



Ravished By Her

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Description: Every day I look forward to waking up in my beautiful apartment and going to my job in marketing at a real estate agency. Then life turns upside down when the company goes under and I can't find another job that will pay enough for me to keep my apartment. Everything seems hopeless until my twin sister, Sterling, offers to let me stay in the converted van she used to live in while I get on my feet as a freelancer. The small town of Arrowbridge, Maine, isn't where I thought I would end up, but I did miss my sister, so it wouldn't be all bad. One day, Sterling tells me about a new Arrowbridge resident who needs some help staging their house to sell. The job is right up my alley, so I go over to see what I can do. The house, to put it mildly, is an utter disaster, and my interaction with the owner, Lacey Pierce, isn't much better. Still, I need the money, and I see the job as a challenge that I want to conquer. Working with Lacey isn't easy, but there's something about her that keeps me coming back, day after day. Lacey is just as closed off as I am, and I like teasing her and watching her slowly open up. One night, she invites me over and things escalate as we both give in to the desire we've been trying to ignore. Our chemistry is combustible, but since neither of us have plans to stick around Arrowbridge, anything that happens between us is temporary. There's only one problem: the intensity of my feelings for Lacey are anything but temporary.

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Chapter One

Some days when I woke up, I still didn't know where the hell I was. Instead of sunlight filtering in from the floor-to-ceiling windows in my beautiful apartment outside of Boston, I looked up to a low ceiling covered in reclaimed wood and a white fan that spun slowly above my head.

"Fuck," I said as I realized what my life had become. Waking up never used to be like this.

I lay in the surprisingly comfortable bed for as long as I could stand before I had to walk the several steps to the bathroom that was the size of a broom closet. It made sense that it was small, seeing as how I was currently living in a van. With a composting toilet.

Annoyance filled my veins as I shuffled around the small space, trying to get dressed and brush my teeth and wash my face before making myself some coffee.

This was never how I saw myself living life, yet here I was. Someone knocked on the side of the van and I peered behind the window coverings to see the smiling face of my twin sister, Sterling, holding up a plate of breakfast for me.

I slid the door open and gave her a grim smile.

"Breakfast?" she asked.

"Thank you," I said, taking it from her. Sterling had worked briefly for a food truck

that specialized in eggs and she'd picked up a lot of skills she enjoyed showing off.

"You got big plans today?" she asked, pushing her black-framed glasses up her nose. Even if people couldn't tell us apart due to Sterling's skin being covered in tattoos and me having none, our glasses choices would have done the trick. I alternated between several different frames. My current favorite pair was a bright clear pink.

"You don't need to do that," I said, setting down the plate on the small counter. There wasn't enough space in here for me to even breathe.

"Do what?" she asked, tilting her head to the side. I knew I did the same thing, so it annoyed me seeing her do it.

I rolled my eyes. "Check on me to make sure I'm still here. That I've gotten out of bed and am not wallowing my days away." I had never wallowed for an entire day. When I lost my job a few months ago, I'd allowed myself a ten-minute cry in the bathroom before I'd washed my face, cleaned out my desk, and gone to take myself out for a drink at my favorite wine bar. A few hours later, I was already submitting applications and resumes to other real estate agencies. Giving up my apartment had been harder, but I'd still contacted a storage unit and started listing some of my furniture online before the end of the day.

"Gwen, I'm just trying to be your sister," she said with a sigh. "Can you let me do that? There's nothing wrong with needing some support."

My jaw clenched at that word. Support. I didn't need support. I just needed...the universe to stop fucking me over. I needed to get my business up and running so the only one responsible for failing would be me. Other people were too unreliable.

"Thank you for the breakfast," I said.

“Gwennie,” she said, and I cringed at the nickname.

“I’m fine,” I said. “And I’m busy today so I can’t hang out.”

Sterling’s face fell, and I almost apologized for being such a bitch to her. It was a reflex of mine.

She crossed her arms and sighed. “Have a good day then. I’ll just be working in the house if you want to take a break for lunch. Let me know if you want me to set you a place.”

I wouldn’t, and we both knew that, but I still nodded.

She went back into the single-wide she shared with her girlfriend, Kai. They’d moved in together almost immediately upon Sterling coming to Arrowbridge and I still thought she might have made a massive mistake, but Kai did love my sister, and they were good together.

Sterling living with Kai was the only reason the van was even free for me to stay in it.

Everything was so fucked up.

* * *

By the time I remembered the breakfast she’d brought me, it was cold, but I ate it anyway because I wasn’t going to turn down free food that I didn’t have to make. Cooking in the van was an exercise in frustration, and I avoided it as much as I could.

Thankfully, I still had my own car, so I didn’t have to haul the van everywhere. It also stored most of my clothes that wouldn’t fit in the storage areas of the van.

Doing my hair required a little bit of effort, but it was worth it. I never went anywhere without looking my best, even when I was living in a van.

I carefully did my makeup and realized that I would need to find someone to fill my eyelashes soon.

Since I felt so suffocated in the van, I tried to spend as little time there as possible. My refuge to work was Common Grounds, a coffee shop near the bank where Kai used to work. The baristas were lovely and sometimes even gave me free drinks for being Sterling's sister. I'd balked at first, but they just kept refusing to let me pay sometimes so I'd given up. I had other battles to fight.

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Today, Mia and Lark greeted me with warm smiles and said they had a new drink on the menu they thought I should try, and they'd give it to me for free if I'd tell them what I thought.

"It's market research," Mia said with a wink.

"Is it now?" I asked as I pulled out my card.

"Yes," Lark said as she walked by to grab something from a shelf behind Mia.

"I'll give you my honest opinion then," I said and ordered a wrap as well. My emergency fund was holding out, but I didn't want to take any chances, so I'd been living as cheaply as I could. Staying in the van mostly for free was a huge help.

I picked up my drink at the window, along with my wrap and tipped the drink in the direction of Mia and Lark before setting everything at a table in front of one of the windows. It had a close outlet and a good view, even if it was of a parking lot. It was better than nothing.

Missing the city was a constant ache in my chest. I missed elevators and walking the crowded streets full of strangers and bodegas and being able to get pad Thai at two in the morning. The pace of life in Arrowbridge seemed to crawl and I just wanted to tell everyone to move faster and get their heads out of the clouds.

Even my nomadic sister had been seduced by Arrowbridge and seemed content to stay in one place. One boring place.

A boring place I couldn't wait to get away from. I needed lights and excitement and buzz and anonymity. This place was like being under a microscope. I could feel eyes on me everywhere I went, could feel their questions about who I was and what I was doing here as if they were shouted at me.

No matter how much I tried to ignore people and mind my own business, they all seemed intent on minding it for me. You couldn't go into any kind of place of business in this damn place without having to chat. I hated chatting. Hated it with a fiery passion. That didn't seem to matter to these people. They'd just keep going and telling you about their lives as if you cared.

I didn't know how Sterling could stand it, but then again, a lot of things about Sterling I couldn't understand, even though we were identical twins.

Pushing those lovely thoughts aside, I went back to my list and my plan. There was no time for me to be unfocused. I had to get myself together and get the hell out of here.

* * *

When I arrived back home after tackling a few items on my list, I couldn't stand the thought of having dinner in the van. The space was so tight, and it steamed up and everything was always in the way or falling down. Some of us just weren't meant for vanlife. As much as I didn't want to have Sterling and her girlfriend obsessed with each other right in my face, I loathed the idea of dinner in the van more, so I knocked on the door and heard my sister call that it was open.

"Hey, Gwen," Kai said, looking up from the couch where she'd probably been reading a book. I would say this for Sterling and Kai, they were well-matched in that department.

“Hey,” I said, sliding off my shoes and heading toward the kitchen where Sterling was cooking.

“What are you making?” I asked as she darted around the stove.

“Buffalo shrimp wraps and then a beet and orange salad on the side,” she said, pointing to a platter with bright slices of navel and blood oranges and beets on it.

“Need any help?” I asked.

“I’ve got this,” she said, putting her hand on my shoulder and gently pushing me away.

I hated feeling beholden to anyone, even my sister, but if she didn’t want me to help, then there wasn’t much I could do about that. I went over to join Kai on the pink velvet couch that I was envious of. While pink was my favorite color, I’d never dream of having a pink couch. My apartment had been all about sleek metal and soft neutrals and clean whites. I liked to be the brightest thing in the room, and I dressed accordingly.

Kai closed her book and gave me her attention. When I’d first come up and met her, I could feel her staring at my face and trying to find the subtle differences between me and my sister. Everyone did that, so I knew the look. Thankfully, that look had gone away after the first week.

“How was work?” she asked.

“Productive,” I said, wishing we didn’t have to do this. I liked Kai, I really did, but talking about my work wasn’t what I wanted to do right now.

I expected her to ask me to elaborate, but she didn’t.

“Reading anything good?” she asked instead. Since I actually had more free time now, I’d gotten back into reading more, and Kai had been helpful with steering me toward what was good, especially when it came to romance. She worked part time at the local bookstore, and she had an impressive collection of books herself. Mainly Books was a treasure trove of romance, especially sapphic romance, and I wished that I could buy as many as I wanted, but budget and space didn’t allow. Kai was more than generous with her collection, as long as I promised not to damage any of them, which was a promise I could easily keep. I didn’t use receipts or forks as bookmarks, unlike some people.

“Oh, I finished the one about the chefs you told me about. You were right, it was perfect,” I said. Kai’s eyes lit up and she grinned at me.

“I know, right? I loved the stress of them having to work in the kitchen together.”

“I’ve never worked in a restaurant, but it felt authentic,” I said.

“It was,” Sterling called from the small kitchen. The house was small, so she could easily hear everything I said to Kai.

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“You worked on a food truck,” I said, turning to look at her.

“Same difference,” she said, pointing a spatula at me. “A kitchen is a kitchen.”

I rolled my eyes but didn’t argue with her.

“If you ever want to come to book club with us, you’re welcome,” Kai said.

I shrugged.

“I know it sounds...well. Let’s say I wasn’t a fan of it when Karissa first told me about it. I was basically dragged there kicking and screaming, but once I went, I ended up loving it. Very low pressure. You don’t even have to talk, and they have themed drinks and snacks and dessert.” The food did appeal to me, but if there was one place I’d have to do chitchat, it would be a book club.

“I’ll think about it,” I told Kai, because I didn’t want to say no outright. She was being more than kind by letting me hang around with her and my sister and letting me borrow her books.

“You only came back because I was there and you were obsessed with me,” Sterling said, winking across the room at Kai, who blushed.

“I was not obsessed with you,” Kai said.

“She was absolutely obsessed with me,” Sterling stage whispered.

I couldn't help but smile as they pretended to argue with each other as Kai got up and went to put her arms around Sterling.

No idea where they landed on if Kai was obsessed or not, but it didn't seem to matter as they started kissing and I had to look away.

"Dinner," Kai finally said with a little gasp. "We should have dinner."

"Yes, food," Sterling said, and I didn't think either of them was thinking about anything but each other. If I wasn't here, I had no doubt that they'd be running to the bedroom and ripping each other's clothes off.

Somehow, they got themselves under control and we had a nice dinner together. The food was delicious, and I offered to take the plates and stack the dishwasher and put away the leftovers as they sat together on the couch and talked in low voices, trading heated looks.

"Thank you for dinner," I said, drying my hands and then heading for the door. Some nights I'd stick around and read or watch something with them, but this was one of those nights when I was more than happy that the house only had one bedroom so I didn't have to hear anything.

"I'll see you for breakfast tomorrow," Sterling said, her eyes not leaving Kai's face as she tucked some of Kai's dark hair behind her ear.

I didn't even respond as I shut the door and headed to the van. Alone.

Chapter Two

Several days later, Sterling seemed overly excited when I stopped over for dinner.

“I think I have a job for you,” she said before I’d even had a chance to take my shoes off. Kai was out with her friend Karissa tonight, so it was just me and Sterling.

“What kind of job?” I asked, instantly wary.

“No, no, it’s perfect for you,” Sterling said, as if she was already preparing to sell me on it. “I was in Common Grounds and heard someone asking the baristas if they knew anyone who would help with the cleaning and staging of a house to sell. Of course, I thought of you immediately and got her to give me some details and her email.” She handed me her phone, where she’d taken down some notes.

“I don’t know,” I said after I’d read through the scant details.

“Why not? Isn’t this literally what you want to do?” Sterling said, taking her phone back.

“It is...” I said. This had been what I’d been hoping to find here. Get a few jobs under my belt with spectacular pictures for my website. Results and testimonials I could use to build my credibility.

I hadn’t even approached any local real estate agents yet about my work because I still hadn’t completed everything on my launch preparation. This was too early.

But if I didn’t grab this potential job, what if something else didn’t come around? I should at least take a look and see if I could do this. And see how much it would pay. Being too selective about potential clients could seriously bite me in the ass if I let it.

Sterling sent me an email and I immediately sent the woman a message. I was honest about the fact that I was building a new business, but that was to her advantage because I could give her 100 percent of my attention, and she would get a better deal from me than from someone more experienced.

“There,” I said after I’d finished the email and sent it off.

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“She seemed really nice, I think it’ll be great,” Sterling said, but that didn’t matter to me. It only mattered if I could get this job, absolutely do my best work, get the house sold and have a satisfied customer at the end of it.

Beggars couldn’t be choosers, and I was a beggar right now. Facts were facts.

“Want to chop some veggies for salad for me?” she asked, and I raised one eyebrow.

“Really? You’re letting me help?”

She rolled her eyes and bumped me with her shoulder. “I’m not that bad.”

I selected a knife from the block on the counter and confronted the pile of veggies on the cutting board. “I’m going to remind you of this in five minutes when you’re taking this knife out of my hand and telling me I’m doing it wrong.”

Sterling scoffed, as if she hadn’t done that about a million times to me already.

We fell into silence as I worked on cutting the vegetables and Sterling dealt with the stove.

I let Sterling talk about work as I concentrated on not slicing off my fingers. Cooking wasn’t one of my strong suits. When I’d lived in the city, I’d relied too much on delivery food and eating out. It had been expensive, but the convenience was worth it for me. Now here I was in a no-delivery town. Good thing the local pizza place was decent or else I might have starved.

“It’s not so bad here, you know,” she said, and I realized she was staring at me.

“That’s a matter of opinion.”

“And what is your opinion?” she asked.

I set down the knife. “My opinion is that I can’t fucking wait to get back to the city.”

Sterling crossed her arms. “I know you don’t love vanlife, Gwen, that’s not a secret. And I know you want to get back to a stainless-steel apartment in a skyscraper, but would it kill you to just have a good time while you’re here? I feel like I’ve barely seen you smile once.” What did I have to smile about? Not much.

“My fucking life fell apart, Sterling. Am I supposed to be thrilled about that?”

“No, of course not. I’m not trying to be an asshole here. I’m your sister and I love you and you seem miserable. Am I not allowed to be concerned about that?” she asked.

It wasn’t her fault that my life had gone south, and I knew she came from a good place.

“I know,” I said. “I know you’re just worried because you love me, but I’m fine. This is a bump in the road. A pothole. A blip in the grand scheme of things. Once I get my business running, everything is going to fall into place.”

Sterling smiled and pulled me into a hug. “I know it will.”

I hugged her back and sighed. “I really don’t know why you love living in a van so much.”

She laughed. “Guess I just stole all the vanlife genes in the womb.”

* * *

I’d gone back to the van for the night when I realized the woman I’d emailed about the job had responded.

Hi Gwen,

Thank you for reaching out to me. Here’s what I need: someone to assist with cleaning out my grandfather’s house and then staging it for showings. I need this house sold ASAP, so speed in getting this job done is a priority. I’m happy to discuss additional compensation for a rush job. I’m also attaching several photos of the house so you can get an idea of the time commitment. Please write back with any questions, and I’d be happy to give you a tour of the property.

-Lacey Pierce

The email was brusque and businesslike, which I appreciated. Then I opened the file with the pictures and I almost fell off the bed.

Junk. The house was full of junk. Clocks and books and figurines and paintings on the walls and tacky decorations and the ugliest mustard yellow and green kitchen I’d ever seen in my entire life. It honestly looked like one of those listings that went viral due to how wild the interior was.

“Fuck,” I said as I scanned through the pictures a second time. Was I up for this?

I scanned through Lacey’s email again and saw she had offered additional compensation. I wanted to see just how much that would be. Pulling up my rate sheet, I added a line about my rate for rush and difficult jobs and then sent Lacey a reply.

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Hello Lacey,

Please find my rates in the attachment. I'm fully confident that I can turn this house around. Are you planning on handling the sale yourself without the help of an agent?

Unless she had real estate experience, I would advise her against that, but right now my main goal was getting this job.

She responded just a few minutes later that she was going to have a local agent handle the sale, which was smart. This was also good for me, because if I could work with the agent and do a good job on Lacey's house, then the agent might send more work my way.

We set up a time tomorrow for me to come over and see the house for myself. I'd get to estimate how many hours it would take to clean, then what furniture I could save, and see what cosmetic touches I could handle myself.

Finally. Things were looking up.

* * *

I didn't tell Sterling about my meeting with Lacey at the potential job site. I didn't want to talk about it until I had the contract and the down payment in my hand. Working in real estate had taught me that much. Don't count on anything until all the contracts were signed and the checks had cleared.

The house was fairly close to Kai's, so it was only a short drive, which was nice.

The exterior wasn't bad. The home was two floors with a detached garage and a nice front porch. Sure, it could use a few paint touch ups, and the grass was out of control, but those items were pretty easy to handle.

I parked next to a pollen-covered truck that I assumed belonged to Lacey.

The front door opened, and someone walked out to come greet me.

My breath caught in my chest for a moment as I watched her jog down the steps. Bracing myself, I got out of the car as she approached me. She must have been in the middle of cleaning with her cargo shorts, black T-shirt, and backwards baseball cap.

"Gwen?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, fighting the urge to tug on my dress and make sure it wasn't wrinkled. It was tweed plaid with shades of pink and I'd paired it with a black belt and black pumps. I'd traded my flashier pink glasses frames for a pink pearl pair that I thought made me look a little more professional.

"Lacey," she said, holding out her hand. I gave her a good handshake as I noted the calluses on her fingers. She had at least four or five inches on me, even with my heels, but I wasn't going to let her know that I was sweating on the inside.

"A pleasure to meet you," I said, putting my bag on my shoulder. I'd brought a notebook and my phone so I could make a game plan to tackle this job.

"Well, here we are," she said, gesturing at the house. "I'll give you the grand tour."

Her tone made me think that she was being sarcastic about the grand part.

I followed her, figuring I could take exterior shots after I'd really gotten a look at the

inside.

“Oh,” I said as I stepped into the house. The pictures I’d seen hadn’t quite prepared me for the reality.

“My grandfather was a collector,” she said, staring down the hallway and then up the stairs.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I said, remembering that I should have said that in the first place.

Lacey didn’t meet my eyes, but she took off her hat before settling it back over her dark blonde hair again.

“Thank you,” she said.

“What do you plan to do with...all this?” I asked, gesturing around at the chaos. The home wasn’t dirty or trashed, just cluttered. With too many things. Way, way too many things. He’d obviously loved and cherished these items. There were no cobwebs in the corners that I could see, or dust covering the pictures and clocks and figurines.

I wondered what had happened to the man who’d lived in this house, but it was absolutely none of my business.

“Fuck if I know,” Lacey said, rubbing a hand down her face. “I still can’t believe I’m the one who has to deal with this.”

Not sure what to say, I just took a few more steps into the house. Lacey seemed to be lost in her own thoughts as I moved room to room, taking notes and pictures and mentally stripping away all the clutter to see what was underneath.

“The colors are...unique,” I said when we got to the kitchen.

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“Mmm,” Lacey said. She didn’t seem to want to be here, and I wondered what the story was.

The upstairs had two bedrooms and a bathroom, all done in garish tones, but the space was cheerful. Once we got it cleared out, I could put down some rugs and a new shower curtain and do my best with the rest. The floors were all beautiful hardwood, which was a blessing. No need to find rugs to cover up stained carpeting.

Lacey hovered behind me and I could feel the annoyance radiating off her like heat.

“Why don’t we talk outside?” I asked when we returned to the downstairs area.

She nodded and followed me out to the porch. I decided to lean on the railing as Lacey leaned against the house.

“Well?” she asked.

“Well, what?”

She looked over at me. “Can you do it?”

I nodded. “Yes. I can. There’s no guarantee that it will sell, but you’ll have a much better chance if it’s cleared out and touched up.”

She nodded and let out a sigh.

“Fuck,” she said, squinting off into the distance as if she was going to cry. She started

pacing. Off came the hat again as she raked a hand through her hair.

“Is...everything okay?” I asked and she pivoted, as if just realizing that I was still here.

“Fine,” she said through clenched teeth. “I’m fine.”

Her hands clenched into fists and then she spread her fingers.

“I have somewhere to be, are you done?” she asked, her tone brusque. Ouch. It was a good thing I wasn’t sensitive.

“Yes, I have everything I need. I’ll send you over the contract with the final numbers in the next hour or so. I can start work as soon as I get the first payment.”

She nodded as if she had barely heard me.

I stood up and put my hand out. “I look forward to working with you.”

Lacey shook my hand and I headed to my car, glancing back once as she leaned on the porch railing and gazed out into the distance as if she was looking for something. As if she didn’t want to be here.

Well, at least we had that in common.

Chapter Three

My mind was reeling from the visit to the house and I had so many ideas already that I went back to the van and got out my computer to type everything out. I also started researching local junk hauling companies and pawn shops and storage units. I knew speed was Lacey’s goal, but I didn’t want her to regret completely clearing out the

whole house and getting rid of something that she might want down the road. Once we sorted the junk from the non-junk, we could move the majority of it to a storage unit that she could deal with when she was ready. Not that I really knew anything about grief, but it seemed the most sensible course of action.

I made a bulleted list of my plans and fired it off in another email to Lacey. Today she had seemed...lost. As if she needed someone to come in and help her get a handle on this task. Lucky for her, this was what I was made for.

Lacey sent me back the signed contract and replied that my plan sounded fine and she would have the check for me tomorrow if I was ready to get started.

I couldn't stop myself from jumping off the bed in the van and doing a little victory dance in the small space. I couldn't really move as much as I wanted to, but I still put on some music and let myself go.

After I'd danced out my joy at booking the job, I went and knocked on Kai and Sterling's door to share the news with them.

"Whoa. You look happy," Sterling said when I walked into the house. I hadn't changed out of my dress, but I'd thrown on some flats.

Kai whistled at me. "You look fantastic."

"Thank you," I said.

"Should I be jealous right now?" Sterling asked, turning toward Kai, who'd been arranging her bookshelves.

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Kai grabbed Sterling's chin and kissed her lips. "No. You're still the hottest woman in this room."

"I should probably be insulted, but I'm not," I said. It was only natural that Kai would consider my sister hotter.

They kissed a few more times and I had to clear my throat to remind them that I was still here.

"I got the job," I announced as they both turned to face me.

"Of course you fucking did!" Sterling said, throwing herself at me. I managed to catch her as she hugged me tightly. "I knew you would."

"Congratulations, really," Kai said. "That's amazing."

"The house is a complete shitshow and my first meeting with the seller didn't go very well, but it's a job and she's paying very well." I pulled up pictures on my phone and they laughed and made comments about all the interesting items in the house.

"Oh my god, can we have it?" Sterling said about a statue of a leopard that sat at the foot of the stairs.

"Do you really like it?" Kai asked.

"Hell yeah, honey. I love it," Sterling said her eyes bright.

“Do you think we could have it?” Kai asked me.

“Oh, uh, I don’t know. I’d have to ask my client, but I can, if you truly want it.” The thing was ridiculous, but my sister often adored ridiculous things. The van was a prime example.

“It doesn’t really go with your aesthetic,” I said.

Sterling grinned at me. “Who cares? It’s a freaking leopard.”

I shook my head at her. Sometimes I didn’t understand my own twin.

“If we get him, he can guard the bookshelves,” Kai said.

“It’s definitely a she,” Sterling said, zooming in on the picture with the leopard in it.

“I’ll send you the picture,” I said, taking my phone back from her.

“How long do you think it’s going to take you to clear out the house?” Kai asked me. I flopped on the couch and stretched my legs out in front of me.

“At least a week, and that’s if I hustle.” Before I went over tomorrow, I had to go and pick up all the supplies I needed. My fingers were already itching to start dragging items out of the house and categorizing them.

“Is Lacey going to help you?” Sterling asked.

“I think so. It would be weird if she didn’t.” Lacey didn’t seem all that enthusiastic about the work, just having it be done, but even if all she did was tell me which items to toss and which to put in storage, that would be fine. I could do all the rest.

The before and after pictures were going to be incredible. I couldn't wait to have them for my website. Along with a glowing testimonial from Lacey.

* * *

"Good morning," I said when I arrived at the house after my shopping trip. I'd gone as early as I could, but I still arrived at Lacey's house later than I planned, but at least I had everything I needed. I'd dressed in a pink jumpsuit that was easy to wash and I had gloves and protective gear if needed. You never knew what could be lurking in a house just under the surface.

Lacey wore black bike shorts, a green tank, and an aggressively flowered button-up along with another backwards baseball cap.

"I brought coffee, just in case," I said, grabbing the drink tray from the passenger seat. I'd gotten a regular cold brew and one with cream and two shots of caramel.

Lacey grunted and chose the regular drink, which was what I'd hoped she'd choose. "Thanks," she said, wrapping her lips around the straw. I tried not to stare too much at her mouth.

Her wardrobe was telegraphing queerness, but I didn't want to assume. Besides, it wasn't professional to lust after your clients. And that was if I could see past her fashion choices.

"I also brought pastries, just in case," I said, holding up the bag.

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“You didn’t have to do that,” she said, setting down the coffee on the hood of my car.

“I know. But I like making a good impression.”

Lacey seemed to hesitate before taking the bag and digging through it, pulling out the maple bacon glazed donut. Once again, I’d guessed right on her preferences.

I also handed her a napkin for the donut as she grabbed her coffee and seemed to inhale it like she needed the liquid to live.

So far, so good.

She sat on the porch steps and I joined her, digging into a croissant filled with prosciutto, brie, and lavender honey. We ate in silence and I wondered if that was how the day was going to continue. I’d much rather have someone who didn’t want to chat than someone who talked my ear off. So many people were exhausting to be around.

Lacey finished her donut and dusted her hands off before drinking the last dregs of her coffee and sighing.

“I guess we should get started,” she said, putting both hands on her knees and standing. I finished my croissant and then wiped my hands with a disposable wipe from my purse.

“How do you want to do this?” she asked.

“It’s really up to you,” I said. “My suggestion is to start with one room and clear it out. We can’t clean or decide how to decorate until we have a blank slate.”

Lacey nodded and clenched her jaw. “Sounds good.”

I followed her to the front door and we both gazed down the hallway.

“Start from the front and work our way back?” I asked.

She adjusted her hat and nodded.

“Oh, before we get started, what are you planning on doing with the leopard?” I pointed to the gaudy thing at the base of the stairs.

“I didn’t have any plans for it, why?”

“My sister wants it. The sister who gave me your name,” I said.

Lacey snorted and I stared at her. “Your sister wants that?”

I let out a sigh. “She does.”

She stepped closer to the leopard and peered at it from a few angles. “She’s welcome to it, then. I don’t think it’s a leopard made by a famous artist or anything.”

“I’ll check,” I said, turning the leopard over so I could read the bottom. There was a very faded MADE IN CHINA sticker on the bottom.

“Safe to say it’s not worth much,” I said, turning it upright. It was much lighter than I thought. Must be hollow in the middle.

“Sure, fine. One less thing I have to deal with,” Lacey said, crossing her arms.

“Great, thanks,” I said, picking the thing up and carrying it out to my car. I shoved it in the backseat and went back into the house. Lacey had a somewhat panicked look on her face.

“Hey,” I said, my voice sharp to get her attention. “One thing at a time.”

Lacey swallowed and then nodded. “Let’s do this.”

* * *

The next two hours were mostly silent with the exception of me asking what Lacey thought we should toss, and what should go into the storage unit to be dealt with later.

Items started piling up in the yard. Lacey told me that we could fill her truck with the storage unit items and she’d handle taking them over.

“We’re making progress,” I kept telling her as we dragged more and more things to the yard. Lacey just nodded when I said it. She’d been sneezing a lot, so I’d handed her a mask to put on so she didn’t breathe in all the dust we’d kicked up, and I put one on myself. Of course, mine was pink. She’d taken the white mask I’d provided.

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“I need a break,” she told me when we’d made it partway through the living room.

“Sounds good,” I said, and we both went outside. She took off her mask and coughed a few times. “I have water if you need it.”

I grabbed two bottles from my car and handed one to her. She rinsed her mouth out and then spat in the grass.

“Sorry. I feel like I’ve been eating dust.”

“It’s cleaner than I expected,” I said.

