



Imagine Me and You

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Description: When Samantha Parker and her very big, very hairy, very drooly dog Poppy find themselves thrown out into the cold – literally – Samantha turns to the one person she’s always been able to count on: her best friend, Jace. Jace is a pillar of stability in her life. He also really doesn’t like dogs in the house, but she knows he won’t leave her out in the Oregon winter to freeze, even if Sam is the chaos to Jace’s order and control. Dysfunctional is a nice word to describe both their childhoods, but they’ve been each other’s safety forever. Nothing could ever compromise that, surely.

Cowboy Jace Colter worships at the altar of bleach and disinfectant. After his traumatic upbringing, he keeps everything he owns neat and tidy. The only thing free spirited in his life is Sam. The trouble is, lately, Sam has been inspiring some feelings in him that fall well outside the boundaries of friendship. And Jace isn’t one to violate a boundary. But with Sam and Poppy living in his house for the next thirty days, Jace is either going to lose his mind, or the battle he’s been fighting to keep his hands off Sam.

They’ve been best friends for half their lives, compromising that over attraction seems silly. But would it be worth risking it all for true love?

This book was previously released in 2013 as part of a charity anthology called *Animal Attraction* and has never been available as a standalone.

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One

“I’m literally outin the cold, Jace. I need you.”

Jace Colter looked at his best friend Samantha Parker, who was indeed on his porch and freezing her small, perfectly round butt off. Which was a damn shame in his opinion. Because it was a perfect butt. Completely perfect. Not that he’d noticed. At least not that he should have noticed, but he had.

And then he looked down at her companion. Not too far down. Even sitting, Poppy was one big-ass dog. A giant mound of hair and drool that, Samantha was always quick to point out, was a purebred Newfoundland. As if that somehow excused the drool.

It didn’t. Not in his opinion.

He and Poppy had a tentative truce when he was over at Samantha’s place, but the idea of letting her, and her huge paws, inhishouse onhiscouch was enough to make it feel like his skin was itching. Like he already had dog hair embedded into his clothes. Dog hair he would never, ever get out.

“Start at the beginning.”

“Can we come in?” she asked, hazel eyes huge, her red hair creating a ginger halo around her head thanks to the porch light. As if on cue, snowflakes started falling behind her. She looked like a pitiful angel.

“Yes,” he growled, standing to the side and letting Samantha hop over the threshold.

Poppy followed, no encouragement needed, as she tended to do. Poppy was as insistent as she was shaggy. She always wanted him to pet her. Stroke her. Things he could never, ever get away with doing to her owner. Not that he would try. Samantha was his friend and this sudden surge of lust, whatever it was, that had crept up on him over the past couple of months was just damned annoying. And completely impractical. And not something he could do anything about.

Ever.

Samantha bent down and started taking her boots off. She knew him well.

Jace had no problem getting his hands dirty working his ranch, but he didn’t track that dirt inside his house. His operation was an organized one: a place for everything and everything in its place.

He had a major outfit here with horses and cattle, and letting loose ends hang could result in devastating consequences. Jace didn’t allow loose ends, and he didn’t screw up. Ever.

“Let me get a towel for your dog. And then you can explain to me why you’re standing here looking like a dramatic reenactment of the Little Match Girl.”

Jace stalked off to the laundry room and took a towel from the dryer, then walked back into the entryway, where the dog was currently dripping on his wooden floor. He tossed the towel to Samantha, who bent and started working on Poppy’s massive paws.

“My lease is up,” she said, straightening. “Poppy sit.” And Poppy did. “And basically, no one in town will rent to me as long as I have her.” She gestured to her

massive, hairy companion. “And I can’t buy anything yet. Not until I can do taxes for the year. Because that’s when my income from the bakery will count,” she added, her face glowing now. “Two years in business.”

“That’s great, Samantha—it is. But it doesn’t really answer the question of why you’re here.”

Except he had a feeling it did. And he had a feeling he knew just what she would ask of him. And he had a feeling he really, really wasn’t going to like it.

“I can do my taxes in January. I just need a place to stay, with Poppy, until then.”

“So, you need a month. A whole month.”

“Yes, and Jace, you’re my best friend and I didn’t have anywhere else to go and I knew you wouldn’t turn me away and?—”

“Take a breath, Sam,” he said, his head pounding as he tried to sift through the jumble of words she’d just let spill out of her mouth.

“You have a lot of room here, you would hardly notice me. And I would cook for you.”

Samantha looked at Jace and tried to will him to feel her desperation. She was sure if she tried hard enough, she would be able to make him understand her distress. He’d been her best friend since high school, and fourteen years after they’d first met, he was still her best friend. Her rock. Her support. He was all things stable and good, and given her upbringing, he was everything she needed.

Not that her adult life had been a whole lot more stable, except there was Jace. Always Jace. And Poppy, whom she was not, under any circumstances, getting rid of,

even if it meant sleeping in a snowdrift in eastern Oregon in December.

Because friends took care of each other, no matter what. And Poppy was her friend. And Jace was her friend, so she expected him to extend her, and thus Poppy, the same courtesy.

He wouldn't let them freeze in a snowdrift. Though he looked as if he was considering it.

“What would you cook?” he asked.

“Stew. And bread. I would bake you bread. And pies. Lots of pies. All the pie you could eat.”

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He cleared his throat and shifted his weight. “Generous.”

“Well, yeah, I thought so.” Jace had plenty of room. His two-story, Craftsman-style home had gorgeous, exposed wood beams in the ceiling, making the space feel huge and expansive. His fireplace had a huge couch in front of it, and it really would just be sad to sit there alone. And a dog should definitely lie on the rug by the fire too.

He also had four bedrooms and he didn’t need them all. He could certainly spare a corner of his house for a small redhead and her not-so-small dog.

“She’s not allowed on the furniture,” Jace said.

“Thank you!” She flung her arms around his neck and buried her face in his skin. And for a moment, she couldn’t help but be conscious of just how hard and muscular his body was. Or of the fact that his skin smelled like soap with a sheen of sweat over it, thanks to the long workday.

No. She wasn’t going there. Jace was her friend. Her attractive, hyper-masculine, sexy friend. But just her friend.

She had her occasional forgetful moments, often fueled by the scent of his skin or an unexpected smile that seemed to break through all the walls surrounding her heart and hit her square on.

But she knew friendship was the best place for them to be. He was her pillar. And without him...without him she would fall.

Which meant no risking the solid relationship they had for a little spark that was probably one-sided. Heck, it was almost certainly one-sided. If Jace wanted a woman, he didn't sit around and wait. He went out and got her. Temporarily. Jace was a fling guy. And while she was sure being flung by him would be a good time, it wasn't what she wanted.

Samantha was a bit more reserved in her relationships, but even with the great caution she exercised, they always seemed to sink like a bad soufflé. Nope. Definitely not moving Jace from FriendZone to BoyfriendZone. In her case, BoyfriendZone was always temporary, and it always ended in disaster.

She'd had all the relationships-ending-in-fiery-hellstorms-of-doom that she could possibly take for one lifetime. And not just with boyfriends. She hadn't spoken to her mother in years. Jace was her rock. And cracking the foundation she built her life on was just not going to happen.

"Jace," she said, pulling her face back so she could study him. He wasn't smiling, but had a weird kind of intent look in his eyes.

"Yes?"

For just a second, a little tiny second, she thought about leaning in and brushing her lips against his. A friendly thank you. An expression of gratitude.

But that would be stupid. And it wasn't the kind of thing they did.

"Yes, Sam?" he asked again, his voice a little deeper, a little huskier than normal. Oh, my.

She pulled out of his embrace. "I'm going to make you some cupcakes."

Two

Somehow, Jace had ended up with two guests for dinner. One beautiful. One decidedly not and lying far too close to the table for his liking.

But Sam had made dinner, in addition to the cupcakes from earlier, and that meant he couldn't flip his lid over the damn hairy dog sprawled out nearby while he was trying to eat.

"Guess what," Sam said, beaming, her round pale cheeks downright cherubic. Ironic, considering she made him think of sin, not salvation.

"What?"

"I had German chocolate cake leftover at the bakery. And a lemon cream pie. And now they're in your fridge."

He took a bite of homemade bread. "I appreciate it." He really did. Samantha was the best baker around, in his opinion. She'd also been the best personal chef, the best hairdresser, and the best dog groomer. Not necessarily in that order.

Samantha was always bursting. With ideas. With talent. It was the settling that was hard for her. The follow-through. But then, given her upbringing he could hardly blame her. By the time she'd come to Bend at the age of sixteen, she'd lived in nine states and twenty-one cities. She and her mother had rented the apartment above the mercantile where Jace worked, and he'd clicked with her instantly.

It had started, he could admit now, as a case of insta-lust like a corn-fed country boy had never known before. She was new and bright. She wore eclectic clothes and had hair that seemed to glow in the sun.

When she'd turned seventeen, she'd shown up at his parents' house, much like she'd done tonight at his own house, in tears, telling him she didn't want to move. That her mother had found a job in Washington state and was going north.

Mrs. Brown, who owned the mercantile, had let Sam stay on in the upstairs apartment. She had a way of taking in stray people and making them feel like they belonged. She'd done the same for him when she'd given him his first job.

Mrs. Brown let Sam live there rent free so she could finish school, so she could remain in the town she felt a part of.

It was too bad Jace hadn't bought the store from Mrs. Brown when she'd offered, or Sam could have stayed in the old apartment. But when she'd been ready to retire and spend half the year in a warmer climate, his ranch had just been getting off the ground and he hadn't been willing to take his focus off of his new enterprise for a moment.

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It was, by extension, his fault that Sam and Poppy were bunking with him. Not that he minded Sam's presence so much.

Unless you brought the sexual frustration issue into the picture. Though even when she wasn't staying with him, she did a pretty good job of sexually frustrating the ever-loving hell out of him. Just last week they'd curled up on her couch to watch an action movie. And she'd put the damned popcorn bowl. In. His. Lap.

The ceramic shield over his cock was the equivalent of a Kevlar vest pitted against a 30-06 rifle. Not. Fucking. Helpful.

The constant promise of a hand job with no satisfaction. And she'd had no idea. She'd been all involved in the movie while he'd sat there with a hard-on so intense he was a little afraid it would break the popcorn bowl.

Yeah, so...he was already in hell where she was concerned.

Now hell had moved in. Complete with hound.

His own little ginger specter of sexual doom.

And none of that was fair because Samantha needed a friend. But not a friend who was hiding an erection that wouldn't quit and casting aspersions on the round suppleness of her breasts.

Not right now. Which meant getting a grip on himself—literally in the shower if need be—and moving on without blaming her for what a sick freaking puppy he was

where she was concerned.

“And tomorrow I’ll make you pancakes for breakfast,” she practically chirped. In truth, it had been a long time since a woman had made him breakfast. But usually when one did, it was a much-needed refueling after a night of sex. Not so for tomorrow’s pancakes.

He repeated that to himself. Enough times and his body might get the message.

“Great, but you don’t have to pay rent, Sam, in money or in foodstuffs.”

“No, I know. But I figured that I should do something. If not for you, Poppy and I wouldn’t have anywhere to go.”

He knew better than to suggest she not tie her fate to her pet. That would get the batter of his morning pancakes sneezed in.

“So where are your things? Do you need help moving?”

“All of my things are in the delivery van.”

Samantha’s only vehicle was a giant white van with colorful decals on the side and the words Samantha’s Sweetsemlazoned on the side in swirling letters.

“Even your furniture?”

“No. I got a storage unit for that. Which, come to think of it, Poppy and I probably could have slept in if we’d gotten desperate.”

“Yeah, right, like I would have let you sleep in a cold, mouse-infested storage unit.”

“Mice?”

“I mean, I’m not that heartless, Sam, not even when it comes to dogs.”

“Mice? As in actual mice?”

“You’re welcome to stay here as long as you need.”

“Are they going to have babies in my couch?”

“What?”

“The mice,” she said, hazel eyes round.

“You sound concerned. I thought you liked vermin.”

“I like dogs,” she said. “And cats. And...fluffy vermin like hamsters. I draw the line at anything with a naked tail. No mice, rats or possums.”

“Hairless cats?”

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“Ew, no.”

“See, I think I could get on board with a hairless cat. The kind of pet that doesn’t leave pieces of itself all over your house.”

She smiled, that impish smile that took him straight back to high school. And made his heart and body react just like the boy he’d been, not the man he was. The man who had decided, years ago, that Samantha was his friend and nothing more, in spite of occasional lapses in sanity.

Like when she stuck her hand into a bowl of popcorn that happened to be positioned on his lap.

“Yeah sure, but it’s a cat. So it would probably bring pieces of other animals into the house for you to find.”

The idea disturbed him, which was doubtless what she intended.

“The dog doesn’t do that, right?”

She cocked her head to the side, her smile widening. “Not usually.”

“If it brings a rat into the house, I’m throwing it out into the barn.”

“The rat?”

“The dog.”

“The dog isn’t anit. She is a she and she has a name. As you well know, since I have owned her for five years and you’ve been in my life for every single day of those five years.”

“Fine. If Poppy brings a rat into my house, I won’t hesitate to kick her furry, purebred behind out to the barn. How about that?”

“You would let her in your barn?”

She had him there. “The stable. In a stall.”

“What if she barked and scared your horses?”

“Samantha, you’re making the image of you in a storage unit not seem that bad. I’m sorry,” he said before she even had a chance to react to his jackassness. “That was uncalled for and I don’t want you sleeping in a storage unit on a nest of baby mice.”

“Jace, I know you worship at the altar of bleach and disinfectant spray. I have a certified kitchen and a food handler’s card, plus, I passed my last health inspection with a score of ninety-nine. So I don’t think you really have to worry. I shall not desecrate the temple of cleanliness.”

“I’m not that crazy, Sam. I’ll deal.”

“Darling, Jace, I’ve known you since we were sixteen. You are that crazy.”

“It’s better to care about being clean than to be attached to your dirt.”

He cringed, knowing they were having a shared memory. Of his childhood home, the piles of things, his mother’s over-attachment to all of it. Her inability to throw one damn thing away.

For a while it had spilled over into his room. Until he'd reclaimed it. Until he'd thrown out every piece of garbage and disinfected every corner and told her anything that crossed the threshold was going in the dumpster. He had to have a haven, or he would have really gone insane.

But he'd had his bedroom. He'd had the store and Mrs. Brown. And he'd had Sam.

His room and the store had provided escape. Mrs. Brown had provided the tough love, the guidance, the financial help when he'd wanted to start his beef ranch.

Sam had provided the smiles. The laughter. Sam made everything feel a little bit lighter. A little more colorful.

It was just ungrateful to begrudge her or Poppy a place in his home. Of course, his opinion on that would likely continue to fluctuate depending on how messy the dog proved to be.

"All right, yeah," he said. "I'm that crazy. But I like to have control over my house and I know you understand that."

Samantha did understand that. She remembered what Jace's house had been like. She'd known him for more than a year before he'd let her inside, and when he had, his humiliation had been palpable. It was the only time she'd seen her friend near tears—that moment he'd let her walk through the rubble that was his childhood home.

Through the trash his mother treasured more than she had her husband who'd left and her son who was slowly going insane living in it.

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She stood and picked up her empty bowl, crossing to Jace's spot and taking his bowl too. "Don't worry, Jace, I'll be good," she said, bending down and kissing his cheek.

The moment her lips touched Jace's skin, she knew she'd made a big mistake. She didn't just go around kissing him on the cheek. She'd done it before, but she didn't make a habit of it. And for some reason, this time had sent a rush of heat over her skin, a flame through her veins.

