd like to explore beds and *anything* with Mason, but his line of questioning intrigues me. Of course, he looks like Mr. Nature-lover. I'm sure he is very fond of camping. Hiking. Saving the world one rainforest at a time.

“Let me guess. You're an avid camper.”

He takes another sip of his wine, then nods. “I enjoy it. I haven't been since I lived out in Texas, but I would love to spend a weekend outdoors with you.”

Well, that's completely unexpected. And insane.

I throw my head back with a laugh. Tears brim my eyes. “Sorry but . . . yeah, there’s no way I’m sleeping outside. It’s not happening. I don’t do bugs, Mason. I don’t have any desire to sleep on the ground where a snake can work it’s slimy way into my tent and strangle me to death.”

His eyes flash with amusement. “How big is this snake?”

Nice. Perfect set up.

I hesitate responding, tilting my head, watching as he catches up to my filthy mind. His eyes train on my lips, move lower down the line of my neck, then snap back up as if he’s just been awakened from a trance.

I love these moments when I catch him staring at me like this. As if he’s fighting the biggest temptation of his life by not touching me.

Fuck though, touch me! This doesn’t need to be a struggle for you!

He clears his throat. “You’d like it with me,” he states confidently. “I’d protect you from bugs and the snakes you *don’t* want around. Trust me. You’d have fun, yeah? We’d lay out under the stars. Share a sleeping bag.”

“I’m listening.”

“That interest you?”

“Sharing a sleeping bag? Tightly pressed together? Yes. Do you sleep naked?”

He doesn’t answer that question. Just slowly grins at me. “Do you?”

I match his expression, only, I can’t simply teeter the line of flirtation. I jump right over it.

I lean forward, running my hand down my leg, angling my body down the slightest bit until Mason takes notice of my cleavage. I play with the chain hanging around my neck, which just so happens to tickle between my breasts. He doesn’t remove his gaze, and my nipples quickly harden under his scrutiny. Then I slowly sit back, crossing my one leg over the other, waiting until he looks up at me before I leisurely raise my glass to my lips and taste my wine. His eyes flare with desire as my tongue licks the residue from the corner of my mouth.

The longer we stare at each other, the wetter I become.

I never realized how sexy silence can be. How hot I could get from unspoken words, or the idea of something as personal as someone's sleeping habits.

Boxers, I decide. He looks like a boxers guy. No shirt. His lean body modestly concealed, stretching against the sheet.

I subtly tug at the bottom of my shirt below the table. My breasts swell. More skin is revealed.

Mason clears his throat.

I have no idea if he is growing hard in his jeans, until he drops a hand to his lap and inhales sharply through his nose.

My smile broadens. His disappears entirely.

But just like that, the aura around him shifts. All signs of a man starving to throw me on top of this table and feast vanishes the second our plates arrive.

I glare at the waiter. *Can you let the chef know his promptness is annoying?*

He merely smiles at my silent instruction, murmurs something in Italian, and steps away.

I look down at the dish placed in front of me. Seafood pasta, with scallops and shrimp over a bed of linguini. Mason's plate has a lobster tail, a generous cut of steak, and some greens on the side.

Everything looks incredible. I was set on climaxing before I dined but I suppose it can wait.

I twirl some pasta onto my fork and bring it up to my mouth.

"I always sleep naked, Brooke," Mason mumbles quietly.

I nearly drop my fork.

Oh, you gorgeous bastard.

He laughs around his bite of steak as our eyes meet. He looks delighted, reveling in my reaction and clearly thinking he's won this round.

Did I mention how much I love a little friendly competition?

I shoot him my sweetest, most innocent smile as my mind begins calculating my next move.

Silly man. You have no idea who you're up against.



MASON

Dinner with Brooke is . . . interesting, to say the least.

I've never watched a woman so completely focused on my undoing before. So casually sexual with every little movement and shift of her body. Fucking brilliant, on her part. I'm finding it hard to concentrate, which I believe is her every intention. She's had to repeat a question or two. My voice has grown a bit thick at times, leading me to tug at my already unbuttoned collar. I've thought about every way I could possibly get her off at this restaurant, how concealed I would be if I were to crawl under this table and feel her orgasm against my tongue. After thorough investigation of the white cloth stopping well off the floor, my horny arse remains planted in my chair.

What she's doing, it's calculated, and fucking torture not to react to. I can hide my erection but I can't keep that bloody thing under control. Even the placement of her hands while I speak of my classes from earlier today is suggestive.

"I think I've established a good client base," I tell her, tossing my napkin on the table. "I'm seeing some familiar faces come around now and pop in again. That's encouraging. I was worried about that."

Her fingers brush against the smooth dip between her collarbones, then

trail lower, openly teasing the swell of her tits.

Fuck. What I wouldn't give to bury my face in there.

She grins. "I don't know why you were worried. I hate exercising and enjoyed your class. Not just the view either."

Her voice remains completely neutral, friendly, delightfully engaged in this conversation. That's the only thing about her that isn't screaming for me to bend her over that chair she's sitting in and fuck her senseless.

I discreetly adjust my cock, again. I'm surprised I'm still able to form coherent responses at this point. There can't be much blood flow still heading to my brain.

"You should come to another one," I suggest, keeping my hand in my lap, a smile tugging the corner of my mouth.

Her eyes dance with mischief. She drinks the last of her wine. "That's a fantastic idea. I would love to *come*."

And there's that. So much for innocent banter. I walked her and my throbbing cock right into that one.

Brooke chuckles, arching her back to gather her hair over one shoulder, pressing her chest forward, watching me watch her, because unless this building caught on fire right now I'm not looking anywhere else.

"How old are you?"

My eyes snap up to hers. I almost laugh. She goes from suggesting I get her off to verifying my age? How adorably odd.

"Twenty-nine. You?"

"Guess."

This time, I do laugh, nodding at the waiter as he returns with my credit card and slip to sign. I shake my head. "I have seven sisters, Brooke. I know better than to guess a woman's age, and I rather like my testicles. How about you just tell me."

"Oh, come on," she chides. "Aim low."

"Sixteen."

“What?” She clamps a hand to her mouth, muffling her laughter.

I sit back in my chair after signing the slip, watching the vibrant glow move over her cheeks as she slowly eases her hand away.

“Be serious.” She pinches her lips together, fighting the playful smile threatening.

I shrug, standing and offering her my hand. “You said guess. I did. Now, please fill me in on your actual age before I start feeling like a pedo.”

She allows me to help her to her feet and we move together through the restaurant. Her elbow gently connects with my side. “Mm. Nah. I rather like you squirmy and nervous like this. Shame on you for taking out a minor and shoving booze in her face.”

“Brooke,” I press.

“Really, Mason. What will my parents say?”

We step outside and I freeze on the footpath. She spins around to look at me.

I reach for my keys, shrugging. “All right then. I was planning on driving around and finding a dark spot so I could plant my face between your legs. But, I suppose that’s off now. I should get you home. It’s probably past your curfew and I’m not interested in finding out what prison is like.”

“Twenty-five.” She grabs my wrist, tugging me closer until we’re chest to chest, her breaths suddenly coming hurried. “I’m twenty-five. Legal. Very much a fan of dark spaces and heads between my legs. Yours, specifically. I’m sure it looks lovely down there.” Her body vibrates with a quick burst of laughter.

As I slide my hands to her hips, she keeps her head down, staring at my chest, my neck, almost bashfully trying to avoid my eyes while her hands tease the bottom of my shirt.

I like her like this, gentled, and what seems to be a bit unconventional for her. I like imagining that Brooke’s only been this way with me, and that maybe I make her feel a bit undone and out of sorts, unsure of what’s

possibly happening between us.

I bend to kiss her forehead. “Shall we find that spot then? I want your taste in my throat.”

She seems to weave a bit on her feet, then mumbles a hoarse, “yes,” taking my hand and leading me down the footpath.

I slowly slide my fingers between hers as we pass a few shops, and my Denali. *Interesting.* “Have something in mind?” I ask.

She seems on a mission to get me somewhere specific. Determination leading her, along with desire.

Her shoulder jerks the slightest bit. “Maybe.”

She smiles at me. The moonlight slides across her face, a shadow pooling in her dimple.

“I was here a few months ago, down in this part of the city with Dylan and everyone. Juls and her kids were there. Anyway, we took them to this place down the street a bit and I’d like to go there with you.”

“Yeah?”

I can’t hide the delighted lift in my voice, the overwhelming warmth that seems to spread up my spine.

This seems pretty personal for her. I *want* personal with Brooke. Every tiny detail of her life, bottled up and given to me.

“It’s not anything special.”

And there goes that glorious feeling. I run a quick hand through my hair.

Right, mate. Just relax on her a bit.

She clears her throat. “It’s funny. When I was here before and used this thing I’m about to take you to, my mind was nowhere near the gutter. I mean, gross. There were kids around. That’s pushing it even for me. But now?” She shakes her head, making a soft tsk sound as we cross the street. “Full-on filth. I’m almost a little nervous about this.”

I straighten with intrigue, pulling her closer so I can slide my hand around her waist, so she can tuck against my side and I can feel the quick flutter of

her heart against my ribs.

I press my lips to her hair. She smells like honey and vanilla.

“Sweet Brooke. I like you nervous. You get very honest with me.”

Her head tilts up, brows pinched together. “What? When have I ever been nervous with you?”

She thinks I miss it, the way she peels back a layer of that impetuous exterior of hers to take a breath and slow down. The wide eyed look she seems to give herself, not me, confused and a bit cautious when I reach for her hand or get caught simply gazing at her. It’s fleeting, yes. These aren’t obvious moments with Brooke and she recovers from them quickly, but I see them.

My fingers splay along her hip. “The alley I kissed you in. Your shop practically every time I walk in there, more so the first time though. You seemed a bit flushed, yeah?” I smile at her. “I was too. I felt that kiss the entire day.”

Her lips part, her eyes drop to my mouth. “Yeah,” she says on a rushed exhale.

Not a question. She isn’t asking me if I’m telling the truth, which I sure as fuck am. I’m honestly not sure if I’ve stopped feeling that kiss, or if I will.

She’s agreeing with me. Another layer is exposed, and I want to keep her like this, open and unconcerned with revealing too much, too soon, too fast. I want her letting go and letting me have her secrets, being perfectly unashamed and trusting that I’ll not only like every honest moment she gives me, I’ll protect them for her.

But before I can ask her to elaborate on that single perfect word, Brooke presses her hand against my chest, halting our progression.

“This is it.”

I look up at the building we’ve stopped in front of. The large sign set off in neon colors and strobe lights. The hordes of children scurrying in and out of the door with tickets and carnival prizes.

This is it? This is what she has in mind? I never would've guessed anything close to this.

I smile at Brooke, my hand circling around her back. "Are we playing skee-ball, gorgeous? I must warn you, I'm a bit competitive. I've never believed in letting a lady win simply because she's a lady. Nothing honest in that."

She stands on her toes, getting as close to my face as she can, her small hand sliding over my elbow to my bicep. "I'm going to let you in on a little secret, Mason," she murmurs, her breath hot and hungry against my jaw.

I smirk, tilting my head down. "Yeah? What's that?"

"I'm not a lady. Not even close. And I'm about to show you why." She grabs my hand and eagerly tugs me inside the arcade.

The large space is dark and noisy, awarding sounds from machines mixing with the heavily bassed music pumping through the speakers. Children rush past us, alive with laughter and exuberance. Parents are lined up against the wall engaging each other in conversation while keeping an eye out.

I look around the room. I'm betting aside from the staff, Brooke and I are the only adults in this place who aren't here to chaperone.

What the hell does she have in mind bringing me here?

She leads me to the back of the room and down a long hallway. A young bloke wearing a name-tag steps through a doorway and moves in our direction, nodding at me before asking Brooke if she needs help with anything.

"Bathrooms," she more states than asks, alluding to her knowledge of their location. He takes her meaning and keeps moving in the opposite direction we head in.

The room breaks open. I spot the two doors indicating our destination, I veer right. Brooke goes left.

"This way." She curls a finger, beckoning me to follow.

I glance at the signs on the doors. Frowning, I make my way to her. “No toilets? I’m a bit lost here, Brooke. What are we doing?”

She smiles at me over her shoulder, waving her hand floppily in the air. “Bathrooms are a bit played-out, don’t you think? Or toilets. Whatever you want to call them. Everyone fools around in bathrooms. I’m sure you have.”

“No,” I admit, a bit shocked at her suggestion. “Public facilities that probably aren’t cleaned often enough? Am I missing the appeal?”

We stop just outside a small, nearly pitch-black room. Her eyes widen as she looks up at me. “Shut up. You’ve never done anything sexual in a bathroom before?”

I shake my head.

“Not even a little h* between mates?”

“Bloody hell.” I lean back, searching her face, which is now alive with amusement. “A good wank between mates? Is that something you’ve witnessed in a toilet? ‘Cause I sure as fuck haven’t.”

She giggles, dropping her head against my arm. “Well, I do live with two men. There’s a lot of wanking going on in that condo. Semen flying everywhere. It’s like a minefield getting from my room to the kitchen.”

“Excuse me?”

What the fuck?

I’ve met both of Brooke’s roommates. Nice blokes. Seem to be very much in love and fully committed to each other, which I assume means they aren’t into sharing. But if I am way off here and they walk around whipping their cocks out around her, I’m going to have a major fucking problem with both of them.

Her laugh blooms to something louder, her small body vibrating against mine. She brushes her lips against my neck. “You seem worried. I’m kidding, mostly. Joey is terribly unashamed, much like myself, but Billy locks that bedroom door and keeps his private life very private. I haven’t seen anything. Only heard.”

“When are you moving out again?” I bend to kiss her. “Tomorrow?”

She rolls her eyes and pulls away, stepping into the room and swiping her hand along the wall. A light turns on in the corner. I follow her inside what appears to be another gaming room. Table games. Foosball, air hockey, pool. I’m shocked there aren’t any kids back here. I know this is where I would be if I were their age.

“Apparently you can only rent out this room for birthday parties and stuff. It’s not available to the people just here for the arcade. That’s why they keep it separate,” Brooke answers the silent questions circling in my head as she walks around the tables.

I take a moment to watch her.

Dark hair curling down her back. That tight black skirt, showing off her slim waist and perfect fucking arse. She turns to face me and I slowly lift my eyes, catching her smirk, knowing she’s caught me staring at her and hardly caring. I think she rather likes it when I do that.

“Do you know what this is?” With a quick hand, she pushes back the red curtain of the photo booth she’s stopped at in the back corner, then sticks that same hand to her hip. “I mean, do they have these in Australia or is this strictly an awesome American thing, like setting off fireworks on July fourth?”

With an intrigued smile, I step forward. “Ah, your pull from those bloody Poms. I’ll celebrate that.”

She tilts her head adorably. “Poms?”

“English. Brits. And of course we have photo booths. I believe they are quite popular at weddings and parties, yeah? People take pictures with silly props and what not.”

“Sometimes.”

I reach her, touching the smooth skin of her arm with the back of my fingers. My smile gentles. “What are we doing here, Brooke? Do you want to take photos with me?”

Something sharp gathers in the center of my chest, spreading down my limbs and prickling in my scalp. Is it possible she wants a keepsake from our night together? A piece she can store away and slowly build on?

The evidence of the beginning . . .

Fuck, it's staggering how badly I want it. How affected I am. She isn't the only one feeling out of sorts here.

Brooke steps inside the booth, which seems to be much larger than any of the ones I have ever seen before. I'm guessing you can fit groups of people in here instead of just one or two. Perfect for a large party of kids, I suppose.

Facing me, the corner of her mouth lightly pulls into a smile. "It's a dark spot. I'm hoping there's enough going on out there to keep the staff occupied for a bit." She holds out her hand to me. I don't miss the slight tremble in it. "I need ones. Got any?"

I stare at her, wondering if she's about to do something she's possibly never done before. If maybe this fresh, charmingly sexual woman wants to give me one of her firsts.

I'll take it.

I dig into my wallet and hand her a few bills. When I move to step inside with her, she presses against my chest, keeping me out.

"Watch for your photos. There." She nods at the slot on the outside panel.

I give her a wary look, but ultimately agree to this. Maybe she wants to give me photos of herself first before we take any together.

Too fucking right. I would love photos of Brooke.

I step back with a quick jerk of my chin. "All right."

The curtain is drawn. It stops a short distance from the bottom of the booth, completely obstructing my view of Brooke. I move to the side and press my back against the panel, waiting. A soft shuffling sound comes from behind the curtain, followed by a click, the shutter of the lens. Three more follow between long seconds, and I imagine her changing her pose, going from something innocent and playful to something a bit silly. Brief flashes of

white light streak across the tile floor at my feet. I cross my arms over my chest, only to push away from the panel when I hear something slide into the slot behind me.

I pick up the sheet of photos.

Good God. Holy . . .

“*Fuck*,” I groan, my cock quickly lengthening as I stare at the four shots of Brooke; topless, pinching her rose colored nipples, licking and sucking the skin of her tits. Her pretty little arse turned toward the camera in the bottom shots while she fucks her pussy with two fingers. Over her shoulder, her eyes are round with abandon. Feverish and frenzied. Her red lips parted with a sigh or a moan.

She’s giving me this. This gorgeous girl is giving me images of her body to not only admire, but to keep and stare at for later, stroke my cock to, do what I want with.

I wrench the curtain open and step inside, dropping the sheet of photos on the bench and grabbing her face after I conceal us.

She’s still topless. Her skirt is still gathered at her waist, and she’s panting, breathless from her own touch.

I slide my mouth against hers. “Jesus Christ, Brooke. You’re trying to kill me, yeah? You sweet fucking thing.” She answers with a moan as I kiss her jaw and suck on the skin beneath her ear. Sugar sticks to my tongue. Gripping her arse in my hands, I groan against her neck. “You taste so fucking good. Like one of those bloody cupcakes you make.”

“It’s my body lotion. Vanilla cake batter. It’s edible.”

“Fuck. Don’t tell me that.” My groin throbs against her belly. I pinch my eyes shut.

Stay focused, mate. You don’t want to rush with her.

Brooke giggles against my ear. “Why not? I’m wearing it for you. Lick away.”

I lean back and bring her hand to my mouth, drawing on the tips of her

fingers.

“Mason,” she whispers, moving in to kiss me, sucking her taste off my tongue. Pressing, pressing, harder. Her lips are soft yet commanding, and she tastes like her wine from earlier; a warm, ripe fruit. I bite her lip and she gasps, tilting her head back and brushing her heavy breasts against my shirt. She does the same to me, a quick bite of pain, and I groan, slapping her ass and relishing in the quiet shudder that ripples through her body.

Fucking hell, she likes it.

Her warm hands travel under my shirt and across my stomach, nails dragging against skin, fingers squeezing my hips and pulling me closer while her mouth slowly devours me.

“Filthy fucking devil. Sit. I want to kiss you here.” I press my hand between her legs, my other palming her breast, roughly squeezing it.

She drops back onto the bench, meeting my eyes as I lower to my knees in front of her, as I spread her thighs open with my hands and settle my body between them.

“Were you wet before you touched yourself?” I ask, bending over her and licking between her breasts. I pull a nipple into my mouth and she arches her back, hands fisting my hair and breaths growing hurried and sharp. A whimpered yes catches in her throat when I drag my teeth across the hardened peak.

I know at any second someone could come walking into this room, see the bottoms of my legs, hear Brooke’s quiet, aching noises and investigate behind the curtain.

What would Brooke do? Would she stop me? Cover herself up while I continue working her with my mouth? Maybe she wasn’t only shaking when she stepped inside here because this is a first for her. Maybe she was thinking about the risk, doing this here when we can easily be somewhere more private, a room with four walls and a lock on the door.

I don’t relish in the thought of anyone seeing Brooke, topless and coming

against my face, but I want to give her this. Be the person she associates with this memory.

With a thick voice, she begins begging me with quiet words.

More and move and more and yes.

“How wet were you?” I ask her, kissing her ribs, her stomach, licking the skin of her hip. The sweetness from her lotion soaks into my throat, making me dizzy and delirious.

She tastes too good. Smells too good.

“V-very. It was dripping down my leg.”

“Fuck, Brooke,” I growl, ducking my head, meeting her gaze as I press my lips against the smooth skin of her inner thigh. “Here?” I ask, opening my mouth and sucking.

She nods, her lips parting, fingers digging into my scalp. “Higher too.”

I smile against her. “Obviously. But I rather like kissing you here. Can I keep going?”

“Mm.” She tugs gently on my hair. “No. Move up. I want you to taste me.”

“I am.”

I switch legs and slowly drag my tongue closer to her pussy, kissing and licking her skin. She never stops watching me, her hazel eyes wide and hungry, capturing and captivating me.

“Play with your tits,” I tell her, blowing against her clit.

With a soft cry, she lifts and squeezes them, rolling her nipples between her fingers as I slide her legs to my shoulders. I press my nose against her clit and inhale, groaning, blinking up and seeing the awe bloom across her face.

She’s beautiful; the way she smells, the way she tastes. That heavy look in her eyes as she watches me.

“Say something,” she pleads, moving her hands over her breasts.

I take a slow lick, my eyes nearly rolling closed in ecstasy. “Mi stai rovinando.”

You're ruining me.

Her eyes widen ever so slightly. "What does that mean?"

I open my mouth to tell her but she silences me with her fingers against my lips.

"Don't," she whispers, slowly removing her hand and bringing it back to her breast. "Don't tell me. I don't want to know."

There it is; that quiet panic lingering, never too far away when she begins to feel something unfamiliar or different. The little protective shield she slides into place until she senses it's okay and safe to let herself just fucking *be* with me.

I'll wait. Stand still or move, I don't care. I'll go where she goes.

Keeping my eyes on hers, I lean forward again and press my mouth between her legs.

Brooke drops her head back with a sigh, quietly crying, "oh, God." Her thighs tense in my hands while she openly gropes her breasts, her fingers twisting and pulling on her nipples.

I stay as unhurried as I can with my tongue, with my lips sucking gently on her clit. Teasing. Slow. Slower. Drawing this out, leisurely building her to the point of madness. I lick up one side and down the other, again and again. Ignoring where she is wettest until I can't fucking think straight, until I need her coating my mouth more than I need to fucking breathe.

I slide my hand up her stomach and over her ribs to palm her breast, rolling her nipple between my fingers. She gasps and lifts her hips against my mouth, rocking into me, seeking out her release with gentle, pleading circles.

"Put money in," I instruct.

Her eyes flash open, dark and cautious, but only for a second. Hurriedly, she grabs a dollar off the bench and leans over me to insert the bill into the slot. With a shaky breath she falls back and grabs my head, guiding me between her legs where I grin against her, moaning at the feel of her heels on my back.

Click.

“Mason,” she whispers through the shyest, sweetest smile, knowing what all is probably being captured right now by the lens behind me; my head between her legs, her hands sliding up her body, over her bare breasts where she lifts and squeezes them, blissfully unashamed.

I add my fingers, two inside, stretching and fucking her, my teeth toying with her clit. She bucks against my face, hands pulling my hair and roughly scraping along my scalp.

Click.

I can't stop watching her; the smooth line of her body, her flat stomach quivering every time I dip my tongue inside to fuck her with it. Her perfect breasts, and the rapid heave of them as she slips closer to the edge.

Her whimpers turn into frantic words, begging me for more, for faster, to fuck her with my fingers again. To make her come. To tell her how she tastes and if I like it.

Click.

“So good,” I assure her before adding another finger and twisting my wrist.

“I told you I could live here. Die here. I meant it,” I don't say, for fear she'll pull back again, but I think it. I whisper it in my head as our eyes lock.

Hers, heavy-lidded and pleading for release.

Mine, so willing to give her this and anything. Everything.

I suck and suck on her skin. Her hands fall away from her body, slapping against the bench, and with a startled cry she falls, sweet and warm and perfectly. Lips parting with a gasp and a beg, one last word.

“Please.”

Click.

Her fingers thread through my hair, pacing me while I go on and roughly devour her. I can't help it. Oral sex has never felt this intimate with a woman before, this profoundly carnal and I don't want to let up. I don't want to pull

away and risk Brooke regretting any second of this. The haze of desire lifting and revealing how personal this moment was for her, allowing regrets and bloody protective shields to slip in and taint it.

“Mason,” Brooke whispers, touching my forehead with two fingers.

With a heavy blink, I press one last kiss between her legs, then lean back enough to rest my head on her thigh.

I ready myself for it, the pull away, but the eyes I meet are tender and content.

She smiles lazily. “Holy shit. That was so much fun.”

I suck in a burst of air, trapping it in my throat.

Goddamn. This one is full of surprises.

Tilting her head, Brooke laughs a little; a light, sweet sound.

“You are so fucking pretty.” I reach up and touch her cheek, running the back of my fingers over her flush.

“I thought I was beautiful,” she says, smirking.

“You are. There’s no denying that.” I kiss her thigh once more before standing and helping her to her feet, my hands smoothing down her skirt. I cup her face and bend to kiss her. “But after you come, you’re softer, Brooke. Sweeter even. I can’t explain it well, but I think you’re more pretty in those moments. I like seeing you like that with me.”

She turns and grabs her shirt and bra. “Make me come more often and you’ll see it all the time.”

A laugh rumbles in my chest as I help her, insisting on clasping her bra.

“These gorgeous fucking tits needs to be well secured. Here. Let me. I’m better suited for the job.”

She giggles against my neck, moving her hands over my waist and under my shirt. “Taken a good number of bras off, have you?”

“Don’t you worry about that.”

I look around the booth as she slips her shirt on, tucking the photos she took for me into my pocket and glancing behind her to check the bench.

“Where are your undies?”

Her eyes widen with amusement. She smiles. “What undies?”

I feel my mouth fall open. *The little minx*. “You mean to tell me you were naked under that bloody skirt all night and didn’t tell me?”

Laughing, she draws the curtain back and steps out of the booth, retrieving the photos.

“Maybe.”

I scratch my jaw, moving to her. “Fucking hell, Brooke. Had I have known, I wouldn’t have shown that much restraint at the table. I probably would’ve gotten you off before our entrees were brought out. Why didn’t you tell me?”

I nearly curse for keeping my wits about myself earlier on the drive to the restaurant. She was trying to show me she wasn’t wearing anything underneath, hiking up her skirt like that, seeking my hand. I was too determined to keep her waiting and wanting.

Good on you, mate. Really fucked yourself with that one.

I touch her hip. She doesn’t respond, not with a look or a word. With parted lips she studies the photos in her hand for several silent seconds. I can feel the slow drag of air pulling into her lungs and I slide my hand up her back. She releases it quickly and bites her lip.

“Look at you,” I say against her temple, bending lower to see. I point at the shot of her coming. “Fucking perfect right there. Did you like it?”

She hesitates, then quietly replies. “Yes. I just . . . I wasn’t expecting to look like that.”

“Like what?” I can’t read her face, the implication she’s making. I step in front of her and run my hands down her arms, ducking to see her eyes.

She keeps them lowered for another few seconds, studying. With a flighty laugh, she brings the photo down between us and gazes up at me. “I don’t know. Pretty, I guess? You were right. I do look different.” She shakes her head, blinking several times, as if she can’t believe what she’s saying, or

admitting. “It’s strange.”

I smile, wanting to kiss her, to talk to her more about what she’s seeing, but I don’t. Instead, I step beside her, my hand sliding to her back as I guide us through the room and toward the exit.

“Come on. Let’s get you home and into some undies.”

She laughs, curling against my side, giving me the okay to pull her closer. And I do.



BROOKE

I press the number seven on the elevator panel a second before greedy hands tug me backwards and into Mason's arms.

I go willingly with a squeak, tilting my head as his lips suck gently on my neck, as he whispers just beneath my ear how tight I am, "so fucking tight," and how he nearly lost his mind in that photo booth. His fingers squeeze my hips, pinning me to him, to his rock-hard cock that's pressing against my ass.

Fuck, I want to see it. Touch it. Drop to my knees and feel his hands in my hair. This elevator ride is driving me crazy.

I glare at the numbers slowly rising to my floor.

Two. Ridiculously long pause. Three.

I nearly pout. *Could this shit take any longer?*

"What are you doing next weekend?" Mason asks me, breaking my attention off the electronic panel, sliding his hand to my breast and pinching my nipple through my shirt.

I gasp, rolling my head back as he twists my hardened peak. "*Jesus.*"

His laugh rumbles against my back, sweet and cruel. He knows what he's doing.

"Are you going to be attending church, Brooke? I honestly can't imagine going to confess my sins and seeing you there. I think I'd end up just

dragging you into the confessional with me and saying, ‘Here. She’s it. Give me my penance’.” He releases my breast and slides his hand back to my hip.

I’m his only sin?

Whoa . . . that might be the best compliment of my life.

I resume staring at the numbers above me as the ache in my breast slowly subsides. I bite back a smile, saying, “I haven’t attended church since I was a kid. Well, not regularly anyway. I go every Easter to appease my Nana but that’s it.”

“So, you’re free next weekend?”

“I think so. Why?”

“I’d like to steal you away if you’ll let me. Weather permitting.”

The elevator finally comes to a stop and I pull away, peering back at Mason over my shoulder as I step out onto the floor.

He looks content, and so sure of himself, like he already knows I’m going to say yes to this.

“For the entire weekend? What exactly do you have in mind?”

With a cocky smile, he steps off the elevator. “It’s a surprise.”

I spin around, staring at the man slowly advancing on me, and it all clicks in an instant as our conversation from the restaurant trips my subconscious.

“Oh, no you don’t.” I hold my free hand up as I continue my slow retreat backwards. “*Weather permitting?* Busted. I told you. I don’t do camping.”

He feigns seriousness. “Who said anything about camping?”

“I’m not going! I’m busy anyway.”

“No, you’re not.” Quickening his strides, he reaches out for me and grabs my arm. We both come to a stop inches from my door. “You just said you weren’t doing anything.”

“I said I *think* I’m free, but now that I really think about it, I remember I have plans. Ones that don’t involve nature or mosquitos carrying the West Nile virus.”

I wrench my arm away, ignoring his quiet laugh, and open my clutch to

rustle out my keys.

Seriously? He is completely insane. You couldn't pay me to go spend the night out in the wilderness. Naked sleeping bag sharing, or not. There is no fucking way I am agreeing to this.

When I look back up to give him more shit, Mason is watching me, his scorching gaze torn between my lips and everything lower.

I forget about camping, or suggestions of camping. I forget about bugs and wild animals as I slowly drink him in, from his unruly hair, still disheveled from my fingers to his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides.

He's holding back.

Why? There's no need. Doesn't he know how badly I want this?

Anticipation plucks in my belly as I stare at the erection pressing hard against his zipper. As I remember what it felt like minutes ago, sliding between the cheeks of my ass.

Well, if he's not going to give it to me, I'll just take it. No problems there.

I drop my keys back into my clutch and fist his shirt, urgently pulling him until my back hits the wall just beside the door and his body has no other choice but to crowd against mine.

He moves willingly with a moan, his hands bracing himself on either side of my head, boxing me in.

I arch my back and press my hips out away from the wall, grinding into his stiff length. "Mm. You know I never got to properly thank you for what you did earlier with that wicked mouth of yours. I'm also very sad to admit I can hardly remember what your cock looks like. Care to whip it out and kill two birds with one very hard stone?"

With shaky hands, he grabs my waist and drops his head beside mine. "Brooke," he whispers, so faintly it's as if he's trying to resist everything at this moment, including words.

"My turn." I slide my hand between us and cup his length.

He hisses a curse against my ear.

“God, I forgot how big you are. You might actually kill me.”

Turning my head, I claim his mouth, sucking on his lips, his tongue, pressing gentle kisses between ones that somehow feel more important or greater than any act of desperation. I lose my mind for a second, a stillness takes over and I allow myself to get lost in this kiss, forgetting about everything I want to come after and just giving in and giving up.

How does he do it? How does he make me want to just do *this* for hours and hours and hours? Sweetly surrender myself over to him and everything he makes me feel.

Shit. Snap out of it, Brooke. Remember why you reached for him.

I break away, panting against his mouth, watching him suck my taste off his bottom lip.

“Come inside, Mason, before I drop to my knees right here in this hallway. I want you on my bed while I suck your dick, but I’m not picky. Here is fine too.”

I press harder against his jeans and he groans, his fingers digging into my skin, his arms locking up and trembling.

I go in for the kill, planting a kiss to his jaw and whispering, “think how good it’ll feel fucking this pretty little mouth.”

“Jesus Christ.” He pushes against my waist and leans back, blue eyes blazing as he stares at me. His other hand comes around and grabs my wrist. “Baby, stop.”

“Why?”

“Because . . .” he trails off, pinching his eyes shut as he gently removes my hand, forcing it against my side. He exhales a rigid breath. “Because, I want this to be about you.” His eyes flash open, and there it is again, that struggle so obvious it’s as if it’s vibrating across his skin or flashing in neon letters above his head.

Please, Brooke. You’re killing me.

I stare up at him, confused. *Why are you fighting this? I don't understand.*

His free hand glides up my arm, stopping just above my elbow where his thumb begins moving softly across my skin. "What I did earlier, it wasn't just so you'd return the favor. I would never think like that, Brooke. When I touch you in any way, it's because I *want* to touch you. Or I fucking need to. I'm not trying to get something in return."

I wet my lips, feeling slightly awkward for even insinuating that Mason was fishing for his own release by getting me off. But honestly, what man is that selfless to not even consider his own needs?

His hand forms to my cheek. "Stop thinking so much. Let me enjoy you."

"You can enjoy me but I can't enjoy you? That hardly seems fair."

"Brooke."

"Mason." I try to pull free from his grip, but his fingers wrap around me tighter, keeping my arm pinned where it is. I open my mouth, ready to argue, to ask nicely for the use of my hand when a thought settles over me.

Maybe Mason doesn't want to risk the chance of getting caught by another tenant, and that's why he's keeping me from very publicly groping him. Maybe what we did earlier in the photo booth was all the thrill he can handle for one night.

He wants privacy for everything I'm offering? I'm good with that. I don't need an audience to relish in every thick inch of this man.

I allow my arm to go limp, yielding to his hold. "All right. Fine, I get it. We don't have to do this here. And I was half serious offering it anyway. I'd rather not get rug-burn."

He watches me curiously as I lift my clutch between us.

"Come on. Joey and Billy won't bother us. They're most likely passed out already and they both sleep like the dead."

I go to spin around but Mason slides his hand back to my waist and keeps me facing him.

"I'm going to go."

“What?” I look up into his eyes, my entire body tensing. “You’re leaving?”

Is he serious? Why would he leave?

A hint of a smile touches his lips. He bends down, brushing his mouth against mine. “Yeah,” he mumbles, gently kissing me, barely even the feel of skin on skin.

It’s more like the promise of a kiss, or the idea of one, when you think of something hard enough or for long enough it almost starts to feel real, blurring the lines of reality and fantasy.

He stays that close to me, never pulling away, staring into my eyes for the longest, most intense second of my life. His breath is hot and heavy against my face, quickened, but I have no idea from what, and as I slide my hand to the center of his chest, I startle at the wild beating against my palm.

“Mason.” My voice sounds miles away, frantically chasing after him.

A growl rumbles in his throat. Then, as if something breaks inside of him, he cups my face and forces me against the wall, pinning me while his lips roughly take my mouth in a kiss that has me high and breathless and begging in incoherent words.

It’s violent and vital, exactly how a kiss should feel, with greedy hands and pounding hearts.

I drop my clutch and hold him against me, tilting my head to deepen this, to give him more as I plead for it through whispered words, but the second my fingers tighten in his hair he breaks away.

His hands slide to my neck as he moves his lips to my cheek and keeps them there. “Goddamn, Brooke. It’s really fucking hard not kissing you,” he pants through ragged breaths, leaning back to gaze at me.

I give him an odd look as his hands slip away, and an even odder look when he turns around and leaves me lightheaded against the wall.

What the fuck?

With quick strides, Mason takes his sexy ass in the direction of the

elevators, a hand disappearing around the front of him to no doubt adjust the stiff dick I just so rightly earned.

“Um . . . where are you going?” I call out, stepping away from the wall to get a better view of him continuing down the long hallway, to watch in complete shock as he puts more and more distance between us.

He was serious about leaving? No . . . no, he’s . . . no, that’s impossible. He can’t just leave.

Hello! Massive erection! Get back here! I’m supposed to be handling you!

He smiles at me over his shoulder as he bypasses the elevators. “Goodnight.”

My mouth falls open. I bring my hands to my hips as I think of a reasonable explanation for his swift departure, and it comes to me at the sound of his keys jingling. “You’re just going to move your car, right? Then you’re coming back up? You’re not actually leaving . . .”

He pushes the door open that leads to the stairwell, making no attempt to tell me I’m correct or to ask me if I’ll wait for him here or leave my door unlocked.

He’s actually leaving. He’s taking his hard dick and he’s *actually* leaving.

I take a few steps to follow behind him. “Is this a joke? Is this strictly an Australian thing, because here, in America, we don’t kiss the fuck out of someone and then haul ass in the opposite direction.”

I hear the faint sounds of a laugh echoing down the hall.

Before I can think to speak again, to yell out something else to possibly change his mind and end this madness, Mason steps out onto the stairwell.

“I’ll see you later, gorgeous,” he calls out before the door slams closed, and I know, I just fucking know that gorgeous bastard is smiling as he says it.

“What the hell?” I ask myself, God, if he’s listening. Maybe he can shine some imperial light on this situation.

I snatch my clutch off the floor and fish out my keys, jamming them all

too aggressively into the keyhole while I mumble every curse word I know into the deserted hallway. I shove the door open and toss my things onto the table behind the couch, kicking off my heels and moving like a bat out of hell across the room.

With a closed fist, I pound against the bedroom door until my skin grows hot.

“I need you both to put something on and get out here. Now. You will not believe what . . .” I cut myself off, shaking my head as I try and wrap my own mind around what just happened, but I have absolutely no idea what to think. I can’t even begin to make sense of this.

Mason passes on a Brooke style blow-job? NOBODY passes on that. Is he fucking mental?

With a very aggressive grunt, I drop my hand and stare at the door. “Just hurry up and get out here. Please. I need both of you.”

Muffled voices and the creak of a mattress sound before I feel satisfied enough to cross the room again.

I step into the kitchen and open the refrigerator, pulling out a bottle of wine and digging the container of ice cream I keep hidden under bags of frozen vegetables out of the freezer.

Joey likes to eat his feelings also. If I don’t hide my snacks, they go missing.

I fill a glass and grab a spoon just as the bedroom door swings open.

Joey emerges first, his fingers snapping the waistband of his boxers. He looks half-asleep, digging the heel of his hand into his eye. “What the fuck is it? You interrupted cuddle time.”

I shove a spoonful of Neapolitan ice cream into my mouth to prevent myself from stating the obvious response, that every time Joey and Billy are within twenty miles of each other, I run the risk of interrupting cuddle time.

Assholes. Their perfect relationship is a little hard to swallow at the moment. I’m sure neither one of them keep their dicks to themselves.

Billy files out of the bedroom next with his T-shirt in his hand. He eyes me warily once he takes notice of the wine and the container I have a death-grip on.

“Uh oh. What happened?” he asks, slipping his shirt over his head and sliding his arms through. “Bad date?”

I watch him and Joey each grab a stool and sit at the kitchen island across from me. Boosting myself up onto the counter, I place the container on my lap and dip my spoon in, scraping out the rest of the chocolate.

“No. The actual date was fine,” I mumble around the spoon.

Joey drops his chin onto his fist. “Just fine?” He looks doubtful.

I roll my eyes before lowering them to the container. “More than fine,” I confess, jamming my spoon into the vanilla. “He took me to this really nice restaurant where he had to order in Italian, which he fucking did, so just go ahead and tack on a few more ‘how hot can this guy possibly get’ points.”

“Damn,” Billy comments appreciatively. “I bet that sounds amazing with his accent.”

“Mm hmm. Boyfriend is full of surprises,” Joey adds.

I don’t even bother looking up. “Yeah. Tons. So, we had dinner, and he mentioned wanting to stick his head between my legs and taste me in his throat.”

I glance up at the sound of the wine bottle being slid across the counter.

Billy brings it to his lips and tips it back, his eyes round as he swallows a mouthful.

It’s funny how squeamish he gets around any sort of graphic sex talk, when his husband is basically a walking advertisement for it.

I shift my eyes when Joey motions with a quick hand for me to continue on with my story. He suddenly appears wide awake and eager for conversation.

“You want details?”

“Yes,” Joey says at the same time as Billy’s, “Not really.”

I split the difference. “He did more than just taste me, okay? I took him to this photo booth I found a couple months ago, and that man worked me out like his life depended on it. His mouth is fucking ridiculous.”

A shiver runs down my spine as that familiar ache settles between my hips. I press the back of the spoon to my mouth, hoping to conceal the smile I can’t seem to control.

“It was hands-down the best sexual experience of my life,” I admit against the cold silver. “And that includes all the times I’ve actually had sex.”

Straightening on his stool, Billy scratches his jaw, his other hand still clutching the neck of the bottle. “Photo booth? Did you two actually . . .” he pauses, his eyes searching my face.

Joey slaps the counter with exuberance. He looks practically giddy. “You little slut. Did you get pictures of this?”

I glance across the room at my clutch, remembering how reckless and exciting it felt being in that moment with Mason, not knowing who, if anyone, was on the other side of that curtain and if they were listening and waiting for those photos.

If they would see me, and how I looked at him. *With* him.

I return my gaze to the two men staring intently at me. “I gave Mason his own set of solo’s to keep. That seemed to go over smashingly well. Then, while he was down there, going at it, he told me to put money in.” I shrug. “I did.”

“Where is this photo booth exactly?” Joey grabs the small pad of paper and the pen we keep by the phone, ready to jot down the address.

“Joey,” Billy starts, waiting for his husband to look over at him. He jerks his chin. “No.”

Joey shoots him a pleading look. “Oh, come on. You know you’d love it.” He leans in for a kiss, hovering a breath away from Billy’s mouth. “Just think of how cramped it probably is in there. How *tight* it would be. Mm. I bet there’s hardly any room for you to move, but you like that, right? You

like tight things, don't you, baby?"

Holy shit.

I shove a massive bite of strawberry into my mouth as Billy groans, pinching his eyes shut and dropping a hand to his lap.

"Brat," he murmurs, adjusting himself while he tries to look annoyed but only succeeds at looking immensely turned-on and on the brink of dragging his husband back to the bedroom.

Joey leans away, grinning and tapping his pen on the paper. "See? Do I know my man, or what?"

"You do. But let's get addresses later." Billy covers Joey's hand with his, forcing Joey to release the pen. He then turns his dissecting attention onto me. "Brooke, what are we missing here? Why are you binge-eating and nearly breaking down doors? What else is going on?"

I drop my spoon into the container and set it on the counter, exchanging it for my glass of wine. I lift it in the air, toasting. "Mason is withholding the dick."

"This is news?" Billy raises an eyebrow. "I thought he made it clear when you two first met that he wanted to wait to have sex. Get to know you and all."

"He did. But apparently, he wasn't just referring to sex."

Joey grabs the bottle of wine. "What else was he referring to?"

"Oh, you know." I sweep my hand through the air. "Everything. Touching it. Sucking it. Anything I could possibly do to get him off. The entire thing is a no-go apparently."

The bottle hovers in the air an inch away from Joey's mouth. He leans to the side to see me around it. "I'm sorry. What?"

I bring my glass to my lips, swallowing a generous amount of wine. "You heard me. After kissing my fucking brains out at the door, he walked away, refusing my offer to come inside . . . pun intended, and left, taking his glorious erection with him. He told me he wants this to be about me. That he

didn't get me off just so I would return the favor."

"That's actually kind of sweet, Brooke. Unconventional, but sweet," Billy remarks, laughing quietly at Joey as he mirrors my reaction to this discovery and goes immediately for alcohol. Running a hand through his short blonde hair, Billy turns back to me with a gentle smile. "Name one other guy who has ever done that for you."

I let my eyes roam the condo, pretending to think, but I don't need to.

The truth is, I can't name anyone. I can't think of any man who has ever done half of the things Mason has insisted on or offered. If I could, this might not seem so completely baffling to me.

Why is he putting himself through all of this? He's taken every sexual release I have to give him off the table, and yet he's still fixated on me.

Why?

"Okay." Joey sets the bottle down and wipes the back of his hand across his mouth. "First of all, this wine is terrible. Let's never buy it again."

I quietly chuckle as I lift my head.

"Second, I can see this being a problem if you weren't getting off, Brooke, but you are. And although you refuse to admit this, I think you like this guy."

"But I don't understand him."

And for the first time in my life, I feel completely out of my league.

Joey crosses his arms against his chest, sitting up a little straighter, showing off his proud smile.

"What?" I ask, confused by his sudden disposition.

"You didn't argue with me that time. You like him."

"I like a lot of men who get me off. It doesn't mean anything."

Joey loses the smile and levels me with a skeptical glare. I look to Billy, only to find him mirroring his partner's demeanor.

Fuck this. I've had enough girl talk for one night.

With a heavy head and an exhausted mind, I hop off the counter,

polishing off the rest of my wine and setting the glass in the sink. "I'm going to take a shower and go to bed. I can't think about this anymore tonight."