“He used to hire cleaners every now and then,” she said. “But it’s probably been a while.”

I gulped at my water, trying not to spill. I was so thirsty already and we still had a full day.

“What happened?” I asked.

Lacey shrugged. “Let’s just get back to work.” She chucked her empty water bottle into the pile of items that were getting thrown out.

* * *

We made it through the living room before I decided to call it quits for the day. My body ached so much that I knew I was going to have to ask Kai to let me soak in her

bathtub tonight. A quickie shower in the van wasn't going to cut it.

I knew I had dust and probably spiders in my hair and my jumpsuit was a mess. Still, I felt good in a way that I hadn't in a while. To see the room cleared out now and ready for me to work my decorating magic was exciting. I couldn't wait to see the whole place empty.

"Thanks for helping," I said to Lacey as we sat on the porch steps again. She'd taken off her hat and leaned backwards on her elbows. Something in my chest tightened as I looked at her. There was something about her jaw that captured my attention.

"Fuck, I'm beat," she said, rubbing her eyes. I took off my glasses and wiped them with a cloth I kept in my pocket.

"Are you staying nearby?" I asked.

"Yeah, I have a rental. I couldn't stay here." Understandable, even if the house had been livable. "You?"

"I'm staying with my sister. She just moved up here a few months ago." I wasn't walking around and telling people that I lived in a van, even if that was the cool thing to do now for my generation.

"The sister that wants the leopard," she said.

"Yes," I said, smiling. "She's something else."

I thought the conversation was going to continue, but she dropped things there, taking out her phone.

"I'm going to get going. I'll see you tomorrow."

Without a backward glance, she headed to her truck and got in, cringing at the amount of crap in the back that was now covered by a tarp.

Reluctantly, I got into my car and cringed at how much dust I was probably bringing with me. I'd have to take it to the car wash and get it detailed when this job was over.

By the time I parked my car and knocked on Kai and Sterling's door, I was both starving and ready for bed.

"How was your first day?" Sterling said immediately and I had to put my hand up to stop her from throwing all her energy directly at me.

"Can I use your tub?" I asked Kai, who was in the kitchen chopping something.

"Of course," she said. "Take whatever you need."

I'd have to use her products, which wasn't ideal, but I didn't have the energy to retrieve mine from the van.

"Talk when I get out," I told Sterling as I headed to the bathroom.

* * *

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The bath and shower to wash and rinse my hair revived me. I wrapped myself in a towel and realized I didn't have a change of clothes but just then someone knocked on the door. Sterling handed me a stack of her clothes.

"Thanks," I said. Since we were exactly the same size, theoretically we could share our wardrobe, but our styles were so different that it wasn't something we often did. Now, though, it was nice.

I pulled on a dark T-shirt and soft shorts before brushing out my hair and using whatever products were available to smooth it before leaving the bathroom. I wanted to braid it so I'd have nice waves when I took it out tomorrow, but my arms were too sore.

Sterling and Kai were just plating up dinner when I came out.

"Thank you," I said, taking my plate from Sterling and grabbing some utensils that they'd laid out. I was half ready to forgo the fork and use my hands, I was so hungry.

"Today was good. We got a lot done," I said as I sat on the couch with them and stabbed at my food.

"Did Lacey help, or did you do everything?" Sterling asked as I tried not to stuff my face.

"She helped," I said. "But she didn't seem to want to talk. Oh, I almost forgot, the leopard is in the backseat of my car. She said you could have it."

Sterling's eyes lit up and I thought she was going to jump right up and fetch it from my car.

"Please thank her for me," Sterling said. "If you find any other weird stuff you think I might like, send me a picture. Maybe I'll come with you and help out to see if there are more treasures."

"No," I said, shaking my head. "I don't need you to come help me. It wouldn't be professional to have my sister coming to my job. I'll keep my eyes out." Although, I had no idea that she would have wanted the leopard, so who knew what other strange items she'd adore.

"Fine, fine," Sterling said, rolling her eyes. "It's not like I'd come to embarrass you."

"I know," I said. "I just really want to do this on my own." Independence had been harder for me growing up with an identical twin. I'd done my best to assert myself as an individual, but people were always mistaking me for Sterling. At least until she decided to tattoo every inch of her body. Now it was easy for anyone to tell us apart.

"I get it," Sterling said, resting her head on my shoulder. When we were younger we'd been very affectionate, but as we'd gotten older, I'd pushed her away in an effort to separate myself. Still, it felt good to sit close to my sister and wear her clothes that smelled so familiar.

I'd really fucking missed her these past few years when she'd been flitting around the country in her van. Like an essential part of myself had been missing for so long. I'd learned to live with it, but now... Now I could see my sister every day again. At least until I went back to Boston. Maybe I should use this time not only to build my career, but to rebuild my relationship with Sterling.

I leaned my head until it rested on top of hers and felt her let out a soft little sigh.

“Would you braid my hair for me?” I asked and she sat up.

“Yeah, of course,” she said. “Now?”

I’d destroyed my plate, so I took it to the dishwasher and came back to sit on the floor in front of Sterling. It was almost like going back in time when we used to do each other’s hair before school or dances.

Sterling hummed softly to herself as she parted my hair and combed it out before starting one of the braids. It felt good to have her fingers in my hair and I closed my eyes for a moment.

“I’m going to take a shower,” Kai said softly, leaving me and Sterling together in the living room.

“When was the last time we did this?” Sterling asked as she tilted my head so she could braid down the back of my head.

“I don’t even remember,” I said. Sterling finished one braid, tying off the end and then starting the second.

“I’m happy to do it whenever you want,” Sterling said.

“Same.”

Sterling finished my second braid in silence, and I lifted my hand to touch the new braids across my head.

“Thanks,” I said, getting up and sitting next to her on the couch.

“Anytime, Gwennie,” she said.

Chapter Four

“Are you going to bring me breakfast every day?” Lacey asked the next morning when I arrived with coffee and a donut for her again.

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“I can,” I said. It seemed like the right thing to do for my very first client.

Lacey shrugged. “You don’t have to.”

“Whatever you need,” I said, and she flashed me a quick look before focusing on the donut.

The two of us ate in silence before entering the house. “I’d love to get the kitchen finished today,” I said.

In addition to the living room and kitchen, there was also a dining room and an office on the first floor. The dining room and office were going to take probably a day each, due to how cramped they were. Finishing the kitchen was an easier task today. My body was sore already, but I wasn’t going to breathe a word of that to Lacey.

Today she had on another pair of cargo shorts and a black tank that showed off her arms. I was trying not to stare too much at them, but I had a thing for arms and shoulders on a woman and Lacey’s body was just the type to make my mouth go dry and my hormones start to race.

Even the baseball cap was doing it for me today, for some reason. Mentally slapping myself, I focused back on my job. There was no time to be lusting after my client. I was just here to work.

Lacey and I got moving, falling into the same routine that we’d had yesterday.

“These are nice dishes,” I said as we cleaned out one of the cabinets.

“Think they’re worth something?” Lacey asked.

“Definitely,” I said, wiping off a dish before stacking it with the rest of the set. Lacey had emptied her truck bed yesterday, so it was available to fill for another trip to the storage unit. We wrapped up each plate before carefully setting them in a box.

“Good,” she said with a sigh. “That’s good.”

I wondered what that was about, but I didn’t question it further.

“We’re definitely going to have to paint in here, at least the cabinets,” I said. There was nothing we could do about the ancient appliances but redoing the cabinets would make a world of difference.

“Mmm,” Lacey said. Her phone went off and she fished it out of one of her pockets, frowning at the screen. She sent off a quick reply before shoving it away again.

It was strange, spending so many hours with this woman that I didn’t know, going through the detritus of someone else’s life. In addition to the collections of art and statues and dishes and everything else, there were photographs that I’d carefully put aside in the living room so they didn’t get damaged. I’d made it a point to not look at too many of them. That felt too intimate. Too invasive a thing for me to do. So I put them in a corner and told myself not to look. Not to think about the man whose life was contained in this house.

“Do you like turkey sandwiches?” Lacey asked me when I suggested that we stop for a lunch break.

“I do,” I said, wondering why she’d asked.

Lacey pulled a cooler out of the fridge. “I made extra, if you wanted some.”

I'd brought my own lunch today like yesterday, but for some reason a turkey sandwich sounded better than what I'd packed.

"Sure," I said.

"It's just turkey, American cheese, tomato, lettuce, and mayo," she said, handing me a sandwich wrapped in a reusable cloth wrapper.

"Works for me," I said.

Her face relaxed into something that wasn't a smile, but it wasn't a scowl either. It was a pit stop on the way to a smile.

"I only brought one pickle though and I don't share," she said as we headed outside.

"That's fine. The only pickles I like are fried and dipped in spicy ranch," I said, and she plunked herself down on the steps.

"That sounds really good, actually," she said.

"They make them at Nick's Pizza," I said, surprised at myself for chatting with her about fried pickles.

Lacey unwrapped her sandwich and took a bite. I did the same, enjoying the thin-sliced turkey and fresh bread. There was just the right amount of mayo too.

"Now I'm going to be thinking about Nick's for the rest of the day," Lacey said, frowning into her sandwich.

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“Too bad they don’t deliver,” I said, now also craving pizza and fried pickles. I should call in an order and bring it over for Sterling and Kai to thank them for all the dinners they’d shared with me. That was a good idea. I sent a message to the group chat thread I had with both of them asking what they wanted.

We both jumped as Lacey’s phone rang. She got it out and frowned at the screen before declining the call. It rang again immediately. Lacey growled and for a second I thought she was going to throw it, but she just turned off the ringer and put it away again.

“Something wrong?” I asked when she didn’t say anything.

“Just my family,” she said, the growl still in her voice and it was starting to affect me. My cheeks flushed and I imagined her growling under different circumstances. Naked circumstances.

Be a goddamn professional, Gwen.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

She sighed and did that thing where she took off her hat, raked her hair back and then put the hat back on. That was starting to affect me as well.

Lacey was sexy. There was no other way around it. I’d always had a thing for butch girls, and she had all of that going on. She looked like she owned multiple drills and could assemble a bookshelf without the instructions and would look mouthwatering in a suit, but equally devastating in a dress.

Fuck.

I had to get myself under control. These little fantasies couldn't affect my work and I sure as hell couldn't have Lacey knowing that I had those fantasies in the first place.

"Just be grateful they're not your family," she said, reaching into the cooler and pulling out a bag of chips, and then a second.

"Take your pick."

I took the bag of cheesy flavored chips, leaving her with the plain potato. She seemed satisfied with my choice.

"My sister thanks you for the leopard, by the way," I said. After dinner last night, Sterling had retrieved the monstrosity from my car and had lovingly carried it into the house, setting it right near the bookshelves like a guard. She was still pondering a name for her, but agreed to give me updates. Kai watched the whole thing with a loving look on her face.

"Tell her thanks for taking it off my hands. One less thing I have to deal with," Lacey said and then crunched into a chip. "You must be close."

"It's kind of hard to avoid when you're twins," I said. She must have noticed, having met both of us.

Lacey gazed at me for a few moments, as if she was marking my similarities to my sister.

"We used to look more alike before she got all the tattoos," I said, munching a chip. "But once you know both of our personalities, it's easy to tell us apart."

Lacey nodded. “Yeah, you can definitely tell who is who.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I take that as a compliment.” I cleaned off my glasses and put them back on my face and I found her still studying me.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said, looking away, but it wasn’t my imagination that her cheeks were a little pinker.

“We should probably get back to work,” I said, wiping my hands with one of my wipes before gathering the rest of the trash.

“Yeah, sure,” she said, following my lead.

* * *

By the time we finished the kitchen, I was ready for bed. I barely made it to my car and then to pick up my order at Nick’s. Lacey had been even more quiet the rest of the day, but that had been fine. I’d been focused on getting that damn kitchen cleared out and we’d done it. The downstairs was almost completely finished. There was a light at the end of this tunnel, and I could see it. I could visualize the cabinets painted a soft cream color. I could see how we’d arrange the living room. It was all within reach.

“Fuck me, I’m starving,” Sterling said when I showed up with pizza and appetizers and even dessert in the form of whoopie pies that I hadn’t been able to resist.

“Me too,” I said, and my stomach growled as if to agree with me.

Kai got out plates and we loaded them up. I couldn’t eat the fried pickles without

thinking about Lacey and wondering what she was doing. I didn't even know where she was staying or what she did with herself when she wasn't helping me clean. What was her story? I didn't know if I was ever going to find out. She wasn't forthcoming which normally would have been perfect, but for some reason I wanted to know her.

Yup, my hormones were definitely getting the best of me. Ridiculous.

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Once I'd absolutely demolished as much pizza, fried pickles, and topped it off with a whoopie pie, I was ready for a soak in the tub and then bed in the van.

"I got you some Epsom salts," Kai said when I said I was going to grab a change of clothes from the van.

"Oh, thank you," I said. I was still unsure of how to act around her. She loved my sister, that much was obvious to anyone, but I felt uncomfortable sometimes at how much I used her washer and dryer and ate her food. She'd told me that I was welcome, but it was hard getting used to someone being so damn nice to me.

My job had been competitive, and I'd gotten into that cutthroat mindset. Sure, I'd had friends outside of work, but then I'd mostly stopped hanging out with them in favor of trying to get ahead and network and improve my resume. And now all of that was for nothing because I'd lost my job anyway.

Kai smiled at me and I leaned forward and hugged her. The move startled both of us, but she hugged me back and the awkwardness vanished.

"I'm really glad you're here," she said. "I know how much Sterling missed you."

"I missed her too," I admitted.

* * *

Lacey had another sandwich for me the next day. Turkey again, but it was just as good as the one from the day before.

Her mood seemed even more gloomy than before, and I wondered if she had more family stuff after we'd parted ways.

"I know we don't know each other," I said, as we pulled very creepy figurines from a cabinet in the dining room, "but if you wanted to vent about your family stuff, you can."

Lacey froze as she held a ceramic child with the most disturbing expression I'd ever seen. I reached for it and she finally handed it to me. I shuddered and made sure it faced away from me. These things were absolutely going to haunt my dreams.

"Oh," she said, looking at her hands and then wiping them on her shorts. "I don't want to burden you with all that shit. Sorry."

"It's fine if you don't, but I wanted to leave that door open. Just in case," I said, reaching for another figurine. She gazed at me for a moment and then grabbed another creepy child, cringing at it as she handed it to me.

Our eyes met for a second and I thought she was going to say something, but she just nodded and that was that.

* * *

During one of our breaks, I went to look up the figurines online and found that they were collectibles that might be worth something, so I told Lacey that she might want to hold onto them.

"I don't care what we do with them as long as I don't have to make eye contact with them anymore," she said.

I snorted. "What you can do is just list the whole collection as is and someone will

have to buy the lot. Easier than trying to list them all individually. I can set them up and take photos for the listing if you want.”

Lacey shook her head. “I think that’s going above and beyond the scope of this job. I’ll deal with them.” She sighed. “I’ll deal with them just like I deal with everything else.” The last part was muttered under her breath.

Reading between the lines, the death of her grandfather wasn’t the only thing she had going on, even though that was more than enough to handle.

“I’m here to help you deal with the house,” I blurted out. Where the hell had that come from?

Lacey stared at me for a second. “I guess you are.”

I couldn’t fight back a blush, so I turned away from her, hoping she didn’t see it.

Chapter Five

On Thursday we finished the downstairs and I had to fight my body not to do a celebratory dance.

“It’s like a blank canvas now,” I said as we did a walk-through and I talked to Lacey about my vision for the space. We still had the upstairs, but I wanted to bask in this victory.

“We’re going to need to paint, obviously, that’s the first thing. The floors are gorgeous, so they just need to be cleaned.” Lacey followed behind me, nodding and letting me keep going. The major thing would be furniture and other items like art and accents to fill up the space and give a homier vibe. Curtains, pillows, fake plants, etc. I was going to work with the aesthetic of the pieces we already had instead of

trying to completely change everything. A modern look wasn't going to work and would just seem completely out of place. Instead, I was going to lean into warm colors and rich woods, keeping the patterns soft and minimal. Warmth was the main idea I wanted to convey. Warmth and safety and comfort with a touch of coastal charm.

“Do you want me to pick up the paint?” I asked.

Lacey shook her head as we left for the day. “No, I can handle that part.”

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“Okay, I’ve already selected colors I think will work,” I said, sending her a text message with the exact brands and color names. “Let me know if you run into any issues at the paint store.”

“Yeah, will do,” Lacey said, glaring at the full bed of her truck. I couldn’t believe how many trips she’d made to the storage unit already.

“Be careful with those figurines,” I said.

“I will,” she said. “You sure they’re worth something?”

“Unfortunately.”

She made a face and I couldn’t help but laugh. There was that attraction again, making it hard for me to think.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said.

“Have a good night, Gwen,” she said. She spoke my name softly and it felt good. I liked the way she said my name.

My skin tingled as I got in my car and I mentally scolded myself to get it together as I drove back to the van.

* * *

“Any plans this weekend?” I asked Lacey the next day as we worked on the first

bedroom. The words sounded so artificial coming from my mouth and I wanted to take them back, but it was too late. What was it about being around her that made me unable to function sometimes?

“Not really. Catching up on all the shit that I didn’t get done while I was here,” she said, pulling open the bottom drawer of the dresser in the room. It was empty, except for some dust and a few random items. This hadn’t been the main bedroom and I sensed that Lacey was saving that room for last.

“You?” she asked after checking the drawer and then closing it. I was handling the closet, which was a mix of tools and collectibles and other oddities.

“Not sure. I hang out with my sister a lot, but she and her girlfriend will probably be doing something. They like to do road trips on the weekends.” That would leave me alone and they’d said that I could use the house if I wanted, but it felt wrong being in their space without them, so I usually just kept to myself in the van if I wasn’t out somewhere else.

At least it was summer, and I could escape to the beach if I wanted to. I could spend all day on the sand with a book, or wading into the water, or collecting shells. Being near the ocean just did something to me. It revived my spirit in some kind of way.

“That’s sweet,” Lacey said.

“They’re disgustingly in love and I would hate them for it, but my sister is so happy that I can’t.” I hadn’t said those words out loud to anyone.

Lacey didn’t respond to me and I almost wondered if she hadn’t heard me, but then she said, “you could always come to the storage unit with me to make sure the figurines haven’t formed a rebel army and escaped only to swear vengeance on any human they encounter.”

Her words surprised me so much that I gaped at her for a second before I burst out laughing.

Lacey gave me an actual smile, her cheeks red.

“We’ve been working together for how many days and I’m just now finding out that you’ve got jokes?” I said and couldn’t help but hear the flirty tone of my voice. Hopefully Lacey didn’t pick up on it.

Her smile faded. “Don’t get used to it.”

Fine. I’d hold onto those jokes when I heard them. Fold them up and tuck them into my brain so I could keep them safe.

Lacey fell back into her comfort zone of almost total silence and I let it happen, holding back on all the other things I wanted to say to her. I’d built up a whole list of things about her I wanted to know. There was no way around it: Lacey intrigued me. She intrigued me a little too much.

She’d brought me another turkey sandwich, this time on a croissant.

“I couldn’t resist them at the bakery,” she said, almost as a confession.

“They are irresistible,” I said. I’d gotten addicted to them myself and hid my stash from Sterling in the van.

“Where do you stay when you’re not here?” I asked, wondering if she’d answer me.

“I have a rental not that far away,” she said. “You’re staying with your sister, right?” Lacey seemed to do that anytime I asked a question. Flip it back so I was the one talking.

“That’s right,” I said. “She’s living with her girlfriend and I’m living in her converted van.” I braced myself for her reaction.

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“Oh, like one of those vanlife things?” she asked, seeming interested instead of judgmental.

“Yeah, she did that for years. Fixed it all up herself and traveled around. She came to Arrowbridge to crash for a while, met her girlfriend and the rest is history.”

“How did you end up here? I can tell from your accent you’re not local,” she asked, her eyes lasering toward me. Lacey might have been quiet, but those eyes missed nothing. I’d done my best to tamp down my southern accent, but it had gotten thicker now that I’d started spending more time with my sister.

I pressed my lips together. I didn’t want to talk about it, but something about Lacey made the words spill out of my mouth.

“I grew up in Virginia, moved to New England for college. Lost my job in Boston, couldn’t get another one. Sterling offered to let me use her van and I didn’t see any better options,” I said, cutting out a lot of the details that she didn’t need to know. I’d given her the highlights. Or lowlights, in truth.

“Shit, that’s rough. I’m sorry,” she said.

I shrugged, because what else was there to say? I’d been dealt a bad hand and now I was going to turn it into a good one. I’d get back to where I was. I’d get back to the huge apartment and the drinks after work and the life I’d had and built for myself in the city.

“Thank you,” I said with a sigh.

I wondered what she thought about me. About what I'd told her. She didn't say anything as we finished our lunch and went back to work.

I wasn't going to see her during the weekend. She'd said that she needed some days off and to be honest, so did I. My body stopped feeling like it had been repeatedly run over by a train, but I was still exhausted. Every night I barely made it through dinner and a bath before I was ready to pass out, and only woke up when my alarm went off.

"We're so close," I said as we finished the first bedroom and the only bathroom upstairs.

The only room left was her grandfather's bedroom and Lacey didn't seem eager to get to it.

"Don't worry about it now. We'll deal with it next week," I said. She nodded and clenched her jaw. The door to that room had remained closed the whole time I'd been here, and she hadn't even let me look inside.

Next week might be hard for her and I was going to prepare for that. Not that I was the right person to handle grief and all that came with it, but I'd do my best. It was my job.

Lacey seemed to linger as we finished for the day.

"I'll get the paint so we have it for next week," she said.

"Perfect," I said as she leaned against the bed of the truck. She looked good. She looked so good. Her legs were on display in a pair of ripped black jean shorts, and her shoulders were looking delicious. It was official: I had a crush. They could strike anywhere, at any time, and this was truly inconvenient. The timing was bad, but I'd recover. Even though it had been a long time since I'd felt attraction like this to

anyone, it would pass. I'd move on and she'd sell the house and that would be that. I just had to get a hold of myself until then.

Chapter Six

That night, Sterling and Kai had decided to have dinner out in Castleton with their friends. I'd been invited, but I claimed I was too tired from work and wanted to just take a bath and go to bed with a book. It wasn't a complete lie, but I was also looking forward to some solitude.

I shopped for food and then brought it back and loaded up the small fridge and freezer in the van. It held a surprising amount, and at least I had backup in the house if I needed it.

I made a quick salad with a pre-made mix and shredded a rotisserie chicken. The van felt so cramped, so I let myself into the house and ate on Kai's pink couch with random TV before getting in the bath with my ereader to have a nice long soak.

My current read was a riveting tale of an assistant falling for her boss who was the head of a fashion magazine. The chemistry and yearning were sizzling, so I had to force myself to get out when the water got cold. I changed into my pajamas and went back to the couch with my book.

The next thing I knew, Sterling was touching my shoulder and informing me that I'd fallen asleep on the couch, my ereader resting on my chest.

"Sorry," I said, trying to wake up.

"We brought you back some fried pickles from the restaurant. They're not as good as Nick's, but I knew you'd still want them," Sterling said as I sat up and pushed my damp hair back from my face.

“Thanks,” I said as she sat next to me and Kai joined us.

“Looks like you had a good night,” Kai said, nodding at my ereader. “Good book?”

“Yeah, the one you told me about with the assistant,” I said.

Kai’s eyes lit up. “It’s so good, right?”

“Shhhh, no spoilers, I haven’t read it,” Sterling said, covering her ears.

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Kai rolled her eyes. “We’ll talk later.” She yawned and stood up.

“I’m going to take a shower.”

Sterling’s eyes lit up. “Need some company, honey?”

The look Kai gave her was heated. “Always.”

That was my cue to leave. I said goodnight as they headed to the bathroom together.

* * *

The sun was bright on Saturday and I had a fast breakfast before packing a bag and heading to the beach in Castleton, the next town over from Arrowbridge. I’d slept hard last night, so I was feeling fresh and ready to lounge on the sand and finish my book and start another and recharge my batteries.

The beach was crowded with tourists, but as long as I didn’t have to chat with anyone, I was fine staking out my little spot for my chair.

This was what I liked. There were people all around me living their lives and having a beautiful day and I could be part of it, but still have my own space. All I had to do was put on my headphones and sink into my book if I truly wanted solitude.

The air was sharp with the scent of salt and I breathed deeply, filling my lungs. It was refreshing after being in the dusty house all week.

My thoughts drifted back to Lacey. Had she thought about me at all today? Probably not. I couldn't help but think about her, though. All these little moments I'd collected of her facade cracking and showing me who she was underneath.

I went back to my book, but then I felt restless. I got up and walked down the sand to where the ocean waves lapped at the shore. The water never seemed to get as warm as you wanted it to, but I waded in anyway. I breathed as my toes grew numb and a hermit crab crawled next to my foot.

My feet carried me further down the beach and I let myself wander, something I rarely did. Usually I didn't go anywhere without a strict purpose. Sterling and I were opposites that way. She loved wandering. At least she had. Now she loved being with Kai. Sure, she still traveled, but now they were shorter trips, and with me living in the van, they were only really doing trips close to Arrowbridge. Could people just change like that? Go from being nomadic for years to staying in one place overnight and be content with that? I wasn't so sure.

I completely lost track of time and everything else as I walked and reached the end of the beach where children clambered over rocks to find treasures in tidepools. I watched them, remembering when Sterling and I were kids and we'd do things like that. Well, Sterling would coax me into doing things like that. Even though I was older, she was the fearless twin. The one who took the first step to make sure it was safe before letting me follow. I'd never minded it, because I did have the fear. I often felt like I got all the fear and she got none of it. Over the years I'd gotten to be a master at hiding my fear, at pretending it didn't exist. But it would always be there, coming for me in my weakest moments, making it so I couldn't even breathe or move.

Sterling had always known when I was struggling. She'd crawl into my bed and hold me all night before my presentations and games and even when we weren't together, she'd call me and stay on the phone with me all night. Just breathing with me until I

fell asleep.

Ever since I lost my job, the fear had been simmering quietly in my blood all the time on a low level, so quietly I almost didn't notice it.

Almost.

I leaned down and picked up a beautiful mussel shell. Purple and periwinkle and black and gray on the outside and so soft and pearl-like on the inside. I clutched it in my hand and kept walking, heading in the opposite direction to the other side of the beach.

* * *

My lunch was a lobster roll packed with meat that almost made my eyes roll back in my head it was so good. I chased it with ice cream that I savored with my eyes closed.

Eventually the sun got to be too much, so I packed up everything and went back to the van. Just looking at it made me want to scream, so I let myself into the house and headed for the shower.

After getting clean, I put on some pajamas and made myself some dinner in the kitchen, being careful as I ate it on the pink couch. I'd just gone back to reading when Sterling and Kai got back from their day adventure.

"How many books did you buy?" I asked when Sterling crashed through the door, her arms weighed down with heavy bags that could only contain one thing.

"Blame her," she said, nodding at Kai, who also struggled to carry in her load.

“We’re both to blame,” Kai said, dropping her bags with a thunk. She let out a breath and stood up, rubbing her shoulder.

“Good thing we have plenty of room,” Sterling said, flopping on the couch next to me after she’d petted the leopard on the head. “And how was your day, Gwennie? Get up to any shenanigans?”

I rolled my eyes and turned off my ereader. “Just went to the beach. Nothing earth-shattering.”

Sterling snapped her fingers. “That reminds me, I got you some books.”

“And where am I supposed to put them? There isn’t a whole lot of room in the van.”

“The van is temporary, right? So you can just keep them here until you’re ready to move again,” Sterling said, riffling through the bags until she found what she wanted.

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It was a boxed set of Jane Austen's works all with gorgeous embossed fabric covers, sprayed edges, and ribbon bookmarks.

"I saw them, and I knew you'd have to have them," she said, putting the set on the coffee table. It was heavy, but the books were so gorgeous I didn't even care.

I pulled out *Persuasion* and flipped through the pages.

"They're beautiful, Sterling," I said, almost at a loss for words.

"I know how much you love pretty hardcovers," she said as Kai joined us, almost draping herself in Sterling's lap.

"I've talked Joy into ordering more of them at the bookstore. People can't get enough of the special editions we have now, and if they're signed by the author? Forget about it. I have to keep stopping myself from putting them aside for myself," Kai said.

"Thank you," I said, and I truly meant it.

"Of course. What are sisters for?" Sterling said, leaning into Kai.

"What did you get up to today?" I asked, and they told me about their trip and visit to a bookstore and the terrible dinner they'd had. Both of them took turns telling the story and it was incredible how in tune they were with each other after only being together for a short period. It was as if they'd always been together.

It gave me mixed feelings that I didn't feel like sorting through, so I excused myself

and went back to the van, but I brought my new books with me even though I had to pile them on the passenger seat. It hadn't been a bad day. Not bad at all.

