



# Unbelievable You

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**Category:** Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** Hunter: Things had been going pretty well for me. My time was filled with my jobs and friends, and my parents seemed to have finally given up on bullying me to go to law school. Then everything changes in the blink of an eye. One minute I'm teaching a yoga class, and the next there's smoke and then fire and with it comes firefighters. One in particular.

Stace: There are only three things that I take seriously—my job as a volunteer firefighter, my work with the animal shelter, and my family. Everything else? Not so much. And then we get a call and I end up carrying an unbelievably gorgeous woman down the stairs and I feel like my entire world has shifted and nothing will ever be the same.

Hunter: She lifted me like some hero from a romance movie and I couldn't help but notice how good she looked when she took her helmet off and smiled at me. But that's neither here nor there. I'll never pursue someone like Stace. Love doesn't work out for me, not for any member of my family. It's just not in our genes. Why would I sign up for the inevitable downfall that will wreck my life? I'll keep my heart whole and intact, thank you very much. Stace is the kind of person who demands all or nothing, and I have nothing for her.

Stace: Hunter is...complicated. Closed-off. A challenge, not to mention she's so beautiful that she'd make angels jealous. I've never met anyone who deserves to be seduced and spoiled by affection more than her. So that's what I'm going to do. Because I have to have her.

**Total Pages (Source):** 99

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:18 pm*

## Chapter One

### Hunter

“I don’t know how many times I need to say this. I am not going to law school,” I said through clenched teeth. I’d said those exact words so many times. Perhaps saying them in another language would help? My best friend Cade was currently learning American Sign Language. Would that work?

My mother pursed her lips and put her fork down on her plate, her cobb salad left half-finished, all of the bacon and eggs shoved to the side.

Why did I keep agreeing to come to these lunches with her? It was a ritual I couldn’t seem to break myself out of. Along with going to charity events or country club weekends. Without fail, law school would come up.

“I just think—” she started to say, and I pushed my chair back. I’d barely touched my own salad. I’d only ordered it so she wouldn’t comment on my eating habits.

I couldn’t look directly at her. “I’m not doing this with you anymore. If you can’t accept my choices, then you can’t accept me. Give Dad my love.”

“Hunter,” she hissed, worried that I was going to make a scene. Oh no, a scene. The worst thing that could possibly ever happen to her.

Part of me imagined really making a scene. Screaming or yelling or flipping the table. But then everyone around us would have their day disturbed and the workers would

have to clean everything up and they didn't deserve that. So, threats of a scene were the best I could do under the current circumstances.

The sun was shining when I left the restaurant hungry. I thought about sending Cade or Reid a message that I needed them, but Cade was working and Reid was probably sleeping after her bartending shift at Sapph and I didn't want to wake her up.

As I was contemplating my next move, my phone rang. My mother, of course. I ignored the call and started walking away from the restaurant and toward somewhere I could get a decent burger.

My parents liked to eat at the kinds of restaurants where the food was absolutely spectacular, but the portions were so minuscule that you got about one bite per course. I'd grown up used to dining that way, but nothing at those places could top a really good burger when you were ravenous.

Remembering that one of my favorite food trucks was probably still serving and parked not far away, I headed toward the park and was thrilled to find that the line wasn't too long. Finally, something had gone right.

While I waited, I checked my social media pages. I had several that I had to manage. One for my yoga teaching business, one for my hair tutorials, one page for regular posts and my watercolor art, and then one for my closest friends. It was a lot to manage, but I'd developed a system and there was a plan for each one. My parents were absolutely horrified by my career choices. In truth, I didn't need to work. My trust fund took care of most of my needs, but I couldn't stomach the idea of not doing anything with my time. Or doing what my parents wanted me to do with my time. If they weren't working, they were having pointless conversations over too-small portions or pretending to smile at people they hated during a charity auction while bidding on things they didn't need and telling themselves they were contributing positively to society.

If they weren't my parents, I wouldn't have anything to do with them.

And then I'd remember that the reason I had a trust fund and could spend my time doing things like teaching yoga and making hair tutorials without worrying I was going to be homeless was because I was their daughter. There were struggles I would never have to face because of them and their money. My family's money.

Someone cleared their throat and I realized I was next in line. I ordered my burger and then decided to eat it at one of the picnic tables. I slipped off my heels and let my feet rest in the cool grass. I'd worn a "family appropriate" outfit and I was already sweating and wishing I had brought a change of clothes. Most days I lived in yoga gear or my professional wardrobe if I was doing something for the real estate company, or casual clothes that I didn't mind getting paint on. I also had a wardrobe for making videos, including sponsored items that I had tried and loved.

The clothing my parents deemed appropriate lived in the back of my closet and only came out when I had to see them. Most of it was void of color and only designers that my mother deemed acceptable. Boring. Boring and lifeless.

I almost grinned to myself when I managed to get a little grease spot on the tan skirt I'd worn.

When my stomach was finally satisfied, I put my shoes back on and headed back to my apartment.

I might have been able to stop my parents from forcing me to go to law school (up until now at least), but I hadn't been able to get them to budge on where I was supposed to live. True, my apartment was spacious and beautiful, but it had been picked by my parents. At least I'd gotten to decorate it the way I wanted. And the floor-to-ceiling windows with the gorgeous city views in the living room didn't hurt at all. But if I'd had my choice, I might have chosen differently.

Sighing, I kicked off my shoes and stripped out of my outfit on my way to the bathroom. Right now, I needed a bath and an edible. And maybe some cookies for after the edible hit.

Every time I had to see one or both of my parents, I kept a kind of emergency recovery kit stocked, which included plenty of frozen cookie dough ordered from one of my favorite bakeries up the coast in a tiny town called Castleton. Cade's love language was cake, but I was all about cookies. Especially the ultimate s'mores cookies. Those were calling my name tonight. Comfort cookies.

I popped my edible, cringing at the taste, and preheated the oven before covering a cookie sheet with parchment paper and arranging the pre-formed balls of dough so they didn't run together when baked.

My mother called again, but I ignored her. She sent me a terse text message saying that I needed to call her back and I wanted to tell her that I didn't need to do anything. That I could choose one day to cut off contact with her and Dad. I didn't want to. As much as they irritated me, I did love them. Just in small doses. Smaller doses than they thought were acceptable. I might be a grown woman, but they still treated me like I belonged to them and had to do everything they said.

The oven went off and I shoved in the tray of cookies before heading to the bathroom to decide which bath bomb I wanted to use from my collection. I put a movie on my tablet and once the cookies were done, I filled the tub.

Should I have reached out to Cade? I knew she would have dropped everything to come and be my friend and therapist after lunch with my mother. But she had so much going on now. She was happy, and I didn't want to be a cloud in her sky. No, it was better for me to handle my family on my own, the way I had my whole life.

My parents had probably wanted more children, but it hadn't worked out, no matter

how much money and time they had spent trying for their spare. Nope, they got me, an ungrateful bitch who refused to carry on their legal career legacy.

I had gone along with the program getting a business degree, but that was where it ended, and they'd been furious ever since.

Sighing, I sunk into the bath and rested my head on an inflatable pillow as I shoved a cookie in my mouth. My edible had finally kicked in, and I was languid, warm, and unbothered.

## Page 2

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At least the day wasn't a total waste.

Eventually my mom gave up and Dad started calling. He was always the easier one to handle, so I picked up the second time he called while I was making dinner.

"Hey, Dad," I said, trying not to sigh.

"Hello, pumpkin," he said, and I rolled my eyes at the nickname. Bit silly to call me that just before laying on the enormous guilt trip I knew was coming.

I turned off the stove so I wouldn't burn anything and braced my back against the island.

"How are you?" he asked, as if he didn't know. As if he was just calling to chat for no particular reason.

I listened as he launched into all of the reasons I shouldn't have left lunch so abruptly, how I had upset Mom, how I was their only daughter and it was my job to carry on the Larson legacy. I'd heard him say all this so many times I'd considered making Bingo cards and filling them out whenever he called me about something like this. Most of the words had been repeated so often that they'd lost all meaning.

When I could finally get a word in edgewise, I reiterated that I was my own person, that I was doing work that I enjoyed, that money wasn't everything, that I could have done something really abhorrent, like going on a reality show or starting a podcast.

Eventually I was able to calm him down enough and promise that I wasn't going to

cut them off and that I was absolutely going to be attending the historical society lunch that my mom was in charge of in two weeks and that I would send flowers to “apologize” for leaving lunch the way I did. The flowers were one thing, but I’d rather get hit repeatedly by a train than go to her lunch, but I would. To keep the peace. Or at least as much as I could keep without wanting to say to hell with it and deleting them from my phone.

Sorry I was so busy today. How did lunch with your mom go? Cade asked in our group chat.

About as well as expected. I kind of stormed off and went to get a burger. Just got off the phone with Dad. Think I smoothed things over. Going to send flowers. You know the drill. I answered.

Cade and Reid had been through this routine enough times with me to know how it went.

You’ve got to put up better boundaries, kid Reid sent. She had an equally tumultuous relationship with her mother. Reid had been raised to fulfill her mother’s dream of becoming a ballerina and then Reid had smashed that to pieces and quit and things had been volatile ever since. They barely spoke, and it almost always ended in a fight and Reid cutting off contact for a while.

It wasn’t healthy, exactly, but I couldn’t really give her advice in that department when I had my own parental situation.

I’m working on it I sent and then Cade changed the subject by sharing a picture she’d taken of her girlfriend, Eloise. It still blew my mind that my friend Cade, the one who loved cake and chaos, was dating a famous author. It still didn’t make a whole lot of sense, if I was being honest. Not that I thought Cade wasn’t good enough for Eloise or anything like that, I just didn’t see them together. Eloise was this older woman



with this huge career and she'd fallen for Cade, who'd been working as her assistant at the time, and I wasn't sure how to feel about that.

Yes, Eloise had gotten her a new job, but still. I didn't like it. I'd never say anything negative to Cade about it. She was head over heels, and she was happy. Eloise hadn't done anything directly to cause me to pull Cade aside, but I had my eye on her. They were going on a book tour in about two months and that would be the real test. If she was asked about her relationship status, what would Eloise say? Would she tell the truth? And what would she do if people linked her with Cade and started being awful? I didn't know her well enough to know if she'd step up and protect my friend.

She said she's coming to Sapph with us this weekend Cade sent, and that did surprise me. Cade had organized a few hangouts with Eloise already, but this was bringing her into our territory. Eloise was older and freshly out as bisexual and Sapph could be overwhelming even when you were used to queer spaces.

Jury was still out on Eloise.

The next day was a busy one for me, which was good since it didn't leave a whole lot of time to ruminate on my parental situation.

I had a showing at one of my properties in the morning, then a meeting with my boss at the agency to check in and see how things were going, a few PR packages came in that I needed to unbox and film (including doing my hair and makeup and styling an outfit), I had a new print to launch in my watercolor shop, and then I was teaching two yoga classes back-to-back. I managed to shove enough food in my mouth and stay hydrated in between. One of the yoga classes was heated and fainting in the middle of teaching wasn't very good for my brand.

Fortunately, teaching was one of my favorite things. I'd set up my playlist and had written out a little plan, but more often than not, the classes my students liked the

most were where I came up with a flow in the moment. My brain knew the drill at this point, and I found myself linking poses that might not seem like they flowed together and creating a funky flow. Wisdom and quotes that I didn't even know that I knew flowed from my mouth and I sounded like a person who actually knew what the hell she was talking about instead of someone who only pretended to.

It was a full house tonight and everyone was in a good mood. We'd just switched sides, and everyone was deep into their flow when all hell broke loose.

## Chapter Two

### Hunter

Flashing lights and blaring sirens, followed by smoke and panic and screaming. For a moment, I froze, but then my brain kicked in and I quickly got everyone out of the room and into the hallway that was choked with smoke, telling everyone to get low and head for the stairs.

People were bumping into each other and frantic and I hoped someone had called 911 because I was going to make sure that everyone got out. Smoke filled the air, making it harder and harder to breathe. I didn't see any flames, but it was impossible to tell where the fire was coming from. We needed to get out. Now.

"Someone call 911!" I yelled and then had a coughing fit. I needed to check the rooms and the bathrooms but there was too much smoke and if I didn't get out now, I might get trapped. Just as I was debating what the fuck to do, I heard sirens. Thank fuck.

Crouching as close to the floor as I could get, I hustled in the direction of the stairs and started heading down. The air on the lower floors was clearer, but then I had a coughing fit and tripped, rolling my ankle and crashing to the landing on the third

floor.

“Help!” I screamed through another coughing fit and streaming eyes. I wish I’d grabbed a towel from the room. I was only wearing a sports bra and my yoga pants, so I couldn’t use any of my clothing to cover my mouth and nose to protect my lungs.

“Fire department!” a voice called out.

## Page 3

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“I’m here!” I yelled as loudly as I could. “I’m here, help!”

Pounding footsteps on the stairs reached me and I looked up to find a firefighter in full gear looking down at me.

Everything took on a blurry surreal quality, and not just because of the smoke. The firefighter asked if I could walk and I pointed to my now-swelling ankle. Their voice was muffled through their mask. Several other firefighters pounded up the stairs to check the rest of the building.

Next thing I knew I was being picked up and fucking carried down the stairs by a firefighter as if I was an actress in a movie. There was a surreal quality to all of this. Like any moment someone was going to yell “cut!” and everything would go back to normal.

The firefighter set me down outside and an oxygen mask was put on my face and I inhaled cool, fresh air. Finally, I could breathe. I was never going to take that for granted again.

I shoved the mask off my face. “Did everyone get out? Please, you have to make sure they got everyone out. Oh my god, you have to get everyone out!” I should have checked the other rooms before going downstairs.

The firefighter took off their mask and helmet and held the oxygen up to my face again.

“Whoa, whoa. Easy there. Take a few deep breaths for me.”

My entire body shook like I'd had about fifty cups of coffee and I couldn't really feel my fingers. How was any of this real?

I looked up into a pair of eyes that could have been brown, green, gold, or some combination of the three.

"That's it," the firefighter said as I took her in. Dark blonde hair cut shorter on the sides with the top that flopped over in a careless way. Oh.

"Don't worry. We're going to get everyone out, but let's focus on you right now. What's your name?"

I had to think for a second. The lights from the firetrucks and the commotion and the smoke were too much. Too much pressing in on me at the same time and I wanted to close my eyes and make it all go away.

"Hunter," I said. "I'm Hunter." Couldn't remember my last name.

"Well, hi, Hunter. I'm Stace. How do you feel about letting these nice paramedics look you over?"

She spoke with a soothing tone and I knew in the back of my mind that I was flipping out or going into shock or something. I saw the name STACEY on a patch on her jacket. Was there a special name for a firefighter's jacket? There probably was.

"Okay," I said, and Stace waved someone over.

The paramedics sprung into action and started asking me questions that I did my best to answer. Stace picked up her mask and helmet and I knew she was going to leave.

"Where are you going?" I blurted out, as if I had a right to ask.

“Just going to make sure the building is clear. Don’t worry.” She winked before she put her mask and helmet back on, obscuring her face again.

Stace was gone and then I was somehow in an ambulance and on the way to the hospital, in spite of me saying, repeatedly, that I didn’t need to go to the hospital. They didn’t pay attention to me.

Somehow, I’d remembered to grab my phone so I was able to call Cade and tell her what the hell had happened when I got to the hospital.

“Oh my god. Okay. Eloise and I are on the way. Do you want me to call Reid too? What about your parents?”

Right now, I didn’t want to deal with my parents. And Reid didn’t need to leave work for this. I informed Cade of my wishes and she said she would be there as soon as she could.

Time lost all meaning as I waited in the ER to be seen and then for x-rays and other tests to check my lungs. Cade and Eloise had arrived as a nurse was evaluating me, and it was such a relief to have someone with me.

One diagnosis of a sprained ankle and mild smoke inhalation later, I was more than ready to go home. The whole thing had taken hours. I couldn’t have done it without Cade. She’d taken control of my phone, including speaking with the yoga studio owners to get the story of what happened, giving Reid updates, and seeing about my care instructions.

Eloise also made her presence known, which included interrogating the doctor to check his credentials and asking if I should get a second opinion, all of which made me roll my eyes. I had very simple injuries and they didn’t need to make a big deal out of it. The hospital offered me crutches, which Cade and Eloise made me accept,

even after Eloise questioned the quality and price. I just sat there and let her.

I tried to listen to the doctor, but my brain was completely checked out. My throat was raw, and I was still coughing from the smoke. At least they'd given me something for the pain in my ankle.

“Hey,” Cade said, getting right in my face as Eloise made a call and I waited to get discharged. “You have two options right now. You can either go back to your place and I’ll come with you and stay the night, or we can go back to El’s house and I can take care of you there. Either way, you’re not staying alone. And Reid might join us after her shift.”

Of course.

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“You really don’t have to do that,” I said in my new hoarse voice, but Cade clenched her teeth and shook her head. Her hair was a mess. Hopefully she’d let me fix it for her.

“I’m not arguing with you. And we should really call your parents. Maybe not tonight, but they should know.”

She was right. I knew she was right, but that was one more thing I could not stomach right now.