I wave a limp hand in the direction of my two roommates as I pad across the condo.

Billy starts to say something but I shake my head, cutting him off before I escape into my room.



Morning comes too soon after I close my eyes, and because of the restless night's sleep I'm suffering from, I arrive late to work for the first time in three years. Luckily, having chatty Cathy as my roommate pays off for me and I don't get much of an earful from Dylan when I step inside the bakery.

I'm sure she has been adequately filled in on the night I had.

"Sorry. Sorry. It won't happen again. I promise," I say, reemerging from the kitchen after setting my purse down. I secure my unruly hair up into a pony and step behind the counter. "I don't think you want me doing any detailed piping work today. I'm running on about five minutes of sleep."

Dylan drops her head into a nod as Joey finishes up with a customer. "That's fine. Man the front with Joey. I need to be off my feet today anyway so I'm going to stay in the back. I can work from a stool."

"Are you feeling okay?" I watch her close her eyes through several slow, deep breaths.

My gaze shifts to the shop phone hanging on the wall.

Even though I've never had a reason to call it, I was forced to memorize Reese's work number when Dylan was first pregnant with Ryan. I wonder how quickly he could get over here if I called him right now.

I imagine before I have the chance to hang up.

The door chimes as the customer exits the bakery, and Joey comes to stand beside Dylan, resting a hand on her shoulder.

"I'm fine. It's not contractions or anything," she reassures, looking back at him and then pressing two fingers to the inside of her wrist. "I'm just

feeling anxious for some reason. I think I should take it easy today.”

“Then get your pretty little ass in the back, cupcake. I’m not dealing with that man of yours if you go into early labor due to work-related stress. I’m sure he’ll somehow blame that shit on me.” He guides her in the direction of the kitchen with a gentle push, then comes to stop beside me, dropping his head next to mine.

“Mason missed you at the coffee shop this morning,” he murmurs. “I told him you were up late hitting the sauce.”

“Did you really?” I glare at him as he leans away.

That’s just what I need, Mason thinking he drove me to alcoholism. He’s so fucking sweet he’ll probably pay for my rehab.

He smiles. “No. I said you had to do an early delivery this morning and skipped the coffee. He seemed to buy it.”

I gaze through the shop window. “I know I just got here but . . .”

“But you need to go talk to him.”

Our eyes lock. I nod at his spot-on remark, rubbing my hand down my face. “I’m just so fucking confused, and I need sleep, Joey. My skin doesn’t do well without it. I’m going to start looking like I’m in my thirties.”

“Heaven forbid.” Joey steps back and leans his hip against the counter, exaggerating his stare the longer I look at him. “Go, before Dylan comes back up here and discovers you’re missing.”

“Right.”

I slip behind him and grab an empty bakery box, filling it with four cupcakes.

“Shut up,” I snap when I hear Joey’s breathy laugh behind me.

It’s just because I need something to hold when I’m talking to Mason, otherwise I’ll reach for him, hold his face, try and slip my fingers through his hair and feel his soft curls.

There will be none of that happening.

I hastily exit the shop and cross the street. Peering through the large

studio window, I can see a class is in session, but that doesn't stop me from barging in with baked goods and a pissy attitude.

"We need to talk," I exclaim, stopping just inside the door and glaring at the twenty-plus pairs of eyes on me. I focus in on one set in particular, crystal blue and softened with curiosity.

Mason steps between mats to see me better, his faded, sleeveless tee darkened with sweat. "Can you give me five minutes, Brooke?"

I look at him, at the crowd of women and their irritated expressions. With a quiet sigh, I slip past the elongated table covered in brochures and vitamin supplements and perch myself against the wall. I hold the box against my belly, letting my eyes wander the studio.

"Whatever."

Class resumes. Mason goes through various positions and breathing techniques, offering assistance when some women struggle to hold a pose.

I reach into the box and bite into a strawberry ganache cupcake, smirking when a nosy chick in front of me scowls in my direction.

Fuck off, I think. You have no idea what that man is putting me through.

After the last attendee leaves and I swallow my last bite, Mason pulls the door closed behind him and stalks toward me. He tugs his shirt off with one hand and wipes it across his face.

"You wanted to talk?"

I take in his perfectly sculpted torso, from his lean hips to the muscles thickening his shoulders, every inch of him damp with perspiration.

"Yeah." I set the box on the table and lick the frosting off my lip. "What the hell is your problem?"

His steps falter. "My problem?"

"Don't do that." I point a finger at him, advancing closer. "Don't act like you have no idea what I'm talking about. I'm not allowed to touch you? I can't . . . do anything to you? Why not?"

"Brooke." He tosses his shirt on the table, reaching for me.

I step back to avoid his touch. "Answer my question first." He takes in a deep breath, and my next words slip out before I can stop them. "Is it me?"

Other women have touched him. Other women have done *everything* with him. Why can't I?

His eyes widen and he closes the space between us. "No. Fuck no, it's not you. Jesus. How can you think that?" He slides his hand to my hip, his eyes following his finger as he runs it along my jaw. "It's overwhelming how you affect me. Can't you see it? How I look at you? I'm a bloody wreck here, Brooke. I want to take my time with you, but fucking hell if I don't want everything you were offering last night."

"Then take it." I squeeze his hips, pressing us closer.

Take me. Stop torturing yourself.

"I won't be able to stop," he confesses, bending to kiss the corner of my mouth. "I'm not a God, Brooke. I only have so much restraint, and you on your knees sucking my cock would smash it all to shit."

"So you're just going to jerk off alone after you leave me? Come on, Mason. That's ridiculous. You could at least let me watch."

A small laugh erupting past his lips has me pulling away and out of his reach.

"This isn't funny," I snap, turning my body when he tries to grab me again.

I need distance anyway. He's half naked and those loose shorts he's wearing do a piss poor job at concealing every perfect inch of him.

He slowly advances on me with his hands raised between us, with that cocky smirk tugging at his mouth.

"Are you not enjoying what I'm giving you, Brooke? Because if I'm remembering correctly, you seemed pretty fucking happy grinding that sweet pussy against my face last night. There's pictures to prove it."

Warmth surges between my hips. I narrow my eyes and silently curse my lower region for reacting to that reminder. "You know what? I'm going to

go.”

His eyes snap up to mine. “Why?”

“Because I have work to do and you’re making my brain hurt.”

He grabs my waist before I can take a step. Pulling my back against his front, he drops his lips to my ear, whispering my name before he asks, “Are we still on for this weekend?”

I turn my head to look at him, biting my cheek to keep myself from reacting to the smug grin staring back at me. “I don’t know. Am I going to be allowed to touch you?”

“In a matter of speaking. I’m sure your hands will be in my hair while you beg me to make you come. That counts, yeah?”

With a grunt, I pry myself out of his arms and gesture at the box on the table as I stride past it. “I ate one of your cupcakes because you kept me up all night, and not in the way I wanted to be.”

“You kept me up too. Fucking that pretty little mouth was one hell of a visual. I came all over my sheets.”

My mouth falls open. I nearly face-plant . . . again. *Bastard.*

“Yeah? Well, it’s too bad I wasn’t there to lick it all up for you. Good luck getting those stains out.”

I push through the door with the biggest smile on my face.

Have fun with that visual.



I stare into the darkness of my bedroom, pulling the covers up around me when the AC kicks on.

It’s almost eleven, and I could be asleep. I should be. God knows I’m exhausted but I can’t seem to close my eyes yet.

The condo is quiet. Joey and Billy have no doubt gone off to bed by now. I stretch my legs against the cool sheets before flipping onto my stomach and attempting to shut down in this position. Within a few seconds I’m turning back over and flopping my head against the pillow.

A soft buzzing sound pulls my attention off the window. I throw myself out of bed and grab my phone out of my purse.

Mason . . . facetimeing me? How does this even work? Oddly enough, I've had this phone for two years and have never used this feature before.

I accept the call and hold the phone above me as I settle back against the sheet. I glance briefly at the image of myself in the corner.

Good. I don't look too rough. God knows I feel it.

Mason's neck appears first, bathed in the soft light from a nearby source. He tilts the phone and smiles when he sees my face staring back at him.

"Little devil. I didn't wake you, did I?"

I smirk at the nickname. "No. I'm actually having trouble winding down. I blame you for that."

"Yeah? Am I on your mind?" He adjusts the pillow under his head as his eyes shift about ever so slightly. "You look pretty."

I look at the tiny image of myself again. "Thanks."

"Do you know why I'm calling you like this?"

"Because you're a stalker and you needed a way to see my bedroom? You know, since you refuse to step in it."

He laughs, low and deep in his throat. I feel myself smile and the haze of drowsiness slipping away.

"Brooke."

"Mm."

"You wanted to watch me, yeah?"

"Watch you . . ." I pause, my hand tightening around the hard case of my phone as realization shocks my body into full-on alertness. "Yes," I reply through a quiet voice, running my tongue over my bottom lip and sitting up a little higher in bed.

On the screen, I watch desire pass over Mason's face. His heavy breathing spills through the phone and out around me.

My toes curl against the sheet.

“Are you doing it?” I ask, although I already know the answer. I just want to hear him say . . .

“Yeah.” He jerks his chin, lips parted and eyes heavy. He shifts the phone away just enough for me to see the muscles rolling in his upper arm.

My breath catches in my throat. “God,” I exhale on a shaky breath.

Watching Mason above me, as if he really *is* above me, does wild things to my mind. I imagine our bodies sliding together, the heavy drag of his cock along my skin, trapped between us, throbbing and wet from the heat of my mouth.

“My cock, Brooke,” Mason gasps, staring back at me as I quickly kick my feet out and remove the sheets covering my body. I’m suddenly burning up.

“Do you want to see it?”

I nod, rubbing a hand down my neck. My skin feels like it’s humming. “Yes.”

His eyes darken to that steely shade of blue I’m becoming familiar with. “Spread your legs for me. Touch yourself. I bet you’re drenched, aren’t you, you filthy fucking girl.”

Again, I nod, even before my hand slides into my panties. Arousal coats my fingers as I press lightly against my clit.

“How wet? Tell me. I want to taste you.”

I lick my lips. “Mm. Like this?” I suck my finger into my mouth, releasing it with a wet pop. “Too bad you aren’t here. I think I taste better off your tongue.”

Mason groans through a clenched jaw, his breathing growing louder, exploding into the air as his arm moves furiously against his side.

“Fuck, baby. Let me see. Show me. Put the phone between your legs. God, my dick is so fucking hard.”

With a gasp, I drop the phone against my shirt. “Shit! Sorry,” I apologize through a nervous giggle, waving at the screen. “I need to get undressed. I’m

in panties. Hold on. I'm putting this down."

Holy shit! This is exhilarating and nerve wracking and crazy and CRAZY. But fuck, there is nothing holding me back from giving him everything he's asking for.

I want this. I want him. I've never felt this way about anyone.

I shimmy my panties down my legs and pick up my phone. Holding it above me, I watch Mason's mouth twitch when I appear in the small square.

"Hey. Okay, I'm going to do it now."

He nods, his chest heaving. "Good. Make me come."

Good fucking God.

I prop myself up with two pillows behind my back. Bending my knees, I let my legs fall open and hold the phone between them.

"Fuck. Look at you. So good, baby." His face appears larger on my screen. "Fuck," he whispers. "Closer. Spread your legs more. I want to see everything."

"Okay," I softly reply, my voice breathy and thick as I open wider and slide the phone closer to my body. "Like that? Can you see? I'm so wet. I'm dripping. I don't know if I've ever been this turned on before."

Mason growls my name, "Brooke."

He tells me how hot his dick feels in his hand. How sensitive it is. How he can't stop thinking about my mouth and my tits and how tight I'll feel around him when he finally takes me. He snarls like an animal when I slip a finger into my pussy, and then he tells me to fuck myself, to think about his cock and to beg for it.

"Please," I gasp, writhing against my sheets, sliding further down the bed with my legs pulling higher and spreading wider.

"Look," he orders through a strained voice, and I glance down my body at the phone in my hand and moan at the image on the screen.

His cock.

His long, thick cock, dripping at the head as he strokes it almost brutally.

I bring the phone closer to my face and slide my fingers over my clit, staring, gasping, telling him I'm close and to come and to show me what I do to him.

With a strangled cry, we fall, words and moans blending into the night. It's hot and filthy, and so profoundly intimate, and again I find myself smiling and so strangely happy, and I wonder if what I'm feeling has anything to do with the climax pulling me apart.

My legs fall heavy against the bed and I lift the phone off my chest. A lazy smile fills the screen.

"Well?" I ask, lifting my hair off my neck and falling back onto the pillow. I laugh at the peculiar look Mason gives me. "Don't you have something to ask me, now that I'm sated from orgasm and willing to agree to even the most ridiculous requests?"

He grins, perking up. "Right. This weekend . . . can I have you?"

I blow him a kiss and end the call. My phone buzzes almost immediately with a message.

Mason: I'll take that as a yes.



MASON

The shrill sound of a phone ringing jolts me awake, dragging me out of one hell of a dream.

Brooke on her knees, her skilled hands cupping my balls as she laps at my cock.

I groan into the pillow.

God, I love dream Brooke. Who the fuck is calling me this early?

Lifting my head, I glance around the dark room.

The faintest amount of sunlight pushes across the floor by the window, breaking through the small gap in the curtain. Searching for my cell amongst the sheets I'm tangled in, I find the menacing thing halfway down the bed near my left calf.

Last night . . . shit, I don't even remember hanging up after that spectacular conversation. Best solo session of my life. I will never look at that function on my phone the same again.

Facetiming my mum is now out of the question. Maybe I can convince her to Skype.

I accept the call and place it to my ear, letting my eyes fall closed again.

"You," I mumble, picturing Brooke's face against the backdrop of her lavender pillow. Her hair messy from sleep. "Morning, sweet girl."

A breathy laugh pulls through the phone. “Oh, my God. You’re still in bed, aren’t you?”

“You wrecked me last night. I slept like the dead.” I peek an eye open and spot the clock on the wall. “My alarm doesn’t go off for another thirty minutes.”

“Really? Mm, that’s funny.”

A car horn sounds through the phone, followed by the distant noise of a busy street. Light chatter, heels striking the ground. Birds.

Is Brooke outside this early in the day?

“Is it?” I roll to the side and slide my arm beneath the pillow to build my head up. “My alarm set for ten to eight is funny to you?”

“Yes,” she chuckles. “Considering how adamant you were about getting me to agree to another breakfast with you. I give you Tuesdays and you stand me up. What the fuck, dude?”

My hand tightens around the phone. The cloud of content encasing me as I listen to Brooke’s warm morning voice quickly rips away, along with any ounce of lethargy keeping me pinned to the bed.

It’s Tuesday. I’m supposed to meet Brooke for breakfast on Tuesdays.

“Fucking hell.” I throw myself out of bed and dart across the room to grab some clothes. “Brooke, fuck, I’m sorry. I was so bloody out of it last night after we talked, I forgot to change my alarm. I’m up now. Just hang on, all right? Did you order?”

I step into a pair of boxers and some running shorts, fisting a shirt as my eyes scan the floor for my shoes.

“No, I gave up our table.”

“What?”

She laughs again, and for the second time during this conversation I take notice of the outside world quietly buzzing around her through the line. She’s calling me *after* waiting for God knows how long inside that café. It’s twenty past seven now. If she didn’t arrive early, that’s twenty fucking minutes of

her sitting alone, wondering where the fuck I am after I practically begged her for this.

Brilliant, mate. You're such a fucking wanker.

"Mason, relax. Jesus. It's not a big deal. I'm just giving you a hard time because it's funny and I can. Go back to sleep."

I step into my runners and pull my shirt on. "Fuck that. I'm on my way out now. I'll meet you there."

"Can't."

"Why the hell not?"

"Wow," she giggles. "Listen to you. You're really pissed about this."

"You gave me a day, Brooke. I want that day."

My hand pushes through my hair as I step inside the bathroom. The light flickers on, pulsing against the white walls. I switch to speaker phone and hurriedly brush my teeth, glaring at my well-rested reflection.

She clears her throat. "I gave you *breakfast*, not a day. And it doesn't matter. Dylan called me while I was waiting for you and asked if I could come in early to help her with something. So, you see? No big deal. I would've ended up cutting our time short anyway."

I spit into the sink, dragging the back of my hand across my mouth.

She sounds fine, teasing me and brushing this fuck-up off as if it's nothing. But I know this woman. I know she likes to hide behind a tough voice. I know you get more honesty from Brooke by slowing down and *watching* her, which is why I'm hesitant to believe her reassurance right now.

"Where are you?"

A quiet chime breaks through the phone. "The bakery."

"Good."

I move through the room and take to the stairs, walking across the empty studio. After unlocking the door, I jog across the street between traffic. Brooke says something, a greeting directed at Dylan, I assume. It sounds muted as if she's moved her mouth away from the phone.

“Hey, Mason. I need to get off here.”

“All right,” I reply, ending the call and stepping inside the bakery.

“We’re not open yet,” a voice, not Brooke, yells from the back.

I move across the room and stop in the doorway opening up to the kitchen, leaning my shoulder against the frame.

Dylan notices me first, a coy smile twisting across her mouth. “Oh, hey. It’s you.”

Brooke raises her head from the large mixing bowl she’s staring down into.

She looks beautiful. Her hair is down, a tiny braid gathering some of it back and out of her round hazel eyes.

With parted red lips, she looks at the phone sitting on the large wood surface, then pins her gaze to me again.

“What are you doing, stalker?” she asks, her voice lifting sweetly. She shakes her head slowly through a tight lipped grin.

“I came to apologize, and to see if I can possibly take you to lunch today, instead of breakfast.” I straighten in the doorway and take a step closer, halting before I take another. “Is it okay that I’m back here?” I ask Dylan.

I’ve never stepped foot inside a professional kitchen before. I have no idea what the rules are for commoners here.

Dylan nods, her eyes shifting curiously between Brooke and myself. She smiles. “It’s fine.”

Brooke focuses on the containers of baking supplies in front of her as I loom closer. “I only get thirty minutes for lunch. That’s not enough time to go out anywhere. Sorry.”

“You can have an hour today.”

I grin at Dylan. “Brilliant.”

Brooke’s head snaps up. She looks astonished, maybe a bit annoyed. Her one hand closes into a fist against the wood while the other moves to her hip. “Are you kidding me right now? How many times have I asked you for an

extended lunch, and never once were you keen on the idea. Just last week I wanted an additional fifteen minutes and you refused to budge.”

“So?” Dylan dumps some flour into a bowl and brushes her hands off. She stares evenly at Brooke. “This is my bakery, my fucking name is on it, and I don’t have to explain to you why I’m allowing this today.”

“Oh, I know exactly why you’re allowing it.” Brooke points a finger at my face. “That mouth right there. It makes people stupid.”

I keep my laugh muffled as I bring my arms across my chest, looking between the two of them.

Dylan removes her apron and lays it on the stool. “I’ll give you two a minute.” She hits me with a smile before moving across the room and climbing the stairs.

A door closes.

Stepping behind Brooke, I drop my head and kiss her shoulder. Her hands relax against the wood, while mine snake around her trim waist and pull her back against my chest.

“Think she’ll notice if I duck under this table and stay between your legs the rest of the day?” I ask, running my nose along her skin.

“Probably. Dylan doesn’t miss much.”

I smile. “Shame. I know I’d feel a lot better about fucking up this morning if I spend the next eight hours getting you off.”

“Mason.” Brooke spins around and tilts her head to look at me.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her before she can get another word out, my hands gently squeezing her hips as I fight the urge to inch closer and kiss my way through this.

She stares at me, silently absorbing my apology. Her shoulders drop with a quiet sigh, her eyes lowering to a spot on my shirt, and *that*, fuck, that right there is the reason why I’m here and not relying on her casual brush-off.

She isn’t fine. She’s disappointed, or hurt, or *something*. Definitely not fine.

“Now would be the perfect time to call me a wanker, Brooke. Or a tosser. I know how much you like slipping those words into our conversations. Feel free to let me have it.”

Her eyes flick to mine. She narrows them, draws her fingers into a fist, then knocks it gently against my chest. “What the fuck, dude?” she whispers, repeating her words from earlier, fighting back a smile as she stands on her toes to get closer. “You forgot? How could you forget?”

“It was that hot as fuck phone call last night. I think I lost some brain cells with that emission.”

“Aw, are you dumb and pretty now?” she chuckles, lifting a hand to my cheek. “It’s okay, sweet boy. I’ll still play with you. Do you like shiny things? Here. Let me get my keys.”

I grab her waist when she tries to dart away.

Fuck, I love her playful like this. Completely unaware of how open she is to me. It’s beautiful, her unguarded heart. I like to imagine it’s untouched as well.

She laughs against my neck, her hands sliding under my shirt.

“So,” she whispers, her lips pressing to my skin.

“So.”

“Last night was fun.”

I kiss her hair. “Mm. Maybe I’ll bring two tents with us this weekend and we can reenact it in the wilderness. I think your moans will sound lovely in an open field.”

She leans back to look at me. “Two tents? You’re delusional if you think I’m separating from you at any point during this absurd camp-out. I told you I didn’t want to do this. Now you’re trying to suggest we sleep apart? Fuck that. Haven’t you ever seen *Deliverance*? I know that wasn’t set in Chicago, but there are freaks everywhere. You’re stuck with me. One tent. One sleeping bag. Get ready for stage-five clinger status, buddy. I’m going to be on you like a hobo on a muffin.”

My mouth stretches into a smile. I grab her face, bending for a kiss. “I like the sound of that.”

“Of course you do.” Her hands circle my wrists. She bites at my lip. “The stalker becomes the stalkee.”

“Exactly,” I say quietly, opening my eyes to watch hers slowly flutter open.

She stares at my mouth like she wants another taste, but she isn’t asking, or moving in for it. I think I’ll leave her like this.

Waiting. Wanting.

“What time do you want to do lunch?” I ask, letting my hands fall away and moving beside her.

I tap my finger on the large mixing bowl. The white powder vibrates against the steel.

She nudges against me and slides the bowl in front of her, along with several various sized measuring spoons. “One? That’s when I usually take it.”

“Great. I have a break between classes then.” I rest my hand on her back and kiss her cheek. “You know that park with the water fountain about ten minutes from here? Meet me there. I’ll take care of the food.” I make for the exit, glancing back when I reach the doorway.

I smile.

Brooke looks like she wants to ask questions, maybe protest the location and offer up a private spot where clothes aren’t required.

I know my girl.

Instead, she lifts her hand and waves me off. “Okay, but you better show up this time. No epic facetime wanking sessions between now and lunch. I need you focused. Maybe you should grab a banana or something. I hear that’s brain food.”

A laugh rumbles in my chest.

“I’ll be there,” I tell her, I promise her, as I back out of the room.

I will fucking be there.



I beat Brooke to the park and claim a vacant bench near the large fountain.

Three sprouts of water erupt from the center, fanning close to the flat stone edge and darkening the rocks. A few children drop coins into the water and stand on their toes to watch them sink to the bottom. Dog walkers and mums with prams filter in between one another along the paved footpath.

It's a nice day, the cool spring air smelling of flowers and cut grass. The sun slicing through the clouds.

My ringtone sounds from my pocket.

I'm expecting it to be Brooke, telling me she's on her way, or maybe that I'm still a huge tosser for standing her up earlier and she's paying me back by for it.

Palming my phone, I look at the screen.

It isn't Brooke. The woman calling might've threatened castration if I would've pulled that stunt with her.

I bring the phone to my ear. "Hey. How are ya?"

Tessa grunts. "Finally! Someone answers the damn phone today. Sweet Christ, I'm going batshit crazy listening to these transcripts and I need a reason to not listen to them." A loud crunch comes through the line. "Humor me. What's new? What happened with that one chick who definitely does not have bigger balls than me?"

I chuckle, my eyes searching for Brooke. "You know, I should be offended you're only calling me to get out of working. You're a terrible mate."

"Hey, screw you. *I* should be offended you left the best fucking state in this beautiful country to be all adult and open up your own business, but I'm not, 'cause that would be shitty of me. Even though I still don't understand why you couldn't open up your own studio here. 'Bama girls love yoga."

We share a light laugh. I know of one particular 'bama girl who doesn't care for yoga one bit.

“How’s all that going anyway?” she asks.

“Good. Yeah, really good. It’s a bit shocking, actually. I might have to consider tacking on another class during the day if interest stays this fortunate.”

“Mason, you’re a great teacher, and you look like a male model. I’m sure your interest stays plenty fortunate.”

“We’ll see.” I smile, rubbing my mouth. “So, yeah, this woman I mentioned, Brooke.” At the mere utterance of her name, something catches in the center of my chest, warming my blood. My mouth twitches. “We’ve been seeing a bit of each other and it’s been great. I’m quite fond of her.”

“Yeah?” Tessa takes another bite of whatever it is she’s eating. “You two serious?”

“Serious?” I repeat, considering the word.

My answer is simple.

In my mind, we are. I have never been anything less with Brooke, and I don’t relish the idea of it. She is quickly becoming a beautiful constant in my life.

Wake up thinking about her.

Go through the day, counting down the minutes until I can pop in her shop for a quick visit.

Pass out and welcome some of the filthiest dreams I’ve ever had, all featuring her sweet face and sinful body.

But if asked this question, how would Brooke answer? I know how this thing started out, her casual plans for me, but how does she see us now?

I rub at my neck. “I’m serious about her. She’s bloody fantastic, and the only woman I care to be around.”

“And how does she feel?”

“Lovely.”

There’s a brief pause. “Jesus,” Tessa laughs. “That’s not what I meant. Though I’m impressed you went dirty before I did. Not many people beat me

to the punch. Bravo.”

I look up and spot Brooke walking toward me on the path. Her hand lifts with a cute little wave, and I grin. “She’s warming up to me. I’m meeting with her now so I’m sorry to say you’ll have to return to work. I’ll keep you posted on my developments. Tell everyone I said hi, yeah?”

“Jerk,” she mumbles, then giggles quietly. “Yeah, I’ll tell them. And let me know when you decide Chicago blows and need some help looking for apartments back here. I’ll be all over it.”

I stand from the bench. “Goodbye, Tessa.”

“Later.”

Disconnecting the call, I tuck my phone back into my pocket and continue watching Brooke moving toward me.

Her cream-colored, short-sleeved blouse dips low in the front, courtesy of several unfastened buttons. Dark jeans fit to her curves. And on her feet, a pair of gray flats.

Those pink heels she likes to wear are sexy as fuck, but I might like her in flats better. When I pull her close and fit our bodies together, she’s the perfect height for me to rest my chin on top of her head.

“Hey. You made it.” She places her hand to my chest, offering me her cheek. She knows that’s where I’m heading.

I fucking love that she knows that.

“I almost called to remind you,” she adds, smirking.

“I told you I’d be here.” I bend for a kiss and then motion for her to have a seat. Sliding the sandwich bag into my lap, I hold out the to-go box for her to take.

She studies the label on the top of the box, then slowly eases it from my hands.

“You went to Rosie’s,” she states through a soft laugh. “You know I’ve only ever been there for breakfast? I have no idea what their lunch menu looks like.”

It wouldn't matter, I think, smiling to myself.

I dig my sandwich out of my bag, keeping my gaze in my lap. "Lots of sandwiches and soups. A few salads. Typical lunch stuff." I peel away the wrapper to reveal the top piece of rye bread.

A soft gasp perks in my ear, followed by cardboard creasing. "Oh, my God, Mason. This is impossible. How did you get them to make you this? They stop serving breakfast at ten-thirty!"

I glance over at her, watching as she lifts the box to her face and inhales.

She makes a soft, moaning sound in the back of her throat as her eyes fall closed. The wind picks up, blowing her hair off her shoulder.

I stare at neck, her dimple, the adorable wrinkle in her nose as she practically submerges her face in that box.

She turns and bumps our knees together. "Mason."

"What?" I casually ask, taking a bite of my sandwich and finally meeting her eyes. "Oh, do you like that kind of French toast? It's a bit odd, yeah? With the cereal? I wasn't sure you would like it." I pull a set of wrapped plastic silverware out of my pocket and hold it out.

Our fingers slide together as she reaches for it. I feel a jolt of energy pulse under my skin.

Brooke's eyes widen, lowering to my mouth.

With a quick jerk, she leans forward and hovers an inch from my face, her lungs straining for breath. The movement is so abrupt and clearly so startling for her, given her staggered expression, it's as if she is being pushed into me and held there.

"Brooke," I murmur, looking all over her face. I bring my arm behind her and rest it on the bench, angling us together.

She blinks up at me. "Mm?"

"Do you want to kiss me?"

She doesn't answer, but her eyes, those beautiful fucking eyes drop to my mouth and stay there, flickering open a little wider when I wet my lips.

A heaviness gathers in my limbs as I wait, and wait, and *fuck*, wait for her to make a move. A decision.

This is a first.

Every kiss, every sort of affection we've shared has been instigated and carried out by me. Sure, she's been an active participant, minus a few of the times I've tried to hold her hand, but she's never reached for me. She's never forced the seal of our mouths together and shocked the hell out of *me*.

I inch closer, just the smallest shift, enough to feel her breath on my face. It's warm and smells like fruit, something berry.

"Come on," I whisper.

It sounds like I'm begging. I feel like I am.

Her pink tongue darts out and slides across her lips.

I can see the wild hammering of her pulse beneath her ear. I can practically hear her thoughts and the argument she wages with herself over this monumental affirmation.

Come on, Brooke.

I keep reminding myself to breathe and to not move and to just fucking wait another second. Then another. Time becomes a double-edged sword. The longer she considers this, the more shattering or satisfying the end result will become.

I'll look back on this moment and think it was torture and damaging in the end. She wasn't ready. She might not ever be. Or, I'll only remember the feel of her lips and the taste of her warm breath and I'll think, 'I would've waited hours for that'.

A hand touches my thigh. My blood turns to lava, scorching and slow-moving.

Then with a gasping breath she leans in and presses the softest kiss to my mouth.

FUCK.

I've shared a lot of kisses with Brooke. Hot, hungry ones where it feels

like I've captured her after a long-winded chase. Ones that seem imperative and essential to my survival. But this kiss, even though it's fleeting and painstakingly faint, feels superior to every other kiss she has or will ever give me.

And in that moment, my life becomes profoundly simple, consisting of only one person.

Brooke.

With a quiet laugh, she pulls away and opens her cutlery. She lifts a brow when our eyes lock. "You are crazy. Did you promise to rock Rosie's world? Is that why she made this for you?"

It takes me a minute to process her question. I'm still reeling from the ghost of a kiss that just knocked me on my arse.

I run a quick hand through my hair, gathering my wits about me. "No. I never saw Rosie, although I'm sure she's lovely and a minx in the sack."

Brooke laughs, reaching up and tucking some hair behind her ear.

"I asked a waitress if they could make an exception and help a poor bloke out. There was some gentle begging. I may have mentioned how badly I fucked up this morning and that I was declaring my adoration for this one particular woman through the weekly meals she's giving me, which I'm hoping will soon convert to days." I take a bite of my sandwich, shrugging when she turns her head. "If you think about it, I'm already creeping in on lunches. Next it will be routine dinners. Minutes in between. I'll claim a day from you soon enough."

"Are you talking about once a week? Like every Tuesday is Brooke and Mason day?"

I smile. "Yeah."

"Oh, okay. In this fantasy world, do either one of us have jobs? Because I need to work." She licks some powdered sugar off her lip. "How am I supposed to give you a day if I'm working?"

"Weekends, obviously. Or I'll forgo your time in between meals and have

you after work.” I lower my voice, leaning closer as I set my sandwich on the paper wrapping. “Although, fair warning. I might not be so willing to give you up after the sun goes down. I’ve imagined how perfect you are waking up to and if I have a chance to entertain that idea, I’m taking it.”

She stares at me for a moment, her mouth slowly lifting into a mischievous grin. “And what exactly have you imagined? Anything particularly tight and wet?”

My cock stirs beneath my shorts.

I lower my eyes to the white lace peeking out of her blouse. “Mm. And soft. I wake up with my face buried between your spectacular tits and we go from there.”

She lowers the box to her lap and shifts closer, her chest pressing against my side. “Tell me,” she murmurs.

I lift my gaze to hers.

She wants me to go into detail about what I’ve imagined more times than I can count? Now? Here?

With heavy eyes, she slowly nods as if she’s heard my internal thoughts. Her hand moves back to my thigh.

I swallow, my heart pounding in my chest, my cock quickly lengthening as pornographic thoughts run rampant in my mind. I turn my body more and hold the sandwich bag strategically in my lap, concealing my unwelcome erection.

This is a crowded park. There’s bloody kids running around. I can’t will my prick not to react to this woman, but I can at least keep it hidden.

“Dirty girl,” I whisper against her ear. “You want to know what I think about?”

“Yes,” she replies breathlessly. Her hand squeezes my leg.

“I lick and suck your tits until they’re wet enough for me to slide between. Will you let me fuck them, Brooke? I want to. God, I’ve thought about it. Your hot little mouth opening for me, lapping at my head. Your

gorgeous eyes going round while I milk my cum onto your nipples.”

“Oh, God,” she gasps.

“I dream about your tits, Brooke. And your arse.”

She blinks rapidly. “My ass?”

“Fuck yeah, your arse. Are you kidding? I want to come on that too.”

Her hand moves closer to my cock. “What else? Just . . . keep going. I won’t touch you. I just want to drive you a little crazy.”

I groan when her fingers brush against my length. “Brooke . . .”

“Oops. Sorry,” she says through a giggle, jerking her hand back. “I forgot how much room you take up down there. That was an accident.” Her hand tightens on my leg. “Go on. What happens before you come on my ass?”

I bend to kiss her mouth. I can’t fucking help it. Sugar coats my tongue, and again, I’m reminded of the way her skin tasted the other night.

My hand forms to her neck and she tilts her head. “I get you face-down on my bed. You ask me to spank you, and I make you beg for it. I bite and lick your skin. I straddle your legs and hold your ass so I can slide my cock between your cheeks. And then,” I pause, kissing along her jaw, smiling against her cheek when she lets out a shuddering breath.

“And then?” she asks.

“I found a quarter!” a tiny voice yells, way too fucking close to whatever the hell is happening on this bench.

With a muffled curse, I frantically move the sandwich bag further up my lap.

Brooke yanks her hand away and falls against my side, laughing unashamedly with a hand to her chest.

“Having a good time?” I ask her before addressing this little mood killer.

I pull back and stare between the round face in front of me and the coin that’s being held out for me to notice.

“Look!” The young boy turns the quarter in the air. “There’s only ever pennies in there. Sometimes nickels. I found an actual quarter!”

“Brilliant. Why don’t you run along now?”

“Aw, let me see.” Brooke holds her hand out and takes the coin. She studies it for a moment, smiles coyly at me when our eyes meet, then places it back in the boy’s hand. “That’s so cool. What’s your name?”

I gape at her.

Is she bloody serious? Does she not know how uncomfortable this is for me? What’s next? Asking the little bugger if he’d like to join us for lunch?

“Willie!” A woman yells, waving her hands in the air and running at me.
Jesus fuck! Can she see my cock from there?

Heart racing, I look down into my adequately concealed lap.

No. Everything’s good here. Nothing hanging out.

My pulse steadies. I suddenly remember how to breathe.

When the woman stops beside the boy and places a hand on his shoulder, I realize she was calling out for him, not announcing to everyone here that I was giving shows.

She gives me an apologetic look, then glares at the kid. “What have I told you about walking up to strangers? Come on. It’s time to go.” She tugs on his hand and leads him down the footpath.

Brooke laughs unapologetically as she settles back against the bench, then stares down at the bag covering my now flaccid cock. “How are things down there? Anything turning a shade of blue yet?”

“You’re the devil.” I move the bag and pick up my neglected roast beef sandwich. “Let’s spend the rest of your lunch-hour eating, shall we? Hands where I can see them.”

She picks up her fork and shoves a massive bite into her mouth. Her lips strain to close. “So good,” she says, although it sounds more like the noise a dying animal might make.

We laugh and eat under the midday sun, and I slip a little bit further under Brooke’s spell.



BROOKE

Camping . . .

Am I completely insane?

Not only do I have absolutely no idea why I agreed to this absurdity, I also have no clue how to pack for a weekend in the wilderness.

Outdoors. Zero climate control. According to my weather app, I'm looking at temperatures anywhere between forty and eighty-five degrees this weekend.

Say what? That's basically my entire closet. Random Packing 101 right here.

I have jammed my oversized Victoria's Secret duffle bag full of the oddest combination of clothing. Shorts, sweatshirt, bathing suit, a pair of snow pants just in case. I refuse to be unprepared for this. I even break another shopping rule and run out to the local sporting goods store to grab a few camping essentials, or at least what *I* classify as camping essentials.

Is there such a thing as too much bug-spray? Are road flares frowned upon at campsites? The answer is no and I don't really give a fuck.

I have never been camping. I never wanted to be a girl scout. I have absolutely no desire to spend any time outside unless I'm lounging by a pool with a fruity umbrella drink.

There are outdoorsy people, and then there's me.

So, why am I lugging this duffle out of my car and surrendering myself to Mother Nature for two days? Simple.

Orgasms. Mason's mouth in general. That accent? Jesus. I can listen to him talk for hours. And . . . okay, if I'm being honest, it's not terrible hanging out with him and doing things that don't involve safe words.

He makes me laugh. A lot. The only other time men I've been interested in have made me laugh in the past is when they've dropped their pants.

That didn't happen with Mason. That will never happen with Mason. I will take his cock very seriously.

And soon, if I have any say in the matter.

After locking up my car and making sure I have everything I think I'll need, I adjust the strap on my shoulder and wait for a break in traffic.

It's nearly six-thirty and the sky is beginning to warm with the approaching sunset. Reds and deep oranges color the clouds. The air is slowly dropping in temperature.

Thank God for the sweatshirt I packed. I may need it before we get to the campsite.

Across the street, Mason carries a large cooler around to the back of his car. He's been loading up for the past ten minutes, not that I've been watching from the bakery window or anything.

Okay, I have. He's excited, and it's kind of cute to watch him step back and evaluate his packing job. Move things around. Scratch his head when the back door won't latch shut and then pull everything out and start over.

Frustrated Mason King is surprisingly sexy, and I'm guessing not something people get to see very often, being Mr. Zen.

Traffic finally slows and I step off the curb. I get halfway across the street before Mason turns his head and notices me.

He looks fucking edible in dark gray warmups and a yellow graphic tee.

Fucking. Edible.

His hair is a blonde wavy mess, messier when he pushes a hand through it as he watches me. Both of us are in sneakers, which I had to run home for after he sent me a text this afternoon.

Mason: Your arse looks amazing in those heels. It also looks amazing in runners. That's what you should be wearing this weekend. Lots of walking, gorgeous.

How did I forget about shoes? I remember floss and a nail file, but comfortable shoes? Not a priority.

After setting the cooler down on the back of the car, Mason jogs over and takes my duffle.

“Here. I’ll take that.” He slides the bag off my shoulder and lifts it with one hand, gauging the weight. His brows pull together as we move to the car. “A bit heavy, yeah? You pack for both of us?”

I hook a thumb behind me. “Oh, that’s just my lube. My clothes are in my other bag. Can you grab it?”

His face right now? Priceless.

Mouth falling open. Alarmed eyes shifting between the bag in his hand and my face. His lips pinch together after a few seconds of utter shock, and he fights a smile through a shake of his head. “Your lube? Jesus, Brooke. A bit of a wasted purchase, don’t you think?”

We stop at the back of the car. Mason moves a few things around to make room for my bag.

“Wasted? How is stocking up on lube a wasted purchase? You should always have some handy, just in case. And they last a while. I don’t think they expire for like two years or something.”

“Do you have any idea how wet I make you? You don’t need lube, sweetheart. Not with me.”

I cross my arms, leaning against the side of the car. “Are you sure about that? What about anal?”

He freezes, keeping his hands on the duffle after he stuffs it beside the

cooler.

His head is down. Profile tense and body deathly rigid.

There is something extremely satisfying about supplying Mason with another spank-bank image. I like the high it gives me, knowing he'll get off on that later. Picturing my body to seek out his release.

Enjoy that.

Laughing at my own cleverness, I start to move to the sidewalk, but he reaches out and grabs me, pinning my body between him and the bumper. My breath hitches when his hand connects sharply with my ass and stays there, his other roughly roaming over my curves.

His touch is possessive. Indecent.

I mold to his front like warm putty. I suddenly feel drugged.

So much for having the upper hand.

“Don’t give me any ideas about this perfect fucking arse, Brooke. Unless you want me to show you why we wouldn’t need lube for that either.” He sucks on the skin beneath my ear, then drops his hands, moving away as suddenly as this delicious assault came on. “You ready to get going? I want to set up camp before dark,” he says, completely casually, grabbing a rolled up sleeping bag off the sidewalk and sliding it next to my duffle.

I blink him into focus, reaching up and wiping my chin. I’m surprised it’s not wet with drool.

“Y-Yeah, sure. Just let me use the bathroom first.”

Jesus. Pull yourself together, Brooke.

I rush inside the studio before I see or hear his reaction to my obvious discomposure.

Lord, the man’s hands are wicked. Paired with that voice? I’m completely defenseless.

“You started it,” I mumble to myself as I tie my hair up off my heated neck. I guess it serves me right for trying to get a rise out of Mason.

He got one. I definitely felt it. And now I can very easily confirm his

statement about not needing lube.

I push the door open at the top of the stairs and step out into the loft.

The room is exactly how I remember it from my first embarrassing experience up here. Lots of grays and blues. Massive wood-panel bed. A small kitchen table that looks to also be serving as a desk. It's covered in membership forms and signed contracts. A laptop. A book about franchising.

I walk over to the accent chair in the corner and pick up the stuffed koala. I crush it to my chest.

"Hey, mate," I whisper.

He kept it.

After using the bathroom and washing my hands, I stop at the refrigerator to hopefully grab a bottle of water. Something to hold in the car when my hands become restless. I swing the door open and startle at the contents littering the shelves.

Boxes. Bakery boxes. A lot of them.

Why are there so many?

"What the hell?" I grab the closest one in reach and open the lid. Four cupcakes fill the container. Four cupcakes I made. Completely untouched. I set the box down and reach for another. And another. Each one still exactly how I delivered it. No bites taken. None of the icing sampled. I find the first box I gave to Mason on the sidewalk the morning we met. The only cupcake that has been disturbed is the dulce and banana I tasted for him.

He isn't eating anything I give him. He's not even tasting them.

Why? Does he not like cupcakes? Fuck, if that's the case, why is he allowing me to make it rain desserts every time we see each other?

I put the boxes back on the shelf and grab some water. I can't get back outside fast enough. When I push the studio door open, I charge at Mason with my bottle pointed at his chest.

"Why is your fridge filled with cupcakes? What is going on?"

The smile on his face diminishes the second I get those words out.

I lower the bottle. I almost tell him to forget what I just said.

He looks uncomfortable, maybe a bit anxious. His eyes are shifting about the sidewalk while he rubs the back of his neck.

But damn it, I want to know. I'm too curious to drop this. And I'm not going anywhere until he explains what I've just discovered.

With a sigh, he pushes away from the car and steps forward, lifting his shoulders. "Because you made them," he quietly states, stopping a foot away. "I don't eat stuff like that, Brooke. I haven't in a long time."

"So tell me and I won't push them on you. Jesus. I can't believe you never said anything."

"I don't eat them. I didn't say I don't like getting them. You're so proud of what you make. I am too."

What . . . did he just say?

I stare at him as something warm bursts open in my chest, spreading from my neck to my navel. My shoulders sag. I chew nervously on the inside of my cheek.

He keeps them because he's proud of me?

How can someone be so straight-up filthy one minute and this sweet the next? He's like this beautiful balance of dark and light, dirty and decent, and he seems to know *exactly* when to be one and when to give me the other.

Keeping one cupcake because I make it is surprising enough. He keeps them all.

Every single one.

Mason watches my reaction, and what does he do? He waits. He waits while I absorb what he's just disclosed. This completely insane, yet incredibly affectionate gesture. He doesn't say anything else. He doesn't move closer and kiss my cheek, or tell me I look pretty while I struggle to comprehend this.

He just simply waits, and it's so him, and so what I need him to do right now.

I lower my gaze to his arms, the same arms that just had me pinned roughly to that hard body without giving me much of a choice about it.

Funny. Now I'm tempted to willingly throw myself into them.

I don't fight it.

"God, Mason." I reach for his shirt and pull us together. My head hits his chest. I barely move but my heart is pounding. "What are you doing?" I whisper, allowing my eyes to close.

He wraps his strong arms around my body, squeezing me. "I don't know. I couldn't throw them out."

I smile against the soft cotton.

We stand there for several minutes. My head never moves. His arms never leave me. It's soothing, the constant pressure of his hold, and somehow it feels strangely familiar. Like he's held me like this for years. Like I've known him my entire life, and in the moments when I've needed someone to be with me like this, it's always been him.

No one else.

Sighing, I snuggle the tiniest bit closer, clutching my water bottle between us. "You're crazy."

"Yeah."

"Promise me you'll toss them when they start to grow mold."

"All right."

I crane my neck and kiss his jaw. "Now, take me camping before I realize I'm just as crazy as you are."