Calm down, woman. It was a kiss on the cheek, not second base.

Her body didn't get the memo. Her lips burned and her nipples tightened, begging silently for attention because they knew she sure as hell wasn't going to beg for him to touch her.

Nope. She was not.

She cleared her throat. "I'll even do dishes."

She turned and headed toward the kitchen and Poppy stood and followed her, her tags jingling with each footstep. There was something perfect about this moment. Something so domestic and calm.

Except for the lingering crackle of fire on her lips. That wasn't calm at all.

This moment, except the crackle, embodied all the things she'd always wanted but never had. But she would have her own home soon. And it would have Poppy. It wouldn't have Jace, but he would still be in her life.

That was all that mattered.

For now, she had his big, beautiful kitchen. Spotless and perfect. Like everything else in his house. She'd always admired the way he'd transcended his upbringing. The way he'd made something so orderly out of the chaos he'd been raised in.

She was afraid she'd inherited her mother's transient, hippie dippy nature. And in terms of her taste in incense, she didn't mind. But the restlessness she felt, the dissatisfaction with her surroundings... those seemed to be ingrained deep in her.

But instead of moving, she bought a new lampshade and curtains. Her feet were itchiest when it came to jobs. She'd had more jobs than most people twice her age. Not because she couldn't do the jobs she got, and not because the businesses she'd started had all failed, but because she'd simply never found anything to latch onto.

But Mrs. Brown had taught her to bake. Survival skills, the older woman had said. And that had always been a part of her life. So when the bakery downtown had gone up for sale, Sam had scraped together her meager life savings and poured herself into her new project with a vengeance. When she was bored, she infused buttercream frosting with lavender instead of selling everything.

The next big step in defeating her restlessness was buying a house. And then when she needed a change, she'd paint a wall.

She was rising above like a mother effing phoenix.

Then there was her love life. Men didn't stick with her, much like she couldn't stick with a career. Or rather hadn't been able to. No men, same job for the past two years.

She deserved a trophy. The Deferred Orgasm Award for Excellence in Abstaining While Getting Your Crap Together. Yeah, she was on the upswing for sure. Except

for this little hiccup. But as always, Jace had her back, so the disaster wasn't too big.

That was Jace. Steady. And neat. So many things she wasn't.

Which was why she needed him. One of the many reasons why.

"You don't have to do dishes," he said, following her into the kitchen. "You cooked."

She started rinsing the bowls, smoothing away stew chunks with her thumb beneath the running water. "I want to."

"Seriously, it's fine."

She glanced over at him. He was leaning against the counter, his relaxed posture at odds with the tension coming off of him. "Oh my gosh. You don't think I'll do a good enough job on the dishes, do you?"

"That's not it," he said, rubbing the back of his neck, a sheepish expression on his handsome face.

"No, it totally is. Jace Colter. You don't trust me to do dishes."

"You're scrubbing them with your thumb, Samantha."

"They're going in the dishwasher!"

"You have to pre-clean them correctly."

"Holy frick, Jace. Your issues can be perfectly adorable, especially when they culminate in you wiping my kitchen table off after we have dinner at my place, or you vacuuming my couch before you sit on it, but this," she said, holding up the

bowl, “not so cute, my friend. It’s going in scalding hot water that will disinfect everything. It’s not like I let Poppy lick it.”

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“You wouldn’t.”

She arched a brow and took the bowl out of the sink, lowering it slightly. “You don’t think?”

“Sam,” he growled.

“Grrr. Jace is mad.”

“I will put you on the hide-a-bed.” He took a step toward her, his scent attacking her like a sexy beacon of temptation again.

She swallowed hard, tossing her head back, ignoring the lingering tingle in her lips. “Bastard. You have a bed with a down pillowtop and you would be put me on that abomination?”

He took another step toward her, his dark eyes clashing with hers, sending a little zing of heat through her. It was all that deferred pleasure business. This level of not-being-able-to-ignore-Jace’s-hotness wasn’t normal.

“If you let your dog lick my dish...” His tone was so menacing, his gaze so intense, and the tension in her chest was so tight...she snickered.

“That sounds like the world’s sickest euphemism.”

His lips twitched, as if he was trying very, very hard to hold back a smile. Or evidence of amusement of any kind over her shenanigans.

“Samantha, do not let your dog lick the bowl. And I’ll let you do the dishes.”

“Hollow victory, but I’ll take it.” She lifted the bowl back up out of Poppy range and turned to the sink. “You can do the breakfast dishes.”

“Great. I’m going to go take a shower. Pick whichever room you want, but the dog cannot sleep on a bed.”

“Fine. Fine. Good night, Jace the Grumpy Cowboy.”

“Good night, Sam.”

He turned and walked out of the room and she just kept washing dishes. She didn’t even look at his ass.

Normal. Everything was back to normal. The kiss had inspired a bit of temporary insanity, but it was over now.

Totally over.

The next month was going to be just fine.

Three

Samantha cranked up the radio and ladled some more pancake batter onto the griddle, singing the octave above Blake Shelton as she got in touch with her hillbilly bone. Poppy barked along in no particular key.

Jace’s kitchen was so big she actually had to take steps to the fridge to get more milk for her batter. In her old apartment she’d just kind of stretched to get everything. This was heaven.

When her bakery started getting featured on the Travel Channel and Food Network, 'cuz hell yeah it would, then she'd get rich and famous and buy a house with a huge kitchen. Testing recipes would be way more fun in here.

She started to do a little dance, using the batter-covered ladle as a microphone and giving an on cue "Yeehaw" as the song commanded.

"Samantha, what the f?—"

Then she flung her arms wide, a motion started because of the music and made bigger by the very stern sound of Jace's voice, and came up against something solid, the pancake batter making a wet splat as it came into contact with its target.

She turned, her eyes wide and level with Jace's throat. And the spray of raw batter that started between his pecs and spread out like a gooey star.

She snorted a laugh and quickly took a step back, clapping her hands, one of which was still holding the ladle, over her mouth. "I'm sorry," she said through her fingers.

Little clumps of uncooked pancake tangled in his dark chest hair, which got her noticing the chest hair. Which got her following the thin line of it that ran down the center of his abs and to his very low jeans and...oh my.

She looked back up into very dark, very angry eyes.

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“Good morning,” she said, her smile wide. “I made breakfast. Dammit!” She turned and scurried back to the griddle and flipped the pancakes. They were only a little dark. Some syrup and whipped cream would cover that right up. “It’s okay. The pancakes are fine.”

“What the hell are you doing, Sam?”

“Cooking. For you, silly. Before you go out riding the range.”

“I’m castrating calves today.”

“Well...you know. Before you go cut off animal balls. I hear that really works up a sweat. Also, these are kind of a theme breakfast. They’re round like...yeah, well, that’s not appetizing.”

Jace pulled a hand towel off the oven door handle and wiped it over his bare chest. She cocked her head to the side and watched intently, unable to help herself. It was like some kind of weird breakfast porn. And it was kind of fascinating.

Jace walked over to the radio and turned it off.

“Country music hour is sacred in the morning,” she said.

“My sanity is sacred all the time. And I reserve the right to not be assaulted by breakfast.”

“Who hasn’t had a slight pancake mishap?”

He looked down at his chest. “Everyone?”

“Eh.” She waved her hand. “Charming foibles aside, I’ve made you breakfast.”

“Your foibles are possibly less charming than you think.”

She shook her head. “Nah. I’m quirky. It’s adorable.”

“Is that what you call it?”

“Breakfast!”

She used the spatula to put a stack of four pancakes on a plate. Then she added syrup, chocolate chips, whipped cream and a cherry. And held it out to him. “Be mad at me while you eat this,” she said.

“It’s impossible,” he said, sounding defeated as he took the plate and sat down at the small kitchen table, his bad mood lightening even more when he noticed the cup of coffee already in position for him.

“I know.” She smiled and put a pancake onto a plate for herself, sticking to chocolate chips and whipped cream, and sat across from him.

He took a bite and moaned, a deep, guttural sound that echoed in her stomach and made her feel all strange and jittery.

“Good?” she asked.

“So good.”

First the pancake batter show, now he was making sex noises while he ate. The man

was a damned hazard to her health.

No, this wasn't the first time she'd been inappropriately aroused by Jace. There was...well, all of high school. But he'd dated other girls, and she'd dated other boys. And then there were a few months of melancholy longing sprinkled throughout the next twelve years. But nothing she couldn't deal with. Nothing she couldn't ignore.

Like a few weeks ago when they'd watched that movie and he'd put the popcorn bowl in his lap. It had forced her mind to what was beneath the bowl. To whether or not he felt her reaching in the bowl. To what he might think of that.

But then she hadn't seen him for a couple of days due to work obligations, and she'd gotten her head on straight.

It was just that there had been two incidents in the space of a few hours and since she was living with him for the time being, there had been no blessed distance to make sure she could get her brain back in order.

The Jace lust had to end. It was just bad. Bad bad bad. If they were going to live together for the next four weeks she had to somehow manage it without drooling like Poppy.

"I've got to head out," she said, standing and stretching. "I need to get everything going at the bakery. Thank God I just make cupcakes and pies and not breads, or I'd have to be there at three a.m. Still, the meringue will not whip itself." She wiggled her eyebrows and reached down to the floor by her chair to retrieve her purse.

"What are you doing with your mongrel?" he asked.

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“My purebred—” she bent and smooched Poppy on the lips “—stays home. I run a bakery. Unsanitary.”

“You just made pancakes withitright there.”

“She’snot unsanitary to me. She’s unsanitary per regulations laid out by the state of Oregon. I think she’s a peach. But then, I don’t really want hair wafting onto the cupcakes either.”

“What am I supposed to do with her?”

“I’ll take her out now and she can stay inside until I close up shop. That’s what I normally do.”

“You want her to stay in the house?”

“She can’t stay in the van. It’s cold. Sometimes I leave her outside, but not all day in the snow.”

“She’s a Newfoundland, Sam. Aren’t they...waterproof like ducks?”

“Poppy is an inside doggy,” she said.

“You’re overindulging.”

“Ah, Jace, you overindulge in bleach and I love you anyway.”

“Bleach, unlike your dog, leaves things cleaner than before it blew through the kitchen.”

“I was the one splattering pancake batter, not Poppy.”

“Then maybe I should keep her and throw her owner in a snowbank.”

“You wouldn’t. I’m too cute.”

Jace felt all the electricity that had flowed through his veins when she’d hit him in the chest with pancake batter now run toward his heart and encircle it, giving it a hard jolt. Dammit, she was too cute.

She was too cute to send to a mouse-infested storage unit. Too cute to throw into a snowbank. Too cute to have underfoot twenty-four hours a day because she was also just about too cute not to pull into his arms and kiss until neither of them could breathe.

Which meant it was time to go out and throw himself in a snowbank and then get his ass to work.

“Do whatever you want with Poppy. I have calves to de-ball.”

She arched her brows. “As you do.”

He gave her a halfhearted wave and walked toward the front door. He grabbed his gloves from their place on the shelf that was just to the right of the door and the keys that were hanging on the hook below.

A place for everything, everything in its place. A simple fantasy he’d had in his childhood, one that had been unattainable.

Now he had it. And it really did make everything run smoother. He could get everything he needed for the day together in a matter of minutes. Muscle memory. Everything was right in reach, just where it was supposed to be.

No waste. No valuable moments spent searching for a tool that wasn't where it belonged. He didn't really care if Sam thought he was crazy. He was efficient. Crazy and efficient, but what the hell? He had control. He was the master of his domain.

He paused for a moment and put his hand on his hips, letting out a long breath that lingered in the air like fog before dispersing. He looked at the fields, covered in snow, to the mountains beyond them. The barns. The equipment sheds. It was all his, and it was all how he liked it.

Yeah, life was pretty damn good. And in a few weeks, Sam would be on the path to homeownership and out of his house. And things could get back to the way they were supposed to be.

With mild lust flare-ups that happened every now and then. But nothing like this seam-busting, perma-erection he was dealing with now.

He shook his head and kept walking. Spending the day removing the testicles from animals should serve as a decent libido crusher.

He'd never looked forward to the job so much.

"Holy shit."

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Jace walked through the front door of his house and was greeted by the muggy, unpleasant scent of dog. Wet dog.

And then his eyes went to the floor and followed the little trail of cotton fluff balls that ran from the kitchen, across the entryway and into the living room, to the fireplace.

He half-expected to see a big black beast at the end of the trail. But he didn't.

Because the big black beast was on his couch. With the remains of the throw pillow that had been viciously attacked hanging from its jaws.

And its face was wet. It added to the gore of the scene. And judging by the puddles that led from the hall bathroom to the couch, the wet had come from the toilet.

“Hi, Jace! I brought cupcakes.”

He whirled around. “Why is your dog on my couch? Why did it drink out of the toilet? And why in hell did it chew up my pillow?”

“What?”

“You heard me,” he said, angry now, unreasonably so, maybe. No, not unreasonable. She'd come storming in yesterday and given him a fait accompli and now she was getting pancake on him and getting his cock hard and her dog was breaking his house.

“She never does stuff like that.”

She crossed to where he was standing and her mouth dropped open.

“See?” he asked. “She did that. She did. She killed that throw pillow and she didn’t even have the decency to consume the body. A pleasure killing.”

“She never does things like that!” she said again, running over to the side of the couch and kneeling down in front of Poppy. “Bad dog! Bad, bad dog.”

She sounded like she was cooing at a newborn baby. Not like she was scolding a two-hundred-pound animal.

“You don’t sound like you mean it.”

“I’m in shock,” Sam said, pushing into a standing position. “She doesn’t chew things at home. She must have been confused about the boundaries here.”

“Confused about the...she’s a dog!”

Sam crossed her arms beneath her breasts, the motion tugging her shirt tight across them. He imagined her expression was fierce, but he was having a hard time motivating himself to raise his focus and confirm it. Angry eyes...perfect breasts. Frowning mouth...boobs.

There was no contest.

But at some point, he had to acknowledge that he’d passed from normal, expected male study of the female form to slobbering douche bag, so he had to no choice but to look up. Yeah, she was mad.

“Where do you get off being mad? Your dog chewed up my?—”

“Ten dollar throw pillow.”

“The money isn’t the point. It’s mine. And I like things where I left them and not desecrated by the hound of the Baskervilles.”

“It won’t happen again, Jace. Come on,” she said to Poppy, genuinely stern now. “Outside.”

She walked out with the dog and returned a few moments later without her. “She’s thinking about what she did.”

“No she’s not. She’s thinking about when she can kill again.”

“Jace, I’m sorry. She really doesn’t normally chew. She does drink out of the toilet—I can’t lie. But she doesn’t have opposable thumbs, so we’ll just make sure the bathroom door is closed and she’ll go for her water bowl.”

“She can’t stay in the house, Sam. Not while you’re gone. I can’t have her in here. It would drive me crazy.”

“Jace, what am I supposed to do with her?”

“She can hang out with me. That way I can keep an eye on her. She’s never made a move toward any of the animals on the ranch before, so I’m assuming she’ll stick close, right?”

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“Well, yeah, but you hate her.”

“I don’t hate her, not any more than I hate the idea of any dog in my house and on my furniture. We’ll be fine as long as she doesn’t try to crawl in my lap like an overgrown puppy.”

“She’ll be a mess if she follows you around all day.”

“I’ll hose her off inside where I take care of the horses. She won’t get cold. I don’t mind mud out there. I mind it on my floor. There’s a difference.”

“Okay, thanks. I’m sorry we’re being high-maintenance guests. That wasn’t my intention.”

