



Indigo: Three (Indigo B&B 3)

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Category: Romance, Adult, Lesbian Romance

Description: Three women scarred by trauma. Will they find a way to thrive?

Heidi and Ann have been together nearly sixteen years, and yet, something hasn't been right in their relationship from the start. Struggling with deep trauma, Heidi pulls away and doesn't know how to function in a normal loving relationship. Ann is overwhelmed by shame when it comes to her needs. Eighteen months ago, they took a leap and opened their relationship in hopes of finding a better balance.

Insert Lila.

Lila is young, vicarious, and a strength for both Ann and Heidi. With trauma of her own, she was graced with the tools to cope and thrive. Now she has to choose if she can work through her own past and race toward the future either by herself or with Ann and Heidi in tow.

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CHAPTER1

Her hips hurt. Ann couldn't even fathom why or how, but her hips ached, straight from the joint down through the length of her legs and into her feet, which were also telling her they were in quite a bit of pain. The car was chilly as she got inside, and that didn't help the throbbing any.

With the engine running, she closed her eyes and shifted in the seat so it wouldn't hurt so much while she made the twenty-minute drive home. God, everything hurt. She was not the young, spry nurse she used to be, and for some reason, this week had been particularly brutal. Shivering, Ann attempted to focus. It was dark outside already, as it usually was when she drove home from her ten-hour shift.

Home wasn't much better than work some days, which meant it was exhausting. With the car finally warming, Ann put it into reverse and backed out of her favorite parking spot. The streets flew by as she made the familiar drive to the house they had purchased ten years ago on a whim. It had been a foreclosure, a modular with a bit of land around it on the edge of town.

When they'd seen it, they'd known it was perfect. Close enough to the hospital that Ann could get to and from work when the weather was bad, but isolated enough that they could have their own space and not have to worry about neighbors. Pausing at a stoplight, Ann pondered her situation.

When had she come to be comfortable living with such a disconnect between herself and Heidi? It seemed almost as if it was yesterday when they had all the hopes and dreams of the world—kids, family, friends. But something had happened in between,

and even as Ann tried on occasion, she couldn't figure out what it was or when it happened.

At some point, she'd stopped pushing for adoption. It was never the right time, and they weren't in enough balance with each other to think it'd be a good environment to bring a child in. Heidi had brought up fostering several times over the years, but those comments and questioning looks had come less often in the last two or three years. Ann couldn't even remember anymore how long it had been since they'd talked about it last.

As the light turned green, Ann stepped on the gas and the car moved forward. They lived quite the life of solitude if she thought about it. Sure, her fellow nurses knew all about Heidi, and even some of the issues they had, but they rarely went out and did even the occasional dinner with friends, Heidi especially. Ann was certainly the more outgoing of the two.

She pulled through the city limits and upped her speed on the highway as she went. Two more miles until she got to her turn off. She gripped the steering wheel tightly as the car struggled to catch up with what she demanded of it. The roads were slick with a fine layer of moisture from rain that must have fallen while she'd been ensconced inside the hospital for hours. She hadn't even noticed.

Usually rain was a huge deal in their part of Kansas, so any inkling it might have happened was the talk of the town for days before and days after. Living in an area of the county filled with farmers and ranchers that had been slammed with drought for years would do that. But she'd grown up there. She loved it there. Ann would have it no other way.

The turn off onto the dirt road was expected, and her low-to-the-ground car bounced a little as she hit some holes that needed filled and the areas the grader had missed on the last pass. She'd been told several times her little car wouldn't cut it in the rainy

season, but it had survived her a good ten years already and she'd managed well enough. Farmers liked to think they knew everything about the land, but Ann knew better than to trust their advice on the world.

Pulling off the gravel and onto the slab of cement that was their driveway, Ann parked. Heidi's car was no doubt in the one-car garage already, as was their habit. Lights in the house shone through the darkness as she stepped out of the vehicle and walked toward the front door.

Ann twisted the knob and stepped inside. Her stomach dropped at the sight that greeted her. Nerves worked into her chest and then her stomach, swirling a vortex of worry and betrayal. Boxes littered the living room, all of them put together, some of them ones they had used years ago to move into the house. Ann shut the door with a click, glancing around the living room to try and figure out what was going on.

"Heidi?"

"In the bedroom!"

Her hips still ached as she waddled her way down the thin hall to the master bedroom. Heidi sat on the floor of the closet, her legs stretched out before her as she dug through an ancient box. She stared up at Ann, her endlessly dark brown eyes filled with stirring emotion that she never let loose.

Ann sucked in a breath. There was no denying she found her long-time partner attractive. That had never been their issue. "You moving out?"

"What?" Surprise rang through Heidi's tone. "No! Why would I do that?"

"The boxes." Ann moved her arm to indicate the mess in the bedroom but also the stack of boxes in the living room.

“Oh! No. I had a client today, and it got me thinking, and you know me when I think.”

“Sure.” Except Ann didn’t really know. She’d been trying to crack that nut for the last decade at least and had given up at some point. When had that happened? She needed to fix that and pay more attention to the nuances of Heidi.

Heidi shrugged, but she didn’t move like she was going to get up. “I was just cleaning out the closet. Do you remember the last time we did it? I don’t.”

“Nope.” Ann sighed as she sat on the edge of the bed to take off her nasty hospital shoes. She probably should have taken them off by the door like she preferred, but she’d been so surprised to find the boxes everywhere and so worried Heidi could be leaving that she’d forgotten all about it. Pulling the laces, she popped her tennis shoes off and dropped them to the floor. Next would be the disgusting scrubs she was wearing.

“How was work?” Heidi asked.

“Work was work. Lost a patient today.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that.” Heidi’s eyes softened.

These were the moments Ann could read, but the rest? It was an abyss of the strange and unknown. Unraveling the mystery that was Heidi was something Ann was pretty sure was impossible, at least for her. She’d never been given the key.

Standing, Ann shucked her bottoms and then her top, dropping them in the laundry basket in the corner of the room after tiptoeing around the mess on the floor. “Will you have this cleaned up enough so I can crash soon? It was a long day.”

“Sure. I can finish tomorrow or later in the week.” Immediately, Heidi was up off the floor and shoving boxes and piles of crap into new piles of crap. Heidi was right. They did need to do a massive spring cleaning of the house in general. Too bad it was mid-fall and they’d missed the official spring clean-out.

Ann jumped in the shower for a quick scrub-down to get the hospital gunk off her skin. It helped ease the ache in her hips too, which was a bonus she hadn’t expected. When she was out and toweled off, Heidi already had mostly cleared a path for her to get to her side of the bed. She dressed in a loose pair of sweats and a T-shirt she’d had since her college years that was so thin she should probably toss it along with half the crap Heidi was finding.

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She ate the leftovers from Heidi's dinner as quickly as possible while Heidi straightened the living room. They worked in sync in the quiet, something Ann had gotten used to over the years—Heidi always doing and her always watching. She couldn't quite figure it out. Never had been able to.

With her dishes in the sink, Ann touched Heidi's shoulder to get her attention as she bent over a box. Heidi stiffened, her muscles tightening under her fingertips unexpectedly. Her day must have been rougher than she was letting on. Oftentimes Ann wondered if being a social worker was the best choice for Heidi. She dealt with and saw so much that she couldn't share.

Leaning in, Ann pressed her lips gently to Heidi's in a sweet kiss. "Will you be coming to bed soon?"

"Yes. I have an early morning. Need to take some kids over to Ford County."

"Transfer?"

"For now at least. They're going to a more long-term emergency placement."

Ann sighed. "All right. I'm off tomorrow, so I'll finish up with the closet in our room at least."

"Thanks." Heidi moved in, kissing Ann briefly.

It left a lingering hope but also sadness in the pit of Ann's stomach. She couldn't remember the last time Heidi had kissed her passionately, the last time they had really

connected physically. It wasn't that they didn't touch or have sex, but it was all so routine and normal. It was never spontaneous or out of the blue, and every time, she felt as though Heidi held back, trying only to please her and nothing else, like she didn't get anything from it.

Trying again for what felt like the millionth time, Ann cupped Heidi's cheek, kissing her harder this time and holding her close. Heidi tensed, but Ann pushed through it because she always did. Heidi's eyelids fluttered shut, and Ann kissed her again, this time a quick peck on her lips and her forehead as Heidi's hand covered Ann's on her cheek.

"I love you," Ann whispered, and she meant it. She'd never known a love deeper than what she'd experienced with Heidi, an emotional connection as strong as the one they had. They knew everything about each other even if they didn't understand it.

"Love you, too," Heidi whispered. "Will you have time this weekend? Maybe time to go to town and have lunch?"

"I should. I'm off Sunday."

"Good." Heidi's eyes lit up.

Ann moved in to kiss her again, this time lingering and hoping Heidi would join her in bed and leave the mess in the living room for another day, but she knew her partner. Heidi would stay up and slide under the covers late. Ann might or might not wake up when she joined, and Heidi would likely be gone by the time Ann woke up in the morning. It was their routine. It had been for years.

* * *

A week had passed. They managed to clean up the closet in their room but then all

cleaning had halted, as it normally did when Heidi's bursts of energy dissipated. Ann drove the familiar road to work, started her shift, and was halfway through it before she realized how much time had passed and she still hadn't paused for lunch.

The cute little blonde woman who did their supply orders came up to the nurses' station and gave her a bright grin. Lila was always a welcome distraction. Grinning back and pushing at her short hair as the strands went wild around her ears, Ann tried to look her best. She had her list ready, but she could handle a little flirting too. It would make her day go so much smoother.

Lila bent over the counter with a smile on her plump lips, lips that were just so damn kissable. Ann grinned at her. "Hey there."

"Hey back," Lila said, her eyes lighting with humor and teasing. "I'm here for the order."

"I've got it." Ann rifled through papers on the desk, trying to find the piece of paper. She had just seen it. Moving one binder and another binder along with some patient files, she muttered to herself, "This is ridiculous. No one cleans this shit."

Lila chuckled. "It's always a disaster up here."

"Not always," Ann countered. "Only when one particular person works."

"You?"

Ann stopped looking for the paper and raised her gaze to Lila with a fake glare. "How do you figure that?"

"Because you're the one who is supposed to have the list and you lost it." Lila folded her hands over the tall edge of the counter and leaned in again. "Am I wrong?"

“No.” Ann was perturbed that Lila was able to read her so easily. She was extremely organized when it came to patient care. She had to be, working in ICU. But the rest of the papers? The protocols, the standard operating procedure booklets, all of that went to the wayside in favor of caring for her patients.

Focusing on the papers in front of her, she shuffled some more and found the handwritten list on white copy paper she’d grabbed from the printer at the last minute during the shift changeover. She skimmed it quickly to see if she needed to add anything from the last few hours, noted she didn’t and slid it next to Lila on the counter.

“There we are.”

“Glad to have it.” Lila didn’t make to grab the paper. “Has it been a busy week up here?”

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“Busy like any week. We’re not full, and we haven’t lost anyone in a couple days.”

“That’s always good.” Lila’s pink tongue dashed across those plump lips, absolutely distracting Ann.

Lila’s mouth quirked upward. Ann had been caught staring, and it wasn’t for the first time. Immediately she thought of Heidi, times when Heidi had caught her staring just like this. It had been a while, but still, Heidi had loved it. Any woman would, really. She should make sure to do that more often.

In fact, Ann needed to make far more of an effort on all levels where Heidi was concerned. Maybe that would bridge the widening gap between them. Cocking her head to the side, Ann gave Lila a curious look. “And how was your week?”

“Oh, boring as ever.” Lila grinned. “Just making orders, getting orders, delivering orders. You know, the usual. I could certainly use something to spice up my life.”

Ann wondered briefly if that was an invitation before she dismissed the idea. Carlos walked down the hall in his scrubs, nodding his head at Ann and looking Lila up and down like she was a piece of meat he wanted to try. If it wasn’t so obvious by the angle she stood at, Ann would roll her eyes and tell him to find someone else since he was lacking in subtlety. Instead, she let Lila handle it.

“Hey, Lila.”

“Carlos.” Lila gave him a broad grin, but it lacked the teasing she’d had with Ann a moment before. “How’s the shift going?”

“Good, good. You busy this weekend?”

Lila slid Ann a deliberate look. Ann kept her face straight and even, not giving away anything. “I think I am.”

“Too bad. There’s a Halloween party at my friends, thought you might like to join us.”

“Next time then.” Lila’s smile faltered. She took the piece of paper Ann had handed her moments before and stepped away from the counter. “See you next shift. Call if you need any special orders.”

The last bit was said directly to Ann. A shiver ran through her. Lila had certainly upped her flirting game in the last few months, not that Ann minded. She rarely got to flirt at home, which was something she sorely missed from the early days of their relationship. It had seemed so much easier then, before she’d truly gotten into the details of who Heidi was and what made her who she was.

“I’ll let you know,” Ann finally responded as Lila wasn’t leaving until she got an answer.

Lila winked where Carlos wouldn’t see just as she twisted on her toes and headed for the double doors to ICU. Ann watched as Lila sashayed her way through them—the sway of her curvy hips, the lightness of her step. Oh to be young and free of the wisdom and depth life brought. They were a little over ten years apart if Ann remembered. She’d asked once, but it hadn’t really mattered.

Carlos focused on her. “You ready to do that transfer?”

“Yes.” Ann grabbed her chart and a pen, readying herself.

She was near the end of her shift when she remembered what she'd wanted to do earlier. Grabbing her phone after she passed everything off to the night crew, Ann walked to her car in a far better mood than she had been all week. Visits from Lila tended to do that. The first text she sent was to Heidi, telling her she was on her way home.

The second was an invitation for a date. They needed the time alone together, without distractions. Hell, Ann needed the time more than anyone, that was for sure. Her mind was an unfocused jumble of what-ifs. But by the time she made it to her car, she had an answer.

Yes.

They figured out the details and finer points quickly and set a date. It would be glorious. By the time Ann got home she was exhausted. Her hips didn't ache like the previous week, which was the only high point, but her feet did. She slipped off her shoes and left them by the door to try and keep the hospital nasty out of the house. Immediately, she stripped off her scrubs and hopped in the shower.

Heidi popped into the bathroom. "How was work?"

"It was good." Ann soaped up her hair.

The shower curtain pulled back, the heat escaping and cold air rushing in. Ann hissed as she glared at Heidi's offending hand. "Can I join you?"

"Sure, but close that up quick."

Heidi took off her clothes and slipped into the shower with Ann. Heidi smiled, giving Ann an appraising look. Ann couldn't quite tell what was going through her mind. She never could anymore.

Stepping up to Heidi, Ann left the sanctuary of the hot water spraying on her back and reached out to grab her partner's hands. "It's been a while since we've done this."

"Too long," Heidi answered.

"Agreed." Ann smiled and turned so Heidi could have the water. She hissed, and Ann should have remembered it was going to be too hot for her. She reached and turned down the temperature before pressing a gentle kiss to Heidi's lips. "I'm glad you thought of it."

Heidi's lips quirked lightly. Ann couldn't tell if she was happy, pleased, or giving in because it had been so long. It had become so hard to read her over the years. At first it had seemed so easy, but perhaps it never had been.

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They switched positions again, and Ann rinsed the soap from her hair. Heidi seemed to watch appreciatively as her body moved, as the water sluiced over her skin, but there always seemed to be a giant wall between them. Kissing Heidi again, Ann grinned. “Want to take this somewhere else?”

“Maybe,” Heidi answered, her tone lowering before rising on the end of the word.

Once again, Ann wondered what that even meant. She went with it, trying to see if Heidi would be up for more than a shared shower. When their lips touched this time, she sensed the fire and urgency behind the kiss. She had guessed right this time. Cupping Heidi’s cheek, Ann kissed her deeply, their tongues tangling for a quick minute before Heidi flipped them and stood under the spray. Ann gave her a curious look.

“I mean, we could stay in here if you prefer,” Ann murmured.

“That could be interesting. It’s been even longer since we tried shower sex.” Heidi’s cheeks were red, but it was probably from the steam and temperature of the water.

“Triedbeing the operative word there.” Ann gave a snort. Heidi wasn’t wrong. They had tried shower sex, but since Heidi struggled with orgasming and patience and showers were awkward anyway, they’d given up before they’d gotten very far. The bed and mouths were always better than hands and fingers.

“True.” Heidi reached out and gripped Ann’s hand. “I guess the bed would be the better choice.”

“Right.” Ann kissed Heidi’s cheek and turned off the water.

Together they got out and dried off. Ann hung her towel to dry while Heidi kept hers wrapped around her middle. They were always like that, complete opposites. Ann walked unabashedly naked through the house while Heidi insisted on always covering her body. When they got to the bed, Heidi dropped the towel on the corner of the footboard and climbed under the covers.

Ann took the hint and followed, wrapping an arm around Heidi’s front to pull her in closer. This was going to have to be a slow work up, like it always was. She kissed Heidi’s shoulder and closed her eyes as she directed her fingers over Heidi’s body. This was the perfect way to end the night. If only she knew Heidi was doing it out of love rather than pity that they hadn’t had sex in over a month. Pushing that thought from her mind, Ann focused on Heidi.

CHAPTER2

Letting out a slow, deliberate breath with her eyes closed as she lay in bed, Heidi tried to center herself. It was her typical practice every morning when her alarm woke her up just before five. It had taken her decades to develop this practice. It helped keep her centered every day, helped make her work and life flow just right, and helped with the tremors she fought to keep at bay.

No light shone through the blinds so early in the morning. Fall was a time of year Heidi was not fond of, when days would shorten and nights elongate, when daylight savings hadn’t hit yet to bump up the sunlight. She missed the summers, when she’d wake up before the sun and see the orange and pink hues every morning as they painted the sky from her bed instead of office. Those sunrises were breathtaking, just as much as Ann was.

Opening her eyes, Heidi turned her head to look at her longtime partner. It was hard

to imagine they'd been together fifteen years already. She longed to reach over and touch her, to run her fingers through Ann's short dark brown hair which had a little more salt and pepper every year. Heidi loved it. Ann wore her age well, and even her gravelly personality couldn't keep the sexiness away.

Heidi had fallen in love with Ann the first moment they'd met. It'd been so clichéd at the time, lesbians falling in love like that, but she'd known from their first date. It'd taken three months for her to work up the courage to tell her, to have sex with her, and to properly love her, and Ann had been so patient through it all.

Heidi's tongue dashed across her lips as she stared at Ann's sleeping form. What had happened in fifteen years that had put such distance between them? Such strains on their relationship. Heidi wanted to reach over, touch Ann's cheek, wake her up, make love to her for the few hours they had before she had to shower and go to work, but every nerve in her body told her not to. Every time she had sex it was that same damn battle.

Sighing, Heidi got out of the bed as quietly as she could so she wouldn't wake Ann, who had come home late, and walked barefoot through the house to the kitchen. She turned on the coffee maker so Ann would have hot coffee when she woke and started water for her tea. She made their lunches for the day, and finally sipped her steeped tea as the first slivers of light crested the horizon.

She should really do something for Ann that week, something to make her feel she was special and to feel just how much Heidi really did love her. It was so hard sometimes between the two of them, and their work schedules conflicted so often, especially when Heidi got called in or Ann picked up an extra shift to let someone go on vacation. There had been a lot of that lately.

With everything prepared for the day, Heidi snuck into the bedroom, grabbed her clothes, and took them into the bathroom to shower and get ready. She would surprise

Ann for lunch on her next shift. That would be sweet—something special. She hadn't done it in probably a year, either, so Ann would not be expecting it. Heidi got in her car to go to work only thirty minutes before Ann was due to wake up.

Two days passed before she managed to figure out when she'd have time for a lunch date, but she'd looked through her schedule and found one day that would work for the next week. Luckily, the hospital was a place she was familiar with. As a social worker, Heidi often had to go there to help a client or a kid, advocate for them, be with them through examinations if they wanted her there, and talk with doctors to get evidence for her cases.

However, it was rare that she was in the ICU unless she was there to spend some time with Ann, which she was that day. The double doors to the ICU were open, which was only the case during visiting hours. Heidi stepped through them and was glad to see Ann at the main desk, her nose buried in a patient file. She loved to be in the thick of things. Ann was utterly brilliant, and she had worked hard to get where she was.

"Hey there," Heidi said, trying to make it come off as teasing, but she was pretty sure it was a failure.

Ann jerked her head up, eyes wide, those dark brown eyes filled with surprise. "Heidi! What are you doing here?"

"I thought I would surprise you for lunch." Heidi lifted her hand to reveal the bag of takeout from one of their favorite restaurants in town. "I hope you've got some time."

"Really?" Ann's eyes lightened, and she straightened her shoulders as she looked around. "You're too good to me."

Heidi moved in to lean against the counter. "So am I staying or leaving?"

Ann checked the watch on her left wrist before looking around again. “Let me see when I can sneak out of here for a few minutes. I’ve got to find Silvia.”

“Okay.” Heidi watched as Ann walked away, the scrubs not doing much for her figure, but Ann was all business in them. It gave her an air of power that Heidi was helpless to resist. She was so distracted in her thoughts that she hadn’t even realized Ann had come back.

“I can be down in fifteen.”

“Cafeteria, then?”

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“Yup.” Ann gave her a smile. “Don’t eat it all while you wait for me.”

“Never.” Heidi grinned as she grabbed the bag and walked out of ICU. It didn’t take her long to make it to the main floor again and grab the only table left in the corner of the cafeteria. She rested back and waited. She should probably start eating since she only had a short window of time as well. She’d managed an extra thirty minutes for lunch that day, but it also meant she’d be staying a bit later than she normally did.

“Hey.”

The voice startled her. Heidi twisted her gaze, surprised she’d been so lost in her thoughts she hadn’t noticed the petite woman come up to her. She was usually more on her guard than that. But Ann did that to her—distracted her. “Hi?”

“Do you mind if I sit here for a few minutes? It’s the only chair open, and I only have five minutes to scarf down this food.”

“Oh, um...” Heidi looked around, noticing just how full it was. Ann had said she’d be fifteen minutes, which usually meant thirty. “Sure.”

“Thanks.” The young woman plopped down into the chair and set her plate of cafeteria food onto the table. “I’m running later than I thought I was, and I don’t have as much time as I’d hoped, but I am starving. I missed dinner last night.”

“Why would you do a silly thing like that?” Heidi eyed her carefully. She couldn’t be older than thirty, but she didn’t look like a nurse. She definitely didn’t look or act like a doctor, and she was barely old enough to pass for one—though it wouldn’t be the

first time she was fooled by someone's age.

The woman shrugged. "I got busy with a date."

"Ah." Heidi's cheeks heated. She really didn't need to know any more than that, and she hoped this woman wasn't about to go into a long explanation about her night.

"It was fun while it lasted, but she had to go home at the end of the night."

She? Well, that was a tidbit of information Heidi wasn't going to miss no matter what she didn't want to hear. "Oh, yeah, that's one of the woes of dating. It's been a while since I've dated, so no real reason to be sad about no sleepovers."

The woman's gaze softened. "Are you waiting for your special someone?"

"Why would you ask that?"

She pointed at the bag of food. "You haven't even opened it to eat."

"Oh." Heidi's cheeks reddened. "Yeah, I'm waiting on someone. Thought it'd be polite to wait to start, but I may have no other choice. I have to get back to work at some point."

"Doesn't sound all that different from dating."

"It's probably not."

Heidi was curious. It wasn't every day she had cute women who stopped to chat with her who was also interested in women. She wondered if she were that easy to read, if this woman knew she was equally interested in the same.

“I’m Heidi, by the way.” She held out her hand, trying to be extroverted for a few more minutes.

“Lila.” Her eyes crinkled at the corners as her lips curved upward.

Heidi could fall into those eyes if she wasn’t careful. They were so blue, a deep sapphire color that she wasn’t sure she’d ever seen on another person before, but she was absolutely intrigued. “It’s good to meet you. You work here, I guess.”

“I do the supply ordering for the hospital. Last week one of our trucks didn’t come in, so we were running short, and lo and behold, we’re out of some things. So I’ve spent most of my morning calling offices and nearby hospitals to see if we can borrow supplies or something because apparently we can’t wait for the truck to come tomorrow.” Lila rolled her eyes. “Sometimes you’d think it was the end of the world because an item doesn’t get delivered.”

“Sometimes it can be.” Heidi’s voice was quiet and gentle as she thought about Ann. If Ann didn’t have the right pieces of equipment to do what was necessary, then yes, it could be the end of the world for someone. Ann had seen too many people die in her career, and Heidi would rather a lack of supplies not be the reason for another.

“You’re right. I meant it more in the metaphorical sense of disaster on the frustration front.”

“Right.” Heidi tried to shake the cobwebs from her head to figure out what on earth Lila was talking about, but before she could ask, Lila was on to the next topic.

“Do you work here?”

“No. I’m a social worker for the county. So I do spend some time here when the need arises.”

“Oh, that’s a tough job.”

“It can be.” Heidi played with the edge of the bag containing her food, wondering just when Ann was going to come down. “But it can also be very rewarding.”

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“I imagine. You must be a very strong woman to see some of the things you do. I can’t imagine walking into those situations and not coming out jaded or angry.”

“Oh.” Heidi’s chest tightened. She cocked her head to the side, making eye contact with those deep blue eyes again. “I’m not sure I’d call myself strong.”

“You have to be. There’s no other explanation for it.”

Heidi’s cheeks heated with a flush. She had no idea what to say, but the compliment was just that and nothing more. “Well, thank you.”

“It’s well deserved.” Lila winked. “However, my lunch break is over, and I’ve got to get running to put out this fire.”

“Right.” Heidi stayed put as Lila gathered up what was left of her lunch before she reached over and pressed a hand to Heidi’s left hand.

“You really are strong, even if you don’t believe it sometimes.”

Heidi’s heart clenched. Who was this woman? Lila stepped away with a grin and a lightness to her step that Heidi envied. She couldn’t remember any time in her life when she’d been so carefree and jovial. She’d always been weighed down no matter how she tried to lighten the load.

She didn’t even realize she was still staring at the space Lila had left when Ann showed up. “Lunch?”

“Uh...yes.” Heidi pulled the bag of food over and started to get their meal out. She tried her best to focus on Ann, but that petite blonde kept floating back through her brain.

“You got my favorite.” Ann’s eyes lit up as she saw the small container with the Reuben from the local diner they’d found years ago.

“I did.” Pleased with herself that she could at least do one thing right that day, Heidi grabbed her avocado and cucumber sandwich, sliding it in front of her. “I thought this might be a good surprise.”

“It definitely is. Thank you.” Ann’s hand on top of hers was cold, such a contrast from Lila’s which had been warm, firm, and tight when she’d gripped Heidi’s fingers.

Shaking the thought, Heidi focused on her partner. “How’s work going so far?”

“Not bad at all. Just like any old day. No major emergencies yet, which is always welcome.”

“Same here. Maybe the world has decided to play nice for one day.”

“Maybe it has.” Ann lifted her sandwich to her mouth and took a bite. “God, this is so good. Just what I needed.”

“Me too.” And she meant it. Heidi had felt so alone lately, so left out in the dust and disconnected from the reality of their relationship. She’d needed to do something to try and reel that in, drag their relationship to the front and center of her life again. It was too easy to get lost in the comings and goings of life and work, and she didn’t want that. She could only hope Ann felt the same, but at the very least, she could try and make up for her failings.

Ann rolled her neck as she went in for another large bite. “I was thinking maybe we should go on a date soon, like a real date, not just some dinner we halfway plan last minute.”

“That’d be nice.” Maybe Heidi wasn’t the only one feeling the chasm between them. Maybe this was Ann trying to reach out for her, too. “What would we do?”

Ann snorted. “Hell if I know.”

Heidi swallowed down the lump in her throat. That was what happened nearly every time they tried to make a date. They got to the point of wanting to plan it, but nothing ever came of their talk. She focused on her lunch, trying to enjoy the few minutes of time they did have together. Lila popped into her mind again, the curve of her hips, yes, but something in the way she looked so sincerely at Heidi when she gave her compliments before she’d walked away. Heidi couldn’t remember the last time Ann had looked at her like that. Oh, but she used to, and they had both lived for the days when they could connect like that.

“Let’s do it this weekend,” Heidi interjected.

“Do what?”

“The date.”

“Oh! Yes, let’s. Except...” Ann paused and furrowed her brow. “I think I’m working this weekend.”

“Are you? I don’t remember seeing it on the calendar.” Heidi’s stomach dropped. This happened every time, and she shouldn’t have been so stupid as to get her hopes up.

Ann nodded. “I picked up some PRN in emergency.”

“What? Why?”

She sighed. “I thought we could use the extra cash.”

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“We don’t need it,” Heidi countered. “We haven’t needed it for ages.”

“I know, but I know how you like to have an extra cushion, and I thought we could maybe buy the stuff for the flooring you wanted to put in the kitchen if I was able to work enough hours.”

Heidi sighed. “At the cost of what, though?”

She shouldn’t have said it. As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she regretted it. Ann was only trying to do something nice for them, for her, and she had to go and shut it down like it was an awful idea. The shadow that flashed over Ann’s face confirmed the fact that she should have held her tongue. There was no way to backtrack, however.

“I’m sorry,” Heidi muttered. Ann’s hurt sliced through her. She didn’t even have to say anything. “Maybe we can do dinner on Monday.”

“Yeah,” Ann mumbled.

Heidi reached across the table for Ann’s hand, twining their fingers briefly before pulling her hand away. She knew how much Ann hated public displays while she was at work, and she didn’t want to push it too much. They tried to keep their relationship as low-key as possible so as not to offend anyone or run into the wrong people at the wrong time. Ann had mentioned once how she was afraid she’d lose her job if they ever found out.

“I’m glad I was able to at least make it for lunch with you today,” Heidi commented.

“Yeah, it was a good surprise.” That at least earned her a smile, though the happy mood had switched to melancholy. “We should do this more often.”

“I try.”

“I know you do.” Ann took the last bite of her sandwich and cleaned up after herself.

Heidi put the second half of her lunch back in the container. She’d bring it home and eat it for dinner since Ann would likely still be at work. She walked Ann to the elevator, said goodbye, and left without any more preamble. It had been that quiet kind of love for so long, and sometimes Heidi wondered if it was even still love or if it was more obligation or routine.

She was in her car driving to the small brick building close to the center of town in a matter of minutes. The county was going to make them move offices soon since the rent on the current building was too high and they needed more space. So as soon as she stepped inside, everything was a sea of boxes and prep for the move.

Her office was anything but quiet. It was almost three in the afternoon, and her late lunch had put her back there at a difficult time. The room next to her office was filled with a family—at least three kids and three adults—who were playing and having a supervised visitation. Normally she loved listening to the chatter and excitement of kids seeing their parents for the first time in who knew how long, but that afternoon, all she could think about was the pain she’d caused Ann and the confidence of one young Lila.

What was it about Lila that she kept coming back to? Pulling out some paperwork she’d left for herself to do that afternoon, Heidi froze. It was Lila’s confidence. That was something Heidi had never had but always wanted. It was the same with Ann. She had so much confidence in her work, in who she was, and Heidi never measured up to that. They were complete opposites in that way. Lila was the same. She held

control where Heidi knew she'd lose it.

The phone on her desk rang loudly, jarring her from her thoughts. "Child Protective Services, this is Heidi."

"Heidi," the sweet voice on the other line sighed, and immediately Heidi knew who she was talking to. Jana Everly—a foster mom she'd brought a four-year-old girl to three months ago. "I'm just calling to let you know that we're taking Naveah to the hospital."

"What happened?"

Jana sighed heavily again. "Her daycare was doing sensory games involving beans, and Naveah thought she'd have a good old time putting the beans in her ears."

"You're kidding."

"I'm not. We managed to get two out, but I know there are more in there. She says it hurts and she can't hear."

"Jana..."

"I know. Four-year-olds."

"Well, take her in, let me know what they say. You've got my cell number, right?"

"I do."

"Call me even if it's after five." Heidi pulled up Naveah's file on her computer to input the call record.

“I will. Thanks.”

“No problem.” She recorded the call and what was going to happen before she concentrated on her other paperwork for the day. She had a potential reunification the next day that she wanted to prepare for. She wasn’t entirely sure bio-mom was ready to have her three kids back with her, and she was going to need quite a bit of support.

Two hours later, her back ached from being hunched over her desk working. She’d answered calls here and there but had mainly worked on the case she was going to deal with the next day. Jana had called to report in. Five beans in one ear, three in the other. They suspected Naveah had a couple more lodged deep but needed a specialist’s opinion on it because they were so far down the girl’s ear canal.

When she finally finished for the day, she grabbed her things and headed for her car. She would slip in a visit to Naveah’s foster home in the upcoming week, sometime in her busy schedule. She wasn’t quite sure when, but it needed to happen, and she wanted to be the one to do it. When she got to her car, she checked her phone, finding a simple apology from Ann in a text.

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It warmed her heart, but at the same time, it saddened her. It seemed they were always apologizing for something lately. She'd never thought a relationship would be this hard, not one where they loved each other so deeply. She knew she came with baggage, with trauma that couldn't be avoided, but certainly she deserved something easy, right? Shouldn't love be easy?

CHAPTER 3

Lila flipped her hair up into a ponytail as she stepped out of her apartment early on Saturday morning. She rolled her shoulders as soon as the chilly air hit her. She should go for a run later that day when it warmed up—it would help ease the tension filling all the space in her shoulders and head.

Work had been a terror that week. Her boss was out of town, leaving everything in her hands, and of course, everything went wrong. She'd only resorted to calling her manager once, to help deal with a problem when the vendor wouldn't even speak with her. That had been frustrating.

But today was Saturday. It was her weekend, and she planned on utilizing as much of the spare time as she possibly could. She had a date later that night with a lovely woman she had been seeing almost a year, a woman who could make her smile with one simmering look.

Giggling to no one but herself, Lila got into her car and backed out of her parking spot. She wanted to make something nice for dinner, something that would show off her skills in the kitchen, which were limited, but decent enough. She could make a mean steak and potatoes, something her stepfather had taught her when she was a

teenager. He was convinced she needed to know how to fend for herself so when she moved out on her own she wouldn't starve.

What he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. She knew how to order from the nearest restaurant as good as her mom did. She really should give them a call later that day, make sure everything was going as planned with the renovations to the house they'd just bought. It had been entirely too long since she'd seen them, but they'd wanted to winter down south for the easier climate. She'd just laughed and called them wimps.

The grocery store was fuller than she'd expected, but it was early enough in the morning that it shouldn't be too insane inside. That was why she preferred to shop on Saturday mornings. Easier to get in and out in a reasonable amount of time and avoid crowds. She saw enough people during the week, and Lila preferred her weekends to be quieter. Which was why her date that night was going to be perfect. A quiet relaxing dinner and some sexual fun on the side to round it all out.

She got out of her car and paused as she watched a middle-aged woman step up to the double sliding doors. She looked very familiar. Her hair was at her shoulders, black and wavy. She wore a thick wool jacket that was buttoned all the way up the front with her hands shoved in her pockets as she hunched her shoulders and walked inside. At the last minute, she glanced up and caught Lila's eye, those stunning dark brown eyes that were so full of ... something. Lila couldn't put her finger on it.

Heidi.

They'd met earlier that week in the cafeteria. Lila had been stunned by her beauty and more than a little curious, opting to commandeer a seat at the table in favor of returning to her office to eat. Lila grinned. Saturday morning grocery shopping just got a little more interesting. Picking up her speed, Lila followed Heidi inside and caught her as she grabbed a cart. Lila gave her a huge grin and made direct eye contact.

“Hello again.”

Heidi seemed startled. She tensed, her fingers curling tightly around the handle of the cart before she relaxed. Her lips thinned into a line as she narrowed her gaze at Lila, presumably trying to figure out who Lila was.

“We met at the hospital, remember? In the cafeteria.”

“Oh. Oh!” Recognition flitted across Heidi’s hooded gaze. “Yes, Lila, right?”

“You remember.” Lila’s cheeks heated, and it took her a little by surprise. She definitely had a type when it came to the women she dated, and Heidi fit it perfectly so far, but she wasn’t used to such a physical reaction to someone when they hadn’t even talked about that kind of relationship yet.

“I do.” Heidi gripped the cart again. “Are you here to shop?”

Lila paused.

Heidi rolled her eyes. “Sorry, that was a stupid question. Of course you’re here to shop.”

“I am.” Lila grabbed a cart and twisted it around so she faced the second set of doors that would lead inside. “Want to shop with me? I’d love the company.”

“Um...” Heidi looked around. “I suppose.”

“You’re not shopping with anyone, are you?” Lila asked, trying to see if Heidi was in a monogamous relationship, something that would hinder the flirting she wanted to ramp up. She liked seeing that little flare in Heidi’s eyes, and she wanted to know more about it and where it came from.

“I’m not,” Heidi answered, her voice wavering on the last part.

Still unclear, Lila decided to push forward and get to know Heidi better. Nothing had to go anywhere that day. Today they could just get to know each other. “Come on, then.”

Lila moved inside the grocery store proper and glanced over her shoulder. Heidi was tiny, so thin she almost looked frail. Usually Lila liked a little more to grasp onto in a woman, but something about Heidi intrigued her. She wanted to know more.

“Coming?”

“Uh...yes.”

Curious as to why Heidi always seemed to be cautious, Lila made that her first goal to figure out. Something about this woman had her on edge all the time, and Lila wanted to unravel that mystery.

“I usually start with produce,” Heidi said.

“Sure.”

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Heidi turned her cart toward the east part of the store, which was laid out with vegetables and fruit. Lila followed, carefully weighing her options. Something about Heidi screamed loneliness, and even if they only ended up as friends, that would make Lila feel as though she'd done her part—or even if it never went beyond the one conversation they were going to have that day. Which meant she'd have to make it count.

“What inspired you to go into social work?” Lila asked as she reached the apples and grabbed a bag.

Heidi's lips curled upward, her cheeks tinged pink, and she looked at the ground before she answered. “The kids, really.”

“Yeah?” Lila dropped an apple into the bag.

“I wanted to make sure they had a voice and that someone listened to them. In some ways I'm able to do that, and in others, it's so much harder than I ever imagined.”

“I bet you just want to take them all home and make sure they're safe.”

“Some days.” Heidi grinned before her face dropped. “Other days I know I'm not prepared to give them a home on any level. It wouldn't help. Some of these kids have such deep issues that it's hard to even know where to begin beyond finding shelter and food that is only marginally better than where they were.”

Lila paused as she dropped the bag into her cart. “I can't even imagine some of the things you see every day.”

“Not every day, just some days.”

“But those days—gosh, it must be hard.”

“It can be. It’s also incredibly rewarding. To see the love strangers give to children who literally show up at their doorsteps with nothing? It’s what makes me come back every day. These kids deserve love.”

“That they do.” Lila drew in a deep breath before letting it out slowly. “I spent two nights in emergency placement. It’s nothing compared to most kids, but it certainly was eye opening.”

Heidi kept her lips closed. Lila gave her a wan smile. She hadn’t quite expected to dip into this topic, but maybe it would help Heidi to see the impact she made on all those kids that walked through her door.

“My sister and I were living with our dad at the time. Mom and him shared custody, and we never liked going to his house. It was...” Tears stung her eyes. “...it was hell, honestly. He had a drug problem, he had a women and men problem, and he wasn’t around the greatest people.”

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that.”

Lila shrugged slightly. “In a lot of ways I wish it had been easier, and in others, I’m glad I went through it because it makes me who I am. Dad got busted because one of his friends, and I use that word lightly, took pictures of my sister and I and put it out on the Internet. He got caught, we ended up in emergency care until Mom could come get us.”

“That’s terrible.” Heidi took a step and reached out, gripping Lila’s hand. “You called me strong before, but I’d beg to differ. You’re the one who is strong.”

Lila snorted and rolled her eyes, brushing off the sentiment. “I had really good therapy.”

Chuckling, Heidi nodded. “That always helps, too. I’m glad you were given the tools you needed to sort through all of that trauma.”

“Yeah, I was lucky. My stepdad was always a great support, too. He took both my sister and me under his wing like we were his own. A much better father than our bio dad.”

Heidi hummed briefly before moving toward the vegetables. “And you went into ordering.”

“I did. I like it. It’s an easy job, most weeks. This week, not so much. But I get to go to work, come home, and not think about anything but life as I want it to be.”

That sad look crossed Heidi’s gaze again, but she masked it quickly. Lila moved in next to her and started to test out avocados. She could make guacamole for a dip that night prior to her dinner date.

“Why do you look so sad?” Lila asked out of the blue. She really should learn to be more tactful, but sometimes she couldn’t help herself.

Heidi started before she relaxed. “I didn’t realize it was obvious.”

“I’m a natural born observer, for obvious reasons.”

“No doubt. I am as well, and I learned to hone those skills very early on in my life. It was more self-pity than sadness, only because I had the thought that you were lucky to have those tools. I wasn’t so lucky.”

“Oh.” Realization hit Lila like a freight train. Opening up about her own sexual abuse, albeit it not terribly traumatic on some levels, had given Heidi the opportunity to subtly talk about hers. If there was one thing she had learned over the years of sharing her story, it was that sometimes these connections with other survivors were the strongest, most intense, and most immediate she would ever experience.

Reaching out, Lila touched Heidi’s arm very gently as she left a lot of space between them. She didn’t want to crowd Heidi or make her feel as though she couldn’t escape. In fact, Lila took a step so she wasn’t blocking Heidi in. “I was right about you being strong.”

Heidi snorted and frowned. “You might not say that if you knew me better.”

“Try me.” Lila gave her a wicked smile. “I bet you’re not fragile at all.”

“That is too much for one hour-long shopping session.”

“An hour?” Looking around, Lila checked on her basket with one bag in it and Heidi’s, which had nothing in it. “I think we’re going to be here longer than an hour if we keep talking.

Heidi chuckled. “You may be right.”

As if to prove her point, Heidi reached for a bag and grabbed some cucumbers off the organic section, which was far smaller than it should be. “I like my cucumbers with enough dressing to make them slippery.”

Lila froze mid-thought as she twisted to focus on Heidi. She couldn’t tell in all that subtlety if Heidi had meant that to come across the way that it had. Though with the blush in her cheeks, her gaze boring straight at Lila, and her full lower and thin upper lip parted, Lila was going to take a guess she had meant it to sound suggestive. Maybe they shouldn’t have started in the vegetable aisle.

Something short-circuited in Lila’s brain because for the life of her she could not figure out how to respond to the simple, suggestive innuendo.

“You okay?” Heidi asked, as if there was nothing else to her but innocence. The contradiction was spectacular.

Lila nodded. “Yeah, everything is fine. If you wanted, we could grab a coffee. That’d

certainly take longer than an hour.”

Heidi gave a gentle but sad smile. “Not today. I have chores at home I need to get to. My partner is working, and I like to get these things done when I’m by myself rather than spending what little time we have together doing it.”

“Understandable.” Lila’s heart sank slightly. Usually the mention of a partner in any form meant a no to a relationship with her. She might be open to just about everything, but finding someone else who was on that same wavelength in rural Kansas was a different story. She’d struck out more than once, and accidentally slept with someone far more often than that.

“Maybe some other time.”

“Right.” Lila counted out three avocados and dropped them into her cart. “You getting anything else over here?”

“Yeah.” Heidi trailed up and down the aisles, grabbing mostly vegetables and a few pieces of fruit. Her cart looked half full by the time they finished in that section. When Heidi finally stopped and looked as though she was ready to move on, she said, “I’m vegan.”

“Oh! So I guess this is your playground over here.”

“It is. My partner isn’t, though. Often when we go out, it’s a feast of meat.”