He smiles, kissing my temple. Tipping up my chin to steal my mouth.

Or maybe I just give it to him.



"*This* is where we're camping? Really?" I unbuckle my seat belt and lean forward, looking out the window at our surroundings.

Dirt covered parking lot. One single lamp post lighting the area.

I turn to Mason, smiling. "You fingered me here."

With a sly grin, he winks at me before exiting the car.

Mm. Ready to build on that stellar experience, Mr. King?

I take a sip of my water and meet him around the back to help unload.

Mason insists on carrying the bulk of our stuff as he leads the way down a small narrow path toward the campsites. I follow behind, clutching the sleeping bag against my chest. Tall trees surround us. I can barely see the darkening sky through the branches.

I move closer until I'm practically climbing onto his back.

He talks the entire time, as if he can sense my apprehension behind him. He talks about camping with his dad back in Australia. How his sisters never had any interest in going until his friends started tagging along. He tells me he came by here the other day to stake out the grounds for our weekend. There's a lake, and a few hiking trails he thinks I'll enjoy checking out. He smiles over his shoulder when I let out a doubtful chuckle, which I play up. I like lakes. I might like hiking.

It's as if the fresh air is drugging me.

When we reach a large clearing in the woods, I watch Mason set everything down by two logs. Tent. Cooler. My bag and his. He kicks some rocks and branches out of the way and immediately goes about setting up the tent.

I drop the sleeping bag and look around.

It's a wide-open space, room enough for at least a handful of other tents, but we're alone. There's a fire pit contained by an ill-defined rock formation. It resembles somewhat of a circle. The wood in the center looks recently burned. A metal grill that seems to be a courtesy for campers to use is located next to a large rectangular picnic table.

Nice. At least we won't have to eat with our asses in the dirt.

Stepping to the edge of the clearing, I stand on my toes and peer through a break in the trees.

"Hey. We're right by the lake," I tell Mason, looking over my shoulder.

“Did you know that?”

Literally, right by it. It can't be more than fifty feet away.

His smiling face appears from around the back of the tent. “Yeah. That's one of the reasons why I picked this campsite. The other two are pretty secluded and nowhere near the toilets. Figured you'd do better out here if I kept us in walking distance of those.”

“Good thinking. I'd hate you for life if you told me I had to go pee in a bucket or something.”

His chuckle is broken up by the sound of my ringtone. I pull my phone out of my back pocket and look at the screen.

“Hey, Juls,” I answer, watching Mason disappear again behind the tent.

“Hey, stranger. I feel like I haven't talked to you in forever. Where are you?”

“Camping.”

My nephew Jacob yells something in the background. I hear Ian's voice, then the sound of a door closing. “Say that again? It sounded like you said camping.” She laughs. “Jesus. Can you imagine? You? Camping? I think there's a better chance of Ian carrying our next child.”

I roll my eyes. “I did say camping. And Ian probably *could* carry a baby if he wanted to. He's hormonal as shit.”

“What?”

“I said he's hormonal . . .”

“Not that,” she brusquely cuts me off. “You're camping right now? With who?”

Mason moves on to the next post, securing it down with a spike. I spin around and face the trees.

“Mason,” I murmur, playing with the hem of my shirt.

Juls inhales a sharp breath. “Oh, really? The hot Australian from the bar,” she states, her voice lifting with her obvious approval of this development. “Mm. He was really nice. Are you still seeing him? I figured that would be

done by now.”

I move as far away from the tent as I can get without stepping into the woods. I lower my voice to a stern whisper. “I’m not seeing him like *that*. We’re just hanging out, okay? It’s not a big deal.”

“Just hanging out doing what, Brooke? Dating? Being in a relationship?”

“Shut up,” I snap. “And stop grinning like an idiot. I can totally hear it in your voice.”

“Look at you,” she laughs. “First sign of being in love is denial. Welcome to the club, sis.”

“Oh, my God,” I groan, rubbing my forehead. “I’m hanging up.”

“Wait! Are we still on for dinner next week?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, good. Jake and Izzy miss their favorite aunt. You need to come over more.”

“Fine. I gotta go.”

My shoulders ache with tension. Why did I even answer this call? Juls is always giving me grief.

“All right. But Brooke? Just remember . . .”

There is a long pause. I drum my fingers on my jeans and sigh exhaustively. Her breathy laugh pushes through the line.

“You’re my sister. I love you, and I will totally give you a discount when it’s time to plan the wedding. Don’t think . . .”

I disconnect the call and power off my phone.

God, she is completely insane. How are we even related?

Stepping over a log, I drop the phone onto my bag. I begin to pace in front of our gear, kicking up dirt and cracking my knuckles. I try and sit down on the cooler, but my ass barely touches it before I’m springing to my feet again.

I should’ve let that call go to voicemail. Now I’m restless and ready to chew my nails off.

I risk a glance at Mason. He's staring at me like I'm in the middle of a psychotic break.

Talking. Talking might settle me. I can talk. I'm fucking awesome at talking.

"So, possible showers tomorrow night. Did you see? Like a ten percent chance. Not much, but still."

He positions a stake in the ground. "I think it'll hold off."

"It was fifteen percent earlier, then they dropped it to ten."

"Yeah."

"If I got naked right now and jumped into the lake, what would you do?"

I look over to where Mason is crouched down beside the tent. His hammer is suspended in the air.

He looks startled. Confused maybe? I can elaborate.

"I mean, obviously, you'd look. Who wouldn't? But would you take off your clothes and follow after me? Or would you continue pitching that tent *and* the one in your shorts?"

"Are you planning on getting naked and jumping into the lake?" he asks, lowering the hammer and resting his elbow on his knee.

I shrug, kicking a rock out of the way. "Maybe. I don't know. I've never been skinny dipping before. Shocking, right? You would think *I've* done that, but no." A nervous laugh bubbles in my throat. "I'm just wondering what you would do if I did it."

"Probably follow you."

"Would you get in?"

He hits the spike once, then looks back up at me. When he tries to answer, I cut him off.

"Have you ever done that before? Gone skinny dipping?"

"No."

"Yeah, me either." I step over the log and continue my pacing. "Mm. We're both virgin skinny dippers. That's cute."

He hits the spike a few more times. The branches under my feet snap.

“How old were you when you lost your virginity?” I ask, chewing on my thumb nail.

“Brooke.” Mason catches my gaze and studies it. He slowly rises to his feet. “Are you okay?”

I stop behind the log.

Am I? Fuck. He’s looking at me like I’m definitely *not* okay. Like I’m some wild animal he’s just encountered out here and he’s trying his hardest not to startle me.

I exhale a quick breath. My hand falls away. “I’m fine,” I tell him, stepping over the log again. “Just killing time while you . . .” I pause, looking up at the large red and gray *house* Mason has pitched. “Oh, you’re finished. Nice.”

Holy fuck. This thing is enormous! Not at all what I pictured in my head when he suggested we do this.

Two-man tent. Close quarters. Little room for space between our sweaty naked bodies.

Mm. Maybe I can unpack and spread my clothes out on one side. That should help force the two of us together. This portable condominium is large enough to contain Joey *and* his personality. Not many things are.

Mason drops the small hammer by our bags and comes to stand next to me. His hand circles my back. “Are you cold?” he asks when a shiver chases up my spine. “I can build a fire.”

I look from the tent to our surroundings again, my arms hugging my body. Mysterious noises rustle the branches of the trees. Crickets sing into the night. It’ll be fully dark soon.

A knot forms in my stomach.

From being out here? From my conversation with Juls? I can’t seem to tell.

“Maybe we can just stay in tonight?” I softly suggest, turning back to

Mason.

He cocks his head, trying to understand. I'm sure he thinks I mean stay in tonight, in the car.

I might. Give me an hour.

"We have all day tomorrow to be out in this . . . stuff. You know?" I gesture around us, then at the tent. "Honestly, I'm feeling a little anxious, if you didn't notice. This is a lot for me, Mason. Being out here. Roughing it. Could we just stay in the tent the rest of the night? Would that be horrible?"

A gentle smile lifts the corner of his mouth. "You, all to myself in a tent? Nothing horrible about that." He tugs on my pony. "You want a fire or no?"

I shake my head, spinning around to open my bag. "No. I'm really not that cold. Can we walk to the bathrooms though? I want to brush my teeth and stuff."

"Yeah, sure."

He grabs his toothbrush and a flashlight, leading me down another path after he stores our things inside the tent.

I'm one extremely happy girl when it takes us no more than a minute to get to the bath houses. I can easily find this on my own.

We separate and wash up. I scrub my face clean and fix my hair into a sleeker pony.

When we get back to the campsite, it's nearly dark. Mason unzips the flap on the tent and holds it open for me to climb inside.

I toe my shoes off and step in.

"Wow. Swanky," I say, admiring the large dome ceiling and mesh windows. He's left them partially unzipped, allowing for a cool breeze and the moonlight to cut through.

Mason smiles as he ducks to enter and closes us inside. He sets the flashlight down and turns on a lantern, sitting it on top of the cooler. Soft light fills the tent. He kneels and unrolls the sleeping bag in the center of the space.

“Room for two,” he murmurs, shooting me a heated look.

Yes, please.

Leaving it zipped up, he stretches out on his back and pats the spot next to him.

I wet my lips and lower to my knees, crawling closer. I let my head fall beside his. “So, I’ve been meaning to ask you something.”

“What’s that?”

“What made you leave Australia three years ago? Was it like a yoga thing? Were you wanting to study it here?”

“No, it had nothing to do with yoga.”

I stare at his profile when he doesn’t elaborate. My foot nudges his calf. “Were you in love with her?”

Shit. I need to get my mouth under control. Do I even want to know his answer? Will it matter to me one way or the other?

He looks at me briefly, just a glance, then resumes staring up at the ceiling. “I don’t know. If you had asked me that question three years ago I would’ve said yeah. I followed a woman to another country. I felt something for her. I said it, more than once.”

“I love you,” I quietly offer.

His head snaps in my direction and he gives me the strangest look, full of intrigue and stunned disbelief. Questions. So many questions in those bright eyes staring back at me.

I swallow before I continue. My tongue suddenly feels too large for my mouth. “That’s what you said. You told her you loved her.”

His lips part with a rushed exhale. “Yeah.”

“What does it feel like when you say it?” I bite my lip, rolling to my side to look at him. I prop my head up on my fist.

“You’ve never said it?” he asks, his eyes searching my face. He continues after I shake my head. “What about to your family and stuff? Like a best mate, you say it to them?”

“That’s not the same thing. I mean, yeah, I say it to my family. I have to. My mom would punch me in my teeth if I didn’t tell her I loved her.”

“Your mum a violent woman with everyone? Should I scream my affection for her when we meet?” He smiles when I poke his side. “You say it to your friends, yeah?”

“No.”

“Never? Not even growing up?”

“I didn’t really have friends growing up.”

“Come on.” His brow pulls tight. “I don’t believe that. I bet you were very popular in school.”

“Yeah, with the boys. And they weren’t interested in being my friend. Girls were either nasty to me because they were jealous or they had no idea who I was. I never had a best mate.” My eyes lower to a spot between us. “I had my sister, Juls, and we were forced to like each other so that doesn’t count. And now, yeah, I’m friends with Joey and Billy. I’ve known Dylan for years, but it’s not the same thing.”

I flop back over and blink up at the ceiling. My hands tangle together on my stomach.

I think about Mason that night at The Tavern, how he told me all the things he wanted from this, what *more* meant to him, and how I almost laughed at his desire for a friendship on top of everything else.

Would I laugh now?

Clearing my head, I bump my leg against his. “So, I guess you don’t know what it’s like saying it then. I mean, *really* saying it. Mates don’t count.”

“No, I guess not,” he chuckles. “If we’re not counting mates or mums.”

“Or Mother Earth. I’m sure you’ve pledged your undying affection for that bitch.”

In a flash, he rolls over and pins me beneath him. I giggle against his neck.

“Jealous?” His hard torso settles between my legs. He tilts my chin and claims my mouth, stealing my ability to answer.

We kiss slowly, a gentle glide of lips and tongues until our breaths grow hurried and our hands no longer hold our bodies together, but roughly explore skin and shape.

My fingers filter through his hair and tug on the ends. I wrap my legs around his waist. When his hips start gently thrusting forward, pressing his erection against my clit, I gasp into his mouth and squirm beneath him. I reach under his shirt and feel the warm skin of his back. My nails pull him closer, my body jutting away from the earth and further into his arms.

He squeezes my breast, taking and taking my mouth until I’m bruised and breathless.

Nothing is hotter than Mason’s desperation, and it’s evident in everything.

His kiss. His touch. The way his voice breaks when he says my name.

“Brooke.”

I grasp at his body like he’s slipping away. I’m worried he will.

I want him to want me so badly he can’t remember anyone before. I want him to distract me so I’m not completely terrified of what this is or what it’s becoming.

I don’t want to think. I just want to feel. His hands. His mouth. The wild pace of his heart.

He sucks on my neck and my head rolls to the side.

I spot my duffle. I remember what’s in it.

“Wait. I brought you something.” I push against his shoulders and he rolls off, growling his protest. I stand and give him a playful look. “You’ll like it. Trust me.”

“I liked what we were doing.” He tucks both hands behind his head. His feet cross at his ankles. “Is it another koala?”

“No,” I laugh, unzipping the bag. I strip my shirt off and toss it aside. My

bra is next. I look up at Mason and find his attention drawn off my face. "Close your eyes," I tell him, my fingers popping the button of my jeans.

He continues to stare, his erection tenting his pants. "I can't."

"Please? It'll be worth it. I promise."

With a disapproving grunt, he pinches his eyes shut. I don't trust him not to peek so I carry my shirt over and toss it onto his face. He chuckles against the material. I take a full minute to appreciate the line of his cock.

Hot damn.

I strip my jeans off but leave on my blue lace thong. After changing into the outfit I packed, I straddle Mason's waist and sink to my knees.

"Okay. You can look."

He tosses the shirt and opens his eyes, wide, wider the longer he stares at my cheerleading outfit from college.

"Jesus Christ, Brooke. *This* is what you brought me?" He runs his hands up my thighs and under my skirt. The light from the lantern flickers in his blue irises.

"Still fits." I wink, cupping my breasts through the tight polyester. "Itchy as fuck, though. I better make this quick."

"Make what quick?"

I shoot down and tug on his warm-ups. His cock springs free, slapping hard and heavy against his stomach.

He hisses through his teeth. "Brooke. Wait."

I put my weight on my knees. I'm prepared for his protest. "You don't want my hands or my mouth, and you don't want to have sex yet. Fine. But you never said anything about dry humping." I blow him a kiss before spinning around and lowering myself onto his pelvis. I move my ass against his cock, rolling my hips in slow circles.

He twitches beneath me and I smile.

"Mm. Remember those dreams you have about me, Mason? When you spank me and come on my ass?"

“Fuck,” he groans, pushing up my skirt, holding it at my waist so he can watch.

I grind my pussy against his shaft. My back bowing as I squeeze his thighs. “Do you like this?” I ask, glancing over my shoulder.

His hungry eyes never leave my body. “So good, baby. Look at you.”

I reach back and tug on the string of my thong. “You like this? Do you feel how wet I am?”

I gasp when he slides his cock between my cheeks, his hands squeezing my ass to fit around him.

Our eyes lock.

“Fuck, Brooke. Do *you* like it? Knowing how hard you make me. How crazy you make me feel. Tell me.”

“I like it.”

He slaps my ass.

I drop my head through a groan. My hips pulsing faster, my chest heaving through quiet, quick breaths. The tiny bundle of nerves between my legs begins to throb and swell. My nipples harden against my top.

I watch the shadow of our bodies on the wall of the tent, and I realize the moment Mason sees it too.

Us. Together. His long body stretched beneath mine.

He growls behind me, fingers pulling at flesh. His body tightly wound like a spring ready to jump.

He’s on the edge, right there, and I want him to fall. I want to give him pleasure and take my own.

I arch my back and chase my relief, closing my eyes, gasping when his hand connects with my ass again.

“Brooke,” he groans. “Tell me. God, fucking *tell* me.”

I know what he wants me to say, but I don’t just say it. I don’t give him an empty echo of a response. I admit my own truth.

“You make me feel crazy too.”

When I come, I gasp in shock as my spine and muscles burn.

Mason's release shoots onto my ass, hot spurts sticking to my skin as he moans my name into the night. He wipes me clean with his shirt, I realize, when he pulls me back and holds me against his bare chest, nuzzling my neck and kissing my jaw, his heart racing and his mouth ravenous.

Turning in his arms, I cup his face, staring into his eyes, pushing my hand through his hair. "I like camping with you," I whisper.

He smiles against my mouth. "Yeah? Thought you might."

We strip off each other's clothes. Mason kills the light from the lantern and we slide inside the sleeping bag. He puts his arm around my waist, whispering how he'll protect me from bears and huge snakes I don't want to dry hump.

I laugh against his neck and close my eyes. I might even snuggle closer.

Sleep takes a hold of me before I can tell.



MASON

Getting Brooke to agree to a hike today came easier than I was anticipating.

It probably had something to do with the timing in which I asked, while she was grinding her tight, wet pussy against my hand and wiggling beneath me in the tent, clawing at my back and crying out in pleasure. She moaned my name before whispering a breathy 'yes' against my mouth, then slapped a hand to my chest and shoved me off, claiming her orgasm had nothing to do with her answer.

Apparently, she's a changed woman, loves everything about nature and is eager to explore it with or without me.

On top of everything else that drives me completely crazy about Brooke, she's a beautiful liar. Fully committed and iron-willed.

Her determination really is a thing to appreciate.

It's midday, and we're halfway through our hike. I watch the cute little sway of Brooke's hips as she tentatively walks the narrow trail in front of me.

Her steps are light against the dirt, quiet and cautious, as if she's trying not to draw any attention to herself from the wildlife. When branches from trees or large shrubs encroach our track, she turns her body sideways, pulls her arms in close, and sucks in a breath until she's made it safely past.

So fucking sweet. I can't stop watching her. I don't know what I'm

enjoying more, being out here with her in the sun and gorgeous weather, or every honest reaction she's giving me.

After nearly stumbling over a rock sticking out of the dirt, she digs it up, cursing the entire time, and tosses it into the woods with a strangled yell. When a bee flies too close to her face, she gasps and then flips the thing off, threatening to find its hive and burn it to the ground.

I'm waiting for her to break and beg me to take us back. To tell me she's had enough and that she hates this and me for dragging her out here.

She stops abruptly on the path and I ready myself for her dismissal.

This is it. She's gone three hours with no complaints or sour tone. But instead of turning on me and threatening my life if I don't get us out of here, she gathers her hair off her neck and applies another thin coating of bug spray to her exposed limbs.

This is her eighth application.

"I'm starting to get hungry. Do we have any food?" she asks, bending over and spraying the front of her legs.

I groan when the bottom of her arse peeks out from those tiny fucking jean shorts she's wearing. Again.

This is the eighth time I've gotten hard on this trail.

"See something you like?"

Her voice is tempting, sweet and wily. She's caught me every time we've done this.

I scratch my jaw as I resume looking at her, never peeling my eyes away, smiling when she molds her hand to the back of her jeans. "I more than like it, gorgeous," I say, giving her a quick glance. "If I didn't give a shit about other men seeing you out here I'd pull those shorts down and bury my face in that."

"In my ass?" she giggles, spinning around and tucking the small tube of bug spray into her pocket. She wipes her hands down the front of her shorts. "That's a win/win for me. You can eat that and I'll eat all the actual food."

Laughing, I reach out and grab her face, kissing her soft mouth. “You hungry?”

“Starving.”

I step back and pull my bag around to the front of me, tipping my chin at a large boulder.

It’s flat and smooth, wide enough to hold several people.

“Want to sit up there and eat? Seems like a nice spot.”

Brooke looks at the path between us and the rock I’m asking her to get to, her brows pinching together and her mouth pulling into a frown.

Her anxiety slips on like a veil.

I follow her gaze. It’s not a far distance, but the overgrown grass is thick with weeds and wildflowers, some of it reaching up as high as her knees. We’ve stayed on clear paths up until this point, nothing unkempt like this.

I know how much I’m asking of Brooke. Bull-headed determination or not. She might just tell me to go fuck off for even suggesting this. I don’t really care where we eat. I’ll sit on the dirt right here, but I’m curious to see how far she’ll go to prove her persistence today.

Another first, little devil? Will you give me this?

I step closer and squeeze her hand. “It’ll be a nice view up there. We might be able to see the lake.”

She slowly turns her head. Her eyes, more green than brown today, narrow in on mine. “Yeah? You know what else has a nice view of the lake? Our campsite. Maybe even the car. Why don’t we go check?”

“I can carry you,” I offer, attempting not to smile at her quick-witted apprehension. “I wouldn’t mind it.”

“You are not carrying me,” she scoffs, yanking out of my grip. “I’m capable of getting there myself. And you know what?”

“What?”

She leans in, standing on her toes to get closer, her hands curling around her hips, her face so near to mine I can see the freckles she’s hiding

underneath her makeup. “That’s exactly what I’m going to do, Mason, because contrary to what you think, I fucking *love it* out here.”

Brooke lets out a tiny squeak, spins around, and sprints through the tall grass like something is chasing her.

My mouth stretches into a grin.

Fuck, baby. Look at you. Always surprising me.

She makes it to the boulder and, with frantic hands, tries to claw her way on top of it, but her footing slips on the smooth rock. “No! Goddamn it, no!”

Laughing, I follow behind and reach the boulder just as she slips again. Even with a running start, she’s too short to get up here alone. I toss my bag on top of the rock to free up my hands.

“Here, my little nature lover,” I say against her hair, grabbing her waist and hoisting her up onto the rock.

She thanks me through a breathy pant and shifts over to make room.

I climb up with ease and sit on the warm stone. Reaching for my bag, I watch Brooke scoot to the ledge and look out over the tree-line.

She’s tousled and winded. Her hair is coming undone, several thick pieces falling beside her face and sticking to her neck, barely any of it still contained in her pony. Her skin is flushed and shiny from the bug spray. A light dusting of dirt clings to her legs.

I want to freeze this moment. I want to be able to sit here and do absolutely nothing, just stare at this woman for hours and hours. Bask in the stunningly unpolished version of the temptress I met on the footpath that first day.

Fuck, how wild she was then. Luring me. Making it so I couldn’t remember ever seeing anyone else.

She’s still just as brilliantly captivating as she always is in any arrangement. The little wolf or the docile sheep. I’ll take every layer of Brooke. Anything and everything.

You’re a wreck for her, mate. This is a lot more for you now.

My world seems to slow.

Brooke moves from her perch to sit on the other side of the bag. She tucks some hair behind her ear, looks up at me through those long, dark lashes, and winks. That's it. Nothing more than a bloody wink, and a commanding warmth spreads in my chest like kerosene poured over an open flame.

Yeah, I'm a fucking wreck all right.

I wipe my hand across my mouth, collecting myself before I speak. She grimaces at the dampness beading on her brow when she touches her fingers to her skin.

"You look pretty," I tell her, ducking my head to see her eyes. "Really fucking pretty."

She shrugs, laughing a little as she drops her hand. "Thanks. I'm sweaty."

"Yeah."

"Yeah," she echoes, fighting a smile. Her gaze shifts between my face and the bag as she crosses her legs beneath her. "What did you pack to eat? I could murder some food right now."

I unzip the pouch and pull out what I grabbed from the cooler before we took off this morning.

Bread with some almond butter, apple slices cut and drizzled with lemon to keep from browning, trail mix, two protein bars, and some fruit leather.

I hand Brooke a bottle of water and set the food between us with some napkins.

"Anything edible in there?" she asks through a chuckle, poking at the fruit leather. "This . . . I'm not going to lie. It looks like a shoelace."

I hand her a cookie dough flavored protein bar. "Eat this."

Her eyes flicker with delight as she reads the package. She tears it open with her teeth and takes a bite, her jaw working through one full chew before it locks up. Our eyes meet. Her nose wrinkles in disgust. She drops the bar and grabs her water, tipping it back and swallowing the bite she took.

“That tastes like glue,” she mumbles, wiping the back of her hand against her mouth. She shoots me a disapproving look. “You packed glue bars and shoelace, Mason. Congratulations, we’re going to starve to death.”

I take a bite of my sandwich, grinning. “We can always hunt for food. Have you ever tried squirrel? It tastes like chicken.”

“Me? Oh, yeah. I eat squirrel all the time. It’s all I usually eat when I camp.” She grabs the bag of apples and opens it on her lap, stretching her legs out in front of her. “Can’t we hike to a McDonalds or something? Or a Chick-fil-A? I need a six piece nugget to make my life right.” She crosses her ankles and snaps into an apple slice.

I’m smiling, amused at her reaction to the lunch I packed, until something small and black on Brooke’s calf catches my attention.

I know what it is. I know *exactly* what it is. Ticks are an unfortunate hazard to camping, one I didn’t warn her about.

Fuck. She must’ve picked it up when she ran through the tall grass. I would’ve noticed it on her before. I’ve been staring at her legs all morning.

I need to act fast and get it off.

I also need to keep her oblivious to it.

“What would you order at Chick-fil-A, if we hiked there?” I ask, reaching into the outer pouch on my bag and feeling around for the supplies I need. My hand closes around a small metal instrument. I pull it out and search for my lighter and medical kit.

“Mm. A number one, extra pickles. And a cookies and cream milkshake on the side.” She takes another bite of apple. “Or a wrap. They have good wraps.”

“Sounds good.”

“Better than squirrel,” she laughs through a shake of her head. “Which I’m sure doesn’t taste anything like chicken.”

I set out my supplies and put the bag down, pushing the food out of the way. Scooting closer, I wrap my hand around her knee and gently hold it.

“Brooke, I need you to stay still, yeah? Don’t move.”

“What?” Her leg jumps. The apple she’s holding falls on top of the bag.

“What are you doing? Why do you have tweezers?”

“You have a tick on your leg.”

“WHAT? Oh, my God, where?” She sits up and gasps. Her entire body jerks. “Mason! Get it off!”

I squeeze her leg and look up into her round, panicky eyes. “Baby, relax. I’m going to get it off.”

“Have you done this before?” she asks, her voice shaking. Tears filling her eyes and those pouty lips quivering.

I nod. I would nod right now even if I didn’t know what the fuck I was doing. I don’t want Brooke to be scared. Her face is killing me.

“Yeah. Plenty of times. Trust me. Can you hold still? That’s all I need you to do.”

“Oh, God,” she whispers, blinking hard and sending the tears down her face. Her leg remains tense beneath my hand, but she doesn’t resist me. “O-Okay. Just don’t mess up.”

“I won’t.”

“Mason.” She puts her hand on top of mine, gripping me tight. Our eyes meet. “Please. Don’t mess up.”

I stare at her as she slowly pulls away. “I won’t,” I promise, letting her see my conviction, making sure she hears it in my steady voice. “Hold still and you’ll be right.”

She nods and blinks away.

Looking down at her leg, I grip the tweezers and position them over the tick, slowly advancing. I pinch as close to Brooke’s skin as I can get and gently pull the fucker straight up, making sure to remove the mouth. I blow out a quick breath when I see I have all of it.

“All right there, sweetheart?” I ask, picking up the lighter.

“No,” she quietly replies, her face turned away. “Just tell me when it’s

over.”

I burn the tick with it still pinched in the tweezers. When I’m certain it’s dead, I dispose of it off the rock and open up my kit. I kneel next to Brooke. “Just going to clean the area. I’m finished. It’s gone now.”

Brooke nods and wipes at her face. She still isn’t looking at me. Her tear-filled eyes are fixated on the tree line.

Once I disinfect and bandage the wound, I clean my hands and rub her leg. “There. See? That wasn’t so terrible, was it?”

I immediately regret my words when her head drops between her shoulders.

With a quiet sob, she breaks. My strong, determined girl crumbles, crying into her hands, her tiny body drawing in on itself like a wounded animal.

“Hey, come here.” I pull her into my arms, crushing her to my chest as she continues to sob. I push her sweaty hair out of her face and kiss her cheek. “Shh. Baby, it’s okay. You’re okay. It’s over, yeah? Does it hurt?”

She shakes her head and clutches onto my shirt. “I hate it here,” she cries, rubbing her face into my neck, her body shaking as she draws me closer. “I hate hiking. I hate all of it. Bugs and my smelly bug spray. All those trees you pointed out. The flowers. Fuck, I hate flowers, Mason. I fucking hate them.”

She sniffs and cries some more. I hold her tighter, running my fingers through her hair and rubbing her back.

“I was lying when I said I loved it. I don’t love it at all. I want to go.”

I press a kiss to her temple. “Okay. We can go.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Hey.” I tilt her chin up.

Her face is red, streaked with tears. Her eyes swollen and sad. She looks miserable and scared, and the worst part is she wouldn’t look this way if it wasn’t for me.

I did this.

I brought her out here and made her uncomfortable. I saw her anxiety and kept fucking pushing because I thought she'd enjoy what we were doing. Maybe not all of it, and maybe not right away, but like everything else with Brooke, I was willing to wait for that moment. Guide her to where I wanted her to be with me.

Fucking selfish is what I am. She probably hates me for this, and if she does I don't blame her. I feel like the biggest asshole on the planet.

"Come on."

I stand, bringing her with me and setting her on her feet. I quickly pack everything away into my bag.

I don't give her the chance to help. She shouldn't have to. This is all my doing. My bloody mess I need to clean up.

Same goes for the campsite.

Once we make it back, Brooke stands off to the side while I pack up the tent and stow our belongings into our separate bags. I load up my arms with the gear and the cooler. She grabs the sleeping bag, squeezing it against her chest just like she did when we arrived yesterday. Her head stays lowered as she stares at the ground.

Fuck. She can't even look at me now.

"I'm sorry, Brooke," I tell her, ready to drop to my knees and beg for this woman's forgiveness.

She lifts her eyes and nods, acknowledging me, then drops her chin against the sleeping bag and hugs it tighter.

With a jerk of my head, I motion for her to walk in front on the path that leads to the parking lot.

She's ready to go. I won't keep her here any longer.

The trip home is different than every other time I've been in the car with Brooke. I'm the one turning up the volume on the stereo, but not because I'm anxious or avoiding conversation.

I hate silence. I hate how quiet we're both being, but somehow I know

she prefers music to hearing my voice right now.

She's completely shut off from me. Head turned and eyes engaged out the window. She hasn't looked at me once since we pulled out of the lot. I doubt she wants to talk.

I park in front of the studio and grab Brooke's bag out of the back of the car. I'm ready to carry it for her when she blocks my path with her body and with quick hands, takes the bag away from me.

"It's fine. I got it." She slides it up her arm and over her shoulder, huffing a loud breath after. Her eyes slowly reach mine.

She looks unsure of what to say next, if anything.

I'm unsure too.

I take a step back and gesture at her leg. "Clean that again when you get home, and keep some antibiotic ointment on it. You should be fine, but if it gets infected or you start running a fever, you need to go to the hospital."

Brooke's eyes widen marginally. She glances down at her leg, uttering a soft, "fucker," before shaking her head and looking back up at me. Her shoulders sag. "All right. Anything else?"

I feel my eyebrows draw together. *Anything else? Is she dismissing me?*

Running a quick hand through my hair, I lift the other between us, then lower it with an exhausted sigh. "I don't know, Brooke. Is there?"

My voice sounds tight and hoarse. I feel like something's got a grip around my throat.

She stares at me like I've just asked her the most absurd question, her eyes hard and searching. Then, as if snapping out of a trance, she blinks away, tilting her head and wiping a hand along the line of her neck.

"Ugh. I need to take about fifty showers. I'm going to go do that and then coat my body in disinfectant."

Spinning around, not giving me another look or word, Brooke clears traffic and hurriedly crosses the street.

I watch her get into her car. I watch her pull away and disappear around

the corner.

I stand there, dumbfounded, my mouth slack, my mind reeling with confusion.

What the fuck? Is that it? Is that how this is going to end between us?

Sure, Brooke has every right to be angry with me. Sure, I fucked up dragging her out into the middle of nowhere this weekend and pushing her to try new things, but what about everything else?

The dates. Our talks and the way she opens up to me when it's just us. Last night in the fucking tent. Does none of that matter?

I slump back against the side of my car and scrub both hands down my face. Tension pulls at my muscles. I feel stiff and tight all over.

I need a long run. Hours on the pavement.

I practice yoga daily. It calms my mind, but nothing substitutes the mental and physical workout a hard as fuck run will give you. I want to be too tired to think. Running will do that.

Haphazardly unloading my camping gear into the studio, not even bothering to take it upstairs, I lock up behind me and go through a few stretches to loosen up. I hit the footpath with quick strides, running down and back up Fayette Street, through alleys and behind businesses. I run faster, harder, down streets I've never been down before and ones that are familiar.

The sun lowers in the sky, dipping between buildings. Sweat soaks my shirt and trickles down my face.

My feet beat on the cement, a steady, relentless pace I push myself to keep even after my muscles ache and my lungs burn.

I think about Brooke and our weekend, but not the shit that happened today. I think about holding her last night in the tent. Her soft body curling against mine, pulling me closer in her sleep. Her breath against my neck and the smell of her hair.

Christ, being with her like that was everything. And fuck me, if I don't want it every single night.

My infatuation with her started out as an idea. A glimpse of a woman I wanted to know and understand. A delightful interest. But the more time I spend with her, the more desperate I feel.

To have her. To keep her. I'm completely mad for this woman and I may have cocked it all up.

Three hours later and I'm staring down at the drain in my shower as cold water beats on my back.

My body is fatigued, my muscles aching and worn, but I don't have the clarity I usually feel after a long run. My goddamn head feels heavier somehow.

So much for de-stressing therapeutically. I debate getting dressed and walking to the nearest liquor store.

Cutting the water off, I step out and cinch a towel around my waist, moving out of the bathroom and toward the bed. I unplug my phone from the charger and send out a quick text.

I did promise to keep her informed of developments. This is, unfortunately, my latest development.

Me: I fucked up with Brooke.

The phone barely touches the dark wood of my nightstand before it starts ringing.

"That was fast," I tensely answer, wiping a quick hand over my face to collect the water dripping from my hair. "Please tell me you weren't expecting that message and waiting around for it. I like to think my chances with this woman weren't doomed from the start."

"How the hell should I know about your chances? I've never met her," Tessa replies, her tone helplessly clever. "And last time we talked, *you* said she was warming up to you, and that you've been seeing a lot of each other. Quite a bit, I believe were your exact words. Based on those two facts right there, I'd say you were doing better than a chump who was doomed from the start. I doubt she would've spent any time with you if that were the case."

“Right, well, as lovely as that thought is, our time together may be over. I’m not sure how warm she is to the idea of me anymore after what I’ve put her through.”

“Oh, Christ. What did you do? And please, don’t skimp on the information. Reed still likes to leave out important details to stories just to make himself sound better. It never works. If you want my advice, I’m going to need to know exactly how you fucked up. Like you can’t tell me Brooke hates you now because you took her for a moonlit walk last night after your date, because I’m going to hear that and think ‘what the fuck is this bitch’s problem’, when really, you’re leaving off the part where you ran over some poor old lady with your car, left her to die in the middle of the street, and then ditched your vehicle because it was evidence. Making someone an accessory to murder is a valid reason to hate you.”

“I actually think Brooke might’ve preferred that to what really happened.”

“Ha-ha,” Tessa dryly replies. “Spill it. What did you do?”

I blankly stare at my comforter. “Took her camping when she expressed a strong aversion for it. I thought maybe I could get her to like it if she just focused on being with me, and not where she was or what we were doing. Last night I saw how anxious she was out there. I should’ve taken her home then.”

I might still have a bloody shot with her if I had.

Exhaling a worried breath, I pinch the bridge of my nose. “She was trying to like it. Christ, she was beautiful out there, Tessa. So determined. Then today I pulled a tick off her leg and she broke down crying. I felt terrible. I still feel terrible. It was fucking awful seeing her upset like that and knowing I was the reason for it. She asked me to get her out of there and I did. When we got back, she barely said anything before she left to go home. It felt like a brush-off.”

“Maybe she was just freaking out and needed a moment to deal with it.

Did she actually tell you to go fuck yourself and never speak to her again?"

"Not in so many words," I answer.

"Well, I would've," Tessa chuckles. "Fucking gross. A tick? That's just cold."

I feel the muscles in my shoulders tense. "I didn't fucking put it there. I got the bloody thing off, didn't I?"

"Would you relax? I think you're overreacting."

Overreacting? Am I? I don't see Brooke here with me, so I think I'm reacting just fine.

Tessa breathes a laugh. "Mason. Mason. Mason."

"Yeah?"

"Do you love her? It kind of sounds like you do."

I close my eyes, taking in a deep breath and releasing it slowly.

When did my obsession with Brooke become something more?

I have no doubt of my feelings for her. I've never been more certain of anything before, but I can't pinpoint the exact moment it all changed for me.

Would it even do me any good to admit it to someone now? If it's over, what's the point?

"I . . ." My response is interrupted by another call coming through the line. I pull the phone away to look at the screen, and my spine straightens as I blink the caller's name into focus.

I nearly drop the damn device before I press it against my ear again.

"Tessa, it's Brooke. I need to take this."

"Ah, see? All that worrying for nothing. Let me know how it goes."

"Yeah," I reply thickly, my bloody voice bound by my uneasiness again. I clear my throat before clicking over to answer the call. "Brooke?"

"Hey." Her voice is light and lifted. She sounds like she's smiling.

Why would she be smiling?

"What are you doing?"

I look down at my towel, then around the darkened room. "Nothing. Just

took a shower.”

“God, I took so many showers. I used an entire thing of body wash,” she giggles.

I run a hand through my wet hair.

She’s giggling? Why the fuck is she giggling? Is she happy right now?

“So, Mason . . .”

“Yeah?”

“That goodbye sucked. It was awkward and really fucking weird. I didn’t like it. You need to do better than that, okay?” A slurping sound comes through the phone. “Mm. Are you coming over?”

“What?”

“Billy is making his famous martinis. They’re so, so good. I’m on my third one so I can’t drive. You have to come to me.”

I sit down on the edge of my bed. *Am I dreaming this phone call?*

“You want me to come over there? After what happened today?” I ask hesitantly.

I almost don’t want to shatter this illusion. This Brooke still likes me.

“Yes, hello! You wanted me for the whole weekend, right? I mean, that *was* the original plan before that bloody tick showed up and ruined everything. It’s Saturday night. Still the weekend, mate,” she laughs again. “You’re so funny, Mason.”

“I am?”

“Yes. So sweet and funny. A little strange, yeah? I like it.” She pauses, humming a bit. “Now hurry up and get over here. I want to kiss you before I’m drunk and don’t remember it.”

The call disconnects. I bring the phone away from my ear and stare at it.

What just happened?

Brooke isn’t upset anymore. She isn’t mad or acting like we’re through and she’s done.

She wants me to come over. She hated that goodbye as much as I did.

She wants to kiss me before she's drunk.

Too fucking right. I want that. I hated that bloody goodbye. I didn't even want one.

I dart off the bed and attack my dresser like a man possessed. Clothes are flying. I pull on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt and stumble into my runners, grabbing my keys and my phone.

My mood is jubilant. There's that runner's high I was hoping for earlier. Only this is better. Leave it to Brooke to shock me back into my usual pleasant self. She can't do or be anything predictable. It doesn't suit her.

Traffic is mild and I arrive at her building within a few minutes, pulling underneath and parking in the garage.

I take the elevators to her floor. I knock twice and step back, scowling at the water I collect off my neck. I didn't even bother running a towel over my hair before leaving. My collar is damp.

The door swings open and Brooke's bright face appears. She squeals and lunges at me, wrapping her hands around my neck and tugging me inside.

My back hits the wall. Her full lips form to my mouth.

"Hey. Hi. Your hair is wet, goof." She filters her fingers through my hair and tugs on the ends. She kisses me slowly. Deeply. Pressing her small body against mine. Her tongue swipes across my lip and she moans. "Mm. My face is so warm right now. Feel." Stepping back, she grabs my hand and presses it to her cheek.

I look at her, at that wild, devilish smile twisting across her mouth. The dimple sinking into her cheek and her brilliant eyes, round and eager.

"I'm so glad you're here," she whispers, smiling so goddamn big. Her cheeks lifting and flushing pink.

My heart thunders in my chest.

Christ, I'm so in love with this girl.

A throat clears in the room. I look up and spot our audience, Billy and Joey, hovering a few feet away by the sofa. Both of them looking more than

pleased at what they're witnessing.

"Hey. How are ya?" I choke out, straightening off the wall.

"Evening." Joey tips his glass, arching an eyebrow. "She's been pacing around waiting for you. I almost had to sedate her."

"Whatever. I was not," Brooke snaps over her shoulder. She tugs on my hand. "Come on. Do you want a drink? We have beer."

"And martinis," Billy adds, nodding his greeting and then gesturing across the room. "Liquor cabinet is over there if you want something stiff."

Brooke spins around. Her mouth slowly falling open and then spreading into a knowing smile. "Oh, my God. Do you get it? Something stiff?" She gets up on her toes, hand beside her mouth as she whispers, "like a cock."

Tipsy Brooke doesn't know how to whisper.

Her eyes pop wider when everyone enjoys a good laugh. Joey and Billy remark about only wanting stiff ones as they move about the condo.

I grin down at Brooke, scratching my jaw. "Yeah, sweetheart. I get it. I'm good with a beer, yeah?"

Her little nose twitches. "Yeah," she chuckles, pushing on my chest. "Go sit. I'll grab you one."

I do a quick take of my surroundings as I pad toward the bar.

The condo is spacious and elegantly decorated. Expensive looking art covers the walls.

"Nice place," I comment, sliding out a stool and stretching my arms out on the cool marble. "I'm still working on getting all of my stuff unpacked. It's been a bit of a slow process. Other things have been occupying my time."

Brooke smiles over her shoulder as she grabs me a beer.

"Oh, this is all Billy. I can't decorate to save my life." Joey comes to stand at the bar with his cocktail. "It's strange how fabulous I am with my own fashion sense, yet when it comes to color schemes for a room I'm a hot mess about it."

Billy steps up behind him and kisses his shoulder, laughing a bit. "It's a

good thing I love you for other reasons. Remember when you tried to wallpaper the bathroom?"

"Christ, don't remind me," Joey groans in embarrassment. "I have no idea why I thought that was a good idea."

"Because you had just moved in and you wanted to surprise me with something. It was sweet."

Brooke runs her hand across my back and places the beer in front of me. She kisses my cheek.

"I'll be right back."

I watch her disappear behind a door. I fight the urge to follow her in there when I decide on that being her bedroom.

Slow it down, mate. You damn well know what'll happen if you go in there.

"So, camping . . ."

I turn my head and watch Joey's eyes flicker with amusement over the top of his drink. He takes a slow sip.

I look between him and Billy. "Right. How was she when she got back here? Like this?" I hook a thumb over my shoulder in the direction of the bedroom.

"Hardly." Billy drops his chin on Joey's shoulder, his arms wrapping around his waist. "She was freaking out about the tick, which isn't shocking. This is Brooke we're talking about. She once stayed at her sister's house for the weekend because she saw a spider in her bedroom. Wouldn't come home until we promised her we killed it."

"We never found the damn thing," Joey adds with a cheeky grin. "We just missed her crazy ass and wanted her to come home."

I rub at my mouth. "So, when did she start acting like this? She seems fine now, like nothing happened."

"Do you not know the glorious effects of alcohol?" Joey's eyebrow lifts. "Once we distracted her with drinks, she calmed down about it." He looks at

Billy, then back at me, smiling like he's in on some secret. "That's also when she started going on and on about you."

"Another thing you need to know about Brooke," Billy pauses, his eyes lifting to something over my shoulder. I hear a door shut and he quietly adds, "She doesn't do that," before turning his head and pulling Joey away from the bar.

My mind soaks in that obscure bit of information.

She doesn't do what? Talk about blokes like she does me? Drink and forget about unfortunate run-ins with insects?

What the fuck? I need clarity on this.

Brooke moves back into the kitchen and waves at me. I watch her as she reaches for a tall cocktail on the counter, one resembling Joey's. It's a pale green color with a cherry floating at the bottom.

She spins around and closes a cabinet. I study her, resting my chin on my hand. Her long hair falls down her back, curling against her black tank top. Loose trackies hang low on her hips with the words Team Pink covering her arse.

She brings the drink to her mouth and takes a sip. Our eyes meet. I smile, and she cutely waves at me again.

A door slides open behind me and draws my attention.

Billy looks up, places his hand on Joey's shoulder, and muscles him outside. He looks to be struggling with it.

"We're . . . go, will you? Jesus! We're going to go sit on the balcony. Give you two a little privacy for a while." He jerks his chin and then steps out onto the terrace, pulling the door closed and drowning out Joey's flippant protest.

"Goddamn it, Billy," I faintly hear through the glass.

Brooke's quiet giggle turns my head as she sits beside me, her bare feet swinging in the air. "This is my fourth apple martini." She takes a small sip, licking her lips. "It's apple."

Laughing, I twist off the cap on my beer and take a swig. “How’s your leg?”

“Mm. Good! Look.” She sets her drink down and pulls up her pants. “It’s not even red anymore. Not that you can tell ‘cause of the Band-Aid, but still. I cleaned it like you said and put some Neosporin on it. Billy said it looks fine. He’s had tick bites before.”

