



Tell Me You Crave Me (Search and Seduce 3)

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Description: Easton Ambrose has spent half his life protecting Natalie St. Clair from guys like himself. It's not like he wants to interfere with her dating life, but what's he supposed to do when she insists on going out with the wrong kind of guy? Kiss her, of course. But now she's pissed. And what starts as an apology turns to heated words...then just to heat.

Jumping East was the worst idea in the history of ideas. The guy is Natalie's older brother's best friend, the definition of off limits. But she's tired of the safe guys who couldn't light a fire with a flamethrower. Time for a little dangerous—even if dangerous always blows up in your face. Because even if they survive their bedroom antics, it's only a matter of time before they're caught...

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Chapter One

Holy God, this was painful to watch, Easton Ambrose thought, wincing at the pitiful display in front of him.

Honey's was the only bar/restaurant in town that boasted Southern hospitality, good food, and unique architecture, so it was the place to be on a Friday night. Hell, in his small town of Beaufort, North Carolina, it was where most of the ladies flocked, and East was nothing if not an avid hunter.

Seeing as how he “knew,” aka “saw naked in some capacity,” most of the women currently in the bar, he could spot a hot chick he didn't recognize immediately. Even if all he could see was her sweet ass sitting in the barstool with her back to him. Hourglass figure. Prominent hourglass, to be exact. With her perfect posture and all that thick, dark hair falling over her trim shoulders, the delicate curve of her back leading to some serious hips and ass, he knew right away he'd remember a frame like that if he'd felt it before. And he was certain he hadn't. Something he'd like to change tonight.

Not that he was a total playboy douche. Playboy maybe, but not a douche. No, he was upfront with women, cared about their needs, and was clear on his own. He wasn't a commitment type, and he had good reason for that. But he enjoyed being loved on and lovin' on someone—as long as it was one night at a time.

He took a swig of his beer and adjusted his Stetson back on his head just enough to get a better view of this mystery woman at the bar. Normally he'd be at the bar himself, tossing a few back with his buddies, likely all still in their search and rescue

gear, but he'd taken tonight off. His buddies had handed in their man cards for "domestic bliss," and that left East alone on the prowl in a white T-shirt and his favorite hat.

He shuddered and had to take another drink of beer at the words "domestic bliss."

My ass...

There was nothing blissful about being tied down. Granted, his buddies Dex and Gage were roped to some seriously awesome women, but still. It wasn't for East. It was a Friday night, and that meant the women from a few towns over always wandered in looking for the country boys and good times that Honey's promised whenever live music was playing. Which it was. And East played his part well—not the music, but the game—and had his sights set on his opponent for the night.

Hourglass hottie was clearly on a terrible date with a boring guy. That was obvious. Poor sap didn't stand a chance with a dime piece like this woman.

The boring guy was prattling on and on, and East couldn't help but do his own muffled voiceover:

"The accounting firm I work at is super duper, and the only thing that gets my dick harder than my calculator watch and tax season is reruns of Golden Girls." East's voice was quiet but had a nerdy twang, and to his credit he kept in time with the boring guy's mouth. Okay, it was kind of fun, so he went on. "Wanna come over to my mom's house where I live in the basement, and I can heat us up some pot pies and pretend I know how to unfasten a bra?"

East snickered again. Fuckin' boring guy. He just knew he wasn't too far off on his commentary. But still, East was no asshole. He was a prick. Big difference. And he was only a prick sometimes. Particularly when he was riled up, or he saw a woman

not being treated right. And man, did this woman look like she needed to be treated right. He could tell by her body language that she was begging for it. And the idiot she was with wasn't getting the signals. Granted, now her shoulders were slumping, and the hair flick that should be flirty was more annoyed than it had been a minute ago. She knew the guy was lame and not her speed. East could show her what speed a pristine woman like her should be accelerated to.

Top gear, pedal to the metal, gasping for breath kind of speed.

And yeah...he got all that from Miss Hourglass without her even having to face him. The deep

cut of her dress and perfect slope of her back was enough for him to know that woman was capable of moving in ways he could only dream of.

East was an easy going guy, and he wasn't looking to cock block anyone. But when the boring guy did a double take at a woman walking by, East wasn't the only one who noticed. Hourglass noticed, too. Her date had just openly checked out another woman right in front of her.

Dick.

That annoyed East because clearly the woman Boring Guy was with was hot. But her shoulders slumped a little more, and he could tell by the shift in her body language she felt defeated. He kind of wanted to punch Boring Guy. Thankfully, the idiot got up to use the bathroom, and East was done sitting back and watching this mess.

He was going in. Part of his job as a search and rescue medic for the North Carolina area was to assess a situation and save damsels in distress. Okay, so it was more like assess the situation and save lives, but Hourglass definitely needed to be saved. All of his years learning and knowing women told him that.

East made his way toward her at the bar, weaving around the packed area, casually holding his beer with one finger around the longneck and tipping his hat down just enough to shadow his eyes so that when he approached her, all she'd be hit with was his trademark smile, dimple included.

Lucky for him, he did enjoy the hunt. And Honey's was a massive old Victorian mansion that had been renovated into a huge restaurant and bar. It even had a few shops hidden within what were once bedrooms. So he moved stealthy and finally closed in on his prey.

"Can I buy you a drink, darlin'?" he asked Hourglass as he came right up to her. All that long, chocolate hair smelled amazing, and damn, it looked thick and glossy. She clearly took care of herself. "Or maybe we can skip the drink and go straight for dessert," he finished.

He leaned in just as she turned to face him. Here it came...he unleashed the smile just as she faced him, and he caught her scent of vanilla, spice and—

Oh shit...

"East?" Hourglass's voice wasn't lyrical. It was penetrating and damn near shrieking. Mostly because that voice, which was tied to the hot bod of Hourglass, was none other than Natalie St. Claire, his childhood nemesis.

She hit him with a glare, and East tried real hard to hit her with one back, but the dress she wore showed way too much cleavage, and he had a difficult time remembering why they'd never liked each other.

"Did you just hit on me?" She spun in her stool to face him fully, and that glare turned to a scowl. "What the hell is the matter with you? Don't think you'll get my cupcakes for free just by tossing out any old line you use on all your other

conquests.”

Oh, right. Now he remembered. She was a mouthy pain in the ass. She’d treated him more like an older brother—one she hated—than she did her own actual brother, and that dynamic had never faded. It didn’t help that she was now her own boss with her own cupcake bakery. She had nobody to talk any sense into her.

Normally he had no problem accepting that they were natural enemies, except that tonight there was nothing normal about Miss Natalie. She was smoking hot. She’d ditched her messy pile of hair for sleek waves, and her oversize flour-covered apron for a sexy little dress. Which again, he shouldn’t be appreciating as much as he was, because she was Natalie Fucking St. Clair. Her last name was a damn legacy in the town, and her family was the only one he’d ever had.

They’d taken him in when he was a young teenager. His dad had never been around, and his mom had barely been there, either. And then, when his mom had taken off and overdosed on her final drug bender, the St. Clairs had become his legal guardians. Lemon-Anne St. Clair was the only woman he really knew as a mom. She’d raised him. Nurtured him. He knew he was trash, as wrong a match for their high class as oil was for water, but they’d loved him anyway. He’d already been best friends with Matt at school, but after that, Matt had been like a brother, Natalie like his sister. Their parents like his parents. He owed everything to the St. Clairs, even if Lemon-Anne St. Clair sometimes liked to remind him of the fact a little too much.

And when Waylon St. Claire passed away three years ago, they all grieved together as a family at losing their patriarch, the only father East had known.

Which was why, even after he’d lain awake at night for years, unable to stop thinking about Natalie and how much he wanted her, he’d never pursued her. To the St. Clairs they were brother and sister. Hell, that was how East thought of them, too. It just wouldn’t be right.

So yeah, little Natalie needed to get out of that little dress really damn quick before his not-so-little dick started hurting.

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And not in the way he wanted her out of it...

“Sorry, darlin’. Never expected you to clean up so well.”

And damn had she cleaned up well. He took another look. Couldn’t help himself. He was used to seeing Natalie in baggy jeans and an apron covered in some kind of mess, and thank god for that. He could see her as simply Nat, nothing else and nothing more. The cute little girl grown up into the cute town cupcake baker.

But today? Tonight? Wearing that dress? Every ounce of desire he’d tamped down threatened to rise up.

Get a hold of yourself!

What the hell was wrong with him? The way she pushed his buttons, and the way he felt watching her go out with idiots from her teenage years to now had always come with the territory.

Territory...like the uncharted territory that trailed right between some serious creamy cleavage—

“Get out of that dress,” he muttered.

“Excuse me?” she said and folded her arms over her chest.

Great, that made the “territory” way more enticing to explore. Which was fine for him. But if it attracted more idiots like the one she’d been talking to, he’d never

forgive himself.

“I just don’t know why you’re dressed like that.”

She glanced down at herself. “Um, because I’m a twenty-five-year-old woman and can dress myself in whatever I want, that’s why.”

And there was that attitude. But he’d always dealt with her snark in fine fashion, and he’d deal with it now. No matter how much she delighted in pushing his buttons—She. Would. Not. Win.

“Why are you staring at me?” she said.

’Cause you look like a fuckin’ bombshell.

Then her green eyes went wide. “Oh God, is there something in my teeth?” She grabbed the butter knife next to her and examined her reflection.

“Jesus, Natalie, this is date behavior?” he asked. And no, there was nothing in her perfectly straight white teeth. In fact, she had pristinely lined red lipstick. A very good look. But not on her, he reminded himself.

She put the knife down. “Like you have room to critique—the one man in history who’s never been on an actual date,” those red lips shot back at him.

“Hey, I’ve taken women to—”

“Your truck?”

She had a point there. “My truck is very nice. And besides, I’m sure I’ve taken a woman out for a meal before.”

Though he couldn't recall who or when. But surely he must have. Nevertheless, he wasn't one to lead anyone on. The women he saw always knew upfront that he was a casual, one night at a time, no strings kind of guy. And if that one night happened in his truck, well then, who was he to deny a lady? Besides, he never treated them poorly. Ever. In fact, he took pride in being so direct with them from the get-go that a relationship was never on the table.

He leaned his elbow on the bar and took another swig of his beer. "Why would you care anyway, Nat? You're not even enjoying yourself."

She frowned at him. "How would you know?"

"Because I saw you."

"Stalker," she mumbled.

"Observant," he corrected. "It's easy to see how awkward you are with that guy." And how the man she was with clearly didn't appreciate her the way he should. Why the hell would he look at another woman with Natalie in all her irritating beauty right

in front of him?

She opened her mouth like she was ready to argue, but then they both caught sight of Boring Guy.

"Awkward," she repeated, and for some reason East's chest hurt for a second. It was the way she'd said that one word, like just the sound of the letters were distasteful. Her pretty, red-painted mouth turned down and her brows furrowed. She looked lost. Like she didn't know what to say. Like...Jesus, like she was suddenly awkward with him. And he didn't like it.

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But in true Natalie fashion, she shook off the expression and hustled off the bar stool.

“What the—” East said, but he didn’t get any more words out, because the woman grabbed her purse and bolted around the back of the bar and toward the narrow hallway. She kept her head down to skirt past Boring Guy and make a beeline toward her cupcake shop.

East didn’t know whether to call after her or chuckle at her discomfort. Natalie St. Clair had a stigma of being awkward and nervous, but somehow everyone’s best friend. Hell, giving her shit for being so fidgety had been half the fun for East and Matt when they were all teenagers. She’d always taken it in good stride, though. Always laughed along.

Tonight she’d looked disappointed, though. Sad. And as much as he wanted to kick Boring Guy’s throat in for caring so little about giving her what she needed, he couldn’t forget that brief moment where she’d seemed at a loss for words with him. East and Natalie. No matter how much they’d gotten on each other’s nerves, she’d never been awkward with him. But something was different tonight. Something that had sent her out the bar without another word. Something that made every protective instinct in his body light on fire.

He went after her.

Natalie darted inside the quiet space of her cupcake shop and shut the door. It was dark, thank God, since she was closed and far enough away from the main restaurant and the hustle and bustle of the bar patrons. Gotta love this old mansion. It gave her the privacy she needed without her having to go more than a winding hallway away.

The muffled sound of everyone talking off in the distance did little to calm her, so she busted open her secret stash of bourbon, reserved for her bourbon cupcakes, and took a few hefty swallows. She didn't even bother turning on the lights. The low-lit hallway cast enough of a glow for her to see. Besides, she knew her small shop by heart—little display case in the front next to the checkout counter, and the prepping table, stoves, and endless counter space in the back.

It was all hers. Not her family's. Definitely not her mother's idea of a “prestigious career path,” but the little bakery was all Natalie's. And she loved it.

A buzz came from her phone. She glanced at the screen. Speaking of her mother... She kept a tight grip on the bourbon bottle with one hand and held her phone with the other to read the text.

How's the date going? A suitable gentleman, I hope? You tweezed your eyebrows and are remembering your manners, correct?

Natalie sighed and took a big swig of bourbon. It wasn't so much the way her mother treated her like a child that bothered her; it was that she treated her like half a person. Like Natalie would never be a “whole” person unless she had a “suitable gentleman.” A fact that had never bothered her—much—before. But come on, everyone she knew was getting hitched to the loves of their lives. And here she was, having a hard time just finding someone who didn't make her want to claw her eyes out.

She hit a few keys and responded to her mother.

Texting during a date is rude. And, yes, I have manners.

She smirked. She'd never be a pain in the ass to her mother on purpose, but she couldn't handle her right now. Because the truth was, while Natalie didn't “need” a man the way her mother wanted her to, she was getting fed up with the loneliness.

And the constant berating from her mother about how she'd die a spinster.

It didn't help that she was the "local" girl and had been in the friend zone with most of the men in town since about second grade. But she loved her town, loved her shop, and wouldn't ever move. She'd find the kind of happiness she wanted, right here in Beaufort.

"Fuckin' friend zone," she muttered, and took another hefty swallow of alcohol.

And tonight, just when she'd thought the night couldn't get any worse, the one man that got to her like no one else had shown up.

Easton Ambrose.

"What the hell was I thinking?" she mumbled around another swallow. Another awful date with a boring guy who looked at her like she was little more than adorable at best. Which super sucked, since she'd spent her last paycheck on that dress from her friend Michelle's boutique. Deep down, she knew that no dress or makeup could change her curse.

No one wanted her. Not like that.

And the guys who might want her...well, her big brother Matt was the town's pride and joy. The man had practically ridden out of here on a float when he left for college. East had taken it upon himself to annoy the shit out of her in Matt's absence.

Hold on. East hadn't just annoyed her tonight. He'd intervened. Was that another reason why so many guys gave her such a wide berth? Because for big brother Matt and big pseudo-brother East, no one was ever going to be good enough for her?

She took another swig.

They were probably right. They just had it backward. She was the one who would never be good enough. She was plain at best. Quirky at worst. And somewhere in between, she was sick of it. Her few experiences with sex were anything but stellar, but damn it, she wanted to feel something. Everyone around here, her best friends, were all happy and settling down. Even her own brother was getting married.

She didn't need all of that. Not marriage. Not kids. Not even commitment. She just wanted a chance at that whole passion thing everyone seemed to be raving about. It looked...nice.

Better than nice.

She'd seen the way her friend Chloe's husband kissed her neck whenever she was within a few inches of him. Watched how her other friend Michelle had her ass squeezed by her fiancé constantly because he couldn't seem to keep his hands off her.

"Must be nice," Natalie said to her bottle of bourbon, and took another drink. Yeah, must be nice. To be wanted like that. Treated like you were...sexy. Desirable. Just once she wanted to feel that.

She'd had high hopes for her date tonight. But he'd turned out to be a dud, and then stupid Easton Ambrose with his stupid muscles and stupid smile came in and made her feel weird. Not just weird—more like hot and buzzing. But what else was new? He'd made her feel that way since she was a teenager.

But between her brother being his best friend, and East never looking at her twice except to flick her forehead or tug her pigtail, she'd determined a long time ago that they were just bound to be enemies. Mostly because the man irritated her like no other. He'd been the senior varsity quarterback of the football team when she's been a freshman band geek. And not much had changed. Well, other than East had somehow gotten sexier, and she'd given up playing the clarinet. God, going through

puberty with the hottest man on the planet under the same roof had been no easy feat.

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He was blunt and cocky and so damn good looking it hurt to look at him sometimes. Even if he weren't basically her second older brother, her mother wouldn't call him "a suitable gentleman." But he was more of a member of her own family than she was. Hell, her parents had taken him in and raised him like their own child! Maybe that was why they'd always treated East with class and respect. He was family to them, and family deserved unconditional love.

As if her mother was summoned by her thoughts, her phone buzzed again. And again. Nope. She wasn't looking at that now. Wasn't dealing with her mother or her ideas on how Natalie was failing at life and love.

At least here she was far away from East, and that ridiculous look he'd given her in the bar. What had that been about, anyway? It had almost looked like...jealousy. Well, screw him and any hint of jealousy. He had no right.

"Dick," she mumbled.

"If that's what you're after, all you have to do is ask," East said from the entry of her shop. She spun to face him. He had his forearm casually resting against the doorframe, and the light of the hallway haloed him like he was Christ himself. And damn...he looked good. A Stetson, white T-shirt, and dark jeans had never looked more perfect on a man. She wanted to punch him in the throat. How dare he stand there looking like...that!

"Actually." She cleared her throat and lifted her chin. "I was just thinking of you, and 'dick' was the most suitable word that came to mind."

He raised a brow. “That right? Well, I’m glad you think of my dick. Gotta admit, I would have taken you more for a good girl whose thoughts were full of rainbows and unicorns.”

That fueled the fire she had been tamping down. One, because she wasn’t thinking of his dick. Okay, maybe she was. Kind of. Whatever! He didn’t need to know that. And second, “I’m not a good girl! Now get out of here.”

“Sorry, can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s my responsibility to make sure you’re okay.”

She rolled her eyes. Was that why he’d followed her? Because he was worried about her? The guy needed to realize he was the reason she was upset in the first place.

“I’m fine. I don’t need your ‘saving’ or your pity. Now leave.”

“Sweet thing like you shouldn’t be left alone in your state of distress,” he said with a touch of sarcasm in his voice.

He was doing the same thing he’d done all their lives. Teasing her. Flicking little words and retorts that got under her skin. God, he knew her so well. He got a rise out of her, and that fire made her forget about being awkward and pushed her to simply speak her mind. Not that knowing this made it any easier to resist. He wanted to challenge her? Game on. He was going down.

She set the bottle on the counter, squared her shoulders, and hit him with a hard glare she could feel all the way to her toes. Power. She harnessed whatever kind she had, and she took aim at that big playboy pain in her ass.

“Easton Ambrose...” Her voice came out as a deep rasp that clearly got his attention because he straightened his posture. “Call me a good girl one more time, and I’ll show you just how wrong you are.”

There was a spell of silence, but even in the low light, she could see his perfect smile. “Oh darlin’, you’re all things good.” He took a step inside, and the door closed behind hi

m. Her blood heated another degree. Challenge. He wasn’t backing down. He was coming after her. Again. And she’d rise. She would rise this time.

“And sweet,” he said, adding that extra bit of What are you going to say to that? attitude. He came up to the counter. The only thing separating them was that, a triple tier of her best cupcakes sitting near the register for presentation tomorrow morning, and the bottle of bourbon.

That and the fact that he was all but her brother. If only they didn’t have this history—

Whoa. Where had that thought came from? What did it matter what he was to her? He was off-limits. Period.

“In fact,” he said, “you’re so good and so sweet, I think you’ll go down in history as the Best Friend of Beaufort.” With that, he swiped his finger along one of her pristine gourmet cupcakes on display and licked the frosting from his finger.

Oh, he was really fucking with her now.

“You prick!” she said, and grabbed up the now-ruined mini chocolate cake.

“Come on, Nat, lighten up. I’ll pay for it.”

But that wasn't the point. He was standing there, in her shop, eating her frosting, telling her she was sweet? Telling her she was nothing more than Beaufort's town buddy? No. She couldn't take it anymore. She was face-to-face with the last man who'd ever call her sweet again. Especially when she was feeling anything but.

"You have no idea who I really am." She stepped toward him. "I'm capable of way, way more than sweet."

East shot her a look like he was examining a baby duck trying to fly for the first time. But just before she bought into that look, she saw a flash of lust in his eyes, especially when those eyes landed on her mouth, then her breasts. But he recovered quickly and patted the top of her head. "Just because you got a new dress, doesn't change anything. You're still sweet, darlin'."

His words made her anger rise, but his gaze told a different story. Had he just done a double take? He had! He'd totally just checked her out! She wasn't certain the first time, but she was now.

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Easton Ambrose wanted her.

Her!

Holee-crap-on-a-cracker!

“Maybe not,” she said, determined to not only challenge him right back, but to force his acknowledgment. “But you seem to appreciate the dress.”

He snapped his eyes away and shrugged like he hadn’t just been staring down her body. “Just wondering where the rest of it was. You think your brother would let you—”

“My brother lets me do nothing. I let myself do what I want. Because I’m a grown woman. When are you going to stop being an idiot?”

“Oh, I’m the idiot?” His voice rose a tad. “You’re the one out there chasing a loser guy who apparently can’t see jack shit.”

She moved around the counter to face him head on, because it’d be easier to scratch his eyes out if she were toe-to-toe with him.

“Actually...” She nudged his chest with a pointed finger. “I ran from him because you’re right—he couldn’t see what was right in front of him.” She tapped his chest again, her other hand still holding the cupcake he’d desecrated. She knew they were talking about different things now. But she didn’t care. It was time to call a spade a spade. Or an East an East.

“Don’t push me, Natalie. That’s not very nice.” He was so close, looming over her, his warm breath hitting her mouth and his clean masculine scent surrounding her.

“I don’t feel very nice right now.” She tapped his shoulder again just to prove a point, and he gave a low growl. “Oh?” she said with mock concern. “Does that not feel good? Getting bossed around? Someone telling you what you are and what you’re not?” She tapped him again, and this time he took a step back, so she took a step forward until he was only a foot away from the counter.

“I’m warning you—”

“I warned you, Easton. Call me sweet again, and I promise you’ll regret it.”

He snarled at her. “You’re not sweet...you’re sugar incarnate.”

That was it. She shoved the cupcake at his mouth, effectively shutting him up, and the big search-and-rescuer was left wide-eyed and speechless. But only for a moment, because when he registered that she’d just shoved food in his face, he swallowed a piece down and glared hard.

“Ballsy move there, darlin’.” He ran one thumb along his lower lip then sucked off the frosting he’d collected. “But I’m a retaliation kind of guy.” With that, he grabbed the largest vanilla cupcake on the top tier of the display and smashed it into her cleavage, frosting first.

She gasped sharply and looked down at herself. “You son of a bitch!”

“That’s not news, darlin’,” he said with an easy chuckle.

She pushed him hard, but he caught her arms and spun her until her butt was against the counter’s edge. Instead of shoving another cupcake at him, she shoved her tongue

into his mouth.

What shocked her wasn't how amazing he tasted, or how good his mouth felt. It was how quickly her body registered him as a deep, desperate want. And he seemed to register her back. Because there was no hesitation. His talented tongue devoured her like he had no care in the world about who she was or how sweet—or not-so-sweet—she felt.

Her entire body ignited like fireworks popping off in succession. She was ravenous. Needy. Horny. And pissed.

She nipped at his lower lip then sucked his top one. He groaned, and his hands instantly landed on her ass and hefted her up to fully sit on the counter.

“Not so sweet now, am I?” she said, and bit his lip hard.

He lifted her briefly to swat her ass once, then dropped her back on the counter with a loud thud. Damn he was strong, lifting and working her body like she weighed nothing.

“You're a vicious little thing,” he rasped in her ear.

She clawed at his shirt, and he buried his head in her breasts and licked and nibbled on the frosting that covered them. She cupped the back of his neck and leaned away to give him better access. Which he took. The man had a mouth on him that made her whole body light up like a furnace. He licked along her neck, then lower, and he shoved aside the deep V of her dress and bared her still bra-covered breasts. The brim of his Stetson scratched her throat as he sucked along the exposed flesh of her chest. He was making a mess of her and her new dress. But when he brought one breast out of her bra and sucked hard on her nipple, she didn't care in the least. Fulfilling this forbidden fantasy was wrong on so many levels, but with his mouth on her, it felt so

right.

“I still think you’re sweet,” East growled, blindly grabbing another cupcake from the display and slapping another heap of the cake and frosting on the top of her thighs. She wiggled in his arms, but he kept her right on him and spread her legs and stepped between them.

“Well, I still think you’re a pain.” She tugged him close for a kiss.

He squeezed her thighs until she yipped. “I think you like my version of pain.” He bit her neck, and she moaned. Maybe she did like it. A lot. She’d never been so turned on before. Never wanted someone so badly. But she knew, even through her foggy thoughts...

“You are so so wrong for me,” she said.

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Shit. Was he going to stop now? Should he stop now? If anyone from her family saw them like this—

“Testify, darlin’,” he agreed, his thumb digging into her frosting-covered thighs while he sucked at her breast.

Okay, so they were both on the same page. Kind of. Because he didn’t stop kissing her, and she sure as hell wasn’t about to stop letting him. Every breath, every touch of his hands, and she knew this was that thing she’d been looking for.

Passion.

It was amazing and heady and deliciously weighty. And she felt it settle all over her like her own personal gravity of bliss, and she wanted to roll around in it like a warm blanket and never let it go. Jesus, this was drugging. She could see how people became addicted to sex. Not that she and East had even had sex yet—God, “yet” implied she wanted it to happen—but just the h

ot and heavy frosting-fondling was enough to make her hips rock to press her center against his jean-clad erection.

“Look at you,” he said, and ran his fingers through the frosting on her leg and up her inner thigh. “You’re close already, and I’ve barely touched you.”

“Barely touched me?” She looked down. “You’ve covered me in frosting and there’s going to be bruises on my ass and thighs from your manhandling.”

“Well, say the word, darlin’, and I’ll stop all the handling,” he teased just as his sugary fingers found her panties.

“You stop and I’ll kill you.”

“You’re hot when you’re giving out threats, Little Natalie.”

Little Natalie. The mocking name he’d given her when they were teenagers to let her know he was older and always knew better. Well, she’d grown up since then, and she wasn’t going to let him lord anything over her anymore. Certainly not tonight.

She reached between them and grabbed his hard cock through his jeans. He instantly stilled.

“If you call me Little Natalie again, I’ll start calling you Little Easton.” She squeezed harder, and he gritted his teeth, biting back a hiss. “And not in the good way.”

He growled and nipped along her neck. “There’s nothing little about me,” he said, and he thrust his hips toward her so that her grip on his shaft had no choice but to move along it. Oh yeah, there was nothing little about him. She could attest to that. The hard cock in her grasp was impressive, and she hadn’t even properly seen or felt all of it yet.

But East didn’t seem to mind how hard she was gripping him, so she rubbed along the steel rod in his jeans, then grabbed him even harder.

“Fuck, baby,” he said, switching from the “darlin’” she was used to. Watching his face tense with pleasure while he called her “baby” was so...hot. It made her feel sexy, like the woman she wanted to be.

Not sweet.

“Rethinking your stance on me yet, Easton?” she asked with more confidence than she’d felt in a long time. He gave her a satisfied “mmm” just as he thrust into her hand.

He threw his head back. “Yes. But you best be warned, I like it rough.”

His words sparked through her whole body until her nipples zinged so hard with anticipation it almost hurt. She’d wanted this—wanted him—for longer than she dared admit. And now, though she knew she should stop here, ought to send him out and forget this had ever happened, she had him in her hands and heaven help her, she couldn’t stop herself. She needed more, and it looked like he needed more, so she did the only logical thing:

She went for it.

She unfastened his belt, unzipped his jeans, and shoved them low on his waist. His cock was big, hard, and...wow.

“Oh my...” She gasped and ran her fingers along the deeply grooved V of his hips. Though his shirt covered most of him, even in the low light she could still see the tops of his powerful thighs and smooth skin—

“Now look who’s star struck,” he said, with all the cockiness in the world. Which only irritated her. She was not star struck by him! She was just new to this whole passionate, half-naked messing around thing. And she’d prove it!

She grabbed the bottom hem of his white T-shirt, lifted it up, and shoved the bunched cotton in his mouth.

“Will you shut up for a second so I can enjoy this, please?” she said.

Even with the bottom of his own shirt stuffed in his mouth, she saw him smile around the cotton.

At least he was quiet for the moment. And sweet baby Jesus, he was on display. For her.

The hips she'd been touching apparently had been just the beginning of a rocking body. She ran her fingers up his endless abs. She'd had no idea muscles could be so hard. She wove her fingertips along the defined grooves and trailed up to his chiseled chest and small brown nipples. Everything about the man was hard.