“I want to go home,” I said, my eyes burning with fresh tears.

“Okay, let’s take you home,” Cade said, hugging me gently. She and Eloise got me into Cade’s car and then to my apartment. Eloise called a car to get back to her house after I told her she didn’t need to stay and assured her that I would call if I needed anything. She’d done more than enough already, throwing her famous name around the ER on my behalf.

Cade helped me hobble to the elevator and then to my bathroom. Even more than laying down, I desperately needed a shower. My clothes reeked of smoke and it was making me sick.

Since I needed to keep my ankle elevated, Cade talked me into a bath, which took some maneuvering, but the painkillers were helping.

Once I was clean, I got myself into my favorite soft as hell pajamas and Cade put me into bed with my ankle propped up.



“I’m going to stay in the guest room, but I’m going to keep checking on you. If you need anything, send me a message. I don’t want you hurting your voice if you don’t have to. Oh, and here is some tea with honey and some cough drops.”

Cade finally left me and I let the tears fall that I’d been holding back.

What a horrible fucking night.

The good news was that the firefighters were able to save the building and there were no deaths. The bad news was that the yoga studio was closed until further notice, and the fire was under investigation, but was probably caused by some old wiring. No one had been injured, other than me with my ankle and some smoke inhalation, and everyone had gotten out. Things could have been so much worse.

For me, it meant that I needed to find a new yoga studio to teach at after my ankle healed. The sprain was so minor that I was on track to be fully healed with only two weeks of down time, and my lungs were back to normal functioning after a few days. I did whatever I could to hasten the process, and I busted my ass filming, creating, and scheduling as much social media content as I could, since nearly everything else was off-limits.

Cade and Reid came to visit me a lot so I didn’t lose my mind being stuck in my apartment, bringing me books and food and making me laugh again. I did a lot of painting, which helped quiet my mind and distracted me from that night.

My parents were livid that I hadn’t called them the night of the fire, but what the hell would they have even done? Every time I’d gone to them for help in my life, they’d either said no, or they’d made me feel so horrible for daring to ask that it wasn’t even worth it. Fortunately, they had a big fight with each other that distracted them from being disappointed with me. My injury did save me from having to go to my mother’s charity event. I never thought I would have been happy about a sprained ankle.

There were nightmares, though. No one knew about them. Not even Cade and Reid. Having nightmares about a traumatic event was only natural after a traumatic event and they would fade in time, I told myself.

Confusingly mixed in with the nightmares was a flash of beautiful smile. Dimples. The feeling of being carried by strong arms.

Stace. The firefighter who'd rescued me. I found myself wondering about her in those times after I'd woken up in a cold sweat with my heart trying to thrash its way out of my chest and gasping for breath. Thinking about Stace was much better than reliving those awful moments.

She had dimples. It wasn't right that she had dimples in both cheeks when she smiled.

The way she'd lifted me, as if I was nothing but a bag of flour she was putting in her cart at the grocery store.

Was she a firefighter full time? Was that a thing? I was sure it had to be. What an interesting job. Physically demanding, no doubt. She had to be in good shape to cart all that gear around and be able to haul people as well. How long had she been a firefighter? Did she enjoy it?

So many questions about a person I'd interacted with for less than fifteen minutes.

If I wanted to, I could find her. There were only so many local fire departments and they all had social media. Plus, there had been articles written about the fire which would tell me which companies had responded. Finding her would take a matter of minutes.

But I didn't do it. Finding her was pointless. She was just a person who had carried me out of a building and that was it. Stace probably didn't even remember me.

## Chapter Three

Stace

“You’re still thinking about her?” my brother Torrin asked incredulously.

He bumped my shoulder with his, trying to knock me off balance as we walked into the diner to get breakfast. We both had the day off, so we were eating together before heading to our little brother’s soccer game. We both had decided we needed blueberry pancakes, bacon, sausage, and lots of strong coffee before heading over to the field to watch.

“I am not,” I said as he put our name at the counter of our favorite diner and grabbed the pager the server handed him. We crammed ourselves into a corner to wait since there was nowhere else to stand. The diner was an absolute circus, but that was to be expected on a Saturday morning.

“Yeah,” he said, grinning at me and bumping my shoulder again. “You are. You know you could find her.”

## Page 5

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I rolled my eyes. In the three weeks since the fire at the yoga studio, Tor and I had had this conversation multiple times. Any time my mind would wander, he'd accuse me of thinking about her.

Hunter.

The woman I'd carried down the stairs. She'd been panicking about getting everyone else out and not worried about herself, even as she been coughing from the smoke. That wasn't surprising, but what was surprising was just how otherworldly beautiful she was. I'd barely been able to focus on doing my damn job after she'd looked at me. Big blue eyes that were luminous in the flashing lights. A face crafted by a master with skill and hair that was pulled back but curled in gentle golden wisps around her face, making her look like an angel. An actual angel that had fallen from the sky and into my arms.

She'd barely spoken to me, but that hadn't mattered.

"Stace. You're obsessing."

I knew I was, but I couldn't help it. That moment with Hunter had changed my life, and I couldn't make anyone else understand that.

Everything had gone out of focus around her until she was the only thing I could see. Every cell in my body reacted to being close to her. I'd never experienced anything like that before, but the intensity of it rocked me to my core.

She was someone. She was someone to me. I didn't know how or why, but she was

important. I just knew that she was. I knew it like I knew I loved my brothers. I knew it like I knew I was going to be a firefighter when I was seven. I knew it like I knew my dog, Buck, was mine the first time I saw him at the shelter and he'd run over to lick my face.

Tor continued to tease me as we ordered so much food that the server raised her eyebrows. Tor and I were not small people. We worked out constantly to keep up with our jobs, me as a firefighter, him as a paramedic. To say we could put away a few calories was a massive understatement.

"I haven't seen you this twisted up about someone in a long time," Tor said as we sipped our coffee and waited for our orders.

"I'm not twisted up," I said. "I don't even know her." And I didn't. I didn't know this woman. And I probably wouldn't. She was the person I'd think about when people talked about "the one that got away." Because that kind of spark, that feeling? It only came around once, or twice if you were very lucky.

My mom's first marriage hadn't been like that, but her second? When she'd met Tor's dad in a grocery parking lot because she was screaming at a bigot and he went to defend her, they'd known. They'd both just gotten out of bad marriages and were single parenting on their own. Tor and I were only a few months apart in age and as soon as they brought us all together, we were an instant family. Tor and I always joked that we were twins who were just separated by DNA. Years later our two youngest brothers, Elias and Carson, had made us a complete family of six.

The server brought our plates and they nearly covered the table, but soon all of them were empty.

Tor and I fought over the bill and he ended up winning the arm-wrestling match, so he paid.

We stopped to pick up some waters and mandarin oranges for the team at the grocery store before making it to the field and finding our parents and Eli in the stands. Tor dropped the water and oranges off to the coach and winced as he sat on the bleachers.

“Finally. All my children are here together,” Mom said, giving me and Tor hugs.

“We are together literally all the time,” I said, taking the seat next to her as Tor sat next to Dad. While another man had given me half his DNA, this man, Hamilton Thomas, was my father in every way that mattered.

“I’m bored,” Eli whined. He was twelve and well into his tween stage even if I still thought of him as a baby.

“The game’s going to start in a few minutes and you’d better be paying attention and cheering for your brother,” Mom said, giving him a look.

Eli huffed and I reached over and mussed his light brown hair. He was just grumpy because he wasn’t allowed to bring his gaming system with him. He still had his phone, but it was a stripped-down model with very few apps on it, which was a crime if you asked him.

Finally, the teams took the field and started the game, the kids looking adorable in their little uniforms and cleats and shin guards.

“Go Carson!” we all cheered and hollered as he ran around the field and actually did chase the ball, unlike several of the other kids. Getting a bunch of seven-year-olds to focus was a monumental task.

We lost our minds when Carson scored a goal and did a little cartwheel before doing a ridiculous dance that he’d probably stolen from some video online that Eli had showed him.

“I have no idea where he gets that from,” Dad said with a laugh.

“You’re gonna have to talk to him about what appropriate dance moves are,” Mom said, patting him on the shoulder as she tried not to laugh. “And I’m pretty sure I’ve seen you dance like that a time or two.”

The game ended with Carson’s team, the Tigers, pulling out a win. He was over the moon when we went to grab him to give him hugs and tell him what a good job he’d done.

“I’m so proud of you for trying so hard, Carson,” I told him, crouching down so I could meet his eyes. “Winning is nice, but doing your best is better.”

He nodded, and I could tell he heard and understood me. As the oldest, I took my responsibilities as a big sister seriously. I’d been there the moment that both Eli and Carson had been born and I’d changed their diapers and babysat and helped them both learn how to ride a bike. They needed a big sister to make sure they didn’t turn into little assholes when they became teenagers and beyond. I was be there to make sure that didn’t happen.

Carson’s team always went out for pizza after they won, so I said goodbye to my family and headed to the gym for a workout. I was meeting Rivera and Cooper from my firehouse. The three of us had started around the same time and we’d formed a tight bond being some of the only female firefighters at the station. There were still pockets of men who wished that we could go back in time when women weren’t allowed to do things, and it could wear on you.

I met them in the locker room and since it was leg day, we ran on the treadmills first to warm up and then hit the machines and weights.

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The three of us did our own workouts but broke often to chat and tease each other. I had my favorite playlist going, and I'd just moved up weight on my leg press and squats when I felt like someone had called my name. Sitting up and pulling out my earbuds, I looked around. Rivera was filling up her water bottle and Coop was doing Romanian deadlifts in the mirror. Huh.

Still feeling weird, I glanced around and that's when I saw her.

Hunter.

Hunter

Teaching classes at a gym like this wasn't my first choice, but they'd been so gracious about adding me on their schedule. A few of my regulars had followed me, and there were some new faces, so I was adjusting to a new schedule. The owners of my other studio were still dragging their feet and I had the feeling that they might just cut their losses and close, so I needed to find a new home anyway. I already had a few friends and contacts at other studios, so I wasn't all that worried about finding a place to teach.

I'd just finished an intense power class and was wondering what to order for dinner when something made me glance to the right, where the weights and machines were.

At the same time, a blonde head turned, and I locked eyes with someone I'd only seen once, weeks ago, but who I'd recognized instantly.

Stace. The firefighter.



For a moment, I couldn't move. As if someone had hit Pause on the entire world.

While I couldn't move, I guess she didn't have the same problem. Stace rose to her feet from the machine she'd been sitting at and crossed the room. I couldn't take my eyes off her.

On the night of the fire I hadn't been able to get a sense of her body under all that bulky gear. Sure, I knew she was strong, but seeing her wearing a tank and shorts that didn't leave much to my imagination was another thing entirely.

This woman was jacked. Absolutely and totally jacked. She looked like a walking ad for muscles.

There was just so much of her to look at. My memories had made her shorter than she was. She was actually taller. Or maybe she looked taller in fewer clothes. Was that a thing?

While I was trying to figure it out, she reached me, nearly knocking me over with a smile that made both of her dimples pop.

"Hunter, right?" she said, but I knew that she remembered me. Probably not as well as I remembered her.

"Stace?" I asked, as if I wasn't sure.

"That's right," she said, crossing her arms and giving me an eyeful of biceps and forearms that made my mouth water. I never knew I was into women with muscles, but Stace was doing all kinds of things to my libido. I was already warm from teaching, but my internal temperature kept going up, up, up.

"How are you doing?" she asked, leaning closer and looking me over, as if she was

checking for injuries.

“Much better. My ankle is fine.” I looked down and twirled my foot to demonstrate.

“No lingering effects from the smoke?” she asked in a concerned tone.

“No, I’m good,” I said, wondering where the hell this odd conversation was going and still stunned that we had found each other again.

“Great. That’s great,” she said, rubbing the bridge of her nose. Now that my initial shock of seeing her had worn off, I was noticing more about her. Including her ears. They were big and stuck out just enough in a way that was so...adorable on someone who was so jacked that a warm feeling bloomed in my chest. I bet she got teased for those ears when she was growing up. Bet she still did.

“I’ll, uh, let you get back to your workout,” I said, still completely off balance. I wasn’t normally so conversationally tongue-tied.

“Yeah, of course. I should let you go...whatever,” she said, her cheeks going a little pink and it wasn’t fair.

None of this was fair.

It was time to go, but my feet wouldn’t move. I couldn’t think of a single reason why I needed to leave.

“Stace!” someone yelled across the gym and she turned and shot a look at a woman who tapped her wrist.

“You should go,” I told her, because she’d have to be the one who left first. My body was just not going to do it.

Stace swore under her breath. “It’s good to see that you recovered and everything.”

“Thanks. Oh, and thanks for carrying me. I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t found me.”

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She shrugged one shoulder. "Someone would have carried you out. Just happened to be me."

Another person called her name and she made a frustrated sound and did that nose-rubbing thing again.

"Bye, Hunter," she said, walking backwards two steps so she was still looking at me.

"Bye, Stace."

She gave me one last tight smile and turned around to rejoin her friends.

"You want me to find her? I can totally find her," Cade said that night when she and Reid came to hang out with me. Cade was so busy now with Eloise that we had to be strict in scheduling our times to hang out. Before they'd met, I'd seen Cade nearly every day. Now if I wanted to hang more than once or twice a week I usually had to drive out to the suburbs. Eloise's house was absolutely stunning, but still. I felt like an intruder there.

"No, I don't want you to find her, if I wanted to find her, I could do that in a few seconds. It doesn't matter."

Why had I told them about seeing Stace at the gym? What was wrong with me? Now they wouldn't shut up about trying to find her and writing some story where we were destined for each other. Well, Cade was, but her brain was currently poisoned by love. Reid was just living out her fanfic dreams through me. Reid might have a crusty exterior, but she had the heart of a romantic. Cade and I had been sworn to secrecy

about her writing or else she threatened to stab us with one of the knives she used to slice limes for the bar.

“Hunter, we can see that you like her. We know you,” Cade said, nudging Reid, who agreed. We were all in my apartment eating various desserts. Cade had brought cake that Eloise’s friend had made, I’d baked some cookies (from frozen dough), and Reid had been in charge of drinks, as usual, but she’d also brought some crispie treats that she’d made for some reason. They were good, full of gooey marshmallow and she’d mixed the crispy rice cereal with the fruity kind. I was actually impressed, even though they weren’t that labor intensive to make. Reid worked as many shifts at the bar as she could, and as a result she was nearly always too exhausted for things like making desserts.

“I don’t like her. I don’t even know her! She’s literally just a firefighter who carried me out of a building. I’m grateful. That’s all.”

Angrily shoving a cookie in my mouth, I glared at my two best friends, hoping they’d drop it.

“You know, your glare is only good on people who don’t know you well enough,” Cade said, smirking at me and leaning over the island to snatch another cookie from the plate I’d set out.

“Reid, back me up here,” Cade said.

“She’s right,” Reid said, pointing at Cade. “You like her.”

I clenched my teeth. I really needed to get a handle on this.

“Fine. I will admit that there is an attraction, but I’m attracted to a lot of women. That’s nothing new. Attraction happens all the time.” It was meaningless.

Cade grinned as if she'd won some sort of contest and I rolled my eyes.

"Can we please discuss something else? You two have been on this for way too long. Reid, tell me you have some good bar stories."

She thought about that for a moment, chewing on one of the treats she'd brought.

"Okay fine. There was a fight the other night and it turned out to be some kind of throuple drama that ended in everyone hugging and making up and sharing a three-way kiss."

Now that I had to hear about.

Monday was another busy day and I barely had time to eat. I had another class to teach at the gym and I wondered if I'd see Stace. I didn't think that I would. What were the chances that she'd show up again at the same time as me?

That didn't stop me from jumping and my eye twitching every time I saw someone with blonde hair and biceps. Even guys. One or two thought I was checking them out and I had to quickly grab my phone and pretend I'd gotten a message or call.

Of course, one of them came up to me as I was leaving my class and gave me what he probably thought was his smoldering smile. If I liked men, it probably would have worked on me.

"Hey, haven't seen you around? You new?"

That was his opening line? Even if I wasn't a lesbian, that was pathetic.

"Yes," I said, trying to throw him "get away from me" vibes.

“Aw, are you shy?” he said, leaning closer to me. Okay, this one wasn’t going to take a hint.

“Excuse me, I have somewhere to be,” I said, starting to move past him, but he stepped in my way.

“Come on, maybe I can book a private yoga class or something with you. Can I get your number?”

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I opened my mouth to tell him he could go fuck himself when another voice spoke first.

“I think that’s going to be a no.” Both me and the Blond Guy turned to find an extremely tall man with brown hair and bulging biceps standing a few feet away. He had colorful tattoos all over both arms and looked like he wasn’t messing around. Plus, he was taller than the guy shooting his shot with me.

“It’s a no, right?” he asked me, and it took a second for me to understand that he was intervening on my behalf.

“I’ve got this, thank you,” I said, putting my hand up to ward him off.

He grinned and it was a much friendlier smile. “Oh, I know. Just thought I would lend a hand,” the new guy said. The original guy was quiet, as if he was waiting to see how this played out.

Silence fell and Blond Guy’s confidence drooped. “Listen, I was just—”

New Guy cut him off. “We all know what you were just. Leave her alone. This isn’t a dating app.”