* * *

Sterling and Kai did house chores on Sunday, so I did the same as Sterling helped with maintenance on the van. I had zero intention of driving it anywhere, but it was good to keep it in working order just in case.

In the afternoon we sat outside on the new patio furniture that Sterling and Kai had gotten for the backyard. They'd also set up a little fire pit and birdfeeders and buckets with flowers in them.

"It's not an in-ground pool or a secret garden, but it's the best I could do," Kai said, reclining in one of the chairs. We'd also brought a cooler with ice and drinks out with us. What else was there to do around here on a lazy Sunday?

If I was back in Boston, I'd probably be on the roof deck of my apartment with a drink in one hand and my ereader in the other. I might have dipped in the pool and then sweated it out in the sauna.

Fuck, I missed my apartment. I missed the elevator and getting groceries delivered right outside my door and the gym and the view.

I reached into the cooler for a drink.

"I should have invited Karissa and Ingrid over, but they're so busy," Kai said, speaking of her closest friend and her girlfriend. I'd met them and they were lovely, as was their daughter, Athena. Kids weren't always my thing, but Athena was absolutely adorable, and you couldn't help but laugh at her antics.

I wish I knew what Lacey was doing today. I didn't know if she would like hanging out with us, but I could absolutely picture her in one of the other chairs with a frosty can of beer in her hand.

"You there, Gwennie?" Sterling said, catching my attention.

"Yeah, just thinking," I said, giving her a quick smile.

"About anything in particular?" Sterling asked, studying me in a way I didn't like. I hadn't breathed a word about my attraction to Lacey and if I could, I was going to keep my sister in the dark. What purpose would it serve to tell her about something like that? She'd probably just end up teasing me until I couldn't deal, or worse, trying to get me to make a move.

"No," I said, sipping my drink. I was going to need a few more of these before my tongue got loose enough to talk about what I really thought.

"Hmmm," Sterling said, narrowing her eyes. "There's something you're thinking about. Something you've been thinking about for, oh, I'd say a week." Her eyes glittered and I glared at her.

"Yes, I've been thinking about my business. That's it," I said, and Sterling smirked at me.

"Oh come on, Gwen. We both know that the job isn't the thing that you've been thinking about when you keep drifting off." She wiggled her eyebrows up and down.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I said, keeping my face neutral.

"She's hot, you know. You should go for it," she said casually before getting out her phone and pretending to ignore me. "Don't think I didn't notice that she's exactly

your type when I first saw her.”

“What the hell, Sterling?” I asked. “Were you trying to get me a job or set me up?”

She grinned and didn’t answer my question, pulling something up on her phone. “Did you know she makes jewelry? Really amazing stuff.”

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She handed me her phone and I thought about throwing it for a second, but I fought against that urge.

Sterling had pulled up a social media page and I didn't have to scroll to realize it was Lacey's. There she was, carefully crafting rings and necklaces and earrings. The pieces were mostly silver, and they were gorgeous, with a kind of rough and rustic feel. I had to admit, she was talented.

So that was what she'd needed to catch up on this weekend. Her most recent post was put up today, so that made sense.

"Did you see the ring with the rose quartz?" Sterling asked.

"No," I said, scrolling down.

"I think you'd like it."

I found the ring and Sterling was right. I did like it. The ring had a rough teardrop-shaped rose quartz stone with silver vines wrapped around it that formed the band. There was a touch of whimsy to it that didn't normally call to me, but for some reason, this captured me.

"Anyway, you should ask her about her business and then offer to take her out for coffee, and then..." She trailed off.

I shoved the phone back at her. "I don't need your relationship help, thank you."

“You don’t? When was your last relationship?” What the hell was this? Interrogate Gwen about her love life day?

“When was yours?” I fired back at her.

“She’s right here,” Sterling said, pointing to Kai, who’d been reading on her ereader. Kai waved a few fingers without looking up.

“And before her?” I asked.

Sterling gazed at Kai. “Nothing before her matters.”

“Babe,” Kai said finally looking up and smiling so hard I thought it would break her face. She leaned over and kissed Sterling.

“You say the sweetest things sometimes,” Kai whispered as Sterling stroked her face.

“I love the truth, remember?” Sterling said, and I had to look away from them again.

“My point is,” Sterling said, finally ripping her eyes away from Kai, “it’s obvious that you like her and she’s not here with anyone. Give it a shot. The worst thing she can do is say no.”

Sterling would think that. “The worst thing she could do is accuse me of being a creep and dragging the name of my brand-new business through the mud. I’m not risking this for a crush.”

Sterling’s eyes lit up. “Aha! So you admit you have a crush on her.” She pointed an accusing finger at me.

“Get that out of my face,” I said, batting her finger away, but she just pointed with the

other hand, so I tried to get that to stop and before I knew it, Sterling was tickling me mercilessly.

“Stop it, you’re being a child!” I said through giggles.

“Admit you have a crush on her!”

“Fine! I have a crush on her!” I said and she stopped. I panted, wiping tears from my eyes. Sterling just grinned at me.

“I can’t believe you just did that,” I said, sitting up and adjusting my glasses.

“It worked, didn’t it?” she asked.

“I’m going to get you back for that, mark my words. When you least expect it, I’m going to get my revenge,” I said, wiggling my fingers at her. She knew I was ticklish, but she was too.

“Now who’s being childish?” she asked.

“You brought me down to your level,” I said, and I realized Kai had been watching us with a small smile on her face. She looked away when I met her eyes, but she didn’t hide her smile.

Chapter Seven

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I couldn't help but be a little nervous to see Lacey when I showed up on Monday with our usual breakfast.

She came out and met me in the driveway and I could feel my cheeks getting pink as I looked at her. She wore paint-splattered shorts and a faded T-shirt that looked like it was ready to disintegrate. All it would take is a few tugs and it would just...rip right off.

"Good morning," she said, interrupting my fantasy.

"Yes, hi, good morning," I said, handing her breakfast.

"So, I came over this weekend and finished up the last room and the closet, so we can start with the paint today," she said as we sat down together.

"You did?" I asked, surprised.

Her expression remained tight. "Yeah, just wanted to get it over with. So it's done."

Oh.

"You didn't have to do that," I said.

She shrugged and bit into her donut. "I know. But it was better to get it over with."

I wasn't going to argue with her because it was her house and the client was always right in this instance.

“Of course,” I said. “Looks like you got a head start on painting too?” I asked.

“No, these are just my painting clothes,” she said, plucking at her shirt and giving me a momentary glimpse of her stomach that made me inhale sharply.

If anything, being away from her this weekend had only intensified my crush on her.

“Oh,” I said, at a loss for words. I went back to my breakfast and hoped Lacey didn’t pick up on a weird vibe from me.

* * *

“I figured we could start in the kitchen,” Lacey said after we finished breakfast. She’d already moved the furniture out and had the cans of paint sitting in one corner along with brushes and other painting tools.

“Here,” she said, pulling a screwdriver out of one of her pockets and handing it to me. Why was that so sexy?

She pulled a second screwdriver out and started working on the cabinet doors. After a second, I joined her, attempting to shove my lust back down so it wouldn’t embarrass me.

Professional. I was a goddamn professional.

Lacey was more advanced with her screwdriver skills and was working on her second cabinet door while I was still fighting with the first.

“Did you want to get new hardware?” I asked. The knobs were brass and tarnished to hell, but that was an easy fix. They were simple and well-made.

“No, I think these are fine,” she said, setting the second door down on the floor on a sheet we’d put out.

I finally got the last screw and pulled off the door with a little grunt.

“Looks like that one put up a fight,” she said as I set the door down next to the other two.

“I won in the end,” I said, pretending to blow off the smoke on the screwdriver. Lacey let out a snort of laughter.

“I just need more practice,” I said, leaning down to work on another cabinet. “This is a new facet of my job.”

“You’re good at it,” she said, and I looked up to find her flipping the screwdriver with one hand and then catching it. Hot. She was so fucking hot.

“Thank you,” I said. “But you haven’t seen the finished house.”

Lacey shrugged. “I didn’t think I was going to be able to do any of this, so the fact that we’re even to the painting stage already is kind of a miracle.”

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Her eyes seared into mine and my breath caught in my chest.

“Even if you ditched me today and I never saw you again, what you’ve already helped me with has made this whole thing bearable.”

Holy shit. I didn’t even know what to say to that.

Lacey flipped the screwdriver again and then went to work on a cabinet without another word. As if she hadn’t just dropped one of the best compliments I’d ever gotten.

“Wow,” I said to myself softly before I went back to the cabinet.

* * *

Lacey and I took turns scrubbing the paint from our hands when we stopped for lunch.

“I have gloves, if you want to use them,” she said as I scrubbed my fingernails.

“No, it’s fine. I’m not that much of a princess.” Sure, my manicure was ruined, but that was the price I paid for this job. I’d get everything fixed once I was done with this job. Perfect way to reward myself.

“Didn’t say you were,” she said as I dried off and followed her out to the porch.

“Since I obviously didn’t do anything exciting this weekend, did you?”

I shook my head. “It was a lot of nothing. Except for going to the beach. That was nice.” I leaned back and let the sun warm my face.

“I don’t get to the beach very often,” she said. “I’m not used to one being so close.”

My eyes opened and I glanced over at her.

“You should go. Even if you don’t swim, it’s just a nice place to be.”

Lacey flexed one arm. “I was on swim team in high school.”

And now I was openly ogling her.

“I quit before college, though, but I still enjoy it,” she said, when I couldn’t wrangle any sensible words to respond with.

“I did tennis. And golf,” I said. I hadn’t been good at either one, but they’d seemed like the right sports to play at the time.

“My ex-wife played tennis in high school,” she said, and I almost choked.

“Oh?” I asked when I could breathe.

Lacey frowned. “Shit. I promised myself I wasn’t going to talk about her.”

“I don’t mind,” I said, my brain exploding with so many questions. Lacey had been married to a woman, which answered the “is she queer, or just from New England?” question.

Lacey pressed her lips together and shook her head. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

“That’s fine too,” I said. Now that I knew about her divorce, her grumpiness made a lot more sense. Or maybe she was just like that and the divorce was unrelated.

“Stop looking at me like that,” she muttered as she handed over a turkey sandwich.

“Like what?” I asked and she pointed to me.

“Exactly like you’re looking at me right now,” she said. “This is why I don’t talk about it.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, looking away and focusing on my sandwich. “I’ll stop looking at you for the rest of the day.” My words came out more biting than I intended.

Lacey huffed out a breath. “You don’t have to do that. Just don’t give me pitying looks because I literally can’t take it.”

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I glanced back at her and did my best to keep any kind of pity off my face. “You got it.”

* * *

The rest of the day I couldn’t stop wondering what had happened to Lacey. How long had she been divorced? How long had she been married? Who had filed?

None of that was any of my business, but I couldn’t help but be obsessed by thoughts of it.

We’d finally done the first coat of primer on the cabinets and had moved on to painting the living room when Lacey finally set the roller down and faced me.

“Okay, ask me.”

“What?” I asked. She wiped her paint-splattered hands on her shorts. I didn’t miss the spots that dotted her legs. Lacey had really spectacular legs. The kind of legs I wanted to suffocate me.

“Ask me about my divorce,” she said, glaring at me as if daring to say anything.

“You said you didn’t want to talk about it,” I said, wondering where this was coming from. I hadn’t breathed a word about my internal questions, so had she somehow read my mind?

“I know, but I can literally feel you thinking the questions at me,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” I said immediately, also putting down my brush. I’d managed to stay a little cleaner, but not by much. Painting was messy work and there was no way around that unless you wanted to wear a full-cover suit or something. I planned a long bathtub session this evening to scrub everything off.

Lacey glared at me for a second longer before she sighed. “She was my first girlfriend. We met in high school, started dating in college, and got married after we graduated. Nothing went really wrong, we just grew apart and she really wanted to have kids and I wasn’t ready yet. I thought we could stay friends, she cut off all contact and the only time I hear from her now is through her lawyer. There, now you know.” She picked up the roller again and angrily rolled it in the paint tray.

I was at a loss for words other than, “I’m sorry.”

Lacey’s shoulders slumped. “Yeah, me too. Anyway. That’s how my life went to shit and then my grandfather died, and I was left with this.” She gestured around at the house. “And no one in my family was willing to step up and deal with this shit, but they sure as hell want the money when a sale goes through.” She started pacing the room. “I don’t know how the fuck this got dumped on me!” she yelled. “Fuck!”

This was something I hadn’t anticipated, and I wasn’t sure what the best course of action was.

Lacey stopped pacing and then faced me. “Fuck,” she said, her voice softer this time, with an edge of tears.

“Do you want me to give you a minute?” I asked.

Lacey clenched her jaw and looked up at the ceiling, blinking rapidly, as if she was trying to keep back tears. She did that for a few seconds and then set her shoulders, sniffing loudly.

“Nope, I’m good.” She picked up her roller again.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said, and went back to painting.

* * *

“I’m sorry about earlier,” Lacey said as we made sure the paint cans were closed. I was more than ready to get out of the paint fumes and into a hot bath with a book, but I was still concerned about Lacey.

“It’s okay,” I said. “Not a big deal at all.”

“I’m under a lot of stress with this, but that doesn’t mean I need to take it out on you when all you’ve done is help me. I know it’s your job and everything, but I meant what I said about not being able to do this without you. So, thank you.” Her face was slightly red as she dried her hands and I took her place at the kitchen sink to wash mine.

“You’re welcome,” I said as I scrubbed as much of the paint from my fingers as I could. “You should do something for yourself tonight.”

Lacey leaned her back against the counter next to me.

“Like what?” she asked.

“Something nice.”

Lacey thought about that as I dried my hands off. “What would you do?”

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“I’m getting into a bath with a CBD bath bomb and a new book on my ereader and hopefully I’ll get out of the tub before I completely pass out. But that’s me.”

She looked me up and down and for a second I wondered if she was checking me out before she looked away.

“I do have some edibles I’ve been saving for whatever reason,” she said. “And I have the latest Lexi Starr book burning a hole in my ereader.”

My ears perked up at that name. “You like Lexi Starr books?”

“I do. You know her?” she asked, meeting my eyes and daring me to challenge her for reading the sapphic erotica author.

“I do know her. What would you say if I told you that my sister’s girlfriend works for her?” I asked.

“I’d say you were probably full of shit,” she said.

I grinned in triumph. “Well, she does. The author is actually the best friend of my sister’s girlfriend’s former coworker.” It took a second for me to make the connection, but it was there.

Lacey’s eyes widened. “I’m not even going to begin to try and figure that situation out.”

“Everyone seems connected around here,” I said. “Anyway, if you wanted a signed

book or something, I could probably get my hands on one through Kai. She helps manage the subscription box.”

“Really?” she asked, and her face brightened up for maybe the first time I’d ever seen.

“Sure, hold on.” I pulled out my phone and sent Kai a message asking if she could get her hands on some signed Lexi Starr books for Lacey.

To help you woo her? Absolutely. Which ones are her favorite? Kai responded. I wasn’t going to argue with her about the wooing part.

“She wants to know which ones are your favorites,” I told Lacey. She listed a few titles and I sent that to Kai.

“She says that she’s got a few special edition extras she can give you too,” I said, relaying Kai’s response.

“That’s way too much,” Lacey said. “I can’t take a whole bunch of free books.”

Kai seemed to have anticipated her resistance. “She says that you’re doing her a favor by taking them off her hands.”

Lacey huffed and shook her head. “I know I should protest more and offer to pay for them, but I’m not going to look gift books in the spine.”

A surprised laugh burst from my mouth.

“Sometimes I’m funny,” Lacey said as I got control of myself.

“Sometimes you are,” I said and found myself leaning closer to her, but the wild

thing was, she was leaning toward me too.

“I should let you get to your bath,” she said, her voice soft and low. Fuck. She was so hot.

“Right,” I said, and Lacey finally stepped away from me. “Let me know how the Lexi Starr book is. I’m so behind on her series.”

“I will,” she said. “And if you know of other authors that write like she does, send them my way.”

“Okay,” I said, already thinking of several names. “See you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow,” Lacey said as we walked out to our respective vehicles.

My stomach fluttered all the way home.

* * *

Instead of reading my book in the bath, I went through my digital bookshelves and found every single book that I thought Lacey might like if she was a Lexi Starr fan. I had to cut myself off when I had thirty titles on my list because that might be a little excessive. Instead, I picked my top five and decided to tell her about them tomorrow.

My body ached from the painting and the bath bomb was doing its job to chill me out, but my mind was wide awake. Today Lacey had told me about her divorce, I’d learned that she read sapphic books, and then we had that leaning moment. Of course, the last thing was probably just in my head. Still, it had been a weirdly good day. One of the best I’d had in a while.

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I managed to make it out of the bath without passing out and then back to the van. My final coherent thoughts before I fell asleep were of Lacey and how she'd made me laugh.

Chapter Eight

Hey, I can drop those books by later today, if that's okay with Lacey? Kai sent me as I was getting out of my car the next morning. I was ready to juggle everything in my arms, but Lacey was right there to help me.

"Thanks." I tried to ignore the way my heart had started beating faster in her presence.

"Good morning," she said, and she didn't smile, but she seemed lighter somehow. Like she wasn't as weighed down by everything. "How was your night?"

"Good. I didn't fall asleep in the tub. How was your book?" I asked as we headed into the house and I was hit with the sharp smell of the paint and primer.

She flexed her left hand and wiggled her fingers. "Reading one-handed isn't as easy as you'd think."

For a second, I didn't know what she meant, but then she glanced at me and I got it.

"Oh," I said.

"Have I scandalized you, princess?" she asked, and my mouth dropped open. Was she

flirting with me?

Lacey laughed and plunked herself down on the steps and started drinking her iced coffee as I tried to get myself together.

Following an instinct, I grabbed her hat off her head and put it on mine.

“Hey!” she said, reaching to take it from me.

I slammed both hands on top of my head and grinned at her.

“Does it look good on me?” I asked and she stopped trying to steal the hat. She leaned back and studied me for a second and I struck a little pose.

“It does look good on you,” she said and then yanked it off my head before I could do anything.

“Rude!” I said, reaching up to undo my bun and redo it before we started painting for the day.

“You stole it first,” she said, adjusting her hat to get it back on her head again. Fuck, it looked good on her.

“And I’ll probably steal it again,” I said, taking a risk and bumping her shoulder with mine.

Lacey narrowed her eyes. “I’m keeping my eye on you, Gwen.”

I winked at her and grabbed the bag of pastries. “Wise idea.”

* * *

Lacey was still quiet as usual, but I caught her humming a few times and she did say a few things to me. The difference from when I first started working with her was night and day.

“My sister found your social media,” I told her when we stopped for lunch.

“Did she?” Lacey asked. “Should I be worried?”

I rolled my eyes. “No. She showed me some of your jewelry, though.”

“And?” she asked. “What did you think?”

“Your work is amazing. I can’t even wrap my mind around how you make such intricate designs with metal.” I hoped that wasn’t too much.

Lacey didn’t say anything for a while, and I was worried I’d offended her.

“Thank you,” she finally said. “That means a lot.”

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“You’re welcome.”

She ate her sandwich thoughtfully and didn’t speak until she’d finished.

“If there was anything that you liked, you know, I’d be happy to gift you something. Same goes for Lexi Starr. If she wants anything, in exchange for the books, she’s got it.”

I was about to tell her that was a generous offer when Kai pulled into the driveway.

“Hey,” she said when she got out of the car and then went to the passenger side. She emerged with a tote bag almost completely weighing her down on one side.

“Jesus, Kai,” I said, racing down to help her.

“I’ve got it,” she said, but I started pulling books out of the bag to lighten it for her.

“Christ, did you bring the entire library?” Lacey asked and Kai smiled.

“Not quite. We just had a lot of books laying around and I couldn’t stop grabbing more.”

We ended up in the dining room and Lacey unpacked the bag which also had a ton of swag in it with bookmarks and a cup and even a baseball cap that said READ MORE SMUT on it that almost made me choke when Lacey showed it to me.

“This looks more your style,” she said, plunking the hat on my head with the bill in

the front. I glared at her and she studied me before taking the hat off, smoothing my hair with one hand and then placing it on my head with the bill backwards.

“There,” she said, her eyes sparkling a little. I felt a blush creep across my cheeks and looked away.

“Tell her thank you for the books, seriously,” Lacey said to Kai.

“No problem. And I can get you on her ARC list so you’ll get review copies for her upcoming releases if you want,” Kai said.

Lacey shook her head. “That’s way too much.”

Kai waved her off. “We love supporting sapphic readers.” I didn’t miss the way she looked back and forth from me to Lacey and back. She was definitely going to bring every single detail of this interaction back to my sister and I was never going to hear the end of it. I should have told Kai to bring me the books and then I could give them to Lacey, but it was too late now.

“Shit, I love a foiled cover,” Lacey said, picking up one of the hardcover special editions and stroking the cover.

“Me too,” I said. “My sister just bought me a Jane Austen collection with velvet foiled covers and I have to stop myself from constantly petting them.”

Lacey raised one eyebrow and I realized how suggestive that sounded, even though that hadn’t been my intent.

“Well, I’m going to head out. I have a lot of book boxes to pack,” she said, but she was smiling. Sterling had told me that Kai had worked as a bank teller and hated every second of it, but my sister had inspired her to quit and do something else. Now

she split her time between working at Mainely Books Bookshop in downtown Arrowbridge, and working for Tenley, a.k.a., Lexi Starr.

“Thank you again,” Lacey said.

“Nice to meet you, Lacey,” Kai said, and I realized that we hadn’t even given her a tour of the house, but maybe Lacey didn’t want to do that.

Kai left and Lacey carefully packed up the books again and put them in the cab of her truck.

“That was really generous,” Lacey said. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

“From my experience, Tenley is just like that. She loves giving books away. Sometimes she’ll take a bunch on a road trip and just leave them places, or in those little free library things.” Tenley and her girlfriend, Mia, were fascinating people, and I was going to make a point to hang out with them more before I went back to Boston. You didn’t meet many couples where one was a sex toy designer and one was a sapphic erotica author, but they fit together perfectly. Their lives would make a fantastic reality show.

“You know, if you wanted to meet her, she’s a part of this book club at Mainely Books in town. My sister and her girlfriend are in it, and they’ve been trying to get me to go,” I said.

“I don’t know if I’m a book club kind of person,” she said.

“Yeah, me neither. Kai was really down on it until she first went, but obviously she changed her mind.” I had the feeling my sister had as much to do with that as the actual book club meeting itself.

“I’ll think about it,” Lacey said, sighing. “Should we get back to work?”

I almost said no. Painting was the last thing I wanted to do right now. I wanted to...I wanted to go to Mainely Books with Lacey and see her pick out whatever she wanted. We could go to Castleton and gorge ourselves at Sweet’s Sweets Bakery and then walk on the beach. She could take me to the place she was staying and show me how she made jewelry. We’d cap off the day with pizza from Nick’s and then...

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None of those things were going to happen because this wasn't a fucking date. This was a job and right now, my job was painting.

"Yeah," I said to Lacey. "Let's get back to work."

* * *

Lacey and I lingered even after we'd called it a day and had put away the paint again. Tomorrow we got to add the last coat of paint to the cabinets and then we could put them back on and finish the rest of the touches in the kitchen. That was perfect timing since some of the furniture I'd rented from the closest staging company was coming in. Lacey had pretty much given me free rein to get whatever I thought was best, so I'd had a good time looking through my options and selecting what would look best in the space, and what would complement some of the existing pieces I had. I still needed to get things like sheets and blankets and the small touches, but the big pieces were taken care of.

"We should hang out," Lacey said, completely out of the blue.

"We should?!" I blurted out and then cringed. "Sorry."

"Not if you don't want to," she said, and I caught the blush on her cheeks.

"I do. Want to," I said, feeling like the ground was moving under my feet even though I was standing still.

Silence fell between us.

“Did you have anything in mind?” I asked. Since she was the one who suggested it, I assumed she might have some ideas.

“Are you hungry?” she asked.

“Starving,” I said, putting my hand on my stomach. PMS was hitting me like a truck and all I wanted were salt and sweets. And chocolate. In any form.

“Nick’s? Or did you want to go somewhere fancier?” she asked and there was a bit of teasing tone in her voice.

“I don’t know where you got this idea that I’m high maintenance,” I said. “I’m not.”

“Have you seen you? I’ve never seen someone who wasn’t a celebrity or something dress as coordinated every day as you do,” she said, and I looked down at my paint-splattered pink jumpsuit and then back at her.

“I did have to special order the pink jumpsuits,” I said, and Lacey laughed. “But I am not high maintenance. I’m not a car.”

I said it in a joking tone, but Lacey’s expression grew serious.

“Shit, you’re right. That’s kind of an outdated term, isn’t it? And so what if you enjoy coordinating your clothes? You always look good,” she said, and I savored the compliment.

I had never dressed to please anyone but myself. Still, having Lacey compliment me made my skin warm and heart beat a little faster.

“How about this: we both go and clean up and meet at Nick’s?” I said and Lacey nodded.

“Sounds good to me. See you in a half hour?” I was definitely going to need more than a half hour, but I nodded.

“I’ll see you at Nick’s,” I said, and she pretended to tip her baseball cap at me as I got in my car and a silly grin pulled at my face. I did the same with the READ MORE SMUT hat that was apparently mine now.

* * *

“She is so into you,” Kai said when I rushed into the house and said I needed to shower because I was meeting Lacey for pizza.

“She is not,” I said before I closed the bathroom door and stripped out of my jumpsuit and took off the hat, setting it on the counter.

“She is!” Kai yelled through the door. No doubt she and Sterling had been dissecting the whole thing before I’d gotten here. Now that I was meeting Lacey for dinner, they were going to have a party bugging me for details when I got back.

I wish I was more annoyed at them for being so nosy, but having my sister and her girlfriend be all in my business was...nice. I liked the regular reminder that there were people in my life who gave a shit about me. Sure, my parents called a lot and we had the family group chat, but Sterling and I being in the same place was different.

I rushed as fast as I could through my shower and dried my hair using the tool that I’d spent way too much money on, but it was worth every penny. I only had moments to pick my outfit, which wasn’t ideal, but I went with my first instinct of floral-patterned shorts, a white top, and a soft pink blazer with baby pink sneakers. The look was cute, but casual.

“Spin!” Sterling said when I popped back into the house to tell them I was heading

out.

I did a little twirl and posed as Sterling clapped.

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“You look great,” Kai said. “She’s going to lose her mind.”

“She is not,” I said. Sterling blew me a kiss and Kai waved as I left them and went to my car.

Chapter Nine

“It’s strange not seeing you with paint all over you now,” Lacey said when I got out of my car and looked around to find her leaning against her truck two spaces away.

“Same,” I said. She pushed herself off the truck and walked over and just the way she moved made my mouth water. Fuck, she was so damn sexy and she didn’t even try. Tonight she wore dark brown cargo pants with a white T-shirt and an open button-up with a subtle black design on the cream fabric. She’d switched out her worn-in signature hat for one that looked much newer.

I reached up and tapped the top of her hat. “New hat.”

“Yeah, this is my going out hat,” she said, pulling it off, raking her hand through her hair and then slicking her cap back on.

For a moment I completely forgot who I was, where I was, and what I was supposed to be doing.

“You look gorgeous, as always,” she said, bringing me back down to earth.

“Thank you. You clean up pretty nice too,” I said, and Lacey popped the collar of her

shirt and struck a pose. I burst out laughing and a few people walking into the restaurant stared.

“That’s a good look for you,” I said, unable to stop myself from reaching out and adjusting her shirt.

Lacey froze and I didn’t miss that her breathing faltered for a moment as I let go of her shirt and stepped back. She pushed her collar back down and gestured toward the front door. “Shall we?”

Lacey got in front of me and held the door open when we reached it.

“Thank you,” I said, trying not to grin too much at how much I liked it. You didn’t encounter a whole lot of door holders in Boston. Everyone was so wrapped up in what they were doing and where they were going that holding doors was mostly an afterthought.

“How many?” the harried hostess asked us, her eyes flitting around the restaurant.

“Two,” Lacey said, holding up two fingers.

“It’s going to be about a ten-minute wait,” the hostess said, handing Lacey a buzzer. There were two benches on either side of the door to wait, so Lacey and I sat down on the empty one together.

I found myself suddenly nervous, wondering if I’d picked the wrong outfit, wondering what the hell we were going to talk about. This wasn’t a date, but right now it sure felt like one.

One of my legs started jiggling and Lacey leaned her forearms on her knees, which drew my attention to them. Her hands clasped together, and I allowed myself a

moment to appreciate her fingers. It only took a fraction of a second for appreciation to turn to something dirtier, so I looked away again to nip that in the bud.

My phone buzzed and I almost jumped out of my skin in shock as I pulled it out of my bag and read the message that Sterling had sent me.

If all else fails, drag her into the bathroom and have your way with her. That's what I did with Kai and it worked out she sent, and I choked on a breath of air and coughed violently several times.