Lila giggled. “I can see that happening. I once dated a guy who didn’t eat pork, and for some reason any time we went out to eat, all I wanted was pork.”

Heidi’s eyes crinkled in the corners. “Understandable.”

“Did you grow up here?” Lila asked as they turned down the meat section. She reached over to grab two steaks, and Heidi didn’t even seem fazed by it.

“I grew up in Topeka.”

“How’d you end up way out here?” Dropping the meat into her cart, Lila went back for some chicken. She needed enough food to last her a week of dinners and half a week of lunches, assuming she ate out some. She mentally ticked off the list of what she typically bought for herself.

Heidi sighed. “My partner is from out here, and we met in college. When we were looking for jobs after school, this is where we landed. We didn’t really expect to be here this long, but it stuck, and we like it.”

“I grew up here. I never wanted to live anywhere else. I love being this close to home.”

“Must be nice.”

That sad look was back. Lila realized her mistake too late. With Heidi’s past, home must not have been a place she necessarily wanted to go back to, which would explain why moving hadn’t been so difficult a decision.

“My dad lived in Wichita. I’m not sure I’d ever want to go back there. I went to Manhattan for school for a reason,” Lila tried to alter the topic slightly.

Heidi’s eyes widened, surprise echoing in her gaze. “I didn’t think you’d pick up on that.”

“Why not? You think I don’t also live this?” Lila grabbed some ground beef and set it in her cart. “I’m sure we have quite a few similar experiences.”

“I’m sure we do,” Heidi mumbled. She moved down the aisle toward the far side of the store.

Lila followed. She could always swing back by if she missed something, but she wanted to continue her conversation with Heidi. She was interesting. She’d never met someone so open and closed off at the same time. It wouldn’t be any wonder if Lila had ended up like her if she hadn’t had good therapy. She was lucky she’d had parents who supported her, and that her trauma wasn’t as awful as others.

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“I really would love to talk with you more. I mean that.” Lila made sure her eye contact lingered. “I don’t find many other people I can talk to about this.”

“Neither do I.” Heidi sighed, the weight falling off her shoulders. “It’s a bit lonely sometimes, honestly.”

“Your partner—”

Heidi shook her head. “I try not to share too much. I don’t want to traumatize her with my trauma. It’d all be a mess then.”

“Sure, but you have to have open communication.” Lila curled her hands into fists, wanting to reach out but also wanting to give Heidi space.

Heidi didn’t really answer, she just found something else to focus on and grabbed some milk from the shelf.

“Heidi, I don’t mean to pry, but she does know, right?”

“She knows.” Heidi settled the milk in the top part of her cart. “We just don’t talk about it much.”

“It’s not easy to talk about.” Lila knew she was pushing the boundaries of any relationship they had, which was not much. She should probably just drop it.

“It’s not. How do you do it?”

“Oh. Um...I try to be as honest as I can, when I can.”

Heidi nodded. “I supposed that’s the best advice for any relationship.”

“True.” Lila picked up a few more items she needed for the week and set them in the cart. “If you ever want to talk about this and relationships, I’m always up for it.”

“Thanks.” Heidi looked genuinely relaxed for the first time since they’d met the other day.

Lila loved it. This was the true Heidi, the real person underneath all the filters, the walls, the barriers she put up to protect herself. Lila had done that at one point too, for years, and it was no way to live, and no way to be in a relationship. Her heart broke for Heidi’s partner. Hopefully they’d found a way to work around all that.

They walked together to the front of the store and the checkout lanes. Lila let Heidi put her things on the belt first. She did it methodically, first the vegetables, then the fruit, then the cold items. Lila was impressed. She usually just tossed everything up and didn’t pay so much as one lick of attention to the order.

“I’m betting I could really learn some things from you,” Lila commented, pointing to the conveyer belt.

Heidi whipped her head around, her gaze dropping from Lila’s eyes to her chest, to her crotch before slowly sliding back up. “I’m pretty sure I could learn a few things from you, too.”

Interesting. Lila was far more intrigued now than she had been before. Maybe her first evaluation had been wrong. Leaning on the handle of the cart, Lila danced her gaze over Heidi’s lean face. God, she was a tiny woman. “I suppose we’ll have to meet up again at some point.”

“I suppose we will. I imagine you can’t be that hard to find.”

“Never know.” The cashier had all of Heidi’s items rung up.

Lila straightened her shoulders and started to put her own things on the belt. By the time she looked back up, Heidi was gone. “Where did she go?”

“She left, ma’am.”

Lila flipped around to the young, pimply cashier who couldn’t be older than seventeen. “She’s fast.”

“Do you know her?”

“Kind of,” Lila muttered. She hadn’t even gotten a chance to get Heidi’s phone number or give Heidi hers. Damn it. She was going to have to find a way to figure out where Heidi was. Showing up at her work would likely not be taken kindly.

“Seventy-three-eighty-one.”

“What?” Lila twisted to the young cashier. “Oh, right.”

She whipped out her debit card and slid it through the machine. She paid for her food and took the cart and bags out to her car. Lila looked around for any sign of Heidi—maybe she was still putting groceries in her car or bringing the cart back in—but there was absolutely no sign of her ever having been there.

Cursing under her breath, Lila shoved the bags in her car and put the cart in the corral. When she got back to her car, she took out her phone and heaved a sigh. She really wanted to see Heidi again, if anything just to talk about the unspeakable. She hadn’t realized until that moment how important that was, and she missed it. It had

been years since she'd had someone she could talk to about that part of her past, someone who didn't know all the details.

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She was back at her apartment and putting everything away before she knew it. The meal she was going to cook that night for her date was going to be one of the best she'd ever done. Hopefully. She'd burned far too many dishes for her date, but it'd all been worth it. They'd laughed over her mess-ups and taken it in stride to order out when it was completely inedible.

Lila decided to go on the run she'd thought about that morning. Changing into leggings and a windbreaker, she redid the ponytail, popped her headphones into her ears, and locked her front door. Reliving memories was never easy, and while she hadn't gone into detail, she still needed the break to get the weight off her mind.

With one foot in front of the other, Lila pushed through the ever-present western Kansas wind and focused on her breath. Strong, deep, even breaths. She could run for hours if she needed to, just to feel free, to feel calm, to feel in control.

CHAPTER4

The weekend had been longer than Ann had expected. Her date Saturday had gone well, and they'd already set a time for another, but Ann was exhausted. Once again, her hips ached as she sat down on the couch. She'd had the whole day at home by herself while Heidi had gone in to work. One of the joys of working four tens while Heidi worked a more regular shift, though she often got called in late as well and had her own life on the side.

Ann rubbed her thumb over her fingers as she stared blankly at the television screen. Nothing had captured her attention that day. She had tried desperately to focus on anything but had abandoned each one halfway through or even in the first five

minutes. Instead, Ann found herself sitting on the couch, staring at the television, and thinking of nothing but Heidi.

They were due to celebrate sixteen years in January, and while it was months away, she thought they should do something big for it. They'd always talked about doing something big for their fifth, then when that didn't happen their tenth, then their fifteenth. Last year, they'd looked at the idea of planning some sort of fun, exciting trip and decided it would just be easier to celebrate on their own at home.

Heidi was such a homebody. Ann knew she was also incredibly uncomfortable when she was out of her norm and when she was in new places she'd never been before. That anxiety carried with her throughout the entire trip and even after, every time they'd gone somewhere together, or really any time Heidi traveled at all.

What was it that put her so on edge? Ann hadn't felt this restless in their relationship in years. They'd found a decent balance, even if it wasn't totally satisfactory for either of them. It worked. Didn't it? Scoffing to thin air, she rolled onto her side and lay down on the couch to stare at the television that way. Maybe she could focus if she moved positions.

It was another thirty minutes before she gave up. Grabbing her phone, she reread the last text Heidi at sent her, just a quick note about when she thought she might be home that day. Ann really should get up and do something around the house. It was awful of her to let Heidi do it all, but she was so damn good at it sometimes it was just easier to let her do it.

Some days she was an awful failure of a partner, and today was one of them. She'd literally accomplished nothing since she'd woken up that morning. She hadn't even managed to get out of her basketball shorts and T-shirt. She'd been a lazy pig all day. There was nothing more to it. Heidi had even made her lunch and left it in the fridge so she'd have an easy meal.

Cursing herself, she dragged her lazy body from the couch and moved into the kitchen. She would make a veggie stir-fry, hope she didn't burn it, and then hope Heidi actually ate it this time. It was just her trying to be nice after all. She had the meal mostly done when the front door opened. That was good timing.

Ann stepped out into the living room and watched as Heidi shucked the jacket that dwarfed her small frame. Ann couldn't understand why she insisted on wearing clothes that were too big for her. It made her seem even smaller than she actually was.

"How was work?"

"Oh, um...it was a bit of a rough day." Heidi pulled off her shoes and shoved them into the cubby by the door. "What are you cooking? Smells good."

"Stir fry."

Heidi's lips tightened into what could pass as a smile, but Ann wasn't quite sure that's what it was. Instead, she focused on the fact Heidi hadn't told her she didn't want to eat it or that she'd already eaten out with a friend or something. At Heidi's steady gaze around the room, Ann felt her defenses go up and click into place one by one.

"Sorry I didn't get to any cleaning or laundry."

"Don't worry about it." Heidi sighed as she came closer to Ann, kissing her on the cheek as she walked past her to the kitchen. "I'm not."

Ann couldn't help but feel like that was a dig, as though Heidi never expected her to hold up her end of the household chores or do her part in their partnership. Sometimes it felt so uneven, so unbalanced, skewed either in Heidi's direction or in

Ann's. Fifteen years and they'd never managed to find the elusive balance they kept striving for.

Heidi moved the food around the cast iron skillet. "Looks good, too."

"Thanks," Ann muttered. "It should only be another five minutes."

"I'm going to go change."

Once again cast into silence while she was on her own, Ann tried to keep herself from sliding further down the rabbit hole she couldn't seem to get out of. Why would Heidi ever stay with her? They weren't happy. They tried to be, so desperately, but Ann was pretty sure anyone could see the cracks in their relationship as if they were under a spotlight. They weren't connecting, but by God, she wanted to on every level possible. All Ann had ever wanted was a true partner in life, and she'd thought at one point—for years if she thought about it more—that Heidi would be that person.

She wanted Heidi to be that person.

As Heidi stepped into the kitchen, wrapped in her usual comfort garb of fuzzy jammie pants and a tank top, Ann was overwhelmed with the feeling of wanting to be with her. She wanted to show Heidi how much she loved her, how much she wanted her. Ann made up the plates and handed one over to Heidi. No matter what happened between them, Ann wanted to be there for Heidi. She always would be, in whatever capacity Heidi needed and wanted.

"Do you need to vent about today?"

"No, I don't think so. I can't tell you a lot anyway."

"I know. I just hate that you have to keep so much bottled up sometimes." Ann

reached over and touched Heidi's hand as they sat at their dining room table, trying to give her as much physical comfort as possible while also taking something from the physical contact herself. Heidi centered her. Every day when she felt like she was going off the deep end, Heidi would bring her back. It was awful to put that on her, but they'd fallen into that habit years ago, and it was difficult to break. Though they had worked on it at one point, and it was far better than it used to be.

"It's tough some days, but I know you'll catch me when I fall." Heidi gave a small quirk of her lips, but it never reached her eyes.

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“Right.” Ann’s tongue dashed against her lips. “You don’t think you might want a reprise of the other night, would you?”

Heidi’s look morphed from calm to confused. Ann cocked her head to the side, casting her gaze over Heidi’s body, remembering exactly how she’d feel in her hands, against her mouth. It was near perfection.

“The other night?” Heidi was still confused.

Ann’s stomach dropped. That likely meant the answer was no. She’d told herself every day not to ask, not to push, but she couldn’t help herself. She wanted to be with Heidi. She wanted Heidi to grip her suddenly and hard and kiss her like Ann was the only other person in the world.

“Iwantyou.”

Heidi’s lips pulled tight, thinning out into a line, and she didn’t dare look Ann in the eye. That should have already told her the answer, but still, Ann needed to hear it. She needed the word, even though she knew it would send her into a spiral.

“Not tonight. I’m really tired after today.”

“Right.” She was terse, the word a stark contrast to her previous tone. Every time she tried to stop herself, but it never worked.

She stayed at the table as long as she could make it, giving short answers and playing up the simple conversation as she could, but the only thought coursing through her

brain was, what the hell was wrong with her? Why didn't Heidi want her?

What was so wrong with her that after fifteen years Heidi still denied her?

The thoughts were impossible to avoid. And she'd known better, too. Ann had known better than to ask, better than to push, and still she'd done it—again—to no one but herself. She finished out her meal and went to put the plate in the sink, leaving it for whenever. She couldn't deal with it right now. Stalking to the bedroom without another word, Ann collapsed on the mattress on the side Heidi told her to sleep on, because God forbid Heidi sleep near a damn window.

"Fuck," Ann murmured, rubbing the heels of her palms roughly over her face. Why did she do this to herself? It was so stupid. No matter how many times she asked for sex, Heidi was very likely to say no, as if it was some kind of punishment. All of her exes had done that. Every relationship she'd been in had done that to her, and she'd thought Heidi was different. Yet there they were. Heidi had said no. Ann wasn't good enough for her, and she would never fulfill all of Heidi's needs.

That was something she had come to accept a long time ago. Ann couldn't satisfy Heidi, and every time something like this happened all she could wonder was why Heidi stayed there. What did Heidi even see in her? Crumbling, Ann took the covers and tossed them over her head, hiding under the blankets in the dark.

The television rumbled in the living room as Heidi changed it to something else, something more to her tastes. A single salty tear fell down Ann's cheek, rolling over her skin to disappear into the sheets along with the rest of her hopes and dreams for the night and maybe even their future. If Heidi couldn't even stand to be with her one night that week, how would they manage to stay together until their sixteenth? How they'd made it to fifteen was beyond her.

Sighing, Ann pushed the feelings of sadness away, pain filling her chest until she felt

nothing other than shame and guilt. It really was all her fault when she thought about it. Nothing would change the fact that she was just not good enough. She wasn't who Heidi needed.

* * *

Ann called in to see if she could pick up another shift and get out of the house—and maybe get out of her head a bit. Heidi had slunk into the bedroom late that night and left early in the morning to go to work. Ann was cast into the darkness of her own mind, still spinning from the rejection of the night before.

She waited another hour before her cellphone rang with a call from the hospital. She hoped it was some PRN hours she could take—something, anything to distract her from the chaos that was her head. Ann held her breath as she listened to the nurse prattle on about what hours she had available.

As soon as the word emergency was out of her mouth, Ann grasped onto it. She took the hours and went to the bathroom to get ready for the day. In an hour she was dressed and at the hospital, ready to work and keep her mind clear of the worst that she was thinking. It was awful some days, that all she could think of was the worst-case scenario.

Heidi would remind her time and again, “I haven't left yet. I'm not leaving now. I want to be here.”

But Ann struggled to believe her, to trust that that truly was the answer, that Heidi's insane ability with logic would outsmart the emotions rampaging through her. With stiff shoulders, Ann walked into the ER determined to work the shift she'd chosen and not think about the problems she was having with Heidi any longer.

As soon as she walked in, she was slammed with cases. Something about the flu

going around one of the schools and hitting hard. Even the pediatricians were sending kids there. Ann moved from one curtain to the next as she tried to comfort sick kids and sympathized with their parents. Nothing was going to help them other than some meds and rest for the most part.

Three hours into her shift, she finally managed to catch a break and stopped by the coffee pot to steal a cup. It wasn't as good as it had been the nights before when she'd been in the emergency room, but it did the trick. Ann pushed the knuckles of her fist into the top side of her right hip, which had started aching. Maybe she should stop picking up hours in the ER, where she knew she'd be on her feet for hours at a time with no break. She needed a calmer unit.

"These kids!" A bright young woman stepped through the door, her hair in tight curls down her back, pulled away from her face with a huge scrunchy. "They're not even from the same class."

"You know, one gives it to the other, they go home and give it to the sibling, who brings it to their class."

The woman rolled her eyes and grabbed herself a cup of coffee. "At least we do know they're all from the same elementary school."

"Right."

"Are you PRN?"

Ann nodded. "Ann. I usually work in ICU."

"Oh! Then you're a blessing to have with us today. I'm Jerica. I usually work nights, but I'm trying to flip to days. Nights are rough."

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“They are,” Ann agreed. She’d worked them when she and Heidi had first started dating and for years afterward. It was only in the last couple years that she’d had enough seniority to request working days and actually managed to keep the shift.

“Well, I hope we’re not scaring you too much with all the sick kids.”

“Not at all. I’ve worked peds before. It’s just been a while since I have. I like ICU. It’s a bit calmer most of the time. Less patient to staff ratio.”

“That’s true.” Jerica’s lips moved upward, the freckles dotting her cheeks moving as if to wink.

The door burst open, and there she was, the petite blonde who had so much of Ann’s attention. Shock crossed Lila’s features as she made eye contact with Ann before slowly shifting her gaze to Jerica. “They said I could find you in here.”

“Yeah. What do you need?” Jerica took a sip from her coffee.

“I gotta make the order for the day.”

“Oh.” Jerica grinned. “And here I thought you were going to ask if you had an invite to the friends-giving party this year.”

Lila narrowed her gaze and flicked a glance at Ann. “Maybe. Last year was...interesting.”

“How so?”

Sighing, Lila shook her head. “Doesn’t matter. I’ll come if you’re hosting again.”

“I’m trying to.” Jerica smiled. “Everyone comes and they’re at the point it’s expected now.”

“Right. Sorry to push, but I’m running late today.”

“Yeah, I’ll go get it.” Jerica walked out of the break area, and Lila stared directly in Ann’s eyes.

“What are you doing here?”

“I picked up some hours,” Ann replied tersely. It hadn’t been that long since she’d seen Lila last, and oh how those lips would feel pressed against hers. It would be the perfect, glorious distraction that she wanted. Ann tore her gaze from Lila’s lips to her cool blue eyes. “Figured I could grab some and get out of the house.”

“Avoiding?” Lila always went straight to the point.

Ann admired her for that as much as she hated it sometimes. There wasn’t much hiding anything from Lila because she’d be sure to find it. “Perhaps.”

“I thought we talked about you avoiding.” Lila’s voice lowered, her words poignant.

It had taken a lot for Ann to confess that particular sin of hers, and she often regretted trusting Lila to hold that secret so close. Ann’s heart thudded. She wanted Lila to be right next to her, to hold her as she answered the statement, but Lila stayed put, maintaining professional distance between the two of them.

“We did, and sometimes it’s the only solution to my problem.”

“Ann.” The amount of pity in the one word tore Ann apart. She didn’t want to hear it. She wanted Lila to be fun and flirty, just like she had been the other week. She wasn’t ready to dive deep into why she didn’t want to be home by herself, why she was so upset about Heidi’s answer to whether or not they could have sex the night before.

“Lila,” Ann countered, putting a wall right in front of all that pity. She couldn’t take the shame and the guilt if Lila spelled it out to her. It would be too much.

“I got it.” Lila turned just as Jerica came back in. They sat at one of the small tables, poring over forms that were quite familiar to Ann.

She didn’t even bother to say anything as she left the room and went back to work. A few minutes later, she was just coming out of a curtain when she made eye contact with Lila as she left the unit. Lila gave her a sad smile before disappearing into a hallway. Ann’s heart clenched. Lila was right, and Ann knew it. She’d known it before Lila had even shown up. She was avoiding.

Not just her home life—it was easy to put a front on that—but she was avoiding her own feelings on the problem. What had happened last night had only highlighted the last fifteen years of issues between her and Heidi. Sex. It always seemed to come back around to that, didn’t it?

Ann adjusted the chart from the patient she had just left, recording the information so the doctor could do her assessment.

Doctor Vasquez grabbed the chart before Ann even had a chance to finish inputting the information. She waltzed toward the curtain as she read it over and tossed over her shoulder a “Coming?”

Ann struggled to keep up, her joints protesting at the quick movement. No one had ever told her how hard being a nurse was on her body, not even when she’d been in

nursing school, though she should have figured it out then. In her early twenties, she hadn't thought twice about it.

Following Vasquez into the room, Ann stepped to the side. Vasquez asked questions, listened to the patient, answered questions, and then moved on after making some orders for tests. Ann's mind spun at how quickly it all happened, but she went with it before turning to put in the lab orders. She was hunched over the computer terminal when Jerica showed up again.

“I didn’t realize you knew Lila.”

“Everyone knows Lila,” Ann muttered, and it was mostly true. Lila was one of the few people who would see every unit in the hospital between making orders and delivering supplies, but Lila was also an extrovert who loved to flirt, so Ann had no doubt most people knew who she was. Add in the fact Lila had good looks going for her, she could easily have whoever she wanted, and she often did. Something Ann was all too viscerally aware of.

“True.”

Ann popped her gaze up. “I make the orders for ICU often.”

“Ah.”

She wasn’t going to give any more explanation than that. It was enough. Ann focused on her patients for the rest of her shift, pushing away Lila’s disturbing comments about avoidance and Heidi’s sad and devastated look as she’d walked away the night before. It had been her fault. There was no way around that.

As she finished out her shift, Ann sat in her car and stared at her phone as the engine warmed. She curled her fingers into a fist and blew on them so they weren’t as numb from the cold air. She stared at Heidi’s name and number, the first number on her contact shortcut list, and the only one she should be calling or texting.

Ann shifted in her seat as she stared at the light emanating from her phone in the darkness of the autumn evening. Screw it. She would continue to avoid. It was the

best-case scenario for everyone involved. Confronting the problem head-on would only end up with Heidi leaving her high and dry. Dialing the number, Ann lifted the phone to her ear and waited impatiently as it rang.

“Hey, Ann.”

“Hey.” Ann smiled at the familiar voice, the tone so soft and welcoming. It was exactly what she needed. “I was thinking we should have another date.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” Relaxing into the seat of the car, Ann flipped through her schedule mentally. “I should have Friday night free if you do.”

“I do.”

Ann grinned. She was always there when Ann needed her. “Then say eight?”

“Sure. Do you want me to cook or are we going out?”

“Let’s stay in this time. I think I need more time with you and less time to worry about what others think.”

“You always worry.”

The comment threw some ice onto Ann’s mood, but she pushed past it. “Not out of the norm. Friday it is then.”

“I can’t wait.”

“Neither can I.” Hanging up, Ann dropped her phone into the cup holder and backed

out of the parking spot. Home didn't seem as bleak anymore. Which was exactly what she'd needed all day.

CHAPTER 5

It took until Friday for Heidi to find the time to have a lunch date with Ann again. She stopped by their favorite sandwich shop and grabbed their go-to meals. She'd already texted ahead, and Ann was going to meet her in the cafeteria this time, saving Heidi from having to walk so far through the hospital since she couldn't take that long a lunch that day.

Heidi sat at the same table as before, having enjoyed the fact it was a bit out of the way and she and Ann could have more privacy. She also just had a preference for things she was used to, and since Heidi had sat at that table once, it had become her table.

This time she set out their dinner as she waited, knowing she didn't have an abundance of time compared to the other day. She really wanted to make this more of a regular practice. They'd talked for years about having a weekly date, at least one, and they'd made small efforts toward moving in that direction, and then one or both of them would falter or scheduling would get messed up.

Heidi realized that in order to keep their relationship strong, one of them was going to have to make sacrifices to connect with the other, and this was one way she would do that. Hopefully Ann would pick up on it and join her in the efforts as soon as she noticed. If the two of them did this together, Heidi knew they'd succeed. They always had before.

She stuck the straw into her carry out cup and sipped the bubbly soda from it. She debated whether or not to start eating her sandwich when she was startled by a familiar voice.

“Fancy seeing you here.”

Looking up into Lila’s deep blue eyes, Heidi was surprised to find her standing over the table. She’d figured after the conversation the last weekend that even if Heidi did see Lila again, Lila would not want to talk to her. That’s how it most often went when she shared about her past with someone, and while she hadn’t given Lila any details of her past sexual trauma, there was enough skirting around the issue that Lila would be aware they were made of the same cloth.

“Yes, isn’t that an interesting coincidence.” It wasn’t, but Lila didn’t know that Heidi’s partner worked at the hospital. For all she knew, Heidi could have been there visiting a patient within the confines of her job and had stopped to eat lunch with a friend.

Lila pulled out the chair across from Heidi and sat down, holding only a coffee cup today instead of a lunch. “You ran off last Saturday before I thought we were done talking.”

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“Oh.” Genuinely surprised, Heidi relaxed her stance in the chair.

“One thing I’ve found when survivors are involved is that there’s something about each other we just get, and so I feel like a bit of a kindred spirit with you.”

Heidi narrowed her gaze, slightly suspicious of Lila and her motives. She had never experienced that understanding with someone else, even through all of her work and the different kids she had met. It could simply be because she was at a vastly different stage of life than they were, having dealt with her trauma for thirty-plus years, but still, what Lila was talking about was a foreign concept.

“I am curious as to why I keep running into you, though.”

Heidi shrugged. “I’m meeting someone for lunch.”

“The same someone you met the other day?”

Raising a single eyebrow, Heidi took a sip of her drink to bide her time in finding an answer to the question. “Yes.”

“Is this a special someone?”

“Why are you asking?” Heidi’s shoulders tensed, and she put her drink down, folding in to protect herself.

Lila must have caught the move because she put her hands out to try and ward off Heidi’s self-defenses. “I didn’t mean anything by it, honestly. I was just trying to get

you to open up more.”

“There are easier ways to do that.”

“Are there?” Lila’s face pinched in suspicion.

Heidi thought about it a moment before shaking her head. “Actually, you’re probably right, there aren’t.”

“Right.” Lila sipped her coffee. “I don’t have a special someone in my life, in case you’re wondering.”

“You were talking about a date.”

“Yes. I did have a date, but not a single person I am committed to.”

Heidi was trying to figure out just what Lila was going on about. It was as if there was some sort of subtlety in her phrasing that she was supposed to understand but didn’t. She wasn’t even sure how to ask a question that would get the answer she was seeking, so she just nodded and pretended like she knew what Lila was talking about.

“I’m also here for a date.”

“Well, then, I should leave you to it.”

Heidi smiled lightly. “She’s running late, so I don’t mind the company.”

Lila grinned, the expression reaching her eyes as she took another sip of her coffee. “I do love a woman who lives on the edge.”

“I hardly live on the edge. I’m quite reserved and practical, actually.”

“I gathered.” Lila had a twinkle in her eye.

Surprised Lila had been able to pick up on that in the brief amount of time they had spent together, Heidi canted her head to the side and tried to figure Lila out. What exactly was her game in all of this? Was it just flirting? Flirting Heidi could handle. In fact, sometimes she thought of herself as an expert at flirting. Ann had thought so too at one point in their relationship and somewhere along the way it had changed into something else, something that never quite came off the way she meant it.

“What are you thinking?” Lila asked, curiosity dripping off each word.

“What on earth do you mean?”

“Your look, it went from vacant to teasing to downright depressed.”

Again, she was taken aback by Lila’s ability to read her. She’d always been told she was a hard read, by literally everyone, including her own mother. Therapists had tried for years to crack her open, and it was rare she could find one so talented and tenacious as to accomplish that task. “It’s nothing important.”

“I doubt that, but I’ll let it pass just this once. Next time I ask though, I’ll expect an answer.”

Heidi swung her gaze over Lila’s shoulder, wondering when Ann would be joining, and if it would make any difference in how this conversation was going if Ann would show up right then and there. Then Lila would know what Heidi’s type was, which was not young, bold, cocky, and downright gorgeous. She preferred women who were a bit more reserved than Lila was proving to be.

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“So you do a date during her lunch break, is that it?”

“Both of ours.”

“Must be hard to find time outside of that.”

“Timing is always something we have to overcome, no matter what the relationship it is.” Heidi fiddled with the soda cup, twisting it in circles. She was suddenly nervous, her stomach roiling at the conversation. But everything was fine, wasn’t it? They weren’t doing anything that would harm her relationship with Ann. She’d never so much as dare to dream of doing that.

“It is, but if you really love or like someone and are interested in continuing a relationship with them, you’ll make time.”

“That’s what we’re doing now. Making time.”

“Good for you two, then.” Lila’s cocky grin slid in place, and Heidi couldn’t quite figure out why it was there.

What had she missed in the exchange that would put such a smile on Lila’s face? Either way, no matter what it was, she liked it, and that wasn’t something she could deny. She liked the attention Lila gave her, the prodding questions that pushed her to dare to go deeper than she initially wanted to. Lila challenged her. Not only to think deeper but to explore her thoughts and emotions in a way she never had before. It was an odd feeling, one that she equally resisted and looked forward to at the same time.

Heidi shifted. “We try.”

“I meant that sincerely,” Lila added.

“All right,” Heidi agreed, though she wasn’t totally convinced.

“Give me your phone.”

“What?”

“Your phone.”

Hesitating, Heidi slid her phone across the table.

“Unlock it, silly.” Lila handed it back.

Heidi entered her passcode and unlocked the phone before handing it once more to Lila. Lila put in a phone number with her name, then dialed.

“There, now we have each other’s numbers. Feel free to call me if you want. Sometimes it’s nice to know you’re not alone in this big old scary world.”

“That’s true.” Heidi stared at her phone like it was the enemy. Ann wouldn’t care that she had Lila’s phone number. The problem was how much more Lila was going to pry into her life. And Heidi was pretty sure that was going to be a lot.

“I better get back to work. It was nice running into you again.”

“Same,” Heidi murmured, still staring at her phone. She barely even noticed as Lila left, but quiet settled over her as the rest of the cafeteria buzzed with conversation and noise. It took her another minute before she pulled out her sandwich and took a bite.

Lila was interesting in a way Heidi struggled to put into words.

Still, she was intrigued.

What could become of their friendship? Would it be comforting to be able to talk to someone who understood so viscerally what she had experienced? Even then, Lila's abuse was so limited compared to her own. Heidi wanted to sigh, but she held it in, also wanting to minimize the emotions floating through her chest and into her brain. She didn't quite understand them and wasn't sure how to work through them just yet.

Heidi didn't even taste the sandwich as it lingered on her tongue before she swallowed. She stared at the odd gray hues of the table, not seeing anything as her mind spun circles about Lila, the possibilities of what and who she was and what that would mean. What would it mean? Heidi was lost in her thoughts and confused when the table bumped and moved toward her.

Jerking her gaze up, she landed on Ann already sitting across from her with her sandwich pulled in front of her as she unwrapped it. Pushing the thoughts of Lila from her mind, Heidi focused on Ann, the beautiful woman she'd been with for nearly sixteen years. They had both changed so much in those years, but at the same time, they hadn't at all—especially her.

When had they stopped trying? When had everything become so stagnant?

"Glad you could join the living," Ann muttered.

"Sorry, I was lost in thought," Heidi replied, sipping her soda to wet her tongue.

"Busy day?"

Ann nodded. "Way busier than expected."

Heidi didn't say anything. She wasn't sure what to respond. Ann always seemed busy when Heidi made an effort, and it came off as if the planned lunch date was an inconvenience. How was it ever supposed to work if they didn't talk or spend time together? Heidi's stomach gurgled unhappily as she took a small bite of her lunch. Her appetite was gone, and all she could think about was what she could do to make it better.

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She knew it was her trauma that held them back, that it was the walls between them, but in fifteen years she hadn't figured out how to tear them down. Frankly, it was a scary prospect to even attempt to do that. Had she really even tried? Heidi racked her brain for moments when she had tried to break down those barriers, and indeed, she did find some. Not as many as she'd hoped, but she did remember times when she had tried to share with Ann what went through her mind half the time.

Usually Ann didn't understand or didn't sit with it long enough to try to understand. Biting back another sigh, Heidi focused on the food in front of her. Fifteen years was a long time to spend with someone she couldn't effectively communicate with, but she'd never thought about leaving. According to Ann, she hadn't either. Something about love and wanting to be together forever kept them from taking that final fateful step.

"Is your day busy?"

"Huh?" Heidi jerked her head up. "Oh, no, not really. It's a quiet Friday for once."

"That's good. I'm going to be home late tonight."

"That's okay. I'm sure I can entertain myself." Heidi hadn't meant it to come off sad and depressing, but her tone was so melancholic it was nearly unavoidable.

Ann gave her a hard look, her gaze roving over Heidi's face, and Heidi stared directly at her, challenging her to push the boundaries of what was going through her head, daring her to ask one simple question that might open her up. Ann cocked her head, still giving that hard look before closing her eyes and focusing on her already half-

eaten sandwich.

Heidi's heart fell. It was like that all the time. Ann scared to ask, and Heidi frightened to speak. How they would ever get past that she didn't know. Perhaps this was how they would live out the rest of their days together, however long that ended up being. Heidi picked up her food and took another small bite, but her appetite was completely gone. Forcing herself to eat was not something she enjoyed, so she wrapped her meal up. She could eat it for dinner if Ann was going to be out—and they both knew what that meant.

“You're not eating?” Ann's brusque tone sent a shock through Heidi's chest.

“Not hungry,” Heidi muttered, knowing if Ann truly was paying attention it would be a dead giveaway to the turmoil she was going through. She hoped Ann was distracted enough that it wouldn't come to that conversation, but she could never be sure. Most of the time she could hide it, since they rarely ate together.

Ann eyed her suspiciously, but thankfully, she didn't comment. Whether it was because she didn't want to open that can of worms today or if she didn't want to do it in such a public place, Heidi didn't know, but she was thankful the inquisition ended rapidly. Ann went back to her own meal. “We should try to do a date next week.”

“I can come for lunch on Thursday, I think. I'll have to check my calendar.”

Ann shook her head. “No, I mean a real date. One where we go out for dinner, spend the night together, dress up maybe.”

Heidi wrinkled her nose. “Dress up?”

“I don't know. I miss you is what I'm trying to say.”

Pressing her lips tightly together, Heidi thought. Most often Ann said things like that when they'd had a fight or an argument or when Heidi had denied her sex. Suddenly the realization hit her. She had denied sex. She'd said no, and Ann had been in a piss-poor mood all week. This was a direct reaction to that.

Her heart sank. They could never work around this one problem, could they? She was always the problem in that area, and no matter how much Heidi tried to convince herself she wanted to have sex as often as Ann did, the fact remained, she just didn't. Some nights—well, most nights—she preferred a good cuddle on the couch before a snuggle in the bed, falling asleep in each other's arms.

Often there never seemed to be an end to Ann's anger when Heidi said no, when she held her ground and her boundaries and didn't give in to something she didn't want. At the same time, it pissed her off, like Ann somewhere in the back of her mind thought she deserved sex, as if it was Heidi's to give as a requirement of their relationship, which was vastly untrue. Heidi was obligated by nothing.

Flicking her gaze to Ann, Heidi held all the tension she had in her shoulders. "What time do you think you'll be home tonight?"

"Late. Don't wait up for me. I know how you like to get up early."

Heidi nodded almost imperceptibly. "Right."

Ann finished her meal and leaned in her chair. "I'm sorry to have such a short lunch with you, but I barely made it out of there as is."

"It's fine. I understand." Heidi did understand, even if she didn't want to. When would she become more of a priority in Ann's life? It certainly didn't feel that way most of the time.

Ann reached over the table and gripped Heidi's hand, giving her a gentle squeeze before gathering up her trash and throwing it away. Heidi watched her walk away, her hips swaying as she went. Heidi longed for her, longed for the woman she'd fallen in love with, the one who tried, the one who she connected with. She couldn't understand when that had stopped.

Heidi grabbed up her own food, carrying it out of the hospital to the parking lot where her car was. Getting in, she headed to work to finish out her day. She needed the distraction to be able to function for the next few hours before she went home to an empty house.

As she got home, the house felt emptier than ever. Heidi dropped her bag onto the near side of the couch as soon as she entered and flopped onto the cushion, not even bothering to take her jacket or shoes off yet. It was thirty minutes after five. She hadn't heard a thing from Ann yet, which wasn't unusual, especially if she was going to be out late. Staring at the blank television screen, Heidi finally let out the sigh she'd been holding in for the last half of the day.

Her head hurt. Her heart hurt. What were they even doing anymore, just playing house? Lila popped into her mind. Beautiful, young, confident Lila. What Heidi would give to be more like her, to have moved fully past her own sexual trauma into the realm of healing and wholeness. It seemed so easy for some people. She'd seen it with the kids she worked with. Some rebounded like nothing ever happened and others struggled daily, minute by minute, just to survive. What was the difference between them?

Reaching into her pocket, Heidi pulled out her phone, unlocked it, and skimmed to the number Lila had left in her call log. She could learn something from Lila—that much Heidi knew. Lila knew secrets to recovery and survival Heidi had never been shown. Sure, Heidi had met adult survivors before, but their trauma was never something they talked about, never something she shared about. It was typically a

simple acknowledgement of what had happened once, a long time ago, never to be mentioned again.

Before she knew what was happening, she pressed her thumb on Lila's name and number. The call connected almost instantly, ringing. Heidi barely had time to bring the phone to her ear before Lila's sweet voice echoed over the line.

CHAPTER6

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:44 am

“I didn’t expect you to call so soon.” Lila grinned as she set the mascara wand down on the counter of her bathroom. A thrill ran through her at the thought Heidi had been thinking about her that day. She had been right when she’d said there was an instant connection between them from both being survivors, but she could also see the deep hurt and hesitation in Heidi.

“I didn’t think I’d call.” Heidi’s voice was soft, nearly a wisp, and Lila had to strain to make sure she heard correctly. That dark empty tone was far stronger now than it had been hours before when they’d seen each other at the hospital. It nearly broke Lila’s heart to hear it.

Giving a nervous chuckle, Lila checked her makeup in the mirror before spinning out of her bathroom and plopping down onto the couch. The silence was unnerving, but Lila had trained herself to listen to the silence for years, and she listened as Heidi paused. Just what was she worrying about? “So what did you call to talk about?”

“Are you busy?” Heidi suddenly asked as if she realized she might be interrupting something.

“Not at the moment.” That light flirty tone was still present, but Lila had to work to keep it there. Something seemed off and wrong, as if Heidi was screaming for her to pay attention and listen and take care of her.

“Are you busy tonight?”

Lila paused, trying to grasp onto the conversation and where it was going, keeping track of the different jumps Heidi made as she bounced from question to question. “I

am, actually. But I have time to talk now if you wanted. My date isn't set to arrive for a couple hours at least."

"Late night," Heidi commented. "I'm such a morning person."

"I am too, honestly. I love the quiet of mornings that nights just don't seem to give me." It wasn't a lie, although Lila found she spent more nights wide awake than early mornings. She missed those mornings though—something about the eerie quiet before the day got started seemed like the perfect way to center herself. "Maybe I should get up early and give you a call sometime."

"I would like that." A tendril of hope lingered in Heidi's tone, and Lila grasped onto it and held on with an iron fist. That was what she wanted to hear in every word Heidi said.

"So, what would we talk about?" Lila pried softly, hoping Heidi would feel welcome to open up even more. She had a feeling Heidi was used to keeping everything bottled so tightly that she didn't even know how to let it all loose.

"I don't know. You have a date tonight?"

"I do." Lila wondered if that would cause issues, but she was as open as she could be about her relationships and how she wanted to live her life. "It's a woman I've been seeing for about a year now."

"Oh, do you like her?"

Lila giggled. "Of course, why else would I continue to see her?"

"That was a stupid question, sorry."

Pressing her lips together, Lila paused. “Not stupid, just trying to make conversation, and I shot it down. I apologize. I do like her. This is about as far as we’ll ever go in a relationship, dates when she can find the time, and I’m comfortable with that. I don’t need anything deeper from her.”

Heidi dragged in a ragged breath. “Do you want more?”

“No. I’m perfectly comfortable with what we have.”

“That’s good.” Heidi’s voice was flat.

Lila squinted at her television across the room. “You said you had a date today. Did it go well?”

Heidi coughed before she answered. “No, not really. I mean...it’s not for lack of trying.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means we’re both trying, and it seems we both miss more often than not. She was rushed today, so we didn’t really get to talk about much of anything.” Heidi’s voice wavered.

Lila dashed her tongue across her lips, daring herself to ask a risky question. “Did you need that connection with her?”

Heidi sighed. “I did. I wanted it. I know she’ll give it to me, so long as I can figure out the right way to ask.”

“And you haven’t yet?”

Groaning, Heidi let silence fill the conversation before she finally spoke. “I thought we had at one point, but maybe we’ve never known how to communicate effectively.”

“How long have you been together?” Lila’s curiosity was piqued. It wasn’t often she found couples who had been together for ages not knowing how to communicate. It usually ended before then, and she would know, she’d seen her fair share of couples throughout her life, those still together and those who were on their third or fourth long-term partner.

“Fifteen years. Sixteen this coming January.”

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“No shit!” Shock hit Lila. She couldn’t imagine being with someone that long and struggling to talk to them the entire time. What kind of connection Heidi must be missing. “How have you stayed together so long?”

“We love each other, and we both keep trying.”

“You’d have to.” She still could hardly fathom it. “Does she know about what happened to you?”

“She knows it happened. I told her that a few dates in, but she doesn’t know specifics.”

“Huh.”

“Why?”

“Seems like something she ought to know.”

“Why?” Heidi sounded like a broken record.

Shaking her head, Lila relaxed into the couch. “Because it matters to who you are, and how you perceive things, and how you react to things. Like, take me for instance. I do not like people taking pictures of me without express permission. When it comes to naked pictures or sex pictures? Not happening at all. I have never once sent a nude of myself to anyone, and I likely never will.”

“That makes sense.”

“But it has to make sense for you, too. I mean, how is your partner supposed to understand you if she doesn’t know you.”

Heidi grumbled, “She knows me. We’ve been together for years.”

“Yeah, but you said yourself you struggle to talk to each other.”

“Sometimes. Other times, we’re really good at it.”

“When?”

Heidi groaned. “This isn’t what I called to talk about.”

“All right.” Lila curled her hand into a fist and checked the time on her phone to make sure she wasn’t going to be late. “What did you call to talk about, then?”

“I don’t know.” Heidi sounded miserable again.

Lila bit the inside of her cheek. The conversation had been going smoothly up until that point. “Why don’t you tell me what conversations are off limits?”

“Nothing.”

“I’m confused, so can we go back to our previous conversation?”

“I don’t know.”

“Okay.” Lila softened her tone. She didn’t want to push Heidi to talk about anything she didn’t want to, but at the same time, she was so damn curious. It was to her own detriment most days, and today wasn’t going to be one of them. That she vowed. “Let’s talk about how you can woo your woman.”

Heidi chuckled, downright laughed at that. “Sure. Let’s talk about that.”

“Romance her.”

“I’m not even sure what that means.”

“Well, wine and dine her. Do something she loves, make sure she knows you’re doing it for her, make a big production of it, let her know that you love her, and then fuck her.”

Heidi choked. “What?”

“Fuck her.”

“Oh...um...maybe.”

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“What do you mean maybe? That’s the best way to tell a girl you love her sometimes. Not all the time, but it sounds like you both need it.”

“Yeah...probably. What should I do on a date?”

Lila hummed as she thought. What would she do on a date? What was she doing that night? It was a last minute date, so she hadn’t had a lot of time to prepare or plan for anything. “Do what I did the other night. Make one of her favorite meals, set the table, light candles. Yes! All the candles.”

Heidi giggled. “We don’t have many candles.”

“Why not? I can bring you some to borrow if you want. I have tons.”

“I think I can get my own, but thank you for the offer.”

“Right, so candles. Your preferred perfume everywhere so she can’t escape you—”

“This sounds like a seduction.”