This was too much.

“If you two want to get your dicks out and start swinging, be my guest. I’m out of here.”



I pushed between them and started walking to the locker room.

Fortunately, neither of them followed me and I thought I was in the clear until I heard someone say, “hey wait!”

Expecting the first guy, I turned around and prepared to read him the harassment clause that he had signed to use this gym, but it was the guy with the dark hair who approached me.

“I’m sorry. About that. And about him,” he said, jerking his thumb backward.

“It’s fine,” I said. “You didn’t have to get involved.”

He nodded. “I know. But I saw someone in distress and my rescue gene kicked in. I’m a paramedic. I guess I can’t help saving people.”

Okay, that was charming, I had to admit. He seemed like an actually nice guy.

“Got it,” I said. “Well, I guess thank you then.”

“I’m Torrin,” he said, putting his hand out. Friendly, this one.

“Uh, Hunter,” I said. “I teach yoga here sometimes.”

“Oh, great. What kind of yoga?”

I told him and he seemed legitimately interested.

“I need to do more yoga. I work out for my job and I feel like I get stuck only doing weights and cardio and forgetting about things like yoga. I’m glad I ran into you. You’ve given me something to think about,” he said.

Good for him. I was happy to help.

He pulled his buzzing phone out of his pocket and read a message before typing out a response.

“Sorry, my sister was just checking in. She’s a firefighter and she’s on call tonight. We always check in with each other when we’re working.”

His sister. A firefighter.

No, surely not. He looked nothing like Stace, apart from having huge arms.

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him his sister’s name, but I didn’t.

“That’s sweet,” I said instead. “Listen, I’ve got to get going. It was nice to meet you, Torrin. Hopefully I’ll see you in one of my classes.”

He nodded. “Yeah, you definitely will. Have a good night. Hopefully without any more annoying people.”

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I laughed reluctantly. “Thanks.”

### Chapter Four

#### Stace

“Okay, give me a big smile,” I said.

The parents and the little boy who wouldn’t let go of the puppy he’d just adopted all grinned at me as I took a picture for the shelter’s social media page.

“Perfect.”

Everyone laughed when the puppy started excitedly licking the little boy’s face as he giggled.

I said goodbye to the happy family and went to check on the volunteers while they cleaned the cages. There was never a dull moment here. Any second someone could show up with a trunk full of bunnies, we would get a call from Animal Control about a puppy mill, or a box of newborn kittens would be on our doorstep when we arrived in the morning.

As hard as it was, as much of an emotional toll it took on me, I loved my job. I had to stop myself from taking so many animals home with me, but my apartment had a one-pet limit and I already had Buck, my dog. Lucky for him, he was allowed to come to work with me and spend most of his days napping by the front desk and getting up only to greet people before going back to sleep again.

After supervising the cleaning volunteers, I checked on the cages full of bunnies, a few hamsters, and the cockatiel that we'd gotten in last week when her owner passed away.

"Everything good?" Beth, my coworker asked as she minded the front desk.

"Yup, no fires," I said, and she rolled her eyes.

"If there were, I'm sure you would put them out," she said. I'd made the same joke about five hundred times already.

"Hey, that food shipment just came in. I forgot to tell you," she said, giving me a sheepish smile. Everyone knew around here that if there was something heavy that needed lifting, I was the one to call.

I was just picking up the last bag when I heard someone say my name.

"Need a hand?" Torrin took up all the room in the doorway and grinned at me. He was wearing one of the shelter volunteer T-shirts and it was practically painted on. If he was trying to get attention, it was working. Tor could be a shameless flirt sometimes and he was currently single.

I set the bag down so I wasn't standing there holding it and scowled at him. "Wish you'd gotten here fifteen minutes ago."

Setting my hands on my hips, I took a few deep breaths.

"Anything else I can do?" On his days off, Tor sometimes swung by and lent a hand where he could. He was a good guy like that.

"You wanna walk some dogs? One of our volunteers called out sick."

Tor's eyes lit up. "Hell yeah I'll walk some dogs. Which ones?"

I told him and he gave me a little salute before going off to get leashes and probably to harass the other employees and volunteers. They didn't mind, because everyone pretty much fell in love with Torrin, once they got over how physically intimidating he was.

I went back to work and Tor took two of our unruliest dogs out to get some exercise. They were sweeties, but they were going to need families who had the time, energy, and patience to love them.

Torrin hung around until my shift ended and asked if I wanted to eat at his place.

"I've got leftover lasagna," he said, leaning over the front desk as I filed paperwork.

"Is it Nonna's recipe?" I asked.

He rolled his eyes. "You know it is."

"Then I'm in."

"What are you doing tomorrow?" I asked later that night after we'd demolished the last of the lasagna. I was on call, but I had a million things to do, so hopefully it wouldn't be busy. Which probably meant that it would be.

Buck sighed from his bed in the corner. He was very picky about what kind of bed he'd lay on, so I'd gotten multiple versions of the same one and they lived at Tor's, the shelter, and at my parents' house. I also had an extra in my car.

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“Chores, probably and then I’m doing a yoga class in the evening.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Since when have you been into yoga?”

“I’m into all kinds of things, Stace,” he said, but I knew there was something else behind this new interest.

I sat back, crossing my arms and waiting.

“Okay, fine, I bumped into a new yoga teacher at the gym and she’s kind of cute. But that’s not the only reason!”

“Yeah, okay. I’m sure. You’re just there to balance your chakras.” My tone was laced with heavy sarcasm.

“I’m not going to hit on my yoga teacher. Besides, the only reason I met her was because another guy was being a dick and I kind of stepped in to see if she was okay. I don’t want to be like that guy.” He frowned and I felt bad for assuming.

“I know. You’re not that guy, Tor. You’re one of the best guys I know.”

He gave me a small smile, but I could see that he was still bothered. “I feel like I’ve been in a rut lately. With work, with everything, you know? I wanted to try something different and then I had this idea. I don’t know.”

For a guy who was built kind of like a Viking, he sometimes had a confidence problem.

“Hey, it sounds cool. Let me know how it is. I’ve never really done that kind of thing, but maybe I should add it to my workout?”

He seemed to perk up and nodded. “I’ll let you know.”

I got home late after hanging with Tor and crashed on the couch with Buck while I tried to convince myself I needed to get ready for bed.

Buck was a warm weight on my legs as I held my ereader and reread one of my favorite books. Some days it felt like I was going so hard that I needed a hobby like reading to really force me to slow down and stay in one place.

If I read on the couch, I was going to pass out on the couch and then have to drag myself to bed and I hated that. It took some effort to get Buck to climb off me, but I eventually did and changed into my sleep shorts and tank before brushing my teeth and doing the rest of my nightly routine.

Buck was already hogging the bed when I climbed in with my ereader again. When my eyelids started to feel like I couldn’t keep them open, I set my ereader aside to charge and let myself drop into sleep.

Since I had a bunch of things to do the next day, we of course got paged to a call. First was an elderly woman who’d fallen in her bathroom. She was fine, but we took her to the hospital to get checked out anyway. Second call an hour later was a small car accident that we had cleared up in a few hours. After that there were regular duties at the station, so I was a little grumpy when I finally got home. Buck was thrilled to see me, as usual, which helped.

I was sweaty and tired, so I showered first and pulled some leftovers out of the freezer. I didn’t have the energy for anything else. Our firehouse didn’t do meals, since it was so small. The city had a larger full-time department, but I’d wanted to

keep my job at the shelter, so volunteering was my best option. That meant our station didn't get all the shiny perks, but I wasn't complaining. The crew was good, and I'd made some amazing friends. This weekend one of the guys was having a cookout for everyone and there were nights out and other events all the time.

Tor sent me a sweaty picture of himself smiling.

Yoga is no joke.

That's right. He'd had his yoga class today.

How was it? I asked.

Different than I thought. Really intense. I liked it. Definitely going to keep coming. He responded.

Maybe I'd have to join him next time.

Hunter

Much to my surprise, Torrin did show up at my next class. I really hadn't expected him to. Sometimes men got weird about yoga. They thought it wasn't masculine enough or something. Torrin hadn't seemed like that kind of guy, no matter if he looked like one.

He'd arrived early and found me while I was mentally going over the flow I'd planned.

"Remember me?" he asked.

I snorted. "You're a little hard to forget."



He smiled and it was too bad I was a lesbian, because he was incredibly good looking. I knew that objectively. He looked like he was training to play a superhero in the next franchise movie.

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I hadn't noticed his eyes the last time, but they were a lovely shade of deep blue and his smile was beautiful.

"Yeah, I know," he said, rubbing the back of his neck as if he was embarrassed. It couldn't be easy to be that big. I wondered if he'd always been the tallest kid in his class. Probably.

"Is this your first yoga class ever?" I asked, feeling like I wanted to be extra nice to this guy for some reason.

"Yeah, is it that obvious?" He had what looked like a brand-new mat slung across his shoulder and a bottle of water with him.

"Hey, you're not wearing jeans or sneakers, so you're already doing better than some people."

He laughed softly. "Okay, so is there anything else I need? They told me this mat was the best at the store, but I have no idea what makes a good mat."

They'd probably sold him the most expensive one.

"Why don't you choose a spot and roll it out and we'll see," I told him.

The store had sold him an extra-long mat, which was good given his height.

"So you're probably going to want a mat towel, and a regular towel. Be right back." I grabbed both for him, along with a yoga strap.

Torrin listened intently while I explained the yoga towel that would cover his mat, absorb sweat, and give him a better grip. I also got him a yoga strap from the basket in the corner and explained what it could be used for.

By the time I was done, it was almost time to start class.

“You’ve got this,” I told him.

He gave me a weak thumbs up as I sat on his mat with his legs crossed.

I was going to keep my eye on him, but I had the feeling he was going to be fine.

Torrin did survive his first class, and I could see it on his face that he’d had a little bit of a revelation. He waited for me after and told me how much he’d loved it and that he would be back. I gave him my schedule and told him to try other teachers and styles too. He thanked me with so much enthusiasm that I found myself blushing. It was nice to have someone appreciate what you did.

I came back down to earth when I got home and had a message from my mother that we needed to talk. I knew what that meant. She was probably going to start in on me about law school. Again. I didn’t think death would even stop her. I’d still get ghost messages to take the LSAT. A few times in the past I had agreed to sit for the test, but then never showed up. Oh the fights we had after I did that. Memorable.

I kept ignoring her for the rest of the week as I adjusted to my new schedule. Another local studio had taken on some of the other teachers from mine, but the slots they had for me were so early that they wouldn’t work for me, so I decided to stick with the gym for now.

On Saturday, Cade had a small party at Eloise’s house. I showed up with cookies and a bottle of nice wine. Reid also came, even though she was coming off a shift at

Sapph, but she brought one of our other friends, Jo. Eloise's best friend Camille and her family were there as well. The three kids were cute as could be, but high energy. Cade was also high energy, though, so she ended up chasing them in the yard, playing tag, and teaching them jump rope tricks.

Camille's husband John was quiet but nice, and he did know his way around a grill. The food and company were both excellent. Better than expected.

At one point, Eloise approached me while I was sitting and sipping some wine. Reid was talking to John and Camille, and Jo had joined Cade to play with the kids.

"Enjoying your afternoon?" she asked me, and I could tell she'd been waiting to have a moment alone with me. I'd been expecting it.

"I am."

She took the chair next to mine and let out a little sigh. Eloise was a beautiful woman. Cade had excellent taste.

She seemed content to sit in silence as we both watched Cade chase the kids around. Eloise smiled softly and laughed when Cade lifted the youngest boy and swung him around in a circle.

"I didn't want to fall in love with her, you know. I fought it," she said.

I knew this. Cade had told me all about it.

"But Cadence is a force of nature. And I think when she decided she wanted me, she made it so. An inevitability."

Well, that did sound like Cade. I couldn't argue with her there.

I nodded.

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“I’d like us to be friends. If you’re open to that. I know you’re skeptical of me. Of my intentions. I know that Cadence and I don’t seem like we fit. But I love her. I love her more than I’ve ever loved anything.”

Now was my time to speak. “More than your career?”

Eloise’s eyes snapped to mine. Hers were a strange shade of blue that almost looked violet in certain lights. Stunning and unusual. Hypnotic.

“Tell me what you mean,” she said, and it wasn’t a question.

“You’re going on a book tour, and you’re bringing Cade. Are you going to make her pretend to be your assistant again to explain why she’s with you? If someone asks a question about her during an interview, are you going to lie? Are you going to make her tell lies about the two of you?”

All of those questions had been knocking around in my brain ever since Cade told me about her feelings for Eloise. I’d been supportive of my best friend when things had seemed like they were one-sided. I hadn’t wanted to tell her that her crush on Eloise wasn’t likely to be reciprocated. And then it had been, and I’d been completely and totally thrown.

Cade was wonderful. Amazing. I would sing her praises all day, But I never thought that Eloise would reciprocate her feelings. Never in a hundred years.

I’d thought that the relationship would flame out after its initial heat. So far, it hadn’t, but I wasn’t holding my breath. Eloise would have to prove she was in this for the

long haul.

“This isn’t easy for me, you know,” she said, defensive. I expected that.

“I do know. I’m queer too. Do you think my parents were jumping for joy when I told them that their only daughter wasn’t going to be marrying a nice boy they picked out for me?”

To this day, my parents would still ask me if I was very sure I was a lesbian. If there wasn’t any wiggle room for me to fall for a man that they would approve of.

Eloise looked away. “I’m sorry for that. That your parents didn’t support you.”

I brushed that aside. It didn’t matter right now. We were talking about Cade.

“I’m going to claim her. Publicly. The reason I haven’t done it already is because I don’t want it to hurt Cade. There won’t be photographers hiding in the bushes to talk pictures of us, but people will say things. She’s going to be put under a spotlight that isn’t always kind. I’ve built my armor up over years of dealing with it. But Cade hasn’t. I don’t—” she broke off, emotion choking her voice.

“I don’t want who I am to hurt her. I’d do anything to protect her.” She hurriedly swiped at her eyes. Tears. Another surprise.

“She’s strong,” I said, and Eloise nodded.

“Oh, I know. It’s one of the things I love about her. I just wish I could change the world for her. I’ve done my best, but I don’t know what’s going to happen on the tour.”

There was genuine fear in her eyes.

“You could tell her not to go,” I said.

Eloise snorted. “Have you ever told Cade not to do something? That’s the quickest way to get her to want to do whatever it is.”

A laugh escaped me. That was true. She knew Cade well.

“I know,” I said.

“I’m hoping that all my fears are just paranoia. There’s a chance that no one cares or will notice.”

That was a possibility. A small one. Eloise was used to her level of fame.

“Will you protect her?” I asked. Cade was the only thing I cared about. Eloise and her career were irrelevant.

“Yes, I will,” she said. “I need you to believe that I will do whatever I can to protect her from anything that tries to hurt her.”

Eloise reached out and gripped my wrist. “Do you believe me?”

Her fingers dug into my skin and her eyes were desperate.

I believed that she was sincere. But I didn’t believe she had the power to stop people from attacking Cade.

At least that was something that wouldn’t happen to me. After seeing every single member of my close and extended family be wrecked by love in one way or another, I was staying far away from it altogether. People might think that just because a couple didn’t get divorced, that meant everyone was happy, and that the marriage was



successful. Not so. Every single married couple in my family was miserable, bitter, and hated each other. Some more so than others. But most couldn't stand to be in the same room for longer than ten minutes, my parents included. Love was a poison that ruined everyone. All I had heard growing up were arguments and snide comments and diatribes on how awful wives were, how terrible husbands could be.

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No way was I signing up for that.

I had other things in my life to fill my time and to satisfy me. I didn't need someone living in my house that was going to end up resenting and hating me for the rest of our lives. Sure, divorce was an option, but I'd still be left with a broken heart. Not giving it a chance to get broken in the first place was a better option.

Before she'd married my father, my mother had been an amazing artist. I'd found some of her paintings once and asked her about it. She said she gave up art to have her family, but I knew the real reason. My dad had come into the picture and she'd given it up. He sucked all the joy out of her and left her with nothing. And she'd done the same to him. I couldn't remember the last time my dad had laughed or smiled or enjoyed anything.

Growing up with them I'd dreamed about finding out that I was adopted and my real family would come and take me away. I'd have siblings and a mom who hugged me and read books and baked cookies and a dad who never missed my school events and taught me how to drive.

That wish never came true.

Now I was an adult and none of that mattered anymore. Only that I avoided everything my parents did so I don't end up like them.

Eloise was waiting for an answer and I didn't have one for her.

"I believe that you believe it. That's all I can give you right now," I said.

She sighed. "I understand."

Her fingers gripped her glass and she opened her mouth to say something else, but Cade ran over, her face flushed and her smile bright.

"El, come on! I want to show you how to do a double under." The way Eloise's face softened when she looked up at Cade made me look away as something uncomfortable twisted in my gut.

"Cadence, I don't think I'm in the right outfit for jumping rope," Eloise said, but Cade just rolled her eyes.

"Go put on your yoga pants and your workout shoes on. Please? It'll be fun."