I wrap my hand around her calf and examine her leg, slowly running my thumb along her smooth skin.

Images of Brooke on the rock, scared and trembling corrode my mind. Her broken voice fills my ears.

“You know how sorry I am for this, right?” I quietly ask, looking up into those big, curious eyes. I tug down her pants to her ankle and release her leg. “I’m so fucking sorry, Brooke. I should’ve never taken you there. I shouldn’t have made you do that.”

She gives me a lopsided smile. “I liked the swanky tent. Remember what we did in there?”

“Yeah.”

“You didn’t make me do any of that.”

Straightening with a quick breath, I look down as her hand finds mine under the lip of the bar. She squeezes my thumb.

I close my eyes.

Fuck, she’s so different with me right now. When has she ever reached for my hand, or displayed any sort of honest affection for me in front of people she knows? Is it the alcohol?

Christ, just enjoy it, will ya? Stop analyzing everything.

“I thought it was over today,” I softly admit, brushing my fingers against hers and staring down into my lap. “I was shocked when you called. I thought I was dreaming.”

“Maybe you were.”

Our eyes lock, and she breathes a laugh, taking another sip of her drink

and then tipping her head down. Her eyes flutter. “Dreaming about me is kind of your thing, isn’t it?”

“*You* are kind of my thing.”

“And yoga.”

“Yeah.” I reach up and grab a piece of her hair, tucking it behind her ear. My phone beeps with a text alert, and I pull it free from my pocket and place it on the counter.

Tessa: Well?

I quickly type my response.

Me: Crisis averted.

“Who is that?” Brooke asks, leaning close to see my screen as I set the phone back down. She studies it for a moment. “Tessa?” Our eyes lock. Hers narrow. “Mm.”

I turn my head, smiling as she rights herself on her stool and shrugs indifferently.

“She’s a mate from Alabama. I’ve told her about you.”

Brooke lifts her glass to her mouth. “Oh, really? And have you seen her vagina? Because I’ve never seen any of my mates’ vaginas. Just saying. Or their penises, before you ask. No penises or vaginas between mates.”

I rub at my neck, watching her, uncontrollably smiling at this development.

Now this is quite interesting.

“Are you jealous, Brooke?”

Her head snaps in my direction, eyes heavy with disagreement. She lowers her glass to the marble. “Jealous? Me? Of who? That ugly bitch who just texted you? Why would I be jealous of her if you’ve never seen her vagina, which you have yet to confirm. Please confirm that before I toss my drink in your face.”

I take another swig of my beer, letting her stew a bit next to me before I

respond.

“Tell Theresa to find her own Australian.”

I nearly choke.

Wiping at my mouth after my coughing fit, I turn to Brooke and set my beer down, reaching for her hand. She fights my hold for a good three seconds before letting me have it, but keeps her gaze fixed behind the bar.

“*Tessa*, not Theresa, and I went out on one date months ago. I never even kissed her, Brooke. She’s just a really good mate.”

“You don’t need to explain your relationship or whatever with her. I really don’t care.”

“No?”

She shakes her head.

I lean forward to see her face. “Because I would really fucking care if you were texting some bloke and I didn’t know who he was to you. I’m not a jealous guy, but I think for you I would be. It’s staggering how you make me feel.”

She turns her head, watching me press a kiss to her palm.

“And I rather like thinking you might be right there with me, willing to be jealous and crazy for only one person.”

Her face relaxes the longer she stares at me. She wets her lips. “You never even kissed her?”

“No.”

“Did you want to?”

“Not like I want to kiss you.”

Slowly, like she’s fighting it, a gentle smile tugs at the corner of her mouth, then pulls across the rest of it. She shakes her head through a quick exhale, giggles quietly, then slides her warm body into my lap, squeezing my neck and pressing soft kisses to my jaw.

“Tell me something in Italian again,” she whispers as her fingers slide through my hair. “I liked it so much before.”

I drop my head beside hers. My arms tightly coil around her back. “You like not knowing what I’m saying?”

“Mm.” She nods and kisses my neck.

“I could say anything, you know? Maybe something you aren’t ready to hear.”

“I know.” She moves back and stares at my mouth. Her eyes darken, liquid desire swirling in those wild green and brown irises. She wets her lips and grabs my face. “I think I’m drunk.”

“Yeah?”

Nodding, she leans in. “Definitely.”

Her lips press against mine. I open my mouth and take her tongue, sucking off the bitterness from the alcohol. Letting her taste saturate my soul.

God, what this woman does to me.

She moans and presses her chest closer, kissing me hard and unhurried, stroking her tongue against mine, sucking on my lips and wiggling in my lap.

I both hate and love how Brooke’s being with me tonight, so unashamed with her affection. Abandoning all her doubts. Exactly how I want her to be with me all the time. Exactly how *I* am with her, all the time.

It’s bloody torture, knowing why she’s acting so free with me, but fuck, it’s hard to pull away from.

This is what it can be like. And this, goddamn, this is what I’m missing.

“Mason,” she groans, digging her nails into my neck, rocking her hips against my erection.

I snap out of my haze and slow us down, moving my lips to her cheek and kissing her dimple.

“Voglio che questo non finisca mai,” I whisper against her skin.

I won’t ever want this to be over.

She stills in my arms, her breath blowing hot and sharp against my ear. Then, with a quiet sigh, she drops her head to my shoulder and goes limp.

“Yeah,” she murmurs. “I won’t remember that tomorrow.”

Laughing, I lean back and push the hair out of her face.

“Are you spending the night?” she asks, her fingers dancing along the back of my neck. She looks excited for that possibility.

“Better not.”

Her lip twitches. “Think I might forget your rules and try and take advantage of you in my drunken stupor?”

I smile, squeezing her hips. “Yeah, and I might forget you’re drunk.”

Too much temptation. I know how fucking amazing it feels having Brooke next to me at night. I won’t be able to keep my hands off her.

“I would,” she confesses through a massive grin. “Forget, *and* take advantage of you. But can you at least stay until I fall asleep? I’ll let you stare at my tits a little.” She shimmies her shoulders and makes her tits bounce and sway.

My cock stirs.

No bra. Fuck, this is going to be a challenge.

“Jesus Christ, Brooke,” I groan, leaning in and taking her mouth again, tilting her head and pressing kisses to her jaw. “You’re keeping that on, yeah?”

“Nah.”

She laughs and I suck on her neck.

“Good,” I tell her. “Then I’ll stay.”



BROOKE

Mondays have never bothered me.

I know most people would rather skip this day entirely, but I've never had a problem with it. I don't mind working on Mondays, or dealing with the general population on this specific day of the week. Traffic is never really an issue because I work so close to where I live. And as long as I'm not drinking my weight in booze the night before, I never have difficulty waking up and getting my ass to the bakery on time.

Mondays have never bothered me. Until today, this particular Monday.
The Monday after my weekend with Mason.

Why the fuck did I think it was a good idea to come into work today?

Because I was nursing a wicked hangover all day yesterday and spent my life in bed with my door locked, Joey missed his opportunity to run off at the mouth and bug the shit out of me about everything that happened this weekend. But now that I'm fully coherent and stuck in this chocolate raspberry scented Hell for eight hours? I not only get to try and ignore Joey's nosy comments, but Dylan is also weighing in with her opinion on everything.

She's my boss. I can't exactly toss her through a window to shut her up now, can I?

Plus, there's the whole pregnancy thing. I'm sure that wouldn't be good for the baby.

"Cupcake, you should've seen her." Joey's broad smile reemerges as he steps into the back for the hundredth time today.

I sigh and keep my head down.

"Talking about how sweet Mason was when he removed the tick. How he held her while she cried with those sexy ass arms of his. She even mentioned something about having a decent time up until that point. Can you believe it? Our little mini muffin actually enjoyed camping."

I place another pastry into the large bakery box in front of me and glare at him from across the worktop. Dylan laughs quietly from her stool. "I was drunk when I said that," I tell him.

I can't believe it. I actually had fun camping. What is happening with the world?

"You were barely into your first martini. Don't even go there with me, Brooke." Joey points a finger at my face. "I am way past the point of trying to get you to admit you have feelings for this guy, because I think you're way past just having feelings. I saw you with him when he came over, and I know how you flirt when you're drunk. That wasn't it, honey."

I close the box and stack it on top of the other two I have already filled. A sharp, unrelenting tension builds behind my eyes. I ignore Dylan's pleased smile and focus all of my annoyance onto Joey.

"Well, I don't remember how I looked when Mason came over, because like I said fifty times already today, I was well on my way to party hour, but I'm sure I looked how any woman would look when sex comes knocking at their door."

"Oh, give me a fucking break." Dylan pushes a sheet pan away from her and crosses her arms under her chest. "Brooke, when was the last time you had sex? How many days ago?"

I open my mouth to answer, then quickly close it.

Fuck. Fuuuck. I can normally count my response to this question on one hand. But today I have no idea . . .

How long has it been?

Paul. That giant asshat was my last regrettable encounter. I met Mason the following week. Am I into double digits territory?

Holy shit. That had to be at least two weeks ago.

“Do you need a calendar, Brooke? There’s one right over there.”

Ignoring Dylan and her question, I open up a paper bag and begin filling it with banana muffins, keeping my eyes down and focusing on my task.

“So what if it’s been longer than usual since I’ve had sex. Who cares? I’m doing other stuff with Mason. I’m still getting off. I don’t see what the big fucking deal is or why both of you are bugging me about it.”

Silence.

No wiseass responses. No amusing little noises like I’ve been listening to all morning.

Have my prayers been answered? Am I suddenly the only employee of Dylan’s Sweet Tooth?

I look up and spot two pairs of eyes on me.

Damn.

Joey looks over at Dylan, grinning wildly. “I so wish I would’ve gotten that adorable speech on camera. You?”

She nods slowly. “Absolutely.”

What the fuck are they going on about now?

“What?” I ask, setting the bag down. My hands flatten on the wood as I flick my gaze between the two of them. “What did I say?”

Dylan straightens on her stool and rests her hand on her belly. “You just admitted you don’t care anymore that Mason is withholding sex from you. You, Brooke Wicks, don’t care about sex because you’re spending time with a man who is making you so happy, you’re forgetting what you’re missing.” She tilts her head. “Now, are you ready to admit *why* you don’t care?”

“I just told you!” I yell, slapping a hand over my mouth.

Oh, my God. What am I doing?

Dylan and Joey both startle from my outburst. Worried glances are exchanged, and then directed at me.

Shit! Get it together, Brooke. You like having a job. You need a job. No more incidents like that or your ass is going to be out on the street.

“I’m sorry,” I say, lowering my hand and looking across the worktop at Dylan. “I didn’t mean to yell like that.”

She unscrews the cap on her water and brings it to her mouth. “All right.”

Reaching back and untying my apron, I calmly continue after I’ve settled on a more appropriate work-place volume. “As I told you, I’m still getting off with Mason. The orgasms he gives me are some of the best of my life. Maybe even *the* best. It would be different if I was just hanging out with this guy and he wasn’t touching me, but he is. It doesn’t matter that we haven’t had sex yet. Mason’s foreplay is on point.”

Joey shakes his head, waving a dismissive hand in the air. “What is he to you? Boyfriend? Friend with benefits? What?”

“We’ve been over this,” I sternly reply, tossing my apron onto the table. “Jesus. He’s just this guy I’m spending time with. And in five minutes when you ask me that question again, he’ll still be just this guy I’m spending time with.”

Dylan stands from her stool and reaches for her pink mixer, sliding it in front of her. “Denial doesn’t look good on you, Brooke. Stop wearing it.”

“Oh, my God,” I softly utter, snatching up the muffin bag and setting it on top of the three boxes.

I need to get out of here. Far away from these two. I’ve never done a delivery by myself before but I’ve knocked out tons with Joey. It’s usually the two of us.

Well, that’s not happening today. If I don’t get a break from this madness, I’m going to end up burning this place to the ground just to avoid further

conversation.

Joey comes to stand beside me. He rubs his hands eagerly together, looking between the boxes and my face.

“Ready to go, Mrs. King?”

My eyes widen. *He did not just fucking go there.*

Did I say burn this place to the ground? I meant slaughter a third of the staff.

Fists clenching at my sides, I step closer to him. Joey leans back when he registers the look on my face.

“Too much?” he meekly asks.

“You think?” I lift the boxes and balance the bag on top, glaring at Joey as I lower them against my chest. “I’m doing this delivery alone. Do yourself a favor and eat a dick for lunch while I’m gone. You sound deprived.”

“Ow, kitten.” Joey gapes at me. He looks sincerely hurt. “Just because I’m all up in your business, doesn’t mean I’m deprived. Retract the claws, please.”

I look up at him, trying to stay angry, swallowing down the remorse I feel burning the back of my throat.

I haven’t spoken to Joey this cruelly since before I moved in with him. This used to be regular dialogue between the two of us, back when we could hardly stand each other. Then I started working here. The closer we became, him and I, the more playful our banter. We stopped cracking on each other years ago.

Why did I have to go there just now? Why did *he*?

Why are both of them on my case about this?

I brush past him and move toward the doorway. If I stay any longer, I’ll either yell or apologize. Neither one seem appealing right now.

“Brooke, do you know where it is?” Dylan calls out as I step into the main bakery.

“Yeah. We delivered there last year.”

I turn sideways to push the door open with my elbow. Movement catches my eye. I look up just as Joey walks in from the kitchen, looking like he wants to tell me something.

I don't wait around to hear it. God only knows what other clever little comments he has to say right now.

With a firm shove, I exit the bakery and head for my car.



I take the elevators to the eleventh floor of the Harding and Associates building, a huge venture capitalist firm in the city.

I have definitely been here. More than once in the same day. While Joey and I made our delivery to one of the offices in this building last year, I caught the eye of one of the associates. Our delivery just so happened to be for a breakfast meeting. The associate ended up being my entire lunch.

I hardly remember anything about him. Dark hair maybe? Glasses? The only thing sticking out in my mind is how irritated I was with Dylan's thirty minute lunch rule that day.

I drop my head back against the mirrored wall behind me.

What if that had been Mason, and it was a year later, or several years later. Would I remember little details about him? Or major ones? Anything?

Yes.

My answer is as certain as my desire to keep breathing. It's terrifying and oddly comforting all at once. I don't understand it. I don't understand any of it. My stomach feels like it's being twisted into a perpetual knot.

Balancing the three boxes filled with treats and the bag of muffins, I step off the elevators and walk across the shiny marble floor to the reception area, praying I leave my anxiety behind me. An older woman directs me down the hallway to the conference room by the large window overlooking the city streets. I say a silent thank you when the doors to the room are already propped open. I would hate to place these boxes on the floor to be able to knock.

That's extremely unprofessional, and probably one of the reasons these deliveries are done in pairs.

I step inside the room, lowering the boxes so I can see above the paper bag. Several men in suits are seated at a long rectangular table. All of them look up at my arrival and halt their dissection of whatever document is in front of them.

"Hello. I have a delivery from Dylan's Sweet Tooth. Pastries and muffins."

The older man closest to me stands and takes the boxes. He smiles warmly. "Excellent. We were just about to get started."

He spreads the boxes out in the center of the table. Lids are quickly flipped back and the contents of the paper bag is examined.

The older man straightens and looks back at me. "Please see my secretary Helen for your payment, Miss . . ."

"Brooke."

I look across the room at the sound of my name.

Seated at the other end of the table is the very associate I gave up my lunch for last year.

Blonde. No glasses. Nothing particularly memorable at all about him. In fact, if he hadn't called out my name just now, I would easily pass this guy on the street and not recognize him. It's only in this setting, large board room with baked goods spread out on a conference table that my memory is being triggered. And that might have everything to do with the treats and nothing to do with the sex we had.

He stands and buttons his jacket, grinning in my direction. "I'll walk you out."

I smile at the older man who took the boxes from me and exit the room. Blonde, no glasses guy has to catch up.

"I said I would walk you out. You can't wait a second?" He gently squeezes my elbow, bending down to whisper into my ear. "In a hurry? I can

make it quick.”

I wrench my arm away. “That’s okay. I need to get back to work.”

My feet continue to carry me down the hallway. He stays right with me, his quiet chuckle grating on my nerves.

Christ, just go away. This isn’t going to happen.

“Come on, Brooke. I’m about to have to sit through this boring as fuck meeting. Make a guy’s day a bit brighter, will ya?”

I turn to glare at him. “I don’t even remember your name.”

“Vince.”

“Well, Vince, like I said, I need to get back to work. But even if I didn’t, I wouldn’t be interested.”

His eyebrows meet his hairline. “Why not?”

“Because I have a boyfriend.”

My feet skid to a halt in front of the reception desk. I clamp my mouth shut, sucking in a sharp breath through my nose. Vince begins to blur in front of me, followed by all of my surroundings. The walls seem to pulse, throbbing with the beat of my heart as it fills my ears, growing louder and louder. My breaths become shallow and my palms start to sweat.

What . . .

The . . .

Hell . . . did I just say?

I look around for another woman standing nearby whose voice I had to have been hearing.

That wasn’t me. I didn’t just say that. I didn’t just say I have a boyfriend.

Turning my head, I meet the gaze of the older receptionist behind the desk.

Was it you?

“Ah, gotcha.”

I look back at Vince after he speaks.

He tugs on his jacket, lifting his one shoulder. “I’m not trying to break up

a relationship. That's too much involvement for me. Good luck with your boyfriend. Hope it all works out."

Boyfriend.

"Shut up, Vince!"

He leans back, looking startled. "Excuse me?"

I look around us, gauging the eyes on me and watching them multiply. I bring both hands to my face and mold them to my cheeks.

My skin feels warm. Too warm. I need air.

I spin around and nearly climb onto the reception desk. "Are you Helen? Please, for the love of God, tell me you're Helen. I need a Helen."

She stares up at me from over the top of her glasses. "I'm Helen."

"That guy back there told me to stop here for my check. For the delivery I made. Dylan's Sweet Tooth."

"Oh, yes." She smiles and picks up a check and a small piece of paper, sliding them both in front of me. "Here you go. Just need you to sign for it."

I grab a pen and scribble something onto the receipt. I doubt it's my name. I doubt it's legible.

There's a strong possibility I just signed it 'boyfriend'.

I snatch up the check, fold it up, and shove it into my back pocket. The elevators have a small gathering of people in front of the doors. I can't wait for those. I take the stairs instead and swiftly descend eleven flights, darting across the lobby and pushing through the revolving doors.

The sun hits my face. Oxygen hurriedly enters my lungs with the ragged gasps I take in. I move to a lamppost at the corner of the sidewalk and place my hand against the warm copper, seeking balance. I suddenly feel dizzy.

Boyfriend. I just said I had a boyfriend. I passed up sex because I have a boyfriend.

Segments of my earlier conversations in the bakery filter through my head. The noise from the busy street fades out to silence. Joey and Dylan's voices are all I can hear as I close my eyes and steady my breathing.

“She was pacing around like a love-sick puppy waiting for him to come over.”

“You get this little smile on your face every time he comes in here, Brooke. Don’t act like you don’t more than like this guy.”

“Oh, my God, Dylan. She got jealous over this girl he was texting on Saturday night. You know what that means.”

“If you didn’t care, you wouldn’t be jealous, Brooke.”

Jealous. I didn’t get jealous. I was drunk. Anything I do or say under the influence of Billy’s martinis shouldn’t be held against me. I don’t even remember Mason texting anyone.

I picture his phone and the name highlighted on the screen.

Tessa.

Fuck!

A hand on my shoulder turns my head and pops my eyes open.

Mason’s concerned face studies mine, his hands reaching out to grab me. “Hey, are you all right?”

I step back, avoiding his grasp. “What are you doing here?” I ask, looking over at the building I just evacuated like it was going up in flames. I turn back to Mason and take in his attire.

Khakis and a nice button-down shirt. Not what I’m used to seeing him in during the week.

“Why aren’t you teaching a class? Did Vince call you?”

“Vince? Who is Vince?”

I rub my hands down my face. *God, I am losing it.*

“Nobody. He’s nobody,” I utter, letting my arms fall limp at my sides and looking up at him.

His bright eyes are filled with worry. I probably look like I’m having a nervous breakdown.

Clearing my throat, I ask again. “Why are you here, Mason?”

He moves closer, getting out of the way of other pedestrians on the

sidewalk. Sunlight catches in his hair and lightens a few strands. “I was meeting with someone about possibly expanding into a chain. Just discussing ideas. I don’t really know if it’s something I’m serious about.”

I wet my lips. “Oh.”

Mason’s logo on store fronts around the city. I can picture it. Then merchandise. Water bottles and cute little tops.

He should expand. He’d be fantastic with it.

“Why are you here, Brooke? You look a bit . . . out of sorts.” He reaches out and squeezes my arm at the elbow. I don’t pull away from him like I did when Vince touched me.

After a year, I would still remember how this felt.

Swallowing through a heavy blink, I lower my gaze to a spot on Mason’s shirt. “I was making a delivery in that building and this guy I hooked up with last year asked if I wanted to go at it again. You know, have sex.” I briefly glance up at him.

He appears engrossed by what I’m saying, watching me with an absorbing look in his eyes. His jaw tight as if he’s clenching his teeth. His grip on my arm tensing.

I drop my head. “I told him I didn’t want to. That I had a boyfriend.”

“Yeah?”

I nod and step back. “I have to go.”

“Whoa. Wait a minute.” Mason grabs my arm again. His other hand cups my cheek. The corner of his mouth twitches as he stares down at me. “You said you have a boyfriend.”

I close my eyes. “I don’t know,” I whisper.

My heart pounds in my chest. The blood in my veins warms and heats my skin until a fine sheen of sweat builds on the surface.

“Brooke.”

I grab his wrist and pull his hand away from my face. “Stop. I need to go. I just . . .” I move back, but Mason seizes my waist and hauls me against him.

“What’s going on? Why are you panicking?”

“Because.”

I try and turn in his arms. I try and escape, run away from this, from my worry and the emotions I feel coiling around me and suffocating.

I can’t breathe. I can’t think. I suddenly feel so small and crowded in my own skin.

“Because why? Talk to me,” he pleads, bending to get closer. “Brooke.”

My name on his lips and the way he says it, like a familiar embrace, unlocks something inside of me. Another level of uncertainty. Something so overwhelming it roots itself deep in my soul and demands to be acknowledged.

Feel this. Do you know what this is, Brooke?

Panic collapses in on me. I gather a full breath into my lungs and push against his chest with every ounce of strength I have left. “Because I don’t know men like you!” I yell, my voice breaking and sounding as fragile as I feel.

Mason staggers back, eyes round and enthralling. The look on his face mirroring my own trepidation.

“I don’t understand what we’re doing and I just need a minute to breathe, okay?” Tears wet my cheeks. More threaten behind my lashes. “I need a minute,” I softly utter, wiping at my face and looking up at him.

God, what is happening to me? I’m yelling at everyone today.

He pinches his lips together through a tense nod, studying me with rapt attention. His eyes gentle yet gripping.

I try and compose myself. I manage to at least stop fresh tears from forming, but my chest feels tight and my hands are sweaty. I pray I don’t stroke out right here on the sidewalk.

Mason stares at me a moment longer, then looks over my shoulder and rubs at his jaw. “Why don’t we go grab some coffee? Sit down for a bit.”

I shake my head. “No. I need to get back to work.”

“Come on.” He reaches out for me, but pulls his hand back before he can touch my arm. He tilts his head with a tender grin. “Just a few minutes, yeah? I won’t keep you long. Just one cup of coffee.”

“I’ve already given you coffee today,” I reply, wrapping my arms around myself.

He seems to fight a much broader smile as he moves closer. “I know, sweet Brooke. But it’s either this or lunch, and I figured you’d be more agreeable to a quick beverage.” He sticks his hands in his pockets and jerks his chin in the direction behind me. “One more cup. If Dylan gives you grief about it I’ll say it was all my doing. That I kidnapped you and ignored your urgent pleas to return to work. You’ll look like the model employee, I promise.”

I bite the inside of my cheek and contemplate his request.

Coffee, then I can return to work. Do I even want to return to work? I’m beginning to think that maybe leaving the sanctity of my bedroom at all today was the biggest mistake of my life.

Everything seemed so simple this weekend. I was in my perfect little Mason bubble and everyone left me alone about it. I didn’t have to explain myself to anyone. I wasn’t being asked to define anything. Even though Billy and Joey were around Saturday night, they left the two of us alone and from what I can remember, I enjoyed myself. I usually do with Mason. But now the weekend is over. I’m being forced to analyze what I’m doing and what all happens in my perfect little bubble, and I don’t want to. I don’t even know if I can.

How am I supposed to explain this to people when I don’t know what’s happening myself?

I clear that question from my head and look up into Mason’s eyes.

He’s offering me a chance to delay further abuse from my co-workers. I’d be crazy not to take it right now.

On the other hand, agreeing to this means spending more time with the

man I just stuck a label on.

My mind itches with hesitancy.

God, I seriously hate Mondays. I am never partaking in one again.

Wiping away another tear with the back of my fingers, I drop my arms and make my decision.

“Fine. Okay. One more cup.”



MASON

Brooke stares down at her fingers knotted together in front of her as I wait for our coffee.

She isn't crying anymore, but she doesn't look like my Brooke. No sweet-dimpled smile. No luminous spark in her eyes.

She looks unsettled. Caught up in some worrying thought she's allowing to consume her. A stark contrast from the warm, gregarious woman I openly kissed and touched Saturday night.

The one who very openly kissed and touched me.

I allow my mind to go there for a moment. Be present with *that* Brooke. Feel her hands around my neck and her breath against my cheek. Remember her quiet words, the ones I'm not sure she even realized she was saying as I held her on the couch and enjoyed our time together.

With the softest voice, with her lips moving against my ear, she asked if I could stay a little longer, if I could hold her until her heart stopped racing. If mine was racing too, and if that was normal for me, because it wasn't for her. She told me to kiss her, again and again, to move my hand a little higher and that no one could see us. That even if they could she didn't care, and that she wondered what we looked like together, not just then but all the time.

"Do you think they know?" she whispered, her fingers filtering through

my hair.

“Know what?” I asked, just as softly, pressing a kiss to her nose, the flush in her cheek.

“That you’re kind of my thing too.”

We laughed and talked until she fell asleep with her face pressed into my neck. I carried her to bed and lingered there. I didn’t want to leave. I was beginning to hate the moments I spent away from Brooke.

All of them. Each miserable second.

But I knew what would happen if I stayed. If I slid beside her and kissed her some more, touched her where we both wanted. If I allowed my urges to overwhelm me, I wouldn’t be able to stop. My resistance had been wavering all night and was close to being non-existent. And Brooke, among being unconcerned with her affection for me, was drunk.

She was open and comfortable, sweet and warm . . . and very, very drunk.

So I left, but fuck, it was bloody difficult, knowing the next time I saw her she would be different. Not as showy with her fondness. Still a bit tentative and unsure.

She seemed okay yesterday when we spoke on the phone. Hungover and regretting those cocktails, but still my Brooke. Laughing and willing. Even this morning when we met for coffee, there was no sign of the woman I’m currently observing.

I need to find out what’s gotten her like this. Why she’s so shut-off from me now.

What the hell could have happened in the span of five hours?

Taking the coffees as they are held out for me over the bar, I thank the barista and walk over to the seating area, moving between oversized lounge chairs and a leather sofa.

Floor-to-ceiling windows span across the front of the shop, offering a spectacular view of the bustling city, but I doubt she’s noticed yet. Brooke’s barely lifted her head since she sat down.

“Here you go, gorgeous.” I set her coffee on the round high-top table and claim the stool across from her. “I got you a mocha this time, since you had white chocolate this morning. Figured you’d be due for a bit of a change.” I take a sip of my black coffee and watch her above the brim.

Her hands slowly wrap around the paper cup. She clears her throat. “Thank you. How much do I owe for this?”

“Nothing.”

I give her a strange look when she finally glances up at me.

How much does she owe? Is she being serious?

Sighing, I set my cup down and brace my weight on my elbows. “You’re not paying me back for something I asked you out for, Brooke. That’s never happening. This was my idea. I will always treat you, yeah?”

“You shouldn’t keep paying for me when we do stuff, Mason.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because it’s not like we’re . . .” she pauses, her lips pinching together through a frown. Her shoulders sag, then with a much quieter voice, she continues. “I mean, we’re just having fun, you know? When we hang out like this?”

I feel my jaw clench. I roughly scrub at my face, then stare at her, trying to figure out where this is all coming from. “Yeah . . . no, I don’t fucking know, Brooke. We’re just having fun? This is news to me.”

She leans back a bit. Her teeth drag across her plump bottom lip.

I take in a deep breath, remembering how all of this started for her. What she was solely after in the beginning before I got her to consider trying things my way.

Just having fun was her main interest then. A quick root and then nothing. I thought we were past this absurdity.

“What’s going on with you? What happened?” I ask, trying to keep my voice even and not at all accusing.

She looks away. “Nothing.”

“Bullshit.”

Her worried eyes flick back to mine.

“Don’t do that,” I tell her, straightening up. “Don’t shut me out when something obviously happened, Brooke. You were just calling me your boyfriend and crying about it on the footpath, and now suddenly we’re just having fun. Help me understand why you’re being like this. Talk to me.”

She looks down at her cup, her hands still wrapped around it. She sighs through a heavy blink. “Everyone keeps asking me what we are, or what we’re doing. I don’t know what to tell them because *I* don’t know. I don’t know what this is.”

“Who is everyone?”

“Joey. Dylan.” She pops the tab on her lid but doesn’t take a sip. “They’ve been bugging me about it all morning. Non-stop. They want me to admit things. Label it. Us. I don’t feel like I should have to. It’s nobody’s business what I’m feeling, or what I’m not feeling.”

Our eyes meet. My hand curls into a fist on the table.

What she’s not feeling?

“That’s complete bullshit,” I want to say, but I don’t. I didn’t coax her to sit with me and practically beg her to talk just to have an argument.

But I know she feels something. I know this changed for her too. I don’t buy her denial.

She’s freaked out *because* she knows what this is. Not because she doesn’t.

Brooke looks away again, tapping her fingers on the cup.

I force my hand to relax and slide it into my lap. “All right, then don’t. Don’t explain it,” I suggest, catching her cautious attention. “Why do we have to be labeled anything? Why can’t we just continue doing what we’re doing, ‘cause I thought it was pretty fucking great.”

“But everyone . . .”

“Who cares about everyone?” I ask, my voice growing a decibel louder.

“Am I asking you to tell me what this is? Or if you could start referring to me as your boyfriend?”

Fucking hell. Not that I don't love hearing she did that. Why couldn't I have been present for that little offhand comment?

She frowns. “No, but you're asking other things of me, Mason. Things I don't do.”

“And you're doing them.”

“I know that!” She startles at her own voice, her eyes round and regretful as she looks around us, at the attention we've possibly drawn, but I wouldn't know for certain if that's the case.

I can only look at Brooke. The anxiousness radiating off her in thick waves. I can practically feel it on my skin.

She shakes her head, drops her elbows to the glossy table-top, and begins rubbing at her temple. “*I know that. God, do you think I don't?*” she asks much quieter, looking across the small table at me. Her hands lower. “Do you have any idea how strange this is for me? How confusing this must be, *for me?* Do you? Or are you just caught up in getting me to do things your way? As long as I'm agreeing to shit, that's all that matters, right?”

I give her a hard look. “What? No, of course not.”

“Yeah, okay,” she remarks coldly, averting her gaze.

My brow furrows as I observe her.

Jesus Christ. Women are mysterious creatures.

I force myself to calm down, once again. The beginnings of one hell of a headache builds behind my eyes.

Just pull her aside and tell her you love her.

I pinch the bridge of my nose.

Right. Because she's not already freaked out enough. Bombarding her with that confession will surely do her in.

I absorb the idea of Brooke having a complete nervous breakdown. Right here. Right now. Being too distraught to talk or even move after I've

divulged my deepest feelings for her.

Will I be permitted to visit her in the hospital while she's under clinical observation? Surely the staff won't know exactly why she's in there. That is, if she isn't talking . . .

Reaching out, I brush my fingers against the back of her wrist. Her eyes follow my calming gesture. "I see how hesitant you are, Brooke, but I also see how you relax around me. How playful and fucking adorable you get when we're together, and not just when you're pissed. Though I do enjoy that version of you a good bit."

Her head lifts. She winces at the memory. "Christ, that hangover was epic. I thought I was dying."

We share a brief, quiet laugh. Hers more fleeting than mine. She's still too anxious to soften for me.

I slide my fingers lower and gently squeeze her hand. "I know I ask a lot of you. I know I have since the beginning, but I think you rather enjoy yourself when you stop thinking so much about what this is and just fucking be with me. Stop thinking, Brooke."

"I can't," she whispers, tugging her hand away, her gaze drifting to the table. "I can't stop thinking. Trust me, I'm trying, okay? But it's not happening. Not today." She bites at her lip and slouches against the back of her stool. "I just need . . ."

"A minute?" I suggest, drawing her eyes back to my face. I faintly smile.

I hear you, baby.

She stares at me, frowning. "Yeah," she replies through a small nod, her voice incredibly quiet. "A minute."

I push at her cup, sliding it closer.

An offer of coffee and company, minus the conversation. Somehow I think this is a better option for Brooke rather than what I've been working around to this entire time.

Talking until she understands how ridiculous her worries are. How she

doesn't need to label us if she doesn't want to yet, just as long as she acknowledges and admits to everyone in this bloody coffee shop that she is mine as much as I am hers. Once she's done that, we can take her announcement to the street, let the general population know. Venture out to neighboring cities and alert the media . . .

Okay, maybe that last part is a bit of a pipe dream. I'll be fucking ecstatic with one broad declaration to the masses.

Or to me. Hearing her tell *me* will be enough.

Brooke regards the coffee, her expression soft and timid. Finally reaching out with both hands, she brings it to her mouth and takes a long sip. I do the same with mine, watching her, wanting to be closer so I can smell her hair and that vanilla cupcake body lotion she slathers on herself.

She turns her head and reveals the long slope of her neck. Her pale throat. Desire hums in my blood.

Fuck, I love kissing her there.

I swallow a heaping gulp of coffee.

She needs a minute? I need a bloody minute.

Clearing all indecency from my thoughts and willing my cock not to react, I watch her dimple cave in with her next sip.

Time passes. We embrace the silence between us, only it's not contented or easy like it's always been. I can practically hear her mind analyzing and overanalyzing, considering labels and then dismissing them with dishonest perception.

I have to bite my tongue to keep from speaking. I know how easily I can shoot this nonsense down. How concluding my argument is.

I'm in love with you. We're damn near perfect together, and you know it. Stop fighting this and come home with me.

Brooke taps on the side of her cup and stares between the window and the phone she places in front of her, every few minutes or so noting the time.

I finish my coffee and debate on getting another. I have a feeling my

afternoon classes will be demanding and unusually difficult to focus on. Maybe a massive caffeine boost will help. My attention already wanders absentmindedly to thoughts of Brooke when I'm supposed to be instructing.

The curve of her hips. Her cute laugh. The way her tongue always tastes of sugar.

Knowing she's across the street questioning us might be enough to distract me entirely.

Might be? Who am I kidding? I'm tempted to clear out my schedule and spend the rest of the day convincing her. Erase all doubt from her mind as my hands roam her body, as I press the most vulgar words I can think of into the flush of her skin.

That sounds like a brilliant plan.

Licking the mocha off her lips, Brooke checks the time again, abruptly standing and palming her device. She grabs her nearly empty coffee. "I need to get back before I lose my job. Dylan already has cause to fire me. I accidentally yelled at her earlier." She looks away, muttering, "I'm yelling at everyone."

I touch her wrist. She quickly jerks her hand up and adjusts her pony.

A subtle, yet not so subtle move to keep me from touching her? I'm not sure. Maybe I'm just becoming paranoid.

"All right then." I stand and toss my cup into a nearby rubbish bin. Following her to the door, I hold it open and allow her to walk out ahead of me.

She steps onto the footpath. When she glances in my direction, I gesture down the street.

"I'm just down there. Where did you park? I'll walk you."

"Um." She looks up at me, her eyes careful. Both of her hands holding her cup. "Maybe you don't?" she quietly suggests.

Maybe I don't?

I feel my eyebrows raise in surprise, my lips slowly part, though I'm not

sure why. I should be expecting this.

She said so in the coffee shop. In so many words, with her stiff, averse body language, she needs me to back off a bit. Give her some time. *Her minute*. Honestly, it's the last thing I want to do, but what choice do I have here? I want Brooke to acknowledge on her own what this is for her.

What I am to her.

I need her to say it. I won't force the words I've been waiting for out of Brooke. I won't push her when she's obviously struggling more than ever with this right now.

I won't push her like I did this past weekend. Never again.

I have to rely on what I feel, how bloody sure I am of us. That's the only way I'm going to be able to step off and leave her be while she takes her minute, which apparently begins right fucking now.

She wants time? I can give her time, if it'll help move this along.

I'll give her whatever she wants.

I push a rough hand through my hair. My fingers slide down to my neck where I grip harshly at the skin. "Right. I almost forgot. I can't do our breakfast tomorrow."

Our breakfast.

Jesus Christ. I'm bailing on this again. I can't catch a break with this fucking day.

Brooke studies me, lowering her coffee after taking a sip. Her mouth pulls into a frown.

She looks . . . disappointed?

No. That can't be. Why would she look disappointed? Taking a bloody minute involves distance. I'm giving her that.

I drop my hand and continue with my lie. *This fucking sucks*. "Since I canceled classes on Saturday while we were away camping, I decided to add on a few early ones this week to make up for it. I didn't want to lose any potential clients. It would've been bad business not to offer."

In my mind, I try and remember the names of some of my attendees who requested classes before sunrise. There was at least a handful of them, business women who work long hours in the city and have difficulty getting home at a decent time. Weekends are usually spent with family, so they inquired about something before work. I told them I would consider it.

Maybe I could quickly throw something together for tomorrow so I don't feel so terrible about making this up.

I rub at my jaw.

Come on, mate. She wants a breather. Look at her. Look how she's acting. She would've canceled on you anyway.

"That's really early. People are insane wanting to workout instead of sleep." Brooke looks down the footpath, her gaze possibly following the couple who just strolled past, hand in hand. Making it look simple.

We can have that. Be that.

All too quickly, she lowers her eyes back to her cup.

"Mm." I look away and observe the world around us.

Cars go zipping down the street and a few bicyclists zoom past in a blur. The sun peers out from behind a cloud. Warmth spreads across my neck and down my forearms.

It's a gorgeous day, but I'm too tense now to enjoy it. My shoulders are tight and my back aches. Hopefully my next four classes will help with that.

"Well." Brooke turns her head, her pony flopping against her shoulder. She lifts her cup and weakly smiles up at me. "Thanks for the coffee. I should go."

Instinctively, and just because I really fucking want to, I move to lean in and kiss her, but catch myself before she seems to notice my intentions. Straightening and shoving my hands in my pockets, I give her a quick nod. "I'll see you around then."

I think I see something, maybe a glint of a distaste for my bullshit impersonal goodbye. Whatever it is, it's gone before I can analyze it, and so

is Brooke.

She turns without saying another word. Without giving me another glance.

I watch the soft sway of her hips until she disappears around a corner. I saunter in the direction of my car, my hands curling in my pockets. Tensing, releasing, and tensing again. I think about how else I could've responded to Brooke's irresolution just now. How I could've reacted differently, and if it would've mattered.

I think about it all afternoon.

Through four classes, while I struggle to keep my attention off the studio window and the bakery across the street, I picture Brooke's face on the footpath when I first found her out there.

Those big, rolling tears wetting her cheeks. Her quivering lip. The way she startled when I approached her.

I remember the feel of her hands on my chest as she shoved me off, yelling about how she doesn't know men like me.

Good, I recall thinking. I want to be the only one. *Her* only one.

Seven o'clock rolls around. Stragglers from the last class finally gather their towels and water bottles and exit the studio. I shut and lock the door, allowing myself one glance across the street.

One more glance.

The lights are off in the bakery. Brooke's probably home by now. Or out, erasing me from her memory. Replacing me . . .

The thought makes me nauseous. I take a long, hot shower and heat up some soup for dinner.

Sitting at my kitchen table with my bowl in front of me, my laptop opened, I update my website and send out a newsletter via email, informing subscribers of the additional class tomorrow morning.

Maybe I'll at least have one person show. That's enough to transform this lie into a truth.

I swirl my spoon around the bottom of the bowl, stirring up the vegetables. Just as I'm about to close out of my email, a new message shows up in my inbox. The sender, *PageOne@gmail.com*, heightens my intrigue.

The small bookstore down the street.

I move the mouse and open up the message, quickly scanning the short paragraph.

Trish, the owner I met a few weeks back, has mentioned my class to her daughter, who in turn informed her roommates. Excitement is brewing. They are all interested in attending and are hoping for something this week. Maybe something permanent, if they all enjoy it.

My first smile in hours stretches across my mouth. A lightness moves through me.

I type out my response, my suggestion of a day and time. I allude to my enthusiasm as well, and welcome any parents or siblings, offering my standard 'first class on me' discount. I send the email and grab my phone to shoot out a quick text to my sister, Ellie, as I pad toward my bed.

She'll be so excited about this.

I sit on the edge of the mattress with my phone in my hand. Instead of opening up a new text, my thumb hovers over the last message from Brooke. I hesitate, then press on the screen to enlarge it.

Brooke: I'm a genius. Let's camp out in your loft! That way I can enjoy the tent (and you) and I won't even have to be outside. FANFUCKINGTASTIC idea, yeah? ;)

Leaning forward, I rest my elbows on my legs and stare at the screen. I read the message two more times. I breathe deeply, evenly as I picture Brooke admiring the tent pitched in the corner of my room.

By the window, obviously. I'd like her to see the stars.

She climbs in excitedly and tugs on my hand. We tumble down together onto the soft, billowy sleeping bag and clutch at each other. Clothes are stripped. I taste her skin, nuzzling my mouth between her legs. My hands fit

to her curves, squeezing her hips, her breasts. She explores my body with her eyes and wild touch, dragging her nails across my back, arching off the floor and writhing against my tongue.

Our wanting is vigorous. Our desire frenzied.

I fall back onto the bed, closing my eyes and reliving that moment as if it were real.

As if it still could be real.



BROOKE

After my emotional collapse in the middle of the city, I leave Mason on the sidewalk and hurry to my car.

I just want to keep to myself the rest of the day. I need space to think, to get a hold on things. Calm the fuck down and breathe a little.

If I had any sick leave left, which I don't, thanks to my bout of pneumonia this past winter, I would fake an illness and head home instead of back to the bakery.

I don't want to talk . . . to anyone.

I'm expecting Joey and Dylan to bombard me with questions and clever little comments when I step through the door, but surprisingly, they leave me alone. I don't have to ask. It's strange. Maybe they can hear my tangle of thoughts. Maybe they received a call from Vince and he's filled them in on my enormously unprofessional outburst, or maybe I just look two seconds away from needing a straitjacket.

If I yell at one more person today, someone might actually have me committed.

Whatever their reasoning for backing off, I seem to settle in my solitary. My mind grows quiet and I busy myself with work. The rest of the afternoon goes by in a blur of baking timers and detailed decorating.

At home, after inhaling some leftovers, I pop my headphones in and listen to my playlist while I change my nail color. I stay in my room all night with the door shut. No one disturbs me. Smart move on their part. I am still irritated with Joey, though not as much as I was before my run-in with Mason, and hardly at all after I make a decision about him while I'm lying on my bed, reading through our old text messages.

Mason: I apologize for staring at your chest like that this morning. Did your mates notice?

Me:

Mason: What does that mean? Yes?

Me: That was my 'one second while I ask them' text. They didn't notice. But now they know you were all up in my boobs and will be watching for it tomorrow. Your cover has been blown.

Mason: Did you notice?

Me: Yes.

Mason: Hmm. I like to think I'm pretty covert with my obsession, but your tits in that top did me in. I nearly lost my mind a little.

Me: Really? I don't think they look any better today than they normally do. I am wearing a new bra. Maybe that's it.

Mason: What store did you purchase it from? The bra and the shirt. I want to send a thank you gift.

Me: Shut up.

Mason: Maybe a nice bottle of wine? Or jewellery? With a note attached detailing my appreciation.

Mason: I suppose I should go to church and thank God as well. Your tits are some of his best work.

Me: Well, while you're there, go ahead and give him props from me.

Mason: For what, sweetheart? My cock?

Me: Yup! Your PERFECT cock. I'll say a few hallelujahs for that masterpiece. I'll even drop to my knees . . . to worship.

Me: And by worship I mean suck your dick, just in case that didn't translate in Aussie speak.

Mason: Right. Getting hard. Not a good thing before class. I'll see you later, yeah? Take care of those tits for me. If they need a good squeeze, I'm just across the street.

I muffle my laugh against my hand. I trace my smile with the tip of my finger.

I make a decision, and God, it's easy. It's so easy to choose him. To choose *this*.

I don't care anymore. I don't care what anyone has to say about what I'm doing with Mason. Friends. Family. I'm not going to allow their opinions or remarks to get to me. I'm also going to stop overthinking everything and freaking out in the middle of the day. This is making me happy, and that should be the only thing that matters.