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He was being a good sport. But he'd tortured her as a teenager, and she had every intention of making him suffer now. She'd take her time with him, go so slow it made him ache. His swollen cock was begging for attention, and she really wanted to give it. But not yet. Nope, Easton Ambrose would have to earn it, at least a little, when it came to her. For all the times he'd annoyed her, poked at her, challenged her, this was her time to poke back.

Besides, he was about the finest specimen of man she'd ever seen. He stood between her spread thighs, jeans tugged down, holding his shirt up with his teeth and smiling at her from beneath the shadow of his Stetson, and she was certain she'd never seen a sexier sight.

But that didn't mean she had to feed his ego.

"You know, honestly?" She trailed her palms down his abs until her thumbs teased inches from his straining erection. "I don't see what all the fuss is about."

He growled at her, and when she ever so gently ran her fingertip along the pulsing head of his cock, she barely saw what happened next.

East's hat and shirt were gone in one swoop, and his hands were on the backs of her knees, yanking her body into his. Somewhere along the lines he'd torn her panties off because suddenly she felt his skin against hers.

She gasped when velvet steel slid between her folds. Not breaching her, but pressing on her clit so hard, she might have just had a mini orgasm from the single touch.

“Getting mouthy is one thing,” he growled, his lips on hers. “But lying is another.” He ground against her and ran his cock up and down her folds. The crown of him caught the sensitive bundle of nerves in a way that shot electricity through her veins like a bullet.

“Oh God!” she gasped, slapping her hands on his shoulders, looking for anything to hang onto and finding only him.

“I’m sorry,” East said harshly and thrust against her again. “I didn’t hear you, baby.” He tugged hard on the backs of her knees, and he pressed her closer against him. “Did you just call me a god? Because a second ago, I thought you said you couldn’t see what all the fuss was about.” The way his deep voice danced over the shell of her ear just before he bit down made her nails sink in as she clung to him.

“I...I...” She struggled for words. Struggled to keep the upper hand and not give in. But this felt so good. Too good.

“You what?” he asked. “You thinking maybe you like it?”

He slowly slid his cock down...

“Thinking maybe you do want me, and want to tell me how sorry you are for hurting my poor little feelings?”

He slowly slid his cock back up...

She gritted her teeth. He was baiting her. Her body was shaking, already on the verge of exploding with pleasure. But she couldn’t give in.

“Thinking maybe you want more?” He took a taste of her sweetly sticky nipple, then was back at her ear. “Want to tell me how I’m going to make you come and I’m not

even inside you yet?”

That did her in. The way he talked to her, a little deep, a little dirty, and a lot hot, had her melting. She wasn't Little Natalie, wasn't awkward. She was a woman. A woman he wanted, and he was treating her like she'd never been treated before.

She couldn't hold back, she was so close. Needed him so much. And there was only one thing she could say.

“Yes.” She threw her hips out to try to run herself along his cock, but instead impaled herself in one motion. “Oh, East!” He was inside her. Deep and fast and hard, and she came instantly.

“Fuck, baby!” he groaned, but she barely heard it. She was too busy clawing at his back and locking her legs around his hips to keep him right where it was. Deep. Because her entire body was spiraling around him, and he was the only gravity she held to.

Light flashed behind her eyes as every single nerve snapped and pulsed with white-hot pleasure, warming her skin and curling her toes. Her core shuddered, over and over, milking the hard cock that was still inside her. Just still. No movement. No thrusting, as if he were taking in every moment of her core squeezing him.

“Baby,” he said. “We can't...we have to stop...”

“Don't stop,” she gasped.

The pulses got faster, hotter. She bit down on his shoulder and rode out the best release of her life, while his grip tightened on the backs of her knees and he held her through it.

When the pleasure started winding down, she couldn't breathe. She only felt. Felt spent and alive and wild and exhausted all at the same time. But when East pulled quickly out of her, she knew right away she wasn't done. She wanted to scream and cry and beg him to come back. She barely had her eyes open to watch him take a condom from his pocket, rip it open with his teeth, and cover himself. Thank God, he didn't look to be done, either.

"Please, baby," he said, coming back between her legs. "Let me feel you do that again."

He gripped the nape of her neck with one hand, and the other wrapped around her waist and pulled her back onto his hard cock.

She instantly lost her breath and gave in to the incredible feeling of what it was like to be a part of Easton Ambrose. He'd made her feel better than any man ever had, and he'd barely had to try. Not to mention...he wanted her to come again?

She kissed his lips softly and finally answered his plea:

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“Make me.”

She felt him smile against her mouth and slowly shake his head. “Oh, baby, I intend to.”

With that, he yanked her body into his as he thrust even deeper than she’d thought possible. Her ass almost came off the counter, but East was right there to catch her. He held her steady between his strong grip and massive cock, and he worked in and out of her like his sole mission on earth was to make her body feel alive.

And God did he do that well.

He held her tight, pumped in and out, and hit an amazingly sensitive spot inside she never knew existed. The way he ground his hips, stirred deep after a forceful thrust, hit every nerve she had, she had no choice but to throw her head back and moan wh

ile he turned her body into a blissful puddle.

“Oh no you don’t,” he rasped, the grip on the back of her neck tightening and forcing her face up to look at him. “You watch me.” He punctuated his demand with a succession of perfect pumps into her. “You watch me fuck this tight”—thrust—“hot”—thrust—“pussy. And you remember what you asked for.”

Her blood started to snap in her veins like a freshly struck match. Not quite igniting...so close...

Snap...

“You wanted me to make you come?” he rasped, and when his hand slid to the back of her head and tunneled into her hair, he tugged hard and caused her chin to lift toward the ceiling and her eyes to hit his. “I expect to see it. Unless you were bluffing? Maybe you want something softer...sweeter...”

Snap...

She snarled at him at that word, “sweeter.” He was like a sexy wolf. The glow of the hall light hit his chiseled frame and shone off his bright eyes and perfect face.

Always challenging me.

She slid her hands to his bulging biceps and sank her nails in as she kicked her hips out, all the way off the counter to meet his wild fucking.

Snap!

The match lit. Her body caught fire, and the flame surged along every muscle and bone and atom she had. She shattered into a thousand pieces as East fucked her through an even more intense orgasm than the last.

“Ah, God, yes!” he yelled to the ceiling. He didn’t go softer. Didn’t go sweeter like he’d threatened. He fucked her harder, until she was certain the entire shop was shaking.

“Natalie...” he said. The way he rasped her name into her ear made her cling tighter. His whole body tensed and shuddered with his own release. She locked her legs around him and pulled him as deep and as close as she could.

She held him there as the bliss of what had just happened faded. Her eyes were too heavy to open and face what they’d just done.

Chapter Two

It took Natalie a solid fifteen seconds to realize the loud knocking she was hearing in her ears was also coming from the door.

Some large, hard pillow surrounded her. She peeked with one eye and took in her surroundings. She was on some kind of blanket, on the floor in the back room of her shop. And the large pillow was actually East sleeping with his tree trunk arms wrapped around her.

Oh crap!

This was bad. So bad. Having sex with him had been wrong but so right. And maybe they could forget that had happened. But him staying here with her? Holding her while they slept? What the hell had they been thinking?

Knock, knock!

Perfect. And now someone was out front. How was she going to explain East and her being here together overnight?

Wait. This didn't even need an explanation. East cared about her. Everyone would assume she'd needed help with some big order or something. Simple as that.

She slowly got up, adjusted her mangled dress, and peered around the corner from the back prepping station toward the entrance. There, right above the Closed sign, was her mother's snooping nose as she tried to look into the shop window.

"Natalie!" Knock, knock, knock. "Natalie Elizabeth St. Clair, I know you're in there," her mother called.

Great, her mom had hunted her down. Not that it was a hard feat to accomplish, since she'd been doing it Natalie's whole life. She was the only daughter of the renowned southern belle Lemon-Anne St. Clair, and her mother made it a special priority to ensure Natalie was on the debutante path of all things a lady should be.

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Too bad Lemon-Anne got an awkward, nearsighted daughter with apparently not a sexy gene in her body. At least until last night. East had made her feel more than sexy. He had made her feel wild. Free. Like a woman.

He'd also made her see red and pissed her off to no end. And what was worse, he was still here.

Yeah, that thing about East's presence not needing an explanation... She wasn't ready to test that out.

"East!" she whispered harshly. But he just lay there, asleep in nothing but a bit of frosting and a smile, and covered by nothing more than her pie cloth. Which, judging by the way the scrap of pastry mat was distended, was hiding what she now knew to be a very impressive cock.

She couldn't help but to appreciate him for a second—a sexy, strong man surrounded by tall rolling trays of cupcakes.

Knock, knock!

Appreciation time was over.

"East!" she whispered again. He just stayed asleep, with one meaty arm thrown over his eyes, and his rock hard abs slowly rose and fell on even breaths. Even his cock grew harder. God, was there a soft thing about the man? This was bad. Very, very bad.

“Natalie!” her mother said again.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

Using her foot, she shoved East’s leg the rest of the way into the back room and shut the door gently. Leave it to the aggravating man to sleep like the dead when she needed him to get the hell out.

She paused only to adjust her dress the best she could and brush the now crusty frosting off of her. Fat chance she could make herself presentable, but her mother wasn’t leaving. So she did her best to fix her hair while making her way to the front of the shop.

One deep breath...then she opened the door.

“Hello, Mother.”

Her mother took in her appearance and clearly wasn’t impressed. “What on earth have you been doing in here?” she said in horror.

“Uh...baking. Large order, so I was up late,” she fibbed.

Lemon-Anne let herself in, sidestepped Natalie, and took in the top of the display case, which looked like a cupcake massacre had happened there.

“I see,” her mother said with a stern scowl. “You can’t throw a fit every time you don’t get a little cake perfect. If you’re going to be in this ridiculous business, you might as well be professional about it.”

It would be like her mother to assume she’d thrown a fit. It was also ironic that Natalie’s perfectionism was in large part placed on her by the great Lemon-Anne. But

for now she would shut her mouth and just try to get her mother out of there before East stumbled out half asleep and, God forbid, half naked.

“I need to get back to work, Mom, so what can I do for you?” Natalie asked.

“So, I’m to understand you ran out on your date last night to come bake instead?”

Between the frosting and her sad-looking dress, Natalie couldn’t really deny much. But she definitely had to deny the East part of her night. Her mom loved East like a second son, and that was kind of the problem. The guy was forbidden territory in every sense.

“The date went fine, but, like I said, I had some stuff to catch up on.”

“I heard at my ladies’ group this morning that you stood up poor Charles.” Her mother sauntered around. Her light pink purse hung from the crook of her arm as she rubbed her thumb and first finger together as if there was something sticky between them. “Not to mention, you didn’t respond to my messages last night. Not a kind way to treat your mother.”

“I responded,” she said. It had only been once, but that counted. “And it’s not true that I stood up Charles. I showed up to the date, I just didn’t stay the whole time.”

Her mother looked horrified by her admission, but Natalie had been bored out of her mind and hadn’t even felt like she’d been on a date. At least until East had come around and annoyed the hell out of her.

“Well, it’s still rude, Natalie, and honestly, if you want to get a man to stick around, you have to first stay for the whole date.”

“I know, Mom. But you and I have different opinions on the role a man plays in my

life.”

“Well, be that as it may,” she said, dismissing Natalie’s words. “You need to settle down.”

“I have my own shop, my own home. I’m settled.”

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“You know that’s not what I mean by settled. Start a family. You have all your other roots here. Honestly, I don’t see why you don’t want more.”

“I do want more.” Just not

in the form of weekly ladies’ groups and debutante status. Yes, Natalie wanted a man, but she wanted him for passion and fun. Not as sweater-vest-wearing father-of-four material.

“Well, Charles was your last chance to find a date before your brother’s wedding.”

“His wedding is in two weeks. And who cares if I have a date?”

“I do!” her mother snapped. “You’re pushing thirty, and all the good men with good families are already taken. Your friends are getting married, having babies—”

“I’m twenty-five, mother.”

“Exactly. Already a quarter of a century.”

That familiar hollowness in Natalie’s stomach started to tug again. Her mother was a good woman, but she was hard to live up to. She knew her family loved her. Especially her mother. But they were nothing alike, and the things her mother wanted for her would never fit with the life Natalie wanted, least of all the idea that one day she would be a “kept” woman.

Yes, her friends were moving on, and yes, it played on some insecurities she had

about her life and the clock ticking. But she was tired of being invisible. Even on her best dates, she was never noticed as a woman.

Until last night. Why was the one man she ought to stay far away from the one man who'd ever made her feel seen?

Her mother came over to clasp her shoulders. "Sweetie, I just want what's best for you."

Natalie nodded. "I know."

"So I'm calling Harrison."

"What? Mom, no."

"Now, Natalie, your brother's wedding is a big event around here, and I won't have my only daughter showing up alone. You'll look uneven in the pictures. It's bad enough you wander about unattached as it is."

"Wait..." Natalie had to take a few steps back. This was more about the family name and the fact that Natalie going stag would start some gossip at her mother's women's group than anything else. Was Lemon-Anne really becoming that embarrassed of her own daughter? Natalie tried not to think so, because it made a sting rise behind her eyes. "What do you mean Matt's wedding is a big event around here? He's getting married in Connecticut." Where he lived with his fiancée.

"The church they booked got flooded, along with the reception hall. Terrible storm. So they're moving everything here to Beaufort."

Oh crap...

Now Natalie was going to be around her big brother and his gorgeous fiancée and likely all her equally gorgeous friends, and her mother wanted to set her up on the world's worst date for the whole event.

"Mom, I'll help with the wedding and all, but I'm not going with Harrison. He's my cousin, for Christ's sake."

"Watch your mouth," Lemon-Anne snapped. "And he's your second cousin by marriage. Not blood-related so it's fine."

Nothing about this was fine. It was humiliating. Because she knew, one way or another, her mother would get her way. The whole town would show up, and Natalie would once again be the weird ugly duckling of the otherwise prestigious St. Clair family. No, no, this could not happen.

"I have a date," Natalie lied. But it was the best she could come up with.

Her mother's perfectly penciled brows lifted. "Oh?" she smiled. "Who?"

"Well, ah..." She glanced over her shoulder toward the back room and thanked God East was still hidden behind the closed door. "I mean, I have some prospects of dates. I'm sure one will be perfect."

If looks could kill, Lemon-Anne's could sting, burn, and bludgeon. Natalie knew that expression. She was assessing, looking for a weak point in Natalie's plan—her lie, that is. Thankfully, her mother finally gave a tight nod. "Well, in that case, go on your dates, but if you don't have a suitable man on your arm come the rehearsal dinner, then I'm calling Harrison."

And Harrison would show up, and Natalie would have to repeat the traumatizing experience of her junior prom all over again.

“I’ll have a date, Mom.”

Her mother smiled, and Natalie tried not to let it hurt that her mother placed so much value on the man—theoretical or not—in her life that it overshadowed Natalie as an individual. But she’d deal with that later. For now, she just needed her mother off her back, and then to get East the hell out of here and figure out how she was going to come up with “suitable date material” in two weeks.

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“I look forward to hearing all about your time, dear.”

With a light pat on her cheek, her mother left. Natalie closed the door and took a deep breath. She had to open her shop in an hour, and she was a mess, and now she was in deep shit to boot.

A door creaked open behind her, and she turned to see Easton. He was in nothing but low-slung jeans, resting his strong arm against the doorframe.

Her mouth instantly watered at the sight. The morning light was the man’s friend, and between the rumpled hair she’d had her hands in last night, and the steely abs and the open belt hanging on some seriously cut hips, she couldn’t help but squeeze her knees together.

“So that was your mom,” he said.

“Yeah.”

He shook his head. “Too close for comfort.” He looked down at himself. “Shit. I have to get out of here.”

Of course he had to get out of there. But they hadn’t even talked about last night, what it meant that they’d crossed that boundary and entered forbidden territory. Maybe it was better that way—to not talk about it at all and just forget it had ever happened.

“Good luck with your mom, darlin’,” he said.

So now that they were in the light of day, she was back to “darlin’” and no longer “baby.”

Probably because we’re no longer in the throes of passion, idiot.

Not that she was thinking about last night or anything.

“Nothing I can’t handle,” she said with fake confidence and took a step toward him. “Besides, you don’t have a date, either, and it turns out Matt is moving the wedding to Beaufort.”

He shrugged. “No problem for me. I like to keep my options open. Usually I take home a hot bridesmaid.”

She tried really hard not to grit her teeth at that. She didn’t care what East did. And obviously he’d take someone home. He always did. And any pang of jealousy she felt about that would have to die a quick death. She could feel the wall of “Little Natalie” vs “Playboy East” back between them.

Must be nice being a guy with options and not a grown woman with a mother hell-bent on marrying her off. Worse, East now knew all about her problem. Great, just great. The arrogant pain in her ass—currently looking way too good without a shirt on—was probably thinking about all the city girls coming into town. And given that he was Matt’s best man, he’d likely hook up with at least one bridesmaid, if not the entire frickin’ gaggle of them.

Not that she cared.

Whatever happened last night was over.

It never should have happened, and maybe if she tried real hard, she could pretend

that the one passionate experience of her life had been with someone else. She'd look back on this memory and try to picture anyone other than East.

She watched him search for his discarded shirt, and his muscles rippled with every movement...

Fat chance of fantasizing about a guy hotter than him.

"So you're going to the wedding alone and I'm—"

"Going with a date it sounds like. One way or another," he finished for her and winked. Yep, he'd heard the whole conversation. "Better get on it then, darlin'. It's slim pickin's in these parts."

Didn't she know it? But it was clear East wasn't going to help her. Why would he? He'd never helped her find a good date. No, but he'd always delighted in pointing out when she was on a bad date. And now, after last night, after he'd shown her what she was missing and what she needed, he had the nerve to tell her to look elsewhere. Like it was so easy to find someone who knew how to push her buttons like he did.

For her own sanity, she had to address last night at least once, and set a boundary so she could officially go back to really, really hating him. She needed him far away and out of her system, because him simply standing there was irritating and turning her on all at the same time.

Not a good combo considering that she now knew what that level of sexual animosity erupted into. A messy cake shop, a ruined dress, and some seriously hot memories she'd never forget.

Focus! East equals bad.

“Look, with the wedding being moved here and my brother coming into town,” she started, “I think it’s best we just keep our distance.”

He frowned and looked at her like she’d just spoken in a language he didn’t understand. But finally he said, “Fine.”

Why was he being huffy? Wasn’t he the one who’d said he needed to get out of there ASAP?

“What’s your problem?”

He finally found the rest of his clothes. He dusted off his hands, picked up his shirt, and yanked it over his impressive chest and abs. What she’d give to see those abs for one more second...

“No problem,” he said, then grabbed his Stetson and tapped the brim after properly placing it on his head. “Just time to get on with my day.”

“Wow, with morning-after lines like that, it’s hard to see why you’re still single.”

“First of all, I don’t do morning-after lines. The lines come the night before.” He took a step toward her and faced her straight on. His belt was still unfastened, and the slight jingling of the clasp when he walked made her wet. God, she was pathetic.

“Second.” He held up two fingers for reference, as if she were a moron. “I’m happy being single. Getting tied to one woman seems...”

“Awkward?” she finished for him.

He looked her up and down, and nothing about the heat in his eyes matched his words. It was like he was looking at her in the way he had last night. In a way no one else had ever looked at her—like she was sexy.

Too bad. Because no matter what kind of heat was in East’s eyes, that passion couldn’t survive outside what had happened last night.

He shook his head. “Not awkward. Stifling.”

“Well, God forbid the great E

aston Ambrose hang up his bachelor badge and settle down.”

“It’d be a crying shame,” he said with a wink, and came right up to her and kissed her cheek, hard. Not like a lover. Not like they’d gone crazy on each other’s bodies last night. Nope. Like she was a kid again. Like the baby sister of his best buddy. “Hearts would break all over North Carolina,” he teased as he made his way toward the door. He hadn’t even mentioned her brother, but it was an issue. It had to be. It was all part of the big damn elephant in the room that he seemed intent on not even acknowledging.

East was playing it casual, cool, like she was nothing more than a friend. Not another lover, not another woman, not even a one-night stand. Just a buddy. And that boiled her blood more than anything.

“Indeed,” she called after him. “What with your big reputation of satisfying the ladies, it would sure be a shame if word spreads that you’re really not up to par...”

He glanced at her, and she gave him a pinky wave just to prove her point. Yeah, she was making a joke about his manhood, and she was maybe even being bratty, and she didn’t quite know why, but she pushed his buttons anyway. And this button was one he took seriously.

He turned that perfect, casually strutting, ass back around and stared her down.

“You threatening me, little girl?” he whispered, lips just above hers.

“Whatever do you mean? Women talk, you know.”

“Not you,” he said quickly. “Because if your brother finds out that we—”

“Oh! So last night did happen after all?” She smiled with victory. At least she’d gotten him to acknowledge her, which she’d count as a win.

“Of course it happened. Look, last night was...well, it was unexpected. But I figure we’re good now. Not going to happen again, and no reason for anyone to know.”

“Why? Because you’re ashamed?” That last question came out softer than she’d meant it to.

He frowned hard. “No. Yes. Damn it, I mean you’re Matt’s sister. Your parents are basically my only family, and I’m not fucking with that.”

“But you fucked me.”

“Yeah, and I shouldn’t have. So can we just go back to being family? Or friends? Or whatever the fuck we are?”

“Sure,” she said, hating to agree but knowing as well as he did that he was right.

He grinned. “Hey, you have some dates to schedule before you end up kissing cousins with ol’ Harry-boy.”

God, don’t remind me.

“Fine, this is our secret.” And that was fine with her. She didn’t need any more drama from her mother or brother. She knew how much East valued her family, because they were his family. She’d never want to take that from him.

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But there was a flash of something serious in his eyes when he'd asked her not to tell. Like he was afraid of what losing her family might do to him. Like it'd hurt him...or ruin him.

With a final look down her body, he took a deep breath, and just for a moment she thought he might be struggling to pull himself away. "See ya around, darlin'."

She nodded. Yeah. She would see him around. And she'd be forced to remember that the irritating son of a bitch had given her a taste of the no-excuses kind of passion she'd been looking for. If she knew what was good for her, she'd avoid him like the plague until this itch for him went away. Because a woman only had so much willpower. And if she didn't stay away from him, she'd make another mistake she couldn't take back.

Chapter Three

What the fuck was I thinking?

East walked into the local search and rescue office. It'd taken an extra-long shower this morning to get all the frosting off, and he still was pretty sure he smelled like vanilla...and like Natalie.

He scratched his head and pulled the back of his hair hoping the sting of pain would get it through his thick skull that he'd fucked up. But that sting only reminded him of how last night Natalie had yanked on the same strands while he was buried inside her.

Jesus, he needed to get a damn grip.

What the hell had come over him? Natalie was Matt's sister. She'd been the runt and an annoying fixture since they were all kids. She was beyond off-limits, to say the least. And not only had he fucked her last night, he'd fucked her hard. Repeatedly. And she'd fucked him back.

"It was the dress," he said as he made his way to the small table in the corner where the coffee pot was. "Yep, just the dress," he decided.

Because he sure as shit had never once looked twice at her in the past. Not when she'd stood behind the counter and frosted cupcakes while absently biting her plump bottom lip and quietly humming to herself. He'd never even looked twice on the occasions when she'd walked through Honey's bar in that damn pair of jeans she had that hugged her ass perfectly, while her thick ponytail swung with every stride. And he'd certainly never thought of pulling that ponytail while he bent her over and fucked her from behind.

Nope. Not. Once. Not ever had he ever had any of those fantasies.

But her and that dress, and that need she was radiating, were too much to deny. Because Natalie had been needing a man. And that was something he couldn't ignore.

He yanked open the bag of coffee, dumped a bunch into the filter, and stomped through the office to the back sink to fill the carafe. He hated that dress the whole way to and from the faucet, and he hated it even more as he jammed his thumb on the brew button.

It had been that damn dress last night. That was the culprit, together with her perfect curves, which were hard not to notice. Normally, she was covered in an apron. But damn she looked good. She was a beautiful woman, don't get him wrong, but last night she just...

She'd needed a man.

Everything from her body language to the idiot she'd been with had told him what she'd wanted, and she was going to get it, even if that meant being reckless. He'd hoped to keep her safe. Instead he'd ended up being reckless with her.

Could he have been any more pathetic trying to keep it cool this morning? Of course she wouldn't tell Matt. Not just for herself, but because that could ruin his lifelong friendship, not to mention the dynamic of the only family he'd ever known. Her family. Lord knew he'd never be good enough in Lemon-Anne's eyes, and Natalie had to know that, too. She wouldn't say anything, and neither would he. But what she had said was pricking his mind.

She wanted distance.

What the hell did that mean? He saw her all the time. And surely she couldn't mean it in the way he meant it when he used it as part of some bullshit excuse to one of his one-night stands. No woman had ever wanted distance from him before.

He really was a son of a bitch. Or his ego was extra-sensitive today. No way in hell would he stand there and think about why he was so annoyed about this. And he sure as shit wasn't going to go into mommy issues of abandonment, and commitment phobia. Lots of people had shitty parents. His had just happened to be one of the worst. He was lucky his mom had taken off when he was so young. Sure, seeing her passed out with blood running from her nose and foam from her mouth wasn't exactly a pleasant memory. But there had only been a few times like that. And then she'd died so soon after.

He closed his eyes for a second and remembered the day he'd found out. He'd already been living with Matt and Natalie, but at that point, he'd assumed it was a temporary arrangement. Eventually, his mom would come back. Eventually, he'd

return to living in that dark and empty house, his mom drunk or high or...

But she hadn't come back. And as crushed as he'd been to hear that her addictions had finally gotten the best of her, his entire life had turned into one worth living when Natalie's family had taken him in.

And now he'd betrayed their trust. His only saving grace was that he was never going to let them find out, and he was never going to let this happen again.

"Fuck this," he muttered, and poured a cup of coffee. The drip wasn't done, and when he removed the pot, it continued to pour and spilled onto the t

able. He shook his head and replaced the pot. He wasn't thinking straight.

He needed to clear his mind, and fast. Because he couldn't, and wouldn't, deviate from the boundaries that kept him safe. Hell, the boundaries that kept Natalie safe, too. He'd seen the hurt in her eyes when he'd left her this morning. But fuck, she knew as well as he did that last night had been a mistake.

A wonderful and terrible mistake he couldn't stop thinking about.

Yep, I'm an asshole.

For once, he should have kept his dick in his pants. Hopefully Natalie would just move on, and so would he, and they'd go back to irritating each other, and this whole thing would fade away.

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He adjusted his shoulders and felt the small welts left by her fingernails rubbing against the cotton of his shirt.

Fade away. Good plan.

“Hey, bro!” a happy voice came from behind him. Matt walked in and barreled toward him, big arms open.

Guilt gripped East’s gut, but he swallowed and hugged his best friend with his free arm. “Hey! I was wondering when you were getting into town.”

Matt hugged him so hard that East’s cup of coffee splashed and scalded his hand. He put the cup down and grabbed a napkin.

“Oh, sorry,” Matt said when he saw the spill.

“Don’t worry about it.” Honestly, a scalded hand was the least he deserved.

Matt frowned. “Shit, man, you’re getting banged up.” He pointed to East’s bicep. “You get into a sticker bush or something out on a mission?”

East looked at where Matt was pointing on his arm. Wouldn’t you know it? There were bright red scratches from the sexiest set of fingernails he’d ever had on him.

“Uh, yeah, sticker bush,” he said, shaking the memory off. “You’re looking pretty good for a groom-to-be,” he said, changing the subject from his appearance to Matt’s.

Matt glanced down at himself. “Yeah, the love of a good woman will do that.”

East kind of wanted to barf at that sap, but this was his best friend, so he’d let it slide. Also because Matt looked to be truly happy. He was in sharp clothes, his hair freshly cut. Not like he’d been before he met Bridget, back when jeans and a two-day beard had been his usual.

Kind of like how I still am.

“Thought I’d find you here.” He glanced around the small office. “Still rescuing the damsels?”

“You know it.” East might not have changed like Matt had, but he did take his job seriously. Rescuing people and keeping up his medic training were essential to his mental health. He needed to feel...needed. He and his closest friends made up the core of the team, and East’s specialty was medical training. He didn’t just search and rescue, he cured. At least he tried. After being an EMT for years and reviving overdosed users or the abused and battered, he’d finally recognized how angry he still was at his mom. Every time he’d seen someone OD, he’d seen her, until he couldn’t take it anymore and shifted into the outdoors version of the rescue bit. Broken limbs, hydration, and CPR were on a different scale with lost hikers than with strung out junkies.

There wasn’t much room for growth in S and R. He was at the position he was in, loved it, and that was it. Good enough for him. There didn’t need to be any kind of goal or endpoint. Which was why he couldn’t do anything to fuck with his setup. If anyone found out what had happened with Natalie, not only would he lose his friends and family, he’d likely have to find a new job because staying in Beaufort wouldn’t be an option. Her family was the name of the town. And no way in hell would a scandal like East and Natalie hooking up be allowed to thrive. Lemon-Anne would have a damn conniption.

