



Between the Lines

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: As “Jojo Kink,” writer Jo Marchande lives an exciting, sexy life filled with wicked adventures that she shares with her readers. The unsexy truth, however, is that Jo can’t remember the last time she experienced anything remotely naughty. Well, except for those hot, needy nights with Theo all those years ago...

Then—out of sight and flushed with aching heat—Jo witnesses an illicit encounter featuring none other than Theo Laurence. The same boy she once loved, only now a gorgeous, hard-bodied man filled with raw sensuality. But Jo isn’t quite as hidden as she thinks... Now Theo is offering Jo the two things she wants most—a big break for her writing career and a chance to experience all the sexy, kinky things she’s merely written about. With every searing touch, Jo is beginning to realize exactly why only one man has ever been able to unlock her desire. Why only Theo can make her burn with need... And that letting Theo in might give Jo the naughty experience she craves...at a cost she never imagined.

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CHAPTER ONE

Then

HEALWAYSGOT what he wanted...except when it came to this woman.

Theo Lawrence groaned with something akin to pain as she arched her hips into him, her soft, heated flesh rubbing against his aching cock. He fisted his hands in the front of her thin, ribbed tank top, yanking the fabric up to expose her small breasts, the nipples rosy red from his fingers.

“Don’t stop.” Pressing her lips into the corded muscle of his neck, Jo Marchande dug her fingers into his shoulders until it hurt, sparking deeper need to life inside him. All the while, her hips rocked restlessly, teasing the rock-solid erection that was straining at the stiff denim of his jeans. “Please don’t stop.”

“You’re killing me.” He didn’t want to stop—oh fuck, how he didn’t want to stop. He’d never loved anyone in his life the way he loved her, and not being able to be inside her was exquisite agony.

The one decent thing he’d done in his life, however, was to keep his hands off his underage girlfriend. He loved her—loved her family—far too much than to disrespect them by taking her before she could possibly be ready.

It was the hardest thing he’d ever done. Especially when she was dead set on making him change his mind.

“You don’t have to hold back.” Hand sliding down between them, she rubbed her palm over his arousal. His erection jerked in response, angry at being confined to its denim prison. “You know you don’t. I want this. Want you.”

“Not while you’re still seventeen.” His words were strained. He tugged her shirt higher still, and she took the opportunity to rub her breasts against his chest, heating his skin to a feverish pitch. “It’s not right.”

“You’re only two years older than me.” Her voice was stubborn. This was nothing new—his girl was nothing if not determined. Single-minded. He admired it in every aspect of her life.

Except for this one.

“And two years won’t be a big deal when you’re eighteen,” Theo growled against the top of her head. He inhaled the scent of her shampoo, straight spicy mint, something he’d never be able to smell again in his life without being aroused. “Tomorrow. We can wait one more day.”

In Massachusetts, the age of consent was sixteen. It damn near killed him to do it, but he was making them wait until eighteen. It just seemed like the right thing to do.

“No.” That stubborn streak in her voice thickened, and she dipped a finger inside his waistband. She swiped over the swollen head of his cock, and he groaned when a droplet of liquid leaked out in response.

“Jo.” Drawing on every last ounce of strength that he had, he forced himself to take a deep breath, pulling back and putting a single precious inch of strength between them. It wasn’t much, but it allowed him to inhale without the smell of her skin sinking into the very cells of his being. “It’s not happening. You know me well enough to know that I don’t change my mind.”

“I’m not asking you to.” He looked down into her face, the one he’d known since they were kids. Mischief was sparkling in her storm-gray eyes, bubbling up through the thick haze of lust.

“You’re going to have to use smaller words.” Dipping his head, he pressed a soft kiss to her forehead, then trailed his lips down over her cheekbone. “All of my blood has flooded south of my brain. Far south.”

She laughed breathlessly, and he felt the exhalation, warm as it teased over his chest. “I’m not asking you to change your mind. But I am asking you to...to fuck me.”

His mouth went instantly dry, his cock surging forward, cheering at her words. Her dirty words, her innocent tone belying them, were rapidly bringing him to the absolute edge of no return.

“I’m not sure you know what it does to me, hearing that sweet little mouth of yours talking about such filthy things.” Releasing her tank top with one hand, he dragged it up, up until he could rub his thumb over her kiss-swollen lips. In response, she swiped her tongue over it, then sucked it into her mouth, showing what she wanted to do to another part of him.

What they both wanted her to do.

“I’m going to do more than talk about it,” she insisted. Slowly, slowly, she started to work at his belt, the sound of metal on metal one of the most erotic things he’d ever heard. “Haven’t you figured it out yet?”

“Jojo,” he exhaled, running the tip of his tongue over the seam of her lips. She parted them beneath him, and he licked inside. “No more teasing. What are you talking about?”

“I’m not seventeen anymore.” She grinned up at him triumphantly. Blood suffused her pale, creamy skin, camouflaging the golden freckles that he knew were there. “It’s after midnight, Theo. And I know exactly what I want for my birthday.”

Holy shit. Releasing her long enough to look at his watch, he watched as the numbers turned over from 12:02 to 12:03.

She was right. She was eighteen now. And with that knowledge, his noble intentions melted like sugar in a hot pan, becoming something even better.

He growled in response. He’d made it. And now there was nothing holding him back from sinking between those pale, pretty thighs that had taunted him for so incredibly long.

“Put your arms around my neck,” he demanded. She cried out when he palmed her ass, lifting her so that she could wrap her legs around his waist. Again, the heat of her sweet core taunted his cock, but it was different now.

Now it just spurred him on because finally, finally, he could touch her the way they’d both wanted him to for the last year—the longest year of his life.

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“I can’t believe we’re finally doing this,” she gasped as he carried her to the foot of the bed. Sliding her down his body, he set her down on her feet, then again fisted his hands in the front of her thin cotton tank top.

“I can.” He grinned wickedly as he tugged. Jo exhaled harshly as her shirt ripped down the front. For a split second he felt bad—he’d ruined her shirt, and her family didn’t have a lot of money.

But when she looked up at him, there was no judgment in her eyes, just raw need.

He’d buy her a new shirt—he’d buy her anything she wanted, if she’d let him. Heaven knew he could afford it. Right now, though, the last thing he wanted was for her to start thinking about the differences between their lives—the one point of contention between them.

Right now he didn’t want her thinking of anything. He just wanted her to feel.

“Hold still.” He whispered the words into her ear, savored the resultant shiver. She was nervous, and he didn’t mind that.

By the time they were done, she’d be too lost in sensation to worry about anything.

He palmed her breasts, running his thumbs roughly over her distended nipples. She rarely wore a bra. She claimed that her breasts were too small to need the support. He didn’t care what size they were, because to him they were just perfect.

And the lack of bra gave him easier access to heaven. Who would complain about

that?

Her breath hitched when his fingers worked at the button of her low-slung jeans. The denim was worn, the fastening giving way easily. Hooking his thumbs in the waistband, he worked the garment down her slim hips until it fell to the floor. She was left in nothing but a pair of flimsy blue cotton briefs, hardly a barrier to the sweet heat between her legs.

“Lie down on the bed.” She did as he told her, scooting back until her head was cushioned on the pillows of his bed. Her slim, pale figure stood out in stark contrast to the deep sapphire-blue of his linen duvet, and he knew that he’d never look at his bed the same way again.

He watched as she propped herself up on her elbows, her avid stare fixed on him. Her lips, swollen from his kisses, parted unconsciously as he undid the buttons on his expensive dress shirt, leaving it hanging open as he pulled his leather belt from his jeans. He was so hard that it was nearly painful, and yet he savored the bite of discomfort before popping the button and allowing the heavy length of his cock to breathe, his swollen length clearly outlined against his underwear.

“Oh.” On the bed, Jo’s entire body flushed. She ran her tongue over her lips, and he barely suppressed a groan as he imagined those lips swallowing him deep.

“You’ve felt me before.” He’d stuck to his rule, no sex until she was eighteen, but that didn’t mean they hadn’t touched. But this was the first time she’d seen him naked, and he felt a strange surge of pride at her hungry gaze.

He wasn’t a virgin, but nothing turned him on like knowing that she’d chosen him to introduce her to this kind of pleasure. It was a heavy responsibility, but he knew he was up to the task.

“I know,” she whispered, her words rasping against the still air of his room. “But I’ve never really thought about...you know...how it’s going to fit.”

Theo closed his eyes, his head falling back. What had he done in his life to deserve her?

He hadn’t done anything, but he wasn’t that noble.

“It’ll fit,” he promised, shoving his jeans down his hips. He stepped out when they fell to the floor, then rubbed a hand over his erection, which tented the front of his black briefs.

Jo groaned, shifting restlessly on the bed. The sight of her arousal dampening the tender skin of her inner thighs was nearly his undoing.

Quickly, he shed his shirt, then let his briefs fall to the floor. He stood before her naked, and though he wanted to pounce on her and bury his face between her thighs, he forced himself to hold still, letting her look her fill.

He knew what she saw when those inquisitive gray eyes looked him over. He was tall, a good half a foot taller than her five foot six. He was also more than a little vain, and he started every day in the gym on the third floor of the house he shared with his father. He may not have had the drive for school or business that his dad had hoped to see in his offspring, but he never missed a session with his weights.

Because of that, his body was chiseled and solid as a rock, and he’d shared that body with more than a few girls before he’d finally convinced Jo to date him. He knew that girls liked his abs, his cock, and even the fact that his skin was dark gold and his hair nearly black, his coloring thanks to the Brazilian mother who had died when he was a baby.

Yeah, he knew he was a good-looking guy. And that plus his family money meant that he'd never been hard up for someone to warm his bed.

But he'd never, ever wanted anything more than what he had right now—Jo Marchande in his bed, wanting him.

He had to make this good.

“Spread your legs.” He clasped her ankles in long fingers, rubbing his thumb over the tender skin at the inside of each. She shuddered, then gasped when he tugged, pulling her to the edge of the bed. Kneeling on the plush carpet that covered his bedroom floor, he hooked her legs over each of his shoulders, opening her wide. Exposing that part of her that he craved.

“Theo... I've never...” Jo squirmed, her heels digging into his back. “I don't know how to do this.”

“You don't have to do anything except take what I give you.” Beneath his avid stare, the thin cotton of those panties grew wet. He traced it with a finger, circling the hard bud of her clit, and she shuddered in response.

He pressed his lips to the supple skin on the inside of her thigh, just above the curve of her knee. Her quick exhale told him that she was trying desperately to hold her breath. That she was nervous.

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Knowing that the nerves would only help to heighten her pleasure, he slid his lips up only the barest inch, determined to draw out the sensations for her. She shifted, and he could feel her heat, smell her arousal.

Trailing his lips farther up her thigh, he teased them both by trailing his tongue over the crease that divided her leg from her abdomen. She jerked beneath his mouth with a breathless laugh.

“Liked that, did you?” He repeated the motion, and she groaned. He slid his mouth up even more, closer to his goal, savoring the salt on her skin.

“Theo,” she breathed as he brushed his lips over the soaked fabric of her panties. “Oh God. I can’t—”

“Oh yes, you can.” He flicked his tongue over the cotton, and her hips lifted off the bed.

“I’ve waited so long for this.” Nuzzling his nose against her heat, he hooked his fingers into the waistband of her simple underwear. Not wanting to take the time to pull them all the way off, he pulled hard and grinned when they ripped, allowing him to toss them aside.

She didn’t give him hell for destroying a second item of her clothing, just rocked from side to side on the cool sheets of his bed. He took a moment to simply look at the glistening pink of her center, hot and wet and all for him.

Jo groaned. This was the only time she got quiet, his girl—when she was aroused. It

made him want to drive her so crazy that she got loud again.

It made him want to make her scream his name.

Inhaling her scent, which reminded him of some kind of exotic cinnamon, he leaned forward and swiped his tongue through her folds.

“Oh my God,” she breathed, arching up off the bed. He licked again, and she tried to close her legs against the onslaught of sensation, but he was there, the width of his shoulders holding her wide-open.

With long, slow swipes of his tongue, he licked her from bottom to top, brushing the flat of his tongue over the hard nub of her clit every time. She tasted so sweet, and he wanted more.

Using his thumbs, he parted her lips, focusing his attention on the swollen bud. Her heels began to drum into his back, her breath coming in gasps.

“Theo. I can’t. It’s too much.” He could tell that her arousal was spiking hard and high. She didn’t have much experience—hell, any experience—and he knew that it wouldn’t take much to send her over.

That was good. He was going to make her come now, and then again. He was going to make sure that she was so ready for him that when it came to the part that might hurt, she would simply melt around him like ice cream left in the hot, hot sun.

CHAPTER TWO

“THAT’SIT, BABYGIRL.” Using one finger, he traced around her slick opening, barely dipping inside. She groaned, arching her back, pressing herself against his mouth greedily. “Let go. I’ve got you.”

“Theo!” She bucked against his mouth as he increased the flicks of his tongue against her clit. Her thighs started to shake, and then her entire body tightened as her pleasure overtook her.

He buried his face between her legs as she came, kissing her now with broad swipes of his tongue. Her words were unintelligible, and when he looked up the slim column of her body, he saw her face flushed the prettiest shade of pink, her eyes closed, her mouth parted for the breathy little pants she didn’t seem able to help.

Before the waves stopped battering at her, he pressed a kiss to her inner thigh, then gently moved her legs from where they were clenched around his ears. She lay panting on the bed as he crawled up beside her, placing one hand on the dip of her impossibly slender waist.

He watched as she opened her eyes, fascinated by the glints of auburn in the mink-colored lengths of her lashes. Beneath them, those stormy gray eyes were glittering with need, and he knew, he just knew, that his dirty girl already wanted more.

“Did you like that?” He brushed his lips over the shell of her ear, nipping at the lobe. She nodded frantically but remained silent.

Squeezing her hip, he splayed his palm over the flat, quivering plane of her belly.

“What was that?” Chuckling as she garbled something in response, he slid his hand down, dipping between her legs. “I didn’t understand. I guess I’ll just have to check for myself.”

Her hands fisted in the quilt as he used his fingers to do what his tongue just had. Pinching her clit lightly, quickly, he waited until she moaned, then slid a finger into her waiting heat.

She was wet, and tight, and if she felt like fucking heaven on his finger, then what would she feel like around his cock?

“More,” Jo whispered, and he realized that she’d gone still. She was waiting, he realized, for it to hurt.

He didn’t want it to hurt.

“Are you sure?” She nodded, so he worked his finger out slowly, then in and then out.

She hissed when he added a second, scissoring them the slightest bit to stretch her. He kept his gaze on her face, searching for any sign of discomfort. Instead, he saw raw, unadulterated need.

He would make this good for her.

Returning his attention to her clit, he caught it between his fingers and rubbed. Wetness slicked her folds, and within moments another keening cry slipped from between those pretty lips. He let her ride the wave of her second orgasm before reaching over her to his mahogany bedside table, removing a small foil packet from

the drawer.

Her eyes widened a bit when she saw what he'd retrieved, and he watched the slim column of her throat as she swallowed thickly.

“Are you sure about this?” It just might kill him to stop right now, with her taste on his lips and her slickness on his fingers, but he would. He'd do pretty much anything for her.

“Don't you dare stop!” Rising up on her elbows, Jo caught his chin in her fingers and pulled him down for a kiss. She sucked in a surprised breath, and he knew that she was tasting herself on his lips.

The greedy noise that slipped from her mouth was the hottest fucking thing he'd ever heard.

With hands that were far less steady than any other time he'd done this, he tore open the foil packet. Her curious eyes watched avidly as he removed the ring of latex, smoothing the sheath down over the length of his erection.

He hissed when she reached down and danced her fingers over his cock. God, he'd dreamed of this, of her hand on him, stroking him just like this.

Pleasure began to gather all the way down in the soles of his feet, and he jerked back with a rueful laugh.

“Did I do something wrong?” She sat up, eyebrows raised in alarm.

“Not at all.” Catching her hand in his—the one that had just been stroking him—he pressed his lips to it in a kiss. “It was a little too good, actually.”

“Oh.” She drew out the word, understanding dawning. “Duly noted.”

She smirked. What choice did he have but to kiss her?

They fell back down to the bed, the covers tangling around them. Rolling on top of her, he braced his weight on his arms on either side of her head, looking down into that face that he knew like he knew his own.

Jo Marchande wasn't classically pretty. Her face was a bit too square, her features too angular. Her milky-white skin stayed pale year-round, except for the times she got so absorbed in a book she was reading out in the sun that she didn't realize she was burning. The smattering of golden freckles stayed year-round, too, and he took a moment now to brush a kiss over them on each cheek.

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It was her eyes that made people look at her twice. They were huge, a stunning gray that shifted with her mood, surrounded by lashes that she never bothered to tint with mascara. She never bothered with makeup at all, something he loved because it was so different from all of the other women he knew.

Her hair spread out around her head on the pillow as she returned his gaze steadily, the chestnut color adding warmth to that pale skin. No, she wasn't classically beautiful, but he wouldn't have changed a damn thing.

She was his.

"I love you." The words slipped from his lips before he could even think about what he was saying. Her mouth parted in surprise, but then he was burying his face in that long mane of hair, tucking his hand between her legs. She rocked up against him as he tested one more time that she was ready.

His fingers came away soaked.

"Theo, I—" The words got caught in her throat as he reached between them and lined the head of his cock up with the sweet, sweet heat of her center.

She gasped as he slid just the head of his erection into her slickness. He sank his teeth into his lower lip as nerves fired to life. It was everything he could do to hold still, letting her adjust to the feeling of him inside her.

He wasn't expecting her to grab onto his hips and rock herself up.

“Fuck,” he cursed as he slid deeper into her soaking-wet channel. He wanted so badly to be in deep, to claim her from the inside out, but when the head of his cock met resistance, he had to force himself to still.

His limbs shaking with the exertion of holding back, he pressed his damp forehead against hers, looking right into her eyes. Their breath mingled, fanning out over their faces, and he kissed her again, their first kiss with him inside her.

“Are you ready?” He rocked back and forth the slightest bit, testing. She whimpered, but it was a sound of pleasure, not of pain.

“Hurry up.” Her voice was greedy, her fingers eager as they dug into his ass. She pulled him closer, and he resisted for just one more minute before he pressed forward, the cock that was swollen past the point of pain pushing deeper.

Beneath him she winced, sinking her teeth into her lower lip. He automatically stilled, but she urged him on with an impatient hiss.

Her body resisted him, clenching tightly until finally something gave way, allowing him to slide home. He grunted as he sheathed himself fully inside her, the sensation causing his eyes to roll back in his head.

“Holy shit,” Jo whispered beneath him, looking up at him with eyes that were bright.

“It will only hurt for a minute. I promise.” Theo rocked inside her, just a bit to test, and she moaned.

“It hurts, but not the kind you mean.” Her hands moved from his ass to his hips, and she shifted impatiently beneath him. “It hurts because I don’t even know what this is, but I want it so bad. Please, Theo. Please. Move.”

The last strings of his self-control snapped. With small rocking motions, he pulled back, then worked his way back in. He'd never had anything so tight, so hot around his cock, and if he wasn't careful, he was going to lose it before he could make her feel good again.

She wouldn't let him be careful. She rocked beneath him, urging him to go faster and faster. Her tight sheath was swollen, pulling him back in again and again. The pleasure rose hot and fast, and sweat beaded on his forehead as he strained to hold back.

Slipping one hand between their bodies, he located her clit and focused his attention on it. At the same time, he dipped his head and sucked one of her puckered nipples into his mouth.

Beneath him she went taut as a bow. Her cleft tightened as her eyes went wild with pleasure yet again, and he felt his own release start, fire licking along every inch of his skin. Closing his eyes, he finally allowed himself to let go, to let himself revel in the fact that Jo Marchande, the strong, proud girl that he'd loved since the day they met, had given herself to him.

After, he pressed a kiss to her brow. Pulling out, he disposed of the condom, then slid back into the bed, tucking them both under his soft, expensive sheets. She was already drowsy when he tugged her against him, fitting his chest to her back.

"You okay?" He tucked a ribbon of hair behind her ear. She sighed, a small murmur of contentment that made his stomach do a small flip.

How was it possible that she was his? He'd never done anything to deserve having someone so wonderful in his life.

According to his father, he was lazy. He had no drive, no direction, no purpose in life.

He was squandering the opportunities that he had. This, of course, was in direct contrast to Theodore Lawrence Sr., who owned a huge import-export company. His mother, famous in her native Brazil before her death, had been a world-renowned concert pianist.

He'd never live up to either of them, so he didn't bother to try. He knew what he was worth, and it wasn't much. So the fact that Jo Marchande, the woman who had imprinted herself into his very DNA, had deemed him worthy?

It wasn't something that he would ever take for granted.

"I've never been better." Casting a sleepy smile over her shoulder at him, she snuggled back into his arms. "Can I stay?"

His heart skipped a beat, sending his pulse skittering to catch up.

"You can stay." If he had his way, she'd stay forever.

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“You just couldn’t control yourself, could you?”

Theo stiffened, a steel rod snapping into place in his spine. Slowly, he turned, doing his best to look nonchalant as he leaned back against the endless expanse of marble countertop in the rarely used kitchen of the house he shared with his father.

“What am I lacking control in this time, exactly?” His voice was cold when he spoke, every trace of the warmth he’d had for Jo frozen into daggers of ice, meant to maim or at the very least protect. “You have such a long list, you’ll forgive me for not immediately understanding what it is that you’re referring to, this time.”

“You know exactly.” His father stepped out of the shadows and into the dim kitchen, leaning against the breakfast bar, his stance mirroring Theo’s own. He lifted his heavy crystal snifter of expensive scotch for a small sip. His gaze slid over the matching one in his son’s hand, but as per usual, he said nothing about the fact that Theo was drinking, even though he wasn’t yet twenty-one.

Theo knew that, at the end of the day, Theodore Sr. just didn’t care.

“I assume you’re referring to Jo.” The words were sour in his mouth. He hated even saying her name right now, not wanting to cast shadows on something that, to him, was so perfect. So theirs.

“Of course I’m referring to Jo.” His father’s voice was layered heavily with impatience. “They are family friends. They are our neighbors. They are good people.”

Theo said nothing. What was there to say?

“You have nothing to offer any of them,” his father continued. The utter contempt in his voice was clear. “You’ve disappointed me time and again, Theodore, but I thought that you at least had the morals to stay away from those girls. Shame on you.”

It shouldn’t have hurt, but it did. Theo took a hefty swallow of his drink, focusing on the fire that it left as it traveled down to his gut. Taking a moment to study his father—the man he’d come from—he wondered how a person could seem to detest someone who had come from them so very much.

Ha. Why was he even questioning that? He knew exactly what his father saw—he saw his lost wife. Theo had inherited his golden skin, his exotic features, his glossy black hair, even the charm that he used regularly, from his mother.

Theo knew that, if given a choice, his father would rather have his mother here in his place.

“Did you hear what I said, boy?” Theodore Sr. set his glass down on the polished countertop with a sharp crack. The hand not holding Theo’s own glass fisted in the thick velvet of his robe, kneading at it like a stress ball.

“Jo and I have been dating for over a year.” Theo tried to rein in his temper. “It’s not like I plan on sleeping with her and leaving the next day.”

“You shouldn’t be sleeping with her at all,” his father snorted with derision, shaking his head. “What if you got her pregnant? You really think you could make a go of it? You’d run right out the door, and then where would she be?”

Theo expected nothing less from his dad, but hearing the harsh words was still a lash from a whip. He knew he’d do no such thing, but hearing out loud what his own flesh and blood really thought of him reminded him of the worst hangover he’d ever had.

Try as he might, he just couldn't ever outrun the nagging pain.

"Have a nice night, Dad." Draining the last of his scotch in one giant swallow, he left the kitchen through the servants' door, preferring the longer route back to his room to going anywhere near his father.

The conversation they'd just had was nothing new. Often he was able to completely deflect the criticism, keeping the barbs from landing and piercing his skin.

Tonight, though? Some of those words had landed.

He loved Jo more than anything. But what if his father was right?

CHAPTER THREE

“HAPPYBIRTHDAY, DEAR JOOOO, happy birthday to you.”

“Cake! Gimme.” Standing up in her seat, Jo reached for the tower of cupcakes that Mamesie had so painstakingly arranged on the antique silver platter. Grabbing the one with the most frosting, she sank her teeth into the decadent chocolate cake, shuddering with pleasure when the sweetness of the icing hit her tongue.

“I’m hurt.” Warm breath misted over her ear, and she made a sound low in her throat. “I thought I was the only one who could pull that sound out of you. Yet here you are, cheating on me with a cupcake.”

“Sorry, babe.” Turning in his arms, she tuned out the chatter of her mother and three sisters as she focused in on Theo. Thinking about what they’d done last night had a fizzy feeling bubbling up inside her, making her feel like she’d drunk a giant glass of champagne too fast. “The cupcake offers instant gratification. Unlike someone I can think of, who made me wait an entire year.”

“It was worth waiting for, though, wasn’t it?” His voice was a low rumble against her ear. And even though she was still sore, she felt molten heat gather between her thighs. “At least, you seemed to think so this morning when you were moaning my name.”

She uttered another small moan at that. Putting space between them before she shoved the cupcakes off the table and pulled him down for another round, she tucked another bite of cupcake in her mouth as a distraction.

“I know you’re trying to change the topic, but I don’t think it’s working the way you hoped.” Jo sucked in a sharp breath as Theo’s stare tracked the way her tongue was licking sprinkles off the top of the cupcake. “I can think of a lot of places that would look awfully pretty with a bit of white icing on them.”