"You okay?" Lacey asked me.

"Yup," I said, taking a deep breath. "I'm fine."

You can't just message me things like that, Sterling! I sent. I could picture her cackling about my reaction.

"Sorry," I said, putting my phone away.

"No worries," Lacey said and then stood up, shuffling her feet. Something else I'd observed about Lacey was that she wasn't still very often. Even when she was sitting, she was fiddling with something or messing with her hat or pulling something out of her pocket. I'd seen her flipping a coin more than once, not seeming to care if it came up heads or tails.

She had to move aside to let a couple who were leaving through.

"I am not doing that, Justin," she hissed under her breath as the guy looked put out as he carried the box with their leftovers.

"But—" he attempted to say, but was silenced with a glare from the woman as she

paused at the door.

“If you want someone to do that, then you can find another wife,” she said before shoving through the door ahead of him.

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Once they were gone, I looked up at Lacey. “Want to guess what he was asking her to do?”

That made her stop pacing and sit down next to me again.

“Probably butt stuff,” she said, leaning close to me.

“Maybe he wanted her to peg him,” I said.

The buzzer went off, interrupting our speculations as the hostess took us to our booth in the corner which was nice and cozy. The TV screens on the walls played sports of various types with the sound on low. From the kitchen, you could just barely hear the sound of what was probably an international soccer game.

The hostess told us about the specials and handed us the menus that smelled like they’d just been cleaned with lemon-scented wipes.

“Please tell me you’re hungry enough to order appetizers,” Lacey said, her eyes scanning the menu.

“I absolutely am,” I said. “Want to order the sampler?” Usually I’d order just the fried pickles, but they came in the sampler, so I’d still get my fix.

“Perfect,” she said.

Now I had to debate between getting pizza or pasta or something else. Everything here was so good.

“Will you be okay if I get a meat lovers pizza?” Lacey asked me.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?” I asked.

“Just checking to make sure it wouldn’t bother you,” she said, and I knew there was something else behind her question.

“No, it wouldn’t bother me at all,” I said. “I think I’m going to get the spanakopita pizza.”

“Shit, that looks good too,” she said.

“I’ll trade you some of mine if I can have a slice of yours.”

Her blue eyes met mine. “Deal.”

Lacey ordered a local beer and I was craving a whiskey and Coke with lime, so I ordered myself one.

The appetizer platter came out in a flash and Lacey and I had single-minded focus on demolishing it together.

Maybe I should have had a snack before coming, but it was too late now. I was hungry as hell and ate some of everything, from the fried pickles to the cheeseburgers sliders to the Greek salad bruschetta.

“I think we both needed that,” Lacey said when we started to slow down and pace ourselves. Our pizzas arrived and immediately Lacey moved a slice of her individual pizza to my plate.

“Thanks,” I said and then did the same to give her a taste of mine. Lacey topped her

pizza with a few drizzles of the hot honey from the table and stared at her plate as if in challenge.

“Are you going to eat it or fight it?” I asked.

Her answer was to take a huge bite and close her eyes in bliss. Everything in my body tightened as she let out a sound that was related to a moan.

Fuck.

I could barely concentrate on my own food as she ate her way through every slice.

“I started making a list of books you should read if you like Lexi Starr,” I said when the silence became too much. Lacey seemed comfortable with it, but I desperately wanted to talk with her outside the confines of work, and this was my chance. I didn’t know if I’d get another one.

“You did?” Lacey asked, wiping her mouth.

I nodded and took out my phone and sent her the smaller list of five books. Lacey read the message.

“Just five?” she asked.

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“Well, I had thirty, but I figured five was better to start with,” I said, feeling my face go red.

Lacey arched an eyebrow at me. “That’s quite a list you made. Must have taken some time.”

“Not really,” I said, wishing I hadn’t told her about the full list. Should have just sent the five and shut my mouth.

“Seems like it to me,” she said and smirked at me. My blush was quick and fierce, and I wanted to climb under the table.

“I just really value customer service,” I managed to say.

“Customer service,” she said.

“Yes. Going above and beyond,” I said, wishing our server would pop up and check on us so I could get out of the hot seat.

“Uh huh,” she said, and we both knew I was full of shit, but she didn’t push. “Well, thank you for being so diligent.”

“You’re welcome.”

I finished my pizza after Lacey, and I felt like I didn’t want to move when I’d swallowed the last bite.

“Feel better?” she asked, finishing her beer.

“Yes, but now I’m stuck here,” I said, laughing. “I don’t think I can move.”

“We don’t have to go anywhere,” she said, leaning back as our server came back and asked us if we needed anything else. Lacey got another beer and I decided to hold off on a second drink and switched to plain Coke with lime.

“Dessert?” our server asked, and I shook my head. There was no way I could fit anything else in my stomach right now.

“We’re good, thank you,” Lacey said and grabbed the bill before I could even think about racing for it.

“I’ve got this,” she said, pulling out her wallet and sliding the card into the pocket.

“I’m fine with splitting,” I said, holding my card out.

“I’m not,” she said, pushing my card away. “I’m paying. The end.”

I huffed out a breath and put my card away.

“Was that so hard?” she asked, amusement flickering on her face. “Don’t pout.”

I glared. “I’m not pouting.”

Lacey sipped her beer and I watched her throat work as she swallowed. It was an effort not to imagine running my tongue down her neck. Every single thing about her turned me on and it was getting harder and harder to ignore. Being around her was a challenge, that was for sure.

“How did you get into making jewelry?” I asked, which was something I’d been wanting to know. Talking about her other work seemed like a safe bet.

“I studied art in college and got into metalworking. It just kind of happened naturally, I guess. I was always making things when I was a kid. My parents weren’t so happy, but they were never really happy with anything I did.” She never talked about her parents. Lacey gave me a grim smile.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

She put her hand up. “Not your fault. Anyway, I started out doing craft fairs and farmers’ markets and so forth and sold online and it’s worked out. I had no idea if it would or not.”

I swirled the ice around in my drink.

“If you have any tips about running your own business, I’m all ears. This is all new for me,” I said. I didn’t mind admitting to her that I had no idea what the hell I was doing. Sure, I could research my ass off and make spreadsheets and plans but at the end of the day, I didn’t know what I didn’t know.

Lacey adjusted her hat as she thought about that.

“Get a good accountant. Be careful what you outsource, but don’t be too stubborn to ask for help when you need it. What else? Oh, get really clear about what tasks will directly lead to making more money. It’s easy to get bogged down in stuff that feels like you’re doing something, but really you’re just wasting time and spinning your wheels.”

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That all sounded solid to me.

“Thanks, I appreciate hearing that,” I said.

Lacey shrugged and finished her beer. “Let me know if you need any more advice. Least I can do is pass on my wisdom.”

“Your wisdom, huh?” I said and she gave me another one of those smirks that made me feel like I was going to slide right onto the floor.

“I know some shit about some things,” she said, and I laughed.

“I guess you do.”

She smiled at me and the world did that thing where everything slowed and narrowed until she was the only thing I could see. It was gone in a second, but it left me reeling.

“We should probably head out,” Lacey said, and I realized that the place had mostly cleared out while we’d been sitting here.

Things closed down so early in Arrowbridge. Yet another reason I couldn’t wait to get back to Boston. If I wanted tacos at two in the morning, I had my pick of places. Not so much in Arrowbridge.

We both slid out of the booth and Lacey brushed her hand on my lower back as we walked toward the front door, which she then opened for me before following me to my car.

“Thank you for the pizza. And for suggesting this,” I said, leaning against my car.

“You’re welcome. I just thought it would be nice to see each other in a space that doesn’t smell like paint and doesn’t stress me out,” she said.

“Does the house stress you out?” I asked and she gave me a look. “I mean, I know it does, but you can always talk to me about it. My job is literally to take stress off your shoulders.”

Lacey sighed and looked away from me. “Yeah, I know. But I’m not the kind to lean on anyone. It’s kind of my thing to soldier on alone. It’s what I’ve done my whole life.”

“Well just stop doing that,” I said, and she gave me one of those reluctant smiles.

“I’ll work on it,” she said, and I knew it was time to go, but I didn’t want to. Our time felt unfinished. We’d both been so hungry that we hadn’t talked as much as I’d liked. Lacey wasn’t the kind of person that would open up easily after a few slices of pizza.

“I should let you get going,” she finally said.

“Right,” I said, fiddling with my keys.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Gwen,” she said.

“See you tomorrow.” She turned toward her truck and I got in my car, but kept glancing over at her. Lacey turned the truck on and waited for me to start my car and pull out of my space before navigating out of hers.

Tonight hadn’t been enough. Not even close. Still, I was going to see her tomorrow, but it wouldn’t be the same.

“Fuck,” I cursed to myself as I drove. What was I even doing? It didn’t matter if I got close to Lacey because nothing would ever happen between us other than a quick fling and I wasn’t really a fling kind of woman. I preferred relationships, not that I’d had that many. My career had been my driving force since I’d graduated from college and I’d had a hard time splitting my energy and giving part of it to a relationship. I always told myself that once my career was stable, that’s when I’d have more time for other things.

And then I had lost my job and had to come to Arrowbridge. I could have all the plans in the world, but they still wouldn’t save me from things that were outside of my control. Sterling had said as much to me, as had my parents, and I still had been convinced that I could plan my way out of any catastrophe.

The world had decided to knock me down a fucking peg.

* * *

Sterling was waiting in the van for me when I slid the door open and scared the daylights out of me when I found her lounging on my bed. Technically her bed, but still. It was mine right now.

“Jesus fuck, Sterling. What is wrong with you?” I put my hand on my chest, doing my best to convince my body that we weren’t going to be attacked.

“Sorry,” she said, not looking sorry at all as she sat up and slid over, patting the space next to her.

I slipped off my shoes and took my earrings out before joining her.

“Well?” she asked, leaning back to look at me.

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“Nothing happened,” I said. “Just as I predicted. Nothing happened because she’s not into me and I’m not dating anyone right now.”

Sterling frowned. “There wasn’t any kind of anything?”

“I mean, she opened the door for me, and she did put her hand on my back when we were leaving, and she paid for me. But that was it. Oh, she gave me business advice. Really hot stuff.” I rolled my eyes at her and she made a silly face at me.

“She’s an idiot then,” Sterling said resting her head on my shoulder and putting her arm around me. I thought I’d wanted to be alone when I got back, but it was nice having my sister here. In fact, it was better than being alone, now that I was thinking about it.

“She’s not. She’s just not into me and that’s fine, Sterling. It’s not a character flaw to not want me,” I said.

“I think it is,” she said, and I couldn’t see her face, but I could picture exactly how she was clenching her jaw.

“You know I’m not an easy person to get along with.”

She made a grumpy little sound. “That just means not enough people can handle how great you are.”

I snorted. “That sounds like a nice way of calling me a bitch.”

“You are a little bit of a bitch, but so am I,” she said, sitting up and then kissing my cheek loudly. “All the best people are.”

I laughed and wiped off my cheek.

“Thanks. Can I go to bed now? I have to get up and paint tomorrow and my shoulders are screaming.” I winced as I rolled them back. A massage was something I desperately needed.

“Turn around then,” she said, wiggling her fingers.

I did and she started digging her fingers into my sore shoulders and I had to admit, it hurt, but in a good way.

“Fuck, you’re all locked up,” she said, grunting as she worked my angry muscles.

“I’m going to have to start lifting weights,” I said. And definitely get back into Pilates. It was kind of impossible in the van, and there wasn’t really a gym or anything around here. I could go to the beach, but then I’d have to deal with people watching me.

“I could join you,” she said. “Kai has started getting strong lifting all those boxes of books and I think I need to keep up.”

“You provide the weights and I’ll show up,” I said. It wasn’t the fabulous gym at my old apartment, but working out with my sister could be fun.

Sterling finished my little shoulder massage and I sighed in relief.

“Thanks,” I said and leaned forward to hug her. She wrapped her arms around me and leaned into the embrace.

“Anytime, Gwennie. I love having you here.”

I had to close my eyes as a rush of emotion made them damp.

“It’s good to be here,” I said.

Chapter Ten

Lacey was waiting for me when I pulled up the next day and she jogged over to open my door for me.

“Good morning,” she said, grabbing the breakfast bags and coffee from me.

“Good morning,” I said, feeling my face flush as I got out. She stood close to me and I felt a rush of happiness at seeing her again. I tried to tamp it down, but I couldn’t.

“The furniture is getting here today, right?” she asked.

“Right,” I said, following her to the steps where we sat down. I was going to miss this little ritual of us eating together on this porch.

“We’ll have to put most of it in the garage and the dining room,” I said as she bit into her donut. I hoped I didn’t seem like a creep for enjoying watching her eat, but I did.

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“Mmm,” she said, nodding. “We should finish the living room today.”

“Yeah,” I said. The easiness I’d felt last night was gone. We were back in work mode.

The truck with the rental furniture arrived an hour later and it was a challenge to get everything into the garage and the overflow into the dining room, but we managed it, covering everything with sheets just in case.

“Shit,” Lacey said when the truck drove off. We were both exhausted and drenched in sweat. “I need to sit down.”

“Me too,” I said. She looked around and just sat down right there in the foyer.

I joined her, laying so my back was on the floor as I groaned.

“I need a nap,” she said.

“Same,” I said.

Lacey copied me and turned her head to look at me.

“I know we’re supposed to paint the living room, but it’s not happening. At least not for me,” she said. She’d taken off her hat and set it next to us. Even though I knew it was sweaty, I still kind of wanted to put it on.

“You can go if you need to. I’ve got this.” As much as I absolutely did not want to

move, this was my job and I wasn't going to slack on it.

"No. I think we should both take the day off," she said. "Or the rest of it anyway." Her smile was soft and reminded me of the way she'd been last night.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yes. I think we both need a break." I didn't know about that, but I couldn't even move right now.

"Good," she said with a sigh. "When I can move again, would you like to come over to my place for lunch? I'll cook."

I had to fight to keep a huge grin off my face. I'd thought she would want to leave and be on her own, but here she was, inviting me over.

"Sure," I said and then froze as she took my hand in hers.

"On the count of three, we're going to stand up," she said, squeezing my hand. "One."

"Two," I said.

"Three," we said at the same time.

Neither of us moved. "We were supposed to get up," she said.

"Are we not standing?" I asked, and she laughed, a low, sensual sound.

"No, we're not. Try again?"

She counted us down and with great effort, we ended up getting to our feet.

“That was harder than I thought it was going to be,” she said, and she let go of my hand even though I wish she hadn’t.

Lacey pulled her phone out. “That’s the address. You can just meet me there.”

My phone buzzed with her message and I glanced at it. Her rental wasn’t that far away at all.

“See you there.” She slid her cap back on and went out to her truck. I locked up the house and went to my car, but she hadn’t left. It wasn’t until I had pulled out that she drove behind me, even though we were going to her place.

The house was cute and situated on a back road with rows of other similarly adorable homes. There was a small yard and a FOR SALE sign that I noticed as I parked in front of the garage and Lacey pulled in next to me.

She got out of the truck and I waited in my car just to see what she’d do, pretending to look at something on my phone.

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Lacey came right over and opened my door for me.

I thanked her and got out, just now realizing that I should have gone back home and changed since I was still wearing the jumpsuit I painted in. Too late now. Lacey was still wearing her painting clothes, so I wasn't the only one.

She unlocked the front door and I followed her into the house, slipping off my shoes as she did the same.

"Oh," I said, looking around.

"Obviously, I didn't decorate it," she said. "I actually enjoy color, unlike the owners."

The space was varying shades of beige and white, following the bizarre colorless trend that had the country in a chokehold. Sure, neutrals could be nice, but if you took it too far you just made rooms that were visual representations of depression. My apartment had been very neutral, but I'd still had art on the walls and seasonal pillows that I changed out and careful little bursts of color and fresh flowers.

Once you got past the beigeness of the place, it had good bones, good potential. To the right of the door was an open living room and kitchen that were open all the way to the second floor with giant windows that let in tons of light. There were little remnants of Lacey everywhere, though. A few baseball caps on the coffee table, what looked like some jewelry tools next to the sink, and her ereader on the table next to the couch.

"Would you like the tour?" she asked.

“Of course,” I said, already calculating the square footage and value. “What are they selling it for?”

Lacey told me the number and I whistled. “They’re never going to get that.”

“Why not?” she asked as we headed to the left of the door and she showed me the primary with a bathroom before taking me upstairs to the other two bedrooms, one of which she was using as her studio.

“Only one bathroom? Good luck with that,” I said. I couldn’t imagine what the builders were thinking. This was obviously new construction and it was just foolish not to have more than one bathroom.

“And this is where I spend most of my time,” she said when we went into her workshop. There was a large window that faced the backyard, which had a little pond that was charming as hell.

“Wow,” I said, stepping closer to the worktable. There were piles of stones and metal and even a giant magnifier with a light for more delicate work.

“What are you working on now?” I asked.

“A custom piece. It’s an engagement ring,” she said, picking up a sketch from the table. “Sometimes I like drawing without technology. I think it taps into my brain in a different way.”

The sketch was absolutely gorgeous, complete with multiple angles of the ring and all the intricate detail.

“I took inspiration from Celtic designs,” she said, and I could absolutely see that in her drawings.

“What stone are you going to use?” I asked.

“It’s a black rutilated quartz,” she said, picking up a tiny stone and placing it in my palm. The stone was clear, but had black lines running through it like veins. Totally unique and stunning.

“It’s beautiful,” I said, dropping it into her hand again and realizing how close she was to me.

“They’re an interesting couple, so I was pleased to get to work on something like this.” She set the stone back down, but didn’t move away from me.

My body leaned into her, almost as if I couldn’t help it.

“Lunch,” she said. “We should have lunch.”

I nodded and she jogged down the stairs as I walked down a little more carefully.

She wasn’t into me, that much was obvious. She wasn’t into me and I needed to get a grip on myself so I didn’t make things between us uncomfortable.

“We can have the usual turkey sandwich, or something else. Whatever you want,” she said, opening the fridge.

“Oh, I’m fine with whatever you feel like making,” I said.

“Would you leave if I decided to make breakfast for lunch?” she asked, peering around the door of the fridge.

“Breakfast for lunch?” I asked. “You mean brunch.”

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Lacey rolled her eyes. “Technically, yes, you could call it that. But I think of brunch as more of a quiche lorraine and mimosa kind of thing. I’m thinking more bacon and potatoes and pancakes and coffee.”

“That sounds perfect,” I said, because it did.

Lacey got cooking and I asked if I could help, but she said she had it under control, so I took a seat at one of the stools on the other side of the kitchen island and watched.

“How do you like your bacon?” she asked me.

“Crisp, please,” I said.

“Good answer.”

I snorted. “I’m glad my bacon preferences meet with your approval.”

Watching her cook was making my crush more intense. Lacey moved with confidence in the kitchen and she effortlessly managed multiple burners and she even poached eggs when I said those were my favorite.

“I can show you how to poach an egg,” she said when I told her I’d never mastered the technique.

“I’d rather watch you do it,” I said and the second the words were out of my mouth, I realized how they sounded. Lacey turned around and met my eyes, but she didn’t say anything. She just gave me a look and then turned back around.

Fuck. Had I ruined it?

Lacey filled up a plate for me and asked if I needed any condiments.

“Do you have any truffle oil? I couldn’t possibly eat my eggs without truffle oil,” I said, adopting a haughty tone.

“I actually do have truffle oil, if you want it.” She held up a bottle and then gave it to me.

“I was actually joking, but since you have this, I’m not going to turn it down.” I drizzled just a touch of the oil on my eggs. Lacey put hot sauce on hers and sat on the other stool next to me.

“This is wonderful, thank you,” I said as I dug in. Everything was perfect, including the bacon.

“I’m so used to cooking for two people that I never got out of the habit. Now I just put the second serving away and eat leftovers a lot,” she said, crunching on the bacon.

“My sister is so happy that she has someone else to cook for. Part of the reason I think she’s glad to have me here is so she can feed me.”

Lacey chuckled. “I think it’s more than that. I’m sure she’s thrilled to have you around.”

“To be honest, I missed her more than I was willing to admit to myself,” I said, surprised at the candor of my own words.

Lacey added some more hot sauce to her eggs.

“You missed her.”

I glanced over at her and couldn't believe how good she looked in this lighting. That was another selling point. The natural light from the windows makes people look fresh and fuckable.

My sister. We were talking about my sister. Get your mind out of the gutter, Gwen.

“I did miss her. Too much. I think I adjusted to it, but there was always something missing.” I shrugged one shoulder. “I'm a complete person without her, but things are definitely better when she's around.”

“You're lucky to have someone like that,” she said, and I didn't miss the slight bitter edge in her tone.

“I know I am. She's the best. Even when she's being the worst.” If Sterling heard me talking about her like this, she would make fun of me.

Lacey got quiet in a way that I knew meant she was upset about something.

“Are you okay?” I asked her.

“Yeah, sorry,” she said and then she let out a sigh. “It's nice to hear that someone gets along with their sister. Not all of us are so lucky.”

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So she had a sister. This was the first I was hearing of it.

“Do you just have one sister?” I asked, hoping this was her chance to open up.

Lacey nodded. “One sister that I’ve barely spoken to in years.”

Ouch.

“And now I’ve completely ruined the mood,” she said, putting her fork down and rubbing her face.

“No, you haven’t,” I said, reaching out and touching her arm. “You haven’t.”

“Do you want a drink?” she asked, getting up from her stool.

“Yeah, absolutely,” I said. She grabbed two beers from the fridge and popped the tops with a bottle opener from her pocket.

“Sorry it’s not a mimosa,” she said.

“This is better.”

We moved to the extremely beige couch and sat next to each other.

“How would you stage this house, if you were selling it?” she asked.

“Firstly, I’d bring in some bright pillows and art and get rid of those awful curtains.

They're so bad," I said, cringing at them. They had a pattern that was supposed to look like woven rope and it was just awful.

"And there's nothing wrong with classic white. You can overdo it, but just changing the curtains to white panels would help so much," I said. If I let myself, I'd go around the whole house and mentally stage it.

"Anyway," I said, shrugging. "I could turn this place upside down if I had the right resources." My fingers itched to start walking around and taking notes and pictures.

"I'll refer your services to the owner," she said. "They've been having trouble selling it, which is why they decided to rent it out in the meantime."

"Really?" I asked. "Well, the price is their first hurdle, and the bathroom issue is the second, but there's a lot you can do to make a property sing."

Lacey smiled at me. "You've got that look in your eye. I kind of want to sit back and watch you work your magic on this place."

Why was that so fucking hot?

"You haven't even seen me finish a house yet," I pointed out.

Lacey put her arm on the back of the couch behind us. Her arm brushed the back of my neck.

"I have full faith in your abilities, Gwen," she said, and my breath caught in my lungs for a moment.

"Can I get that in writing for my website?" I asked and she tilted her head back and laughed.

“Sure, you can use that for your website,” she said, her face shining with a smile that was so beautiful and so devastating at the same time.

This attraction to her had never been worse and if I wasn’t careful, she was going to figure it out and then things were going to be weird and then I wasn’t going to get that glowing testimonial from her.

Her phone went off, interrupting my thoughts, which was a good thing.

“Fucking hell,” she said under her breath as she read the message and then typed a reply and glared at her phone. Another message came in and she responded. Her anger was palpable.

“Everything okay?” I asked when there was a pause between the exchange of messages.

“Everything is fine,” she said through clenched teeth before she put the phone screen-side down on the coffee table next to a few of her hats.

“Remember that amazing advice I gave you last night about not having to carry all this on your own?” I said, and she snorted.

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“I do recall something like that,” she said, reaching for her beer again. I let myself settle back into the couch, leaning just a little bit closer to her.

“My family is up my ass about getting the house sold so they can have the money. Oh, and I’m also supposed to be a one-woman auction house for all of my grandfather’s stuff so they can have that money too,” she said. “And that’s on top of the lawyers and the courts and everything that just makes me want to set everything on fire and mail my family the ashes.”

She got to her feet and started pacing in front of the coffee table like she’d flipped a switch and couldn’t stop herself.

“Were any of them here for him in his last weeks? No. Did they give a shit that he was dying in that house alone? No. All they care about is their fucking inheritance and I have to live with the fact that I share DNA with a bunch of greedy monsters.” She spun and faced me. “How fucked up is that?”

She ripped her cap off her head and squeezed the bill between both hands, nearly breaking it in half.

“Fuckkkkkkkkk,” she said, drawing out the word.

“You know what you need?” I said as I watched her.

“A different family?” she asked, putting her hat back on and crossing her arms.

“Yes, but also: a beach day. You need a beach day.” Going to the beach could solve

almost anything.

“The beach?” She raised her eyebrows. “You think going to the beach is going to help?”

I stood up and grabbed another one of her hats. The one she’d worn last night, actually, and put it on my head. “It’s worth a shot.”

Chapter Eleven

Lacey seemed skeptical, but with a little bit of prodding, I got her to pack a bag and put on a swimsuit under a new outfit.

“We can take my truck, if you want. Just means you’ll have to come back here to get your car,” she said as she shoved a towel in her bag.

“That works. I just need to stop at home to get my suit and so forth,” I said.

Lacey nodded and opened the passenger door of her truck for me. I hopped up and buckled myself in, noticing the pendant she had hanging from the mirror.

“Pretty,” I said as she got in and slid a pair of aviators on her face.

“Thanks. That’s one of the first things I ever made. I keep it around to remind myself that I was a beginner once. Keeps me always striving to be better.” She rolled her window down and propped her arm up while she drove with her right hand.

Hot. She was so hot. I wanted to sit sideways in the passenger seat so I could just watch her as she drove, tapping her fingers on the steering wheel.

I gave her directions to Kai and Sterling’s house and too late I realized she might

want a tour of the van. I wasn't embarrassed of where I was living, especially since my sister was letting me crash for free, but it was a far cry from my glorious former apartment.

Lacey pulled into the driveway next to Sterling's car. She must be working from home today.

"I'll be right back," I told Lacey as I shoved myself out of the truck and went to the van.

"Do I not get a tour?" she asked through the open window.

"Give me a few minutes," I told her as I yanked the van door open and then closed it behind me for privacy.

The van was clean, but I still didn't know what Lacey would think of my living conditions. I found my suit and threw it on under a white cover up, tossed several items into my beach bag, and swapped my regular glasses for prescription sunglasses. Once I was sure I had everything, and that there was nothing out in view that would embarrass me, I opened the van door again and called out to Lacey.

"This is it," I said, gesturing as she stepped up into the van, crowding me in the limited space.

"This is completely different than I pictured," she said, touching the branches that Sterling had used to decorate.

"My sister did everything, so all of this is her. I would have gone more modern and sleek with the design," I said as Lacey took in the bed and the fairy lights and peered into the bathroom and shower setup.

“It’s bigger than it looks from the outside. I’m surprised,” she said, reaching up and touching the reclaimed wood that decorated the ceiling.

“It doesn’t feel that way after you’ve been in here for a few days, trust me. Sometimes I wake up and feel like the walls are closing in on me,” I said, trying not to move too close to her, but failing. Everything about me was drawn directly to her. I couldn’t help it.

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“It’s impressive, what she’s done in here,” she said, and backed out of the van, giving me some room to breathe.

“I’ll tell her you said that.” Either Sterling knew what was going on out here and she was holding herself back from intruding, or she was so deep in her work that she had no idea that we were even here. My money was on the second.

“Come on, let’s get this beach day started,” I said, even though it was more of a beach afternoon.

“Okay,” she said, opening the truck door for me, but she still looked skeptical. I couldn’t wait to see her change her mind.

* * *

“Is a chair essential for this?” she asked as we stopped at the rental shop. I’d forgotten to grab the chair I used from the trunk of my car, so I’d already planned on renting one for myself.

“Yes, it is,” I said, handing her a folding chair and picking one up for myself.

“Give me that,” she said, taking the second chair from me. “Anything else we need?”

An umbrella would have been nice, but I didn’t feel like dragging it across the sand, so I figured we were good with the chairs. Lacey mumbled under her breath as we took our chairs and bags across the wooden walkway and down onto the sand.

“Where now, princess?” she asked me.

I studied the beach and scanned for the perfect spot. “There.” Lacey looked to where I’d pointed.

“Lead the way,” she said, and I did, her hauling the chairs behind me.

“This is the right place?” she asked when I stopped walking.

“Yup, it just feels right.”

Lacey shrugged and put the chairs down. “If you say so.”

“You’ll see,” I said, arranging my chair and taking out my towel to drape on the chair, as well as two containers of sunscreen.

Lacey flopped down in her chair beside me and looked up at the sun.

“What now?” she asked.

“Sunscreen,” I said, shaking the bottle of spray sunscreen at her.

Lacey took the bottle from me and looked at it. “You’re strict during beach day.”

“If by strict, you mean me wanting to protect you from melanoma, then yes, I guess I’m strict.” I didn’t fuck around with the health of my skin.