It is the only thing that matters.

Yes, I still have no idea what I'm doing, because this is completely new to me. Being this happy and not having sex with the person who is making me this happy, wanting to be around the same person all the time and it having absolutely nothing to do with my desire to sleep with them. It's confusing and unexpected.

But I can't stop smiling.

I can't stop smiling.

Damn him and his adorable little yeahs. I'm completely caught up in this guy.

After my shower, I wait for Mason's nightly FaceTime call, but it never comes. I'm half expecting not to hear from him. It's what I asked for. My little minute.

The other half of me wonders if he's staring at his screen as much as I am.

I fall asleep hugging my body pillow, my hand clutching my phone. I wake with it tangled up in the sheets and the battery nearly dead.

God bless car chargers.

When I step inside the coffee shop Tuesday morning, I find myself searching for Mason amongst the crowd.

It's a habit now, seeking him out. He always beats me here.

His tall, lean frame usually perched against a wall while he skims a newspaper. When he spots me, he sets the paper on top of the stack next to the registers and bends to kiss my cheek. We joke about which absurdly sweetened coffee drink I'll be ordering today. Cavities are a risk I'm willing to take. I wrinkle my nose when he drops a tiny pad of butter into his black coffee, turning down his offer to taste it.

Butter in coffee? And he thinks I'm crazy for requesting a non-fat latte with extra whipped cream and chocolate drizzle. Please.

This has become our routine. I pay for Joey, Reese, and Dylan's coffees, while Mason insists on paying for mine. We walk together to the bakery and chat for a few minutes before he tells me he'll see me later, takes the treats I offer him, the ones I now know go uneaten, and crosses the street.

I watch him slip inside the studio. Joey and Dylan watch me watch Mason slip inside the studio. The three of us exchange teasing looks, then we all proceed to get to work.

But Mason isn't here today, and I knew he wouldn't be. After breaking our breakfast plans due to a work obligation, I knew I'd be going through this morning ritual alone.

So why am I still looking for him? Why am I still expecting to see him

leaning against that wall in loose shorts and a T-shirt that clings to his muscles, his hair still damp from a shower, casually unkempt in a mess of waves on top of his head. His blue eyes bright and engaging, and that charming smirk lifting his mouth.

It's odd, how I expect him. It's automatic. I want him to be here, and he's not.

I carry my order down Fayette street, my eyes shifting between the sidewalk ahead and the studio as it comes into view. Cars and large delivery trucks obscure my sight. When a break in traffic comes, I strain to catch a glimpse of Mason, teaching his class, but the brutal glare of the sun blinds me.

Oh, well. I'm sure I'll see him later.

I step inside the bakery and smile half-heartedly at Dylan as she works her fingers through Ryan's blonde wavy locks.

I still feel like an asshole for yelling at her like I did. I regret not sending another apology via text last night.

And one early this morning.

She lifts her head and grins back at me, all casual and pleasant, as if nothing unusual happened yesterday. "Hey. Where's Mason?" Her eyes trail over my shoulder.

Okay. I guess this here is all good. I can probably get rid of those classifieds I swiped from the recycling bin last night.

I sit the coffee carrier on the display case next to Ryan. She swings her legs in the air, her pink ballet slippers catching in the light and sparkling. "He had a class really early today," I explain, dropping my hand to Ryan's knee and giving it a light squeeze. "Hey, girlfriend."

She stops chewing her muffin, looking up at me, her cheeks stuffed with food. "Hi, Aunt Bwooke," she mumbles, spitting bits of blueberry onto her dress.

"We have that cupcake order that's going to be picked up at eleven. Five

dozen red velvet. Can you get started on them?" Dylan asks in a tone that suggests I do as she says.

Her questions regarding work-related duties are never to be interpreted as questions. They are always commands.

Do these or I will fire you.

Roger that.

I nod and grab my coffee. "Sure."

"I'll be back to help you as soon as I get this mess fixed." She sighs exhaustedly, staring at the back of Ryan's head as she struggles to work out a knot. "No more letting Daddy braid your hair, baby, okay? He has no idea what he's doing."

I wave at Ryan and slip into the back, sidling up to the worktop. I set my coffee down and begin pulling supplies off the shelves.

Mixing bowls. Cupcake tins. A few spoons and spatulas.

Reese enters the kitchen with Drew in the infant carrier, his free hand straightening out his tie.

"I hear you suck at braids. What's up with that?"

He stops short and gives me a puzzled look.

I laugh and point to the doorway. "Ryan. Your wife is in there untangling her hair. With two girls you really need to step up your game. Watch a YouTube video or something."

His eyes widen. "They have videos like that on YouTube? Hair braiding tutorials?"

"Yup."

"Huh." He looks down at Drew, his hand flattening down his tie. "All right. Thanks. I'll check it out."

I watch him exit the kitchen, smiling at the idea of Reese, Mister Serious, hovering over his laptop late at night without Dylan's knowledge, because knowing him, he will want this to be a surprise. He becomes a hair braiding expert overnight and twists Ryan's hair into some elaborate pattern,

completely flooring his wife.

I can also see him getting extremely frustrated when he can't figure it out after countless tries and leaving heated comments below the videos, explaining his aggravation.

NumbersGuy: This tutorial is too complex. You need to break this down better and explain your steps as you go through them. No one can follow this. The image quality is also quite terrible. Do better.

Either scenario makes for a funny story.

I retrieve my apron off the wall and slip it over my head, wrapping the long strings around the front of me and tying them together into a loose bow.

A gift from Joey when I first started working here. Right after we first made nice.

I run my fingertips over my embroidered name, remembering how excited I was when I first put this on.

Did I know then that I'd be making a career out of this job? Or how much I'd end up loving it here?

My phone beeps from the back pocket of my jeans, breaking into my little moment of nostalgia. I pull the device out and open up the new text.

Mason: Sorry I had to cancel breakfast.

I go over the message twice. Slowly.

There's nothing unusual about it. A standard apology, but it reads strange. No sweet introductory greeting. No nickname thrown in, sweetheart or gorgeous or little devil.

I like that one. I like thinking I'm Mason's greatest temptation. His only sin, he once said.

But this message isn't his typical style at all. It seems too impersonal for him. Something he might send a stranger, or someone he doesn't bother to give nicknames to.

What gives?

I quickly type my reply.

Me: That's okay. How was class?

Mason: Great.

Great . . . that's it?

Huh.

I stare at the screen, expecting more. More than just one word. I'm certain it's coming. Maybe a 'Let's do breakfast tomorrow instead', or a 'Can I have you for lunch?' to which I will then respond with something overtly sexual, and he will confirm that he does indeed mean lunch in the true meaning of the word, and also the implied innuendo.

'You eat your strange French toast. I eat you, yeah?'

Warmth spreads low in my belly, until my screen fades to black.

What? Really?

I light up my screen again, confusion pinching my brow.

Well, this is different.

Maybe he's really busy at the moment? No time to elaborate because . . .

Reasoning settles over me like a thick fog.

Class. He must be starting another class. His typical first one of the day. He can't text *and* instruct a class.

Of course. This makes perfect sense. *God, Brooke. Use your head.*

I convince myself of this completely logical explanation and set my phone on the worktop.

He'll probably text later, like he usually does. Or stop in at some point.

I smile at the thought.

The front door chimes as I'm setting out my ingredients for the five dozen cupcakes. Movement catches my attention. Joey steps through the doorway wearing dark washed jeans and a bright blue polo. He stares at me, his expression unreadable as he moves across the kitchen.

I open my mouth to utter a greeting, something to ease us back into our

regular everyday banter, when he halts me with a hand in the air.

“Let me just start off by saying how much I hate not speaking to you,” he announces, stepping closer and lowering his hand.

My grip tightens on the bag of flour. *He does?*

“I know this is all my doing. I should’ve apologized to you yesterday but I felt like maybe it would be better if I left you alone. Teasing you like that wasn’t . . . right of me. I regret doing it. I saw how upset I made you and it fucked with my emotions.” He leans a hip against the worktop, his arms tightening across his chest.

Typical Joey. Even in an apology, he makes it all about him. He’s lucky I like him that way.

I cock my head. “Oh, really? It fucked with *your* emotions?”

“Yes,” he snaps. “I barely ate last night and turned down a quickie in the shower. I hope you realize how little that happens. And by little, I mean never. Billy thought I was coming down with some weird virus that diminished my sex drive. He wanted to take me to the hospital.”

My mouth twitches. I open up the bag of flour. A white cloud of dust bursts onto the back of my hands and sprinkles the wood. “Good Lord. You two are dramatic.”

“Brooke.” Joey squeezes my shoulder, prompting me to look up at him. His sky-blue eyes are sorrowful. “I’m really fucking sorry, okay?”

I feel my throat tighten. “Okay,” I quietly reply.

“It’s like when I fight with Dylan. I can’t handle it. And I fucking hate the whole silent treatment routine.” He removes his hand from my shoulder and flicks his head, tousling his blonde hair. “Let’s never do that mess again.”

“Don’t be an asshole and we won’t.”

His eyes narrow. I let out a quiet laugh, and so does he. Spinning around, he rests his elbows on the worktop and leans into it, exhaling a rushed breath. “Can I be blunt with my opinion for a second?”

“When aren’t you blunt with your opinion?”

“Tuesdays, usually.”

We exchange mocking smiles. I dip a measuring cup into the bag of flour and level out a scoop, dumping it into a large mixing bowl.

Joey looks down at the wood, moving his finger through some spilled flour and making tiny circular patterns. “You’re different with this guy, Brooke. Really different. Don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re usually more like a puppy with men.”

I wince, dumping more flour into the bowl. “What?”

“A puppy. A cute one. Relax. Like those teacup ones you carry around in your purse.”

“Really? They’re so yappy.”

“I know,” he says playfully, lifting his head. He smiles at my tight expression. “Anyway, you get this new toy, right? One of those bones that squeak.”

“Only when you bite down on them.”

A slow grin pulls across his mouth. “Girl, you have no idea.”

I chuckle under my breath.

“Okay, so new toy. You’re really excited to play with it, but you don’t just want *one* toy. You want every toy, ‘cause you’re a puppy, and the minute another toy is placed in front of you, you’re dropping the first one and lunging for the other. That’s not happening with Mason. You aren’t even looking at other toys.”

I brush my hands off.

A puppy? Give me a break. They pee everywhere.

“Okay.”

I slide the sugar and salt in front of me and palm a measuring spoon. I bite my tongue, keeping any comments that might derail this conversation to myself. I am curious to see where Joey is going with this. Some analogy . . .

Not all that inaccurate though. I do like my toys.

“I just know that sometimes new shit can be scary. You have no idea

what's going on or how to explain it, and that makes some people bolt. Yesterday, when I was getting on you about it . . ." he pauses to straighten up. His hands flatten to the wood. "Look, I just don't want you to do that. Bolt. I think if you did, it would be a huge mistake. He's good for you. Great for you, actually, and you know I would say something if I thought you could do better. I don't think there is better."

Biting the inside of my cheek, I think about all the men I've been with, the ones worth remembering anyway. All of them pale in comparison to Mason. I never wanted to have any sort of real conversation with them. I never thought about them in scenarios that didn't involve sex.

Did I ever even laugh with them? Or stay up late at night talking for hours until one of us passed out on the line?

Would any of them have been able to convince me to go camping?

Fuck no. Only him.

I nod, conveying my agreement with Joey as I measure out some salt and pour it into the bowl. "I'm not bolting."

"You're not?" He sounds surprised.

"No. I mean, don't get me wrong. It is different. Really different for me, which when I think about it, I get a little freaked out, but that's okay. I'm okay with that." I look up at him. "I don't want to bolt. I like Mason. I like what we're doing. I called him my boyfriend yesterday and he . . ."

"Whoa." Joey waves his hand. "Wait a hot damn minute. You called him your boyfriend?"

"Yes."

"To who?"

I make a distasteful sound in the back of my throat, dropping my head and the measuring spoon. I slowly peer up at Joey. "You know the building I delivered to yesterday? Do you remember us going there last year, and the guy who hit on me?" Joey nods. "To him. He tried to get me to sleep with him again while I was there."

He grimaces. "Go home, Vince."

I shove at his shoulder. "You remember his name?" I ask, laughing. "I didn't. I had no idea."

He shrugs, his mouth twitching with a smile. "I lost my virginity to a Vince. That name is burned in my memory. Plus, I remember you telling me how he was uncircumcised and you thought his foreskin looked strange."

I scrunch up my face in disgust. "We talk about the weirdest shit."

"Word."

"Anyway, I ran into Mason right after that, and I told him what I said, that I called him my boyfriend, and his face, Joey." I frown, leaning my hip against the wood. My cheeks burn. "He looked so happy to hear me say that. I mean, I was literally *freaking out*, but he was just so ready, you know? Like *yes, say it again. Again, Brooke. Please.* I could practically hear his thoughts."

Joey smiles gently. "I bet. So, are we calling him your boyfriend now? Please say yes."

I shrug, turning back to the ingredients I laid out. "I'm just going with it. Whatever this is, I like it, so . . . yeah, I guess. I guess he's my boyfriend. I have a boyfriend." I let out a nervous giggle. My eyes widen. Joey regards me with barely contained jubilation. "Um, yeah I just had a tickle." I touch my throat, swallowing thickly. "That was weird."

Oh, my God. I just turned into a preteen.

"Weird indeed," Joey remarks, wiggling his brows.

The front door chimes again, followed by the loud tapping of heels striking on tile. Dylan steps into the kitchen with my sister close behind.

Juls used to be a regular in the bakery up until last year when she popped out her second kid. Now she's a full-time mommy, part-time wedding planner, and hardly has a minute to spare for visits that aren't work related.

"Good morning, everyone," she sings, circling the worktop and wrapping her arms around Joey. "Mm. You smell nice. Is that new cologne?"

“It’s Billy’s. I ran out.” Joey leans back, releasing her from the hug. “Do you like it better than mine?”

Dylan chuckles from her stool. “Oh, Jesus. Here we go.”

“What?” Joey cranks his neck around to stare at her. “I’m just asking. I’m secure, bitch. I know I smell fantastic in my own fragrance.”

“Excuse me? Shouldn’t you be manning the front, *bitch*?” Dylan affronts. “Don’t piss me off, Joey. My blood pressure is already off the fucking charts lately.”

“Is it?” I ask, dropping my gaze to the top of her protruding belly.

Dylan lets out a rushed breath, then gathers her hair off her neck and secures it into a messy pony. Juls and Joey loom closer. “Yes. I have a doctor’s appointment tomorrow. Reese bought one of those home blood pressure monitors the other day when I felt really anxious. We’ve been taking it every night. It’s pretty elevated.”

“Other than that, do you feel okay?” Joey asks, rubbing Dylan’s back and shoulders. “Nothing’s going on with the baby?”

“No. I feel fine. Enormous and constantly sweaty, but fine.” She drops her head back and smiles at him. “Thanks. That feels really good.”

“Anytime, cupcake.”

“Women having elevated blood pressure when they’re pregnant is common,” Juls says. “It’s probably just something you need to keep an eye on. Maybe try and stay off your feet as much as possible.”

Dylan closes her eyes. “That’s what I’m worried about,” she murmurs, rolling her head to the side as Joey moves up to her neck.

Jesus. I can’t imagine Dylan staying off her feet any more than she already does. She’s always planted on a stool back here, and I can tell it drives her crazy. She wants to be up, running her business. I get that. She’s a very proud woman.

Juls reaches across the table and squeezes Dylan’s hand. “I’m sure it’ll be fine, sweets.”

Dylan smiles, her eyes remaining closed.

Turning her attention on me, Juls walks around the worktop to stand closer. "I see you survived camping."

I roll my eyes. "Barely. Some tick nearly took me out."

She gasps appallingly. "Oh, gross. See? That's why I always shoot down Ian's weekend retreat ideas. I'm not picking ticks off the kids."

Dylan and Joey both start giggling. I pinch my lips together, fighting my own amusement at the idea of Ian roughing it as Juls looks across the worktop at the two of them.

"Something funny?" she asks, hands flying to her hips.

Joey moves to stand beside Dylan. "Ian wants to spend the weekend outdoors? Where in the world will he plug in his hairdryer?"

Wow. He took the words right out of my mouth.

Dylan's eyes go round, her cheeks lifting.

Juls glares around the room, remaining silent, seemingly pissed, until her shoulders start shaking and she covers her mouth. "I know. God, I know," she giggles, shaking her head. "He would be so miserable. I don't know why he keeps suggesting it. My man is crazy high maintenance, but I don't care. He's so sexy, isn't he?"

"No comment. We're practically related." I shuffle over to the shelf to grab some cupcake liners.

Juls glances down at her watch. "Oo, I gotta go. Hey, dinner this Friday, right?"

I give her a thumbs up.

She quickly says her goodbyes, bending down to speak softly to Dylan's belly before she slips out the front door. I grab the two mixers and set them on the worktop. The bakery officially opens, and Joey disappears upfront, while Dylan slides some of the ingredients in front of her and begins making her own batch of cupcakes.

As my batter is mixing, I hit the button on my phone and light up my

screen again. It's possible that my text alert function is on the fritz. Maybe I missed something from Mason.

I note the time, and the pink glittered wallpaper set for my lock screen.

No messages.

I check the ring volume before pushing my phone aside and focusing on work.

At least until the cupcakes go in the oven.

Strolling up front after cleaning up the mess, I stand at the window and peer across the street, standing on my toes to see above the occasional car. I can feel Joey's eyes on me.

"I'm surprised he hasn't stopped in yet," he proclaims, echoing my exact thoughts.

I chew on my thumb nail, jerking my shoulder as I strain to see through his large studio window. The distance and projection of the sun make that impossible. His entire studio front is washed out by the glare.

"He canceled classes so we could go camping. Maybe he's squeezing them all in today to make up for it. He texted me earlier."

And it was weird.

I push that thought out of my head.

It wasn't weird, he was busy. He's allowed to be busy.

He's just really fucking busy.

I repeat this same rational justification for Mason's nonexistence today as the hours pass. I repeat it so much that it seems to transfer into my own reality.

After the cupcake order is picked up, a frantic mother rushes into the shop in tears because she forgot to order her son's birthday cake last week. She needs it by five-thirty tonight for his party. Doable, until the woman explains what exactly her son is requesting for his fourth birthday.

An elaborate Old McDonald style cake with a tall red barn and at least five of his favorite animals.

Have I mentioned how much I hate working with fondant? It's the devil.

Dylan and Joey exchange worried looks as the woman waits anxiously for the verdict. I can tell which way this decision is leaning, and no child should be disappointed on their birthday. Even little Timmy, or whatever the Hell this kid's name is, who had to go all out for his big day. We should at least attempt this.

"I think we can knock this out," I say, earning a leery look from Dylan. "What?" I mouth.

The woman pulls me into a grateful hug.

Dylan smiles at me, telling her there is no guarantee, and that she needs to be prepared to settle on birthday cupcakes in case this doesn't work out.

She agrees. "Yes. Yes, of course. Thank you so much!" And rushes out of the shop.

We immediately get to work.

Dylan stays off her feet as much as possible. I'm all over the place, pulling ingredients and supplies off the shelves, darting upstairs to grab some paper so we can sketch this out. Our design is promising. Whether or not we can pull off sculpting these fucking farm animals is another thing.

I work through lunch. Joey steps into the back after two o'clock and holds out a sandwich for me to take bites of as I roll out some fondant. Dylan takes several breaks and moves into a more comfortable seat when her back starts to hurt. We check her blood pressure twice. That whole thing worries me. I forget all about my phone and Mason in general as I mold fat little farm animals and place them around the barn.

The cake is completed with only minutes to spare. Dylan can't believe it. I'm too exhausted to offer my opinion on the ordeal and collapse onto a stool. It only registers that I haven't spoken to Mason at all today when I'm gathering up my things at the end of the day.

"Still nothing?" Joey asks as we step out of the bakery together.

I glance across the street. The studio lights are off. "No. Um . . ." I check

my phone again and frown at the screen. No Mason.

Disappointment prickles deep in my chest.

Joey bumps against my shoulder, then throws his arm around me and pulls me along the sidewalk. “Early night, maybe? If he had extra classes today, he’s probably beat. As am I. Jesus. Just watching you and Dylan back there knocking out that cake was enough to wipe me out. Of course, I barely slept last night due to our little lover’s quarrel.”

I feel the corner of my mouth twitch.

“Pizza and beer for dinner sounds fucking perfect right about now. I need carbs and booze. You in?”

Craning my neck, I watch the studio grow smaller behind us as we continue down the sidewalk.

Early night, maybe? I cling to Joey’s reasoning for Mason’s continued silence. I accept it as explanation.

Extra classes. Right. He’s probably beat, that’s all.

“Yeah, sure,” I agree, looking ahead and tucking away my phone. “That does sound perfect.”

Or at least I think it does.

By the time that option is actually laid out in front of me, an hour later back at the condo, my appetite is deficient and I can only manage to consume half of my slice of Hawaiian pizza and nurse a third of my beer. I pick off the pineapple chunks and stack them on the plate. The ham slivers next.

Billy asks me if I’m okay, if I’m feeling well.

“Just tired,” I mumble, standing and carrying my plate to the sink.

Probably beat.

I can’t explain my mood, or what exactly it is I’m feeling as I turn in early and take a hot shower.

Disappointment? Disbelief? It’s odd, not hearing from Mason, but it’s easily explainable, and that’s what I tell myself again and again as I towel off and slip into an oversized T-shirt and a pair of black lace panties.

No reason to overreact. Or react at all, right?

God, when did I become spoiled by our daily conversations? I feel like a huge chunk of me is missing.

I comb out my hair and grab my phone before sliding under the cool sheets covering my bed. The dim light of my screen casts over my pillow as I hold it next to me, my shoulder digging into the mattress. My thumb hovers over the FaceTime icon.

I scowl at my own desperation.

He's asleep, Brooke. Early night. Really fucking busy, remember?

With a heavy exhale, I let the phone drop out of my hand. I curl my body against my pillow and force my eyes to close.

I force myself to stop worrying, and to chase after sleep.

And the next morning, when Mason doesn't show up for coffee, again, or stop in for a quick hello, I force myself to focus on my job, and not the man across the street who is confusing the fuck out of me right now.

Oh, and also, making it damn near impossible to *focus* on anything.

"Goddamn it." I pick up the now empty container off the floor and slam it onto the worktop. A mound of sugar collects near my feet, with a trail streaking across the floor. The granules shimmering along the wood.

Well, this is just perfect. And exactly how you get ants.

Snatching up the broom, I sweep up my mess as Joey steps into the back.

"I think you need a break. Your language is getting a bit out of control back here." He bends down to hold the pan for me, dumping what he collects into the trash.

"It is not," I scoff, sweeping another pile into the pan, although I am a fool to argue. I know how loose my tongue has been today.

"The last customer heard you."

I wince, my grip tightening on the handle as Joey straightens. *Shit.* "Oh."

"Yeah."

Leaning the broom back against the wall in the corner, I brush my hands

down my apron. The hard edge of my silent, might as well be dead, phone scrapes against my palm. My teeth clench.

“Unfuckingbelievable,” I utter, ripping off my apron and tossing it against the wall below the hooks. It falls into a crumpled pile on the floor.

“Strange that he still hasn’t stopped over here.” Joey leans against the worktop. “Are we sure he’s alive?”

Oh, I’m sure. His car is parked in a different spot than it was yesterday. That means he went out last night, or at least some point before I made it in to work today.

Early night, my ass.

“Being too busy to call or stop over here yesterday is one thing, but standing me up for coffee and then not communicating with me all morning is bullshit. Especially when he’s always over here, and always texting me cute, funny little messages. Now I get nothing? No contact? What the hell?”

“What happened the last time you saw him? After your delivery that day, did he act weird?”

I pinch my lips together.

No. No, he didn’t act weird. I acted weird.

The room swirls around me as I begin to pace. Adrenaline surges through my body. “I told him I needed a minute. I couldn’t . . . think. It might have been a panic attack. I don’t know. I was freaking out, Joey. You know that, I told you. But I said a minute. Not two fucking days.”

I shake my hands out at my sides. My feet carry me from one side of the kitchen to the other, and back again.

Where are you?

“Maybe a minute in Australia is longer?”

I stop near the fridge, glaring at Joey. “Really?”

He gives me an even look. “What? It’s possible. Have you called him?”

When I don’t answer, he shakes his head, muttering, “Of course you haven’t. Because that would be the logical thing to do, right? Contact him

and figure out what's going on."

Figure out what's going on. Contact him.

Call him? No. I'll do one better.

If he's changed his mind, he can tell me to my fucking face.

With determination fueling my steps, I grab some cash out of my wallet and dart out of the kitchen. "I'm taking my lunch!" I yell out, pushing through the door and stepping out onto the sidewalk.

Joey calls out something behind me, something motivating.

My spine straightens.

Yes. Feminine power. Why didn't I do this earlier?

I sprint across the street, grateful for my choice of flat, comfortable footwear, and pull on the studio door handle.

Locked.

"You have got to be kidding me."

I knock several times on the glass. I pound on it. Maybe he's upstairs hanging out between classes. Hiding out from me.

Pulling away. Needing his own minute.

Growling when he doesn't materialize in front of me with a believable explanation for his sudden absence from my life, I tug my phone from my pocket and dial his number.

It doesn't ring. His voicemail picks up.

"Oh, really? Is that how we're going to play this?"

Anger sizzles in my blood. I'm furious. With myself, for not contacting him yesterday. With him. More myself though, and that only dials up my rage. I asked for this, and now I'm reacting because he's only giving me what I thought I wanted.

He couldn't fight me a little? Show some defiance?

Damn him for being so understanding.

Stowing my phone away after deciding against leaving a message, I head down the sidewalk toward the restaurants, my feet commanding on the

pavement.

Not that I need to eat. I've inhaled half of my weight in cupcakes already and it's only one o'clock. My mouth still tastes like raspberry mousse.

I blame men for any weight I might gain today. All men. The entire race. Especially ones with sexy accents and stunning physiques.

The warm sun presses into my skin as I walk around the corner. I push up the sleeves of my silk blouse above my elbows and pop another button.

I decide on Grinders for lunch, a little sandwich shop Joey turned me on to years ago. It's the closest in proximity to the bakery, which will allow me to return back to my perch and watch out for Mason so I can have it out with him sooner rather than later.

Stepping under the green awning, I move through the busy outside seating area and head for the door, stepping aside for customers carrying trays. I follow behind a group of business men in suits. When I'm nearly inside the cafe, a laugh turns my head in the direction of the tables and chairs in front of the other half of the building.

A familiar laugh.

I stop, causing someone to bump into my back.

"Sorry," I mutter, stepping aside and searching the crowd. It only takes me another second to focus on Mason as he laughs again, his head falling back with his obvious enjoyment.

My stomach flutters.

I move closer, through the line of people filing at the door. My eyes lock on the person he's laughing with, sharing a table with, a meal with.

A date with?

A woman. A young woman, with red hair and striking beauty, laughs with a napkin to her mouth. Her attention wrapped up in Mason. Her eyes trained on his. The two of them are sitting alone at a table in the corner by the wrought iron fence that wraps around the cafe. An intimate spot, maybe?

It sure as fuck looks like it.

My jaw aches as I grind my teeth. My nostrils flare. I cross the pavement with heavy steps and stop next to their table.

Their table.

Mason looks up at me, surprise manifesting in his eyes. He opens his mouth to speak.

I don't let him.

"Who the hell is this?" I point my finger in the general direction of the redhead. I can't look away. My eyes stay glued to his. "Are you sleeping with her?"

The woman gasps, then goes completely silent.

Mason winces. "What?"

"What?" I echo, leaning down, keeping my finger extended in the air. My hand shakes. "I said, are you sleeping with her? Is that what you've been doing the past two days? Fucking someone who isn't me? Fucking *anyone*?"

My voice cracks and my eyes sting. I lean away as Mason stands from the table.

"Come here." He reaches for my arm. His voice is hard, angry.

Like he has a right.

I step back. "No! You tell me right now where you've been! Where have you been, Mason? With her? Where!"

Tears spill down my cheeks in heavy drops. My lip trembles.

It's strange how quickly your mind can conjure up the worst possible scenario. Self-harm at its finest. Mason and this woman, images of them together, intimate, laughing. It's all I can imagine when I look at him right now.

In a movement too fast for me to avoid, he grabs my arm above my elbow with one hand while his other seals to my waist. "You're making a scene. There are children around," he whispers harshly against my hair, moving me across the pavement.

I hear the soft click of the iron gate opening.

Turning my head, I look back at the sea of eyes on me as Mason pulls me away from the seating area. Away from *her*.

“Like I give a fuck. Who is she?” I growl, trying to get away, pushing against his chest and, at the same time, wanting to bury my face there and cry this out. “Where have you been? What the fuck is this?”

He presses my back against the heated brick covering the side of the building. I look around us, at the building behind Mason. I inhale the dank, musky air.

He’s pulled me into the alley. An alley, just like before, when he first kissed me.

Bending down, he flattens his hands on either side of my face and closes in on me. “What’s the problem, Brooke? Are you upset?”

I inhale a sharp breath. *What the fuck?*

“Am I upset? Are you kidding?”

“No, I’m not. Do you think I’m with that woman? Do you care that I am?”

“What?” I whisper, fresh tears rimming my eyelids as I look up at him. “Are you?”

Bile rises in my throat.

He stares at me, not answering, his eyes distant and detached, but underneath them, dark smudges shadow his skin.

Instinctively, I go to reach for him, but flatten my hand against my side when I remember what he’s put me through. “Where have you been?” I ask, my cheeks burning. “You just disappeared on me.”

“You said you needed a minute.” His voice is cold. Impassive.

That bloody fucking minute.

I break, sending more tears down my face, my hands drawing into fists and pounding against his solid chest. “A minute, Mason. A minute! Not two days. Fuck you! You were my best friend and you just stopped talking to me. Why did you do that?”

He flinches, his eyes as round as quarters as they search my face. Grabbing my wrists, which go limp in response to his touch, he presses closer.

“What else was I to you? Was that it?” he asks.

I shake my head. “No,” I whisper, my body melting against the brick. I feel like I could collapse right now.

“What else?” He wipes a tear from my cheek. His breath bathes my face. “Fuck, Brooke. Tell me. What else was I?”

“Mine.”

The word shocks us both. Him more than me. I swear he stops breathing. I accepted this possessiveness over Mason two nights ago. This right to him. I know what I want. But saying it, hearing it out loud when I’ve never felt this way before, that’s what startles me.

Hearing my feelings at all is what startles him.

I drop my gaze to his dark cotton tee. “And I thought I was yours. I want to be.” I squeeze his hip, pushing off the wall. It’s my turn to press closer. Selfishly, my hands travel up his sides and around his back, dipping under his shirt.

Mine.

God, I missed his body. Two days feels like two years.

I stroke the hard curves of his muscles and the trail of his spine. I flatten my cheek to his chest. “Am I?” I quietly ask. “Am I yours?”

“Fuck,” he moans, crushing me against him, his long arms snaking around my body. Muscles tensing in relief and longing. With a sharp exhale, he nuzzles my hair. “You’re mine, sweet girl. So fucking mine. I just wanted to hear you say it.”

I close my eyes. Relief weighs down my frame, forming me to him. I’m so close but I want closer.

“You didn’t even call me.”

“I know. It’s not because I didn’t want to. Trust me. After that text the

other day, I turned my phone off so I wouldn't. I needed you to come to me, Brooke. I wanted you to admit what this was."

"You were just going to wait?"

"Yeah. But only until Friday." He leans back and cups my cheek. "I gave your stubbornness a deadline. I wouldn't be able to wait any longer than that."

Friday? Jesus, what would I have looked like by then?

I fist his shirt, going up on my toes, not giving him an option one way or the other as I whisper across his lips, "kiss me."

I'm taking this.

With a growl, Mason seals our mouths together, our bodies. His length hardening against my stomach. He sucks on my tongue and kneads my ass, fingers digging at my flesh.

I gasp and arch further into him.

"Say it again," he begs, kissing my jaw. "God, Brooke. Say it."

I moan when he bites my neck. "That you're my best friend?"

He leans away, and I giggle at his expression.

Fuck, he's so adorable. Moody Mason.

I lunge at him again and wrap my arms around his neck, my feet dangling in the air.

He grumbles against my mouth.

"Oh. That you're mine? And I'm yours? Is that what you want me to say?"

He nods. "Baby, please."

"I am yours," I whisper between soft kisses. "I have been. It just took me a minute."

Laughing, he leans back and drops his forehead against mine. "Longest fucking minute of my life. You had me worried."

"I had *you* worried?" I twitch in his arms until he lowers me. "Who the fuck is that redhead?" I ask, poking him in the chest.

His mouth falls open. “Ah, fuck. I forgot. Come on.” He grabs my hand and pulls me out of the alley.

“Erection,” I grate out behind him.

He turns his head. “What’s that?”

“You have an erection.” I tug on his hand.

“Shit.” He spins around just before we reach the fence and the herd of people. He winks at me as he discreetly adjusts himself. “Thanks, gorgeous. That could’ve been embarrassing, yeah?”

My heart melts at that one stupid word. I grab his face and kiss him hard.

“Mm,” he moans and squeezes my shoulders, gently easing me off. “Now you’re just making things worse.”

Smiling through a shrug, I take his hand again and allow him to willingly pull me this time through the crowded seating area outside the café. We stop at the table he was occupying before my outburst.

I look at the redhead, and the man now sitting next to her. His arm thrown behind her back. Her hand resting on his thigh.

Oh.

Nice, Brooke. Very nice.

Mason gestures at the couple. “These are some mates of mine from Alabama. Tessa, and her boyfriend, Luke. They came up to see my studio and do some sightseeing.” He looks down at me, smirking. “You remember me mentioning Tessa, right, sweetheart?”

“Mm.” I nod through tightly pinched lips.

Chuckling, Mason wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me against his side. He looks at his friends. “And this is my Brooke.”

My heart thumps loudly in my chest, echoing in my bones.

His Brooke.

I release the slowest, calmest breath of my life as Tessa and Luke regard me familiarly.

For the first time since I’ve met Mason, I don’t feel unsure. The expectant

worry that usually accompanies being this public with him is gone. Vanished. There's no trace of it.

This is easy. God, it's so easy standing here with him, being his, and it's undeniably everything I want. I realize this is what it feels like to be someone's only. To want to be that. And to hear someone declare their love for you just in the way they acquaint you with others.

A dizzying sensation moves through me like a coiling stream. I feel fuller and weightless all at once.

He loves me. Wow. That's what this feels like.

Raising a limp hand, I smile apologetically at the two of them, more so at Tessa. "It's nice to meet you. Sorry about earlier. I'm not usually like that."

She tilts her head. "No? I've heard you're a bit ballsy. It's all good. I would've done the same thing."

"Babe, you have," Luke adds, laughing. "Who are you kidding?" He holds out his hand and shakes mine. "Sorry I missed the show. I was grabbing drinks."

"Yeah, me too. Way to be absent. I'm probably banned from eating here now."

We all share a laugh, and I notice Tessa smiling up at Mason.

"Can you stay?" he asks, sliding his hand to my back as I spin to face him.

I shake my head. "No. Dylan's at a doctor's appointment so it's just me and Joey running the shop. I really need to grab some food and get back."

He presses a kiss to my temple. "I'll go inside with you."

I say my goodbyes and another round of apologies to Luke and Tessa. Mason keeps his arms around me as we wait in line to place my order. I bury my face in his neck. We laugh about how we've become one of *those* couples, and we both agree we don't really give a fuck.

He insists on paying for my food and walks me to the corner of the street where he grabs my face and presses hot, hungry kisses to my mouth and

neck.

“I gotta go,” I plead, but my hand holds tight to his shirt, my lips still moving against his.

He kisses me once more and leans away. “Can you come by after you get off? I’m teaching this special class tonight I want you to see.”

“Special?” I flash him a devilish smile. “As in private?”

He laughs. “More private than usual, yes. Will you come?”

I giggle at his innuendo. He swats at my ass.

God, yes. I will be coming.



After waving goodbye to Joey after work and telling him to *not* wait up for me at all tonight, I cross the street and open the door to Mason’s studio.

I’m expecting my skin to prick with sweat the minute I step inside. My lungs to adjust to the sultry air. That’s the first difference I notice.

The temperature is comfortable. How it is when Mason isn’t teaching a class. A cool seventy degrees. The second thing I notice is the panel of spectators standing off to the side observing. Some of them snapping pictures.

Older people, mostly. Parents, by the looks of it. They look proud. I’m quickly reminded of my own mom and dad when I used to compete in cheerleading competitions.

I step further into the room and avert my attention to the actual group participating in the lesson. A profound awareness builds around me. Mason’s invitation takes on an entirely different meaning as I smile at the young adults posed on their mats, most of them probably close to my age. All of them sharing similar physical characteristics.

I suddenly feel like the biggest asshole for interpreting his request the way I did.

God, Brooke. Tact. Learn it.

I spot Mason toward the back of the room. He’s helping a young woman

hold a pose where her body is forming an upside down V. Her hands and feet flat on the mat. She giggles and drops to her knees, then rolls to her hip. Her laughter is infectious, and soon others join in.

The woman beside me laughs quietly and whispers to the woman standing next to her.

“He’s so great, isn’t he? Look how much they’re all enjoying this!”

I slide closer along the wall, keeping my attention on Mason as he convinces the girl to try again. She shakes her head, grinning, but ultimately going for it and stretching into the pose.

“I know. I was so excited when Kendall wanted to give this a try. Trish said he’s offering this once a week, with a substantial discount. More than half-off. If they like it, I’m all for it, you know? It’s good for them.”

The woman beside me makes an appreciative humming noise. “The world needs more people like him.”

More people like him.

Mason.

With a sigh, my head hits the wall. I gaze across the room at the one person who has completely surprised me in every possible way. From his unconventional dating method, to his irresistible persistence, to his sweet soul he shares with the world.

My Mason.

I begin to take in quick, shallow breaths the longer I stand here. Something shifts, my lungs and other organs making room for my heart to expand and take over.

Who cares, right? Adore him now, stabilize my breathing later.

What? That’s crazy. I need to breathe. More than anything else, I need to keep breathing.

I close my eyes. *Breathe, Brooke.* I feel myself slipping, sliding under the water and sinking to the bottom.

This is madness. Beautiful, terrifying madness.

I can't breathe.

I love him.

My eyes fly open. Mason smiles at me. My heart reacts without pause, battering against my sternum.

What.

The.

Fuck . . .

I love him. He made me fall in love with him. That's exactly what happened. He didn't give me a choice in this. I've never had any control in this situation. From the beginning, it's been all him.

I bet this was his plan all along. Pull me in. Pull me under.

Well, now I'm fucking drowning, you gorgeous bastard.

In a panic, I move off from the wall and grab Mason's attention again, waving goodbye and ignoring his puzzled look. Pushing through the door, I dart down the sidewalk in the opposite direction of my car.

I run, and run and run and run.

To the nearest liquor store.

If I'm sinking with this guy, I'm going down my way.



MASON

“Next week, then. Have a good night.”

I wave to everyone, parents and attendees as they leave the studio after class. Trish gives me a gracious look on her way out, silently thanking me for the third time tonight for orchestrating this.

She doesn't need to thank me. I've wanted to get something like this started for years, and without her help spreading the word I'm not sure when or if it would've happened. I'm the one who's grateful. Elated, actually. I'm running on a mysterious energy. The best kind of high. What a difference from yesterday and the day before when I tortured myself by avoiding all contact with Brooke.

Now, I don't need to avoid her. I just need to find her.

Where the hell did she run off to?

I take the stairs two at a time and burst through the door, stepping out into my loft. After turning on the nearby lamp, I swipe my phone off the table and dial her number. It rings until her voicemail clicks over. My eyes pinch shut.

For fuck's sake, Brooke.

Worry pricks at my encouraging mood. Is she having a minor freak out? Over-thinking things again? And so soon . . . I was at least hoping for a few days of bliss with her before I had to talk her off another ledge.

I shoot her a quick text, asking if everything is all right, then strip off my shirt and toss it onto a chair.

I step into the bathroom and splash some cold water on my face. I run my wet hands through my hair and along the back of my neck. My reflection stares back at me, one I recognize from the past two days. Laden with uncertainty and tension.

Fucking hell. She *ran* out of here. She ran away from *me*.

As I debate on taking an actual shower to keep myself here and not pacing the streets, a habit I've acquired as of recently, a knock sounds on the front door, startling me. I move swiftly through the room and tug on the handle.

Brooke pushes past me the second the door swings open. I inhale a lung full of soft vanilla.

She's here. That's a good sign. I begin to breathe a bit easier, my anxious mind starting to settle.

"Hey. You had me worried. I thought maybe you were changing your mind." I close the door and watch her move into the kitchen.

She sets a bottle on the table. Tall, amber in color. Tequila.

Our eyes lock.

All right. Instead of pulling away, I'm now driving her to drink? Not sure this classifies as progress or not.

"Everything all right, Brooke?"

A small laugh bubbles on her lips. She unscrews the bottle, bringing it to her mouth for a taste. "I am so mad at you right now."

I watch her take a sip, then another. "Why?"

"Why?" she echoes, pointing at me with the bottle in her hand. Her eyes narrow. "You know exactly why." Taking another sip, she moves around the room with the bottle, gesturing with her free hand. "How long have you been planning this for, Mason? Since that first day, in front of your studio? Or maybe in the alley when I made you lay it all out there for me? Was this

always your motive?”

She takes another sip of tequila as she paces in front of the window.

I rub my jaw, moving closer to the bed. I have no idea what she’s referring to. “Brooke, what exactly . . .”

“I mean, you knew!” she yells, not in anger though. Disbelief maybe? Her voice breaks with a short burst of laughter. “You knew from that first day what I wanted out of this. From that *first day*. It wasn’t a secret. Then you go and convince me to try things your way, with false intentions, I might add.”

She lifts her head, stopping, staring at me from across the room. Her shoulders relaxing with the breath she expels.

“I only wanted to have sex with you. That’s it. But the more time we spent together, the less I thought about what I wanted. And *you*, your entire argument was you wanted us to know each other before that happened. To really know each other, right? But you knew me when we went camping. You knew me then, Mason, didn’t you?”

I think about how close I felt to Brooke that weekend, including during her unfortunate tick encounter and the mess that followed. Our talk in the tent before we crashed that first night, and our adventure together the next day.

She’s right. I knew her. Well enough to take things where we both wanted.

“Yeah,” I reply, nodding.

There’s no point in lying about this.

“And you didn’t give in. You didn’t take me that weekend.”

She doesn’t allow me to respond. I don’t really need to anyway. We were both there.

“That’s not all you were waiting for,” she concludes with a keen arch of her brow.

“No.”

“This was never just about us knowing each other.”

“No.”

Shaking her head through a tight laugh, she takes one last swig of the tequila before setting it on the window ledge. “Who else?” she asks quietly, facing away from me.

I know what she means. I don’t need to ask for clarification on this.

When all of this started with Brooke, I told her I didn’t do a meaningless fuck anymore, but I never told her I didn’t plead for this with anyone else. Or that I never wanted it this bad with someone before.

“No one,” I confess.

I see the quick jerk of her head. I hear her mutter something that sounds an awful lot like “good.” Her voice sounding slightly pacified.

Spinning around, with a steadiness in her eyes, she holds her hands out in front of her. “Well, you did it. Congratulations.”

My eyebrows draw together. I search her face for understanding.

She sighs, staring me down. “I love you, you fucking perfect bastard. You got what you wanted. I’m completely and absolutely in love with you and your little ‘yeahs.’ They kill me. And for the record, I’m pretty sure I loved you that night in the tent so,” she waves her hand. “Opportunity missed. You totally could’ve fucked a cheerleader.”

I feel my lips part, a rush of fervency pitting in the center of my chest and blooming there.

She loves me. My Brooke . . . fuck. Finally.

With a quick exhale, she runs her hands down her face, pressing her palms flat to her cheeks. “Holy shit. Wow. That’s what it feels like to say it.” She blinks, her teeth gnawing at her lip. “Wow,” she whispers.

I cross the room in quick strides, grabbing her face and kissing her harshly. She moans and melts in my arms. The bitter scratch of tequila bursts in my mouth.

“You make me feel crazy,” I tell her.

“Good. You fucking deserve it. I only wanted sex, and now I’m completely screwed. I have no idea what to do with this, you jerk.”

I laugh, taking her mouth again. My tongue moving against hers. My hands roaming down her back and cupping her arse.

“Should I have told you my intentions? Would you have agreed to this if I did?”

“I don’t know.”

We stare at each other. Brooke frowns, her hand flattening to my chest.

“I love how this happened, Mason. How you got me here. I wouldn’t want to change any of that. You made falling in love with you so easy, I didn’t realize I was doing it until it was too late. I think if you would’ve given me a heads up about it happening I might’ve told you to fuck off, and I don’t want to imagine not knowing you. You’re my best friend.” She stands on her toes and kisses me. “And I’m yours, I think.”

Sighing, I crush her against me. “You’re mine. Fuck, you’re everything, Brooke. Tell me again.”