“Well, it is. All dating is a seduction of some sort. You want to seduce her into listening, into caring, and she likewise. It’s not just about sex though, it’s about being seduced into the depth of a connection with each other.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“I am right.” Lila wrinkled her nose at herself. “I do hate to cut this short, but I have

to get ready for tonight.”

“That’s okay, thanks for answering when you did.”

“Anytime for you, Heidi. Please know that, and please trust it. I will answer for you, and I wish you’d talk to someone about what happened to you. If not her, then me. I’m here to listen if you want, and I do understand some of it even if I haven’t experienced the exact same thing you have.”

Heidi sucked in a breath. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Lila smiled. “And I do hope you’ll call soon. If not, I’ll have to call you.”

Laughing, Heidi answered, “I wouldn’t mind that, you know.”

“Wouldshe?” Lila waited with anticipation for an answer, not wanting to cross any boundaries that were invisible to her in Heidi’s relationship. She always was careful. She always asked. She always made sure.

“No, she wouldn’t mind.”

“Good.” Grinning, Lila looked out the front window of her apartment to the darkening sky. “I look forward to it then, and maybe you and I can do lunch or dinner sometime.”

“I would like that.”

“Awesome. I’ll talk to you later, Heidi.” Lila loved the way her name rolled off her tongue, the feel of it as she said the word.

“Bye.”

Hanging up, Lila sighed and sat in the moment for a few minutes before forcing herself to get up and finish putting her make up on. Like she'd told Heidi, she needed to prepare in order to seduce.

* * *

The knock on Lila's door set her heart skittering. She walked in her colorful wool socks to the front door, opening it with a smile on her lips and a lightness to her step. As soon as she saw the woman standing on the other side with her short dark salt-and-pepper hair, her dark eyes, her short stature with wide hips, Lila knew she was done for.

“Right on time, Ann.” Grabbing Ann by the front of her shirt and pulling her forward for a deep kiss, Lila grinned. Ann molded against her, their bodies curving together as every ounce of tension released from Ann's shoulders and went out the door.

Ann lifted a hand and curved it around Lila's cheek, moaning lightly as she pulled back and returned the grin. “I try to be.”

Giggling, Lila stepped to the side to let Ann in the rest of the way. “I didn't know what you'd want for dinner, so I just made enchiladas.”

“Anything will do, really. Lunch was quick and not filling.” Ann heaved a sigh and pulled at the buttons on her jacket until she got it off and hung it up in the closet by the front door.

“How was work?”

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“Long.” Ann settled her shoes on the floor under her jacket before shutting the door and turning to Lila. “But it’s good to see you as a way to finish out the night.”

Lila’s cheeks heated. She loved the way Ann talked to her—ruthless and full of passion. Like she was absolutely desirable in every way. Ann liked to be talked to like that too. Pecking Ann’s lips once more, Lila headed into the kitchen to pull out the dinner she’d made. She plated their meals and dropped onto the couch with them, handing one over.

“It looks delicious.”

“It better be. It took me a whole twenty minutes to make.” Lila winked. “So what’s going on? You lose a patient or something? You’re not usually one to make such last-minute plans.”

Ann shrugged ever so slightly, but she wouldn’t look Lila in the eye. That pretty much told Lila right there what the problem was—home. She tried to stay out of Ann’s relationship as much as she could, per her request, but some days it was hard to ignore how dysfunctional Ann’s relationship had become.

“Do you want to leave her?”

“No,” Ann tersely replied. “No, I don’t want to leave her. I want...I want to be able to talk to her.”

“So talk.”

Ann groaned. “I try, and I fail. But really, I’m not here to talk about that.”

Lila’s tongue peeked out from between her lips. “Sure you’re not.”

Sending her a mock glare, Ann held up her plate. “This is good.”

“Glad I could oblige.” An uneasiness settled in the pit of Lila’s stomach. She never wanted to pull Ann away from her partner. Rather, she wanted to bring them together. She didn’t want Ann for herself—never. That wasn’t how she operated or how she fell in love. She was independent, and she loved having freedom and living by herself.

“Would you say yes to a weekend away?”

“What?” Lila stiffened, facing Ann fully. In all the time they had been together, Ann had never made such a request. Evenings here and there were all she had ever wanted. “Why?”

Ann gave a slight shrug. “I think I need to get away a bit longer, have some more time.”

“But you want company?” Lila couldn’t tear her gaze away from Ann’s face, from the lines that had deepened in the last few months, to the bags under her eyes, and the weariness that seemed permanently settled in her posture as of late.

“I do.” Ann raked a heated gaze over Lila. “Company would be most welcome, and a nice distraction.”

“Distraction?” Lila’s tone was serious even though she wanted it to be flirty. She knew it hadn’t come off like Ann had meant it. She knew after nearly a year of being together that Ann valued her far more than a simple distraction.

“Hmm, yes, you are quite good at distracting.” If Ann could gobble her up in one bite based on the look she was getting, Lila was pretty sure she would.

Giggling lightly, Lila set her plate down. “Now what would you need distracting from? Hmm?”

Ann scoffed and shoved another bite of enchilada in her mouth. Lila tried to hold back the smirk threatening to overtake her. She wanted to push Ann into talking or at least thinking about what was happening. Avoiding never did Ann good, although she was good at it.

“I know you don’t want to talk about your marital problems—”

“We’re not married,” Ann said clipped.

“Right, but you’ve been together for a long time, so in lieu of another word, I know you don’t want to talk about your problems with your long-term partner, but I am here to listen if you want. It’d be better if you’d talk to her about it, though.”

“I’ve tried to talk with her, Lila. Really I have. And we just...never seem to hear each other.”

Lila narrowed her gaze. “Then you need to learn how to listen as well as how to speak.”

“You’re too young to be this damn wise. Stop it.” Ann pouted.

Lila finished her dinner and relaxed. “I’m serious.”

“I know you are. Really. I didn’t come here to talk about her.”

“Then talk to me about something.”

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“I want to go away for a weekend.” Ann finished her dinner and curled into Lila’s side.

Lila trailed her fingers through Ann’s hair, running a single fingertip over the shell of Ann’s ear, feeling her shudder in reaction. “Where would we go? Denver? Kansas City? Amarillo?”

“No. Too far. I heard of a B&B about an hour or so from here.”

“You want to stay in Kansas?”

“Why not? It’s home.” Ann pressed her palm to Lila’s thigh. “It’s far enough away but close enough to come back if we need to.”

“Why would we need to come back?”

Ann squeezed. “Just in case. I don’t want to go too far.”

“So you want to go to a B&B in the middle of Western Kansas as two women in a relationship. Will they even allow us in the building?” Lila stretched her legs out on the coffee table. “Because it’s hard enough being out here, but you’re talking about going to the most rural part of America in the heart of the Bible belt as a couple.”

“I know.” Ann tilted her chin up. “But this place is different.”

“How do you know?”

“Just trust me.”

“No. How do you know?”

“I just know.”

“Tell me.” Lila poked her finger into Ann’s side, getting the bodily jerk and narrowed gaze she’d expected in reaction.

“No.”

“Tell me.” Wiggling her fingers, Lila tickled Ann’s sides. Ann twisted against Lila, trying to break the contact. Lila only dug in deeper to make her point.

Ann laughed. “All right. Uncle! Uncle!”

“So, tell me.” Lila eyed her suspiciously and didn’t move her hands from Ann’s sides. She wasn’t going to give up the opportunity to taunt her girlfriend if she could. She wanted to tease her into submission.

“It’s on the website.”

“It is not.” Lila jerked up. “What’s the name of it?”

“It is. It’s so subtle I’m sure most people miss it, but there’s a flag in the top corner of the website.”

“Are you sure?” Lila narrowed her gaze again.

“I am. I swear!” Ann put her hands up in the air. “I checked some of the reviews online, too.”

“So do you think whoever runs it is...”

“I don’t care, really. If they’re friendly and open, then I’ll support them in any way I can.”

Lila raised an eyebrow and nodded. “I can get on board with that.”

“So do you want to go?” Ann looked so lost, as though Lila’s answer was the only thing that would make her world spin on the right axis.

“Yes, I’ll go with you.”

Ann’s dark eyes lit up like it was Christmas morning. She leaned in and kissed Lila loudly. “I promise you, it’ll be worth it.”

“I know it will be.” Lila wrapped her arm around Ann’s shoulders, holding on to her tightly. “What will we do all weekend?”

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“I don’t know. Most of the activities on the website are for summer stays. Since we’re heading straight into winter...”

“I guess we can find something.”

“There’s a fireplace.”

“That’ll be nice.” Lila dropped a kiss onto Ann’s head. “We can have s’mores.”

“Sure.” Ann traced lazy patterns on Lila’s thigh. “Maybe with wine.”

“Definitely with wine.” Lifting Ann’s chin, Lila kissed her gently. “I’d love to spend more than a couple hours with you.”

“Then let’s do it. I’ll plan it, you just tell me which weekend.”

“Any of them. All my weekends are free right now.”

“Perfect.” Ann moved in and kissed Lila fully, lingering but not deepening the kiss.

This must have been what Ann was after the entire time—comfort and someone who wouldn’t push. At least not yet. Lila didn’t want Ann’s relationship to end simply because one or the both of them were stubborn. She didn’t know much about Ann’s partner, since they kept those worlds so completely separate from the other, but what she did know was any type of miscommunication in a relationship, especially one that continued, could easily be the death of it.

“How late can you stay tonight?”

“Not too much longer,” Ann whispered. “Maybe for dessert.”

“Then let’s eat. I think I’ve got some ice cream left over.”

“That sounds perfect.”

Together they got up and headed for the kitchen. Lila would give Ann everything she could. Ann gave her just as much, whether she knew it or not. In fact, Lila should tell her what that was much more often than she did. When they got their weekend away, Lila would make sure Ann knew exactly how she felt.

CHAPTER 7

It took Ann two days to be able to sit down at a computer and make a plan. Lila had agreed, and while she wanted to book their two days away, she needed to talk to Heidi first. She had another five minutes before Heidi should be home and they could talk. It was the first time she’d asked for a weekend away, and she wasn’t really sure how Heidi would take it.

When they had decided to open their relationship, neither had any idea how it would work out, and a lot of what had resulted was lack of communication about exactly what was happening. They talked for ages about opening their relationship and then there had been no talk about anything shortly after that. Not ideal, but it was what it was. It was also something they both needed to work on.

Leaning back in the chair at the desk, Ann crossed her arms over her belly as it roiled with its disapproval. Yeah. They did need to work on communication. Everything she’d shared with Lila had been true. She and Heidi needed to talk, way more than they currently did, and there might be something to Lila’s comment—Ann needed to

learn to listen. She hadn't wanted to hear it then, and even two days later it was hard to admit. She was so used to paying attention to details because of her job, but with Heidi it was often like there were no details to be seen.

Her head hurt just trying to think about it. How could she listen better? It was absolutely something they both needed to work on. The front door snicked open, Heidi coming in after her long day at work while Ann had the entire day off. Ann twisted her office chair toward the door. It was now or never.

Standing, she walked out toward the living room, her toes squishing into the carpet with each step as she went. She'd spent the day relaxing as best as she could, needing the time after all the extra hours she'd been putting in lately. She should probably say no to so much overtime, or at least do less, but work was also a welcome distraction some days. And it gave her an excuse to get into town to see Lila.

"How was work?"

Heidi shrugged as she pulled off her jacket, her face neutral. This was what made it so damn hard to read her just about every moment of every day. Ann clenched her jaw, eyeing Heidi suspiciously.

"I thought we could do dinner and a movie tonight," Heidi said, not looking at Ann.

"Sure. What are we watching?"

"You pick something." Heidi shoved her shoes and jacket in the closet before facing Ann and kissing her lightly on the lips. "Hi."

"Hi. So how was work?"

"It was work."

“Rough day?” Ann put her hands on her hips.

“Not really.” Heidi moved toward the kitchen. “You didn’t cook?”

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It hadn't even occurred to Ann to start dinner. She wasn't hungry as she'd had a late lunch after an early morning nap, and the fact Heidi just expected her to cook when she was home—it was frustrating most days. “Didn't get to it yet.”

“That's okay, I guess.” Heidi reached under the cabinet and pulled out a pot. “I can make some stir-fry with noodles really quick.”

Ann sighed, leaning against the door frame. “Did you have plans for us coming up?”

Heidi turned on her, raising an eyebrow, her thin face looking even more gaunt than it normally did. Ann's stomach clenched, worried her request was going to be too much, that something else might be going on that she couldn't see.

“No, did you want to plan something?” Heidi turned the gas stove on.

Ann's cheeks heated. She couldn't tell if Heidi expected her to be planning something for the two of them, but either way, her stomach plummeted with the thought that Heidi was not going to expect her next request. There was no good way to skirt around it anymore either.

“I was thinking about taking a weekend with my girlfriend.”

“Your girlfriend?” Heidi's jaw clenched tightly, the muscles in her cheeks working overtime.

“Yeah. I thought it might be nice to take her somewhere and get away.”

“I see.” Heidi’s tone dropped, and she moved to the fridge, grabbing some vegetables before setting them on the counter.

“So I wanted to make sure you didn’t have anything planned for us.”

“No. Nothing.” Heidi wouldn’t look at her.

Ann stepped away from the door and moved to stand right next to Heidi, brushing a hand as tenderly as possible down her arm. “We talked about this.”

“We did. And I have no issues with you wanting to take your girlfriend out for the weekend. You know that. This isn’t jealousy.”

Ann’s lips thinned. If it wasn’t jealousy, then she didn’t know what it was, because that was all it felt like. “You know you have the freedom to find someone else to be with too, if you want.”

Heidi dropped oil into the hot skillet. “I’m well aware of our open relationship.”

“Don’t you want someone else? Someone who can give you something I can’t?” Ann touched Heidi’s arm briefly, but Heidi jerked away.

“This has nothing to do with that, and you know it.”

“I don’t know it. Please, tell me what I’m missing.”

Heidi glared at her. Ann closed her eyes, listening to the oil sizzle, Heidi’s rapid breaths, her own heart thundering.

“Please, Heidi. I want to know.”

“Maybe it is jealousy, but not because you’re with her. I have been trying over here to meet you where you’re at, to connect with you, to do something to get your attention, and everything I do seems to fail.”

“What?” Ann’s eyes widened. “What are you talking about?”

“That.” Heidi pointed the knife at Ann. “Exactly that.”

Ann stood stunned as Heidi went back to chopping the vegetables for dinner. Heidi wasn’t wrong. She did on occasion put more effort into dates with Lila and spending time with her because Lila liked to be romanced. Heidi always seemed to spurn it every time she’d tried with her.

“I don’t know what you want me to do.”

Heidi dropped the vegetables into the skillet angrily. “Maybe acknowledge that this is a two-way street, and that while I have been trying, you have not been.”

“But I have, Heidi!” Ann’s voice rose in pitch, desperate for Heidi to hear her or see what she was doing. “I have tried. I try every damn day to connect with you and you turn me down all the time.”

“You’re talking about sex,” Heidi accused.

“It’s not just sex.” Exasperated, Ann threw her hands in the air and spun around toward the living room, stalking toward the door before heading back. “It’s not just about sex. I swear.”

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“That’s the only time you get mad is when we’re talking about sex.”

“So I want to fuck my partner. Sue me for it. I’m not sorry about it, and you shouldn’t be either. Sex is a good thing. It’s a healthy thing. It’s something both of us should want.”

Heidi glared. “I never said I didn’t want sex.”

“Then why the hell do you tell me no all the time?” Ann could have punched the wall. They’d done so well at avoiding this argument for a month now, but it seemed as if they were fighting about sex once a month at minimum. It made her head hurt, her heart hurt, her entire body hurt. She hated it.

Sex was so much easier with Lila. They understood each other. They wanted each other. But every time it came to sex with Heidi, Ann couldn’t help but feel like it was a pity fuck whenever Heidi couldn’t say no yet again. She needed to know that Heidi wanted her, needed her, wanted to fuck her brains out.

Heidi glared. Ann struggled to even remember the question she had asked. Heidi drew in a slow, steady breath before she moved the food around in the skillet. “Take your girlfriend out for the weekend if you want, Ann. It’s fine.”

“It doesn’t sound fine.”

“It is fine. But don’t forget that you are also in a relationship with me, and while it might not be easier, I do hope you want to stay with me.”

Ann immediately softened. She saw the flash of pain across Heidi's gaze, that fear, that incessant inability to understand that they both seemed to experience regularly. Ann took a risk, one she wouldn't often take, and she moved in close to Heidi, wrapping her arms around Heidi's shoulders and dragging her in to kiss her on the side of the head. "I love you."

"I love you, too," Heidi mumbled in response.

"I could never forget you."

Heidi nodded wordlessly.

"I'm serious."

"I know you mean it."

"Good. Now believe it. I could never and will never forget you."

"Okay." Heidi moved forward to stir the food.

Ann let her go, knowing Heidi didn't care to be restrained in any way. She stayed as close as she could for the time being, wanting Heidi to know that she truly did care, that she wanted to be there, that they would work together no matter how much work it took. "Maybe we should plan a weekend just you and me sometime, or if you ever end up with someone else, all of us."

Heidi jerked her head around. "You would want to meet who I might potentially date on the side?"

"Yeah, why not? They might have some secret insight into your evasiveness."

“My what?” Heidi’s lips parted.

“You’re very good at avoiding the real issue or emotion. Not sure if you’ve ever noticed that, but you’re utterly brilliant, Heidi, and you can essentially get out of any conversation you want because you’re smart enough to avoid it and change the topic so subtly people don’t even know what you’re doing.”

“What are you even talking about?” Heidi turned off the skillet and dropped in the rice noodles along with some water and seasoning.

“Sometimes it pisses me off how well you do it.”

“I’m not avoiding anything.”

“Sure you’re not. I’ll take you on a weekend sometime, I promise.”

“Are you serious?” Heidi turned to face Ann fully.

“Yes.”

“I would love that.”

“Good.” Ann leaned in and kissed Heidi quickly. “Dinner about ready? I’m starving.”

Heidi rolled her eyes but plated their meals.

* * *

Every mile she drove away from home, the more relaxed she became. The stress she'd carried with her for weeks ebbed away, allowing room for freedom and deep breaths. It had been a whim of a suggestion weeks ago that she'd made to Lila, but Ann hadn't realized then just how much she really needed the break.

It wasn't until she'd started all the planning that she truly understood how much she needed to get away to refocus her mind and her energy, just how much she needed the one-on-one time with Lila without having to worry about Heidi. Sure, she was still going to worry about Heidi, but at least they had some physical distance between them to help with that.

For the last few weeks, she'd tried to encourage Heidi to plan something fun while she was gone, to spend some time and money on herself, maybe even go on a date. Heidi had seemed so resistant to it all, though, and eventually Ann had given up trying.

Lila sat next to her in the passenger seat of her car, staring out the window as the sun set outside. They hadn't been able to leave until Lila was off work that day, so most of their drive would be in the dark. It just meant Ann would wait until they headed home in two days to soak in the drive through the high plains.

She'd lived in other places, but she'd found her home here. She loved the wide-open skies with white streaks from planes above, the sunsets and sunrises she usually managed to catch that painted the sky and clouds in ways she'd never seen. This was home, and she didn't want to live anywhere else. If she truly thought about it, Heidi

was also her home. Heidi was what centered her world and rooted her to everything she cared about. She needed Heidi.

Lila sighed next to her. “It’s so pretty out here.”

“I was just thinking that.” Reaching over, Ann gripped Lila’s hand and squeezed. “Beautiful like the woman sitting next to me.”

Lila’s cheeks flushed. “Nice compliment there.”

“I try.” Ann winked. “I wish we’d been able to leave a little earlier so we could enjoy the sunset more, but we’ll have to enjoy it on the way home.”

“Very true. We can sit outside tomorrow night too and watch it if you want. I saw this place has a wraparound porch.”

“It does. We could bring out wine and enjoy it.”

“And each other.” Lila winked, her lips quirking upward.

Ann planned on enjoying Lila as much as humanly possibly during the two days they had. She didn’t want to let any of that time go to waste. It had been a relatively big ask for her from Heidi, and they both knew it. She was going to make the most of every second.

Turning down the dirt road off the highway, Ann drove the last few miles to Indigo B&B. As soon as she rounded the top ridge and the final curve in the long drive, Lila drew in an astonished breath. Ann barely held back her gasp. This place was amazing. The house was white and stood proud against the plains. Trees surrounded it, but quickly dissipated as the fields of wheat and pasture took over.

The house sat above the huge red barn, a steep hill between the two of them. Ann could see where trails led from the house out in the surrounding areas. She remembered something about hiking trails from the house, but hadn't paid too much attention. The last thing she wanted to do was go on a long hike.

"This house is huge," Lila muttered.

"It really is. It looks like they're building something in the back."

"I saw something on the website about planning for weddings in the summer."

"Must be a gazebo or something then."

"Probably. I can't believe you found this place."

"Me either." Murmuring, Ann pulled up to the porch and parked the car. "You ready?"

"Absolutely."

Ann sat on the edge of the queen-sized bed as Lila flopped onto the other side of it. Indigo was as beautiful as the pictures had made it out to be. She stretched her back from the long drive, easing the tension in her muscles. It had been a long two weeks since she'd floated the idea to Lila, but it had been worth it.

Heidi had seemed to withdraw after the conversation, but she still showed up for their random weekly lunches at the hospital, more and more frequently. Two nights was all she'd managed to snag, and even being miles away from home, her thoughts were occupied by Heidi and what she was doing or thinking or feeling.

Ann moved to toe off her shoes and lie fully on the bed. Lila slid in to snuggle against

her, her body curving into Ann's side as Ann stared across the room at the updated farmhouse decor.

"What are you thinking?" Lila asked quietly.

"That I really needed this. Thank you for coming with me."

Lila grinned, leaning in and kissing Ann's lips lightly. "I think it'll be a fun adventure for the both of us. We've never spent more than half a day together."

"True." Ann shifted her focus as best as she could to Lila, pushing Heidi and the troubles in their relationship from her mind. It wasn't the easiest task in the world, but being farther from home, being in a new place where she only had Lila, certainly helped. "Want to break in the bed?"

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Giggling, Lila pushed up and pressed a hand to Ann's chest as she held herself steady. "Sometimes you're insatiable. Did you know that?"

Ann stiffened. Heidi accused her of the same thing often enough, but Lila's tone was different. "Yeah, but you like it."

"I do." Lila moved onto her knees deftly, straddling Ann on the far side of the bed. "I really do."

Bending down, Lila planted her mouth against Ann's and trailed her fingertips gently over Ann's chest so they barely touched anything through her clothes. Ann parted her lips, deepening the embrace as Lila rocked her hips on top of her. She loved how Lila could go from zero to ready at the snap of fingers. It made her feel so wanted, so desirable. Unlike with Heidi, where sex was always like pulling teeth and so normalized and routine that there was never any room to play or to try something new.

Ann reached for the edge of Lila's shirt and dragged it over her head, dropping it somewhere she couldn't see. As soon as she could access Lila's breasts, she moved to cover them with her hands, squeezing, teasing, touching. Lila rocked her hips again before breaking the kiss and straightening her back to sit astride Ann.

"You're such a boob woman sometimes."

"You have nice tits, what can I say? I like them."

Lila snorted as she reached behind her and flipped the clasp on her bra, dropping the

offending item to the floor below. She leaned down and whispered in Ann's ear, "I like yours, too."

Ann flicked Lila's nipple before surging forward and covering it with her mouth. Sliding the flat of her tongue along it before teasing it to a point. Lila moaned, her entire body tense and taut. It was perfect. Ann held on tight to Lila's hips as she moved to her other breast.

"That feels so good," Lila muttered. "But it's your turn."

Lila pushed Ann down onto the pillow and worked on Ann's pants. Eventually Ann moved to help, wiggling around on the mattress so Lila could strip off her pants. Sitting up, Ann pulled off her shirt while Lila tugged off the rest of her clothes. Lila always preferred the quick method to getting undressed rather than the slow tedious way. Ann could take it either way. Sometimes clothes added a fun extra barrier to work through.

Once again flat on her back with Lila on top of her, Ann skated her fingers up Lila's thighs as she raised an eyebrow, wondering just what Lila was going to do next. Bending down, Lila pressed kisses to Ann's lips, her chin, her neck, her chest. She stopped every once in a while to swirl her tongue in odd and random directions.

Ann grinned as Lila moved lower, getting an idea of her own. Turning on her side, she effectively dumped Lila onto the mattress next to her. Ann sat up and spun her finger in a circle, indicating she wanted Lila to flip around. The echoing grin was all she needed to know she'd made the right decision.

Parting her legs as she lay on her side, Ann waited for Lila to get into the right position. She loved how adventuresome Lila was. The pairing of the two of them sexually was damn near perfect. It had been the right decision to open her relationship with Heidi to allow for this. It had calmed a storm that had raged for

years, but it also allowed them each to explore—though Ann knew Heidi had done very little of that. She'd gone on a few dates here and there over the years, but Ann was pretty sure Heidi hadn't done anything more.

A nip to her thigh reminded her to focus. Ann pushed thoughts of Heidi from her mind to focus on the beautiful woman in front of her. This was why she'd come here. For distraction, to get away, to refocus on what she needed to think about—how to find a better balance.

CHAPTER 8

The house had seemed lonely, and Heidi would be the first to admit, she hated sleeping there by herself. It wasn't that she was lonely, but that she was alone, and there was a distinct difference between the two. They'd agreed to an open relationship years ago. Heidi and Ann had spent so many months and even years in conversation about whether or not to open their partnership.

She knew it'd always been a possibility from the beginning, that Ann had tended in that direction and she wasn't opposed to it. She wasn't jealous or hurt by Ann wanting to spend time with another woman. She was hurt because she couldn't figure out if Ann wanted to spend time with her.

Some days they seemed to do so well, and then there were weeks in between when neither seemed to ever be able to get it right. She had no doubt that Ann loved her. What she doubted was if Ann liked her.

Flicking on the television to add some noise to the house and distract her from the insane quiet that had fallen within its walls, Heidi made herself an easy dinner and sat on the couch. She knew she wasn't the simplest person to live with let alone be in a relationship with. People had broken up with her before Ann, and it wasn't because they'd fallen out of love with her. It was because her trauma and her closed-off

attitude were too difficult for them to deal with.

To be fair, it was often too difficult for her to deal with, and she mostly ignored it. Heidi ate slowly, staring at the television but not really seeing what was on the screen. She was lost in her own thoughts, her own worries, her own trauma. She should have sex with Ann more often. She knew that. For the last fifteen years, she had wanted to push herself to say yes instead of no so often. But then that moment would come when she'd have to answer, and she'd respond before she could think about what she wanted to say.

Checking her phone, Heidi looked to see if Ann had texted to at least tell her they had arrived safely. But there was nothing. Heidi's thumb hovered over the digital keys as she debated whether or not to say something. She didn't want to seem clingy, as though she couldn't handle a weekend without Ann, but she also wanted Ann to know that she cared.

Scoffing, Heidi dropped the phone. No decision would be right, even a non-decision in this case. She really wished she'd been afforded the opportunities Lila had, but therapy had been so different back when she was growing up. Even just those fifteen or twenty years between them made all the difference.

When she was a kid, no one talked about the creepy uncle who only came over for big family dinners. Now they were the talk of the town. She often wondered what it would have meant if she'd opened up and said something sooner, if she'd confessed it to someone before she was twelve and pregnant and had no choice but to tell.

Her heart thundered. Heidi's cheeks heated. She closed her eyes, drawing in slow deep breaths. She had no idea how long she sat there, but when she looked up at the television, a new show was on and she felt much calmer than before. She really should not trigger herself into a flashback without Ann around.

Drawing her phone closer, Heidi sent the text to check in. Surely fifteen years together would earn her the expectation of some type of a response. It wasn't more than five minutes before Ann answered with an apology and affirmation that they had arrived safe. A smile blossomed on Heidi's lips unbidden. It felt so good to be acknowledged.

If Ann felt comfortable enough to leave for a weekend with her girlfriend, surely Heidi could do the same. She'd never taken Ann up on the opportunity to find herself another partner. She always struggled to keep up with Ann and never thought she could handle two, but maybe it wouldn't be as hard as she thought. She didn't want a long-term committed relationship like she had with Ann, just someone else who could be there for her. Maybe it would even give Ann a break from being the sole person Heidi relied on.

Picking her phone up again, Heidi didn't hesitate this time as she dialed the newest addition to her contact list. This time she was calm as the phone rang. Lila would be the perfect person to talk to. They already had a connection, one that went deeper than simply being attracted to women. They were both survivors, and that meant something.

"Hey, I didn't think I'd hear from you so soon."

Heidi's lips curled upward. "Thought I might surprise you with a call."

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“Yeah? I like surprises like that.” A gentle flirting tone entered her voice.

Heidi envied the ease Lila had in life thanks to proper therapy and recovery. It wasn’t for the first time. “Then I should surprise you more often.”

“Oh, I’d like that.” Lila giggled lightly. “What are you up to this weekend?”

“Not much at all. Eating dinner and watching television, nothing fancy.”

“Do you have to work?”

“Not unless I get called in.” Heidi shifted the plate onto the coffee table and curled her feet under her body so she could sit more comfortably. “Are you busy this weekend?”

“I am, unfortunately. Otherwise, I’d love to hang out with you again.”

“I would too,” Heidi’s voice was gentle.

What she was about to say would change the trajectory of their relationship. She was going to put the ball in Lila’s court and see if more than mere friendship was possible for them. If not, she hoped they could go back to the way it was, because surely Lila was someone who would be good for her to have around. Heidi wasn’t entirely sure what Lila got out of the friendship, but perhaps it wasn’t so different from what Heidi would receive. They were both survivors, and that was a connection they couldn’t deny.

“My partner and I have an open relationship, you know. I didn’t mention that to you before.”

Heidi wished she could see Lila instead of just listening to her voice. It would give her far more insight into what Lila was thinking and feeling, but she’d have to make do with what she had. “Is that so?”

It could have been a teasing tone or it could have simply been a curious tone. Heidi didn’t know Lila well enough to be able to determine one way or the other. And she was almost too scared to ask for clarification.

“It is.” Heidi relaxed into the arm of the couch. “You had mentioned something about being in poly relationships.”

“Yes. It’s the only type of relationship I will be in.” Lila went from flirtatious to serious.

“No one gets jealous?” Heidi genuinely wanted to know. She couldn’t imagine not being in a long-term partnership with anyone other than Ann.

“No, not if everyone is on the same page. These types of relationships take a lot of communication.”

“They do, even when it’s just an open relationship.”

“Is your partner with someone?”

“She has someone she sees occasionally, but no other long-term relationship. Only me. That’s what we decided we wanted. No other long-term relationships, just the two of us with partners.”

“And it’s working well so far?” Lila’s question seemed genuine, not as though she was trying to pry and find holes but as though she really wanted to know.

“It is, I think. I haven’t found anyone else, but she has, and it seems to have added a balance we were missing before.” The connection between them grew. Heidi couldn’t deny it, but she was being so honest where normally she held back. Something about Lila pulled her to share. She missed that with Ann. They’d had that once, but over the years, Heidi had done everything she could to protect Ann from her own trauma, and that had caused them to pull apart from each other. It wasn’t a good combination.

“I’m glad it’s working, then. Do you have to share with your partner who you’re with?”

“No, only if she wants to know, but no.”

“Ah. What other boundaries do you have in place?”

Heidi’s tongue dashed across her lips as she settled into the conversation. “Never here. Mostly because the logistics of figuring out when someone isn’t going to be home is a bit much.”

“I can understand that. You don’t have as much freedom of space as I do.”

“I don’t.” Even though she was home by herself the entire weekend and Ann would never know, that had been a boundary they’d set in place and one Heidi was determined to keep. Heidi was slower to form bonds with people than Ann anyway. Heidi was not built for quick one-night stands. She’d never had them and never planned on it. Ann, however, could and would do so. Not frequently, but she could have sex without an emotional bond or a need for a sense of safety.

“I have a question for you, Heidi.”

“Yes?” Heidi refocused her attention back on the conversation at hand.

“Are you telling me this because you’re interested in something more with me or are you telling me this because you’re interested in how being poly works in my life?”

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It sounded almost like a trick question, but she supposed it was fair. “Can the answer be both?”

“Yes, but the answer cannot be a question.” That flirtatious tone was back. It warmed Heidi.

“Then both.”

“Good. I’d like to get to know you better in that context, too. However, I’m busy this weekend.”

“Yes, such a pity.” Heidi grinned. “I guess I’ll have to wait for you to have time.”

“You will. I hate to cut this conversation short, but I do have to go. I’ll call you, okay?”

“Yeah. Talk to you soon, Lila.”

“See you soon.”

Just as Heidi hung up, her phone rang again. The number was one she recognized, and it wasn’t one she necessarily wanted to answer. “This is Heidi Lewis.”

“This is Kayla from the Police Department. We have a girl here who was picked up along with her mother and step-father.”

“All right. Where is she at?”

“She’s currently at the hospital in the emergency room while she’s checked over. She will need temporary housing.”

“Right.” Heidi dragged herself from the couch, preparing to go in to work. She got the rest of the information she needed, pulled her shoes on, and put her plate in the kitchen before locking up the house and getting in her car.

The drive to town took her about thirty minutes, and when she pulled up at the hospital, she bolstered herself for what was to come. This was not going to be an easy case. As soon as she saw the girl on the gurney, her heart broke. The police department had told her she was twelve but she looked like she was ten. Malnourished for sure, but the bump on her stomach told Heidi immediately she was either pregnant or had been recently.

“Hi, my name is Heidi. I’m a social worker.”

The girl stared at her blankly with those big brown eyes. Heidi wished she could scoop her up and protect her from everything, but she couldn’t. She was going to have to make her dig deeper into the trauma before she could. It was the worst part about her job.

“The police told me your name is Makenzie.”

The girl didn’t even respond, her cheeks staying motionless as she stared.

“I’m going to have to ask you a few questions, and I hope you’ll help me in answering them. You won’t be going back with your parents.”

Again, Heidi was greeted with silence. She dragged over a chair so she could sit next to Makenzie’s bed and pulled out her notebook so she could write things down.

“I want you to know that everything you tell me stays between us as much as it can, but I have to share some of the information. I’ll only tell the police and those who need to know, okay? No one else will find out, including your parents.”

Makenzie at least moved her gaze to Heidi. That was a decent sign, although Heidi was concerned about how despondent she was.

“Can you tell me what happened tonight?”

“Cops showed.” Makenzie sounded as young as she looked. Her voice was high-pitched, not having dropped at all.

“Do you know why?”

Makenzie shook her head slowly, her matted brown hair moving off her neck and shoulder, showing fresh bruising and old bruising littering her pale skin. Heidi’s stomach clenched.

“Are you pregnant?”

Once again, Makenzie’s head moved back and forth in a negative response.

“Were you?”

“Baby died.”

“How far along were you?”

Makenzie’s eyes watered as she blinked to try and push the tears away. “Nine months.”

Heidi’s heart broke. “What happened?”

“He didn’t want a grandbaby.”

“Your step-father?”

The nod was slight, but it was enough of an answer.

“Do you know who the father of the baby was?”

“Not him.”

That was a blessing, whether Makenzie knew it or not. Still, it left a lot of questions that needed to be answered. Heidi was pretty sure they’d be talking for months to get out everything that had happened. “All right. The nurses are going to have to come in here and do a rape kit. Do you want me to stay with you for that?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Heidi remained with her through the examination. She stayed with Makenzie for hours until she was sleeping soundly and calm. Stepping out of the hospital room for the night, Heidi walked straight to her car. The entire drive home, tears ran down her

cheeks. The horrors Makenzie had recounted certainly only touched the surface of what had happened to her. The biggest of those being the birth of her baby boy, and she had no idea where he was.

He'd been stillborn, which Makenzie knew was going to happen after her stepfather had beaten her into labor. Then he'd left her alone to deliver by herself before returning and taking the dead baby. She'd named him Isaiah.

As she pulled into the driveway at her house, Heidi had to force her legs to move to get out of the car. When she got into the living room, she collapsed onto the couch in the fetal position and could barely move. She checked her phone, finding a text from Ann. She did the only thing she could and dialed.

"Heidi?"

Tears streamed down her cheeks again after she'd just gotten them to stop. Her voice hitched. She couldn't even form a word.

"Heidi. What's wrong?"

"I just... Ann..."

"What happened?"

"I'm fine."

"You're not." Worry etched every syllable in Ann's voice. "You're not. What's going on?"

"New case."

“I’m coming home.”

“No.” Heidi brushed her fingers over her cheeks, trying to strengthen herself. She could do this. She didn’t need Ann to give up her weekend away just because she couldn’t handle her job and life. She was stronger than this. “No, I’m fine.”

“You’re not. I can come home. I made sure to stay close just in case.”

Guilt swarmed Heidi’s belly. She’d thought Ann had stayed close just because, but to know it was because of her? That was nearly too much. She wiped her eyes, the tears stinging now as they dried. “I’ll be fine. I just... I needed to hear your voice.”

“Talk to me, then.”

Heidi sighed. “She... it’s so similar, Ann. I don’t even know how to describe it.”

“Similar to what you experienced?”

Heidi nodded before she realized Ann couldn’t see her. She forced out a “Yeah.”

“Honey. Please, I’ll come home.”

“I don’t want to ruin your weekend. I’ll be fine.”

“You need someone there to take care of you.”

Her initial retort that she could take care of herself died on her tongue. She obviously couldn’t. She barely even made it home before giving in and calling Ann. She needed someone to pull her together, to keep her together, and right now, Ann was the only one who could do that.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come home?”

“You’re coming home tomorrow, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then come home tomorrow.” Heidi sighed, knowing she likely wouldn’t get a wink of sleep that night, but she wasn’t willing to let her trauma be something Ann would have to sacrifice for. “I’ll be fine until then.”

“Are you absolutely sure? It’s no problem. I can come home right now.”

“Stay, Ann. I don’t want you to leave just because of me and my stupid triggers.” Heidi closed her eyes, blocking out the pain in her chest. She hated when she ended up in a flashback, in a world of pain and hurt that she’d escaped from. “Stay.”

“What if I want to come home?” Ann’s voice was steadier now, not as worried, but Heidi could tell she was still trying to make a decision.

“Stay. I’ll talk to you for a bit longer, okay?”

“Okay. Want me to distract you?”

Heidi bit her lip. She wasn’t sure what she wanted Ann to do, if she wanted her to distract or comfort. She knew if Ann was there, she would want to be held tightly. She would want Ann to wrap her arms around her and protect her from anything that might pop up in the middle of the night. The biggest problem Heidi foresaw was that she was going to have to go back to that hospital room in the morning. She was going to have to meet with Makenzie again and again. She had to get a grip on her own trauma so she could be of service to the young girl who needed her.

That had been the entire reason she wanted to become a social worker. She wanted to help people who found themselves in the same situations she did. With parents who didn’t care, who used their children, who cared more about themselves than anyone else. She became a social worker to protect and give voice to those who had none.

She had to find a way to at least be okay enough come morning that she could do her job. She could fall apart when Ann got home, when she was safe and secure, when she could be reminded repeatedly that what had happened to her would never happen again.

“I need you to tell me it’ll be all right.”

Ann drew in a sharp breath. “Honey, it’ll be more than all right. It’ll be good again. I promise.”

“I believe you.” And it was true. Ann said that to her every time she fell back into her memory, when she struggled to get out of it, and every time, Ann was right. It wasn’t just all right, it was good. Ann was so good for her, and Heidi knew she could never live without her. “It’ll be good again for her, too.”

“It will be. You’ll make sure of it. I know you will.”

“I will.” Heidi sniffled, although this time her tears weren’t because of her own pain, but for the very real pain that Makenzie was feeling and going through, the very real pain that she could continue to go through for the rest of her life.

She stayed on the phone with Ann for over an hour, until she could barely keep her eyes open. The anxiety and burst of nervous energy that had raged through her had dissipated to almost nothing. Heidi dragged herself from the couch to the bedroom to grab her blanket. She curled up back in the spot she had vacated, with the blanket over her.

“I’m so tired, Ann.”

“Then go to sleep, honey. I’ll be right here if you need me, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I have to go back to the hospital tomorrow.”

“I’ll see you as soon as I get home. I promise, even if I have to go to the hospital and find you there.”

Heidi’s lips twitched. She knew Ann would do it, too, if she had to. It wouldn’t be the first time she’d gone to find Heidi when something similar had happened. “This is going to be a long one.”

“I’ll be there every step of the way for you. You know that. I love you.”

“I love you, too. Now, stop dealing with poor pitiful me and go be with your girl.”

“I love you, Heidi. I mean it.”

“I know you do.” Heidi smiled softly. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

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Hanging up, she dropped her phone onto the coffee table and turned the television on, the volume up to drown out any memories that dared try to surface again. Ann had done what she could from such a distance, and while it would have been so much better if she was there in person, the phone call had done wonders for Heidi's flashbacks.

Staring at the light coming from the television, Heidi zoned out. She tried to think of anything other than what had happened to her as a child and what had happened to Makenzie. She had no idea how long she stared blankly at the television, but eventually, she fell into a light and disturbed sleep.

CHAPTER9

The drive home was quiet. Lila could tell that something was bothering Ann. She hadn't specified why she had to leave early other than some emergency had come up, apologized profusely, and started packing. It was barely even dawn before they left, grabbing food to go that Elijah had made and running out the door.

Whatever it was, it must have been bad. The tension riding in Ann's shoulders was strong. Lila had attempted to massage it out the night before, but she was pretty sure it was all back. Ann pulled up outside Lila's apartment. Lila leaned over the center console and pressed her lips to Ann's.

"Call me if you need something, really. I'm here for you."

"Thanks," Ann muttered, the hard look in her eyes not fading.

Lila's heart nearly broke. Whatever it was, it must be bad, but the fact Ann refused to share worried her. She couldn't keep it all a secret forever. It would only hurt her in the end, even if Ann's partner wanted it to be a secret. Lila knew better than that. She'd kept things a secret once, and it hadn't resulted in anything good for anyone.

Curling her fingers around Ann's cheek, Lila stared directly into her dark brown eyes. Sadness swam behind the look Ann gave her, but there was also a touch of fear. She wished she knew what Ann was about to walk into, what she was going to face down. "I wish I could be there for you."

Ann gave her a wan smile. "Next time perhaps, but not for this one. I need to be there for her, not the other way around."

"Right. But when you do need someone, come find me. Okay?"

"Okay." Ann nodded so slightly Lila almost missed it.

"I'm serious, Ann. I don't want you to try and handle something on your own when you don't have to. That's what I'm here for, to help take care of you."

"I know." Ann's lips curled slightly. "And thanks. I'm really sorry about this weekend."

"We had one good day."

"Kind of." Ann drew in a sharp breath. "I promise I'll make it up to you."

"I know you will, but don't worry about doing it anytime soon, all right? We'll figure it out when we can."

Ann's look turned somber. "I best get going."

“See you soon.” Lila leaned in for another kiss. Retreating, she got out of the car and grabbed her small duffel from the back seat. She stayed on the steps to her building as Ann pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward the highway.

Once she was inside her apartment, Lila dropped everything and flopped onto her couch. That had not been what she thought it would be. But life was life, and she was glad Ann felt comfortable enough to leave when she needed to. Since she suddenly found herself with extra time, she wondered about Heidi. They’d spoken only briefly the night before, but the conversation had brought her so much hope.