“Fine, fine,” she said, standing up and pulling off her shirt and then her shorts to reveal her basic black racerback one-piece. Of course it was a racerback, which showed off her incredible shoulders and her back and holy hell, that wasn’t even getting into how great her ass looked.

“Spray me?” she asked, looking at me over her shoulder as she took her hat off.

“Of course,” I said, my voice stuttering as I tried to remember how to do that. Somehow, I got to my feet and managed to keep my composure as I sprayed her skin, moving up and down and making sure I didn’t miss anything. Lacey held perfectly still with her arms out as I circled her and tried not to drool over her amazing body. It hadn’t been my intention to get to ogle her in a swimsuit when I’d suggested coming to the beach, but it was a nice perk.

“Not going to do my face?” she asked when I’d finished.

“Not with this,” I said, picking up the tube of expensive face sunscreen. The only other person I might have shared it with was Sterling, and she’d have to do a lot of begging, and here I was, willing to hand it over to Lacey.

Lacey took off her sunglasses and leaned down a few inches. “Can you do my face too?”

“Sure,” I said, my voice just above a whisper at how close her face was to mine. If I leaned forward just a touch, we could kiss.

Sunscreen. I was helping her put on sunscreen.

I covered my fingertips with the sunscreen and brushed them across her cheeks and forehead, and down her nose. She’d closed her eyes and I was relieved because I couldn’t stop staring at her lips. Would it be too much to ask her if she wanted some of my lip balm? It had sunscreen in it.

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Covering Lacey's face with sunscreen and rubbing it in didn't take as much time as I'd hoped. Her eyes opened and I pulled my hand back.

"Sorry," I said, although I didn't know what I was apologizing for.

"What for?" she asked, blinking her blue eyes. I couldn't think what stone they reminded me of. I'd have to look it up later when her lips weren't so close to my mouth.

"Nothing," I said, and she stood up to her full height. The tension between us snapped and I took a step backward. "You can do your neck and your ears."

I held out the tube of sunscreen to her and our fingers brushed as she took it from me, squeezing some onto her fingers and holding her hand out to me.

"Your turn," she said. After a second of shock, I tilted my face up and tried to hold as still as I possibly could for this. It felt awkward staring at her, but I didn't want to close my eyes, so I just went with the awkward.

Lacey's fingers were gentle, but I didn't miss the calluses on her fingers that moved across my skin, making me tremble.

"You have freckles on your nose," she said, her voice soft as she gently stroked down the bridge of my nose.

"So does my sister, but hers are different. It's one of the only ways people could tell us apart, but they're so faint that you can only see them when you get close," I said.

“They’re cute,” she said, and I didn’t miss the way her eyes flicked to my mouth and then back up.

“Thanks,” I said, and she cleared her throat and finished with my face, but she didn’t stop.

“Let’s get those ears,” she said, carefully applying the sunscreen to the tops of my ears and making sure not to get it into my hair. She walked around me and started touching the back of my neck and I hoped she couldn’t feel me shaking. Lacey might as well have been kissing the back of my neck for the way I was reacting.

“I’ll just spray the rest of you,” she said from behind me.

“Yeah,” I said, holding my arms out. Lacey sprayed my body and I did close my eyes for that as she crouched down to get my legs and then stood back up to get my arms and my chest.

“You’re all done.”

I opened my eyes to find her right in front of me.

“Thank you,” I said, and she handed me the spray sunscreen bottle.

“You’re welcome,” she said, gazing at me for a moment before she sat back in her chair, putting her sunglasses and hat back on.

I fell into my chair and put my sunglasses back on, sitting back and attempting to get myself together.

“So,” she said, startling me. “Is this it? Is this what we do during a beach day?”

“I’m hearing some skepticism over there,” I said, turning my face toward her.

“No, I’m just wondering how this is supposed to make me forget about the trainwreck that is my life,” she said, frowning.

“Okay, it’s time for drastic measures,” I said, getting to my feet. “Come on, let’s go.”

Lacey stayed in her chair. “Where are we going? You’re not going to feed me to a shark, are you?” She didn’t seem serious, but I did catch just the tiniest flicker of fear.

“No, because that’s not a thing. I mean, there are shark sightings every now and then, but they’re so rare.” She didn’t seem convinced.

“Are you scared of sharks, Lacey?” I asked.

“No! No, I’m not,” she said.

I laughed. “Very convincing. It’s okay, I’ll protect you from the sharks.”

She let me lead her across the sand and down to where the waves pulled at the shore, pulsing like a heartbeat.

“Weren’t you literally on the swim team? Why are you so scared of the water?” I asked when she wouldn’t get near the water.

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“I’m not scared of the water. I just...I don’t trust it. I swam in pools, not in the ocean that has who knows what in it,” she said, looking at the water as if it was going to bite her.

I had to bite back a laugh because she was so adorable right now.

“Come on,” I said, holding my hand out to her. “If you get taken, then you can drag me with you.”

She snorted, but took my hand and inched closer to the water, letting it break over her toes as she flinched.

“I’ve got you,” I said, squeezing her hand and stepping close to her. I took a step further into the water and Lacey came with me.

“It’s cold,” she said, looking down at her feet.

“You can handle it.” I smiled at her as we waded out slowly into the water.

“What the fuck was that?!” Lacey said suddenly and I thought that she was going to jump into my arms.

“Probably some seaweed. Or a crab or something,” I said, trying not to laugh at her reaction.

“Okay, that’s enough,” she said, leaving the water, but not letting go of my hand so she ended up dragging me with her.

“Hey!” I said, nearly crashing into her, but she grabbed my waist with her other hand to stop me from moving.

“Sorry.” Lacey looked down into my eyes and I let myself get lost in hers. It was so easy to tip over and fall right in. Time stopped and I didn’t even know if I breathed.

“What’s next?” she asked and backed away from me, dropping my hand.

“Now, we walk,” I said, gathering myself, and pointing in front of us.

“I think I can handle that,” she said, nodding.

Lacey walked beside me, with me in between her and the ocean. Cute.

“Are we allowed to talk while we walk, or is this supposed to be silent?” she asked, stepping over a piece of driftwood.

“We can talk, if you want,” I said. “There are no rules for beach day. That’s kind of the point.”

“No rules? I like that.”

We took a few more steps and I spotted what might be a nice rock.

“Okay, there’s one rule,” I said, leaning down. “You have to brake for rocks and sea glass and other interesting items.”

Lacey leaned down next to me as I brushed sand off the rock. It was oval and almost completely smooth, light gray with speckles of white and black.

“Here.” I held it out to her.

“What am I supposed to do with it?” she asked.

“Keep it, toss it, maybe you could make it into some jewelry? It’s up to you.” Lacey turned the rock over in her hand, rubbing it with her fingers.

“I don’t normally use natural stones like this in my work, but I’m not opposed to it,” she said in a thoughtful voice.

We both stood up and kept walking and Lacey seemed to be on the lookout for more stones. I watched as she gathered up an entire handful of them. She even found a piece of green beach glass, smooth as could be.

“Now this is definitely something to use,” she said. “You can buy sea glass that’s been tumbled by machine, but this is better.”

Finally, the beach day was having an effect on her. Lacey seemed totally lost in looking for interesting rocks, and it turned out she knew a fair bit of geology, which was probably an occupational hazard.

Still, I enjoyed hearing her tell me about the different kinds of rocks and the colors and so forth.

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By the time we made it all the way to the tidepools on the leftmost side of the beach, she had rocks in both hands. “I should have brought my bag with me.”

“I had no idea you were going to become a pebble hoarder,” I said, and she glared at me.

“I’m not hoarding,” she said, dropping a few of the stones onto the sand.

I picked them up for her. “Why don’t you put them down here and I’ll show you the tidepools?”

Lacey set her stones down and made sure no one was going to swoop in and steal them. I sat down on a rock and peered into one of the tidepools.

“They seem like magic to me,” I said as I watched a naked hermit crab shove itself into a new shell.

“Hmm,” Lacey said, perching next to me.

The two of us fell into silence as we looked into the tidepool. I couldn’t stop looking at her reflection in the water instead. Several kids nearby screamed as they ran into the water, and a very irate seagull sat in the branches of a tree and yelled as if in response.

Uncomfortable, I shifted on the rock and Lacey looked up at me.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said, blinking a few times. “I was just having some ideas about new designs.”

“For jewelry?” I asked.

She nodded. “Do you mind if we go back so I can get my ideas down?”

I stood up immediately. “Of course not. Let’s go.”

She gathered up the rocks she’d picked up and we headed back to our chairs. Lacey dropped the stones next to her chair and pulled a tablet out of her bag, as well as a stylus.

Not wanting to disturb her, I sat in my chair and pulled out my ereader, but kept half my attention on her as she dragged the stylus over the screen of the tablet.

Lacey was absolutely focused. Even when a frisbee thrown by an overzealous kid landed right in front of us, she didn’t even look up.

I had to admit, seeing her so enthralled with what she was doing was sexy as hell. She moved the stylus with a sure, bold stroke.

“There,” she finally said, turning off the tablet and tossing it back in her bag. “I just had to get that out of my brain or else it was going to annoy me for the rest of the day.”

“There are no rules for beach day. If you have to stop and make some art, then stop and make some art,” I said. “And if you need ice cream, then you should get ice cream.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Is that your way of telling me that you want ice cream?”

“Why? Do you want ice cream?” I asked and she grinned.

“Now that you mention it, absolutely.”

We grabbed our wallets, put our bags under our chairs, and walked to the snack bar.

“I’m also getting fries,” I told her as we stood in line.

“Good, because I’m definitely getting onion rings,” she said. “Will you share?”

“I will if you do,” I said, bumping her with my shoulder. She grinned and I knew that beach day had been the right idea. Not only had I gotten her out of her head about all her family and house bullshit, but she’d let go enough to get inspired to draw some new jewelry. That was a win in my book.

“You didn’t tell me beach day included ice cream and onion rings,” she said. “You should have led with that.”

I laughed. “I’ll know that for next time.”

We got up to the window to order and Lacey told them to put my order and hers together.

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“Are you trying to pay for me again?” I asked.

“Yes, don’t argue,” she said, nearly shoving me aside as she passed over her card.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re stubborn?” I asked as we moved over to wait for our food at the pickup window.

“Yup. Many times,” she said. “You’re not telling me anything I don’t already know.”

There was a group of three teenage girls standing near us and from what I could tell, one of them was trying to decide what to write in a text message and her two friends were workshopping it with her.

“But does that sound too desperate? I don’t want to scare him off,” the message girl said to her friends.

“No, it sounds good. Casual. Like you don’t care,” one said, reading the message off her phone.

“Totally,” the other one said.

“Okay, I’m sending it,” message girl said and then squealed as she waited to see what the boy would say.

“He’s typing!” she said, and I saw that Lacey was also invested in eavesdropping on this saga.

“What did he say?” one of the friends asked.

“He said ‘no cap.’” She frowned at her phone and waited.

“That’s it?” a friend asked.

“For now,” message girl said. Her order was called, so she went up to the window and the three of them went to a table to figure out their next move.

Lacey laughed next to me. “That poor girl is going to be so disappointed.”

I sighed. “Eh, she’s young. We all go through it. If I had to relive some of my cringe teen moments, they’d look like that.”

Sterling and I had done the same thing as those girls. Conversation by committee.

Our number was called, so Lacey grabbed our tray and I stocked up on napkins and cups of ketchup for my fries.

Lacey set the tray down on an empty picnic table and I couldn’t help but pull a wipe out of my wallet and wipe down the bench and top, just to be safe.

I pulled out a handful of fries and put them on napkins, pushing them toward her.

“Fries for onion rings?” I asked.

She did the same and I dumped the onion rings into my french fry box.

Since the ice cream was in danger of melting before I got to it, I had that first.

“Gross,” I said when Lacey dipped some of her fries in the ice cream dish.

“Don’t knock it until you try it,” she said.

“Pass,” I said, wrinkling my nose and using my spoon instead.

“I can’t remember the last time I came to the beach,” she said. “I remember telling myself that I was going to take advantage being so close while I’m here, but I get so focused on work and that damn house and other bullshit and before I know it, it’s time to go to bed again. What I’m trying to say is, thank you. Thank you for making me stop and take a moment to breathe.”

Our eyes met and I felt a rush of emotion so strong that I almost wanted to cry.

“Well. You’re welcome,” I said, putting a smile on my face.

Lacey jabbed another fry in her ice cream and shoved it into her mouth.

“Ew.”

* * *

After finishing our little afternoon snack, we went back to our chairs and Lacey admitted that renting them had been a good idea.

“Am I allowed a nap during beach day? Or is that forbidden?” she asked, shoving her feet into the sand.

“Naps are encouraged.” Now that she’d mentioned taking one, I thought about having one myself. Reading would be good too, though. Especially since my book was set at a resort and featured two women attempting to pull off a fake relationship. Plus, there was an adorable hedgehog. What more could you want in a romance, really?

“Great, I’m taking a nap,” Lacey said, pulling her hat off and laying back in her chair.

I stole her hat and put it on my head.

“It’s rude that you look better in my hats than I do,” she said, glancing over at me before laying back again.

“Don’t be a hater,” I said, turning the hat so the bill faced forward and shade my face. I went back to my book, but I allowed myself a few glances over at her. Just quick looks to see if she was still there. Oh, she was there. She was there in all her glory. Reading a sexy book next to a blisteringly attractive woman had to be a bad idea, but here I was. Sneaking looks at my hot client while I read my hot book.

Beach day had no rules, but I was definitely breaking a few of them.

Even though I couldn't see her eyes, I could tell when Lacey fell asleep. Her whole body relaxed in her chair and I had the feeling that she really needed that nap.

She must have turned her phone off, because I hadn't heard a message alert or anything come through since we'd been here. Good thinking.

The afternoon turned into evening as I read and let Lacey sleep. I finished my book and sighed happily, looking over to find Lacey sitting up.

"Fuck, how long have I been out?" she asked.

"A while," I said. The sand around us had steadily cleared out, so now we had our own little oasis.

Lacey sat up with a groan and pulled her sunglasses off to rub her eyes.

"You could have woken me up," she said, doing a double take when she saw me still wearing her hat.

"I figured you needed the sleep." I took the hat off and handed it back to her. No doubt I'd made it all sweaty, but she didn't seem to care as she put it back on and stood up, stretching her arms over her head as I did my best not to openly stare at her.

I failed, but she didn't seem to notice, so that was a relief.

"I think I'm going in," she said.

"What?"

She gazed at the ocean and nodded. “I’m going in. I’m not going to let a few sharks scare me.”

“There aren’t any sharks,” I said as I followed her down the sand. The tide had come in while Lacey slept, so the waves were a lot closer. She strode confidently toward them, as if she was ready to make them her bitch.

It was sexy as hell.

“Hold these,” she said, giving me her hat and sunglasses. I took them from her, putting on her hat again and sticking the sunglasses on top.

“Did I tell you that I was state champion in the freestyle?” she asked, looking over at me with a smile.

“No,” I said.

“Let’s see if I still have it.”

Lacey walked right into the ocean without hesitation and dove under the waves as I gasped. She resurfaced, slicking her hair back and then swimming out a bit further before moving parallel to the sand, her arms cutting through the water with precision.

“Oh,” I said to myself as she swam through the ocean like an Olympic champion or something. I followed her path on the sand, so I stayed beside her the whole way down to the end of the beach before she did a flip and went back in the other direction without a pause.

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She was magnificent and I wished I hadn't left my phone in my bag or else I would have filmed her just to remember this day.

Lacey did a few more laps as I watched and then stopped, her head bobbing above the water as she looked around and paused when she saw me.

"Stalker," she called to me.

"Hey, I could have stolen all your stuff and left you here. Be glad I'm not a thief," I called, and she laughed as she tossed her hair back and started to walk out of the water.

Now that was another thing I wish I had filmed.

"Fuck, now the cold is setting in." Her teeth started to chatter, and she wrapped her arms around herself.

"Let me get your towel, hold on," I said, running back to our stuff. I also gathered my towel as well, since I didn't need it.

I threw Lacey's towel around her shoulders and she started chafing her arms to bring feeling back into them as I blotted her hair with the other towel.

"Thanks," she said, her teeth still chattering as we walked back to our chairs and she sat down with a sigh. "I'll warm up in a few. I'm fine."

She wiped off her legs and plucked the sunglasses off my head, sliding them onto her

face.

“How was your swim?” I asked.

“Good. My body still remembers what to do, even though it’s been years. I don’t know if I’ll make it a regular thing, but it would be nice to find a pool or something I could go to while I’m here. Swimming is one of the only things that makes my head go quiet, you know?”

I did know. Reading was like that for me. When I was completely immersed in a book, there could be a tornado going on next to me and I wasn’t aware of it.

“I get it,” I said. “Everyone should have something like that in their lives.”

“Agreed,” she said, wiping her ears with the end of the towel. A few drops of water still sparkled on her skin and drew my attention.

Lacey let out a long sigh. “Well, this day has been completely unexpected, but I don’t remember the last time I’ve had a day like this.”

She flexed and pointed her toes in the sand as she gazed out on the water.

“Anytime you want to have one, let me know. I’m always up for a beach day,” I said, and she gazed over at me.

“I just might do that.”

We sat in silence for a while and I knew it was time to get going. The rental shop was closing soon, so we’d have to return the chairs before they did.

“Do we have to leave?” Lacey asked, her tone wistful.

“If we don’t want to deal with the drunken teenagers that come here at night to get wasted and make bonfires, then yes,” I said, and she made a face.

“I didn’t like doing things like that even when I was a teenager,” she said.

Sterling had always dragged me to those kinds of things, but I guess I’d had as good a time as you can have when the alcohol is cheap and there’s always one kid who uses too much lighter fluid. They were great places to grow some courage and approach whomever you liked, which I had done.

The two of us packed up and Lacey dragged the chairs back to the rental shop before we hauled ourselves to the truck.

“Sorry about the sand,” I said, trying to get as much off my feet before swinging my legs into the truck.

“It’s fine. I’m not a hard ass about my truck. It’s meant to be used.”

Her damp hair curled in beachy waves around her head as she drove us back to her place. I was trying not to feel devastated that our little beach day was over. Tomorrow we had to get back to the house and Lacey was going to put up her walls again and pull back from me.

Lacey opened the door for me, and I got out with my stuff.

“I know I already said it, but thank you for today,” she said.

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“You’re welcome. Thank you for agreeing to go with me.”

Lacey’s eyes flicked to my head where I was still wearing her hat. I started to pull it off, but she put her hand on the hat to stop me.

“Keep it. Looks good on you.”

Lacey winked at me and then leaned down, placing a brief kiss on my cheek as I stood there, unable to move.

“See you tomorrow,” she said, leaning back and then stepping away.

I wanted to follow her. I wanted to ask her to put her lips on other places. I wanted to peel that bathing suit from her body and see every single inch of her. I wanted to kiss and taste the salt on her skin.

I wanted...

“See you tomorrow,” I said, fumbling to find my keys. I got my hands on them at last, and Lacey watched as I got in my car and pulled out. She didn’t go into the house until I was nearly out of sight.

* * *

“Did you go to the beach?” Sterling asked when I walked into the house after trying to get off as much sand as possible so I didn’t track it in with me.

“I did, and now I desperately need a shower,” I said.

“Go for it,” Sterling said. “Kai should be here in a little bit. She had to stay later at Tenley’s to get the subscription boxes out, so she’s going to bring pizza from Nick’s and there’ll be plenty if you want some.”

I’d literally just had Nick’s, but I wasn’t going to turn down free pizza again.

“Great,” I said, but Sterling wasn’t done with me.

“You, my workaholic sister, went to the beach in the middle of the day during the week when I know you’ve been busting your ass cleaning out Lacey’s house. So. Details?” She motioned for me to tell her.

“Lacey was having a rough day and she didn’t want to do any more painting, so I suggested we go to the beach in Castleton. She went swimming, I read a book, nothing happened.”

Sterling smirked and tapped the hat on my head. “This is new. But it doesn’t look new. She give you her hat?”

She was never going to let this go.

“Yes, she gave me her hat. I don’t know why. She has a bunch of them, so it doesn’t really mean anything.” I didn’t add that this was the second hat that Lacey had given me, if you counted the READ MORE SMUT hat.

Sterling’s smirk got smirkier.

“Shut up,” I told her, shoving her as I walked by on my way to the bathroom.

“I didn’t say anything,” she sang after me as I slammed the door to the bathroom. I could still hear her cackling even when I turned on the water.

* * *

Kai was back when I got out of the shower and the house was full of the scent of fresh pizza, garlic knots, and fried pickles.

I’d taken the hat off and set it on top of my beach clothes.

“Hey, I heard you took a day off, good for you,” Kai said as she flipped open one of the pizza boxes.

“It wasn’t a plan and Lacey was the one who suggested taking off. She’s got all this family bullshit that’s been wearing her down, so I saw a chance to give her a break,” I said, and Kai looked at the hat with a grin.

“And she gave you her hat. That’s definitely a sign that she likes you,” she said, pulling a pepperoni off the top of one of her slices.

I was never going to hear the end of this hat thing. I wish I’d just left it in my car or hid it in the van with the other hat.

Kai handed me a plate and I set my stuff near the door, including the hat.

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“You’re not going to wear your new hat?” Sterling said, jostling me out of the way so she could get to the pizza first.

I didn’t respond and instead went for the fried pickles.

“I really think the hat is a sign,” Kai said as she handed me a paper towel.

“Since when do you believe in signs?” Sterling asked her.

“Since Lacey gave Gwen her hat. Right about then,” she said, and Sterling abandoned the pizza to put her arms around Kai from behind and smack a kiss on her cheek.

“You’re cute, honey,” Sterling said to Kai.

“Thank you, my love,” Kai said.

I waited for them to have their moment before attempting to get to the pizza in case they decided to make out on top of it.

“The hat doesn’t mean anything,” I said as we ate. “Maybe she didn’t want it back after I’d sweated all over it.”

Kai and Sterling shared a skeptical look.

“That’s the worst excuse to give someone a hat that I’ve ever heard,” Sterling said.

“Giving you her hat is a sign of affection. I was giving this one all kinds of books and making her breakfast to tell her I liked her.”

Kai snorted. “All that, plus we were having sex, and I was still questioning if you liked me.”

Sterling grinned at Kai. “I feel like I wasn’t subtle about it, but you did take a really long time to get it.”

“She doesn’t like me like that. She’s a client and maybe a friend. Maybe. That’s it.”

My sister and Kai started laughing and I glared at both of them.

Chapter Twelve

The next morning when I was getting ready, I couldn’t stop staring at the hat. I’d hung it on a little hook next to the bed so it wouldn’t get messed up or have anything spilled on it.

I put on my painting jumpsuit and wondered what would happen if I showed up wearing the hat today. What would she think? Would it be too much? Would it be like declaring something that I didn’t want to declare?

I’d never felt so conflicted about a hat before. They weren’t normally my thing since I liked to style my hair, but this hat was different. We were painting today, and I didn’t want to get it covered, so it was probably best to leave it here.

“See you later,” I said, tapping it with my finger before I put on my shoes and grabbed my bag to go. Great, now I was talking to a hat. This crush on Lacey was really messing with me.

* * *

“New hat,” I said when she opened my door for me as usual.

“Someone stole my other one,” she said, smiling as I grinned back at her.

“Excuse me, you gave me that hat,” I said.

“Oh, is that what happened?” she asked, and I was thrilled that her playful side was still around.

“That is literally what happened,” I said, handing her the coffee tray and bag of pastries.

“Hmmm, that’s not how I remember it,” she said as we took our seats on the porch.

I grabbed my coffee and narrowed my eyes at her. “So how do you remember it?”

Lacey reached into the bag to get her pastry and then handed the bag to me.

“I remember you telling me how much you loved my hat and how you wished you had one and then you ripped it right off my head, put it on yours and said, ‘this is mine now.’ That’s what I remember.”

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I stared at her. “That is absolutely not what happened, you liar.”

Lacey shrugged. “Huh, weird. Agree to disagree.”

She just kept eating her breakfast with a satisfied grin on her face and I didn’t know what to make of her being this way while we were working.

Lacey’s brighter mood seemed to carry into the day as we finished the cabinets and the living room painting that we had skipped yesterday. We also went through the rental furniture and I put sticky notes on everything so we’d know which room it was supposed to go in.

“I need to go shopping for sheets and so forth too,” I said as we ate lunch on the porch.

“I’ll go with you. Bring the truck to haul everything,” she said, handing me my bag of chips.

“I’m not getting that much that we’d need the truck for, but it would be nice to have someone to push the cart.” That made her glare at me.

“Is that all I am to you? A cart pusher?”

“Well, your arms are longer than mine, so you’re better at reaching the paint roller to the higher parts of the wall. So there’s that,” I said, knowing that would annoy her.

“Okay, okay, I see how it is. Maybe I won’t come and help you carry the sheets and

push the cart.”

“Fine by me,” I said, pretending to be nonchalant.

Lacey scoffed. “You’d be so bored without me.”

She really had turned over a leaf as of yesterday. As if I was finally seeing her for real. The person she was under the walls of protection and the grief and all the other things she’d put in between her and others to protect herself. If I had a family like hers, I didn’t know that I wouldn’t have done the same thing. She was dealing with all this shit by herself, with no help from anyone. No wonder she had issues trusting people.

“Fine,” I said with a dramatic sigh. “I guess you can come. As long as you push the cart.”

Lacey burst out laughing and I ached to kiss her smiling mouth. Her being more open with me was only making me want her more.

Fuck.

* * *

We goofed and joked the rest of the day, and I lost count of how many times she laughed.

“I can’t believe it’s finished,” she said when we were rinsing the brushes out in the sink.

“The living room is finished. And the cabinets are finished. We still have to do the dining room and the office and the upstairs and then touch ups and the bathroom...” I

trailed off.

“Fuck, this is never going to end,” she groaned, resting her head on her arms.

“It will end,” I said, washing my hands and turning off the water. “It will end, and it will get done and then it will be over, and you’ll never have to do it again. Hopefully. But if you do, then I’ll be back, and I’ll help you again.”

She raised her head and nodded. “If I have to do this again, I’m not going to be involved at all. You’re going to be completely in charge.”

I pressed my fingertips together as if plotting something evil. “That’s exactly where I want to be.”

Lacey stood up and snorted. “You’re a much bigger dork than you look.”

“Shhh, don’t tell anyone else,” I said.

Lacey scrubbed her hands and then dried them. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“Yeah,” I said, gathering up my stuff and moving toward the door. Lacey left behind me, locking up and gazing at the clouds.

“Got a hot date tonight?” she asked.

I rolled my eyes. “No. More like dinner with my sister and her girlfriend and then reading.”

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“Is the book sexy at least?” she asked.

“I’m in between books right now. Can you suggest one for me to read?” I asked and she stepped closer to me.

“I thought you were the one who knew allll about the sexy books, princess.” Her smile was cocky and, fuck, I adored it.

“I’m always open for something new,” I said, realizing in half a second how sexual that sounded.

“Hmmm, what should you read,” she said, tapping her chin and pretending to think about it. Lacey got out her phone and did something on it. My phone buzzed with a new message that I was going to assume was from her.

I read the message and it was just a link for a book. Obviously, I clicked on it and read the description and then looked up at Lacey.

“Read it the other day. Definitely a one-hander,” she said, shoving her hands in her pockets.

“Good to know,” I said, immediately buying the ebook. The story was pitched as a lesbian take on Beauty and the Beast crossed with Medusa, so I was sold. I didn’t comment on the one-handed thing. I’d never read and tried to get off at the same time. You’d have to have some serious concentration to pull that off.

Lacey winked at me as if she knew exactly what I was thinking, and my face went red

and I looked away.

“You have a good night, Gwen,” she said, stepping around me and twirling her truck keys around her finger.

“I guess I will now,” I called after her and she laughed as she hauled herself into her truck.

“Thank me tomorrow,” she said out the window.

Did she mean literally thank her or...

I got in my car before either of us could say anything else inappropriate.

As always, Lacey waited for me to turn my car on and pull out before falling in behind me.

* * *

I didn't tell Sterling or Kai about Lacey sending me the link for the sexy book. They'd latch onto that and decide that it meant that Lacey was trying to seduce me. I mean, she might be, but I didn't think so. It was more...teasing. Pushing me to see how much would make me blush or piss me off. That didn't mean it was romantic or anything.

“Remember, book club is next week. I really hope you join us,” Kai said when I came over for dinner.

I sighed, but for the first time, the book club was sounding like it might be kind of fun. And it would be an excellent place to network, if nothing else. I wish I'd thought of that sooner.

“I’ll go,” I finally said, and Sterling nearly tackled me in her excitement.

“Get off me,” I said, pushing her away as she made growling noises at me.

“You love it,” she said, pretending to bite my cheek and then sitting back on the couch.

“You should invite Lacey,” Kai said, trying to be smooth.

“She does love to read,” I said, thinking about that book she’d recommended. I couldn’t wait to get back into the van and start it.