“Well, I have some best man duties for you,” Matt said, not bothering to go into pleasantries. Not that they were needed. Especially since the longer East was in his presence, the more he realized that he’d just had sex with Matt’s little sister—

Fuck. Now he was thinking of Natalie naked again.

He shook his head.

“You okay?” Matt asked. “You having a stroke or something?”

“I’m fine, just a headache,” East lied. He blinked several times, trying to get rid of the image of Natalie in nothing but frosting.

So much for fading away...

“Since we’re moving everything last minute, I need you to help with some stuff to make sure it all goes smoothly,” Matt started. “Bridget is freaking out about every detail.”

“Sure, man, I can handle the bachelor party,” East said. He’d had some sweet spots mapped out in Connecticut, but he could definitely throw a party around these parts, too.

Matt laughed. “Forget the party. I need you to do more than that.”

“You did not just say ‘forget the party.’” East held a hand over his chest like Matt had just shot him through the heart with his words.

“There’s so much, East. I promise you can still throw the bachelor party, but I need your help with other shit, too.”

East nodded. “Of course. Anything.”

“Look after Natalie.”

Except that.

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“What? I don’t need to look at her,” East said quickly.

Fuck, that had come out wrong. But he needed to just stop talking about her, because any minute Matt would see right through him and Jesus...when did it get so hot in here?

“Bridget is bouncing between here and Connecticut for the next two weeks, and I’m helping her move everything, so I’ll be back and forth, too. And one of her bridesmaids can’t make the wedding now, so place settings are off and the bridal party is uneven.” Matt shook his head like this was some dramatic devastation, and East couldn’t help but wonder if there was about to be some kind of Oprah moment here. Man, his buddy was like his brother, but the boy was whipped. “Anyway, it’s a mess, so Bridget is asking Natalie to fill in as the final bridesmaid.”

That last part registered real quick.

“Wait...Natalie is now a bridesmaid?”

“Yeah, and she needs a dress and all kinds of other stuff...” Matt pulled out a list from his pocket, one that was clearly written in feminine handwriting. Likely Bridget’s. Poor Matt just frowned at it and looked overwhelmed, then handed it over to East. “Here. Just do all this stuff.”

East looked over the list. “I can do...” He ran down the list of items again. “None of this.” Then he pointed at one of the line items. “What the hell does ‘get bodice fitted’ mean, anyway?”

“I don’t know,” Matt said and threw his arms up. “Something about the dress Natalie will have to fit into. Can you just help her? The switching of bridesmaids is freaking Bridget out the most. And you know Natalie. She’s...”

Right then, East looked up from the list and almost wanted to smack his best friend. He knew what he was about to say, and for some reason, he already didn’t like it.

“Natalie is just awkward with this kind of stuff,” Matt finally finished. And yep, East kind of wanted to smack him. Which was dumb. He also wanted to say that there hadn’t been a damn thing awkward about Natalie last night. Which would have, of course, been even dumber.

“Just look out for her,” Matt said. “I heard what you did last night.”

East’s heart stopped.

“You did?”

Matt nodded and smiled. “My mom was already chewing my ear first thing this morning about Natalie’s failed date. But rumor mill had it that you went after her to make sure she was okay.”

“Right...” East said. “That.”

“If I can’t be around to look after her, it helps to know that you will be. I don’t want her feelings hurt or some asshole manipulating her. I’m glad you were there last night. Man, the thought of some random guy taking advantage of her bothers me. Besides, you have all your tux stuff done, and she doesn’t know any of the other bridesmaids, and they aren’t even coming to Beaufort until the rehearsal anyway. She could use a big brother right now. My mom is on her ass about dating, and I know she’s having a hard time.” Matt stopped and seemed to realize how many words he’d

just spewed. “Just...help me out. Help her out.”

East took a deep breath. He’d been through this with Matt before. It was their job to look out for Natalie. Had been doing it since Matt’s family had accepted East as one of their own. He’d be there for Matt, and he’d be there for Natalie. Always.

I’m such a fuck.

Because, yeah, helping was one thing, but now he was also lying to his best friend. Last night with Natalie, and now thinking of her the way he was, and then to be stuck with her? He wouldn’t let the family down, but he also couldn’t spend that kind of time with Natalie. God forbid they ended up alone again...

“I can’t, man.” East searched for a valid reason and thankfully came up with one. “I’m running the office these next two weeks and have CPR training this weekend.”

“Then you can help in the evenings,” Matt said.

“I have shit to do.”

“Well, now you have more shit to do.”

East shook his head. “There’s a ton on this list, and I’m supposed to—”

“I love you, bro, but man the fuck up. You’re like my brother. Which means Natalie’s like your sister. We’re family. And family’s always there for one another. Right?”

Now East really felt like an asshole. But he couldn’t come out and say, Dude, I’m trying to stay away from your hot sister because I just banged her and want to bang her again.

So instead he said, “All right. I’ll be there for Natalie.”

Matt smiled wide and tapped the list. “Thanks so much!”

“Yep,” East said as his best friend walked out.

Great. This was just great...

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“You can’t put ‘hangs out at a bar all day’ on my...what the hell are you even doing?” Natalie set down the cupcake she was frosting and looked up from the prepping table in the back of the shop to glare at her friends.

Michelle had brought her laptop into the cupcake shop, and now both of Natalie’s friends were set up on her counter and huddled around it, and they were asking way too many questions.

“We’re making you a profile,” Michelle said. “And we need to put this information on here so the men you date have a better sense

of who you are.”

Michelle just kept typing and clicking while Chloe polished off her third cupcake and rubbed her very pregnant belly. They were her two best friends, and while Michelle was newly engaged, Chloe was expecting twin girls any day now, thanks to her super-hot search and rescue husband, Gage McGraw.

“I still think this is a bad idea.” Natalie put the finishing touches on the cupcake’s frosting and then wiped down the counter. There was a smear of frosting she’d missed from earlier, and the stupid smudge reminded her that only last night she’d had sex with East right here...

She sprayed cleaner and scrubbed harder.

“You need this profile if you want to find a date by the wedding,” Michelle said. She was happily typing away on the laptop, and Chloe was reading over her shoulder.

After she'd called them in a panic earlier, both of her BFFs had showed up to save the day. Except their version of saving the day was setting her up on Match.com.

"Looking for a short-term, good-time, no-strings kind of fun..." Michelle mumbled.

"That makes me sound like I'm looking for a hookup," Natalie said.

"Well..." Chloe coughed. "Does it matter? You just need a good enough first date to invite the guy to the wedding for the second date."

Natalie was starting to think maybe she was too far out of her area of expertise to deal with this. She wasn't her mother. That woman was graceful and classy and could turn the head of any man she wanted. Natalie? Not even close.

"No one around here is going to date me—" Natalie started.

"That's not true!" Chloe cut in. "You're very dateable. It's just that everyone in town knows you."

Michelle tapped a few more keys. "Which is why I'm expanding the search to a fifty-mile radius. Unless..." She stopped typing and looked Natalie dead in the eye. "Is there someone you're interested in?"

Something felt off about the way her friend posed that question and kept that pretty, questioning gaze locked on her. There was no way she could know about East, right?

"Around here?" Natalie asked.

Michelle just continued to look at her. "Yes. If you like someone, there's no shame in that. No matter how close to home they are."

Okay, now Natalie was being paranoid. She really thought Michelle might know about East...but there was no way.

“Nope,” Natalie said, cutting off this line of questioning. “There’s no one in Beaufort I’d want to date.” And that was the truth. Easton Ambrose was the least dateable person in these parts. Next to Natalie, that was. Irony.

“Okay,” Michelle said, going back to typing. “Hookups can be fun, too. You’re hot, Nat. But if the men around here are so set on friend-zoning you, then we’ll go to a different zone.”

That was Michelle. Miss Can-Do Attitude, all the time.

Natalie smiled. Her friends really were great. Too bad she couldn’t tell them that the one man she never thought would ever look twice at her was officially out of the friend zone and in the “oh shit we totally had sex” zone.

Even if she could tell them, she could never go for East anyway...but that didn’t stop her from needing to talk about it. In some way. Because this was killing her. She didn’t know how to process half the feelings she was feeling, and worse, she was pretty sure one of those feelings was withdrawal, like East was some kind of drug. The whole day today, she could still feel him every time she moved.

Yeah, she needed to talk. But she couldn’t out any of the details. Maybe she could be discreet...

“So, most of these guys are probably players, right?” Natalie started. Both of her friends looked up at her. “I mean...” She pointed to the screen. “They won’t be looking for anything long term.”

“You want something long term?” Chloe asked.

Natalie shrugged. “Eventually. One day. I just want...”

“Passion,” Chloe said. She remembered from the discussion they’d had back when Chloe was fighting against wanting Gage. Passion had never been a problem for her. And yeah, Natalie wanted that. In fact, she’d had a taste of that with East. And it was addictive.

“You can find that,” Michelle said. “Maybe one of these guys will work out. You never know!”

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Yeah...you never know. Just like she'd been on a date last night and then ended up sleeping with Easton.

"I'm not sure..." Natalie said. "I want passion but have no idea how to get it, or sustain it if I had it."

"What's going on with you?" Chloe asked.

"I just don't know about this dating thing. It shouldn't be this hard."

"Ah, it's hard as hell," Chloe said.

"Yeah," Michelle agreed.

"Did it bug you, Dex being a ladies' man before he met you?" Natalie asked Michelle. Her fiancé Dex had grown up here like most of them, and he'd had a reputation before he'd met Michelle. A one-and-done kind of man, much like East. Only Dex had always wanted more, and East? Natalie was pretty sure that man would die a bachelor. Proudly.

Michelle thought about her question. "No. I mean, I knew he had experience with other women in this town, and it never really bothered me. Everything you go through makes you the person you are. And Dex is amazing."

"That's because he's all about you." Chloe winked. And Chloe was right. Both of her friends were gorgeous.

If Natalie were honest with herself, she had to admit that Easton's reputation made her nervous. Take out the whole family complication and she'd still feel insecure about the whole thing. She didn't have the experience he did. Hell, everyone in town looked at her like a buddy and looked at him like a sex god. She couldn't compete with the women he'd been with. Or the women he could get.

And now she'd added herself to that list. Jesus.

She'd always assumed the guy was a knockout in bed. He had to be with that kind of experience, right? But she'd been unprepared for just how good he'd been.

She'd never felt that before. But maybe this was routine for East. What was new and fun and unique to her was probably old hat for him. Show up, make a woman come harder than she ever had before, then take his distance. And that was the problem. She was reeling today, and East probably hadn't given her a second thought.

So I should stop thinking about it.

Because she couldn't go after him. So there was no point in obsessing over him. The man drove her nuts, and she wasn't interested in being compared to others and found wanting. Yeah, he'd blown her mind, but could she say the same for him? If she'd had even half the effect on him that he'd had on her, he wouldn't have been so eager to leave this morning.

Time to move on.

"We've got a live one!" Michelle said, interrupting Natalie's thoughts. A ding sounded on the computer. "You have a wink already!"

Natalie looked at the profile her friends had just set up. They'd even put up a picture of her.

“That guy likes me already?” Natalie asked.

“Yep, I told you, you’re hot. And you’re awesome.”

Natalie didn’t feel hot, but that quick ding...somebody had thought so, right? So maybe she could do this. If it meant not feeling like an embarrassment to her mother and family, and not dating her cousin, then she’d do just about anything.

She might be plain to some—like East—but she could use these next two weeks to really date and figure out how to get the passion she wanted. Surely East wasn’t the only game in town.

“You’ve got another one!” Michelle said.

“Set it up,” Natalie agreed. Yep, she’d find passion, or at least a date. East might have awoken something in her, both good and bad, but she’d figure this out for herself. She had to. Because after being seen like she’d been seen last night, she couldn’t go back to being invisible.

“Time to date my ass off!” Natalie said, and both of her friends cheered in support.

Her cell phone rang. Natalie fished it out

of her apron and pushed her glasses up as she read the caller ID.

“Who’s calling?” Chloe asked.

“It’s my future sister-in-law.” Natalie answered the phone. “Hi, Bridget.” She plugged her ear with her other hand to better hear Bridget’s lyrical voice. “You what now?” Natalie asked. Surely she couldn’t have heard her right. But when Bridget repeated herself, Natalie covered the speaker of the phone and mouthed to her

friends. “I’m a bridesmaid now!”

Well, that just got a bit more complicated. And judging by the continuous stream of duties Bridget was telling her came with the honor, Natalie was going to be way busier than she’d thought.

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Which was a good thing. It would help keep her mind off a certain someone.

“Now, I know you’re worried about how you’re going to be able to handle all of this,” Bridget said. “But East agreed to help you through it all.”

Natalie’s heart seized, and she nearly dropped her phone. “Did you say East?”

“Yeah! He’ll be there every step of the way.”

Yep, she was fucked.

Chapter Four

This cannot be happening again...

Natalie stared at the man across the table from her. He was droning on and on about his cocker spaniel, and even though he glanced at her chest a few times, there was no heat behind the look. He was just a jerk taking a peek.

Natalie tried really hard to follow what he was saying. But she felt zero chemistry and even less interest.

“Yeah, dogs are great,” she said. She’d kind of missed his exact words because honestly, she had gotten side-tracked by all the bustle around the restaurant. Yep, she was back at Honey’s. The same place she was at the other night. Only instead of sitting at the bar, she was at a corner booth for two.

Beaufort was small, and honestly, Honey's Restaurant and Bar was where she felt comfortable. That her best friend was the owner was a plus. So she didn't really care that this was her repeat location. However, last time in her cupcake shop had proven to be both convenient and not a great idea.

Not that she was thinking of last time. Or East for that matter.

But Honey's was always busy, and so many people were laughing and having a good time. Meanwhile, Natalie sat there, wishing that the man she was with made her feel...anything.

But he didn't.

"So, you bake?" he asked.

Natalie nodded. "Yes, I have a cupcake shop."

"Aww, that's cute," he said, and looked at her like she was just as adorable as the dog he'd been going on about. What was it about her that couldn't seem to spark up the hot and bothered emotions?

Speaking of hot and bothered, East walked in right then—with a giggling woman on his arm.

Literally.

The woman was literally hanging on him and patting his bicep like he was made of some sort of precious metal.

Natalie glared. It was her "I don't care what you're doing" glare, but she still gave it.

The blonde he was with was exactly his type, the kind of woman she'd seen him parading around for years, while Natalie sat there, boring date and new dress, round two. This was just not fair. And for whatever reason, just seeing East annoyed her.

Because he looked good. Didn't even have to try. Jeans, black belt, and T-shirt. That's it, and he was hot. The man didn't even shave! He had at least three days' worth of stubble. Just like the other night. Only the other night his accessories had been a brown leather belt and Stetson. Not that she was hung up on details.

The man still looked fine.

So. Not. Fair.

The woman was at least five ten with a skintight red dress that showed off her boob job.

Natalie glanced down at herself. She'd gotten over the fact a long time ago that she wasn't the tallest or the thinnest. And her dress was simple, blue, and fit her well. She wasn't spilling out of it or anything, but the zipper in the back went all the way down and made her feel sexy. With one swipe the entire dress would part. Not that there would be any unzipping of any kind.

She glanced at the tall blonde again. Natalie just wasn't that kind of sexy. Not like her. Not like her mother. Not like her friends.

But she wasn't feeling sorry for herself. She was finding out what she did like. And damn it, if she had to go on a thousand boring dates to find that passion, she would. Because she knew it existed. She just couldn't have it with the man that gave it to her. But she could find another man. Could find passion with someone else. And at the very least she'd find a date for her brother's wedding. Because Michelle was right—why not?

“You all right?” her date asked.

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Natalie snapped her attention back to him. “Yes, sorry, I was just distracted for a moment.”

Her date followed where she was looking and she watched him ogle the blonde on East’s arm. “Yes. Distracting,” he muttered.

What the hell! Even her boring date was checking out another woman right in front of her? Now she really felt like a dweeb, and this guy was definitely not a winner. But dessert was on its way, so hopefully this experience would be wrapped up soon and she could get out of there before her pride took another hit—

East’s eyes met hers.

Too late. That ego she was worried about? Suddenly felt safe. And her body caught on fire.

She’d expected him to ignore her. Or scowl at her. But East took a long, long glance at her, and even though she was sitting, she could feel his gaze sweep from her mouth, to her breasts, then back up to her eyes. He was looking at her as if he found her...

Edible.

Goose bumps pricked her skin. She put her elbows on the table and threaded her fingers together. Not to push her cleavage up even more. Just relaxing...

Because East’s gaze wasn’t leaving her. Just one look and she was heating up for

him. She couldn't help but take a moment to appreciate the tall, chiseled man. When she openly gave him a once-over, silently challenging him in this little across-the-room staring contest, she caught sight of something on his arm. Right below his shirt sleeve...

Holee-crap!

She smiled when she realized that the great Easton Ambrose was wearing her marks. Her fingernails had left deep red scratches in his skin. And that had her sitting up a little taller and giving a confident raised brow in his direction. That blonde could hang off his arm all night, because last night it had been Natalie who'd rocked his world. Anyone who touched him would see those marks, and even though they wouldn't know it had been Natalie, they'd know someone had given that cowboy the ride of his life.

If she had a mic, she'd drop it. A surge of confidence raced through her. Funny how East had a way of making her feel things she'd otherwise not experience.

But in true prick fashion, he realized she'd noticed his arms and gave a little flex. When blondie then ran her hands along his skin, rage boiled low in Natalie's stomach. It was absolutely not jealousy! She was just irritated that he was so smug, and some woman was touching him where she had just touched him last night and...

"Prick," she muttered.

"Did you say something?" her date asked.

She smiled and shook her head. Her whole body was heating up to strangle East—or kiss him. Because he was annoying. Why did he have to come here? Why did he have to look the way he did?

Why does he have to look at me the way he does?

The blonde was laughing, and East's eyes snapped back to the counter in front of him, where Chloe set down a round of shots. Natalie idled through more droning conversation with boring-date guy while stealing glances at East. She watched him toss a shot back, and so did the blonde. That looked like a good way to spice up a date...get drunk.

Natalie reached for her glass of white wine and finished the considerable amount in two swallows.

When East looked at her again and gave her a nod, it was like he was speaking to her, saying: Yeah, I see you're here, but I have a hot date, and remember that one time we aren't talking about, when we had sex in your cupcake shop? And Natalie was ready to tell him where he could go.

She didn't need him to speak a word to know exactly the game he was playing. One night with him and now she was desperate for another fix of him. No. Absolutely not.

"You want more wine?" her date asked.

"I'm not that girl," she responded, and realized she'd meant to answer the voices in her head. Not her date. Crap! He looked at her like she was crazy, and maybe she was. Because she wasn't clingy. Wasn't pining over East. She was...confused. Her body was confused. How could a man have this effect over her? She wanted him, he was hot, fine. She wasn't picking out curtains for their house or anything, but she was thinking about him in a way she shouldn't be.

If only she hadn't had sex with him...

Hadn't experienced passion...

She wouldn't know what she was missing.

But she had.

And she had.

And she knew.

And now I'm crazy, and it's all East's fault.

“More wine?” she said.

“Yes, would you like some more?” her date clarified, and Natalie finally unfastened her eyes from East. Watching him flirt like an idiot with the blonde was getting her nowhere. She’d try harder to focus on the man in front of her. The man she felt zero chemistry with. “Um, yes please. Will you excuse me, though, just for a moment?”

He nodded, and she got up. She needed some fresh air. She had to clear her head and take a breath and convince herself that she was blowing things out of proportion.

Stop. Just stop.

She wound around the outskirts of the restaurant, past the bar, making sure she didn’t look at East, and went out the small hall that led to the back of the restaurant. The only people who typically came out that way were her and Chloe because they owned shops there. It wasn’t a main exit or entrance for customers, so she’d have a second to breathe.

As soon as she pushed the back doors open and the cool fall air hit her, she

felt much better. It was quiet. Dark. And exactly what she needed.

“Stop thinking about him. You don’t care about him.” She paced by the brick wall. “You are not a crazy clingy girl that gets all antsy after one night together.”

Granted, she had no idea what kind of girl she was, since this had never happened to her before. She was so great at giving advice to her friends when they were going

through their dating drama. Seemed simple: go after what you want.

Except she wanted what she couldn't have.

"Careful, darlin'," a familiar voice said as the back door made a scraping sound. "Walking around in the dark and mumbling to yourself will have everyone thinking you're touched in the head."

Natalie turned and found East leaning against the now-closed door, grinning at her like he was somehow seeking victory at her demise.

"You're the one driving me crazy," she said. She should probably play coy. Or not even acknowledge him. But Natalie had never been good at games, and she'd never really dated, or been this flustered in her life, so honesty was looking like the best route to go.

"I drive you crazy?" He took a step toward her. "You're the one who's a pain in my ass."

"I didn't even look at you," she snapped.

"Oh, you looked at me."

She threw her arms up and slapped them back down to her sides. "Real mature, East. So, what, you followed me out here to tell me to stop looking at you? What are you, twelve?"

"No, as you're very aware, I'm a grown man. Or should I remind you?"

She took her own bold step toward him. "Grown man, huh? Is that why you parade Blondie around, with the grand plan to get drunk and get laid?"

The low light of the flickering outside bulb was enough for her to see his eyebrow arch and his grin widen.

“You jealous there, baby?”

“I’m...I don’t know,” she said with a weird hitch in her voice. He’d just called her baby again. The only time he’d done that was when they’d been—

“Listen,” he said. “I didn’t come out here to fight.”

“Then why did you come out here?”

“I wanted to let you know I only agreed to helping you out with this list of bridesmaid duties because Matt didn’t leave me any choice.”

“Oh.” She cocked her head. “So you’re saying you don’t want to help me?”

He glared at her. “I’m saying you and I agreed to keep our distance from each other, and I’m not trying to be a dick by making that harder. Jesus. We can both be adults about this.”

“I’m trying to be an adult about this,” she said confidently. “Unlike you, this is new for me.”

“What’s new for you?” he asked. “Sex?”

“No,” she said quickly. “I mean this whole dating, sleeping together, then...”

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“Seeing the guy you fucked in your shop around town and knowing that kind of thing is never going to happen again?”

“Yeah,” she snapped. “It’d be easier if I just never saw you again.”

“Well, don’t spare my feelings,” he said.

“What feelings?” she countered. “Your ego seems to outweigh any that I can see.”

“Oh, getting feisty?” he said. His demeanor was still joking, but a fleck of something in his eyes made her think he’d actually been cut by her words. So something could actually hurt the guy. At least now she knew he felt something besides lust.

“Just being honest,” she admitted. “Sex changed things between us.”

“Why does it have to change? You were a pain the ass before tonight, and you still are. So why are you extra sassy with me?”

“Same reason you followed me out here,” she said.

“I followed you out here because I care about you. Unlike that guy in there who didn’t even notice you’re gone.”

She raised her brows. Was that East being...perceptive? Caring?

If that were true, it just pissed her off even more.

“I don’t need you thinking you can come after me and save the day. You don’t even have a jacket to offer me. So stop this bullshit excuse. I won’t tell my brother, okay? You don’t have to stalk me to make sure.”

A low growl broke from his chest. “You think that’s what this is about? You think you have me pegged?”

“I know I do,” she said. “Unlike those bimbos you flaunt around, I know you, East. I won’t ruin your precious relationship with my brother, or my family, so go back inside. We’re good. And we’re done.”

“Oh, we’re not good,” he rasped. “And we’re not done.” In two strides, he was face to face with her, gripping the back of her hair. He yanked her face up to meet his gaze. The zing of lust spread fast, like hot lava, from her core to her stomach, and in a millisecond she was drowning, just from his rough hands on her.

“East. What are you doing?”

He pulled her hair. Not too hard. Just hard enough. “See, I can’t go back to my date knowing you’re sitting with that idiot who can’t see what’s right in front of him. Just like that other idiot you were with last night. You have a thing for idiots, baby?”

She stared him down. “Looks like I must.”

He yanked her hair harder, and she gasped, loving the sting. Wanting more. Wanting to pin him down and kiss the hell out of him. Wanting to hate him for making her feel the way she was feeling. Just wanting him.

“Mouthy,” he said. “That’s my problem with you now. Because maybe you’re right. Maybe sex did change something, because I can’t walk into the bar and just see you. Now you know exactly how that mouth of yours feels on my skin.” He pulled her

closer so that he could nip her earlobe. “I also know how you bite my shoulder when you’re close to coming for me.” Another nip along her jaw. “And I know how you gasp once, then moan my name, when I slam deep inside of you.”

She gasped. And she felt his smile against her neck.

“Yeah, just like that,” he said.

The asshole meant for her to react to him. And her body betrayed her by heating up. Playing right into his hands. But damn it, there was no place she’d rather be at the moment. She couldn’t look at him without feeling the desire she’d repressed for twenty-five years. The genie was out of the bottle and couldn’t be put back in.

“Well, I know you now, too,” she said, trying to sound calm, but her body was boiling from the heat of her blood. “I know that you bore easily.” She skimmed her mouth along his and took a deep breath. “I know you like a challenge. And I can tell you right now, Easton Ambrose, I’m never going to be another notch on your bedpost.”

Yeah, they’d already had sex, but that wasn’t the kind of notch she was talking about. And he knew it. She could tell by the look in his eyes that he understood. She wasn’t like his other conquests, would never be the kind of blonde he took to the bar for a few shots followed by a few hours of sex. Nope, not her. She’d slept with him, fine. Wanted to again? Sure. But she wasn’t that girl, because she refused to be.

She was looking for something more than Easton could ever offer. But the passion that came with him was something she couldn’t turn down. Maybe she could get a hit of it and learn, though. Use it to her advantage to really find what she wanted.

“Like I said...” He placed his mouth achingly close to hers as he murmured. “You’re a pain in the ass, not a notch.”

With that, he drove his tongue into her mouth and kissed her hard and deep. All the fight in her revved up, not to push him away, but to pull him closer.

She shoved at his chest until he stumbled back and hit the wall. She was on him in half a second, clawing at his belt while devouring his mouth.

“Yep,” he growled and grabbed her wrists. “You’re feisty and mouthy tonight.” In one swoop, he spun her so her breasts were against the brick wall and he was at her back. “What should we do about that, hmm?”

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“You should stop talking and take some action,” she said around an annoyed breath. An

noyed because her mouth had just been on him, and now she was facing the wall and not his chiseled muscles.

A loud zing echoed through the air and a burst of cool wind hit her skin. East had unzipped her dress completely, and it was now hanging around her like curtains, displaying her entire back and ass.

Just like she thought would never happen. But here she was again, in East’s arms. And that spark of self-confidence came back. Oh yeah, she felt sexy. And ready. For him.

“Take action, huh?” he said and smacked her bottom with an open palm. She moaned. “Like that?” He smacked again, and the loud slap of his hand on her ass made her wet. He gripped her hips and tugged her ass up and closer while his other hand on her neck bent her forward. She braced herself on the wall in front of her, and the brick scratched against her palms while he kicked her feet apart.

“This fucking dress has been taunting me. One quick swipe and you’re all mine,” he said. She smiled, because that’s what she’d thought of the dress when she’d worn it, too. So easy to put on...or take off. And now she was bent over, East at her back, the sound of his belt opening, and she was beyond ready.

“Tell me, baby,” he said, and she heard the rip of a condom wrapper and sound of him moving behind her. “You still annoyed?”

She felt the tip of his cock press against her entrance. But he stilled. Didn't go in, just teased her.

"Yes," she said around gritted teeth. "I'm very, very annoyed."

"Poor thing, sounds rough. What with having to...what was it you said? See me around and know what I felt like inside of you?"

Now he was really pissing her off because he was stalling her pleasure on purpose, making her skin prick with icy hot need so she didn't know if she'd burst into flames or split from the frost.

All she knew was that she needed him. Now.

She slammed her palm against the wall. "Are you being a jackass on purpose? Or just trying to—"

"Trying to make you beg for it," he said, and ran the head of his cock along her folds, back and forth, making her wetter and wetter but never breaching. Just like last time. East liked his control. She was learning that quickly. And now he wanted to hear her say that she wanted him. Well guess what? She wanted to hear him say it first.

"I don't recall what I said. It's all a blur." She pretended to yawn. "Must not have been that memorable."

She felt East still for a moment, and she didn't have to look back to know that zinger had gotten to him and his swollen ego.

"Is that right?" He smacked her ass hard as he slid his cock along her clit. The jolt of the slap and the touch on her clit made her choke on her own breath. He still wasn't going inside her. This was a game of wills now, and they both knew it.

“Maybe I should remind you,” he said.

She wanted to scream yes, but she was so close to having him admit he wanted her. Maybe it was her own ego getting the better of her, but in the spirit of not being “that girl,” she arched her back, rubbed herself along his cock, and said, “I guess that depends on you and how bad you want it.”