He let out a long breath. “I know, Sam. We’ll be fine. We just have to establish a routine.”

“Well, in keeping with that theme, I brought more dessert.”

“I like that routine.”

Samantha felt a little glow at the center of her chest. She had no idea why Poppy had decided to go postal on the pillow, and she really did feel bad, in spite of the fact that protectiveness for Poppy made her a little prickly. So the idea that something about her was welcome in Jace’s eyes was...nice.

“I’ll bring out a tray of cupcakes. You sit down. We’ll watch a movie. Your pick.”

He muttered something about cupcakes being preferable to popcorn. “Sure, Sam.”

“And Poppy can come sit by the fire. It’ll make a nice domestic picture.”

“Nothing with that much fur features into my version of a nice, domestic picture.”

For some reason, his words made the glow vanish. Leaving her cold and a little sick.

“Oh. Well, what does feature in your nice domestic picture?”

He shrugged. “Me by myself, I guess. Or with you over for a movie.”

But living by himself. Not with a wife. Why did that bother her? She shouldn’t care. If Jace had a wife she’d never get to see him. She’d long dreaded that day, really. The day when another woman became more important to him than she was.

But it hadn’t come yet. And she was pretty thrilled about it.

Still, the idea that he was happiest alone...she didn’t like that either. “Well, you pick the movie.”

“Die Hard.”

“Ugh. Fine. I’ll get the cupcakes.”

“And a beer.”

“Cupcakes and beer?” She made a face. “Instead of dinner?”

“It’s my house. My rules. Beer.Die Hard.”

“Cupcakes. Manly.”

“Put a piece of bacon on them and man them up.”

“I think I’ll pass.”

“Great. You go get that stuff and I’m going to...” He looked at the couch, then at the fuzz on the floor.

“You’re going to clean up.”

“I know how to party on Friday night.”

“You surely do show a lady a wild time.” Their eyes met and she felt a tug that went down deep, from her heart to her stomach. “I’ll just...cupcakes. And maybe I’ll fry bacon for a side.”

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She turned and went into the kitchen. Where she could get a momentary reprieve from Jace's scent, his hot body and the looks that made her feel like she was being turned inside out.

Four

Saturdays were always slammed at the bakery. When Samantha got back to Jace's that evening she was carrying a box of unfrosted sugar cookies and a tube of red icing, and she was ready to fall over.

"You're late tonight," Jace said when she walked through the door.

"Tidings of comfort and joy!" she said, holding out the cookies.

"Busy day?"

"Yes," she groaned, setting the box on the sideboard that was just by the door. Then she took off her gloves, her hat and her coat and put them on the floor. "Where is Poppy?"

"I set her free. Back into the wild where she belongs. She should be making her way back to the Canadian wilderness as we speak."

"Jace, where is my dog?"

"In front of the fireplace. She had a busy day following me around. I think she's out of shape."

“Yeah, we don’t do much in the way of ranching.”

“I didn’t figure. She did like playing in the snow though.”

“Aw, fun. I’ll have to go out with you both for a while tomorrow. Sunday, my blessed day of rest,” she said.

“Holiday orders getting heavy?”

“Around Thanksgiving I made so many pies my fingers were curled into claws for days, and it hasn’t slowed down much. Mince pies, apple pies, pumpkin pies. I have a special order in for a cherpumple.”

His dark eyebrows locked together. “What fresh hell is that?”

“It’s a pie inside a cake.”

“That’s wrong. You can’t put a pie inside a cake.”

“You can.”

“It doesn’t mean you should.”

“Some power-mad baker decided to wreak havoc with the order of the universe, I guess. I don’t know what to tell you,” she said.

Jace took his hat off and smoothed his hair, his muscles shifting beneath his tight T-shirt. He and Poppy must have just gotten back because he rarely wore a hat inside. “I like things to make sense. To go where they belong.”

He walked over to the coat closet and put the black Stetson up on the top shelf, then

left the door standing open. A clear invitation for her to put her own stuff away.

She wouldn't even grumble about it. She picked up her coat and other accessories and brought them to the closet, placing her hat next to his, and then put her gloves on the shelf by the door, right on top of Jace's leather Carhartts.

She grinned at him in triumph. "I can adapt," she said.

"Good," he said. "Because I don't very well."

"Aw, be adventurous. Try a cherpumple."

"I'm letting a dog sleep by my fireplace. I think that's enough adventure in my life for the time being. I'm not eating some unholy dessert mash-up."

"A cherpumple and a romantic comedy."

"A beer and Die Hard Two."

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“Bah!” She smiled at him and her stomach tightened. She took a deep breath and headed toward the kitchen, scooping up the cookies along the way. “Hey, what do you want for dinner?”

“I made dinner,” he said.

“You...made dinner?”

“Yes, you can have some.”

“I thought you just got in.”

“I came in and put chili in the slow cooker and then went back out for a while. I usually live on my own, you know.”

“I know,” she said. “But I kind of picture you being a little more helpless than that. Your kitchen doesn’t look used.”

“Clean. It looks clean.”

“Ahahaha. Funny, funny. Where is this chili?”

“In the Crock-Pot, waiting for you.”

Again she couldn’t shake the feeling of the domestic. And a little bit of bliss. Domestic bliss. She’d been short on that in her life. She wasn’t sure what she thought about feeling it now, in this situation, with Jace.

She hadn't ever felt this with guys she'd slept with. She'd never felt at ease having them in her space. Which, when you were in a long-term relationship with someone, obviously wasn't very good. And that was maybe why they'd ended up dumping her.

Man #1, Mike, had lasted for two years. Two years of dates, the occasional dinner and night in and then an unceremonious boot in the morning so she could get back to her life.

Man #2, Caleb, had lasted a fleeting three months and hadn't made it into her bed. Poor bastard. He'd always been called out at third base. No chance of sliding in home.

Man #3, David, had lasted a record four years. Until he'd wanted them to move in together. And the idea had felt so close to permanent it had given her the shakes.

Two years since that horrific breakup and she'd been sort of happily without.

So, in all honesty, she'd spent a long time avoiding domestic bliss. That she was liking it now, with Jace, was more than a little disturbing. Because Jace didn't want it. And making any move toward it might alienate the one constant in her life.

The simple truth was, she loved Jace. Not that she was in love with him or anything, but she loved him. He was like a part of her. So deeply ingrained she didn't know what she would do without him.

Which was maybe the root of some of her relationship trouble. Jace was the most important person in her world. That meant her boyfriends always came second. And they didn't like that.

And a husband couldn't come second to a friend. So that made things...impossible.

Just dating was almost impossible. David and Jace had not been each other's biggest fans. And it wasn't entirely Jace's fault. Or David's really. But David had been understandably iffy about his girlfriend going to another man's house, alone, late at night to watch movies. And Jace had been understandably pissed that David had suspected they would fool around behind his back.

And she'd been understandably pissed about it too, but if she'd been in David's place she would have been a little suspicious as well.

That had just been a big mess. And while her attachment to Jace hadn't ended the relationship, it hadn't helped either.

She shook off her decidedly downbeat musings and headed toward the Crock-Pot, filling a bowl with chili, cheese and corn chips. "Nom," she said. "Thank you. It's kind of nice to have someone cook for me."

"Has anyone ever cooked for you?" he asked.

"Not really. Mrs. Brown used to bake for me. And she made us both cheese sandwiches for lunch."

"Oh...I remember those," he said. "Mayonnaise and cheese on white bread."

"It was nice to have someone care enough to feed me." She swallowed past a rising lump in her throat. "Anyway, it was nice then, and it's nice now."

"It's nice to have you here."

"I'm been making your life hell, but thanks for saying that."

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“No. Really. It reminds of me of how things were. I mean, the good things. Because Lord knows there was a bunch of crap. But...there was good. And you were a huge part of that.”

“Thanks. You too. For me, I mean.”

“Tomorrow we should have cheese sandwiches with mayonnaise,” he said.

“I’ll pack them for lunch. I really do want to follow you around while you work for a while.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m proud of you. Of what you have here.”

“I had help getting it.”

“And you were smart enough to take help. You should be proud of that too. Neither of us had anything growing up. I had whatever tiny apartment my mom could get us into. Whatever food we could cook on a little individual burner in one pan. And hey, sometimes we just lived in cars. And then there was your house...”

“Yeah.”

“We’ve come a long way, baby,” she said.

“I know.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing how things have changed since the last time I did an extensive tour. Normally I just come sit on your couch.”

His whole face changed. Pride. Contentment. Oh, she loved to see all that there. He deserved it. “You’ll love it. I’m experimenting with the best time of year to calve. These babies were born in October.”

“And they’re probably mad at you since you stole their testosterone.”

“That’s how it works,” he said.

“You wouldn’t be so cavalier if it was your testosterone we were talking about.”

“Are you acknowledging I have it?”

“What? Naturally. Your chest hair doesn’t come from your rampant estrogen, and I know about your chest hair since I tried to make a pancake on it yesterday.”

“You did.”

“Thought maybe I could cook it on your skin. ’Cuz you’re so hot.”

“Ha ha.”

“See? I acknowledge your...” The light in his eyes changed and her sentence died on her lips. He looked so intense, so focused for a moment that she thought he might...that he might be intending to...

And now he was staring at her lips.

Oh no.

Oh yes.

No. No, no, no.

Her inner hedonist and her inner doomsday prophet were locked in an epic battle. One thrilled about the potential for a kiss. The other screeching about it bringing about the end of days. And unfortunately, the little bitch with the sandwich board was right. It was a recipe for doom. Dooooom.

“Your testosterone,” she finished, kicking her brain into gear and taking a step back from him. “It is in full working order. Beer and Die Hard Two! Let’s do this thing.”

She stalked into the living room, her heart beating so hard her pulse echoed in her temple. This time, it was all Jace’s fault. He couldn’t look at her like that and expect her to maintain sanity and purity of thought. She was on a two-year sex hiatus. And he was hot.

And she was a red-blooded woman with urges and needs. Urges and needs that were going to have to calm the hell down because she was not, under any circumstances, going to kiss Jace Colter.

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No, she was not.

She sat down on the couch and closed her eyes, waiting for Jace and imagining warm summer days spent on a grassy hill. Away from home. Away from the crazy for Jace. Away from the empty for her. And she thought of mayonnaise and cheese sandwiches. And how no matter what, Jace had been by her side. How he'd supported her through everything.

Nothing was worth risking that. Nothing at all.

Five

Jace blessed the cold air as it washed over his body. But he cursed the fact that Sam was with him. Because she was negating the effect that the frigid surroundings otherwise would have had on him.

He'd been harder than hell and bound up in one big knot since last night.

He'd almost done it. He'd almost leaned in and kissed her sassy pink lips. And damned if he wouldn't have regretted it. He regretted not doing it. And that was dumb as rocks.

But she'd gotten to talking about his testosterone. And then the pancake incident. The pancake incident that he should be irritated about. The pancake incident that made his blood run a little hotter and his pulse pound at an accelerated rate.

Because now, when he pictured the scene, batter all over his bare chest, he invited her

to lick it off. A fair trade since she'd caused the incident. And then, when the altered memory went there, his chest wasn't the only thing she licked.

And that was just sick. Who had those thoughts about their best friend? He felt like a complete bastard having fantasies about her lips on him, but dammit, he had them. Lots of them. Explicit, erotic fantasies.

He redirected his thoughts quickly—a necessity because his jeans were starting to get tight—and turned to face Samantha and her big black shadow.

“So,” she said. “What are we doing today?”

“We,” he said, “are going to move the cattle from one pasture to another. We have to keep the rotation going, especially through the winter so they have plenty of grass to eat.”

“We’re going to herd your cattle? That’s freaking awesome.” Her pale cheeks and nose were already stained cherry-red, her hair frizzing around her head thanks to the moisture in the air. She had on a berry-colored hat and gloves, which should have clashed with her coloring but somehow didn’t. She was so vibrant against the background of white snow and silver sky. The most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

And it wasn’t just his groin that tightened. It wasn’t just his stomach that felt strange. It was his heart.

Well, damn. That was inconvenient. Feeling these inappropriate Sam feeling were bad enough when they were below the waist. Bringing his heart into the equation made it all worse.

“Yep,” he said, his throat suddenly tightening up too. Oh good, his whole body was staging a rebellion.

“Get along, little doggy!” she said to Poppy, weaving back and forth in the snow, making uneven footprints. Poppy pranced behind her, lifting her feet higher, clearly excited by Samantha’s exuberance.

And he couldn’t blame her. Samantha had that way about her. She was infectious. She’d always made him smile, even when there’d been nothing in his life to smile about.

She still did that to him. She did everything to him.

Dammit.

“Calm down, cowgirl,” he said. “We’ve got to saddle up some horses.”

Five hours later, Samantha was muddy and exhausted, and so was Poppy. And Jace still wasn’t done working.

“We’re going to head back to the house,” she said.

“Right. I’ll be behind you in a bit.”

She nodded and strolled from the barn back to the two-story home. She’d spent the whole day in the cold with Jace and his hired hands. And they’d eaten cheese and mayonnaise sandwiches, and her cheeks hurt from smiling so much.

Her butt hurt too, from riding the horse for so long. And she was pretty sure she would be walking funny in the morning. She didn’t ride very often, and she’d never shadowed Jace on the ranch before.

It was incredible. To see what his hard work had earned him. To see how hard he worked every day. And it made him even sexier. To see him get dirty. Sweaty. To see

him like she never normally saw him.

He really wasn't joking. He didn't mind getting dirty; he just cleaned up after.

He was like a walking fantasy. Tough and masculine, yet deeply involved with soap.

It wasn't fair.

She let out a breath and opened the door to the house, cringing when Poppy bounded in and left several paw prints in the entryway.

"No," she whined, grabbing Poppy's collar. "Hang on." She marched the dog into the laundry room and got a towel to clean her paws. "You need a bath," she said. "Let's go upstairs."

Samantha wiped up the floor on her way back by the entry door, then marched Poppy up the stairs and into the guest bathroom, right next to the room she'd claimed as her own for the duration of her stay.

"Okay, chica, let's get this mud off you."

A half an hour later, she had a clean and mostly dry dog snoozing at the foot of her bed. And she had a bathtub with a dirt ring to contend with.

She grabbed the flexible shower head and started to spray along the edge of the tub until most of the ring was gone. Now there was just a bit of black hair sticking to everything. That was always the problem with bathing Poppy. The water drew out enough hair to build a whole new dog.

She hummed as she sprayed the tub, jumping when she heard Jace's voice.

"Did you bathe your dog in the house?"

She flipped the switch on the shower head and stopped the flow, diverting the water to the tub. “What? Yes. Did you want me to leave her muddy?”

“I bathed her in the stable yesterday. I didn’t bathe her inside.”

“Oh, for crying out loud, Jace. Unclench,” she said, a rush of anger washing over her. Anger directed at him for being such an ass about the house. And for being so sexy. And so off-limits. And anger at herself for wanting him when she knew it was impossible.

She was suddenly very angry about all the things and there wasn’t anything she could do to stop it from leaking out.

“It smells like wet dog in here.”

“Does it? It’s about to smell like wet cowboy.” She flipped the switch on the sprayer again and aimed it at his chest, making a nice little damp spot right in the same place she’d smacked him with batter the other day, then turned the water off again.

“I can’t believe you did that,” he said.

“Believe it. I’ll do it again too.”

“Sam...”

She sprayed him again.

“Samantha.”