“Then that’s perfect. Please tell her that we’re not scary and there’s no pressure to participate or even say hello. And the food. Tell her about the food,” Kai said. “And drinks, if she’s into that.”

“Plus, I can finally meet her and give my official assessment,” Sterling said.

“What official assessment?” I asked.

“You know, make sure she’s good enough for you. I mean, she won’t be, but I can at least make sure she’s not a complete asshole that will waste your time.”

I rolled my eyes at her. “Honestly, Sterling, that’s ridiculous.”

“Is it? Do you need me to remind you of how you acted with Kai?” she asked.

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I opened my mouth to argue, but I couldn't. My sister was right. I'd been kind of an asshole about Kai, but at least that had been through video chat and not in person at a book club meeting.

"Please don't make things weird. If you love me at all, don't make it weird," I said to Sterling. She took both of my hands in hers.

"I promise to try not to make it weird," she said, looking into my eyes.

"I guess that's as good as it's going to get." I squeezed her hands and found Kai doing that thing where she watched us with too many emotions on her face.

"I know you really like her, Gwennie. I'm not going to do anything to damage that," Sterling said, still holding my hands.

"I never said I really liked her. I admitted under duress that I had a crush on her."

My sister grinned. "You didn't have to tell me you liked her."

"Okay, Sterling," I said, but it was true that we could read each other better than anyone else. Call it a magical twin bond or shared DNA or whatever, but Sterling knew me. Especially now that we were together all the time.

"Invite her to book clubbbb," Sterling said, drawing out the last word and then letting go of me.

"I'll float the idea," I said. "But no promises." Lacey hadn't been enthused about it

when I'd mentioned it before, so I didn't know if she would be up for it now.

"That's all I ask," Sterling said.

"And all I ask is that you don't embarrass me," I said.

Sterling rolled her eyes. "Now you're asking too much."

* * *

"Feel free to say no, but my sister and her girlfriend wanted me to make sure that I invited you to book club next Thursday night. They finally wore me down into going and I know you like to read, so you're welcome to come. You don't even have to read the book or talk. You could just come and eat and drink and then leave," I said, feeling myself starting to babble a little bit.

We were in the office painting the walls and my arms were already aching.

"With an endorsement like that, how could I say no?" she asked, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

"I just didn't want to pressure you. Or make you feel like you had to go." I dipped my brush in the paint tray and tried to force myself to go back to painting window trim. The dining room was the only other room left on this floor that needed paint and as soon as it was dry, I couldn't wait to bring the furniture in and get this place looking like a home again. Or at least not like the cluttered disaster it was before.

"I'm not pressured, Gwen. It sounds like it could be fun, I guess. What's the book we're supposed to read?" she asked. I told her and she smirked. "Already read it. But I can absolutely read it again this weekend."

It didn't surprise me she'd already read the book, given her tastes. I'd also read the book before and was going to read it again before Thursday. The book was an age-gap sexy romance where a woman is kidnapped and taken to a private island under mysterious circumstances by a stunning ice queen. It hit so many of the tropes that I adored.

"So you'll come?" I asked.

"I will," she said, setting down the roller and stretching her shoulders. I didn't miss how they both made a popping noise as she stretched. I also didn't miss the beautiful curves and valleys of her body as she moved. I'd never wanted to lick someone so much in my life.

"And since you are inviting me to book club, I am inviting you over for dinner on Friday. Or another night, if you've already got plans," she said, and I almost dropped the paintbrush.

"Oh," I said. "I'm not busy on Friday." Maybe I shouldn't have admitted that, but I wasn't going to lie to her about my social life. Right now it consisted of hanging out with my sister and that was about it.

"Good," she said, giving me one of those rare smiles that made my heart stop. "Any requests for food?"

I shook my head. "No, make whatever you want."

"Got it," she said, grabbing the roller and covering it in paint again. "Even though you're not a princess, I'm still allowed to call you that, right?"

She stretched to reach the highest part of the wall where it met the ceiling and her tank rode up, gifting me a look at her stomach, causing me to forget my own name.

“What?” I said and she glanced down at me without lowering her arms.

“Can I still call you princess?” she asked, her voice soft and intimate.

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She could call me a dirty fucking whore and I'd say "thank you."

"You can still call me princess," I said, trying not to smile too much. "Am I allowed to call you something?"

Lacey snorted. "You can call me whatever you want, princess."

"I'll have to think about it," I said. "Come up with something that fits you."

"You do that," Lacey said, and I went back to painting trim with a grin on my face.

Chapter Thirteen

Sterling and Kai were far too excited that Lacey had invited me over for dinner on Friday. They'd decided it was a date and were being insufferable about it.

"You should touch Gillian Anderson for good luck," Sterling said and for a moment I forgot that was the name she'd given the ridiculous leopard statue and thought she was speaking of the actress.

"I'm not touching your leopard for luck," I told her. "And it's not like I'm going to need luck because I'm just going over to her house for dinner. That's it."

"What are you going to wear?" Kai asked, thankfully changing the subject.

"I'm not sure yet," I said. I had a load of laundry in right now with a few possibilities. I wish I had room in my budget for something new, but I couldn't justify it when I

had all these new expenses for my business and plenty of clothes already.

“You should wear a dress that shows off your legs,” Sterling said. “If you weren’t allergic to anything in my closet, I’d let you borrow something.” Pajamas were one thing, but a whole outfit was something else.

Still... It would be fun to see the look on Lacey’s face if I wore something different.

“Did you have something in mind?” I asked Sterling and her eyes lit up.

“Hold on,” she said, scrambling up from the couch and running to her bedroom.

“Oh, I’m ready to see this,” Kai said, taking Sterling’s spot on the couch next to me.

Instead of bringing out a bunch of options, my sister chose to model each option for us, which I had to admit was more fun. Not everyone had an identical model of their body to show them how something would look.

“Are we allowed to score these looks?” I asked when she came out in the first outfit.

“I mean, what score could you give me but 100 because I look good in everything,” she said, putting her hand on her hip. The first look was a faded black shirt that she’d cut into a crop and black sweatpants.

“That’s going to be a no from me,” I said, and Sterling grinned as if she’d anticipated that response.

Kai was silent next to me and I glanced over to find her staring at my sister in a very seductive way. Sterling winked at her before skipping off to put on the next option.

It wasn’t until the fourth option that she actually took things seriously and came out

in something I might be caught dead in.

“Oh, I like that one,” Kai said, which was the same thing she’d said about every single outfit.

“What do you think?” Sterling asked as she posed in the black cropped boatneck T-shirt and matching high-waisted maxi skirt with a slit up the side. The fabric had a bit of a silver shimmer to it, so it wasn’t just flat black, and it did hug Sterling’s body really well, so it would look good on me too.

“I’m still going to wear my pink glasses and have my pink bag, but I think I could pull that off,” I said, tilting my head to look at the outfit from every angle.

“Black and pink do go well together,” Sterling said, doing a little shimmy.

“Okay, take it off before you get it all sweaty and full of your pheromones,” I said and both Sterling and Kai stared at me.

“It’s not a date, yet you’re concerned about pheromones?” Sterling asked.

“I just... I meant...” I said, sputtering as Sterling cackled at me.

“Go take it off,” I said, pointing toward the bedroom.

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“I might need some help, though,” Sterling said, turning her fiery gaze at Kai.

“I think I might be the perfect person to assist you,” Kai said, wiggling her fingers.

“Can you wait until I leave to do whatever this is?” I asked. “And not do anything in the outfit that I want to wear?”

Sterling darted toward the bedroom and Kai jumped up to chase her and I just sat there and hoped the outfit would be safe. A few moments later, both pieces of the outfit came sailing into the living room and then the bedroom door slammed. It was time for me to head to the van for the night.

* * *

Just to be safe, I threw the outfit in the wash before Friday night. All day I was nervous and forgetful and kept dropping things. Lacey noticed, but she didn’t mock me for it, which made me wonder.

“Next week we’ll be almost done,” she said as we washed out the brushes and rollers after an extremely long day.

“I know. It’s going to look like an entirely new house when we get everything in.”

“I’ll attack the yard too,” she said. “I’m also meeting with a real estate agent next week.”

I wished I could have handled the sale for her, but I wasn’t licensed in Maine, and I

didn't want to go through the whole process of getting my licensure for a state I didn't intend on staying in.

"Do you want me to come with you? To meet the agent?" I asked. That was definitely going above and beyond my current job description, I wanted to make sure Lacey wasn't getting screwed by a terrible agent.

"Sure, it would be nice to have someone who knows what questions to ask with me," she said. "We can just leave from here."

"Sounds perfect," I said. I'd bring a change of clothes so I wouldn't look like a complete disaster.

Lacey yawned and started gathering up her stuff to leave.

"I'm going to shower when I get home and then start dinner, so just show up when you're ready," she said, checking her phone. She'd been leaving it on silent for most of the day and that seemed to help with her not getting distracted with her family drama all day.

Lacey frowned as she read through her missed messages.

"Fucking Christ," she said under her breath.

"Everything okay?" I asked.

"Just the usual. Family wanting their money and deciding I'm not moving fast enough. Or that I'm stealing shit, in spite of sending pictures of every single thing to them, including the trash."

That sounded complicated and horrible.

“Fuck them,” I said, and she raised her eyebrows in surprise.

“Strong words,” she said.

“I think they’re warranted.”

Lacey laughed softly. “I guess they are.”

She let out a long breath and headed toward the door.

“See you in a bit,” she said, waving at me. I grabbed my bag and followed her out as she waited for me to start my car and pull out, like always. One of these days I was going to ask her why she did that.

* * *

I used Kai’s shower and bathroom to get ready in the outfit and do my makeup and hair. There wasn’t enough time to do something fancy, so I pulled my hair back into a clip and left it a little messy. I decided to go with a dramatic red lip and went simple with my eyes, but I used enough highlighter to make my skin glow. I wanted to look like I’d put in an effort, but not too much. This wasn’t a date, after all.

“You look fuck-hot,” Sterling said when I walked out of the bathroom.

“Thank you?” I said.

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“You look incredible,” Kai said, putting her arm around Sterling. “Wow.”

“Thanks,” I said, using my phone camera to check myself one more time.

“Touch Gillian Anderson!” Sterling said and I reluctantly patted the fake leopard on the head.

“Okay, I’m going,” I said as they watched me walk through the door.

“Your ass looks amazing!” Sterling called as I was shutting the door. I stuck my hand through the gap and gave her the finger.

Her laughter followed me all the way to the car.

* * *

When I got to Lacey’s place, I hoped that I hadn’t gone overboard with the outfit. It wasn’t like I had a ballgown on or anything, but the outfit was pretty and sexy at the same time.

No going back now. I got out and knocked on the front door, doing my best not to tremble with nerves.

“It’s open!” Lacey called and I stepped inside, immediately taking my shoes off. They were a good accompaniment to my outfit, but I was raised in a “shoes off at the door” home and I wasn’t ditching that habit. Not even for fashion.

“Hey,” Lacey said, appearing in the small foyer and looking me up and down. “Holy shit.”

Her eyes went wide and I wanted to cover my blushing cheeks.

“It’s too much, isn’t it?” I said, gesturing at my outfit.

Lacey slowly shook her head. “No, it’s not too much. It’s the exact right amount.”

While she took in what I was wearing, I looked at her. Lacey had traded her cargo shorts for a pair of sleek wide-leg black pants and a striped shirt that clung to her in ways that should be illegal.

“Too much?” Lacey asked, shoving her hands in her pockets.

“Just the right amount.”

We stared at each other for a moment and then Lacey remembered she was cooking dinner and sprinted to the stove.

“Shit, that was almost a disaster,” she said, turning down one of the burners.

“What are you making?” I asked, coming to stand right beside her.

“Just some simple steak and veggie kebabs and a salad with a bunch of things I bought at the farmers’ market. Oh, and lemon parmesan risotto, which I just almost burned.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said.

“I wish I had a grill outside, but I don’t so you’ll have to settle for these,” she said,

frowning as she flipped the kebabs in the grill pan.

“I told you, I’m not picky. I would cook more, but it’s hard to do in the van. The place gets all steamed up and there’s nowhere to move and no dishwasher either. I’ve gotten used to my sister or Kai cooking for me. Does that make me a bitch?” I laughed, but it wasn’t totally a joke.

Lacey stirred the risotto and I had to admit, it smelled amazing. Everything did.

“No, it doesn’t make you a bitch. If you were forcing your sister to cook for you, then maybe. But if she’s offering and she likes doing it, then I don’t see the problem.”

“I’ve tried to get her to let me help, but then we just end up fighting so it’s easier to let her do it,” I said, remembering several of my attempts to help chop or prep something. “She worked on a food truck for five seconds and she thinks that means she’s a professional chef now.”

Lacey chuckled. “Well, I’ve never worked in any kind of kitchen, but I grew up cooking for myself a lot, so I got used to doing it. And it’s nice to be able to cook for someone else.”

“Should I grab drinks?” I asked. It was the least I could do.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry. I should have offered you one, but I got so distracted by cooking. Grab whatever you want from the fridge. I’ll just have a beer.”

I also selected a beer for myself and held my hand out.

“What do you need?” she asked.

“Your bottle opener,” I said.

Lacey laughed. “I don’t keep it in these pants. There’s one in the top drawer right next to the fridge.”

I tried not to be disappointed that I wouldn’t get to see her flip off the tops of the beer bottles, but it wasn’t meant to be tonight.

“Cheers.” I handed her the bottle and tapped mine to hers.

“Cheers,” she said, watching me as I swallowed. My face heated up and I had to look away from the intensity in her eyes.

At last, Lacey again remembered she was cooking and told me that dinner was ready. She had me pull the salad from the fridge and we set up everything to eat at the island.

“Would you be more comfortable on the couch?” she asked.

“Yes, definitely,” I said, and we carried everything to the coffee table, moving her hats and ereader and other random things aside.

“Better, princess?” she asked as we sat down.

“Yes,” I said, getting comfortable.

“By the way, the owner of this house is probably going to be contacting you about potentially staging this one. I may or may not have sang your praises,” she said.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I said, filling up my plate. I was hungry and everything looked incredible. The only thing missing were fried pickles, but you couldn’t have everything.

“I know. But I did it anyway.”

Our eyes met and something shuddered in my chest as I realized just how fucking attracted to her I was.

“How is it?” she asked, her voice thick.

“What?” I asked, having no idea what she was talking about.

“The food, how is it?”

I took a few bites and couldn’t help but make noises. The meat was tender and flavorful, the risotto creamy and perfect, and the salad was full of fresh summer veggies.

“Incredible,” I said when my mouth wasn’t full. “What is this dressing on the salad?”

“Oh, I made that. It’s just a simple champagne vinaigrette with shallots,” she said.

“You’ll have to tell me how to make it because I would literally drink shots of this if I could,” I said, and she made a face.

“Sterling used to drink shots of random things on dares when we were younger,” I said, laughing. “She was always doing shit like that.”

“From what I remember when I met her, she seems like she’d be the kind of person to take a lot of dares.”

I kept forgetting that Sterling had met Lacey first and had been the main reason I got the job at all.

“You got that right. She’s always been the fearless one,” I said with a sigh.

“And you? What were you like?” she asked.

“Scared all the time and desperately pretending I wasn’t,” I said, which was the truth.

“You don’t seem like you’re scared of anything,” she said.

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“That’s because I’ve had twenty-five years of practice,” I said, looking at her over the rims of my glasses.

“Huh, I assumed you were older,” she said, and I glanced at her in surprise.

“How old are you?” I had just assumed she was in her late twenties.

“Thirty-two,” she said. “Ancient compared to you.”

“Yes, you’re growing gray hairs as we speak,” I said. She’d pulled her hair back into a low ponytail that I really wanted to take down.

“Ouch, that’s rude,” she said, but she was smiling. “But you do seem older than twenty-five.”

“I guess I’ll take that as a compliment,” I said, going back to my plate before the food got cold.

“I really wish I could have seen you in high school. I bet you walked down the halls like you owned them,” she said, and I burst out laughing.

“Hardly. It was more like my sister shoved her way through and I followed in her wake. I was still really figuring myself out then. Even though Sterling was the younger one, she walked first, talked first, came out first.” I’d added the last part because I knew that she had an ex-wife, but I’d never outwardly revealed myself to her. At least not in a direct way.

“So I was always struggling to form my own identity. I didn’t find my signature color until college. That’s also when Sterling started with her tattoos, so it was like we were both struggling to define ourselves.”

Lacey sat and listened to me with a thoughtful look on her face.

“You skipped over the coming out part,” she said slowly. “Is there a reason for that?”

“No. I’m a lesbian, if we want to get real technical about the whole thing. My sister is too.”

Lacey nodded slowly.

“I know I told you I have an ex-wife, but I’m actually bisexual. In case it ever comes up. Don’t know why it would, but I am. Bisexual,” she said.

There. We’d gotten all that out in the open.

“Good to know,” I said.

“When I first met you, I assumed...” she trailed off.

“That I was straight?” I asked, putting my fork down. This conversation was more important than food.

Lacey set her plate out of the way and turned on the couch so she was facing me. “I guess I did.”

“A lot of people do. Not sure why. Maybe it’s the pink. I don’t know, but I think I’ve finally gotten to the age where I give off enough lesbian vibes that men don’t hit on me as much.”

That was a relief. In high school all kinds of creepy guys tried to date me or my sister or both of us and it was a nightmare trying to get them to understand that neither of us was interested, even if we were drunk. I hated how many people had admitted to me that they had a fetish for twins too.

“I think the pink works for you,” she said, and I found myself moving closer to her as well.

“Thank you,” I said. “I think your hats work for you.”

Lacey laughed. “I’m going to take that as a compliment.”

“But you look good without them too,” I said, taking a chance.

“Do I?” she asked, leaning closer.

“Yes,” I said and there was no question about what was going to happen next, but I was still shocked when she kissed me. Or I kissed her. I wasn’t really sure who led the kiss, but the result was the same.

It felt like every single moment we’d been together had led to this one. As if this kiss was as inevitable as the sun rising and setting.

Lacey’s mouth was careful with mine at first. Gentle. I’d been anticipating this kiss so much that I wanted to blow right past preliminary kisses and get to the part where her tongue was in my mouth and making my head spin.

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I let out a little noise and she must have translated it as one of her hands came to the back of my neck as she tilted my head so she could kiss me more deeply.

Yes.

I gripped her shoulder with one hand and the other held her jaw, trying to pull her even closer.

“Fuck,” Lacey said, abruptly pulling away, but pressing her forehead to mine. We were both breathing heavily as if we’d run up the stairs.

“Come back,” I said, not even caring that I was begging. Whatever would get her lips back on mine again.

Lacey chuckled. “You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to kiss you.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Yes, fuck. The first day I saw you, I couldn’t believe you were real.” While this was all nice to hear, it would still be nice to hear later, when her mouth wasn’t busy.

“Kiss me again,” I said and then took matters into my own hands as I crashed my mouth on hers and unleashed all of my pent-up desire on her. It was probably too much, but she could always stop me if it was.

She didn’t. Lacey growled in her throat as she gripped the back of my neck and pulled me until I was in her lap.

Guess I wasn't the only one who had been fantasizing about this. I'd have time to analyze that later. Right now, there was only this.

I wanted her so fucking bad that I shook with it.

"You look so fucking hot, Gwen," she said, adjusting me on her lap. The slit in my skirt was really coming in handy.

"So do you," I said, running my hands over her shoulders, finally. I'd been dreaming about touching these shoulders.

"Did you dress up to impress me?" she asked as she stroked my back with one hand and kept the other on the back of my neck.

"I'd be lying if I said no. Of course I wanted to impress you, Lacey."

She bit her bottom lip and closed her eyes for a second.

"I didn't invite you over for this, but I'm not mad about what's happening right now." She opened her eyes and all I saw in them was desire.

"Me neither," I said, reaching to pull the elastic out of her hair so it fell over her shoulders. Lacey's hair was so soft as I ran my fingers through it.

"Can I take your hair down?" she asked, reaching for the clip.

"Yes," I said, and she gently removed the clip and then raked her hands through my hair.

"You're just so goddamn beautiful, Gwen," she said, her voice almost full of awe.

“So are you,” I said, kissing her forehead and then her cheeks before going back to her lips. She kissed me back with a hand on the back of my head that made heat race through my veins. There was something about the way Lacey took charge that made her even hotter. The way she opened doors for me and refused to let me pay and waited for me to leave first, and now, the way she held the back of my neck and kissed me as if she was in charge and wanted me to know.

Curious to see what she’d do, I tried to take over the control of the kiss, but she didn’t let me and that just made things even more intense.

My hips started thrusting against her, trying to get some friction where I needed it. Lacey grabbed my hip and encouraged me, shifting so she could push up against me, but at this point, our clothes were in the way.

Lacey pushed my hair out of my face and looked up at me.

“Should we move this to the bedroom?” she asked, her touch gentle.

“Yes, please,” I said, and then squealed as she grabbed me and stood up so she was carrying me. I wrapped my legs around her and looked down at her as she carried me across the living room and to the primary bedroom on the first floor.

Lacey set me down on the bed, but came with me, and drove me into the mattress and kissed me until the room spun. That was more like it.

Lacey surrounded me and consumed me, and I wouldn’t want it any other way. Her kiss was fierce as she devoured me, and I gave her everything I had. She could take it. She could have whatever she wanted.

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“I need to touch you,” she gasped between kisses.

“Go ahead,” I told her.

“Too many clothes,” she said, yanking at the waistband of my skirt.

“You’re wearing more than I am,” I said, and she propped herself above me with her arms.

“Seems like we should do something about that,” Lacey said, smiling down at me in a predatory way.

“I borrowed this outfit from my sister, so as long as you don’t rip anything...” In the next second, Lacey was standing and pulling me up so she could get the top over my head. I lifted my arms to help her out.

“Shitttt,” she said when she saw the bra I had on under the top. Obviously I didn’t know I was going to get to show her this bra, but I was glad I followed my instinct and put it on, along with the matching bottoms.

The bra was red, and designed to be pretty rather than supportive, with lace and ribbons that crossed in front and in the back. It gave me just the littlest bit of a bondage vibe, which was one of the reasons I’d bought it.

“You like?” I asked, stroking my hand down one of the straps.

“Yes,” she said, fingering one of the bows. “Now let’s see the rest of you.”

I got to my feet and gasped as Lacey dropped to her knees, gripping the waistband of my skirt and sliding it down my legs, somehow managing not to take down my bottoms with it.

Lacey stared at me as I stepped out of the skirt and kicked it away.

“You’re stunning,” she said, reaching out to touch the little bow in the center of my bottoms.

“Get a look at the back,” I said, turning around and showing her the second bow.

“You wrapped yourself up in a bow for me,” she said, and I didn’t argue with her because maybe subconsciously I had.

“Are you going to unwrap me?” I asked as I turned back around. The anticipation of what would happen when she got me naked was so intense that every single inch of my skin tingled and buzzed with it.

Lacey rose to her feet and looked down at me, almost as if she was waiting for something.

“Or should I do it?” I asked, reaching behind me to undo my bra, but her hand snapped out and grabbed one of my wrists.

“I’ll do that,” she said, and I let her turn me around, feeling the heat of her body pressing up against my back.

Lacey made quick work of the clasp and pushed the straps down my arms, following their path with kisses on my shoulder and my neck and my upper back that made me arch into her. The bra slipped to the floor as Lacey kissed me and stroked her hands on my belly before tracing my nipples and cupping my breasts.

“Perfect,” she said in my ear before gently biting my earlobe in a way that made me whimper.

I gasped as she rolled my nipples with her fingers, being just a little rough with me in the way that I liked. As if she’d known exactly what I wanted.

“Beautiful girl,” she hummed as she pushed my hair aside and I tilted my head to give her better access to my neck.

She had me completely at her mercy and all I could do was melt in her hands.

Still, she wasn’t touching the throbbing place between my legs that ached so fiercely that I thought I might die if she ignored for one more moment.

“Touch me,” I begged.

Lacey chuckled. “I am touching you, princess.”

“You know what I mean,” I said, writhing a little and grabbing one of her hands to guide it between my legs to relieve the pressure.

“Is there a specific place you’d like to be touched?” she asked, and I could tell by her tone that she was enjoying this. How could she be so composed when I was coming apart at the seams? I would have been embarrassed if I hadn’t needed to come so badly.

I turned in her arms and looked up at her.

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“Yes,” I said, and then sat on the bed and spread my legs. “Here.” I pointed, and Lacey grinned.

“Direct, I like it,” she said. “But I think that I can take things from here, princess.”

I raised one eyebrow at her. “Can you?”

Lacey made a sound that was almost another growl as she dove for the bed, picking me up and tossing me back so I bounced on the bed.

A squeal came out of my mouth, but then it was swallowed by Lacey kissing me so hard that I saw stars.

“I was trying to take my time with you, but you’re just too impatient,” Lacey said as she looked down at me, pressing her hips into me and making me moan.

“I’m trying to be romantic and you’re desperate for me to fuck you,” she said, and her words made the fire inside me burn even hotter.

“Fucking can be romantic,” I said as she traced a circle around my belly button.

Lacey looked up at me and then leaned down to lick one of my nipples. “Let’s find out.”

My fingers dove into her hair as she licked and sucked at my nipples with her mouth and lavished attention on the other with those callused fingers that I needed inside me immediately.

“Please,” I gasped, and she gazed up at me.

“Please what, Gwen?” she asked, a wicked gleam in her eyes.

“Please fuck me, Lacey,” I said, feeling no shame at begging. I was at the end of my rope and if she didn’t do something soon, I was going to take matters into my own hands.

Lacey kissed my nipple and then flicked it with her tongue. “How do you want me to fuck you? Or are you going to let me decide?”

Both of those options made me ache, but the idea of leaving Lacey in charge appealed to me more.

“You decide,” I gasped.

Lacey smiled, as if that was the answer she’d wanted. “At any time, if you want to stop, you tell me. If I do anything that you don’t like, you tell me. Yes?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Good,” she said, dragging her hand down the center of my body, stopping just short of the edge of my bottoms.

I almost screamed in frustration. Why was she doing this to me? She literally promised she’d fuck me and now she was playing games. Could you die from the lack of orgasm? I felt like I was going to find out.

“Laceyyyy,” I said, drawing out her name.

She laughed again, absolutely enjoying this. She still had all her clothes on and had

me absolutely wrecked on her bed and she had barely done anything.

“You’re a liar,” I managed to gasp.

“Am I?” she asked, kissing my lower stomach right above the bow on my bottoms.

“You said you were going to fuck me.” Was she hesitating because she had changed her mind?

“Did I?” she said, and I was on the verge of screaming.

“Lacey!”

She just laughed again and then hooked her fingers around the corners of my bottoms and started pulling them down. Finally.

“Beautiful,” she said as I lifted my hips so she could get me fully naked. She paused for one moment as if to admire my body and then she dived forward to kiss me at the same time as she drove one finger inside me.

I would have screamed, but I couldn’t, since she had thrust her tongue into my mouth.

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“I’m going to fuck you, Gwen. I’m going to fuck you in a way you’re never going to forget,” she said in my ear as she plunged a second finger inside me, stretching me out and going deep.

“Oh, fuck,” I said as she moved her fingers so they stroked my G-spot, making me even wetter than I already was.

Her mouth traveled down my body as I twisted and shook beneath her. One moment she was only fucking me with her fingers and the next she’d shoved one of my legs up toward my shoulder and was fucking me with her mouth too.

Then I did scream.

Both my hands went to her hair, nearly yanking some of it out of her head as she absolutely devoured my pussy with her lips and teeth and tongue as her fingers set a relentless pace that was driving me toward a sharp and brutal orgasm the kind of which I hadn’t had in a long, long time.

A sound came out of my mouth that sounded like a sob as Lacey showed me no mercy as she lashed my clit with her tongue before switching to soft flutters and then hard licks. She slammed into me so hard with her fingers, but she could have given me more. I would have taken more. I would have taken anything she’d give me.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I panted as I got closer and closer to climax.

“Come on, princess. I want to feel this gorgeous pussy clenching my fingers. I want you to come all over my tongue so I can swallow you. Show me how you come,

Gwen.”

Her words unlocked something inside me, and I felt everything inside me narrow to a single pinpoint before exploding outward, like a dying star as lights exploded behind my eyes and my body gave itself over to primal, intense pleasure that was so much, too much.

Not enough.

Lacey talked me through the orgasm, but I was too lost that I couldn't even make sense of her words until everything settled at last and I came back to earth.

My body still shook a little bit and everything tingled as Lacey set my leg back on the bed and then draped herself on my stomach. Her face was dripping and that was so fucking hot.

“Kiss me,” I said, my voice exhausted.

“Since you demanded so nicely,” she said, crawling up my body to kiss me deeply so I could taste the evidence of my own desire.

“You're still dressed,” I said, just realizing.

Lacey chuckled and gazed down at me.