“Stop it!” Elbowing him, Jo took another deliberate step away, conscious of the fact that her family was right there. But when she looked around, Mamesie had gone into the kitchen for plates, and her sisters Beth and Amy were fully occupied by their own pieces of cake, still being young enough to have their attention fully commanded by the promise of sugar.

Her older sister, Meg, though, cast her a wink before handing her a napkin. Even if she hadn’t heard what was said, it was obvious that she knew that something had changed with her little sister. In response, Jo felt her cheeks heat.

“I need to use the bathroom.” Giving Theo’s hand a little squeeze, she swallowed the last bite of her cupcake and excused herself. She headed upstairs to the bathroom she shared with Amy rather than the small powder room on the main floor.

She splashed icy-cold water on her face, which felt good but did nothing to fade the flush on her cheeks. How was it possible that she wanted Theo again already? Did that wanting ever stop?

Wanting to give her telltale blush time to fade before she returned downstairs—Mamesie was no idiot, but Jo still wasn’t keen on the idea of flaunting her newfound sexuality in front of her mother—Jo wandered down the hall to her bedroom. Her laptop sat open on the slab of plywood and two sawhorses she used as a desk, flashing a retro screen saver of different shapes made of neon lines, undulating around the screen. Yellow legal pads clumped in haphazard piles around the computer, most covered in her messy scrawl.

The keyboard beckoned. She still had a thousand words to go on her latest story. It was just a little article for the local paper, something she submitted every couple of weeks, but for every article that they published, she received a check for a hundred dollars. It wasn't much, but she loved the process of sealing that check in the crisp white envelope, of feeding it into the bank machine to deposit it into her account.

Mamesie had raised her, Meg, Beth and Amy by herself, and while they certainly no longer had access to some of the finer things that they'd had when her dad had been alive, she knew that Mamesie would never accept money from her girls—not unless the situation were truly dire. So Jo tucked away what she could. She didn't dare to dream too big, but maybe one day she could take some journalism courses. Learn a way to apply her writing to a career, when she'd saved enough.

She reread what she'd written earlier while she waited for her body to calm the hell down. Pulling out the creaky desk chair that she was pretty sure bore a permanent imprint of her butt, she rolled up to her laptop and started clicking through.

“What are you doing up here?” She had no idea how long it had been when Theo spoke from the doorway, scaring the shit out of her. She jolted, her elbow sliding over the keys of her keyboard. Swearing, she hurriedly pressed the back arrows to restore her work.

“I came up to cool off a bit after you got me all hot and bothered,” she replied, her gaze veering back to her screen. She was almost at the end. She was pretty sure she only needed a couple more sentences, and they were right there, fresh in her head...

“It's your birthday party.” Theo frowned at her computer as he entered her room, closing the door behind him with the heel of his shoe—his fancy, hand-tooled, Italian leather shoe. Jo didn't pay any attention to fashion, none at all, but her sister Meg did, and she was forever sighing over the gorgeous things that the Lawrences had.

Things the Lawrences had. Things the Marchandes did not. Neither family talked about it, but the difference in their positions in life was always there, the elephant in any room in which members of both families had gathered.

At least, it was always there for Jo. It hadn't been, not always—back when her dad had been alive, they'd enjoyed a lot of the same privileges that the Lawrences had. She knew that Theo and his dad couldn't have cared less that there was now a class difference between their families, but it also meant that when it came to certain things, like money, Theo especially just didn't understand.

“Are you working?” Hastily Jo tried to close out of her document, but when she looked up and saw the puzzled expression on his face, she knew that he'd seen. “Why are you hiding up here working when everyone is downstairs waiting for you?”

“I told you. I came up here to cool off a bit.” She could hear the defensiveness in her voice and pulled in a deep breath. “I read a few lines of my article and got sucked in.”

“Well, come back down.” He reached for her hand. “It's present time. Amy's about to pee herself, she's so excited.”

Jo started to rise, but something about the way he was being so insistent had her hackles rising. Lowering herself back to her chair, she crossed her arms over her chest, the movement stiff. “Tell them I'll be down in ten minutes. I just have a few more lines to finish.”

“Forget the lines, babe.” Theo's smile was charming, deadly when he aimed it at you, but Jo had known him long enough that she could steel herself against it—well, sometimes. “It's your birthday. Finish them another time.”

“I can't.” Her eyes narrowed—why was he pushing? “My deadline is tonight. I should have handed the piece in already.”

“Does it really matter?” Clearly confused, Theo waved a sure hand through the air—the lord in his manor. “Blow off the deadline. I don’t see what the big deal is.”

“The big deal is that they’re counting on me to hand the piece in. If I don’t, they have to scramble to find something else for that spot.” Jo’s voice was incredulous—why was this so hard for Theo to understand? “And also, if I don’t hand the article in, I don’t get paid.”

“They pay you peanuts. What’s the point?” Theo reached for her hands again, and this time instead of just avoiding him, she swatted them away. Rising from her chair, she stood to face him, clenched fists growing sweaty at her sides.

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“A hundred dollars is not peanuts.” Her voice was shaking. Damn it, Theo knew—he knew—that this job was important to her. “I’m saving it for school, and you know it.”

“Well, a hundred dollars isn’t anything to me.” He shrugged dismissively, and Jo felt the bottom drop out of her stomach. “Just...please. Just forget about the article. I’ll give you the hundred dollars, okay? Just please come back downstairs so that I can give you your birthday present.”

For a long moment she was speechless. She actually kind of felt like throwing up.

She and Theo had their differences, but she loved him. She’d given him her body. Her heart.

And here he was pushing her to forget something that meant the world to her, just so he could get his way right now.

“You think I’m going to take money from you?” Horrified, Jo rubbed her hands over the hips of her jeans, trying to ease the clamminess. “After what we just did last night, how do you think that makes me feel?”

Understanding dawned on his face—at least, the tiniest inkling of it. “No, no. Jo, Jojo, that’s not what the money is for. Please—”

“No, of course it’s not.” Damn it, she was shouting. This was nothing new for her, not with her temper, but she couldn’t ever remember feeling exactly like this, sickness mixed in with the growing rage. “The money is so that I will ignore what I have repeatedly told you that I want right now, on my own damn birthday, and so that

I will go do what you want. Lord Lawrence gets his way yet again.”

“Don’t call me that.” A dangerous spark flickered through Theo’s eyes. Lord Lawrence was what they’d all called him when he’d been younger and acting like a bit of a brat. “You know I fucking hate that.”

“Sucks, doesn’t it,” Jo taunted, finding a sick pleasure in getting some kind of reaction out of him. “When someone ignores what you’ve repeatedly said you want so that they can do what they want instead.”

“Wait a minute.” Theo suddenly stood up ramrod straight. He scrubbed his hands over his face before looking back at Jo. “You’re not talking about last night. Please tell me you’re not talking about last night.”

“Jesus Christ, Theo.” An inarticulate scream burst from her throat. “No, I’m not fucking talking about last night. If I hadn’t wanted your hands on me, you would have bloody well known it.”

“Right. I know,” he replied hastily, his restless hands now moving to rake through his hair. “You’re just so mad. And if we’re just talking about the article...”

If we’re just talking about the article, then I don’t know what the hell you’re so worked up about.

Her mouth, the mouth she’d used all over his body not twenty-four hours earlier, fell open with disbelief. Theo’s indifference to the gifts he’d been given had been a bone of contention between them before, but it had been...a small bone. A fish bone. Something that a sweet smile from him could help send into the garbage disposal.

This? This was a dinosaur drumstick, too big to be ground down in the kitchen sink.

“Look, I shouldn’t have done that.” Theo spoke hastily, trying to smooth over what he’d said. “That was wrong. Let’s not fight on your birthday.”

“Are you saying that because you’re actually sorry?” Resentment was bitter on her tongue. “Or are you saying it so that you get your way?”

She watched, almost as if she’d stepped outside herself, as temper flared in those caramel-colored eyes. Copper fire—that was what it looked like.

“Why are you acting this way?” He bit his words out the way he always did when he was angry, as though it took more effort to form them. “I just wanted to spend your birthday with you.”

“That’s not an answer.” He growled in response, actually fucking growled, and took a step toward her. She held up both hands and thought she might even have hissed. They’d been reduced to animals in their fury, and she was really fucking tempted to bite him.

And not in a fun way.

“Get out of my room.” Her voice was shaking. As she pointed at the door, she noticed that her hand was, too.

“What?” Incredulity lent an almost comical cast to his face. “Are you fucking serious right now?”

“I said get out!” she screamed, her voice echoing off the small confines of her room. Theo reeled back as if she’d slapped him, and her palm itched to do just that. He must have read the desire in her eyes, on her face, because his face reddened, the effect of his own temper, but he took a step back. With one last look, he spun on the heel of his ridiculously expensive shoes and stormed out of her room, slamming the door behind

him. Minutes later, Jo felt the frame of the house shake as he slammed the front door as well. Crossing to her window, she hugged her arms to her chest and watched as Theo's tall, lanky figure strode across the lawn, climbing over the short fence that separated their properties, his movements jerky.

He would drink now, she knew that absolutely. He'd pull one of his dad's priceless bottles of scotch from the ornate liquor cabinet and numb everything he felt with the gilded liquid. He would retreat into a sullen cocoon, erecting the barriers that were his first line of defense.

He'd never erected those same barriers against her, but she knew him inside and out. And knowing him as she did, she saw with sudden, startling clarity that he truly wouldn't understand why she'd responded the way she had. Why she hadn't been able to just jump onboard Theo's Fun Train...because to him, responsibility didn't exist.

Knowing him the way she did, she wondered why she only now understood that this particular quirk of his meant that they were never, ever going to be able to work.

Acid churned in her belly as she sank down to the floor. It rose to her throat when Beth, the sister she was closest to, cracked open the door and stuck her head in, and she couldn't reply.

"We heard you guys yelling." Her sister's bright blue eyes were wide, meaning that she was as shocked by the argument as Jo was. "Are you okay?"

Jo looked up at her younger sister, the one she most often confided in, and felt the first small crack reverberate through her heart. Wordlessly, she held Beth's gaze and shook her head, just the smallest bit.

And when Beth crossed the room, sank to the floor beside her and wrapped Jo in her

skinny tween arms, Jo burst into tears.

And that pissed her off, too.

CHAPTER FOUR

Then

THEOLAYSPRAWLED in the massive leather chaise that occupied the corner of his bedroom at one...or was it two in the morning? He lifted the bottle of scotch that he'd brazenly lifted from his dad's supply, squinting as he tried to discern just how much he'd had to drink.

He was pretty sure that the bottle had been full—a brand-new one, in fact. After the first couple of shots from a heavy crystal tumbler, though, he'd decided to forgo the glass and swig straight from the bottle. And then he'd spilled some on the floor in the hallway, leaving a sticky lake of amber liquid for the cleaners to find in the morning.

So basically...he had no idea. He knew he'd drunk a lot, but it wasn't having the effect he'd hoped for. The buzz he was chasing kept dancing just out of reach, and instead the alcohol was filling him with lead, weighing him down until he thought he might never move again.

“Why do you do this to yourself?”

He didn't have to move to know that Jo was standing in the doorway of his room. He caught a whiff of spicy cinnamon, heard her quiet sigh as she entered, closing the door behind her.

He remained motionless, listening as she moved around his room. She straightened his sheets, probably pulling down his covers for him. He tracked her footsteps to his

bathroom, heard the tap and knew that she was getting him water and aspirin. Finally she closed the space between them, reaching out for the bottle he still held.

Because he was in the mood to be a dick, he held tight. He heard a grim hum from her lips, and then she smacked the bottom of the bottle, twisting it over in his grip and upending the contents onto his lap.

“Fucking hell, Jo!” Shocked into motion, he scrambled upright. A tight smirk of satisfaction was on that fascinating face of hers, and she simply stood back, arms crossed over her chest as he reached for the closest thing he could find, a sweatshirt, to mop up the liquid on his lap.

“I’m going to bed,” he informed her. She didn’t move. He wasn’t surprised. Damn it, what the hell was going on with her? All he’d wanted to do was make sure that she enjoyed her birthday. She didn’t have to write those freaking articles. She’d just turned eighteen today—no one expected her to contribute. And if she was worried about money, he had plenty, and he was happy to share. So what the fuck was the problem?

“Theo.” Her voice was a sigh again. He glared up at her as she pulled his footstool closer to his chair, lowering her small frame to a perch. “We need to talk.”

He was just drunk enough that talking seemed like a horrible idea. As he looked at her sitting there, her pert, perfect breasts clearly outlined in the flimsy blouse that he knew Meg had made her wear for her party, he thought of something that sounded like a lot more fun than talking.

“C’mere.” He gestured, overshooting and making his arm swing wildly. “I still need to give you your birthday kiss.”

She closed her eyes, muttered something beneath her breath and then pinned him with

thunder in those storm-gray eyes. “It’s not sexy time, Theo. Sexy time is not on the menu anytime in the near future. Just sit up and answer something for me.”

Theo rather thought that he could convince her on the sexy-time front if she gave it a fair shot, but the clipped quality of her voice finally sank through the scotch-soaked folds of his brain. Warily, he scooted to the edge of his seat, bracing his elbows on his knees and trying to look like he was sober.

From the grimace she made when she caught a whiff of his breath, he knew he wasn’t fooling her. Sighing, he scrubbed a hand over his face, then gave her his full attention. “What do you need to say, Jojo?”

Her question was like a punch in the kidneys. “What are your plans, Theo?” He waited for her to elaborate, but she just waited for his response, her entire frame unnaturally still.

“You mean like...my plans for you?” Anxiety pitched his words higher than usual. He loved her, but wasn’t it a little...soon...to have that talk?

“You are such a jackass,” she muttered. He scowled, opening his mouth to reply, but she forged on. “No. Not your plans for us. Which, incidentally, would be our plans, but whatever.”

His brain wasn’t moving quite fast enough to keep up with that train, but he put all his energy into focusing so that he could catch her next sentence.

“I’m talking about you. Your plans for your own life. What are you doing with it? What do you even want?”

“I—” He paused, unable to verbalize the tangle in his head. “I don’t—what do you mean?”

She studied him, the sharpening of her features making her appear faintly birdlike. Not like a sweet bird, though, he thought grumpily, like a canary or something. No, she was putting him more in mind of a raven, or a crow, maybe a hawk—something gorgeous and wild and more than a little bit dangerous.

“What I mean, Theo, is that you have so many opportunities. So many. More than anyone I know.” When he didn’t respond, she threw up her hands. “What I mean is...do you see yourself going into business with your father? You could, you know. He’d love that.”

“Not bloody likely,” Theo muttered, thinking of the nasty little altercation he’d had with Theodore Sr. last night.

Jo ignored him, plowing on. “What about school, then? You can afford to go anywhere. Anywhere. Doesn’t that excite you, even a little bit?”

“Don’t be stupid. There isn’t a school in the world that would take me with my SAT scores.” Theo snorted with disgust, making sure Jo didn’t know that disgust was actually with himself. “College isn’t an option.”

“That’s ridiculous.” The glare she shot him was like a laser beam, slicing right through to his core. “You can retake those any time you want.”

“I can retake them, but I won’t be any smarter.” Shrugging as if he didn’t care, he took another large swig from the scotch bottle. When he swallowed, the alcohol felt like acid in his gut, eating away at him from the inside out.

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Jo threw her hands up in frustration. “You won’t get any smarter if you won’t freaking try, Theo. It’s called studying. The people who get good SAT scores do it.”

“Why are you on my case like this?” He couldn’t handle even one more of her biting observations, because each one was like the lash of a whip, slicing away another sliver of his defenses. Soon he’d be left open, raw and bleeding, all of his insecurities out for her to see.

No one was allowed that close. Not even Jo.

“I’m on your case because I don’t understand what’s going through your thick skull.” Her temper was up now, and so was her voice. “You have opportunities that some people only dream of, and you’re throwing them all away because...what? You’re just going to lounge around and drive your dad crazy forever?”

Theo stilled. “My dad treats me like shit. Since my mom died, he can’t even look at me. You know that.”

“You don’t treat him any better!” Jo’s harsh words reverberated off the walls of the room. “You might not get along, but he’s still trying to help you make something of your life, and you thwart him at every turn!”

Theo had known that Jo had a temper since the second day of their acquaintance, when they’d gotten into a fight during an impromptu softball game and she’d accidentally beamed him with the bat when she’d thrown it in a rage. His anger management wasn’t much better, though, and she’d just stuck a crowbar into his most tender parts and cranked it.

He fisted his hands at his sides, blood rushing to his head so fast that he felt dizzy.

“Thwart? Who actually says that in conversation?” he sneered, his words aimed to pierce her delicate skin. “I get it now. It’s not that you care, that you’re worried about me. It’s that I have chances you don’t, and it’s driving you crazy!”

Jo’s mouth fell open in disbelief, and her eyes were wild. “I’ve known you were a lazy prick with entitlement issues since the day we met, but stupid me, I thought you’d grown up a bit. But you never will, will you? You’ll never figure out what you’re going to do with your life, because you don’t want to do anything!”

She sucked in a big breath before continuing. “Your mom is the one who died, Theo! Not you! So why the fuck do you keep acting like you went with her?”

Theo couldn’t think past the roaring in his ears. Grabbing her by the shoulders, he fought the urge to give her a shake. He’d never hit a woman in his life, and he didn’t intend to start, but Josephine Marchande sorely tempted him to.

He growled, an unintelligible sound low in his throat. He had so much to say, to try to make her understand, but the words were stuck in his suddenly dry throat, choking him. He needed an outlet for the rage, the confusion, even the hurt that was storming through him, and Jo was safe. She’d always been safe.

Instead of shaking her stupid, he tugged her against him, crushing her lips against his. She shoved at his shoulder seconds before he felt a hint of the tension leave her body, her lips softening beneath his.

And then a stabbing pain as she sank those razor-sharp little teeth of hers into his lower lip.

“Motherfuck—” He reared back, clapping a hand to his injured lip. It came away

bloody, but before he could utter another word, Jo followed the bite with a straight shot to his solar plexus.

His breath escaped his body in one giant cloud. Wheezing, he doubled over, sinking back into his chair, one arm around his stomach, the other pressed to his lip.

“What the actual fuck, Jo?” If she’d wanted to stop him in his tracks, she’d done it—he couldn’t believe she’d hit him. He’d have been proud of her right hook if he didn’t think there was a distinct possibility that he was going to vomit all over her bare feet. “What was that for?”

“Are you serious right now?” She laughed, but the sound was dry and harsh. “I can barely look at you right now, so you sure as fuck don’t get to touch me.”

“What?” He tried to focus on her face, but his head was spinning. “Jo. What?”

She sucked a breath in through her nose before jamming a finger right in front of his face. “You don’t touch me unless I want to be touched. And you sure as hell don’t try to kiss me when you’re breaking my heart.”

He watched, at a complete loss for words as she stepped back, putting some much-needed space between them. Crossing her arms over her chest, she started to shake, and when she looked back at him, her eyes were shiny and red, though not a single tear actually spilled.

Without another word, she turned and made her way to the door. She didn’t slam it, didn’t even close it—just left it hanging partway open like a wound that needed stitches but couldn’t be closed.

He should call out. Go after her.

He couldn't. Wouldn't.

She'd cut him open, flayed his flesh, and he didn't know how to fix it. Didn't know if he could.

Instead, he sat motionless in his chair until the sun came up, warring with himself. He was furious with Jo, with his dad, with his dead mom, with himself. He was absolutely, utterly incapable of dealing with any of it.

When pale golden light began to filter through the paned glass of his window, he stood. Strode to his closet. Opened the small safe inside it, retrieving his passport, birth certificate and the stacks of cash that he kept just for the hell of it. Pulling a supple, chocolate-brown leather trench coat from his closet, he stuffed the retrieved items into the pockets and threw the coat over his shoulders.

By the time the sun was fully up, shining fat and high in the sky, Theo was gone.

CHAPTER FIVE

Now

THENUMBERONEquestion in my in-box? The biggest thing that readers want to know? It's how much of what I report on is something that I actually do. Yes, you filthy-minded little freaks want to know all the dirty details, and I know why...because if I've tried it, then you're not so weird if you do, too.

If you're waiting with bated breath for me to answer, you're going to have to keep on waiting. Why? Because I think that if you want to let your freak flag fly, you should find the guts to hoist it yourself. Color it with your own kinks, and don't be afraid to invite a partner...or three.

Now keep reading as I chat with Emma Muse, a cam girl with over six hundred thousand Instagram followers, about why so many women are choosing to pleasure themselves on camera for money, and why she thinks it's a viable career—not to mention fun!

Sluttily yours,

Jojo Kink

Exhaling hugely, Jo sat back in her rickety desk chair. Lacing her fingers together, she twisted them outward, extending her arms and arching her back in a giant stretch. She'd only been working on this post for a couple of hours, but she'd been so into it that she hadn't been paying attention to her posture, and as the minutes had ticked by,

she hunched up tighter with every word that she typed.

Scrolling back up, she reread the introduction and couldn't quite hold back her grin. The post was good, and she wasn't one for false modesty, especially when she was alone in her bedroom with no one to see her crow over it.

She knew that she could write. She'd been doing it steadily for pay for years, which was a pretty good sign that she wasn't a complete hack. But after a seemingly endless period of churning out things that other people wanted, writing about something that interested her felt like she'd grown a pair of giant, feathery wings.

Reading the post through one more time, she made a few small edits before copying the text to her blog site, Jojo Kink. As it uploaded, she opened her blog's email inbox, scanning through the messages and the alerts of comments on her blog, which ranged from rapturous praise to things like Die in hell, skank.

Skank. Ha. If only they knew.

Checking the box that would allow her to delete everything with one click, she emptied her in-box, then blinked at the single message that slid in right after. Marked urgent, it carried the subject Job Opportunity.

"Oh, I just bet." She rolled her eyes and almost deleted this one, too. She received "job offers" every week, and most of them were invitations to meet up with very gracious gentlemen who were interested in letting her blow them. She mostly ignored them, but once in a while she skimmed over one of these fascinating missives and her temper—her Achilles' heel—would get the better of her. It never failed to amaze her how many men couldn't understand that no woman on this earth wanted an unsolicited dick pic. Actually, most didn't want a dick pic, period, but pointing that out usually just resulted in a flurry of them.

She was in the mood to argue, though, so she opened the email, bracing herself for a veiny close-up. She was surprised that, instead of an image of throbbing male genitalia, the email contained an actual message, complete with a website link.

To Ms. Kink,

My name is John Brooke; I'm a freelance business mentor currently working with the dating app Crossing Lines. We at Crossing Lines would like to meet with you to discuss the possibility of writing some blog posts for our site. We love your voice and think that you are just what we need to appeal to the female demographic.

We would love to hear back from you, at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

John Brooke and the Crossing Lines team

"Say what?" Jo sat up straight as hummingbirds of excitement flocked through her veins. Clicking on the site link, she found herself staring at a logo that she actually knew. Crossing Lines had been everywhere lately—she was pretty sure her youngest sister, Amy, actually had a profile on it. Their advertising was slick—they clearly had a lot of money behind them.

And they wanted her? How the hell had they found her blog, anyway? Her blog had decent traffic, but she was a medium-size fish in a gigantic pond.

"Who the hell cares?" She wasn't an idiot. This was huge. Palms suddenly slick with sweat, she scrambled to reply. John Brooke, whoever he was, must have still been in his email, because he came back again almost instantly, asking her if she had time to meet the next morning. When she agreed, he gave her an address close to the financial district in downtown Boston and told her they looked forward to meeting

with her. She didn't have a clue who else was included in the they, but the thrill fizzing through her wouldn't let her care.

Shoving back from her desk, she closed her eyes and savored the moment. She could hear music coming from Beth's room, some kind of weird electro-pop that she normally couldn't stand, but right now it was perfect, and she did a little walk-dance of joy around her cramped room to the beat.

She'd been writing for years. Years. She'd started with the local paper, and her secret dream had been to go to journalism school. When her sister Beth had gotten sick, though, and the family had started to drown in debt, she switched tracks. Words were her skill set, so she searched out the best way to make quick cash from them. Her ghostwriting gigs—writing stories to spec for other people—had been what allowed them to stay in their grand old historic home, but she'd always felt like she lost a bit of herself when she signed away the rights to something that had come from within her.

Now Beth had hooked up with Ford, and while at first Jo had been certain he'd been using her little sister as a stroll through a kinky park, she now had to admit that he'd saved their asses, for no reason other than his love for Beth. His idea to build a small boutique hotel on part of their massive property had led to a source of viable income for their family, which meant that Jo could finally, finally, write whatever the hell she wanted.

She'd been surprised at how much she'd enjoyed ghostwriting erotic stories, and that was what had led to the idea for Jojo Kink. Researching and interviewing people about freaky sexual topics threw in that love of journalism and, it turned out, was just fun.

But writing for a big company didn't mean that she couldn't still blog—at least she hoped it didn't. And writing for a big company meant money. She brought in a bit

through ads on her site, but a regular paycheck...

She couldn't even imagine what she'd do with that. She'd never had one.

Thinking of the hotel reminded her that Ford had organized a sneak-peek open house for Marchande Boutique for that evening...and it was in just over an hour.

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“Shit.” Breathing a bit heavily from her dancing, she looked around the room, a bit lost.

Dressing up? She hated it.

Socializing with human beings who weren’t part of her social circle? She hated it even more. There was a reason that she chose to make a living from behind a computer screen.

If she tried to stay home, though, her sisters would drag her bodily from her room, and experience had taught her that Amy went for the hair, the bitch. Sighing as though the world was ending, which the stone in her gut told her it was, she shuffled across her room to her tiny closet.

She hoped that Ford would be okay with ripped jeans and a T-shirt, because that was all that she owned.