Again, and she could have sworn he smiled as he crossed the bathroom, reaching out toward her watery weapon even though he was trying to give her his very best angry

eyebrows. “No!” she shrieked, spraying him the whole time he was advancing on her. He grabbed her arm and spun her so that she was locked against his chest, facing away from him. And then she was unceremoniously disarmed, held captive against his wet chest, the sprayer against her breasts.

“You wouldn’t,” she said.

“You did.”

“But I’m mean. And you’re usually not.”

“Nah, baby,” he said, his voice low, resonating in his chest, vibrating against her back and sending a million little sparks through her body, “I’m a mean son of a bitch. And don’t you forget it.”

“You are not.” She wiggled, her butt coming into contact with what was either a hard belt buckle or...or...oh my. She wiggled some more, not so much to get free as to identify just what all was hard back there. Because no matter how much she shouldn’t want him to be hard against her ass, she kind of wanted him to be hard.

He flipped the diverter on the sprayer and a shot of cold water hit her between her breasts. “Dammit!”

“I told you.”

“But I didn’t believe you!”

“You pushed me.”

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“Yeah, well, you could use a little push, Jace,” she said, pushing her butt against him again. “Lord knows you don’t get challenged enough.”

“You don’t think?” he asked, his hold tightening on her, bringing him harder up against her ass and no, that was not a belt buckle.

“No,” she said, her throat tight.

Good. Lord. Jace was hard for her. And what was she supposed to do now?

Ride him like you’re not saddle sore!

Her inner hedonist was quick with an answer, while that ever more cautious part of herself whispered “doom” on a low hum in the background.

He lifted his hand, his thumb and forefinger bracketing her jaw, and he turned her head gently, so she could meet his eyes. She couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t think.

All she could do was want. She’d wanted him before, but not this badly and not when he was standing so close.

It was a recipe for disaster. Or tasty physical cake...

No. Disaster.

But he was looking at her, and his fingers were rough against her skin. Masculine. It had been a long time since a man had touched her. It had been...neversince it had

excited her so much. His jaw looked...scratchy. A full day's growth on his skin, dark and...and rough...and masculine. She'd thought all those adjectives already. But it's because they were so true.

He pulled her closer, one arm still partly around her front and holding the sprayer, his cock getting harder at her back.

She couldn't help it. She moved against him. Not an accidental wiggle. A full-on, intentional arch against him. Oh. Yes.

And then her lips parted, her eyes dropping to his.

Kiss me. Please kiss me.

And her silent prayer went answered.

Because then, suddenly, and finally, Jace was kissing her. His lips were firm, purposeful, expert. And he smelled like him. He smelled like home. Spices, familiar and exciting at the same time. Like leather and sweat. Like Jace.

She couldn't get close enough to him.

She turned fully in his arms and he dropped the shower head, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her hard against his body.

"Yes," she whispered, parting her lips for him.

His tongue slid against hers, the friction sending her to the edge, the pleasure radiating deep inside of her. She ached. Everywhere. Her breasts, the apex of her thighs. If he actually touched her anywhere she might explode. Right now, his hands were on her lower back and he was just kissing her lips, but she felt like she was on

the verge of an orgasm.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, sifting her fingers through his hair, kissing him back. Hard.

He growled and backed her up against the wall. She arched against him, trying to fit that tempting ridge of his arousal just where she needed it. She was a little too short to manage it.

She gave up for the moment and put her hands on his chest, skimming them over his body. He was as hard as she'd always imagined, his muscles clearly defined, even with the wet T-shirt fabric stretched over his skin.

Oh no, the fabric wouldn't do.

She ran her fingers down to the hem of his shirt and pushed them underneath, coming into contact with his skin. Lightning zipped from her fingertips through the rest of her body. He was so hot. And she was so hot for him.

There was no time to think or measure what response her actions might get. Measure what kind of consequences they might have.

And then her shirt was gone, so fast she hadn't realized he'd made a move for it. He lowered his head and kissed her neck, her collarbone, his teeth scraping the delicate skin there.

The water was still running into the bathtub, hot now, steam filling up the small room. Or maybe that was just them producing the steam. It was entirely possible.

She was mindless, but she knew it was Jace. It was the fact that it was Jace that made it so hot. That made it so perfect.

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He pressed a kiss to the rounded curved of her breast, traced the edge of her bra with the tip of his tongue. She whimpered, holding his head to her. So good. So incredibly good.

He reached behind her and unhooked her bra. She pushed it down her shoulders. He pulled her up against him and claimed her mouth again, his chest hair rough against her nipples. She arched her back, increasing the friction, deepening their kiss.

He swept her up into his arms and stepped into the bathtub in his jeans and bare feet, her with her jeans still on, then set her down in the water, never breaking their kiss as he settled between her thighs.

He kept kissing her, and she moved against him, using the seam of her jeans and his erection to chase the release that was close. So close. So very, very close.

Jace kissed her neck again. She gripped his belt loops, urging him to move against her harder, faster. She locked her legs over his, the wet denim heavy and scratchy on her skin. She didn't care. She didn't care about anything but this. But the way Jace made her feel.

He put his hand underneath, on her lower back, pushing her up more tightly against him, increasing his movements. Harder. Faster. Yes. Yes.

He bent his head and ran the flat of his tongue over her nipple, then sucked her deep into his mouth. Her orgasm rushed over her. She held on to his shoulders, a hoarse cry escaping her lips, as her mind went blank and she surrendered herself. Utterly, completely.

Jace bucked against her, once, twice, then buried his face in her neck, his body stiffening as he found his own release.

Six

Suddenly, reality shot back into focus. And Sam was very aware of the fact that she was in wet jeans. That the water was still running. That she was half-naked in the arms of her best friend after having dry-humped...well, wet-humped maybe was the better term, all things considered. Whatever.

Gut-wrenching regret and humiliation were all the same no matter what you called the thing that brought them about.

She pulled away from him slowly, her eyes locked shut. She didn't want to see him. She didn't want him to see her. She wanted to sink beneath the water and hide until Jace left the room.

But she was frozen. Completely.

Jace was the one who moved first.

He stood, water pitching around them, splashing over her bare stomach, up to her breasts. She managed to open her eyes and look up at him. His jeans were molded to his legs, to the bulge right behind his zipper. Droplets ran down his chest. And up higher...up higher was what she really didn't want to see.

His eyes were shadowed, his jaw set. At his sides, his hands were clenched. He didn't look happy, that was for sure.

Well, she wasn't all that happy either. Considering the release she'd just had, she was battling between horror, anger at herself, anger at him and a sweet sort of languor that

made her feel boneless and warm and wonderful. It didn't make any sense that satisfaction and terror could exist side by side.

But right now they did. Her body was all happy and smoking a cigarette. Her mind was completely freaking out.

It was quiet in the bathroom now. Except for the water that was still running. Cold now, and she was still in it as it got higher.

Awkward silence had passed to devastating silence, and they were just sort of staring at each other, letting it get worse.

Hell. It couldn't get worse. Could it get worse?

It was getting worse. He was still standing there, staring at her. And she was just staring at him. And she felt like she was looking at a stranger. Because was it really Jace who had taken her to heaven like that? Her best friend, the man she'd known since she was sixteen?

Yes. Yes, it had been.

And now, after speaking millions upon millions of words to the man with total ease over the course of the past fourteen years, she couldn't think of one to say after getting a mind-bending orgasm from him.

Not one.

Except maybe...

"Thanks."

“What?”

He didn't look happy that that was the word she'd said. Damn. Bad choice. Yes, judging by the stormy look in his dark eyes, it had been a bad choice.

“I don't know,” she said, sitting up, suddenly so embarrassed she thought she might die of it. “I don't know what I'm saying. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know.” She climbed out of the tub, her jeans stuck tight to her legs, and scrambled for her shirt.

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“Why the hell did you...thank me?”

“Because the orgasm was good?” She tugged her shirt over her head. “It seemed polite.”

“Polite?”

“I don’t know. What’s the protocol for this situation?”

“There is no protocol.” He let out a string of curse words, each progressively more crass than the last, ending in a word combination she never could have conceived of. “There is no protocol.”

“I was afraid of that. Farmer’s Almanach has nothing? No? Okay.”

Jace was still shirtless, still standing in the tub in water that hit him mid-shin. His expression was starting to resemble that of a man who’d been punched in the stomach with the end of a two-by-four.

It was like watching him go through the stages of grief. Denial was the part that had him frozen in the tub, and she had a feeling anger would be next. But she didn’t know whether the anger would be directed at himself or her.

And she didn’t really want to stick around to find out. “It’s been a long day,” she said, starting to edge out of the bathroom, wondering if Jace would be pissed about the water on the floor. Too damn bad. She was not hanging around to clean it up. That was what had caused this mess in the first place.

It confirmed her deepest suspicion that nothing truly good ever came of housework.

“Yeah,” he said, looking down, probably realizing he was still standing in the tub.

“I’m going to go to bed.” It was five o’clock. Even she didn’t buy her BS. But darn it all, she would huddle up in her room until Jace went to work the next morning if she had to. Because she couldn’t deal with this just yet. Just yet or maybe never.

So she would do what she’d done when she was a kid and reality sucked. She would cover her head with a blanket and imagine she was somewhere else. Just like she’d done nearly every time they’d moved.

Or on particularly cold, frightening nights sleeping in their car.

As scary as that had been, she was pretty sure this was worse. Because this had rocked her foundation.

If she ruined things with Jace, there was no one else.

Mrs. Brown was in Florida. Her mother probably didn’t even remember which city she’d left her only child in all those years ago.

And Poppy was wonderful, but she didn’t make Sam watch Die Hard or drink beer with cupcakes.

She needed Jace. She needed this to not have happened.

“Good night,” she said, not looking at him and as she walked out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Jace was still trying to catch his breath, and Sam was already gone. It was probably a

good thing because the moment he caught his breath, if she was still here, he would have done one of two things. He would have started yelling. Or he would have pushed her back down into the water and wrestled those jeans off of her no matter how hard it was to peel wet denim from skin.

He breathed in deep, finally, his chest pitching sharply with the motion, and stepped out of the tub.

Dammit. What had he just done?

Years of pent-up lust had exploded, and it had gotten all over Sam. Had he been in a shower by himself, great, fine. He'd have guiltily jacked off to her image. And it wouldn't have been the first time.

Even those moments, moments of pure fantasy, made him feel like dirt.

But this was inexcusable. He'd expended his fantasies all over her. Well, the denim had caught most of it.

He winced. What kind of asshole did that to his best friend?

In fairness, she'd kissed him back. And she'd really seemed to enjoy everything that had happened in the tub. But he should have stopped. He should have known better. He should have done better.

He looked around the bathroom. It was a mess. Evidence of the dog's bath all over the place, and puddles from their water fight splashed across the floor.

But for some reason the thought of cleaning didn't relax him.

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Whether he cleaned the bathroom or not, what had just happened would have still just happened.

Because no matter how much control he took over his surroundings, in this situation he had no control at all. And it made him feel like the entire theory for his life wasn't quite as sound as he'd always believed.

He had to figure out a way to get control. At the moment, a little dog hair was the least of his worries.

Seven

Samantha had scurried out of the house before he'd gotten out of bed the next morning. And she wasn't home when he got in from working the next afternoon.

It was so fricking cold outside he felt like his balls had been on ice all day, which, all things considered, was kind of helpful. Especially since he'd spent the whole night trying to ignore the hard-on from hell that seemed to be inextricably linked to a shame wave that threatened to wash him away the minute he wrapped his hand around himself.

He'd been awake most of the night, horny and unable to do anything about it. Because he was hard for Sam, and that was something he was ashamed about. Vicious cycle set on repeat.

Thankfully, punishing physical labor in weather that was pushing the negative numbers on the thermometer was helpful for that state. If he couldn't tame his nether

regions he'd freeze them off.

He poured himself some coffee, needing the warmth in spite of the fact that it was past five in the evening, and added just a little bit of booze. To warm himself up. And to make the image of Samantha's breasts a little less clear in his mind.

He froze at the kitchen counter, his hand wrapped tight around the hot mug. Perfect, pale breasts with little pink nipples. So hard. So delicious. One taste and he craved more with everything in him.

He craved her flavor. Not just her mouth or her breasts. He wanted to bury his face between her thighs and...

Poppy barked and Jace jumped, sloshing his coffee and alcohol mixture over the edge of his cup.

He turned and looked at the dog. "You can read my mind, can't you?" he said, his tone hostile. Poppy looked confused by what she'd done to earn his anger, but he had no doubt that she knew. That bark was too well timed.

"I can have fantasies," he said. "It's my right as a man."

Poppy tilted her head to the side. Silently judging.

"Clearly you wouldn't understand. I guess you've never met another mutt who lit your fire. It's probably better in the end. This is all a lot more trouble than it's worth."

The front door slammed shut and Poppy jingled over to the entryway. He looked out the window and saw Sam's van parked out front, covered in snow. Oh, so that was why she'd been barking. Fair enough.

He stayed at the counter in the kitchen, cursing his own cowardice. He was avoiding her for the next thirty seconds. It seemed the thing to do. And if that made him chicken shit, then fine. He was. He owned it. But he was extending the moment between now and the awkward silence for as long as possible.

Then Sam walked into the kitchen, holding a cake and wearing a huge grin on her face. “Hi! How was your day? Have cheese sandwiches for lunch?”

“Leftover chili,” he said, feeling a little stunned.

“Oh. Well, you know, ’cuz of the nostalgia and whatever.” She laughed, a weird, high-pitched sound, and set the cake on the little table by the window. “I brought cake!”

“You’re going to make me fat. It’s going to go straight to my hips,” he said, his tone dry.

Her cheeks flushed pink. “Ha!” Her fake laugh was as overenthusiastic as her fake smile. “Funny. Jace, that’s...funny. Because you’re a man and things don’t uh...they don’t go to your hips.”

“Yeah, Sam, that was the joke. Thanks for explaining it.”

“I’m going to make dinner.”

“What the hell, Sam?”

“What the hell what?”

“You’re fluttering around here chattering like a deranged chipmunk and trying to pretend everything is okay when you know damn well things aren’t okay. You’re

trying so hard to act like everything is normal that you're acting like a nut job.”

“I...I’m not.” She crossed her arms under her breasts, then fidgeted and cocked her hip out to the side, uncrossing her arms and putting a hand on her hip instead.
“I’m...fine.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because of last night.”

“What?” she said, her voice reaching heights that were almost only audible to Poppy.

“That was...nothing. We made out.”

He crossed his arms in return. “We made out?”

“Yeah, we kissed. So...so what? No big deal. I’ve kissed guys that I’ve only known for, like, twenty minutes. It’s really only surprising that we’ve never kissed before. We’ve known each other forever. Not really a huge shock that we’d test the waters. Ha. Waters. See what I did there?”

He reached out and grabbed her arm, pulling her toward him. “Stop,” he said, anger pooling in his gut. “Stop making it a joke.”

“We kissed, Jace. Stop making a huge deal out of it. We don’t need a postmortem. There’s not even a body.”

“Just a kiss?”

“Yeah.”

He swore and released his hold on her, pushing his fingers through his hair. “Just a kiss? That’s what that was to you? That’s why you were digging your nails into my back like that? Do you kiss all your dates that way, baby? Because if so, I’ve been

missing out.”

Her whole face turned red. “Stop it.”

“Why? You’re determined to act like nothing happened! You’re lying about it, to me, to yourself...”

“Because this is the alternative!” she shouted. “Screaming about it and freaking out about it because...because suddenly this bomb went off between us and neither of us could do anything about it. Because it scares the hell out of me, Jace. Because we went from best friends to having a mutual orgasm in a bathtub in about three minutes flat.”

“Actually, Sam, it took fourteen years to get into the bathtub, but I get your point.”