“I love you.” She squeezes my neck, sucking on my lip. “I love you, and I’m not scared. I’m not. Just don’t let go of me, okay?”

“Never.” I bend down and kiss her neck. Her hands curl around my waist. “Touch me.”

“Where?”

“You know where.”

She laughs softly. “Mm. Okay, um, can you . . .” With shaky hands, she tugs at my shorts. Her breath bursts against my hair. “Pull it out?”

I turn us, backing her up until her legs hit the bed, my mouth still savoring her skin.

She sits on the edge and peels off her shirt, keeping her eyes lowered and focused on my hands as I jerk down my shorts and boxers, kicking them off along with my runners and pulling off my socks. I grip the base of my thick length, stroking it a little, watching the lust bloom in her eyes and her pink tongue dart out to wet her lips.

I stare at her full tits, pressed high together in a black lace bra. Her

nipples hard against the sheer, see-through material.

“Do you want to see them?” she asks, unhooking the clasp around her back. “I think you do.” She slides the straps down her arms and drops the lingerie onto the floor near my feet.

“Fuck.” I step forward, reaching for her hand. “Touch me.”

She wraps around my cock and tests her grip, giving slow, gentle tugs, her usual urgency for my body vanished. She looks timid.

I moan. My legs feel ready to give out. Just her hand and I’m struggling not to break.

“Mason,” she whispers, lifting her gaze as she swipes her thumb across the head. “How bad have you wanted this? Show me.” She leans forward and licks a drop of precum off my dick, watching me.

Owning me.

Jesus fucking Christ.

How bad have I wanted this? She’s about to find out.

“Baby. Come here.” I grab her legs and hoist her up the bed until she’s stretched out on her back. Topless. Her tits bouncing lusciously with the jerky movement. Her dark hair fanning against my sheets just like I’ve imagined countless times.

Beautiful.

I pull off her shoes and socks, kissing the tops of her feet. I tug off her jeans and panties. I look down at her, my girl, naked, stretched out on my bed. Giving me this.

Giving.

Me.

This.

Fuck me. Moving here was the best damn decision of my life.

With my hands spread on her inner thighs, I push her legs open and lay my body between them, my cock rubbing against the mattress. I finger her slit.

“I want you so fucking bad. This. I want to taste this before I fuck it.”

“Oh, God,” she moans as I slip a digit inside, my lips toying with her clit. I suck it into my mouth and she shudders.

“I’ve dreamed of you in this bed, just like this, moaning for me while I lick you here.” I palm her arse and move my face between her legs, roughly consuming her. Getting her in my throat the way I like.

She arches off the bed, fingers clawing at the sheet and tugging my hair, mumbling incoherent words between obscenities.

I suck on her lips, dragging my tongue between them. Up and down, slowly savoring her.

“So wet. You’re dripping down my chin, Brooke. Do you like that?”

“Shit.” She digs her heels into my back. With heavy-lidded eyes, she watches me rub my nose against her clit and fuck her with my tongue. “Mason, please.”

“I want you,” I tell her.

She swallows, nodding. “Yes.”

“I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anything. Anyone.” I slip three fingers inside her, pumping them in and out.

Fast. Faster.

She writhes against the sheet and grinds on my palm, moaning and softly begging.

“Please, yes, yes. Oh, fuck. Oh, God, fuck.”

“I ache for you. My body. My soul,” I whisper against her clit, licking it gently. “I lie here every night thinking about you. Getting off to this. Your body. This sweet little cunt. Fuck, Brooke. You have no idea how badly I want this. I can’t put it into words.”

She strokes my cheek, gasping. “Show me. Make me,” her eyes roll shut. “Come. Make me come.”

“Like this?” I ask, not waiting for an answer as I move my fingers in and out of her, sucking on her smooth pebble of nerves with earnest until my

cheeks hollow and she cries out above me, whimpering a mix of my name and more and fuck, over and over and over.

When her climax subsides and her limbs shiver in aftermath, she wraps her legs around my back, drawing me closer and higher up her body, her hands gripping my shoulders, my back.

I kiss her soft stomach and the curve of her ribs. I lick her nipple, pulling it into my mouth as she watches me with those pouty lips parted.

“Ready?” I ask her, pushing off the bed and digging in my night table drawer for a condom.

Brooke sits up. “Wait. Wait, I,” she stammers, pressing her fingers to her mouth. Her eyes dancing between the drawer and my face. “Um. I’ve never . . .”

“Fucked?” I smile roguishly. “Baby, I had no idea. I’ll be sweet, yeah?”

She giggles as she lowers her hand, drawing her knees up. “Shut up. No, I’ve never done it without a condom. Ever. I’ve never really wanted to.” She looks down at my cock, her gaze burning. “I want to now.”

“Yeah?”

She nods, sucking on her lip. “I have an IUD.”

I slam the drawer closed. Brooke startles, a laugh bursting from her throat.

I can’t deny I want her this way. That I’ve always wanted Brooke this way. There’s something about this woman that turns me into a possessive Neanderthal. I’m greedy with her. Selfish. I want my cum inside her, filling her, dripping down her leg. I want her to feel it and to tell me how it feels. And I sure as fuck want to be the only man who’s had her like this.

Only me.

Condoms? No, we won’t be needing condoms. I’ll be tossing that pack into the rubbish.

Crawling back onto the bed, I drag my cock up her leg, the tip oozing, smearing over her skin. I kiss between her tits, sucking and licking as I settle

my hips against hers.

“Mason.” Brooke spreads her legs wider, lifting up, bracing her weight on her hands and looking down between us. “I want to watch you.”

I follow her gaze, understanding.

She wants to watch me enter her. Fuck, yes. She can watch me all night.

“Baby.”

I grip my cock with one hand, her hip with the other. I slide the tip in slowly, so fucking slowly, stretching her, watching the pleasure build in her eyes, her mouth falling open with a gasp and her teeth biting her lip through a moan.

An overwhelming, earth-shattering heat surges in my veins, burning up my spine. My thighs tense as I lean forward and push in.

Further.

Further.

That’s it . . .

“So good,” I tell her, releasing my cock and grabbing her neck, both of us watching as the last inch disappears inside her tight, slick pussy.

So tight. So fucking slick.

Sweet fucking Christ.

“Mason,” she groans, shifting her hips against me. “Oh, God, please.”

I tilt her head and take her mouth. She falls back. I go with her, laying my body over hers and pumping my hips.

“Fuck, Brooke.”

I kiss her hard, sliding my tongue into her mouth, her soft body melting into me and pressing closer.

“I want to make you feel so good. So fucking good.” I lean back, my forearms taking my weight as I watch her below me.

Her sweet lips parting with shallow breaths. Her cheeks deep in color. And those gorgeous eyes round and realizing exactly what this is.

Us, making love. This isn’t just fucking.

I thrust forward in a slow, heavy rhythm, my gaze never leaving hers. Desperate noises escaping me. Tight, hoarse moans.

I sound frantic to come. I feel frantic to love her, to keep her, to make this last.

To go even slower, show restraint, my thighs burning as I stay unhurried. Brooke's legs shaking against my hips. Slower . . . *good, God, fuck. I can't. I can't . . .*

My hips begin bucking wildly, the smooth walls of her sex gripping me, tightening around me the harder I fuck.

"Brooke, baby . . ."

Her hand touches my ribs. Her other rubbing along my back. My sides. Her nails clawing at my arse.

I drop my lips to her ear and tell her how amazing she feels. How perfect she is for me. How close I am to coming, and how badly I want to fill her.

"Only you," I whisper, and she sighs, wrapping her hands around my neck and pressing her bare chest to mine.

She sucks on my jaw, my neck, dragging her teeth along my skin and biting my flesh.

I run my hands up her legs to her hips, pinning her to the bed when she begs me to make her come, to fuck her harder.

To fuck her like I love her.

I pound into her relentlessly, swearing and moaning, telling her to come on my cock and to take it. Me. Everything. That every part of me is hers and it has been since that first day on the footpath.

"God, you owned me. Did you know?" I ask her, laughing through a growl when she's too delirious with pleasure to answer me. Her eyes closed and her hands seeking anchor.

I palm her tits, squeezing and sucking, pinching her nipples. Biting down when she tugs ruthlessly on my hair.

"Oh, my God," she pants as she pulls her legs higher, gasping when I

reach between us and rub her clit with my thumb.

“Mason,” she moans, clawing at my skin. “Come in me. Come.”

I surge forward, grabbing her face and dropping my head to look at her.

Her pussy clenches around me, and with her lips pressing against mine she falls, gasping and swearing into my mouth.

I fuck her through her climax, my limbs trembling. She tells me she needs to feel me come, “I need it. Please,” and hearing that I break, exploding seconds after she does, a strangled cry catching in my throat.

“Brooke,” I moan, collapsing on top of her, my face rubbing against her neck where I kiss her sweet skin. “Jesus Christ. You’ve wrecked me.”

She giggles, stroking my hair. “You never said it.”

My brow furrows. Curious, I lean back, pushing her sweaty hair off her face.

“I love you.” She smiles lazily, her hands rubbing my shoulders. “I thought for sure you were going to tell me at some point during all that. In the throes of passion. At least while you were coming.”

I lower my gaze to her chin, searching my memory and reeling from the best sex of my life.

“Are you sure I didn’t say it? I feel like I was screaming it just now.”

Her lips pinch tightly together, fighting a grin. She shakes her head. “You didn’t say it.”

“Well.” I slowly kiss her mouth. “Do you know?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“I’ve known for a while now. You may have loved me in that tent, but I think I loved you before that.”

I sit back and slide my cock out of her. Cum oozes from her body, down her slit. My cum. Her thighs glisten with a mixture of our desire.

“Fucking hell,” I groan, rubbing at my mouth, staring. I can’t look away from this.

Something inside of me begins to ache. A strange, foreign need to lay

claim to someone, to have a right to them, but not just someone. Brooke. Only Brooke. This sweet, beautiful thing staring up at me. Sexy as shit and unquestionably the most challenging and defiant woman I've ever met.

"You're looking at me like you love me," she whispers, smiling, her eyes fluttering as she stretches her arms above her.

"Yeah."

Grabbing her thighs, I wrench her closer, smiling at her precious squeal. I push my hips between her legs again, leaning over her, filling her with one hard thrust.

She gasps, arching off the bed. "God, Mason."

"Let me show you how I love you, sweet girl."

Nodding, she grabs my face and kisses me hard and fast, soft and slow.

Just like how I take her.



BROOKE

I open my eyes as I stretch, searching the room for a clock.

I don't remember falling asleep, and I have no idea how long I've been out, but I know it's late. The curtains amplifying the darkness behind them, casting a heavy shadow over one side of the room. The other lightly illuminated by a lamp on the dresser.

I look over at Mason sleeping beside me.

He's lying on his back, one arm tucked beneath the pillow under his head, the other relaxed across his stomach, his face turned away. My eyes linger on the lines of his body. The slope of his neck. The smooth swell of his muscles, his trim waist, and the bulge of his cock against the satin sheet.

Mercy. I'm sharing the bed with an Adonis. Again . . . how is this guy even real?

My thighs pinch together. An ache gathers there. It's nearly painful. I can't remember how many times Mason and I have fucked tonight. I lost count after he bent me over the kitchen table and spanked me until I came.

My cheeks burn as the memory of his desperate voice fills my ears.

"Oh . . . fuck, Brooke. Fuck! Your pussy . . . ah, God. I need to come. Baby . . . Baby."

A shiver runs down my spine.

Damn, I love him like that. Wild for me. Fucking like a man depraved, and still giving me those tender moments in between where he kisses my cheek and whispers across my skin.

“You are loved, Brooke Wicks. My adoration for you is endless.”

I smile against my fingers.

I want to absorb him, every flavor of Mason. His sweetness and his ferocity. The gentle planes and sharp, savage angles of his passion.

Why did it take me this long to choose him? To be okay with this? I’m so happy I could burst.

Sliding out from underneath the covers, I pad around to the other side of the bed and grab my jeans, tugging my phone out of my pocket. I note the time.

Eleven-forty-two P.M. .

I flatten a hand to my stomach. Geez. No wonder I’m starving. I skipped dinner. The only thing I’ve had since lunch is a banana fosters cupcake and some tequila.

Grabbing Mason’s shirt off the chair on my way across the room, I slide my arms through the soft cotton and slip it over my head. The hem reaches my thighs. It smells like detergent and a faint hint of cologne. I bury my face in the collar.

Yummy.

I step into the bathroom to relieve myself and wash my hands. I gape at my reflection.

Jesus. Did we fuck in the middle of a tornado?

My hair looks atrocious. Matted and sticking out every which way. Some pieces still damp with sweat.

I tame the long strands with my fingers and gather them over one shoulder into a braid, securing the end with the elastic band around my wrist. I rub underneath my eyes to remove the smudges of makeup and pinch my cheeks.

There. Major improvement.

When I open the door and step back out into the loft, Mason is awake, lying on his side facing the kitchen, his weight braced on his elbow and the sheet gathered around his waist.

A plate of food sits on the bed in front of him. Grapes and cheese, by the looks of it. Maybe some raisins.

He pops a piece of fruit into his mouth and sucks on his finger. “Nice shirt,” he says, smiling.

I tug on the hem. “Yeah, you know. If we’re doing this whole boyfriend/girlfriend thing, I’m allowed full access to your wardrobe. Don’t be surprised if several comfortable pieces go missing.”

“If?” He tilts his head. “You love me, and there’s still an if?”

The peaceful look on his face doesn’t mask the restlessness in his voice. The tension crusting his words. I hear it. He worries I’m still unsure, or maybe that I’m slowly backing off and changing my mind, but I’m not.

And I hate that his brain automatically goes to that place.

“No. No if’s. We’re doing it.” I move across the room and climb onto the bed, kneeling beside him. I snag a grape off the plate. “Don’t tell Joey because he’ll never shut up about it, but he was right.” I shrug. “I want to keep you.”

The biggest, most contented smile pulls across Mason’s face.

I laugh around my grape.

God, he’s adorable.

“Say that again.”

I lean forward and kiss his mouth. “I want to keep you.”

“Mm.”

“And I really, *really* want to suck your massive cock.”

He moans, sliding his hand to my neck. “*Jesus*. You just got me real fucking hard, Brooke.”

“But, I want to eat first.”

I jerk away, smiling at the look on Mason's face. The heaviness in his eyes and the slack in his jaw.

I pop a cube of cheese into my mouth and gesture at his crotch. "Let me know if things become painful for you. I can eat fast when motivated."

He presses a hand against the sheet. "Fuck. My balls. What's wrong with you?"

Throwing my head back, I laugh and then squeak when he squeezes my side. "Oh, my God. Do you hate me? I'm sorry. I'm just so hungry right now. Here." I feed him a grape. He begrudgingly takes it. "Eat up. Your balls will be fine."

Grabbing my wrist, he presses a kiss to my palm. "Let's hope."

We eat the food he's set out for us, pulling another bunch of grapes out of the fridge when we run out. Mason laughs when I make a pile for myself on the plate, stealing all the cheddar cubes and leaving him with the remaining raisins.

"I don't eat those," I tell him. "Unless they're covered in chocolate."

"Kind of defeats the purpose, doesn't it?"

I struggle to contain my amusement. "Oh, God. You were that kid at the birthday parties who hovered over the veggie tray, weren't you? Trying to get your little mates to eat carrots instead of chips and cookies. Bless you. Were you bullied, sweet boy?"

He pulls me against him and tickles my side until my eyes water and I cry out for mercy. He kisses my cheek and steals a cheese cube, grinning.

I grab a water for us to share and return to the bed.

"So, that class tonight. Have you taught something like that before?" I ask, washing down my grape.

"No, but I've wanted to. My sister, Ellie has Down Syndrome. She's the reason I got started in yoga."

I lower the bottle to my lap, searching my memory for the information Mason's already given me on his family.

Seven sisters. Mason being the baby of the group.

I know he's mentioned Ellie. I remember her name, but he's never told me much more than the fact that he's close with her.

"I've never met anyone . . ." I pause, considering my wording. "With that before. How is she?" I shake my head, my hand covering half my face.

Christ, she isn't sick, Brooke.

"Sorry. I don't know a lot about that."

His face softens with a gentle smile. "She's good. Really good. She lives close to my parents' house with a few roommates. That way she has her support, but also her independence. It's good for her. My mum drove her a little nuts, I think."

"Mums can do that," I chuckle, offering him the water after he sets the empty plate on the night stand. "How did Ellie get you interested in yoga? Does she do it too?"

"She did. Once." He takes a sip of the water, making a face. "Not really her thing. But, when she wanted to try it out, I gave her a lift to the studio. She didn't have her license."

"That was your first class too?"

"I just watched. It was for people with disabilities. But I signed up for my own class the next day."

"How old were you?"

"Eighteen."

I smile, thinking about a younger version of the man I'm staring at. A sweet boy helping his sister, and in the process, discovering a passion that would lead to a career.

I imagine Mason's face as he takes on the role of spectator, watching a class like the ones he teaches from a perch on the wall. His blue eyes magnetic, engrossed in the movement and discipline of the instructor. Soaking it all in and connecting with it.

"I think it's really great, what you did. Amazing, actually." I kiss his jaw

and fall back onto the bed, my head hitting the pillow. “Does Ellie like cupcakes? Or does she eat like a caveman too?”

He smiles, capping the water and tossing it. “She loves cupcakes.”

“Mm.”

Maybe if we ever visit Australia together, I can make her some.

“So, speaking of sisters, Juls is having me over for dinner Friday night. Do you want to go with me? It could be our official coming out as a couple debut, or whatever. If you’re busy, that’s okay. It isn’t a big deal or anything. It’s just dinner.”

I stare at my fingers as they twist together on my stomach.

Way to play down your looming sadness, Brooke.

Geez. Why do I already feel disappointed? As if the possibility of Mason having other plans that don’t involve me is too depressing to even consider. We don’t have to spend every weekend together. He’s allowed to have a life without me. Visit his own family without me . . .

Or, he could opt for *not* having a life without me and that would be terrific too.

Mason rolls over, kneeling between my legs, his large hands pushing up my shirt, *his* shirt, and stroking my torso.

“Brooke, do you have any idea how desperate I was to know you? To spend time together when this all started between us? That hasn’t changed. I’m quite obsessed with you, if you haven’t noticed. I want anything you’re willing to give me, especially if it’s something you’re asking me to take.” He squeezes my hips and rubs my thighs. He bends to kiss my stomach. “I’m yours. My body, my soul. All of my time is yours.”

I slide my fingers through his hair. “Okay,” I quietly reply, my heart beating so loudly I barely hear my own voice.

“And anything involving you is a big deal to me.” He looks up, a playful smirk lifting one side of his mouth. “You were worried I’d be busy?”

I shake my head, fighting a smile. “Maybe.”

“You think too much, Brooke. You make yourself nervous and unsure when you don’t need to be.” He kisses my rib. “Ask me again while you’re sucking my dick.”

“What?” I laugh, watching him push back onto his knees. *Ask him again?* “You already said yes.”

“Pretend I didn’t. You won’t be so worried about my answer if you’re focused on making me come.” He fists his shaft. “Plus, I just really want you to suck me. Ever since you put that image in my head about fucking your pretty little mouth.” He moans, pulling on his cock. His eyes burning down my body and lingering between my legs. “Come on, sweetheart. Before I flip you over and take you on your knees.”

I inhale sharply.

Shit. To stall or to act. Suck him off or be fucked.

Both options seem equally compelling, but the longer I stare at Mason stroking his cock, the easier my decision becomes.

“Lie down. You’re going to want to be on your back for this.” I sit up and strip off my shirt, tossing it off the bed.

Mason slides his hand possessively over my breasts as we switch positions. He settles on his back, feet crossed at the ankles, his arms tucked beneath his head, and his cock lying heavy on his stomach.

I fist him at the base, spreading his legs wide with my knees. “How do you like it? Rough? A little teeth? Do you like your balls played with?” I take him into my mouth as much as I can. I cup his balls and fondle them.

If he doesn’t like it, he will by the end of this.

“Fuck,” Mason hisses through a groan, his body tensing.

He runs his hand along my cheek, pressing his thumb to the corner of my mouth and sliding it inside, feeling his cock against my tongue. His lips part.

I lick the underside of his shaft, swirling my tongue around the head and wetting him fully. I slide my hand up and down his glistening cock as I lap at his balls.

“Ah . . . God, Brooke.”

“Mm,” I moan, taking him into my mouth again and sucking vigorously.

He hits the back of my throat, again and again, cursing with his hands fisting my hair. Tugging gently.

I suckle at the head and smear a drop of precum on my lips, slowly licking it off.

His thighs jump. His chest rising and falling swiftly. I look up into his eyes and gasp around his length. He looks wracked. His eyes are electric, round with shock. The blue irises swelling and blackening with desire.

He told me his body was mine and this is what he meant. I own him right now. He isn't fighting his pleasure. He isn't holding back his reaction to me and what I'm doing to him. I ask Mason what he likes and he curses while staring, mesmerized, marveling in the wet seal of my flesh with his.

He's giving me this. Trusting me with this part of him. With every part. Knowing I'll care and adore him in the way he deserves, or at least hoping I will.

I will. God, I will. I want him overwhelmed. As far gone as he makes me feel. And I won't stop until I get him there.

I gently press my teeth into his length. He thrusts off the mattress.

“Fuck!”

“You like that?” I teasingly ask, wrapping my hand around his cock and slapping it against my tongue. “What about this?” I lean over his body and rub his slick head over my nipple. The hardened peak shimmers with saliva. The soft skin between my legs grows wet. My breath catches. “Oh, God, Mason, do you like this?”

He fists my hair and growls. “Baby.”

“It's okay. It's okay,” I whisper, kissing his shaft. Licking it. “You want to come? I know you do. Let's see what we can do about that.”

I drop back down and swallow him, raking my nails up his stomach to his ribs while I bob my head. I work fast, then faster, sucking hard and taking

him deep. His thick member swells in my mouth, hitting the back of my throat. I gasp when he tugs my hair and smile when his hips begin jerking in tiny movements off the bed.

“Brooke,” he groans, thrusting more boldly now. His cock fucking my mouth in earnest.

I reach between my legs and brush my clit. My quiet moans don’t go undetected.

“Fuck, yeah. God, do it, baby. Look at you. Rub that pretty little pussy for me.”

Mason’s filthy mouth, the throbbing of his cock against my tongue, and the hoarse way he says my name gets me there in record time. My desire drips down my hand. Releasing his shaft with my other, I stroke over his balls and press my finger against the smooth skin just below.

He inhales a sharp breath. His body arches off the bed. “Ah, God . . . fuck! Fuck, I’m gonna come. Baby, I’m gonna come.”

I move my fingers against my clit until my legs shake and my climax burns up my spine. Mason pulls my hair and floods my mouth. I swallow between moans and whimpers, sucking on his head.

Holy fuck, I think.

“Holy fuck,” he says, breathing heavily and rubbing my scalp.

With a heavy sigh, I collapse on top of him, my head lifeless on his thigh and my body half sprawled across his legs and half tangled up in the sheets. I close my eyes, sighing when he wraps me up and pulls me to his chest, cradling me there.

“Filthy girl,” he whispers, pressing gentle kisses to my mouth and cheek. “My filthy fucking girl. I’ll go to dinner with you. I’ll go anywhere, yeah? You don’t need to ask.”

I squeeze his neck. I bury my face there and smile. “It’s ‘cause I can suck a good dick, right?”

Laughing, he pulls the covers over us, tucking me close.

Mason never argues my lighthearted reasoning. Or maybe he does and I'm too drunk with happiness to hear him.

So drunk I feel dizzy, spinning more and more out of control. Falling further into this blind madness where, as long as he holds on to me, I feel safe and steady.



Our usual coffee time together is skipped the next morning. For good reason.

Every time I attempt to get dressed, Mason bites my neck or pinches my nipple, stripping off my clothes and entering me in one hard thrust. We fuck on the bed, in the chair, against the wall by the window. Minutes turn into an hour, and after he leisurely fingers me against the shower wall and comes on my ass, we stumble out together and frantically scramble into our clothes.

Him, loose shorts and a fitted gray tee.

Me, my jeans and blouse from yesterday.

Nothing screams wild sex all night like the repeat of an outfit. At least I wear it well.

After kissing Mason goodbye, and then *really* kissing Mason goodbye, with frantic mouths and greedy hands pulling at clothes, again, I cross the street and enter the bakery just before it's time to open.

Joey looks up from behind the display case. He grins at my attire. "Ah, you know, I miss the days of a good hoe stroll. I used to rock those back in my early twenties."

I roll my eyes and move through the shop. "Did you deliver?"

He holds up a pink cinch bag.

Sweet. My clothes.

"Thank you so, sooo much. You brought me panties, right?"

Joey hands me the bag. He lifts an eyebrow. "Yes, I brought you panties. There are jeans in there. Freeballin' and denim doesn't mix. Trust me."

"Tell me about it."

I shift on my feet, wincing at the odd sensation between my legs. Joey

laughs quietly beside me.

“I’m going to go upstairs and change. Where’s Dylan?”

I roam into the kitchen and look around the room, expecting to see her sitting at the worktop since she’s not up front like she usually is in the mornings. I haven’t seen her since before she left for her doctor’s appointment yesterday.

Joey trails behind me. “She’s upstairs. She’s been waiting on you to get here so she can talk to us.”

I glance back over my shoulder. “What? Why?”

“Fuck if I know. I tried getting it out of her when I got here this morning but she wouldn’t open the door for me up there. Can you believe that? She sent me a text saying she’s only saying this once, whatever it is. Shouty capping me and shit. Girl, please. I don’t need that kind of attitude before seven A.M..”

I climb the stairs with Joey following, my mind trying to come up with a scenario that would explain Dylan not being present in her bakery.

I remember when she was pregnant with Drew and it was nearing her delivery date. She was exhausted all the time, mean to everyone, walking around here like a slap-happy zombie. Joey and I convinced her to sleep in a couple days a week and leave the morning baking to me. I thought she was going to fire us both for that suggestion, but she must’ve been past her breaking point and too tired to argue. With little convincing needed, she agreed and soon became much more pleasurable. Everyone was happy.

Reese especially. Lord, was she cranky around him. Threatening his manhood with notes she made Pete deliver. Swearing up and down that she was not having any more kids.

And now look at her. Kid number three on the way. Reese pushing for more. They’re both gluttons for punishment, in my opinion.

I knock on the door at the top of the stairs. Dylan mumbles something from behind it, and I twist the knob, swinging it open and stepping into her

loft.

“Oh, *now* it’s unlocked. I see how it is,” Joey spits behind me.

Dylan lifts her head from the magazine she’s reading.

She’s in what looks to be one of Reeses’ shirts, a baggy University of Chicago tee that stretches across her belly. Her back is against the headboard of her bed. Her feet still under the covers.

Huh. Maybe she is opting for lazy mornings around here. But shouldn’t she be asleep?

“What’s up, cupcake?” Joey leans his back against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest. He jerks his head. “Why aren’t you dressed?”

“What’s the point?” Dylan quietly asks, pinching her eyes shut through a slow shake of her head. She looks between the two of us. “I’ve been ordered to stay off my feet. Permanently.”

“What?” I move closer to the bed. My bag of clothes hits the floor. “What do you mean, stay off your feet permanently? You aren’t allowed to come downstairs at all?”

“Seriously?” Joey questions behind me.

How can she stay off her feet? She runs the bakery. She’s Dylan, of Dylan’s Sweet Tooth. She does all the wedding cakes and every other awesome thing we produce.

Oh, no. This won’t work at all.

“Nope. I’m stuck in this bed for the next two weeks. I can only get up to pee.” She tosses the magazine beside her, dropping her head back with an annoyed grunt. “The doctor is concerned about my blood pressure spiking the way it is. He said Blake is fine, but apparently keeping to a stool most of the day isn’t doing enough. I have to be completely off my feet. That means no baking, no coffee time with you two, nothing. I’m going to go crazy up here.”

“Aw, cupcake. It won’t be so bad.” Joey walks over and sits on the edge of the bed. He takes Dylan’s hand. “It’s only for two weeks. The shop will be fine. You know Brooke and I can handle things. And I’ll load you up with

gossip magazines and your favorite snacks. Don't worry."

Dylan weakly smiles. "I know you two can handle everything. I'm not worried about that. I'll just be bored up here and missing out on all the fun."

Handle everything? *Everything*? Is she insane?

I move to the foot of the bed so they both can see me. My hands squeezing my hips. My face pinched in disbelief.

"Excuse me? You're not worried? Why not? You should be worried. What about the wedding cake scheduled for next weekend? Now that poor bride is going to have to find someone to fit her in on short notice. That's not happening. The only person around here who does that is you. She won't have a cake. And you know she'll tell all her friends about the bakery that canceled on her last minute. We'll be ruined."

Dylan looks from Joey, back to me. Not a trace of anxiety in her casually amused smile. "She *could* have a cake."

Joey nods in agreement.

What? WHAT?

My mouth falls open. "Oh, really? Is Ryan making it? Did you pass all your stellar decorating genes down to her?"

"Brooke, come on." Joey angles his body so he's facing me. "You're fabulous at baking. You can totally knock out a wedding cake by yourself. There's no need to cancel."

"Are you both out of your mind?"

They must be. There is no way I can tackle a wedding cake by myself. Nor do I want to. I can't imagine disappointing someone on the day most girls dream about. I'll be heartbroken if they hate it.

"You make cakes all the time." Joey waves his hand. "This one will just be taller and with more flare. I don't see the big deal."

I glare at him. His blue eyes widen.

"I make birthday cakes, Joey. Farm animal ones, with fat ass pigs and cows with cute little faces. I don't do shit like you'd see on The Knot. I can't

do spun sugar and delicate piping. Christ, all the edible flowers I've ever made, Dylan has gone behind me and redone."

"That's only because you get frustrated with yourself and eat them."

I turn my attention to Dylan after she speaks. My teeth clenching. "Because they look horrible!"

"You are seriously overreacting." Joey stands from the bed and winks at Dylan. "I'm heading downstairs to open. If you need anything, text me. Don't get up." He motions in my direction. "And calm her ass down please. She played the crazy card yesterday and cussed out a bunch of kids at Grinders. We don't need a replay of that."

I scoff and stare at the wall. "I wasn't directing it at them."

I would never do that. Not unless they were really pissing me the fuck off.

The loft door squeaks open, followed by the sound of Joey's heavy footsteps trailing off.

With a closed fist, I press against my forehead, my eyes shutting as I remember how amazing this morning started out. Stress-free and filled with mine and Mason's hungry moans.

Now I'm so anxious I'm ready to chew my fingers off. Awesome.

"All right. If you don't think you can do it, then I guess we'll have to cancel," Dylan says, staring at me with her eyebrow raised.

My stomach tightens and drops. I lower my arm to my side but keep the fist.

"But, I personally don't think we need to. I know you can do this, Brooke. I've seen some of the cakes you've created, and your detail work is beautiful. Joey's right. You are a fabulous baker. You're just nervous."

"I'm more than nervous."

Tasting bile in my throat, I begin pacing the room, feeling Dylan's eyes on me as I wring my hands out.

I'm a fabulous baker. My detail work is beautiful. I can do this.

I swallow thickly and repeat her words in my head like a mantra, hoping for confidence but only butting against my own self-doubt.

This is insane. How can this be happening? How can either one of them think I can handle this? I'm not Dylan.

I am not Dylan.

I think about the bride on her big day, without a cake. I imagine her disappointment and her anger, her sadness and the memories I'm keeping from her with just a simple phone call and some regretful words.

"We're so sorry," I will say. "We just can't do it. Medical reasons. It's just not possible. Please don't hate me."

She'll cry into my ear or curse me out. Maybe both. Probably both.

I continue to pace, my eyes losing focus somewhere on the floor passing under my feet. "God, I can't cancel on her. I can't. It's her wedding day. I would feel *awful*." I rub at my chest, pressing my palm against my heart. It flutters wildly.

"Brooke."

I can't cancel. There it is. My decision made, and one that comes with a mound of stress, knowing how easily I can still end up ruining this woman's wedding day by screwing up this cake. But canceling? I just . . . I can't do that. I will never do that to someone.

Maybe she'll be so deliriously happy on Saturday, she won't notice my blunder in the corner of the reception hall?

I bite at my thumb nail and squint at the floor, the wall. I force air into my lungs and will my pulse to slow.

If I have a stroke right now and Dylan has to go against doctors' orders and get up to call an ambulance, everyone will hate me for dying.

"Brooke."

Turning my head at the sharp sound of my name, I focus on Dylan's face and halt near the window. I lower my hand. "Huh?"

She smiles hesitantly. "Why don't you do a practice run this weekend?"

The whole cake. That way if you have any issues or difficulty with any of it, you can figure it out ahead of time. Plus, I'll be right upstairs if you have questions." She rolls her eyes, sighing. "You know I'm not going anywhere."

My spine straightens. A practice run?

I can work on the cake until I get it right. Until I get it perfect.

"Really? Dylan, really?" I move around the bed and stop to stand beside it. "You don't mind if I stay and work on it after hours? And Sunday?"

"Not if you clean up your mess."

"I will!" My own excitement startles me. I place a hand to my mouth, a rush of hot breath bursting against my fingers. "Sorry," I murmur, blushing as I spin to grab my bag. "Okay. Yeah . . . okay, I'm just going to go get changed now."

Dylan laughs quietly, reaching for her magazine again.

After dressing quickly in my dark washed jeans and a print v-neck top, I pull my hair back into a haphazard bun and dart down the stairs, stowing my bag away before rushing into the main bakery up front.

I have so much to do now that Dylan is bedridden. But first things first.

Joey eyes me curiously while he helps a customer, nudging against my hip as I reach for the design binder on the shelf.

"What are you doing?" he murmurs.

I open the binder on top of the display case and flip to the special orders paperwork we keep in the back flap.

"I want to see what I'm up against with this cake. I'm going to do it. Dylan suggested I practice it this weekend. I want to be prepared."

"Wow, really? You're actually going to make a wedding cake by yourself? You?"

I glance up when I hear the disbelief in his voice, then fake glare at him for obviously playing it up. His spirited smile beams at me.

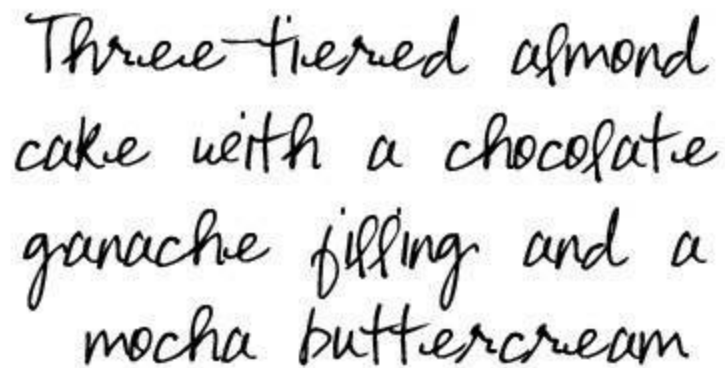
"I have all the faith in you. Rock it out, girl."

Taking the money being held out for him, Joey hands the woman behind

the counter her purchase while I search for the order form for next weekend. The woman takes her change and exits the shop.

“Here.” I slide out the form after matching up the dates and lay it out flat on the open page of the binder. I drag my finger down the thin paper to the bottom where the description is scrolled in Dylan’s handwriting.

Three-tiered almond cake with a chocolate ganache filling and a mocha buttercream.



Three-tiered almond
cake with a chocolate
ganache filling and a
mocha buttercream

*Okay. I can do that. Three-tiered is better than five-tiered. See, Brooke?
No big deal. You got this.*

I continue reading the notes on the design.

Sugared gardenias cascading
down the cake and adorning the
top. Tons of gardenias!
Bride isn't using a cake topper.
Wants the flowers to really
stand out. Make them epic.

Edible flowers. Tons of them . . .

Make them epic?

Oh, God, no. No. No. No. No.

I drop my head into my hands, groaning. “Fuuuck. Why couldn’t she have wanted farm animals or something? I hear country weddings are all the rage. Shit!”

“Don’t believe what you hear. I went to a country themed wedding one time. We all sat on hay bales during the ceremony and drank out of mason jars. Talk about slumming it. I was itchy the entire night.” Joey’s body presses into mine as he leans closer. “Oh . . . gardenias,” he quietly observes. “Dylan’s really good at those.”

I slowly look up at him, my scowl unforgiving.

Flinching, he steps back. “You know, I think I’m going to go get my coffee now.”

“Good idea.”

As Joey hurries out of the bakery, I lean against the case and rub my temple, digging my fingers into my flesh. I stare down at the order form and fight off tears when my eyes begin to sting.

This is it. This is how I’m going to get fired. Taken out by the mother of

all baked goods.

Tugging out my phone, I sniffle and type out a message as tears dampen my cheeks.

Me: Hi.

God, I need him to talk me through this. To tell me I'm not going to fail. His reply comes within seconds.

Mason: Hello, gorgeous. How are you?

Me: Freaking out.

My stomach coils and my hands shake. I wipe at my face and wait for his response, staring at the screen, waiting for those little bubbles to appear.

I wait.

And wait.

They never come.

The bakery door chimes open. I look up, expecting to see a customer, or Joey returning with his coffee and hopefully something alcoholic for me.

I've never needed a drink so badly before in my life. Screw unprofessionalism. If I'm getting canned, I might as well spend my last week of employment drunk and oblivious.

To my surprise, Mason steps inside the shop, looking more keyed up than I feel, if that's even possible.

His fretful gaze slams on me as he clutches his cell in his one hand and rakes through his sweaty hair with the other. The muscles in his arm swelling and glistening. His chest heaving.

"Brooke," he rasps, some emotion tightening his voice.

I study him. The apprehension in his eyes. His distraught demeanor. It confuses me. I don't understand it.

Until I glance down at the phone in my hand and read the last message I sent.



MASON

She's crying. *Fuck*. She's freaking out, and she's crying. *Fuck!*

What happened? It's barely been an hour. What the fuck? Did someone say something to her again? Get inside her head and cause Brooke to over think this and the way it makes her feel? The way *I* make her feel. She was fine.

No. Fine is cheapening it. She was much more than fine. So much more.

She was fucking perfect with me this morning. Unreserved. Laughing and completely open. Free with her affection. Then she comes here and reverts back to those old familiar habits. Drawing in on herself and slipping behind that shield of uncertainty.

Baby . . . God, don't do this.

What do I need to do? Pull each one of her friends and family aside and tell them to back the hell off? Fine, if that's what it takes. Their opinion of me notwithstanding, this is between me and Brooke.

No one else.

I take a step closer just as she looks up from the phone in her hand.

"Oh, Mason, no," she says, shaking her head. Her eyes filling with new tears. "No, this . . . I didn't mean us. I'm not freaking out because of us. God, I'm sorry. That's what you're thinking, right?" She sits her phone down and

wipes at her face. "I'm not. I promise, I'm not. I'm with you." Lifting her eyes, she captures me with the steadiest look I think she's ever showed me.

"I'm with you."

Relief loosens my tongue and slows my rapid pulse. I move across the shop and around the counter, need filling me.

"Baby." I grab her face and kiss her full, pink lips, tasting the juice she had with me this morning and the faint hint of tears.

She's with me.

"I'm sorry," she whispers. "I'm sorry I made you think that. I should've explained in the text. God, I'm so stupid."

"Stop." I lean away and cup her cheek. The corner of her mouth twitches. "You're upset. Tell me why so I can fix it and get back to my class."

Her eyes widen. "You left your class?"

"Yeah. They're taking a water break. It's fine."

"Mason."

She shakes her head at me, fighting hard against a smile, with puffy eyes and tears still beading on her lashes. Her skin flushed red and blotchy.

Damn. I can't stop looking at her.

How can someone look so sad and so beautiful at the same time? I don't understand it.

"You're crazy," she tells me with a soft voice.

I shrug, straightening and dropping my hand to her waist. "It's possible. I'm a twenty-nine year old who has a stuffed koala in his bedroom. An animal I bloody hate, I might add. I keep copious amounts of baked goods in my refrigerator that I never plan on consuming. And I abandon my class when my girl needs me. I don't know. Does that make me barking mad? I'm fine if it does."

"You love that koala. Don't lie," she chuckles, sniffing and rubbing at her eyes. Smiling up at me.

I feel my blood warm. God, I love hearing her laugh. And that timid smile

... *fuck*.

Progress. This is progress.

Brooke seems better. Marginally, at least. She's no longer crying, and she doesn't look as troubled as she did when I stepped in here. However, I still need to find out what brought this on. I don't like seeing her upset about anything, and something definitely upset her.

I run my hand along her spine, bending to get closer. "Really, what's going on, sweetheart? I do need to get back."

With a heavy sigh, she turns to face the counter. "It's nothing you can fix. Though, given how amazing you seem to be at everything, foreign languages included, I wouldn't be surprised if you had a hidden talent for baking. Care to try your hand at it?"

We exchange looks. Mine, puzzled and struggling to follow her meaning.

Baking? She wants me to bake her something?

She waves off my confusion. "Never mind. Dylan's been put on bedrest for the next two weeks until she delivers, which isn't a *huge* deal, except for the fact that we have this freaking wedding next weekend and now I'm in charge of making the cake." She lifts a piece of paper off the counter and holds it between us. "And it's covered in flowers. Covered, Mason, like all over the damn thing. Look. She doesn't even want a cake topper. I have to put flowers up there too. Like this." Setting the paper down, she flips through the binder on the counter and stops on a picture of a cake, jabbing her finger at it. "See? Look at these little fuckers. This is what I have to make."

I lean over the binder to examine the picture.

Looks pretty standard for a wedding cake. I think my sister had one similar at hers a few years back.

"All right. And this particular design gets you upset?"

"I can't do it." Brooke slams the binder closed. Her head lowers. "I can't make flowers look like that. And there's so many of them. The bride wants them to be the focus of her cake, and I'm worried I'm going to screw it up

and ruin everything.”

She looks away and bites at her lip. Her fingers knot together on the counter.

Hmm. This is new. Brooke’s normally so proud of her work. She practically glows when she’s handing off her treats to me or discussing her day and what all she created. It’s one of the things I love most about her. Her passion. I’m not accustomed to seeing any lack of confidence in this woman. Not with her career or anything else.

She’s really worried she’ll fail at this.

I reach for her, tugging at her hand and pulling her close. I want Brooke in my arms so bad but my shirt is soaked with sweat and she looks so damn pretty right now. I’d hate to ruin her clothes.

“I’m sure you’ll do fantastic, Brooke,” I say, tipping her chin up, our bodies barely touching.

She blinks up at me. Her eyes reddened from her tears. Her cheeks blooming with color again.

“I’m so stressed out about this. Making a cake like that on my own is going to be nerve wracking enough. I told you, I don’t do those. That’s all Dylan.”

“But you *can* do them. You don’t but you can. I believe you can.” I run my finger along her jaw. “Don’t doubt yourself. You might be better at this than Dylan. Who knows?”

“It has to be perfect, Mason. I’ll see the look on the bride’s face when I deliver it, and if she hates it I’ll never forgive myself.”

“So, make it perfect.”

Her shoulders drop. Her brows pull together.

Damn, she’s adorable in her confusion. That cute little wrinkle in her nose kills me.

Smiling, I bend to kiss her forehead. “You can practice on those little fuckers, yeah?” I ask quietly. “The flowers, I mean.”

A laugh bubbles in her throat and bursts from her lips. She flattens her hand to my chest. “Yes. I can practice on them. I’m assembling the whole cake this weekend to see if I can do it. I just wish those little fuckers weren’t on it.”

She seems to relax a bit more, giving me an easy smile, touching the hem of my shirt and exploring my skin underneath with tentative fingers.

“Well, there you go. Work at it until you’re happy. What you deliver next weekend will be exactly what this woman is asking for. You’ll impress her, I bet.”

“You seem so sure.”

“I am sure.”

My confidence in Brooke is unwavering. There’s no doubt in my mind she will create something beyond what she thinks she is capable of. I’ve seen her work. I know how dedicated she is to this job. How driven. She will perfect this cake until she can make it in her sleep, but right now, she’s crippled by her own insecurity. Blinded by it. Always letting that little voice inside her head speak louder than it ever should.

“You can do this.”

She stares up at me, looking at my eyes, my mouth, and finally lowering her gaze to my neck. She wets her lips and swallows hard.

“I just don’t want to disappoint anyone.”

She looks so sad. So small.

Fuck, I want to hold her. Why did I have to make it so goddamn hot in that studio?

I squeeze her hips, hoping this small touch will give her some comfort.

“I know you don’t. You care, Brooke. And that’s why you’re going to do something amazing. Just breathe a little, yeah? Try not to worry so much.”

Her mouth tics—the hint of a smile. Letting her eyes slip closed, she takes in a deep breath, filling her lungs to capacity before releasing it slowly through her nose. She seems to slide closer.

“Better?” I ask, moving my thumb over her jeans.

She nods, her hands moving around my waist as she stares at my chest. “You know this means I’ll be tied up all weekend except for the dinner. We won’t really see each other.”

I dismiss her underlying apology. “No worries. I have a few classes to teach. I’ll just be across the street for distractions and words of encouragement, if needed.”

“Yeah.” Her voice comes out quiet and swift. She tugs at my shorts, her nails scrapping across my skin. “Mason?”