I expected Eloise to refuse again, but she just shook her head as if she was trying to hide a smile.

"The things I do for you," she said as she stood up.

Cade used Eloise's shirt to pull her closer, resting her arms on Eloise's shoulders and grinning.

"You'd do anything for me because you love me," Cade said.

Eloise leaned in and I could just hear her saying "I suppose I do" in Cade's ear before kissing her cheek gently and going into the house.

Cade looked after Eloise with stars in her eyes before flopping down on the chair Eloise had vacated.

"So. How did it go interrogating Eloise?" Cade asked.

“I wasn’t interrogating her,” I said. “I was being a friend, there’s a difference.”

Cade’s sunny demeanor dropped. “Listen. I know you are my best friend and I love you, and I love you looking out for me. But you’ve got to stop treating Eloise like this. She’s not making me do anything. She takes care of me, and she loves me. I know you have a hard time trusting people, but I need you to trust me. Trust that I know what I’m doing. And that I know the woman I love.”

My immediate reaction was to argue. To say that wasn’t what I was doing. That I just wanted to make sure that Cade wasn’t making a mistake.

But she was right. Eloise was her mistake to make. And I had been kind of a bitch about it. I was a bitch about a lot of things, but I might have taken this a little too far.

Fuck.

Shame and guilt curdled in my stomach and I looked at Cade.

“I’m sorry, Cade. You’re right. I’m sorry.”

She just smiled and came over to give me a hug. “It’s okay. Your heart was in the right place. You just got a little carried away.”

I hugged her back. Hugging wasn’t something that I did very often, and I always felt awkward about it. That was what happened when your parents didn’t give you enough physical affection as a child. You struggled with it as an adult and now here I was.

Cade let me go and Eloise returned wearing yoga pants and sneakers.

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“Okay, show me how to jump. I’m ready.” There was a light in her eyes and she seemed excited.

Cade handed her a rope. “Let’s do this.”

### Chapter Five

Stace

“Who are you looking for?” Rivera asked me the third time I glanced around the gym.

“No one,” I lied. I was looking for Hunter. I knew she was teaching a class today because I’d looked at the schedule and saw her name. She’d also been added to the gym’s roster of teachers along with a gorgeous picture. No bio, though, which was frustrating.

I could easily find her social pages, but that wasn’t the point.

Rivera and Coop shared a look.

“You’ve been twitchy this whole time,” Coop said, setting down her weights and picking up a heavier set for bicep curls. Her short brown hair was pulled back in a half-ponytail and she had her glasses on. Sometimes we called her the tiny terror because she might be short, but she was deceptively strong. Wouldn’t have gotten through training if she wasn’t. Rivera was about my height and wore her long dark hair pulled back tight. Remnants of her military background. She’d never enlisted but

had been raised as an Army brat and it had rubbed off on her.

I couldn't have asked for two better women to be my friends and sisters at the firehouse.

But right now? I needed them to mind their own business.

"I'm not twitchy," I said, staring at myself in the mirror and pretending to be checking my form. My arms had really come a long way in the last few months that I'd been putting in the work. I didn't have any serious goals, I just wanted to see what I could do if I trained hard. Seeing results was so satisfying.

Hunter's yoga class had started. I'd been hoping she'd walk by, but either I hadn't seen her, or she wasn't here. I'd have to catch her on the way out, which meant I'd have to really stretch out my workout.

Rivera and Coop watched me for the rest of the workout, but it was easy for me to keep track of the time.

"I'm going to stay and do some stretching and foam rolling," I told them when they'd finished and were ready to leave.

They shared a skeptical look but didn't say anything as we said goodbye and that we'd see each other for training on Monday. In addition to our shifts, we had meetings and mandatory trainings each month. It was nice to get everyone together and bond while we kept our skills sharp.

So I wasn't a total liar, I did do a longer stretching routine and some foam rolling. My muscles were going to be so grateful I had decided to hang around and loiter so I could catch a pretty girl.

At least I hadn't crashed her class. That would definitely be taking things too far. Not that I hadn't considered it, since Torrin was doing yoga now. Maybe I could convince him to go to one of her classes and do some recon for me. Would that be too much?

I had my phone in my hand to send him a message when a sound made me look up.

One of the gym bros was making way too much noise during his sets and needed to tone it down. I was just about to give him a glare when something else caught my eye.

Hunter. There she was, wearing a pair of tangerine yoga pants and a pink bra under a white tank. She looked like a piece of delicious candy.

Her hair was up, but it was done in some elaborate braided and twisted way that looked like it must have taken hours. She was speaking with someone else who had a yoga mat slung on her back, so I waited.

The other person said something that made Hunter laugh. They waved and left. Hunter took her phone out of her pocket and leaned against the wall as she checked it, frowning.

I did a quick check of my appearance with my phone and raked my hair back from my face. Seeing her after my workout wasn't the best, but the first time we'd met had been at a fire, so I didn't have much to live up to.

Grabbing my water, I crossed the space and stopped right in front of her. She looked up when my shadow covered her.

"Oh," she said, blinking those gorgeous blue eyes at me. "Are you stalking me?"

"I don't think so. We just both happen to be in the same place at the same time.

Happens every day.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Seriously. Did you come here to see me?”

I held my hands up and stepped back. “Seriously, this is my regular workout time. My friends had to go and I was just finishing up.”

Her phone went off and she read a message and let out a frustrated sound that was almost like a growl.



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It was very cute.

“Everything okay?” I asked as she swiped the message alert away and looked up at me.

“Just my parents being my parents,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “What’s going on?”

She stared at me for a second, as if trying to figure out if I was joking or not.

“You’re a stranger. You don’t care about my issues with my parents.” She crossed her arms.

“Just because I’m a stranger doesn’t mean I don’t care about other people. And you seem upset.”

“I can’t tell if you’re fucking with me or not,” she said.

I grinned at her. “I’m not fucking with you. Do you want to maybe get some pie and talk about it?”

“Pie?”

I nodded and leaned a little closer. “Yeah, pie. It’s too late for coffee, but it’s always a good time for pie. There’s a place right around the corner that’s open twenty-four hours.”

Hunter raised her eyebrows, still waiting for me to admit I was joking.

“Come on. You look like a woman who’s in need of pie.”

I presented her with my arm to escort her and she bit back a smile.

“Give me ten minutes and I’ll meet you out front,” she said.

Progress. That was progress.

Thirty minutes later we were both seated at the diner with slices of pie in front of us. Hunter had ordered strawberry and I’d gotten a slice of their lemon meringue. It was such a classic and so lemony it made your face pucker. Cups of tea sat steaming in front of us in thick scratched mugs.

“So,” I said when she had taken her first bite. “What’s going on with your parents?”

Hunter chewed and swallowed and went for another bite. “They want me to go to law school.” I’d expected her to tell me to mind my own business again.

Pie was magic sometimes. She was clearly enjoying it and I was enjoying watching her. I had a bite of my slice and savored it. Perfection.

“Let me guess, they’re both lawyers?”

Hunter pointed at me with her fork. “You got it.”

“And you don’t want to be.” It was a statement more than a question.

She shook her head and cut another bite of pie. At the rate she was going, she’d need another slice.

“I’ve never wanted to be a lawyer. Never. But I went along with it until I was in my junior year of undergrad. They were on me about the LSAT and looking at law schools and I told them that I wanted to take some time off after I graduated. I wasn’t sure if they’d keep paying for school if I told them it wasn’t going to happen. So I waited and put them off until I graduated and said that I would never be going to law school. Five years later and they haven’t let up. Well, my mother hasn’t.”

She sighed and put down her fork, as if she wasn’t going to finish her slice of pie.

“There. That’s it. Not interesting.”

Waves of hostility rolled off her, but I knew most of them weren’t directed at me.

“Only child?” I asked.

She glared and then the hostility turned toward me.

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“Yes. Why?”

I nodded. “That explains it. Your parents don’t have anyone else to dump their wants and ambitions on, so all of that is sitting on your shoulders. That can’t be easy.”

Hunter looked stunned.

“What?” I asked after having another bite of pie. If she didn’t finish hers, I was going to have it. You just didn’t waste pie like that.

“Nothing,” she said. “I’m guessing you aren’t an only child?”

That made me grin. “Nope. Oldest daughter by a few months. Although, I was an only child for a few years. Don’t really remember it though.”

She picked up her fork again. “Are you from a family of firefighters?”

“Well, my dad worked as a dispatcher for a long time, and my mom is a labor and delivery nurse. So they were already in that world. My brother is a paramedic and then my youngest two brothers are twelve and seven, so who knows what they’ll do with their lives.”

Her eyes went wide for a second. “Three brothers. That must be a lot.”

An understatement. “It is. But I love them. Even when they’re impossible.”

Being a sister was one of my favorite things in life.

Hunter was quiet for a while, poking at the rest of her pie with her fork.

“You’re lucky.” Her voice was soft and sad. It made me want to crawl across the table and hug her. This woman needed hugs, immediately.

Hugs would come later. We were doing pie right now.

“I know. Believe me, I know.”

We both lapsed into silence and I could tell that she was lost in the storm of negative thoughts in her head.

“Do you teach yoga full time?”

She glanced up. “No. I do a number of things.”

I waved my hand for her to continue. “Such as?”

“Do you do the firefighting thing full time?” she asked instead. Okay, we could talk about me.

“No. It’s volunteer. Part time. Usually about twenty-five hours a week that I’m on call. The rest of the time I work at an animal shelter.”

Hunter let out a snorting noise. “Of course you do.”

I sat back, forgetting about my pie. “What does that mean?”

“Firefighter, dog rescuer, it just fits.” She gestured at me.

“I’m trying to decide if that’s a compliment or not.” I couldn’t tell how she meant it.

“It’s a neutral statement.”

I’d have to take her at her word.

“Are you going to finish that?” Those last few bites on her plate were taunting me.

“Can I have a bite of yours?” she asked.

I pushed my plate toward her. Hunter didn’t know that I never shared pie. Ever.

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She took her time getting the perfect bite with crust, pie, and the meringue topping.

“Oh, that’s good,” she said. “So is the strawberry, but the lemon is better.”

“You should get another piece. I’m going to.”

She hesitated and I watched her have a little internal fight with herself.

Then she nodded. “Okay.”

Hunter

If you told me that morning that I was going to end up eating two slices of pie at a diner with the firefighter who carried me out of a building last month, I would have said you had the wrong woman.

Pie wasn’t really my thing, but she’d been so earnest about it when she asked that I couldn’t find it in me to refuse.

Sure, the pie was good, but sitting across from her and getting to see all those upper body muscles on display was better. Not constantly staring at her as she talked and moved and existed so close to me was a challenge, but I was up for it.

There was a brightness about Stace. I’d never seen someone who smiled and laughed so freely. Like she’d been born with sunshine in her veins. Maybe she had been. Created by the same force that nestled a dimple in each one of her cheeks.

For someone who had such massive arms, her hands were surprisingly graceful as she wielded her fork.

While she told me more about her family, I was content to listen and observe.

It wasn't hard to tell what was important to Stace. In case you thought about asking her, she'd tell you before you even got the question out.

"Hey, you might have actually seen my brother, Torrin," she said after an anecdote about how close the two of them had been growing up.

I nodded slowly. "I did meet Torrin. He intervened when a random guy was being unpleasant." That was the mildest way to put it.

Stace grinned. Wasn't she tired of smiling so much? Didn't her face hurt?

"Yeah, Tor told me about you. I mean, I didn't know he was talking about you, but he said he's gotten into yoga. He's a good guy."

I finished my second piece of pie and almost thought about getting a third, but if I really wanted something else, I could have cookies at home.

"He's been a gentleman," I said. "Those are pretty rare these days."

"Single too. In case you were wondering," she said, the smile not leaving her face, but shifting. Becoming a little more tentative.

"Oh," I said. "I'm a lesbian so..." I trailed off.

Stace's smile shifted again, making her eyes crinkle up and her dimples pop. "Me too."



“I didn’t want to assume, but...” She burst out laughing.

“Yeah, I’m not exactly hiding. You’d think I was the first person in my family to come out, but Torrin beat me to it. He started saying he liked boys and girls when he was ten. I didn’t come out until the ripe old age of twelve.”

So they were both queer. Interesting.

“How did your parents take that?”

Stace snorted. “They started their own chapter of PFLAG in our town. I’m pretty sure no one in history has had it as easy coming out as me and Tor. That sounds like bragging, but I know how lucky we were.”

Of course, her parents had been wonderful. Stace was one of those people you just knew who had been raised by loving parents by looking at her for five seconds.

“I’m guessing it wasn’t like that for you.”

I’d just talked about this to Eloise. How my parents had not been supportive and ready to wave a rainbow flag.

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“It was fine. A lot of people have it worse,” I said.

Stace reached across the table and took my hand to squeeze it, but I flinched back and knocked my fork on the floor.

“Sorry,” she said, wincing. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“No, it’s okay,” I said, wondering why I’d reacted like that. Wiggling under the table, I got the fork without injuring myself, but my cheeks were hot with embarrassment.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t... I should go,” I said. The server definitely wanted to turn over the table, even though it wasn’t that busy in here anymore.

“Of course,” Stace said. “I’ll um...of course.”

She wanted to see me again. It was written all over her face as she frowned. My stomach clenched as I tried to ignore how disappointed she looked. I didn’t owe this woman anything. Sure, she’d saved me, but that was her job. She saved people all the time, not just me.

“Thank you for the pie.” She had paid the bill before I could think to reach for it.

“You’re welcome,” she said. Wow, she could not hide her emotions at all and it was getting to me. Stace was too open. Way too open.

“I teach on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays at the gym.” Why was I telling her this? If she really wanted to know my schedule, she could look it up. Or

ask her brother, apparently.

“You know, I’ve been thinking about adding yoga to my workout regimen. Maybe this is the universe telling me to do that,” she said with a grin that leaned on the side of flirtatious.

“You’d be welcome,” I said, trying to keep my face neutral. Encouraging her would only lead to more disappointment. For her. I wasn’t touching all of that sunshine with a ten-foot-pole. If she wanted to come to my yoga class, I couldn’t stop her.

Stace held the door for me and then walked me to my car.

“Now I’d like to ask you to send me a message so I know you got home safe, but I don’t have your number.” She paused, and that was my opening to give her my number, but I wasn’t going to do that.

Her smile fell again, and I wanted to get away from her and her overly expressive face. Too much. She was much too much. Too bright, too sweet, too everything.

“I should get home,” I said again, and she nodded, taking a step back.

“Yeah. Drive safe.”

“You too.”

She waited until I had pulled out of the lot before getting into her car.

Of course she showed up at my class the next day. Of course she did.

Torrin was absent, so it was just her. She filled the doorway and looked lost. I tried not to smile at how cute she was.

Too cute for her own good. Too cute for my good as well.

She had a mat and I went over to give her the same new student talk that I gave everyone else. Not an easy task considering the amount of thigh she had on display. Acres and miles of it peeking out from a tiny pair of shorts paired with a matching tank.

I stumbled over my words as my brain kept yelling at me to stop staring at those thighs. They could crush me and I'd be only too happy to let her.

Lusting after Stace's thighs was not conducive to teaching yoga, so I closed my eyes for a second to get a grip on myself.

More students arrived and stole my attention away, but I let them. I couldn't give Stace that much focus. This wasn't a private yoga session.

I heard a few giggles from some of the women and turned around to see that Micah was here today. He looked up from setting out his mat and gave me a little wave. Micah was an interesting person. Firstly, he was one of the most objectively beautiful men I'd ever seen in my life. With wavy red hair that always seemed styled but probably wasn't, crystal blue eyes, a perfect jawline, straight nose, and cheekbones you could slice yourself on, he was a knockout. Not to mention his body looked like an anatomy chart. If I had any attraction to men at all, he would have made something happen for me.

Even though I was absolutely and completely secure in my lesbianism, it was nice to have it tested and confirmed so easily with someone like Micah.

Oh, and he didn't wear a shirt for classes. Just a pair of athletic shorts.

You wanted to hate the guy for being so aesthetically perfect, but he was also a

complete sweetie on top of it. With his looks, he would have had every right to fall into a superior personality to the rest of us mere mortals. But no. He was sweet and kind and always had a ready (devastating, if you were attracted to men) smile.

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“Who’s that?” Stace said and I jumped. She stood close to me and had leaned down to speak in my ear. Completely unnecessarily close. Like we were sharing a secret.

“That’s Micah. He’s one of my regulars who came from my old studio.” More than a few people had, which made me feel too many emotions at the same time so I had to stop thinking about it.

“Is he a model?”

She wasn’t the first person to ask that question.

“You’d think so, but no. He’s a phys ed teacher and he coaches. Why so interested?” I turned and looked up at her, wanting to take a step back. Did she have to crowd me like that?

“Not for me, obviously. But he’s Torrin’s type. Do you know if he’s queer?”

I shook my head. I hadn’t talked to Micah enough to make that determination.

“Okay, well, I wouldn’t be a good sister if I didn’t do my due diligence,” she said, gathering up her stuff.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Going to make a friend,” she said, flashing a smile that would have made me stumble if I’d been walking. Even still, my knees became less solid for a moment and I had to catch myself.