“Aren’t you freaked out?”

“Hell yes.”

“Then why talk about it?”

“Because it happened.”

“But we can pretend it didn’t,” she said, her eyes shining. “Please, Jace, can we pretend it didn’t?”

“How?”

“By not talking about it,” she said. “I’m embarrassed.”

“Why are you embarrassed?” He knew why he was embarrassed. Because, in his

estimation, it was pretty obvious why it had been so easy for him to go from friend to bathtub buddy. It uncovered the fact that he had some serious not-so-latent lust where she was concerned.

“Because I...climbed all over you like a...hoochie mama.”

He laughed, in spite of the situation and his own horror at it; he just couldn't help it. “Sam, that wasn't what I thought about you.”

“Well, gosh, I don't know what you thought. I attacked you. I'm horrified. I literally have no excuse except...obviously—” she took a breath “—obviously I'm attracted to you, but the thing is, it's not really worth doing anything about.”

He felt like he'd been sucker punched. “You're attracted to me?”

“No, Jace, I think you're a flipping ogre, that's why the minute you touched me I had a violent orgasm.”

Heat streaked over his skin and his face got hot, not from embarrassment but from that same dangerous arousal that had overtaken common sense yesterday. He rubbed the back of his neck, trying to think of something to say.

“Obviously it's mutual,” he said. “I sort of felt like I attacked you.”

“I think I embedded a fingernail in your shoulder.”

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“I knew you...liked it,” he said. “But I felt like I must have taken advantage of you and...”

“No. I felt like I jumped you. But it looks like we both sort of feel like the sexual predator and neither of us feel...preyed upon, so that’s...good. And now we can move on. Hopefully we’re both a little less...hair trigger now.”

He laughed because the alternative was to say: no, no I’m not, if you touched me right now I’d come on contact.

“I know we avoid talking about this stuff, but it’s been...a while for me. Since before the bakery. Since David...so...a long time.”

“Right,” he said, not sure he liked the explaining-it-away thing she was doing. But what was the other option? There wasn’t one. Not really. The other option was to say it meant something. But...he didn’t think he could have it mean something. He was sure she didn’t want it to mean anything.

Burning attraction to your best friend only worked if you were also hopelessly in love with them. Which he was not.

And she definitely wasn’t.

They were just, apparently, mutually hot for each other and in a mutual dry spell. So that explained things. That was the perk of explaining things away, he guessed.

“It’s been a while for me too.” Not that long, but a few months...like...eight now that

he thought about it, which was actually a very long time.

“So see? There. Glad we talked.” She patted his arm, then drew back quickly. “This was good. Now we can...be normal.”

“As normal as we are.”

“Yeah, well, normal for us. It will be enough.” She smiled, but the smile still rang false. He smiled back, and he knew his was fake. “I’ll make dinner.”

“Seriously, you don’t have to.”

“Hey, I want to. I like this. I like being here with you.”

The silence stretched between them, not really awkward but full. Of desire on his end, questions. A deep ache that he couldn’t quite define. He wanted more. He wanted something else. Right in that moment he felt like he might want it all.

But there was a reason he was thirty and not anywhere close to being married. He liked his control too much. He liked his space the way he liked it too much.

It wouldn’t make any sense to pursue something more with Sam. Not when it would ruin what they had. Because it would ruin it. Because he would go nuts about Poppy’s fur. Because he didn’t know how to live with someone. He didn’t know how to share his space.

And then he would be left with the burned-out remains of the most important relationship he’d ever had. All because he couldn’t keep it in his pants.

No. The longing and aching were just going to have to keep on longing and aching. Because he wasn’t acting on it.

He and Sam were going back to normal.

“I’m going to go wash up then,” he said. “Thank you.”

She looked at him, the expression in her eyes unreadable. “You’re welcome.”

“Movie and popcorn after dinner?”

“Sure. As long as it doesn’t star Bruce Willis.”

“I’ll let you pick.”

“Then we have a deal. And I brought movies with me, so don’t think you’re getting off easy.”

Interesting choice of words. And he’d learned yesterday that where Sam was concerned, there really was no getting off easy. Well, it was easy to get off. It was the after stuff that was hard.

But it was an important lesson learned.

“Great. I’ll be down in a few.”

“Great.”

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Yeah, things were normal now. And he was glad.

Sam was happily surprised at how easy dinner had been. And they were on to cake and a movie, and things were still easy. She'd picked a rom com because that was what she liked, and since she humored Jace's need for car chases and explosions on a regular basis, he had to deal with her love of slapstick and happy endings.

They were keeping a healthy distance between them on the couch, and yeah, it was a little healthier than normal, but that was probably good. Because clearly, things were a little more combustible between them than they'd realized. So taking precaution was a good idea, really.

The popcorn bowl sat in the yawning blank cushion space between them—not in anyone's lap. It was just smart to do it that way. As conscious as she'd been about what was beneath the bowl that last time it had ended up in his lap, she would be a million times more conscious of it now that she'd felt every hard delicious perfect inch between her thighs, taking her to heaven faster and better than any other man ever.

He'd had clothes on, and still, comparing the quality of the orgasm she'd received to what she'd experienced with her exes had been like comparing first class to economy. A superior ride in all senses of the word.

But she wasn't thinking about that. She was watching a movie and not thinking about it. Because she should be good. She should be satisfied and stuff because they'd gotten all the tension dealt with, so to speak, and now they were being normal.

She took a deep breath and reached for the popcorn bowl, and her fingers brushed against his. She jerked back like she'd been burned, turning to face him, her eyes wide.

Jace was staring straight ahead, his posture rigid, his eyes focused on the TV. He didn't look like he'd just been zapped by a rush of electricity.

And she immediately felt stupid because when did she react like that to him touching her hand? Never. So why start now? Because she knew how good that hand felt against her bare skin? Because she wanted to feel that hand on her bare breast, and her butt and...and...other places?

No. Surely not. So inappropriate. And she wasn't being inappropriate. She was being normal. She checked this time to see if his hand was in the bowl before she reached in and took another handful. She was taking no more chances.

The electricity between them was just hazardous. And she hated it. Because she couldn't deal with it. At least, she couldn't deal with it in a healthy, mature way that didn't involve throwing herself on his body and breathing heavy.

It was the proximity—it had to be. It was like cranking up the heat on something that had been on a low simmer for a lot longer than she would like to admit.

And last night it had boiled over.

She turned her attention back to the movie and tried to focus except...oh, that kiss on screen was getting very passionate. And...how had she forgotten this part? How? How had she forgotten there was a shower scene? Of all things.

It was so very bad. She and Jace had just had their own, less awesomely choreographed scene in a shower, and now this was just making her think of that.

Well, she was already thinking of it so it was making her think of it more.

She didn't want to look at Jace. It would be awkward. But the more she didn't look at him the more awkward it got because she was so purposefully not looking at him that it was getting painful.

Oh, geez. How had this happened? How had they gone from best friends to this? To her sitting frozen on the couch afraid to move and break the band of electricity stretching around them? Because if she did, she would either snap it and things would just fizzle all to hell with the uncomfortable tension, and he wouldn't want to sit next to her ever again. Or worse, she would set off a spark that would ignite them both and she'd find herself flat on her back again, riding the ridge of his arousal.

But she looked at him anyway, in spite of the inner voice screaming at her not to. She couldn't do anything else.

He was looking at the TV, his jaw tight, his hands clenched into fists. She looked back at the screen and her skin prickled. Some serious action was happening there, and she was feeling envious and edgy.

"It's going to get better, right?" she said.

She wasn't going to pretend everything was fine—not when it wasn't. She'd tried that earlier and the attempt had been laughable. He knew her too well. And she respected him too much to lie to him. She respected their friendship too much.

"This?" he asked, and she knew he knew she was talking about that invisible crackle of electricity, the one you couldn't see. But damn, you could feel it. "I don't know, Sam."

"It has to. How else are we going to...live together for the next month? How else are

we going to be friends?”

“It’ll get better.”

“But you just said you didn’t know it would get better!”

“I lied one of the times. Pick which one disturbs you less and call it the truth.”

“It will get better.”

“Yeah, I’m sure it will.”

“Or we just have sex and get it over with.”

Jace did a literal spit take with his beer, a fine sheen of moisture coating the TV screen. “What?”

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“I don’t know what I just said. I think I’m crazy. Don’t listen to me.”

“You said we should have sex and you think I’m going to just...not listen to that?”

“Well, I hope you’ll write it off as temporary insanity.”

“Like last night?”

“Yes.”

“If we’re still having insanity from last night, is it really all that temporary?”

“We’re within a forty-eight-hour window. I think it is.”

Jace looked at Sam, who was looking back at him with huge eyes, chewing on her thumbnail. A gentleman might let her takeback what she’d said. A gentleman might get up and go to his room instead, take the offer off the table completely by removing himself from the situation.

But he’d proved yesterday that he wasn’t a gentleman, and she was offering sex so he sure as hell wasn’t about to start pretending he was one.

“It’s not temporary for me, Sam. I wanted you before last night. I want you now. I don’t know what that tells you, except maybe that, for me at least, it’s not just going to go away.”

“But what does that mean?” she asked. “Does it change things?”

He closed the distance between them and wrapped his hand around the back of her neck, drawing her to him and kissing her hard on the mouth. She was even sweeter than he remembered. "I don't know," he whispered, his voice husky. "Does it?"

She bit her lip, looking at him, so close it would be easy to taste her again. "I don't...I can't think when you do things like that but I...I thought...I mean, wouldn't it be better to let things go back to normal? I thought we were being normal."

"Closing the gate when the horse already got out?" he asked.

"Maybe that's what it is," she said, looking down at his lips. Then she leaned in and kissed him, lightly at first, then deepening it, slowly, thoroughly. She slid her tongue against his. Her mouth fit perfectly against his, the rhythm and flow seamless.

It was nothing like other kisses he'd had. Nothing like kissing a woman he picked up in a bar who didn't know him. Who didn't know the steps to what he liked or the shape of his mouth. Nothing, even, like kissing a woman he was in a relationship with.

This was different. This was Samantha, and he was so acutely aware of that fact. Because she poured her into her kisses, and he knew her better than he knew anyone else on the planet. Her kisses were sweet, sensual, with bright spots and little points of quirkiness. Nips, licks, the way she sucked his lip between her teeth, things no one else would do.

Nobody kissed like Sam. Because no one else was Sam.

And it was Sam he craved. Had craved since he was sixteen years old and learning just how strong physical desire could be. Had wanted her every day, every hour, every moment since then, no matter how hard he'd tried to pretend he hadn't.

The freedom now, to kiss her, just kiss her, was like balm on a wound he hadn't known he'd had.

When she pulled away they were both breathing hard and her eyes were glistening, the confusion in her expression causing a wrenching his stomach. "I...Jace." She closed her eyes and leaned in, kissing him again. "I need you to promise me something," she said when she pulled away.

"What?"

"This won't ruin us."

"How could it?" he asked, even as he thought of a million different ways. But for him, their relationship was already changed. Because when her lips had touched his a moment ago he'd realized how much feeling he'd been holding back. And now that he'd seen it, now that he felt it, he couldn't go back to pretending it wasn't there.

It was too late for things to be unspoiled for him. And maybe it was selfish of him to want to push on through the feelings. If their friendship wasn't changed forever for her, then maybe he should keep it that way.

But he felt selfish. Completely and totally ungentlemanly. And he was okay with that. Right now, he was very okay with it.

"Sam," he said, "I care for you. I'm attracted to you. We'll follow through and see what happens. It can't ruin things. What we have is too strong."

"Just sex?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. And he hated the answer. Because he wished he could give her more. He wished he could have more. But he couldn't make those promises. And he knew

Sam didn't want them.

Sex was one thing, but bringing emotions in—that was one gamble too far. Friendship and sex, a change to excise the wanting that was starting to take over his body, his life.

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He was just now realizing that Sam was the reason he hadn't had sex in eight months. She was the reason none of the women in his life lasted for very long. He couldn't get over the longing. The what if. And if they could just do it now, if he could take away the mystery, then maybe he could get over that desire. Maybe he could go back to being the friend that he should be.

Yeah, somehow, in his lust-fogged mind, that made sense. A fix-it fuck. That was what they needed.

“Okay.”

She leaned in and kissed him again, that deep, sweet kiss that was like getting hit in the face with all the things he'd always wanted growing up but never had. A home that felt like comfort, spice and love. Companionship. Understanding. A place he could stay and rest forever. A refuge from everything ugly. She was so beautiful, her kiss so intoxicating, there was no room for bad feelings.

He closed his eyes and let it all wash over him, through him. This was more than lust. More than want. More than the F word he'd thought of a moment ago. This was more than he'd bargained for.

And they'd only kissed. But it was a kiss that had altered his whole body, from the inside out.

She pulled away, extending her hand, touching his lips with the tips of her finger. “I didn't know how much I wanted this,” she said.

“I knew how much I wanted it.” He grabbed her wrist and tugged her forward, leaning back and bringing her with him so that she was astride him. She shrieked and braced herself on the couch arm behind his head. His erection was cradled by the heat at the apex of her thighs, her legs draped over his. He braced his hands on her hips and looked up at her, at her wide eyes and open mouth and he thought that if he died then, he could die happy.

Almost. It would be better if he could be inside of her first.

Just the thought made his blood pump hot and fast, made him feel like he was on the edge of losing it. His control, his mind. Everything.

Sam put her hands on his chest and leaned back, tilting her head to the side, her hair spilling over her shoulder, red with gold fire around the edges in the dim lamplight.

The movie was still on, but he didn't care. He couldn't care about anything right now. Anything beyond what it felt like to have Sam touch him like this.

“I seem to have forgotten how to do this,” she whispered. “It's kind of embarrassing.”

“I'm at your mercy, Sam. If this is you forgetting how, I'm in big trouble if you ever remember your moves.”

“Can we stop talking?”

“I'm in favor of that.”

Sam's whole body trembled as she leaned in and kissed Jace, her breasts pressed against his chest, her pulse pounding like a horse's that had just escaped through an open gate. It was too late to go back. He was right. She would always wonder. She would always want.

And their little near miss, well, she hadn't missed and she was sure he hadn't either. They hadn't fully consummated, but they had pushed things past the point of no return. So maybe if they pushed further, they would do a full circle.

A little bit of sex, and they would be able to reset everything. Go back to how it was, with the mystery solved. Successful experiment done.

Or something like that. Logic was a tricky thing with Jace's hard cock up against her clit. Yes, yes it was. He even made her think words like that. Made her feel like a totally different person.

So strange that a man she'd known for almost half of her life was able to open up something in her she'd never found before. It made sense in a weird way, though. That sex with him would have a depth to it nothing else did. Because their relationship had depth to it that no other relationships in her life ever had.

She only hoped she survived this. More than that, she hoped they did.

Jace pushed his fingers beneath the hem of her sweater, his skin hot against her belly. His hands skimmed upward, cupping her breasts, not-so-expertly shielded by her lace bra.

"Oh...that feels..."

"Good?" he asked, his thumb sliding over her nipple.

She arched into him, the motion hitting all the right places between her thighs and thrusting her breast into firmer contact with his hand. "Oh...yes. Oh...how do you do that?"

"What?"

“You make me...” She couldn’t say it. She didn’t say things like this. During sex or ever. But this was Jace, and she was always honest with him. When she wasn’t, it blew up in her face like it had earlier today. So she decided on honesty. “You touch me, and I feel like...one more little brush of your hand will make me come. Just like that. I don’t know how you do it.”

“It’s not usually like this for you?”