“Mm?”

She looks up. I recognize the shift in her eyes. Desire.

With her small, very capable hands, she glides up my arms, slowly, squeezing my muscles and wrapping her grip around my neck. Our bodies press together.

She doesn’t mind my appearance?

“You’re all sweaty and sweet. Just like last night,” she whispers, standing on her toes to kiss me, crushing her perfect tits to my chest.

Jesus.

“Do you really think I can do this?”

I moan when she rubs her hip against my slowly hardening length. My hands rest on her waist. “Are we still talking about cakes?”

“Yes.” She smiles against my mouth. “What else would we be talking about?”

“You’re touching my cock. I have no idea what we’re talking about anymore.”

Laughing, she twists and brushes against me again.

“Baby,” I moan. “I need to go.”

“And I need to come.”

Ah, fuck.

I groan and suck on her tongue a little, touching her arse, feeling my

reserve and all responsibility for the business I own fading to nothing.

Maybe I can make this quick? Maybe my attendees will understand my weakness for this woman and wait me out?

Maybe I don't need to make this quick?

With a soft moan, Brooke pulls away so it's only her hands on my hips and nothing else. She looks up, a softness pooling in her eyes.

"Thank you for coming over and talking to me. I'm sorry I worried you with my text. I wasn't thinking."

Christ, that text. I nearly got run over by a delivery truck sprinting over here like I did.

I frown. "It's fine."

"I'm with you." She touches my face.

My breath catches in my chest. *Brooke*. I lean into her hand, my throat tightening as I try to swallow. "Yeah."

"I'm with you, Mason," she slowly repeats, her lip trembling, tears brimming her eyes again, but her voice so fucking sure it shatters any wall or shield she ever put up between us. Obliterating every hesitation and uncertainty. Every whispering doubt in my ear.

Gone. She's mine, and I am so fucking hers I don't remember the person I was before this.

"Baby." I crush her against me, kissing her, giving her my racing heart and my urgent touch and every breath I will ever take. "With you," I tell her.

She nods and breaks away to kiss my jaw and my cheek, pressing her lips all over my face.

We embrace each other, just holding, until our bodies steady and the pressing urge to touch and kiss and fuck lessens to a sufferable longing.

"Okay," Brooke whispers against my mouth. "Go, before you lose half your class."

"I don't care."

"Mason," she laughs, kissing me hard and then with a firm hand, pushing

against my shoulder, shoving me in the direction of the door. She gives me an incredulous look.

I don't care . . . fuck, that's a bit mad. A truth, nonetheless.

This is Brooke. My Brooke. She's finally mine and she's with me.

She's with me.

I stop at the door. "Say it again."

Lifting her head from the attention she's giving the paper on the counter, a contented look shadows her face. Her hazel eyes appearing brighter now. Bigger, as she looks me straight on, standing taller, holding my gaze with that swelling confidence I'm used to seeing on her.

"I'm with you."

Her sweet voice lifts in the air, her words soaking into me, saturating my heart, my bones, and somehow going deeper than that. I feel them absorbing into my blood and taking on the life of my pulse, beating . . .

I'm with you.

Beating . . .

I'm with you.



BROOKE

I'm excited for tonight. More than excited, actually. And not a bit nervous.

Wait . . . I'm not nervous at all?

I hold my hands out in front of me, turning them over in the air, watching for any signs of panic.

They're steady. No tremble to my fingers. Not even a slight twitch.

Huh. Look at that.

I press two fingers to the inside of my wrist. My pulse is stable, and my stomach doesn't feel like I just stepped off the world's scariest rollercoaster.

I'm not sweating.

I'm not pacing my bedroom or annihilating every sweet in this condo.

I'm not trying to talk my way out of tonight, or making up an excuse as to why I can't make it.

This is a big deal. A huge deal, and the only reason why I'm anxious is because I'm ready for it to happen.

I'm ready. So fucking ready.

Bringing Mason with me to dinner at Juls and Ian's house, officially stepping out with him as a couple, introducing him as my boyfriend. Any one of these would usually send me into a fit where I'd be locking myself in my room and blowing everyone off, refusing to answer my phone or faking an

illness. I normally don't do stuff like this. I never do stuff like this.

But something is different. I'm different.

Maybe it's seeing the look on Mason's face when I tell him he's not alone in his feelings. Maybe it's the fact that he's become more than just a man I'm interested in. He's a man I want to be with all the time, doing everything with, including breakfast dates and dinners at my sister's house. Camping and late night drives through the city.

Or maybe it's just him. No one else could've gotten me here. I'm sure of it.

Mason went from being a guy I wanted to fuck, to a man I wanted to know, to the only person I care to be around.

The only person . . .

I sure as hell didn't see this coming, but I want it, and I'm not nervous.

I'm ready.

As I'm tying my navy cinch dress and securing the loose bow at my hip, my phone rings from on top of my dresser. I run my fingers through my loose curls before hitting the speaker phone button.

"Hey. I'm just finishing up getting ready. Mason should be here any minute."

Picking up my gloss, I apply a thin coat of the shimmery peach shade and press my lips together as I stare at my reflection in the mirror.

"Change of plans. I think Jake has chicken pox," Juls says.

"What?" I look down at the phone. "Are you sure? How did he get it?"

She sighs. "I don't know. Playground, I guess. Ian was giving him a bath and saw the blisters on his stomach. My poor guy."

Poor Jake is right.

"Well, shit. That sucks." I toss the tube of gloss into my makeup case and carry the phone over to the bed. I plop down on the mattress. "You know Izzy will probably get it now."

"I know. I'm almost hoping she does, that way I can just get them both

out of the way at the same time. God, does that make me a horrible mother? Wishing a miserable infection on my child? Ian thinks I'm crazy."

Juls, a horrible mother? Please. She kills it. She's that mom other mom's hate because she's so fucking good at life.

She's organized. Her kids are perfectly behaved and always look like they hopped out of a Children's Place catalog. She still looks like a pin-up girl after two babies, and she rocks heels every day.

Every day. Even at the playground.

I stare at my feet. "Makes sense to me. I wish mom would've done that with us, that way I could still come over with Mason, assuming he's had chicken pox before." I feel a smile lifting my mouth. "I wonder if they call that something different in Australia. Like koala pox or spots down under."

"That second one sounds like an STD."

We both laugh. I pull my knees up and brace my heels on the wooden frame.

"I am bummed though. I was really looking forward to tonight. All of us hanging out." I pick at the hem of my dress.

How long does chicken pox last? A week? Several? Is there a period where it isn't contagious?

I bring up Google and do a search while keeping Juls on the line.

"Aw, me too. You know how excited I was. And the kids. Especially since you were bringing Mason. I really wanted to see you two together." She pauses as I skim the page on WebMD. "Can I . . . okay, I want to ask you something, but you can't get all Brooke on me."

I huff. "What does that mean?"

All Brooke . . .

All awesome and sexy as hell? Because that's unavoidable.

"You know exactly what it means. You can't bite my head off or hang up on me because I'm bringing up mushy shit you don't usually like to talk about. It's not nice. I want your word that you'll at least give me an honest

response.”

I exit out of the search on my phone and stare at the screen.

I have a feeling I know where this conversation is going. Mason. Juls wants details, which isn’t surprising. I really haven’t given her any. In fact, the last time we spoke about this I’m pretty sure I bit her head off and hung up.

I definitely hung up.

I sink back onto the bed, resting my phone beside my ear. “I promise.”

“Really?” Juls whispers in complete disbelief. I smile and stare at the ceiling.

“Yes. Hurry up before I change my mind.”

She clears her throat. “Wow. Okay. Well . . .” a soft, shuffling noise comes through the phone.

“Oh, my God, Juls. Do you have notes?”

Little Miss Wedding Planner. I can totally see her having a list of topic points for this discussion.

“What?” she asks, sounding startled. “No, no I’m just reading a magazine. Glamour or something.”

Thud.

A notepad getting tossed, perhaps?

“Right,” I laugh.

“Anyway, I was just wondering how serious this is with you and him. I mean, obviously you’re willing to admit you’re dating, since you planned on bringing him with you tonight.”

“Mm mmm.”

“And that in itself is a miracle,” she chuckles softly. “Headline news. But, I didn’t know if this is just something you are doing for fun, or if it’s more than that. If you even know what it is.”

“I love him.”

She gasps. My stomach does a strange little flip.

“What? You do? Really?”

“Yeah.” Grinning, I grab the phone and set it on my chest. I lift my hair up and let the cool comforter chill the back of my neck. “I really, *really* love him. I think I just got butterflies from saying it. So apparently those are real.”

“Brooke, that’s wonderful.” Her voice grows exceedingly quiet.

I listen to her soft sniffles. My sister, ever the emotional wreck when it comes to anything even slightly romantic.

“Oh, my God. I was not expecting you to say that. Does he know?”

“I told him last night, right after I figured it out.” I pinch my thighs together. “Then we had wild, shameless sex into the wee hours.”

Juls shrieks. “I’m so happy for you! On both counts, obviously. And I know he loves you too. God, I saw it that night at The Tavern. The way he spoke about you while you were in the bathroom. He was so in love then.”

“What?” I scoff. “No, he wasn’t. That was before we even knew each other at all.”

Is she insane? How he could he have loved me then? I met him two minutes before that night.

“So? I went out with Ian one time and I knew I was going to marry him. One date and that was it. Boom. Why should it take longer? Your soul is recognizing who it belongs to. Knowing should be immediate. It’s like seeing a familiar face in a crowd.”

I press my lips together, holding in my programmed skeptical remark.

Hmm. Maybe Juls is right? Maybe it isn’t entirely strange for it to happen in an instant for some people. I remember what she was like after meeting Ian. Lord, she never shut up about the guy.

And now I never shut up about the guy.

“Maybe,” I quietly reply, thinking back to that night at the bar.

Mason’s face when he walked over. His engaging stare. The way he cared more about hearing me than staying and having a few drinks.

Did he love me then? God, that seems completely senseless.

“Is this like, it for you? Is he the one?”

“Jesus, Juls.” I sit up and hold my phone out. “Would you get out of wedding planner mode please? I told you I loved him. I didn’t ask your opinion on venues or centerpieces.”

Now I know she’s taking notes. I’m sure she has her planner open and is looking at potential dates. So typical.

“Did I ask about venues and centerpieces? No, I asked if you thought Mason was the one. A completely logical question considering your feelings for him.”

“Crazy about Dylan being on bed rest, huh? Can you believe it?”

“Brooke,” Juls snaps. “Don’t change the subject.”

I exhale a slow breath, leaning on my knees and running my thumb over my toenail polish. “The one,” I repeat quietly, contemplating this foreign idea of forever with the same person. A concept I’ve never considered.

But I also never gave a second thought to loving someone. I never imagined any of this happening.

Mason is my wild card. He’s that unexpected storm that hits when you’re outside on a beautiful day, and at first you don’t want it. You were enjoying the sun and the heat on your skin. That’s what makes you happy. Then the sky darkens and the temperature drops a little, and you think ‘okay, this breeze is nice’. You wait it out, thinking it’ll pass, but the rain starts to fall. The first drop hits your shoulder. Another soaks into your hair. It startles you, but it feels good. You were too hot anyway. Then before you know it, it’s pouring, saturating your clothes and pooling on the earth. A giggle bubbles in your throat. Where is this coming from? It’s so sudden and surprising, and in a matter of seconds, you’re drenched from head to toe. Your beautiful day is ruined, and you can’t stop laughing.

You can’t stop laughing.

The sun is overrated anyway. Give me a sweet storm when I least expect it.

Juls hums impatiently in my ear as I smile against my fingers.

“I . . .”

A knock on the door interrupts me. My heart thumps against my ribs.

Mason.

I leap off the bed and breeze through the condo. “Juls, hey, I gotta go. Mason is here.”

“What? No! Yes or no. Yes or no. Give me something.”

“I have to go,” I laugh, stepping up to the door and peering through the peep-hole, grinning at the gorgeous sight of the man on the other side.

Mason looks so damn good in a gray dress shirt, the button undone at the collar, revealing his tanned neck and the thick protuberance of his Adam’s apple.

Fuck, I want to lick him there.

He stares straight ahead, straight at me, as if he knows I’m looking at him. Admiring. A smirk playing on his lips and his blue eyes bright.

“Brooke,” Juls says in my ear, her voice insistent.

I feel a surge of heat blossom in my chest. My toes curl on the carpet.

“Yes.” I disconnect the call, cutting off her exuberant reply. I wrench the door open and hurl myself into Mason’s arms.

I cling to him, kissing his jaw and inhaling his warm skin.

Jesus. Do all Australians smell this good? Like sunshine and impending orgasms. Mercy.

“Hey.” He squeezes me back, wrapping his arms around my waist and lifting me off the ground. The pressure of his hold is paramount.

Did he hear me through the door? Does he know I just chose him as my forever?

I press my face against his neck, concealing my burning cheeks. “Hi,” I whisper.

He laughs quietly, then leans back to kiss my temple. “Little devil. Ready to go?”

“Change of plans.” I wiggle out of his arms and grab his hand, tugging him inside. I kick the door closed. “My nephew has the chicken pox. Juls just called. I’ve never had them so I can’t go over there. God, can you imagine if I got them now? With Dylan laid up? Joey would be in charge of the bakery.” I make a face. “Everything would be cream filled.”

Mason smirks, then lowers his eyes to my attire, focusing on the crisscross of fabric over my breasts. His chest moves with a deep inhale. “Yeah? No dinner?”

I shrug. “Well, no meal with my family. We can eat something here. Or go out.”

“Mm.” He reaches for the door and turns the lock. His eyes darken.

Oh. Ohhhh. Eat something here. Right. Excellent choice.

“Anyone else home, sweetheart?”

I watch Mason’s hands lower to his belt. My neck warms.

“No,” I answer, shaking my head as he steps closer. “No, they went out. They won’t be back for a while.”

“Good. I’ve been hard all day.”

My gaze flicks up to his. “You have?”

The sound of the belt loosening draws my attention back down. The sharp whip of leather.

Mason grabs my hand and presses it against his cock through the fabric of his pants. He moans. The stiff organ twitches in my palm.

“Oh,” I gasp, molding my hand to him. “God . . .”

“Ever since this morning, Brooke.”

He tips my chin up, looking at me while he uses my hand to stroke his length. The front of his pants becomes restrictive. My pulse quickens to a galloping pace.

“I keep hearing your voice telling me you’re with me, and I get so fucking hard.”

I grip his shirt, reaching for a kiss. “I’m with you.”

His breath bursts across my mouth. "Brooke."

"Take me. Here. Right here."

He grabs my breast roughly and squeezes, giving me the briefest of kisses before my head rolls to the side with a moan.

"I want you wet," he says, kissing the line of my neck. Moving his breath over my skin. I shudder when I feel teeth. "So wet that when I bend down and lick that sweet pussy you drip down the back of my throat."

"Mason, Jesus." My hand goes stagnant against his cock. My other squeezing his waist. "That won't be a problem."

God, what his filthy mouth does to me. I'm worried my legs might give out soon.

He backs me against the bar counter, his thumb rubbing mercilessly over my nipple through the thin fabric of my dress.

I make quiet little noises against his shirt when he tugs on the hardened peak.

"I want you to milk my cock with these." He runs his hand between my breasts. "And this." He smooths his thumb over my mouth, then slides his hand beneath my dress and cups my throbbing sex.

His eyes flicker. I nearly shoot off the ground.

"Mm. Think I might start with this."

"Fuck. Please."

I grab his face and kiss him, and it becomes a battle of who can kiss harder, firmer, who can steal the other's breath away faster as both of our hands fumble between us, him popping the button on his pants and my fingers tugging on the zipper. He frees his cock. I hike up my dress. My thong stays in place, Mason slipping his finger under the wet fabric and tugging it aside. He runs his digit through my slit.

"Jesus," he moans. His eyes lowering as mine threaten to roll back in my head. " Tits out, gorgeous."

I pull the neckline of my dress down.

Bossy Mason. Yummy.

My breasts pop free, the cool air of the condo assaulting my nipples. I squeak when he grips the back of my thighs and lifts me, bringing us chest to chest, my hands gripping his hair and his palming my ass and squeezing.

He buries his face in my neck. "Want you. Want you so fucking bad I can't think."

"Take me. Please," I groan, biting my lip when he slowly lowers me onto his cock. My legs shake as he stretches me. "*Mason . . . oh, fuck.*"

He bounces me up and down, fucking me in the middle of my friends' condo, with our clothes still on and the cold metal of his zipper rubbing against my clit. Biting at my flesh. It hurts and it's heaven. Fuck, he's so big I fear he might rip me in half, but even the threat of death wouldn't stop me from taking this. From allowing him to use my body for his pleasure, which is exactly what he's doing. I have no control right now. He's manipulating my weight, lowering me onto his cock at the pace and ferocity he wants, and every time I gasp in shock or squirm in his arms, he revels in my response by giving it to me harder. Faster. Squeezing my thighs until they sting as he shows me how fierce his need is for me, which only solidifies my longing for him.

I've kept him hard since this morning. He's punishing me in the sweetest way for it.

Take me. Take me. Just don't let me go.

With parted lips he looks into my eyes, our faces inches apart as his shallow breaths bathe my skin and absorb into my lungs.

I feel drugged.

I want to taste him in my soul. I want to feel him moving in my blood. I want to consume and be consumed by this man. Only him.

Love is a madness I will willingly accept if he's the one pulling me under.

"Brooke . . . *goddamn.*" He thrusts his hips steadily. "So good. So good, baby."

God, I love it when he calls me that.

My fingers tug at Mason's hair as I lean forward and moan into his mouth. I feel my orgasm tickling my spine. "I'm close. Where do you want to come?" I ask, watching the sweat bead on his brow. His nostrils flaring.

He keeps me on the tip of his cock, slowly lowering and lifting me. He sucks on my lips. "Where can I?" His voice is strained. He's close too.

"Anywhere."

"Anywhere?" He leans back and studies my face.

I smirk. I can't help myself.

Tensing my thighs, I arch into him and reach behind me, fisting his cock. I position him at my back entrance.

He sucks in a breath. His eyes as round as quarters as he stares at me. "Brooke."

"Anywhere," I whisper against his mouth, slowly applying pressure to the head of his cock, easing him past that tight ring of muscle.

I take in slow, deep breaths, controlling my breathing.

Mason isn't controlling much of anything.

"Baby," he rasps, his shoulders and arms tensing, his chest heaving as he slips inside, just an inch, maybe not even that much. Growling like a caged animal, the cords in his neck threatening to burst, he lifts me off his cock and reaches between us, stroking himself furiously against my clit. "Ah, fuck . . . Brooke, fuck!" he yells, the first spurts of cum hitting my stomach and the bunched material of my dress. The rest of his desire coating my sex and his fingers.

Bliss.

"Wow," I breathe, dragging my lips along his cheek, moaning at the warm sensation between my legs. "That was crazy."

And hot.

Mason snarls, leaning away and looking down between us. I swear he sways on his feet.

“Shit, Brooke. Fuck. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I got it on your dress.”

“Shh.” I reach down and grab his dick, pressing it where I ache the most. Our eyes lock. “Need to come.”

Huffing out a breath, he moves us to a nearby stool and sits me on it. His cock wet and heavy against my thigh. With his hand between my legs and his lips moving across my skin, he brings me to orgasm within seconds, pressing sweet words against my cheek and dirty ones into my ear.

He tells me I’m beautiful, the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen, and that he’ll be coming in my ass soon enough.

My tight, fuckable ass.

I moan against his shirt, panting as I come down from my climax. He grabs my face and kisses me.

“You.” He smiles against my mouth. “A little warning next time, yeah? Give a bloke some time to prepare.”

“Ah, come on. Where’s the fun in that?” I giggle, stroking his face and pushing his hair back. I take a long look at him. “You’re beautiful too, Mason. Your heart and your body. Your soul. I’m so lucky.”

His eyes appear dimmer as he stares back at me. A dulled shadow passing over him.

Maybe he feels drugged too?

“Sweet girl, come on.”

He scoops me up and carries me into the bedroom, my bare feet kicking out. He strips off my dress and we both clean up between kisses and lingering touches.

“Will that come out I hope?” Mason tightens his belt and watches me rinse my dress in the bathroom sink. Our gazes lock in the mirror. He looks regretful. “Really, really sorry.” He bends down and kisses the side of my head.

I smile, wringing out the material and turning off the water. “I’m going to get it dry-cleaned. That’ll be a fun stain to illuminate on.” I pretend I’m

handing off the garment. “My boyfriend got a little excited during anal. Can you press this for me?”

Mason rubs at his face, groaning.

Lord, his embarrassment is adorable.

I laugh and elbow his stomach as I move past him.

“Wanna watch a movie? We can order take-out and stay in.”

He nods. “Yeah, all right. What movie?”

“I don’t care. I have a bunch out there in my room if you wanna look. There’s more out by the T.V.”

I throw my dress over the shower curtain rod so it will dry. I can drop it off at the cleaners tomorrow when I go to work.

“I’m just going to use the bathroom and then I’ll be out.”

He jerks his chin and steps out into my bedroom, pulling the door closed behind him.

I use the toilet, looking up at my dress.

My boyfriend got a little excited during anal.

Or . . .

The man I want to spend forever with got a little excited during anal.

Mm, yes. I like that better.

After washing my hands, I stand in front of the bathroom mirror and run my fingers through my messy hair. It looks lifeless. I tug on the ends and my curls spring back. I twist the front pieces. A sticky substance clings to the pads of my fingers.

“What the . . .” I hold my hand in front of my face, grimacing. “Really?”

I grab my shampoo out of the shower. Gathering my hair over one shoulder, I bend over the sink and scrub my ends, rinsing out the suds and semen.

Only you, Brooke. Only you would get cum in your hair after spending hours styling it.

I laugh when I think about Mason finding out he got his spunk in my hair.

Would he be as apologetic as he was for my dress?

I towel dry the ends a bit so they aren't dripping and tuck the front pieces behind my ears. I pinch my cheeks and apply some chapstick from the drawer before padding out into my room.

"Finding anything? I'm in the mood for something funny," I yell out, grabbing a new pair of panties out of my dresser and slipping them on.

Mason doesn't answer. He's probably engrossed in whatever it is he picked out.

I open another drawer and pull out a pair of linen shorts and a tank, tossing them on my bed. I apply another layer of vanilla body lotion to my arms, legs, and neck before getting dressed and moving through the doorway.

Mason's back is to me as he stands beside the couch, blocking my view of the T.V., the remote in his hand.

Nothing is playing. At least I don't hear anything.

Why didn't he answer me?

I come up behind him and slide my hands around his waist. His body tenses.

"Hey," I whisper. "Pick something out?"

"Yeah, sure did." He quickly steps out of my arms and moves beside me, freeing up my sight. "Care to explain this?"

Startled at his abrupt pull-away and the tone icing his voice, I glance up at the T.V., at the stilled image of myself, naked and straddling another man. The camera angled on me from the side.

I remember setting it on the hamper before I crawled on the bed.

Fuck, I forgot about this.

Fuck! How much has he watched?

"You made a sex tape, Brooke? Are you fucking kidding me?" His voice booms through the condo, echoing off the ceiling.

The hairs on my neck stand up. I've never heard him this angry before.

I've never heard him angry at all.

Lowering my hand from my mouth, I turn to Mason. “Where did you find this?” I ask, moving closer.

“Your room. It had your name on it. I thought it was a home video or something.”

His shoulders stay hunched forward. His gaze straight ahead, burning into the screen.

I picture the disc on my shelf. I had stuck it up there and left it. I haven’t touched it since.

“You as a kid, or with your mates. I wanted to see that,” he adds, rubbing at his mouth. “Not this,” he mumbles.

I pinch my eyes shut, then shake my head, looking up. “I forgot it was in there. I’m so, so sorry. Here. Turn it off.”

He wrenches his arm away when I reach for him. His cold eyes send a shiver through me. “Don’t.”

I pull back. *He doesn’t want me to touch him?* “Mason.”

“You were in there awhile. I got to watch the whole thing. You and him.” He jerks his head at the T.V. .

The pain in his voice distorts his accent a bit. His words sound stiff. Fully pronounced, unlike the lazy, sluggish speech I’m used to hearing and loving.

I press my fingers to my mouth, shaking slightly.

Oh, God. He watched the whole thing.

“No,” I whisper.

Any part of this, a second or a glimpse is too much for him to see. But all of it?

He slowly turns his head, his blue eyes so dark they almost look black. “The whole fucking thing, Brooke.”

My stomach drops. “Mason, I . . . just, turn it off.” I reach out again. “Let’s get rid of this. You shouldn’t keep looking at it.”

“Why not?”

He tosses the remote. It hits the coffee table with a loud pang.

I jump. “Mason.”

“Why the fuck not? I’ve watched it. It’s out in the open now. It’s no longer a secret.”

“It was never a secret.”

“Yeah? Everyone knew about it but me, huh? When was this taken, Brooke?” he asks, looming over me. His pain shifting to a louder reaction. Anger. “When I wasn’t fucking you? Did you go out and get it somewhere else?”

“W-What?” I blink up at him, my voice sounding miles away.

Is he seriously implying I’ve been screwing around on him?

“No! This was months ago. Before I met you. How could you say that?”

“How could I say that?” he laughs darkly. His lips curling against his teeth. “I don’t know. Maybe because that’s all you’ve cared about this entire time. I was just a hard dick you wanted, right? And you weren’t getting it.”

“No, you weren’t . . .” My voice shakes. Tears well up in my eyes.

What is happening?

“No?” he asks, disbelieving. He runs a rough hand down his face. I catch the slight tremble in it. “Jesus Christ. Why do you even have this? Do you fucking watch it? Do you and your mates sit around and get off on this together?”

I gape at him, expecting him to recoil at his own words. To apologize and take them back, but he doesn’t. He stares at me with nothing but disgust and anger swelling in his eyes. Maybe a hint of sadness. A shred of what I’m feeling.

I’m having a nightmare. This can’t be real.

I ball up my fists as tears spill onto my cheeks. “No, we don’t. I have it so *he* doesn’t have it. I took it months ago, after it was filmed, *months ago*. I’ve never watched it. What is wrong with you?”

He gestures at the T.V., bending to get closer. “I just watched you getting fucked by someone else. *You*. And you’re going to ask what’s wrong with

me? I just saw another man having his hands on you, his dick in you, and the woman I care about more than anything getting off on it. I just watched you fucking come!”

“You were never supposed to see that! I forgot I even had it. Jesus Christ,” I cry, wiping at my face, my entire body trembling. “I don’t even remember that guy’s name.”

I regret it the second the words fall past my lips.

I know how this sounds. Careless. Even worse than that.

His eyes widen. Mouth slack as he straightens a bit. “Well, that makes me feel a whole lot better, Brooke. You make these tapes with just anyone, yeah? Are there more in your room? Or do you keep them out here for everyone to watch?”

Flinching, I look away. “Stop,” I plead, whimpering quietly against my hand.

Please, stop.

“Christ. Did you . . .” Mason’s harsh voice trails off. He moves to turn away but I grip his shoulder, forcing him to look at me.

I know. I don’t know how, but I know what he wants to ask me. And if he has the balls to think it, he can fucking . . .

“Say it,” I urge, my lip quivering, my rage consuming me. “What were you going to say? Say it!”

My hands push and pull at his chest. I can’t decide what I want, him closer or far enough away I can’t hit him. I’m so mad, so shattered. I want him to comfort me and then stand there and take my abuse.

“Fucking say it, Mason!”

Fat tears stream steadily down my face.

He looks down at me, his own eyes brimming now. “Did you tell me all of that just so I would fuck you?”

“What do you think?” I ask him, but I can’t hear my own voice. It’s so quiet compared to the blood rushing in my veins. To my heartbeat pounding

in my skull.

I want to scream and scream. I want to wake up.

Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!

Mason looks away. He doesn't say a word, but the answer I hear is so fucking loud it rings in my ears and reminds me just how real this is. I'm not stuck in a dream, or a nightmare.

I'm awake. I'm awake and I'm alone. Drowning.

I cry silently, my shoulders shaking. "I did," I whisper, grabbing his stare, which goes from shock to crippling grief in an instant.

Why? I'm only confirming what he thinks.

I tilt my wobbling chin up to get closer. "I did. It was all a lie. All of it. Everything I said to you. Everything I gave. When I chose you . . ." I sob, sniffing and weeping in my sorrow.

I don't even care. God, let him see me like this. Let him see what he's done.

He nods, turning away and wiping at his own face now. "Fine." He moves with purpose toward the door, his feet heavy on the carpet.

I follow behind. "You think it. It must be true. Nothing mattered to me. Our dates and that night in the tent. Yesterday and the day before and the day before that. So go! Leave! Get out knowing you meant nothing and I hate you! I will hate you for this!"

He pauses at the door, his head lowered and his hand gripping the knob. His shoulders lifted in tension. His back shaking.

This is it. That one second we have to take everything back. To tell the truth and admit our wrongs. To forgive and move forward.

To make this nothing more than a nightmare.

Reach for me. Reach for me. Take me. Don't let me go.

I open my mouth to speak but nothing comes out. Nothing, but a whimpering cry.

Without a sound, without giving me another look or word or pleading

glance, Mason swings the door open and exits the condo.

Probably for the last time.

I dart across the room and fling myself into bed, letting my tears fall. I cry for hours, clutching at my pillow, biting and screaming into it until my voice cracks and my throat burns.

The pain, God, the pain in my chest. This ache. I feel like I'm dying.

How could he say those things? How could he even think them?

Mason.

I sob, picturing his face, staring at that T.V. like a man possessed, ready to explode. Scream or cry, I couldn't tell. Then, the disgust simmering in his eyes when he told me what he watched. The hurt. Tears welling up and threatening when he asked me if I ever really loved him, and the agony on his face when I lied.

I gasp and clutch at my chest.

God, someone rip this out of me. Take it away so I don't feel anything anymore.

"Brooke, sweetie, are you okay?"

I hear Billy's voice hours later, after the darkness rolls into my bedroom and blankets me. I open my swollen eyes, trying to see through the tears. Light from the outside room spills across the ceiling. I squint, focusing on Joey's face as he sits beside me. Billy looks on, standing next to the bed.

"What's going on?" Joey asks, studying me. His hand squeezing my shoulder. "And what the hell is that out there on the T.V.? Is that you?"

I cover my face and wail, sobbing into my hands.

How do I still have any tears left?

"Oh, no. What happened?" Joey rubs my arm. "Is it Mason? Did you two get into a fight?"

I sit up and draw my knees against my chest. I wipe the wetness from my cheeks even though it's pointless. New tears fall.

"Yes, we got into a fight. A huge fucking fight. He found that disc in my

room and he watched it. All of it. I didn't know until it was too late. I forgot I even had it."

Joey's eyes go wide. "From like, six months ago? The Cuban guy?"

"Yes!" I shriek. *Thank you!* Both men startle. "Yes, from six months ago! Mason accused me of making that after him and I started hanging out. He said I only cared about fucking and since I wasn't getting it from him, I probably went somewhere else." My lip trembles. "He said so much," I whisper, remembering everything and feeling that pain in the center of my chest swelling inside me. "He was so mad, and mean. God, he was mean. He made me feel like a," I pause, biting my tongue and shaking my head.

No. No, I won't say it. Don't even think it.

Whore.

My eyes sting.

"You know he didn't mean any of that," Billy says, moving closer and tugging at the knot in his tie. "He was reacting, Brooke. How I'm sure a lot of us would react if we saw what he saw. He loves you."

"It still doesn't make it acceptable," Joey snaps. He waves a hand in my direction. "Look at her. Look at how upset she is."

"I'm sure he was just as upset, if not more."

"He *was* upset," I whisper, feeling two sets of eyes on me as I stare at the comforter. "Seeing that, it hurt him."

"Good."

I look up at Joey, then at Billy. Both of them reacting two different ways to this.

Staring at them is like physically being able to dig my heart out of my chest and look at it in my hands. There would be a line drawn down the middle. Two bleeding sides of me, reacting with equal passion and reason.

I hate Mason for what he said, but I get what pushed him to say it.

I love him. *I love him*, but I want him to feel what I'm feeling right now.

Sighing, feeling like every muscle in my body has been stretched and

pummeled with a thousand fists, with my eyes burning and tears leaking and dripping down my face, I scoot down the bed and curl against my pillow again, clutching it to my chest.

A hand strokes my leg. “It’ll be okay, Brooke. It will. I promise,” Billy reassures me.

I wish I can take comfort in that. Maybe tomorrow he can tell me again and it’ll sink in.

Joey pushes my hair off my face and kisses my forehead. “Is there anything you want me to do? Issue a few death threats? Egg someone’s fancy new studio?”

I close my eyes. “Just get me out of bed tomorrow. I need to practice on that wedding cake.”

“You got it.”

I hear his footsteps trailing away.

“Oh, and Joey?” I lift my head.

He braces himself in the doorway, raising an expectant eyebrow.

“Get rid of that fucking disc.”



JOEY (OMG)

I drum my fingers on the counter as my last ounce of patience is stretched thin.

This bitch right here. If she doesn't move her snippy ass along, I'm going to have to search for the number to those window repair men we used a few years back. I am not above violence today. Not after the weekend I've had. But only classy violence, of course. A nice hard shove in the right direction never hurt anyone. If she happens to go sailing through a window in the process, that's on her. I am merely directing her toward the exit she can't seem to locate on her own.

Firmly directing her.

Tapping her manicured finger on her chin, the woman in front of me, who has been debating on her selection for the past thirty-seven minutes, admires the left side of the case.

Again.

For the sixth time.

"These muffins right here." She points at a tray while glaring at me from overtop of her glasses. "Are those raisins?"

"The ones labeled cranberry *raisin* muffins?" I arch my eyebrow. "Yes, those are indeed raisins. We try not to lie to customers here as much as we

can. What with allergies and everybody wanting to sue everybody.”

“Mm.” She pinches her heavily lined lips together. “I’m not sure about raisins. They tend to make whatever dough they’re in a bit on the dry side.”

“Nothing in this bakery is dry, I assure you.”

Except for your vagina. When was the last time that thing saw any action? Prohibition?

I watch her walk along the counter. Back and forth. Back and forth. She leans in close, admires a treat or two while pinching the side of her glasses, then pulls back and resumes her leisurely as fuck perusal.

Breathe, Joey. Keep your fabulous shit together. No mauling the customers. They pay you. You love them.

Stopping directly across from me, the woman glances up. She looks bored out of her mind. “I don’t see any gluten free options available. That’s a shame. You know, Whipped over on Madison offers an alternative menu for people who have digestive troubles.”

I tilt my head. “Whipped also caters to rodents. They were busted two weeks ago by the health department for a rat infestation.”

Her eyes flicker a hair wider. “Oh, I . . . wasn’t aware of that.” She clears her throat, studying the case again.

Tension builds in my shoulders. I close my eyes and think of my happy place.

Billy on his knees, his finger probing my ass and his sweet mouth wrapped around my . . .

A loud clanging noise arises from the kitchen.

My head snaps in the direction of the doorway, then back at the woman who startles, a little too dramatically even for my taste, slapping a hand to her heaving chest as her eyes shift frantically around the room.

“What in the world was that?”

I grit my teeth.

Brooke. Poor thing is on the verge of a complete, epic meltdown back

there. She has three modes I've seen her in the past three days—hysterically crying, angrier than my mother when she doesn't get a drink by noon, and so utterly stressed she paces around the kitchen, shaking and talking to herself.

Christ, it's only Monday. Between the Mason incident and this goddamn wedding, Brooke might need serious therapy by the end of the week.

I also might need some serious therapy by the end of the week.

Laughing off the disruption from the kitchen, I wave my hand in the air. “By the sound of it, I'm going to guess a sheet tray hitting the floor. I apologize for that. We're just so busy back there making things that *aren't* dry.”

The woman adjusts her glasses, cutting a look at me.

I flick a few strands of hair off my forehead.

Bitch.

My phone beeps in my pocket. I tug it out as the woman continues wasting my time.

Dylan: What was that? Is Brooke breaking shit now? I know she's upset but she needs to remember where she is, Joey. HANDLE IT.

Sweet Christ. Why couldn't she be on bed rest at her mother's?

Me: Ease up on the shouty caps, cupcake. Everything is under control.

Dylan: BETTER BE. (I love you)

Me: BITCH. (love you too)

“Is this all fresh? When were these pastries made?” The woman taps two fingers aggressively on top of the glass. “They don't look as moist as they should.”

I breathe in deeply through my nose, feeling the veins in my neck bulging, reminding myself again how much I love this job and the woman upstairs I don't want to piss off by murdering someone in the middle of her

shop.

The woman sighs exhaustedly. “Do you offer any beverages here? Coffee, at least? Most upscale bakeries do nowadays.”

That’s it. Fuck her and the stick up her ass. I am done.

Forcing the fakest smile I’ve ever worn, I put my phone away and gesture at the case. “No, no coffee. This is a *bakery*, not a Starbucks. And everything in front of you is fresh and made daily. We here at Dylan’s Sweet Tooth are all big fans of *moist* things. I myself am like a ripe peach, if you know what I’m saying.”

Her overly plucked eyebrows pull together. “Excuse me?”

I glance at the clock on the wall. “A peach. You know, the fruit. I’m sure you’ve noticed the tarts on the middle tray in the case you’ve been staring at for the past forty-five minutes. Those are indeed peaches right there. Now, if I can interest you in a cupcake or *anything* today, please let me know. Otherwise, I’m going to have to ask you to take your fresh little attitude and that knock-off Coach . . .”

She gasps.

“Yeah, I see you . . . and head on down the street. This here is an establishment where people come in and purchase things. I know, I am stunning, but unfortunately I am not an exhibit, and neither are the treats in front of me.”

The woman blinks rapidly, looking affronted.

I feel like I just came.

“Well.” She tightens her grip on her handbag and glares at me, her nostrils flaring with her breathing. “I suppose if I’m being rushed, I’ll take three of the mocha chocolate cupcakes,” she huffs, tipping her chin. “Those look the most appealing.”

Grinning, I grab a box. “Excellent.”

After taking her money and walking her to the door, just to make sure she gets the fuck out, I spin around and head for the kitchen.

Brooke is sitting on a stool, her head lowered and her fingers rubbing in slow circles against her temple. The sheet tray I thought I heard is on the floor near the supply shelf. As for the rest of the kitchen, it's a mess. The worktop is covered in baking materials. Flour is spilled. A stool is turned over. Brooke's practice wedding cake, which looked pretty damn perfect yesterday, now has a chunk missing out of the top tier.

Did she eat some of it? I wouldn't be surprised.

I notice as I move further into the room the tiny flower petals made out of gum paste dropped on the floor near the tray. A few are still on it. She must've been trying to construct the gardenias again. Each attempt she makes leaves her more and more frustrated and doubtful of herself.

Her head isn't in this. That's the problem. It's across the street.

"Hey. You need me to help with anything back here?" I ask, picking up the stool and righting it. I brush some flour off the wood and scoop it into my hand, dumping it in the nearby trash bin.

Brooke shakes her head. She lowers her hands to her lap and looks down. "How are we doing on treats? Do I need to make more?"

"Not right now. We're good."

"And they're . . . people are buying them? They want what I made?"

"I'm going to pretend I didn't just hear you say that."

She slowly looks up at me.

Sighing, I move around the worktop and stand beside her. "Everything out there is fabulous. Including me. We are selling as good as we always sell, because you are an exceptional baker. In fact, don't tell Dylan this, but I actually think your red velvet icing tastes a little better than hers."

I quickly glance behind me. The stairs are vacant. Good. She isn't disobeying doctor's orders and hearing my blasphemy.

"Yeah, right." Brooke gazes up at me skeptically. Shadowy smudges line her eyes, which appear dull and lifeless. Her face is pale and a bit puffy.

How much has she cried today? Too much, I'm guessing. It's all she's

been doing. Here. At the condo. In her bed. In mine.

She isn't the only one running on minimal sleep. Three people to a queen bed isn't the most comfortable arrangement.

I've suggested a king to Billy. He seems to think Brooke won't be spooning with us for much longer.

I'm doubtful.

"Do I look as shitty as I feel?" Brooke asks, her chin trembling and tears threatening to fall, her hair a mess all around her, some of it tied back haphazardly while chunks tangle together along her back.

Does she look a hot mess? Yes, absolutely. But having two women as my best friends has taught me a very valuable lesson over the past decade.

Lie when you need to. And lie good. The truth is not worth the headache sometimes.

I rub her back. "You look amazing, as do I. I was actually thinking of taking a few selfies later if you want in. Capturing our first day together as a dynamic duo running this shit like we were born to do it."

"If you put a phone in my face, I will smash it against the wall," Brooke growls. "And then I will stab you with something for suggesting we capture this god awful moment."

Inhaling slowly, I slide my hand off her back. "Noted. And for the record, you are definitely becoming more and more like my little cupcake upstairs."

For fuck's sake. How many times have I been threatened in this shop?

"Actually, I'm not. That's the problem." Brooke stands from her stool and picks up the sheet tray. "You see, Dylan would be able to construct these stupid fucking flowers with no problem. I can't. I've tried, and I've tried." She drops the tray on the wood. "And I've tried. None of mine are turning out right. That bride is going to be getting a cake with no flowers on it on Saturday because of me. Her cake will end up being the most boring looking wedding cake in the history of wedding cakes, *because* of me. And bonus, it could also taste like shit. Happy fucking wedding day."

I walk over and grab her shoulders. “I think it’s time for a little break.”

She shrugs away from me. “A break? And where would I go on this break, Joey?” Brooke grabs a large mixing bowl off the shelf and tosses it onto the worktop. “The coffee shop? Where Mason isn’t waiting for me? Or maybe I could go to that park he took me to with the water fountain. Or the campsite. That seems like a nice break spot.” She goes about retying her apron, although I’m not sure she needs to. It seems pretty damn secure. “Or maybe I’ll just march across the street and take my break over there? See if he looks as bad as I do. See if he’s feeling anything even close to what I’m feeling, because he fucking should! He should be the one crying, and losing sleep, and,” she gives up on the trying to tie the apron and rips it off, tossing it on the floor. “And heartbroken. He should feel like he’s dying, because that’s how I feel!”

Oh shit.

She huffs out a breath and wipes at her face. “Jesus Christ. I didn’t even want this!”

I watch Brooke turn away from me, her shoulders hunched forward, her hands coming up to cradle her face as she cries and cries and cries.

Fuck! I can’t take this! I can’t take anymore more of this. It’s killing me. I love Brooke. Wild, crazy, fun to be around, Brooke. This isn’t her. This isn’t even a dulled out version of her. I have no idea who the shattered woman is in front of me, but I know who’s responsible for it.

And that asshole is about to get a little visit from yours truly.

I pick up her apron and lay it across the stool. “Take a minute to get yourself together. I’m going to turn the sign on the door and step out to get something to drink. You’re amazing. I love you. Remember that.”

Spinning around, not giving her a chance to argue or me a chance to see any more of her devastation, I move into the front of the shop and flip the sign on the door, push it open to get outside, and cross the street, sprinting to avoid traffic.

I pull on the door handle.

Locked.

“Really? No classes today, Mister Hemsworth?”

Cupping my hand on the glass, I peer inside the dark studio.

I know Mason lives upstairs. Brooke told me his set-up is similar to Dylan’s. There’s a chance he isn’t here.

There’s also a chance he is.

I dig into my back pocket and pull out my wallet, fishing through for the bobby pin I keep inside.

Billy likes to cuff me. I like to get out of them without him knowing and pounce unexpectedly like a tiger in heat.

I always get off first. Those are the rules my baby likes to forget.

Straightening the pin, I slide it inside the lock and work the mechanism. It takes less than a minute until I’m rewarded with the soft click. The swift glide of metal. I pull the door open and lock it behind me, crossing the room and bounding up the stairs. I’m ready to use the pin again when I test the knob of the next door.

Surprisingly, it turns without any resistance.

I step out into the loft. The room is darkened, courtesy of the drawn curtains, but I can make out the large figure on the bed.

Face down, breathing heavily and clutching a bottle of what looks to be tequila, Mason seems to be out cold, fully clothed and still wearing his shoes. I’m willing to bet he’s going to be waking up with the hangover of his life.

Perfect.

I flip the switch on the wall. Light bathes the room, but the man on the bed remains motionless. Stepping over dirty clothes and other shit on the floor, beer bottles, a few books, and what looks to be camping gear, I move into the kitchen and grab two saucepans from a cabinet.

And then I bang the fucking shit out of them.

Mason’s head snaps up. He blinks fast, alarm and confusion in his

dimmed gaze as he attempts to focus on me. The bottle in his hand rolls off the bed and onto the floor, spilling amber liquid. He covers his one ear and buries his face into the pillow, groaning.

I toss the pans in the sink and brush off my hands.

Ah, that felt good.

“What the hell? What are you doing?” Mason grunts.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I got so hungry on my walk over here I thought about making something, and then I remembered that I don’t really cook. My boo does. Thought I’d make some music instead. Did you enjoy that?”

He grumbles something I don’t make out. He slides his hand off his ear and turns his head to look at me through half-lidded eyes.