With a low groan, he grabbed her hip in one hand and pulled her hair with the other. He lifted her just enough to lean forward and whisper in her ear, “Oh, I want it, baby. And you’re going to give it to me.”

With that, he thrust inside of her.

She yelled to the sky and thanked God she finally had East right where she wanted him.

Deep inside.

“Looks like you want it, too, don’t you?” He thrust in and out, and each time, he pulled on her hair like reins to keep her close and force her to take everything he had to give. “Tell me,” he commanded and tugged on her hair. “Tell me how bad you want it.”

“So bad,” she admitted. Her sheath was already clenching, ready to come from East’s wild pumping, and she couldn’t deny it. Somewhere in her foggy mind, she wondered if he’d needed to hear her admit it. Because the second she did, he fucked her harder, faster, as if all the tension had left and been replaced by wild passion neither of them could deny.

“Tell me again.” There was a harsh rasp and a hint of desperation in his voice. She was too far gone to entertain the idea that East could be desperate for her. But it was a

nice thought.

He reached around and strummed her clit while he pulled her up and bit her neck.

“I want to come,” she said, trying to keep some kind of upper hand. He wanted her to tell him what? That she wanted him? That she was right there? That she wasn’t going anywhere? She didn’t know. All she knew was that she was spinning when it came to this man, and for the first time, she had a hint of a notion that he was clutching to her as if he needed something back. But between the pleasure rising and her core sparking with flecks of release, she could barely form a thought.

“You will come, baby. I will make you come.” He sounded so assured. Granted, she knew she would come. East felt way too good not to. “But I want to hear you say it,” he said. “Tell me who is going to make you come.”

“You are,” she breathed.

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He slapped her ass and surged deep. “Say my name, Natalie.”

She moaned, and he fucked her deeper, quicker, and when the next wave of pleasure raced through her, she screamed his name.

“Easton!”

He growled and continued to thrash her body with hit after hit of raw lust. Her inner walls clamped down on him. He kept taking her, and she was so far beyond the brink that she had to dig her nails into the wall to hold on.

“You’re so fucking good, baby. You’re going to make me come,” he said. And there was something in his words that lifted her up. She was good. She was making him feel good. And suddenly she understood the need to hear it. Why he needed her to say she wanted him, and why she needed him to...

She shivered through her last tremor. “Then say it,” she commanded. “Say my name, Easton.”

His cock hardened further inside her, but he didn’t speak a word.

She clenched her sheath tighter around him. “Say. My. Name.”

“Fuck...Natalie,” he said around a strangled breath, and he came hard, twitching inside of her with every beat of his racing heart.

He pulled out, breathing hard, and Natalie braced herself against the wall. She didn’t

look back to see him, just heard him take care of the condom and what sounded like his pants being fastened. Her bones were Jell-O, and she couldn't move.

Then his hands were on her. He ripped her panties clean off, and she glanced over her shoulder to watch him put them in his pocket.

"You have a date to get to," he said. He knelt down and kissed up the back of her knee to her inner thigh. He gathered the zipper of her dress, trailed it up, and fastened it in place.

She turned to face him, and he steadied her.

"You see," he said, "I was the gentleman who came out to make sure you kept warm."

She glared at him. Just like that, the old East was back. Goaded her and annoyed her. And she was still panting from the orgasm she'd just had.

"You really need to work on shutting up," she said.

He laughed and gave her a wink. "I guess we're done here. See ya in there, darlin'."

With that, he opened the door he'd just fucked her against and walked inside. Like everything and nothing had just happened.

Rage and passion and irritation fueled her.

They were far from done.

"I was starting to think you got lost," East's date said to him as he walked up to the bar next to her. Shit, what was her name? He knew it, but unfortunately all he could

think about was one name: the one he'd groaned out when he'd come inside of Natalie.

Natalie.

"Not too lost," he said and leaned over the bar. But that was a fuckin' lie. He'd just lost his damn mind. Again. Why the hell was Natalie getting to him like this? They fought like siblings, but apparently fucked like champions. He'd never wanted a woman so badly in his life. And most of it stemmed from this need to throttle her...or kiss her.

He'd gone out to check on her, telling himself he wouldn't ever have sex with her again—whoops—and ended up just reaffirming that she was his exact perfect woman and totally wrong type all at the same time.

But the woman had a mouth and set of curves on her that called to him, and he was fast realizing that spanking her perfect ass while forcing his name from her throat could become his new favorite hobby.

He ran a hand through his hair and shook his shoulders out. He was relaxed and tense all at the same time. Because he was a damn fool if he didn't realize what a shit storm this was turning into. If Natalie was looking for someone to date, or even have a relationship with, he was not the guy. She was way, way beyond him in status and what she deserved. He knew that. But he couldn't help himself.

Technically, Matt had asked him to keep an eye on her, and when he'd seen douche date number two tonight, he couldn't help but get instantly annoyed. The guy was clearly not into her, which made no sense. It wasn't that Natalie wasn't hot. She was beyond hot. But she wasn't easy, and guys picked up on that. Douchebag number two was obviously looking for easy. He'd never treat Natalie the way she deserved.

Over my dead fuckin' body...

“Well, I’m glad you’re back. I missed you.” The blonde pouted and stuck out her D cups to accent her words. She was attractive in every sense of the word, but she wasn’t doing it for him. Hell, he’d only agreed to come out tonight because she’d been the only cashier at the liquor store and she’d checked him out with a smile and promise of more if he escorted her to Honey’s after her shift was over. He had planned to just drink alone tonight because he’d been thinking way too much lately about a lot of shit he didn’t need to be thinking about. Like the past. Like his lot in life. Like the fact that everyone else was moving on and he was the same old East.

So yeah, he’d taken the blonde up on her offer to get out, but had no plan to follow through.

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That's when he'd seen Natalie with her douche date and everything shifted. It was game on.

Because whatever the hell he was doing with Natalie it was a game, and he wasn't certain he was winning...

Either way. It made him feel good.

Excited him. Lit him up in a way that didn't leave him with a hollow feeling afterward. When she'd said she couldn't tell he had feelings, something had stung his chest. The thought that he might have hurt her didn't sit right with him. She didn't let him hide or brush shit off or be overly casual. She called him out.

Every. Damn. Time.

And there was that overanalyzing crap he needed to get away from. So he'd had sex with Natalie and felt better, felt good, felt more whole afterward. What the hell did that even mean? It meant he needed to stop being a pansy and get back to doing what he did best: having fun.

Which meant he'd need to be way drunk for that to happen. Because he'd had something beyond fun with Natalie just second ago. Now he needed a bit of numb.

He smiled at the blonde, and she ordered another round of shots. Thank God Chloe wasn't moving as fast these days thanks to the baby. And Gage had mentioned something like "pregnancy brain" once. Whatever affliction that was, East hoped Chloe had it, otherwise he was pretty sure she'd see right through him to the fact that

he'd just had sex with Natalie outside her establishment.

But she just poured the shots, smiled, and waddled back to the other end of the bar. He let out a sigh of relief.

He heard the familiar click-click of those heels and turned to find Natalie walking back to her date, not sparing him a glance. She looked put together, every hair on her head glossy and in its place. No one would ever know he'd just had his fist wrapped in it. She was perfect, and that damn dress...

He watched her walk all the way back to her table and followed that zipper the entire time, knowing what was beneath it. He ran a hand over his pants pocket where her panties were. No one would ever know that the sweet and friendly Natalie St. Clair was really a wild, sexy vixen underneath. She just needed someone to tap into that. And damn did East want to tap that...again.

Shit, he was getting hard just thinking about her. He watched her big eyes look bored with her date and then flash to him. Oh yeah, she saw him. And he saw her. Saw the way she glared with the heat of anger and something else...like the thought of what they'd just done. And judging by the way she was biting the inside of her cheek, she was liking those thoughts.

He would protect Natalie. Always. Even from boring idiot dates she went on.

"Can I get two more shots, please?" East asked Chloe. She poured them without question. Before his date could ask, East picked up two and the blonde picked up the others. "I want to bring a round to my friends." He motioned for her to follow him.

A few steps and a long heated look later, he was standing at Natalie and the douche's table.

“Hi, friend,” he said to her.

She looked like she was ready to smack him. But instead she blinked a few times and gave a tight “Hello.”

“Just thought I’d buy you and your date here a drink,” he said and put the two shots down. He took his own from his date.

“Thanks, man. That’s cool of you,” the douche said.

“Of course,” East said. He clicked his glass with the douche’s and fantasized what punching him in the throat would feel like as he watched him down the shot. “It’s the polite thing to do. Just making sure my friend over here is taken care of.” He winked at Natalie.

“Oh, you two are good friends?” the douche asked.

“Oh yeah,” East said leaning on his heels. “We go way back. In fact, this one time we went to the back of this very bar and—”

“Cheers,” Natalie cut in. She didn’t bother clinking her glass, just downed her shot and set it down.

“Thanks for being so thoughtful, East. Always using that brain of yours,” she said around a slight cough from the hard alcohol.

He smiled. He wouldn’t have outed them, but he wanted to see her reaction, and he’d gotten one.

“So you went to school together?” the douche asked.

“He’s my older brother’s friend,” Natalie said.

“But Natalie and I have always had a special bond. Isn’t that right, darlin’? I take good care of her.”

She just stared silently at him, but the message behind her glare was clearly What the hell are you doing? He wondered. Why was he goading her? Oh right, to get the fire in her eyes going, because damn that fire was good. But he was being an idiot and he knew it. Maybe Natalie had been right. Maybe she had a thing for idiots.

“Thank you for the drink. See you around,” Natalie said dismissing him. She turned her attention to his date and smiled. “And it was nice to meet you...”

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“Cinnamon,” the blonde said. Natalie just smiled at East like she’d caught him. Yeah, his date’s name was Cinnamon, that’s right. And she worked at the liquor store and stripped two towns over on the weekends. So what? Didn’t mean Natalie was right, or that this was “his type” or “notch” or whatever the hell she meant.

“You two have a great night.” Natalie smiled brightly.

East led his date back to the bar, and when he glanced behind him, Natalie wasn’t even looking his way. Whatever the hell was going through his head, it fucking sucked. Because the girl who had always been in the friend zone was now a woman he couldn’t keep his eyes, or his hands, off of.

Now he had to watch her on a date while he entertained Cinnamon...

And he was pretty certain that Natalie had just put him in a different zone altogether.

Chapter Five

“The bachelor party is this weekend, and you’re dropping this on me now?” East said as he paced.

“Look, I’m sorry, but Bridget wanted to—hey, watch the furniture, okay? Mom really likes that sofa.” Matt motioned to said sofa. “Can you just sit down and talk about this without wandering around like a crazy person?”

East sat, reluctantly. Being back in the St. Clair estate where he’d grown up with Matt and Natalie was supremely uncomfortable. Everywhere he looked, all he could see

was Natalie.

“Look, I’ve been planning this bachelor party for you and it’s—” East paused. It’s been the only damn thing to take my mind off how fucking hot your sister looks naked. “I’ve just worked really hard on it, man. You can’t just up and change everything at the last minute. And anyway it’s gonna be epic. Pack a bag because it’s also going to take all weekend.”

“Sorry, no can do,” Matt said. “It’s not that big of deal. Instead of a bachelor party, it’s a joint bachelor-bachelorette party. And it’s right here at Honey’s, and it’ll be great.”

Oh, great. Honey’s. The last thing he needed was a reminder of the last time he’d been there. Oh hell no. He needed to get the hell out of Dodge, and get away from the thought of Natalie.

“You do realize what a bachelor party is, right?” East said, seriously feeling light-headed. “The one thing we’ve talked about since we were teenagers was this kind of party! And now you’re—” He dry heaved in his mouth. “You’re combining the parties?” Yep, he was definitely going to hurl. “I can’t...I can’t even look at you right now,” he said. “Joint? Like...with your future wife in attendance? What happened to you?”

“A lot,” Matt said with confidence. “A lot has happened to me, and all the good stuff is because of Bridget. I don’t need a night to celebrate not being tied down because I want to be. It’s not about the party and crazy benders.”

“It was fun once,” East said.

“Yeah, but it’s not my kind of fun anymore. I’d rather spend my time with Bridget than away from her. I’ve grown up. I want different things now.”

And there it was. That nagging thing in the back of East's mind. Everyone was moving. Trying for more. He was seeking out the same shit, and he'd been fine with it until...

Until Natalie.

"Look, the party will still be great," Matt slapped East's back. "Nothing over the top, just work with Natalie to make the parties cohesive. It'll be fun."

Great. Now East had to try to get that stupid pulse in his head to stop him from thinking too much. Li

ke about the fact that Matt had said, "Work with Natalie." Which was the last thing he wanted to do.

Or was it?

East ran a hand through his hair. This was going to suck. But it might also be a good thing. Planning a party with Natalie would mean he could keep an eye on her and make sure she avoided any more creeps or douchebags. And they'd have to be in close proximity for a couple of days. For the sake of the party, of course. Which was a terrible idea. One he was torn on fighting for and against at the same time.

Jesus, he really needed to stop thinking.

"So no strippers then?" East asked, to change the subject.

"No," Matt said. "I didn't even want those in the first place. And speaking of strippers, I heard you were out with one the other night."

Small town gossip, gotta love it.

It had been a few nights ago, and instead of sealing the deal with Cinnamon, he'd dropped her off and spent the rest of the last seventy-two hours thinking of Natalie and how much she drove him nuts.

"Nothing to report," he said. Which was a lie and a half. Because there was not only a ton to report, it all included Matt's baby sister. Part of him felt like a piece of shit about that, and part of him knew he couldn't walk away from Natalie. The minute he was in her presence he had the need to taste her. For Christ's sake, he'd jacked off four times in two days with her panties in his fist and still couldn't get the woman out of his head.

The wrong woman.

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The one woman that could ruin the only family, the only brother, he'd ever had if he couldn't keep his hands off her.

“Well, maybe you're getting tired of running around,” Matt said in a hopeful tone. “You're a catch, if you'd just let a girl get to know you for longer than a night.”

East could not have this conversation with Matt right now. Especially when he was thinking about Natalie. So he did what he did best: deflected with nonchalant humor.

“Aww, are you flirtin' with me? Bridget ain't gonna like that.”

Matt laughed. “But seriously, man, one day the game is going to get old. That's all I'm saying.”

“Yeah, well, when the day comes that I start talking about joint bachelor-bachelorette parties, I want you to shoot me.”

“Hey, don't be bitchy, it'll be fun. But you have to help.”

Of course he did.

“Natalie is making cupcakes for the event.”

“So?” East asked.

“So, Chloe is making the food, and Natalie is busy trying to make a hundred cupcakes for the party this weekend. Go help her.”

“Have you seen her work? The woman is a perfectionist, and I can’t bake for shit,” East said honestly. He’d always admired Natalie’s talent. She truly was good at whatever she touched, even if she didn’t think so. But there was a reason she made the kind of money she did off baked goods, because they were not only that delicious, they were perfection. Artwork.

Like her thighs smeared with frosting. Or the ripe curves of her breasts in that hot little dress.

There was no way he could go anywhere near Natalie’s cupcake shop again, not after what had happened there last time. He already couldn’t get the damn woman out of his head. Seeing her in her element, where they’d fucked with passionate abandon...nope. Until he knew he could keep his damn hands to himself, staying as far away from the woman as possible was best. Even if she was dating every loser in a twenty-mile radius, it seemed. The gossip mill was running, and it looked like Miss Natalie was on a dating mission from hell.

Not that he cared.

Matt snapped his fingers at him. “Hey! Are you listening? Can you just go see if she needs help? You can stir or something.” He looked at East more seriously. “Just between you and me, she hasn’t been herself the past couple of days. She’s obviously stressed, and all these dates she’s going on aren’t helping.”

“What the hell is up with that, anyway?” East tried to sound casual, even though he already knew the answer.

“Mom,” Matt said as he rolled his eyes. “She’s really pushing Natalie to settle down, and with the wedding coming up she’s been even crazier than usual. But I think there’s more to it. Natalie has been on some kind of mission lately to get...something.”

“You’ve been in Connecticut. How would you know?”

“We talk on the phone. I can tell when my baby sister is struggling. Besides, I keep tabs on the people I love.” Matt looked at East for an extra second, and it was that moment that really punched him in the chest. Matt loved him like family. Was his best friend. His brother. And here he was, lying to his best friend’s face.

East opened his mouth to say something—the truth, maybe? But instead, he said, “Since when has Natalie ever done what people tell her to do? And is having a date really that big of a deal?”

“To my mom? Yeah. And Natalie has always struggled in this area, you know that. It’s not just about a date or dating—my mother’s always cast a long shadow. I think that Nat is just trying in her own way, and I want to be there for her. You should, too. Just give her some support.”

“Support her doing what? Dating idiots?”

“I meant support her attempt at growth. And how do you know they’re idiots?”

“Have any of them stuck around?” East said.

“Good point. Look, I’m not thrilled about my baby sister dating random guys off the internet, but that’s all the more reason why you should be around. You know, keep an eye on her. Make sure she doesn’t get hurt. If anyone’s going to recognize a jerk who’s only in it for sex it’ll be—” Matt stopped abruptly and looked at East.

“Me?” East finished for him.

His friend slapped his shoulder affectionately, but Matt couldn’t hide the truth on his face. “You know what I mean.”

Yeah, he did. And East couldn't blame his buddy. Which was why he could never tell him that he'd slept with his sister, or that he couldn't go help Natalie because all he wanted to do whenever he saw her was rip her clothes off.

"Look, I'd really like your help here," Matt said, delivering a giant middle finger to East's plan of staying away. "Just take care of her, and make sure she's okay."

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With that, East groaned and headed to Natalie's cupcake shop, determined not to fall into her pants again.

After a quick drive and a mental pep talk, East was staring down Natalie's bakery door. The sign out front said Closed, and the blinds were drawn shut. But the smell of vanilla and frosting wafted from inside.

He knocked.

He heard something fall over and a soft curse. Finally, the door opened, and there stood Natalie in her apron and glasses and messy ponytail. She had a smudge of flour on her cheek.

Damn, she looked hot.

"I closed early today so I can get all these cupcakes made by Saturday."

East grinned. "Yep, that's why I'm here, darlin'. To help."

She raised an eyebrow and shoved her glasses up her nose, leaving a smudge of flour behind. God, she was adorable. And that dirty apron couldn't conceal her fantastic curves.

"I've got it covered." Natalie sounded annoyed. East glanced around. It looked like she had almost all of them baked, but not frosted or decorated. Judging by the smell, there was still a chocolate batch in the oven. "Besides, you don't have to do my brother's bidding."

“What makes you think Matt has anything to do with this?”

She went back to stirring a big vat of frosting. “Because I know him. Between him and my mother, they think I can’t walk and chew gum. I told him I’ve got this covered, but of course he didn’t listen to his little baby sister.”

“Maybe I want to help?” he said.

“I don’t need your kind of help,” she said.

“Oh, I think you do,” he came closer. “But I won’t make you admit it.”

“How kind of you.” She didn’t look up from her frosting, but her shoulders relaxed just a bit. Or maybe he was just imagining it.

“Why don’t you just tell me how you fix these and I can do some?” East offered. “Like put on the frosting before you do all the fancy, uh, decorating stuff?” Sure, these weren’t technical terms, but maybe he wasn’t a total waste of space.

“I’m not going all out with these. They’re just going to be your basic cupcakes, but it still takes finesse.” She spared him a glance over her shoulder then gathered a bit of frosting on the spreader and picked up the cupcake.

“Finesse,” he repeated as he watched her delicate hands work the frosting on the mini cake. “I have some skills in the finesse department.”

Natalie snorted.

“What? You disagree?”

“I think you have skill.” She gave him a saucy smile and credit and that made him

want to grin. “But finesse? Sorry, I didn’t feel any of that when I was up against the wall of the bar the other night.”

“That’s because you were busy feeling two orgasms,” he countered. “And anyway, those weren’t my best moves. Just efficient and—judging by your moans—enjoyable. I didn’t have the time or privacy to show you what I can really do.”

She put the cake down and spun to face him. “Oh yeah? I think I have a pretty good idea of what you do, East. And like I said, I’m not a notch. And this,” she motioned between them, “isn’t a good idea. I don’t have the energy or time to fight with you right now.”

“Who said anything about fighting?”

She rolled her eyes. “When don’t we fight?”

“Is that what we’ve been doing? I thought it was foreplay.”

He smiled and she glared. “There you go, making jokes. Casual, confident East. Nothing but swagger. You couldn’t take a funeral seriously.”

If only she knew how much she threatened all that swagger she was calling him out on. Her. Just her. He’d never felt so on edge for a woman before. Never wanted one so badly. Until

Natalie.

“If you’re looking to hurt my feelings, darlin’, you’re getting there. Why don’t you tell me what is actually on your mind instead of giving me hell?”

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Her face stilled, then softened. Oh my God! He'd said something right. At least, he thought so. But that cute, stubborn chin of hers raised a tad.

"Well, you want the truth?" There was the slightest tremble in her voice. Slight. Almost unnoticeable, but like she was gearing up to say something she was a bit insecure about. "You irritate me and you date people like Cinnamon and that's fine. But I'm telling you, I can't..."

He waited, hanging on the silence and hoping she'd tell him...well, anything to give him a clue as to how to make that unsure, sad look on her face go away.

She shook her head. "I just can't deal with this right now on top of everything else."

"I'm not asking you to deal with anything," he offered.

He grabbed her hips gently and lifted her to sit on the counter. She let him.

"East, don't. I can't do this, and I can't afford to wreck cupcakes trying to get you to shut up again."

He smiled and leaned in. "I'm not looking to wreck anything. But I've come to find that this position"—he stepped between her legs and tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear—"makes you have to look me in the eye." He took a gentle taste of her lips. "It takes some of your sass away, and I get some of the..." He kissed her softly again. "Mmm, sweet Natalie."

And for the first time, Natalie didn't look like she wanted to kill him for calling her

sweet. Because she was. But that wasn't a bad thing. Not to him. And judging by her expression and the way her body slowly eased toward him, as if silently begging him to stay near, she believed him.

"Sweet?" she whispered.

He nodded. "You're a lot of things, and I hate to break it to you, baby, but sweet is one of them. And there's not a damn thing wrong with it. Because I've learned there is way more than just sweetness hiding in you. And I have the marks on my back and arms to prove it."

She smiled at him and he felt...warm. Like for the first time, he'd made a woman feel something good, and it had nothing to do with sex.

Not that he wasn't also thinking about sex, because damn, he couldn't not think about it when he was around her. He was already standing close to Natalie but he still felt too far away. He had to be closer, inside her. And when she opened up for him, and he got to experience every angle of her, he was in bliss for the rest of the day.

And he wanted a piece of bliss right now.

"You know, being as sweet as you are, it makes a man wonder where else you taste so sweet."

His hands trailed up her thighs, scrunching up her loose skirt as he went.

"Easton," she whispered. Fuck, he liked the sound of his name from her soft red lips. He liked the way she looked, the way she smelled, the way she felt, and he had to have more. Now.

To hell with the rest. He just needed the kind of sugar only she could offer. And he

was going to take it.

Natalie was in between a cake and a hard place. Literally. And she couldn't bring herself to complain. Yeah, she had been thinking of East way too much, especially after their little outdoor experience the other night.

But East was so good at what he did. Dating. Enjoying life effortlessly. It just came naturally to him, and she found that oddly appealing. But she just wasn't as good at that as he was. And she'd almost just told him so. Almost told him about this weird warmth in her chest that only seemed to come around whenever he did. Almost told him that seeing him with another woman made that warmth turn to a blazing heat. She just didn't know how to deal with this...this...

Unknown?

Yeah, unknown seemed right, since she didn't seem to know a damn thing when it came to East—how to avoid him, how to want, how to handle him. She thought about him, thought about what this all meant, how to stop, how to continue. It was annoying. Like him.

But now, with his softer tone and his hands getting dangerously close to where she needed him the most, she couldn't bring herself to think of anything but those hands, his mouth...just his body on hers. Because he gave her passion, made her feel heat, and that was enough. It was all it'd ever be, and that was fine. She could even use it to her advantage until she found a date she didn't want to punch in the face. A relationship with East was definitely never going to happen—not that she wanted it to—but she could stock up on that passion he offered and try to figure out how to deal with these kinds of emotions so she could better understand them with the next man.

“What are you doing?” she asked with more rasp in her voice than she'd intended.

“Oh, baby, if you don’t know, then you need my help more than I thought.”

She needed to maintain her grip on reality somehow. Needed to stay strong, because deep in the back of her mind she knew he was breaking her down, slowly, like a melting sugar cube.

Sweet...

Just as his fingers skimmed her panties, she grabbed a fist full of his hair and tugged. He faced her with a hiss.

“Like I said,” she murmured, “I don’t need your help.”

“But you want it,” he said.

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Yeah, she did. She wanted a lot of things. Things East seemed to be able to give her. Sex. Passion. Maybe it wasn't a date or a relationship, but she wanted what he was offering. And she was finding it harder and harder to deny that desire.

"I do want it. But there's nothing between us, East."

"There's a lot between us." He thrust his hip against her inner thigh, and she felt his erection press against her.

"Nothing real," she clarified.

She thought for sure he'd come back with a joke about how real he was and thrust again, but he didn't. He didn't joke. Didn't play coy. He looked her in the eyes and said the one thing she wasn't expecting:

"You're right." Something in that admission hit her hard. Truth. They both recognized it and yet...he was still between her thighs. "There's nothing real here. I'm casual and emotionless most of the time, right?"

She opened her mouth to refute that, because he had a lot of emotion. He just kept it hidden. But hadn't she fired a similar comment at him the other night? Told him that if he had feelings she sure as hell couldn't see them?

"East, you're not emotionless—"

"So then there's no reason why I can't have my cake..." He slowly sank to his knees, cutting off her statement. He kissed the inside of her knee, then tossed her legs over

his shoulders. “And eat it, too.”

When his mouth ran along her panties, she moaned.

“I still kind of hate you.” She mostly hated how he made her feel. And loved it. But hated that she loved it.

He nodded. His hair brushed between her thighs and set her skin prickling with heat. “You also kind of like me.”

Maybe she did. He was so confident. And lord knew he brought out the best passion and worst irritation in her.

“Maybe a little...” she said.

“Oh, sweet Natalie,” he said, and moved her panties down her legs and off. “Can’t we just get along?” And then his tongue snaked out and hit her clit in one strong lash.

“Oh! God yes!” she said and tunneled her hands into his hair.

He ran his mouth the entire length of her core, then back down again, slowly sampling every inch of her. He sucked gently on her soft folds. Then his strong arm wrapped around her waist and yanked her closer, and he impaled her on his stiffened, waiting tongue.

“Oh yes!” she cried again, the only word she could think to say. There she was, in her shop with the sexiest, most infuriating man between her thighs, and all she could do was turn into a puddle for him and beg for more.

It was this kind of feeling she didn’t know what to do with. The kind that was addicting. The kind that could get her heart into trouble.

“How’s my finesse

now, baby?” he growled, and then flicked the sensitive bundle of nerves with his tongue.

“Good...so good...”

She was so close. The sides of his face pressed against her thighs, and the soft scratch of his stubble tickled as his jaw moved with every swipe of his tongue. Her skin was alive, and every move he made delivered a fresh jolt of intensity.

He was devouring her.

The man was beyond finesse. He was a master. She felt made of smooth caramel that he warmed up, only to retreat before melting her again and again.

He shoved his tongue deep, then pulled away to suck at her clit and everything in between. The way he kissed along her folds and then ran the tip of his nose along the cleft of her sex sent her into a spiral of crazed need.

She didn’t just feel seen, sexy, or beautiful...she felt worshiped.

A man like East, on his knees before her...

The idea was enough to snap a flare of deep, hard lust from her stomach to her breasts. This wasn’t the quick, wild passion of their other encounters. It was slow, raw passion—consuming and just steady and deep enough to really, really feel it—everything he’d ever made her feel but on another level.

She loved fast and hard and everything else about how Easton fucked her. But this was something else entirely. And she liked it, too.

She shivered as a ping of heat crept from her toes to her ears.

“Mmm, you’re close, baby.” He licked her, with long and purposeful strokes. “And you’re so fuckin’ sweet. Drenching my tongue.” He licked again. “Best damn dessert I’ve ever had.”

He sure knew how to talk, and how to back up that talk with some serious action. She slid her fingers through his hair, gripping the strands harder when he gently nipped at her clit. She wanted to come so bad. For him. Because of him. She wanted to stay in this moment of feeling wanted. Feeling everything except awkward. Because when East was near her, inside of her, she didn’t feel awkward. She felt like a woman.

“You ready to give it up to me?” he said between skilled licks and kisses.

“Yes.” And she was. So, so, ready.

“I want to feel all of it,” he said. His voice was husky with desire and a hint of warning. She didn’t exactly know what he meant. But when he brought his free hand to her opening, she got a pretty good idea what he intended.