“No. Finding an orgasm is usually like searching for the Holy Grail. Tricky. Hit or miss. Step on the right stones in the right combination. Either I get there or you step on the wrong stone and I throw a spear at your head.”

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He laughed, the vibration hitting her between her legs. “I hope to make it out without getting a spear thrown at me.”

“Your laugh just did more for me than my first boyfriend could do with forty minutes and a vibrator.”

“Do you have a vibrator?”

“Not with me.”

“Damn.”

“Jace!”

“What?” he grinned, wicked, sexy. Oh, he was so sexy it hurt. “You’re the one who brought it up.”

“But you’re...straitlaced and tidy.”

“When it comes to cleaning house,” he said. “But I know how to get my hands dirty when I work. And I damn sure know how to get dirty in the bedroom.”

He sat up and wrapped his arms around her waist, kissing her long and deep. He was the best kisser ever. It was official. She’d never enjoyed kissing so much. Because when it came right down to it, it was a little awkward and someone else’s tongue was in your mouth.

But with Jace...it wasn't awkward. And she was happy to have his tongue in her mouth. More than happy.

He lowered his hands, gripped her thighs and pulled the heart of her harder against his denim-covered erection, still kissing her.

She pulled her mouth away, leaning back, trying to catch her breath, while he tried to prevent her from breathing by kissing a path from her neck to her collarbone.

He tugged her shirt up over her head and unclipped her bra. "Oh...yes." He leaned down and drew one nipple into his mouth, sucking hard.

"Mmm" was the only noise she could make. It sounded sharp and kittenish and she didn't care. He pinched her other nipple lightly between his thumb and forefinger and she made the sound again, kneading his back with her fingernail.

Poppy barked and they both froze.

They looked down at the dog, who was looking at them. "She thinks you're hurting me," Sam said, studying Poppy and feeling...embarrassed and somehow guilty for exposing her poor dog to her and Jace's sexual activity.

Poppy wagged her tail and approached the couch. Jace stood, cupping Sam's ass and holding her up against him. She flailed and wrapped her arms around his neck, trying to keep herself steady.

"Mine," Jace said, his voice almost a growl, the word directed very clearly at Poppy. "Stay down here and sleep on the couch if you want. I don't care. But she is mine tonight, and you don't get to interrupt."

Sam squeaked when Jace turned and started walking them toward the stairs, pausing

for a moment to kiss her again, quick and hard. “I’m not sharing,” he said, his tone hard.

It was so stupid, but she felt like swooning a little bit. Thank God he was carrying her because her knees had turned to jelly and she wasn’t sure she would be able to support her own weight.

But Jace could. He carried her up the stairs and she was surprised by how much of a turn-on it was. Such a cliché, but it made her so conscious of his strength and size, of how much of a man he was. Of how much of a woman she was.

He carried her down the hall and to his room, and when he opened the door she was assaulted by the strangest sense of familiar and new colliding. She’d been in Jace’s bedroom before. Lots of times. But she’d never been carried into his room and set down on the bed. She’d never been in his room while he was looking at her like she was dessert and he was a very hungry man.

That was the real difference. She’d never been in his room when she was quite so conscious of the fact that he was a man and she was a woman.

A woman who wanted him. Very much.

There was something extra terrifying about the desire tearing through her because it was directed at Jace. And something comforting about it too.

The entire experience was an exercise in extremes. Good and bad. Terrifying and...well, terrifying. Because she’d never wanted a man like she wanted Jace right now. She’d never trembled with it, had never been so close to the edge from just kissing and a little touching.

He moved away from the bed and pulled his shirt over his head, his hands going to

the buckle on his belt. She wanted to stop him. She wanted him to go faster.

Jace was a contradiction, like everything else about this situation. So familiar, yet a stranger. The lines on his face, a face she'd know anywhere, looked sharper, more drawn, his expression much more...dangerous than she'd ever seen it before.

And it was that combination, that contradiction, that thrilled her, that made her feel like she was going to die if he didn't hurry up and take those jeans off. And a little like she might die when he did.

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And then he was pushing them down his lean hips, along with his underwear. And she was looking at her best friend, naked and aroused. For her.

And good Lord, he was the biggest man she'd ever seen.

"You'd think," she said, her voice scratchy thanks to her suddenly dry throat, "that after fourteen years of friendship, you might have mentioned that you were in possession of what must be record-breaking equipment." She tried to swallow and couldn't. All the moisture in her body had clearly migrated elsewhere.

"I doubt it breaks any records. But I didn't mention it for the same reason you never told me that you have the world's most perfect nipples."

"I might have mentioned it if I'd known I had the world's most perfect nipples."

"What assholes have you been flashing your breasts at, Sam? They should have told you." He got down on the bed with her, lying next to her, pulling her tight up against him, his erection hard and hot against her stomach.

He cupped one breast in his large, rough hand, squeezing her gently. "You are perfect."

She wanted to cry. And she didn't know why. Except that she was excited, and scared, and no one had ever looked at her like Jace was looking at her right now. No one had ever given her a compliment like that before. One so sincere and so deep.

It made her feel like she was being turned inside out. And in the theme of

contradictions, made her want to run from him and cling to him all at the same time.

He moved his hands to the snap on her jeans and undid it, then pulled the zipper down slowly. He closed his eyes and paused, his expression pained.

“What?” she asked.

“I have to catch my breath,” he said. “I...you don’t know how long I’ve wanted to do this, Sam. What it means to be this close to touching you. I tried not to put you in the middle of my dirty fantasies, but baby, I failed miserably. And this? This is a big fantasy of mine about to come true.”

Her heart felt swollen, achey. Jace had wanted her like this? He’d thought about it? She felt...honored by the realization. And strange too.

“I don’t want to disappoint you,” she said, her voice a choked whisper.

“Never,” he said, his hand sliding beneath her panties. “Oh...damn, baby,” he whispered as he slid his finger over her clit, down to the entrance of her body.

“Jace.” She lowered her head, rested it against his shoulder as his hands created a path of white fire over her flesh, the pleasure so deep, so all-consuming she didn’t know if she would survive it.

She shifted to give him easier access and he slid one finger deep inside her. She bit her lip to keep from making that kitten sound again, but she wasn’t successful.

He moved his hand away from her, cupping the back of her head and kissing her deep. She pushed her jeans down her legs, suddenly unable to take any more barriers between them. No more rough denim. Nothing. She just needed him. Now.

“I’m on the pill,” she said. “And I’m...clean. I haven’t been with anyone in more than two years.”

He nodded slowly. “You don’t want to use a condom? I have them.”

She shook her head. “I know you.”

He let out a long breath, a pained expression on his face. “Sam...” He lowered his head and kissed her neck, her shoulder, her breast, down to her belly, below her belly button.

She jumped at the hot swipe of his tongue over the sensitive skin there. He eased her thighs apart and moved lower, his hands digging into her hips. He pulled her closer, his eyes intent on her.

Now, no man had ever, ever looked at her quite so intently. Quite so closely. It was a little intense, a little embarrassing. But she didn’t have time to worry about the embarrassment because suddenly he was kissing her there, licking her, sucking her gently.

And all she could do was grab onto his shoulders and hold on tight. She was shaking, her entire body on fire with pleasure, too hot, too much, but she couldn’t stop him. She didn’t want to stop him, even though she wasn’t sure she could take any more.

“Like eating a cupcake,” he said, his tone rough. “You have to start by licking all the sweet stuff.”

And he did. Long and slow with the flat of his tongue, like he was savoring her. Like he was having her for dessert. He pushed two fingers deep inside of her while he continued to taste her.

She couldn't breathe now, couldn't think, couldn't do anything but surrender to the violent need that was racing through her.

“Jace...I'm...I'm going to...” And before she could even say it, her orgasm broke over her, her internal muscles tightening around his fingers, her entire body shuddering with the force of her release.

It was Jace's cue.

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He moved up her body, taking her mouth in a hard kiss while he thrust deep inside of her. She let out a hoarse cry and arched against him, the penetration on the heels of her orgasm so intense she could have wept.

And then she looked up at his face, into his eyes, and she really did shed a tear. Jace's eyes. His face. His lips.

Jace.

He started to move, thrusting hard, his motion matching the desperate light in those familiar eyes. And every time he entered her, she heard his name again, echoing inside of her.

Jace. Her Jace.

Making love to her like a god. Making her feel things, want things, no other man had ever made her feel or want before.

It was too much. Too intense. The well it opened up inside of her, deep, too deep to be filled.

"Samantha," he growled, looking at her so intently, like he saw that need in her, like he was trying to fill it. With his body. With himself.

She had to close her eyes. Had to turn her head to the side and focus on how good he made her body feel, on the climax that was starting to build in her. Impossible because of the strength of the one she'd had only a moment ago.

But no. There it was, close, so close.

Jace let out a harsh groan, stiffening above her, emptying himself inside of her. And it pushed her over the edge. Into that deep, never-ending well inside of her. She was falling, but warm, suffused with ecstasy, surrounded by Jace.

And she never wanted it to end. Because when it did, reality would hit. And she hated reality right now.

She clung to him as she fell, and when she landed, the mattress was beneath her, soft and warm, and Jace was above her, hard and hot.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and he rolled onto his side, holding her against his chest. She buried her face in the curve of his neck.

“Let’s not talk,” she whispered, a tear sliding down her cheek.

He tightened his hold on her, and she felt him nod his head.

They could talk later. Right now, she just needed to be held. She needed to crawl back out of that abyss and get the cover back on it.

There was no way she could live like this, not forever. Exposed and needy.

Jace had exposed her. And now Jace would hold her until she recovered. Because Jace was her rock. He was her comfort.

A cold feeling entered her chest and she burrowed deeper into Jace’s embrace, trying to escape the chill. Trying to shut out the destructive thought that she might have just put a crack in her foundation. One that she might never be able to repair.

Eight

Jace was awake the entire night, with Sam's naked body nestled against his, her breasts snuggled into his side—a serious distraction from sleep.

Unfortunately, he still did a lot of thinking.

About what she meant to him. About the fact that he was pretty sure he loved her.

Dammit.

Love. Had he always loved her? Probably. It was likely why there had never been a woman in his life that he'd wanted to keep more than Sam. Because when push came to shove with relationships, Sam had always been an issue.

No, he'd never said anything to her about it because, in his opinion, it wasn't her problem. But at some point, his girlfriends started getting touchy about her. Her place in his life, him going to her house to watch movies until midnight.

And some part of him knew that their jealousy was normal for the situation. But mainly, the conversation always ended with him getting pissed and telling them that if they wanted to mark their territory, he was the wrong guy for them.

Not one of them had enticed him to change his situation with Sam. Ever.

Because Samantha was always the most important. Samantha made his world spin. He was so attracted to her it hurt. He thought about her all the time—his first thought when he got up, his last before he went to sleep.

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Yeah. So that was probably love.

Dammit again.

He got out of bed, leaving Sam there, soft and sleepy and so sexy. If he didn't move away from her he was going to jump her, and until they talked he didn't feel comfortable doing that.

He crossed the gray room, the sun still not up over the mountains, and went into the bathroom, turning on the water and waiting for it to warm up before stepping under the shower head.

Love.

How had it come to this? He wanted to tell her. And he wanted to hide it forever. Or at least until he figured out what he could do with it. What it meant for him. For them.

He pushed water back from his face, sliding his hands over his hair, leaning back against the hard tile. Love was elating and terrifying. Like a roller coaster. The climb to the peak was incredible, the free fall after...in Sam's arms...amazing.

It was the blind corners that were killing him. They'd survived everything behind them, sure, but he had no idea what was up ahead.

The door to the shower opened and he turned. Sam was standing there, naked and biting her lip, looking nervous and beautiful, so damn perfect it hurt.

“Mind if I come in?” she asked.

“Please,” he said, his voice rough, not like his own at all.

She did, closing the door behind her, the moisture in the air clinging to her hair, which was completely wrecked after their activities last night. She wrapped her arms around her midsection, the action pushing her breasts up and together.

And he could only stare.

Had she always been this beautiful? How the hell had he survived looking at her for the past fourteen years without his head, or other parts, exploding?

Not the most romantic thought. But honest.

Right now though, it wasn't just his cock that was on the verge of serious injury. It was his heart. It felt like a fist was squeezing it so tight that his chest might cave in due to the pressure.

She didn't make a move to touch him, but she was here, in the shower with him, so that had to mean something.

“So, I was thinking,” she said, her voice soft.

“Sounds dangerous.”

“Does it?”

He shrugged, feeling a little like an asshole for trying to have a conversation while standing in front of her with an erection that was advertising the true contents of his thoughts. “I'm having trouble doing any real thinking right now.”

She looked down. “Yeah. Well...I can see that.”

“Sorry.” He wasn’t. Not really. She was there and naked. And he was crazy about her. If he was lucky enough to see her naked every day of his life for the next sixty years, she would probably always make him hard. That was just the simple truth.

“I was just thinking that...that there’s no going back, Jace,” she said. The way she said it made him feel cold. Like he was sure he wouldn’t like the next words out of her mouth. “I can’t forget last night or what happened before that. The only solution is to...is to keep going until we come out the other side. That makes sense, right?”

“I suppose,” he said. Except he was right—he didn’t like what she was saying. What she was saying made it sound like they were lost in the forest, muddling around, groping and falling into each other’s naked bodies. But not to worry—they would find the other side eventually and all the groping could stop.

And that wasn’t how he felt. He didn’t feel lost. He finally felt like he’d found himself.

“While I’m living here...Jace, this tension isn’t going to let up while I’m here. There’s no freaking way. We’ve seen each other naked. We’ve...y’know, and we’ll be sleeping down the hall from each other and...it’s not going to work.”

“I agree.” Kind of.

“So, I think...as long as we want it, let’s have it. While it feels right, we do it. And when it doesn’t...we’ll stop and never look back.”

“Can you do that?” he asked, feeling like the wind had been knocked out of him.

“What other choice is there?”

There was another choice. One he knew she wasn't ready to address. One he was more than ready to take on.

If he said the L-word now, he would scare her away. But he could show her. He could make her fall in love with him before they got out of the damned woods.

He wrapped his arm around her waist, pulled her up against his body and kissed her. That was his answer. Because he wasn't agreeing to her terms, not really. He had his own agenda. And he wasn't about to give away his plans.

She didn't seem to want to talk any more, though. She was kissing him back, and his whole body felt like it was on fire, the stream of the shower not nearly enough to stop the flames from burning through him. Consuming him.

She was so soft. So perfect. Everything he'd ever wanted. Everything he'd never known he wanted.

The woman he loved.

He groaned and pushed her back against the wall, deepening the kiss, cupping her full breasts in his hands, her skin slick, sexy. Tempting. He leaned forward and licked the water droplets running down between her breasts, lowered his hands and sucked her nipple deep into his mouth, drinking in the moisture that had pooled on her body.

She shifted, opening herself up to him, and he reached down, gripping her thigh and

tugging it up over his hip, testing the entrance of her body with the head of his erection.

He slid deep inside of her, his breath exiting in a gust, curling around his throat and pressing against his windpipe, making breathing an impossibility. But it was okay; he didn't need to breathe. He just needed her.

The feel of her, hot and wet, tight around him, the water hot on his back, her breasts crushed against his chest. It was too much, but it was perfect.

She gripped his ass and pulled him forward, burying him deeper inside her body. She had her eyes closed, her head back against the wall, her brows locked together, her lips parted slightly.

He leaned in and kissed her because in his mind, parting her lips just like that was an invitation to taste her. An invitation she'd made subconsciously for years, one he'd denied because he didn't want to ruin their friendship.