Lila wouldn’t deny that she was attracted to Heidi. Something about the petite woman, the vulnerability she seemed to carry with her everywhere she went, beckoned Lila to dig deeper and find out even more. The fact that they had the instantaneous connection of two survivors only added to that. Lila liked her. She had hoped it would turn to more, but when Heidi had spoken of her partner, Lila hadn’t dared to think beyond friendship, but now...now there was a chance.

Grabbing her phone, Lila dialed Heidi’s cellphone. They could have a quick fun and flirty conversation while Lila figured out what to do with the rest of her weekend now that her plans had changed. Perhaps Heidi would even be able to join her for some of it.

“Hello?” Heidi’s voice was gruff, broken, scratchy.

Furrowing her brow, Lila narrowed her gaze. “Hey, Heidi.”

“Lila.” A rush of relief echoed through the line.

“Is everything okay?” Lila asked.

“Oh...it could be better.” Heidi sniffled.

Lila couldn't figure out if she was crying or not, and she wasn't entirely sure how to ask that question without offending Heidi or stepping into something she wasn't sure either of them were ready for. "Want to talk about it?"

"Can't."

"Work related then?"

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“Mmhmm.”

Pausing, Lila worked through different possibilities of what she could talk about then. There was only one thing Lila could think of that would get Heidi this worked up when it had to do with work. “Did you get triggered?”

“Yeah.”

“I can’t imagine how hard that must be for you, to be in that line of work and see the things you see while having experienced what you have.”

“You have no idea what I’ve experienced.” Heidi got defensive.

“I don’t. You’re right. But in some ways, I don’t need to. I love working at the hospital, don’t get me wrong, but I see what happens behind the doors and the curtains sometimes, and even that—” she blew out a whistle “—even that can affect me sometimes. You’re right in the thick of it.”

“I suppose.”

“No I suppose about it, Heidi. You are. How do you deal with it?”

“Oh...um...I don’t know.”

Lila rubbed her thigh with her palm as she closed her eyes and focused on Heidi’s voice. “I doubt that. You know something. What is the first thing you do?”

Heidi choked. “When I get home, I cry.”

“After you can’t hide from it anymore, when you can’t put it off because you’re free to feel?”

“Yeah.”

“I get that. I cry too, sometimes.”

“You do?”

“I do.” Lila’s lips hinted at a smile. “And then I cry a lot. Sometimes I take a shower that is way too hot for my own good, or I sleep a lot.”

“You get triggered?”

“Of course I do.” Lila paused, not quite sure why Heidi would think she’d be exempt from that. “It depends on the day. Sometimes it’s a smell or a word or even just photos of kids being taken.”

“Ah. This was something very similar to what I experienced.”

Lila hissed. “That’s so tough. I’m sorry you’re going through that. But I’m glad you answered the phone for me.”

“Me too,” Heidi whispered. “I mean that. I didn’t think...I’m glad I met you.”

“Why’s that?”

“I didn’t think what it would mean to find someone who had been through something so similar to me.”

“I have a feeling our experiences of abuse and assault are vastly different.”

“Yeah but...my partner hasn't been through anything like this, and while she's seen it—”

“It's not the same,” Lila interrupted. “I know that. I've been with people who are innocent of assault and those who aren't, and in some ways it does make it easier, and in other ways—well, it makes it harder. Too much trauma colliding.”

Heidi hummed. “I guess. I have to go back into work today.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, to the hospital, actually. Kid is still there.”

“Oh, Heidi. No one else can go for you?” Lila's heart broke. If this was how Heidi was acting now before she'd have to put herself into that situation again, she couldn't imagine what she'd be like when she got home the next time. She wished she could be there for her, but at the very least, she knew Heidi had a partner who would be home to take care of her. That was, after all, what partners were for.

“Not how it works.”

“What if you called in sick?”

“I’m not sick.”

“Physically, maybe, but you are entitled to mental health days,” Lila probed, trying to get Heidi to see the advantage to taking care of herself. That was more important than anything. Heidi needed to be well to take care of her clients and kids who she worked with.

“I can’t call in.”

“Think about it, please. I know it’ll be hard, but you can do it.”

“Not this time,” Heidi reiterated.

“Okay.” Lila wasn’t going to fight her on it. It was Heidi’s job and life after all, but she did wish she knew her better to be able to try and convince her. It would be better for her all around if she took care of herself first. The few times they had spoken, all Lila could think was Heidi was reaching out for something, desperate to try and make a connection somewhere. “Will you call me if you need me?”

“Yeah. It might be good to talk to you.”

“I bet it would.” Lila sighed. She’d wanted a fun weekend, but it seemed as though her weekend was going to be spent alone, far different than she’d planned. It would

be fine, but still not what she'd expected.

"I'd like to see you again."

Lila's brow drew together. "You want to? Even with everything going on?"

"I do." Heidi sounded confident in her answer, so Lila was going to take it for what it was.

"I wouldn't mind. I have some time Monday if you do."

"I'll have to see what's going on with this new case, but I'd like to."

"Call me, then. Let's get together."

"Good."

Lila could almost hear the smile in Heidi's voice.

"I've got to go, but...thank you for calling, Lila. Really. It helped more than you know."

"I'm glad. I'll talk to you soon, Heidi."

"I'll see you soon."

"Yeah, that." Giggling lightly, Lila hung up. She held her phone close to her chest as she grinned. She was glad she'd called. It sounded as though she'd been able to offer some kind of hope and comfort for Heidi in the process. It was a good twist to a day that had not started so well. She'd try to get hold of Ann later and check in with her. Maybe she could call up one of her previous dates and see if they were busy that

weekend. Yes, she would do that for sure.

* * *

It had been five days since Lila had heard from Ann. She'd actually heard more from Heidi, which had been good, but they hadn't found time to meet up yet. Lila had gone through each of her workdays barely even noticing them. She was so focused on Ann and Heidi. Ann who came into her life like a woman on a power trip, desperate for someone to pay a lick of attention to her, and Heidi, a woman desperate for connection.

If she thought about it, they weren't all that different in what they were seeking. Lila had just been the lucky one to find them both. And she got just as much from them, at least so far. She and Heidi hadn't had much of a chance to explore their potential for a relationship yet.

Lila wanted to, though. Heidi intrigued her. Walking through the halls in the hospital, she took her tablet to make her rounds for orders. It was her routine, and while she normally saw Ann during her routine, the ICU had been full and busy every time she'd stepped through the doors that week, and Ann had left the list of items with someone else or just on the counter itself.

The emergency room was calm, for once. It was kind of odd. Granted, Lila was earlier than normal for her rounds, but the emergency room was never this quiet. Lila looked around as she stopped by the nurses station. Jerica Alvarez, the beautiful Hispanic nurse Lila had spent the majority of her weekend off with, stood behind the counter with her face in paperwork, her brow furrowed, and her long wavy hair pulled back into a single braid.

"Hey, Jer."

Jerica's chin jerked up. "Lila! Is it time for ordering already?"

Giving Jerica the best smile she could, Lila brushed her blonde curls behind her ear and put on the most flirtatious look she could. "I'm a bit early."

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Jerica snorted. “Like Sunday morning?”

“I think I more than made up for that.”

“You did.” Jerica winked. “I haven’t had a minute to finish what we need.”

“I can wait.” Lila leaned against the counter, propping her chin on her palm. “So how was your weekend?”

Jerica’s dark cheeks rushed with red. It couldn’t have made Lila more satisfied. They’d known each other for the last year, and Lila had equally gotten the coveted invite to Jerica’s thanksgiving party, the one every lesbian in the county wanted an invite too. Lila had actually heard about it before she knew Jerica. The party had left a lot to be desired, but it’d been a nice break from her norm.

“My weekend was pleasant, to say the least.”

“Mine too,” Lila flirted back. “It was a great pick-me-up after how it started.”

“Oh?” Jerica’s dark eyes locked on Lila.

Lila had forgotten that she hadn’t mentioned what her original plans were supposed to be and her failed single night away with Ann. She shrugged. “I had a weekend away with one of my girlfriends, and it ended rather abruptly when she had an emergency at home.”

Jerica’s eyes widened. “What?”

“Just...go with it.”

Chuckling lightly, Jerica shook her head. “You’re dating a taken woman?”

“She’s in an open relationship, and I’m not in a committed one. Doubt I ever will be. I like being single.”

“Are you single?”

“Yes.” Lila gave a definitive nod. “I am not in a long-term committed relationship, nor will I ever be. Scouts honor.”

“I don’t understand you sometimes.”

“What? You don’t understand being poly?”

“Dating a taken woman.”

“They’re in an open relationship.” Lila raised an eyebrow back at her. “And really, you didn’t seem to mind so much on Sunday.”

Jerica rolled her eyes as she pulled out the order form. “I didn’t mind because I’m not in a relationship with anyone at the moment.”

“But you want to be?” Lila raised an eyebrow, hoping Jerica wasn’t about to confess to some long-time crush on her and that would end their time of fun.

“Not with you.” Jerica winked. “Promises on that.”

“Good.” Tension rushed from Lila’s shoulders. “But you want to be?”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“I don’t.”

“You will someday.”

“No, I won’t.” Lila hated having to defend her choices in life, but she was not made for a long-term relationship. She loved her freedom and independence too much to move in with someone else. Her random dates here and there with others were exactly what she needed in life, nothing more.

“Fine, but dating a taken woman?”

Lila scoffed. “They’re in an open relationship. It’s not like she’s hiding anything from her partner. Trust me, I made sure.”

“Did you meet her partner and ask?”

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Swallowing hard, Lila shook her head. “No. I trust her.”

Jerica snorted. “This is not going to end well.”

“It’ll end perfectly. I promise. Just let me do my thing, and you do your thing.” Lila’s light tone was gone. She tried to rein in her frustration, but it wasn’t working. She hated having to defend her choices, especially to someone she’d hoped would understand, but she guessed she was wrong. Ann understood. That was something at least. Lila hadn’t fully talked to Heidi about it, but she didn’t get the sense Heidi wanted to bring her in for a triad, so everything would be good there as well.

Jerica handed over the order form. “This should be good for a week, I think.”

“Are you taking off for a few days?”

“No, but if I under-order, or try to order for only a few days, then we’ll undoubtedly run out of supplies.”

“Makes sense, I guess.” Lila took the form and skimmed it over. “We should be able to get most of this in for you.”

“I’d appreciate it.” Jerica sent her a wink. “And if you want a rehash of last weekend this coming weekend, you know my number.”

Lila smiled broadly. “I’ll think about it.”

As she walked away, Lila sighed. Jerica was not someone she wanted to get into bed

with on a regular basis. She wanted more than Lila did, and that was something she wasn't willing to compromise on, and Lila didn't want her to get the wrong idea about where they were going. That, and she couldn't stop thinking about Heidi and Ann. They were so different, but they seemed to want exactly the same things, things that Lila hopefully could give them.

Lila just wanted to have fun, most of the time, but she wanted the fun with that deep connection. Jerica was fun. They laughed, giggled, stayed up late and ate junk food, but with Ann and Heidi it was more than that. Lila knew she could talk to them about anything, that if she called them in the middle of the night like Ann's partner had called her, that they would answer and be there. That was something she wasn't sure Jerica would give her.

Inputting the order, Lila finished out her shift in record time. She would call Ann as soon as she knew Ann was off her shift. She sent Heidi a text, but didn't get a response, so she figured she was equally busy with something. Putting her feet up on her couch as soon as she was home and resting, Lila closed her eyes. Why was it she couldn't get either of them off her mind?

CHAPTER 10

Every muscle in Ann's body ached. She'd barely slept the entire week since she'd been back, but at least Heidi seemed a little more even-keeled than she had been. But with every deep sigh Heidi let out, Ann still worried. It had been years—close to a decade, actually—since Ann had seen Heidi in such a state.

When they'd first started dating, Heidi had warned her things like this would happen. Ann hadn't believed her. Really, she hadn't understood what Heidi was talking about or just how extreme it would be when she had an episode.

At one point, Ann had contemplated going to a therapist, just to learn how she could

help. Heidi had even suggested it. However, Ann had avoided, and they'd dealt with Heidi's episodes as they had come. This week had been so tortuously long that she'd barely been able to check in with Lila and let her know that she was okay and everything would be returning to normal soon enough, that no one had died in the process.

Ann had been so worried that something like that might happen, but she'd trusted Heidi enough that the first night she would be fine alone. However, Ann felt far more comfortable being there the rest of the nights. She'd gotten off work and come straight home, cleaning up the house if Heidi was still at work and puttering around while she waited. She'd spent hours trying to figure out exactly what Heidi needed and doing just that. But it never seemed to be quite enough.

She wished there was more she could do, that she could take the pain away from Heidi, even though she instinctively knew nothing would ever wash that trauma away. With an aching heart, Ann finished cleaning the bathroom and changed out the laundry. Her day off meant she wanted to have the house spic-and-span for when Heidi came home.

Sitting down at the dining room table for the first time in what felt like six days, Ann sighed. She hurt so much watching Heidi go through all this trauma again. Sometimes she wished Heidi had picked a different job, one that wasn't so hard on her soul, but she could also see why Heidi was perfect for it. Heidi had compassion in spades, and she knew exactly what those kids were going through. She could help them see their future solely by her existence.

Not only that, but Ann also understood the calling to help. Sure, they got paid—Heidi way less than she did for much more of an emotional beating—but they were both called to be in the caring fields. They wanted to help people first and foremost, and they wanted to help each other.

Her phone buzzing surprised her. Heidi had been very quiet while she was at work, which was typical in general but even more so when she was going through an episode. It always worried Ann. That, or she just noticed how quiet Heidi was during these times instead of during normal times. She wanted constant contact to make sure her partner was all right.

Lila had texted. The hope that it was Heidi dashed away only to be replaced by warmth. Ann had read every one of Lila's texts that week even though she hadn't answered any of them. Now was as good a time as any. Instead of texting back, Ann called.

"Wasn't sure when I'd hear your voice again," Lila's voice was low and sultry.

Ann's cheeks heated from the thoughts it brought to her mind and the last time Lila had talked to her like that. "It's been a week, that's for sure. I've missed you, though."

"Everything well on the home front?"

"It's getting there. Slowly but surely."

"I wish you'd let me help more."

"I would, but..." Ann bit her lip as she paused, staring at the picture of her and Heidi on their tenth anniversary that Heidi had hung on the wall. "...she wouldn't like it."

"I don't need to help her, just you."

"You help me enough solely by being there when I call."

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Lila snorted. “Sure, we’ll agree to disagree on that one.”

Ann sighed. “Are you on your lunch break?”

“I am. Taking a late one today.”

Every nerve in Ann’s body was on fire. She was so exhausted but one mundane conversation with Lila set her in motion again. That was what she loved about Lila. They helped each other simply by existing. Closing her eyes, Ann remembered the sweet, tender, and bittersweet kisses Lila had given her in the car when she’d dropped her off. She sorely needed to remedy that. “I need to see you again.”

“Yes.” Lila nearly whispered. “When?”

“Now?” Ann chuckled. “What would you say to a little phone sex so I can get off real quick?”

Lila hissed. “I’m at work.”

“On lunch.”

“At the hospital...”

“All right. I get it.” Ann bit her cheek. She really should have known better, but she was nearing desperation. She needed to get off, have the sweet little distraction from the shitshow that her life had become in the last week. No way was Heidi going to be ready for that. In fact, it might be close to a month before Heidi allowed that to

happen again. Holding in a groan, Ann wallowed.

“You can come by this weekend.” Lila’s voice was gentle and soothing.

“I can try. I have to work, but I didn’t pick up any PRN. Maybe I can stop by briefly after a shift before coming home. It’d have to be quick, though.”

Lila laughed. “Quick is something I think we can both manage.”

“I’ll see about timing.”

“Please do. I...I miss you.”

Ann’s brow furrowed. That was the first time Lila had ever said something like that to her. They’d kept distance in their relationship on purpose, mostly because of Lila’s own desire not to enter into any type of deeply emotional relationship together. This was new territory they were entering into.

“I’ve missed you, too,” Ann finally replied, hoping she wasn’t crossing some kind of unexpected boundary she couldn’t see. Something felt so different about this conversation than any others they’d had. Whether it was because it was serious and most of their conversations weren’t, Ann wasn’t sure.

“Friday,” Lila stated.

“That’s tomorrow.”

“Please try.” A hint of whine lit up the back end of Lila’s statement.

“I will, but she is my first priority.”

“I would expect nothing less.”

“Good.” Ann’s lips twitched upward for the first time in a week. It felt so good to smile, or at least mostly smile. “I’ll try my best. I think we could both use it after last weekend.”

“True that!” Lila giggled. “I’ve got to get back to work.”

“I’ll let you go then. See you soon, hopefully.”

“Yes, soon. Otherwise I might resort to naughty text messages.”

“I could get on board for that. Even though I know you won’t include photos, texts with descriptions and my imagination will be enough.”

“Incoming as soon as I’m off work, then.”

“Perfect.”

“All right, talk to you later, bye.” Lila hung up before Ann could respond.

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Setting the phone down on the top of the table, Ann stretched her back and twisted from side to side to release her taut muscles. Even though it was only a phone call, it had been helpful. Lila was far more magical than she probably thought she was.

It was a quiet couple of hours until Heidi came home, but when the front door opened, Ann was ready for it. She stood up and walked over, holding her arms out. Heidi walked right into Ann's embrace, collapsing into her chest. Running her hands up and down Heidi's back, Ann marveled at how thin Heidi had become. She'd been wasting away the last week, barely eating and only under duress when Ann scolded her.

"How was your day?" Ann asked.

"Long," Heidi whimpered. "Better now that I'm home."

"Do you have to go back?"

"No, not unless something happens."

"Good." Ann brushed a kiss in Heidi's hair. "I'm glad you're home."

"Where else would I go?" Heidi tensed.

"Nowhere. Just...I'm glad you're home, that's all. I missed you while you were at work. It was far too quiet."

Heidi hummed. "Something smells good."

Ann cringed. That was Heidi's go-to, avoid when she was uncomfortable or didn't want to talk about something.

"What is it?"

"Cauliflower tacos."

"Yummy." Heidi pulled off her jacket and brushed passed Ann toward the kitchen.

"Should we eat?"

"I suppose." As they sat down with their food, Ann watched every move Heidi made. She wanted to make sure she was doing something right by letting Heidi ignore the tension and emotion and push through it. She wished there was some kind of manual that came with this kind of stuff, but unfortunately, there wasn't. Not at least as far as she could figure out.

They made small talk while they ate, Ann still being careful to catch every change in Heidi's demeanor. She wanted to catch even the slightest hiccup in the facade Heidi insisted on putting on. Ann kept waiting for Heidi to break again, if only so she could catch her when she fell.

"Why do you keep staring at me?" Heidi's sharp tone cut deep.

Ann pursed her lips before gathering the dishes. "Nothing."

"No, why?"

"I'm concerned about you is all."

"Don't be. I'm fine."

“Sure you are,” Ann muttered, hoping it was quiet enough Heidi didn’t hear. However, when she turned to look, she knew she’d made a mistake and said it far too loud. “I...I didn’t—”

“It doesn’t matter, Ann.” Pain flashed through Heidi’s gaze before she muted it and then masked it. Ann’s heart nearly broke at being the cause. “I’m going to take a shower and then go to bed.”

“Already? But you just got home.”

“I’m tired.”

Ann scrambled, her mind spinning to try and put a stop to what was happening, what she had caused. “I thought we could hang out.”

“Hang out?” Heidi’s voice deepened with accusation. “Sex. You mean sex.”

“No!” Ann shook her head, coming back into the dining room as Heidi stood. “No, I don’t mean sex, at all.”

Heidi rolled her eyes. “It’s always about sex with you.”

“It’s not!” Ann pleaded. It did seem that way. It was what they most often fought over, but it couldn’t be just that, and this most definitely wasn’t. “I thought we could spend some time together.”

“I just want a shower.”

“All right.” Ann shut her mouth, pressing her lips together hard to keep herself from saying anything else that would push Heidi further away. Heidi said nothing else as she left the room. Ann sank into the couch, covering her face in her hands as tears stung at her eyes.

What was wrong with her? She tried all the time to make Heidi understand just how much she loved her, but it seemed like she failed every step she took. Why was everything so complicated between the two of them? In some ways—the same ways it was complicated with Heidi—it was so easy with Lila. But Ann could never deny the fact she loved Heidi with every fiber of her being.

Ann wallowed until she heard the shower turn off at least twenty minutes later. Before Heidi came out and scowled at her, she dragged her butt off the couch and slipped into the kitchen to clean up from dinner. She knew the best way to keep Heidi sane and less stressed was to have a clean house, and if that was the only thing she was going to manage to accomplish that week, she was going to do it the best she could.

* * *

Ann didn't make it Friday. Or Saturday. But Sunday, she drove to Lila's apartment. Ever since she'd tried to wring emotions from Heidi, her mood had only gotten worse. Lila had been right all along. She needed to take care of herself in order to take care of Heidi. She didn't have a lot of time to spare, but it was going to have to be enough to rejuvenate her mind and get her emotions in check.

Her car was still chilled by the time she parked in front of Lila's building. The texting back and forth to ramp up the sexual tension had lasted three days, and Ann was ready to burst from it. She hadn't had a moment to herself to take care of anything, fearing what Heidi would think if she walked in on her—that it really was all about sex.

Ann's cheeks heated. She had to figure this out at some point. They wouldn't be able to make it another fifteen years, let alone the next five, if they didn't learn how to talk to each other and show each other their love far more easily. Lila's apartment looked so warm and inviting, not only because it was literally warm but because Lila was so much easier in some ways. She didn't come with the complications of trauma Heidi did.

Lila talked about her trauma, openly and freely. She shared what she did and didn't do sexually, what she was comfortable with in a relationship and what was off-limits. Heidi was a mess, and Ann's best guess was she didn't even know what she wanted or what she liked. Still, Ann loved her. She wanted to be partners with her. Fifteen years ago, she'd made that decision, and it wasn't one she was going to back out on—ever.

Ann knocked on the door, knowing Lila would answer right away. Sure enough, the door opened, and she was dragged inside by a fist in the front of her jacket. Ann made it three steps inside, enough for the door to be shut and locked, before she was pressed against the wall. Lila covered her entirely, their mouths mashing together in a heated kiss with no words exchanged.

Ann moaned, running her fingers up Lila only to find she was already naked. Her brain struggled to catch up with sensations and changes and thoughts and anything she could grasp onto, but Lila pressed sensually against her, hips to hips and breasts to breasts. Lila jerked back, grinning.

“Hey.”

“Hi,” Ann answered, at a loss for any other words.

“You’re damn sexy in scrubs, did you know that?”

She didn’t. At least she didn’t think she was, but Lila apparently did. Still her mind struggled to keep up with what was happening. This was exactly what she’d come there for, and Lila was going to deliver with a bang like she always did. Lila’s fingers were at the front of her pants, pulling so her hand could slide under the material.

“Want me to fuck you silly?”

Ann gulped.

“Say it,” Lila demanded.

“Yes.”

“Good.” A devilish smile appeared on Lila’s lips just before she slid her hand down farther, inserting a single finger inside Ann while her thumb rubbed circles. It was rough at first, hard, uncoordinated. But it didn’t take long for Lila to find a rhythm.

Ann threw her head back against the wall, hitting it hard enough to cause a thump. She arched toward Lila who pressed into her even more to push her back, lips pressing to Ann’s neck. Closing her eyes, Ann focused entirely on the sensations running through her body, the twitch of nerves between her legs that built suddenly.

Lila’s skin was hot against hers, seeping through the thin layer of her scrubs. God, this woman could do things to her in seconds, things she had only ever dreamed about. Ann rutted her hips, she gripped onto Lila’s waist to hold herself steady, she

whined.

“Like that, do you?”

“Yes,” Ann hissed. “Don’t stop, please.”

“Not planning on it, gorgeous.”

The endearment sent a shudder through Ann’s body. Lila was always full of compliments. She doled them out every second she had. It warmed Ann to think that someone so young, so free, so wonderful would think of her like that in any way.

“You make me feel so good,” Ann whispered, meaning physically, emotionally, and mentally—though she wasn’t sure which way Lila would take it. She could explain later if it came up again, but right now, she was so focused on Lila adding in a second finger. The pacing increased. “I’m so close.”

“Then let go.”

Ann pulled her lip between her teeth and dug her nails harder into Lila’s sides, holding on as tightly as she could. She followed the sensations ricocheting through her, letting them all drag to where Lila’s thumb pressed hard circles. In what felt like seconds, her orgasm washed through her. Her entire body tightened as her breathing hiccuped.

Lila pressed gentle kisses to her cheeks, lips, forehead, neck—anywhere she could reach while Ann slowly came down off the high Lila had given her. When she finally felt able, Ann opened her eyes and smiled. “I was not expecting this.”

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“Thought I’d surprise you.”

Chuckling, Ann looked down at Lila’s perky breasts, her nipples hard as she confidently stood naked in front of her, something Heidi would never do. “You accomplished that.”

“Good. Now get naked. It’s my turn and I want to feel you against me.”

Listening, Ann stripped out of her dirty scrubs and dropped them on the floor while Lila laid down on the couch, legs spread, the same hand she’d used on Ann between her own legs as she watched every move Ann made. It was utterly intoxicating.

As soon as she was ready, Ann bent down and licked Lila from bottom to top. She drew in a sharp breath and moaned at the flavor blooming on her tongue. Yes, this was exactly what she needed, the exact thing that would get her through the next week or two, a wonderful dose of she was worthy, she was wanted, she was someone to be cared about.

“Get up here,” Lila murmured.

Moving so she hovered above Lila, Ann gave her a quirk of her lips. “So we’re into rough today?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I think we’re on the same page then.” Planting her thigh between Lila’s legs, Ann moved so Lila could rut against her as Ann pushed in, giving her more pressure

and a better angle. Lila ground against her as her cheeks and chest reddened with pleasure, her lips parted in ecstasy.

Ann was entranced by the change in Lila's pale skin color. She bent down, licking and sucking one of those perky nipples between her lips. She made it slightly rougher than their norm, knowing that was what they were going for this time around. Quick, hard, a good fuck before they had to bid each other goodbye and return to reality. Lila careened through her orgasm while Ann bent down and kissed her senseless.

From that moment on, everything slowed down. Ann rested her full weight on Lila's prone form as Lila moved her arms up to circle Ann, stroking her back tenderly.

"Hell of a week?" Lila asked.

"You have no idea." Ann closed her eyes, listening to Lila's steady and slowing heartbeat. It was so calming to be this close to someone else, to have that physical connection that immediately told her she was worthy and wanted. Heidi gave that to her, but it wasn't as often as she would like, and while she knew it was because of Heidi's own trauma, she also struggled to truly understand that.

"You can tell me all about it if you want."

"I wouldn't even know where to begin." Ann sighed. She ran a hand from Lila's hip to her shoulder and leaned up to give her a tender kiss on her jaw. "I promise, I'm not trying to hide things. I'm just not sure where to start."

"What happened?"

"I've spent the week cleaning up someone else's mess, a mess that I'm not sure my partner wants cleaned up, if I'm being honest."

“Why wouldn’t she?”

“Sometimes it feels like she likes to live in the past.”

Lila fell quiet, and Ann worried for a moment she’d said too much. But when Lila’s hands skimmed through her short hair, tugging at the ends of it, it gave her hope she was wrong. “It’s hard to take the step to live in the future sometimes. Take that as you will, but take it from someone who has lived with trauma for years. Being vulnerable isn’t easy. While there is a lot of strength and advantage and love to be found when vulnerable, it’s hard to live that way. It’s even harder when there are trust issues.”

“I guess,” Ann murmured.

Lila lifted Ann’s chin so they looked in each other’s eyes. “I mean it. You can’t force her to do something she’s not willing to do. All you can do is love her through it.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to do.”

“Then you’re the right person for the job.”

Ann smiled, genuinely. Lila was so good at that, making things click where they hadn’t before. What Ann was doing with Heidi was right, it was for the better, and it was exactly what Heidi needed, even if they struggled to see that the majority of the time.

“Why is it so easy to love you and so hard to love her?”

Lila tensed. Ann bit her lip. That was definitely over the boundary lines they’d set. But she did mean it. She did love Lila, and she loved Heidi. It was so different but so much the same. Leaning in, Ann pressed a kiss to Lila’s lips.

“I promise I’m not expecting more than this, but I do love you.”

“Okay,” Lila whispered, her voice wavering.

“I think I’m going to go home now.”

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Lila nodded. Ann extracted herself from Lila's embrace until she was standing. She dressed slowly, making sure to check in on Lila in the process, looking for any sign that she'd just ruined the good thing they had going. As soon as she was fully clothed, her jacket in place, Ann bent down and kissed Lila, lingering for as long as she felt comfortable.

"I'll call you, okay?"

"Yeah."

"And I promise I'll make up for last weekend. Just give me a bit to get the details worked out."

"Sure." Lila kissed her quickly. "You better get going."

"See you soon." As Ann left, she knew she was off her game.

CHAPTER 11

Two weeks since her breakdown, Heidi knew she was on better footing. She could at least take a shower without crying now. Ann was at work all day, and Heidi was home by herself, something that hadn't happened in quite a few days. While quiet was unnerving, it was also comforting.

She curled onto her side in the blankets and covered her head with the comforter. She could spend all day there if she wasn't careful, and she knew Ann would be worried if she did. She would have to find a reason to get up and function as much like a

normal person as she could.

Her phone buzzed, distracting her from trying to formulate any plans. Heidi stared at it curiously before answering. “Hey there.”

“Heidi.”

“Yes?”

“Come over.”

Heidi turned on her back and stared at the ceiling. What was the universe putting her through? She nodded before she answered. “When?”

“Today. I’ve got nothing planned, and I could use some company.”

“It’s as if you’re reading my mind,” Heidi muttered. “Text me your address. I’ve got all day to kill.”

“Yes!” Lila laughed. “When will you be here?”

“Give me an hour.”

“Perfect. I’ll make breakfast.”

“See you soon.” Heidi dropped her phone onto the nightstand as soon as the conversation was over. Well, she had plans for the day. Now all she had to do was force her body to move so she could get out of bed and put herself together. It was far harder than convincing herself to go into work. Friends were more understanding of needed mental health days than bosses.

She was late, but it wasn't much beyond the hour when Heidi pulled up outside of Lila's apartment. It was on the near side of town, closer to where she drove to get home, so it was only a twenty-minute drive instead of thirty, otherwise she would have been really late. Heidi's heart thumped so hard it hurt. She'd never taken advantage of their open relationship before. She'd never done anything like this, but she knew she wanted more than simple friendship with Lila.

Nerves swirled in her belly as she stared at the building in front of her. She could do this. She wanted it, and Ann would be fine with it. That wasn't what worried her. It was opening her heart to someone else, to even begin to make that journey when she'd barely been able to make it with Ann, even after fifteen years together.

It took another two minutes before Heidi finally forced herself from the car. She moved slowly up the stairs as she looked for the right apartment number. It was right in front of her. Drawing in a deep breath, she let it out slowly and formed a fist as she knocked. Heidi shoved her hands in her pockets and stood awkwardly as she waited for Lila to answer.

When the door opened, she was smacked with a wall of heat from inside. She hadn't even realized how cold it was outside. Lila's bright blue eyes, rosy cheeks, beautifully wavy blonde hair all set her at ease and welcomed her. Her lips curled into a smile unbidden.

"Finally!" Lila opened the door to let Heidi in. "I was beginning to think you'd gotten lost."

"No, just took a bit longer to get ready than I thought it would." It was a small white lie, and as soon as Heidi stepped inside and the door was shut, she shook her head. She wasn't going to do this. Not again. "Actually, no. I was nervous. I took my time because of that and then I sat in the parking lot outside for a good ten minutes before I managed to get the courage to come inside."

Lila's look softened, and she reached for Heidi's hand, gripping her fingers. "Why so nervous? I don't bite."

Heidi flushed as the retort on her tongue was definitely not what she should say. "Because I've never done this before."

"Done what?"

"Been out with someone." Lila narrowed her gaze, and Heidi realized she was doing an awful job of explaining. "Been out with someone since we opened our relationship. I never found someone interesting."

“But she has?”

“Several over the years, though I think she’s down to just one other at the moment.”

“Intriguing. You find me interesting?” Lila’s eyes danced with confidence.

“Yes.” Heidi squeezed Lila’s hand. “It’s why I came here today, to get to know you better.”

“Color me curious.” Lila stepped around Heidi and toward her couch. “Come, sit. We’ll get to know each other then.”

Heidi, much calmer than when she’d first walked in, shucked her jacket. Lila told her to put it in the closet, so she did, hanging it up before shutting the door. When she joined Lila on the couch, she sat a little closer than she normal would, their thighs brushing. It was her subtle way of saying she wanted more eventually, if they connected, if they got to know each other, if they clicked well.

“What do you want to know?” Lila asked.

Heidi snorted. “I have no idea. I figured we could hang out.”

“Like a date?”

“Sure.” Heidi wrapped her fingers together in her lap tightly, twining them. Lila’s warm hand covered them before rubbing gently to ease the tension. Heidi let out a shuddering breath. “Sorry, it’s been a long time since I’ve started a relationship.”

“And trust doesn’t come easy.”

Heidi gave her a knowing look. “No, it doesn’t.”

“So stop putting expectations on this, and we’ll just see where it goes, okay? Take each moment as it comes.”

“I wish I could,” Heidi whispered.

“Then let’s work on it. Let’s not put a lot of pressure on this. I much prefer for things to happen naturally instead of being forced, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“So...tell me, Heidi, what have you been up to these past few weeks?”

That was a loaded question. She could take it one of two ways—she could skirt around the truth or she could dive right into it. Lila had already proven herself to be worthy of this kind of trust in the short time they had known each other, and so she was tempted to dive in, but still, Heidi hesitated.

“You said it was rough the other week.”

“Still is,” Heidi mumbled, knowing the decision was already made. She wanted to be more open, vulnerable, and she had to take baby steps to do that. “It’s better though. My client is in a specialized home for now while in recovery.”

“I’m glad to hear that, but what about you?” Lila made eye contact.

Heidi hesitated. “I’m getting better.”

“By forcing yourself to hang out with other people?”

“Yes.” Heidi smiled. “That was part of my reasoning for agreeing to come over today. My partner is at work. It was getting quite lonely in the house, and I knew it was going to be a struggle to force myself up to do anything.”

“Then I’m glad I could be here to help.” Lila kept her hand on Heidi’s as she relaxed into the couch cushion. “You want to tell me more about it?”

Heidi nodded slowly. “What I can.”

“About you, not your client.”

“Oh. I guess. I was pregnant when I was twelve.”

“What?” Lila’s eyes went wide.

“It wasn’t a great situation. I was in the foster care system, and when I was walking home from school one day, three of the high schoolers on my block grabbed me and took me to one of their houses and raped me in the closet for three days. They took turns.”

“They kidnapped you?”

Heidi’s shoulders tightened, the muscles in her chest so taut it was difficult to breathe. “Yes. And I ended up pregnant. My foster dad found out and was really mad about it. He already...he already had clients come and see me, and when I started to show a little, he modified his clientele.”

“Heidi,” Lila’s voice broke. “No one knew?”

“No. We hid it any time I had visitations or someone came by to check in. The system is so different now than it was then. For good reasons.”

Lila squeezed her fingers. “What happened? To the baby?”

“He died. I gave birth to him in my bedroom by myself, and he died about ten minutes later. He didn’t look right.” Heidi sniffled.

“Did you name him?”

“No.” Heidi shook her head. “No, I couldn’t do that.”

“Did you get to bury him?”

The tears in Heidi’s eyes were enough of an answer. “No, he took him somewhere. I don’t know where, and I never asked. I couldn’t.”

“Heidi.” Lila leaned up. “Can I hug you?”

Heidi nodded, falling into Lila's warm embrace as she wrapped her up and held her close. She let the tears fall freely, although she didn't sob. She kept it together enough for that. She would not break apart. Moving away, Heidi brushed her fingers across her cheeks. "The other week brought a lot of this up again, and aside from that, before we do anything, I need you to know what happened, that I'm not the easiest person to be with."

"It just makes you who you are, Heidi, nothing else. I don't do sexy photos or selfies ever. You can understand why, I'm sure, and so I'll respect whatever boundaries you put into place and never question them. Just tell me what they are."

"Okay." Heidi settled, the muscles in her chest and shoulders loosening as her comfort and trust grew. What she'd shared with Lila was only a small part of her story, but it was the main instigating factor in a lot of things. She didn't need to share the rest, not now. Maybe someday she would, but Lila knew enough for the moment.

"I'm glad you came over today. I can't imagine carrying that weight around with you for the last few weeks."

Heidi snorted. "Yeah, it's been rough. Reliving those moments is not something I'd wish on anyone."

"Have you shared all this with your partner?"

Giving Lila a suspicious look, Heidi shook her head.

"You should. I'm sure it'd give her a lot of insight into your mind and heart. I find it's always better to share, even if it's hard."

"Maybe you're right."

Lila smiled. “I know I’m right. Aside from needing company, did you want to do anything specific today?”

“No. I just...I wanted to get to know you better.”

“Perfect.” Lila took Heidi’s hand. “Then let’s be lazy, watch a movie or two, and hang out for hours.”

“Sounds good.” Heidi had no idea how Lila managed to swing from intense conversation to calm, but it felt so natural. She’d shared a moment of her hideous past, something she hadn’t shared with anyone since she’d told Ann fifteen years before, but it felt so natural to have a lazy day after talking about something so big.

They sat together on the couch, and by the end of the first movie Lila had chosen—a light romantic comedy—Heidi was snuggled up against Lila. They took a break for snacks, and when they started the second movie with popcorn in their laps, Lila settled her head on Heidi’s shoulder. The second movie ended with no more flourish.

The hours they’d shared had set Heidi at ease. All of the tension she’d carried with her was gone. Feeling brave and confident, as though a massive weight had been lifted, Heidi shifted and lifted Lila’s chin with a finger as the end credits rolled.

“May I kiss you?”

“Absolutely,” Lila answered, those plump lips curving upward.

Heidi listed forward, their mouths touching so tenderly and lightly. Her eyelids fluttered closed as she relaxed into the move. It felt so odd to be kissing someone other than Ann, but so exciting at the same moment. Lila’s lips parted, and Heidi moved to deepen the kiss, tracing the tip of her tongue around Lila’s mouth before moving in to explore even more.

Lila shifted, moving to straddle Heidi and sit in her lap. The kiss turned feverish, and Heidi struggled to keep up. She curled her fingers into Lila's sides as her mind spun in every direction possible. Lila slowed and broke the kiss, pressing her lips gingerly to Heidi's cheeks.

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“Tell me what you want,” Lila commanded.

“Just this for today.” The words left Heidi’s mouth before she’d even had a moment to think about them. “Just this.”

“Good.” Lila, tuning in to the moment, kissed her again, much more slowly than before.

Heidi thanked her silently for the intuition to calm things down. She skimmed her hands down Lila’s waist to her hips, and then took a risk and slid them around to Lila’s ass, kneading her before pulling her in closer. Lila groaned and nipped at Heidi’s lower lip.

“I like that,” Lila murmured before diving into the kiss again.

They stayed like that for easily an hour. Their lips locked together as they explored, as Heidi eased into the physical intimacy that she had craved for so long. Perhaps this was the issue with her and Ann, everything was so quick and routine, it was lacking the buildup, the emotional intimacy prior to being physical.

Her phone rang, distracting her. Heidi pulled away with a peck to Lila’s mouth. “I should answer that. I don’t want my partner to worry if I don’t.”

“Then answer.”

Twisting around, Heidi reached for her phone and brought it to her ear as she answered. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Ann responded. “I was just calling to check in on you.”

“I’m doing really well, actually.” Heidi moved to look at Lila and smiled. “I left the house for a bit. I’ll tell you all about it when you get home.”

“I should be home on time tonight. I’m not planning on going anywhere after work.”

“Good. I’d like to spend some time with you.”

Lila pressed a warm kiss to Heidi’s neck.

“Really?” Ann asked.

“Yeah. Like I said, I’ll explain when you get home.”

“All right. See you soon.”

“I love you.”

“Love you, too.” There was a slight hesitation in Ann’s voice, but Heidi ignored it. She was going to try something new, try to do something for the two of them.

Leaning in to Lila, she kissed her deeply. “I’ve got to get home.”

“I’m glad you came over today.”

“Me too. We’ll have to do it again soon.”

“Yes.” Lila’s grin reached her eyes. “Yes, let’s do that.”

Heidi left with a smile on her lips and a much lighter step. When she got home, she

put her plans to action. She was going to be honest with Ann about what had happened that day. She'd never wanted to be deceitful, but it wasn't just that she was with Lila. It was more than that. Heidi cleaned up the house and puttered around while the hours ticked by as she waited for Ann to return home.

As soon as Ann walked in the door, Heidi grinned. Ann gave her a suspicious look, but Heidi shook her head and patted the couch next to her in an open invitation she hoped Ann would take her up on.

"I had an interesting day."

"Sounds like it. I'm not sure I've seen you grin like that in months."

Heidi shrugged. Ann was probably right. It had been a particularly hard year so far, but she was determined to change that for the next one, which was coming up very quickly. As soon as Ann plopped onto the couch, Heidi sidled up next to her, curling her legs over Ann's and halfway curling into her. Heidi pressed a kiss to Ann's lips before settling her cheek on Ann's shoulder.

"I met someone."

Ann tensed before she took a deep breath and relaxed. "Oh?"

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“I met her weeks ago, but we had a date today. I know I should have talked to you first, but it was rather unexpected and definitely unplanned. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I don’t.” Though the tone in Ann’s voice said otherwise.

Heidi raised her chin up. “I promise. If I’d known what was going to happen, I would have told you first.”

“It’s fine. We have an open relationship for a reason. You’re free to go on dates.”

“Yes, but I’m not free to stop communicating, and I’m sorry for not explaining before it happened.”

Ann cupped Heidi’s cheek. “Don’t be sorry. You’re telling me now. I was at work anyway, so it’s not like I could have taken that call.”

“Right.”

Leaning in, Ann kissed her. “So, did it go well?”

“It did.” Heidi grinned. “We watched a couple movies and hung out mostly.”

“Mostly?” Ann raised an eyebrow.

“We did kiss.” Heidi hesitated to share. She’d never wanted to know the details of what Ann got up to with her dates, but it seemed as though Ann wasn’t on that same page Heidi was. She was testing the waters without having a direct conversation

about it first, and they were in dangerous territory of slipping and falling.

“I’m glad,” Ann answered. “I’m glad you found someone.”

“Well, I found you first, and always.” Heidi kissed her deeply. “I’m serious about that.”

Heidi kissed her again, this time deepening it. Ann hesitated at first before falling into the moment. Heidi shifted around so she straddled Ann in much the way Lila had done with her earlier that day. The connection between the two moments was not lost on her, but she also knew she’d have to explain it to Ann at some point.

“We talked mostly,” Heidi whispered as she nipped at Ann’s neck, leaving little bite marks as she moved down. “It was good to get some things off my chest.”

“Oh?” Ann gripped her hips.

“I feel so much lighter now.”

“That’s excellent.” Ann shifted, clearly uncomfortable with something.

Heidi sat back on her haunches and stared down at her beautiful partner. Ann’s hair was short, still gelled from how she’d done it that morning. Her scrubs were still relatively clean today, which was a blessing because she hadn’t insisted on stripping immediately first. It must have been an easy day. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s just...this is so different from your norm.”

“I’m trying something new.” Heidi cocked her head at Ann. “I’m trying to be more open to you.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means, I want to be with you.”

“What?” Ann looked confused.