Like it was nothing, she took a spot right by Micah and introduced herself. He was a little shy, but with a few words, she had him smiling and talking to her. A few of the other women in the class were watching with a mix of shock and envy. Stace even got him to laugh.

I was so busy watching them together that I forgot I had an actual job to do, so I rushed to start my playlist and remember the sequence I'd planned to go with it.

Everything was going fine until I let myself check in with Stace as I walked around the room. She was doing the poses, but her form was off. So off. Her back was rounded way too much in her downward dog and she was going to wrench her neck if she kept doing upward dog like that. I called for everyone to keep going through their opening sun salutation and stopped next to her mat.

"Can I give you an adjustment?" I asked in a low voice.

"Uh, sure?" she said, looking up at me from her downward dog position.

"Back straight," I said, gently putting my palm on her spine to get her to stop arching. "Shoulders down." It took a few tries, but we got her into a better position and then she moved through the flow and I helped her with upward dog. It was a tricky thing, to balance teaching the whole class while giving adjustments to one person, but I really didn't want her to hurt herself. Her body was an important part of her job and I'd feel awful if she couldn't do what she loved and I could have stepped in and prevented it.

I couldn't stay with her for as long as I wanted, so I had to move on, but I saved a small corner of my attention for her. If I was a newer teacher, I wouldn't have been able to manage it, but I'd been doing this for years, so I could.

At last we made it to savasana and I was relieved and drained. More drained than I

had been in a while.

“Namaste,” I said, bowing my head to everyone and then announcing that they could come to my next class. A few students said goodnight and asked a few questions before filtering out and going back to their lives.

Micah and Stace were still talking. He excused himself and came to thank me for the class.

“You’re welcome. See you next time?”

He nodded, his cheeks pink from the workout as he picked up his mat and headed for the showers.

Then it was just me and Stace.

“Well? What did you think?”

She lounged on her mat with her hands braced behind her. Sweaty and with her hair in her face and looking incredibly sexy. Those thighs were stretched out in front of her, teasing me.

“I think that I don’t know what the hell I’m doing and I haven’t felt that way in a while. I didn’t expect it to be so hard.” Sitting up, she rolled one of her arms in a circle and winced.

“Do you have any injuries? I should have asked,” I said, alarmed. She couldn’t get injured in my class. I wouldn’t allow it.

“No. Just regular soreness. My shoulder acts up sometimes. No big deal.”



We needed to leave the room and I needed to go home, but neither of us was moving.

Stace grinned and then held her arms out to me. “Help me up?”

“Are you serious?”

That smile was flirty again, and I wanted to ignore how it made me feel, but I couldn't.

Instead I rolled my eyes and walked over to her, clasping her hands and pulling.

“Damn, you're heavy,” I couldn't stop myself from saying.

“I bet you say that to all the girls,” she said, not even bothering to help me as I tugged.

“Okay, either you put in some effort or I'm letting go,” I said. This was like playing tug of war between me and a team of football players. One of us was going to lose and it was going to be me.

Stace sighed. “Okay fine.”

Before I knew what was happening, she had pulled and stood at the same time until I lost my balance and fell right into her, our hands caught between us.

I let out a little scream and she laughed, a low sound in her chest.

“It's okay. I've got you. Remember?”

This wasn't the first time I'd been up against her chest, but this time she didn't have a bunch of firefighter gear on.

Blood rushed to my face as she took a step back but didn't let go of my hands.

"Hey, can I buy you a piece of pie?" Was that her thing? Buying girls pie as a form of seduction? That wasn't going to work on me.

"Not tonight," I said. "I need to get home."

I didn't, not really. But I needed to get away from her and her thighs and her smiles and the way she made me feel all hot and shivery at the same time.

"Sure. But maybe I could buy you pie another time this week? If you're not too busy."

"Are you asking me out?" I needed to know if she wanted to date me because I needed to set her straight. Not straight. I needed to tell her it wasn't going to happen.

Stace wasn't thrown by my blunt question. "Yes. If you're up for that. If you're not up for that, then I'd like to buy you a piece of pie anyway. I'll take you any way I can get you."

"Jesus Christ, Stace." Who said things like that?

She just kept smiling. Had this woman ever had a bad day in her life? "So. Pie? This week?"

Against my better judgment, I found myself nodding.

"Great. Put your number in my phone." She unlocked it and handed it to me. I hesitated.

"I could always just show up whenever you have a class on the schedule and wait for

you. But somehow I don't think you'd like that."

No. I would not. I'd rather she just had my number.

Stace took her phone back and then mine buzzed with a new notification.

She'd sent me the pie emoji and a winky face.

"Mature," I said, and she winked at me for real and my knees did that liquid thing again.

"I'll see you later, princess," she called, slinging her mat over her shoulder and walking out before I could ask her why the hell she was calling me princess.

## Chapter Six

Stace

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I had her number. Another achievement unlocked. Now that I had it, all I wanted to do was send her all kinds of messages but coming on too strong would not work on Hunter. No, I had to melt her slowly. Ease her in. Give her just a little bit at a time until she got used to it and decided she wanted more. I'd be right there to give it to her.

My first message was corny, absolutely, but she had fought a smile.

Hunter wasn't the only thing on my mind when I got back home after the yoga class. I'd chatted with Micah and if my feelings were correct, I had to introduce him to Torrin. Reading between the lines, Micah was single and I was dying to know if something would spark between him and my brother. I wouldn't be a good sister if I didn't do my best to introduce him to someone who was exactly his type.

I sent Tor a message asking when he was going to yoga again and to tell him that he should do what he could to get there on Monday nights so I could go with him. A little brother and sister bonding experience. Nothing more than that. Not trying to set him up with a pretty boy who looked like an elf prince turned model who loved his job working with kids, was allergic to peanuts, and dreamed of visiting Holland to see the tulips. I'd managed to get a lot out of him in a short amount of time, but people liked talking to me. You could get a long way with a dimpled smile and being interested in what someone was saying to you.

Tor was on shift so he didn't get back to me right away. Buck sighed as he lay across my legs.

"Oh, have you had a hard day?" I asked him. "I'm sure you did."

He blinked his eyes open at me and then went back to sleep. I wished I had his life. Whenever I was on call, I usually left him with my parents or Tor would come over and take care of him. He was rarely alone and never missed a meal or a walk. My little brothers played catch with him for hours and he'd come back to me completely worn out.

While he slept, I scrolled through my phone. I should be getting sleep myself, but my mind was restless. Having one or two overnight shifts a week messed with my sleep schedule already, so I'd adjusted to being able to sleep whenever I got the chance.

I had Hunter on my mind. I wanted to send her another message. To get a conversation going.

I wanted to know her, but she wasn't going to make it easy on me. My frustration warred with my competitive instincts as I mentally wrote and rewrote several messages. I didn't want to type anything out in case she saw it and then wondered at my silence.

I'd just have to wait for her to come to me. I'd put my hand out. It was her turn to reach for me.

Hunter didn't respond to me the next day. I kept obsessively checking, just in case. We had a call for a small kitchen fire, a possible carbon monoxide leak at a business, and a water main break. Nothing too strenuous, but I did take a picture of myself before I took off all my gear and thought about sending it to her.

"Who the hell are you talking to?" Coop said, peering over my shoulder.

"No one. I was just talking a selfie," I said, showing her.

"Were you taking it for anyone in particular?" Rivera asked as she pulled off her

gear.

“Nope,” I said, pulling off my boots.

“Think you’re lying,” Coop sang, and I was tempted to throw a boot at her.

“I bet it’s whoever she was waiting for at the gym on Sunday night,” Rivera said.

“Come on, we’re both single. You owe us,” Coop said, and that was true. Whenever one of us was in a relationship, we always gave the other ones the gossip and teased them mercilessly.

“I’m not in a relationship. Yet.”

“Okay, we’re going to need to sit down and talk about this. Meet at the diner in an hour?” Coop asked.

“Deal,” I said.

I told Rivera and Coop the situation with Hunter, and they rolled their eyes.

“Of course you fell for someone on a call,” Rivera said.

“It’s a good place to meet people!” I said and Coop threw a balled-up napkin at me. We were at the same diner I’d taken Hunter to. When you worked strange hours, having a place that would feed you no matter the time was essential to our survival. They knew us here and sometimes snuck us extra desserts. Especially pie.

“You’re shameless. She sounds like she’s not interested,” Coop said.

“She is. Trust me. She is.” I’d seen the way that Hunter looked at me and you didn’t

look at someone that way that you didn't want to get naked. I also might have thrown a little bit of my game her way to see how she responded. All systems were go. Now I just had to get behind all those walls she put up. Or knock them down. Either way, it was going to happen.

“Well, I'm invested to see what happens,” Rivera said, finishing her plate of fries.

“I know we give you a hard time, but you know we're in your corner, right?” Coop said, squeezing my shoulder.

“Yeah, I know.” They were. Even if they were a pain in my ass most of the time.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:19 pm*

Hunter was teaching on Thursday when I had some free hours, but I wasn't sure if I should show up. I didn't hear from her on Tuesday or during the day on Wednesday and I was losing my mind just a little bit.

I'd kept Tor apprised of everything going on with her and he kept getting annoyed that I wasn't contacting her.

"This isn't like you," he kept saying.

"I know. She's different. Needs a different approach." Normally when I saw someone I wanted, I went for it and cranked up the charm so high that they said yes before they even knew what was happening. I'd never really struggled when it came to dating. Most of my relationships had been short-lived, but that had been fine with me. They'd naturally run their course and I hadn't been devastated when they ended.

This thing with Hunter though. It was an inferno already.

"Have you told Mom and Dad?" he asked me.

"No. And don't you tell them," I said as we lounged on his couch. His apartment was nicer than mine so I'd brought Buck over to hang out on Wednesday night.

"And what about you? Seen anyone cute lately?" I asked, fishing.

Tor kicked his legs up on the coffee table and crossed his ankles, finishing his beer. I'd been slowly sipping mine even though I didn't have a shift tomorrow. I still had work at the shelter, though, and being hung over wasn't professional.

“Not really,” he said. “Jesse has been trying to set me up with his sister again. I guess she finally got rid of that loser she was seeing.”

I snorted. “Yeah, stay away from that.” Jesse was a nice guy, but his sister was a hot mess and I didn’t want my very nice brother anywhere near the chaos that was Jesse’s sister.

“I’m not miserable, you know,” he said.

“I know. But I’d like to see you happy. Have someone to come home to after your shift. Someone to wash your uniforms and to come to cookouts with.” Someone to take care of him, but I didn’t say that.

He turned his head and stared at me. “I could say the same thing to you.”

“I’m working on it,” I said, punching his shoulder.

I couldn’t get ahead of myself, but for a moment I let myself picture coming home and Hunter being there waiting for me. I hoped she liked dogs. She had to like dogs.

“So am I. In my way.”

I laughed. “You’re not working on shit.”

“Shut up.”

I guess I could be free for pie after my class. Meet you at the gym?

Hunter’s message came through on Thursday morning as I was getting ready for work. I read it while I was brushing my teeth and almost swallowed my toothbrush.

I had to read the message three times before I could believe it was real. She'd finally responded. Finally. And she wanted to hang out. With pie.

Sounds like a plan to me. I'll be there.

Since no one was around to see me but Buck, I did a little victory dance that involved a lot of flailing.

"Don't you dare judge me," I said to Buck, who sat in the doorway of the bathroom watching me with his head cocked to the side as if he couldn't figure me out.

"Are you ready to go to work?" I asked him and he barked and ran for the front door to get his harness.

No one had ever been so excited about the word "work" before.

I finished up getting ready and headed out to start my day with a huge ass smile on my face.

Hunter

I'd expected her to start blowing up my phone right away, but she didn't. I gave her a good twenty-four hours and nothing. Like she was waiting for me to make the first move. Instead of doing that, I decided to see how long she could hold out. Stace seemed like the kind of person who loved to chat, and I didn't think she could be silent for very long.

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I was perfectly fine with not hearing from her and was enjoying my game she didn't know we were playing.

And then I woke up on Thursday with sweat on my skin and my pussy aching and the last wisps of a fading lurid dream floating through my brain.

"Fuck," I panted, squeezing my thighs together. I was wet and buzzing with a kind of confused desire.

I hadn't had an erotic dream in ages and this one had come by surprise.

If I ignored it, then it would go away, but why would I do that when I could just slip my hand under my sleep shorts and take care of myself?

Letting out a moan, I brushed my fingers across my clit and shuddered at how close I was already. The dream had gotten me nearly all the way there. With just a few hard circles of my hand, I came. The orgasm was quick and sharp and truthfully left me wanting more.

I checked the time and realized that I could spend the morning in bed getting off if I truly wanted to. That idea was tempting, but I forced myself to get out of bed, ignoring my screaming libido and going to the kitchen for some coffee.

While I was making myself an egg, spinach, and feta scramble, I pulled up the message thread with Stace. Still just the one message. Those silly little emojis.

Without thinking about the consequences, I sent her a message saying that I would

get pie with her after I taught class. Oops. Guess I was the loser in the No Contact Game.

She responded that she'd be there, and I actually expected more of a reaction. More emojis definitely.

Hmmm.

I almost burned my eggs waiting for her to say more.

What had happened to the sunshiny yapper I'd met?

Not that I wanted her to keep blowing up my phone; I didn't. But not getting anything back from her was odd. She was probably in the middle of something.

After I'd properly fueled my body, I sat at my desk and did some admin before setting up to film for a while. I didn't have any showings or real estate work to do today, so I was going to utilize those free hours. There were never enough of them in the day. First I worked on a new painting while the light was good. Something about it wasn't quite right, so I wasn't filming the process like I did with some of the others. I was taking progress pics, but they might all get deleted if I wasn't happy with the results.

I barely paused to have lunch before diving back in to knocking out my endless to-do list.

I did a practice run of a new hairstyle that was a high ponytail where I flipped it over itself to create an interesting look. I added a bow at the end and thought it looked pretty cute for a first try.

"Shit," I said when I saw the time. I needed to get to the gym to teach so I'd have to

keep my hair like this. At least it looked good. I put on my matching yoga set and made sure I had my playlist and notes in my phone to look at.

I greeted my Thursday regulars and had a few newbies that I welcomed and got all set up. Micah was there, and I was glad to see him.

I just happened to look up when Torrin walked in, and I found my feet carrying me over to him.

“Nice to see you,” I said. “There’s a good spot right there.”

I motioned to the empty spot next to Micah before one of his admirers could take it.

One of them was already leaning over on Micah’s other side and throwing him big, bright signals. Micah nodded politely and I could see his face was a little red.

“Uh huh,” Torrin said, looking at Micah and then looking at me.

I leaned closer as if I was sharing a secret. “Please sit next to him or else one of these other women will. And then they’ll try to show off to get his attention and I don’t want to deal with anyone going to the hospital.”

Torrin leaned down to speak in my ear. “I am a paramedic, but I see your point.”

He straightened and winked at me in a way that made me think of Stace. Was everyone in this family born with charisma?

I tried not to stare as Torrin set his mat next to Micah’s and said hello to him.

Micah seemed taken aback for a second and then his cheeks went a little pink.

Oh yeah. Sparks. Definite sparks.

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The woman on the other side of Micah seemed to give up as Torrin asked Micah something.

I bet Stace was going to be thrilled. I didn't even know why I'd done it. Setting people up was not my thing at all. Had I really set them up, though? I'd simply wanted to save Micah from being attacked by another woman who seemed to think that he was fair game.

Pushing all that aside, I started class and let go of everything else for the next hour.

The last two people in the room were Micah and Torrin, who were cleaning their mats so slowly it was mostly just a performance.

I felt like an intruder on something intimate. It was my job to do a quick clean of the room, including sweeping the floors, but I didn't want to interrupt them.

Torrin was saying something and gesturing with his hands which made Micah tip his head back and laugh more freely than I'd ever seen him. Even if nothing else happened between them, it looked like they had the start of a new friendship.

I cleared my throat and they both spun around and stared at me.

"Sorry, I need to clean up the room," I said, feeling like an asshole.

"Shit, what time is it?" Torrin asked, looking at his phone. "I gotta go anyway. I have a shift in an hour." He gathered his things as Micah did the same.



I said goodnight as they continued to talk on their way out. I wish I'd taken a picture of them to send to Stace, but I hadn't thought of it.

Micah was tall, but Torrin was taller and the two of them together was something else. Even in this gym full of guys who took their fitness seriously, these two were special. The Viking and the prince.

"Ridiculous," I said as I swept the floor and finished up for the night.

I changed and freshened up in the locker room before saying goodnight to the people from the gym I'd come to know.

Stace was waiting outside for me, leaning against the wall as she looked at her phone.

The night was a little chilly and she wore a sweatshirt with a pair of joggers, but you could still see how cut she was.

"Your brother was in class tonight," I said instead of a greeting.

Her face snapped up and she smiled. "Yeah, I just saw him. He was absolutely glowing and said he'd met a guy in yoga class. You have anything to do with that?"

I stepped closer to her as I shivered. My jacket wasn't warm enough for tonight.

"Maybe. I was really just trying to save Micah. He's too pretty for his own good."

Stace snorted and pushed off the wall.

"That's basically what Tor said. Well?"