But he wasn't denying it anymore. Never again.

He slid his tongue over her lush bottom lip, taking in her flavor, her texture. Like a crushed rose petal dipped in sugar. Sweet, velvet perfection.

He moved his hands over her curves, the water easing his way. Full breasts, slim waist, rounded hips. A fantasy. But no matter how those curves changed and reshaped over the years, they would still be a fantasy. They would always be his fantasy.

She would always be his fantasy.

He was lost then, in her body, in her sighs, in her nails digging into his back. He wrenched his mouth from hers and pressed his face to her neck. His orgasm rushed up

over him, blinding him, making him feel like he was losing his grip. On his surroundings, on the world. So all he could do was cling to Sam.

She dug her nails deeper into his back, the pain a sharp spike of reality amid the pleasure, helping him stay standing as he emptied himself into her body, his thighs shaking, his whole body shaking.

It wasn't until he came back to himself that he realized he was biting her neck. Not hard. Just a little. But still. He moved away from her, examining the little mark he'd left there.

He brushed the back of his knuckle over the indents, regret slugging him in the gut. "I'm sorry, sweetheart," he whispered, leaning in and kissing her over her delicate, marred skin.

"Mmm." She tilted her head and kissed his cheek. "Don't apologize."

"I hurt you," he said, lifting his head and looking into her eyes.

"A little. But it was the fun kind. And no guy has ever gotten so into it with me before. You make me feel...different." She smiled, sweet and sleepy. "And the orgasms are pretty rad too."

"Rad?"

"Yeah." Her smile widened. "Got a problem with that?"

"Not at all." Hell, he was just glad he was in a position to give her orgasms. He wasn't going to argue with her choice of outdated nineties slang when expressing her enjoyment of them.

“Good.” She smacked his butt and wiggled out of his hold as she stepped out of the shower.

He turned the water off and followed her out into the cold air. She was drying off and it should not be as hot as it was. He was sure he’d seen women dry off after a shower. He was sure he’d had sex in the shower before.

He just couldn’t remember very clearly. Not because there had been so many or anything, just because...every other woman seemed indistinct in his memory now. Every other time seemed indistinct. Samantha was the definition of sexy to him. His life’s sexiest moments were now made up of encounters that had happened with her, and all in the past couple of days.

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“Baby, I could watch you do that...for another ten seconds and then I would jump you again,” he said.

She smiled at him, hot and tempting. “Already?”

“You said no man had ever been like this with you, which proves what I already knew: you have dated assholes. But it also means that I have to tell you I’ve never been this way with any other woman. Ever.”

Her cheeks turned pink and she tugged the towel up over her breasts. Funny what made her blush. And what didn’t.

“That’s nice of you to say. But you don’t have to say it.”

“I do. Because it’s true. Because you’re different. Because I bit you. I’ve never bitten a woman in my life.”

“If you were Poppy, I would have smacked you with a newspaper.”

“I’m glad you didn’t.”

She let out a long breath and hugged the towel closer to her body. She looked smaller for a moment. Unsure. And he wanted to grab her and pull her into his arms. He wanted to reassure her. But he didn’t know if she wanted him to. He didn’t know what was allowed in this little scenario of hers.

And he didn’t want to push her too far. Not yet. Too much pushing and she would

scurry off into those metaphorical woods without him and he wouldn't have the chance to make his case for forever.

His chest suddenly felt tight. Was that what he wanted? Forever? With her and Poppy in his house, screwing shit up and leaving hair and footprints everywhere?

Yes. Yes it was.

He'd spent most of his adult life protecting his space and his organization, prizing it above all else.

And it hit him then that if he kept on doing that, he wasn't any better than his mother. Loving his things more than he loved people. Of course, he was into neat and clean rather than piles of trash. But it was the same idea.

If he took on Sam, he had to let her in. Really. He had to let her have an equal share. He had to give up control.

And in that same moment, he realized he would give up anything, even a clean floor, for her. He would let her damned dog on the couch. He would let the damned dog in his bed. As long as Sam was there too.

Okay, he would get used to those ideas in stages. And maybe they could compromise.

But the sentiment stood.

"Yeah, well. Don't push your luck. Anyway...the cupcakes will not frost themselves."

"My cows won't take their own vitamins either."

"Or cut off their own...well."

“Yeah.”

“Okay so...makeup is in the other bathroom and I...” She shrugged her pale shoulders and backed out of the bathroom.

He didn’t know what had caused her unease, but she was definitely uneasy. He let out a breath and walked into his room, hunting for his clothes. He would have to follow her lead. To a point. Then he was going to do some pushing.

Because he was done hanging in limbo. He knew what he wanted now. He knew what he felt. He loved her. For better or worse, for chewed-up throw pillows or orderly house. And that meant he wasn’t going to just hang back.

And she wasn’t going to be able to avoid him forever.

Nine

Jace was so hot. Standing at the stove cooking her dinner. And he wasn’t wearing a shirt. Just jeans riding low on his hips, the snug fit hugging his ass like a little denim-wrapped present that was just for her.

Ugh. Wasn’t this supposed to be getting easier? Weren’t things supposed to be less...lusty?

She’d spent the past week in his bed. And on his couch. And in the shower. Once on the floor in the hall.

Yes. It had been a busy week.

And she didn't feel any closer to getting out of the woods. Worse, she was forgetting why she wanted out.

Things were getting tangled. Jace her friend and Jace her lover weren't really staying as separate as she would have liked. Because sometimes they were talking and laughing, and she would picture him naked. And then sometimes they were naked and he would say something very Jace and make her laugh.

Muddled. It was muddled.

And her mind was muddled at the moment because of those jeans. Because of the sexy shift and bunch in his muscles as he stirred the pot of spaghetti sauce on the stove.

What she really wanted to do was walk up and kiss his bare shoulder. Trail her fingertip down the curve of his spine. Slide her fingers beneath the waistband of his jeans. Squeeze his butt.

But this was the problem with their little arrangement. She felt compelled to find the line during the times they weren't getting it on. Which meant acting like his friend and not his bed partner when they weren't hot and heavy.

Which meant no random shoulder kisses or proprietary ass grabs just before dinner.

But she wanted to.

That was sort of disturbing. It was line-muddling. And stuff.

But it might not hurt, either. Especially not if it was considered fore-foreplay. Because they would have sex later, of that she had no doubt. Because if every night over the past week was an indicator, they couldn't keep their hands off each other.

She crept up behind him and put her hand on his shoulder. "Hi," she said. He went stiff beneath her fingertips.

"Hi," he said.

She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his skin, just like she'd imagined, before tracing his spine, also like she'd imagined. And then she edged her fingers beneath the waistband of his jeans, skimming the top of his butt. She stopped short at squeezing, even though she wanted to.

"How was your day?" she asked, pulling away.

"Good."

"Did Poppy behave?"

He shrugged a shoulder, the one she'd kissed, and turned to face her. "Yeah, she was fine. She rode in the truck and did my errands with me. Then we did some ranch work. The hands like her a lot. I think she might have gotten a little spoiled with lunch scraps."

She made a face and looked down at the dog. "Greedy thing. They're going to make her fat."

"Her fur will cover it."

“Ah, yes, black hair is very slimming.”

Their eyes met and he smiled. And her heart did some kind of weird melty thing it had never done before. Ever. In her whole life. It was strange and she didn't like it at all.

She cleared her throat and turned away. “Can I set the table?”

“Sure,” he said.

She busied herself with the task while he finished cooking and dished their plates. They ate in relative silence with more small talk about their day passing back and forth. But mainly her eyes were glued to his chest. Why was he shirtless anyway? It was snowing outside. It was warm in the house, but she didn't feel the need to strip off her top.

It seemed like gratuitous male nudity. Which, if it also counted as fore-foreplay, was allowable.

She would just enjoy it then. Let it kindle her flame. Light her fire. Make her go up like a match thrown into a tank of gasoline.

Yeah, more that last one.

Because the man had the most perfect chest ever. And while she'd definitely noticed it before, even before the morning she'd smacked him with pancake batter, she was really, really noticing it now.

Now that she knew just how those muscles felt under her fingertips.

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Now that she knew just how sexy he was.

“I’m suddenly hungry for dessert,” she said, realizing she’d gone a little Marilyn Monroe.

“Are you trying to seduce me?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I am. And if you have to ask, I’m not doing a very good job.”

He smiled and her heart did that thing again. Then he stood from his spot at the table and crossed to where she was sitting, kneeling in front of her and taking both her hands in his, his eyes intent on hers. “You have been seducing me since the moment I first met you. Pick-up lines appreciated but not required.”

“I...” She blinked, trying to soothe suddenly stinging eyes. “How do you do that?”

“How do I do what?”

“How do you make me feel like I’m the only woman in the world?”

“Because you’re the only one that matters.”

She breathed out hard, fighting against the intense emotion rising in her chest. She didn’t want to cry. There was no reason to cry. Jace was her friend so he was saying nice things. He was her lover so they were extra mushy.

That was all.

Nothing deeper.

“We should do dishes,” she said. “I mean, before dessert.”

He reached up and brushed his thumb over the corner of her mouth before straightening. “You really do know how to talk dirty to me. By talking clean.”

“I know my audience,” she said. “Most guys aren’t so excited about putting their hands in warm soapy water.”

“If you were in it, any guy would be.”

“Oh...” Her cheeks heated. “Well, you...you...”

“Yeah. And you.”

He was being gooey. And looking at her funny.

“You know,” she said, “I’m easy where you’re concerned. You don’t have to try this hard.”

“I’m just being honest.”

“Okay.”

She started running hot water out of the tap, scrubbing at the bowl idly with her thumb before realizing what she was doing. And then she realized he wasn’t yelling at her. And that was weird.

“I’m washing the bowl with my thumb,” she said, studying his face closely. “My thumb, Jace. I petted Poppy with these hands earlier. I grabbed your ass. This thumb

was involved in said ass-grabbing.”

He shrugged and smiled. “It’s going to go in the dishwasher.”

She squinted at him. “Are you high?”

“Never once in my life.”

“No. You’re too much of a control freak. Which is why I am suspicious of you now.”

“I’m fine. I’m...” He looked down at her hand. “You did stick your hand down my pants.”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe you could use a cloth?”

She smiled and grabbed a clean dish towel from the counter. “Yeah, I could do that.” There. That was more normal. Nitpicky Jace, who was freaky about his dishes, was strange but normal in his way.

“So what’s with the trying to be relaxed about me manhandling your stuff?” she asked.

“I’m making an effort to be flexible.”

“That’s weird, man. I’m not gonna lie.”

“You’re staying here. And I shouldn’t make you feel like an imposition.”

“Huh. Well. For the record, you don’t make me feel like an imposition, but thank you.”

“But you wouldn’t feel comfortable if you were staying here permanently.”

Something strange and heavy settled in her chest. “No. But I’m not.”

“No,” he said. “But...if you were, I couldn’t be tyrannical about everything.”

“But I’m not,” she said, feeling the need to affirm it.

“No,” he said again.

She set the bowl down in the sink. “Stop thinking so much,” she said, touching his cheek. “I can think of something that doesn’t require thinking at all.”

“Really?” The light in his eyes changed. It had been soft, almost sweet a moment ago. Not now. Now it was sharp. Predatory.

“Yes, really.”

She reached between them and grabbed his belt, tugging him forward. She ran her hands over his chest, confidence filling her. Because Jace was the most enthusiastic lover she’d ever had. Because he made her feel confident. Beautiful. More aggressive. And safe. Even when he took her to the edge, Jace made her feel safe.

She skimmed her fingers over his abs and nearly whimpered. He was so freaking hot.

With one hand, she worked at his belt buckle, the other enjoying all of his amazing muscles. Then she got frustrated with her one-handed technique and attacked the belt with both hands, pushing his pants and underwear down to the floor, dropping to her knees in front of him.

They hadn’t done this yet. She hadn’t. Because...stupidly maybe, it seemed so intimate. And now she wanted to taste him so bad she was shaking with the need for it. To bring it back down to sex—that was why. To stop him from saying all these sweet things. To stop him from talking about her living here full-time, like that could ever happen.

She cupped him, sliding her palm up and over his shaft, squeezing him gently before leaning in and tracing the head of his cock with her tongue. He sifted his fingers through her hair, tugging hard when she took him into her mouth.

A harsh curse escaped his lips, and he tugged harder as she moved her hand in time

with her lips and tongue. And she liked it. This was raw. This was sex. This was something she could understand.

It was Jace, her lover. The man who made her feel like she could do anything to his body and he would like it. The man who whispered dirty promises in her ear at night.

Not the man she ate cupcakes with. Not the man who hated dog hair and kept a small vacuum in his pickup truck to take care of dirt.

This was the easiest way to put a sharp divide between those two men, and she needed the divide. Without it, things were too dangerous. Without it, Jace was everything.

She pushed that terrifying thought away and focused on pleasuring him. On how hot and hard he was, on how perfect. On how this had never, ever been an arousing act to her before, but had her on the brink now.

“Enough,” he growled, tugging lightly on her hair. She followed the motion, rising to her feet, breathing hard, her entire body shaking. “I need you,” he said, his voice rough.

He wrapped his arm around her waist and gripped her thigh with his other hand, lifting her and setting her on the counter with one smooth motion. He pushed her skirt up to her hips, his hands rough as he pulled her wool tights and then her panties down her legs.

He held her open to him, thrusting hard inside of her, kissing her deep, in time with his thrusts. His desperation fed hers, her heart hammering so hard she thought it would eventually come to a dead stop, too exhausted to beat once more.

He pulled away from her, then entered her again, slowly this time, his eyes on hers,

intense, dark, predatory, but for some reason, the line between Jace, her friend, and Jace, her lover, blurred. And they became one man.

He became everything.

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A choked sob rose in her throat and she wanted to close her eyes. To bury her face in his neck like she'd done the first time. To hide from what they were doing. From what she was feeling.

But along with the pressure, the emotion building in her chest was the climax building deep inside of her, tension that was winding tighter and tighter. A sob broke through her lips, and still she looked at him, at his eyes. And she saw the emotion there. Flecks of light breaking through that dark gleam.

Something that went beyond sex. Something that pulled hard at her heart, at all of the feelings swirling inside of her. That forced the desire, the building climax and all of the emotion into one massive knot that made it impossible to breathe.

Panic assaulted her, and she tried to fight it. Tried to fight everything. The feelings. The desire. But it was too late. She was too far gone.

“Oh, Sam,” Jace said, his voice rough, broken as he thrust, harder and faster. And his voice, her name on his lips, his heat and hardness around her, in her, pushed her over the edge.

Everything shattered around her, shards digging inside, splintering the knot that had built into tiny glass slivers that burned through her, stuck into every part of her. Pain and pleasure in equal parts. A tear slipped down her cheek as the wave of her release washed through her, soothing the burn left behind by the emotion.

But only for a moment. The wave was salt on a wound, leaving her feeling raw, in pain, in the aftermath of the most incredible, devastating release of her life.

Jace lowered his head, kissing her, desperate, intense. It wasn't sexual, it was something more. A bid for connection, for an even deeper closeness. When they parted he kissed her forehead, her cheek. "I love you," he said, his voice broken. "Samantha, I love you."

Ten

She shook her head and tried to look away. "Samantha," he said again, cupping her chin, redirecting her focus, forcing her to meet his eyes. "I love you."

"No," she said. "No."

"Sam..."

"No!" She pulled away from him and got off of the counter, panic surging through her, her entire body shaking. She pushed her skirt down her hips, covering herself.

"I do," he said.

"Stop it. That's not what this was. This wasn't supposed to change anything."