“It means I want to have sex with you.”

“Right now?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, but will you explain more of this change later?”

“Absolutely.” Heidi bent down again, this time dipping her hands lower to pull at Ann’s scrub top off. She flicked Ann’s bra and dropped it behind her as she bent down and pressed open-mouthed kisses to her newly exposed skin. Heidi felt so free, so confident in everything she did.

She’d never felt this way before. Taking Ann’s breast in her mouth, she sucked and twirled her tongue. Ann gripped her hair tightly, jerking here and there as she moaned under Heidi’s touch. “I don’t know what’s gotten into you tonight, but I like it.”

Heidi giggled. “I realized I need to be more vulnerable.”

“Oh?” Ann pulled Heidi up to kiss her hard. “Well, I like this new side of you.”

“Me too.” Heidi pulled her shirt off and shifted so she stood in front of Ann. She reached forward for her jeans, pulling the button and zipper until she dropped them to the floor too. She gave Ann a challenging look when Ann’s gaze trailed over her newly naked form. “Are we doing this or not?”

“Hell yes,” Ann stood up, stripping the rest of her scrubs.

Heidi swayed her hips wildly as she walked toward the bedroom. As soon as she was inside, she sat on the edge of the mattress. Ann followed closely, pushing her down and covering her as their mouths connected. Ann’s fingers were firm as she ran them up and down Heidi. Heidi closed her eyes, listening to her body as Ann touched her so confidently. She wished she had that confidence, but at least Ann did.

Tapping Ann’s side, Heidi grinned. “On your back.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Ann giggled before flopping onto her back.

Heidi got onto her knees and bent over Ann to kiss her. Ann reached up, playing with Heidi’s breasts as they dragged across her. Heidi kissed her way down Ann’s body until she kneeled between her legs. Bending low again and lying on her belly, she positioned herself perfectly. She started with her tongue, surprised to find Ann so wet and ready for her. It was so unlike other times they’d had sex.

She moved one finger in her first, then a second, knowing Ann preferred it that way. With her mouth and fingers, Heidi concentrated everything she had on Ann, bringing her up to the pinnacle of an orgasm. She listened to the way Ann's breathing changed, the twitches of her muscles, the rise and fall of her hips as she pushed through the last barrier. Ann reached down, gripping Heidi's hair tightly as her stomach tensed and she groaned. Heidi slowed her movements but kept them up until Ann's grip in her hair loosened.

"Jesus, Heidi."

"What?" Heidi rested her chin on Ann's hip, leaning in to kiss her heated skin.

"Where the hell have you been hiding that one?" Ann laughed, her dark gaze locking on Heidi's.

Heidi shook her head, confused. "It's not any different than I've done before."

"It was different. Trust me. That was amazing." Ann trailed one finger over Heidi's cheek. "Come up here."

Heidi climbed up the bed so she was lying alongside Ann. The kiss was sweet and deep. The connection Heidi felt had been missing between them so often was back, even if only for a brief moment, and she fell into it, giving over everything she had left of herself. She wanted this. She wanted Ann, and she had no doubts.

"I want you on top."

"Okay." Heidi got back onto her knees and scooted up so she straddled Ann's head on the pillow.

Ann curled her hands around Heidi's thighs to hold her in place and in the right

position. Heidi looked down, leaning backward slightly so she could see Ann's concentration, her delight.

"You're so wet."

"So were you." Heidi giggled.

"Whatever you did today, if this is the result, I think it might be worth it to explore." Ann didn't give her a second to respond as she licked firmly. "Mmm, so good."

Heidi gripped onto the headboard as she raised up instinctively. Ann licked her again before diving in. Heidi's knuckles went white as she held on to keep herself as steady as possible. Ann shifted her every once in a while. Glancing down, Heidi lost herself in Ann. Those dark, beautiful eyes, Ann's confidence, Ann's strength, Ann's compassion. It was everything she could need in a partner and more, and she was so glad she'd found Ann when she had. The last fifteen years without her would have been terrifying.

Heidi's orgasm came swiftly, taking her so unexpectedly she grunted and jerked, nearly falling over on the bed in the process. Ann held her tightly as she clenched her eyes shut tight while Ann didn't slow. Heidi wasn't sure if Ann knew she'd come or not, but her mouth was dry and she couldn't figure out how to form words to tell her. Ann kept going, moving her mouth against her until Heidi crashed through a second—albeit far more expected—orgasm.

She moved almost immediately, lying next to Ann on the bed, her chest rising and falling rapidly as she tried to catch her breath. "Twice."

"Twice?" Ann repeated as a question. "You came twice?"

"Yeah," Heidi muttered. "You didn't notice?"

“No.” Ann shifted so she leaned up on an elbow and stared down at Heidi. “But I’m glad. Was it good?”

“Uh huh.” Heidi gave her a silly grin, freer than she had been in ages. “Yeah, it was good.”

Ann grinned. “It was good for me, too.”

They kissed tenderly before Ann shifted and curled around Heidi’s back. Heidi held on to Ann’s hand before she looked across the room, surprised to find she was on Ann’s side of the bed, nearest to the window. She tensed, and Ann gripped her tighter.

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“I promise we won’t sleep like this. Just give me a minute to catch up.”

“All right,” Heidi answered, relaxing again in Ann’s warm grasp. She was safe with Ann. She knew that. She just had to keep reminding herself.

CHAPTER12

“What has got you so distracted this week?” Lila’s boss, Cole, glowered down at her.

She merely shrugged as she glanced up at him, debating what to say. She’d alluded to her lifestyle many times in his presence, but he never seemed to fully understand it. Not a lot of people did, for that matter, but it was exactly how she wanted to live.

“Seriously, what is distracting you?”

“It’s stupid,” Lila murmured. “I’ll try to focus better.”

“It’s not affecting your work, but you have this stupid silly look on your face.”

At that, Lila whipped her head up to stare at him fully. “What?”

Cole shrugged. “You have this silly in-love look going on.”

“Do I?” Lila, instinctively, reached up to touch her cheeks as though she could physically feel the look with her hands.

Cole raised an eyebrow at her. “What’s going on?”

“I met someone, that’s all.”

“You’re always meeting someone new. I don’t think I’ve ever known someone to have as many dates as you.”

“Yes, well, that happens when you’re not in committed relationships for seven years without marrying like you,” Lila fired back, adding a light teasing tone to her voice so he knew she was joking. She loved Cole’s partner of choice, and while she may tease him about not putting a ring on it yet, she was perfectly comfortable with him living life as he saw best for him.

Cole gave her an odd look before Lila remembered he rarely understood her humor.

“This is someone new,” Lila stated by way of explanation. “She’s...she’s kind of an oddball in the mix of people I normally date.”

“Why is that?”

Lila relaxed into her chair, crossing her arms as she contemplated. She couldn’t put a finger on why Heidi was so different from all the others. “I’m not entirely sure yet.”

“I suggest you figure that out. Maybe this one will stick.” Cole winked at her.

Lila rolled her eyes and snorted. He didn’t understand. As much as he tried to understand, he didn’t. Relationships often didn’t last with her because most other people were looking for long-term and she wasn’t, not long-term monogamous, anyway. She wouldn’t mind dating someone for longer than a month or even a weekend, like Jerica. Ann had managed to last over a year with her crazy antics, only the second relationship Lila had ever managed to get sustain past the twelve-month mark.

Cole clapped her on the shoulder and stepped out of the room toward the back room. Lila sighed and clenched her jaw. He was right, in one way. She needed to figure out what was going on between her and Heidi, and that was absolutely something she wanted to explore. Heidi brought out something in her that no one had ever managed before. She became someone who was far softer than she'd ever thought she could be.

Lila checked her watch before grabbing her phone and sending a text to Ann, asking if she had time for a quick lunch that day. She'd never asked Ann to have lunch with her at the hospital. They always tried to keep that part of their lives separate, but if Lila was going to formally start dating someone longer, like she was with Ann, she knew Ann deserved to know. When she got her reply, Lila set out to fill the time before their impromptu lunch date.

They met at the front doors to the hospital, both bundled together in their jackets. Lila smiled as Ann walked down the hall. Together they left the building, opting for a long walk around the area surrounding the hospital so they could speak in private. Lila made sure not to touch Ann in any way that would show that they were more together than friends. Ann was open about her relationship with her partner and quiet about her relationship with Lila. In some ways it was easier, at least for Ann. Lila, on the other hand, had to keep just about every relationship she was in under the radar.

"I wanted to talk with you," Lila started as soon as they were a block from the hospital.

"And it couldn't wait until after work today?"

Lila pulled her lip between her teeth and shook her head. "No, because I don't know when I'll be able to see you again. And this is easier—neutral ground."

Ann stopped short, her dark eyes locking on Lila. "Are you ending this?"

“No! No, I’m not doing that at all.”

“Good, because I thought...never mind.”

“No, what? Tell me. What had you worried?”

Ann sucked in a breath before starting their walk again, her hands shoved into the pockets of her overcoat. “The last time I was at your place, I may have said some things.”

“You said you loved me,” Lila stated bluntly. She wasn’t going to shy away from it. She hadn’t returned the sentiment, mostly because she’d been too surprised to even consider it at the moment. But she’d had time to think between then and now, time to wonder.

“I did,” Ann whispered. “And I do. Love you, that is.”

Lila’s cheeks warmed and turned red, and it wasn’t because of the biting cold air. “I was surprised when you told me.”

“It kind of slipped out.” Ann sighed. “I’m sorry about that.”

“How long?”

Ann shrugged. “Probably a while now. I didn’t want to think about it. I didn’t want it to be a competition, I think, so I didn’t want to think about it.”

“And it’s not a competition?” Lila questioned, turning the block to start down the long way around the hospital.

“It’s not. All that worry for nothing.”

Lila chuckled. “I’m glad it’s not. It just...there’s something about you that I can’t get enough of.”

“What?” Ann faced her, dark eyes curious and cautious.

“I don’t know. You’re so damn full of passion, you know? It’s insane sometimes how you manage to bottle it up inside you, and when you release it—it’s like being consumed.”

“Consumed? You’re speaking nonsense now. I do not consume.”

Lila giggled before sending Ann a heated look. “Oh, you do. Like right now I’m betting if we found a quiet place, you’d fuck me into oblivion even if it was just for a quickie.”

“Don’t tempt me,” Ann muttered.

“Exactly my point.” Lila knocked her shoulder into Ann’s. “I love that about you. It’s consuming.”

“I guess,” Ann sighed.

“No guessing about it. You, Ann, are one sexy woman, always wanting to please your partner, always giving more than you get, always pushing the limits of how many times you can make me come in a few hours.”

Ann’s cheeks were bright red. “All right, I get it. You can stop now.”

“Fine.” Lila laughed again. “But I did bring you out here for a reason.”

“Yes, to break up with me.”

Lila grimaced. “No, not to break up with you. I did want to talk to you about me adding in another longer-term partner, a girlfriend this time.”

“You’re asking me permission to date someone else?” Ann’s eyebrows rose in confusion. “Why would you need my permission?”

Lila was stumped. She didn’t really need permission. It was more a courtesy, so Ann would know that Lila was regularly sleeping with another person, that her time would be far more limited now that she was dating two people instead of just one, that the quick “Can I come over after work?” texts might not be as feasible.

“I don’t want your permission, really. I want you to be okay with it.”

“Lila...” Ann stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. “This is an open relationship, a poly relationship. I don’t expect you’ll only be with me, ever.”

“Okay.” Lila breathed a sigh of relief. “Okay, well, then, I guess I want you to know because I want to keep the lines of communication open.”

“Good.” Ann smiled. “Let’s do that.”

“Right.” Lila stared awkwardly at Ann. It wasn’t that she thought Ann would refuse, ever, but she hadn’t expected the conversation to go quite like it had. She wished she could kiss Ann, that they were free and open enough to be able to do that, but she didn’t feel comfortable with that, and she knew Ann wouldn’t. They might live in the twenty-first century, but they still lived in rural western Kansas, and kissing a girlfriend could result in exposing themselves to the seedier homophobic side of life where they lived.

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“I should get back soon,” Ann muttered. “I need actual food to keep going for the rest of my shift.”

Lila grinned. “And I have orders to fill and supplies to deliver.”

“My little delivery girl.” Ann blushed as she started back toward the hospital. “Who knows what would have happened to me if I hadn’t met you.”

“What do you mean?” Lila followed, skipping a step to catch up to Ann’s rapid pace.

“Just that. I’m not sure I’d be where I am today if you hadn’t shown up working at the hospital when you did. I desperately needed someone exactly like you.”

“I’m still confused.”

Ann stopped. “I needed someone who can keep up with me, sexually. My partner...I love her, but it’s not a relationship built with rainbows and warm fuzzies.”

“No relationship is just that, Ann.”

“I know, but...this one is hard. And you showed up exactly when I needed you.”

“Ann...”

“Just take it for what it is. We can talk about it later when we’re in a little more of a private space.” Ann pointedly looked at the looming white hospital.

“Right.” Lila nodded. “But do know that you have also fulfilled some of my needs.”

“Only some?” Ann winked. “And here I thought I was the grand goddess able to fill everyone’s needs.”

Chuckling, Lila shook her head. “You’re a dork sometimes.”

“Yes, I am. I fully own up to that.”

They stepped through the front doors of the hospital. Lila nodded toward Ann. “I’ll see you around.”

“See you later.”

As Lila walked away, her step was light. Now all she had to do was make a date with Heidi and find time to finish that conversation with Ann—one she definitely wanted to see played out.

* * *

Lila had forgone dinner, deciding finding a vegan restaurant in western Kansas was going to be difficult enough, and she wanted to plan everything and give Heidi a break from thinking. Instead, she asked Heidi to meet her after dinner downtown. It was right early-November, and she knew the Christmas decorations down Main Street were going up before the winter moved into full swing. It would be gorgeous just after sunset.

She parked in front of the little bar she knew and loved. It was one of the few places where they were welcomed in their town, openly. She hoped Heidi hadn’t spent too much time there with her partner before, and she had a sinking suspicion she hadn’t. As she stepped out of her car, pocketing her keys, her gaze lit on Heidi.

Heidi was stunning. The street lamps were just the right angle to accentuate her slight curves as she shoved her hands in the pockets of her jacket, which was open in the front. She wore dark blue jeans that were tight fitting, a loose top that billowed around her waist in a dark green. Lila's mouth went dry.

“Well, how-dee.”

Heidi's cheeks moved as she smiled. “Hey.”

“You're looking good tonight.”

“Thank you.” Heidi glanced toward the ground, and Lila suspected she'd made her uncomfortable with the compliment. “I've never been here before.”

“Really? It's the only gay bar in town so I figured you might have.”

Heidi shook her head. “No, I'd thought about it, but I'm not much of one for going out. Run into too many clients sometimes.”

“Understandable. Well, I hope tonight we don't, but if we do, we can leave whenever you want.”

“Thanks.”

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Lila stepped in close, tucking Heidi's arm into hers as they walked toward the front door. The building was an old brick, one of the first built in town. Over the years it had been any number of things, but this was one of the longest standing. They stepped inside to find the bar warm and filled with a light crowd of people, but it was still early on Friday night.

Lila held Heidi close, wanting to make sure she was comfortable being around so many people. She led the way to a table in the back corner, where they sat next to each other each so they could face the door. Lila had no idea if that was Heidi's preferred place to sit, but it was definitely hers. Their shoulders and thighs brushed together as they got comfortable and removed their jackets.

"They have a vegetable appetizer thing with pita bread and hummus I thought you might like."

"That sounds wonderful," Heidi's voice dipped.

"Good." Lila waved over a waiter, and they placed their orders. "I'm glad you could come out on such short notice."

"My partner is working tonight, so it was perfect timing."

Lila grinned. "Good to know she works weekends."

"Sometimes. Sometimes she doesn't. It all just depends. She's always home at night, though."

“Don’t like sleeping by yourself?” Lila raised an eyebrow.

Heidi shook her head. “There was a time when I wanted nothing other than to sleep alone, but after meeting her, I never wanted to be alone at night.”

“Understandable, with all you’ve gone through.” Lila took Heidi’s hand in her own and folded their fingers together under the table. Heidi gave her a gentle squeeze and kept her hand there, so Lila figured it was an acceptable move. “What do you like to do? For fun?”

“Oh...um...I work mostly or clean the house. We don’t do a lot of dates or outings.”

“Really?” Lila narrowed her gaze. “You don’t have any fun.”

“Not really. I’m pretty boring, as you’ll find out.”

“Somehow I doubt that.”

Their food and drinks were set in front of them, and when Heidi didn’t release her grasp on Lila’s hand, Lila knew they were doing well so far. Physical connection was typically a good indicator of emotional connection.

“I like to go to concerts, although there aren’t many here. I have to go to Wichita or Denver sometimes for them,” Lila attempted to make pleasant conversation.

“Do you go often?”

“When I can.” Lila shrugged. “I haven’t been to one in a couple months, been a bit preoccupied here.”

“With what?”

“Another woman I’m dating.” Heidi tensed, and Lila leaned in pressing a kiss to her cheek. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m fine with you dating other women, please don’t take my tenseness as that. I just didn’t think of you actually being with other women.” Heidi’s lips twitched. “It’s kind of odd to think of the woman I’m dating having sex with someone else.”

“I guess it can be in some ways. I find it exhilarating.”

“Do you also like to watch then?” Heidi winked before she grabbed her drink.

Oh, they were definitely making progress here. “I do, when fully permitted by those actively engaged.”

“I’ve never done that.” Heidi shuddered.

“Because it’s something you experienced you didn’t want to?” Lila not-so-subtly asked, allowing Heidi to open up a little more if she wanted or not.

“Partly,” Heidi replied, thinking deeply. “Mostly I think it’s because sex makes me so uncomfortable that the thought of doing it while someone else is watching makes it that much more stressful.”

“Oof. I can understand that.” Lila picked up Heidi’s hand and kissed her knuckles. “Would you ever want to?”

“Maybe? I’m not super experienced when it comes to sex, not like it seems you are.” Heidi’s tone dropped, nearly to a whisper, but Lila was pretty sure it wasn’t because of the topic and far more because of shame.

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“That’s nothing to feel guilty about, you know. You have to do what you’re comfortable with.”

“But I want to be comfortable with it. That’s the thing.” Heidi’s cheeks tinged pink.

“Do you?” Lila pushed. If she could get a real answer, it would mean they could work toward something, maybe push some of the boundaries Heidi came with.

“I do. I’ve never told anyone that.” Heidi looked embarrassed.

“Not even your partner?”

“No. Never.”

“Why not?”

“Didn’t think about it, honestly. I suppose it’s something she’d be interested in. She’s far more into sex than I am.”

Lila chuckled. “You just want to be cuddled and held, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Heidi smiled. “I really do.”

“Well, I can do that.”

“But I also want more,” Heidi confessed. “I know it sounds weird to say that, but I do want more. I want to be able to be free and without the burden of my trauma every

time I have sex with someone.”

“Hmm.” Lila took a long sip from her drink. “I’m going to assume you’ve tried alcohol and other things to get you going.”

“Once on other things. That was...unpleasant. Alcohol helps, sometimes. If I’m in the right mood. God, why am I even telling you this?” Heidi covered her face with her hands in embarrassment.

“Why wouldn’t you? I’m a safe person, Heidi. I hope you know that. I’m not going to tell anyone anything of what you share with me. Ever. Please trust me on that.”

Heidi nodded, her dark eyes locking onto Lila’s. “I do trust you. Isn’t that weird? We barely know each other.”

“I told you once. It’s shared trauma. We both know what it’s like to have that very basic trust ripped from us, to never have that essential aspect of trust our parents are supposed to give us. It takes years of relearning our own defense mechanisms in order to overcome that.”

“I think you’ve accomplished it.”

“Most of the time, but not all of the time.” Lila gave her a wan smile. “I still struggle with my trauma.”

“Doesn’t seem like it.”

“Trust me. I do. But if you did want to try something, say tonight, something that would be new and exciting and different, what would it be?” Lila focused on her drink, curious as to what Heidi might say. She kept their fingers locked together to lend the support and comfort Heidi might need.

Heidi sighed. "I honestly have no idea."

"Think about it and let me know. Maybe we can try it out."

"Sure." Heidi finished her first beer and ordered a second.

They spent the next hour and a half talking and laughing, drinking and eating. After their third drink, Lila put an end to it. They both needed to drive home and be safe about it, especially with how pitch black it got at night there. As they left the bar, thirty minutes later, Lila kept Heidi's hand in hers as they walked toward Heidi's car.

She stopped and leaned in to give Heidi a kiss on the cheek, but Heidi moved, making their lips align. Lila groaned as the kiss deepened and she fell into Heidi's body, pushing her against the car. Heidi wrapped her arms around Lila's back and held her tightly, parting her lips and tugging Lila impossibly close.

"Get in the car with me," Heidi muttered.

"For what?" Lila answered.

"Don't know."

Lila pulled back slightly, canting her head to the side. "Tell me what you want."

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Heidi pulled her lip between her teeth, staring directly at Lila, her cheeks pale. Lila stayed in the moment, letting her think and giving her time to answer. “Like last time.”

“At my place?”

“Yes.”

“No more?” Lila asked to confirm.

“No more.”

Grinning, Lila tugged Heidi to her and gave her a firm kiss. “Front seat or back?”

“Back.”

“Lead the way.” Lila held her hand out to allow Heidi to move. Soon enough they were settled into the backseat of Heidi’s SUV, staring awkwardly at each other. “You just want to kiss?”

“Maybe a little more.”

Snorting, Lila shook her head. “I want you to tell me when to stop and where to stop. Got it?”

“Yes.”

“You’re the one who makes these decisions.”

“Got it.” Heidi nodded eagerly.

Leaning in, Lila gently kissed her. It was far slower and smoother than what they’d just done, but she wanted there to be no hesitation on Heidi’s part as they moved forward together. Lila cupped Heidi’s cheek, trailing her thumb back and forth. Instantly, Heidi relaxed.

“Like that?” Lila whispered.

“Yes,” Heidi responded, her voice a whisper.

Lila could taste the alcohol on Heidi as they danced their tongues together. Since Heidi seemed very comfortable with kissing, she wanted that to be their base of playing with boundaries. As soon as Heidi seemed completely relaxed, Lila skimmed her hand down her front, barely brushing her fingers over Heidi’s breast to settle her hand on Heidi’s thigh.

Breaking the kiss, Lila checked in. “How was that?”

“More.” Heidi surged forward, their lips connecting. Her hand was bold when she cupped Lila’s breast, massaging before finding her nipple through the thin bra Lila wore and drawing sensuous circles around it.

“That feels so good,” Lila murmured, pulling Heidi even closer.

Heidi gave her breast a squeeze and then moved to push Lila’s jacket off her. Lila shifted around to help, trying her best not to break their kisses. Everything with Heidi was so calm. The passion was still there, but there wasn’t a frenzy or tension that they had no time to explore. It was so vastly different from Ann, who was quick about

everything.

Lila nipped at Heidi's lip, trying to up the level of heat, and while Heidi surged forward and pressed against Lila, the sense of serenity still remained. If this was all there was to Heidi, this sense of calm and peace, Lila could easily get on board with it. She was so gentle as she tested and played and pushed into new boundaries of their relationship. It was such an easy feeling.

Taking it one step further, Lila tugged off Heidi's jacket and slid her hand down to the edge of Heidi's shirt, rustling her fingers just under it to touch her hot skin. Heidi moaned, the sound leaving her throat surprising both of them. Heidi jerked back, a flash of embarrassment crossing her features before she corrected it into a look of satisfaction.

"Keep going," Heidi stated confidently.

Lila needed no extra encouragement. With her palm fully against Heidi's stomach, she moved it upward until she could cup her bra-covered breast, then her naked breast. Every time Lila pushed the limits, she'd slow down and check in either verbally or with a gentle slowing cue. Heidi told her in no uncertain terms exactly what she wanted and where she wanted to be touched.

By the time they stopped, Heidi's hair was no longer smooth and sleek. Her shirt was wrinkled. Lila could barely breathe and her lips were so chapped she knew she was going to need to go heavy on the ChapStick for a week just to get them back in shape. Heidi pressed her forehead to Lila's shoulder and sighed contentedly.

"Thank you for tonight," Heidi said.

"It was a good night," Lila responded, combing her fingers through Heidi's hair to try and undo some of the tangles.

“I should get home. My partner will be home already.”

“All right.” Lila kissed her cheek gingerly. “I’ll see you soon. Text me when you get home so I know you made it safely.”

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“I will.” Heidi kissed her, lingering just long enough to make Lila wish they were going to take it one step further. When she moved away and opened the back door, all the heat rushed out. “See you soon.”

Her dismissal in hand, Lila shrugged her jacket on and followed Heidi. They shared one more kiss before Lila walked to her cold car. She watched Heidi drive away, forcing herself to stay in the parking spot until her car disappeared. Ann and Heidi were such a contradiction of each other, but they each brought something out in her that she wanted to explore, and luckily, they both seemed willing for that to happen.

CHAPTER13

Ann was home wellbefore Heidi arrived, and as she stepped through the front door, Ann eyed her carefully. Everything about her seemed lighter than it had been in weeks. It was a relief, and at the same time, that nagging voice in the back of her mind told her none of it was because of her.

Heidi flopped down on the couch and dragged Ann in for a kiss. Surprised, Ann pulled back and cocked her head to the side. “What was that for?”

“Just wanted to.” The smile was still there on Heidi’s lips.

Ann wished desperately she had been the one to put it there, the one to make these changes for her, but she knew she wasn’t. It was someone else, someone Heidi had barely mentioned in passing. “How long have you been dating this other woman again?”

“Oh, not long. I think it’s going well, though.”

“I’m glad.” Ann grasped Heidi’s fingers, clasping their hands together. “It seems like you’re enjoying yourself.”

“I am. It’s so different from being with you, and both ways are really good.”

Ann wasn’t quite sure what to say to that, so she kept everything to herself. Heidi settled her head on Ann’s shoulder and sighed lightly.

“I like spending time with you like this.”

“What?” Ann asked.

“Like this, just time spent together, doing whatever. We should go out more.”

“You want to go out?” Ann raised an eyebrow. This was not the Heidi she’d been with the last few years. This Heidi was far more reminiscent of the woman she’d met fifteen years ago—someone who lived a little more on the edge and outside of routine and the house.

“I do, but I like to stay in, too. It’s more comfortable.”

“What do you mean?” Ann furrowed her brow. Of course home was comfortable, but she didn’t understand why anywhere else might not be.

Heidi kissed Ann’s cheek. “I think we need to talk.”

Ann stiffened, immediately thinking Heidi was leaving her, that this was the end.

“Not like that,” Heidi chided. “I’ve been doing some thinking, and I’ve had some

realizations.”

“About what?”

“About me, mostly. This last episode got me thinking about my past, obviously.” Heidi’s cheeks reddened, and tears welled in her eyes. Ann reached out and touched her face softly to encourage her to continue. “I don’t want to live this way anymore.”

“What way?” Everything in Ann’s mind was spinning and telling her that this was Heidi breaking up with her, that fifteen years was too much and she was done, that they weren’t connecting and never would.

“I love you,” Heidi whispered. “I don’t want to feel so alone anymore, and something I’ve come to realize is that I’m alone because of my own doing.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t let you in, and I need to stop doing that. I’m tired of living as if the world is happening around me. I want to be in it.”

Heidi’s eyes were wide, as if she was making a huge confession, but Ann didn’t understand it. She was so lost, left in the dark. Heidi had this huge light show up for her, but Ann couldn’t see it. She stayed still, hoping Heidi would elaborate. She waited, listening to the silence, eyeing every change in her features, her tone, her posture.

“I’m tired of being so disconnected. I want you to know that I’m going to be working on that, but it’s going to take time for me to relearn bad habits.”

“Okay,” Ann answered, still lost, but at least it sounded good for both of them. “But you’re doing okay after the other week?”

“Yeah, I’m doing better than okay. I’m doing good.” Heidi leaned in and kissed her loudly. “I want this for us, you know, because of you. You make me want to be connected, to know what it’s like to feel love. It’s all because of you that I think...I think I can finally do this when I never thought I could before.”

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Ann was at a loss for words. She wanted to believe every single thing Heidi told her, but in the back of her mind, somewhere, she worried it wasn't because of her, it was because of this new woman, someone who finally showed Heidi all the possibilities of love. Nodding, Ann retreated into herself, hiding her own worries and fear from Heidi as best as she could.

Heidi shifted on the couch, swinging her legs up to rest them over Ann's. "Will you stay out here with me a bit? I know you have to go in early, but I was hoping for some time with you."

"Yeah." Ann cleared her throat. "I can do that."

Heidi leaned in and kissed her cheek. "The other night, when we had sex, that was really good, right?"

"Yeah, I thought so."

Heidi traced her tongue along the shell of Ann's ear. "I enjoyed it a lot."

"Did you? You were smiling through the whole thing, so I had hoped I was doing something right." Ann let Heidi do whatever she wanted. This was a whole new side of her that she'd never experienced or even seen.

"I was?" Heidi seemed genuinely surprised, though it didn't shock Ann. Heidi could never tell someone what she was feeling when. She was always in the dark about her own emotions as much as she was intuitive about others. Ann always found it an interesting contradiction.

“You were, and you seemed like you were enjoying it.”

“What do you mean?”

“You were moving around a lot more.”

“Interesting.” Heidi went back to tracing the shell of Ann’s ear.

“You keep doing that and I’m going to want something else before bed.”

“I might be up for that, but I’d rather just snuggle.”

Ann turned to her slowly. “I think that’s the first time you haven’t flat out told me no when I commented about sex.”

Heidi shrugged. “I told you. I’m trying something new.”

“Well, I like it so far.” The change was jarring, but it was nice to have a fresh moment of true honesty from Heidi. It wasn’t a no. It wasn’t Ann’s fault. She simply didn’t want sex but still wanted intimacy. Ann could give her that.

Heidi kissed down Ann’s neck to the top of her tank top before she moved and settled against Ann. “Let’s go on a date tomorrow night. I can meet you in town after work.”

“You really want to go on a date?”

“Yes.” Heidi smiled.

Ann settled into the couch. “What would we do?”

“Dinner? I don’t know. Let’s do something.”

“There aren’t many vegan places to eat in town, you know that.”

“I can always just eat a salad. Come on. Why are you being so resistant to this?”

Ann sighed as she mulled it over. She wasn’t sure she had an answer to Heidi’s question, at least not immediately. She was going to have to think that one over. She wanted to be all in, but something held her back. “Let’s go then. I’ll figure out a place.”

“Call me when you get off work, and I’ll come meet you wherever.”

“Okay.”

Ann wrapped her arm around Heidi until they were settled together on the couch. She liked the idea that Heidi was willing to change, willing to open up to her and try something new, but she still couldn’t help think that it was because of this new woman in her life. Ann kissed Heidi’s head.

“I love you,” Ann whispered.

“I love you, too.” Heidi snuggled in closer, relaxing completely into Ann’s side.

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They stayed that way for hours until Ann found Heidi lightly snoozing against her. Shaking her until she was awake, Ann helped Heidi to the bed where she pressed up against her from behind, her back to the window and her body between it and Heidi, just like every night. She still didn't understand it, but if it was the only way either of them was going to get some sleep, then Ann would deal with it.

She held Heidi close, staying awake far longer than she should as her mind spun for hours about what could be the cause of all the changes. Surely it couldn't be that easy to connect with Heidi after all these years of trying.

In an attempt to bring herself back to reality, Ann took several deep breaths. She could do this, she could calm herself down, think about why it was she was still there. Heidi. It was all for her. Heidi slept comfortably, snuggling in Ann's arms, like they did every night. It was the only time Ann truly got to be quiet and think. If it was this easy, she knew she could do it every day, she would know that Heidi loved her, and she would believe that there was hope for the two of them yet.

Ann eventually shifted, lying on her back as she stared at the ceiling. Her heart raced at the thought that Heidi might be doing this because of someone else. It would be good for Heidi no matter what, but didn't fifteen years mean anything? Tossing her arm over her head, Ann closed her eyes and tried to force herself to sleep. She needed to rest, needed the sleep so that she could function in the morning at work.

Still, she couldn't stop thinking about Heidi and these changes. For her to feel something, for her to be more honest not only with Ann but with herself about what she was feeling and thinking—that would be extraordinary. The possibilities it opened up were beyond anything Ann could imagine. Perhaps they could finally

connect, emotionally, like they had tried so desperately to do for years. The only question spinning through her brain had to do with the root cause. Why would Heidi choose now of all the years they had been together to try something different?

The only thing Ann knew for certain was Heidi couldn't be the only one to make changes. Ann was going to have to work on herself too. She was going to have to learn how to see the bigger picture, how to find herself in the sea of doubt and anxiety she warred with every day. She knew, however, that if Heidi was willing to do it, she could too. Turning to face the window, Ann closed her eyes and fell asleep.

* * *

All week, Ann struggled to comprehend exactly what Heidi had told her. She'd spent her days off contemplating it. She'd spent her time at work wondering just what these changes were going to mean, and still in the back of her mind was the fear that Heidi wasn't doing this for her or because of her. It all struck her as such odd timing. They'd been together for fifteen years, so why now? Why try to live now? And why wasn't she living before?

Ann didn't understand it. As much as she wanted to, as much as she desperately wanted Heidi to live better, she couldn't imagine a relationship where that was the case. The tension in Ann reached an all-time high by the following Thursday, and she was barely able to focus on work. It was going to be bad for her patients if she didn't get her shit figured out sooner rather than later. It also wasn't the first time in her life that she'd contemplated going to therapy just to have someone else to talk to about it all.

Hours into her shift, Ann hit a wall. Heidi was supposed to meet her for lunch the following day, and that weekend they were planning a date—well, Ann was supposed to be doing that. Heidi had left this one in her hands. It was nerve-racking. They'd never really gone on a date before, not a proper one. Not one that they planned and

executed.

Heidi had always been more of a hang-out-at-home kind of person, and this change was sudden. Ann wasn't opposed to it. She always wanted to go out and try new places, but Heidi had been such a homebody. She'd blamed it on Heidi's abuse and just being an introvert. Still, it unnerved her.

Ann counted down the minutes—having already texted Lila—until her lunch break would begin. Lila was always good for listening and helping Ann figure things out, even if Lila didn't say much of anything. It was a wonder Lila was interested in her at all. She couldn't figure it out half the time, but Lila didn't seem like she was going to be ending their relationship soon, even with Ann's fears the other week.

She'd also have to try and figure out how to make the weekend up to Lila soon, preferably before the holidays hit, because if they waited any longer than that, Ann was likely to forget about it all together. Brushing her hand through her short hair, Ann checked the clock again. Five more minutes and she should be able to leave. She was working a couple extra shifts that week, having picked them up to make up some hours and give her extra ammo to take off short-term during holidays.

As soon as it was time, Ann rolled her shoulders and left the ICU. The walk to the cafeteria wasn't a long one. Ann sat down in the back corner where it wasn't full and waited for Lila to sit down with her lunch. They were in blatant public eye, but she hadn't wanted to wait until she could find time to talk with her alone. She needed the conversation to happen now.

Lila slid into the seat across from her and picked at the food on her plate with a frown. "I hate hospital food."

Ann chuckled. "It's far more convenient than leaving."

“Bring your own lunch next time, so I don’t have to eat here.”

“I do, sometimes. Other times, I don’t—or I forget it, like today.”

Lila pouted.

“Just eat it. Calories are calories.”

“Flavor is everything,” Lila muttered.

Chuckling, Ann dove into her own meal. “Do you have any free weekends coming up?”

Lila jerked her head up. “What?”

“So we can plan another weekend. I feel so bad after the last one—I still want to make it up to you.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that.” Lila’s eyes crinkled slightly as she smiled. “I’d love to spend another weekend with you, but you don’t have to treat me to something like that.”

“I want to.”

Lila grinned. “I don’t have any plans except for Thanksgiving.”

“Going to your parents’?”

“A friend’s.” Lila relaxed. “Just pick a weekend, and I’ll make sure you have it.”

“I’ll do that as soon as I check my schedule.”

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“Good. But I have a feeling that isn’t why you insisted on this short-notice lunch.”

Ann narrowed her gaze. “You know me too well sometimes.”

“You know me pretty well too at this point.”

“I guess.”

Lila sent a pitying look her way. “What’s wrong?”

“I found out my partner is dating someone.”

“So?” Lila raised an eyebrow in her direction. “If you have an open relationship, you can’t get mad at her for dating someone.”

“I’m not mad. That’s definitely not what I’m feeling.” Ann frowned into her plate.

“Then what are you feeling?” Lila moved her food around with her fork, and Ann wondered if she was ever going to eat it or if she was just going to play with it.

Ann sighed, mulling the question over. She really did need to figure out what she was feeling. That was part of the problem. She wanted to be mad because it was easier, but if she really focused on it, anger wasn’t what came to mind. No, it was something else entirely. Lila stayed quiet as she thought, which was a blessing. Finally, Ann set her fork down and rolled her shoulders. “I’m unsettled.”

“Why?”

“Do you always ask such hard questions?” Ann snorted.

“Yes. It’s why you always come to me with the hard problems.”

“Fine. It’s new, and it’s not just that she’s dating someone. She’s becoming a whole different person.”

“Oh?” Lila looked her directly in the eye then, her deep blue eyes never wavering from Ann’s. “What do you mean different?”

Ann shrugged. “I don’t know how to explain it. She came home the other night wanting to be in the moment more. She asked me on a date. I can’t even remember the last time we went on a date.”

“How is that a bad thing?” Lila cocked her head to the side.

“I guess it’s not. I mean, I know it’s not.” Ann groaned. “I’m not making any sense, am I?”

“You’re making sense.” Lila shifted in the hard plastic chair. “Tell me, are you scared of who she might become or are you scared she might not love you when she gets there?”

Trust Lila to lay it all out bare. Ann’s heart thudded wildly, every nerve in her body firing warnings, and her muscles tensing so much it hurt. She had no idea if Heidi would love her after she changed. What Heidi wanted was definitely for the better, it would make such a huge difference in her life, but Ann had no idea if she’d even be part of Heidi’s life after that. She wanted to be. She loved Heidi with everything she was. She never wanted to give her up.

“Ah...there we have it.” Lila crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair with a

cocky smirk on her lips.

“You’re so mean sometimes.”

Lila laughed. “Sure, but it’s why you love me.”

“It is.” Ann grinned, glad Lila was able to say that without fumbling this time around. Drawing in a deep breath, Ann let it out slowly.

“I don’t think she’ll stop loving you because she’s dating someone else.”

“No, I don’t think that,” Ann muttered. “I think she won’t be the woman I fell in love with.”

“So you’re scared of not loving her?”

“What if she doesn’t need me anymore?” Ann could barely make the words out, but it was exactly where all of her fear came from.

Lila’s look broke into one of pity. “Oh, Ann. You need to talk to her about this. But I think she’ll always need you. We always need our partners. It’ll just look different than it does now, like you said. Don’t let that go. Be there for her exactly as she needs you to be.”

“You’re right.” Ann stared down at her plate, still more than half full of food. She was doing a poor job of eating her lunch. “I do want what’s best for her.”

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“Yes, that’ll be good. And in the meantime, what changes will you make to stay up with her changes?”

“Oh boy.” Ann took a sharp breath. “I need to let go of some things, too, I suppose.”

“Which things?”

Ann rolled her eyes. “Shame.”

“You went straight for the noose on that one.” Lila pointed at Ann with her fork. “But you’re probably right. And you need to work on your overthinking. Your desire to put your needs first. Make space for her.”

“All right! All right. I get it.” Ann went back to eating, knowing she was going to need the energy to keep up the rest of the day.

Lila chuckled lightly. “I’ll be here when you need to figure out how to do that.”

Ann shook her head. “Why do you act like you’re fifty?”

“Because I lived fifty years in my twenty-six.”

“Don’t remind me how young you are. Makes me feel like a cradle robber.”

“You just like that I can keep up with you.” Lila winked, boldly.

Ann’s cheeks heated. She hadn’t meant to have lunch with Lila to flirt, but that was

the turn it took. Shifting in her chair, Ann focused on her food and ignored Lila's comment. They were in public, at the place where they both worked, and Ann needed to make sure they maintained their distance. They couldn't be caught doing anything unsavory where someone might run back and tell Heidi, not that Heidi would care—she knew—but because of the internal drama it would cause in the hospital. That was something Ann wanted to live without.

“And are you busy Saturday night?” Ann asked.

“You know, I am, actually.”

“Wonderful.” Ann pouted. “And I'm busy Sunday.”

“Monday?”

“I guess that's what we get. Your place?”

“If you want, or we can go out.” Lila's bright eyes locked on hers.

“Go out? Where would we go?”

“Anywhere you want. We don't always have to go to my apartment.”

Ann pursed her lips. Lila's apartment meant they were free to touch. Being out in the public meant Ann had to hold back and maintain a reasonable distance. That would not be as much fun as fucking Lila senseless against a wall, or the couch, or the bed, or maybe even the shower. Yes, she could definitely go for that on Monday.

“Ann—” Lila interrupted her thoughts. When Ann looked up, Lila raised an eyebrow in her direction. “I know exactly what you're thinking, and that is perfectly reasonable if you want, but also consider going out. We can make a night of it and

then do that afterward.”

“I’d have to stay later than normal.”

“Can you not manage it?”

“I might be able to. Let me talk to my partner about it.”

“Okay.” Lila grinned, and Ann caught the unexpected blush in her cheeks. It pleased her to see it, and she wondered if she’d be able to get the red to deepen in color.

Ann’s mind moved quick as she worked out how to have the conversation she wanted. “What do you think we should do on Monday?”

“I don’t know. Movie?”

“Dark rooms and you think I’m going to be quiet?” Ann lowered her tone.

Lila’s gaze jerked to Ann’s face. “Maybe that’s not the best idea.”

Ann laughed. “You figure out Monday then. I’ve got to go back to work.”

She finished up her meal in a few bites, cleaned up her tray, and took it to the trash. She said nothing else to Lila as she walked away, and didn’t even look over her shoulder. That had been boundary pushing, but it had been so much fun. When Ann got back to the ICU, she was far more relaxed and in a good place. The conversation with Lila had been exactly what she needed.

CHAPTER14

Tonight was the night. It was exactly what Heidi wanted and needed. She and Lila had been texting and talking every day, and all the changes Heidi was making were feeling so different, with Lila’s help. It was perfect. Lila had no idea, but Heidi sensed the reason the start of their relationship was going so well—unlike every other relationship she’d been in—was because of her honesty, because she was trying to connect with her deeper feelings. This was how she had wanted to live for her entire life.

They ended up back at Lila’s apartment after a quick dinner Saturday night. Lila couldn’t stop smiling. She was so relaxed for the first time ever. She’d barely even noticed the other people in the restaurant while she was there. She’d told Ann at one point she didn’t like going out because people might see her, and she was pretty sure Ann had thought that it was because of being lesbian in a conservative part of the country, but that hadn’t been it.

After being prostituted by her foster-father for the majority of her life, Heidi had no idea who was out there who had seen her, who had used her, who had paid for her

services. She was always worried she was going to run into one of them, and that it would put her right back in that place. It was so different with her work because then she could actually do something to help the kid in trouble and maybe even put the John away, but in her life? It was too long ago for it to happen.

And Heidi didn't remember all of them. She wished she did some days, and others, she was so happy their faces blurred together into an emotional mess of trauma. Shaking the thought from her mind, she focused on Lila, this beautiful young woman who was so intuitive. Tonight was the night. Heidi had known it before she'd even shown up for the date, before she'd made the decision to go back to Lila's.