He wanted to feel all of her.

“And I want to feel you buck and squirm while you come. Don’t you dare try to stay still.” He circled her entrance and every muscle in her body tightened. She was desperate to be filled, had never felt the need for anything so much in her life. She thought she would die from the wanting. In fact, she was certain. Death. That was the only thing that awaited her unless East let her come.

“I want to hear you say my name. Can’t have you forgetting who’s making you feel this way,” he reminded her.

He slid his finger ever so slightly inside her, and just like he said she would, she squirmed and groaned.

“Trust me,” she breathed. She tried to scoot her hips toward his finger, but he held her firm. “I know who makes me feel this way.”

She looked down and saw his intense eyes gazing up at her.

“Good,” he said. She watched his mouth settle over her clit just as he thrust his finger to the hilt.

“Easton!” She cried out his name, which only made him latch on and suck her harder. He thrust in and out, hitting deep and curling his finger to touch the spot inside that drove her wild.

She held on to his head like it was her lifeline, and her skin pricked with flashes of white heat so intense it felt like ice cubes shattering through her veins.

She came apart.

Her whole body shook so much she thought she’d fall off the counter, but East was right there to hold her. His insistent mouth just kept going, drawing out every last ounce of pleasure until she couldn’t see anything but a flash of light, or hear anything but her heartbeat in her ears.

Shuddering and aching and desperate for more, for less, for everything, her mind was gone and so was her sense of anything around her. Anything but East. She cupped his face and yanked him to his feet and kissed him hard.

She clawed at him and pulled on his belt so hard she almost whipped it clean off. She had to taste him. Had to have more of him while he was hers to have. Because he'd go back out into the world, and so would she, and neither of them belonged to the other. But right then, he was there for the taking, and she had to ride this feeling out for as long as she could.

She wanted to make him feel how he'd just made her feel.

She was frantic, ripping at his jeans as she scooted off the counter. Then it was her turn to hit her knees.

“Whoa, baby, you don't have to—”

“Will you shut up?” she said. She unzipped his jeans and tugged them low on his hips, forcing his hard cock to spring free. “Stop assuming that I don't want to do this... Because I do.”

She leaned in and licked him from base to tip.

“Oh...fuck...yes,” he said with a satisfied moan. He slowly traced his fingers along her face as she took the head into her mouth. But he didn't force, didn't move, just held her, as if he simply wanted to feel her mouth working him over at her own pace.

And she liked that idea. It was a small act that once again made her feel cherished. Like she wasn't just some random woman, she was herself. And she was giving East pleasure—awkward Natalie could make him melt. He'd made such a point of reminding her and himself what they were doing. And despite all the reasons it could and would never work, in that moment she just wanted to enjoy him.

She sank down on him, taking as much of his impressive cock as she could into her throat, then slowly came back up.

On her way down again, she glanced up to gauge his reaction. His eyes were heavy and watching her, and once again she felt seen. So damn seen, in fact, that she almost shook from the intensity of his gaze. And it gave her confidence.

She moved her tongue along the crown of his cock as she watched his face.

He liked that.

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Then she sucked hard at the tip, while moving her tongue...

He really liked that.

Then she sucked and sank down again, faster and faster, sucking harder each time and pushing herself to go just a fraction deeper. His chest heaved, and she watched him grit his teeth. His hands stayed gentle on her face, but his whole body was wrought with tension.

She wondered if he was feeling what she had just felt. That painful need for more. Deeper, harder, more. But he was staying gentle, not pushing or even moving, as if he was concerned, maybe.

Maybe he didn't see her as lover material and was trying to spare her? Because only a few nights ago, he'd smacked her ass and fucked her hard against a wall, and now he was holding back?

Oh hell no.

East had never once let her hold back. And she wouldn't be "Little Natalie" or his buddy's baby sister. Not now. She would show him exactly what she was capable of. Because that way he made her feel? Like she was seen? She wasn't ready to give that up. Not just yet.

He didn't want to move? To reach out? Fine.

With a small smile, she let her lips come to the crown of his cock and linger for just a

second. She took a deep breath, reached out, and gripped his ass with both hands.

With her nails digging into his muscled flesh, she yanked hard and made him fuck her mouth. She moved her head and pulled him deep on every thrust, urging his hips forward to pump into her throat.

“Holy, shit, Natalie...I’m gonna come. Oh God, you have to let me come.”

Oh, she’d let him come. And she was ready for him. Easton wasn’t going to hold out on her, not this time. He tried to pull out, but she didn’t let him, just grabbed him harder and held him close.

With him deep in her mouth, she felt his release hit her tongue, and she drank him down and continued to take him over and over until his groans turned into a yell and his body was shaking. Just like he’d made hers shake.

Serves him right.

When she could tell that he was humming and his pleasure was coming down from the high, she slowed her attention and finally let him fall from her mouth. He looked almost in pain from the intensity. And she knew exactly how that felt.

She rose to stand, faced him and adjusted her clothing. East looked stunned, half asleep and half confused, but one hundred percent blissful.

I put that look on his face...

And she felt pretty proud of that.

“Well, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get back to my cupcakes.” She moved past him and headed toward the back, right as the ding of her oven timer went off for the final

batch of cupcakes. The last thing she'd seen was East with his jeans around his knees and a look of shock on his face.

She couldn't help but feel exceedingly powerful and utterly stupid.

Stupid.

Natalie was going with the feeling of “stupid.”

A few hours ago she'd gone all tasty time with East, and she was pretty sure she'd gotten in deeper than she'd meant to. Which was why she'd nearly burned the last batch of cupcakes and hadn't realized she was almost out of cocoa for the frosting, so she'd had to run out to the store—perfect, another delay. In addition to the chocolate cupcakes, she still had thirty un-frosted vanilla cupcakes waiting to be frosted because once again, East had distracted her. And after that little sexy session of “Let Me Taste Yours” she had a hard time even looking at frosting and not getting hot and bothered.

It was going to be a long night. She juggled the grocery bags of cocoa and cream as she opened the door to her shop. And then she gasped.

“What the hell...” She set the bags down and looked at the large cart full of cupcakes.

Frosted vanilla cupcakes.

All of them were done.

She took out the tray and examined one, then another.

“My God, they're damn near perfect.”

They didn't have any of the flair she usually added, but the lines were smooth, neat and well done. Just like she'd shown...

&nb

sp; Easton.

This was his doing. He must have snuck back in to “help.” And as she looked at all the completed cupcakes, she smiled.

Easton Ambrose cared.

Chapter Six

“You look like a pile of ass,” Dex said as East walked through the door of the S and R office.

“How are you still dating Michelle with compliments like those?” East shot back. Yesterday had been a hell of a day. It had started with him attempting to help Natalie, which led to him helping himself to her delectable body, and ended in the best blow job of his life. And then he’d been dismissed by said baker. But he’d gone back, like the glutton for punishment he was, to frost her cupcakes for her.

Because he’d gone to help, damn it. And if it made her life easier, then he’d follow through at least once.

“First of all, Michelle is my fiancée. I’m not dating her,” Dex said. “And second, Michelle never looks like a pile of ass. You’re...” His buddy looked him over. “You just look like you haven’t slept.”

Honestly, he hadn't much. And it had little to do with the fact that he'd spent a couple hours cursing himself and trying to frost mini cakes the way Natalie would, hoping to hell he was doing an okay job and wondering if she'd hand his ass to him at some point for fucking up.

Because ironically, he really didn't want to fuck up. Not the cupcakes. Not the way he'd been fucking up lately in a lot of other ways.

At this point, though, sleep was a luxury because every damn time he tried, he saw Natalie's face and felt her mouth and Jesus...it was a nightmare.

That woman really was a pain in his ass. And he just kept getting in deeper with his lie to his friend. Which was why he'd shifted his goal of staying away from Natalie to staying away from Matt. Maybe if he didn't have to look him in the eye to lie about sleeping with his sister it'd make it easier. Sure, it didn't make him less of a prick. But easier. Maybe.

So why did he still feel like...what had Dex just said? A pile of ass?

"You excited for tomorrow? I hear the party is going to be awesome," Dex said.

Ah yes, the joint bachelor-bachelorette party. Something East hadn't really helped with at all since it had been taken out of his hands. And apparently Dex had drunk the Kool-Aid, too, about it being "awesome."

Whatever. Matt could have the party Bridget wanted. At this point, the only part that bummed out East was the fact that he couldn't seem to get away from either St. Clair sibling. And tomorrow at the party? Avoiding either one of them would be plain impossible.

"So you like this idea of it being joint, too, huh?" East asked Dex. He set his bag

down and took a seat behind his desk. Normally, they were both in the field, but things had been slow lately, since it was turning into fall. Which was nice that people weren't going missing, but it made for some slow days at the office.

“Yeah, I'm really excited about it. Now I get to bring Michelle, and she's wearing this sexy little dress that has no straps and—”

East held up his hand. “I do not need to know about dresses.” He still couldn't figure out how his best friends were this smitten. Yeah, the women they were with were awesome, but how did that translate? Was East incapable of that level of monogamy and just didn't get it? Maybe he never would.

“Jesus,” East muttered.

“What?” Dex said.

“I just think I'll puke if one more of my friends talks about how this joint thing is a good idea.”

“You're just pissed because you don't have a bestie.”

“What the hell is a bestie?”

“You know, a best friend.”

“I have friends!” East said defensively. “My friends are you and Matt and—hell, even Gage was climbing the ladder.”

“No, man, this is on a different level. Being best friends with your partner in life.”

“I don't get it. Don't you wanna have guy time?” East asked.

“For what? To drink beer and bullshit and count the hours until I get to go home to my hot fiancée?”

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“Ah, yeah!” East argued. “Because drinking and bullshitting is fun.”

“It can be,” Dex said. “But I guess I just like being around Michelle. I’d always rather have her as a part of my world than not.”

“What about couples needing space?” East shot back.

“We have space. I’m not with her now, and it sucks. But it makes it good for when I see her in the evenings.”

“I just don’t get it,” East mumbled.

“That’s because you haven’t found a woman you enjoy. A woman you’d go back to twice. A woman that has stuck around for you.”

That made East’s head snap up. Mostly the last part. Women never stuck around for him, either. He always made damn sure of that. If you got them to leave first, then they couldn’t leave you by surprise, like his mother had. She’d had something better to chase—a drug high.

Ironic, since right now the only time East felt high was when he was near Natalie. But if anything, he was her closeted secret. And she was his quick fix. But for a brief moment, he understood chasing the high. Then he realized that maybe it was all he was. He was good enough for a woman to chase, but not good enough to stick around and make a claim. Just like he’d never, ever, trust a woman with his heart.

That got broken a long time when his mom had cared less about him, and her own

health, than getting that fix.

And now I'm into mommy issues overload.

Which was why he didn't think about this shit.

He just wanted to protect Natalie and make sure she was all right. And based on this affinity she had for dating losers who didn't see what was right in-fucking-front of them, he had his work cut out for him.

Or...he just wanted to interfere before she went home with anyone else.

No, no, he cared. Natalie was the one girl he cared about despite her pain-in-the-ass tendencies, because she was better than everyone else. Better than him. But she was also his best friend's little sister. Talk about "bestie" problems.

Anger rose, and he tried to tamp it down, tried to focus on something else, but Dex's earlier words only ran on repeat in his mind. East never went back to the same woman more than once. Not that he was trying to be a dick, he just didn't really enjoy their company on that level.

Okay, so maybe he was a dick.

Sure, he knew he was a tad closed off when it came to relationships and whatever, but that was because he didn't like anything serious. Just casual. And he was always honest about that.

But he'd gone back to Natalie...

"You look like you're going to barf. Did you get sushi from that truck stop again on your way in today?" Dex asked, frowning.

“No,” East said. “I just thought of something.” Like the fact that he was thinking about Natalie way more than he’d ever thought of anyone else. Or that he was lying to his best friend. Or that the one family that had taken him in was hers, not his. How she was better than him. Or the fact that he’d literally chased after her three times now, and was getting nowhere except deeper into this secret affair. They were fucking with the dynamic of things. And he couldn’t bring himself to stop.

But he didn’t want to hang out with Natalie, and he didn’t want her to be his “bestie”... He just wanted to be around her. Totally different.

“Well, whatever your problem is, I hope you get it figured out, because tomorrow is happening, and you’re the best man so you better smile and bring your A game.”

That was the thing—East always brought his A game, but lately Natalie had been handing him his ass in that department. He was supposed to be the pro at casual, and she was beating him at this game of “not dating.”

She was also the best he’d ever had. Not just in the “not dating” department. But the sex. All of it. She was just...the best. Not something he was admitting out loud even to himself. But damn...he needed to get a grip.

“You’re lecturin

g me about my game?” East said to Dex. “Where’d your game go, buddy? You used to be famous for it.”

Dex just shrugged, not fazed at all. “Game gets old. And when you have a good woman, you don’t need to play it.”

East instantly wanted to strangle his friend. What the hell was up with the world this week? Was everyone conspiring to piss him off? Shove in his face all their love and

domestic bliss?

Just then he caught the faint smell of chocolate, vanilla and...

Natalie!

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“What the hell is that?” he asked, sniffing the air.

Dex looked at him liked he’d lost his damn mind, and maybe he had. But he was sniffing the air like a basset hound, following the scent to a white box on Dex’s desk.

“Cupcakes,” Dex said, opening the box and pulling one out. “Natalie dropped them by earlier. I guess these are the castoffs.”

East frowned and came up to the box, then stopped. The castoffs. Ones he’d frosted, probably. Fuck, he had messed up. He should have known his efforts wouldn’t have been good enough for Natalie. Easton Ambrose, class A fuck-up, can’t even frost a batch of cupcakes. Yep, that sounded about right.

“Here, have one.” Dex held open the box top, and East was almost scared to look. “You look like you could use it.”

This was ridiculous. East was scared of a box of cupcakes. No. He was a strong, tough search and rescue medic for Christ’s sake. But it wasn’t just the box...it was the woman behind the box.

Not that he’d been trying to prove anything...but seeing the “castoff” cupcakes cracked something in his chest he didn’t know he had.

“Fuck it,” he finally said, doing his best to get back to the “casual East” of not caring. So what if Natalie didn’t like his help or his frosting job? She was a professional, and he wasn’t, and what the hell ever.

She could just go—

He glanced down and saw six perfect mini cakes. All chocolate and red velvet. Not a single vanilla.

Vanilla were the only ones he'd frosted, which meant she'd kept them.

“These are the castoffs?” East asked. They looked pristine. The woman was stubborn and a perfectionist. She was also talented as hell, because if these were her “worst work,” he could barely handle her best.

But she kept mine...

Of course, she could have thrown them all in the trash and he wouldn't know, but he couldn't bring himself to believe that. For whatever reason, he felt...happy. Looking at a box of cupcakes, he was hopeful for the first time in...

Ever.

“Don't worry,” Dex said, sliding the box toward East. “She specifically marked one for you.”

East took a better look. Sure enough, inside sat a red velvet cupcake with cream cheese frosting and a little decorative flag stuck on a toothpick that read Easton's Dessert.

She'd thought of him.

Even knew his favorite flavor.

He reached for the cake, and in one bite knew how amazing it was. But somewhere

along the line, he'd started to develop an affinity for vanilla...and the sassy baker that tasted like sugar, spice, and everything wicked.

Chapter Seven

Natalie tugged at the hem of her dress and tried not to fidget. Difficult, considering the entire place was packed for the bachelor-bachelorette party. Chloe had taken care of the food and the location. As if there was ever a doubt there could be a better establishment than Honey's.

And Natalie's display of a hundred hand-crafted cupcakes was proudly presented on its own table in the corner.

She glanced around.

Most of the out-of-towners she didn't recognize seemed to be Connecticut friends of Matt's and Bridget's. Though no other bridesmaids showed up, a lot of other acquaintances did—not to mention the majority of the townspeople between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five. A big party in town was never kept secret for long, and most everyone was a beer or two in.

Natalie should grab a drink. It'd give her something to do with her hands other than stand there like a moron, trying not to look awkward.

Story of my life...

"Hey, sis," Matt said and slung an arm over her shoulder. "Good turnout, huh?"

"Yeah, it is."

"The cakes look great. Thanks for doing that. Bridget loves them."

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“Of course.” She hadn’t really chatted with her future sister-in-law much. Bridget was elegant and sociable and everything her mother had ever wanted in a daughter. All class and sophistication.

“Easton helped,” she said, feeling the need to not only give him credit but to bring up his name. For some reason just saying it made her feel better.

“I’m glad,” Matt said. “Hey, by the way, my buddy Gary is single.” Matt not-so-subtly pointed to Gary and waved. “Want me to call him over here?”

“Please God no,” Natalie said. She adjusted her glasses, wishing she had put in her contacts. They were just annoying, and she’d already been running late. So there she was, in a simple pink dress that she’d gotten from Michelle’s shop a while ago, and her dorky glasses. She was lucky she’d even had time to curl her hair.

She glanced down again at herself and the pink dress. It was made for twirling, dancing. Something it seemed like everyone in town was doing, except Natalie.

“Come on, I bet he’d like you,” Matt pushed.

“You’re turning into Mom,” she said. She knew her brother loved her, but this dating thing was getting old real quick. She felt like a charity case. “Besides, I’m dating guys on my own. I have an extensive list of potential candidates,” she said, thinking about the profile Michelle and Chloe had made for her. It had attracted attention, sure, but not from anyone she cared about.

“Oh yeah? That’s great!”

Natalie nodded, but deep down, she wondered when her family would see her as enough on her own. No man, no high class attitude, no Southern Belle charm. Just her.

Would she ever be enough?

Her answer scared her because she wasn't sure that would ever happen. And to make matters worse, she caught a flash of the bluest eyes she'd ever seen.

East.

He walked in like he didn't have a care in the world and was instantly flooded by back-slaps and handshakes. How was he so effortlessly sociable? How was it so easy for him to blend in, be liked? To be enough?

Because there's a lot to like about East.

"Well, good luck on your date, sis. I still think you should talk to Gary, though." Matt chucked her under the chin like she was frickin' twelve-years-old and took off across the room to talk to East. Her friends were in conversations with the men in their lives, but Chloe waved and Natalie gave a wave back. Someone had to hold up the corner of the room and Natalie decided that would be her job.

"I hear you're the one responsible for these amazing cupcakes," a woman's voice said. Natalie turned to see a sophisticated middle-aged woman in a pantsuit staring her down and devouring her cupcake.

"Yes, ma'am, I am the baker."

The woman nodded. Her graying hair was fastened back in a French braid and the crow's-feet by her eyes wrinkled a bit with a kind smile. "They are delicious! I'm

Leslie McMann, and I have a gourmet catering company in Connecticut. We're doing the wedding here in Beaufort for Matt St. Clair, and these are just fabulous."

"Thank you," Natalie said. "Matt is my brother."

"Oh, how wonderful! Tell me, have you ever considered selling your recipes? I'd be happy to talk business with you. Adding these to my menu would be amazing."

"I just have my shop and have never considered outsourcing..." Natalie said slowly. Because honestly, she never had.

"Well, think about it and let me know. I'd even be happy to steal away the baker herself." With a wink and another hefty bite, the woman wandered back into the crowd and left Natalie with more questions than answers. Natalie could expand? Move to Connecticut, maybe, and be a part of a bigger company? Her first thought was no way. She loved her town and her shop. But as she stared over the crowd of people who didn't even seem to know she was alive, she wondered if maybe getting out of Beaufort was a sound idea.

Maybe...

She looked over the room again. There were so many people that she didn't see East anymore. Not that she was staring. But he'd obviously gotten swallowed by the gaggle of tipsy women flicking their hair and flirting with him.

"Concentrating on something pretty hard over here, darlin'," East said. He sidled up to her and handed her a champagne flute. She glanced at him, but she really wanted to stare. She let a smile slip. He'd brought her a drink, which she happily took. Of course, he hadn't bothered with champagne for himself. From the smell of it, his cocktail glass held pure whiskey.

“Just looking at the crowd,” she said.

He nodded. “Yeah, it’s exhausting.”

She scoffed. “I’m sure you get really tired, with all the women hanging on your every move.”

He faced her full on and laughed. “Now, darlin’, you’re gonna sound jealous if you aren’t careful. And anyway, I am in the presence of the finest woman in here.”

Natalie rolled her eyes and took a drink of her champagne. “Nice line.”

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“Not a line, baby,” he whispered. “You look beautiful. I love your dress.”

That made her bite the inside of her cheek and glance down at herself for the millionth time. It wasn’t skin-tight and sexy. And on her short frame she probably looked more adorable than hot. But the way East was looking at her, the way he said what he did, made her feel his words...

“Thank you,” she said. His eyes stayed on hers. “For everything,” she finished.

He nodded once. “I saw you kept the vanilla cupcakes.”

She lifted an eyebrow and shrugged. “I can’t go tossing aside perfection.”

“My thoughts exactly,” he said.

When she looked back at him, there was a calm seriousness washing over his entire body. She didn’t think she’d ever seen East so...real.

The music switched to something with a strong beat but a bit slower rhythm. He took her glass and set it down on the nearby table with his.

“Dance with me, baby,” he said quietly.

/>

And there it was. Not a question—it was a demand. And he’d called her baby. She knew where his mind was, and hers was right there with him. This was a bad idea.

But she couldn't say no. Couldn't fight. She just wanted to be...twirled.

She nodded and he smiled.

When he led her to the center of the floor where several people were talking, swaying and dancing, he didn't look at her twice until he spun her to face him and clutched her close.

She glanced over his shoulder, then over hers. She caught sight of her brother chatting with people, not noticing she was dancing with Easton. Not that he'd have cared if he had. No reason he should think anything was off. It was crazy to assume it was anything more than a dance between old friends.

Close friends.

Really close.

"What's on your mind?" East asked her. He moved her body with his as he kept perfect time with the music. Of course he was amazing at dancing as well as everything else.

She shrugged, and he pulled her a little closer. "Tell me," he insisted.

"Just how there are a ton of women looking at you right now. Wanting to be where I am."

He shook his head. "They're looking at you," he whispered.

She scoffed. "I'm your buddy's baby sister, remember?"

"Yeah, I do, which is why I can't hold you the way I really want to right now. But it

doesn't change my response."

"They're looking at you, East, not me."

"You're the epitome of what every woman wants to be."

"Have you lost your mind? I'm pretty sure my mom would disagree with you."

He just smiled, and then he did pull her closer. But just for a moment, a silent stolen moment that was theirs, one that no one would be able to recognize. Then they were back to a platonic distance.

But when he twirled her out once, then tugged her back, her smile turned into a full on laugh.

"You make me lose my mind constantly, actually," he said when she was once again at a close stance with him. "You're interesting, Nat. Smart and tough and so damn stubborn and mouthy I want to smack your ass so hard sometimes..." He spun her out again, and again she twirled, feeling her dress float around her. Then he pulled her back, and that smile was still plastered on her face. "Your laugh is the best sound, and your smile takes up your whole face. That's not awkward. That's beautiful, and like it or not..." The music came to an end, and he dipped her down and whispered her in ear, "You're all woman."

When he let her up and everyone clapped for the band, he nodded once and stepped away from her.

"Thank you for the dance," he said and turned to walk away.

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Once again, East was never alone long. Natalie stood there, swallowed up by a crowd that deemed her invisible. His eyes had made her feel anything but.

Maybe it was just a magic power he had with women. Because just then, she didn't feel like Lemon-Anne St. Clair's awkward disappointment of a daughter. She felt...seen. In a way that only he could see her. And even though this was all pretend, and everyone in here knew they were just two friends that argued more than they got along, she had a feeling that she might never feel this seen again.

And that made her chest constrict.

For tonight, she wasn't dating, wasn't her mother's daughter, she was just Natalie. Dancing with the town bachelor. Because he chose her. And because she'd worn the kind of dress that deserved to be twirled.

She'd soak it in for tonight. Tonight might be all she'd ever get of this level of passion, this desire—she knew it was unsustainable and it wasn't real, but she wanted to cling to it while she could.

Just tonight...

She would let herself slip free from the weight of what she wasn't...and just be.

Be herself.

Be in East's arms.

Be happy.

Be enough.

Chapter Eight

East unlocked the front door of his home and ushered Natalie inside.

“So this is the great Easton’s house,” she said with a sly smile.

“You’ve been here several times,” he said, shutting the door behind him.

“Yes, but never at night,” she said. Clearly that third glass of champagne had hit her. She wasn’t drunk, just a touch tipsy. “We all but snuck away from the bachelor-bachelorette party.”

“Naw, it was winding down. And there was no way I was letting a pretty thing like you go home alone.” He winked at her. Great, now he was flirting like an idiot.

“Oh, how many women have walked these halls...” She walked with her arms outstretched, fingers skimming the sides of the hallway as she made her way toward his bedroom.

“None,” he said honestly, walking behind her.

She turned to face him, her face a picture of surprise. “I beg your pardon?” she asked and shoved her glasses up her nose. My God she was fuckin’ adorable, with her pink pouty lips and big eyes staring at him. She was also sexy as hell.

“I’ve never brought a woman to my home before,” he said. And it was the truth.

Natalie looked at him like he'd grown a second head. "How can that be?"

He shrugged. "My home is personal to me," he said honestly. It had never crossed his mind to bring a woman here. He'd had sex in lots of places, public and private. But never once in his home or his bed.

Ever.

Now that he thought about it, it seemed weird.

Good thing he wasn't thinking about it. All he was thinking about was Natalie standing in front of him, looking flushed and sexy and sweet and edible all in one.

"Well, I don't want to infringe on your personal space. I thought we had snuck out of the party to..." She glanced over her shoulder at his bedroom door, and he realized just then what the expression in her eyes was. Uncertainty. He knew because he'd seen it before. He also knew she wasn't overly experienced. Hell, she didn't date much at all, much less men like him. But it was the first time he'd really seen her pause.

"We snuck out and I brought you here because I wanted to get away from everyone else." He tucked a lock of hair behind her ear.

"To have sex?" she clarified.

"Or hang out."

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Shock ran over her face. “Hang out? Like...”

“God, will you stop giving me the third degree? I just wanted to duck out and thought you’d like to come. Is that okay?”

“Well, yeah,” she whispered, and then the sass was back on her face. “But that was before I realized your bed is a virgin.” She tapped on the door handle. “I wouldn’t want to spook you. I bet you still have those old Star Wars sheets, huh?”

He smiled. She really was a brat, and he loved it. “They’re Spiderman sheets, and they’re awesome.”

She laughed, and it was the sweetest sound he’d ever heard. Tonight when he’d held her at Honey’s, it had annoyed him to the point of physical itching that he couldn’t touch her more. But they’d been in public. In front of Matt and all their family and friends. And all he could do was hear Natalie’s laugh and take it in like a friend. Because that’s all he could ever be to her. And at times, he’d been barely that.

He’d seen the look on her face when he’d found her in the corner tonight. Blank. Not sad, not happy, just blank. Like she knew the drill, knew her place, and played that part. But there was so much more to her that not a damn person seemed to realize.

Her laugh alone was life-changing, for Christ’s sakes! It came with a dimple and cute little crinkle by her eye, and fuck, he wanted to make her laugh again. Normally he’d be thinking about other things for her mouth to do. But just then, laughing was top priority.

He realized she wasn't pushing. Wasn't going into his room. She was respecting his privacy, as if knowing this was some kind of step for him. Knowing him.

He came close and, damn, she smelled good. When his nose brushed hers, he reached and opened his door handle.

"Enter at your own risk," he said in his best doom voice.

She smiled, and he felt it just briefly against his lips before she turned and walked in. It was dark, so he flipped on a single lamp on the nightstand by his bed.

"Wow," she said, slowly moving around his room, the hardwood floor creaking beneath her steps. "This is not what I expected."

She looked around and he followed her gaze. He was a pretty simple guy. King-size bed, matching dresser and nightstand, all in dark wood. She ran her hands along the stack of books he had by on his nightstand.

"The Last Battle?" she asked, reading the title of one.

"It's about the Civil War." She smiled and he crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow. "What? I read."

She nodded. "Clearly."

"So what were you expecting?" he asked.

"Honestly? A round rotating bed, leopard print sheets, velvet curtains and—"

"Are you kidding? What else? Was I going to wear a smoking jacket to bed?"

“I was going to say that I’d assumed you’d have a cage with a dancing girl in it but, sure, a smoking jacket completes the look.”

“Such a smart-ass,” he said, and smacked her butt. She grinned and laughed.

“I just...” She started, then trailed off.

“What?”

She looked him dead in the eye, and it was nearly his undoing. “You should let people see the real side of you more often.”

He frowned. “I do.”

She shook her head. “No, you’re all flash and busy and sexy and popular.”

“I’m not seeing the down side here.”

“There’s more to you, East. More than a night.” She looked around his room again then back at him. “More than a lonely room.”

That hit him hard. “I’m never lonely,” he said, but even he didn’t buy it.