“I guess it's only fair that you get to see me now,” she said, pulling her shirt over her head. She wore a simple black bra underneath that was sexy as hell.

“Off,” I said, pointing to the bra and flicking my finger.

“You're demanding after you come. I'll have to remember that,” she said as she stood

up to remove her bra, then pull her pants and bottoms down one motion, stepping out of them and then joining me on the bed again. Lacey stretched out and I took in every glorious inch of her.

I'd seen her in a bathing suit, of course, but Lacey in all her naked glory was something else.

"You look a little ferocious right now, princess," she said.

I bit my lip and looked her up and down before I leaned down to kiss her again and run my fingers across her shoulders and down to her breasts, pinching one of her nipples and making her gasp.

Inhaling the sound, I did it again and her hips bucked once. Maybe she wasn't as in control of herself as I thought.

She lifted her own hand and pinched her other nipple and I wanted to slap her hand away, but I didn't. I just kissed my way down her neck and nudged her hand out of the way with my nose as I circled her nipple with my tongue at the same time as I pinched and pulled on the other to make her moan.

"Fuck, Gwen, as much as I love what you're doing right now, I'm going to turn around and beg you to fuck me," she said, her blue eyes dark with desire and need.

"You'd like me to fuck you?" I asked, enjoying this change of power.

"Any way you want," she said, her voice desperate. "Hell, you could suck on my toes right now I'd probably come in two seconds."

That idea had never appealed to me before, but I did glance down at her feet and consider it for a half a second. Lacey's feet were just as delectable as the rest of her.

Right now, though, I wanted her incredible legs wrapped around me.

Without telling her what my plans were, I trailed kisses down her stomach, pretending as if I had all the time in the world.

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I lifted one of her legs and ducked under, until I was between her thighs. Exactly where I wanted to be.

To get even better access to her, I lifted first one and then the other leg to rest on my shoulders, her heels digging into my back.

I licked her lower belly, traveling down to lick just above her clit before pulling back to look at her before I removed my glasses and set them aside.

Lacey reached one hand up and stroked my hair back, gathering it in one fist.

“Thank you,” I said and then she tugged on my hair just a little.

“I need you inside me. Right now. Please,” she pleaded. I knew exactly how she felt.

Deciding I wanted to taste her more than anything else, I licked her up and down, savoring every millimeter of her. She was already dripping, and I lapped her up.

“You taste so fucking good,” I told her, and she moaned as I drove my tongue inside her, feeling her internal muscles clench as more of her desire flooded my mouth.

Lacey’s nails dug into my scalp as I drove my tongue in and out of her before circling her clit and then pulling it into my mouth, feeling its pulse.

Her legs spasmed on my shoulders and her heels pressed into my spine as she tried to defy gravity and fuck my face. She would get a chance for that later, but now, I was on top and steering this ship.

I spit on two of my fingers before stroking her entrance and then pushing inside her slowly.

“Fuck!” she said, her hips coming off the bed.

She squeezed me internally and I stroked with my fingers, finding exactly the right place that made her start cursing and begging me again.

Feeling her pushing my head to one side of her clit, I took the direction and focused my attention on where she steered me and was rewarded with her gasping and rocking and begging. Lacey was unleashed, her chest shining with sweat as she let me drive her toward her climax.

I felt her clench on my fingers and gave her everything I had as I felt her starting to come. All over my hand, all over my face, all over the bed as her legs clenched around my head and I decided this would be a glorious way to suffocate.

Lacey gasped my name and I thought I was going to come myself as her body stilled and she melted back into the bed, going almost completely limp.

I pulled my fingers out and moved so I lay next to her on the bed on my side.

Lacey watched me as I took the same glistening fingers that had just been inside her and touched my clit before driving them inside myself.

“Holy shit, Gwen,” she said as I maintained eye contact and fucked myself.

“I wanted you inside me again,” I said, gasping because I was so close already.

Lacey brushed her fingers along the hand that I was using on myself. “We can do better than that.”

I let out a moan as she pushed one of her fingers inside me, along with the two I was already using. The addition of Lacey's finger stretched me in the best way.

"Turn over," Lacey said to me and I rolled until my back was to her. She yanked me close and slipped that finger inside me again.

"Oh, fuck," I said as we moved in tandem. It was a little clumsy, but it didn't matter. It didn't matter because it felt so damn good. With Lacey's finger inside me, her hand cupped my clit and her palm slammed against me and before I knew what was happening, another orgasm raced down my spine and hit me hard as she whispered dirty things in my ear and held me the whole way through.

"Holy shit," I said, resting back against her as she kissed my shoulder and brushed my hair sweaty hair back.

"That was unexpected," she said.

"Sorry. I couldn't help myself," I said.

Lacey laughed in my ear. "You're not that sorry, princess."

I grinned at her over my shoulder. "No, I'm not."

* * *

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Since I'd already come twice, it seemed only fair that Lacey got to sit on my face.

"I think I'm dead," she said when she flopped on the bed next to me.

"Me too," I said, wiping my face.

"You're a mess," she said, clumsily trying to brush my chin with her hand.

"Worth it," I said, smiling over at her and reaching for my glasses. "I had myself so convinced you didn't like me."

Lacey sat up and gave me a puzzled look. "What?"

"You're not exactly an open book, Lacey. I have no idea what the fuck you're thinking about half the time," I said. Things were a lot easier to talk about when we were naked for some reason.

"I can't believe you didn't notice all those times that I couldn't stop staring at you," she said, shaking her head.

I moved until I was literally draped across her body.

"I was too busy hoping you hadn't seen me staring at you."

We both laughed.

"You did give me your hat," I said.

“I couldn’t help myself. I loved the idea of my hat this head.” She ran her fingers through my hair.

“So next time I’ll wear the hat and nothing else.”

Her eyes lit up at that idea.

“Next time?” she asked. “Is there going to be a next time?”

“I sincerely hope so,” I said. “This isn’t a one and done for me. Is it for you?”

My heart dropped at that idea. Even though it was ridiculous. She didn’t live here. I didn’t live here. Neither of us was ever going to live in the same place, so there was no reason to start anything.

But then I looked at her and she was all I could see and everything else faded into the background. Our pasts didn’t matter, our futures didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered was this thing between us.

“No, it’s not,” she said, holding my face. “It’s not one and done for me.”

“Good,” I said, kissing her chest right above her heartbeat.

Chapter Fourteen

At some point we decided we needed to move and clean up and figure out the rest of the night.

“I know I shouldn’t beg you to stay, but please stay,” Lacey said as I put on a T-shirt that she tossed me from a drawer before getting one for herself, along with a pair of shorts.

“Try and kick me out,” I said, rising up on my toes to kiss her.

“I’d rather tie you to my bed so you can’t leave,” she said, her eyes glittering.

“Mmmm, I would definitely hate that,” I said, licking my lips.

“Good to know.” She kissed me again and then grabbed my ass.

“I’m into that too.”

Lacey kissed me again. “I think you might be the most perfect woman I’ve ever met.”

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Both of us cleaned up the kitchen and put the food away and then showered together before I helped her remake the bed in fresh sheets and blankets. I sent Sterling a quick message that I was staying over at Lacey's.

I KNEW IT!!!! GET IT, GWENNIE! she sent me and I put my phone on silent before setting it on the dresser next to Lacey's phone.

"My sister is thrilled that I'm staying over," I told Lacey as she brushed her teeth over one of the sinks in the attached bathroom.

"I'll bet." She spit in the sink and then rinsed her face off. "There's a new toothbrush for you."

I peeled it out of the package and brushed while Lacey finished the rest of her routine.

"I don't have my skincare, but hopefully everything won't go to shit after one night," I said, peering at my face in the mirror.

"I'm not a total cretin," Lacey said, gesturing to a few bottles and containers on the other sink. "I've got night cream. And some other crap that the website recommended to me."

I giggled and went to see what she had going on.

"This is trash, this is good, this you should never use," I said, going through her products, taking the last one and throwing it in the trash can.

“Hey! I spent money on that.” She tried to go into the trash to get it, but I dived in front of it to stop her.

“Please just trust me and do not use that. I am trying to protect your gorgeous face.”

Lacey glared down at me but sighed. “Fine. But don’t throw any of my other stuff away.”

I grabbed her face in my hands. “No promises.”

* * *

The two of us got in bed, but I wasn’t ready to sleep. Neither was Lacey, it seemed.

“I need a snack,” she said, unwinding herself from my arms.

“Me too,” I said. One of my favorite things to do when I had gone to the van for the night was to make myself a little plate and munch on it while I read. Looked like Lacey was the same.

I couldn’t stop touching her as we pulled random items from the fridge and the cabinets to fill a plate together. I’d never really thought about being a tactile person, but I didn’t want to stop touching Lacey in every way I could. It was as if I’d been holding myself back every single second since I’d met her and had finally let myself go for what I wanted. And I wanted her.

Lacey carried the plate to bed, and I poured us both glasses of water. We sat together on the bed and ate as we talked. Lacey asked me what other books I liked, and told me a little bit about her childhood in New Hampshire and funny stories from some of the craft fairs she done. I told her about some of the twin pranks I’d played with Sterling.

She and I talked until our voices were raw and the night had almost faded into morning.

“I should let the princess get her beauty sleep,” Lacey said, kissing my forehead as I lay on her. She didn’t seem to mind when I used her as a human pillow.

“I would argue with you, but I’m too tired,” I said, my eyes closing.

“Sleep, Gwen. Go to sleep,” she said, and I felt her lips in my hair.

“You go to sleep too,” I said, my voice slurred with exhaustion.

“Okay,” she said through a yawn.

* * *

The next thing I knew I was waking up with hair in my face and a warm arm flung across my chest.

For a moment, I was confused about where I was and who the arm belonged to, and then the night came back to me. The bedroom was full of late morning light and as soon as I moved, Lacey fluttered her eyes open.

“Good morning,” she said, her voice rusty from having talked so much last night.

“Good morning,” I said, my voice just as rough.

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Lacey put her hand under my chin and pulled me close for a soft kiss. “I’m glad you decided to stay.”

“Me too,” I said. Yes, I was still tired, but last night had been worth it. So fucking worth it.

Lacey stretched her arms and then turned on her side.

“So. Breakfast? Or sex? Or breakfast sex?” she asked, wiggling her eyebrows, looking so ridiculous that I burst out laughing.

“I like to keep my food and sex separated, personally,” I said. “Food and sex can be a recipe for infection.”

Lacey made a face. “Okay, no breakfast sex.”

I was about to say that I wanted sex first and then my stomach growled and made the decision for us.

“Breakfast first,” Lacey said, kissing my belly as I tried to push her away.

* * *

“You could give my sister a run for her money when it comes to eggs,” I told Lacey as we ate breakfast on the couch together. She’d made poached eggs again on top of hash browns with crumbled bacon, cheese, and hot sauce along with fresh strawberries.

“I feel like I should meet your sister again,” she said, stealing one of my strawberries as I tried to fight her off with my fork.

“You’ll see her at book club,” I said, finishing my coffee. Lacey didn’t have any kind of creamer, so I’d used milk and sugar with some fresh vanilla extract and cinnamon, and it wasn’t terrible.

“That’s right,” she said, finishing her plate, and setting it on the coffee table.

“Don’t worry, she already likes you. But I did grill her girlfriend when they first got together, so she might try and pay me back for that. Just to warn you.”

Lacey flexed her arm and looked at it. “I think I can take her.”

I kissed her flexed bicep.

“I don’t know, I’ve fought Sterling before and she’s vicious.”

“Still think I can take her.” Lacey put her arm around me and pulled me close for a kiss.

“Now that we’ve had breakfast, is it time for sex?”

I nodded. “It’s absolutely time for sex.”

Lacey kissed me one more time before getting up and throwing me over her shoulder as I screamed and told her to put me down.

She only did when she tossed me onto the bed again.

* * *

I couldn't remember the last time I'd spent this long in bed, and it was exactly what I wanted and needed. Lacey and I fucked fast and slow and every way in between, and ended up in her tub with bubbles and wine for me and beer for Lacey.

"Arrowbridge isn't so bad, you know," she said out of the blue.

"Did you get a job for the Chamber of Commerce?" I asked, laughing. Why was she bringing this up?

"No. I was just thinking that it's not as bad as I thought it would be. Of course, I'd visited my grandfather before, but it'd been a really long time. I'm not saying it's the greatest place on earth, but it's not the worst."

I splashed a little bit of water at her. "You should tell them to put that on the town sign."

She drained the rest of her beer and set the bottle out of the way. "Admit it. You don't hate it here."

She was persistent about this and I didn't know why. What was her angle? It wasn't like she was staying here, so why was she going so hard for Arrowbridge?

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“It’s not the worst,” I said, relenting. “But it’s still not Boston.”

Lacey sighed. “No, it’s not.”

She was quiet for a little while.

“What are you thinking about?” I asked. Lacey shifted carefully so she didn’t get any water on the floor. The tub was a nice size, but it was still a pretty tight fit for both of us.

“Nothing,” she said, shaking her head and reaching toward me. “Come here.”

Even though I was curious where her thoughts had wandered, I let her pull me into her arms as she wrapped her incredible legs around me and I rested against her chest.

“What would you say if I wanted to have a sleepover in the van with you?” Lacey asked, leaning her chin onto my shoulder.

“You’d want to?” I asked.

“Sure. It would be like camping.”

I made a face. “I hate camping.”

“But don’t you have a bathroom and a shower in there?”

One of my hands stroked her leg up and down, remembering how it felt to have her

sit on my face. Could we go back to having sex instead of talking about this?

“Yes, technically,” I said. “But it’s not what you think it is. Trust me.”

“So it’s true,” she said, and I could hear the smile in her voice.

“What’s true?” I asked.

“That you are a little bit of a princess.” Her voice was full of triumph.

“Oh my god, I’m getting out,” I said, pretending to stand up, but she clamped her arms and legs around me to prevent that from happening.

“I didn’t say being a princess is a bad thing,” she said, kissing a spot under my ear that instantly made me want her.

“I do kind of feel like you’re my throne right now,” I said, deciding to go with it.

Her energy shifted and I knew I had changed the direction of her attention.

“Oh, I’m a throne now?” she asked, moving one hand under the water to stroke my entrance. “Can a throne do this?”

I arched my body into her touch, begging for more. “You can.”

Lacey chuckled in my ear as she pushed two fingers into me so slowly that my entire body shook. I couldn’t count the number of times I had come since last night, but I was still ready for more. My need and desire for her didn’t seem to be decreasing. It kept getting stronger, and I didn’t know how I was going to leave, let alone function without her.

Lacey fucked me with her fingers until I came and turned in her arms to kiss her. We drained the tub and rinsed off in the shower before I got on my knees and made her come with only my mouth as she stood against the wall and tried to keep herself upright.

I should have put a towel down, because my knees were aching when I stood up, but it was worth it.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” she said, kissing my wet face.

“So are you,” I said, kissing her back.

Eventually we needed to eat again, so Lacey cooked and since the weather was nice, we ate outside in the backyard. It reminded me of eating breakfast with her every morning and how our time together was coming to an end.

Lacey didn’t need to be in Arrowbridge to sell the house once it was ready and staged. She could go back to her life in New Hampshire and I would move on to my next job, which might end up being staging this very house.

The bottom line was that she was leaving, and I couldn’t let myself get carried away with this. Right now, we were two people who had an attraction to one another and we’d fallen into bed. That wasn’t a serious commitment. No one was proposing. I would just have to let her go when that time came. We’d go our separate ways and I’d have these memories to look back on.

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“You have a serious face over there,” Lacey said as we ate dinner and swatted at mosquitoes. Even with the bug problems, the night was beautiful and the yard was peaceful with the burble of the fountain on one side of the pond.

“Just thinking,” I said.

“About anything in particular?” she asked, and I decided it was time to talk about this, as much as I didn’t want to. Avoiding it was just going to drag out the inevitable.

“This thing between us,” I said, putting down my fork and setting my plate on the little table beside my chair.

Lacey let out a long breath. “I wondered when one of us was going to bring that up.” Our eyes met and I felt like I was going to cry for a moment, but I swallowed that feeling and did my best to ignore it.

“You’re going back to New Hampshire. I’m going back to Boston. I know neither of us has brought up a relationship or anything, but I’m just wondering what your expectations are.”

Lacey snorted. “You sound like you’re negotiating a contract.”

I made a sound of frustration. “Be serious, Lacey. We need to talk about this.”

She nodded, looking down at her hands for a moment. “I know. I just don’t want to.”

“Neither do I,” I said.

Her eyes met mine and I saw a flash of pain before she seemed to cover it up as quickly as she could.

“What do you want, Gwen? Out of this?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, which was the absolute truth at this moment.

“Me neither.”

We were getting nowhere.

“How about this?” she said, leaning over in her chair. “We do what feels good for both of us and just...ignore everything else?”

How did that sound? It sounded like living in denial. But what choice did we have?

“You want to continue...whatever this is?”

“Yes, Gwen, I want to continue ‘whatever this is.’ If you do,” she said, using her fingers to make air quotes.

I did. I really fucking did. For a moment, I pictured getting up and walking away from her and trying to go back to her just being my client.

Absolutely fucking not.

“I do,” I said.

Lacey shrugged. “Then we’ll deal with what happens later, later.”

Every part of me knew this was an absolute recipe for disaster and I knew I was

going to look back on this moment and kick myself, but right now, I didn't care. I'd never been the reckless girl. The one who threw caution to the wind. That had always been my sister. Maybe being around her so much had her rubbing off on me.

This felt like diving off a cliff without a parachute.

"We'll deal with it later," I agreed.

"Good," Lacey said, clearly relieved. "Should we seal that with a kiss?"

I smiled and ignored my heart thrashing with panic in my chest. "Absolutely."

She leaned over and kissed me softly, tasting of my future heartbreak. I kissed her back until she made me forget everything else.

Chapter Fifteen

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:00 pm

Feeling raw after that conversation, I told Lacey that I had things to do and should get home. I didn't want to leave, but I also didn't want to overstay my welcome. We'd agreed to let things happen, but that didn't mean that I needed to move in with her after our first date that wasn't even a date.

I got back into my outfit from the night before and realized how much had changed in less than twenty-four hours. There were multiple messages from my sister on my phone asking how things were going and giving me extremely graphic sex advice.

I'll be back in a little bit. Please stop sending me sex tips. It's weird. You promised not to make things weird. I responded.

I promised not to make things weird at book club, not in general. She replied.

"Jesus Christ, Sterling," I said under my breath.

"Everything okay?" Lacey asked as she came out of the bathroom.

"Yeah, my sister is just...being herself," I said in explanation. Lacey smiled at me and all I wanted to do was throw her in bed and never let her leave, but I settled for giving her a quick kiss and putting my bag over my shoulder.

"Let me know you got home safe," she said, pulling me in for a hug, completely wrapping her arms around me. I allowed myself to melt into her chest as I gave in to what I wanted for a few moments.

I leaned back first and looked up into her face.

“I’ll message you when I get back,” I told her as she gazed into my eyes like she was trying to memorize me. It was silly, really, that we were standing here acting like one of us was going off to war.

“I’ll talk to you later, princess,” she said, kissing my forehead.

“Bye, Lacey,” I said, forcing myself to take one step back from her, and then another until I made it to my car. She watched out the window as I turned on the engine and backed out of the driveway.

* * *

“Oh my fucking god, you have to tell me everything,” Sterling said, grabbing my arm as soon as I’d walked through the door of the house and yanking me inside.

“Sterling!” I yelled as she dragged me to the couch, put both hands on my shoulders, and forced me to sit down.

“I thought you were on an adventure today,” I said, more than a little disgruntled by her manhandling.

“We went and came back,” she said. “Kai is having a girl’s night with Karissa and Ingrid. I decided to stay back and get all the dirt.” She was almost bouncing in her seat next to me, her eyes full of excitement.

“I’m going to need you to take it down about fifty notches right now,” I said, holding a hand up. At least I wasn’t still wearing my outfit from last night. I’d stopped in the van to collect myself and change before I came over.

“I’m not allowed to be happy for my sister anymore?” she asked. “Wait! Hold on.” She jumped up from the couch and ran to the kitchen.

What the fuck was going on?

“If I’m getting details, I’m gonna need snacks,” she explained as she moved around the small kitchen like a tornado. I sat and waited while she made up a snack plate and poured us both glasses of wine.

“Okay, now we can talk,” she said after she’d brought everything over and set it in front of me on the coffee table.

“Go,” Sterling said, picking up her wine and looking at me expectantly.

“You’re ridiculous,” I said.

“I know, I know, but you love me, please give me details.” She motioned for me to get talking.

As much as I enjoyed keeping things private, this was my twin, and she was the person who had thrown me in Lacey’s direction in the first place. She was asking because she loved me, so how could I be angry about that?

I told her about Lacey cooking me a beautiful dinner and how we’d started talking about hats and how I had clumsily told her I was a lesbian, which led to kissing and then other things. Sterling seemed to want details, but I kept most everything to myself, other than to tell her that Lacey and I were extremely compatible when it came to the bedroom. Very, very compatible.

But it wasn’t just the sex, as mind-blowing as it was. Lacey was dry and funny and we liked the same books and she was strong and stubborn and just...I liked her. I liked her a lot. I liked her too much.

“Can I just say that you’re glowing right now talking about her? And that you glow

every time you talk about her?” she asked me as I gulped some wine to wet my dry throat. I’d done so much talking this weekend already.

“Shut up,” I told her, but she just beamed at me.

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“Can I float a hypothetical scenario to you without you getting mad?” she asked, and I frowned, sensing a trap.

“No, but you’re going to do it anyway.” I wished I had more wine, so I got up and plucked the bottle from the fridge and brought it over for both of us.

“Go ahead,” I said, once I’d filled my glass again. The wine was fine, but I almost wished it was one of Lacey’s beers.

“The hypothetical scenario is that you stick around Arrowbridge. Maybe even rent a place. You keep doing your work and getting more clients and build a thriving business. And you make Lacey fall in love with you, which I think she’s probably already on the way, and then you make her decide to stay and we all live happily ever after and I get my van back.”

I immediately started shaking my head. “No. That’s not a hypothetical that’s ever going to happen. Even if Lacey decides she wants to stay here, I’m not. Sterling, my life is in Boston. I worked so hard to get there and build a life and I’m not giving that up.”

Sterling let out a frustrated sound and set her wine glass down. “But that’s the thing, Gwennie. You don’t just get one life. You get multiple chances, multiple choices. I thought the only way I could be happy was by always moving from place to place and never letting anything tie me down. And then I met Kai and I saw that I had another option, a better option.”

I opened my mouth to interrupt her and point out that we were two different people,

even if our genes were identical, but she put her hand up to stop me.

“I’m not telling you that you have to run over to Lacey’s, rip out your heart, and give it to her. All I’m saying is to not slam this door immediately.”

“I’m not giving up on what I want,” I said, and she sighed.

“I know. I’m not asking you to. But there are different ways to get what you want. And sometimes you think you know what you want until you’re presented with an alternative.” She touched my shoulder and I wanted to push her away. I wanted to go back to the van and forget everything she’d just said.

“Why are you doing this to me, Sterling?” I asked, taking my glasses off and rubbing the spot between my eyebrows where I felt a headache brewing.

“I’m not doing anything to you. Just presenting facts. If they make you mad, then that’s a you problem.”

I pulled the pillow from behind my back and whacked her with it.

“Hey! Don’t attack me for speaking truth! You know I only speak truth!” she said as I kept hitting her with it and she tried to shield herself with her arms.

“What about that time when you told me that I looked good in my junior prom dress? What about that?” I didn’t know what I’d been thinking when I chose an orange dress, but Sterling had told me I looked great and then I saw the pictures and I looked like a fucking sparkly pumpkin. That dress was going to haunt me for the rest of my life. I’d been so lost in high school, and that dress was evidence.

“I made a mistake with the dress! I admit it,” she said, clasping her hands together. “Please forgive me.”

I grinned down at her and shoved the pillow at her. “Never.” I also still owed her a tickle attack, but I was holding off on that until she really had her guard down. Then I’d pounce.

“Oh come on, Gwennie. You love me. You know you love me.” Sterling peeked at me over the pillow and pouted.

She looked too silly for me to keep up the act that I was mad. “Fine. I’ll forgive you for the prom dress, but only because I am partially to blame.” I had been the one who picked it out in the first place.

“Thank you,” she said, jumping up from the couch and then smacking a kiss on my forehead with a loud sound. The door opened and Kai came in, which made Sterling’s face light up.

Did I look like that when I saw Lacey?

“Hey, honey. Did you have a good time?” Sterling dashed over to give Kai a hug and a kiss.

“I did. Everyone says hello and that you have to come next time. They missed you,” Kai put her bag down and sighed.

“And just so you know, you’re invited to a barbecue next weekend, Gwen,” Kai said. “It’s at Everly and Ryan’s house. You’ll meet them at book club. They’re great.”

Sterling’s new friend group was huge, and even though they’d explained who everyone was and gave me names and details, I was still going to need a refresher if I was going to remember who all these people were.

“Everly is the one with the pink hair. And Ryan is like, incredibly tall. And buff,”

Sterling said, flexing her own arms. “Everly has social anxiety, so I’m a little surprised she volunteered to host, but who knows.”

“Something tells me they have an announcement to make,” Kai said, taking her dark hair down and running her fingers through it.

“Ohhh, do you think they’re engaged?” Sterling asked as Kai settled on the couch next to her.

“I don’t have anything confirmed, but I just have a sense about these things. I think one or both of them is going to be sporting a ring,” Kai said.

Sterling bombarded Kai with questions about her night and updates on their friends and I decided that it was time for me to leave. I said goodnight and walked the short distance to the van. The fairy lights did make the space feel cheerful and magical, I had to admit. Even though it wasn’t enough space, and I hated the bathroom situation, and I didn’t like cooking in it, the van had still taken care of me since I’d been here.

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“You’re not so bad,” I said, hopping onto the bed. “Great, now I’m talking to a van.”

Ridiculous. I turned on my ereader and looked over at where I’d hung the two hats that Lacey had given me. I put the READ MORE SMUT on my head and took a selfie, sending it to Lacey before I could change my mind.

It looks so much better on you she sent.

I’d done as she asked and had informed her when I’d gotten back, but I’d held off on sending her too many messages. Even though I missed her. I fucking missed her, and we had only been apart for a few hours. What the hell was that? One night of incredible sex and I was reduced to a simpering fool that needed someone more than they needed to breathe. Completely embarrassing. Sterling would mock me forever if she knew what was going through my mind right now.

It does look better on me, doesn’t it? I responded.

It would look even better if it was the only thing you were wearing... She replied and I had to bite back a moan. I still wanted her.

For half a second, I considered throwing myself in my car and driving over to her place and walking in just wearing the hat and nothing else.

That was definitely too much. Lacey knew that I liked her, and I was attracted to her, but she didn’t know the extent and I was going to keep it that way. Things had to stay casual if I was ever going to get out of this when the time came.

That didn't stop me from taking all my clothes off, with the exception of the hat, and taking a selfie to send to Lacey.

I love it when I'm right she replied. You look sexy as hell.

Thank you. Do I get anything in return or... I sent, unable to stop myself from wanting a picture of her for myself.

I'll give you a little taste of what you're missing she responded and then sent me a video of her with her shirt pushed up to expose her breasts and her hand under her shorts as she touched herself and gave me a sexy smile before ending the clip.

"Fuck," I said, looking down at myself. I mean, I'd already gotten naked, so I might as well keep going. Knowing that Lacey was also doing the same thing only made it more exciting.

I let out a moan as I touched my clit with one hand and pinched my nipple with the other. My phone sounded an incoming call and I went to turn it off when I saw who was calling.

"Hello?" I said, my voice sounding harried.

"What are you doing right now?" Lacey said and then let out a little gasp. I put the call on speaker and set the phone next to me.

"What do you think I'm doing?" I asked, touching myself again.

"Fuck, I wish you were here, but this is the next best thing," she said before doing some shuffling and then I heard her start up again.

"What would you do if I was there?" I asked, stroking my clit and then sinking two

fingers inside myself.

“Mmmm, I’d make sure you were naked and then I’d toss you on my bed before getting out my strap-on,” she said, and I let out a sound at the mention of a strap-on. We hadn’t used one last night, but Sterling had mentioned it.

“Fuck, yes,” I said.

“And I’d let you pick out which dick I was going to fuck you with, because I’m nice like that.”

I let out a little breathless giggle.

“And then I’d make you open your mouth and get my dick all wet. I’d drive it into your mouth as far as it could go,” she said, and I couldn’t hold back any of the sounds I was making if I’d wanted to.

“I’d make you choke, just a little bit, and then I’d hold you down and fuck your pussy until you saw stars. And then I’d put it back in your mouth so you could taste yourself before driving into you again, oh, fuck.”

I picked up my pace as she’d kept talking and I was almost there.