She was going to do it. She wasn't going to make it a big deal, not like it had been with Ann. She was going to relax and ease into it as best as she knew how. Heidi turned to look Lila over as she watched the movie playing on the screen. Heidi stayed closely snuggled into her side as she took in all the tiny features about Lila—the slight freckles sprinkled across her face and the dark moles along her neck and collar bone, which Heidi desperately wanted to trace.

Lila was so relaxed, so content with just sitting there in that space and time, but Heidi was going to take it one step further, assuming Lila wanted to. Her lips curled upward at the thought. For once in her life, she was going to seduce someone, and she was going to make it worth their while. Heidi skimmed her hand down Lila's arm, catching her attention. Lila turned and gave her a curious glance, her gaze dancing.

“Yes?” Lila asked.

Leaning in, Heidi pressed their mouths together. The moment was tender and perfect. They each gave and took, willingly and kindly. Lila smiled underneath the pressure of Heidi's lips to hers.

“That was unexpected.”

“You’re unexpected,” Heidi answered and kissed her again. She pushed a bit more so Lila would know she wanted more. She peeked her tongue out to trace Lila’s lips before easing back. “I don’t really want to watch a movie.”

“Oh?” Lila smiled. “And what would you like to do?”

“You.” Heidi’s response was so simple.

Lila grinned, her entire face lighting up as the realization hit her as to exactly what Heidi wanted. Moving in, Lila kissed her fiercely, passion striking both of them deeply as they connected. In the few short months since they’d met, Heidi had become completely entranced by Lila. Lila was so soft with her, so tender and caring at the same time. She allowed Heidi to explore and push herself when she wanted, to try something new without lashing back or making Heidi feel guilty about running scared.

It wasn’t just that, though. Heidi had been working on herself too. She wanted this. She wanted to be free from her trauma, to be able to handle it better and connect. Not just with Lila, but she’d proven she could do it with Ann, too. In some ways, it was far more important that she did it with Ann. She wanted Ann to be there for the rest of her life, and she wasn’t willing to hide in herself, to put up barriers that would keep her out anymore. They had to be open and honest with each other.

Lila kept their hands locked together as she moved to stand up. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“The bedroom?” Lila answered as though it was a question, raising an eyebrow.

“That’s what you wanted, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, yes.” Grinning, Heidi stood and let Lila lead her into the single bedroom the

apartment boasted. It was nice inside. White walls, as expected in any apartment, the bed surprisingly made and the floor cleared of crap. It was a dream come true for Heidi, the cleanliness adding to her ease. Surely Lila couldn't have known about that, could she?

Lila walked backward until she reached the edge of the bed, sitting on it. Heidi moved in, stepping between Lila's legs and bending her head so they could kiss again. Heidi loved kissing her. It was so comforting and passionate at the same time. As though she could spend days and weeks just kissing Lila and never tiring of it. She threaded her fingers through Lila's hair, the soft curls gripping her fingers at the ends before she started again.

Lila held her hips, keeping her in place firmly. Heidi felt as though she couldn't move, but she knew if she twisted and turned or stopped that Lila would let her go. She had absolutely no fear or trepidation about what they were about to do. Lila nipped at her lower lip, adding a little spice to the mix. Heidi gasped.

"Did you like that?" Lila asked.

"Yes." Heidi mimicked Lila's actions before pushing forward on her toes until Lila toppled back onto the mattress. They fell together, Lila cradling her between her legs as they shifted.

"Tell me what you want," Lila whispered in between kisses.

"Make me feel everything at once."

"I can do that."

Lila stripped Heidi's clothes off one by one until she was completely bare and lying in the middle of the bed. Lila stood up, dropped every scrap of clothing she still had

on and climbed onto the bed again, hovering on all fours over Heidi. Heidi drew in a ragged breath, and Lila shifted, falling to her side and giving Heidi more space. Heidi breathed freely, turning onto her knees and straddling Lila's hips.

“Move up here,” Lila demanded. “And then close your eyes.”

“Close them?”

“Uh huh.” Lila smiled. “Haven’t you ever been blindfolded before?”

Heidi tensed. She had been, not willingly, but she had been. She used to close her eyes when she wasn’t blindfolded so she didn’t have to see what was happening. Lila’s fingers against her cheeks caught her attention.

“Tell me.”

Heidi shook her head and sat back on her heels. She drew in a deep breath, calming her racing heart and re-centering herself. She was safe. She was exactly where she wanted to be with someone she wanted to be with. Lila wouldn’t hurt her.

“All right, no blindfold unless you change your mind,” Lila muttered. “Talk to me.”

“I’m fine,” Heidi answered tersely before biting her lip and shaking her head. “I do mean that. Sorry. I just needed a second. I don’t want to be blindfolded.”

“Then we won’t. Only what you want.”

Lila ran her fingers in gentle circles over Heidi’s thighs. It was comforting, and Heidi eased back into the moment, pushing her trauma behind her as she focused on the woman underneath her. “Make me feel everything.”

“I will if you still want that.”

“I do.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. I’m positive.” To make her point, Heidi bent down and took Lila’s mouth in a heated kiss. She deepened it, pouring everything she had into that one moment. Lila raised her hands to Heidi’s back, dragging them down her spine to her ass as she pulled her in closer. “I’ve never been more sure.”

“Tell me what you feel.”

“Safe,” Heidi stated firmly.

“Really?” All of Lila’s features softened, her tone sounding almost placating or patronizing, but Heidi knew she was being genuine.

“Yes.” Heidi kissed her again, hard.

They stayed that way for some time before Lila broke the embrace and got a cocky grin on her lips. “Move up. Sit on me.”

“Fast becoming my favorite position.”

Lila chuckled. “Because you have all the control when you do it.”

“Do I?” Heidi leaned back as she straddled Lila’s head so she could look at her fully.

“Oh, yeah.” Lila curled her arms around Heidi’s thighs. “Ready?”

“More than ever.”

Lila's tongue reached out, circling around her clit and flicking it. Heidi grunted, her hips rocking sharply as a surge of pleasure shot through her. She reached down and gripped Lila's beautiful hair to hold herself steady. Next time they'd have to do this in a bed with a headboard. It was much better the way she'd done it with Ann.

Soon enough, she was barely able to think. She moved against Lila, not able to control her body as pleasure coursed through her. It was such an odd feeling, as though she wasn't in control of herself but at the same time she was. She had invited it to happen. Sounds she'd never heard herself make before left her lips.

She'd never been this lost in a moment. She'd never felt this connected to someone she'd made love to—not even Ann, and God did she want to experience this with Ann. She wanted to have every single damn wall she had built up broken down between them. Heidi cried out as her orgasm ripped through her. She tried hard not to clench her thighs around Lila's head, but she wasn't sure she was successful. When she finally was able to focus, she was on her back, Lila raised up on her elbow, staring down at her as she trailed her fingers in random patterns over her breasts, along her belly, between her legs.

“How are you feeling?” Lila asked.

“Fuck,” Heidi muttered. “Is that what I've been missing out on?”

“Apparently.” Lila giggled lightly.

“No wonder she's so into sex.” Laughing at herself, Heidi closed her eyes and flung a hand over her face. Lila bent in and captured one of Heidi's nipples between her lips, teasing even more. Before Heidi knew it, she already wanted to go again, but first, she wanted to make sure Lila had the exact same experience. “Come on, your turn.”

“Which way?”

“Scissor?”

“Sure.” Lila shifted so she was on top, sliding their bodies so they were lined up just right. “Ready?”

“Only if you are.” Heidi winked. She couldn’t stop herself from smiling. It was as if it was permanently plastered on her face.

Lila rocked hard. Heidi moved against her. It took a few seconds for them to get the right pattern and rhythm, but before she knew it, Heidi was a sweating pool of sensations again. She dug her nails into Lila’s legs as she held on, increasing the friction between them. Lila grunted, her hair falling to curtain her face. Heidi reached up to push it behind her shoulder so she could see everything happening. She wanted to know what it looked like for Lila to fall apart, to be the cause of that.

Lila’s pattern faltered. Heidi continued it, having a bit more to go to get where she wanted to be. Lila came first, but she didn’t stop even though her movements became clumsy and difficult. Heidi focused everything she had on her body, on her nerves, on what sensations she was feeling and what she wanted to feel. She was so lost in that moment that when she crested through a second orgasm, she fell into it freely. Lila continued to move, dragging out the pleasure even longer than Heidi had ever thought possible. It felt so damn good. She never wanted to give it up.

When Lila finally slowed down and stopped, Heidi grinned and turned so they were lying face-to-face on the mattress. She kissed Lila, still smiling when she pulled

away. “You should have told me sooner it would be this good.”

“Didn’t think you didn’t know, honestly.”

“So good,” Heidi repeated. They fell into a comfortable silence, and Heidi knew she was going to have to leave soon. She didn’t want to stay overnight. She wanted to go home to Ann, snuggle with her, be with her, share with her all that she’d experienced, although, she was going to have to be careful with how she did that. Ann was so sensitive when it came to conversations about sex.

“What are you thinking?” Lila traced the curve of Heidi’s cheek.

“That I want to do this again. Soon.”

“Me too.” Lila pecked her lips.

“Perfect.” Relaxing, Heidi stared up at the ceiling. She really did have to get up and get dressed. As much as she wanted to snuggle and stay with Lila, explore more, she wasn’t willing to give up Ann for anything. That was one love she wanted to carry with her until one of them died, and probably even after that.

“Need to get home?” Lila asked, as though she could sense where Heidi’s thoughts had gone.

“Yes,” Heidi replied. “But right now, I don’t want to move.”

Lila laughed. “Oh, I understand that!”

“Still, I guess I should get moving.”

“I’ll watch you while you get dressed.”

“Voyeur!” Heidi tossed over her shoulder as she shifted off the bed.

“Always,” Lila teased.

* * *

Heidi collapsed onto the bed next to Ann as she flipped through the pages of a book. She peered over the edge of it to see what she was reading, smiling when she caught Char Dafoe’s name across the top edge of one page.

“Her new book?”

“Came in the mail a couple days ago,” Ann folded over the page and closed the book, plopping it on the nightstand. “How was your night?”

Heidi sighed and pulled the blankets over her legs so she could lie next to Ann, tucking her head on Ann’s shoulder and moving to clasp their hands together. “You know, it was pretty good. Unexpectedly.”

“I’m glad.” Ann tone was terse.

Heidi couldn’t quite figure out why, but Ann had been short with her lately in just about every way. Kissing Ann’s cheek, Heidi settled in. As long as Ann would let her hold her, she would stay right where she was.

“I’m working really hard at sharing with you what I’m feeling.” Heidi kept her tone light, but she focused everything in her on Ann’s reaction. Sure enough, she tensed. “I want you to know that. I’m trying to make these changes.”

“I know. It’s just...fifteen years is a long time to have you one way and then have you change to something new, you know?”

“I know.” Heidi played idly with Ann’s fingers. “But I’m doing this for us, so maybe we can get over some of our crap.”

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Ann's lips twitched at that. "Our crap isn't all on you."

"What do you mean?"

Ann sighed and wrapped her arm around Heidi's shoulders, pulling her in closer. "Come here. I don't even know where to start with it all, but it's not just you. I have issues too, and it's just a matter of us both figuring out our issues and working on them, maybe individually and maybe together."

"What issues do you have?"

"Shame," Ann whispered. "It kills me every time you say no, and please don't start saying yes just to assuage that. I don't want you to do it. But when you say no something happens inside me that I hate. I think it's all my fault, that I'm not good enough, that I'm doing something wrong."

"That's not it at all." Heidi tried to push herself up to look Ann in the eye, but Ann held onto her firmly. "I promise you, that's not it. I just...I don't know how to tell you no."

"It's taken me a while to realize that." Ann closed her eyes with a shake to her head. "And it's not right that it took me this long. I'm so sorry for that. I should have figured it out way sooner. You don't only love me when you have sex with me."

"Is that what you've been thinking?" Heidi did move then. She stared down at Ann. "I love you, Ann."

“I know. I know you do. Sometimes I get lost in my own thinking, and I forget that sex isn’t the only way to show that love. And for the record, Heidi, I love you too.”

Heat blossomed in Heidi’s chest. She leaned down and kissed Ann gingerly. “I love it when you tell me that.”

Ann’s lips quirked. “I’ll try to say it more often, then.”

“Please do.”

They fell into a comfortable silence, lying together in the quiet with only the bedside lamp on to light the room. Heidi was nearly asleep when Ann spoke up. “Would you want to do a weekend away?”

“With you? Where would we go?”

Ann shook her head. “I mean yes, with me, but also with our partners. I’m curious about who it is you’re dating, and I’m sure you’re curious about who I’m dating. I know it’s unorthodox. We could all have our own rooms if we wanted, or maybe two or three and just flop around.”

“Our own rooms?” Heidi pushed up onto her elbow so she could study every feature on Ann’s face. “You want to go away for a weekend with four women who are all kind of dating each other in a really weird way.”

Ann shrugged. “I know it sounds weird.”

“It sounds insane.” Heidi’s brow drew together. “Absolutely crazy. And no, I don’t want my own room.”

Ann’s gaze whipped to Heidi’s. “What does that mean?”

“Meaning I don’t like sleeping by myself, and you know that. I don’t want my own room.”

“Then we can share.” Ann still looked suspicious.

Heidi tried to figure out what she was missing in the conversation, but she couldn’t. They still weren’t communicating effectively, and it frustrated her to no end. After fifteen years together, they should be able to understand each other far more easily than they did.

“Are you saying yes to this crazy idea?” Ann finally asked.

“What? Oh...I don’t know.” Heidi flopped onto the bed again. “It is crazy.”

“I know it is, and our respective partners would have to agree to it as well, and they may not. I’d want to talk to them first before we plan anything.”

“What if they don’t like each other?”

“How many lesbians can there be in town?”

“I don’t know,” Heidi trailed off. “I guess I can ask.”

“I think...I think it might be good for us.”

“Why would you say that?” Heidi folded their fingers together again. “I think it’d be more of a disaster.”

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Ann chuckled. “I think our respective partners might have some insight into each of us the other might find useful.”

“Oh...I hadn’t thought of it like that. But we could have that conversation here.”

“Neutral ground,” Ann replied. “I was reminded recently of how useful neutral ground is.”

“I guess,” Heidi agreed. Still, she felt there was some ulterior motive Ann wasn’t sharing in terms of this plan. But she reminded herself that she wanted to trust and to trust fully. Drawing in a deep breath, Heidi took a risk she never would have before. “I’ll talk to her, but I’m on board, so long as we lay out some ground rules first.”

“Like what?” Ann twisted to face Heidi.

“First, I don’t sleep alone.”

“I think we can manage that.” Ann kissed her lightly.

“Second, this is not to break anyone up or cause any arguments. It is solely a fact-finding trip, a learning trip.”

“Agreed.” Ann’s voice rose, and Heidi could tell she was getting excited about this prospect.

She had to come up with more rules. The overwhelming desire to protect herself and all of them through this entire process consumed her. “Third, no one leaves once we

get there until it's time to go. We don't leave on a bad note."

"Yes. Let's do this."

Heidi paused. Was this something she really wanted? Did she need to know what Ann's partner knew about her? It would be a wonderful insight, no doubt, and perhaps it would fill in some missing blanks she'd been wondering about. Since they struggled so much to communicate with each other, maybe their girlfriends could help them figure that out. On the other hand, her relationship with Lila was so new, she didn't want to set that off on the wrong foot.

"Let's see how it plays out for now before we make any plans."

"For sure," Ann replied.

Without warning, Ann moved and hovered over Heidi. It surprised her, and she drew in a sharp breath, gripping the sheets under her to center herself before she remembered this was Ann, someone who was safe.

"I love you," Ann whispered.

"I love you, too," Heidi responded with a kiss.

"I'm glad you had a good night out. I know how much you needed it."

"Thanks." And Heidi genuinely meant it. "I think I learned a lot tonight when I didn't expect to."

"Even better. You'll have to tell me all about it."

"Mmhmm." Heidi moved in, kissing Ann more deeply. There still seemed to be a

barrier between them, one she had hoped was gone by then with all the changes she had made and all the work they had done recently. She couldn't even put her finger on what it was that seemed to come between them, but it was still there. Cursing it, Heidi wrapped her hand around the back of Ann's neck and dragged her in deeper for a kiss. She wouldn't push her luck on what they did that night, not after her evening with Lila, and she was going to have to think more deeply about Ann's suggestion of a weekend getaway, but for now she was content to have Ann next to her under the covers.

CHAPTER 15

Lila rolled out her yoga mat before she turned the television on and selected her streaming service. She needed to concentrate and center herself before Ann came over. Dating two people with consistency was more chaotic than she'd anticipated especially because both of them currently seemed to have intense needs.

It was good, though. She enjoyed both Ann and Heidi, but moving into a committed relationship with both of them at the same time was a larger adjustment than she'd anticipated. Still, her last night with Heidi made her smile. Heidi was so sweet, and in a way, so innocent. She hadn't experienced pleasure when there was full trust yet, and Lila could see why. Even in the short time they'd known each other, she'd seen Heidi break down walls each and every time they were together. She was slowly coming out of her shell.

The video played on the television, and Lila shook out her arms and legs as she prepared to stretch her body and center her mind. She tried to do yoga at least three days a week when she had the time, but it had been difficult lately to get a good session in. This was exactly what she needed before Ann arrived for their weekly dinner date—well, it was weekly until the fiasco of attempting to go to Indigo had knocked them off their pattern.

She was still somewhat curious about what had pulled Ann away so rapidly and if that entire situation had resolved, but she also didn't want to pry. Ann was always so closed off about sharing anything to do with her partner, to the point Lila still didn't even know the woman's name. Ann always played it off as her partner being a severely private person. Lila had gone along with it, trusting that Ann wasn't lying.

With the way Ann had opened up recently, she was pretty sure the truth lay closer to Ann and her partner having some deep underlying issues they were still working through. Which, in Lila's estimation, sounded like a pretty typical relationship. She loved her stepfather dearly, but she knew he and her mother didn't have a perfect relationship and still argued. They'd been married ten years at that point and there were still problems that arose.

Moving into a downward dog before shifting into a warrior pose, Lila drew deep breaths in and out. Her mind spun with thoughts of Ann and then thoughts of Heidi. She had to stop it if this session of yoga was truly going to work. Re-centering herself, Lila listened to the directions from the instructor as she shifted into a tree pose.

Her muscles tightened and relaxed on command. She cleared her mind of the stresses in her life. She listened to the steady rhythm of her heart and pushed everything else from her mind. This was her time, and she was going to use it to prepare herself for the next few days when she couldn't do this.

Lila spent the next hour doing yoga, a light sheen of sweat on her skin when the video finally ended. She shook out her muscles and then cleaned up from her session, feeling far more at ease than she had been before. Yes, a good hour of yoga had been exactly what she needed. She hopped in the shower to clean herself up before Ann was due to arrive.

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Refreshed and renewed, Lila pulled on a clean pair of yoga pants and a tank as she wrapped her hair up in a towel to help it dry. The knock on her door surprised her. Glancing at her clock, she realized it was far later than she'd expected. Finding Ann on the other side, she grinned and invited her inside.

Ann kissed Lila lightly before putting her jacket away as usual. Lila removed the towel from her hair and ran it through the still quite wet strands before hanging it up in the bathroom.

"Sorry, I didn't realize the time. I must have gotten lost in doing yoga."

"Don't worry about it," Ann replied, flopping onto the couch. "I'm a bit earlier than I thought I would be. Couldn't wait to get out of work."

"What happened?"

Ann shot Lila a dark look. "Lost a patient today. I hate losing patients. She was so young too. Just had a kid in the last year, and a four-year-old at home."

"What'd she die from?"

"The flu." Ann pressed her lips tightly together. "And still there are so many people out there who don't think it's dangerous. She had no pre-existing conditions either. Just one of the statistics now."

"She's not a statistic for her family, or for you." Lila gave Ann a soft look. "I love how you care so much for your patients."

“I try too. Not much point in being a nurse if I don’t.”

“Not all medical personnel see it that way.”

Ann chuckled wryly. “That’s true. Some doctors...their ego is bigger than their asses.”

Laughing, Lila agreed. She’d seen her fair share of those through the years. They didn’t tend to last very long around here. The small-town feel meant they never quite fit in. Ann rubbed her hand up and down Lila’s thigh. It was a habit Lila noticed she had when she was nervous, something about the physical connection to Lila meant she felt more comfortable bringing up uncomfortable topics.

Their relationship had been taking some odd turns lately, first with Ann opening up more about her partner and then with Lila taking on another committed partner. The tension she’d felt between them had been light, however, and she hadn’t thought much of it until this moment.

“Everything okay outside of that?” Lila asked.

“What are you doing next weekend?”

“I have a date Saturday, but that’s it.”

“Is it one you can cancel with enough warning?”

“I suppose I could.” Lila narrowed her gaze. “Why do you ask?”

“I thought we could have that makeup weekend at Indigo. I checked, and the entire place is open. I don’t think Eli gets much business during the winter months anyway. Not as much to do on a ranch for guests would be my guess.”

“Makes sense. Is your partner okay with you leaving so soon? I want to make sure she’s not going to be struggling with you gone again.”

“Oh, well, that couldn’t be helped last time. Something unexpected happened. She’s doing much better lately, though. Thank you for asking after her. I know she’d appreciate it.”

Lila nodded. “Five days isn’t a lot of time to plan a getaway.”

“I know. I just...I don’t want to wait much longer. Would it be something you were up for?”

“Yeah, I would be. I really enjoyed the one night we had together.”

“Me too.” Ann gave her a sheepish look. “But we might not get the whole night together this time.”

Lila narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”

That nervous tic Ann had was back. The pause in the conversation intensified what she was about to say, and Lila wasn’t sure she could wait much longer for an answer. She wanted to know what was going on, what bomb Ann was about to drop.

“I want her to come.”

“Want who to come?” Lila narrowed her gaze, her stomach twisting as she was pretty sure where the conversation was going, and it was something she had never done before nor wanted to do.

“My partner.”

Lila sucked in a breath. She had no idea what to say to that. This was completely out of the blue and out of any norm Ann had set before. Ann hardly ever mentioned her partner outside of recent events, and now she wanted Lila to meet her, for what?

“I also want her to bring her girlfriend.”

“Why? Why on earth would you want to do that?” Every warning bell in Lila’s brain was going off that this was an awful idea. She didn’t know Ann’s partner, and she didn’t know this other woman. What good could come from this?

Ann leaned in, utterly calm. “Will you trust me on this?”

“I want to know why. I think that’s reasonable.”

Ann nodded slightly. “My partner and I have been struggling to connect, and I’m curious about her girlfriend. I want to know how they connect so that maybe she and I can communicate better.”

Lila was even more confused now. So many questions filled her brain at once, and she couldn’t figure out how to form even one of them. She pushed up from the couch and paced to the kitchen and back, staring at Ann’s calm form as she planted her hands on her hips and shook her head. “This is a terrible idea. And sure, that might make sense for you, Ann, but where the hell do I come into this?”

Ann drew in a long breath. “She’s curious, too.”

“We’ve been together for a year now, and she’s just now curious about who I am?”

“I guess.” Ann shrugged. “I’m not sure it’s so much who you are but how we are with each other. Something isn’t right in our relationship, and we’ve both known that for years, but I think this is the first time we’ve seen that we might have an answer to all those questions we keep asking.”

Lila whistled out a breath, her lips vibrating together. She shoved a hand through her hair and swallowed hard. “I don’t know about this, Ann.”

“We’d all have separate rooms. Well, not me and her, but you and her girlfriend would have your own rooms, and I don’t even know if any sex would happen while we’re there. It’s more about talking and learning.”

Lila couldn’t believe what she was hearing. This was the craziest thing Ann had ever said to her. “Was this your idea or hers?”

“Mine.” Ann stood up, walking straight to Lila and holding both of her hands. “It was my idea, and we haven’t planned anything because I wanted to talk to you first.”

“Next weekend?”

Ann shrugged. “It’s not something I really want to wait on.”

“Five days. You’re giving me less than five days to make this decision.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

Lila cocked her head to the side, eyeing Ann. “You really know how to throw me for a loop, don’t you?”

“Sorry.” Ann gave a wan smile. “Don’t feel like you have to answer right now.”

“Don’t plan on it.”

“All right.” Ann let out a sigh. “Can I kiss you?”

“Fuck, you better. I need something to calm me down.”

Laughing, Ann moved in, their lips connecting. As they breathed the same air, focused on each other, Lila strove to find the center she’d had only an hour before, the peaceful place she so desperately wanted to be. She was going to have to think about this one for at least a day or two before she answered Ann. She’d never expected this.

* * *

Lila sat at the table in the back of the bar, the same one she’d been at with Heidi. She sipped a beer as she waited. Heidi had gotten held up at work and was going to be a bit later than expected, which was perfectly fine with Lila. Even two days later she couldn’t stop thinking about Ann’s proposal, and she could use the distraction Heidi would give her.

The idea was absurd, that much she knew, but depending on the personalities at play, Lila could see how it could be helpful. Ann’s for sure, but she didn’t know Ann’s partner, and it would make her far more comfortable if she did have some sense of who this woman was before she agreed to an entire weekend with her and some other strange woman she didn’t know.

And, there weren’t that many women who loved other women in their small town in rural western Kansas, so the likelihood they knew each other was strong, or at least knew of each other. As soon as Lila had a name, she’d subtly ask around and see if

anyone knew who it was. Lila sighed when Heidi entered, looking strong and confident as ever.

Heidi shucked her long black jacket and folded it on the chair next to Lila before she scooted to sit close enough they could touch subtly under the table. Lila had come to expect these quiet touches from Heidi and even looked forward to them.

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“How’s your week been?” Heidi asked as she leaned in and kissed Lila on the cheek.

“It’s been a week. I’ll tell you all about it in a bit. First, how are you doing?”

“Good. Work was a bit crazy today. Someone overscheduled visitations, that’s what took me so long.”

“Don’t you love when people do that.”

Heidi shrugged. “With Thanksgiving coming up, it’s reasonable I think. These kids might not get to do visitation for a while, and some find it very useful.”

“And those who don’t?”

“Then it’s out of the way for another week, and they get a break.” Heidi called the waiter over and ordered a drink and the vegetable tray they’d gotten before. “Are you doing anything for Thanksgiving?”

“I was invited to a friend’s house for an annual party, but I’m not so sure that’ll be happening now.”

“Why’s that?” Heidi furrowed her brow, her hand landing on Lila’s under the table with a comforting squeeze.

“That’s the drama of this week I’ll tell you about when I’ve got more of this drink in me.”

“All right.” Heidi glanced at her suspiciously.

Lila was glad she was willing to wait. She wasn’t even quite sure how to broach the topic without it coming off as gossip about her other girlfriend, which she definitely didn’t want. But, if Lila was going to be gone for the weekend, then her date with Heidi on Saturday would have to be cancelled, which was something they needed to talk about.

“I’m going to have to cancel Saturday, sort of,” Heidi started.

“Oh?” That could easily solve one problem. “Are you going somewhere for the holiday?”

“Maybe. I have the time off, and my partner suggested that we go away together.”

“That’ll be nice. No family to see?”

Heidi shook her head. “We don’t talk to anyone in my family, and hers is a mixed bag of toxic and stressful. It’s easier just to see them randomly and do holidays by ourselves. Normally she works holidays since we don’t have big family get-togethers. It’s her way of giving back to the others, but this year, she’s wanting to take off and go somewhere.”

“I’m sure it’ll be lovely.”

Heidi nodded, not looking at Lila. Lila narrowed her gaze as she took a long sip from her drink, trying to figure out why she was having flashbacks to Ann’s conversation the other day.

“She wants you to come.”

Lila gasped.

“I know. It’s weird, and random, but she wants to meet you.”

“Stop.” Lila put her hand up. Her heart thundered. A ringing echoed in her ears, and her head felt all sorts of fuzzy. It couldn’t be. But it had to be. There were not two crazy lesbian couples running around their fair city. Nope, it was firmly one, and somehow Lila had ended up dating both halves of a relationship. Her chest tightened so much that she struggled to draw in a breath. Shaking her head again, she turned to Heidi, her lips parted. “I need some air.”

Without waiting for a reply, Lila booked it out of the bar. She stepped onto the sidewalk and walked half a block to the corner. Bending down with her hands on her knees, she breathed in as deeply as she could. Panic swarmed her. How the hell had she not figured it out before now?

She was dating Ann. She was dating Heidi. Ann and Heidi—they were a couple for nearly sixteen years. The ringing in her ears intensified.

“Oh fuck.” Lila’s stomach churned. She should have asked more questions. She should have insisted on knowing who was who, but she had trusted. And she had messed it all up. Her first foray into dating two women at once in a committed relationship and she was dating a couple. Fuck, she was an idiot.

“Lila?” Heidi stood a few feet away, Lila’s jacket in her hands.

She hadn’t even realized she’d run into the freezing weather without it. Heidi looked so lost and confused.

“What’s wrong?” Heidi asked.

Lila shook her head. How was she going to explain this one? Heidi had to know, didn't she? She and Ann talked, surely they did. Except, she knew they didn't. She knew that was their problem. Everything both of them had told her led her to believe neither knew. They were both in the dark as much as her. Slowing her breathing until she could catch herself, Lila stood up and held out her hand for her jacket. Heidi handed it over, and she shrugged it on.

“Did you pay the bill?”

“I told them we’d be right back and to hold the orders for now.”

“Inside.” Lila said nothing else as she stalked back toward the door and into the warmth of the bar. When they were settled, she downed the rest of her drink and nodded to the waiter, who looked incredibly confused. As he set their food down, Lila asked for another.

Heidi stared at her curiously, in a quiet unnerving way. Lila knew the feeling must be mutual. With a steadying breath and a few more seconds, Lila started the only way she knew how.

“I met Ann about eighteen months ago at the hospital.”

Heidi’s lips thinned in distress.

“I believe that is about the time you two had a discussion, formally, about being in an open relationship together.”

“Yes,” Heidi confirmed.

“Ann and I started dating a little under a year ago.”

“No.” Heidi’s dark eyes widened.

“Yes,” Lila responded. “I didn’t know you were her partner. I swear to you. I would

never...well, I might have, but not without a whole lot more conversation. Ann never says your name. She never gives me details about you or who you are. She always told me you were a very private person and wanted to keep that to you two, which I'm completely comfortable with, except—"

"Except you ended up in the middle of it." Heidi rubbed her temple in circles. "I should have known."

"All of us should have known. Ann asked me to Indigo on Sunday."

"She said she had and that you were going to think about it."

"Yes, and I think now it would be a really bad idea for us to go."

Heidi shook her head emphatically. "I disagree. I think now more than ever it will make all the difference."

"What? What do you mean?" Lila's brow furrowed. This was a complete disaster in the making. Going to Indigo together would only make that worse.

"Look, I don't know what Ann told you or how she invited you, but I think it would be better for us. I know there isn't much in it for you, but I think you can really help us."

Lila narrowed her gaze.

"I was opposed to the idea at first, too. I told her it was absolutely crazy."

"It is crazy."

"Right. But the more I thought about it, and now that I know you're also her

girlfriend, I think this really would be for the best.”

“Why?” It was the same question she’d asked Ann, and she’d gotten a truthful answer, but she was curious if Heidi would be just as honest and if the answers would line up.

Heidi sighed. “Something is between us, like blocking us from seeing each other. I don’t know how to talk to her or be with her, but I can do that with you and so can she. I want to know how. I want to be a better partner for her, and I think you can show us how.”

It clicked. They were right. Lila could do so much for them, but where that left her at the end of everything, she wasn’t sure. Would she lose not just one girlfriend, but the two she’d committed to? Breaking up with both of them so they could run off and be happy together wasn’t her idea of pleasant, especially if she was going to be confined to a B&B with them, no matter how nice the B&B was.

“I still don’t know,” Lila whispered. “I think this is going to turn out really badly for me in the long run.”

“I don’t think it will,” Heidi replied. “Look, I want to learn how to talk to Ann better, but I’m not going to do that at your expense. I realize this is new and that we don’t know each other very well, but I would hope you know me well enough by now to trust that I don’t want anyone to be hurting.”

“Sometimes hurt is unavoidable.”

“Sometimes it is.”

Lila knew Heidi understood that viscerally. No one who had gone through sexual trauma wouldn’t understand that. Heidi reached out and covered Lila’s hand.

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“I won’t do this if you don’t want to. And I will take the blame if you want, but think about it. This could be really good for Ann and me.”

“I know it could,” Lila whispered. “But how much will I get hurt in the process?”

“Hopefully not at all.”

Lila clenched her jaw. Heidi was so damn confident while her world was spinning out of control. “A weekend?”

“Just a weekend unless you want longer.”

“You think we can hash this out in a weekend?”

Heidi shook her head. “No, but I think it’ll be a start.”

“I don’t do threesomes.”

“Then that’s off the table, not that I thought it was on it to begin with, but I will make that clear to Ann.”

Lila groaned as she leaned into the hard wooden chair and closed her eyes. “You can’t tell her until we get there.”

“Why not?”

“Ann will flip out when she finds out. This will not come as good news to her, and if

you want her to show up at Indigo, she can't know until we get there."

"She'll just flip out while we're there."

"Right." Lila nodded. "Best make it for most of the week, then. I don't have to be back at work until Monday."

Heidi blew out a breath. "I'll see what I can do. I don't know how I feel about keeping this from her, though."

Lila thought it over again, but she was pretty sure she knew Ann well enough at that point to know it would be better if they waited. "We need a plan."

"For what?"

"The week. Here's the deal, if we go into this without a plan—just sticking the three of us in a house together—it's going to be very awkward and nothing will come of it. We need a plan."

"Then let's make one."

They spent the next three hours talking everything through. It was nearing midnight when Heidi finally begged to leave. As Lila walked her to the car, she felt like she was on far more even footing than she had earlier that night. She could see how this plan was going to work, how Ann and Heidi would actually communicate for once in their partnered lives. But she still couldn't stop the raging fear that this was going to end terribly for her in the long run. Sometimes she hated being such a bleeding heart.

CHAPTER 16

It was nearing sunset when Ann pulled up outside Indigo B&B and parked the car.

Heidi gasped as she looked through the windshield at the house. Ann knew that sound. She'd damn near made it too when she'd first seen the place. It was stunning, and no one could deny it.

"This place—"

"Is something," Ann finished for her.

"Yeah." Heidi turned and grinned. "I'm glad we got here this early so I could see it in the light. Well, sunset, but it adds so much to it."

"Wait until you see it at sunrise."

Heidi shook her head. "I can't even imagine."

Ann pulled the key from the ignition and stepped out of the car. Lila had said she wanted to drive by herself in case something happened and she needed to leave. Ann understood. It would be insanely awkward for all of them to drive in one vehicle the three hours from home. Besides, car rides, while the perfect place for serious conversations, were not how she wanted to end the trip, especially if it didn't go well.

She hoped it did. The stakes were high—to mend her relationship with Heidi, to learn something that would be the key to understanding each other and making the connection the both of them so desperately wanted. At least, she hoped Heidi still wanted to. Swallowing down her fear, Ann moved to the trunk of her small sedan and pulled out her bag and Heidi's. Heidi took it from her and smiled.

"I'm glad you suggested this place. I didn't know anything like this existed so close to home."

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“I didn’t either, but someone mentioned it at work, and when I found out it was LGBT friendly, I couldn’t resist but support it.”

“I know what you mean.” Heidi sighed. “So hard to find places like that out here.”

“For sure,” Ann answered.

She stepped around the vehicle and up to the wraparound porch. It was so fun to watch Heidi take it all in. Ann had never seen her this excited about going somewhere before. She was usually so on edge about the possibilities of running into someone who knew her. That had been in part why Ann had suggested this place—it was so isolated that the likelihood of someone else showing up and knowing Heidi was slim to none.

They moved to the large wooden front door. Ann gripped the handle and pushed it open. Inside, they were greeted with a modern farm style house. They walked right into the main living area, with a couch and several chairs to sit in. Ann pointed farther away.

“There’s a den over there with a fireplace.”

Heidi chuckled. “I bet you want s’mores.”

“Of course I do.” Ann winked. “But I’ll settle for just a fire if that’s what I get.”

“I think you can have both,” Eli stepped out from the dining area and into the living room. “I’m Eli.”

“Heidi.” They shook hands, Heidi looking Eli up and down once before she relaxed even more.

Good, so Eli being part of the community wasn’t completely lost on Heidi. Normally she wasn’t as cued in to the sexuality of others. Ann had to come right out and tell her after they’d met, and even then, Heidi hadn’t been sure of her own sexuality at the time. It had taken another year before they started dating properly. Ann had already been head-over-heels in love by that point, though.

“I can give you a tour, if you want, or Ann can since she’s been here before.”

Heidi nodded. “A tour would be lovely.”

Eli’s voice was deep for a woman, her blonde hair in two braids on either side of her head. She’d definitely worked the ranch in the flannel shirt that day, but she wore wool socks instead of shoes. Ann set her suitcase next to the stairs and then took Heidi’s to settle them together.

“Ann already told you about the den. Fires are welcome at any point. I just ask you make sure it’s died down before you leave it for the night.”

“I think we can do that.” Heidi sent Ann a heated look, as if there was a double entendre in the entire phrasing.

Eli nodded. “Dining room is on this side of the stairs.”

Heidi followed closely as they walked into the next room.

“Breakfast is from seven to nine. Lunch is on your own, and dinner is at five. Kitchen is right there.”

The kitchen was an open floor plan, modern in every sense of the word, and led right into the dining area.

“I suppose I’m making lunch for everyone,” Heidi mumbled.

Ann leaned in and kissed her cheek. “You’re a better cook than I am, anyway, so I’d appreciate it if you did.”

Heidi chuckled.

Eli moved back to the stairway. “I’ll show you the rooms you’ve booked.”

They all walked up the stairs. Heidi’s and Ann’s room was on the far end of one hall, the other rooms next to them on either side. Ann didn’t care so much, but she saw Heidi visibly tense as she figured out where she would be sleeping so that she wouldn’t be near a window. With their bags settled, they headed down to the den to light a fire for whenever their partners arrived.

Luckily, they didn’t have much longer to wait. They both saw the headlights of a vehicle through the front windows. Heidi turned sharply on the couch as Ann bent over the fireplace. Heidi’s eyes widened and a grin light up her face. Ann loved seeing that reaction. It was one she hoped Heidi would give her most days, but at least Heidi was giving it to someone. It meant there was something there that they could grow into—hopefully.

“She’s here,” Heidi muttered.

“Who’s here?” Ann asked as she set the starter on fire.

“Lila.”

Ann dropped the match sharply. Every muscle in her body told her to stand up straight and run. Every nerve in her brain told her to ask Heidi to repeat what she'd said, but she didn't have to. The front door to the house opened, and Lila stepped inside, her beautiful curls wrapped in spirals down her shoulders, her deep blue eyes locked on Ann's face, fear and worry etched into every line.

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Lila let out a shudder of breath as she held her position at the door and glanced from Heidi to Ann. Ann's mind still spun. Heidi knew who Lila was. Perhaps they had met at the hospital one day—but they wouldn't have, would they? Heidi rarely came to the hospital and only ever for lunch with her unless it was work related, and Lila wasn't a nurse. Their paths wouldn't have crossed, Would they?

Heidi stood up, straightening her shirt as she spun on her toes to face Ann. Her look went from soft, to confused, to afraid—very afraid. Ann tried to school her features so that Heidi would open up, so she wouldn't turn tail and run in the other direction, but she couldn't. She could do nothing but stand there and gape at the two of them.

“I don't believe it,” Ann finally whispered, breaking the silence.

“I didn't either.” Lila stepped forward with her hand out in front of her as if to stop Ann from running. “I didn't know until this week, I swear to you.”

“How could you not know?” Ann's voice rose to the point where she was yelling.

Lila shook her head. Heidi stepped toward Ann, but Ann moved back and shook her head to halt Heidi. She couldn't be touched right now, by either of them.

“I swear she didn't know. I didn't know,” Heidi stated. “I met Lila at the hospital when I came to bring you lunch one day, and I met her randomly at the grocery store after that and at the hospital again while I waited for you, but we didn't start dating then.”

Ann lobbed a glare through the room to Lila. “How could you not know?”

“You never told me Heidi’s name!” Lila pleaded. “You never told me what she looked like or where she worked or introduced us. You kept that part of your life so separate—how would I have ever known? You have to believe us. When Heidi asked me to come here for the weekend is when I finally figured it all out. Before that? I was completely in the dark.”

Ann drew in slow deep breaths, trying to calm her racing heart. She couldn’t even think straight. All she wanted to do was lob accusations at each of them, yell and scream, and storm off. Except she knew that wouldn’t get her anywhere, and they were now pretty much stuck there. She wasn’t going to drive the three hours back home that night, not for this.

“I need a minute,” Ann’s words were rushed. She stepped around the couch and straight out the front door. She moved to the side of the wraparound porch where she could see nothing but the two lights on the barn.

She plopped down on an old wooden rocking chair and leaned forward, running her hands angrily through her hair. She couldn’t even formulate words to describe what had just happened. If Heidi hadn’t said her name, she would never have known. But it also meant that both Heidi and Lila had known for days at that point and neither had bothered to share that information with her.

They had planned against her.

Ann pulled her hair tightly between her fingers and groaned. What the hell was she supposed to do with this? None of this was in the plan for the weekend. Everything was completely messed up now. The weekend was a waste. How were they supposed to have honest conversations now?

Growling, Ann sucked in a breath and raised her face to the sky. She couldn’t believe it. But she had to. Lila and Heidi were together. The image of the two of them

wrapped around each other, fucking, of Heidi riding Lila into oblivion, struck her so hard it made her sick to her stomach. She wanted that. Ann wanted that with Heidi, and Lila, a woman she trusted and loved, had had that.

Standing because she couldn't take it anymore, Ann moved to the railing and leaned out over the edge of it. The cold air bit at her cheeks and arms, reminding her where she was and what she was doing there. They had all come there to learn from each other—that was what Heidi had said. To learn, to be open minded, to ask questions. Ann had checked in with each of them every day since they'd agreed to the trip.

“But this?” Ann muttered. “What the fuck is this?”

She leaned her elbows against the white railing and stretched her back. She needed time to sort it out before she went back in there to talk to the two of them, before she even thought about being open to a conversation with the three of them. She'd even booked three damn rooms and now that third was going to go to waste.

“She already cancelled it.” Lila's voice was soft as she stepped out of the back doorway, letting the weather door slap shut.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I can see your mind working about the wasted money, and I know how much that matters to you. Heidi called Eli earlier and cancelled the third room but asked Eli not to tell you.”

Ann rolled her eyes. “This is an entire fucking conspiracy.”

“It's not.” Lila moved closer and put her hands up as she stepped in front of the light. It was so hard for Ann to see her face in the shadows. “I swear to you, it's not. This happened entirely by accident.”

“I believe you,” Ann whispered, not sure that Lila even heard her, but it didn’t matter. It was true. She did believe them.

Lila leaned over the railing, her jacket still on. She stared down at her hands as she clasped them together. “I told her it would be a bad idea to tell you before we came up here because you wouldn’t have come.”

“You’re probably right,” Ann confessed. “I would have pulled the plug on the entire thing.”

Lila frowned. “We were at the Lounge when I figured it out. I ran outside because I couldn’t breathe in there.”

Ann snorted. “I can see that happening. Just like I did now.”

“Yup.” Lila turned and looked Ann over. The scrutiny was noticeable. “So how are you handling it?”