She nodded. “Yeah, neither am I.”

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Then they both knew they were lying, to themselves and to each other. And somehow, he didn't feel alone in that moment. More, he only wanted to be in that moment with her.

He cupped her hips and pulled her closer. "I'm not lonely right now," he whispered.

She reached up and wrapped her arms around him and gave him the softest, sweetest kiss he'd ever had.

"Neither am I."

She walked him back until he felt the edge of his bed, and he sat down. She instantly straddled him, her dress floating over his legs. He tunneled his hands in her hair and she reached between them to work his belt open and shimmy his pants just enough to reach in and grab his cock.

"Baby," he whispered, "If you let me get up, I'll get us both undressed."

"Can't. Maybe later. I need you now," she said. She pulled harder and East was all kinds of ready for her. The fact that she needed him so much now made his chest swell with pride. Plus, there was that sweet promise of "later," so for round one, he wasn't complaining on getting inside of her, stat.

He pulled a condom from his pocket and handed it to her. He didn't take his mouth from hers. He just unzipped her dress enough to let the top fall low, exposing her breasts.

She had the largest, firmest, most perfect breasts that he'd ever seen. And thank Christ she wasn't wearing a bra. He latched onto a delicate pink nipple and sucked hard. Her little moan made him clutch her closer. He swirled his tongue along her flesh as she arched into him and put the condom on.

"Don't stop doing that," she said when his mouth continued blissful suction.

He gave a little nip to show his understanding as she pushed aside her panties and gripped his cock to guide it inside of her.

It was his turn to moan now.

Once she was seated on him, taking him all the way in, a deep sigh of fulfillment came from her. She held his head against her chest and rocked back and forth, up and down, riding him like she needed him, just as she'd admitted.

East wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, surging up as she sank down, never letting his mouth trail from her amazing breasts.

"I feel you everywhere," she said and East knew exactly what she meant. Because he felt her everywhere, too. Especially in this tugging spot between his ribs.

"East...East..." Her breath was picking up and her hips were rocking in his lap. He opened his mouth wide and sucked as much of her breasts as he could. He flicked and lapped his tongue and felt her go even wilder on him.

She was riding him like a pro, and his own release was on the brink of rising. He couldn't come until she did, though. He gently bit down on her pouty nipple, and that did it.

Hearing his name from her mouth, he felt her whole body shake with her orgasm as

she used him to take it all. And he was right there to take it and follow her down.

He never let her go. Not with his hands, his cock, or his mouth as his orgasm swept over him and he thrust up hard, letting the lashes of pleasure hit his skin like a whip.

He could barely think, barely register anything but the sexy hellcat in his lap. But he did know one thing. Natalie was slowly killing him with pleasure.

Chapter Nine

East's head was pounding. Even through his closed eyes the sun was blinding him, and he was pissed because the day was trying to wake him from the most incredible dream he'd had.

He reached out to grab his covers and felt the hot, smooth skin of Natalie's perfect ass.

He peeked open an eye and saw her sleeping next to him.

It wasn't a dream.

She was here, she'd stayed, and they'd had an incredible night. And now she was in his home, sleeping in his bed—

Knock, knock, knock.

Shit, that wasn't pounding in his head. It was—

“East? You in there, man? Wake up!” Matt's booming voice rang out from the other side of the front door.

“Shit!” East gently shook Natalie’s hip. “Baby? Wake up, wake up.”

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She sleepily looked up at him, and if he hadn't been so fucking terrified because her brother was on the other side of his front door, he'd have taken an extra-long moment to appreciate how beautiful she was in the morning.

She grumbled at him and, in her true sassy fashion, hit his hand away and tried to pull the covers up.

“Natalie, you have to get up. Your brother is knocking down my door.”

That made those big eyes pop open.

“Are you joking?” she asked.

Just then another round of knocking came, and Natalie got with the program.

“Shit!” she whispered.

“Right!” East agreed.

She looked around and grabbed her dress and her panties and hugged them close. “I guess it's too much to hope you have a back door to this place?”

East shook his head.

Natalie quickly scanned the room and then headed for the closet.

“Natalie—”

She shot him a grumpy look. “Just go get rid of him, okay?”

East helped her in and then he shut the door behind her. Then he felt like a terrible idiot and opened the door to give her a quick smack on her lips with his.

“Are you out of your mind?” she whispered, but then kissed him back quickly before tugging on her dress. “Go answer the door before he breaks it down.”

East nodded quickly and tried to compose himself. He pulled on his discarded jeans from last night and walked through the short hallway into the main room to answer the front door.

“About time,” Matt said. “It’s after ten. Didn’t know you’d be sleeping in.”

“Long night,” East said.

“I bet,” Matt gave him a grin. “I saw you talking with Sara last night.”

East ran a hand through his hair and glanced over his shoulder toward his room. Christ, he hoped Natalie wasn’t hearing this. He’d hooked up with Sara once last year, and he dimly remembered talking to her. But he’d talked with a lot of people and obviously wasn’t looking at anything more with Sara.

“Nah, nothing like that.”

“Well, I was just checking in to see if you could make sure the chairs from Baughman’s rental company get to the garden for the ceremony on Friday. Also, will you pick out the groomsmen gifts? I just have a fuck ton to do. I’m going back to Connecticut for a few days then coming back for the ceremony. Oh, and keep the gifts around a hundred bucks a person.”

“So, I get to buy myself a gift from you?”

“Yeah, basically,” Matt said.

Matt walked to the kitchen, and East realized he had left his bedroom door wide open. That wouldn't have been so bad if A) Matt's precious baby sister wasn't currently stashed in his closet, and B) her glasses weren't right there on his nightstand, totally visible from the front room.

Fuuuuck....

This was why people had bigger houses and longer hallways! But unfortunately for East, he'd never wanted or needed much, and now Matt was a few yards and an easy glance away from seeing Natalie's trademark glasses resting on his nightstand.

East tried to casually make his way to his bedroom door, but every time he took a step in that direction, Matt followed and kept talking about wedding details. East then tried to turn so his focus was away from the room and the tangled sheets he'd just had Natalie in last night. He felt like no matter what he did, though, it was written on his forehead.

A rush of terror and flood of guilt hit him all at the same time. Here he was, staring down his best friend while his best friend's sister was hiding in his closet.

“You all right?” Matt asked.

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“Yeah, why the hell is everyone asking me that lately?”

“Because you look weird.”

“You woke me up, asshole.”

Matt raised his hands. “Cranky. Must be hard having the day off.”

“I still work. I’m teaching the damn CPR class.” Just because the season was a bit slow didn’t mean he wasn’t doing anything. He still had training, equipment checks, and now the damn class.

“Fine, fine. Don’t get snippy because you didn’t get your

beauty sleep.” Matt headed toward the front door. Thank God. “One more thing. Bridget wanted me to kindly remind you that the wedding and reception are classy events.”

“Oh, and I’m not classy enough for her?”

Matt raised an eyebrow. Okay, fine, he wasn’t classy—certainly not classy enough to be at the St. Clair level. But hell, he was house-broken for Christ’s sake.

“We meant more like the best man speech could be classy, too.”

“Oh, so you don’t want me to bring up that one time we went to Mexico and found those women—”

“No.” Matt shot him a stern, no-nonsense look.

“I’m kidding,” East said. “I’ve got it covered.” Of course, he was lying. He had no clue what the hell he was supposed to say at a wedding, much less how to give a speech about love or committing to one person for the rest of your life. He was probably the least qualified person on the planet to talk about any of that. But he couldn’t let his buddy down. “Already working on something great,” he assured Matt.

He made a mental note to try to figure out what the hell he’d say for a speech and added it to his growing list of things to do.

“Oh, and thanks again for looking after Natalie. I saw you dancing with her. It was sweet.”

“It wasn’t a pity thing,” East said, a touch defensive. He didn’t like the way Matt sounded like he was doing her some kind of favor. If anything, Natalie was too good for him, and her even entertaining the thought of him was more than he’d ever hoped possible.

Didn’t change the fact that he couldn’t be the guy she needed, or would even want long term.

“I know,” Matt said. “I just think it’s nice she can count on you. I wish I was around more, but you’re doing a good job keeping an eye on her, especially with all this dating stuff.”

“Yep,” East said, feeling like a special kind of loser himself.

“Thanks, man. You know she’s really special.” Matt slapped his arm and walked out. East shut the door and locked it behind him. He waited until Matt’s truck pulled out of the driveway before he headed back to his room and opened the closet.

Natalie was standing there in her wrinkly dress and messy hair, her big eyes staring at him.

“Well, that was...” She glanced around. She stepped from the closet and went straight toward her glasses and picked them up.

“I’m so sorry. I would never hide you in a closet on purpose,” East said. And it was dumbest thing he could think of. But what else was he supposed to say?

“Sure, it was all an accident,” Natalie said. There was a bite to her words. East felt like he’d done something wrong, but it wasn’t like he’d shoved her in there. She’d been hustling in there before he’d even thought to hide her. But any trace of the dynamic they’d had last night was gone. All that remained was the confrontation of what was real. And what was real was that Natalie had just been stashed in his closet like a secret...because she was. For both their sakes.

Which was something they both knew and understood. So why did he feel this shitty?

“I’m going to get going,” she said.

“Well, let me give you a ride,” he said.

“I’m good. The shop is only a few blocks away.”

“Natalie, I’m not going to let you walk out there looking like—”

Her eyes snapped to his, and that made his voice cut off real quick.

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“Like what?” she challenged. “Like I’m coming from a night at a man’s house with my panties in my purse?”

He opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. So he tried again.

Then once more.

Finally, words decided to come.

“Not exactly,” he said. But this was Natalie. He couldn’t let her walk out of here, right? He was supposed to protect her from jerks, not be the jerk whose house she left wearing last night’s dress and makeup. He was in way over his head here. This was why he’d never had a woman to his home before.

She just blew a lock of hair out of her face and shoved her glasses up her nose and ran her hands over her dress.

“Well, don’t worry, East. Walk of shame or not, it’s nothing I can’t handle.”

That was like a punch to the gut. She marched to the front door and shut it a little harder than usual behind her. He couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d done the only he thing he could have in the moment...but why did it still feel like the exact wrong thing to do?

Chapter Ten

Natalie walked into Michelle’s boutique. It had been twenty-four hours and two long

showers since she'd seen East the other night, and she needed a girl fix.

"Hey! I was wondering when I was going to see you," Michelle said happily as she walked through the door, and came around the counter to hug her. "You left so quick at the party the other night we didn't get a chance to chat."

"Sorry. I was just tired," Natalie said.

"I bet! Those cupcakes were amazing though! Beautiful work. And not a single one left over."

"Thanks." Natalie flicked through a few items on the rack.

"You looking for something particular?"

As Michelle spoke, Natalie caught sight of the back table full of what looked to be a new lingerie collection.

"Is this your new line?" she asked her friend. Michelle ran not only the hottest boutique in town, but also designed her own line of lingerie. It was just starting up, but it was already proving to be both fun and lucrative for her friend.

Michelle beamed with pride. "Yeah, just in time for fall! The dark red is my favorite."

Natalie agreed. She held up the bra and matching panties, which were all hand-stitched lace and silk.

"For your date?" Michelle asked and wiggled her eyebrows lasciviously. Ha, if only she knew. East was far from a date, yet he was on her mind all the time. She'd always seen him as another big brother to boss her around, and it was hard to reconcile that

feeling of affection and frustration with the pure animal desire she seemed to melt into whenever he was physically near. It was so annoying. And the more she tried to stop thinking about him, the more she found her thoughts wandering back to that night in her cupcake shop...or the night at the back of the bar...or the night he'd brought her—her, awkward ugly-duckling Natalie—to his home.

And then she'd ended up in the closet. That made her angry, but she didn't really have a reason to be. East hadn't done anything wrong the other night or the other morning when she'd hid from her brother. But it felt...bad.

So was this her being dramatic about something that she didn't need to be dramatic about? Was this part of dating? No, because she wasn't dating East. They were a secret. Not even that—they were some sort of negative anomaly that kept bouncing back to the same bad decision to have sex and then feel crappy afterward.

It was a swing. Back and forth, never changing, nowhere to go.

Have sex, say “never again,” then have sex, then “never again.”

On and on.

Still, Natalie wanted to talk to someone so much. Because, while she knew all the reasons why what she and East were doing was a mistake, she kept going back. And what was worse, every time she gave in, she felt more deeply. And to go from being in his arms and his bed—apparently a place no other woman had been—only to then be in his closet, felt...bad.

Like that tight-in-the-chest, sore-in-the-brain, ache-in-her-stomach kind of bad.

“Yeah,” Michelle said, and Natalie realized she hadn't answered her friend's original question. “Those are definitely date-type panties you're looking at.”

“Something like that.” Natalie glanced at the garter belt and absently ran her finger along the silk. Michelle came to stand by her.

“I know it’s hard,” Michelle said, her voice soft. “Dating, men, expectations from others...it’s just hard. But some things you don’t have to hide. If you ever want to talk about anything, I’m here.”

Natalie glanced at he

r friend with a grateful smile, but then her words sank in. Did Michelle know about her secret relationship—or whatever it was—with East? Or was she being paranoid?

“What would I want to talk about?” Natalie asked with her best casual voice, probing to see if Michelle alluded to knowing her secret.

“Anything,” she said. “I do have expertise in dating the bad boy, you know.” She winked. “But seriously, sometimes secrets are hard to carry on your own. I just want you happy, and I’m here for you. That’s all.”

Crap...she’d said the word “secret.” Maybe she did know?

No, there was no way. East wouldn’t tell her, and Natalie hadn’t even mentioned him to anyone except in the same way she always had: with annoyance.

Whether Michelle knew about her personal life or not, she did know about what it felt like to fight for yourself against expectations. And Natalie must have been wearing her emotions on her face, because Michelle gave her a hug. Maybe she should confide in her friend. Discreetly, of course.

“Thank you,” Natalie said. “You ever feel like you’re trying to find something and just can’t quite get your hands on it?”

Michelle nodded. “I think you’re trying to find yourself and I think you’re doing great. You’ve really put yourself out there these past couple weeks. Whatever is

helping you gain the confidence I've seen come out in you, keep it up. Because you deserve to feel that self assurance."

Natalie thought of East, how he looked at her and how he made her feel seen. She loved that—like butterflies fluttered beneath her skin.

Then I go into the closet.

She shook that notion off. Michelle was right. She needed to stick to her plan to find herself and what she wanted. And she needed to survive the wedding and get her mother off her back.

"You know, even wearing something like this under your clothes can make a woman feel sexier. You don't have to even show it. Just knowing you're wearing it provides that hidden sense of confidence," Michelle said as she gestured to the red lace set.

Natalie could see the point in that. Besides, she needed to feel sexy.

She'd gotten a different glimpse of East the other night. She'd seen past the smart attitude and right to the soul of him, and it connected to her on a level she hadn't been ready for. While she'd known him most of her life, she was learning that there was a special side of himself he kept hidden, and she really wanted to see more of it.

"I think I'll get these," Natalie said.

"Great!" Michelle said and picked up the set. "And you know what, consider this a gift."

"No," Natalie protested. "I'm going to pay you."

"Not a chance," Michelle said. She walked toward the register and started wrapping

up the lingerie. She was effortlessly graceful and beautiful. Natalie didn't want to know what kind of lingerie that girl was always rocking. But she had a feeling she rocked it regularly.

"So..." Michelle asked as she finished wrapping. "Who is it tonight?"

Natalie raised a brow when she realized what Michelle was asking. "Oh, from the profile. Ah...I think his name is Will. He's from Charlotte."

"Oh," Michelle said with a wink as she folded the red panties in tissue paper. "Well, it'll be a good night, then."

Yeah, too bad all Natalie could think about was a certain search and rescue medic.

She glanced around. "Why does it feel slow in here today?" she asked Michelle. Normally, there were at least a handful of women browsing. Michelle had struggled with her business the first few months after she'd moved here, but had really come into her own the past year, and there was always a crowd at her shop.

"I don't know where everyone is today. Just quiet I guess."

Natalie nodded. "So, you getting excited for Matt's wedding?"

Michelle nodded. "I love meeting new people, and Dex cleans up real nice, so I'm looking forward to that. Although, I gotta say, I like the dirty thing he has going on, too."

Natalie just laughed. Michelle was so ridiculously in love, and it was great. She was happy for her friends. Part of her wanted that—to be so crazy about someone you couldn't see straight. East just made her crazy, and the only reason she couldn't see straight was because her glasses came off when they were having sex. Not exactly the

same thing.

“Dex mentioned you were taking the big S and R van to transport the cupcakes? I think it’s so sweet you’re making more for the wedding. Seriously, everyone loved them at the party the other day.”

“Thanks.” Matt had called her yesterday to ask if Natalie would make more for the wedding, since they’d been a hit with Bridget and everyone else. “Yeah, I need the van to move all of them, and was going to borrow the S and R one, since it has enough room for that many cupcakes.”

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“It’s down at the search and rescue office, but I think I heard that East was using it to transport groomsmen gifts or something.”

“What?” Natalie exclaimed. “What the hell is he getting them all?”

“Knowing East? They could all be getting ponies.”

Natalie let out an annoyed breath. She’d have to face this because she needed the van to move all the cupcakes without messing them up, and the surface area in that vehicle was perfect.

She took her bag of red lace and silk and thanked her friend. It would appear that she had one more stop to make before she could be done with today.

East let out a long breath and looked over the crowd. The place was packed for CPR class today. It was pretty basic, a couple of straightforward hours, but a ton of people had shown up. All of whom were women.

He set up his demonstration as everyone was chatting and finding a seat. The door opened once more, and he didn’t know if there was room for anyone else. But when he saw it was Natalie, he did a double take and smiled.

She was a brunette in a sea of blondes...or a sweet, pure face in a sea of heavy makeup. Whatever. Metaphors weren’t his specialty. But she was lovely. So fresh and honest-to-god pretty it made his chest twitch.

She stalled, looked around, then her eyes were back on him. For a moment she looked

uncomfortable, but she walked toward him and pushed her glasses up her nose, her mouth set in a determined line.

Ah hell, he knew that look. She was going to chew him out about something.

“I don’t mean to interrupt—” she said as she reached him.

“You’re not,” he cut in. He glanced at the table in front of him and the bag of medic gear he was prepping. “Haven’t even started the class yet. You’re just in time.”

“Not here for that. I’m here because there’s a rumor you’re taking the S and R van the day of the wedding?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, I already reserved it. I need it for cupcakes.”

“Reserved?” he asked. “I work for S and R and last time I checked, we weren’t Enterprise.”

She glared at him. Damn, he loved her fire. “It’s for the wedding,” she said in a low tone.

“My reasons are, too. I have the groomsmen’s gifts to transport.”

“And you need a whole van?”

“Well, five kegerators is a lot.”

She closed her eyes and ran her fingertips along her temple. “You got everyone kegs?”

“Kegerators, very different. It’s the gift that keeps on giving.”

She shook her head and glanced around. People were still bustling to find their seats but it was quieting down.

“Look,” she whispered. “I need the van. So just figure out something else for your kegs.”

“Why don’t you figure out something else?”

“Because I don’t know anyone with a car that big. And I can’t put the cupcakes in the back of a truck, for Christ’s sake.”

“Sounds like you’re in a pickle,” he said.

She was pissed, but he couldn’t say he wasn’t enjoying poking at her a little. She was damn sexy when she was riled up. “Why don’t you stay for the CPR class, and we’ll talk after?” he offered.

“I don’t need a CPR class, and I think you already have the entire female population of Beaufort here, so I’m good.”

He didn’t miss how she said those last words and wondered if she was a tad jealous. Not that he wanted her to be...exactly. He just liked the idea that she cared. What he didn’t like was how she couldn’t see she was so far beyond all these women.

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“You want the van or not?” he said. He knew how to get Natalie, and that was by irritating her. But it got her to huff and stay, so he’d take it as a win.

“You’re a prick,” she muttered.

“You haven’t had any complaints,” he countered, under his breath but loud enough for her to hear. That got her to glare harder. But she did find a seat and sit down, so he was pretty pleased with himself. He turned his attention to the class.

“Okay, everyone. We’re going to get started,” he said in an authoritative tone.

He walked along the front of the room the way he’d seen professors do it in the movies.

“Normally, I have my CPR dummy to show you some basic skills on, but I thought today I could demonstrate on a real woman. That is, if I have a volunteer?”

Everyone’s hand shot in the air. Everyone but one.

“Natalie,” he called out. She was slouched in her chair, clearly hating life and likely hating him even more. She looked like she was ready to kill him. “Can you come up here, please?”

She made her way back to the front of the room to join him, and he couldn’t help but feel like he’d won a small victory. Or like she’d chop off his nuts at the soonest opportunity. It was a toss-up.

“Lie down right here,” he said and gestured to the long table.

“Are you kidding me right now?” she snapped.

“No, ma’am,” he said. “Go ahead and lie down. Don’t worry, this won’t hurt a bit.”

He winked, she snarled. But she was keeping her composure enough for him to know that he would so pay for this later. And he was looking forward to that. So far when he’d managed to get Natalie’s claws out, he’d ended up having some of the best nights of his life.

He also knew that everyone was watching, and she wouldn’t make a scene and give away that they were...whatever the hell they were. Intimate?

She went to climb on the table. And he might have helped her, just a little, by cupping her butt real q

uick. But she laid down on her back, and he arranged her arms at her side.

“I’m going to kill you,” she whispered so only he could hear, just as he took his place to address the class while standing over her.

“Looking forward to it, baby,” he whispered back.

Natalie was going to kill him. There she was, lying on a damn table in front of every damn woman in town, and East was standing over her, controlling everything.

“Now,” East said as he faced the class. He stood behind the table and seemed to tower over Natalie. “First thing you want to do is check for a pulse.”

He put two fingers on her neck, and just that small touch made her take a quick

breath. Damn him and his touch. Damn him and his smell, spicy and woodsy and all manly. And all she could do was lie there and try not to let on how much this man affected her. She was ready to wring his neck and kiss him all at the same time.

She was on display. He'd picked on her on purpose. This was his way of annoying her. The way he'd called her out in front of all these people bugged her. She couldn't help worrying that someone would notice...whatever it was this thing was between them. She wasn't delusional enough to think what they had was anything special, but she hadn't expected him to be so casual about putting her up on display. Her mother had tried that the whole time she was growing up. It hadn't turned out well then, and it sure as hell wasn't going to turn out well now.

East went on to discuss various things about CPR, and she tried to follow his voice, but all she could see were glimpses of his hard abs straining against his T-shirt, and flashes of his black belt.

She squeezed her thighs together and focused on hating him instead. Hating that he had this effect on her body. Hating that she knew exactly how he could move those hips as he entered her. Hating that she knew what those abs felt like against her palms when she ran them along his skin.

She was so lost in her own thoughts that she was surprised when she felt East's hand cup her throat.

"You want to tilt the head back," he said, and gently raised her chin so that it was pointed at the ceiling. His eyes met hers. "You want to make sure nothing is obstructing the mouth." He gently ran his fingertip along her lips, and she parted them slightly. "Then you want to blow and start the count."

He leaned in and place his lips on hers and gently blew as his hand trailed down just between her breasts. Her stupid tongue betrayed her and sought out just a taste of

him. He clearly noticed, because he winked at her right as he pulled away.

“One, two, three...” he counted, and started pumping her chest lightly. “When you do this in a real-world situation, you’ve got to get really forceful with it. But Miss St. Clair here is a delicate thing, so I wouldn’t want to give her something she can’t handle,” East said to the class as he kept his hands on her.

“Then you do another breath.” He bent down, and his mouth was back on hers, and between that and the feel of his hands she was going to lose her mind. But she forced herself to stay still. Only this time, it was his tongue that took a brief foray of her mouth before pulling away.

Not fair! His insolence pissed her right off. She could see his dumb grin as he continued his count. He was getting to her, and he knew it as well as she did. Damn that dumb, earth-shatteringly sexy grin.

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Finally, he addressed the class again. “Once your victim comes back to life, they will likely be full of gratitude and want to thank you in any way possible...”

And that was her cue to sit up. “Or they’ll run far and fast from the trauma they just experienced,” she said.

She hopped down off the table, and East just said, “Let’s give a hand for the lovely victim.”

Everyone clapped, and Natalie tried to tamp down the growing heat in her stomach as she walked back to her seat. She felt flushed with desire and hated that his hands and lips had been enough to raise that in her. She was angry at him for toying with her but desperately wanted more.

Her phone buzzed silently, and she checked the text. It was from Leslie McMann, the caterer she’d met at the party at Honey’s.

I hope you don’t mind, I got your number from your brother. Have you given any thought to my offer? I’d be happy to buy your recipe and brand your cupcakes. I’d also be happy to hire you on as my personal pastry chef. Look forward to hearing from you!

Natalie took a deep breath. It was the only offer she’d gotten lately that sounded worthwhile. Sure, it was terrifying and would be a huge change, but it was something to think about. Judging by the god-awful dates she’d been on in the last couple of weeks, she didn’t really have anything here worth staying for. She glanced at the front of the room, where East was. He’d gotten one thing right: she’d played the part

of the victim well. It was time she took the power back and reminded him that she was not another Easton Ambrose plaything.

Chapter Eleven

East swigged from the carton of orange juice, not caring to use a glass. It had been a hell of an afternoon. After the CPR class the other day, Natalie had slipped out, and he hadn't talked to her since. He felt kind of bad about that. Time was winding down, the wedding was around the corner, and Natalie was still on his mind.

He'd heard she still had a date lined up every damn night. But so far, no word of any of them sticking. He was relieved about that. He couldn't exactly justify crashing every date she went out on, but he didn't want her to get hurt.

And maybe he didn't want her with anyone else, either.

He ran a forearm over his brow to clear some of the sweat from the workout he'd just finished. He'd hoped a long run and an endorphin boost would clear his head, but here he was, still fantasizing about Natalie and her tongue tasting him at the CPR class. He hadn't meant to embarrass her at the class. In that moment he'd just wanted to be near her, in public, and for some reason he hadn't been able to stop himself.

Stupid.

He was basically inviting problems, same as he'd done with going to her cupcake shop, same as he'd done with dancing with her at the party, same as he'd done the other day at the CPR class.

He kept putting them in positions to get caught. To get looked at funny. To get questioned.

What the hell did he think he was doing? This was a secret he wasn't doing a great job of keeping, but whenever she came around, he had a habit of not thinking straight.

He put the orange juice back just as there was a knock on his front door. He'd hadn't bothered to shower yet, or even put a shirt on, but it was likely just Matt back in town and coming to give him more wedding duties.

He opened the door. It wasn't Matt. It was Natalie.

"Hey there, darlin'," he said, trying to sound casual. "Pleasure to see you."

She raised her chin and walked past him. She was looking extra sexy, and there was a confidence to her he couldn't quite place. But he liked it.

"I came to get the keys for the S and R van," she said plainly.

"Well, come in, sit down, make yourself at home," he said.

"That little stunt you pulled the other at the CPR class was—"

"Awesome," he cut in.

"Ridiculous."

He winked. "Your tongue didn't seem to think so."

"Oh, please. I was trying to push you away."

"With your mouth?"

"Yeah, since that was the only thing you put on me."

“I can put more on you, baby. Just say the word. Or I can put my mouth on you in different places. Again, all I need is a word.”

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“Oh, I have a word for you. It starts with ‘jack’ and ends with ‘ass.’”

“Feisty tonight?”

She crossed her arms and the gap in her sweater showed a red bra strap. He instantly wondered what kind of lace she was hiding, and if the panties matched. His fingers itched to tear them off her.

“You have a date tonight?” he asked. It was getting down to the wire with the wedding, so he was sure Natali

e had some kind of set up going on to find a guy to be her date. Which he hated. Not that he cared. Okay, he cared. But there was jack shit he could do about it, since he couldn’t obviously take her. Or date her. Or even be in the same realm as good enough for her.

But now all he could think about was that red bra and her date and the fact that if that idiot got to see it and he didn’t, he might have a stroke.

“I have drinks later,” she said.

So she did have someone lined up. A boiling rage threatened to spill over but he turned it down.

“Well, then you may want to tell him you’ll be late, because I don’t know where the keys are. It’ll take me a few hours to find them.”

She frowned at him.

“Unless you want to help me look?” he offered.

“Fine,” she said.

“Great, you start looking in my bedroom. Particularly the bed.” She rolled her eyes, and he shot her a grin. “Come on, that was a good one.”

“Is that all it takes to get women into your bed?”

“I don’t know. You tell me. You’re the only one who’s been there,” he said. Suddenly there was nothing but seriousness in his voice.

That got her eyes to soften, and he took the moment to cup her hips and tug her closer. She still kept her arms crossed. Fine by him, because he’d also been serious when talking about using his mouth on her.

“I thought about you today,” he said.

She frowned. “Why?”

He shrugged. “Because you’re a nice thought.”