“Aah!” Opening her closet, she ducked when something flew through the air. Batting at her head as though something might be nestled in her hair, she exhaled on a laugh when she realized that the flying object had been something swooshing on a hanger—a dress. No wonder she hadn’t expected it.

A dress. What the hell?

Scowling, she unhooked the hanger from her closet door. A note fluttered to the floor as she did.

Jo,

No, you can't wear jeans to the open house. Wear this instead.

Meg

(PS: Matching shoes are under your bed.)

"Shit." Jo groaned out loud. She did not wear dresses. In fact, she mostly wore men's clothing. She was used to people wondering if she was a lesbian—the way she dressed, the way she carried herself, the lack of any long-term relationship seemed to invite the question. She'd even wondered herself for a while if the lack of sexual interest she'd had in men since Theo was because she wasn't attracted to them as a species.

One female fling later and she'd discovered that that wasn't right, either. She was who she was—not a lesbian, not a boy trapped in a girl body. She was just Jo, and she was far happier when she dressed how she wanted, behaved how she wanted, dated—or didn't—who she wanted.

She thought her sisters understood that, and she felt her infamous temper rise as she examined the offensive garment.

The fabric was actually quite nice—some kind of heavy, silky stuff, none of that wispy, flirty fabric that always made her feel like she was half naked. The top part had a halter neck, which she liked, and though the back dipped lower than she was comfortable with, she actually quite liked the fact that the tattoo on her back—a stunning phoenix inked by her sister Amy—would be shown off.

That left the skirt part, which she didn't think she could get past—except that when she examined it, it wasn't a skirt at all, but rather shorts. Meg had gotten her what she

supposed would be called a romper, and the relief was like chugging icy lemonade on a scorching-hot day.

A quick glance under the bed showed that her older sister had had enough sense not to get her high heels, either—the shoes Meg had chosen were flat, gladiator-type sandals, with straps that wound up her calves. She could deal with that.

After slithering into the simple garment and struggling with but ultimately conquering the shoes, she looked in the mirror and thought that maybe, this time, Meg had known what she was talking about. Jo didn't feel like she was playing dress-up, she was fairly comfortable and she wasn't wearing jeans—everybody won.

Flicking a glance at the time on her phone, she saw that she only had five minutes to get across the grounds to the hotel. With any luck, her sisters had already left, and no one would try to attack her with lipstick or a hair straightener.

“Slayyyyyy.” Giving one last look in the mirror, she tried out the word that Amy used whenever she was trying to tell someone that they were looking hot. She placed a hand on her hip and tried out a seductive, come-hither expression before bursting out laughing.

Ironic for someone with a blog called Jojo Kink, she thought as she clattered down the stairs and out the front door, that its owner wasn't the least bit, and had never been, sexy.

CHAPTER SIX

“IT’S JUST LIP GLOSS,” Meg insisted as she aimed the wand from a glossy tube of red goop at Jo’s face.

“I don’t want it!” Ducking, Jo tried to avoid the lip gloss, and Meg missed, swabbing Jo’s cheek instead.

“Now look what you did,” Meg sighed as Jo scowled. Leaning in, she rubbed at the red stuff on Jo’s cheek and then, lightning quick, swabbed a matching stripe on the other cheek. “There. It’ll work as blush. Now you at least look like you’ve seen the sun sometime in the last decade.”

“For fuck’s sake, Meg.” Holding up her hands to fend off another attack, Jo took a giant step back, putting space between herself and her fashion-loving older sister. “I’m wearing the outfit. Isn’t that enough?”

“The blush looks good,” Meg continued as if she hadn’t heard Jo speak, “but you’d look even better if you’d just let me comb your hair.”

“Don’t touch it,” Jo warned, backing up yet again. She’d kept her formerly long, chestnut waves in a sleek bob since she’d hit her twenties, the only reason being that, in her opinion, she never needed to do anything to it—it always looked the same. “Seriously, Meg. The energy it takes me to fend you off is the energy I should be using to smile at strangers without baring my teeth.”

“Fine,” her sister huffed, turning her attention to her own reflection. As usual, she

looked like an Instagram post—something Jo knew she could never achieve, even if the thought of spending several hours on her hair and makeup didn't make her want to stab herself in the eye.

“You look good enough for both of us,” Jo insisted, herding her sister to the door of the funky little bathroom in the lobby of the hotel. There was a fireplace and a lounge chair inside the room, which puzzled her—why would anyone want to hang out in the bathroom?—but she supposed that Ford knew what he was doing. Actually, maybe she'd sit in that chair and hide here for the rest of the evening...

Before the door closed behind Meg, though, she turned and grabbed Jo's hand, tugging her back into the lobby. Snagging a fresh glass of sparkling wine from a passing waiter in what looked like a vintage tux, she pressed it into Jo's hand, then gestured around the room.

“Chug that, then go mingle,” she ordered, straightening her sequined, spaghetti-strapped sheath. “Ford said we had to. You don't want to disappoint Beth.”

Damn it. Meg knew that Beth was Jo's kryptonite—the sister she'd always been closest to, the sister she still was terrified of losing if her illness came back.

Yeah, she'd do anything for Beth—even mingle.

Pasting what she suspected was a terrifying smile on her face, she shuffled a few awkward steps farther into the room. Chugging down her sparkling wine so fast that it burned, she grabbed a second glass as a prop while she stood awkwardly, shifting her weight from foot to foot.

“You look like you could use some company.” Jo looked up as a man sidled up next to her. He smiled, revealing toothpaste-commercial teeth, and she cocked her head, taking him in.

He was good-looking, she supposed. Objectively, he was tall and well built, with the kind of body that wore a suit well. His features were distinct, with high cheekbones and a strong jaw. He even had a dimple in his chin.

“Are you all right?” His blinding smile faltered, and she realized that she’d left the silence run on too long as she studied him. She had a bad habit of doing this, losing track of the conversation as she scrutinized a potential partner, wondering what the hell was wrong with her when she inevitably wasn’t interested.

Again.

“I’m fine, thank you.” She smiled politely, sipping at her wine. “Why are you here?”

Her potential suitor blinked, and Jo winced. Man, she sucked at small talk. “What I mean is, what brings you to this event?” There. That sounded fancy enough.

“I’m one of Ford’s friends from back home.” He sipped his own wine, looking at her over the edge. “I’m barking up the wrong tree here, aren’t I?”

“Pardon?” Jo blinked, even as his meaning flooded through her. She could have recited his next words along with him.

“You’re not interested.” He smiled at her, though he seemed slightly puzzled by her reaction. At least he hadn’t said You’re not interested in men, which was what she’d been expecting.

“Sorry.” She shook her head and offered what she hoped was a winsome smile. “Better luck elsewhere.”

He was clearly startled by her response, but then she was gone, scurrying across the lobby floor as fast as she could in her slightly slippery shoes. She gulped at her wine,

leaving the empty glass on a table as she headed unerringly for the wide, stone-tiled stairs, desperate to get away.

She wasn't good with words in person. She was socially awkward to the extreme. And Dimples had picked up on her one insecurity, the one thing that she just couldn't figure out about herself—no, she wasn't interested. Not in him, not in any man. Hell, not in any woman, either.

She hadn't been since Theo. She'd tried, and sometimes she managed a mild affection, but attraction? Sexual arousal?

Forget it. That was why she'd fallen in love with her blog—it was an outlet, a place for her to explore her sexuality in a place where her own biology had failed her.

She could rage against it, she supposed, as she reached the upper floor and sighed with relief at the sudden muting of the party noise, the voices. But what was the point?

Footsteps sounded on the staircase behind her, along with the hushed murmur of voices. Shit. Her encounter with Dimples had drained her—she just couldn't handle interacting with even one more person.

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Desperate, she tried the handle of the closest door. It opened, and she wasn't going to question it. She hurriedly ducked inside.

The heavy door swung shut behind her, enclosing her in a dim, quiet space. She ran a hand over the wall, searching for the light switch, then decided to leave the room in the dark. The lack of stimulus after the sensory assault of the party was soothing.

She'd recharge here then go downstairs and force herself to mingle for twenty more minutes—long enough to say that she'd given it a go.

Then she'd go home, put on her jeans and tank top and return to the cocoon of blissful aloneness.

The doorknob turned. A feminine giggle shattered the womblike tranquility, followed by a deeper voice that was undeniably male.

She had no idea why she ducked into the closet—maybe just the urge to not have to interact with even one more person. She stood in the small space, behind the half-opened door, fisting sweaty palms as the people entered the room, letting the heavy door fall closed behind them with what sounded like an ominous click.

“How much have you had to drink?” The man's voice made her straighten, like she was in school and her knuckles had been slapped with a ruler.

“Not so much that I don't know what I'm doing.” The woman giggled, a bubbly, breathless sound. Jo squinted across the room. It was dark in the room, more shadows than light, but she could see shapes, outlines.

She could certainly hear, and knew that the metallic rasp couldn't be anything but the lowering of a zipper.

"This wasn't what I had in mind when I invited you to this party as my date," the man said, his voice wry. The woman shushed him. Jo's eyes were gradually adjusting to the dark, and she watched the woman drop to her knees in front of the door the man was leaning against.

The woman inhaled sharply, and the man exhaled slowly, a circular dance. Jo fought to hold her own breath, lest she give herself away.

Why, oh why, had she ducked into the closet? It was past the point where she could announce her presence. Oh, pardon me, I'll just look the other way if you don't mind letting me through.

"Chill out," the woman said, voice exasperated. "This doesn't mean anything, okay? I'm your assistant, and I'm supposed to make your life easier. I don't know why you're all keyed up tonight, but let me take the edge off. It's nothing we haven't done before."

The man said nothing, did nothing for a long moment. Then a low rumble of pleasure escaped his throat, followed by the wet sound of mouth on skin, sounds that screamed sex.

Close your eyes, Jo. Close them now.

A rustle of movement, then a groan as the man tangled his hands in the woman's hair. That groan should have been a sound of surrender, the man acquiescing to the woman's desire to please him, but somehow he still sounded like he was the one in control.

Jo shifted in her hiding place as something dark and wild tangled in her belly. She found herself rubbing her thighs together against the sudden ache. It took her brain a few moments to catch up.

Was she actually aroused by this? By hiding in the closet, watching a woman she didn't know suck on a strange man's cock? How could that be, when nothing had turned her crank in the years since Theo had left—absolutely nothing?

She swallowed, hard, pressing her forehead to the cool plaster of the wall. Watching this when they didn't know she was here was so, so wrong. But this was the first hint of arousal she'd felt in so long—she knew she wasn't going anywhere.

Taking another quiet breath, she focused in. The woman's mouth made obscene sucking noises as she worked on the man, but she wasn't what held Jo's attention, though she supposed that the woman's inherent enjoyment in the action of pleasuring the stranger was erotic. No, it was him, something about the man. About the way he looked downward, attention focused on the point of contact. And something else about him—the outline of an imposing body, the unapologetic way he held himself, as if he deserved to be serviced.

Like he was doing the woman a favor by letting her place her mouth on his cock. He almost seemed impatient.

How strange.

Jo watched, now entranced, as the woman seemed to redouble her efforts. The sounds she was making said that servicing the man was pleasurable for her as well. How could that be?

Her attention was caught on him as he sucked in a breath that sounded pained, his focus sharpening. Sliding his hands through her hair, he caught the woman's face in

his palms. The thin, inky darkness seemed to thicken, to throb along with the pulse between Jo's legs.

"Pull off," he growled, and the woman did with a sound so wet it was obscene. She hummed, low and satisfied, like she'd just indulged in some delicious treat, and a jolt of hunger struck Jo.

She sighed, just the quietest of sounds, but it was enough to be heard. The man's head snapped up, his head orienting right in Jo's direction, even as he exhaled harshly, thrusting into the woman's cupped hands.

Oh shit. Had he heard her? Could he see her? Did he know she was there? Spell broken, Jo pulled back farther into the closet. A single bead of icy sweat rolled down her spine.

"See? I told you you'd feel better," the woman purred, satisfaction thick in her voice. This puzzled Jo as well.

The man had come. The woman had not. Why, then, did the woman seem so pleased?

The man simply grunted. The unfamiliar slickness between Jo's thighs and the buzzing in her head, the flush of her skin begged her to step from the closet, to get one more look at the shadowy figure who'd brought her senses to life. That, though, would be pure insanity, so she forced herself to stay crouched in her hiding place, her pulse thrumming through her veins.

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She listened, trying to slow her breath, as the man zipped himself up. Listened as the pair exited the room, the door closing heavily behind them, and then listened to the silence left in the room as she absorbed the fact that she was alone.

“Jesus.” Cautiously, Jo pushed off the wall, stepping softly onto the thick, luxe carpeting of the hotel room. Part of her thought—hoped?—wildly that the man might still be here. He was gone, though—of course he was gone. She was left alone with the vague sense that it had all been a very dirty dream.

And, of course, that suddenly pressing need to fill the aching space between her legs. That was new. Actually, it was old—so old it was new again.

Throwing her head back, she huffed out a laugh at her own expense. She was a disaster.

Against her hip, her phone buzzed. Since the romper had no pockets and no back, the only place she’d been able to tuck her phone was under the elastic waist of her panties. She pulled it out, frowning when she saw a message from Beth.

Ford says he’s sorry. He didn’t know.

Well, that was clear as mud. Shrugging it off, Jo replaced her phone, took a cleansing breath and left the room. She held her breath as she walked down the empty, elegant hall, still half expecting to see the couple who had just awakened her slumbering carnal appetite.

She didn’t see them. Of course she didn’t, and even if she had, how would she have

known?

What is wrong with me?

Descending the ornate staircase, Jo made a beeline for the bar. She both needed and, she thought, deserved a drink—something a little stronger than the cheerful glasses of sparkling wine that were still being circled.

Standing on her toes, she leaned against the polished dark wood of the lobby bar, trying to catch the bartender's attention. The gray-haired, heavily mustached server didn't even spare her a glance.

Meg was way better at this. Then again, Jo thought as she looked down at her rather flat chest, Meg had a little more to work with.

"Scotch on the rocks with a twist." The voice came from behind her. Jo turned as irritation snaked over her skin—she was here first, and also, that was her drink.

Slapping a palm down on the counter, she angled her chin up as she pivoted on her fancy sandals. "Back of the line, buddy."

"I've been lots of things to you, Jo, but buddy was never one of them."

Jo whipped her head the rest of the way around so quickly that she felt a pinch in her neck. A roaring sound filled her ears as she found herself staring at a wide, hard chest, then up to broad shoulders. Tequila-gold skin started at the neck, covering chiseled features that were set off with night-black hair and eyes just as dark.

"Hi, Jo."

Her mouth fell open. She must have looked like she'd gone simple, staring up at him

like she'd never seen a man before. Though it was true enough that she hadn't seen this particular man for quite some time—years, in fact.

“Theo,” she managed, her tongue thick and cottony in her mouth. She'd always known he would come back, had known it right down to the marrow of her bones. And yet of all the ways she'd imagined that the reentry of Theo Lawrence into her life would go—and she'd dreamed up plenty—she'd never expected that she'd actually manage to smile and be charming. To hide her innate social awkwardness and show only what she wanted of herself, the way so many women seemed able to do.

After all, this was the man who'd been like a part of her family. Who'd spent holidays with her family, who'd been her first kiss, her first love.

Her first experience with the kind of pain that could tear a person in two.

Drawing on every ounce of strength she had inside her, she turned back to the bar. She couldn't deal with this without some liquid courage.

When Theo snagged the drink from the bartender's hand, she felt anger whip through her. When he handed her the heavy tumbler, ice clinking merrily against the glass walls, the anger evaporated into a dense cloud of confusion.

“Scotch on the rocks with a twist, right?” He studied her with those coal-dark eyes, the ones that still haunted her dreams. “You never could stomach the hard stuff without a little ice.”

The rage winked back to life. “Do you really think that remembering what I drink will make up for ditching out on life?”

His smile dimmed, and Jo cursed internally. Damn it. Damn it. After that, how could

she smile and pretend that she was doing just fine?

“So that’s how it’s going to be.” He smiled at her, but the press of his lips was tight. Still, she was distracted by it—the way that full, beautiful mouth moved. She’d always thought of his mouth as his Latin-lover lips, inherited as they’d been from his gorgeous Latina mother.

Well, she could look, but she was no longer interested in his lips, gorgeous or otherwise. Since she’d already blown the cool card, this was where she should scream. She should rage, pummel his chest with her fists. Flood the lobby of the hotel with angry tears.

At eighteen, she would have. She still had a temper, but she was also no longer that young—or that innocent. It took enormous effort to reseal the bottle that contained everything she felt and had felt for Theo Lawrence, but she did it, shoving the cork back in until she could get somewhere alone, a safe place for that bottle to explode.

Instead, she took a deep swallow of the drink he’d pressed into her hand, even though she resented that he’d been the one to procure it. Then she finally managed that civil smile, though it felt like pushing through a thick wall of cement.

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“You look well, Theo.” There, that was normal. No hint of weirdness there. “What brings you back to Boston?”

For just the merest blink of an eye, she thought she saw something like confusion flicker through his stare. Then it was gone, and she was sure that she’d imagined it, because he turned the charm back on—and he still had plenty—showing her a flash of teeth against that delicious skin.

“Business.” He didn’t elaborate; she didn’t ask. “And you’re still writing.”

It wasn’t a question, and she resented the hell out of what he hadn’t said with that, with the drink. “You don’t know me anymore, Theo. Don’t presume that you do.”

“I suppose that’s true.” She didn’t miss the hint of danger that snaked its way into his voice—he never had enjoyed being told that he was wrong. “For instance, I never would have pictured you as a voyeur.”

Time crashed to a standstill. Jo’s fingers, suddenly sweaty, slipped on her drink, which would have crashed to the ground if Theo hadn’t caught it, setting it back down on the bar.

“What did you say?” she finally gasped, her pulse stuttering before starting to throb double time. Her mouth was dry—she wanted her drink but didn’t trust herself to pick it up.

“I think you heard me,” he replied mildly, gesturing to the bartender, who brought him a glass of something that looked like club soda. In some dim recesses of her

brain, Jo noted that it was odd to see him drink something nonalcoholic in a party setting, but she couldn't give the matter more than a passing thought.

"I heard you," she managed, narrowing her eyes. She tucked a strand of her loose hair behind her ear for something to do with her hands, and when his stare tracked her movement, it caused conflicting sensations to reverberate off one another inside her. "Explain."

"I know you were just in that room upstairs." The way he was looking at her was like a dare. He knew—there was no sense in denying it. He knew she'd just watched him get sucked off.

Of course, she hadn't known it was him. Though really, it seemed like some part of her had. Hadn't he always been the only person in existence able to arouse her? Just her fucking luck.

"I was already in the room when you and your little friend decided to have a private party," she replied tartly. Damn it, now she sounded like a jealous shrew when in fact she felt nothing of the sort. No, when she thought of what she'd seen, she got that sticky, sweet sensation between her thighs again—and knowing it was Theo was a new but not entirely unwelcome element. "I couldn't exactly go anywhere while your dick was in her mouth."

"I suppose not," he replied thoughtfully, looking at her over the rim of his glass. To avoid that stare, Jo looked up, down and around, but all she managed to do was note that he still wore a suit better than any man she'd ever met—and that even to her unskilled eye, the suit looked like it cost more than she made in a month. "But you didn't have to watch, either."

Jo cleared her throat. What the hell was she supposed to say to that? It was one hundred percent the truth. She'd gouge her eyeballs out with one of those little plastic

cocktail swords, though, before she admitted to him what watching had done to her—for her.

“How did you know it was me?” This seemed safe enough.

His grin was both wry and the tiniest bit wolfish. Her pulse responded, even as her brain scolded it. “You still smell like cinnamon.”

She’d never cared about makeup, but she’d always like to smell good, and she always had a little bottle of cinnamon essential oil on the go, ever since she was thirteen. That he remembered should maybe have been touching, but instead it brought out her caged fury yet again.

“I’m surprised you noticed it. You were a little busy.” Her words were too loud, too sharp—social awkwardness was back in the room. But where lots of people would have recoiled, starting to look at her like she was a bit odd, Theo didn’t even seem to notice.

Nor did he apologize, though Jo certainly didn’t expect him to—not for this. But neither did she expect what he said next.

“Then I suppose my next question should be, did you like it?”

Jo barely held back a strangled sigh. He was deliberately pushing her buttons, but for the life of her, she couldn’t understand why. Surely he didn’t think they were just going to pick up where they’d left off? Theo was a lot of things, but he’d never been crazy.

She didn’t answer. He let the silence between them stretch and thicken.

“Everything all right here?” Like a wave of fresh spring air, Beth appeared at Jo’s

elbow. Gratefully, Jo tore her focus away from her ex to pay attention to her sister.

Clad in a slinky little red dress, Beth looked like she'd never been sick a day in her life. The spaghetti straps and short hemline left her many tattoos on full display. The purple streaks in her dark hair should have clashed with the deep crimson of her dress, but instead they made her look effortlessly cool.

On her other side, her fiancé, Ford Lassiter, was dressed in a suit that was probably even more expensive than Theo's. He looked like he'd stepped out of an issue of some men's business magazine. He definitely didn't look like the kind of man who would be enamored of a woman who was a walking advertisement for a tattoo parlor—namely, her sister's tattoo parlor—and yet somehow they worked.

“Theo!” Placing her hand on Jo's elbow, Beth offered up a polite smile. “It's been forever. What brings you back to Boston?”

“Business.” Theo offered the same one-word explanation he'd given Jo. The smile he offered Beth was genuine, however, with none of the layers of undertones that his voice had when he spoke to Jo.

“I haven't seen you since that tournament...was it at Palm Springs? Two years ago. What are you into now?” Ford, too, seemed friendly as he offered Theo his hand, but the other man had been hanging around the Marchandes for long enough now that Jo caught the hint of stiffness in his voice. “It's funny that you didn't mention you knew my girl's family when you accepted this invite.”

“I didn't put two and two together.” Theo smiled smoothly, but Jo's bullshit alarm screamed. He was lying through his teeth—but why? “I never would have imagined the girls opening a hotel on their property.”

“The girls, huh?” Ford rocked back on his heels. “You must go way back.”

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Jo exchanged a glance with Beth as the two men puffed up like peacocks, each trying to posture their way to dominance.

“I’ve known the Marchandes for a long time,” Theo started, and Jo had suddenly had enough of the bullshit. Holding up her hands, she waved them in the air to stop the argument in its tracks.

“Let’s just cool it before we get to the point where you guys hose each other down with testosterone, okay?” Both men grunted, and Jo turned her attention to Ford. “Thanks for defending our honor and all that, big bro, but if you don’t like the dude, don’t invite him.”

“I liked him just fine before I knew what he’d done to you,” Ford muttered, “but I’d like him better back on one of the golf courses in LA, where I could go after him with a nine iron.”

Beth turned away, her shoulders shaking as she tried to hold in her laugh. Her laugh died as Ford dipped his head to whisper in her ear. Jo watched as her younger sister flushed from head to toe, her posture changing just slightly as she took in whatever dirty thing Ford had just said to her.

“I might be wrong, but I think they’ve forgotten about us,” Jo said wryly as Ford caught her sister’s elbow and led her from the lobby. She felt the pang of envy reverberate around her rib cage.

She was happy for Beth. She was. But was it too much to ask that she have someone who made her feel like that, too?

“Never would have thought that sweet little Beth would hook up with Ford Lassiter.” Theo took another sip of his club soda, calling Jo’s attention back to him. She watched as he swallowed, cursing inwardly when she caught herself watching the lines of his throat.

Couldn’t he have gone soft under that suit? Did he still have to look so damn physical?

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Jo felt the flare of temper as a knee-jerk reaction. “You don’t think one of the Marchande girls is good enough for a hotel tycoon?”

“Jo.” The exasperation he managed to inflect that single syllable with was a talent of his. “I was actually referring to the fact that, according to rumor, he’s a kinky fucking bastard.”

“What rumors? He said you were golf buddies.” Jo glowered up at Theo. Man, he’d been gone for so long, and yet within seconds he’d managed to tap right back into that special talent he had for getting under her skin.

It was during those times, when he would put his mouth all over her body except the place she most wanted it, that made her hate the fact that he made her wait.

“Golf buddies,” Theo agreed, a slight smirk curling the corners of his lips as he watched her. Heat rose into her cheeks—he knew. Damn it, he knew where her mind had gone. “And we also had some mutual friends. Friends who were into things that would shock you.”

Jo’s mouth went dry as Theo looked her over, top to bottom and up again. His eyes glinted with mischief, and also something darker.

“Shock me more than being trapped in a room watching you get blown by some other

woman?” She found her voice and used it as a weapon. She no longer cared if she sounded jealous—she wanted an excuse to leave, leave this conversation and leave Theo, because the longer she stood here with him, the more she started to want things that she could no longer have—at least not if she was smart.

Theo. The dark. The rasp of a zipper, the wet sound of lips on skin. Without warning, Jo felt moisture surge between her legs, just from the memory.

She wasn’t jealous at all. Rather, being a voyeur on that little scene had awoken something she’d thought she’d never feel again.

Theo didn’t reply—he just kept on watching her with those dark eyes. And she absolutely did not have to fight back the urge to rise to her toes and trace her tongue over the golden line of his jaw.

“Fun as this has been, I’m going home.” Setting her now empty glass down on the bar, she wiped her palms over her thighs to hide the fact that they were trembling. “Good night.”

The way that Theo had been acting, the way he’d been flirting—for that was what it had been—Jo was surprised that he remained silent as she walked away, though she knew, just knew, that he watched her until she was out of sight. It wasn’t until she was back in her own room, her back pressed flat against the door she’d just closed, that she acknowledged that she was disappointed that he’d let her just go.