“Afternoon,” I sing, smiling as I move closer. “I gotta say, you know, I am a bit disappointed in you, Mason. I mean, for years I have been let down by American men doing dumbass shit, but you have managed to prove to me on an international level that the majority of the male race are complete fucking idiots. Way to represent your country there. Bravo.”

“What . . . how did you get in here?” he asks, still looking just as disordered, trying to sit up and then moaning, collapsing back onto his stomach. “Fuck. My head. Can you switch that light off?”

I study my nails. “Nah. And to answer your question, I picked the lock. This building is like a billion years old. A monkey could get in here if he wanted to.”

Mason grabs a pillow and covers his head with it.

“You know I was rooting for you, right? Really rooting for you. And now I look like the shitty friend who pushed a guy who was *not* who we all thought he was on someone I really care about.” I kick the mattress, jarring his body a little. “Thanks for that. I doubt Brooke will ever take my advice again.”

Mason lifts his head, snatching the pillow off and glaring at me, until his sudden movement registers in pain across his face and he winces. “Could you

... please stop talking? Please.”

I bend down. “No. I have a lot to say, and you’re going to hear every word of it.”

Groaning, he rests his head back on the pillow, his eyes open but unfocused. “Fine. Get on with it then.”

“Gladly.” I cross my arms over my chest. A large object in the corner by the window grabs my attention. “Why do you have a tent set up in your room?”

Mason pinches his eyes shut, breathing deeply.

“Never mind. That’s not important. What you did, saying those things to Brooke and making her feel the way she does right now was beyond fucked up. We all have skeletons in our closet, Mason. I’m sure you’ve been with other women. You knew Brooke wasn’t a virgin when you first met her. That wasn’t something she kept from you. Getting on her about shit that happened before she even met you is a complete dick move. Yeah, it sucks that you saw it. I’m sure anyone would’ve reacted the way you did, but it doesn’t make it right.”

“Sucks?” He blinks up at me. “It more than sucks, mate. All right?”

We stare at each other for a moment, and it’s then I see how ragged he looks.

His blonde hair is a mess. Pieces sticking straight out and the rest plastered to his skull. His beard is grown out several days worth. It’s thick and dark. He looks older. The same shadowy smudges I just saw across the street on Brooke line his tired eyes. His clothes are wrinkled. I’m guessing they’ve been worn a couple days in a row now.

Jesus. He’s as miserable as she is.

“Is this what you’ve been doing all weekend?” I ask, gesturing around the room, picking up the tequila bottle and setting it on his night stand. “Getting drunk and then passing out?”

He nods slightly, barely a jerk of his head.

“You know what she’s been doing?”

Mason flicks his weak stare to me.

“Crying.”

It darts away again.

“She’s messed up over you. Really messed up, which is only adding to her stress. This fucking wedding she’s got . . .”

“Why?” he gruffly asks, cutting me off. His gaze still lost on something in front of him. “Why is she messed up? She shouldn’t care. She doesn’t love me. She said it herself. None of this ever mattered to her. I never mattered.”

Bending down, I get close enough to his face, he has no choice but to look at me. “You believe that? ‘Cause if you do, you’re more of an idiot than I thought.”

He grits his teeth. “She said she hates me.”

“I’d hate you too if you made me feel like a whore.”

His eyes go wide, as round as saucers. “What?” he asks, his voice eerily quiet.

Oh, for fuck’s sake. Of course he has no idea that’s how she would take all that. God, sometimes I wonder why I love men as much as I do.

Cock.

Yup. That’s why. That’s definitely why.

I straighten my spine. “I heard what you said. The whole ‘are there more of these tapes? Does everyone watch them?’ bullshit. How the fuck do you think she would feel after hearing that? And from *you*? The one person she cares about more than anything? Yeah, I’m sure she does hate you. But that isn’t all she feels.”

He swallows heavily. “I would never think that of her. I was just . . .” his voice trails off as he rubs a hand over his face. “Fuck, I was . . .”

“You were mad and upset, and you said some shit you didn’t mean.”

He releases a stiff breath, nodding, his jaw locked tight.

I squat beside the bed. He looks at me, the pain searing in his eyes. The

guilt. I'm happy it's there. He should feel really fucking sorry for this.

He made me commit a felony.

"And Brooke was upset, crushed actually, and said some shit she didn't mean," I tell him, watching his nostrils flare, his throat shuddering with the breath he takes. "We all have people in our past, Mason. Some of us more than others. I say, who the fuck cares? I know Billy's been with other men. But you know what? I fucking have him. They don't. He chose *me*. Brooke might've made that tape with someone else, but she never gave anyone what she gave you. To be honest, she never even came close. Forget about the tape and think about that. You got her. She chose *you*. Everyone else? Fuck em'."

I stand to my feet, Mason's eyes following my movement. I glance once more around the room. "You know, I always pictured you as a neat guy. This is quite a disappointment. Unless this is all the aftermath of Friday night then, okay, I can understand that. I've wallowed in filth when I've been on the outs with my man. Pretty normal reaction to heartbreak." I look down at him. "The tent I still don't get though. You've lost me there."

He shifts on the bed, turning onto his back and immediately clutching at his head and wincing in pain, his breath seething through his teeth.

"Brooke joked once about camping in here instead of outside. That's where I've slept the past two nights. Pretending she's with me."

My chest tightens.

Oh, my God. If I wasn't so irritated with this man, I'd give him the kiss of his life right now.

Smiling, I move away from the bed. "Aw, that's sweet. I appreciate your misery. I do. I am a full supporter of karma, and you deserve that bitch's wrath right now."

"Thanks," he mumbles.

"Anytime. Oh, and Mason?" Halfway out the door, I turn back, waiting for him to look up at me before I speak. "She loves you. Fix it, or you will have me as your enemy. And I can get all kinds of crazy up in here. Breaking

into a business is nothing. You won't have one when I'm finished."

He gives me a troubled look.

I wink, pulling the door shut behind me.

God, I am fucking fabulous. Someone should really write a book about me.



MASON

The door closes behind Joey.

Wincing through the pain tightening in my skull, I try and sit up, try and get out of this godforsaken bed and into the shower I desperately need, but the knife prying my head apart twists an inch deeper, lighting a fire along my scalp.

“Fucking hell,” I groan, grinding the heels of my hands into my eyelids and falling back onto the bed.

This bloody hangover. I can’t remember ever having one this awful before. Not even during the three years I spent at university.

Think you’ve outdone yourself, mate. And over the woman you love. Good on ya.

I close my eyes, hard, needing to see her, giving into this agony. I can’t fight it. I don’t want to.

Brooke touches my hand, looking up at me, smiling the way she always does with those dimples caving in her cheeks and that warm flush blooming across her face. Her big hazel eyes burning, the gold flecks dancing in the sunlight. She slides her hand along my palm, moving her fingers between mine and squeezing.

Squeezing.

Taking and laying claim.

Mine, she's saying.

My breath grows thicker, slow moving in and out of my lungs. My pulse is wild. I need to hold her.

Reaching out, lifting her chin so I can see that sweet face again, I startle at her appearance.

Big tears fall down her face, her lip trembles. She lets go of my hand and we're suddenly feet apart. I'm at the door, my hand on the knob, my body shaking so badly the hinges rattle. I hear her voice behind me, words broken apart by sobs, telling me I never mattered and that this meant nothing. She hates me.

"I will hate you for this!"

My eyes flash open. Wetness beads on my lashes. I wipe it away and flip over, groaning into the pillow and breathing anxiously against the sheet.

She said it. I didn't imagine that. She said it after confirming my biggest fear, that she never loved me. That it was all a lie, and I believed her.

Hell, it makes sense. Brooke was fighting me from the beginning. We wanted different things. She knew what I was after, and she figured out what she had to do to get the one thing she cared about.

Only . . .

It felt different. Pretty early on, it felt like maybe sex wasn't the only thing she cared about.

She wasn't pushing it. She wasn't grabbing my hand and hurrying us, getting what she wanted and getting rid of me. She was holding on and standing still, letting me lead her, trusting me, hesitating at first but finally opening up and slowly becoming the one to reach out. Saying things to me I was feeling. Even when I limited what we did because I knew my willpower with her was and always will be shit, she kept our pace. She was with me. She was willing.

She was mine, or she was a damn good liar.

Why would she tell me I never meant anything if it wasn't true? Because I hurt her? Because I reacted?

That disc. God, fuck, that disc. I never should've picked it up. Never should've played it, not without asking Brooke what it was first. Just knowing about it, I could've gotten past that and enjoyed my night with her. I could've pretended it didn't exist.

Maybe.

The truth is, I don't like thinking about Brooke with anyone else. Ever. I don't want to know about it. I don't want to run into some drunk tosser who's been with Brooke and makes it bloody known he's been with her, and I sure as fuck don't want to see it happening.

Watching her with some other bloke, seeing his hands on her, touching what's mine, thinking in that moment he has her when he never fucking came close, yeah, I reacted. I reacted how anyone would react seeing something like that.

Seeing someone you love taking pleasure you aren't giving.

I was angry. Murderous. Rage running in my blood, and the pain, fuck, that was the worst of it. I ached in my bones. There was a hole in my chest, I was sure of it. Bile singed the back of my throat. I couldn't breathe.

I looked at Brooke and all I could see was her with him.

I looked at Brooke, and all I could see was the woman on that disc, not the one I knew.

Not the soft, vulnerable woman I had in the alley. Or the shy one giving me a first in that photo booth. Not the Brooke who laughed and played with me, or the one who told me she loved me and that she was mine.

"Yours," she said that day. *"I thought I was yours. I want to be."*

Did I imagine it all? Did I imagine the hold she had around my heart and the tie I felt to hers? Did I imagine *this* Brooke?

I looked at her, and I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. I gave her my anger and my pain. I spoke without consideration. I reacted.

I reacted, asking something I was sure of minutes before.

I was sure.

She was crying. I knew she was, but I barely saw her tears. I couldn't focus on that. Then she spoke and her answer gutted me. Her truth.

Only . . .

What if it wasn't? What if Joey is right? What if we were both saying shit we didn't mean, both of us reacting, being rash and thoughtless of the other person. Not seeing each other's pain and only feeling our own.

Is it possible?

Fuck . . . is it?

He said she's been crying all weekend, that she's messed up over this. Why would she be messed up if I mean nothing to her? If *this* was always nothing?

Closing my eyes again, I see her face, her broken, agony-stricken face, covered in tears I'm now focusing on for the first time. Really focusing on. Her pink lips trembling and her entire body shaking.

Shaking like mine.

She was shattered. Fuck, she was. I couldn't see her suffering. Not while feeling my own. It blinded me, but now I see it. She was crushed. Devastated. Because of how I spoke, how I looked at her. My reaction ripping her apart, and my question . . .

My question destroying her.

"*What do you think?*" she asked me, begging me with her eyes to speak the truth for her. The only truth she wanted to say, but I didn't. I gave her nothing because I couldn't. I couldn't see her.

I couldn't see my Brooke.

"She loves you. Fix it."

I gave her nothing, and she gave me everything. Me. No one else. She chose me.

She chose me.

A shuddering breath bursts from my mouth, blowing hot against my face.
My Brooke.

My Brooke . . . she chose me. She loves me.

Loves. Me.

And I'm the one who made her feel like she never mattered. I'm the one who treated her as if she meant nothing that day.

I'm the one who made her feel like a whore.

Pain sears in my jaw as I grit my teeth.

What have I done? What the fuck have I done?

WHAT THE FUCK HAVE I DONE?

I need to see her. Need to talk to her. Need to hold her.

Groaning, feeling a thousand needles stabbing my skull and acid churning in my gut, shredding the lining of my stomach and burning my intestines, I ball my fists and try and push off from the bed.

I get an inch. Maybe. Pain doubles me over. Scorching pain behind my eyes, in the center of my chest, blooming out to my limbs, my fingers. I feel it everywhere. I roll onto my side and hold my head. I taste bile in my throat.

I have been doing nothing but drinking the past two days. Drinking and missing Brooke. Drinking and wondering if she was always too wild for me. If maybe we were doomed from the start.

Was the sole purpose of meeting this woman to show me everything I ever wanted, and everything I would never have? Is the universe that fucking cruel?

I couldn't answer that this weekend, or maybe I didn't want to. Fear bonded to my tongue and imprisoned my mind.

I have no problem answering now.

Impossible.

Impossible, because I love her wild. It was always part of the attraction with Brooke. I love her rough edges and her sharp tongue. I love the woman who pulled me into that photo booth as much as I love the one who shyly

came against my mouth. The sheep and the wolf. It has always been *everything* about this woman, her unbridled desire and the soft, sweet way she gentles for me. Her darkness and her light. I want them both.

I will always want them both.

We were never doomed. I didn't move to Chicago to open my own studio. That's not what brought me here. I moved to Chicago so I could find her.

That disc, it means nothing. He never had her. No one has ever had Brooke the way I have. No one ever came close.

I pinch my eyes shut and stay on my side, not moving. I breathe tensely through my nose. The pain decreases to a bearable throb.

A few minutes pass and I'm trying again, sitting up and then immediately collapsing back down when the room starts to spin mercilessly.

"Fuck!"

I roll onto my stomach and bury my face into the pillow. I feel my heart everywhere. In my skull, pounding, the echo radiating along my scalp and down my spine. In my chest where it aches, it doesn't beat. It won't beat there, not until she's with me.

Not until I have her.

It's probably for the best that I'm too sick to move. I know I look like shit. Probably worse than I feel. If I were able to get out of this bed, there wouldn't be anything stopping me from going to Brooke right now, not waiting and getting myself together. A change of clothes at least.

No. I wouldn't wait for clothes.

She deserves better than this version of me coming to her and begging for forgiveness. I need to sober up first. Shower. Fucking shave.

Christ, I'll probably scare her looking like I do.

I need to do this right. I won't be selfish right now. This is for her, not me.

Tonight. Tonight will be better. Or tomorrow after I get a decent night's

sleep and go long enough without a drink that I don't reek of alcohol. I can see her in the morning, first thing. I can meet her at work, or at the coffee shop, or . . .

My gut tightens. Rosie's.

Yes. Fuck, yes, tomorrow is Tuesday. Our breakfast, the one morning Brooke agreed to give me.

I still want it. Does she? Will she show up? Will she be hoping I'm there, even though I hurt her and she has every right to hate me?

Anxiety soaks into my bones. My heart rattles in my chest.

God, if she's there . . .

Fuck it. I might ask her to marry me before I get my apology out. I won't be able to stop myself.

No. Come on, mate, she deserves to know how sorry you are. Give her that first.

An extraordinary serenity warms my skin. I'm so close. So close to seeing her. If she shows up at Rosie's or not, this unbearable agony ripping me apart from the inside out is nearly extinguished because either way, I'm getting my girl back tomorrow.

And I'm never letting her go.

Swiping my arm along the bed, I grab the furry leg of the bastard stuffed koala and pull him against my side, squeezing him.

Only one more night in the tent without her.



BROOKE

I don't know what I'm doing.

I know what I *should* be doing. I should be sleeping, or at least trying to sleep. I could use more than what I've been getting, which is turning out to be only a few hours a night. Not nearly enough. I'm exhausted. Physically and mentally. It distracts me from the pain a little so I'm okay with being too tired to care about how I look, and nearly too tired to care about anything. But since I am awake, and showered, at least half-way put together, I should be walking in the opposite direction on Fayette street and heading into work, but I'm not.

I'm walking past the coffee shop, down the street a little further toward those yellow umbrellas.

Why? Why am I doing this? I need all of the practice I can get, every spare minute I have to work on those flowers, and instead I'm wasting my time going to Rosie's because it's Tuesday.

It's Tuesday.

Mason wanted this day so badly, this breakfast. Me, early in the morning, and I know he isn't here. I know it. I know it just like I know that at some point today I'm going to hear that door chime and hope that it's him, and it won't be. And then I'm going to cry, and throw something, and scream a

little. I'm going to miss him and hate him and love him because I can't turn that off yet, and I'm afraid I won't ever be able to.

I'm more afraid I'll never want to turn it off, and I'll keep doing this.

I know he isn't here, but I can't turn around. I can't stop myself from crossing the street and stepping up onto the sidewalk. It's programmed in me to look for him, to hope that he'll be here. To hope that he's still with me.

A shuddering breath fills my lungs. My eyes won't stop watering. I can avoid this torment. It isn't too late . . .

My body moves without thought. I scan the line wrapping around the building before stepping inside the busy café.

The young hostess looks up from her podium, ready to greet me, but I avoid her eyes and shift my attention around the room.

"Good morning. Is your party already seated?"

I hear her question as I study the faces in the booths along the window and the tables spread out along the floor.

Be here. Please, be here.

I take a step closer to look again, and again. One last time.

He isn't here, and I knew he wouldn't be, so why am I crying? Why?

The first tear slides down my cheek. I focus on the hostess and shake my head, biting at my lip. She gives me a concerned look. I need to get out of here before this becomes yesterday at the coffee shop all over again, where I sobbed uncontrollably the entire time I waited for my order.

I got a free muffin out of it, which was nice. Not that I had the appetite to eat it.

Spinning around, I push through the door and run straight into someone, bumping into their chest.

"I'm s-sorry," I mumble, wiping at my face and moving to sidestep them.

Large hands squeeze my shoulders. "Brooke."

My stomach drops. I look up at the person holding onto me, but I don't need to. I know that voice. That low, relaxed voice. It pours over me like sap

sticking to a tree. My bones suddenly feel heavier.

Mason studies me with parted lips and absorbing eyes. “God, I’m . . .” he pauses, moving his hands down my arms, squeezing gently. “It’s really good to see you.”

I blink up at him. “You’re here,” I whisper in disbelief, looking all over his face, waiting for him to vanish and for this to be just another layer of my nightmare. A cruel joke my heart is playing on me.

“Where else would I be?” he asks, smiling a little. “It’s Tuesday.”

My lip quivers. I don’t know what to make of this.

He’s here. He’s here, and he’s touching me. He’s smiling. The man who wouldn’t listen to me, who would barely look at me three nights ago.

The man who believes I never loved him and that everything I said was a lie. He’s here.

I wished and wished and wished for this, and now I suddenly can’t breathe.

I step back and his hands fall away.

“I can’t do this,” I utter, pushing past him and darting across the street.

I don’t know how to do this.

“Brooke!” Mason’s voice calls out behind me. He sounds urgent. I know he’s following.

And I run faster.

I pass the coffee shop, dashing in between people walking on the sidewalk. Knocking into several of them and blurting out an apology between hasty breaths.

Mason calls out again behind me. He sounds closer.

Tears sting my eyes as I push myself to move, to not let him catch up.

What am I supposed to say to him? I want to collapse into his arms and I want to scream into his face. I want him to hold me and I can’t stomach the thought of him touching me. I’m so confused. He isn’t supposed to be here.

Why is he here?

My breath is stolen from my lungs when my toe catches on something. The crack in the sidewalk. I don't see it. I go down hard, smacking the concrete with my hands bracing my weight and my knee dragging along the cement.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow," I cry, rolling onto my side and pulling my knee to my chest. The pain is instant and unforgiving. Flesh is torn open. My hands burning and cut up from the concrete, blood beading on my palms, but my knee, Jesus, my knee feels like it's on fire.

"Fuck! Ow. Ow. Ow."

Mason crouches down beside me, a bit winded. Concern tightening his features.

"Shit. You all right? Let me see. Come here." He tries to slide my jeans up my leg, my bloody knee visible through the hole ripped in it.

I brush his hands away, sitting up and wincing. "Stop. I'm fine. It's nothing."

Mason grabs my ankle. "Brooke, you're bleeding. Let me just check it. You hit the ground pretty hard. I won't hurt you, I promise. I just need to see your leg and make sure this isn't serious."

My chest shudders. I drop my hands to my lap, my palms burning.

"You already hurt me," I quietly reply, surrendering and slowly stretching out my leg for him.

His lips pinch together. We stare at each other, and he looks like he wants to say something in response but he doesn't.

Using gentle hands, he pulls my jeans up my leg and over my knee, making sure to keep the material away from my broken skin. He bunches my pants on my thigh.

I inhale a sharp breath when his warm hands hold my leg, his thumbs pressing and sliding around the tender area.

The world blurs around us. Heat blooms at the base of my spine.

God, this shouldn't feel good. I'm injured. This really fucking hurts.

Focus on that, Brooke. You could've died. The sidewalk almost killed you. This hurts. This hurts. This hurts. You're not enjoying any part of this.

I repeat that mantra in my head as he continues to examine my leg. *Thoroughly* examine it.

He massages my ankle, my calf. He pops my sneaker off and presses against the bones in my foot.

My toes curl. *What is he doing? I didn't hurt my foot.*

"Mason." I try and pull my leg back.

"Just checking," he says, smirking a little and popping my shoe back on.

Bending down, he squeezes my leg and blows softly against my cut, watching me with those bright blue eyes while he does it.

My breathing quickens. I don't know whether to cry or moan. I decide on a strange mix of both, which luckily goes unnoticed thanks to the car horn down the street.

"This hurt?" he asks, forcing my knee to bend and then straightening it. He repeats the motion.

I shake my head. "No. It just stings where it's bleeding. And it hurts around my knee-cap."

He nods slightly. "Good. It looks like it's just scraped really bad. You might've bruised the bone a little. You should be fine. No major surgery needed, I'm willing to bet."

"Okay." I pull my leg out of his lap and attempt to stand. "I need to go."

I shift my weight on the ground, trying to maneuver this on my own.

Getting to my feet on a bum leg and without the use of my hands quickly proves to be a hopeless endeavor. Not only because there's no way I'm going to be able to do this without any assistance, but also because Mason doesn't allow me much time to struggle.

"Let's get you cleaned up."

Leaning over, he scoops me into his arms and stands effortlessly, taking my weight.

Oh, my God. What is happening?

I squeak, flailing a little. “Put me down! What are you doing? I can walk.”

“You think you can walk?” he asks doubtfully. “Relax, sweetheart. I have you. It’s a bit of a hike across the street to my studio anyway. Rest your leg.”

Sweetheart? HIS STUDIO?

He sounds so cavalier, like nothing monumentally destructive happened between us three nights ago.

Did I imagine it all? Jesus Christ, am I going crazy?

I tilt my head to look at him.

Clean shaven, freshly showered, no signs of distress or obvious heartache in his eyes. He appears well rested and as stunningly attractive as ever.

I barely brushed my hair this morning and I’m not even sure my clothes match.

All of the pain I’m feeling shifts and centralizes in my chest. I squirm in his arms.

“Put me down right now! God, look at you! You should be destroyed! You should be the one crying and miserable, and instead you look like this? Get off of me! I said I can walk. I can walk.”

His eyes widen. Agony slips over him like a cloak.

I mentally question if I just slapped him in the face somehow, flailing about like I did.

That’s exactly how he looks.

“I am,” he whispers harshly, his body tensing against mine.

I still in his arms.

“I am miserable. I have been, but I’m holding you. I’m touching you and I can’t help the way my heart reacts to that. I’m sorry. Know that I’ve been in Hell, Brooke. Know that the past few days have been the darkest of my life. Every second we’ve been apart, I’ve been drowning.”

“But you look fine,” I tell him. “You don’t look miserable.”

You don't look like me.

“That’s only because I know something you don’t.”

“What?”

His lip twitches. “Let’s get you cleaned up first. That cut needs some cleaning out. I have that first aid kit in my loft. It has what we need.” He cradles me closer, dropping his head to breathe in my hair. “I have so much I want to say to you. So much I need to say. Let me do this first, yeah? Let me heal you, Brooke.”

Let him heal me. Is it even possible? I feel damaged beyond repair.

Closing my eyes and surrendering once again, I let my head fall against his chest.

The ground moves beneath me. I feel like I’m floating. Mason’s hold is gentle yet secure, preventing any bumping or jarring as he maneuvers us. I hear the light traffic on the street, the soft scrape of a key fitting into a lock. I smell the earthy scent of the studio and Mason’s clean soap.

I tilt my head up and rub my face into his neck. Fuck it. If it turns out I’m dreaming, I want this to be a really good fucking dream.

He ascends the stairs, shifting his arm underneath my knees. The door opens. I lift my head and look around his loft as he carries me to the bed.

It looks how it always looks. Tidy. I’m not sure you can see the floor of my bedroom anymore. I’ve stopped caring about neatness and organization. I’m barely sleeping in there anyway.

One thing seems out of place and catches my attention as he sits me on the edge of the mattress.

I stare at the tent in the corner of the room. It takes up the majority of the floor space near the window and bends awkwardly against the ceiling.

“Have you been sleeping in that?” I ask, wincing when I push my palms against the mattress, forgetting about my injuries. “Ow.”

“Yeah. I might get rid of my bed. I rather like it in there.” Mason grabs my wrists, turning my hands over to examine me. “Let me grab my kit. Don’t

move.”

I watch him pad into the bathroom, his running shorts hanging low on his hips. He returns seconds later with his kit and a bottle of disinfectant.

“Would you really get rid of your bed?”

He kneels in front of me, pouring some of the liquid onto a square piece of gauze. “Depends.”

“On?” I hiss through my teeth when he presses the cold gauze against my knee. My leg jerks. “Shit. That stings.”

“Sorry. I need to clean it out. You might have dirt in it.” He lifts the gauze and blows over my knee again. Our eyes lock. “Better?”

Christ, it just got a thousand degrees hotter in here.

Swallowing thickly, I nod. “Mm. A little.”

“I’ll be quick.”

He presses the pad against my skin again, lifting and moving it over my knee. I pinch my eyes shut and grit my teeth.

“You said it depends. What does it depend on?” I ask again, blowing out quick breaths and distracting my mind from the pain.

I am curious. Maybe it depends on him needing a new mattress and he doesn’t feel like purchasing another one. Maybe he’s debating on going rogue and drifting away from all uses of modern civilization.

Why would someone give up a bed for a tent?

“Depends on you,” he answers casually.

The sound of something tearing opens my eyes, or maybe it’s his response. He applies a bandage over my knee and looks up.

“Why would it depend on me?” I ask.

I watch his neck roll with a heavy swallow. He grabs another piece of gauze and pours some disinfectant on it, then holds onto the back of my hand as he presses the gauze against my palm.

It doesn’t sting nearly as bad as my knee did. I barely react to it, or maybe I’m just too engrossed in the vague man in front of me.

“Mason,” I press him.

He clears his throat. “If you want us to have a bed, or if you’re happier in the tent,” he explains as he cleans out my cut and moves to my other hand. His eyes focused on his task. “I’m not sure we can have both in here and be able to move around easily. It’s a bit tight in that corner. And I was thinking, if we got rid of the bed and set the tent up over here, we can fit your dresser and anything else you want to have. Whatever you want.”

I blink several times, trying to absorb and understand what he’s just said, but there’s no way . . . is he really suggesting what I think he’s suggesting?

He looks up at me after he’s finished and discarded the gauze. “Do you want bandages on your hands too? I wasn’t sure.”

“Did you just ask me to move in with you?”

Mason stares at me, his expression indecipherable. He doesn’t respond.

I swallow and blush instantly. My gaze lowers to my lap.

Oh, my God. It’s official. I’m crazy. I’m imagining conversations now.

“I did,” Mason finally says after what feels like an eternity of silence.

I slowly look up.

“That’s what I’m asking. I mean, it makes sense, yeah? I’m going to spend my life with you. You’re my forever, and I thought this would be a good way to ease you into agreeing to marry me, just in case that idea terrifies you. I’ll do it proper, I swear, Brooke. You deserve that. I’m just warming you up to it.”

My mouth falls open. Heat floods my face and my neck as my eyes struggle to focus on anything in front of me. “I think I need to sit down.”

“You are sitting down.”

“Well, then maybe I should stand up.”

He pushes lightly against my shoulder. “Your knee. Rest it for a minute.”

Frustrated, I swat at his hand. “Stop! Just stop, okay?” I yell, startling him a bit.

He drops his hand and nods, looking cautious.

Tears fill my eyes as I slowly fall apart. “I don’t understand what’s happening. Friday you let go of me. You promised you would never let go of me, Mason, and then I don’t hear anything from you for days. I thought this was over.” I shove against his chest. “I thought this was over! I’ve been dying and what the fuck have you been doing? Planning our life together? Are you serious?” I blink, sending fat tears down my face.

Hesitantly, he reaches up and wipes his knuckles along my cheek. “I’ve been dying too.”

“How?” I ask, watching him shift closer.

“The only time I left this room was to go to the liquor store,” he tells me in a somber voice, brushing my hair out of my face. “I’ve been drunk up through yesterday, Brooke. Black-out drunk. I don’t remember most of it. I canceled all of my classes and smashed my phone against the wall.”

“Why? So I wouldn’t call you?”

He shakes his head. “So I wouldn’t call *you*. God, I would’ve been bloody ecstatic if you would’ve called me. I came close. I nearly texted you a few times and I knew I shouldn’t. You hated me, but I missed you so fucking much.” He holds my face, tears brimming his eyes now. “So fucking much, Brooke. Every second you were away from me I longed for you. That distance killed me.”

I sniffle, thinking back to that night, to all the things that were said and the question that broke us.

“I fucked up,” Mason whispers, blinking and sending his own tears down his face, moving so close to me I can feel his breath on my skin. “I saw that disc, what was on it, and I . . . I lost it. Baby, I lost it. I couldn’t see you. I couldn’t hear what I was saying or how it sounded. I have never felt any of the things I feel for you for anyone else. I’ve never felt possessive before, but that night I wanted to find that guy and kill him for touching you. I would’ve killed him, Brooke.”

“Mason.” I clutch at his shirt, crying harder.

“You’re mine, and I saw you with someone else and that fucked with my head. I know I have no right to be that way. I know you were with him before you even met me, but fuck, Brooke, I feel like you’ve been mine for longer than we’ve known each other. You brought me here.” His hold on me tightens. “*You brought me here.*”

The devastation, the agony and regret in his voice, it’s ripping me apart. I can’t help but feel some blame for this.

And I missed him too.

I slide my hands to his face, ignoring the burn in my palms. “I’m sorry about that disc.”

“No.” He wipes away more of my tears. “I’m the one who’s sorry, Brooke. More sorry than I will ever be able to express to you. This is on me. I hate what I’ve done. I hate that I made you feel any less than how I think of you. I hate that you thought this was over. It could never be over for me. God, even when you said this never mattered and I meant nothing, I still loved you. That will never change. I will never let go of you.”

I drop my head, letting more tears fall. “I only said those things because I thought that was what you believed. I didn’t mean them.”

“I didn’t mean what I said either, sweetheart.”

Mason guides my chin up, sliding his body between my legs, cupping my face and making sure I look at him.

“I will never let go of you, Brooke. I told you the day we met that I wouldn’t be able to. I warned you then. You remember?”

“Yes,” I quietly reply, tears dripping off my jaw. “You made me so nervous. I think my heart knew who you were that day and it scared me.”

“Baby,” he murmurs, sliding his mouth over mine and pressing, melting us together.

He guides my head with his hand, tilting me to deepen the kiss, licking along my lip and moaning when I open for him.

We kiss and we kiss and we kiss, but it’s so much more than that. I can

feel his apology on his mouth. I can taste it on his tongue. His sadness and his guilt, I swallow it and give him my own.

It's the best and worst kiss of my life, because I know what we went through to have it.

I fist Mason's shirt and pull him closer. "I like that tent," I tell him, sucking on his lip. "Maybe enough to give up the bed."

He smiles. "It's so lonely in there without you."

"Take me in there now."

"Yeah?" He leans away. "Can your injury handle my lovin'?"

Laughing, I kiss his jaw. "You can be sweet, yeah?"

Smiling that gorgeous smile that nearly stops my heart at the same time as filling it, he stands and helps me to my feet.

"I can be sweet for you."

Mason assists me to the tent. I can put most of my weight on my knee, but not all of it. I have a small limp. Nothing that would prevent me from doing my job.

Thank Christ.

With some assistance, I push the flap aside on the tent and hobble inside. Falling onto my hip, I grab the stuffed koala off the sleeping bag and hug him to my chest.

Oh, my God. Has he been sleeping with this? My heart might burst.

Mason ducks his head and steps inside the tent. He taps the koala on the head. "He's not so bad. Seems docile compared to his mates."

I'm smiling, laughing through my pinched lips, until Mason reaches behind him and strips off his shirt.

His shoes and socks follow.

I loosen my hold on the koala and it rolls out of my lap and onto the tent floor. I gaze down at the impressive bulge in Mason's shorts.

My mouth waters. I am literally salivating at the thought of his cock in or anywhere near my body.

Preferably in. At least touching. I mean, I'll look at that masterpiece all goddamn day, but here, right now, I need to feel it.

Mason crouches beside me and kisses just below my ear.

"I love you," he whispers. "You with me, sweet girl?"

I close my eyes, nodding, fighting the biggest smile of my life.

"Yes."

I raise my arms and he strips my shirt over my head. My bra follows.

"Lie back," he instructs, popping the button on my jeans as I stretch out beneath him.

He's careful not to brush against my knee as he pulls down my pants. My jeans are discarded. I lift my hips, tugging at the string of my thong, biting my lip when Mason slides them down my legs and tosses them over his head.

He crawls over me. I tuck my fingers inside the waistband of his shorts and tug them down to mid thigh, my toes helping. My breath bursts against his neck. I lick and bite it, running my tongue up to his jaw.

His cock slides against my slit. I feel his hand between my legs, positioning himself.

My legs tremble.

"You're dripping," he murmurs, kissing my cheek as he slides in the first inch. "You feel how hard I am?"

I gasp, nodding and clawing at his back. He fills me slowly, stretching me perfectly. I squeeze his neck and lift my legs higher.

The pain in my knee is forgotten. Goose bumps break out across my flesh.

Mason thrusts into me, his pace measured and adoring. He whispers his sorry over and over against my lips, his voice growing incredibly quiet. When I stop hearing it, I close my eyes and feel his mouth moving the words his soul is screaming at me.

No apology has ever been felt like this.

He tells me he's mine, his body, his heart. I worship him with my hands,

roaming over the beautiful planes of his back, squeezing and rubbing his muscles, his trim hips and his ass. I press my lips everywhere, his face, his neck, his shoulders. I tell him that I'm his and I always have been. When he hears my declaration, he moans and fucks me harder. My pussy clenches around him and soaks his cock. Wetness leaks to my ass.

Mason drops his head and circles my nipple with his tongue. He sucks on the other, lifting and squeezing my breast, using his teeth when I beg him for it.

I fist his hair and cry out, arching away from the floor.

"Baby. Missed you," he rasps, grabbing my face and kissing me hard, rocking into me more steadily, drawing my orgasm. "It killed me being apart, Brooke. I need you here. Need you with me."

"Forever?"

"Fuck yes, forever. I love you. I will never love anyone else."

"Mason," I groan, gasping into his mouth. "If you ask me, I'll say yes. I'm not scared. I will always say yes to you."

I feel the rhythm of his heart change.

He growls, leaning back to look at me with wild eyes, his breathing heavy and desperate between us, his jaw clenched tight and sweat dripping down his face. I can see him struggling, trying to slow down the fervent drag of his cock while the muscles in his arms flex and swell on either side of my face.

He loses the battle.

Swearing and moaning my name, Mason pistons his hips and releases inside of me. His orgasm is exquisite, the tensing of his stomach, the noises he makes. He drops his head against my shoulder and pants in hot breaths, only contented for a few seconds before he's sliding down my body and nuzzling his mouth against my clit.

"Oh . . . oh, God."

I reach blindly for his hair, my eyes closed in bliss. I feel his hands take mine and link us together on either side of my body, his fingers pressing into

the tops of my hands.

My legs shake against his head as he sucks and sucks on my clit. I moan when he blows lightly across it.

“You’ll say yes?” he asks, and I know he’s smiling. I can practically feel it against my skin he’s so close to me.

“Yes,” I breathe.

He squeezes my hands. He rolls his tongue heavily over that smooth bundle of nerves, and I wait, I wait for him to ask while my body tightens and warms all over. I wait while blood rushes in my ears. I strain to hear his voice. *Is he asking?* The only thing I can hear is my own heartbeat and my answer, over and over as my orgasm pulls me apart.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.”

I collapse against the sleeping bag, my skin slick with sweat. I feel Mason’s lips on my thigh as he presses them there.

“Will you marry me?” he asks.

Smiling, I look down my body between my legs.

Mason raises his head. He looks so unsure for a man who just got his answer multiple times.

Was I not loud enough?

I sit up and grab his shoulders, pulling him until he’s on top of me. I kiss his mouth. “I’m sorry. What was that? I couldn’t hear you.”

His lip twitches. Leaning back a bit, he stares down at me, smoothing his hand over my cheek. “Will you?” he asks, staring at my mouth, waiting for that one word I will never make him wait for.

“Yes.”

He collapses, burying his face in my neck. “Baby.”

“Don’t let go of me.”

I feel the slight shake of his head, his lips on my skin and the wetness leaking from his eyes.

“Never.”



BROOKE

My hands are shaking. Sweat builds up on my palms.

Jesus. How hot are these people trying to make this fucking wedding?

I suppose there's a bright side to sweating my ass off standing here. If the bride hates the cake, it'll probably end up melting before she cuts into it anyway.

I'm doing this delivery alone. I wanted it this way, until last night when I cried to Mason and begged him to cancel his classes this morning so he could be here to support me. I took it back immediately when it actually occurred to me that he *would* do that.

I won't have him missing anymore classes because of me. He's missed enough.

Turning my head, I glance at the cake on the table beside me as I wait for the bride. To my standards, I think it looks . . . okay. Maybe better than okay, but I'm not the one getting married.

Yet.

My thumb twists the engagement ring around my finger.

The flowers look as realistic as I was able to get them. The icing is flawless. This morning when I snapped a picture of the finished product and sent it to Dylan she called me and squealed in my ear.

I begged her to stop. Reese really begged her to stop. She still has another week to go before Blake is due to arrive and if she goes into early labor because of me, I might as well pack up my apron.

Reese will fire me himself.

As I'm looking up the stairway leading to the bridal suite, my phone beeps in my back pocket. I slide it out and read the message.

Mason: How's it going, sweetheart? You doing okay?

A door closes at the top of the stairs. I glance up and see the bride and a woman walking with her in my direction. I look down and quickly type my response.

Me: I'll let you know in a minute.

I tuck my phone away. Standing beside the table, I clasp my hands in front of me and concentrate on remembering to breathe. It's a challenging task, and one I might benefit from disregarding.

Passing out right now does have it's allure. I'll miss the rejection.

The bride gasps, raising a hand to her mouth when she gets halfway down the stairs. Her eyes glued to the cake.

I don't know what to do. I debate on giving this disaster a right shove and fleeing out the doors behind me.

"Oh, my God. Look at it, Mom!" She hurries down the remaining steps and stops in front of the table. She fans her face. "Shit! I'm going to cry. I can't cry." She cuts me a look. "Don't make me cry!"

"Okay? Um . . ." I gesture at the cake. I pray I don't vomit all over it. "I'm s-so sorry. The flowers weren't the easiest for me, but I'm very certain it takes good. It's at least edible."

"What?" she laughs, moving quickly and throwing her arms around me. "You're so funny. I love it!"

"You do?"

"Yes!" She releases me and admires her cake. "The flowers are perfect.

They look just like my bouquet, right, Mom?"

The older woman beside her nods. "Absolutely stunning." She gives me a warm smile. "You have a real talent, young lady."

I look from the woman, to the bride, then back again. "Um . . . thank you. Dylan, our main baker, is on bedrest so I did this by myself. I was really nervous. I ate some of the practice one I did."

"It's perfect. All of it. God, thank you again." The bride squeezes my hand, then grabs her mother and flees back up the stairs.

I stand there for a moment staring at the cake. My cake.

I did it.

Holy fuck, I did it.

Pressing my hands against my cheeks, I spin around to walk toward the door. A figure halts my steps.

Mason stands in the doorway of the estate house, smiling at me, still in his sleeveless tank and running shorts. His phone in his hand.

I sprint across the marble floor and hurl myself into his arms.

"You're here! Did you see?" I lean back to see his face, my feet dangling in the air. "She loved it. She thought it was perfect. Even the flowers."

"They match her bouquet," he adds, kissing me sweetly.

"You saw." I squeeze him tighter. "What are you doing here? What about your class?"

He puts me down and walks me outside, resting his hand on my lower back.

"I don't have any until this afternoon."

After stepping off the last stair, I look up at him. "What? You canceled them again?"

"No. I never had any scheduled until later. I just let you think I did. I knew you wanted to do this alone. I just wanted to be here if you needed me."

I tug on his hand, pulling him against me. I press a kiss to his chest. "I love you."

“Yeah? Wanna get married?”

My laugh cuts with a squeal when thunder claps over our heads. My hands immediately fly to my ears. I slide closer to Mason and lower my arms.

“Oh, my God. That was so loud.”

He looks up at the rapidly darkening sky.

The first few drops of rain pelt against my face. The wind picks up around us.

“We should get going, yeah? It’s coming fast.”

Mason tugs on my hand and we dart through the parking lot.

There is no gradual incline of precipitation. The rain goes from a few sprinkles darkening the asphalt to buckets being dumped from the heavens.

I shriek, staying close to Mason as he humorously tries to shield me with his T-shirt. My hair sticks to the sides of my face and water pools in my sneakers. We’re both drenched by the time we reach the delivery van around the side of the building.

I tug my keys out of my pocket.

“Out of nowhere. It was so nice today too. The sun was out.”

I look up at Mason after he speaks, watching as he wipes his hand over his face and pushes back his wet hair.

He gives me an odd look. “What is it?”

Buckling over with my hand clutching my stomach, I fall into a fit of laughter as the rain continues to beat down on us.

“Something funny, gorgeous? You’ve lost me here.”

I grab his face and stand on my toes to kiss him. “It was beautiful today. All day, and now it’s raining.”

“Yeah,” he replies, still confused. “That it is.”

“It feels good, doesn’t it? I love sweet storms like this.”

Lightning flashes across the sky, startling me again. We both look up, then at each other.

“We need to get in the van,” he tells me. “With lightning, we’ll be safe in

there. Come on.”

A wicked little thought pops into my head. Biting my lip, I grab his arm and lead him around the back of the vehicle. I quickly unlock the door and climb inside.

“What are you doing?” he asks, looking around the open space.

I reach for him, fisting his shirt. “I’m willing to bet you’ve never had sex in a delivery van before.”

He arches his brow. Rain beads up on it. “Can’t say I have.”

“Me either.”

I tug and he tumbles on top of me, pinning me beneath him, or maybe he lunges for me when he hears I’m giving him another one of my firsts.

I’m too happy to care how I get him. He’s mine.

You hear that, bitches? MINE.

The End



Overjoyed by Matchbox Twenty

More Than Anyone by Gavin Degraw

Come Around by Rosi Golan

Replay by Zendaya

Sugar by Maroon 5

Clumsy by Fergie

Somewhere Only We Know by Keane



Mr. Daniels, thank you for being my best friend, for being an amazing husband and father, and for your steady support as we navigate through this crazy world together. Your face is my favorite face of all faces.

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Xo,

J

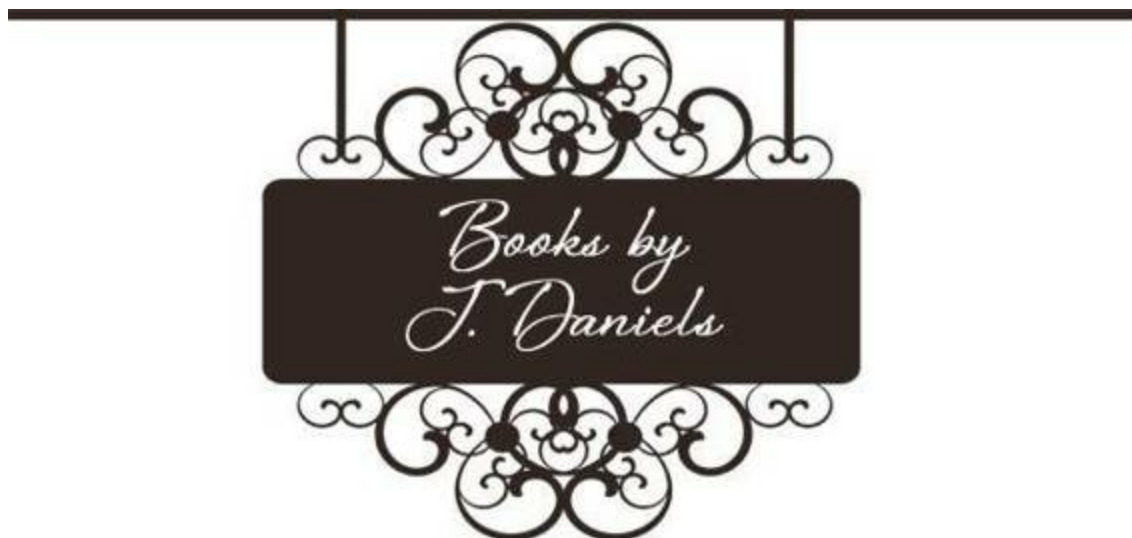


J. Daniels is the NY Times and USA Today Bestselling author of the Sweet Addiction series and the Alabama Summer series.

She loves curling up with a good book, drinking a ridiculous amount of coffee, and writing stories her children will never read. J grew up in Baltimore and resides in Maryland with her family.

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