I was lost. "Well what?"

“Well, are you ready to get pie? And tell me all about how it went with Micah.”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

We still took our separate cars to the diner, which was a bad idea because then I couldn’t find any parking. By the time I’d gotten a spot, I was hungry and annoyed.

Stace was waiting for me in the entryway of the diner.

“I thought you got lost,” she said. “I was just about to send you a message.”

“No, just couldn’t find any damn parking. I thought I had a spot and then someone stole it.”

Stace held the door open for me. “Cheer up. We’re about to have pie.”

“Pie can’t solve every problem, you know,” I said, still clinging to my irritation.

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“Not everything, but a lot of things.”

Once I had a piece of pie in front of me (lemon meringue this time), I did feel better. Stace was grilling me about her brother and Micah.

“Oh there were definitely sparks. They were acting like there was no one else in the room after they made eye contact. The other yogis aren’t going to be happy about that. They’ve all been circling him like prey ever since his first class.”

Stace frowned. “Poor guy.” Her words were sincere.

“I know. He can’t help it that he’s one of the most beautiful humans I’ve ever seen in person,” I said.

“Tor loveeeessss pretty guys. Just loses his mind. Most of the time he’s loud and confident, but get him around someone pretty like that? He can barely function. It’s hilarious.”

I sipped my tea. “He seemed to be doing okay from what I could see.”

“I can’t wait to hear all about it,” Stace said. “How has your week been since I saw you last?”

Her face was open, and I knew she was sincere about this question too. She actually gave a shit.

So I told her. I gave her a rundown of my week and all the mundane, boring little

details that no one but even my closest friends would care about.

And she listened. And asked questions.

“Your hair does look good,” she said when I was telling her about my tutorials. “I mean, it always looks good, but this is cool, especially with the bow.”

Normally I didn’t blink about compliments on my appearance, but for some reason Stace giving them to me hit differently.

“Thank you. It’s a lot of work. People have no idea.”

Stace sipped her decaf and nodded. “Yeah, I bet it is. You do so many things. It sounds exhausting.”

I shrugged. “It’s not. I just manage my time.”

She laughed. “You should teach me how to do that. I’m not very good at it.”

“Doesn’t look like that from where I’m sitting. You seem to manage.”

Her dimples popped as she smiled and her cheeks pinked. Fuck.

She shouldn’t be allowed to do that. Her smile hit me in my chest and it also hit lower. I remembered the way I’d woken up this morning and shifted in my seat. I didn’t get horny in public like this.

“You’re sweet,” Stace said. “Can I ask you something?”

I let out a snort. “I don’t think I could stop you.”

For the first time, she seemed hesitant. “How do you feel about dogs?”

That was an odd question.

“Why?” I asked her.

“Because I have a dog. His name is Buck.” She showed me a picture on her phone of her crouching with her arm around a tan medium sized dog with one pointy ear and one ear that flopped over. I didn’t know what breed it was, but it wasn’t like anything I’d ever seen. Maybe a mix of breeds?

“Oh,” I said. “I don’t know. I’ve never had a pet or been around many animals.” There had been a few school trips to farms or a friend or two who had a pet, but I was always uncomfortable around animals because they seemed so unpredictable.

“But you’re not opposed to them?” she asked, leaning forward, as if my answer was important.

“I guess not, no. Why?”

Stace looked down at the picture on her phone and then turned the screen face down on the table.

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“Because even if you’re just going to be my friend, me and Buck are a package deal and I can’t be friends with someone who hates my dog.”

For a moment I wanted to laugh, but she was absolutely serious.

“I don’t hate dogs. I’m sure your dog is wonderful.” That seemed like the right thing to say.

“You could meet him and find out. I promise he’s very well-behaved. I know a lot of dog owners say that and it’s not true, but I trained him well and he’s a good boy.”

My heart cracked open just a tiny bit when Stace talked about her dog. Anyone could see she adored him. That this was important to her.

“Okay,” I found myself saying. “I’ll meet your dog.”

Stace gave me one of her biggest smiles yet. “Yeah? How about this weekend? My little brother has a soccer game, but I could meet you nearby.”

My mother had another charity event on Saturday that I was expected to attend. Or maybe it was a baby shower for one of her friend’s daughters. Something. I hadn’t been paying attention to the invitation I’d gotten. There had been so many over the years.

“When?” I asked her, checking my calendar on my phone. There it was. It was actually a bridal shower for one of my mother’s friend’s granddaughters that I barely knew. Most people wouldn’t even know if I was there or not.

“It starts at two,” she said, which was the exact same time as I was supposed to be sipping cocktails and making small talk with people I didn’t care about but had to pretend to like.

A little boy’s soccer game sounded much better. Especially if Stace was going to be there.

“But I’m just coming to meet your dog, right? Not your whole family?” There was no way in hell I was going to meet her family. I still didn’t even know her actual first name.

“No, no. I wouldn’t subject you to them this early in the game. My family is wonderful, but they’re a lot all at once. And we get a little extra when one of us is competing.” The fondness with which she spoke about them made something different ache in my chest. What was it like? To be loved and cared for like that?

“It’ll be just me and Buck. The field is right near the park so we can just meet up there. I’ll sneak you some snacks.”

That didn’t sound awful at all.

“Okay,” I said, deleting the other event from my schedule and exhaling. Why did that feel so good? My mother was going to be absolutely livid. I was going to get another round of angry voicemails from her and my father.

“Should I bring anything?” If there was one thing I learned from my mother, it was that you always showed up with a gift.

“Nah, just bring your gorgeous self,” Stace said, making something flutter and unfold in my chest.

A lot of people had told me I was pretty but hearing Stace call me gorgeous was like hearing it for the first time.

I was still going to bring something with me. Maybe something for the dog? What did dogs like? Bones, right? I'd have to do some research.

"I have a question for you," I said after I'd finished my pie.

"Shoot," Stace said.

"What's your first name?" She laughed as she scraped the plate for the last crumbs of pie.

"Do I have to tell you?" she asked.

"No, you don't have to if you don't want to." It must be something really awful.

She sighed heavily. "No, it's fine. It's Katrina."

"Katrina? What's wrong with that?"

Stace raised both eyebrows. "Do I look like a Katrina to you?"

"No, but there are a million nicknames. Kat, Kate, Katie, Trina."

As someone who had zero good nicknames for my name, I was envious.



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Stace made a face. “And I hated all of them. I can’t explain it. People have always just called me Stace. Or Stacey, when I was younger. It’s the only good thing my dad ever gave me, other than half of my DNA, I guess. I’m just Stace.”

She was.

“Yeah, you are a Stace.”

She nodded in my direction. “Thank you.”

Our server brought the check and I was almost disappointed. It was getting later, and I needed to get going, but I didn’t want to move. Didn’t want to get in my car and go back to my quiet apartment.

Stace paid it before I could get the chance again.

“You don’t always have to pay,” I told her.

“I know. But I like paying. It’s just a few slices of pie, princess. My bank account can handle it.” She got up to pay at the register.

“That’s not what I meant.”

She didn’t respond.

When she came back, I wanted to say something about the money comment she’d made, but she said she had to get home to her dog and it was the first time she seemed

like she wanted to get away from me.

Perplexed, I followed her out to the parking lot and toward my car. She followed me again and waited while I got in and put on my seatbelt.

I rolled the window down and she put one hand on the roof to lean down and speak to me.

“Drive safe, Hunter,” she said.

“I will. You too.”

She tapped the roof once and pushed back. When she didn’t say anything else, I rolled the window up again and turned my car on. She stood back and waited while I backed out of my space and pulled onto the street.

Made it home safe and sound I sent to Stace after I’d slipped my shoes off on the mat at the door. She hadn’t asked me to send her a message, but now that I had her number, it felt like the right thing to do.

Happy to hear it. I’m home too. Buck says hi. Her message was accompanied with a picture of the dog I’d seen earlier laying across her glorious legs. She wore a pair of shorts similar to the ones she’d had on at the yoga class. At first, I wasn’t even looking at the dog. Too busy staring at those legs and trying to get my lust under control. Fuck, those legs. So thick and defined just the way they should be. I wanted them around me. I wanted them to crush me. I wanted to lick every single glorious inch of them. Suck on her skin and leave marks.

Very, very inappropriate thoughts.

I shoved them aside as best I could and looked at the dog. He really was cute. He had

these triangle-shaped ears and one was always kind of folded over and the other would stick straight up. I didn't mind meeting him. It was so much better than going to that damn event.

Tell him I said hello I responded even though it was silly. The dog didn't understand English.

Stace responded with a video of the dog "waving" at me with one paw. Okay, that was adorable, I had to admit. She hadn't been lying about him being well-trained.

He's a good boy she added.

I watched the video multiple times. Not just because of the dog or her thighs, which you couldn't even see. I wanted to look at her apartment. I needed to know if she was a slob. I didn't think so, but you never knew. Cade wasn't a slob, but her apartment was always a kind of controlled chaos. Kind of messy, but not dirty. And if you asked her where something was, she knew exactly which pile to point to.

I could handle a little bit of mess. Dirt, on the other hand, that I couldn't stand.

From what I saw, Stace's apartment was cozy and filled with bold colors. A red couch. A multicolored rug. Art and tons of pictures on the walls. A dark wood coffee table. Nothing fancy, but her place was warm.

I played the video again as I walked to the kitchen and looked in the fridge. Too bad I hadn't gotten another piece of pie to go so I could have it now.

There was no cookie dough in my freezer either. Immediately I got online and placed another order for cookie dough to be shipped to me, but that wasn't going to help me right now.

I don't have any cookies I posted in my group chat with Cade and Reid.

The latter was probably at work and the former was probably having spectacular sex with her older girlfriend, but it was still worth trying to get them to talk to me.

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So order them. You're right. This is a problem your money can solve Cade responded quicker than I thought she would.

Her words coming from anyone else would have made me angry, but Cade didn't mean it in a negative way. She and Reid were probably the only people in the world who could tease me about my trust fund, and it didn't make me want to stab them.

But I can't order the good cookies and I need the good cookies I responded. I knew I was whining, but I didn't care.

Oh boo fucking hoo Reid finally chimed in.

She had very little patience for me when I said things like this.

Fine. I'll order the less good cookies. But you're going to hear me bitch about it I responded.

It was nice being able to order cookies to be delivered to your apartment at night.

Why don't you just learn how to make cookies the way you want? Then you'd have them all the time. Reid said, using too much logic.

Cookies aren't as good when you're the one making them Cade said, taking the words right out of my brain.

What she said I agreed.

I have to go back to work Reid responded in her typical grumpy way. She really did need to get another job so she could cut back her hours at Sapph. The money was good, but it really took over her life and she barely had time for anything else.

We love you, crossing my fingers for good tips Cade sent.

Thank you. Now stop bugging me Reid responded. The funny thing was that if we left her out of the group chat, she'd get pissed at us for not including her. Reid was a complicated person and I didn't think I'd ever truly figure her out, but I wasn't sure I wanted to.

Another message came in as I was waiting for the cookies.

Do you have any food allergies? It was from Stace.

No, why? I asked.

Just wanted to make sure before I brought you something that you couldn't eat, or that would harm you. My youngest brother has celiac, so I'm always making sure.

There was something so open and genuine about Stace and it took my breath away.

Thank you for checking I responded.

You're welcome. Sorry if I'm keeping you up. My sleep schedule is all messed up so I never really know when an appropriate time to talk to someone is she sent.

I put my phone on silent when I'm sleeping, so don't worry about it I replied.

I was so used to my schedule that I couldn't imagine working overnight shifts like she did. Very few people could handle something like that without burning out fast.

Well, I apologize in advance if I send you a message at a random time she sent.

Apology pre-accepted I responded.

This was how I'd expected her to be when she first got my number. It was almost a relief that I'd been right about how she would be.

One of the nastiest surprises in life was when you'd made your mind up about someone and then they turned out to be completely different. So many people I'd known throughout my life had been like that. My parents, especially. In public they smiled and pretended they were a power couple. Smiling at each other. Touching, but not too much. Laughing with each other and using pet names.

And then the moment they got home, they pulled off those layers and went back to hating the other person so much they couldn't breathe the same air so they had to retreat to opposite ends of the house. He had his rooms, she had her rooms, and I was an entity that floated in between. Often I used to wonder what might have happened if I'd had a sibling. It would have been nice to have someone to share the house with.

Stace's house had no doubt been loud when she was growing up. She'd been older when her younger brothers were born, but I still imagined a lot of noise and chaos. Sports equipment everywhere and after school snacks and homework spread on the dining room table.

Part of me wanted to ask her about it. To know what that had been like. To know what I'd missed. To maybe imagine what my life would have been like in another family. One like hers.

The cookies arrived, interrupting my juvenile thoughts. None of that shit mattered anymore. I was an adult now.

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In case this is the last message you see before you go to sleep, goodnight Hunter Stace sent, along with a picture of her sleeping dog.

I couldn't stop myself from smiling as I took my cookies to eat in bed.

### Chapter Seven

Stace

"She'll be here. Won't she?" I asked Buck as we waited for Hunter to meet us near the playground. I'd managed to secure a bench to myself and had brought drinks along with clementines, cheese sticks, and two brownies that one of the other moms had made. She always added something extra to them, this time in the form of butterscotch candies, and they were going to be delicious.

Buck sat next to me and twitched his ears, ignoring me in favor of glaring at squirrels. He wanted to bolt and chase every single one up a tree, but he was a good boy and wouldn't move unless I gave him permission.

"There you are," said a familiar voice and I turned my head to find Hunter walking toward me. Her hair was twisted back in a clip and she wore a long skirt with a soft slouchy sweater, since the air was a little chilly today. The leaves had begun their transition and soon it would be peak foliage. I couldn't wait. Fall was my favorite season.

She had a paper bag with her.



I stood up to greet her and Buck was distracted from the squirrels by the new arrival, wiggling with excitement.

“Hey,” I said, feeling so much relief that she was here. She was here.

“Hey,” she said. “I know you said not to bring you anything, but technically this isn’t for you.”

She held out the bag and I was intrigued. I pulled out two balls and a rope toy.

“They’re for Buck. The lady at the store said these were the most popular ones,” she said, shuffling her feet a little bit.

I was touched at the gift. “These are perfect, thank you. He’s going to love them.” Buck had seen the toys, so I hastily put them away so he didn’t get too excited.

Hunter came close and crouched down.

I took Buck’s leash and led him over to her.

“Sit,” I told him. He did, even though he was vibrating with excitement to meet someone new.

“Hello,” Hunter said, reaching her hand out.

Buck leaned forward with eagerness to get close to her.

“He’s happy to see you,” I said. It was obvious from the tension in Hunter’s body that she was nervous. Her fingers were hesitant, as if she was afraid that Buck would bite her.

I got down on her level and took her hand, guiding it so Buck could sniff her. He did so with enthusiasm before butting his head against her fingers in an effort to get her to pet him.

She let out a little giggle when he licked her hand.

“Buck, that’s not very polite,” I chided him, but he was ignoring me and creeping closer to Hunter.

“It’s okay,” she said in a soft voice and there were so many thick emotions clogging my throat and inflating in my chest while I watched Hunter pet my dog and my dog falling absolutely in love with her.

“Yes, you’re a good boy,” she said as she stroked his head and he gave her the biggest heart eyes I’d ever seen.

“It’s safe to say he likes you.”

Hunter looked up at me and there was such a delighted smile on her face.

“I like him too. I didn’t think that I would.” At least she was honest.

“He has a way of winning just about everyone over,” I said, stroking the other side of his head. Buck was in heaven right now. He flopped to the ground and rolled on his back, demanding belly rubs.

“Shameless,” I said as I gave him a few loud pats and he rolled back and forth.

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“Are you hungry? I have snacks,” I said, standing up. Buck rolled to his feet and shook all over.

“Oh, sure.” We sat on the bench together and I pulled out the clementines and cheese sticks.

“I hope you didn’t swipe these from some hungry kids,” she said, taking a cheese stick.

“Nah, there were extras.”

Buck sat at our feet as Hunter and I ate.

Since we saw each other on Thursday, we’d been talking in messages. Nothing serious, just random questions here and there.

I asked her about her million jobs, and she asked me about being a firefighter and about my brothers. I couldn’t help but be delighted that she wanted to know about them. The urge to gush about each one of them was strong, so I had to hold back a little.

“Are you missing the game?” she asked, frowning at her sticky hands from peeling the clementines. I pulled a disposable wipe out of the fanny pack on my waist and handed it to her.

“Thanks.”

“It’s okay, they just started. It’s not like he’s on the Olympic team or anything. It’s peewee.” He already had a cheering section with the rest of the family.

“Still,” she said, playing with the edge of her sweater cuff.

“Hey.”

Hunter looked up at me. “I’m right where I need to be right now.”

She looked away and shook her head. “How do you just say things like that?”

“Like what?”

Buck sighed and rested his head on his paws, apparently giving up the search for dropped crumbs.

Hunter waved her hand. “You know what I mean.”

“I’m not sure I do, actually.” I rested my arm on the back of the bench. It was almost as good as putting my arm around her. We’d get there.

She let out a sound of frustration. “Never mind.”