“No way, Jo. Not happening.” She shed her romper and the sandals as quickly as if they’d burst into flame. Pulling on white cotton panties and a worn Marilyn Manson concert tee, she exhaled with relief, as though in taking off the party clothes, she’d shed the Jo who was tempted by Theo Lawrence.

It was still there—that thing between them, that indescribable connection. Even in the

dark, even not knowing who he was, he'd managed to turn her on.

"Don't be stupid," she muttered to herself as she climbed into her bed, crawling beneath the covers.

The only man who made her crave was also the man who had broken her heart. What kind of person would she be if she took him back? Not that he'd asked. Not that she would.

But as she lay there in the shadows of nighttime, listening to her sisters return from the open house, she couldn't stop shifting back and forth in her bed. If she got up and looked out the window, she could see the Lawrence house. Was he staying there? Probably not, but the thought of him being so close after so many years made her pulse race.

So she stayed in bed, but when she finally fell into a fitful sleep, she was chased by images of dark eyes, golden skin and wicked hands that woke her up from the sleep she'd been in since he'd left.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LET'S TALK ABOUT VOYEURISM. If you're reading this blog, chances are you're a dirty birdie and you already know what it is, but for those of you who don't, it's getting hot and bothered watching someone else involved in illicit activities. Now, while this sounds like it could be a sexy good time, if you take it too far, it ventures into crime territory, so don't expect to peep into your sexy neighbor's bedroom window without consequences. But say you're at a party and you're grabbing some alone time. A couple with oral sex on their mind stumbles upon your hidey-hole, and before you can make your presence known, she's giving him a happy ending and you've been whisked along for the ride. Is this awkward, or is it hot? Is it hotter if they discover you're there?

Food for slutty thought,

Jojo Kink

The offices for Crossing Lines took up the entire third floor of a tall office building just outside the financial district in downtown Boston. The building was sleek, the smell of latex paint still evident as Jo closed herself in the shiny silver elevator that was so eerily silent she double-checked to make sure she was actually moving.

The woman at the front desk was the type who intimidated lesser specimens without having to lift a finger. She barely even looked up as Jo crossed the plush carpeting to the massive chrome desk, clearing her throat when she arrived.

"Can I help you?" When the woman finally did look up, she flicked a glance over Jo,

and though there was no visible change in her expression, Jo felt her distaste flavoring the air. Jo knew what she saw and couldn't help but squirm a bit under the assessing stare.

She'd never gone on a job interview. The position at the paper so very many years ago had been offered to her over the phone based on her work on her high school paper. When she ghosted stories for other writers, they didn't care what she looked like or how she dressed. She deliberately left images of herself off her blog.

That left today. She hadn't had time to go shopping for something more appropriate and didn't know what that was at any rate, so she'd settled on a pair of black jeans that were free of rips and tears, a black sweater from the men's department, and a clean pair of sneakers. Face-to-face with this woman, whose hair was glossy and highlighted, and who wore a white blouse without a single wrinkle, Jo knew that she'd missed the mark, but there was nothing she could do about it now.

"I have a meeting with John Brooke," she stated, drawing herself to her full, if insignificant, height, trying to look like what she was wearing was just fine. "At ten o'clock."

"I'll take you to his office." When the woman stood up, Jo noted that she was also wearing heels that added at least three inches to her height, and that her skirt came to midcalf, hugging her legs like a second skin. How did she walk?

The woman, who hadn't introduced herself, seemed equally interested in Jo, taking a long moment to look her over, her expression faintly puzzled. Maybe, Jo thought, she was wondering how security downstairs had let someone with such little fashion sense into the building.

Finally, the other woman turned and walked down the hall, gesturing for Jo to follow. Jo watched the sleek length of the woman's ponytail, thinking of the woman last

night, savoring the resultant heat.

Not now, Jo!

The woman paused outside a glass door. It was cracked open, but she knocked on it smartly. A voice called out for them to enter. The woman didn't follow Jo in, just studied her intently again as she gestured her in, and Jo felt her stomach slowly roll with nerves.

"Miss Marchande?" The man who stood up from behind the desk was tall, well over six feet, and absolutely gorgeous. Light brown skin set off pale green eyes, and the short buzz of his black hair showed off the strong lines of his face. Dressed in a well-cut suit, he was, quite simply, hot. "I'm John Brooke."

His smile was friendly enough that some of Jo's nerves eased. He didn't make her feel out of place like Miss Tight Skirt had, and when he offered a large palm for her to shake, she felt some of her confidence return.

"Nice to meet you." She winced a bit as the words came out just a bit too loud, but he didn't seem to notice. Gesturing for her to sit, he checked the expensive-looking watch on his wrist. "The owner will be here momentarily. While we wait, would you like coffee? Water, tea? I can have Ava get you whatever you'd like."

Assuming that Ava was the girl at the front desk, Jo was tempted to ask for something as a petty revenge for the scrutiny. She knew she wouldn't be able to swallow a thing, though, since the news that another person would be joining them had ratcheted her anxiety back up again.

"I'm fine." Doing her best to smile like a normal human, Jo took a second look at John Brooke. He'd said in his email that he was some kind of adviser to the company, which made her think of endless travel, city to city, clandestine encounters in airport

bathrooms. He looked the part—sleek and sexy.

He did nothing for her, roused nothing more than a mild appreciation for a fine-looking man.

“Sorry I’m late.”

No. Oh, hell no.

Jo hadn’t recognized Theo’s voice last night because she hadn’t heard it in so very long. Now, with it fresh in her mind, she was on her feet before he’d even cleared the doorway, his voice triggering an instant surge of adrenaline.

“Miss Marchande.” He cast her a polite smile, almost as if they were truly meeting for the first time—almost. There was a glint in his eye that told her he was looking forward to seeing how this played out.

It pissed her off.

“What the hell, Theo?” Still standing, she planted her hands on her hips and stood up straight. “What are you doing?”

“Do you know each other?” John stood as well, furrowing his brow in Theo’s direction. “I thought Miss Marchande was the writer of that blog you showed me.”

“She is the writer of that blog,” Theo replied, fully entering the room. Crossing the room, he propped a hip on the massive desk, looking like he truly didn’t give a fuck about the tension brewing.

He’d never given much of a fuck about anything...anything except her. She couldn’t make out what his game was here, though, and she didn’t like being a pawn in it.

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“Explain yourself,” she demanded crisply. He gestured for her to sit, but she remained standing, refusing to do anything he told her to.

“I’m going to go,” John announced, clapping his hands together as he cast Theo a stern look. “Please stop by my office after...whatever this is.”

Theo acknowledged the other man with a jerk of his chin, and then John was gone. He closed the door behind him, leaving Jo alone with Theo.

Her pulse tripped, then started to beat double time.

“What are you doing, Theo?” Her voice trembled, and she told herself that it was with anger. “You had a chance to talk to me last night. You didn’t have to drag me all the way here with a made-up story.”

“Let me be quite clear.” Theo’s voice was suddenly sharp, commanding in a way that she’d never heard before. It caught her attention, and she eyed him sharply. He still lounged against the desk, but he’d straightened.

Rather than the lazy, hedonistic Theo she was acquainted with, this man looked in control. She had no idea what to make of it.

“There was no false story. I own Crossing Lines. I am looking for a unique voice to draw in new users. The offer of a job is real.” His expression darkened, and he didn’t hide the way his gaze swept over her small frame. “But at the same time that John and I came up with that idea, I was looking into what my ex-girlfriend was up to, since I was coming back to Boston. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that the

sweet girl I'd left was the writer of a blog exploring all things kinky."

"I've never been a sweet girl." Jo made air quotes around the last two words with her fingers. "And you didn't discover that I was the writer of my blog with a simple internet search. I've made sure of that."

The corners of his lips twisted in a smile. "Touché. I may have had one of my programmers dig a little. But your secret is safe with me."

"Why offer me the job, Theo?" Jo's voice was quiet. "There are a million writers out there who could write what you want. This has messy written all over it."

He paused.

"I owe you," he finally said, tapping a finger on the desk. "Though of course, if you weren't qualified, this wouldn't even be an issue."

"You owe me?" Jo heard her voice echo off the high ceiling and realized she was shouting but didn't care. "Fuck that noise, Theo. You thought you'd come throw a job at your fancy new company at your hard-up ex and all would be forgiven? I don't need your charity. I don't need you."

That was it—she was done. Her fury at his actions overrode the very real disappointment that the job wouldn't work as she stormed toward the door.

When Theo grabbed her arm, she slapped at it with angry hands. "Stop manhandling me!"

"Then stop acting like an ass and listen." Hauling her around so that her ass was pressed against the desk, he leaned in, a hand on either side of her hips, forcing her to rear back.

She could smell him, some kind of pricey cologne that made her throat go dry. She could feel the heat of his body all along the line of her own, and damn it, that ache between her thighs decided that it would be a fine time to wake up.

It was Theo. It had always been him.

“The reason I offered you the damn job, and the reason that you’re going to take it, is because we have unfinished business.” He leaned in, and she felt his warm breath mist over her lips. “I didn’t leave because of you, or us, and you damn well know that. And there’s still something here. You can’t deny that.”

Opening eyes that she didn’t realize she’d squeezed closed, Jo looked up at Theo, saw the glint of truth in his eyes.

Her heart felt as though he’d placed it in his fist and squeezed.

“You may not have left because of us, but you still left.” She did her best to keep her voice level. “You really expect us to just pick up where we left off? Unbelievable.”

She placed her hands on his chest, intending to push him away, but the feel of his body beneath her palms made her hesitate. Like a shark sensing her weakness, he closed the ribbon of space between their bodies, pressing himself against her.

“Tell me you don’t want me to touch you.” He touched his lips to the thin skin behind her ear, and she couldn’t hold back the shudder. When her fingers dug into his chest, he slid those lips down her neck and over, measuring the beats of her heart in the hollow of her throat.

Damn it. Damn herself. She’d gone for so, so long without feeling this heat, and now that she’d had a taste, she wanted another hit, and another after that. Would it really be so bad to just let herself go, one more time?

Slowly, giving her time to say no, he moved his hands from the desk to her hips and up, until his long fingers framed her waist. He squeezed gently, and she remembered what it was like to have him grip her like that when he was inside her.

She also remembered what it had felt like after he'd left, in the days and weeks and months when she'd missed him so much it felt as though she'd been stabbed with a ragged shard of glass. It had taken everything she had to move past that—was it worth feeling that again, in exchange for just a few moments of pleasure?

No.No, it was not.

Pulling back abruptly, she pushed him away and broke the embrace. Her breath came fast and hard as she made space between them, wiping sweaty palms on the thighs of her jeans.

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“We’re not doing this.” If only she felt as sure as she sounded. If he so much as crooked a finger at her, she’d strip off all her clothes and lie down on the desk for him to play with. “It’s not fair to ask that of me.”

Theo looked as though she’d clocked him in the head. He, too, was breathing hard, and when she saw the outline of his erection pressing against those fancy suit pants, she almost gave in again.

“I have to go.” Shaking her head, she blindly pushed her way out of the office, heading straight for the elevator doors. Once inside, she turned and saw the satisfied smirk on Ava’s face, realizing that she must have been the woman she’d caught with Theo. She should have felt jealousy, but instead the memory sent another bolt of heat through her. So long feeling nothing, and the sudden onslaught meant she was about to self-combust. But she held firm, and as the elevator doors closed, she pressed her damp forehead to the chilly steel of the elevator wall.

What the hell was she going to do?

“Want to explain to me what that was about?”

Theo was slouched in the chair at his desk, a can of icy club soda open in front of him. He desperately wished that it was three fingers of hideously expensive scotch.

“Is this where you spank me for not telling you that I knew Jo?” he asked wryly as John came in, closing the door briskly behind him.

The other man rolled his eyes. “Don’t be such a drama queen. But yes, I’d like an

explanation. You're paying me a lot of money to help get this company off the ground, Theo, and I'm not interested in being blindsided with whatever shit that was that you just pulled."

Theo took a large swallow of his club soda. It was flat and tasteless—why did he drink this shit, anyway?

John remained silent. Theo knew the tactic well—he often used it himself to make the other person talk first, to establish power.

He didn't have enough energy to fight it.

"Jo was my girlfriend when I was nineteen, but I've known her family since I was a kid. We lived next door to each other."

"And what did you do to piss her off like that?"

"What makes you think I did something?"

John snorted inelegantly. Reaching across to the sleek minifridge, he pulled out a club soda for himself. He grimaced after he took a sip. "This stuff is nasty."

Theo shrugged. "I realized that I wasn't good for her, and I left."

John cocked his head, as if waiting for the rest of the story. When he realized that there wasn't any, he slammed his can down on the desk.

"Let me guess—you haven't talked to her in all this time, am I right?" Theo didn't answer, but John was already building up a head of steam. "And you lured her here with a job offer in the hopes that—what? She'd be so thrilled at your return that she'd jump right back into your arms?"

Well...yeah, that had essentially been his plan. Hearing it come from someone else, though, made Theo wince.

He hadn't thought that out very well. With Jo's legendary temper, he was lucky she hadn't pushed him through the window.

"You." John pointed a finger at him before rising to pour the rest of his club soda into a plant. "You don't approach her about the job again. I'll handle that end so that we have a hope in hell that she takes the job, assuming you haven't fucked that up beyond repair. That blog of hers is the ticket to a successful launch, Theo, and that is my very expensive, professional opinion."

Theo cast his colleague as a sidelong stare. "You done yet?"

"Not even a little," John replied cheerfully, sitting down again and bracing his elbows on his knees. "Now, as someone who is an absolute magnet for the ladies—"

Theo interrupted him with a snort before waving his hand through the air. "Sorry. Carry on, Casanova."

"As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, you can't just come back after something like that and expect a woman to jump for joy at your mere presence."

"Then what the hell am I supposed to do?" Theo burst out, frustrated. "She's the most difficult woman in existence, ever."

"Ah, but the greater the challenge, the sweeter the reward." John grunted when Theo furrowed his brow. "You know, for the brilliant, maverick owner of a start-up valued at over ten million dollars, you can be an idiot." Standing, he tossed the empty can into the recycling bin, then leaned over the desk to pat Theo on the shoulder.

“Woo her, my man. Woo her like you’ve never wooed before.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

WHEN JOGOTHOME, she headed straight for the garage. The small space housed her sister Beth's mechanic shop, and the sister she was closest to could almost always be found there during work hours.

She didn't want to be alone, but she wanted someone she could be silent with.

"Beth?" She strode into the garage, throwing her arms up at the last second when she saw her sister, who was very much not alone. "Oh shit! Sorry! I'll go!"

"No, no. Stay." Beth pushed Ford away with a mock-stern stare and pulled her coveralls back up to her waist, where she tied the arms in a knot, then straightened her tank. "Mr. Handsy here was just trying to convince me to take a break, but I have too much to do."

Beth stopped when she caught sight of Jo's face. Jo thought she'd done a pretty good job at masking what she felt, but her sister knew her well enough to know that she wasn't all right. "For you, I'll take a break. Sit."

Beth gestured to her workbench, then shot Ford a look with eyebrows raised. He took the hint, buckling up his pants as he entered the house through the door that joined the two.

"I'm not going to bug you if you're busy," Jo started, but Beth waved her off.

"You can talk while I work," she said, ducking under the hood of the car she was

working on. Jo saw something spark and took a cautious step back, out of range.

“It’s nothing. Really,” Jo insisted, but she didn’t leave, instead opening up the mini fridge that Beth kept in the corner. The door was lined with shiny glass bottles of kombucha. So gross. Jo wrinkled her nose and shifted things around, finally locating a can of Diet Coke in the back corner. She didn’t love soda, but she did like having something to do with her hands.

When she closed the fridge, Beth was watching her. Her sister’s skin was still flushed from what she and Ford had been doing when Jo entered the garage, and Jo felt a pang of what was undeniably loneliness.

She wanted what Beth and Ford had. Not just the companionship, either, damn it. She wanted the lust, the can’t-keep-your-hands-off-each-other headiness.

And the only person who had ever done it for her was Theo.

Fuck her life.

“I’m going to take a wild guess and assume that it’s Theo who’s gotten that crazy look in your eyes.” Beth eyed Jo’s drink, then crossed to the fridge and retrieved a kombucha for herself. Jo couldn’t hold back a grimace when her sister downed half the bottle. Sure, it was supposed to be good for you, but it had little floaty things in it. Yuck.

“So, tell me.” Beth gestured with her bottle. Jo squirmed. She’d come here because she’d wanted to rant to her sister, absolutely. But after seeing Beth and Ford together, she felt more like curling up into a ball in her room. Alone.

“How can you drink that?” Both Jo and Beth jumped when the door Ford had just disappeared through banged open, smacking into the unfinished drywall of the shop.

“It has chunks in it.”

Beth arched an eyebrow at the bottle of beer Meg carried. “But beer before noon is okay?”

“It’s craft beer.” Meg smiled sweetly. “Doesn’t count.”

Looking to Jo for support, she stopped short. “What’s going on?”

“Theo,” Beth supplied before Jo could answer.

“Damn it.” Meg handed Jo the beer. “Want to talk about it?”

“No.” Jo scowled. She’d come here wanting to talk to Beth, but now she didn’t know what the hell she wanted.

“Hello?” All three sisters turned at the sound of the male voice. Jo felt awkwardness weigh down on her like wet wool as she saw John Brooke standing in the open door of the garage. His pristine suit looked completely out of place against the oil-stained walls.

“Mr. Brooke.” Shit. Jo had no idea what the social nuances of a situation like this were. She also had no idea what the hell he was doing here.

“Miss Marchande.” Sidestepping a slick of oil on the floor, John closed the distance between them, offering her a hand. “I don’t feel that we had an adequate discussion of the position at Crossing Lines. I’d like to remedy that. Perhaps we can try again, tomorrow morning?”

“What?” Jo blurted, ignoring the hand that he still held out. “But didn’t Theo tell you about us?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” John arched his eyebrows in a way that he suggested he didn’t want to know, either. “If you need time to think about the offer, I can give you twenty-four hours. But I don’t think you were informed of the compensation for the job, which might influence your decision.”

He named a sum that made her two sisters gasp and left Jo gaping. It wasn’t astronomical, but it was far more than most writers made...ever.

“Apologies—I didn’t think that it might be crass to drop numbers in front of others.” He looked over at her sisters as he spoke, then did a double take at Meg. She looked right back, and the smirk that curved her lips said she liked what she saw.

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“Thank you,” Jo said, a little too loudly, but this time her volume was on purpose. John cleared his throat and forced his attention back to her. Working on anything connected with Theo was a bad, bad idea, but she was human, and she had no money. The sum he’d named had her mind spinning wildly with possibilities.

She could maybe, possibly awaken that dream of going back to school. At the end of the day, she supposed that she was like most people—money was a powerful motivator.

“If I come in tomorrow to discuss this, will I be speaking with you?” She chose her words carefully. The last thing on earth that she wanted to do was discuss her complicated history with Theo with his business partner, so she was relieved when he simply nodded.

“Yes. I’ll go over the job with you, what we hope it will bring in terms of visibility to the company.” Tucking his hands into the pockets of his well-tailored trousers, he looked her in the eye. “But there will also be some input from the owner on the creative side.”

“I see,” she replied slowly, swallowing past a dry throat. Could she really do this? Could she work at a job where she knew she’d have to see Theo every day?

For that kind of money—life-changing money—could she not?

She could feel her sisters watching her—well, Beth was watching her. Meg was staring at John while licking her lips. She sucked in a deep breath, then nodded decisively.

“I’ll see you then.”

Beth jumped in place as John turned and exited the garage. Meg stared blatantly at his ass. And Jo felt as though all of the air had been sucked from her lungs.

What had she done?

Theo heard them as soon as he turned his ignition off. Taking advantage of the warmth of the early spring day, he’d taken his convertible, leaving the top down. He’d meant to pull his car into the yawning garage of the estate, which he had to do manually since he had no idea where the fob was—his dad had left an insane amount of personal things to sort through. But when he heard the feminine laughter, he was reminded of all the times he’d hung out with the Marchande girls on the very same lawn that they were on now.

Woo her like you’ve never wooed before.

His partner’s words reverberated in his head. He wanted to balk—he was Theo Lawrence. He’d made something of himself, even though no one had ever thought he could. He could have any woman he wanted, and he frequently did. He didn’t have to woo.

Those women weren’t Jo.

“How the hell am I supposed to woo her?” He waited for inspiration to strike, and when it didn’t, he reached for his phone. A few taps later, and his screen was filled with images of flowers, chocolates and people eating dinner with napkins in their laps.

A date. He should ask her on a date—a real one.

An unexpected pang of nerves shot through him, and he mercilessly squashed it down.

He needed to approach this like he would approach a business meeting, confident in his success.

As he strode back down the driveway, the rosebushes that had grown wild since his father's death caught his eye. Among the tangle of branches were a handful of early blooms.

He'd never given Jo flowers. What an ass he'd been.

"Ow!" The branches were thorny, but he managed to gather enough stems to make a small bouquet. Arranging them clumsily in one hand, he took a deep breath and headed for the house next door.

"It went through!" Triumphant, Meg brandished a...was that a croquet mallet? Yes, they each had one, and there were thin wire hoops set up all over the lawn.

"No good! You weren't holding your drink!" Amy pulled a fresh can of beer from a small cooler and tossed it to her eldest sister before taking a long drink from her own. "This is how you do it!"

Holding her can in one hand, Amy waved her mallet in an inelegant arc that somehow managed to connect solidly with a black ball. It flew through a wire hoop and smacked against the orange ball that Meg had just hit. "Yes! Two extra strokes for me!"

"From what I've heard, you don't need any extra strokes to get the job done." Beth grinned wickedly at her youngest sister, waving her mallet in the air like a pointer finger. "Who is it this week? Mason? Caroline?"

“A lady never kisses and tells,” Amy sniffed before sending a ball through the next hoop. Jo snorted in response.

“Since when are you a lady?” She’d been lying out flat on the grass, but now she propped herself up on her elbows, shielding her eyes from the sun. He could tell the moment she spotted him, because her spine straightened, her body tense. “Oh.”

“What?” Beth turned to look in the same direction. “Oh. Theo.”

“Hi, Beth. Meg. Amy.” He nodded at each of them in turn, suddenly feeling as though he was facing a firing squad. He’d never met an opponent he couldn’t best in the boardroom, but facing these four women that he’d known a lifetime ago made him wish for a drink. “May I ask what on earth you’re doing?”

“Playing beer croquet. Obviously.” Amy looked him up and down. At least he was assuming it was Amy—he could see whispers of the girl she’d been in the lines of her face, but this woman had blond dreadlocks and so many tattoos that he could barely see the ivory of her skin. “Wanna join?”

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“Amy!” Meg glared at her sister, gesturing toward Jo with her head in a not-at-all-subtle manner.

“What?” Amy tossed her mallet to the ground with exasperation. “We’ve known him forever. You can’t just erase that because he went on some rich-boy rumspringa and grew up.”

“That’s right.” The sound of his own voice surprised him—he hadn’t intended to say anything. But as all four of the women looked at him curiously, he cleared his throat and continued, flying by the seat of his pants. “You can’t erase it.”

He focused in on Jo, offering her the bouquet he’d plucked. “Here.”

The expression on her face wasn’t one he’d seen before, a cross between confusion and terror. “Did you pick these?”

“I—yes.” Damn it. He should have thought this through better. Gotten something made up at a fancy florist. Something spiky and tropical, with lots of wild greenery—something that suited her better than a bunch of garden roses. “I’m here to woo you.”

“What?” Jo threw her hands in the air. Behind her, Meg choked on her swallow of beer, and Amy cocked her head, watching him intently. “Woo? What the hell does that mean? Who says that anymore?”

“Shush, Jo.” Meg wiped the back of her hand over her mouth. “Or you won’t be able to hear the wooing.”

Jo growled at her sister, who smiled beatifically back at her. The fact that Jo's sisters hadn't run him off the property with their mallets restored the smidgen of confidence that had been misplaced by doubt.

Jo hadn't told him to leave yet, and the heat of her skin was still on his lips. She wasn't immune to him, and her sisters hadn't chased him away. He was going to take that and run with it.

Shutting out the other women, he crossed the lawn to Jo. Her expression was stony, but he saw her swallow thickly when he got close.

He held out the roses. She looked like she'd as soon eat them as accept them, but she reached out a wary hand.

"I want to take you on a date." She sucked in a sharp breath, and he felt a stab of vindication. No, she wasn't immune. "Tomorrow night. Dinner. You and me."

Jo opened her mouth but never got a chance to speak.

"She'll go!" Meg and Amy shouted at the same time. Jo turned to glare at them, but her gaze stopped at his hand.

"You're bleeding."

He looked down at his hand. Multiple scratches from the rosebush striped his skin, and a drop of blood welled up from one. "I didn't notice."

He wiped it on the thigh of his suit pants, and Meg winced. Amy watched him thoughtfully, and Beth pretended to be busy moving clips on the hoops, though he knew that she was paying attention, too.

Jo, though, squinted at him as though trying to peer into the dark recesses of his brain to find what his motivation was. He really thought she should have known.

Her. His mind was full of her. She'd never been far from his thoughts, even when he'd tried to tell himself that choosing to locate the offices of Crossing Lines in Boston was because of the location, or when he'd dated other women—fucked other women—in a desperate attempt to wipe her out of his mind.

He'd gone to that party knowing damn well that he'd see her, but he hadn't been able to stop himself. He'd let Ava give him what she wanted—his cock in her mouth—to try to tell himself that the only reason he wanted to see Jo was to check in, to make sure with his own eyes that she was doing all right. That the job offer was really just a job offer.