She gave a small laugh. She reached one of her hands toward his chest and slowly traced a line along his pec with her finger. He was really happy he hadn’t put a shirt on now because feeling her touch, no matter how brief, on his skin was a slice of fuckin’ awesome.

“Did you think about why you keep testing our boundaries in public?” she asked.

“Actually, yeah, a little,” he admitted. “Among other thoughts. But I guess you come around and make it hard...” He paused for dramatic effect. “To focus.”

She gave a little scoff that sounded more like a laugh. “Well, you make things difficult.” She ran her finger up and down again then glanced at his mouth. “What other things did you think about?” she asked softly.

Honestly? He thought about her in everything. And for no particular reason nor anything specific. He thought of her smile, her eyes. Wondered what she was wearing and if she was baking. Tried to picture her in her life, even though he knew he could never be a part of it in the way he wanted. Pictured her in his bed...waking up with her. That could never happen, though. He’d be run out of town because Beaufort wasn’t big enough for the both of them. Lemon-Anne would disown him—heck, knowing her stern standards, she might disown Natalie, too, for having scandalized the family name. And he’d lose everything—his friends, the only family he knew... But he didn’t want to focus on that now. He only wanted Natalie.

But he couldn’t tell her that. That kind of pressure would be so unfair. And he didn’t do relationships. He couldn’t. So instead he went with—

“I thought of your taste. The sweet vanilla.” She glanced up at him, and he ran his finger under her chin. “Do you think of me?”

“I thought of how I need the van keys,” she said.

He laughed. She wasn’t pulling any punches, and he kind of liked it. It kept his ego in check. But then she blinked twice and admitted, “I thought of your skin.”

“My skin, huh?”

She nodded. “You have ridiculously soft skin.”

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That made him frown. “Um, by soft skin, clearly you mean rugged, manly skin.” He held up his hands and waved his palms. “Calluses.”

She just laughed and placed her whole hand on his chest and rubbed slowly up, then back down. “Sorry, buttercup, but you’re a softy.”

“Nope, no way,” he said, and flexed his pec for effect while her palm was resting over it.

“Yep,” she argued. “Your hands may be rough, but your skin, like right here”—she placed her hand over his heart—“is super, super, soft.”

“I can guarantee there’s at least one hard thing about me,” he teased.

She didn’t miss a beat. “Oh, I know. You’re hard everywhere,” she agreed. Her hand trailed lower until she reached the waistline of his shorts. “Especially your...” He took a deep breath, but right when he thought she’d grab his straining cock, she said, “Head.”

She pulled away and started to walk toward the door.

What the hell? She’d gotten him worked up on purpose and was now walking away?

“Whoa, that’s pretty rich coming from the stubbornest woman I know,” he called.

“You have a hard head, Easton. That’s not my opinion, that’s a fact. And I’m not stubborn, I’m just usually right. There’s a difference.”

“Where the hell are you going?”

“Home, to get ready for my date. Call me when you find the van keys.”

She went to open his front door, but he was on her in two seconds flat and kept her inside. He whipped her around and pushed her back against the wall.

“You’re toying with me, baby. And that’s not nice.”

“Just like you toyed with me at that CPR class?”

“I did not...” Okay, he did. A little. But not to embarrass her. He did it to be near her. “I just wanted you for a second.”

“In public? With all the women staring?”

“Yes!” he admitted. Because deep down, he wanted everyone to see him with a woman like Natalie, to pretend, for a single stolen moment in time, that he deserved a woman like her.

“I want you, Natalie.”

She shoved at his chest and lifted her leg to his hip to keep him close at the same time. She was hot and ready, and he was, too.

“That’s an awful thing to say,” she snapped.

“That I want you? Jesus, woman, you’re so damn frustrating. You don’t want me to want you?”

“No! And I don’t want to want you.”

“But you do,” he growled. He cupped her thigh and tugged her so close that her skirt hiked up, and he pressed his hard cock against her core. “Admit it. You want me.”

“I do,” she said. “But I also hate it. And this is just another moment, and nothing can come from it. So what’s the point?”

Good question. He had his best friend, his family, and Natalie herself on the line, and all for what?

He looked her dead in the eye and knew the truth right then. A small taste of her was better than nothing. And the risk, he was realizing, was like chasing the drug he couldn’t have. It didn’t change the fact that he’d keep chasing, consequences and all.

“I’ll take the moment over nothing,” he admitted. He felt a little shocked by it. He glanced down and saw a flash of red lace between her legs and thanked whatever God was listening.

“I’ll take the moment, too,” she said, and pulled him close for a kiss. He was gone for her. He didn’t think of anything but needing to be inside her. Reaching between them, he ran his thumb along her panties and felt a small square. It almost felt like a...

“Condom?” he asked, grabbing the tiny package from her panty line. “You totally played me. You were ready and wanting me the whole time.”

She shrugged. “Maybe.”

Oh, she was good. She came in here with clear intentions, then threatened to walk out on him, only so he could chase her.

“You’re going to pay for that sneaky trick, baby.”

“I hope so.” She smiled.

With that, he crushed her with a punishing kiss and pressed her further into the door.

“So you were ready to be fucked wherever I chased you to, huh?” he said. He tugged off her sweater then returned to her mouth.

“Yes,” she said with no shame. And he loved it. She pulled on his shorts, and his cock sprang free, the throbbing head hitting the inside of her thigh.

“So sure I’d come after you?” he asked. He tugged down the thin red silk of her bra until it bunched under the soft, pale mounds of her breasts. He bent to taste the creamy cleavage and then sucked gently on a pink peak.

“No,” she whispered.

He stopped, but she held him close.

“No, I wasn’t sure you’d come after me,” she said with a breathy tremble in her voice. East looked at her. There was something very vulnerable in those wide eyes of

hers. He just shook his head. He didn't know what to say or how to tell her that of-fucking-course he'd always come after her.

Instead, he kissed her hard, showing her, making her feel how much he wanted her. How she made him this crazed. How she made him chase.

How she made him do the one thing he'd never done before: want more.

She wrapped her arms around him, and he worked the condom onto his erection as he kissed her mouth, her neck, her jaw.

"Please," she whispered in his ear. "I need it...I need you."

That was all he needed to hear. He hoisted her up, and she locked her legs around him. He reached between them and pushed her panties aside. He rested the tip of his hard cock against her opening.

"I'll give you what you need, baby," he promised.

Another time he'd fuck her against the wall, but right then, he wanted to play out one of the fantasies that wouldn't leave his mind: her in his bed.

He'd had her there once, and he wanted her there again.

"Please... Now, Easton," she begged as he carried her down the hallway. He couldn't deny her. He stepped into his room and shifted his hips just enough to breach her. "Oh yes."

He loved hearing her happy. He was only half way in when he laid her down on the bed.

She cupped his face as he followed her down, never leaving her body. She kissed his lips, his cheeks, his neck. Her eyes were squeezed tight, and he just let her kiss him while he watched

her. He felt her relax against his mattress. Like she was comfortable. With him. In his home. In his bed.

As her soft hands stroked his hair, she whispered his name between kisses, and that was the moment—

He drove the rest of the way inside her.

One hard, consuming shove of his hips. He felt her gasp, and so he breathed for both of them. Just like at the damn class, only better.

Her legs were still locked around him, and their clothes were distorted, but he couldn't stop to pull away and get completely naked. He just couldn't leave her body.

So he stayed.

Something he wasn't known for.

Stayed right with her. Kept his mouth on hers. His body in hers. His heart against hers.

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He thrust deeper. Shifted and stirred, hitting her every way he could without retreating.

“Yes, oh, yes. More. Don’t go. More.” Her words were broken, and he felt them vibrate against his lips as she said them. She wasn’t retreating, either. She kept every part of herself on him, and he realized he’d meant what he’d said.

This moment was better than nothing. Better than everything.

She pulled him even closer, her legs locking tight, her breasts pressed against his chest. It felt like an earthquake surrounded them, but it was his pulse and hers, hard and fast and in sync with each other.

“East...I’m coming,” she whispered. It wasn’t a clawing, gnashing kind of pleasure, it was calm and smooth and deep. He knew because he felt it wash over her. Felt it wash over him.

“Let me feel you, baby.”

She nodded and did. And it was the best damn gift he’d ever gotten. The first tremble of her arms and squeeze of her sweet core was all it took for him to follow her down. His own orgasm hit, and he twitched and pulsed as she milked him, and they carried each other through to the other side.

He’d never come at the same time as a woman before. And yet, part of him felt like he shouldn’t be surprised because everything with Natalie was different than with any other woman.

They stayed wrapped around each other for several moments. When her legs unlocked, he realized he must be crushing her and hoisted himself up onto his arms. But the loss of her skin against his was so chilling he almost fell right back on her.

She adjusted and he let her get all the way up. “Be right back,” he said, and went to the bathroom to take care of the condom.

When he returned, Natalie was sitting in his bed, combing her fingers through her hair, her pretty red bra back in place and her skirt smoothed down over her flawless legs. God, she was beautiful.

“Well,” she said with a sigh and patted the bed, “I don’t think the van keys are here.”

He smiled. He was still in his gym shorts and though his cock should be going back to normal, he couldn’t help but stay a little hard for the sexy, sassy woman currently looking so perfect in his sheets.

“You can have the van. I’ll get you the keys by tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” she said with a smile. When she moved to get out of his bed, panic washed over him. Like he didn’t want her to leave, not the moment and not him. Like he might never see her again...

A flash of the last time he’d seen his mother hit him hard and fast. Once she left, there was no getting her back.

He shook his head. Where the hell had that come from?

He didn’t know, but the heat of fear spread across his chest, and he held up his hand to stop her.

“Wait. You have to help me,” he said.

She settled back in his bed, still sitting up and facing him. “What do you need?”

“I need...” I need you. To stay. To just wait until this awful sense of abandonment leaves. He sure as shit wasn’t saying that. But he could say part of the truth, which was that he wanted her to stay. “Just sit there. Listen.”

“Okay,” she said slowly.

He came to the foot of the bed, and then it hit him—the excuse he’d been looking for.

“I have to practice my best man speech.”

“Oh!” she said, as if that made sense. “Well, I’m happy to be your audience. You know what they say if you’re nervous. Picture the audience in their underwear.” She glanced down the front of herself and held out her hands. “So I guess I’m kind of perfect.”

You have no idea.

“Yep,” East agreed and moved his palms together as if warming them, slowly pacing and trying to think of what the hell he would say in his speech. “So, I guess I’ll just start...”

She nodded, attentive, her back straightening.

“Ah, welcome everyone. Matt and Bridget just got married.” He paced some more. “Love is nice and when you fall in love...you get married...” He chanced a glance at Natalie, who wore an expression like she was witnessing a slow-moving car crash.

“That bad?” he asked.

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“Well...I think it’s a great start,” she said encouragingly. It was funny—he was used to the sassy Natalie, but this side of her was new to him. And he liked it. “Maybe instead of stating facts, trying speaking from the heart a bit more.”

He gave her a knowing look. “You’ve met me, right? What the hell am I supposed to say about this shit?”

She laughed. “I do know you. And I think you’re a softy, remember?”

He waved his hand again, showing her his calloused palm but she just psshed at him.

“Tap into something you can relate to,” she suggested. “You don’t have to be sappy and talk about things you don’t want to, or about the act of marriage or anything. But try to pair what you can to the situation. How you feel and how it ties to the occasion.”

He nodded. That was good advice. It was enough to stop his pacing. He stared at her fresh face and kind eyes and said the first thing that came to mind.

“I’m a search and rescue medic, so I know all about risk. No one makes the active choice to risk anything. Why would you want to give up something you enjoy? But when the right something—someone—comes along, enjoyable isn’t worth the risk of losing the amazing. So I don’t think love is about risk. It’s choosing to trade in basic for incredible. It’s about upgrading. Even if it means losing what you once thought was worth it. That is, if you’re not too scared to take the leap.”

East had no idea if what he’d just said was gibberish, or even made sense, but he

watched Natalie's delicate throat as she swallowed hard. She took a deep breath, then another.

"That's great," she said, and had to clear her throat. "Of course, then mention Matt and Bridget."

"Right," East agreed and glanced at the floor. "Mention them, then salute."

"Yeah," she said softly. "I think you've got it."

Her sweet smile was interrupted by the ding of her cell phone. She reached for it and read something on the screen, then she looked up at East.

"I, uh, I have to get going."

He glanced at the clock and realized she had plans still. "Yeah, your date is soon."

She glanced at her phone. "Yeah."

"Well." He clapped his hands together and smiled, but it felt like his chest just had a metric ton of gravel dumped on it. "Thanks for your help."

She got off his bed, and the moment her feet hit the floor, he knew, he was losing something—someone—he couldn't hang on to.

"Anytime," she said.

Chapter Twelve

Family dinner was nothing new. Ever since they'd all moved out, Natalie's mother still insisted that once a month all the kids have dinner at the St. Clair home. Matt had

been in Connecticut the last several months, but she and Easton always made it. It felt like old times with her and East and her mom around the family table.

Well, like old times except that when she took her seat across from East, she was now looking at someone she'd seen naked.

Yeah...that was different.

Not bad. Not good. Well, it was good in some ways. Seeing East naked was better than good. But it was not good t

hat she kept thinking of that, causing her heart to race and her palms to sweat while he was sitting right there and her family was around.

She adjusted in her seat and chanced a glance at him.

He simply passed along the mashed potatoes, and winked at her. She felt heat flush her cheeks. It was more than just having seen him naked. She'd really seen him, at least in flashes, the real East he kept hidden from everyone else. Last night when he'd had her in his bed, she'd felt something shift. But worse, when she went to leave, and he'd told her he needed help—everything in her body stopped and responded to him.

She couldn't remember feeling like this with anyone else before. It was as though her body and her emotions were conspiring against her with the simplest equation: East needs help equals Natalie gives it. That speech he'd delivered, the way it had seemed so heartfelt, it had hit her like gravity had doubled.

She took a bite of food and looked at East again, wondering how he seemed so calm all the time. Wondering what that flash of pain behind his eyes was—

“So, have you found a date yet?” her mother said, snapping her back to reality.

“Jesus, Mom, I just sat down,” Natalie said quickly.

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“Watch your mouth, young lady,” her mother said. Her cheeks flamed with embarrassment that East was witnessing this. Not that it was anything new. But now that she’d been with him, she hated the idea of coming off like a kid again, of being scolded for not being the perfect St. Clair daughter. He’d really seen her in the past few days, the real Natalie, and she didn’t want them to lapse back into their old roles, where she was nothing more to him than Matt’s little sister.

“I wasn’t kidding about Harrison, Natalie. I’ll call him,” her mother threatened. And with the wedding approaching, she was running out of time.

“I know you will, Mother,” she said. She stabbed idly at the pork chop on her plate.

“But I ran into Michelle at her shop yesterday. I was getting shoes for the wedding,” Lemon-Anne said, her face beaming with pride. All Natalie could feel was embarrassment that she was clearly a disappointment to her mother because she wasn’t like her brother. Wasn’t madly in love with the perfect person and getting married. Wasn’t a gorgeous, elegant debutante who ran a ladies’ charity or something. Natalie hoped briefly that the wedding talk would distract her mother from scolding her, but of course, that would have been too good to be true. Lemon-Anne’s eyes went back to Natalie. “Michelle said that you had a date. Did it go well?”

Natalie’s gaze flashed to East, and he glanced down.

“The other night? Yes, it was fine.” That was stretching the truth. The moment she’d had East buried inside her, that had been more than fine. That had been perfect. “Drinks with Match.com guy” had been as disastrous as all her other attempts. Will

from Charlotte hadn't stopped droning about...what had he even been talking about? Mergers or something. She hadn't known it was possible to be that bored. Especially after the intense excitement she felt whenever she was with East.

Her mother smiled brightly, and East looked up from his plate to hit her with a steely stare. She couldn't read his expression. Was that...anger? Excitement?

"Well, tell us about this mystery man. Was he a gentleman?" Lemon-Anne placed extra emphasis on that last word. Nobody but a true Southern gentleman would be good enough for a St. Clair girl, of course.

Natalie didn't know what to do, but her mother was pressing for details, and she wasn't about to admit to yet another failure in front of her family and the man she couldn't stop picturing naked. So she fudged a little.

"He can be. He can also be downright dirty." Natalie shot a quick look at East.

Her mother blinked several times, and East bit his lip to keep from smiling. The sparkle in his eye told her that he knew she was talking about him now. She felt a fizz of happiness inside.

"Oh, does he work with his hands?" her mother asked in a naive tone. Natalie had to bite back her own laugh. She didn't dare look at East.

"Um, yes, you could say that," Natalie replied, as thoughts of East's hands and what they could do arose unbidden from her memory. "He's very skilled. He can do things with sugar that you just wouldn't believe."

East coughed abruptly and grabbed his glass of water.

"Oh, so he's a baker, too? Hmm, well, that's, um...that's nice, dear." Lemon-Anne

was clearly not very pleased with the idea of her precious daughter dating someone who wasn't Beaufort aristocracy, but Natalie assumed that having a date at all was better than nothing in her mother's eyes.

"Will he be available for the wedding?" Her mom continued, oblivious to the electricity arcing across the table between Natalie and East. "I was hoping you might have found someone a bit more, ah, deserving, but if he's willing to show up, then we'll make it work."

Ouch. Willing to show up? That snapped her out of her inside joke with Easton.

"Is that how pathetic I am, Mom? I need a date so badly I can just—"

"Don't get dramatic, I'm simply saying that your options are limited, and beggars can't be choosers."

Her entire heart kicked into her throat like every single word her mother just uttered had its own foot.

She'd heard that turn of phrase several times, but it had never cut as bad as right then. Maybe because East was witness to it. Maybe because she was tired. Maybe because deep down, she was getting scolded like a little girl in front of the one man she wanted to look at her like a true woman. The earlier fizz of happiness was replaced with the acid bite of her mother's words.

"I totally agree," East cut in with a nasty tone, and hit her mother with a glare. "Beggars can't be choosers. Good thing Natalie is far from a beggar. If anything, she's not choosy enough."

Her mother gave a kind smile. "You and Matt have always been so sweet. Just like you should be. Looking out for her. Tell me, Easton," her mother said, fully turning

her attention to him, “how’s everything coming with the wedding? Matt and Bridget are due back tomorrow, correct?”

While East addressed the question, drawing attention from Natalie’s dating life, she took the chance to excuse herself and leave the table.

“Forgive me,” Natalie said, and scooted her chair, “I just need a minute.”

A minute to collect herself. Her mother nodded absently, but East kept his gaze on her as she rose from the table and left the dining room. She went up to the third floor bathroom because she needed two flights of stairs to get her mind right.

She leaned over the sink and looked in the mirror, then took a deep breath. She had to let this go. Let it roll off her back like she always had. Or had she? She knew her mother loved her, deep down, but she also had those crazy St. Clair expectations that Natalie could never meet. And for some reason, tonight they were harder to stomach than usual. Maybe because she did want more. Maybe because she didn’t want East to see her as pathetic. She shook her head and reminded herself that she shouldn’t be thinking of him anyway.

She thought, instead, of her options. Thought of Connecticut and Leslie’s offer. Maybe she was just getting too tired of fighting to stay in Beaufort. Fighting her mother. All of it. Yes, she loved her shop, but maybe this circle of self-doubt and exhaustion needed to end. Maybe she needed a big change.

First, though, she had to get through dinner, then Matt’s wedding.

With a final breath, she prepared herself to go back down. She opened the door and—

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“Holy hell!” she gasped. East was standing right outside. “You gave me a heart attack!” she whispered harshly.

But he stood still, a look of raw hurt and rage on his face. “Are you okay?” he asked.

She frowned. “Yeah. Why?”

“Because of what your mom said. It wasn’t right, darlin’.”

“Oh, that’s normal. Come on, you know that.”

He nodded. “I do. I’ve heard her say shit like that for a long time, but tonight...” He shook his head. “I’m sorry, Natalie. I should have said something sooner.”

“What are you talking about? I’m fine. This is just my mom being herself, and we all know I’m not a Southern belle, and that’s okay.”

“It is okay. The way you are is better than okay.”

She looked at him for a long moment. “Thank you.”

He nodded, cupped her hips, and gently pulled her close. It was a move she was getting used to—comforting. And just when she thought he’d kiss her, he bypassed her mouth and drew her in for a hug. He wrapped his big, strong arms around her and held her, tight and perfect. Something in the way he clung to her made her want to...

Cry.

She was losing it. He made her feel safe. Seen. And here he was, offering solace after a shitty moment, just like—

Like he loved her.

But he didn't. She knew he couldn't.

And she couldn't do this anymore.

She pulled away. East's face looked hurt, as though she might as well have slapped him.

"I'm really fine," she said. "We'd better get back."

"Natalie, wait."

But she didn't. She took the stairs as fast as she could. The dinner table might be a death trap with her mother waiting, but East was a soul trap, and her heart was on the line.

Losing her pride was one thing. Losing her heart to East was another.

Chapter Thirteen

Natalie came to sit next to Matt at the bar at Honey's.

"Hey, sis," he said, and gave her a hug as she sat down. Chloe was behind the bar and came over to serve them.

"Glad you're back," Chloe said, and poured Matt a drink.

“Thanks. Yep, I hope you don’t mind, the whole Connecticut crew is in town and I’ve talked up Honey’s.”

Chloe smiled and then poured Natalie a drink, too. “Well, I think the wedding this weekend is the talk of the town. You two holler if you need anything else.”

“Thanks, Chloe,” Natalie said to her friend as she waddled her adorable pregnant behind away.

“Mom has been grilling me about all the details.” Natalie gave her brother a playful nudge. “Your friends and I have money going on when she’s going to bring up grandkids. My bet is on the rehearsal dinner tomorrow night.”

“Don’t think she’ll even wait for after the wedding, huh?” Matt asked.

“Nope. Come on, you know Mom.”

“Yeah.” Matt took a sip of his beer.

r. “Which is why I wanted to chat with you tonight. Just the two of us.”

That sounded serious. Natalie’s stomach knotted as she tried to figure out what her big brother had to say. But before he could get much out, the familiar ding of the door caught just enough of Natalie’s attention for her to realize it was Easton.

Small town.

More than that, though, she was happy to see him. Not annoyed. Not nervous. Just happy. She thought of how he’d hugged her last night and wondered if she could get another one of those tonight, depending on the way this cryptic conversation of her brother’s was about to go.

“Hey, there’s my best man,” Matt called. Easton headed over.

“Hope I’m not interrupting?” he asked before taking a seat next to Matt. Not next to her. Not that she could blame him. It was just a bar stool, right? And they were a secret. Or maybe they weren’t even that.

“Nope. I just have to chat with Nat real quick, but it’s nothing you can’t hear. You’re family.”

Something in Easton’s gaze sparked at that word, and a flash of pain crossed his face. Then he gave a tight smile.

“So, Sis, I know Mom has this whole thing about you having a date tomorrow night. And you’re right, I know how she can be, so I wanted to check in with you and see how you’re doing on that?”

Natalie blinked a few times. “Are you asking how that makes me feel, or asking if I have a date?”

Matt blushed, and he looked embarrassed. “Both, I guess. You know I care about you. But, uh, do you have a date? A prospect at least? I just want Mom off your back because she can be tough to handle.”

“And you know that’s an understatement,” she said and took a sip of her beer.

“So...” Matt pushed, and East glanced at Natalie as if awaiting her answer as well.

There was something in his eyes that she couldn’t deny. Not tonight. She might have denied it last night when he’d hugged her like he cared. Or the few nights ago when he’d made love to her like he’d cared, and spoken to her like he’d cared.

Maybe because he does care.

Once again, East was looking at her and she felt seen. And in that moment, it was clear.

“There is someone I like that I’d go to the wedding with,” she said, looking directly at East. His mouth dropped a little, and she nodded in reassurance.

Yep, I’m looking at you, tough guy.

She returned her gaze to Matt. “But it’s complicated.”

“You like him?” Matt asked. As if it were that simple.

“Yes.”

“Then just go with him. At this point, Natalie, I don’t want to deal with Mom when I’m trying to get married. You like the guy, take him, call it good.”

“Again, not that simple, Matt.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t know if he wants to go with me.”

“Then he’s an idiot,” East said, and her eyes snapped to his.

“You think so?” she asked.

He nodded. “Absolutely.”

She smiled, but Matt was still on his line of questioning, and no matter how they went about this, it was still a delicate matter. She couldn’t blurt out everything now, but the way East was looking at her, she knew he was on her team, and somehow, this would work. They’d make it work.

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“Great,” Matt agreed, still obviously thinking they were talking about some mystery man. “Then ask him, bring him, and all is well, and I can get married, and we can both take a break from dealing with Mom.”

She nodded. “Okay. I just may do that.” She took one more sip and glanced at East, then at her brother. “I’ve got to get going. Big day of baking tomorrow before the rehearsal.”

“Love ya, sis,” Matt said.

Natalie caught East’s eyes as she slid off the stool. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” She made sure her voice spoke the promise she felt.

He nodded. It was funny—they both were on the same page and still in their secret world at the same time. But she was confident that tomorrow night, she’d finally go after the one man that made her feel like more. And deep down, she hoped that he’d help her work out the details.

“See you tomorrow,” he confirmed.

“Thanks again for all your help,” Matt said to East.

East watched Natalie walk out. His heart was thumping in his chest, but he felt strangely calm. This was going to happen. Everything was going to hit the fan tomorrow night, but he and Natalie, together, were going to come out of the closet.

And he was excited and terrified. Because the thought of her leaving or hurting was

too much. He loved Matt and the St. Clairs, but he loved Natalie, too. Only that love was shifting.

A hollow ache pulsed in his chest. He was, and had been, violating Matt's trust this whole time. He'd like to think it was for Natalie, so that he could be with her, but in the end, he felt awful about lying to his best friend.

"Happy to help," East said. "You're my best friend, Matt."

His buddy looked at him and elbowed his arm. "I know. And you're mine. You getting sappy on me?"

"Something in the air, I guess."

"I guess. With the way Natalie was just talking, I'm hoping this guy she likes isn't a total asshole."

East glanced away. "You talk like she can't make up her own mind. She's not a kid anymore, you know."

Matt gave him a look he couldn't quite place. "It's not that. She's just...vulnerable. You know that. Falling for the wrong guy? He wouldn't just break her heart. He'd break her completely."

"She's stronger than you think," East said.

"Sure, but come on. She's dating all these guys, no real winners, and suddenly she likes one of them? You know she didn't think this through. Dating is one thing, but liking him is another."

"So she can't win?" East asked. "You and Lemon-Anne wanted her to find a date, she

has, but now, even though you haven't even met him yet, he's not good enough?"

Matt leaned in, and his voice got low. "Bridget was talking with Michelle the other day. I guess Natalie isn't as discreet as she thinks. Apparently this guy she's been seeing has been kind of a secret, and she's hung up on him. I guess he even hurt her feelings or something, and she tried to stay away but he wouldn't let her." Matt shook his head. "I don't know. Bridget just told me about it. But this guy doesn't sound good if he's already fucking with her head."

A stab to the kidney would have felt better than what Matt had just said. But he wasn't exactly wrong. At any point, East could have handled the situation with Natalie differently. Could have claimed her, or better, could have left her alone. Instead, he'd played with her. Fought with her. Fucked her. Worse, he'd fucked with her mind.

He wanted to crawl into a hole.

He wasn't just trash compared to Natalie, he was just plain trash in general.

"Hey, speaking of dating," Matt said. "Bridesmaids are in town."

East just chugged his beer. His buddy would never see him as more than a ladies' man with no staying power. Hell, that's probably all he was, judging from the shitty way he'd treated Natalie. She deserved better than that. She'd even said so before: he made her crazy.

Of course, Matt had no idea how close to home he was hitting. Granted, East had hit everything close to home when he'd pursued Natalie. He'd known from the beginning that he wasn't good enough for her. Known he wasn't on the same level as the St. Clairs. They'd done him a favor, taken him in, made him family. Even now, Matt was talking to him with total trust. And he'd turned around and just fucked

everything up.

It was time to stop.

Stop making shitty decisions. Stop running from reality. Because reality was, he was a player without a committed bone in his body. That's what his own best friend saw, too.

"Something in the air," he muttered to himself after finishing his beer.

"Well, I'm glad you feel that way becau

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se...” Matt trailed off and East followed his eyes. Bridget and three women walked in. The bridesmaids, he guessed.

“The tall blonde is Bridget’s sister Kelly, and we’ve told her all about you.”

Kelly’s eyes were fastened on him, and East knew exactly what was happening. He was being set up. He wanted to be angry with Matt, but the truth was he was almost grateful. He’d set out to keep his eye on Natalie and make sure she didn’t get hurt, and here he was, being the guy who’d end up hurting her more than anyone. He couldn’t keep fucking with her when deep down he knew it could never be more. He didn’t even know how to love a woman like Natalie. He was trash. He might as well let Natalie see him for who he really was.