“Staceeeeeee.” I turned and found Eli jogging over.

“What is it?” I asked, only slightly annoyed that he’d interrupted us. Guess Hunter was going to meet at least one member of my family.

“Mom wanted to know if you’re still coming over for dinner after the game,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“Why didn’t she just send me a message?”

Eli shrugged his bony shoulders. He was still in that awkward gangly phase, all elbows and knees. I wondered how tall he’d end up being. If he would end up like me and Torrin.

“Yeah, I’m coming over for dinner,” I said and turned to Hunter, who’d been pretending she wasn’t watching the interaction.

“Hunter, this is my brother Eli. Eli, this is my friend Hunter.”

I gestured for him to come closer and watched as his eyes got a little wide when he saw how pretty she was.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Hunter said, putting out her hand.

I gave Eli a look and he uncrossed his arms and gave her a shake. “Uh hey.”

Eli looked at me and crossed his arms again, suddenly getting shy.

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“Hey, can you take Buck back over to the game for me? I’ll be there in a little while.”

That made Eli brighten up. He adored Buck.

“Yeah,” he said, grinning and taking Buck’s leash from me.

He bolted off with Buck and I turned my attention back to Hunter.

“How old is he again?”

“Twelve, and in full tween mode. He’s a good kid, but junior high is really hard.” Anytime Eli told me that someone was mean to him I wanted to march into that school and physically fight some children.

“I remember,” Hunter said, nodding.

“Were people mean to you?” I asked.

“Compared to my parents, dealing with a few childhood bullies was nothing,” she said and then ducked her head, as if she hadn’t meant to tell me that much.

I’d only gotten out little bits and pieces about her parents, but my assessment so far was that they were complete assholes.

“I had a bully, but then I broke her nose and most people stopped teasing me after that,” I said.

“You broke her nose?”

I nodded. “Yup. And I’m not sorry about it. She was being a homophobic bitch and she got what was coming.” Holding grudges wasn’t my thing, but if I saw her again, I might ask if she remembered what happened when we were thirteen. And see how her nose looked.

“Wow. I’m a little in awe and a little scared,” Hunter said, but she was smiling.

I flexed my hand. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“I was too scared to do anything about my bullies,” she said, and I didn’t think she was talking about mean girls in school.

My phone went off and I looked down to find a message from my mother.

Eli says you’re sitting with a pretty girl and I’m going to need some more details.

Of course. I knew that sending Eli over was just a ruse to find out where I’d disappeared to. Mom wasn’t slick.

She’s a friend and you need to stop sending your children to do your dirty work. How’s the game?

“I should get going,” Hunter said, getting up from the bench.

“Sorry. My mom is asking for more details about the pretty girl I’m with. That’s you, by the way.”

Hunter ducked her head and blushed. Surprising. I couldn’t wait to give her more compliments and see how many it took to get her to beg me to stop.

“And what are you going to tell her?” Hunter asked, one hand on the bench as if she wasn’t ready to leave quite yet.

“A friend. She doesn’t need to know more than that,” I said. Hunter’s shoulders relaxed a fraction. Just enough for me to notice.

“Are we? Friends?” The question was tentative.

I smiled up at her. Shit, she was beautiful. “Yeah, we’re friends, Hunter. I don’t share pie with just anyone, you know.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

Hunter

I really didn’t want to take Stace away from her family, so I left before I wanted to, even though I’d gotten cold sitting on the bench. She’d put her arm across the back, and I’d been able to feel the warmth radiating from her skin. Stace was one of those people who was always warm, even in the dead of winter. Like a human heater. It made me want to snuggle closer, and I had never been a snuggler. Never in my life.



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But Stace was just...soft. Not her body, necessarily. Her body was all muscles, but something about her told me that she'd be an excellent cuddler. That when she hugged you, she really went for it. She'd probably pick me up and hold me so close that I couldn't breathe. That kind of thing.

Not something I'd ever fantasized or considered, but after I saw her at the park, I couldn't stop wondering.

Cade and Reid even noticed when we went out for dinner. Eloise was under an intense writing deadline, and Reid didn't have to work so it was perfect. I'd missed both of them. The three of us had been so close and I couldn't help but feel like we were drifting apart. Just a little.

It was only natural that our friendships would ebb and flow as we got older, but if I stopped having them in my life altogether, I didn't know what I'd do.

Cade had hugged me tight, as if she had missed me as well.

"Hey, you seem sad," she said, pulling back to look at my face.

"I'm fine," I said, swallowing back a few uncomfortable emotions.

Reid hugged me too, but it was brief. Reid wasn't much of a hugger or a toucher, and I understood that.

We ordered our first round of wings, cheesy fries, and chips with spinach artichoke dip. The beer was pretty weak, but that was fine.

“How’s the deadline going?” I asked Cade.

“I think my girlfriend is starting to crack. She keeps waking up and making notes in the middle of the night and she’s actually started talking in her sleep. I keep telling her that the book doesn’t have to be perfect, but she’s been agonizing over every single word. I wish there was something I could do other than to bring her food and force her to eat and drink enough water so she doesn’t get dehydrated.”

Cade had circles under her eyes so it seemed that the deadline was taking a toll on both of them.

“And then you have the tour coming up,” Reid said after she gulped some beer.

“Yup. Still freaking out about that, but I bought a bunch of clothes and a new suitcase. I don’t know. It’s going to be a lot.”

I wanted to ask if she’d talked with Eloise about what they were going to say to the public, but I kept my mouth shut. I wasn’t going to interfere or continue to bring it up.

“You’d better give us all the behind-the-scenes content,” Reid said.

“Oh you know I will. Is it bad that I’m most looking forward to staying in the nice hotels and the room service?” Cade asked.

“And the hotel sex. Don’t forget about that,” Reid said, grinning.

“Oh my god, Reid. We’re probably going to be too tired and busy for sex,” Cade said, but her face was scarlet.

“If you don’t have any sex on tour, I’m going to be disappointed in you,” Reid said,

pointing at Cade with a fry.

“Have sex, don’t have sex, it doesn’t matter to us,” I said, nudging Reid.

“Listen, one of us should be getting regular sex,” Reid said.

I turned in my seat to look at her. “What about you? What’s stopping you from getting regular sex?”

Reid let out a grumpy sound. “My job? My sleep schedule? My...personality?” The last one made Cade snort.

“Those sound more like excuses to me,” I said. “You literally work in a bar where people hook up in the bathroom and you can’t get laid? Seems like a skill issue.”

Reid gave me a viscous look. “You know I can’t hook up at work. That’s how I get fired.”

Cade scoffed. “I have seen several other bartenders getting laid at Sapph.”

So had I.

Reid growled and downed the rest of her beer. “Listen, if I knew you were both going to gang up on me, I wouldn’t have come.” Reid was the kind of person you could tease only so far before she got seriously pissed and then you might not hear from her for a few days. She blamed her prickliness on sleep deprivation all the time, but it really was just her personality. Once you got past that, she was loyal and truly kind and talented at most things she tried.

“We’re sorry. We’re not ganging up on you,” Cade said, reaching across the table to squeeze Reid’s shoulder. “Do you want us to help, or do you want to just bitch

without judgment?”

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Reid settled back in her chair. “The second thing.”

Cade gestured. “Go ahead.”

The three of us had a few too many drinks, but I didn’t care. I’d be hung over tomorrow, fine. Laughing with my friends and soaking up time with them was more important.

“I need dessert,” I said as we stumbled out of the restaurant.

“Me too. I need cake,” Cade said, pouting.

“You always need cake,” Reid pointed out, but she wasn’t that steady on her feet and crashed into me. I managed to keep us both upright as we meandered down the sidewalk.

“Pie,” I said. “I want pie.”

“So we get pie and cake,” Reid suggested. “Piecaken is a thing.”

Cade and I shared a disgusted look.

“I’m gonna be honest with you, that sounds awful,” Cade said.

“Agreed.”

“Fine, shit on my ideas. Go ahead,” Reid said, gesturing wildly with her arm. “I’ll

stop suggesting things then.”

As we walked, I realized we were only a short distance from the diner where I’d had pie with Stace.

But I didn’t want to bring my friends there for some reason. I didn’t know why. It wasn’t like a secret or anything, but what if one of the servers recognized me and asked about Stace? Or what if Stace was there now?

It wasn’t that I was hiding her from my friends, exactly. More than I didn’t want to introduce her to them yet. I would, eventually. If we stayed friends.

Stace seemed to think that we were officially friends. That wasn’t a word I used liberally. But Stace had pretty much claimed it for herself. Just took it from me and made it hers. Like she’d picked me up during the fire.

“Cakeeeee,” Cade wailed, and we took pity on her and hit up another place that was known for having fantastic burgers and ludicrous desserts. Like those milkshakes that had piles of cookies on top and whipped cream and brownies and way too much to actually call them a milkshake.

Cade got the red velvet cake shake, of course, which came with an entire piece of cake on top. I got the chocolate chip cookie dough that had an entire ice cream sandwich on top, and Reid went with the brownie, which had not one, but two double chocolate brownies on top.

The shakes arrived and the three of us rushed to suck down the shake part before everything melted. It wasn’t easy, but we made a mess and had a good time.

“This was exactly what I needed,” Cade said, finishing the last bite of her cake slice.

“I think I may have over done it,” Reid said, rubbing her stomach. “Let’s just sit here for a little bit before we go anywhere.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said, leaning back in my chair. The chill from the air and the ice cream in my stomach made me shiver.

What was Stace doing right now? She’d had dinner with her family, but what would she do after? Did she hang out with her firefighter friends? I could so easily picture her at a bar, slinging darts with precision and laughing with a group of her friends. No doubt she had dozens of them. Stace was just one of those people that everyone liked. Even if you didn’t want to like her.

So I still haven’t gotten the details from Tor about Micah. It’s very frustrating. If you see him before I do, see if you can do some recon. I have a family thing so I won’t be at the gym tomorrow.

Why did her telling me she wasn’t going to be at the gym fill me with disappointment? It didn’t matter, really. I’d probably see her at yoga on Monday. Probably.

I’ll do what I can I responded.

“Who are you talking to?” Cade asked.

“No one.” I kept my face neutral.

“You’re talking to someone,” Reid said.

“Great, now you’re ganging up on me.” I glared at both of them.

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“With love,” Cade said. “We gang up on you with love.”

“Whatever. Am I not allowed to have any secrets from you two?”

Reid nodded. “Yeah, you are.”

“We just want to know what’s going on in your life. You know, that’s part of this whole friendship thing.”

“Jesus Christ.” I was about to get up and leave, in spite of all the food sloshing around in my stomach.

“Cade? Lay off,” Reid said, her tone a little sharp.

“We were having a good time. Can we just forget this happened and go back to complaining about our families?” I asked.

“Yes, please,” Reid said and then she let out a breath. “My mom tried to reach out through my aunt. Again.”

Shit.

“Why did you wait this long to tell us?” Cade asked as we shared a look.

“Because I didn’t want to bring the mood down. Like I’m doing right now.” She gestured to the table and rubbed her eyes. “It’s fine. I’m just going to ignore her. Just...I’m so tired of this. So tired of so many things.”



“I know you don’t do hugs much, but can I give you a hug right now?” Cade asked and Reid huffed before she nodded. We ended up in a little group hug and Reid put up with it.

“Okay, that’s enough,” she said eventually, back to her grumpy self. She had to head to work, so we all headed to Sapph.

“Don’t let me get wasted,” I told Cade as we walked in.

“No promises,” she sang.

## Chapter Eight

### Stace

At least once a month I took each of my brothers on a little date. It was something I’d kind of started when Eli was a toddler to give my parents a break and I’d just kept doing it. Tor and I were grown now, but I still made him have a dedicated sister date with me when our schedules allowed.

Sunday evening was Carson’s turn and he wanted to go to the movies, so that was what we did. He got the works with pizza and popcorn and candy and soda. He laughed and I kept glancing over and seeing his smile and it made my chest tight with emotion. Damn, I loved my brothers.

I finished the food he left behind and listened as he chattered about his friends and school and every random thought that came into his head. Carson was a social butterfly and had lots of friends and almost never had a bad day. That kid could smile through just about anything.

“Stay?” he asked. He’d been calling me that since he could talk, and it stuck as a

nickname.

“Yeah bud,” I said as we sat at a red light.

“You’re my favorite sister.”

Well, wasn’t that just heartwarming. “That’s sweet. But I am your only sister.”

He nodded. “I know that. But you’re still my favorite. Of all the sisters in the world.”

Now I was getting choked up. I had to wipe at my eyes and hope he didn’t see.

“I can’t tell you that you’re my favorite brother, because that isn’t fair, but of all the brothers in the world, I’m really glad you’re one of mine.” I reached over and messed with his hair, making him giggle.

I dropped him off at home and went back to my apartment. It was still early enough that I could have gone to the gym, but Hunter’s class had already ended, so she wasn’t there for me to bother and convince to get pie with me.

A message came to my phone as I was parking my car on the street near my place. I turned the car off and pulled up a picture of a piece of pie on a diner counter that I recognized.

It was from Hunter.

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You've gotten me into a bad habit, Stace.

I smiled so hard I thought my face was going to crack.

You need some company? I was so excited to answer her that I almost dropped my phone in my hurry to answer.

I suppose. How long will it take you to get here?

I checked the time and calculated.

Gimme 15 I responded.

It only took me twelve minutes before I was entering the diner and looking around. Hunter was at the counter, since she was alone.

Her back was to me, so I sent her a message.

Turn around.

She did, and her face brightened. Not a smile. Not yet. But I'd take this. It still hit me with the power of a smile. Beautiful. She was just beautiful, even with her hair a little messy and her clothes sweaty. I'd take her any way I could get her.

I slid into the seat beside her and inhaled her sweat and her perfume. It had to be something expensive. Floral, but with a little bit of a spicy bite to it that managed to cut through the other smells of the diner.

“Gonna share that pie with me, princess?” I asked, mostly to see how she’d react.

Hunter’s eyebrows went up, but her eyes flickered at the nickname. It had just slipped out, but I liked it for her. She did look like a princess with that blonde hair always done and those big eyes and cheeks and the rest of her. A princess straight from a fairytale.

I’d slay a dragon for her. Or tame a dragon as a pet if she wanted one. Either way.

“Get your own,” she said, sliding her plate away from me.

“Oh, I see how it is. I turn you on to this place and now you’re not even going to give me a bite? Cruel woman.”

Hunter let out a little huff. “Dramatic much?” But she cut a bite and held her fork out to me.

Oh. Okay.

For a second I thought she might yank the fork away again, but she held it steady for me as I leaned forward and put the bite in my mouth. Lemon meringue again. It was heaven, just like always.

This particular bite of pie was extra delicious, because it came from her.

I licked my lips and it wasn’t my imagination that she watched me do it. Heat pulsed between us.

“What can I get you, hon?” A server said, bursting the moment like a bubble.

“One piece of lemon meringue and a Sprite, please.”

Once my order was in, I turned my body to give Hunter my attention.

“How was your class?”

She had another dainty bite of pie, as if she wanted to make it last. I was going to order a second piece to go for her before we left.

“It was good. No Tor or Micah, so nothing to report there.”

I sighed. “Tor is being weirdly tight-lipped about it and pretty much told me to lay off so if the two of them are in class together, you have to tell me what the vibe is. Because if he got shot down, then I want to know. He might not seem like it, but he can get really sensitive when he likes someone.”

His first few crushes had absolutely crushed him, as the name suggested. Whenever he’d had a relationship that ended, he’d sunk into a dark mood that took him a while to get out of. He hadn’t had many relationships, but those he’d had were serious and intense. When Torrin fell, he fell hard. He just needed to find someone who’d fall with him.

“He doesn’t look like a sensitive guy,” she said.

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“I know. That’s what people usually think and it’s one of the reasons he gets hurt, I think. I wish people weren’t like that, but the least I can do is be there and try to pick up the pieces.”

My pie arrived and I found Hunter studying me.

“Do I have something on my face?” I asked after a while.

“No. Just thinking.”

I savored my first bite. “About me?” I flashed her a grin, but she didn’t blush this time. Her eyes remained steady on my face.

“A little bit. I just don’t think I’ve met very many people like you.” She rested her chin in her hand that she’d propped on the counter.

I decided to go for it. “Baby, you’ve never met anyone like me.” I licked my fork in a suggestive way.

Hunter’s face went red and she looked down at her plate, slowly shaking her head. She muttered something under her breath that was too quiet for me to hear.

She looked up and her face was back to normal.

“How was your day?” Oh, I guess we were just going to gloss right over what I’d just said and her reaction to it. Okay. I could do that.

I told her about my date with Carson.

“He’s such a fun kid. I can’t wait to see when he grows up into a man.”

Hunter nodded and finished her pie, setting her fork down carefully.

“I wish I’d had a sister like you,” she said. “Life might have been different.”

“You deserved someone to be on your side, Hunter. You deserve someone like that now.” It was so obvious that she craved having someone in her corner.

“I have my friends.” Her words were defensive.

She did, and I was glad for that.

“I don’t need anyone else,” she said, her tone stubborn.

I nodded but didn’t argue with her.

The server came over to check on us and I ordered another piece of lemon meringue to go.