And then there she'd been in the dark, watching him. Watching him and liking it. And just like that, it all came roaring back.

She looked up at him with an indecipherable glint in her eyes.

And then she nodded. "Okay."

CHAPTER NINE

“WHATDOYOU know about Crossing Lines?”

Jo rocked back and forth a bit in her chair. Unlike the hardware store special that was at her desk at home, this one was sleek leather, softly cushioned, and had wonderful support for the achy back that Jo figured most writers probably had.

She was enjoying the chair so much that it took her a moment longer than usual to answer John’s question. When he cleared his throat, she looked up, realizing that she’d taken too long.

“I looked it up,” she admitted, “after you emailed me. I read the Wikipedia entry on it and took a look at the site. But I’m afraid I didn’t really understand the specifics of it.”

“Did you download the app?” John asked. Jo shook her head, trying to hold back her grin.

“I’m sorry. I know most people would have, but I don’t have many apps on my phone at all. I use it for email and jotting down story ideas when pen and paper isn’t around. That’s it.”

“You don’t use it as a phone?” John’s expression registered horror at this, prompting Jo to laugh. He’d had to pause their meeting several times already because he’d gotten calls that he couldn’t ignore.

Jo was the opposite. “Hell, no. I hate talking on the phone.” She shuddered.

John stared at her, perplexed. “You’re a unique woman, Jo.”

“Is that bad?” She might have felt nervous, but she had a sneaking suspicion that John was one of the few people in the world who both wasn’t related to her and genuinely liked her.

“Not at all. It’s very refreshing.” His smile was very nearly dazzling, and Jo might have thought that he was flirting—except that she knew she very much wasn’t his type. Never mind that he hadn’t been too subtle in checking Meg out yesterday, but she wasn’t most people’s type. Antisocial tomboys with tempers weren’t in high demand.

“Okay. Where to start, then...” John stopped his pacing—he was constantly in motion, full of energy—and pulled a second chair up to the massive desk. “What dating sites are you on?”

Jo couldn’t hold back the laugh this time. John looked at her, perplexed.

“I’m not on any dating sites.” She wasn’t sure how she was supposed to interpret the look that John cast her then—not quite pity, but like he couldn’t figure her out.

She didn’t really like it. Romance was for other people. She’d mostly accepted it, until Theo had crashed back into her life. She was the one who was friend-zoned, considered one of the guys. On the rare occasions that another person seemed interested in her, she was too awkward to figure out the interaction—and she rarely found it worth it at any rate, since none of them ever made her hot and bothered.

She wasn’t about to express this to some slickly suited guy that she’d met yesterday, though, so she searched his face for a cue and decided to deflect. “I think my sister

Amy is on this one, though. She's on a few."

"Amy." He rolled the name over his tongue. "Is she one of the sisters I met yesterday?"

Jo refrained—barely—from rolling her eyes. "The sister you're ever-so-delicately inquiring about is Meg. She's a caterer with small-business dreams. She tells very dirty jokes, treats thrift-store shopping like an Olympic sport, and she's single."

John blinked, then ran a hand over the buzzed ebony hair on his head. "I guess I wasn't that subtle, huh?"

"Not even a little bit." Damn. Should she be more formal with someone who was now her boss? She wasn't the formal type. And hadn't he said that he liked the fact that she was unique?

Theo always had.

Do not go there, Jo.

"Okay. The Wikipedia article said that Crossing Lines is revolutionary. Can you explain that to me?" She tugged on the hem of the black tunic thing that Meg had shoved at her that morning. She was wearing it with some stretchy leggings that her sister had also strongly—forcefully—recommended, but she'd ignored the ballet flats in favor of her Converse sneakers.

"Okay. I'm going to explain as though you don't know anything about dating sites, so apologies if any of this is redundant."

Jo nodded. It won't be. I know nothing.

“So on most dating sites—Cupid.com, PlentyOfFish, even older ones like Match.com and Lavalife—people set up a profile. They talk a little bit about themselves, about what they’re looking for, and then they conduct searches for matches with their criteria. Often the sites will have algorithms that suggest profiles that members might want to check out. Following?”

“Yes.” It sounded a little bit tedious to Jo. She spent enough time at her computer, and the thought of scrolling endlessly, looking for a partner, didn’t appeal to her.

“What makes Crossing Lines different is that it adds back a bit of the meeting-in-person element. You know, how everyone up to our generation was stuck meeting.” He grinned, tapped on the keyboard, then turned the monitor to show her the screen. “What our site does is connect you with people that you come across in real life.”

“I’m not following.” Wasn’t that just...meeting in person?

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“Bear with me.” John tapped on the keyboard again, and she was surprised to see him bring up what appeared to be his own profile. “Okay. So let’s say that your hot sister and I were both members of Crossing Lines.”

Jo couldn’t hold back the smirk.

“Then let’s say we both happened to go to the same Starbucks at the same time—crossing lines, so to speak. We would each receive an alert that someone else from the app was in the vicinity. You could then check out their profile and indicate whether or not you’re interested.”

“Oh...” Jo cocked her head to the side. “Oh, so that saves the nerves of approaching someone you find attractive for a date, too.”

“Exactly!” John beamed at her like she’d performed a trick and earned a treat. “So then let’s say your hot sister and I checked out each other’s profiles and indicated that we were interested. Then I could approach her, or she could approach me, and we could set up a date.”

“What if one of you didn’t hear the alert?” Jo didn’t hear her phone most of the time, though in her case she kept her notifications on silent deliberately, so they didn’t annoy her. “Doesn’t that kind of screw things up in this magical meet cute?”

“No matter when you catch the alert, you’re still able to see the profile,” he assured her, pointing at the screen. “So even if you check an hour, two hours later. The next day. You still might think, oh, that’s the cute girl from the coffee shop. Or, oh, that guy was with his kids, but now I see that he’s a single dad, so I’m going to hit him up

to install my kid's car seats.”

Jo snorted at the innuendo that John infused his last words with. Pushing back in her chair, she took a moment to let it all absorb.

“This is actually kind of brilliant.” She drummed her fingers on the arm of the chair. “Who thought this up?”

“Theo did.” John suddenly, deliberately, busied himself with closing out his profile and readjusting the screen.

Yeah, Jo was pretty sure that Theo had filled him in on their history. She wondered if he also knew about the upcoming date, and what he thought about it.

She still wasn't sure what she thought about it. She didn't—couldn't—dwell on it right now, or she'd think herself into a spiral of doom, so she changed the subject again. She was becoming an expert at it.

“So where do I come in?” She couldn't really think what place a creative writer would have on the staff of a cutting-edge dating app. She especially couldn't imagine what her kinky sex blog could contribute to anything.

“We're still what's considered a start-up company,” John explained, pushing out of his chair and starting to pace again. “We're the new kid on the block—the weird new kid on the block. Our business model tells us that we can be incredibly successful, but we need to find new and creative ways to bring in users. Millennials and Gen Z are statistically the most likely to give something a bit different a try, and they are also the generations that are more open to new things when it comes to sex and relationships. They're intrigued by kink, and that's where you come in.”

“You don't expect me to put up a profile, do you?” Panic was a flock of tiny birds in

her belly. She couldn't imagine something less appealing. "I just write about it. I don't want to get kinky with strangers."

John looked at her as though she'd grown a second head. "Of course not."

She exhaled, trying to expel those tiny birds from her system. "Sorry. Go on."

"We want you to write content for us, targeted toward millennials and Gen Z." Pulling his phone from his pocket, he glanced at the screen before returning it. "We plan to start a blog that will be advertised on the home page of the site. We'll be advertising it on Facebook, Amazon and all social media. Essentially it's to be a column about sex and dating as a member of that generation. We're a new, edgy site, and we want edgy content. Your blog stood out because you aren't afraid to go there."

"Are you sure it didn't stand out because I used to date Theo and he has some kind of guilt complex?" Jo winced as the words left her mouth, but even if it was brazen to ask, she wanted—needed—to know.

She wanted this job. She had that hit of adrenaline, cold sweat, sick-with-want kind of feeling in her gut, and that wasn't even factoring in any feelings left over between her and the boss.

Her writing was hers and hers alone. No matter how much she wanted the job, any joy from it would be tainted if Theo had only offered this out of guilt.

John stopped his pacing in front of the window, his face set in serious lines. In the pale light filtering through the thick glass, Jo noted again how classically handsome he was—and again, she felt nothing. When she looked at Theo, though, with his wild dark eyes, the skin that reminded her of caramel, the way he moved his hands when he spoke about something he was passionate about...

Her entire body clenched just thinking about him.

Damn you to hell, Theo Lawrence.

“Jo, when Theo showed me your blog, he didn’t tell me anything at all about your history. I had no idea that you two had ever even been in contact, let alone...close.” John tapped a finger on the glass. “I agreed that your writing was perfect. And I have to say, I’m a bit jealous—you have the most fascinating dating life. Reading about it almost makes me feel like I’m there.”

If only you knew. Jo forced herself to smile, nodding along with John. If he liked her content, then she didn’t think there was any reason to let him know that she had experienced precisely nothing that she’d written about on her blog...well, except for this morning’s. Lack of real sex, of desire, meant that she’d filled that void in her life another way, with a fascination of all things kinky. She threw in anecdotes about her sisters, too, since they always insisted on sharing every single dirty detail of their relationships, their hookups.

But her own experiences? Her blog hadn’t included a single one, because there hadn’t been any—not until Theo had come back.

“So that’s what you want me to write, then?” Shit...did Theo think she’d done all those things she wrote about? Not that she would be ashamed of it, she just...hadn’t. It was weird that he might think she did. “What I write about on my blog?”

“Essentially, yes, with an emphasis on the dating experience posts. But—” He was cut off when a knock sounded on the door. Theo entered the room without waiting for an answer. “As I was going to say, Theo will be in momentarily with a list of ideas for topics.”

“And here he is.” Theo’s words were light, but his gaze was a punch of pure heat

when he ignored John and focused in on Jo. “Is John treating you right?”

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Something about the way he asked made the question sound deliciously dirty. Jo found herself unconsciously rubbing her thighs together under the shiny surface of the desk.

“Like a lady,” she retorted, casting a smile in John’s direction. On anyone else the expression might have looked coquettish—on her, Jo imagined it looked pained, but it had the intended effect. Theo narrowed his eyes at his partner.

Like Jo, he’d always had a temper, often fueled by jealousy. Where that had caused them to self-combust when they were younger, now Jo tasted a hint of how that possessiveness could be...well, hot.

Moving her gaze from John to Theo, she instead found it a bit hard to breathe.

What the hell was she supposed to do with this?

John’s phone rang, the no-nonsense ringtone slicing through the thick air. Without another word to the pair of them, he answered it, waving goodbye as he exited the office, closing the door firmly behind him.

They were alone, and the heaviness of Theo’s gaze made Jo want to break eye contact. The thread of stubbornness that had been wrapped around her since birth refused to let her back down.

He wasn’t challenged by the direct stare. If anything, he seemed amused, his lips curling into a faint smirk. Holding eye contact, he closed the distance between them, stopping when he reached the front of the desk.

Jo immediately felt the need to stand, to put them on even ground, but she knew that the movement would show how off balance he made her feel.

Why did this feel so much like war? And why did she want to wave the white flag and throw herself at that rock-solid chest?

“Since you showed up this morning, I’m assuming you’ve accepted the job.” His posture was arrogant, as though it would never occur to him that she would say no. Looking him over, though, Jo noticed him rubbing the pads of his thumb and forefinger together at his side. It was an old tic of his, a way of releasing excess energy when he was feeling more than he wanted to be.

What was he feeling now? Lust? Guilt? What would she do if she knew?

“I haven’t accepted it officially, no.”

Theo said nothing, just kept watching her with that dark gaze. Damn it, he knew—he knew how much she wanted this job. Refusing it would show him how much he was affecting her.

Still looking at her, he pulled out his tablet, moving his fingers over the screen. “I just emailed you the employment agreement. There’s no need to print it—it can be signed electronically. Of course, you’ll want to read it all the way through, but I think you’ll find that it’s an extremely generous offer.”

“Theo...” She closed her eyes. Why was she bothering to put up a front at all? He’d always been able to read her better than anyone, and she had no doubt that he knew exactly what she was struggling with right now. She might as well say it. “Look. I want this job. I’m still attracted to you.”

She choked on the last part—that she was terrified of falling for him again, only to

have him leave. There was vulnerable, and there was vulnerable.

“I don’t understand why you can’t have both.”

Jo’s chin snapped up. There was no disguising the desire that was thick in his voice, a sound that was imprinted onto her very DNA.

“You can review the agreement in the car.” He tossed an inky-black silk scarf onto the desk in front of her, and for the first time since he’d entered the room, she noticed that he was wearing a light peacoat. “You can also look over the list of potential blog topics that I sent. I’m curious which one catches your attention first.”

“The car?” Picking up the fabric, she discovered that it was a kerchief, the type an old-time movie star might have once worn to protect her hair. “Where are we going?”

“You agreed to go on a date with me.” The cocky smile he shot her made her feel like she was fifteen years old again, all knobby knees and fluttery feelings for the boy next door. “It’s date time.”

“I agreed to go to dinner with you.” She pointedly checked out the clock on the wall. “It’s not even eleven in the morning.”

“We’ll have dinner, too. Maybe more, if you’re good.” Damn it. The confidence in his voice, in every line of his body, shouldn’t have still been so sexy, and yet it was like his words cast out a hook that caught her and reeled her in.

“You know damn well that I’ve never been good, so I wouldn’t get your hopes up.” Even as she spoke, she found herself rising, reaching for the cardigan sweater that was part of the ensemble when Meg had dressed her up like a doll this morning.

Theo frowned when she shrugged into it. “Don’t you have a heavier coat?”

“I only wear coats when it reaches minus twenty.” Jo held up the kerchief thing.
“What am I supposed to do with this?”

“Tie your hair back.” He gestured with his hands. “Otherwise it’ll get in your face.”

Puzzled, Jo struggled to arrange the scarf on her head. Breathing out on a chuckle, Theo rounded the desk, taking it from her hands.

“Like this.” Turning her with the press of a hand on her lower back, he stroked his fingers through the sleek, chin-length strands of her hair. Her pulse stilled as he tucked them behind her ears, brushing over the tops of her ears.

A rough breath escaped her as he arranged the silk over her hair. When he tied it in a knot at the base of her skull, he whispered a light touch down the back of her neck, tracing a line to the top of her spine.

Just a simple touch, but she felt it over her entire body. Her breasts swelled, aching, and she arched into his hands.

“There. You’re ready.” Breaking the connection, Theo stepped back, put some much-needed space between them. Her heart was hammering so hard that she spoke extra loud in order to be heard over it.

“Ready for what?” And she wasn’t ready. She wasn’t ready at all.

He grinned, then dangled a set of car keys. “Ready for a ride in the convertible.”

CHAPTER TEN

“JO, YOU MIGHT as well relax. We’re going to be in the car for a while, and you’re going to get a headache if you keep clenching your jaw like that.”

Theo had his eyes on the road ahead but was aware of every movement, every breath Jo made in the passenger’s seat of the low-slung F-Type Jaguar.

She’d been tense since they’d left the office, navigating through the congested streets of the city and onto the interstate. He could still feel the heat of her skin, branded onto the tips of his fingers from when he’d helped her with the scarf, and he didn’t think the tension was because she didn’t want to be there. In fact, he knew it—he knew Jo.

He knew that breathy little sigh, the same one she’d made when he was inside her. She was tense for the same reason he was—because she still wanted him. She wanted him, and she was confused about it.

He hoped that what he’d planned for today would help her clear her mind.

“Where are we going?” She’d asked this approximately every ten minutes since they’d left Boston, making him grin. Patience had never been one of her virtues.

“You’ll find out when we get there.” Luckily for her, he had patience enough for the both of them. “For now, let’s go over that list of article ideas. Pull it up and let’s see what grabs you.”

Huffing out a breath of exasperation, she wriggled her phone out of her pocket. He watched from the corner of his eye, enjoying the view of her thighs and her slim hips, wondering how on earth she'd managed to fit anything into the pocket of pants so tight.

““Wildest one-night stands,”” she read. He expected her to make some kind of sarcastic remark—in fact, he was looking forward to it—but instead she nodded thoughtfully. “I could work with that.”

What?

“What is the main purpose of Crossing Lines, as far as your marketing goes?” She sank her teeth into her lower lip, and he wanted to do that himself. “Is it for casual dating? Relationships? Or is it like that one site...what’s it called? Timber?”

“Tinder.” He pressed his lips together, trying not to laugh, since he could see that she was being serious. “And it’s for all of the above. But the hope is that by having you blog about all kinds of interesting topics relating to sex and love, it will set us up as being more cutting-edge than our peers. More avant-garde, the ones with our finger on the pulse of what the cool kids want.”

She nodded, returning to the list.

““Sugar dating—dating on your terms.”” She cocked her head, curious. “What’s that? I know I’ve read about that, but I’m a little unclear on the details.”

“Ever heard the term sugar daddy?” She nodded. “There are a number of sites to connect people who are looking for that kind of situation. Sugar daddies—or mommies—who don’t have the time or inclination for a relationship will post, seeking an arrangement with a sugar baby, mostly women, but there are some men now. In return for company and, most of the time, sex, the sugar daddies will fulfill

wishes on the sugar baby's list—often that's someone to cover the rent, to help with student debt, to fund travel.”

“So we could do an article about why it's called dating when, really, it's a form of sex work?” She chewed on her lip as she thought about it, and he fought to keep his eyes on the road against the distraction those pink lips provided.

“That could work,” he said, taking a moment to look the other way, away from those sexy lips. Unfortunately, the endless field of grass didn't have much to offer that could hold his attention.

“I don't think we should do this one. It will make readers curious about these arrangement sites, driving them away from yours. We want to write about things that get them excited about exploring what they've read about, eager to meet people...but to meet people on Crossing Lines. Right?”

“I hadn't thought about that,” he said, surprised. She was right, of course, and John would have likely said the same thing if he'd reviewed the list before Theo had sent it to Jo. “That's a good point.”

Jo tapped a finger to her temple, grinning. “Not just air in here, my friend.”

A dart of warmth—not heat, not lust, but warmth—spread in Theo's chest. This was the first genuine smile that Jo had given him since he'd returned. Something twisted in his rib cage, causing a bone-deep ache.

““Erotic fire cupping. Naked summer pool-hopping. Marijuana lube.”” She continued reviewing the list, commenting as she went. When she was halfway through the list, she paused, letting out a sexy little sound that made his dick sit up and pay attention.

““Sex with an ex,”” she read, setting her phone down on her thigh. ““Exploring kink

with an old flame can be easier than getting dirty with someone you want to keep.’”

He said nothing. He hadn’t added it to the list just to broach the topic, at least not consciously. That said, he’d wondered what she’d say about it, if anything.

With other women, he was on sure footing. He was charming, he was cocky, he was bossy and it worked—oh, how it worked.

Jo, though? Jo wasn’t like any other woman he’d ever met. She saw through his charm, laughed at his cockiness, and if he was bossy, well, one nudge too many and she’d kick back like a mule. It didn’t leave him with many options—at least, not ones he’d used before.

She was silent for a long moment, her thumb rubbing over the screen on her phone. He wasn’t prepared when she half turned in her seat, tucking one leg up underneath her.

“What would you think about that?” she asked, curiosity thick in her words.

“What?” His fingers tightened on the steering wheel. “Like...what do I think about that in general?”

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“No.” She drew the word out into three syllables. “You know what I mean. Sex. Us.”

She’d managed to shock him. He’d thought that she might read that item and tuck it away in that busy brain to think about later. She might even have ignored it entirely, refusing to give him the satisfaction of letting him know that she was thinking about it.

Never in his wildest dreams—and when it came to Jo, he had a lot of dreams—had he imagined that she would come right out and ask him what he thought about them having sex.

“I think I’ve made it pretty obvious what I want here.” He cast her a sidelong look. “That’s why we’re in this car, right? This is a date.”

“It’s a date, but I wasn’t planning on sleeping with you after it,” she replied archly. He made a show of wincing.

“Way to hurt a man where it counts, Jo. Right in the desperate hope.”

“You’ve never been desperate in your life,” she snorted, tapping her phone on her knee. She was quiet for a moment, and he had to claw back the urge to demand to know what was running through her head.

“I’m not saying this properly.” She swallowed, tapping her phone faster. “Look. I know that I write about a lot of...stuff. Kinky stuff. And you must think I write about it convincingly, or you wouldn’t have offered me this job.”

“Right.” He drew out the word, his pulse picking up. She’d always been easy for him to read, but right now he truly didn’t know what she was thinking.

“You’re going to make me spell it out, aren’t you?” She huffed out a breath, then scrubbed her hands over her face. “Look. I write about kink because I’m interested in it. But I don’t...you know I don’t do all of those things, right?”

Her words came out in a rush. A terrible, wild hope began to build up inside him.

“Are you saying that you want to try some of those things?” His attention had been on her since the moment he’d walked into that office, but now it was laser focused.

“Yes.” His Jo had never been anything but direct, and right now, by God, he appreciated it. “But I don’t... I’m not interested in exploring with most people.”

“Are you saying that you’re interested in exploring with me?” His hands clenched on the steering wheel.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.” Turning, she looked up at him with those wide gray eyes. “But I need you to understand that that doesn’t...it doesn’t mean that things are the way they were before.”

The tiniest dart of pain hooked itself into his chest. He’d known that she wouldn’t welcome him back with open arms, but it still hadn’t killed the evil that was hope.

He wasn’t a man to settle for halves when he wanted the whole—he was, however, a man who’d learned that nothing was sweeter than something you’d worked for.

“So what you’re saying is, you want to use me for my body and nothing else?” Her cheeks were flushed, and he knew that it wasn’t from the wind as they flew down the interstate. “I’d be a very stupid man not to take you up on that offer, Jo Marchande. I

like to think I'm rather clever."

"So you don't need to do stuff like...this." She gestured out the window as the Jag swung onto the exit to the town of Concord. "Planning dates. Being charming. You know."

"Baby, my charm is natural. You should know I've never been without it." He grinned at her, wiggling his eyebrows, and she giggled, a wholly un-Jo-like sound, but one he was pleased to have pulled from her. "As for the date. Just go with it. You might have been here sometime since I left, but I wanted to bring you here anyway."

"Bedford Street." Letting his GPS navigate them through the town, he finally brought the car to a stop outside a large set of wrought-iron gates. On either side of the entrance were long, low-slung stone walls, worn with age and slicked with moss.

Jo squinted forward, reading the sign.

"Sleepy Hollow Cemetery," she read, her words tinged with confusion. He waited patiently.

Every other woman he'd dated would have been horrified to be taken to a cemetery on a date, and rightly so. But this truly was someplace he'd wanted to take her for well over a decade, and when the confusion on her face gave way to delight, he knew he'd scored a home run.

"Author's Ridge!" Shoving her phone back into the pocket of her pants, she undid her seat belt, then scrambled out of the car. "Let's go!"

High on the success of his idea, Theo followed more slowly, catching up with her as she paused to take a picture of the cemetery entrance. "How have you not been here yet?"

She shrugged, turning to get a shot from the other direction. “Well, I drive, but I don’t trust my scooter to go this far. And no one I know is even the slightest bit interested in going to see graves.”

“Their loss.” He shrugged. He wasn’t overly pumped about graveyards as a whole, but knowing how much Jo had wanted to come here made it appealing for him. Plus, he thought as he looked around, sucking in the clean air of the wide space, the freshly budding trees and the scent of spring, there were worse ways to spend an afternoon than outdoors, exploring history.

“Come on!” More animated than she’d been since he’d come back, at least to him, she grabbed a paper map from a box affixed to the gate. “Did you know that Ralph Waldo Emerson gave the dedication speech when the cemetery first opened? And that he’s buried here?”

Theo chuckled as he followed after her. Watching Jo study the map, her brow furrowed, something settled in his chest, something that he recognized as contentment.

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He'd missed this. He'd missed her. And he understood why she was wary when it came to her feelings about him, but once he'd seen her again, he'd known that this was it.

He just had to convince her that this—them—was it, too.

He enjoyed the walk through the cemetery, which reminded him of one of the gorgeous, slightly overgrown gardens that he often saw in Europe. The stones were weathered but well taken care of, and the greenery was lush and wild. It was peaceful, he realized.

One thing he'd never really had in his life was peace. It was the thing that had been lacking among the countless other luxuries he'd once taken for granted.

He caught up with her when she paused, staring with barely concealed excitement at a stone marker. "This is it. This is Author's Ridge."

He didn't entirely understand why she was so excited that she was trembling a bit. He didn't have to understand to respect it, though, so he stayed silent, his arm brushing companionably against hers as they started to weave their way among the graves.

"Henry David Thoreau." She pointed to a simple stone that, rather than being marked with the last name, displayed the first in blocky letters. "Wow."

"What's with the pencils?" Scattered among the bouquets of flowers and votive candles that showed that something noteworthy lay here were pencils—singles, bundles wrapped with ribbon, even whole boxes, the cardboard warped and faded

from the sun and the rain.

“Thoreau and his father ran a big pencil company before he was a writer,” she murmured, capturing the image with her phone, then consulting the map. “And just over here should be...holy crap. It’s Louisa May Alcott.”

“Little Women, right?” He followed Jo over to where she’d stopped at the base of a plain stone set into the ground. Around it were more flowers as well as a handful of apples and paper—so much paper. Dog-eared books, shiny new copies, torn book covers, what looked like art.