“I’m close,” I told her, and heard the wet sounds of her fucking herself on the other end of the phone.

“Jesus, Gwen...” she gasped, and I heard those sounds I’d memorized last night and that was what I needed to tumble over the edge with her. It wasn’t as good as being with her, but it was close.

“Holy shit,” Lacey panted, and I let out a laugh.

“Never underestimate the power of phone sex,” I said.

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Lacey laughed. “Has anyone underestimated the power of phone sex? What do you think people did before the internet when they weren’t in the same place?”

I turned on my side and wished she was here so I could see her face. “Erotic letters?”

“If you waited for the postal service to get yourself off, you’d be waiting a long time,” Lacey said, and I dissolved into giggles.

“I miss you,” I blurted out in the post-orgasmic haze.

Lacey let out a breath. “I miss you. I know you were just here, but I do. What are you doing tomorrow?”

“Just cleaning and working on my website and other random things,” I said. Sterling and Kai had gotten me into the Sunday chore routine.

“Shit, I need to do a lot of things too. How about we do what we need to get done and then you come over for dinner again? And since we’re going to the same place on Monday morning, you can just stay over. If you want.”

That sounded just about right to me.

“Should I bring something?” I asked. It seemed only fair since she was doing all the cooking.

“Just that hat, and yourself. And if you wanted to pick up something for dessert.”

I pretended to gasp. “But I thought I was dessert?”

She chuckled. “Okay, bring something for second dessert. Since you’re the first.”

“I’d better be.”

We both sighed at the same time and I wanted to reach through the phone and pull her until she was in this bed right next to me.

“I should let you get some sleep after we stayed up so late last night,” she said, and a part of me wanted to beg her to stay on the phone with me until I drifted off, but that was silly. I had slept many hundreds of nights without her and only one with her. I could handle it.

“I guess,” I said reluctantly. “Just let me know what time to come over tomorrow.” I’d have to go to Castleton and grab something from Sweet’s. Something decadent.

“I will,” she said, her voice low. “Sweet dreams, princess.”

“Sweet dreams, Lacey,” I said and ended the call.

* * *

When I woke up the next morning, I was naked and it took me a second to remember the phone sex session with Lacey from the night before. I’d even forgotten to take off the hat, so it was on the bed right next to me.

I got up and dressed, getting ready for a chore day. I did all the dishes and dried them before getting down to business and cleaning and wiping everything down. The worst part was dumping the dirty water, which Sterling did for me since I wasn’t comfortable driving the van and never would be. Maybe it was bad of me to rely on

her to do that, but she had offered. Sterling also checked the solar panels and the power and the fridge and everything like that. She'd learned so much about so many things and it made me feel like I knew nothing when she walked me through her maintenance routine.

"And how are things with Lacey?" Sterling asked as she checked the fan and then sat on the bed facing me. I'd swiveled the passenger seat in the van all the way around to face her. She kicked her feet and grinned at me.

"I'm going over for dinner tonight and staying the night. She also wants to come and stay with me in the van for whatever reason," I said, touching one of the fairy lights.

"You should bring her over. We can have dinner in the house and then you two can have a romantic van date. Put up the projector screen and everything." My sister and I had very different ideas of what constituted a romantic date. Sure, I liked watching a movie as much as the next person, but I'd rather do it in a living room, and especially in a place with access to a real bathroom with a flush toilet.

"I'll think about it," I said.

She was silent for a little while as she studied me, her head tilted to the side. "You're happier lately. You laugh and you smile and it's good to see. Whenever I talked to you when you were living in Boston you were never smiling."

That was absolutely not true.

Was it?

"I can assure you, I was happy in Boston. Why do you think I'm working so hard to get back there?" Everything I had done since I'd lost my job and apartment had been in service of clawing my way back. Well. Except for everything with Lacey. That

was actively steering me away from what I wanted, but I couldn't help myself. I was addicted to being around her.

Sterling nodded, but she didn't seem convinced. "I think you've been telling yourself that."

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“Jesus, Sterling, can you not? I know you’re trying to convert me to be Team Arrowbridge so I can move here and be one big happy family with you, but it’s not going to happen. I’m sorry. I know it’s going to be hard to have me leave again, but I’m going to have a guest room. You and Kai can come stay with me.” One of the main reasons I wanted to be so financially stable was so I could afford a two-bedroom place. For her. So we could see each other more.

Sterling sighed. “That’s not the point, and you know it isn’t. You’re being stubborn.”

“Of course I am! How do you think I accomplished anything? I had to be fucking stubborn! So are you!” I had no idea why I was yelling at her, but I couldn’t pull it back.

“Gwennie,” she said, her voice irritatingly gentle. “I just want you to be happy. If that’s not with Lacey, then fine. But I know you. And I know what you look like when you’re happy, and that life in the city? It wasn’t making you happy. You were literally working all the time and then the company you gave all those hours to just laid you off without a second thought. I’m so thrilled that you’re doing your own thing now and you’re going to be amazing at it because you are not mediocre.” She stood up and pointed at me. “Don’t you fucking dare to settle for a mediocre life. You deserve everything.”

I failed to see how a stunning apartment in a skyscraper in a vibrant city was “mediocre,” but I wasn’t going to argue with Sterling when she was like this.

She clasped my face between her hands and looked into my eyes.

“You deserve everything that makes you happy, Gwen. Always.”

Emotion thickened in my throat and I had to break our eye contact.

“Thank you. Can I have my face back now?”

“Yes,” she said, letting go, but not moving away from me.

“I have things to do,” I said, wanting to escape the intensity of this conversation.

“I know. Just...think about what you want. You might surprise yourself.” She left the van with those parting words, and I wanted to scream. Instead, I turned on my laptop and threw myself into fiddling with my website, ending up going back to all my original ideas after testing multiple options.

The rest of the day passed too slowly for me. I tried to read, I tried to do more work, I tried to do anything, but all I could think about was going over to Lacey’s. This time I wore my own clothes, pulling out a fluffy pink knee-length princess dress. I’d bought it on sale under the influence of too much caffeine and I’d never worn it. Something told me that Lacey would like it. Especially with me wearing her hat with it.

Not something I would normally wear, but I looked cute as hell. I’d done my hair in two low messy buns and if I put on black glasses, I would have looked more like Sterling.

Sterling had begged me to come over to show off my outfit.

“Oh my god, you look incredible,” Sterling said, taking my hand and making me do a little twirl. I posed with one of my feet kicked up behind me. I hadn’t put the hat on yet, because I knew they were going to tease me about it.

“Thanks,” I said.

“I love it,” Kai said. “It’s so cute.”

Boosted by their compliments, I grabbed my overnight bag, shoved Lacey’s hat on my head, and drove to her place.

Chapter Sixteen

“Fuck,” Lacey said when I walked into her kitchen with a cake from Sweet’s to find her flipping some steaks.

“Good fuck or bad fuck?” I asked, doing a slow twirl that made the skirt spin out and setting the cake down on the counter.

“Good fuck,” she said, wiping her hands off and coming over to me. “Get over here.”

She swept me into her arms, lifting me off the floor and kissing me as if we’d been apart forever.

“You look amazing,” she said, spinning both of us around before she set me back on my feet again.

“You look so hot,” I said, and she did. Her white T-shirt was fitted, and she’d rolled the sleeves up to show off her arms and paired it with a pair of dark joggers that did wonders for her ass.

Lacey blushed and bit back a smile and she was so adorable in that moment that I wanted to shove her right into bed and have my way with her, but I didn’t.

“What are we having?” I asked.

“I know it’s not fancy, but how’s steak and mashed potatoes, asparagus and a salad sound?” she asked.

I put my arms around her waist and smiled up at her. “It sounds perfect. I swung by Sweet’s and got a mojito cake because it looked good.”

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Lacey grinned at me and then started laughing. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t hear anything you said because you look so pretty right now.”

“Are you trying to make me blush?” I said, slapping my hands over my cheeks to hide my red face.

Lacey seemed to remember that she was cooking and ran back to the stove, saving the steaks in just the nick of time.

“I would eat well-done steak for you,” I said, leaning into her as she set the steaks aside.

“That’s sweet, but thankfully you don’t have to. I’m pretty much ready here, if you want to get plates and drinks and so forth.” Moving around Lacey’s kitchen felt so domestic and I couldn’t deny how much I liked it. Sterling’s voice echoed in my head and I allowed myself a moment of wondering what my life might be like if it had Lacey in it, and not just for these few weeks of finishing the house and getting it on the market.

What would my life look like if I stayed?

I’d never even allowed myself to picture it for even a fraction of a second. I was too convinced that if I let myself consider a different future that I’d get distracted from my goal, so I’d surrendered to tunnel vision.

My goal had been so clear that I didn’t question it. Didn’t wonder if it was even what I truly wanted.

“Gwen?” Lacey said. I’d been frozen in place with a plate in my hand.

“Sorry, zoned out for a second,” I said, giving her the plate so she could serve both of us.

Lacey and I settled onto the couch together with dinner and beer and it was...

“What did you get done today?” I asked, slamming the brakes on my thoughts.

“Finished the engagement ring. I’ll show it to you later. And I drew something new and started fiddling with those stones that we found at the beach the other day. How about you?”

I cut into the perfectly medium rare steak and savored a bite before I answered. Lacey had cooked it in tons of butter and fresh herbs and the bite practically melted in my mouth.

“Cleaned the van and watched while Sterling did maintenance. She’s tried to teach me, but I’m so terrified to break anything that I don’t want to touch anything. Worked on my website. Nothing earth-shattering,” I shrugged and watched her as she carefully cut a piece of steak.

“So the van is all ready for guests now,” she said with a wink.

“I suppose it is,” I said. “How about this? We can go together to book club and then you can come and stay the night in the van with me?” That way I wouldn’t have to worry about cooking dinner for her.

“That sounds great, actually. Just make sure you have enough water, because I am curious to see how the shower works.”

I made a face. “You’re going to be seriously disappointed.”

She laughed. “It’ll all be part of the experience.”

“You know, that’s how Sterling and Kai ended up together. First they hooked up at that lesbian bar, Sapph, and then Sterling parked the van next to Kai’s house and asked if she could use her water. And the rest is history.” Sterling was bold, I’d give her that much. Bold and fearless.

“I’ve heard of Sapph, but I’ve never gone,” she said.

“You definitely shouldn’t go,” I said, making my expression serious.

“Why not?”

“Because you’re so hot, you’d cause a riot and it would be a shame to destroy the only sapphic bar in the state,” I said, and Lacey laughed so hard that she wiped away tears and the warm feeling in the vicinity of my heart spread all the way through my body to my fingertips and toes until it was everywhere and my face hurt from smiling.

“What am I going to do with you?” Lacey said as we lounged on the couch together.

“Anything you want,” I said, stroking her shoulder.

Our eyes met and she smiled slowly.

“Do you recall something I mentioned in our phone call last night?” she asked.

I bit my lip and leaned closer to her. “I think I do.”

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Lacey tweaked one of my buns. “Are you up for it?”

“Take me to the bedroom and find out,” I challenged.

True to form, Lacey threw me over her shoulder and carried me to the bedroom where we both found out just how up for a strap-on fuck I was.

* * *

“You know, I haven’t wanted to be with anyone since my divorce,” she said as we lay naked together. I loved it when Lacey talked to me after sex. Both of us were more open than we would have been otherwise as the sweat dried on our skin and our heart rates went back to normal.

“I haven’t been in a relationship at all for two years,” I admitted. “I went on a few dates, but I was so busy with work that I didn’t want the distraction.” The majority of my social interaction had been with my coworkers going for drinks or to networking events. My job really had been my life.

Sterling’s words came back to me. Hadn’t she basically said the same thing?

Lacey tangled my fingers with hers. “Seems like both of us are out of practice with this.”

“True,” I said.

She brought my fingers to her mouth and kissed each one of my knuckles. “I don’t

know where you came from, or what happened to throw you into my life, but I'm glad you're here. I'm really fucking glad you're here, Gwen."

I wanted to hide my face from her so she couldn't see how much her words affected me. Instead, I snuggled into her chest and closed my eyes.

"I'm glad you're here too," I said.

* * *

The next few days were strange, but good. We were in the home stretch of staging the house, but we were at what felt like the beginning of something else. As much as I told myself I was going to go back to the van and stay the night by myself, inevitably I ended up at Lacey's rental. Being with her was so much better than being by myself in the van. Her bed was decently sized, she let me steal the blankets, and she let me help cook, which was more than I could say for my sister. Our trip to get linens and accents for the house was so much fun that my stomach hurt from laughing when we got back. Lacey did end up pushing the cart for me and pretended to fight with me on pillow selections. We brought out each other's goofy sides, which was something I didn't expect.

* * *

"I'll drive," Lacey said, when we were arguing about who was going to take us to book club on Thursday after we'd finished at the house for the day.

"Fine," I said, giving in, but only because that meant I could have as many drinks as I wanted without worrying about driving.

"Come on, princess, your chariot awaits," she said, opening the truck door for me and putting her hand out to help me in.

“Thank you,” I said, putting on a fake accent.

We went back to Lacey’s to change and have a snack before she drove us both to the bookstore in the heart of downtown Arrowbridge.

“Fancy seeing you here,” a familiar voice called as Lacey helped me out of the truck. She didn’t have to, but I loved it when she did.

Sterling and Kai walked over from where they’d parked a dozen spaces away from us.

“Nice to see you again, Lacey,” Sterling said. “This is my girlfriend, Kai.”

“It’s good to see you, and nice to meet you Kai,” Lacey said, shaking both of their hands. I hadn’t really been nervous up until this moment, but now my old friends, fear and anxiety, were dancing through my head.

“Nice to meet you,” Kai said. “I’ve heard so much about you from Gwen, I feel like we already know each other.”

Lacey nodded and adjusted her hat. I had to hide a smile, because that meant she was nervous too. “Likewise,” Lacey said.

She’d closed up again a little bit since we’d gotten out of the truck, and that was something I should have expected. Lacey might be completely open with me, but we definitely didn’t start out that way.

Lacey looked down at me as I slid my hand into hers, squeezing her fingers.

“I’m starving, let’s go,” Sterling said, also taking Kai’s hand as we walked toward the bookstore.

* * *

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“They go all out for this, huh?” Lacey said when we walked into the bookstore. Joy hadn’t skimped on decorations for this meeting. She’d gone for opulence, to match the mansion that was one of the settings of the book. Mini chandeliers hung from the ceiling, and she’d draped the tables with velvet.

“Hello, welcome,” Joy said, coming over to greet us. She hugged Kai, since they worked together, and said hello to my sister before turning to me and Lacey.

“Gwen, wonderful to see that Sterling finally wore you down,” Joy said, grinning. She was such a warm and inviting presence that I felt instantly at ease. Lacey let go of my hand to shake Joy’s and introduce herself.

“It’s such a pleasure to meet you, Lacey. Thank you for coming. Since this is your first meeting, please know that this is a no-pressure zone. You’re not required to do anything but enjoy yourself.”

“Thank you,” Lacey said, glancing down at me, her face a little tight.

“Let’s get you something to eat,” I said, taking her hand again and dragging her to the food and drinks tables.

Sterling and Kai stayed to talk with Joy, whose tattooed girlfriend Ezra joined them. Safe to say that Sterling and Ezra had a lot in common when it came to their love of body art.

I handed Lacey a plate and she started taking things.

“Try the dips. Everly’s moms make them, and Sterling has raved about them,” I said. Even though I hadn’t been to one of these before, Sterling had painted such a vivid picture that I felt like I had.

Tenley and Mia arrived just after we did, followed by some more of the local Arrowbridge sapphic squad.

Lacey did her best as people came over to say hello to me and introduce themselves.

“This is bigger than I thought it would be,” she said, looking around the room as we found chairs.

“It seems like the place to be,” I said as we ate and I enjoyed one of the mixed drinks.

“Are you doing okay?” I asked in a low voice so only she could hear me.

Lacey gave me a smile and turned in her chair to face me.

“I’m fine, you can stop worrying, princess. You didn’t drag me here under duress. I’m not totally socially inept. Just rusty.” She took my hand and kissed it. “I’m having a good time, promise.”

That was a relief. She did seem to have relaxed a little since we’d sat down, and she was conversing with Sydney, who sat on her other side.

Joy called everyone to order and laid out how the night was going to go before opening things up for introductions. Lacey declined, but I figured it would be weird to not confirm to everyone that I was, in fact, Sterling’s identical twin.

The general discussion was lively, and my sister seemed to get a kick out of sharing her opinions, which wasn’t a surprise to me. She’d always liked things like this.

Lacey didn't speak, but I caught her nodding and agreeing with a few points people made. Since I was so busy watching her, I didn't even think about participating myself. Joy had said it was no pressure, and tonight I just wanted to think about Lacey.

We took a break to get more snacks and drinks and then finished up with our final thoughts and selected the choices for the next book club selection, which we would vote for via email.

"Well?" I asked Lacey as everyone started putting the chairs away and packing up the food.

"I can understand why your sister likes it," she said, nodding at Sterling who was, once again, talking to Ezra.

"But what about you?" I asked.

"It's nice to be around people who are so passionate about books. Makes me feel less alone when I read something that affects me so much. And you were right about the food. It's worth coming here for that alone." Her face relaxed into a smile and I felt a huge sense of relief. She hadn't hated it.

"And what about you, princess? What did you think?" She rested her arm on the back of my chair and I leaned toward her.

"I think I'd definitely come again, even if there wasn't food and excellent drinks."

We were the only two people still sitting, so I got up so we could put the chairs away.

"Ready for your first van night?" Sterling asked Lacey as she came over to us.

“I’ve been camping a time or two, so I think I’m up for it,” Lacey said, glancing at me with a smile in her eyes.

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“You are? Up for it?” I asked, referencing what I’d been “up for” the night she’d gotten out the strap-on for the first time.

Lacey leaned down and said in my ear “I’m up for anything with you.”

Sterling snorted as I blushed and tried to hide my face.

“Shall we?” Lacey asked, gesturing toward the door. I went over and thanked Joy for everything before we went back to Lacey’s truck.

“It really wasn’t bad?” I asked when she got in and shut the door.

“No, it really wasn’t. I’ve been thinking more about how I’ve always sort of isolated myself. Mostly due to my family, and the fact that I don’t trust people, you know? I’d gotten used to my self-imposed loneliness, and I guess I’m kind of realizing, at age thirty-two, that it doesn’t have to be that way. I can have more. Anyway.” She seemed a little embarrassed at her own candor, so I touched her shoulder to get her attention.

“I know what you mean. I’ve been focusing so much on building my business and getting the hell out of here that I haven’t stopped to look around. I’m so convinced that getting back to Boston and back to my old life is what I want, what I need, and...I don’t know anymore.” I hadn’t admitted that to anyone, not even myself until just now.

“Were you happy in Boston?” she asked, oncoming headlights flashing by and illuminating her for a moment.

“I told myself I was. I thought I was.”

“It’s okay to admit that you changed your mind. Believe me, I know. My ex-wife and I had grown apart for a long time before either of us called it quits. I know I was telling myself that we could make it work, that we could get back to the way we were, but I was holding onto a relationship that didn’t exist anymore.”

Lacey had told me more about her divorce, in those quiet post-coital moments. It made me wonder what her ex-wife was like. I also couldn’t help but be jealous of the woman who Lacey had all her firsts with.

“Sterling told me to consider other possibilities. I guess I should. But don’t tell her I said that, or I’ll never hear the end of it.” I laughed, imagining Sterling’s look of triumph if she’d heard that I said she was right.

Lacey pulled into the driveway right next to the van and turned the truck off.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m ready,” I said, waiting for her to open my door. She helped me down and I unlocked the van and slid the side door open and flipped on the lights. Lacey followed me in and I shut the door, sealing us in together.

“It’s beautiful at night,” she said, looking around at the strings of lights.

“Please, have a seat,” I said, pointing to the passenger seat that I kept swiveled around so I didn’t always have to sit on the bed.

Lacey sunk down into the chair and took her shoes off, leaving them near the door on the mat. I did the same and opened the fridge. I’d stopped at the store and gotten some of Lacey’s favorite beer to have it on hand for her.

“Such hospitality,” she said when I held up two bottles.

“I try,” I said, and she pulled out her bottle opener. “I’ve also got some snacks for if we get hungry.”

Lacey sipped her beer and then put it in the console next to the seat.

“Come here,” she said.

I crossed the short distance between us and lowered myself into her lap.

“Does your sister have any rules about sex in the van?” she asked.

I made a face. “I think if you asked my sister, she would make a crude comment and some obscene gestures.”

Lacey laughed and grabbed both of my hips, dragging me closer.

“That’s good to hear, because I have a lot of obscene things I want to do with you.”

My hair fell forward and she pushed it back for me.

“What kind of obscene things?” I asked, my body already burning at the suggestion of them.

“So many,” she said, tilting her head up and kissing me fiercely.

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“Show me,” I demanded, and she picked me right up and did just that.

* * *

“You were right,” she said a while later when she got out of the shower, wrapping herself in one of my towels.

“About?” I asked, still naked and laying in bed. I was going to do a quick hair wash and rinse if there was any water left.

“The shower. I didn’t anticipate the lack of room. And the fact that the toilet was right there.” She scrubbed her hair and went to get some fresh clothes from her overnight bag.

“I told you so,” I said, watching her as she put on a pair of shorts and a tank.

“Yes, princess, you were right.” She came over to kiss me and then smack my ass. Not the first time she’d done that tonight and I was pleasantly sore from her earlier efforts.

“Why don’t you go have your little shower and I’ll put something together?” she asked.

“You take such good care of me,” I said, stepping by her.

“I like taking care of you, Gwen,” she said, and I smiled at her as I shut the door and took the fastest shower I possibly could.

* * *

Lacey made us a snack and we lay in bed together and watched a movie that she said I had to see. It was a dark comedy, but it was super sapphic, so I was on board.

“Have you ever dated guys?” I asked. “Sorry if that’s a weird question.”

Lacey shifted me in her arms, and I melted further into her body, letting her surround me.

“I did in high school and a few times in college, before everything happened with my ex. I guess I’m just super selective with which men I’d even be willing to date, you know? And I just never met one I was attracted to with the right timing.” That made sense.

“Does it bother you that I’m bisexual?” she asked, and I felt her body tense beneath me. As if she was scared of my answer.

I sat up and faced her. “No, it doesn’t bother me at all. Why would it? It’s a part of you and if I love you, then I have to love all of you.”

Her eyes went wide and it took a moment for me to realize what the fuck I’d just said.

“Did—Did you just say that you love me?” she asked.

I gaped at her, unable to figure out how those words had come out of my mouth.

“I…” I trailed off. Words had deserted me.

“Gwen, what did you mean?” Now she was sitting up and giving me an intense look I couldn’t escape.

For a moment, I let myself look at her. This woman, who had been so closed when we'd met. This woman with her backwards baseball hats and chivalry and dirty mind and artistic soul. This woman who had somehow worked her way into my life and had made me question what I knew to be true about myself for maybe the first time in many years.

This woman that I...

"I love you, Lacey," I said, after taking a deep breath to make sure it was true. The rightness of those words rang through my bones, like the clear tone of a bell.

"I love you and I know we said we would let what happens, happen, but...I don't want to leave Arrowbridge if that means leaving you. I want to see where this goes. I want to see what a future could look like with you. And I know this is new and it's probably too much, too soon, but—" She cut me off, getting out of the bed and going to her bag to pull something out.

"Lacey?" I asked, terrified. Was she getting out her truck keys to leave? Had I completely fucked this up?

"I made this for you. I just...I couldn't stop thinking about you when we weren't together so in my spare time I made this." She held out a box and my heart froze in shock.

"What is this, Lacey?" I asked.

"It's not what you think it is," she said, and I was about ready to jump off the bed and strangle her so she'd tell me what the hell was going on.

“Then what is it?!”

Lacey opened the box and I almost fell off the bed when I saw a ring inside.

“It’s not what you think it is!” she said again, her hand shaking as she set it on the bed next to me. “It’s just a ring that I made for you. It’s pink tourmaline I mined myself a few years ago. I’ve been holding onto it, not sure what to do with it and then...well, you showed up.”

I glanced away from the ring to her eyes and then back to the ring. The stone was round and set in a silver setting that looked like a rose, with leaves forming the band. It was exquisite.

“You made this for me?” I asked, tentatively touching it with one finger.

“I did. I made it because...because I love you, Gwen.”

My head snapped up to stare at her.

“You do?” I asked.

She picked up the ring box and plucked the ring out.

“I do. I love you.” She took my shaking hand and slid the ring onto the first finger of my right hand.

“Making it for your ring finger felt like too much,” she said, before bringing my hand

to her lips and kissing the finger with the ring on it.

I had never been so shocked in my entire life. This moment felt completely surreal.

Lacey pulled me until I was sitting on the edge of the bed with her standing between my legs.

“Do you like it?” she asked, brushing her fingers over the beautiful ring on my finger.

“I love it,” I said. “I couldn’t love it more if I tried.”

I stroked her face. Her beautiful face.

“And I love you, Lacey. It feels like I’ve been looking for you and now I don’t want to let you go.”

She pressed her forehead to mine. “The feeling is entirely mutual, princess.”

Epilogue

That night when Lacey gave me the ring and we finally told each other how we felt was the beginning of something new for both of us. In the days ahead there were logistics we had to work out and discussions to be had about how the hell this was going to work.

After speaking with both Lacey and my sister, I decided that going back to my previous life in Boston wasn’t what I wanted. Lacey agreed that her old life in New Hampshire was also not what she wanted either.

“I can’t believe I have to sell two homes now, in two different states,” she groaned to me one night when we decided to sit down and work on logistics.

“You’re lucky you’re dating a real estate agent then, aren’t you?” I said. “This is doable. Sterling said we can live in the van as long as we need.”

Lacey glared at me. After that first night in the van, she had come around to my opinion that the van was fine for a night or two, but not all the time.

“I will help you handle this, Lacey. You’re not alone. Plus, my sister is over the moon that we’re going to stay, so she’s going to move heaven and earth make that happen.”

To say that Sterling was excited was a massive understatement. My parents were also thrilled that both of us were in the same place for the first time in years. They were planning to come up and visit, so I’d have to tackle meeting the parents with Lacey at some point. One step at a time.

“If worse comes to worst, I can always stay here,” Lacey said. “They emailed me today to let me know they’re taking it off the market for now and I can extend my agreement month-to-month if I want to.”

That was great news. I liked Lacey’s rental, even if it did only have one bathroom. I hadn’t mentioned the idea to Lacey, but if she wanted to buy it, then she could just do some renovations and make it bigger. Add at least one more bathroom and a bigger workshop for her jewelry.

There was a knock at the door and Lacey got up to answer it. I heard her talking to someone and then laughing, so I went to investigate.

“Gwen, this is my neighbor, Leighton,” Lacey said, and I took in the woman standing in the doorway. She was shorter than me with thick blunt bangs and shoulder-length hair that was dyed a deep purple.

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“Hi, Gwen, it’s so nice to meet you,” she said. I’d heard that Lacey had finally met one of her neighbors when Leighton had some car trouble a few days ago, but I hadn’t met her yet.

“Nice to meet you,” I said, shaking her hand.

“This is kind of silly, but I wanted to thank you for giving me the jump the other day.” She held up a paper bag and handed it to Lacey. “I make, um, macarons in my spare time. Just for fun, but I hoped you might like some.”

I almost snatched the bag away from Lacey. I loved macarons.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Lacey said, peering into the bag and then handing it to me. Wise move.

I held myself back from going feral on the macarons, but just barely.

“I know, but it’s kind of a thing I do. Anyway, if you need some sugar or something, I’m close by. Thanks again, Lacey.”

She seemed embarrassed about her gift and ran away before Lacey or I could say anything else to her.

“She seems nice,” I said, looking into the bag and pulling out one of the macarons. It was green and looked like a frog with a little frosted froggy face.

“They’re so cute!” I said.

“Too cute to eat?” Lacey asked.

“Never.” I shoved the macaron in my mouth and savored it.

“Good?” Lacey asked, her eyes on my mouth.

“Very good,” I said, licking my lips.

“Going to give me a taste?” she asked, brushing her thumb across my bottom lip.

“Do you want one?” I asked. I loved playing these little games with her.

“With you? Always,” she said, before our lips met and I dropped the bag of macarons. They’d be fine. I had more important matters at hand.

Lacey picked me up and I automatically wrapped my legs around her as she carried me to the kitchen counter and set me down.

“I’ve never eaten you in the kitchen,” she said, unzipping my jeans.

“That’s an oversight,” I said, breathless as she pulled my jeans and underwear off and threw them on the floor before pushing my legs apart.

Lacey got to her knees and looked up at me.

“An oversight I am going to rectify right now.”

I took her baseball hat off her head and put it on my own.

“I love you, princess,” she said, kissing first one knee and then the other.

“I love you, Lacey,” I said, running my fingers through her hair before gripping it and

bringing her mouth to where I needed it to be.

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