"Too damn bad. It changed everything."

"But I didn't want it to!"

"And what, Sam, you honestly believed it wouldn't? Honestly?"

"I don't know. You're a guy and..."

"I am your best friend, Samantha. I would never use you that way. Ever. How could you not know I had feelings for you?"

“Because you said,” she began, her voice shaking, “you said we’d just get it out of our systems.”

“I thought maybe it was possible,” he said, his voice unsteady too. “But not after. Not after it happened.”

“I can’t do this.”

“Why?” He moved closer to her, still naked, his expression stark, raw. Painful. “Why can’t you do this with me?”

“I don’t know if I can ever do this with anyone.”

“But why not me, Sam? Don’t you feel something for me?”

“Jace...you are...you’re my rock. You’re my...everything. And me and men...it never works. I don’t know how to have that kind of relationship. I don’t like it. I don’t...do well with it.”

“Bullshit.”

“I don’t! It’s never worked.”

“It was never me.”

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“Like that would really change anything?” she asked, regretting the words as she spoke them, panic driving her on. “My mom left me, Jace. My mom left me here and never came back. She didn’t even care. I don’t...people don’t stay with me.”

“And I’ve only stood by you for fourteen years. Not much of a guarantee.”

“It’s different. I...Jace....” She took a deep breath. “I have had so much...so much loss. And not a moment of stability, until you. I need you. Don’t you understand? I need you where you were. I need my friend. My support system.” She put her hand on his cheek. “If I don’t have you here to hold me up, my whole world will crumble and I can’t risk that for sex, for...for this idea of love when I’ve never, ever seen that version of it last.”

Jace stumbled back like he’d been punched in the stomach, and she felt the impact in hers.

“Tell me you understand,” she whispered.

He nodded, a muscle in his jaw jumping. “I understand.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“I understand, but I’m not going to do it.”

“What?”

“I’m not going to be your fucking support system,” he said, his tone hard, even. “I am

not here to prop you up. Stand on your own damn feet, Samantha. You aren't a child. You're a grown woman, and I'm a man. I'm not going to be half a person to you. Just here to fill your needs. Because I want everything. I want to be your friend. I want to be your lover. I want to be your husband."

She felt like her world was falling away, the ground disintegrating, slipping from beneath her feet. "Jace..."

"You can't have me only on your terms."

"So, I can only have you on yours?" she asked, a tear sliding down her cheek. "That's not fair. That's..."

"Put your dog on the couch. Let her drink out of the toilet, wash the dishes with your thumb, bake pies inside cakes—that's fine as long as I can have you. I want you, Sam. But I want all of you. Not half."

"Maybe...maybe you feel like that now. And maybe you want me now. But in five years? I don't...I don't think you will. And it's not worth it to me. There's too much risk and I...I can't."

She regretted the words the moment they left her mouth, as she watched them hit Jace with the force of a slap. He swallowed hard, the expression on his face so pained it tore into her guts.

"Great. Then that's...fine. But I'm going to need you to go somewhere else."

"Where? I can't...where?"

"Then I will. I'm going to a hotel."

“You can’t leave your own house.”

“I’m not staying here with you.”

He bent and picked his clothes up off the floor, putting them on as quickly as possible. He walked away from her into the living room, grabbing his T-shirt off the back of the couch.

Poppy lifted her head from where she was sleeping in front of the fire, unperturbed until that moment.

Jace flung open the closet and pulled out his hat and coat, putting both of them on before going to the door and picking up his keys and wallet.

Horror crept over her, along with the realization that he really was leaving. “Jace!”

He turned to look at her, waiting for her to speak.

“You won’t really go. We’re friends...we...”

He shook his head. “No. Text me when you figure out somewhere else to stay that will take Poppy.”

“Your animals...”

“I’ll come back to take care of them. We won’t run into each other.”

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He put his hand on the doorknob and anger shot through her, rescuing her from dissolving into tears. “You’re throwing away fourteen years of friendship because of sex?” she spat. “Then maybe what we had didn’t mean as much as I thought it did.”

“No, Sam. You’re throwing away love because of fear.” He opened the door, a shaft of cold air bursting through the comfortable warmth of the house, and then he slammed the door behind him. And he was gone.

Really gone.

Her legs wobbled, gave out beneath her, and she went to her knees, to the floor, too numb to cry. She heard his truck motor. Heard the vehicle roar through the snow and out of the driveway.

Poppy got up and wandered, not to where Samantha was on the floor, but to the door, whining, the high-pitched sound hitting Sam right in her heart, pain splintering outward.

She moved over to where Poppy sat, wrapping her arms around the big dog, and she buried her face in her fur. And then she cried like she’d lost her best friend.

Because she had.

Jace hated motel rooms. They weren’t his, and he hated that feeling. But it seemed to fit right now because his body didn’t feel like it was his either.

It was numb. All of him was. And for now, he was thankful for that fact. Because like

any good physical injury, once the shock wore off it was going to smart like a son of a bitch.

He wasn't looking forward to that.

Fortunately, he could prolong the moment by downing some whiskey. And then, in the morning, maybe, just maybe his head would hurt more than his heart.

He popped the top on the bottle and debated pouring a glass, then decided against it. He raised the bottle to his lips and took a long drink.

Class act. But who the hell cared? No one. Apparently, no one cared.

Not Sam.

He replayed the scene in his mind. Every ugly word that had flown between them. He'd done the right thing by leaving. He had. Because if he had stayed, he would have to watch her finally find the guy who melted her reserve. The man who would make her want to take a chance on things she clearly didn't want to take a chance on with him.

"You can't have me only on your terms."

"So, I can only have you on yours?"

Was that what he was doing? His way or the highway?

No. She wanted him to be her damn crutch through life, and he deserved more than that.

You love her, but you're taking yourself out of her life completely as punishment for

not feeling the same way? For being afraid? Asshole.

So what? He took another drink. He deserved more. He deserved more than a mess of a house and a mother who loved garbage more than she loved people. He deserved more than a friend who loved safety more than she loved him.

And maybe she deserved more than a love with conditions.

He took another drink and stared out the window at the snow. He had a feeling his heart and his pride were going to do battle tonight.

And he had no idea who was going to win.

Samantha slept on the floor by the fire with Poppy. Well, she didn't really sleep. She tossed and turned, her entire body aching.

She hadn't known heartbreak was physical. Hadn't known she would really feel like a part of herself had shattered. She'd imagined she'd felt heartbreak before, but she'd been wrong.

Nothing was like this. Nothing.

Being in Jace's house without him was a special kind of hell. She needed to find another place to stay, but she didn't want to. Because it smelled like him here.

She wanted to crawl into his bed and inhale his scent, wrap herself in it.

But she denied herself. Because she didn't deserve it.

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She kept replaying her own words, hearing how small they sounded. How pitifully meager in light of what he'd offered.

She pulled her knees up against her chest. She'd lost him now. In every way. As her support. As her lover. As her friend.

She wanted to be angry. To scream at him and say this was why she couldn't do it. Because losing him would hurt too much.

Because it did hurt too much.

So much. So much she didn't know if she would survive it.

He left because he offered you his heart, and you asked him for something else. You didn't offer a damn thing.

A tear rolled down her cheek and she squinted, the light from the fire blurring into orange stars, the heat on her face doing nothing to heat the chill in her soul.

It was the truth. He'd laid it all on the line, and she'd rejected it. Rejected him.

Because she'd been afraid. But not of what she'd thought.

The realization made a sob catch in her throat. Jace was already everything to her. No matter what she'd let herself think. No matter what lies she'd told herself.

She hadn't needed to share his bed for him to have her heart. He'd always had it.

Always. It was why she'd never let her relationships progress past a certain point. It was why no one had ever been important enough to replace him in her life, to come between the two of them.

She loved him. She'd always loved him.

He was her everything. Not just her support, but hereverything.

And what would happen when he realized that she could never be his? That was her real fear. That he would suddenly look at her and see what her father must have seen when he decided to walk out. What her mother must have seen when she'd let her teenage daughter stay behind in a different state.

That he would realize at some point she wasn't worth all that emotion.

She closed her eyes and scooted closer to Poppy, resting her head on her dog's shoulder. "What did I do?"

Eleven

Sam's fingerswere stiff by the time she raised her hand to knock on the motel room door. Her heater had decided to crap out in her damned van, and she'd been driving all over Bend, checking every hotel in mad pursuit of Jace, with Poppy in the back, happy as a clam among the pies. And the cherpumple, which, epic broken heart or not, she had to deliver today.

But she hadn't opened her bakery today.

She had priorities.

She'd been to eight motels already and it was only seven-thirty in the morning.

Because somewhere between midnight and the gray light of dawn, she'd made a decision.

Fear was a dumbass state to live in.

She was hiding from possible heartbreak by giving herself certain heartbreak.

More than that, she was being a lousy friend. Because Jace had never lied to her. He had never let her down. And she was judging him based on other people's track records, and not his own.

And dammit, she loved that man, and she wanted him. For always. For keeps.

She stuck her hands in her armpits and waited. No one came to the door, but the front desk man had been certain that Jace Colter was indeed staying here and in this room. And when she'd given a little eyebrow wiggle and said she wanted to surprise him, the man had immediately given over a room number.

Because men were very predictable that way. And of course, he was not going to block Jace out of a potential lay. It was bad security.

But the motel employee letting his penis do the thinking was currently her best friend, so she wasn't complaining.

She extricated her hands from their place of warmth and knocked on the door again. "Jace!" she shouted for good measure. She knocked again; the cold, combined with the hard door, made her feel like she was in danger of splitting her knuckles open.

Fine. She'd knock 'til her hands were bloody. She didn't care.

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Finally the door opened, and there was Jace. Shirtless and scowling, a blanket wrapped partway around his shoulders. He winced against the light. Hungover. She recognized his hangover posture well.

“Mornin’, Superman,” she said. “Nice cape.”

“What the hell are you doing here, Sam?”

“I came to see you.”

“Why?”

She laced her fingers together, squeezed them tight, tried to ease some of the nerves, the adrenaline that was rushing through her body. “Because. Because I was stupid last night, and while I lay by the fire crying like an infant for half the night, leaving a snot trail on your rug, I realized something.”

“What’s that?” he asked, leaning against the door frame.

She drew in an unsteady breath, releasing her hold on her hands and shaking them out. “I can’t stop you from being everything to me because you already are. I thought the key was keeping sexy Jace and buddy Jace separate so I couldn’t fall in love with you, but here’s the thing. I loved you without the sex. I have loved you from the moment I met you. But I was afraid you could never love me. So it was safer to forget the attraction part. To lean on your strength, to be your buddy. And I counted on you, and your presence in my life, so much that I never, ever wanted to take a chance of losing it. But everyone in my life has walked away so easily, Jace, so I was afraid of

upsetting anything. Afraid you would be like everyone else, not because there's something wrong with you, but because of me."

"Samantha," he said. "That's not..."

"It wasn't fair. Because never once have you ever let me down. You've never lied to me. You've never disappointed me. How dare I question you? You didn't deserve that."

"That stuff is hard to shake," he said. "I know. I'm the king of the bleach bucket, right?"

"Yeah, I know."

"I was wrong, Sam. To ask so much of you all at once. To walk away when you couldn't give just what I wanted."

"You didn't ask anything of me. You gave. I'm the one that shoved it back at you and asked for different. And you were right—it was all because I was scared."

"So what is it you want now?"

"Everything." Her chest burning, a tear sliding down her cheek that she didn't bother to wipe away. "Your friendship. Your heart. You, all of you. Your love, every kind of love. That everyday friendship love that makes me excited to see you. That deep intense love that makes all the pieces of me ache a little bit. Makes me want to cry over its beauty. The kind of love that makes my body burn for yours. Every emotion. Die Hard and romantic comedies. Every. Damn. Thing."

He dropped the blanket and walked out of his room on unsteady feet, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her up against his body, his breath hot on her neck. "I

want it too,” he said against her skin. “The way you kiss me and make me feel like I’m finally home. I want your mess in my house. I want you to take some of the control from me. I want your dog and your dishes in my sink to frustrate me. I want you so that I can feel that kind of happiness only you make me feel. You’re my smile, Sam. You always have been. Until you walked into my life fourteen years ago, I’d forgotten how. And when I walked out last night, I thought I would forget all over again. But now you’re here.” He tilted his head back, and he smiled. “It feels easy now.”

“I love you, Jace.”

“I love you. Forever. No matter what. Do you believe me?”

She nodded. “Yes. I do.”

His heart on the verge of bursting, Jace looked at Sam standing outside of his hotel room door, backlit by the early morning light, snow piled high behind her. She looked like an angel.

“Now why are you standing out there doing a dramatic reenactment of the Little Match Girl?” he asked, his smile widening.

“I thought my best friend might take pity on me. Because I was an idiot, and I hurt him. And he was right about me. I was a coward. But I thought standing in a snowdrift looking pitiful might earn me a little compassion.”

“I’m all out of pity. How about love? The deep, everlasting kind?”

“I would take that.”

“And a place in my house, permanently.”

“You know, Jace, every other time I’ve thought about putting down roots with someone, or, until recently, even when I thought of putting them down alone, I panicked.”

“Are you panicked now?”

She shook her head, hazel eyes glistening with tears. “No. I’m home.”

“You’re at a motel.”

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“No, silly. I’m with you. And that means I’m home. I think that’s why you always felt like my foundation, why I could never settle anywhere else. Because I was supposed to be wherever you were. With you.”

“Welcome home, baby,” he said, kissing her nose. “I’m so glad you came.” A hard knot loosened in his chest, emotion flooding through him. Joy. Contentment. Love.

“Me too.”

“So come in and stay a while.”

“Eek. Can’t.”

“Why?”

“It’s cold and I have Poppy in the van. And a cherpumple.”

“The pie cake thing?”

“Yes. I have to deliver it.”

“Give me a minute.”

He joined Sam out at the van a moment later, fully dressed, his hat doing something to keep the sun from making his headache worse. Really, his heart felt so good the hangover didn’t seem that bad.

“Okay, Sam, let’s take that sugary abomination to its rightful owner.” He got into the van and closed the door.

“What about your truck?”

“I’ll come back for it.”

“You seem so relaxed about all this spontaneity. We’re practically being unruly! Disorganized, in fact.”

“The most important thing in the world is in place, Sam. Nothing else seems to matter that much.”

“Not even throw pillows?”

He looked back at Poppy, sitting between the racks of desserts, gazing at him and wagging her tail. “Sam, she can chew up one throw pillow a day for the rest of her life and I’ll give thanks for every damn fluff of cotton I sweep off of my floor, and do you know why?”

“Why?” she asked, smiling that sweet, special smile.

“Because it’ll mean you’re there. And I would rather have you and a little chaos than a clean but empty house.”

She leaned over and kissed him. “Now I know you love me.”

“More than anything, Sam. More than anything.”

Her grin turned wicked. “Enough to let me make a cherpumple for our wedding?”

“No.”

“A true representation of blending lives by blending desserts.”

“Sam, I have my limits.”

“Come on, baby,” she wiggled her brows, her voice getting breathy. “Blend desserts with me, you dirty pastry-mixing boy.”

“When you put it that way,” he said, “it sounds kind of hot.”

“Just wait. I have even better ideas for mixing butter cream frosting and...skin.”

“Well, hell.” He sat up straighter, arousal pulsing through him. “If that’s what I get for letting you experiment, you can have a wedding cherpumpleanda wedding turducken for all I care.”

She smiled, and his heart melted. “Stick with me, baby, and it’ll be a fun ride.”

“It always has been. And I’m sure it always will be.”