“That’s right.” Jo’s voice was hushed, and he understood that this particular grave was why she’d so badly wanted to come here once upon a time. “I don’t even know how many times I’ve read that book. I still have my first paper copy, the one I had as a kid, but it’s so tattered you can’t read it anymore. But I feel like... I almost feel like part of myself is in those pages, because they gave me so much growing up. That sounds stupid.”

“It doesn’t sound stupid at all.” A lightbulb went on in his brain. “Was she what inspired you to start writing?”

“Yeah.” Jo nodded, then looked up at him with a wry smile. “She wrote a classic American novel, beloved by millions. I have to wonder what she’d think about me writing a sex blog.”

He grinned. “If you found so much inspiration in her, then I have to think she was pretty cool. She’d probably say that as long as you were writing what made you happy, it was all good.”

The look Jo cast over her shoulder at him then was almost shy, and he felt something in the vicinity of his heart squeeze, just the littlest bit. Turning, she closed the space

between them until she had just enough room to place a hand on his chest, the other behind his neck.

“No matter what else happens with us, thank you for this.” Drawing up on the tips of her toes—he really had forgotten how small she was—she drew him down for a kiss. It was a sweet brush of the lips, almost chaste, but the bolt of emotion he felt as she sighed against his lips nearly set him back on his heels.

He’d thought he’d loved the girl that she once was, but he saw right now, with clarity, that what he’d felt then paled compared to the potential of what he could feel now.

He looked down into her eyes, where she was watching with curiosity and a hint of wariness. He wanted to pull off the scarf she was still wearing, to grip that sleek hair and plunder her mouth with his tongue, but he figured that was probably inappropriate when standing at the grave of her idol.

Still, the moment seemed to call for something—something to pin it in place, bookmarked for the future.

“You know why I had to go.”

“Of course I know.” Angling her chin up, she regarded him with those big eyes. “We fought. You realized that we didn’t fit. That we never would.”

“What?” His fingers squeezed her shoulders as the words hit him like a bat. “You think I left because we fought? Is that seriously what you’ve thought this entire time?”

The sneaky snake that was guilt coiled in his belly and settled in. He’d thought the reason for his leaving was so obvious, he hadn’t left a note. Hadn’t emailed. Hadn’t said a damn word to anyone, not even his dad.

No one had come after him, either. Years later, that still hurt.

“That wasn’t why you left?” Jo pushed lightly on his chest, enough that she could look up at him. “What on earth was your reason, then?”

“I left because you were right.” He slid his hands down until he held her by her upper arms, somehow needing the connection.

“I was right?” Her brow furrowed.

“I was throwing my life away. Drinking and partying and wasting money that wasn’t even mine.” He rubbed his hands up and down her arms, as though to warm her, though he was the one feeling a chill. “I looked at how hard you were working to achieve your goals, you and your sisters. The way I was must have just rubbed it in your face that I was squandering what I had, and what you so badly wanted.”

“That’s part of it,” she admitted, then to his surprise leaned forward and pressed her forehead to his chest, letting out a soft sigh.

“What was the other part?” he asked quietly.

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She kept her face buried, and he liked how it felt. Finally she sighed again, then spoke.

“The other part was that I loved you.” She shifted position, now pressing her cheek against him. “I loved you, and I believed that you were capable of taking over the world if you wanted to. Instead, you seemed intent on self-destruction. I couldn’t just sit by and watch.”

Theo opened his mouth to reply but found that he had no idea what to say to that. Most of the decisions that he’d made over the years had been pondered with Jo’s voice in his ear. He’d done it with an eye to proving himself to her, even though he wasn’t sure if he’d ever see her again.

He had no idea that she’d thought him capable all along.

A drop of rain splashed squarely on his nose, breaking up his thoughts. It was followed by a sprinkling of rain in Jo’s hair.

“Shit.” Clouds rolled in, thick as soup, and a bolt of lightning lit up the sky and made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up straight as the electricity charged the air around them. “Let’s run!”

Jo squealed with laughter as he grabbed her hand, tugging her back in the direction they’d come. They were both soaking by the time they reached the car, which he’d thankfully folded up the top to.

He opened her door, helping her in, before sprinting around to the driver’s side.

When he was safely enclosed in the dry space, he shook like a dog, cursing as he looked down.

“Since when do you get so worked up about rain?” Peeling off the silk scarf, Jo combed her fingers through her hair, which was sleek with moisture. “I distinctly remember you once streaking down the street in it after a few too many beers with your school friends.”

Theo grimaced, unbuttoning his suit jacket. “I’ll go streaking anytime you want me to, baby. But I’d prefer not to ruin this suit. I was assured that it was made by blind monks on a hill somewhere, woven out of their blood and tears or some such nonsense. That’s the only explanation behind the price.”

He tossed his jacket behind his seat, then loosened his tie, unbuttoning the top of his shirt. Moving on to loosening his cuffs, he found Jo watching him with more than a hint of hunger on her face.

He didn’t think; he just acted, placing his palm flat on the nape of her neck and hauling her against his chest. She made a muffled moan as he crushed his lips to hers, his tongue immediately tracing the seam of her mouth, demanding that she open for him.

She did, a sigh of surrender on her lips when he slipped his tongue into her mouth and tasted her. The smoky scent of cinnamon that he swore came from her very skin surrounded him, drugging him as he stroked between her lips the way he wanted to taste between her legs.

A crack of thunder so loud that the car vibrated crashed through the air, and they jolted apart, both breathing heavily. When he looked at Jo, saw her lips swollen from his kisses, her cheeks flushed with desire, it took everything he had not to haul her astride him then and there.

He didn't want their first time again to be in a cramped car outside a graveyard. No, what he wanted was to strip her naked, lay her out on his bed and do every single thing he'd ever dreamed of doing to Jo Marchande.

The way she was looking at him right now? He thought he might finally have the chance.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE HOUR-LONG RIDE back to Boston was quiet, the only words exchanged as they picked their way through the picnic that Theo had packed. Actually, he'd ordered it from a popular deli downtown, but he didn't see why that made any difference. She was too keyed up to eat more than a handful of grapes and a small wedge of smoked cheddar, and he liked that she seemed worked up.

"Where do you live?" As he turned down their street, he realized how little she still knew of his life in the years between. "I can't imagine you're staying at the house. It's been empty since...well, since your dad died."

"I actually am." He cast a sidelong glance at her in the growing shadows. Warmer weather was approaching, but the nights were still long and the light was already fading. He liked it—the blueberry tones of twilight seemed to wrap them in a little cocoon, where they could stay as long as they liked. "I stayed away for a while because...well, I just couldn't handle going through his things yet. Not when I know what a disappointment I was to him."

"You didn't come to his funeral." There was no judgment in her words.

"I did, actually," he admitted, pulling the Jag into the long driveway that led to the stately mansion. Jo gaped at him as he put it into Park and turned to face her.

"Why didn't I see you there?" A spark of anger licked at her words, and he knew he deserved it.

“I made sure you didn’t,” he replied simply, shrugging. “I wasn’t ready.”

“Ready for what, for the love of God?” She threw her hands in the air.

“I wasn’t yet the person I’d gone away to become.” He watched her steadily as she seemed to mull that over. He knew she had questions—she’d always displayed every single thing that she thought on her face without a filter.

“Have you been back in Boston since then?” she asked carefully.

“No.” He wanted to reach for her, to touch her, but wasn’t sure she’d welcome it right then. “No, I came back just for the funeral. I was in New York then. Had been for a few years. I only moved back to Boston a couple of months ago, when I opened the Crossing Lines office here. I stayed at the Boston Plaza until this week.”

“Until you were ready to let me know you were back?” She seemed to chew on that. He held his breath, wondering what she was going to ask next. “Is Crossing Lines that new of a company?”

“Yes and no.” He thought back, pulling up the details. “It’s been in the works for a few years. I didn’t want to use my dad’s money for it, so I had to raise funds, which took a while. Then there was the programming, structuring the company. I didn’t move the offices to Boston until we were officially open. Some of the staff came with me, which made me happy. I’m trying to instill a certain kind of corporate culture, one that treats its employees right and makes them happy, because I think that happiness will filter down to the users of the site.”

“Was Ava one of the employees who moved with you?” Theo studied her face as she asked. He didn’t see jealousy, but there was a hint of possessiveness that made him want to drag her into the house and claim her, caveman style.

“She was.” He didn’t feel guilty about anything he’d done with Ava—he assumed that Jo had had lovers over the years, as well. “But we were never together romantically. It was just sex.”

Not even that great of sex, either, but he didn’t think that Jo needed any details—at least, any more detail than what she’d already seen with her own eyes.

She nodded, appearing to accept that, but then pinned him with an intense look. “I don’t care what you’ve done when we were apart. But I’m not comfortable with you being with other women while we’re...while we’re doing whatever we’re going to do.”

“Say it.” He savored the spark that lit her eyes. “Say what you want me to do to you.”

“I want you to fuck me.” Her voice was quiet, but sure. His girl had always known what she wanted before she reached out and took it. “Only you.”

Taking her chin in his hand, he tilted her head so that she was sitting up perfectly straight, his hand on her skin their only point of contact. “You don’t want to see what I’d do to any other man who touches you.”

“While we’re together,” she added, expression daring him to argue.

He smiled grimly. “We’ll see.”

Leaving her frowning over that, he exited the car, circling round the back so that he could open her door for her. He helped her out, hooking his suit jacket—now only slightly damp—over her to protect her from the relentless drizzle that was still coming down.

He led her through the front door, closing it behind them. The door was old, like the

rest of the house made of heavy wood. The sound of it closing was satisfying, solid, and Theo again had the sense that they were being wrapped in a cocoon that was all their own.

“Do you want a refresher tour?” he asked quietly, watching as she looked around, those keen writer eyes taking in every detail. “It’s been a long time.”

She turned her attention from the heavy, dated crystal chandelier overhead to him, and his heart skipped a beat when he saw the decision in her eyes.

“No.” She inhaled softly, pulling his suit jacket off and holding it back out to him. “I just want to see your room.”

If he touched her, they wouldn’t make it to his room. Hanging his jacket carelessly on the post of the banister, he followed her upstairs, stopping her when she tried to turn into his old room.

“I’ve moved.” With a jerk of his chin, he pointed her in the direction of the master suite. “Over here.”

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Inside the massive room, he slid the dimmer switch on halfway—he wanted to be able to see her, every part of her. Pulling off his tie, he enjoyed watching her explore the space.

“You must have just redone this.” She paused to run a finger over the headboard of his bed—a new one he’d had custom built when he’d decided to move into this house. “I can smell paint.”

“It was just finished last week, actually.” Kicking off his shoes, he undid a few more buttons on his shirt, noting the way her eyes tracked the movement. “Moving into my old room felt like moving into the past. But I thought it would be weird to live in here with my dad’s old stuff, which was hugely dated, anyway. So I gutted this room and the master bath. Some of the crew was actually putting the finishing touches on your hotel, so I’m not surprised you didn’t notice. They would have blended right in.”

She appeared to chew on that as she moved to the window. Bracing her hands on the sill, she peered outside, in the direction of her house, the one that her family had been in for decades, the one he knew she’d worked herself to the bone to make sure they kept.

“You renovated these rooms.” She spoke carefully, measuring each word. “Does that mean you plan on staying?”

He was taken aback by the direct question. He knew his plans for the next few years, but beyond that...he hadn’t really thought.

He couldn’t help but be honest. This was Jo. He’d never lied to her, and he didn’t

want to make it a new habit.

“I’m here as long as it makes sense for me to be here, for the company.” He took a deep breath. “I’ve always assumed that sooner or later I’d sell, though. That I’d take the profits from Crossing Lines and go invest in something else. Something bigger.”

“Something away from Boston,” she said as she stared out the window. He wanted her to turn around so that he could see her face.

“Well...probably,” he agreed, raking his hand through his hair. Why did that suddenly not sound as appealing as it once had? Why was he even asking that question? He knew why. Chances were, after this he would move back to New York, or more likely, to LA. His dreams didn’t start and end with Crossing Lines. And no matter what happened here between him and Jo, she would never leave Boston. Never leave her family.

He shifted uncomfortably in the silence, suddenly filled with a restlessness that made him edgy. He watched as Jo pushed away from the window, sauntering over to the bed. Her body language said that she didn’t care one way or another what his answer to that question had been, and it made a thread of something darkly possessive spark to life inside him.

She perched on the edge of the bed, smoothing a hand over the steel-gray quilt. “This bed is huge. You could have an orgy in it.”

“Let’s save that for another night.” He felt his lips form a lopsided smile as she arched an eyebrow at him, seemingly content with the subject change. “I promised you dinner.”

“I’m not hungry.” Rising, she crossed to him, stopping a foot away. His stare fixed on her pulse, beating rapidly beneath the glove-thin skin of her throat. He wanted to

press his mouth there. Use his teeth to mark her as his own.

“What should we do, then?” Even as he spoke, he undid the last of the buttons on his shirt, letting it hang open. He enjoyed her appreciative glance. He’d always logged long hours in the gym, even as a teen, since he wasn’t doing much else. But he’d thickened since then, no longer had any of the gangly limbs associated with puberty. As Jo shed her cardigan, he noted that her body had changed, too, though the differences were subtle. She’d always been petite, nearly skinny in her teens. Now she was curved in all the right places, and though her breasts were still small, they’d plumped up enough to make him think about all the dirty things he wanted to do to them.

“What should we do?” he repeated, taking her by the waist. She shivered as he drew her slowly to him, until the tips of those pretty breasts brushed against the bare skin of his chest.

“I’m cold.” He didn’t think she meant just physically, though her hands were chilly from the damp, the rain. “I want you to warm me up.”

Heat rocketed through Theo’s body. He’d been with other women, beautiful women, sexy women. Most of them had been so eager to be with him that he hadn’t had to do much to charm them into his bed. He hadn’t had to do much to please them there, either, since ultimately what they were after wasn’t really him. No, they wanted the idea of him—the maverick rich boy, the one who turned his back on his family fortune and made his own millions. They liked the travel, the luxury, the lifestyle.

With Jo, his money had always been more of a hindrance if it was anything at all, which it often wasn’t. The woman who stood before him in what he was pretty sure were clothes belonging to one of her sisters had no interest in money beyond keeping her family comfortable. She wasn’t into shopping, hadn’t batted an eye at his Jag. So the fact that she was here at all meant that it was because she wanted him. Him, Theo.

He'd never had to work so hard to get a woman into his bed. And no other woman heated his blood quite like she did.

He wanted this to be good for her, wanted her to be fully aware of who was inside her when she came on his cock.

"Strip for me." Peeling her cardigan down just enough to expose her delicate shoulders, he pressed a kiss to one then stepped back. He enjoyed the shiver that passed through it, because he knew she was thinking of what was about to happen.

"I said I was cold. How am I supposed to get warm if I take off my clothes?"

But even as she spoke, she was tugging the damp sweater down her arms and off, tossing it to the floor.

"Keep going." Wanting to see if she would buck against the command, he infused it with arrogance. His brave girl merely arched an eyebrow and slithered out of the long shirtdress thing that hid far too much of her tight little body.

"Last time we were together, I don't think you even owned a bra." He nodded at the simple, baby blue cotton that covered her chest. "This is new."

"I was a little smaller then. I didn't need one." Rosy pink flushed the skin of her torso. "They're still not that big, but it's enough that I'd be giving everyone a show without one."

"I like it." He really did—the simple cotton held up her sweet breasts like an offering. "Take it off."

"You're probably used to seeing women in things a lot sexier than this." Flicking open the front clasp, she held the bra up by cupping her hands around her breasts. "I

can get something fancier.”

“Don’t you dare,” he ordered with enough force to make her blink up at him with surprise. “If I wanted to see other women in fancy lingerie, then that’s what I’d be doing right now. But I’m here with you, so what does that tell you?”

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She stared up at him almost nervously, her tongue flicking out to lick over her lips. She didn't answer.

Before she could inhale even one more time, he'd closed the space between them, threading a hand through her short, sleek hair. She gasped but arched into the touch, letting her bra fall open and down to the floor.

"I want to hear you say it," he commanded, focused on every little detail of her expression. Her pulse had quickened, her eyes were dilated and her lips had parted, making him think about how they would look wrapped around his cock. "Answer my question."

"You're here because you want me." Her voice was quiet, but her words were clear. She knew it, too—there was no point in fighting the connection that had snapped tight between them since the moment they'd met.

"I like hearing that from your mouth." Without letting go of her hair, he tugged at her leggings, yanking them down her thighs, along with a pair of briefs that matched her bra. Sliding his foot between her legs, he pushed down until she was forced to step out of them.

She gasped when he lifted her without warning, hauling her over his shoulder. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I told you to strip and you took your sweet time about it, so I decided to do it for you." Carrying her toward the bathroom, he let his palm roam over the supple planes of her ass. "Since you don't seem to take direction well, I decided that I would just

take you where I wanted you, rather than wait for you to get around to it.”

“Since I don’t take direction well?” Her lips parted in shock as he carried her right into the massive shower that he’d had installed when he redid the bathroom. Flipping her hair out of her eyes after he set her on her feet, he saw her struggle to make sense of that play out over her face.

Her lips parted as if to ask him something, then closed again.

“Ask me,” he said as he entered a series of settings on the sleek control panel built into the wall of the shower. Triple rainfalls burst down around them, steam rising hot and quick. He looked back at Jo, was entranced by the droplets of water sliding over her skin.

“Do you expect me to do what you tell me to?” Her voice was tentative. “Are you dominant? Are you into that?”

She didn’t sound horrified, only curious, which raised his temperature far past the point of comfort. Shrugging out of his now soaking-wet dress shirt, he tossed it to the floor, his slacks and briefs quickly joining it.

Her stare immediately went to his erection, and even over the thunderous spray of the shower he could hear her soft moan. He’d been hard since they stepped into his bedroom, but with her eyes on his cock, he swelled even more.

“I’m not into hard-core BDSM, if that’s what you’re asking. I don’t expect you to call me sir.” He grinned down at her; she snorted in response. He grabbed her wrist, tugged her wet, naked body against his own and gave in to the urge to lick those water droplets from her neck.

“I’d rather hear you say my name when you’re coming on my dick,” he murmured

into her ear, nipping at the lobe when she shuddered. “And like I said. I’m not dominant, but if you let me be bossy, I think you’ll find that you enjoy it.”

“I’m...not...the...submissive...type.” She gasped, rocking into him when he trailed kisses down her neck. He laughed.

“I don’t want you to be submissive. I like women who give me hell.” Trailing a hand down her spine, he pressed her to him, groaned himself when his erection pressed into the lean planes of her belly.

“That’s always been a special talent of mine,” she gasped as he ground into her. He was surprised at how tentative she was when her hand slid lower and found him. She stroked his length, cupped his shaft as though she’d never seen a cock before.

Her next words nearly brought him to his knees. “I’m always happy to give you hell. But... I don’t think I’d mind if you...told me what to do. I think I’d like to try.”

“Hell, Jo.” Both of his hands found her hair, smoothing through the wet ribbons of it and dragging her mouth to his. He claimed her lips, tonguing her until she was rocking against him with breathy little sighs. “If you don’t like what I’m doing, you just say so in plain English. Or shake your head. Whatever. I’ll stop.”

She nodded breathlessly, then raised her chin defiantly. “You’re talking an awful lot. Got any action to back it up with?”

With a growl that was part laughter, part pure animal lust, he cupped his hands under her ass and lifted her, carrying her to a small seat carved out of the marble wall. Placing her on it, he reached for his discarded pants, pulling his belt free from the loops.

His leather belt, his suit, they were all ruined after today. He didn’t give even a single

fuck. It was all going to be worth it.

Jo's eyes widened at the sight of the belt. "You're not hitting me with that thing."

Theo snorted, though he couldn't resist slapping it against his palm, just to test her reaction. "Not this time, baby. But something tells me you might like a little spanking."

"You're not—" Her words were stuck in her throat when he grabbed her hands, pressing her palms together. She watched with wide eyes as he wrapped his belt around them, securing her wrists together before sliding a finger underneath to make sure the belt wasn't too tight.

Part of him, the one that was very familiar with her temper, expected her to tell him to fuck right off if he thought he was going to tie her up. But this Jo was older, more mature and had a self-professed interest in all things kinky. This Jo made a low, breathy sound when he lifted her bound wrists and hooked them over one of the showerheads, tethering her in place.

"Oh, I like this." Stepping back, he admired his handiwork. Seated on the small bench, the position of her arms forced her to arch her back, which showed off those pretty tits. Man, he'd missed those. Cupping one in each hand, he circled his thumbs over her nipples, satisfaction coursing through him when they pebbled beneath his touch. "I can do whatever I want with you all trussed up like this, can't I? You can give me lip, but you can't do much about it."

He was testing her. If she gave him even one sign that she wasn't into it, that she was scared, he'd let her go in an instant. Instead, her body rocked forward, trying to get closer to him.

"For heaven's sake, Theo, stop messing around. Come here." Her voice was raw with

need.

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Letting go of one breast, he tapped a finger against her lips. “You’re not the boss here, remember? You’ll get my cock when I say so, and not a minute before.”

She cursed, and he laughed. Sliding his hands down, he parted her thighs wide enough for him to stand between them. She gasped eagerly when the head of his shaft brushed the soft heat of her cleft, but he had other ideas.

“I wish I had another belt in here to hold you open just like this, but since I don’t, we’ll just have to make do.” He slid a finger through her folds, her knees tightening on either side of his hips against the sudden contact.

“You’re soaked.” He lifted his fingers up so she could see her own moisture on them, wetter even than the water pouring down around them. When he slid those same fingers into his mouth and licked them clean, her head fell back, watching him through partially lowered lids.

“You’re the only person who’s ever made me that way.” Her focus stayed locked on him, and he understood that she was sharing something important with him. The weight of her words hit him with the impact of a bulldozer.

He didn’t deserve this, not after the way he’d left. But then, he’d never claimed to be a good man. He certainly wasn’t above taking what she was offering to him.

He thought he just might die if he didn’t.

“Are you warming up?” He ran a hand along her inner thigh. She melted beneath his touch, her muscles liquefying like honey in the sun. She continued to regard him with

that laser-like focus, as though she was afraid he would disappear if she looked away.

“Keep looking at me like that.” Moving his hands to brace them on either side of her face, he leaned in, let his cock press against her slick heat. “It makes me so fucking hard.”

“Good.” She gasped when he rubbed against her, her thighs clenching around his hips. “That’s how I want you.”

“Mmm, but this isn’t about what you want. I’m bossy, remember?” Dipping his head, he laved his tongue over her nipple. “It’s about what I want to give you.”

“Damn it, Theo.” She tugged at her bindings, cursing when they wouldn’t give. “I want to touch you.”

“And I want to touch you.” Standing, he reached for the detachable showerhead mounted into the wall. “Guess what? I win.”

So would she, though, and very soon. Adjusting the nozzle of the showerhead until the water flowed in a steady stream, but not one that would be too hard for her sensitive flesh, he aimed it between her legs. Her gasp when the water made contact sent a stream of pure desire through him.

“Jesus.” She writhed on the bench, twisting against her restraints like a wild thing. Her hips bucked, and he wasn’t sure if she was trying to lean into the spray or push away. Steam rolled through the shower, and he couldn’t tell if the droplets of water on her skin were from the water falling around them or sweat, not even when he laid his tongue to her shoulder for a taste.

“Theo. I can’t... I’m going to...” She arched like a bow as he began to move the spray in slow circles between her legs, edging around her clit but not coming in direct

contact with it. Her frenzied motions brought her heat into contact with the swollen length of his dick, and he briefly closed his eyes to regain his control.

When he opened them again, he was struck by the visual that was laid out before him. Slim as an arrow, she still curved in all the places that made his mouth go dry. Her milky-white skin was a pretty shade of pink from arousal and heat. Her nipples were cherry red and their tips bunched enticingly, begging for his mouth. Her eyes were still at half-mast, glassy with lust but fixed on the visual of his cock, the water and her parted thighs.

“You surprised me,” he said as he ran a finger through her folds again, letting the water beat around the touch. She gasped, groaning when he pulled away again.

“What do you mean?” She ground this out through gritted teeth. He could tell from the look on her face, the increasingly frenzied movements of her body, that the pleasure was rising high and fast inside her. He loved that he could bring her there so quickly.

Grinning wickedly, he returned his hand to her pussy. This time he tucked two fingers inside, savoring the way she clenched around him as he slid through her liquid heat. “You’re completely bare. That’s new.”

“I...like it...that...way.” He found that special place inside her, rubbed over her and watched the way her eyes blurred. “Jesus fuck, Theo. I can’t take it anymore.”

“You will take it, because I say so.” He kept up the pressure inside her but moved the showerhead so that the spray was focused directly on her clit. She cried out, the sound echoing off the glass walls of the shower, her inner walls squeezing him so tightly it hurt.

“Come for me, Jo.” He’d barely said the words when she screamed his name, her

body clenching tight, her mouth open as she cried out. She rocked against him once, twice, then shuddered, every muscle melting like candle wax.

His cock actually throbbed with the need to be inside her, to claim her as his. He wasn't sure that he could keep her here once they were done, though—he thought she might go rabbiting back home to overthink what had just happened. With that in mind, he ground his teeth and called up every ounce of restraint that he possessed, not yet ready to stop playing with her.

She murmured something as he reached up and unhooked her from the showerhead, then undid the belt around her wrists. She was pliant, letting him pull her to her feet, pressing his front to her back.

She unconsciously rocked back against him, pressing her ass against his length. Grabbing his shaft at the base, he stroked it gently between her cheeks. She shuddered when it pressed against the tight rosette, and he grinned.

“Dirty girl.” She murmured in agreement. When he rubbed the bar of soap over her breasts, she leaned her head back on his shoulder trustingly, and he stilled for a moment.