“Finding out my two girlfriends are actually sleeping together and dating is not something I think I could ever have been prepared for.”

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“I think Heidi is the one handling it the best out of all of us.”

“She would.” Ann bit her lip, wondering if she’d said too much already. She had no idea what Heidi had shared with Lila or vice versa. Honesty. The word struck out to her hard, and Ann took a step she’d never taken with Lila before. “Heidi tends to react after the fact but not in the moment. I imagine it’ll hit her tonight when we all go to bed or even in a week or two, now that the three of us are finally in the know.”

“She reacts after?”

Ann shrugged. “She always blames it on her trauma. Distancing herself from her feelings to handle the drama in the moment before it spins her out of control later. That’s what happened when we were up here last. She ignored her own feelings so she could deal with a client until it smacked her hard when she got home.”

“Oh. That makes a lot of sense.”

Ann straightened her back, turning around and sitting on the edge of the railing. “I suppose in some ways this might be better than having four people here.”

Lila chuckled lightly before she moved to mimic Ann’s position. “You’re probably right on that front. It’ll be less complicated at least.”

“Nothing with Heidi is uncomplicated.”

“Nothing with you is uncomplicated,” Lila countered. “You come with your own baggage too, Ann. You have to recognize that by now.”

Ann cut her a sharp look.

“I’m serious. Heidi’s baggage is loud and blatantly obvious, especially to those she allows in her inner circle. Mine is too. But yours is far more subtle and far harder to parse out.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Lila sighed. “Think about your family, Ann. Your parents. Your siblings. The conversations you all had at the dinner table when you were growing up. You’ve shared some of it with me, and it shocked me. I can’t imagine parents talking like that in front of their kids—ever. It’s inappropriate.”

Ann bit her lip. She knew exactly what Lila was talking about. The crude language surrounding sex, where it was talked about in great detail, always trying to one-up the other and shock everyone in the room. Her parents had accomplished that so many times, and yet, that wasn’t even it. The only time her parents talked about loving each other was when they talked about fucking each other.

She’d known that was the problem for the entirety of her sexually active life. It was why sex was rarely satisfying because there was never enough. To her it was the only way someone could love her. Lila was a good match in that regard, open sexually, always willing to try and do something. And Heidi—Heidi came with so much sexual trauma that putting the two of them together meant a battle for which type of trauma would win out.

Looking Lila in the eye, Ann clenched her jaw. She’d known it for years, yet she’d never thought of it quite so definitively. Lila was right. They all came with their own kinds of trauma, and when trauma clashed, it put everything to a stop.

“What the hell am I supposed to do?” Ann whispered.

“I suggest we go in there and talk to her before she starts to freak out, which we know will happen. Heidi can’t be left alone for too long in strange places.”

Ann grumbled. Lila had picked up on that characteristic of Heidi rather quickly. It was nearly unnerving. Ann had to remind herself that Lila and Heidi had similar pasts, which afforded them an opportunity to see each other very clearly. Pressing her lips together, Ann stayed put. She wasn’t done talking to Lila just yet.

“I’m not mad.”

“You’re not?” Lila raised an eyebrow at her in question.

Ann knew how odd it sounded for her to say that. Her reaction had been one of anger at first, but if she really dug down into what she was feeling, it wasn’t anger. The word mulled through her brain, spinning faster and faster until it slipped from her lips. “Betrayed.”

“You feel betrayed?” Lila put a hand on Ann’s forearm, and Ann moved her hand away. “I’m so sorry, Ann. We never meant to hurt you.”

“Doesn’t mean you didn’t. How could I not have known?”

“We all missed quite a few signs, to be honest. Probably because we weren’t looking for them. I think that’s something we can all learn from for the future.”

Ann rolled her eyes. “Stop being so damn put together for once.”

Lila gaped.

“I’m serious. This can’t not affect you like you’re making it out to be.”

“It’s not. I told you, I had a panic attack when I figured it out. I really did. I ran outside to the end of the block and nearly passed out from breathing so hard. While Heidi was able to calm me down, I didn’t sleep a wink that night. How the hell was I supposed to tell you something like this?”

Ann snorted. “I don’t know. Send a text? Make a fucking phone call?”

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“Really? You think that would have gone better than this?”

“No, but it would have been sooner.”

“You’re right about that.” Lila crossed her arms. “And you are fully allowed to be mad at me for that.”

“I’m mad at both of you for keeping it from me.”

“Makes sense,” Lila commented. “So what are you going to do about it?”

“Hell if I know.”

Lila gave her a demanding look, and Ann—not for the first time—hated that Lila knew her so damn well.

“What I want to do is go home, but that’s pointless.”

“It is,” Lila agreed. “So is continuing to be mad about something you couldn’t control.”

“I’d rather be mad.”

“Than betrayed? That’s understandable. It hurts, Ann, and you are allowed to own that feeling. I about puked myself that night I was so freaked out. You are allowed to feel whatever you feel right now. What you’re not allowed to do is leave us completely in the dark.”

“Why would you care?” Ann fired back, hoping it would knock Lila off the high horse she seemed to climb on.

Lila stood up, facing Ann down. The glower in her gaze immediately made Ann swim with guilt. “That was uncalled for.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry,” Ann apologized.

“And you know why we care, and if you’re not willing to admit it, then this entire weekend will be over before we even get started.” Without another word, Lila spun on her toes and walked inside.

Ann stared at the door long after it had shut, confused as to what she should say and do. She had somehow managed to mess up the situation even more than it already was. She’d let her emotions get the best of her, and she hadn’t even heard Lila when she’d tried to explain what she’d been feeling. Once again, she’d failed to make space for either Lila or Heidi to express their feelings.

“Fuck me,” Ann muttered.

Everything was going to hell in a hand basket, one Ann had managed to weave herself. The door opening startled her. She knocked her chin up, hoping it was Heidi, but when she was greeted with the androgynous blonde owner of the B&B, Ann groused.

“Sorry, I didn’t realize anyone was out here.”

Ann shrugged. “I needed some air.”

Eli’s look said she knew it all already. Anger bubbled in the pit of Ann’s belly. Eli took up Lila’s old spot and placed her hands on either side to hold herself up. “My

partner has anxiety, severe anxiety.”

Ann eyed Eli, trying to figure out where the lecture was going.

“Sometimes it’s hard to communicate with her because she’s so damn worried about everything under the sun—and the sun, too. It’s really hard to let her anxiety live in the moment until she can name it and then let it die as we both bury it together.”

“I’m sorry,” Ann said, interrupting. “But why are you telling me this?”

“Because it is important to recognize our individual demons and then to fight them together.” Eli stood up and stepped off the porch. “I’m going to check my cow, Betsy. She broke her foot the other day.”

Ann’s jaw dropped as she stared after Eli’s back. Damn that woman for saying what she didn’t want to admit. Ann had always been there for Heidi, but it had never been fighting with her. Finally, Heidi was willing to step up to the plate and fight for herself as well as for them and all Ann had done was spurn her decision, wonder if it was real, and then push Heidi to the side when her own fear and anger acted up.

She was such a shitty girlfriend sometimes. The chill was even worse now. She didn’t stand a chance to warm up if she didn’t go in soon. Staring longingly at the door, Ann drew in a deep breath and calmed her racing heart. She was right where she wanted to be. She was with Heidi and Lila, together, and they were all there to learn something. It seemed so vague now that she thought about it, and she hoped Heidi had a better plan in place like she normally did.

Ann knew what she had to learn. She needed to learn how Heidi loved, learn to accept that love, and then figure out how to return it in a way Heidi understood. That was the entire point of the weekend, and it was all Ann was going to focus on for the next few days. She could be mad and feel betrayed all she wanted, but Lila was right.

No one had planned that. No one had tried to hurt someone else. All the three of them were doing was loving each other.

CHAPTER17

Heidi wokeup first thing in the morning, well before the sun rose over the horizon. She slid from the bed, leaving Ann and heading toward the kitchen to see if she could snag herself some tea. The house was so quiet this early in the morning, but surprisingly with both Ann and Lila there, Heidi hadn't felt fear once.

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Barefoot, she padded her way into the kitchen and smiled at the pot of coffee already going. Eli had said she woke up early for the ranching side of life, so she'd leave the coffee on for any other early risers. Grabbing the kettle and starting water, Heidi leaned against the counter as she stared out the windows into the just now rising sun.

Colors painted across the sky this way and that as the stars faded and oranges, pinks, and yellows took over. She was so lost in her thoughts that she barely heard the back door open and the shuffle of boots against the mat on the floor.

"Morning," Eli muttered as she moved around Heidi to refill her thermos. "I'll take the rest of this and then make some more."

"I think the others will quite appreciate that. I'm making some tea for myself."

Eli pulled out the makings for a fruit salad and after washing her hands thoroughly began the food prep.

Heidi didn't even miss a beat as she jumped in to help, peeling and slicing as she went. They worked in silence for some time before Eli spoke up.

"Forgive my curiosity, but what is going on?"

"With what?" Heidi questioned, focusing on the grapes she was halving.

"Who is with who?"

"Oh...all of us technically are together, although that wasn't planned. Ann and I have

been together nearly sixteen years. She started dating Lila last year, so it's been almost a year, and I started dating Lila just this past month."

"So this is an open relationship?"

"Yes." Heidi still didn't dare look Eli in the eye. She knew she didn't have to explain if she didn't want to, but it felt nice to say it, finally, to someone she had a feeling wouldn't completely shun her for it.

Eli dropped all the fruit into a bowl and mixed it. "I don't see that often up here."

"I think most people don't see it often in general. We never intended to both date Lila. That happened rather unexpectedly."

"So you just decided to take a trip here together?"

"No." Heidi shook her head. "No, Ann and I struggle sometimes, and we're hoping Lila might be able to bridge that gap, especially considering her unique position."

"That actually makes a lot of sense. But be careful. As much as she seems like an observer, Lila isn't a therapist."

Heidi canted her head to the side. Eli was right, and it was something they were going to have to make sure to remember, but they also wouldn't find a poly-friendly therapist in their part of the country. It was hard enough to find one comfortable with them being lesbians. Lila was not an objective observer, and she was not someone outside of the relationship trio. They were going to have to care for her as much as she cared for them.

As soon as Lila and Ann came downstairs they ate breakfast, the chitchat shallow as they all tried to navigate how to have conversations with the three of them together.

After helping Eli clean up, the three of them settled in the den and awkwardly looked from one to the other. Heidi carefully watched Lila, who fidgeted with her mug as she stared into the flames, shifting in her chair more often than Heidi had ever seen. She knew better, and she knew Lila was nervous and uncomfortable.

Catching Ann's gaze, Heidi nodded her head toward Lila and tried to express what Lila was feeling, but Ann was clueless to what was going on. She shook her head back at Heidi and rolled her shoulders. Heidi inwardly groaned. Someone was going to have to break the ice, and as much as she didn't want it to be her, she knew it was going to have to be.

"We came here to be productive, so I suggest we all start talking."

Ann whipped her head around. Lila started at her with wide eyes.

Heidi shrugged. "I know that was blunt, more so than I normally am, but watching the two of you pretend there is nothing going on here is painful."

"Painful?" Ann immediately lit onto that word.

"What she means is why would spending time with her be painful?" Lila interjected.

Heidi's heart thrummed steadily as she glanced from Lila to Ann, seeing the hurt that washed through her in an instant, then the shame that Lila had called her out on it. Heidi shook her head slowly as she leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees to correct herself. "I didn't mean spending time with you is painful. I meant you two look like you're in pain."

"Oh." Within a flash, Ann's entire demeanor changed and went back to what it had been before.

Heidi pressed her lips together sharply, glancing again at Lila. She never would have figured Ann had thought that, not in a million years. Lila had so easily read her, it was uncanny. Heidi pressed forward, curious as to what else she could glean from this conversation. “Why would you think I was trying to hurt you?”

Ann lifted a shoulder and shrugged, not looking like she was going to say anything. Lila rolled her eyes, but Heidi shot her a look to tell her to keep quiet. This was something Heidi wanted to do on her own, something she hoped they would learn to get better at.

“Tell me why, Ann. I want to know.”

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“Because it’s how I always think.” Ann’s words were filled with anger, but if Heidi stared at her long enough, she was sure she’d once again be greeted with shame.

“You always think I want to hurt you?”

Ann shook her head, tears forming in her eyes. Lila moved in, clasping her hand in a stand of silent support. Heidi waited, biding her time as Ann collected her thoughts. The fire crackled at the back of the room as they each sat in silence.

“I always believe you don’t love me.”

Heidi’s face dropped and cold rushed through her. She wanted to deny it. She wanted to scream and shout about how untrue that statement was. She did love Ann, desperately loved her. But that wasn’t what Ann had said. She’d said believe. Ann didn’t believe she was loved. That was a terrible heartache and position for someone to be in.

Opening her heart, Heidi scooted closer on the couch and touched Ann’s thigh gently. “Why is it you struggle to believe me?”

Ann shook her head as tears spilled down her cheeks, falling off her chin. She gripped Lila’s hand tightly but that was the only move she made. Heidi flicked a glance to Lila, hoping there would be some kind of assistance, but Lila held up a finger in a sign for Heidi to wait it out. Heidi heard nothing but Ann’s sobs as she drew in deep breaths to try and calm herself. It was a good five minutes before she spoke again, and Heidi was ready to listen.

“You know my parents,” Ann whispered, accusation in every word. “I’m not even sure they love me.”

Heidi’s lips parted in surprise. She’d thought the same thing for years, but Ann had never admitted it out loud. It was why Heidi hated going to their house, why she despised their visits. They never left Ann the same person she had been, and Heidi hated listening to them tear her down.

“My heart hurts so much to hear you say that,” Heidi whispered.

Ann moved immediately from Lila’s grasp and into Heidi’s arms. Heidi rubbed circles into her back, up and down, held her for as long as Ann would allow. She sent sad glances to Lila who eventually moved into Ann’s other side and held her as well.

When they were all calm, and Ann far more herself, Heidi relaxed into the couch cushion with a cup of tea at her fingers.

“Heidi needs to share,” Lila stated.

Heidi turned sharply to look Lila straight in the eye. That had been the last thing she expected to hear from Lila, or anyone for that matter. No one had ever really cared what she thought or felt before. Lila sent her a challenging look. “I don’t even know what to share.”

“Anything,” Lila answered. “You’ve said you don’t share enough, now is your chance. That’s why we’re all here, right?”

That challenging look was back.

Cursing under her breath, Heidi held her mug tightly like it was her only lifeline. Her mind spun every which way. She could say so many things that would make Ann feel

loved in that moment, that would de-escalate the drama about her parents. But that wasn't the purpose.

With a deep breath, Heidi said the only words that came to her mind. "I'm lonely."

"How are you lonely? You're constantly with someone," Ann stated.

Lila smacked her lightly on the arm with the back of her hand and nodded at Heidi. "Shut up and listen."

Ann rustled her shoulders, her face pinching as she fought with herself to keep quiet and listen. Heidi had rarely ever seen that look on her.

"Go ahead, Heidi." Lila's look was encouraging.

"I'm lonely. I know I tell you that all the time, Ann, but I'm not sure you know how deep that runs."

"I guess I don't," Ann whispered.

"I haven't let anyone in, ever. I let people go only so deep and then I put a stop to it, but there's something about you, something that keeps me coming back. I don't want that distance with you. I want you to know every part of me, the good, the bad, the ugly. I know you can make me feel not so alone."

Ann had tears in her eyes again, but this time for an entirely different reason. Her dark eyes wavered as she stared dumbfounded at Heidi. Lila had the same look, too. Heidi supposed it was a confession for both of them, because yes, she'd done the exact same with Lila. It was more than surface level, but she never shared what she was truly feeling with either of them. Hell, half the time she wasn't even sure what she felt. She was just too good at reading people and turning the conversation back on

them in order to protect herself.

“I never want you to feel alone.”

“I know I’m not.” Heidi wiped at her damp cheeks. “But at the same time I am, and it’s my own fault really. I don’t let you in. I don’t tell you things. I keep you at an arm’s length, and still you’ve never once tried to walk away from me. That should mean something, right?”

“It does.” Ann touched Heidi’s arm. “I love you. That’s what it means.”

“I know.” Heidi sniffled. “I know it does, and I love you, too. Both of you.”

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Lila and Heidi made eye contact, Heidi hoping that Lila knew and understood how true the words were. Ann moved in and kissed Heidi's cheek, whispering her love once more.

Heidi tried to rein her emotions in so she could at least have a normal conversation with the two of them, but it was a struggle. The confession had exhausted her. It was such a simple thing to say, to share, but it had taken everything in her to utter those words and let them live so they could die.

Knowing intuitively that this was their turning point, they had all taken that step. Well, Heidi and Ann had. Staring back at Lila, Heidi wondered just when she would give in to everything holding her back, but particularly the fear that someone she loved would hurt her when she least expected it. Heidi had seen it so many times in the families she worked with that she'd known from the start it was exactly Lila's struggle.

Baby steps were the name of the game that weekend, and so far they were progressing. She already felt closer to both of them. It wasn't about one night changing everything, but simple small steps they would all have to make to learn to trust, to learn to be with each other or maybe even others. At some point, all of them needed to learn to love themselves and each other.

They spent the afternoon together in the den. At some point, Heidi had excused herself to make lunch, and Lila cleaned up. They worked well in tandem, if Heidi thought about it long enough. Perhaps that was what would finally make all of this work. She had to believe it would.

However, she had noticed Lila interpreting things for the each of them to the other. While she appreciated how it made communication smoother, there had to come a point when that habit was broken, when Lila would feel free to communicate about herself. Heidi would make sure to make some room for that the next day if it didn't happen naturally later that night.

Lila was already upstairs when Ann bent over and kissed Heidi passionately. Heidi cupped a hand around her cheek and held her close. Their tongues tangled in a messy kiss, and she knew Ann was looking for more. But after the emotional morning she'd had, Heidi couldn't summon the energy. She nipped at Ann's lip but slowed the kiss and pulled away shortly after.

"As much as I would love to be with you, Ann, I really have zero energy for it right now. Not after this morning. What I need is physical connection without all that."

Ann pouted, the flashes of hurt and shame coming right back into her gaze. Heidi raised her chin up so they looked each other in the eye.

"My decision has nothing to do with you. I want to be with you, just not right this minute in that particular way. Do you understand?"

"I'm trying to."

"Good." Heidi sighed and did the next best thing she could think of. "I think Lila could use some attention right now, don't you?"

Ann looked at the staircase that led up to the bedrooms. "I think you're right."

"We'll both have to take care of her, Ann. She's doing something wonderful for us."

"Yeah." Ann trailed off. "I have an idea about that."

“Do you?” Heidi raised an eyebrow.

“Not today. Maybe tomorrow. We’ll see how the day goes.”

Curious, Heidi let it drop, knowing Ann would share when she was good and ready. Heidi knew she would. Ann was a verbal processor. She talked things through out loud to figure them out, and this would be one she wouldn’t be able to hold in for long.

Heidi watched as Ann left the den and headed up the stairs. She stared at the fire, finished her tea, and then made her way to their room. It wasn’t long before she lounged on the bed with a book between her fingers as she read Edale Lane’s book, *Walks With Spirits*. She’d picked it on a whim and hadn’t been able to stop thinking about the characters from the moment she’d gotten into it.

Within a few minutes, she was interrupted by sounds echoing under the doorway. At first Heidi tried to ignore them, but after a while, she listened. They were both her partners, and there wasn’t anything wrong with listening in on the two of them doing what they needed to feel connected to each other.

With Ann’s and Lila’s lovemaking in the background, Heidi went back to her book, flipping through the pages as she immersed herself in the story. She’d lost track of time, but when the door to the bedroom opened, it was getting dark outside. She expected Ann to stumble in, tousled and cheeks red from sex.

Instead, Lila tiptoed inside and stood near the edge of the bed. Heidi stared at her oddly. She really had expected Ann to be the one to come find her, but she should have known better. Ann notoriously crashed after sex. Lila fiddled with the blanket.

“Can I join you?”

“Absolutely,” Heidi answered, moving the duvet aside so Lila could climb underneath it. Heidi set her book on the nightstand as Lila moved into her side, wrapping an arm over Heidi’s belly. Heidi dropped a kiss into those blonde waves. “Everything all right?”

“I need to be held,” Lila whispered. “I thought you might, too.”

Heidi hummed as she turned on her side to slide down and face Lila. “Turn over.”

After much scooting and adjusting, Lila’s backside pressed firmly into Heidi’s front. She held on tightly, kissing Lila’s shoulder and the back of her neck in soft comforting connections. This was what she had wanted from Ann hours ago, but she’d survived without it. Now was her time, and Lila’s too.

They lay in the quiet, and Heidi wondered if Lila had fallen asleep accidentally. She’d heard nothing from the other room, but she also knew they would be nearing dinner time soon and would all need to head downstairs for their evening meal. The quiet of the day after such an eventful and emotional morning had been so welcome.

Heidi longed to explore the ranch and see what else there was, maybe take a walk down to see the cows, but she wasn’t willing to leave if the others needed her, no matter how much the solitude would be freeing. Lila sighed, and Heidi squeezed her a little tighter so she’d know Heidi was there for her. With one last kiss to Lila’s neck, Heidi closed her eyes, and she almost missed Lila’s question.

“How is this going to work?”

CHAPTER18

Watching the two of them was like watching a failed beer pong match where everyone missed the cup and never managed to sink a shot. Lila's gaze bounced back and forth between them as they tried endlessly to talk to each other, each time missing unless Lila stepped in to be the communicator. It was utterly exhausting.

The first day it had at least felt like they'd made some kind of progress. But this morning? Nothing. Ann was so tense Lila knew it was going to end in her yelling at someone, probably Heidi with the way things were going. Heidi seemed to be withdrawing, although Lila was impressed with her resilience in trying repeatedly to reach Ann.

Lila's head hurt. She took the afternoon off and spent some time in her room, staring at the ceiling and reveling in the stillness and quiet. Why was it so damn hard for the two of them to talk? She'd never seen a couple struggle so hard with that before. Everything was a miss. Hardly ever did they have a hit, but when they did, Lila could see the love they had for each other blossom right in front of her. It was absolutely the most beautiful thing to witness.

She had always wanted a love like that. Even if it wasn't with one person, she wanted to know what it felt like. To be consumed by another person, and to know so confidently that they were someone she wanted to be with. She'd never had that before, even with Ann and Heidi. She loved them, yes, but it wasn't an all-consuming passionate love like she desperately wanted to experience.

The two of them had it. They just didn't know what to do with it. It was frustrating

for her to watch, oftentimes in slow motion as she parsed out who would say what and when to get to the conflict that would shut everything down. It would take at least thirty minutes of recovery time before they'd start up and try again.

Lila rubbed her temples and closed her eyes. The previous day, sex with Ann had felt bittersweet. It had been odd. Ann had fucked her to oblivion, as if it was the only thing she could concentrate on and feel in that moment, like she wanted everything around it to vanish. Yet at the end, all she'd done was talk about Heidi and suggested Lila go in there and snuggle since they both liked that form of intimacy. Lila had taken her up on the offer and snuck in to be with Heidi, resting and relaxing in her sublime embrace.

They'd stayed plastered together for hours before they'd gone down for dinner. Still, Ann knew enough and was able to figure out Lila in that way, so why couldn't she figure out Heidi? Yes, Heidi was even more adept at hiding things, but fifteen years, nearly sixteen, was a hell of a long time to go without knowing those small quirks about a partner.

The idea had been stirring around in her brain for days now, but after being an outside observer for the last two, she was pretty sure it might be the best course of action. Ann communicated best during sex. That much Lila knew. It was when Ann didn't think and when she felt the most connected. It would be perfect, but only if Lila could get over herself for the few hours it would take.

Still, she could do it in a way where it wasn't all of them together—mostly. She had to put up those boundaries for herself because she couldn't deal with them both at the same time. Ann and Heidi were her exact matches, and the fact she'd found them in two people who were together was something she had never anticipated.

She'd always thought she'd find more than one person, but never together. The possibility of a triad had never entered her mind. And after witnessing the last few

days, she wasn't sure she wanted to try it with them. Heidi and Ann were lovely women, who clearly loved with their entire beings, but having that much focus on her at once would be too much. Lila was convinced of it.

So for her plan, she was going to have to make sure to stay far away from that possibility. She would make sure of it. Lila wished she had brought her laptop so she could do some yoga to calm her nerves, but she'd foolishly left it at home, thinking she wouldn't need it or have time to use it. She stared at the floor next to the bed and debated whether to try and do some of it without a guide. She'd done it before, but she had none of her stuff with her.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, and instantly, Lila knew it was Heidi. The steps were soft, not loud, which meant it wasn't Ann, who lacked the self-awareness sometimes to even know how loud she was. Lila stood and immediately walked to her door, opening it. She caught Heidi by surprise but gave her a sweet smile to calm the trigger Lila had no doubt hit.

"Got a minute?" Lila asked.

Heidi narrowed her gaze. "How heavy is the topic?"

"I don't think we're going to escape heavy topics during this vacation."

Snorting, Heidi nodded her agreement. "You're right."

Once they were both in Lila's room, Lila shut and locked the door. When Heidi looked at her curiously, she shrugged and nodded toward the bed. "Sit with me?"

"Sure."

They climbed onto the bed and sat next to each other, leaning against the headboard

with pillows behind their back. Heidi took Lila's hand in hers and squeezed lightly.

"Why do I have a feeling you want to talk about something?"

"It's an idea I've had for the last few days, and I want to run it by you because I need you on board in order to run with it. I'm pretty sure Ann will be fine with it."

Heidi tensed even more than normal, and she didn't even know what Lila was going to say yet. That was not a good sign. Lila tried to calm her own nerves so that Heidi would relax next to her. It was something she'd learned rather quickly with anyone who was tense or stressed. The more there was of the negative emotion, then the worse it would get, but if she remained calm and sensible, then everyone else would eventually drop closer to her level of calm.

"I was thinking that we should have sex."

The tension in Heidi skyrocketed.

"I don't mean us. I mean...damn I'm doing a bad job at this for once. I mean I've watched you two for nearly two days now, and we're not really getting anywhere. Ann communicates best during sex. I know that's weird to say, but she's the biggest damn talker ever."

"She never talks to me," Heidi whispered.

Lila whipped her head around. "What?"

"She talks during sex, but it's not a lot."

"What do you mean it's not a lot? What does she say?"

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Heidi folded her hands together. Lila brushed her fingers down Heidi's arm to try and calm her down. She wasn't sure it was going to work, but she also wanted to give Heidi the space to come up with the words herself for what she was feeling. Heidi swallowed hard before her lips trembled. Lila knew she was about to speak.

"She asks me what feels good a lot, if something is nice, if what she's doing is right."

Lila narrowed her eyes. "And...?"

"What do you mean and?"

"I'm confused." Lila pressed her lips together hard, trying to decide how to ask the question. "What is wrong with her asking those things?"

"I don't have answers, and she gets frustrated when I'm quiet."

"Oh, I see." And she did. It meant the idea she had fluttering around her brain really might be just the perfect idea. "I want you and Ann to have sex tonight, but I think it might be best if I'm there to help out."

Heidi twisted to face her sharply. "You said you didn't do threesomes."

"I don't. I never have before, and I'm not sure I want to now, but that doesn't mean this has to be that. I can just be there to help out."

"What do you get out of it?"

“Actual communication between the two of you for once.” Lila widened her eyes before chuckling. “And I like to watch, remember?”

Heidi hummed. “I’m not sure that’s the best idea. I don’t want you to be left out.”

How Heidi managed to do that, Lila had no idea, but she’d just called out exactly what Lila was attempting to do. She wanted distance between them, because she wasn’t so sure at the end of their excursion to Indigo that there was going to be any room for her. That had been what she’d meant when she asked Heidi how everything was going to work the day before, and she still hadn’t found an answer to that question.

“I think it will be good for the two of you.”

“I have no doubt of that, Lila, but I’m concerned.”

“About what?” Lila could barely look her in the eye.

Heidi’s lips parted, her eyes wavering as she stared directly at Lila. “You.”

“Don’t be. I’m fine.”

“I don’t think you are, but if you want to use that facade, I’ll let you for now. Just know that I’m watching, and I really don’t think you’re okay.”

Lila’s heart thumped hard. Yeah, she was definitely in love, and so were they, but she still couldn’t see how everything was going to work out for the better. No good could come of a relationship like that. She’d seen it fail so many times. “Are you going to do it or not?”

“I’ll do it, but I want you to be honest from here on out. That’s the only way I’ll agree

to this. You need to be as honest with us as you need to be with yourself. This is not a time to hide, and you know that. You agreed to that.”

Sighing, Lila closed her eyes. She’d agreed to it for their sake, not hers, and this was encroaching too much on her sensibilities.

“Lila, you agreed.”

“I did,” she muttered.

“Good. Tonight?” Heidi asked.

“Yes. After dinner. In your room. You have the bigger bed, but I also figure you’ll be more comfortable there than here.”

Heidi rolled her eyes. “I doubt I’ll be comfortable anywhere since I’m not at home or your place.”

“Really?” Lila asked.

“Really, really.”

* * *

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It was after dinner when Heidi excused herself upstairs. She made eye contact with Lila as she walked past the couch. The three of them had found some ease in their conversation, which had been a pleasant break from the previous few days. It was good to relax before what Lila and Heidi had planned.

“Heidi is going upstairs to get ready,” Lila stated, her voice even with no hint of emotion.

“Ready for what?” Ann’s face pinched in confusion.

“You. But I’m going to be there.”

“I’m lost.”

Lila drew in a deep breath. “We’re all going to be together.”

“You said you don’t do that.”

“I’m making an exception with some rules in place. This is about the two of you, not me.”

Ann narrowed her gaze and pressed her lips together so tightly they almost disappeared. Lila chose to ignore it and her own discomfort. She kept reminding herself this was for them. They needed to learn, and this would be the thread they were both missing.

“Lila, I don’t know about this.”

“Please, trust me.” Lila reached over and settled her hand on Ann’s thigh. “Please.”

“I will.”

With their hands entwined, Lila led them upstairs to the largest bedroom in the house. Heidi was on the bed with her book in her hand. She immediately set it down as she saw the two of them coming in. Lila sat on the edge of the bed and leaned in, kissing Heidi tenderly.

“Are you ready?” Lila asked.

“I am,” Heidi answered.

“Good.” Lila kissed her again.

“Are you?” Heidi’s voice was gentle, but Lila knew she couldn’t move forward without giving an answer.

“I am.”

“Ann?” Heidi looked over Lila’s shoulder.

“As I’ll ever be.”

“I’m going to start,” Lila whispered. “You all right with that?”

Heidi nodded, and Lila moved in. Their lips pressed together. It took a few minutes for her to be completely comfortable, knowing that Ann was watching from behind them. She slid her fingers under Lila’s shirt, pulling it up an inch at a time.

“Tell me what you want.”

Heidi didn't answer verbally. She reached down and pulled her shirt upward until it was over her breasts. Lila helped her to get it the rest of the way off. Ann moaned lightly, and Heidi tensed. Lila pressed open mouth kisses to her neck and her chest.

"Tell me if you're uncomfortable, all right?"

"Okay," Heidi replied. When Lila looked up at her, Heidi stared directly over Lila's shoulder—she assumed at Ann. Lila continued, reaching behind Heidi and flicking the clasp on her bra. Like she thought would happen, Heidi moved to pull it down. Lila was glad to see how into it she was at least.

Lila had Heidi completely undressed before she stepped away and turned to Ann, eyeing her carefully. "Your turn."

Ann's lips parted. "I'm not sure I want to join now. This is amazing to just watch."

"It also defeats the purpose if you don't join, so come on."

Stripping as she walked, Ann stood in front of the bed and looked down at Heidi. "You're so beautiful."

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Heidi's cheeks reddened, but she didn't say anything.

"Do you mind if I kiss you?" Ann asked.

Heidi's gaze flickered from Ann to Lila, a smile blooming on her lips. "Please do."

Lila grinned. She knew Ann was a quick study in this arena. She would have it figured out in no time. Ann sat on the edge of the bed, leaning down and kissing Heidi. She started slow at first, deepening the kiss within a minute. Heidi threaded her fingers in Ann's hair. Lila bit her lip and stepped to the corner of the bed, holding on to the footboard to keep herself upright.

The two of them moved together, Ann asking and opening the space for Heidi to respond. When Heidi was slow to answer, Ann waited, either doing nothing or continuing whatever she had been doing until Heidi directed her to move. It was absolutely beautiful to watch. This was what had been missing the entire time they had been at Indigo, this connection, this communication.

Lila couldn't wipe the smile off her face. She stood back and watched, her clit tingling as Ann used her tongue on Heidi. Heidi's eyes flung open, those dark eyes locking on Lila as she grinned. Lila's breath caught in her throat.

"Come here," Heidi stated, firmly.

Lila shook her head slightly and gripped the footboard harder.

"I want you to come here."

Giving in, Lila moved around to the other side of the bed and pulled off her shirt as she went. She scooted into the middle of the bed as Heidi reached out and grabbed her hand, tugging her closer.

“Kiss me,” Heidi demanded.

“As you demand,” Lila giggled nervously as she moved in.

Heidi smiled. “Good. We do love you.”

“Agreed,” Ann muttered in between licks.

Lila ignored them as she captured Heidi’s lips and added to the pleasure she was no doubt feeling. Heidi pulled at Lila’s hair, tangling her fingers in the long strands. Lila nipped at her lips, kissing her deeply. Heidi broke the kiss as her muscles clenched tightly, her orgasm washing through her. She kept muttering her thanks as she turned on her side to make sure Ann stopped to give her a rest.

Ann sat up and kissed Lila, Heidi’s taste lingering on her lips. “Would you mind?”

“Mind what?” Lila asked, confused.

“My turn.”

“Not if Heidi doesn’t.”

“Go for it.” Heidi grinned. “I want to watch this.”

Ann moved so she hovered over Heidi. Lila got onto her knees and moved behind Ann, running her hands all over her ass and hips, to her thighs. Ann liked it hard sometimes, and that seemed to be what she was asking for. Ann bent down and kissed

Heidi.

Lila slapped her butt and moved her fingers around to slide two into Ann. She went to move her thumb but found Heidi's hand already there. She glanced over Ann's shoulder to the woman in question.

"If you're all right with it."

"Sure," Lila answered, tersely. She wasn't opposed—it had just been unexpected was all. This was focused on Ann, so she was fine with it, and it was about the two of them connecting. Ann rocked back and forth as the two of them worked in tandem. Ann's voice rose, her groans growing louder as she neared her orgasm.

Lila loved those sounds. It was so easy to tell when Ann was close, when she fell over the edge, and afterward even. She muttered words here and there that told both Lila and Heidi exactly how she liked what they were doing. Words of love were interspersed. Heidi's eyes lit up, and Ann bent down to kiss her as her body jerked.

"I love you," Ann whispered to Heidi.

"I love you, too." Heidi grinned up at her. "That was...that was something else."

Ann chuckled. "It was."

Lila started to shift off the bed, but Heidi gripped her wrist lightly to stop her. A curious look sent her way by both of them had her mind spinning into overdrive. She couldn't even formulate a question to ask what Heidi wanted. Ann sat back on her haunches and turned to fully face Lila.

"I think something has been wrong with what's been going on, and I know Heidi will agree with me," Ann stated, so matter-of-factly that Lila wondered how she could be

so calm after that orgasm.

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Her blush still raged in her chest down to her breasts. Lila shook her head. “This is exactly what the both of you wanted.”

“It is, in some ways.” Ann continued eye contact.

“What Ann is trying to say is you have been so helpful for us, so attentive, and in some ways we have ignored your needs and emotions. That’s not something we want to do anymore.”

“You what?”

“We want to take care of you,” Ann added. She shifted on the bed so she focused all her energy on Lila.

Lila was stunned. She glanced from Ann to Heidi and back again, still not sure she understood what was going on. She hadn’t anticipated this.

“Let us be with you,” Heidi pleaded. “Let us take care of you.”

Lila found herself nodding before she knew she was doing it. Heidi’s grin lit up her face, and Lila fell into her. Their mouths connected in a deep kiss, Lila skimming her hand down Heidi’s chest, over her breasts, to settle at her waist. Ann moved in from behind, carding her hand down Lila’s back in an encouraging but soothing gesture.

Her heartrate skyrocketed, making it harder to breathe and concentrate. She trusted these women. This should not be a problem, and yet Lila hesitated. This was something she wasn’t comfortable with. Not sex. She could do sex, had done it with

both of them. This was something else.

Breaking the kiss, Lila sat up and shook her head, staring down at Heidi and her wide dark eyes. Heidi didn't reach forward like she expected. Ann remained still next to her. The room was utterly silent, everything resting on her shoulders. She controlled this moment, and she'd never quite felt that power before.

Fear ratcheted up a notch in her belly. Discomfort echoed in every thought she had. Lila looked from Heidi to Ann and back and forth, her breathing coming in quick rasps. Heidi was the first to move, pushing herself to sit up.

"Lila, talk to me a minute. Take a breath."

She did as best as she could to listen, but it was so damn hard. Heidi told her to do it again, and this time she managed. The room seemed to be spinning, and she hadn't realized how much ringing was in her ears until then. Lila clasped Heidi's hand to bring her back to reality, then clasped Ann's hand. Together they sat on the mattress until Lila was calm, until she could function and say something, a word, anything.

"I can't do this," Lila whispered.

"We won't do anything you don't want to," Heidi answered.

"Exactly what she said," Ann agreed.

Lila nodded. "I need some space."

Without another word, Lila climbed off the bed and grabbed her shirt from the floor. She didn't even bother to put it on as she walked out of the bedroom and toward her room, locking the door behind her. She did need space—and time—and she was going to take it in spades.

Running face first into that trauma had not been on her list of things to do that weekend, although she had wondered at one point if it would come up. She should have known better than to suggest what she had. It was far too close to everything that had happened to her. Groaning and rubbing her hands over her face, Lila burrowed under the covers and turned on her side.

She needed time away from the two of them. She needed time to think and get her head on straight. She had never told either of them why she never did anything like that, why the prospect was so stomach-churning.

Silent tears fell down her cheeks, and Lila didn't bother to wipe them away. She let them fall onto the sheets and disappear into the fabric. Images from her childhood flashed through her mind, of him touching her, of him making her touch others. She tried to make them stop, tried to think about something else, but at some point, Lila sobbed and gave in to the flashbacks. They would end soon enough—she had to trust that.

CHAPTER 19

Ann and Heidi lay in bed together for an hour talking. It was as though the floodgates had opened. They'd both cried lightly, but every five minutes or so either Ann's concern for Lila would spike or Heidi's would. Finally, Ann broke her silence on it after she caught Heidi staring at the door to the bedroom one more time.

"I'm worried about her," Ann said, folding Heidi's hand in hers.

"Me too. I think she got triggered."

Ann's brow furrowed. "Triggered?"

"I don't think she's told us everything." Heidi shifted so she leaned more into Ann's

side and sighed. “She’s very good at hiding her trauma by not hiding it.”

“I’m not even sure I know what you mean,” Ann muttered.

Heidi’s lips curled upward. “Lila has no problem talking about trauma and recovery, but have you ever noticed her explanations of what happened only go so deep?”

“Yeah. I just figured it wasn’t that bad.”

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“Ann.” Heidi turned on her. “If it wasn’t that bad, Lila wouldn’t have been in therapy for years to learn how to deal with it. She hasn’t told us everything.”

“How to the hell do I miss these logical points?” Ann ground her molars. “I wish I was better at picking up the small details like that.”

Heidi shrugged. “I don’t. Because it would mean that you had experienced similar trauma, most likely, and that would mean that you’d also have as much baggage in that area as the two of us. Consider it a blessing you don’t understand it. I know I don’t want you to understand it—not viscerally like I do.”

Ann’s lips parted in surprise. She’d never heard Heidi talk like that before, but the idea that she’d withheld sharing all her trauma and pain not only because it was difficult to talk about and she was protecting herself, but also because she was protecting Ann? That was nearly too much. Dropping a kiss onto the top of Heidi’s head, Ann breathed in her scent.

“How long do we give her?”

“It’s been nearly an hour, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Not much longer I should think.”

“All right. You still want her, right?” Ann asked bluntly, hoping Heidi understood her meaning. Then she rectified her comment, trying again so that she was being clear. “I

mean, we're not ditching her just because we're finally starting to get into a good place."

"No. I love her, Ann."

"Good. I love her, too. I don't want to lose her."

"I don't imagine she'll want to move in with us and be a triad, however. The current arrangement we have may be all she wants and that's sufficient." Heidi trailed her fingers up Ann's arm and back down. "Though I'm not opposed to either."

"We have to make sure to take care of her, though."

"Yes, absolutely." Heidi kissed Ann's jaw. "She's so fragile, even if she doesn't want to recognize it. We all are."

Ann grunted, though she herself wasn't sure if it was agreement or annoyance that Heidi was so accurate. Sometimes she hated that Heidi could do that.

"We should probably let her know that. I think she's worried she won't have a place with us when we go home."

"You think?" Ann asked.

"I do."

Ann clenched her jaw tightly, staring at the door. Lila had always been so strong, but to see her here in this state was something else. Her facade had cracked. Heidi was right about that. Worry twisted in her stomach, and she wanted to get up and go find out what was wrong.

“You’re glaring,” Heidi commented.

“What?”

Heidi chuckled lightly. “You’re glaring at the door. Just go already.”

“Are you coming?”

“In a bit. I don’t want her to be overwhelmed by the both of us.”

Standing up, Ann grabbed her clothes from the floor and put them back on. Heidi watched her from the bed the entire time. As Ann’s hand covered the doorknob, she looked over her shoulder at Heidi. She could do this. She could be there for Lila like Lila had been for her so many times lately.

As she stepped out into the hallway and took the few steps to Lila’s door, Ann’s stomach twisted even more sharply. She really felt as though something was wrong. Closing her fist, she knocked on the door four times and was met with silence. Ann looked back toward the bedroom she’d just come from, but the door was still shut. Leaning in, she pressed her ear to the wood and tried to listen for some kind of noise.

“Lila?” Ann asked as she knocked again. “I was wondering if you wanted to talk yet.”

Ann had to close her eyes to concentrate and listen, but she did hear faint noises inside.

“Lila, I’m going to come in, okay?”

With her fingers on the cold doorknob, Ann tried to turn it. It was locked. Panic swelled in her chest. She’d never been denied access to Lila in quite this way. It felt

so foreign and as though something seriously was wrong. Knocking louder in case Lila had fallen asleep, desperation clawed at her.

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“What’s wrong?” Heidi said, startling Ann.

“She’s not answering.”

“Are you sure she’s in there?”

“It’s locked.”

Heidi came out, dressed, tried the doorknob, and then knocked herself. “Lila, open up, please. We just want to talk.”

Still there was no response. Ann was at a loss. She tried to remember where Eli had said she was going to be all day, but she couldn’t recall. They didn’t have an extra key.

“Lila, we’re really worried, please open the door.”

They still heard nothing.

Heidi glanced at Ann with raised eyebrows. “Lila, if you don’t open the door, I’m going to do it. This is your fair warning.”

“Heidi...”

“I’ve got it, hold on. Tell me if she says or does anything.” Heidi disappeared downstairs and came back up with a few different items in her hand. Within sixty seconds, she had the door unlocked. It swung open unhindered.

“How the hell did you do that?” Ann asked.

Heidi sent her a sideways glare. They moved slowly together toward the bed, where the lump that was Lila lay under the covers. Heidi sat on the edge of the mattress in front of Lila and told Ann silently to stay on the side with her.