Chapter Fourteen

“I want you. And I don’t care who knows,” Natalie said out loud. She was finally speaking the truth about how she felt about East. “We’ve been together the past couple of weeks, and I’m not sorry. In fact, I want more. And I want everyone to know that you annoy me, but I love...” She trailed off and closed her eyes as she let the truth sink in. The truth she’d known all along. “I love you, East. You make me feel alive. Seen. And you drive me insane. But I’d rather be crazy with you than normal and boring without you.”

Natalie smiled and fluttered her eyes.

Now if only she could say that to East in person, instead of to the rearview mirror of her car as she sat in the parking lot of the hotel where Matt and Bridget were going to

get married tomorrow.

“You can do this,” she said to her reflection. “Get your butt in there, and tell him how you feel, and tell Matt what’s been going on.”

Honestly, she was worried about her older brother finding out about her and East, but she cared too much about East to let that stand in their way any longer. It was time to come clean and face Matt, even if he got furious. And he likely would. But he’d understand. Eventually. East was a good man. The man she wanted. It would all be okay.

It had to be.

Natalie took a deep breath, got out of her car, and ran her hands over her pink dress. It was the fluffy one she’d worn when she’d danced with East. Was it only last week? It felt like a lifetime ago. She walked into the rehearsal hall feeling confident and ready to tackle the man and the situation that had been driving her crazy for the past couple of weeks.

She’d realized last night that it had been the good kind of crazy the whole time. The challenging kind.

Because East sees me.

She felt confident—for the first time in her life, honest-to-goodness confident. And tonight she was going to claim East as her date, and he was going to claim her back.

She didn’t need a job offer in Connecticut. She didn’t need to sell her recipes. She could stay and be happy with the man who made her happy. Anyone who didn’t like it, well, they could just shut their mouths. It wasn’t like they’d ever paid her any attention to begin with.

She walked into the historic hotel—a local monument and beautiful setting. Matt and Bridget had the whole thing rented out and everyone was congregating in the lobby.

She caught sight of East. He looked amazing in a button-up white shirt and dark jeans. He'd even shaved. He was laughing and talking with a small group of people, Matt and Bridget among them.

Deep breath...

She walked up with all the confidence she felt, and when East's eyes hit hers, she smiled and—

He glanced away.

Fast.

Not like he wasn't happy to see her. Like he had looked right through her.

She frowned but continued her trek, not stopping until she came to Matt's side and faced East.

"Hey, sis." Matt hugged her. She gave him a half smile.

"Thank you so much, again, for filling in last-minute as a bridesmaid," Bridget said, and gave her a hug.

"Sure," Natalie said. She felt dwarfed by the three other women she was standing with. Well, standing under. Bridget's friends were apparently all amazons or supermodels or something.

"And what an adorable dress!" Bridget said. "This is the same one you wore to the

party last week, right?”

That hurt. Adorable? Great. Tall, elegant Bridget thought she was twelve, just like everyone else in this damn town. Even her brother. And yes, it was the same dress. The one East had twirled her in. The one he'd taken off of her later that night at his home. Suddenly she felt silly. She hadn't even started her grand “I'm a confident, grown-ass woman” speech and she was standing there in a repeat outfit feeling not so confident.

“Forgive my rudeness,” Bridget said, giggling. “These are the other bridesmaids, Suzanne and Abigail.” She waved her hand at the tall, thin, stupidly stunning women. “And this is my sister Kelly.”

Kelly was a tall, cool blonde who wore towering stilettos and a designer silver dress that probably cost as much as Natalie's car. She reached out and shook Natalie's hand, then swayed into East a little. It was then that Natalie saw East put his hand on the small of Kelly's back.

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“Did I miss something?” Natalie blurted out. She felt her cheeks flush with a sting of embarrassment. East was next to Kelly, looking like they were some kind of item, and...what the hell?

She'd thought they were going to be together. Her and East. Not Amazon Blonde and East. Sure, Natalie might be awkward, but she wasn't blind or stupid. She'd seen the way East had looked at her last night. Heard the promise in his voice. The sincerity. He wanted her. Wanted to be with her. At least he had. But clearly something had changed in the past eighteen hours. An entire night had come and gone—she couldn't bear the thought that East might have spent it with another woman.

But she wasn't seeing much of an alternative. He still had his hand on the glamazon's back. He looked directly at her, but there was a hollowness in those amazing eyes of his. Eyes that had once looked at her while he was inside of her. Eyes that had stayed on her when she walked into a room. Eyes that now seemed void of any emotion for her.

“You didn't miss anything, darlin'. You're right on time,” East said. He took a sip of his whiskey and turned his attention back to Kelly.

Matt nudged her in the ribs and distracted her from East's cold nonchalance. “Hey, Mom just walked in. Where's your date?” he asked.

Natalie looked at East. He just took another sip of his whiskey, not a single emotion on his face. Like he didn't see her. Like she was back to being Natalie, Matt's silly baby sister, and not Natalie, the woman she'd thought he really cared about.

“I don’t know where he is,” she said honestly. Her heart rose in her throat. The last sixty seconds had been pure confusion, but clarity was coming in with each breath she took. East didn’t want her. In fact, it looked like he wanted the woman he was with. He couldn’t keep his hands off her. She felt like a damn fool.

No...no this couldn’t be right. He couldn’t be doing this to her. He cared about her. Surely he did. She couldn’t have made all of it up.

“You all right?” Matt asked, not knowing he was witnessing her downfall. No, she wasn’t all right. She’d thought she and East had something special. But clearly she was just another woman he’d cycled through. It wasn’t like she could really compete with Miss Blonde Stick-figure on his arm. Still, she found the courage to lie to her brother yet again.

“I’m fine.”

She’d been duped, but it hadn’t even been East who’d done it. No, she’d fooled herself. Had East ever actually said they were more than sex? Even that hug at her parents’ house...it was probably just him taking care of little Natalie St. Clair, who was so fragile she couldn’t even stand up to her mom.

Her nose tickled, and a sting pricked behind her eyes. She felt stupid. And it was all on display for East.

“So you have no date?” Matt asked quietly as their mother made their way over.

She looked at East one final time. “I guess not. Turns out he was an idiot.”

Or maybe I am.

But hadn’t he told her that only an idiot would turn her down?

Truth or not, it didn't help the pressure pains in her lungs. Because she couldn't breathe. It hurt too much. So she just stood there, letting the pain slice through her.

Matt let out a long breath as if disappointed. Natalie was on the brink of falling to pieces. The phantom knife stabbing through her chest intensified. She'd never felt anything so powerful, like her rib cage was compressing in on itself.

Keep it together...

It wasn't working. She focused harder.

Keep. It. Together.

She inhaled hard, past the pain, past the implosion of her lungs and something very cold, very stale settled over her.

Numb.

It was the first time that she understood what that felt like. It was a welcome feeling. She stood there in her adorable re-worn dress, watching her mother and her judgment approaching, watching the man she'd fallen in love with touching another woman, and she thanked whatever God was out there for giving her the numbness to get her through that moment.

Until the numbness turned into a hollow, throbbing ache that ripped through her again. She didn't know for certain, but she thought her heart had just crystalized and shattered into a thousand pieces.

She had to get out of there.

Natalie didn't say a word, just placed a hand over her chest as if something was

falling off of her and she was trying to hold it in place. She turned and walked out the way she'd come without saying a word.

East's first instinct was to stop her, to go after her. But he couldn't. He wasn't the man she needed, and he'd fucked with her enough. But he knew he'd never get the look of pain on her face out of his mind for as long as he lived.

"Where is she going?" Lemon-Anne asked as she approached the group. Natalie had pointedly ignored her and continued toward the exit.

"She just needs some air," Matt offered.

It w

as then that East stopped listening. He just watched a glimpse of floating pink dress disappear outside.

Kelly touched his arm, and East felt himself recoil. It wasn't her fault. She was fine: tall, blonde, thin, nice enough. A few weeks ago East would have had no problem with her. Hell, he'd have probably gone after her and had a great night. But she wasn't what he wanted now. He couldn't stand the touch of her perfectly manicured nails on his skin. He didn't want to look at her perfect cheekbones and her perfectly coiffed platinum hair. He wanted a brunette with a sassy smile and flour on her nose and the most incredible set of curves and the most incredible laugh he'd ever had the pleasure of knowing.

Instead, he watched Natalie walk away, and it killed him. But he had to let her. Because he had to protect her. Protect her from him.

Chapter Fifteen

East slammed the door of the mini fridge in his hotel room, broke open the tiny vodka, and downed it in record time, hoping it would ease the clutch of pain in his stomach.

It didn't.

So he got another one. He was so close to the kind of drunk he needed to be to not feel this ache. Thank God the wedding was tomorrow.

But tonight had been awful. The rehearsal was tense but thankfully quick. Natalie had never looked at him again. He couldn't blame her. He was pretty sure she wasn't staying at the hotel. He'd seen her walk out a few times as if just to get away from him.

Again. Couldn't blame her.

A knock came at his door, and East stomped to open it.

"What?" he asked before he saw who it was.

"What?" Michelle repeated his question. Her red hair was tied back, and she had a scowl on her face that could kill.

"Sorry," East mumbled. "I wasn't expecting company."

"Well, I wasn't expecting you to be as big of an asshole as you are, but looks like we're both surprised." She pushed past him but didn't sit down, just continued to gear up for what was looking to be some kind of ass-chewing.

"Well, I've always been an asshole, darlin', so if you're particularly upset about something you'll have to be more specific."

East wouldn't normally talk to a lady this way, but he was all kinds of drunk and angry and flat-out sad. A feeling he'd been trying to drown, thank you very much, until Michelle had rudely interrupted him.

"I'm talking about a particular woman you just hurt," Michelle said. "What's the matter with you? You've been in love for a long time now, and after finally seeing each other the past couple of weeks, tonight you treat her like nothing?"

East frowned. "Natalie told you?"

"No, I accidentally saw the two of you at her shop."

"Which time?" East smiled but Michelle didn't, and then he realized his jokes and nonchalance couldn't help him this time. He was sunk. Hurting. Because he'd hurt the woman he...

Loved.

He loved Natalie. He did. Somewhere along the line she'd become the one person he wanted to spend his days and nights with more than anyone else.

"I'm not blind. But clearly you are," Michelle said. "I've sat back and listened to my friend struggle over you. Watched her struggle to even talk about what she feels. For you. All while considering your feelings, keeping your secret. And I watched her confidence bloom. Then tonight you cut her down?" Michelle shook her head. "You should be ashamed."

"I am!" he snapped.

"Good!" Michelle snapped back. "I know what it feels like to mess up. I also know what it feels like to not measure up in people's eyes. So, lucky for you, I'm giving you a free piece of advice."

"Hit me with it," East said in exhaustion, because at this point, he was beyond depressed. He was over himself. Couldn't even stand his reflection in the mirror.

"Fine, I will," Michelle said. East didn't see her hand fly across his face. But he felt her slap. "Stop moping. It's not about being a better class or stock. It's about being a better man. So get it together and start acting like the man Natalie believes in."

As the warmth from her slap heated his cheek, East realized that Natalie did make him feel like a better man, and she was worth more than anything else. She challenged him, accepted who he was and all the difficulties that came with him. All his flaws. She was unsure and didn't know how to handle most of what he'd thrown at her, and yet she'd held on with him. For him.

“She'd never come here and hit you upside the head and tell you how awful you are,” Michelle said. “She's too busy trying to put the shreds of herself together. You know she's talking about taking some job offer at a bakery in Connecticut? But I am happy to remind you, Easton Ambrose, what a jerk you are. You are lucky to have a woman like her willing to claim you.”

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“I know,” he whispered. And he did. “That’s what I’m afraid of. I don’t want to mess up. I’m a fuck-up. I don’t know what I’m doing. I have no idea what she needs.”

Michelle’s eyes softened a touch. “She needs you,” she said, shrugging. “Pushing someone away because you’re afraid to love them and lose them is one of the stupidest things you can do. Trust me.”

And the truth in her eyes made East do just that.

“Not all of us get a second chance to make it right,” she finished.

And he believed her. Then her words from earlier set in. “Wait, you said she’s looking at Connecticut?”

Michelle nodded. “Yes. A big time caterer offered her a job, and to buy her recipes even.”

Natalie couldn’t leave. And East would be damn sure he didn’t drive her away.

“I see you have a lot to think about,” Michelle said. And with that, she looked over his face once more, seeming proud of the mark she’d left on his cheek, and turned to walk away.

East stood against the door, feeling like that one slap upside the head had just changed his whole damn future. He just hoped he could make a certain beautiful brunette forgive him.

Chapter Sixteen

Natalie was in her bridesmaid gown and arranging the final touches on the tower of cupcakes in the reception hall, which was the only place that seemed to be quiet at the hotel. Everyone else was rushing around getting into place for the wedding to start.

She'd sent a text to Leslie McMann and told her she'd love to chat about her offer after the wedding. It would pain Natalie to leave her town and her friends, but she needed distance from the shattered heart East had left her with.

"There you are!" her mother called as she walked through the room. "It's time to line up."

Natalie nodded and stepped back from the tower. It was perfect. But when she looked at the vanilla cupcakes, she thought of East. He might not have helped with this batch, but she saw him now not just everywhere, but in everything.

Her heart stung with sharp pain.

She'd spent most of the night crying to Michelle. At some point, her sweet friend had washed her face with a warm cloth, and Natalie had fallen asleep. When she'd woken up, Michelle was gone.

Not that she needed anyone to stay with her. Turned out, Michelle had known about her and East the whole time. And she'd been so supportive in letting her try to find her own strength. Which, despite everything, was something Natalie was going to do.

Her heart might be in pieces, but she refused to be invisible. At the very least she wouldn't be invisible to herself.

"The cakes are lovely," her mother said approvingly. "And I'm so glad you wore

your contacts today. You look much better without those glasses.”

“Thank you, Mom,” Natalie said with a low sigh.

“Harrison is in the second row and waiting. Since you’re walking down the aisle, I told him to wait for you after the wedding for the reception. You can walk in and—”

“Stop,” Natalie said. She quit fidgeting with the cakes and faced her mother. Just the two of them in a silent hall was daunting, but Natalie had to take a stand. More than that, she had to f

ollow through. Her confidence might have been shattered, but she had to try to rebuild. Might as well start now.

“Mother, I’m not going to have Harrison as my date today or any other day.”

“Natalie, you need to—”

“Stop,” Natalie said again, and her mother’s eyes grew large with surprise. “I love you, Mom. I hope one day I’ll be enough for you as I am, on my own. But I’m done worrying about that. I’m not you. I’m not a Southern belle. And I’m okay with that.” At least, I’m trying to be. “So you have no say in my dating life, and while I appreciate your concern for me in many ways, this is not one of them. I’m an adult. I will see, or not see, whomever I chose.”

Her mother blinked several times and then ran her hand along the pearls on her neck. Her face looked a little flushed. “I—I’m sorry, dear. I love you, Natalie. I just want you to have everything.” She fidgeted with her pearls again. “I’ve always just wanted you to be happy.”

Her mother’s words were surprising, but Natalie actually believed her. “Then trust me

to go after and get the things I want. You just have to have a little faith in me.”

Her mother nodded.

Natalie hugged her, and they both headed to the ceremony hall. For the first time ever, Natalie felt free. And when she caught sight of the men lined up in tuxes, and East’s perfect frame standing next to her brother, she also felt like she was marching toward her death.

Liberation had a price.

Easton Ambrose and her love for him was apparently hers. And it hurt like a bitch.

East was certain he was in hell. And hell was made of satin and roses and scented candles. He had to stand during the ceremony and face Natalie.

She was beautiful.

And she didn't glance his way once.

The pricking pain in his gut intensified as the wedding turned into the reception and it became clear Natalie was taking extra effort to keep at least twenty feet between them at all times.

She'd avoided him like the plague, but he was due to give his speech soon, and he had to talk to her, to tell her how sorry he was. He hadn't even been near Kelly, and he'd noticed that Harrison wasn't on Natalie's radar, either.

Damn it! There was way too much he had to say, and she'd have to give him a chance. She just had to...

He walked up behind where she was sitting alone at the bridal party table. Everyone else was off dancing or doing something else. Now was his chance.

"You look beautiful," he said, as he put a hand on the table and leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Natalie, I'm sorry."

She didn't move. He could smell her sweet perfume, felt a lock of her silky hair brush his nose, and her shoulder was so close. Just an inch from his mouth. He could close the space and kiss the skin there...

It was maddening because he actually couldn't. He'd lost that right. Maybe he'd never had it to start with.

"Natalie." He said her name again because she hadn't acknowledged him yet. "I'm really sorry, baby."

That last word made that shoulder he wanted to kiss so badly tense. "Go away, East."

"It's not what you think. I don't want Kelly. I just want you."

She turned to throw him a hard stare. Her eyes sparked fire, and he felt something clutch in his chest like a fist.

"If you think this is all about another woman, then you really have no idea what I think." She turned her back and shut him out. "Go. Away."

The fist turned into a full on volcano, ripping apart his entire chest. How could he have messed up so badly?

"East, honey," Lemon-Anne said, as she walked up to the other side of the table, "will you come with me? I want to introduce you to some people. They want to see my favorite non-biological son."

Lemon-Anne's smile was genuine, and it made him feel like part of the family for a moment, like he'd once been. But he had to come clean. Had to say out loud what he really wanted.

“Of course,” he started. “But first I have to tell you that I love you.”

Lemon-Anne blinked several times, and East went on.

“Thank you for being the mother I didn’t have, and thank you for how you treat me. I don’t deserve it. I don’t deserve a lot of things.” He touched Natalie’s arm. “But I’m going to earn it from here on out.”

Before Lemon-Anne or Natalie could say anything, Matt motioned for him to give the speech, and it was the last thing on the planet he felt like he could do.

“Hey, you’re up,” Matt said to East as he came over to stand next to his mother. Surrounded by the people who loved him, he realized that Natalie sitting there was his sun. Everything he was pulled him to her side.

“You really want my speech?” he asked Matt.

“Of course. You’re the best man.”

Time to earn it. He left Natalie, Matt, and Lemon-Anne, and made his way to the stage where the band was, grabbing a champagne flute on the way.

“Hello, everyone. I’m Easton Ambrose, and I’d like to say a few words.”

Everyone quieted down, and he glanced around the room. The silence. The joy. The happy couple. The expectant faces, all staring at him. East didn’t care about any of them. All he was concerned with was Natalie.

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“I’m not good at speeches, even worse with speeches about love and marriage. But a very wise woman once told me to just try to speak in a way I can relate.”

He saw Natalie’s eyelashes flutter on a few hard blinks, as if she was physically trying to not look at him. That just wouldn’t do. She had to hear him. He wasn’t done trying for her. He would never be done trying for her. He was going to do everything in his power to earn her.

“I can only give this speech because of Natalie St. Clair,” he called out and looked directly at her. It was time everyone knew how he really felt. Especially Matt, Lemon-Anne, and Natalie.

Everyone looked where he was looking. Right at her. Her gaze snapped up and then hit his. “That’s right. I’m talking about you, gorgeous,” he said to Natalie.

She glared at him. And that’s when he knew he had a chance. The words might not come out right sometimes, but if Natalie got pissy with him, then she cared, which meant there was a chance. And he’d take pissed off over hurt and sad any day.

Matt made his way back to Bridget, and Lemon-Anne slowly moved toward her table, obviously in shock.

“Matt and Bridget are in love. Clearly. They got married. And honestly, I didn’t get it. For the longest time it didn’t make sense how you could be happy with just one person. But they are. And I get it now. Well...sort of.”

A few chuckles rang out, and East went on.

“See, turns out to talk about love, you have to feel something. So I’m going to talk to the one person that makes me feel, and that’s you, baby. Natalie St. Clair.”

Everyone’s heads turned to Natalie again. Matt darted his eyes between East and his little sister in disbelief. Bridget looked confused. Natalie looked ready to throttle him.

“What?” he asked her. “You don’t like that? Don’t like that I want everyone to know I’m in love with you? That you’re the only person on this damn planet I’m terrified to lose?”

Her eyebrows shot up, and she looked at him questioningly.

“It’s true, baby. I thought we were risking too much, that it could never work for—for whatever the hell stupid reasons we came up with. But it can.” He glanced at Matt. “I’m in love with your sister, bro. A hundred percent, stupid in love.” He shifted his focus back to Natalie, but he caught a glimpse of Matt turning red and looking like he was going to come out of his seat and murder him. Which he’d deal with later. He’d even take a beating, because yes, he’d lied. But loving Natalie and being honest about it was more important than anything else.

“You’re the only one I want to hang out with,” he said to Natalie. “Which is something I know Matt will understand, because when he was trying to explain this crazy idea of love and commitment and all that, he talked about Bridget like she was the only person that he wanted to be near. Like things were better when she was around. I get it now.” East shook his head. “Even when we’re fighting, and you’re being a pain in the ass, and I’m being a prick, I still would rather spend every annoying minute with you than anywhere else.”

He watched Natalie’s big eyes well up with tears, and he had to pause to clear his throat.

“Love is ridiculous,” he continued. “I mean, think about it. It’s like a really bad drug, a hangover and a high all rolled into one. You get all fidgety for a fix, then it knocks you on your ass, then if you’re real lucky, the woman you happen to be in love with literally knocks you on your ass and laughs as she walks away. Which is good, because some of us”—he adjusted his tie—“have an ego that needs to be kept in check.”

A few more chuckles rang out.

“But sometimes you need to get beat up a bit to realize what you’ve been missing. What’s right in front of your face. Yeah, love sucks. It’s frustrating as hell. But when it’s with the right person, it’s so fucking amazing.”

Everyone laughed, poor Lemon-Anne gasped, and East realized he’d just dropped some cursing in his best man speech.

Fuck it.

“Sorry,” he said a little sheepishly and looked at Lemon-Anne. “I’m just speaking in a way I can relate. It’s clear that Bridget and Matt have that kind of love. It’s something to aspire to. And I can honestly say that I’ve only had one amazing experience in my life...and that is you, Natalie. You’re the reason I’m up here botching this shit speech and pretending I have even half a clue about this love crap, because I don’t. But I want to learn about it with you.”

He raised his glass. “And to Matt, bro, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner, but I love your sister, and I hope you can be cool with that. I’m just doing what you asked, being the best man I can be. Congratulations to you and your lovely bride. Because if love keeps going the way I think it doe

s, the next rest of your life is going to suck so wonderfully you’ll never know what hit

you.”

He drank his champagne, and so did everyone else as they clapped. More than a few people looked stunned, and when he walked off the stage, he saw Matt and Natalie get up and head toward him at the same time.

Natalie made it there first.

“Have you lost your mind? What the hell was that?” she hissed.

“My speech,” he said calmly. She was pissed at him, but she was talking to him. So he’d take the win.

“This is Matt’s wedding, and you are such a prick for saying what you said. This isn’t all about you, you jackass.”

“I am a prick and a jackass, but you love me anyway, and it was all true. Besides, I circled back around to Matt and Bridget, just like you said.”

She threw her hands up. “You’re impossible. You think that you can say whatever you want, wherever you want, and that I’m just going to deal with it?”

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“No, I think you’ll hand me my ass, like you’re doing right now.”

“Because you’re impossible!”

“Yeah, well, you’re impossible, too,” he countered. “Impossible for me to stop thinking about.”

“That isn’t fair, East,” she said. Her shoulders slumped a little. “Do you have any idea what it’s like loving you? I just want to strangle you and hold you close, and I just want...more. All the time. Just you. Because you have my entire damn heart in your hands and it’s just not fair, East.”

“But you love me?” he said.

She nodded.

“Good. Because I love you, too, and I’m a giant idiot for not saying that sooner. I’ve never trusted anyone like I trust you. I’m sorry I pushed you away. I was just afraid of losing you.”

He glanced at Michelle in thanks for that gem of realization, and she smiled.

“Well, that’s dumb,” Natalie said. “Like I would ever leave you.”

He stepped closer. “Care to make a promise on that?”

She smiled, and her eyes were teary, and just when he cupped her hips and pulled her

closer, she said, “I promise to love you forever and make your life a living hell if you ever hurt me like that again.”

He brushed his lips over hers. “Hell is life without you. I’m sorry, baby. I love you so damn much, you’re going to be so annoyed with me by the end of all this.”

“Promise?” she asked.

“Promise.”

Matt came up to him then, and East turned to face him. His face was red, and East couldn’t read his expression.

“So, you want to tell me why in the hell you didn’t talk to me about this?” Matt asked.

East looked at his friend but didn’t let go of Natalie. “I wanted to, man. I just couldn’t. I knew you wouldn’t think I was good enough.”

Matt’s face went redder and he sighed. “You’re such an asshole,” he said. “I’ve depended on you to take care of Nat our whole lives. I told you she was vulnerable.”

East held up a hand to stop him. “I know, I fucked up.”

Matt looked at Natalie. “So. Are you happy with this guy?”

Natalie nodded. “Yeah.”

Matt put his hand on East’s shoulder. “I love you, bro. But if you fuck this up, I will kill you.” He fake-punched East, but just hard enough to let him know he was serious. And then he broke into a grin and gave him a huge hug before he went back to his

new bride.

East felt Natalie's arms wrap around him, and he turned back to face her. He held her face in his hands and kissed her, and a round of healthy applause erupted. He wrapped up Natalie, the one woman he couldn't live without, in his arms and held her, kissed her, in front of everyone.

Finally feeling like he was clinging to something worth holding on to.

Epilogue

"Why are you being such a pain the ass about this?" East asked.

Natalie rolled her eyes and just kept her head down, frosting another batch of cupcakes. "Because I prefer living in sin, all right?"

East slapped the counter and paced. "I've asked you to marry me thirty-one times in the past month."

"Thirty-one?" she repeated and glanced to the ceiling.

"Yeah." East came around the counter to stand behind her and kiss along her neck. "Remember last week, when I asked you right before I fucked you in my truck because you were so hot for me you couldn't wait to get inside..."

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“I may recall some vague memory like that,” she whispered, and leaned into his kiss.

“And then I asked you again an hour later when you kissed me in the kitchen.”

“Oh, yeah. You got down on one knee and everything. That was cute.”

“Twice, Natalie. Twice in one day, and every damn day I’ve asked you.”

“Yeah, but in fairness, if you hit your knees in front of me, I just assume you want me to wrap my legs around your shoulders.”

He nipped her earlobe. “I do. And I want you to marry me. So give me both.”

She sighed and continued frosting her cupcake while his hands slid around her waist and he kept kissing down her neck. He was making her hot, like he did every day, a lot more than twice a day. Since Matt’s wedding just over a month ago, Natalie had had a hard time keeping her hands off East. And neither of them seemed to care about anything but touching each other at any given moment.

It was awesome.

She’d never felt so wanted in her life. And she loved the hell out of this man. And everyone knew, and everyone supported them, and she couldn’t quite believe it. She was going to spend forever with him, but there was a lot on her mind, and making him work a little wasn’t a bad thing.

“You think this looks all right?” she asked East and held up the cupcake.

“It’s perfection. Just like every single one you make. And Leslie will love them.”

Natalie smiled. She’d come to an arrangement with Leslie McMann. Natalie had kept the rights to her cupcake recipes and supplied them as a secondary vendor to Leslie’s elite clientele. Business was booming, and Natalie got to stay where she was, doing what she loved.

“Oh, by the way,” East said, and kissed her neck again. “Marry me, baby. My life sucks without you.”

“I’m not going anywhere. And we’re hanging out now. This is nice.”

“Not enough. I want more.”

She turned to face him. “Oh yeah? How much more?”

“All of it,” he said with seriousness. “I want you. All the time. All of you. In every way.”

“You have me,” she said and kissed him softly.

“I have you as my love and my best friend. I want you as my wife, the mother of my children, my road trip buddy, and my bowling partner.”

“Is that all?” she said with amusement, but something in what he’d said made her pause. “You want kids someday?”

He tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “Of course. The world needs more of you in it. But I’m telling you right now, I don’t have a clue as to what to do, but I am certified in infant CPR and watched this documentary on whales and their young and how like humans you’re supposed to just support them and teach them stuff and there’s these backpacks you can stick your baby in and just go hiking! So I can take

the little thing with me everywhere. A baby backpack, best idea ever.”

She laughed and watched East’s eyes light up when he talked about forever and a family. With her. Like she was a prize and he was excited for their future. Like she was excited every day she woke up next to him.

“I love you,” she said, and kissed him. “Can you do me a favor?” she asked against his mouth.

“Anything, baby.”

“Can you marry me?”

He pulled back enough to look her in the eye. “Yes!” She smiled, and he hoisted her up and set her on the counter. “About damn time, woman,” he said, and then kissed down her neck as he lifted her skirt.

She laughed and kissed him and wrapped her legs around his waist just as he loosened his belt and yanked her close to take him deep. Her whole body was on fire for him, and all she felt was the beat in his heart.

“Love you,” he said, kissing her like crazy and taking her body to the edge of bliss.

“I love you, too.”