She might still be scarred from what he'd done, but some primal part of her, something that they'd just tapped into through their bodies, still trusted him. He would hold on to that and pray that the rest of her followed suit.

When her skin was coated with a creamy lather, he set the soap down and squirted shampoo into his hands. The crisp scent of citrus permeated the steam as he rubbed it into her hair, massaging her scalp, her neck and her shoulders.

Once he'd rinsed her clean, he watched as the sleepiness disappeared from her limbs. Turning in his arms, she cast a very obvious glance down at his red, swollen length.

“I think someone is feeling deprived. I’d better take care of him.”

She panted out a breath when he yanked her against his chest, hands splaying over her back so that she couldn’t move away. Those watchful gray eyes focused in on him like lasers, questioning, and he slowly rubbed his erection back and forth across her soft flesh.

“You don’t listen very well, baby.” His cock slid between her thighs, and they clenched around its length, making him exhale sharply. “You don’t get to make the rules.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

SHEWASGOINGto have sex with Theo again. Tonight. Soon. There was no question. After so long with numbness as her constant companion, she was overwhelmed with feeling—like steam building up in a pressure cooker, she needed to let some out before she exploded.

The orgasm that had just exploded through her body hadn't relieved the pressure, not at all. As Theo rubbed his cock against the tender skin of her inner thighs, she wondered if she was going to survive this intact, or if her entire body would self-combust the second he slid inside her.

“Put your arms around me.” She did as he commanded, her heart melting a little as he scooped her up in his arms, fireman-style. He snagged a towel the size of a lake as he carried her from the shower to the foot of the bed. When he wrapped her in it, the hem of the plush fabric fell almost to the floor. Content for the moment, she watched as he crossed to the massive fireplace, picked up a remote and set a blazing fire to life with the press of a button.

“That's quite the toy,” she commented when he returned to her, rubbing the towel over her hair and then lower. She closed her eyes against the sensation when he scrubbed the fabric over her sensitive nipples and then between her legs, the nubby fabric a tease.

“I like toys.” He didn't bother to dry himself off, instead tossing the towel to the ground. She felt his gaze everywhere he looked at her just as much as if he was stroking her with his hands.

What was it going to be like, this time? In the first few years after he'd left, she had a few fumbling encounters, but she always stopped it short of penetration, because why would she go there if it did nothing for her? But now, all she could think about was the one time he'd been inside her, how it had been when he'd slid his arousal right into her very core.

"Please." She didn't want to wait even a minute longer. However stupid it was, it felt like all this time she'd been waiting for him to come back—him, the only person who could make her feel good. Her entire body was restless, riding an edge of need that was almost painful in its intensity.

"Please what, Jo?" Her gaze snapped to his when she heard the need in his voice, equal to her own. How was this happening? How were they here together again? "I need to hear you say it."

Need, not want. That little distinction did something funny to her insides. She reached for him without meaning to, wrapping her arms around his waist, pressing her cheek to his heart.

"I want you," she whispered, listening to the thunder of his pulse, knowing that hers matched. "I want all of you."

"How do you want it?" His hands roamed over her back, tracing the lines of her shoulder blades, the curve of her spine.

She thought of all the filthy things she'd written about, the pictures she'd seen as she researched.

He was giving her a chance to ask for what she wanted. To explore.

Swallowing past the hard, sudden lump in her throat, she gently disentangled herself

from his arms. Trying not to feel self-conscious about the fact that every inch of her naked body was on display, she knelt at the edge of the bed, angling herself away from him.

“I want it like this.” She was sure that her skin was on fire, but her voice was sure. “And I don’t want you to be gentle.”

The sound he made was nearly inhuman, and she felt herself grow impossibly slicker. “You can’t be real. I’m imagining this.”

“Not this time.” Not sure what to do, she leaned forward until her hands rested on the bed, so that she was on all fours. She knew he had a full view of every intimate part of her, and knew damn well that he was looking, but knowing that sent a little thrill through her. Made her feel powerful.

“You asked for it, baby.” She heard the rip of foil. Her pulse stuttered, then began to beat again, double time, as she closed her eyes and imagined him rolling the tube of latex over his cock. She nearly looked back over her shoulder, just for the visual of those sure fingers on his own erection.

Next time, she promised herself. This time she didn’t want to think, because then the little voice in her head would nag, reminding her of the heartbreak she was opening herself up to here. No, she just wanted to be taken, to have all thoughts shoved from her mind so that the only thing in her existence was Theo and what he was doing to her body.

“What is that?” Something soft danced over the skin of her lower back, and she gasped.

He didn’t answer, but a moment later something was placed over her eyes. He smoothed her hair back, then secured what she now knew to be the silk scarf at the

back of her head.

“I don’t want that busy brain of yours thinking of anything but what I’m doing to you. Understood?” She nodded, her throat suddenly so dry that she couldn’t have spoken to save her life.

She didn’t have to speak. Like he said, all she had to do was feel. And that’s exactly what she did when he pressed the head of his cock to her aching entrance, alighting nerves that hadn’t been touched in a very, very long time.

She inhaled sharply when he pushed forward. Or rather, when he tried to. Her body was as tight as it had been when she was a virgin, and it wasn’t sure what to do with this intrusion, no matter how good it felt.

“How are you still so tight?” His hands gripped her hips as he stilled, only the head of his cock tucked inside her. “Am I hurting you?”

“Not hurting.” Dropping down to her forearms, she tilted her hips, changing the angle. He slid in another inch, and she gasped at the friction. “I just—I haven’t—”

“Jesus, Jo.” He stopped again, and she felt the tension in the hands that gripped her hips. “Tell me you’ve been with someone else.”

There was no shaming in his words, but she felt it all the same. “I didn’t—I’ve never wanted to.” And she hadn’t. Something was just different with her body, her brain.

If she didn’t love the person, she wasn’t interested in sex.

Oh shit.

She was still in love with Theo. In love again.

This was going to hurt.

“Baby.” His voice was full of wonder. “You’re a gift.”

Then he reached forward, sliding his hand between her legs. Sure fingers found her clit, circling and teasing, and as she melted into the pleasure of his touch, he worked in another inch.

“That’s it,” he coaxed, circling her swollen nub again and again until she felt that strange tension low in her belly, that aching need for more. “Just relax. We’ve got all the time in the world.”

Her forehead was damp with perspiration, and she pressed it to the soft cotton of his quilt. Her hips were canted, and the higher his fingers brought her, the farther he was able to slide inside her. When he pinched her swollen flesh between his forefinger and thumb, she gasped, feeling something inside her open, and he worked in the final inch. Stilling, she felt his hips resting against the curves of her ass and shifted against the unfamiliar fullness of him inside her.

“How are you doing?” His voice was strained, and she knew that the slow pace had to be killing him. He was doing it all for her. It made her a little weak in the knees.

How could she be afraid of him hurting her when he acted like this? How could she

believe that he'd once again be careless with her heart?

"I'm good," she gasped, unable to keep from pushing back against him when his clever fingers worked her higher still. "So good. I think I—"

"Don't you dare come yet." Clenching her waist, he pulled back, and the slow drag of his erection over her swollen tissues had her eyes rolling back in her head. "Don't you do it."

"I don't think I can help it." That wild wave was rising inside her as he worked his way back in, swiveling his hips to get her body to let him in. She gasped when he sheathed himself to the hilt again. "I can't—I think—"

"We're going to go together." His pace quickened slowly, bringing to life nerves that she hadn't even known she had. "Hold on."

She was lost in the world he created for her. Eyes covered, she existed in the seductive dark, her fingers scrabbling to hold on to something and finding nothing, realizing that she had to let herself fall. He gripped her hips, moving in and out of her tight flesh with increasing speed, a relentless onslaught of pleasure that had them both gasping each time he bottomed out inside her.

Her knees gave out, and she fell face-first on the bed. Bracing his weight on his arms, he continued to pump. Beneath her, the cotton rubbed against her damp clit with the friction she needed to fly over the edge. She started to chant his name, trying to wait as he'd told her to, but the rocket inside her was ignited and counting down to launch.

"That's it," his voice rasped in her ear. "I want you to feel this tomorrow. Every time you take a step, every time you sit down, you're going to remember who filled you up. Yes?"

“Yes,” she agreed wildly, and then she was flying. He pushed into her one final time, thrusting as he emptied himself once, twice, three times. The smell of salt and sweat hung heavily in the air as her body clenched around him, her muscles shaking as she exploded so brightly that stars danced behind her eyes.

She was aware when he pulled out of her, and when he used the towel to dry the sweat on her brow, but it was as if she was watching someone else. Surely that couldn't be her who felt so sated, so blissful. Surely that couldn't be her half draped over Theo's chest as he tucked them in and promised that he would cook her spaghetti just as soon as they could move.

That dead space inside her was alive, filled with light. And she was scared of going back to the dark.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I GET A lot of repeat questions in my in-box. You, my dear readers, have helped me to define some of the most common problems of our generation. The one on my mind today is, can you ever really let an ex back into your life?

Hear me out. We're all familiar with that phenomenon where our memories make things in the past seem better than they actually were. So when an ex comes back into your life, and you're consumed by that flood of emotion that inevitably shows up with it, how can you be rational? Throw sex into the game, and it's like all of your efforts to move on and heal have disappeared like a puff of smoke.

The question you ask me, time and again, is if I think a relationship can be different the second time around. Can a cheater change his stripes? Can you find common ground when you want different things? Can people grow up, can people change? I don't have the answer to that for you. What I can tell you is what I've discovered for myself this week—even if it's scary, even if it means you might get hurt, aren't you going to be disappointed if you don't try? Now, I'm not talking getting back with someone who didn't treat you well, or taking an abuser back because he asked you nicely. But what if the reason you parted ways with someone ultimately came down to youth and stupidity? What if, as an adult, they're the best thing that ever happened to you? Will you turn them away because you never make the same mistake twice? Or will you let them back in, even knowing that you might get—probably will get—hurt again?

Is the experience worth the pain?

Thoughtfully yours,

Jojo Kink

“Hey.” Jo jumped when Theo poked his head into her office. She hurriedly—and not very subtly—closed the screen of her laptop, not wanting him to see the post she was working on. When she’d sat down at her computer that morning, she’d debated which topic on Theo’s list to tackle first, but ultimately, when her fingers started to fly over the keyboard, she’d found herself writing about him.

She wasn’t ready for him to read it, though. She might not ever be. But it had been cathartic to get her feelings out into words.

“You left before I woke up.” He studied her with those dark eyes as he entered the office that had been assigned to her, closing the door behind him. She sat up straighter when she saw the sternness on his face.

“I had to get ready for work.” She cocked her head slightly but saw that he knew the truth.

“And?” He crossed his arms over his chest, his muscles pulling at the fabric of his suit. After the up-close and personal look she’d gotten at his muscles a few days earlier, it was extra distracting, because all she wanted to do was rip off his jacket and shirt and run her tongue over the bumps and ridges.

She considered pretending not to know what he was talking about, but he would see right through it. Sighing, she tucked a ribbon of hair behind her ear and leaned back in her desk chair.

“I just needed to think,” she admitted, shifting restlessly in the cushioned seat.

“You couldn’t think with me there?” His voice was gruff, and she saw that she’d actually wounded him, which hadn’t been her intention at all.

“I’m sorry,” she blurted out, rubbing her suddenly sweaty palms together. “You’re—you’re very distracting. I needed to think about you, but I couldn’t be around you while I did.”

“You needed to think about me, huh?” Crossing the room, he only stopped when he could brush against her knees as he sat. “And what conclusion did you come to?”

Her mouth was dry. She reached for her coffee cup, only to find it was empty. She replaced it on the desk, desperate for something to do with the nervous energy in her hands.

“You might hurt me again,” she started, holding up a hand when thunderclouds gathered fast and thick in his eyes. “Just bite back on your temper for a second, okay? You might hurt me. I might hurt you. I feel like I still know you, the real you, but the truth is that I’m missing the details on a huge chunk of your life. I’m terrified that that’s going to jump out and bite me on the ass.”

“If anyone is going to bite you on the ass, it’s going to be me,” he promised darkly before gesturing for her to continue. “Go on.”

“But...” The words stuck in her throat, nearly choking her before she forced them out. “Nobody ever made me feel the way you do. I don’t think anybody else can. So... I want to keep exploring whatever this is. Slowly.”

He lifted her out of the chair by her elbows. She sucked in a breath when he brushed his lips over hers so softly it felt like butterfly wings. “There’s never been anything slow about either of us, Jo. We both jump headfirst, all or nothing. But know that when you fly off that cliff, I’ll be right there beside you.”

“When did you learn to be so smooth?” She huffed out a laugh, pressing her forehead against him.

“Baby, I’ve always been smooth.” He grinned down at her, then jerked his chin at her laptop. “Now. What were you working on that you so desperately don’t want me to see?”

“Nothing.” The lie was automatic. Damn it, she wasn’t ready for him to read those words yet. “It’s nothing. It’s not ready. Don’t open that.”

“You know that just makes me want to look even more, right?” Arching an eyebrow, he reached for the computer. She smacked his hand—and wasn’t gentle about it.

“You did not just smack me.” His eyes glittered, and she felt something dark come to life inside her.

“You’re not going to read that. Not as long as I’m standing here.” Stubbornly, she lifted her chin in the air.

“Oh really?” Bending down to her height, he brushed his lips over the shell of her ear. “I’ve heard that I can be very distracting.”

“Damn you,” she exhaled, then before she could overthink it, she snatched up the laptop and darted to the far side of the office. Pressing herself back into the corner, she watched Theo warily as she fought to keep a grip on the computer with her slick hands.

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She had no idea what the hell she thought she was doing, but when he grinned, her stomach flipped with a potent combination of nerves and excitement. The sensation only intensified as she watched him remove his suit jacket with excruciating slowness, folding it before placing it on the seat of her chair.

“What the hell are you doing?” Her pulse quickened when he loosened his tie. All the time he watched her with laser focus, and she suddenly understood what a gazelle was faced with when cornered by a lion.

“Seems to me like you want to be chased.” He grinned, but there was no humor in the expression, just wicked intent. “Who am I to say no to that?”

“What?” She darted a panicked glance between him and the door, even as wetness surged between her thighs, a fresh ache blooming where she was already sore. “It’s nine o’clock in the morning. Your whole staff is out there. John is out there!”

“If you’re so concerned about where John is, maybe I should invite him in to watch,” Theo commented mildly, taking a step closer. “Then you won’t have to wonder.”

“Oh God.” He wouldn’t. Would he? The dangerous look he was casting her way told her that she really had no idea what he was capable of in that moment. “The door isn’t locked!”

“Guess you better hope no one comes in, then.” Without warning, he leaped forward. She squealed and scuttled down the wall away from him, still clasping the laptop to her chest, though she understood it wasn’t about the article anymore.

“I don’t know why you think you can run.” He started toward her again, but this time his steps were slow and deliberate. “Where are you going to go?”

Having lulled her with the steady moments, he sprang, catching her by the front of the silky T-shirt that she’d stolen from Meg’s closet that morning. She made a wordless, choking cry when he yanked and it tore right down the front, gaping open to expose the lacy bralette that she’d liberated as well.

“If you run out of the office right now, everyone will know what we’re doing.” He grinned, running a steady palm down her torso, between her breasts. She was quivering with suppressed sensation. “The new girl fucking the boss. Whatever will they think?”

“No!” The laptop slipped from her hands onto the plush carpet, and she barely noticed as it bounced away. Backing up rapidly, she wasn’t aware that Theo had stopped in his tracks until her ass hit the edge of her desk.

“No?” He searched her face intently, and she realized what she’d said. “Do you want to stop?”

Something delicate inside her snapped. He’d stopped. His cock was so hard that she could see its full outline, straining against the fabric of his pants, and his face was flushed with arousal, just like hers was. They were in the middle of some hot, kinky game that she didn’t fully understand, and he’d just stopped because she’d said no, even when she hadn’t really meant it.

How could she not trust this man with her heart?

“No. I mean... I don’t mean no. I mean, I meant it, but not like that.” Sighing with frustration, she scrubbed both hands over her face. “Is this where a safe word comes in?”

“No will always work with me. I’ll always check in with you if you say that, okay?” The intensity he spoke with told her that he needed her to understand this. “But if you want to choose a safe word, choose it now. Make sure it’s something you wouldn’t normally say in conversation.”

“Shower,” she blurted immediately, feeling herself flush when he grinned. “That’s my safe word.”

“Shower. Got it.” He nodded to emphasize the point, and then he unbuttoned the collar of his shirt. Her eyes fixed on the inch of golden skin it revealed, desperate to press her lips there, to gauge his pulse.

“Run.”

She blinked, not sure she’d heard him correctly, but when he moved, a surge of adrenaline had her scrambling back. The corner of the desk bit into her hip as she pushed past her chair, but she didn’t feel a thing besides the need to get away.

She knew she wouldn’t, not in the end. It didn’t stop the urge to move, move, move, move, because once he caught her, she was at his mercy.

“Might as well give up,” he taunted, continuing after her with that slow, relentless pace. “You know I’m going to win.”

“Not if I can help it.” Bracing herself to leap back the way she’d come as soon as he got a little closer, she wasn’t prepared for him to anticipate the move. He caught her around the waist, hauling her off her feet as she cried out.

“I don’t care if anyone hears you,” he informed her as he dragged her back to her desk, splaying her out on its surface, “but you might not like it when someone comes to investigate just why you’re being so damn noisy.”

“Theo,” she begged, and she wasn’t sure if she was asking for him to let her go, or to touch her. Still caught up in the game, she writhed against him, forcing him to pin her arms above her head with one of his hands, to catch her lower body with a thrust of his hips. With the other, he tore at the front of her bralette, treating it to the same fate as her top.

“I told you not to buy anything fancy just for me.” Cupping one of her breasts, he squeezed the mound lightly. “I told you I liked what you wore.”

“That was Meg’s,” she spat out, still struggling. The dressy jeans that completed her outfit—also her sister’s—caused delicious friction against her clit as she wriggled against where the firm pressure of his hips pinned her down, her legs dangling on either side of his hips.

“Guess I owe Meg some clothes then.” He grinned, not sorry at all, as he continued to massage her breast. Her world narrowed to the point of his touch, the pleasure he was pulling out of the swollen tip of her breast. “Gonna tell her what happened to the things you borrowed?”

“Something tells me she’ll know.” She yelped quietly when he swatted the side of her hip.

“You’re awfully mouthy for a captive.” Dragging his hand roughly down her torso, he tugged at the waistband of her jeans. “I’d like to give your mouth something else to do, but I don’t have enough time for that today. Guess I’ll have to hope that a quick fuck will knock that sass out of you for a while.”

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Her mouth fell open. Never in her life had someone spoken to her like that—not even Theo when he was younger—and it shocked her to her core. It also thrilled her, that part of her that was fascinated by the new, the different.

How he managed it, she wasn't sure, but he managed to work her jeans open with one hand while she was bucking against him. Dragging them and her underwear down over her hips, he worked one of her legs free before wrapping it around his waist.

“Keep on struggling,” he told her as he undid his own slacks. She found herself watching avidly as he shoved his boxer briefs down far enough to release his erection. It was thick, and long, and swollen with need, a slick of moisture already making the head shine. She marveled for a moment that she'd managed to fit that inside her. And then she just wanted it inside her again.

“I won't let you do this,” she spat, fully immersed in the role she was playing. She pulled against him with renewed vigor, even managing to pull free for a split second, causing him to curse and haul her back to the edge of the desk.

“It's happening, baby.” The dark intent in his words made molten heat pool in her core. Her spine pressed into the flat surface of the desk, her breasts freed by the torn garments on her torso. Her ass was balanced on the edge of the desk, one leg still tangled in her jeans while he held the other tightly to his hip. “I'm going to let go of your hands, but there's no point in trying to get free. I'll just catch you again.”

“I have to try,” she said breathlessly when he released her arms. She tried to roll, but he caught her, forced her back down with a hand pressed flat on her chest. Dropping the leg he'd clutched to his hip, he lined his shaft up with her wet slit and pushed

inside, the intrusion making her eyes fly wide-open.

“Fuck,” she groaned, letting her head fall back to the desk. He held still for a moment, letting her adjust to his thickness just inside her, but before she could get too comfortable, he flexed his hips and drove himself home.

A wordless cry escaped her lips, her hands sliding over the slick surface of the desk as she tried to catch hold of something, anything. Finally she settled on his shirt, his tie, but instead of shoving him away as her role demanded, she pulled him down closer until he was bent overtop of her, his chest rubbing against the tips of her breasts with every movement.

“Fuck, that’s good.” Bracing one hand on the desk above her head, the other again finding her hip, he pulled back until he almost slid out. Her slick channel clenched around him as he drove forward again, his length dragging over sensitive flesh and igniting a level of arousal she’d never felt. “Shit. Shit. I’m not wearing a condom.”

She growled when he pulled out, wanting him back in. Propping herself up on her elbows, she watched, fascinated, as he fumbled with his wallet, pulling out a condom and tearing into it with his teeth. Within moments he was sheathed, his wallet was on the floor and he was pushing back inside her with renewed urgency.

“How is it possible for you to feel so fucking good?” He worked in and out of her at a slow, steady pace, and she watched with fascination as beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. She was hot, too, aroused to a fever pitch as she felt the pleasure begin to gather in her core like it had the night before.

“You feel good to me, too,” she admitted as she watched his cock slide in and out of her parted lips. She’d never thought about watching, but it was just about the hottest thing she’d ever seen. “I feel so much, and I don’t know what to do with it.”

“You don’t have to do anything with it except what I tell you to.” He slid back into his role, and Jo eagerly followed. It was so easy to let go when she pretended that she had no other choice. There was no point in worrying about getting hurt if the decision was being made for her.

“And what are you telling me to do?” She couldn’t resist taunting him. Reaching down between them, she grabbed his waist, holding him tightly to her as he thrust deep.

“Mouthy brat.” He grinned down at her, but his eyes were starting to glaze over with what she realized meant he was edging close to his own release. Knowing that she was the one to bring him there was heady, a kind of power she could get drunk on.

“That’s not an answer.” Her hand slid from his waist to dig into the hard planes of his rear, and she wished she could have that view, too—what he looked like from behind as he thrust inside her, the muscles of that truly spectacular ass flexing as he moved.

“You’re going to come on my cock, is what you’re going to do.” He increased his pace, his head falling back. Her vision started to blur as the pressure inside her coiled tighter and tighter, a spring about to snap. “And you’re going to do it now.”

His hand slid to the place where they were joined, and the first touch of his fingers on her clit sent her flying over the edge. She swallowed her cries as she contracted around him, senses dulled to everything but the bliss that was riding her.

He grunted as he emptied himself in her, and she found herself fascinated by watching as he was lost. Stilling himself above her, he remained as he was, fully inside her, fully connected.

Fully hers. Without thinking, she reached up to brush a lock of his inky hair back from where it stuck to the sweat on his forehead. He opened his eyes, and when he

looked down at her, she felt a jolt as she wondered what he was trying to say without actually saying it.

“I still want to read what you wrote.” He broke the strange tension of the moment by nodding toward where her laptop lay, discarded on the floor. “I also feel that this is a good time to remind you about respecting company property.”

“Jackass.” She smacked his chest lightly, struggling to sit up. “And you can read it when it’s ready, which it might be if someone hadn’t decided to hunt me down in my own damn office.”

“Much as I’d love to spend the rest of the day inside you, I should get back to my own office.” He pulled out of her slowly, holding on to the condom as he did. “I’m very busy and important, you know.”

She rolled her eyes, but inside felt lightness buoying her up. She’d missed this, too, so much it had hurt—this friendship that they’d shared before everything had gone to hell. Because when he’d left, she hadn’t just lost her boyfriend and her love, she’d lost the best friend she’d ever had.

“I missed this.” There. She’d said it. And though a flicker of surprise crossed his face as he tied off the condom and tossed it in the trash, he nodded in agreement.

“I missed it, too.” Stepping back, he slowly zipped himself back into his slacks, straightening his shirt and tightening his tie. Catching her watching, he cast her a cocky grin. “How do I look?”

“Put your jacket on, and no one will know you’ve spent the last half an hour abusing every human resource code you put in the contract in the first place.” Sliding from the desk, she struggled to pull the snug jeans back up over her hips, then looked down at her chest in dismay. “What the hell am I supposed to do about this?”

“You wore a sweater into work this morning. I saw you.” He gestured to the back of the door, where a thin cardigan hung. “Just wear it buttoned up.”

“With no bra?” But she was already reaching for it. It wasn’t like she had much choice.

“Never used to stop you.” He smirked at her, then stared avidly as she tucked her now braless breasts beneath the thin sweater. “Just don’t get too close to anyone else. Not that you’d want to after having a taste of this.”

“Go!” She rolled her eyes, then pointed to the door. “My boss is a bit of a tyrant. If you’re not careful, he’ll literally hunt you down just to check on your work.”

“Sounds like my kind of guy.” Opening the door, he cast a look back over his shoulder at her. She couldn’t stop the swelling of her heart as he winked at her like this had all been their dirty little secret. “Dinner tonight?”

“All right,” she replied softly, thrilling to the question even as she knew she was diving off a very high, very dangerous cliff.

But oh, how she was enjoying the fall.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE OFELT LIKE he'd just completed a champion workout. He was riding high on endorphins, body loose, mind sated as he all but staggered back into his office.

Hell. He'd had some good sex before. He'd had some great sex. But what had just happened with Jo was so astronomically amazing that it couldn't even be described.

They'd connected on a physical level when they were younger, for sure. He'd thought he just might die from insisting they wait until she was eighteen.