“Lila,” Heidi whispered gently. “Lila, please talk to us.”

Ann worried for a moment that she was asleep until the question filtered up. “How’d you get in here?”

“You didn’t think I was locked in rooms my entire childhood and didn’t learn how to break out, did you?”

Ann tensed. She’d never heard Heidi joke about her experiences in that blatant and, frankly, terrifying manner.

“No,” Lila replied. She wiped her eyes as she turned onto her back and pushed herself up on the bed. “Why are you in here?”

“We’re worried about you,” Ann started. “We gave you some time, but with the way you left, we weren’t willing to give you much more.”

“I...” Lila looked from one to the other, her gaze settling on Heidi. “I had some flashbacks.”

Ann bit her tongue. Heidi’s face softened as she reached out, her palm up, as she waited for Lila to take it.

“What can we do for you?” Heidi asked.

“Just hold me?” Lila said it like it was a question, and Ann didn’t understand why. She would do anything for Lila and for Heidi.

Heidi moved in first, shifting onto the mattress and pulling Lila in to her chest. Ann hesitated. Heidi held up a finger and moved it around so Ann knew to go to the other side of the bed. Since Lila was on her back and not her side, she at least wouldn’t be approached from behind this time, which was probably why Heidi had given her the okay.

As soon as they were all settled, Ann ran her hands soothingly down Lila’s arm and held onto her tightly. It took a minute, but Lila relaxed as she sat between them, settling into the weight and warmth of their bodies.

Heidi kissed Lila’s head. “It wasn’t just pictures of you, was it?”

Lila shook her head. “No, there’s a lot of pictures of me and others. Never my dad or my dad’s friend though. They just took them.”

“Oh Lila, I’m so sorry,” Heidi whispered into her hair.

Ann’s heart broke, shattered into a million little pieces. What these two women had gone through was extraordinary, but the fact they had both survived it so well, even more so. Ann kissed Lila’s head. “I love you.”

Lila sniffled as she tried to control her tears.

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“We both love you,” Heidi added. “And we’re here for you, even if you have flashbacks, even if you don’t want to do certain things, even if you’re scared or hurting or so happy you can’t contain it. We’re here for you.”

Lila gave a gentle nod. Ann hoped she understood what they were saying, but in the state Lila was in currently, she wouldn’t be surprised if she barely heard the words. At least she knew the sentiment. The three of them hunkered down in Lila’s double bed and waited until Lila was ready to emerge.

After a while, Lila begged them off, wanting to take a shower to clear her mind. Heidi agreed it would be a good idea. Together they waited for Lila to be done, sending each other looks of worry and keeping their conversation light. When Lila was done, they headed downstairs for a quiet snack and to sit by the fire. Ann tried to keep the conversation as easy as possible but also allowed room for Lila to talk if she wanted. Everything that night had turned out to be about Lila and taking care of her needs. Ann and Heidi had neglected her too much already.

* * *

At breakfast, Lila seemed to be much more even-keeled. Heidi had spent the night with her, and Ann had heard low rumblings from the room on and off when she’d woken up, so she’d known they hadn’t slept much. Still, both looked decently awake once Ann had stumbled down the stairs.

Eli settled an omelet in front of each of them. Ann was about to remind her of Heidi’s vegan tendencies when Eli put her hand up. “It’s egg substitute, and it’s vegan. I already told her.”

Heidi raised an eyebrow in Ann's direction, filled with curiosity and a bit of appreciation if Ann looked more closely than usual. She liked the feeling that swelled in her chest. Eli sat at the table with them and ate.

"I wish it were nicer out so I could take you all on a trail ride."

"I think I'll skip getting on a horse," Heidi muttered.

"Not your thing?" Eli asked, locking eyes on Heidi.

"Not at all."

"I've ridden before," Lila added. "I was a kid, maybe nine or ten. I barely remember it, except my horse was named Pooh."

Eli chuckled. "Come back up in the summer or late spring and I'll take you on a trail ride."

"I'd love that," Lila added, her lips curling into a smile.

It was so nice to see that. For a few hours there, Ann had worried she'd never see Lila relaxed again. She never knew how to react when her partners were triggered into flashbacks, not during them or after. She constantly stumbled with it, so she was glad the night before when Heidi had taken over and taken that role on herself. It eased the burden from Ann, although she wanted to learn.

"Have you ever ridden a horse, Ann?" Eli's question jarred her out of her thoughts.

Ann nodded. "We grew up on a farm."

Lila twisted her head, her eyes wide. "You did?"

“Yeah, not a full working farm, but big enough that we had a couple horses that I’d ride out in the fields behind the house.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“She knows how to milk a cow, too,” Heidi stated.

All of them started at her, Eli with wonder, Lila with surprise, and Ann wondering if Heidi even realized what she’d just said and the innuendo that could and most definitely should be understood. She kept her mouth shut, not wanting to be the one to drag them down that road.

After dinner, they helped Eli clean up. They were going to have a big dinner that night for Thanksgiving, which Ann thought none of them were super excited about, except perhaps Eli. They moved into the den as Eli prepped the turkey and set it in the oven. She’d told them the rest could wait until later.

Sitting in the front of the fireplace was so reminiscent of all that had happened in the few short days since they’d been there. She hoped the conversation would be vastly easier this time around because she wasn’t sure she had the energy to start back where they had begun when they’d arrived.

Heidi touched Ann’s thigh lightly, getting her attention. Ann understood that look. Heidi wanted to talk about something, but she didn’t want to say it out loud. It would be far easier if she would, because silent conversations were never good between the two of them. Way too many misunderstandings.

“How are you feeling, Lila?” Heidi finally asked, turning her attention to the beautiful young blonde on the chair next to the couch.

“Much better than last night. Thank you.”

“You up for a talk?”

Lila visibly tensed, and Ann winced. That was not the smoothest transition Heidi had ever done. Usually she had a lot more tact, but Ann supposed lack of sleep could account for her bluntness.

“It’s an easy talk, I promise.”

“I suppose,” Lila responded.

Ann still had no idea what conversation it was they were supposed to have, but she assumed Heidi knew what they were going to be talking about and that she’d just drag Ann right along with her as she often did.

“I want to talk about something, something that may have started last night.”

“O...kay?”

Heidi nodded at Ann. “We’re not breaking up with you. This isn’t simply ayau come here, fix us, we ditch youtype of thing.”

Lila drew in a shuddering breath. “I don’t do monogamous, committed relationships.”

“Well, this wouldn’t be monogamous,” Heidi said with a light laugh. “And we’re not necessarily asking you to give up other dates. What we’re saying is, we’re still here, and we still want to be here for the future as well. We’re not done with you.”

Lila stared at Heidi with a blank expression before turning it on Ann. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“We want to keep dating you,” Ann supplied, fully on board with where the conversation was going. It was one they needed to absolutely have. “We love you.”

“You love what I can do for you.”

“No,” Ann corrected. “I love that part of you, yes, but I also love so much more than that. I told you before I even knew you were dating Heidi.”

“But I was still useful to you.”

“Isn’t everyone useful to their partner in some way?”

“I suppose.” Lila still looked suspicious, almost like she was going to bolt. Not that she had many places to run to except her room. “I still don’t do those kinds of relationships.”

“We’re not asking you to. All we’re asking is that you believe us when we say we both still want you.”

They fell into a quiet silence. Lila thinking deeply about something that Ann wished she had some insight to. Her glances to Heidi didn’t help her glean any information either. Just as her nerves were getting the best of her and she was about to be pushed into the land of utter impatience, Lila gave a single curt nod.

“I’ll think about it.”

Ann groaned. Were they not going to resolve anything on the trip? Nothing to completion, only halfway there? Yes, she and Heidi had mended a lot of fences in their short time at Indigo, but they were only getting started. All she’d wanted was one really good thing to grasp hold of and hang on to.

“Lila, I promise you, we will never do anything you don’t want. We’re not together in this, we’re just in this together—I really hope that made sense.” Ann clenched her jaw as she waited for confirmation.

Lila chuckled. “I think I know what you mean.”

“Good. Because I’m not sure I can explain that better.”

Heidi shook her head, halfway in disbelief and halfway teasing. “I’m glad we came up here, you know.”

“I am too,” Ann added. “Even if it’s sucked a lot of the time. I think it was good for us.”

“You and your damn crazy ideas.” Lila laughed fully this time. It was beautiful to listen to, and Ann was glad Lila seemed to be getting back on her feet and moving toward balance.

The three of them talked for hours, until it was time to start helping with dinner prep. Eli had said she could do it all, but they insisted on helping as much as they could. With Eli’s family coming for the day—at least those who were in town—they wanted to make sure they didn’t stick her with doing everything.

CHAPTER 20

Heidi settled on the couch in the den on their last night at Indigo. She had never expected the few days they spent there to go so well, but they had, eventually. That first shock for Ann had certainly thrown them all for a loop. And then Lila. Heidi sighed into her tea. Lila was still a bit of a conundrum.

She could so easily see how this would all end up, how they would work well together and be the two parts with the third. But still there were nerves around this new aspect to their relationship, with a new twist to how everything was playing out. Everything was just too new. Sipping her tea and burning her lip and the tip of her tongue, Heidi scrunched her nose.

The fire flickered nicely across from her, warming her toes as she stretched them

toward the flames. She'd always loved fire, the mesmerizing way it would captivate her. There was nothing better than sitting and watching the fire lick its way into darkness. The B&B was quiet, except for the wind blowing against the windows and trees outside. The night before had been a bustle of noise and people, and it had taken a lot of out Heidi to stay present in the moment. She'd escaped as soon as she felt it was polite to do so. The others hadn't seemed to mind.

It was still decently early in the morning, and so she knew Ann would be sleeping in like she always did. Heidi was comfortable with the silence. It had taken her years to get that way, but eventually, she'd managed to get her body to wind down enough that she could focus on the sounds of the earth around her and not be terrified someone was coming in to visit her. That had been the most terrifying experience of her life, never knowing which person had bought her time next.

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“Heidi?” Lila’s sweet voice broke her thoughts.

Heidi twisted sharply on the couch to find Lila leaning over the back of it with a worried look on her face.

“You’re crying.”

“Am I?” Lifting her hands to her cheeks, she found they were wet. Surprised, Heidi brushed the tears away and wiped her nose before bringing her tea to her mouth again.

Lila moved slowly as she rounded the couch and sat next to Heidi on the cushion.
“Everything all right?”

“Yes, it wasn’t bad memories per se, more thinking of how everything has changed.”

“I have those moments too sometimes.” Lila gave a wan smile. “Ann still sleeping?”

Heidi nodded. “She’s not a morning person.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

Giving Lila an odd look, she nodded. “I suppose you wouldn’t. She never stayed the night, did she?”

“Never. Always home to you.”

Heidi hummed, losing herself in her thoughts again. It was the perfect segue into the conversation she wanted to have, and she would most certainly take it, but for now she was comfortable with the silence again. Lila shifted comfortably next to her so she leaned half on Heidi and half on the couch cushion. Heidi turned her head to rest it on the side of Lila's and gave a contented sigh.

"I'd like that to change," Heidi whispered.

"What to change?" Lila questioned, still not moving.

Heidi kissed Lila's temple. "I want you to spend the night with her, and with me, if you'd like. Sometimes at your place, and perhaps even sometimes at ours."

Lila stiffened.

"I want you to be comfortable with the both of us. No more secrets, no more hiding things, no more tiptoeing around. We're all in this together." Heidi tightened her grip around her tea, hoping Lila understood her meaning. They'd already broached the topic, several times, but she had a sense Lila didn't fully believe the two of them. "Wewantyou."

Lila shifted away, moving to the end of the couch and curling her legs under her as she grabbed the throw from the back to cover her. She sighed but made no move to say anything else. Heidi let the silence linger for as long as it needed. Silence was something she could handle. It wasn't quiet, and it wasn't without people. There was so much said with no words, and she lived for understanding those moments and what happened without speaking.

The snaps of the fire popping echoed between them. Heidi stayed still, waiting for Lila to speak and answer the unasked question. Was this what Lila wanted? It seemed everything was hanging on that one question, which no one seemed brave enough to

ask. And even in that moment, recognizing it, Heidi wasn't either.

With a deep breath, she settled her tea on the coffee table and took Lila's hand in her own, threading their fingers together. How she could show Lila how much she was loved with such a simple move, she wasn't sure, but Heidi figured she had to start somewhere.

When Lila squeezed back, a small flare of hope landed in Heidi's chest. She could do this. They could do this. It would take a lot of work, but if there was one thing she knew, it was that she and Ann were not afraid to work until they made it. They were tenacious when it came to relationships.

Heidi had no idea if Lila was that sort, however. She was sure Lila had it in her if she wanted, but from what she knew of Lila, which was very little compared to what Ann knew, Lila avoided long term committed relationships. On the other hand, she had committed to both her and Ann without much hesitation, and Heidi wondered if Lila even recognized that as a sign of commitment.

"Where do you see yourself in ten years?" Heidi blurted out. It was a technique she used with some of her kids, the ones who were struggling to make it through the system and survive it. Perhaps Lila needed the same prodding.

"What?" Confused, Lila faced Heidi.

"Where do you see yourself in ten years?"

"I don't know." Lila blinked, still lost as to where Heidi was going with the conversation.

"Well, then tell me where you don't see yourself. Will you still be at the hospital?"

“I don’t know.”

“Do you want to be?”

“What’s with the twenty questions, Heidi?”

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Slowing down, Heidi squeezed Lila's fingers. "Trust me, please."

Lila sighed and settled against Heidi's side again. "No, I don't see myself at the hospital in ten years."

"Where then?"

"I don't know, but somewhere else."

"Do you want to go back to school?"

Lila thought a moment before shaking her head. "No, I don't think so."

"Okay, so not at the hospital but open to possibilities."

"Yes."

Heidi dropped a kiss onto Lila's lips. "Who is with you in ten years?"

"I have no idea."

"Try five years. Who is with you in five years? Who are your friends? Who do you spend time with?"

Lila's plump lips parted before she closed them quickly. Heidi's heart doubled its speed as she waited for the answer. She would be perfectly fine if Lila didn't say her and Ann. She had to keep telling herself that, although she knew inside she would be

heartbroken if that wasn't the answer. If Lila didn't want to be with them for that length of time, she would let Lila go. She'd have to.

When at least a minute had passed and Lila hadn't answered, Heidi nudged her with her shoulder. "Who's with you in five years?"

"My parents."

"And your sister, yes?"

Lila nodded. "Yeah, her too."

"What about friends?" Heidi rubbed her thumb gently along the back of Lila's hand, tracing a gentle back-and-forth pattern to try and soothe whatever upset she knew she was causing.

"There are a couple I can think of who might still be around. I've never had long-lasting friendships, though."

"Me either," Heidi commented. "Except for Ann."

Lila nodded, tears in her eyes as she turned to look up at Heidi. "Yeah, Ann. I've known her since I started at the hospital. I think she'll still be around."

Heidi's lips twitched as she tried to contain her smile. Lila hadn't said in a relationship. Either way, Ann would still be working at the hospital in ten years, that much Heidi knew. And if Lila was there for any considerable time, they would still see each other on a regular basis.

"Will I?" Heidi finally asked.

A single tear slipped from the corner of Lila's eye and down her cheek before she moved her gaze, not making eye contact again. "I don't know."

"I love an honest answer," Heidi whispered. "I know I would love to have you still in my life in five years, please know that. When you're ready to answer that question, let me know in your own time."

"Okay," Lila whispered.

Heidi turned Lila's chin upward so their lips could meet in a sweet kiss. She closed her eyes, listening to Lila's breath, her shifting on the couch, and Heidi's own heartbeat as it thudded. She could wait for an answer. She had to. There was no other choice.

Lila took the moment, curling her fingers in the back of Heidi's hair and holding their mouths together in a long kiss. The embrace turned from sweet and comforting to heated before slowing back down. They went back and forth, both listening to the moment and to each other as they stayed locked together on the couch, mouths touching, hands exploring, lives intertwining even if only for this short period of time.

They broke apart when Ann cleared her throat as she sat on the chair adjacent to the couch. Ann raised an eyebrow and stared at them curiously. "Don't stop on my account. It's quite interesting to watch."

Heidi grinned and rolled her eyes as she pecked Lila's lips one last time before grabbing for her tea, which was cold. She frowned into it before Ann spoke up again.

"I started more water for you, don't worry."

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“Thank you,” Heidi answered, happy to have Ann in her life, not for the first time.

Lila crossed her arms and lounged into the couch to stare into the fire. Heidi left her alone with her thoughts for the time being. She figured Lila had a lot more thinking to do on the matter than either Heidi or Ann did. Relationships weren’t something they were afraid of. They struggled with them, yes, but they weren’t afraid to love—not like Lila was, and they were also very patient people.

Staring at her partner of nearly sixteen years, Heidi smiled contentedly. It was the happiest she could remember feeling in a long time. They still had a lot of work to do—it would take years to learn and smooth all the kinks out—but for the first time in years, she felt as if there was some hope they could accomplish that very difficult task, and that they both wanted to. Ann had told her once she was in it for the long haul, and Heidi was reminded just how truthful Ann had been in that statement.

* * *

The first half of the drive home was quiet. They had both been resigned. Their goodbye with Lila had felt stilted somehow, and Heidi couldn’t figure out why. They had made so much progress in the last few days, and she worried Lila hadn’t come along with them for it. She did not want to leave Lila behind.

Fields passed by on either side of the vehicle as Ann drove. Lila had left an hour before they had, and the final hour at Indigo without her had been unsettled. Heidi stared out the window as she mulled through everything. In some ways it was rather overwhelming, but there was a sense of calm and peace at the center of it all. She hadn’t felt that in over a decade. She could barely remember when, honestly.

Ann's fingers curled around her thigh, garnering her attention. Heidi slid her hand on top of Ann's and gave her a light squeeze and a small curl of her lips before moving to look out the window again. She wondered if Ann could sense her mood, curious as to what was wrong. On the one hand, nothing was, but on the other, not everything felt right either. Heidi closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath, calming her heart, which had already begun to race.

"It's Lila," Heidi whispered.

"She needs more time," Ann answered, her hand tightening. "Give her some time."

"I'm worried time will push her away."

Ann snorted. "For someone who has the patience of Job, you are not patient right now. How am I the one who has more than you in this?"

"Practice?" Heidi gazed at Ann, winking when they made eye contact with a flirtatious smile. "You always joke about how impatient you are, but you're not with me. If there's one thing you have patience with, it's me and my baggage. I imagine it's the same with Lila. I'm not as used to that as you are."

"Perhaps." Ann stared out the windshield, driving straight down the highway.

Heidi swallowed the lump in her throat. She wasn't even sure she could figure out what it was she felt. How she could form it into words for Ann to understand was another disaster just waiting to happen. She sighed, thinking about Lila. The beautiful curls of her blonde hair.

Those eyes. That was what had done Heidi in. Lila's deep blue eyes, such a sapphire blue—she'd never seen a color like that before. Ann's hand on her leg caught her attention again.

“What are you thinking about?”

Heidi snorted.

“Really?”

Pushing her head into the back of the seat, Heidi faced Ann. “I think I’m worried about her still.”

“You said you talked to her again.”

“I did.” Heidi sighed. “And I don’t think I got very far.”

“Were you trying to convince her to be with us?”

Heidi tossed Ann a glare. “No. I was trying to tell her how we felt about her.”

“Ah.” Ann turned her hand over and entwined their fingers. “And how do we feel about her?”

Narrowing her gaze, Heidi tried to decide if Ann was attempting to confirm or if she was prodding to get Heidi to think about things differently than she had before. Thinning her lips, Heidi decided to answer. “We love her.”

“Yes, that.”

“Yes, that,” Heidi mimicked back. “So of course we want to be with her.”

“I’ve known Lila for years now, Heidi, and I have never seen her be in a committed relationship beyond me. No offense, but you two haven’t been together all that long. Even in the year we were together, love didn’t come up until recently.”

“How recently?”

Ann shot her a serious look. “Like in the last month.”

“Interesting, so I was right.”

“Right about what?”

Heidi grinned. “Lila has had all this therapy, good therapy, but it doesn’t leave us unscarred, Ann. And—”

“I know that. I’m not so obtuse as to not know that.”

“Right, sorry.” Heidi tensed her hand on Ann’s. “Lila is so good at coming off as put together, but she’s scared.”

“I know,” Ann muttered. “She’s scared of love in the way you run toward it but are scared of sex.”

Heidi squinted. “I am not scared of sex.”

“You’re right, that was the wrong way to phrase that. You’re scared of letting go of control when it comes to sex.”

Heidi moved her arms to cross them, glaring all the while at Ann. She debated whether Ann was right or wrong. Either way, she wasn’t super fond of that assessment. “Lila is scared of love.”

“Okay, change the subject for a minute, but we’re coming back to this one. Yes, Lila is scared of love. The one person who was supposed to love her unconditionally is the one who hurt her.”

“I get that,” Heidi mumbled.

“Yes, but you didn’t have it great from the beginning. She did. She had it switch from normal to abusive. You started with abusive and continued with abusive. You never had love ruined like she did.”

“Tainted.”

“Sure, but that’s your word not mine.” Ann sent her a sharp look. “Now can we go back to you being scared to lose control?”

“Fine.” Heidi pouted. “I don’t know why you think that’s news to me. I like control.”

Ann giggled. “Yes, you do. I guess so long as you recognize it.”

“Makes it harder,” Heidi whispered, staring at her feet and not daring to look at Ann. She wasn’t so sure she wanted to have this conversation.

“Makes what harder?”

“Getting off.”

“Oh.” Ann covered Heidi’s clasped hands. “Look at me a second.”

It took her more than thirty seconds to turn her head and calm her breathing. She’d never admitted that to anyone before. It wasn’t that she couldn’t find the point of orgasm, but it was more difficult when she intuitively resisted even when she didn’t want to. Old habits and self-protections were very difficult to let go of.

“You know you’re safe with me, yes?”

“You are my safe place,” Heidi’s words were so quiet. “You always have been.”

“Then trust that I will take care of you, no matter what.”

The words “I do” were on the top of her tongue, but she couldn’t form them. She wanted so badly to trust Ann in that way, to allow her to take complete control of everything, but she wasn’t sure she could do it.

“I want to,” she said instead.

“I guess that will suffice for now.” Ann went quiet. “As for Lila, she struggles with the same, you know. It’s not so different for her, just a different issue. For her to love someone fully would be to give up that control.”

“When did you get so insightful?”

“I pay attention, Heidi. I always have.” Ann had a tone of offense underlying every word.

Heidi hadn’t meant to make her feel awful about it, or like she didn’t think Ann listened to her. She knew Ann listened, it was just that sometimes Ann didn’t hear, and more often than not, Heidi didn’t explain in a way Ann could understand. That was more the issue than either of them trying not listen.

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“I know you do,” Heidi reassured. “You’re always so attentive to me. Thank you for that.”

“Good.” Ann smiled slightly, which brought Heidi’s lips upward.

“How...” Heidi paused, not quite sure the best way to ask the question. Choosing to go for it, she started again, “How do you feel about this past week?”

Heidi’s heart rapped wildly as she waited for the answer. She thought they were on the same page, but she wanted to be one hundred percent sure they were. They’d had enough miscommunications in their time together, and they didn’t need to add to them. Ann didn’t answer right away, and Heidi realized how unspecific her question was.

“About us, I mean. You and me. Leave Lila out of it for a minute.”

“That’s difficult to do, don’t you think?” Ann asked.

Heidi canted her head to the side. Ann was right, but still, they had their own relationship, and they should be able to talk about it without Lila being interjected every five seconds.

“I think I feel more connected to you than I have in years, maybe since ever, honestly.”

Heidi sucked in a breath sharply. She’d been thinking the exact same, but before she could speak again, Ann went on.

“I think I feel centered. I’m not sure if that’s the right word, but I feel comfortable, not like I’m walking on eggshells or wondering what bomb is going to be dropped next or where I’ll make a mistake. I’m not quite sure I’ve ever felt that way.”

Nodding, Heidi blinked back the tears sliding into her eyes. She’d seen Ann struggle with her self-confidence every moment they’d known each other, and no matter how much Heidi tried to help her boost it, she’d never managed to do it in terms of their relationship, only work and friends. “I can see that.”

“Good.” Ann gave her a wan smile. “It’s like something has finally clicked into place that was just barely out of place.”

Grinning, Heidi agreed. “Yes, I feel that, too. And everything else you said. I do feel more connected to you. I don’t...I don’t want to lose that.”

“You think Lila is central to that?”

Heidi gave a little shrug. “Maybe not central but essential. She’s what we’ve been missing all this time.”

“I agree, but where does that leave us.”

“Waiting,” Heidi’s answer was quiet. “We can’t make the decision for her.”

“But we can be there when she’s ready to make it.”

“Yes. Until then...we’re waiting.”

CHAPTER 21

Lila thought she’d take the entire week or more to separate herself from Ann and

Heidi, but she couldn't. She started texting both of them as soon as she'd gotten home, first to let them know she'd made it safely, but then the conversations bloomed as if they'd never left Indigo. By the time two days had passed, she missed both of them. She hadn't managed to see Ann at work to get even a little fix, and Heidi had been so busy with work and the after-holiday calls that none of them had found time.

She sat on her couch staring at the television screen as images moved across it. Her phone sat neatly in the palm of her hand as she waited for it to go off with something from someone. She'd never felt this tethered to someone else before, not in a romantic sense, but there was something about both Ann and Heidi that she couldn't deny. She did love them, though admitting that was harder than she'd ever thought it would be.

Years of therapy, years of processing, and it still sucked that she had shit to deal with on the daily where it concerned her trauma and abuse. She hated it. It shouldn't bother her anymore, and more often than not, Lila ignored it if she could. Yet that entire week, she'd been slammed with it face first more times than she could count, and all she wanted was to curl up with her women and potentially go through that again.

"Huh." Lila bit her lip and closed her eyes.

She hadn't thought of it like that before. She did want to just be with them because she knew they would take care of her. They'd each done that from the first moment she'd met them. It was fun, but she felt so safe with them. Secure.

She sent a quick text to Heidi asking if she was home yet and what her address was. Within seconds she had a response. Turning off the television, Lila grabbed an overnight bag, something she rarely ever packed for her dates, and shoved in an outfit for the next morning and a pair of pajamas along with toiletries. It may be presumptive of her, but she had a feeling they wouldn't care.

Her phone went off with another text from Heidi asking why she wanted the address. Lila ignored it and walked out her apartment, locking the door, and sliding behind the wheel of her car. The drive to their house was so unfamiliar, and she almost missed the turnoff. Lila slammed on her brakes and made a sharp exit off the highway when her GPS told her she was about to go the wrong way.

The dirt road was rough, and she drove slowly, being so unfamiliar with the area. It took her longer than Ann's twenty minutes to make the drive, but she'd get better at it. The house wasn't quite what she expected. They had land, but it was in the middle of nowhere. Small, but enough for two people, Lila supposed. It didn't look run-down, but it didn't look immaculately kept, either. The front porch light was on.

She parked on the far side of the single-car driveway in the grass where she could see tread marks with her headlights. Someone else had clearly done what she was doing now. Lila grabbed the bag from her passenger seat and shut the door to her car as quietly as possible. The walk to the front door of the house seemed to take forever, every nerve in her body warring with itself, telling her to leave and stay at the same time.

Lila reached for the screen door when the front door opened to beautiful, petite, dark-haired Heidi standing on the other side with a curious and cautious look in her gaze. Cocking her head to the side, Lila plastered a grin on her lips. "I brought an overnight bag."

“So you’re staying?”

“For tonight.”

Heidi’s echoing grin warmed Lila’s entire body.

“Ann will be home soon.”

“I figured,” Lila stated as she opened the screen door and let herself inside. “I figure we have some talking to do.”

Heidi took the bag from Lila’s hand and walked toward the back of the house. Lila followed, hesitating. She’d never been inside the house before, and she’d always thought it’d feel somewhat like she was violating some boundary, but instead, all she felt was comfort and a sense of belonging.

They walked down a hallway and turned into a room. Heidi set the bag on the edge of an already-made bed and smiled as her hand rested on the footboard. “It’s our guest room. No one has ever stayed in it.”

“Really?” Lila’s brow furrowed. Surely the house was a three bedroom, and Heidi was saying they’d never had guests. Confused didn’t even begin to cover it.

“We don’t have much family we get along well enough with to invite them out here, and since most of our friends from school are back in Wichita, we go there instead of them coming here.”

“Pity.” Lila frowned. “It’s such a nice room.”

Heidi’s cheeks flushed, and she stared at the floor. “Thanks. I don’t think I quite realized you’d never been here before.”

“No. It was an unwritten off-limits before.” Lila sat on the edge of the bed.

“But not now?” Heidi replied, her tone hitching up at the end as though it was a question.

Lila slowly shook her head. “No, not now.”

“Does that mean...”

“Yes. I wanted to wait for Ann to be here, but whatever. Nothing ever seems to go to plan.”

“And what was the plan, if you don’t mind me asking?” Heidi stayed stoically by the end of the bed, giving Lila all the space she needed.

Yet, what Lila really needed—and wanted—was Heidi up against her. Touching Heidi’s hip, she moved Heidi until she stood between Lila’s legs. “The plan was to stay single until the day I died.”

“Sounds lonely.” Heidi settled her palms against Lila’s shoulders, cupping the sides of her neck.

“Not as lonely as you’d think.”

“Because you didn’t allow yourself to think about it.”

“Probably.” Lila nervously chuckled.

“Lila...”

“Yes?”

Heidi bent down and tilted Lila’s head upward at the same time. Staring straight into those eyes was a little unnerving, but Lila held her ground. She’d made a decision, and she wasn’t one to back down from it. She smiled and pulled Heidi in for a long, sweet kiss.

“I forgot to say hello,” Lila murmured against Heidi’s mouth when she was done.

Heidi grinned. “I like how you say hello.”

“Think I should do it again?”

“Only if this is truly what you want. No pressure, nothing. We want you, but do you want this?”

“This is scary.” Lila pressed a kiss to Heidi’s jaw, moving up toward her ear with a trail of kisses. Heidi hummed in pleasure but didn’t answer verbally. Lila continued down Heidi’s neck, sliding her hands to Heidi’s ass and tugging her in even closer.

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Heidi was so warm. Lila wasn't sure she'd ever be able to leave, it felt so right. She wasn't even sure she wanted to. No, she knew the answer to that question. She didn't want to leave. She wanted to be a part of this—whatever this was. Nipping Heidi's lower lip, Lila fell back onto the mattress and pulled Heidi with her.

"This is what I want," Lila whispered into Heidi's ear. "This is what I need."

Heidi shuddered. She crawled to straddle Lila's hips, pushing the bag of clothes onto the far side of the bed until it tumbled over the edge and onto the floor with a loud thud. Lila giggled when Heidi looked her in the eye again. She'd never felt so free before. Rolling them, she pinned Heidi underneath her, pressing loud and open-mouthed kisses anywhere she could reach.

"Let me take you," Lila whispered as she pulled Heidi's button-down shirt up to expose the soft, supple skin of her belly.

"Yes," Heidi hissed back. "Please."

"Ann...?"

"Will join when she gets home if you want." Heidi's hands flew to her shirt to undo the buttons.

Lila sat back on her haunches and dragged her hoodie and T-shirt off, dropping them somewhere. She didn't care where. As soon as Heidi had her shirt parted, she was back down, kissing every inch of newly-exposed skin. Something clicked in her head. She knew she'd been moving in this direction with the two of them, but she'd been so

resistant, not because she didn't want it, but because she was scared of them.

The two of them loved each other so deeply—Lila had always known that. She'd seen it with Ann from the moment they'd met, and had almost refused to date her because of it. She didn't want to be a third wheel or cause problems. But everything she'd witnessed at Indigo had only confirmed how deep their love ran for each other. It had scared Lila shitless.

They were calm. They were respectable. They did what was expected of them in some ways, got together in a partnership for years, supported each other through the ups and downs, and there had never been a worry from either about the other leaving or doing something they shouldn't. Lila had never seen that kind of passion and strength in a couple before.

Lila pulled the button in Heidi's slacks and dragged them off her body, along with her underwear. Immediately, Heidi sat up and shucked her shirt and bra in two swift movements. Heidi pulled herself into the center of the bed while Lila stood up and finished taking off her clothes. She pushed her hair over her shoulder as she got onto the mattress, on her knees, facing Heidi, naked in all her glory, beautiful as ever.

"You're so gorgeous when you're like this," Lila whispered. "Unrestrained."

Heidi blushed. "So are you."

"Good. What do you want me to do?"

"Uh." Heidi looked lost as she moved her gaze to Lila's. "You decide."

"You sure?"

"Yes. I'll do anything you want."

Lila prolonged their eye contact, making sure this was really what Heidi wanted and giving her a chance to back out if she changed her mind. When she saw no hesitation, she nodded sharply. “Right. You tell me to stop or change it up, and we will. You control this, not me.”

“Understood.”

“Get on your knees and grab the footboard. I want Ann to see you when she walks in.”

Heidi stiffened, only her eyes shifting from Lila to the door of the room that was still wide open. Lila waited to see what she’d say, once again giving her the time to change her mind if that was what she wanted. Instead, Heidi moved up onto her knees and shifted down the bed. She leaned over slightly as she grabbed the footboard of the bed and looked over her shoulder at Lila.

“Do you think she’ll like that?” Heidi sounded so meek.

Lila softened. “Yes, I know she will. Ann wants what is best for you.”

“Right.”

Moving right up behind Heidi, Lila skimmed her fingertips over her back and the curve of her ass. “I’m going to touch you before I eat you.”

Heidi gave a little moan, and Lila knew by then not to expect much more than that from her. She was a quiet lover, but no less passionate.

Lila drew in a deep breath before she focused everything she had on Heidi but still kept one ear attuned to the front door. She wanted to know when Ann came home. Her fingers moved adeptly against Heidi, pressing into her repeatedly. She reached

around and teased a nipple, nipping Heidi's shoulder blade.

"I love you," Lila whispered.

Heidi relaxed.

"I really do love you."

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“I love you, too.” Heidi’s breath hitched as Lila hit a particularly sensitive spot. “I’m so close.”

“Not yet. I want all of you first.”

“Get to it then.”

Lila chuckled low in her throat as she moved and kissed her way down Heidi’s back to her ass, nipping at the flesh there. Heidi yipped. Lila licked her fingers clean before parting Heidi’s ass cheeks and bending lower. Heidi slipped into a better angle, and Lila tasted her for the first time that night.

Heidi cooed, her voice echoing in the room but not covering up the snick from the front door and keys being dropped onto a hard surface. Lila inwardly smiled. “Did you tell her I was here?”

“No.”

“Call for her.”

Heidi drew in a ragged breath when Ann called out to the empty house. Lila pinched Heidi’s butt to make sure she was paying attention when she didn’t immediately respond.

“In the guest room.” Heidi’s voice was barely loud enough to be heard through the room, and Lila wasn’t even sure if Ann could hear her from out there. Heidi cleared her throat and tried again. “In here.”

Heidi must be close with the way she was struggling to speak.

“Tell her to wait at the door,” Lila murmured before resuming her pattern.

Hissing, Heidi rocked her hips. Lila couldn't see her, but she could feel when Heidi tensed and she knew Ann had found them. Heidi whimpered. Ann stepped inside, her footfalls quiet on the carpet until she was very close. Heidi shifted, her chest lifting up and Lila assumed Ann was kissing her. In an instant, Heidi's hand reached around and clasped Lila's head, tapping it and telling her to stop.

Lila took one long last lick and moved away. She found Ann standing right in front of Heidi, with a raised eyebrow and a direct stare. Lila shrugged and smiled sheepishly as she sat on her butt and waited to see what was going to happen. Heidi shifted off the bed, gathering her clothes and holding them to her chest as she faced the both of them.

“You two have some talking to do, so I'm going to make dinner. Also...to make this abundantly clear...I don't care who is in bed with me at the end of the night, but I am not sleeping alone.” Without another word, Heidi left the bedroom and the door still wide open.

“Well, at least she knows what she wants,” Ann muttered, gripping the edge of the bed tightly. “Care to tell me what you're doing here?”

“I invited myself over.”

“For sex?”

Lila debated how much to push Ann. Angry sex was a definite bonus between the two of them, but she wasn't sure how long she wanted to toy with Ann not being in the know. Shaking her head slowly, Lila crossed her legs and relaxed. “No. I mean, yes,

I'd hoped, but that wasn't my purpose in coming here."

"How do you even know where we live?"

"I texted Heidi for the address. Can't wait to see it in the light."

Ann grunted but stayed put, as if she was guarding both the exit and Heidi, as if Lila was going to do something to harm them. Sliding her legs in front of her, Lila stretched them out and crossed her ankles, leaning back on her palms. She gave Ann a determined and obvious once-over. "How was work?"

"Rough. What are you doing here, Lila? I don't want to play games."

"No, you never do. That's what I love about you."

Ann's lips parted, about to retort with her usual quickness, but she stopped suddenly. Her gaze flashed with curiosity and recognition. Lila worked hard to hold in the smile that wanted to burst through.

"Excuse me?" Ann prodded.

"You heard me." Lila deliberately parted her legs and ran her fingers through the coarse hair between them.

"I heard nothing. However, I see a lot."

Laughing lightly, Lila jerked her chin up. "I love that about you, Ann."

"Ah."

"I brought clothes for tomorrow."

“So you’re staying the night, then?”

“That, or you’re sleeping with Heidi tonight.”

Ann’s eyes were locked between Lila’s legs, and Lila slid one finger in and out. Ann must have lost her train of thought because there was far too much silence before Lila cleared her throat to get Ann’s attention.

“Is that all right with you?”

“Is what all right?” Ann asked, her cheeks red and her breathing rapid.

Lila was enjoying this far too much.

“Or would you prefer I sleep with Heidi tonight?”

Ann stayed frozen on the spot, staring Lila down. “Do we just need to buy a bigger bed?”

Laughing, Lila shook her head. “I think two beds will suffice. Do I get to claim this one?”

“Are you staying?”

“I said I loved you.”

“No...no you didn’t actually.” Ann’s stance relaxed, her fingers no longer white

knuckling the edge of the bed. “However, if that’s how you’re going to tell me, I think you deserve a spanking or two.”

“Yes, please.” Laughing, Lila turned over on her stomach and put her hands down to her sides as she waited for Ann to take the hint.

Ann snorted, but she shifted around the edge of the full-sized bed and stripped out of her scrubs, which had some odd stains on them that Lila was sure she didn’t want to know about. Ann’s hand against her ass was sharp and resulted in a loud crack. Wet pooled between Lila’s legs. Ann spanked her again before climbing on the bed.

“Flip over,” Ann ordered.

“Yes, ma’am.” Lila gave a cheeky grin as she settled on her back in the center of the bed.

Shaking her head, Ann bent down and kissed Lila. “Do you mean it?”

“Mean what?”

“That you love me?”

“Yes. I love you, Ann. I have for a while, I think. Just didn’t want to admit it. It’s scary to be the center of your attention. I hope you know that.”

Ann grunted as she trailed her tongue along Lila’s breasts. “So did Heidi—”

“No. There wasn’t time before you got home.”

“Hmm.” Ann sucked one of Lila’s nipples in her mouth and swirled her tongue before popping off. “So you’re ready then.”

“Yes.” Lila bucked her hips. “Are you?”

“When am I not? Give me your hand.”

“Anything you want.”

Lila moved her fingers between Ann’s legs, feeling the soft folds, the hard nub that was her clit. Ann rocked as Lila thrust two fingers in her unceremoniously. Without preamble, Ann mimicked Lila’s movements.

“I do love you, Ann. I hope you know that.”

“I do now.” Ann’s entire body writhed on top of Lila as they pleased each other.

Thoughts of the details of how everything would work slipped from Lila’s mind. She was so much closer to orgasm than she’d thought. Her hand jerked to a stop as Ann pushed her over that edge and she was no longer able to concentrate.

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“I wish you would have told me sooner,” Ann whispered as she bent down and brushed her lips across Lila’s. “If only because it would have been easier on everyone—especially you.”

“Well, I’m damn stubborn sometimes,” Lila teased back. “You know that.”

“I do.” Ann nipped Lila’s lip. “My hips are hurting. Do you mind?”

“Never.”

Ann flopped onto her back and spread her legs until Lila moved between them. Lying down as best she could, Lila focused on Ann. This woman was just about everything for her—they both were. She couldn’t imagine the next five years without them, or the next ten. Heidi had scared the shit out of her with that question because the answer had been on the tip of her tongue without a second thought.

She wanted them. She wanted to be with them. To be loved by them and to love them. They were everything to her. Ann gripped Lila’s hair tightly, her knees clasp against the sides of her head as she cried out loudly and signaled her own orgasm. As soon as Lila was released, there was a knock on the door.

Heidi stood, grinning at the two of them. “Dinner is ready, whenever you are.”

“I’m going to shower,” Ann said. “Get this workday grime off me.”

“I’ll save you a plate.” Heidi left them alone.

Laughing, Ann threw a hand over her eyes and let out a sigh. “Fuck me.”

“I just did.”

“You’re an ass sometimes,” Ann teased. “I did not think you’d show up tonight. I figured we’d be dragging your ass here in a few weeks when you finally gave in and texted one of us.”

“I guess I’m not as stubborn as I thought.”

“Maybe. But what does this all mean?”

“Nothing in some ways. I’m not moving in here, but I do want to be here.”

Ann narrowed her gaze. “What?”

“I still want to see other people, but I do want to be committed to both of you for the long haul.”

“And still no threesomes—just to be clear on that front, because both Heidi and I are open to that if you are.”

Lila tensed, and she took a deep breath to relax herself. “No, not for now. I’ll let you know if that changes.”

“You got it.” Ann kissed Lila gently. “You want to shower with me?”

“You’re insatiable.”

“Well, I get home and find you and Heidi, and yeah, sorry not sorry. It was sexy.”

Lila shook her head. “I think you better shower, and I’m going to entertain Heidi for a bit. What do you think she cooked, anyway?”

Ann choked. “Something that imitates meat, guaranteed. I miss meat some days.”

“Well, with two of us around more often, we may just convert her to the dark side.”

Shaking her head, Ann rolled her eyes. “Good luck with that. I’ve tried on and off for years, and she’s a staunch vegan. I eat what she cooks because frankly I’m not one for cooking.”

“All right. Go. Shower. I’m hungry.”

Ann raked her gaze over Lila’s naked body. “You just ate.”

“Shut up.” Lila’s cheeks heated. “Maybe later. You have me all night.”

“And tomorrow morning. Heidi has to go to work in the morning. I don’t.”

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“Then in the morning I’m all yours.”

Ann leaned down and planted a kiss on Lila’s lips. “I love you.”

“Love you, too. Now for fucks sake, shower, because I saw your scrubs and I’m kind of disgusted you didn’t do that first.”

“Again, Heidi and you...my body over-rode my mind in decision making. You’ll learn it does that.”

“Can’t wait.” Lila winked at Ann, then turned to see Heidi standing by the door again. Ann dropped a kiss on Heidi’s lips along with some loving words before stepping down the hall.

“Everything good?” Heidi asked.

“Better than. I’m your bunkmate for the night.”

“Are you?”

“Yes.” Lila moved to the edge of the bed. “And I plan on taking full advantage of that at least one more time before we fall asleep.”

Heidi drew in a deep breath. “All right. I’ll think about it.”

Lila couldn’t stop grinning. She’d never have guessed this would be where she ended up, but sure enough, here she was—and she liked it.