Now, though? That innocent girl he remembered was kinky as fuck, and he knew he'd never in a million years find someone who inspired the same filthy urges in him. Never find another woman who challenged him, who called him on his shit. Who got excited when he took her to a graveyard on a date, and who really could not have cared less about the number of zeroes in his bank balance.

He was in love with her. Again? Still? It didn't really matter, because the truth was there, written in the way he could still feel her hands on his skin.

He wanted to tell her. Wanted to give her that certainty that he wasn't going anywhere. That he couldn't, not without her.

Loosening his tie that had just been straightened, he sat forward in his desk chair, tapping his keyboard to wake up his computer. He'd take her out for dinner, not someplace fancy, because she wouldn't care about that. Someplace that had meaning for them.

What was the name of that little Brazilian dive they'd frequented when they were in high school? His mom had taken him there when he was little, whenever she'd been craving food from home, since she was the type to burn toast. He'd never gone there with anyone else, not even his dad—not until he'd decided to share it with Jo.

It would be the perfect place to tell her what he felt. He knew she'd catch the significance. Now if only he could remember what the hell it was called, so he could look it up and make sure it was still open.

As he typed Brazilian food restaurant Boston into his web browser, his cell phone vibrated against his hip. John's name flashed across the screen, and Theo put it on speaker.

"What's up?" When Theo had hired the consultant to help ensure a smooth official launch of Crossing Lines, he'd somehow pictured a rich old white dude. John Brooke was rich, certainly, but he wasn't old and he wasn't white, or anything else that Theo had expected. He was, however, everything that he'd promised, and Theo knew he'd miss him when he'd finished out their contract and moved on to another business. The other man had really thrown his heart and soul into Crossing Lines and was the nearest thing that Theo had to a real friend.

"Ass into my office, Lawrence." There was barely concealed glee in the other man's voice. "I'm about to make all of your fantasies come true."

"In your dreams, Brooke." Theo started walking as he spoke. Ava looked up from her desk, arching an eyebrow at him since he was talking so loudly. He shrugged, striding down the hall to John's office, which would be empty soon enough. "You don't have the right equipment."

"I could have you if I wanted you." John held out a paper cup of coffee as Theo entered the room, grinning mockingly. He leaned back in his chair, smugness written

in every line of his body.

“We’ll see how I feel about you after you tell me whatever has you grinning like a freaky-ass clown.” Settling himself in the chair across the desk, Theo sipped at the coffee, gagging as soon as it touched his tongue. “What the hell is this garbage?”

“I made it myself.” John frowned, gesturing at the coffee machine in his office, one that looked like it belonged in Starbucks. “It’s an Americano.”

“It’s swamp water, man.” Shuddering, Theo set it down on the desk. “But it’s reassuring to know that you’re human, after all. Now what’s up?”

John took a cautious sip of his own coffee, and Theo watched with amusement as his eyes widened. He swallowed gamely. “It’s not that bad.”

Theo rolled his eyes; John set the cup on the edge of his desk.

“When you hired me, you told me that your goal was to grow Crossing Lines from a highly valued start-up to a company that could sell for a minimum of fifty million, correct?” Theo nodded. “We estimated three to five years for that growth.”

“I know all this, Brooke.” Theo waved a hand in his air. “What’s the news that makes you look like you’re going to come in your pants?”

“I have far too much self-control to ever come in my pants,” the other man replied archly. “Now. What if I told you that I’ve found a buyer for Crossing Lines already? One willing to pay seventy-five million, not fifty, with the caveat that she take over the company now. Now, not in three to five years! I’ve never come across this kind of deal, man. You must shit gold.”

“Every morning,” Theo responded automatically, but his eyes widened as the news

sank in. “Seventy-five million? Are you for real?”

“Real as rain, brother.” John drummed his fingers on the desk. “She’s the sister of some European prince. I guess she met her now-fiancé on Crossing Lines and fell in love with the premise. She’s excited to take it in a new direction.”

“A new direction?” Theo frowned, rubbing a hand over his chest. “We’ve barely started going in this direction.”

John shrugged, his smile wide. “For seventy-five million, I’d say she can take it in whatever direction she wants. And here’s the thing. She wants to hire you as the business head of her corporation. Interview other people with start-ups like yours, develop them under her banner.”

“Really?” That was what he’d vaguely thought that he’d wind up doing eventually, but years down the line—and for his own corporation, of course. Still, excitement buzzed along his skin. It felt like validation—this was the kind of opportunity that most people only dreamed of, and it was being offered to him because he’d earned it himself. It sounded too good to be true. “I can’t even wrap my head around that.”

“It’s the dream.” John cocked his head, studying Theo’s expression. “Of course, you’d probably have to leave Boston.”

“What?” The airy excitement crashed to the ground, weighed down by reality. It was too good to be true. Because leaving Boston was the one thing he couldn’t do.

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His fingers reached out to grip the edge of the desk, steadying him as his world tilted.

“Well, she’s from some little country I’ve never even heard of,” John said slowly, watching Theo closely. “But she did mention something about San Francisco.”

San Francisco was a million miles away.

His unease must have shown on Theo’s face, because John cocked his head, looking at him with concern. “What’s wrong? I thought this was what you wanted. You should be thrilled.”

“It’s amazing.” Theo heard the hollowness in his own words. “I think I just need to let it sink in.”

John smiled with relief before rising to his feet. Pitching both his coffee cup and Theo’s into the trash, he leaned across the desk to clap Theo on the shoulder. “To hell with this swill. I’m going to go send Ava out for a bottle of scotch. No, I’ll go myself, to that place next door. This calls for a celebration.”

Theo opened his mouth to tell his colleague that he didn’t drink, but the words caught in his throat. He nodded numbly as John rounded the desk and opened the door.

Jo was on the other side.

“Jo!” John was flying so high on the offer that he reached out and caught Jo in a one-arm hug. “Come on in! We’ll be celebrating in a minute. Join us.”

Jo arched an eyebrow at the uncharacteristic buoyancy in John before casting a vaguely amused smile Theo's way. "What are we celebrating? Must be good. He was bouncing like Tigger."

Theo blinked up at her mechanically. He should have been thrilled. This was everything he'd worked for, everything he'd dreamed of, years ahead of schedule. He'd prove to everyone, and finally to himself, that he was no longer just a trust-fund baby. He was a self-made man.

The only person he cared about proving that to was standing right in front of him.

"There's been an offer to buy the company." His words sounded like they were coming from a great distance, somewhere outside his own body. "A great offer, actually."

Jo's face lit up, and it was like she'd taken a pair of tweezers and started pinching at his heart. "That's amazing! So amazing, Theo. I'm so happy for you."

Theo's arm felt like it weighed as much as an elephant as he lifted it to rub a hand over his face. "Yeah. Plus, it came with a new job offer. One that's hard to turn down."

Jo flew at him, wrapping him in an enthusiastic hug that was completely devoid of any of the shadows of their past. He caught her around the waist, urging her back to her feet instead of hauling her into his lap like he wanted to.

She blinked, clearly startled. Wariness flickered through her eyes. "What's wrong?"

There was no good way to tell her, but he knew that she'd never tolerate him keeping something so monumental from her.

“I wouldn’t be able to stay in Boston.”

Jo froze. Literally just froze in place, eyes wide, an empty smile pasted on her face. She stared at him for a long moment, and he knew that she could see every ounce of the angst that he was feeling, pouring off him in waves.

“Well, of course you have to go.” She clapped her hands together, as if in glee, but her voice was hollow. “This is what you wanted, even if it’s a little ahead of schedule!”

“Jo.” He couldn’t handle it. Her voice was positively perky. The girl he’d known, the woman he knew were many things, but perky wasn’t one of them. “What about us?”

“Theo.” Her almost manic smile dimmed a few watts but remained pasted on her face. “We’ve been back together...or whatever this is...for less than a week. I’m glad we got to move past some of that old hurt, and I’m grateful for it. But there’s no question that you have to take this!”

“Jo,” he said again, this time more urgently. Her eyes widened, but the mask of fake happiness stayed plastered to her face. “Talk to me.”

“I actually have to get back to work.” She dusted her hands on the thighs of her jeans. “I just had to ask John a question about the article I’m working on, but I can ask him later. I promised him I’d have it in this afternoon, so I really do have to get back to work.”

Her movements were choppy, robotic, as if controlled by someone else. And as if he didn’t already feel like absolute shit, Theo realized that if he sold the company, there was no guarantee that Jo’s job would still exist once the new owner had taken over.

Closing his eyes for a second, he fisted his hands at his sides as he tried to get ahold

of his options. When he opened them again, Jo was halfway through the door, her own hands balled into tight fists, too.

“Jojo.” He used her old nickname without thinking. She stiffened, her shoulders hunching up around her ears. “Tell me not to go.”

She didn’t turn around. Theo held his breath, and he knew that he wanted her to tell him to stay more than he wanted to sell his company.

“This is the best thing that’s ever happened to you.” She didn’t even bother to turn around, instead directing her words back over her shoulder. “And you know what, I’m really not feeling well. I promise I’ll get the article in on time, but I think I need to work from home for the afternoon.”

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“Jo.” Rising to his feet, he strode across the office after her, but she sliced a hand through the air, letting him know without a word that she wouldn’t tolerate being touched.

“Bye, Theo.” And then she was gone, down the hall and into the elevator. Ava stood as Jo hurried by, clearly picking up on the waves of emotion emanating from the other woman. His assistant looked back down the hall toward him, and the pity on her face told her that she’d intuited what happened.

He didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know what to do. He started down the hall after Jo, but Ava shook her head, halting him in his tracks.

“If you go tearing after her, you’ll argue and one or both of you will say something that you regret.” Shaking her head, she sat back down at her desk. “But honestly, Theo, I don’t know what you thought you were doing with her. You’re on your way up. You’re a star. And she’s just the girl from where you started.”

Theo looked down at her, wondering how he’d ever found her attractive. How he’d ever even looked at a woman besides Jo. Still, Ava had a point. Jo needed some time to calm down.

And he needed to absorb the fact that the woman he’d planned to tell he loved had told him in no uncertain terms to go ahead and move across the country.

The elevator doors slid open, and Theo felt his heart leap into his throat. He groaned when he saw that the only occupant was John, bearing a bottle of what Theo recognized as a brand of scotch that was both hideously expensive and very old.

“Don’t look so thrilled to see me,” the other man said drily as he stepped off the elevator. He held up the bottle of scotch, wiggling it so that the amber contents sloshed invitingly. “After all, all I’ve done today is earn you seventy-five million big ones.”

Striding forward, John passed the bottle to Theo, then continued down the hall. “Ava, can you grab us some glasses? Then come join us. It’s time to celebrate!”

Acid churned in Theo’s gut. The last thing he wanted to do was celebrate. His heart was too heavy for that. But if Jo didn’t care whether he stayed or went, then what else was he going to do?

Drawing everything he felt into a tight bundle and shoving it down deep inside, he followed John down the hall. He was about to accept the deal he’d been working toward since...well, since the night of Jo’s eighteenth birthday, when she’d opened his eyes to everything he’d been taking for granted.

So why did it feel like he’d lost it all?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THEBOTTLEOFhideously expensive scotch sat on the polished Brazilian wood coffee table. Its legs were carved with whimsical tree frogs and palm fronds, one of the pieces that his mother had once hauled into the house to counteract his father's love of everything stiff and dignified.

He would have given that entire seventy-five million dollars away on the street just to be able to talk to his mom again, right now. His relationship with his dad had deteriorated beyond the point of repair by the time his father had died, but he still believed that if his mom had been able to fight back the cancer that had killed her, they would have still been close. He would have been able to call her right now, to ask her how to fix this gigantic mess.

He couldn't do that. And so he was still eyeing the unopened bottle of scotch, its contents glimmering enticingly in the fading light streaming in through the living room window.

A drink wouldn't help him make Jo love him, but it would sure numb the misery that had weighed down his limbs so much that he wasn't sure he'd ever move again.

He leaned back on the stiff sofa, letting his head rest on the back. Closing his eyes, he fought the desire for the drink that was taunting him. He focused on slowing his breathing, on trying to find some semblance of calm. When a chime sounded, he thought that maybe he'd finally achieved some deeper state of being, though he wasn't entirely sure he believed in stuff like that.

The musical note sounded again, and he sat up stiffly, feeling like he'd been drugged. The doorbell—it was the doorbell. Woodenly, he pushed off the sofa and moved to the front door.

Jo's mother stood on the other side. Well-worn yellow oven mitts covered her hands as she clutched tightly to a large pot.

“Hello, Theodore.” She smiled up at him, the fading sunlight catching in the virulently crimson strands of her hair as she held out the pot. He smelled garlic, Italian seasoning and, best of all, spicy sausage.

He knew that smell. “Italian sausage soup?” He'd eaten countless bowls of that soup on the well-worn table in the house next door. His heart contracted, and the warmth he'd been so desperately craving as he stared at the bottle of scotch gathered in his core.

“You know it.” She arched an eyebrow, and he saw a hint of Jo's stubbornness play out over her finer features. “Are you going to invite me in, or do I have to be rude and invite myself?”

Choking out a laugh, he stepped back and let her in. She sailed through the door like a steamboat, heading back to the kitchen.

“I'll just get this right on the stove. You'll eat a bowl now, yes?”

He knew Jo's mother—Mamesie—well enough to know that this wasn't a question. She wanted to talk to him, and she'd decided that he could use a meal while she did.

He rubbed his stomach, which had woken up at the tantalizing scent of the comfort food. She wasn't wrong. He couldn't remember if he'd eaten lunch, and he remembered quite well that his breakfast had been derailed by sex with Jo.

Mamesie had already filled a large bowl by the time he entered the kitchen. She'd placed it on the wide marble island with a spoon and had produced a loaf of bread from the tote bag she'd had slung over her shoulder. The yeasty scent of home-baked bread made his stomach rumble as she sawed off a gigantic slice and balanced it on the edge of his bowl.

"You haven't been by to see me since you've been back," she commented mildly as she leaned over the edge of the island, across from where she'd set the soup. He winced as he slid onto one of the bar stools.

"You still don't pull punches, I see." Lifting the spoon, he trailed it through the soup, watching the red droplets as they slid off the metal.

"I'm not done." Hooking her thick-rimmed glasses into the front of her blousy shirt, she cast him a disapproving stare. "I've got one miserable girl at home. She's holed up in her room and won't talk to anyone, not even Beth."

"Shit." Theo dropped his spoon. "It's my fault, Mamesie. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for any of this to happen."

"Are you the only person in this relationship?" she asked mildly, and he shook his hand, feeling as though she'd slapped his hand. "Then I highly doubt that it's all your fault. So why don't you tell me about it?"

He opened his mouth, then shook his head. "With all due respect, I don't think I should. Jo is your girl."

"Theo." The depth of emotion in Mamesie's voice had him looking up, startled. "Jo is my girl. But you've been my boy, ever since the day I met you. Don't you know that by now?"

Her words were the balm he'd needed. Swallowing thickly, he forced himself to begin speaking. He found himself telling her everything, right back to the night he'd left—well, everything except the sex. There were some things a mother didn't need to know.

She nodded when he was done, and he set his spoon down. He was surprised to discover that he'd eaten all of the bread and soup, and felt a hell of a lot better for it.

“So let me get this straight.” Pushing back from the island, Mamesie fixed him with a cool, pale stare. “You told Jo, before this offer came in, that this exact thing was what you dreamed of accomplishing. Then you told her that your dream had come true. And then you told her to be the one to tell you to stay.”

“Ah...yes. That would be accurate.” When it was all laid out like that, it didn't sound so great. “But I want to stay, if she'll have me.”

“Do you think my daughter loves you?” There was no judgment in Mamesie's words, but the question brought Theo up short. He knew how he felt, but Jo's response earlier that day had made him question whether he'd imagined everything between them.

But...he knew he hadn't. Jo might not want to love him, but she did. They'd been apart for a long time, but he still felt he knew her heart.

He nodded.

“So she loves you. And she told you to go pursue your dream, because it's what she thinks will make you happy.” Mamesie shook her head. “Gee, I wonder why that is.”

Hope was a wild thing, unfurling inside him. “So what do I do?”

Unhooking her glasses again, she placed them squarely on her nose, then peered at him with the withering expression that no one mastered like a mother. “You go get her, you lunkhead. But have another bowl of soup first.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“YOU’REGOINGTO have to talk about it sooner or later,” Amy commented mildly. Jo peeled a slice of cucumber off her eye and glared balefully down at where her youngest sister was painting her toenails neon pink. “If you don’t we’re just going to keep torturing you with beauty treatments.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.” Jo removed the second cucumber slice, tossing them both into the trash can as she struggled to sit up. Holding up a foot, she wiggled her newly polished toenails and grimaced.

“Why pink?” she asked Amy, voice sullen. “You have every color of nail polish known to man in your room, so why the hell would you choose pink for me?”

“Pink with sparkles,” Amy replied cheerfully, pulling her legs up under her where she sat on Jo’s bed. “And I just told you. We’re torturing you with spa night until you talk to us.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.” Jo crossed her legs as well, looking down at the floor where Meg was stirring something in a bowl. “What the hell is that?”

“It’s a hair mask.” Meg smiled beatifically up at her. “Egg yolk and avocado oil. And it’s going on your head unless you spill.”

“I just said, there’s nothing to spill!” Throwing her hands into the air, she accidentally brushed one against her cheek. It came back with a smear of green slime. “Can I wash this off now?”

“Not until it’s dry.” Beth sat on the floor with Meg, holding a plastic shower cap. “The clay won’t have pulled all the crap out of your pores until then.”

“Fantastic.” Jo sucked in a deep breath. Her sisters had her number—this was a form of torture unique to her, and she wasn’t enjoying even a second of it. Her room smelled like flowers, the mask on her face itched and her toenails were fucking pink. More than that, she was miserable.

Had it really only been a few days since Theo had crashed back into her life? As far as her heart was concerned, he’d never left. But that was the thing, wasn’t it—he was going to leave.

And if she stopped him, what the hell kind of person would she be? Not one who wanted the best for the person she loved, that was for sure.

Her computer pinged, a notification that she had a new comment on her blog. Normally she loved checking out people’s responses to what she’d written, but right now she couldn’t imagine ever posting again. She couldn’t imagine wanting to know anything about sex ever again, because she’d always associate the act with Theo. He was her match in every sense of the word.

She’d known he would probably go, but the pain was worse than anything she could have imagined.

“Well, then. Since you’re still holding out, it’s hair treatment time.” Meg wiggled a paintbrush in her direction. “Come here!”

The thought of raw egg, cold and slimy on her head, was finally enough to make her crack. Scuttling back into the corner of her bed, out of Meg’s reach, she growled at her sisters as a whole. “Fine! Fine! I’ve been sleeping with Theo. And I fucking fell in love with him again, and he’s moving to San Francisco with all of the hippies, and

I'm miserable! Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"It's what I wanted to hear." Jo shrieked as Theo stuck a leg inside her window, knocking her pen cup off her desk. Clapping a hand to her chest as he hauled himself up so that he was straddling her windowsill, she gaped at him in shock. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"The last big discussion we had, you climbed in my bedroom window." With a grunt, he pulled his second leg in through the window, sliding into her room. Offering a disarming grin to her sisters, he nodded. "Hi, girls. Do you mind giving us a minute?"

"Not at all." Balancing the bowl of hair gunk in one hand, Meg rose smoothly to her feet. Smirking at Jo, she waved the paintbrush around. "Should I save this for later?"

Jo bared her teeth, and Meg just laughed. Offering Beth a hand, she hauled her other sister to her feet, then nudged her to the door. "Come on Beth, Amy. You guys can argue over who gets the hair mask."

"Not on your fucking life," they said together, all three jostling their way through Jo's bedroom door. Beth was the only one who looked back over her shoulder, smiling softly at her older sister. "Don't be a total bitch, okay? You know what you want."

Then she was gone, closing the door softly behind her. Jo didn't even take offense to her parting comment, because heaven knew, she was feeling bitchy. Bitchy, and prickly, and spoiling for a fight.

"That's a good look for you," Theo commented mildly as he turned to face her, arms crossed over his chest. Damn it, why did he have to look so good? Dressed in a pair of jeans that were faded in all the right places, with a navy T-shirt that stretched tight over his chest, she had to curl her fingers against the urge to reach out and touch.

Jo looked down at her torn jeans. She was only wearing a cotton sports bra on top, since she still had a thick layer of clay on her face. Her hair was scraped back from her face with a fuzzy headband, and her toes were pink and glittered when she moved.

Well, he'd seen her looking worse. Spreading her hands wide, she shrugged. "This is who I am, Theo. What's the matter? Not fancy enough for your big new job?"

He ignored the hostility in her voice. Instead, he held out a small, tattered package wrapped in faded paper. Hesitantly, she took it, squinting to read the words printed on the wrapping. "Happy birthday? My birthday isn't for months. How quickly they forget."

Never mind Beth's gentle admonishment—she was being bitchy. She couldn't seem to help it. She was furious, not with him for pursuing his dream, but with herself for knowing that she'd never get over him.

"I'm reenacting our last night together, back then. But backward." He stuffed his hands in his pockets, then rocked back on his heels. He was barefoot. "You climbed in my window. I'm climbing in yours. We had a fight, and I didn't give you your present. We are not going to have a fight now, and I'm finally giving that birthday present to you."

"This is the present you were going to give me then?" Shock crashed over her like an ice-cold wave. "You kept it all this time?"

"It was still in the drawer beside the bed in my old room when I moved back here." He grinned mischievously. "Right beside a box of condoms that are most definitely expired."

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Jo rolled her eyes but couldn't stop her fingers from trembling. Why was he giving this to her now? Couldn't he just go and leave her and her broken heart alone?

"Open it," he commanded, and before she could think it through, she was tearing open the paper. Inside was a square gift box, and as she lifted the lid, her pulse started to thunder at the base of her throat.

Inside, nestled in a bed of cotton, was a gleaming white-gold pendant. She didn't wear jewelry, never had, but when she held it up closer to her eyes, she immediately understood why Theo had chosen it for her.

"These are made from antique wax seals, ones that were actually once used by someone to seal letters," he informed her, attention focused on her, laser sharp. "Your Louisa May Alcott probably used one. I didn't know that then, but I'm just trying to make you like it more now."

"I do like it," she managed to force out through her dry throat. "But—"

"In case you haven't looked that closely yet, it has two hearts on it," he interrupted, smiling innocently when she glared at him. "They're tied together with a ribbon. And it says forever."

Jo felt her heart crack right open. "Why the hell would you give this to me now?"

"I love you, but sometimes you need to try to see beyond that thick skull of yours." Her head snapped up, but he wasn't done. "I was going to tell you that I loved you this afternoon, before everything went to shit."

When he dropped down to one knee in front of her, Jo gasped. “What—”

“Just let me finish before you yell at me.” Grabbing one of her hands, he held tight even when she tried to pull away. “Look. You walked in right after I heard that news. I hadn’t even begun to digest it yet, and I needed to tell someone. You were it.”

“And I still think you should go.” This was a nightmare, bringing her so close to what she wanted before cruelly tearing it away.

“I don’t want to.” A cry of anguish tore out of her throat, and when he tried to speak again, she shook her head.

“You can’t stay because of me. You’ll resent the hell out of me, and I’ll wallow in guilt.” She swallowed past the sting of incoming tears. “But I..fuck, I’m just going to say it. I love you, too. You can be a cocky asshole, but you’re my cocky asshole. I... I’ll go with you. If you want me to.”

A grin as bright as sunshine spread over his face, and its light chased away some of the dread that crowded after her declaration. She absolutely would go with him, because she needed to be with him. But leaving her family would be one of the hardest things she’d ever done.

“I don’t want to go.” He growled overtop of her protest. “Hear me out, woman. This deal is amazing, but it’s not the deal for me. I’m not ready to turn Crossing Lines over to someone else. I might not ever be. And I don’t actually want to move. I’ve lived in lots of places, but this is the one that feels like home.”

“I—what?” Jo gaped down at him as a terrible hope sprang up inside her.

“But I want to stay on one condition.” Squeezing her fingers, he looked up at her, and love shone from his eyes. “I’d marry you tomorrow, but something tells me that you’ll inform me that that timeline is ridiculous. So I think, in exchange for my

selfless decision to stay here in Boston, that you should move in with me.”

“Move in with you?” Jo couldn’t keep up. Her fingers clenched around the small box that she still held. “Next door?”

“That’s the idea. I know you’re attached to your family home, but I’ve discovered that I’m kind of attached to mine, too.” He cocked his head, studying her face. “I suppose I could move in here, but I think Ford might try to punch me in such close quarters, and it would be a shame to leave that giant house next door all empty. Just think, you could have an office. You could have a suite of offices.”

“You sweet talker, you.” Closing her eyes, she shook her head in disbelief. “I don’t know what to say. I’m sorry I was such a bitch.”

“It’s part of your charm.” He rose to his feet when she snorted. “I’m serious. I love you, Jo, every last bit of you. I wish I had a ring to put on your finger right now, but today has been a little bit busy. Tomorrow we can go pick a ring.”

Unable to hold back the laughter, Jo allowed a tear to spill over. It scalded the tender skin of her cheek, allowing another to trickle down, and before she knew it she was crying full out, burying her clay-covered face in Theo’s T-shirt. He didn’t even complain, just pressed her against him as though he never wanted to let go.

“I don’t need a ring.” Her voice cracked, and she cleared her throat. Lifting her head, she grinned up at him as a content she’d never imagined she could feel flooded through her like warm sunshine. “I only need you.”

“And I need you. I love you.” Dipping his head, he pressed a kiss to her clay-smeared forehead, then wiped the excess off his mouth with a grin. “Come on. Let’s go home.”