“How is your week looking?” I asked, shooting my shot.

“That depends. Why are you asking?” Her eyes were wary.

“Thought we could do something fun. Together.”

Hunter snorted. “Define fun.”

The server dropped off my pie and gave us both our checks. I snatched Hunter’s,

stacked it with mine, and handed over my card.

“You always do that,” she said.

I wiggled my fingers at her. “Good reflexes.”

“I can pay.”

We both knew she could. But I liked riling her up.

“So, fun. How about this? How about I plan something and tell you what to wear and then you can just show up and let me take care of it?” Hunter was someone who gripped control with an iron fist and one of my goals was to let her ease up a little bit. Just a little bit. Make her realize that sometimes surprises could be good. That she didn’t always have to have the first, and last, word. That she could trust someone to not screw her over.



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Sure, that last thing was going to be a challenge, but I was up for it. Usually I was only competitive with my siblings, but Hunter brought it out in me for whatever reason.

Yes, I wanted her more than I'd ever wanted anyone. Yes, I knew that in the course of my life, she was someone. But she also brought out sides of me that I liked.

Hunter's eyes narrowed. "I don't know if I trust you enough yet to let you plan something."

"That's fair. What would you like to do? I'm pretty much up for anything." What she didn't know was that I'd go anywhere with her. If she said we should dive into a dumpster full of rancid fish, I'd put on some goggles and dive in headfirst.

She raised her eyebrows. "No one is up for anything, but how about...movies? Is that too boring?"

"Depends on the movie. And if you have good snacks." Good snacks were a must. Good snacks and good company. Nothing better than that.

"We could...never mind." She looked away.

"No, what were you going to say?" I would sit here all night until she told me.

Hunter looked up at the ceiling and scrunched her face for a second in a moment so adorable that I almost slid right out of my chair.

“You’re going to judge me,” she said.

I made an x over my chest. “Cross my heart that I won’t.”

“Okay, it’s silly, but, Cade and I like to go to those antique markets and shows and pick out the most haunted item we can find. Like, the thing that you look at it and instantly want to call an exorcist. Sometimes we buy whatever it is. If it’s cheap enough. I keep most of them in my guest room. But that’s my thing with Cade. I don’t think she’d be happy if I shared it with you.”

I was at a complete loss for words. Not if I had a million guesses could I have predicted that was what she’d say.

“Do you have any pictures of the haunted stuff?” I asked.

She scrolled through her pictures and then showed me. “I have this painting. And those dolls. A lot of haunted things turn out to be toys. And then some jewelry.”

Yeah you could definitely tell those things were haunted.

“Aren’t you scared about having them in your house?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I don’t really believe they’re haunted. It’s more a vibe. And it’s fun.”

That gave me an idea. “Okay, how about this? There’s a really funky used bookstore that I like to go to. They have collections of some of the strangest books I’ve ever seen. What if we went and dared each other to find the weirdest book?”

Hunter smiled slowly and nodded, and I felt like I’d won something.

“I like it. And then we can get pastries?”

“Of course. Pastries are a given.”

Hunter looked at her schedule on her phone and I did the same.

Wednesday afternoon was the only time that both of us were free when the bookstore was open, so I put her in. Shit, seeing her name on my calendar was doing all kinds of things to me and I wanted to tell everyone.

It was time to head out, so I pushed the to-go container of pie at her.

“That’s for you.”

She stared at me for a second. “You just bought me pie. You don’t have to buy me more of it.”

“Are you saying you don’t want it?” Her hand flexed on the counter near the container. I knew she wanted it.

“I didn’t say that.”

I smiled at her. “That’s what I thought.”

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Narrowing her eyes, she reached out and snatched the container.

“I’m going to take this, but I’m not convinced that you’re not trying to convert me to your pie cult.”

I burst out laughing so loud that a few people around the diner stared.

“I’ve never thought of having my own cult, but if I did, a pie cult sounds pretty great.”

Hunter shared a smile with me as I held the door for her and then walked her to her car. I always wanted to make sure she had a working vehicle before I left. She could always call me and tell me to come rescue her, though. I wouldn’t mind at all. Rescuing Hunter would be a pleasure.

“Thanks for the pie, Stace,” she said as we stood next to her car.

“You’re welcome. Always.”

It was dark, but I swore there was a blush on her cheeks. Or maybe I only hoped there was.

“Drive safe, princess.”

“You too,” she whispered and then got in her car.

Home safe. Eating pie. She sent fifteen minutes later, along with a picture of the pie

on a plate with a fork stuck in it. She'd zoomed in, but I could just barely see her legs and what looked like rumpled blankets in the background.

Pie in bed? You know that's one of the first rules I'd make for the pie cult. Pie must be eaten in bed daily.

Now I was wishing that I'd gotten more pie for myself. I could have been eating it in bed with Hunter. Not with with her. But doing the same thing at the same time. There was an intimacy in that too.

That should be the second rule of Pie Cult. Because you know what the first rule is She responded.

Don't talk about pie cult I sent immediately as I grabbed Buck's leash to take him outside.

That's right Hunter replied.

I snorted and tried not to get my hopes up too high, but this was a good sign. A very good sign.

## Chapter Nine

Hunter

Stace and Torrin showed up for my Monday class. No Micah, which did worry me a little bit, but maybe he had something else going on.

I said hello to both of them as they set their mats out.

"What did your mother feed you?" I asked before I could stop myself.

Stace and Torrin both grinned at each other. I knew they weren't genetically related, but there were still so many similarities that I kept finding more when I saw them.

"If you ask her, she'll give you an earful about the grocery bill," Stace said with a wink.

"Oh I bet," I said as Torrin glanced around and I could tell he was searching for Micah.

"He didn't sign up for class, but that doesn't mean he won't be here," I told him, even though Micah always signed up ahead of time for class. Didn't want to burst his bubble.

"I wasn't—" Torrin said to me, and then the Viking blushed. How cute.

"What happened?" Stace asked him and I moved away, sensing that I was intruding on a sibling moment.

Micah didn't show up, but Stace and Torrin committed themselves to the class and I didn't have to give Stace as many adjustments this time around. I wondered if she had looked up yoga poses or maybe practiced since the last class.

They both lingered after the class.

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“That was a good class,” Stace said. “I really liked that arm balance thing.” I’d had feeling she would, which was why I put crow pose in the class. Not just for her, but because I tended to pull back from adding arm balances because so many yogis struggled and were intimidated by them. This was an intermediate class, but I didn’t want someone to leave feeling bad about themselves or their abilities.

“I’ll try to work more arm balances into my classes then,” I said.

Torrin looked back and forth at us before rolling up his mat. “Thanks for class. I might see you again this week. Depends.”

“I’m always happy to have you, Torrin,” I said, and he waved before heading to the locker room. Just me and Stace again. She waited as I cleaned up this time, asking me random yoga questions.

“If you want, I could make you up a sequence to work on arm balances, if that’s something you’re into,” I said as I cleaned the rental mats and stacked them in the back.

“Oh, that would be great. I’ll pay you for it, though.”

I did one last check of the room before grabbing my things and turning off the lights.

“No, you don’t have to do that. It’ll take me a few minutes. I might even have one kicking around on my laptop already.”

We walked together toward the locker room, our bodies bumping into each other a

few times that I didn't think was an accident. Even though she was sweaty, Stace still smelled amazing, and I smelled sweaty people on a regular basis. Her natural scent under soap and deodorant and laundry detergent was alluring. Made me want to lean closer to get more of it.

"That's really kind of you, Hunter. Thanks."

"Sure," I said as she followed me to my locker.

"I should probably go shower," she said, pulling her sweaty tank away from her skin and I tried not to stare too much. That was always a challenge with Stace when I was near her, especially when she wasn't wearing much.

"I'll see you on Wednesday?"

She beamed. "Can't wait. Get home safe tonight."

Stace always said that and I couldn't lie. I liked it. Having someone who was thinking about me that way.

"You too," I said, and she gave me a wave before vanishing around the corner.

The challenge now that she was out of my sight was not thinking about her stripping down and getting into the shower. Soaping up her naked body. Water pouring all over those muscles.

I rested my overheated forehead on the cool metal of the locker. "Shit," I whispered to myself.

Desire thickened in my veins and concentrated in uncomfortable places. Stripping out of my clothes was torture as the fabric dragged across my skin. I went as fast as I



could to get out of my yoga clothes and into another outfit to go home. I normally didn't get that sweaty teaching but changing out of my yoga clothes was like leaving the office for the day. Taking off my uniform.

The lust wasn't leaving my body anytime soon, so I rushed as quickly as I could to get out of there and back to my apartment where my vibrators lived. Not that I would need one right now because I was so close to the edge already.

What was it about Stace that sent me into overdrive? One minute I'd be wondering what I should have for dinner and the next I couldn't see straight and was so wet that I was afraid someone would notice. It was so wrong, and I needed to get a handle on it before it got even worse.

My drive home was way too long and then I couldn't find a parking space (what else was new) and ended up screaming and cursing more than I would have if I hadn't needed to masturbate right fucking now.

For half a second, I thought about shoving my hand in my pants and going for it in the car, but with my luck, someone would walk by and see me.

At last, I made it up to my place and slammed the door, dropping my bags and then ripping my shirt and bra off. My nipples were hard enough to cut diamonds already and just brushing my fingers across them made me gasp. With one hand, I shoved down my sweatpants and underwear and stroked myself. Just one touch jolted me and nearly made my eyes roll back in my head.

What had come over me?

Most of the time I didn't think about much of anything while I was getting myself off, but more and more images of Stace had invaded my mind while I was taking care of myself.

It was truly annoying.

Viciously I started circling my clit before shoving two fingers inside myself, thrusting as hard as I could. I needed to get off as quickly as possible so I could go on with my night.

“Oh fuck,” I moaned as I felt myself coiling tighter and tighter before that inevitable snap. At this point, there was nothing I could do about the lurid pictures of Stace that wouldn’t vacate my mind. Did it really matter what my brain did as long as I reached orgasm in the end?

As I cried out and rode the wave of my climax, I stopped thinking or caring about anything or anyone but the pleasure that rocketed through me until I slumped to the floor, my sweaty back still up against the door and my sweatpants tangled around my ankles.

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“Fucking hell,” I panted, wiping my hand off on said sweatpants. I hadn’t needed a shower before, but I needed one now.

On wobbly legs, I got up and stumbled to the bathroom and turned on the shower. Clarity didn’t hit me until I was leaving the shower and I started feeling uncomfortable about how things were going with Stace.

I knew she was into me. She was so obvious about it. She wanted me to know. And as much as I’d tried to deny it, I was into her too. Probably not to the same degree, but I did want her. God, did I want her. So much that it was getting hard to function around her. Every time she spoke, I imagined how her lips would feel on mine. What kind of kisser she’d be. Aggressive? Soft? I bet she would use her tongue and use it well.

Then there was her body. Holy fuck, her body. I wanted to climb her like a tree and wrap every limb around her.

This kind of intense attraction was almost violent and getting worse by the day.

But Stace and I had different ideas about life and how it worked. Stace was a romantic. I knew that within the first few conversations with her. She came from a loving family and expected to have love in her life. A wedding and a family and anniversaries and vacations and everything that came along with that. She would never get that with me. We’d never have it together.

And I didn’t feel comfortable just having sex with her when she had those expectations. It wouldn’t be fair to either of us.

I was down to two options: cut off all contact, or ride out this feeling until it went away.

Cutting contact with her was the most rational option, but when I thought about not seeing her in my yoga classes and not getting pie and never hearing her laugh or seeing her smile again, panic and despair hit me in the chest. I liked her, in addition to being attracted to her. She was so bright and funny, and I never really knew what she was going to say. Stace surprised me. Her upbeat energy made you want to be around her. Like basking in the sunshine.

No, I didn't want to let go of that. So I'd simply have to wait until my desire for her cooled off. It would happen. I'd spend enough time with her that we'd get comfortable and then it would stop. My attraction was strong because it was new. She was new. Once we got to know each other, she'd transform into someone I saw purely platonically.

It was only a matter of time until I could be normal around her.

The bookstore was a little hard to find, but I knew I was in the right place when I spotted Stace standing outside and leaning against the wall. She wore a sweatshirt with the firehouse logo on it and her hair fluttered in the breeze, the sides freshly cut.

Why did she have to be so attractive? It wasn't fair. Like some higher power had created her in a lab to appeal to me.

When she saw me, she smiled, both dimples popping and I tripped on the sidewalk and almost went down. I managed to catch myself and keep walking, my face red from embarrassment.

"You okay there?"

“I’m fine,” I mumbled. “Is this it?” I pointed up at the very small sign that just had a stack of books painted on it. No business name or any other identifying details.

“Yup. One of those hidden gems.” She held the door for me, and I walked into a dimly lit space that smelled strongly of old paper, dust, and leather.

This was a bookshop all right. Books were crammed haphazardly on shelves, in rickety piles on tables, even in stacks on the floor in some corners. Scattered around were several mismatched chairs and a few stools for getting books off the higher shelves.

There wasn’t even a register, just an older man sitting behind a desk near the front and flipping through a book, squinting at it before setting it aside and picking up another from a tote bag on the desk.

“Isn’t this place amazing?” Stace asked, her face all lit up with excitement. Her energy was palpable. She bounced on her toes and looked around as if her eyes couldn’t pick out one thing to settle on. Any moment now I expected her to let out a happy little squeal or start jumping up and down like a little kid. Normally someone like Stace might have annoyed me. She could be a lot. But instead of making me want to move away, being around her only made me want to get closer. Like cuddling up to a warm fire in the winter.

Stace’s positivity was contagious, which is something I didn’t think was possible for me.

“It’s something,” I said and then sneezed. A second later, a black cat darted around one of the shelves and jumped up into a chair.

“Oh, hello baby,” Stace said, immediately going for the cat. She crouched down and slowly held out her hand. The cat watched her for a moment and then bumped its

head against Stace's palm and started purring.

"Aren't you a sweetie," Stace said in a soft voice as she rubbed under the cat's chin. It made sense that the cat instantly adored her, given her day job.

A few other people milled around the space, seemingly lost in their own journey to find literary treasures. There didn't seem to be much rhyme or reason for how the books were organized so it was a free for all.

"Okay, I can't spend all day petting the kitties," Stace said under her breath before standing up. "Shall we?"

I nodded and she dragged me to the back, explaining that the books were shelved according to subject, but that didn't necessarily mean much.

"So, if you find the section on whales, you'll get, like, books about whale anatomy, but also Moby Dick and things like that. There's also a chaos section where they just put whatever and you can find just about anything in there."

This was quite the establishment. I had no idea how they stayed in business. There was no way they were making enough to cover overhead costs. I bet the owner was wealthy and had this shop as a hobby. That would explain this absolutely nonsensical shop.

Stace dragged me around the shop and shoved me in front of the shelves to browse while she did the same.

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Surprisingly, there was a queer section of the store which had everything from books on queer theory to memoirs to romances. I managed to find a few from an author that Cade had recommended to me who was from Maine.

Stace had wandered off somewhere, but she popped up and held a book in front of my face.

“How awesome is this?”

The cover was bright with bold pastel colors, but that wasn't what your eye focused on first. There was a woman in a gown that was barely covering her chest and a shirtless man clutching her in the throes of passion. The title was metallic pink swirling font.

“It's quite something,” I said, snorting.

“My mom has a huge collection of these covers so I always grab them when I'm here and then give them to her for Christmas or birthdays. This one is pretty spectacular, I think.”

“It looks like a piece of candy,” I said.

“I wouldn't mind licking her,” Stace said, glancing down at the cover. “I wish book covers of sapphic books would look like this. Bosoms all out there and heaving.”

I coughed and stared at her.

“Big fan of heaving bosoms. Big. Fan.”

Stace wiggled her eyebrows.

“Can you ever be appropriate in public?” I hissed as I looked around to make sure no one had overheard her. Stace didn’t exactly speak at a low volume, even in a bookstore.

“Rarely,” she said, winking. “What did you find?”

I showed her the books I had so far, and she went to the front and came back with a metal shopping basket that looked like it had seen better days.

“Just put whatever you want in here and I’ll carry them for you.”

She didn’t need to carry my books, but it did free up my arms to look for more treasures.

This damn store was growing on me. The cat was even growing on me. It had come over and rubbed up against my legs a few times and I’d bent down to stroke its head once when I thought no one was looking.

It would have been impossible to look through every nook and cranny of the shop, so I made a mental note of what shelves I’d looked at so I could come back another day and search again. Cade would love this place too. And Reid for sure.

But like the diner, I didn’t want to share this place with them. I wanted to hoard it and keep it for myself. And Stace. Like it was our secret.

I found a few more books that looked of interest, including a very strange and gory poetry book that I wasn’t sure I liked or if made me too uncomfortable to read. Stace



had found more romance paperbacks that she'd added to the basket.

“Okay, time to find something really weird. I’m going to give you ten minutes to find the weirdest book you can, and I’ll do the same. Ready?”

Not really, but I said I was anyway.

“Go!” she said it way too loud, startling me. She also kind of shoved me into the shelves as she bolted to the other side of the shop.

It was times like this when I remembered that Stace grew up with brothers and that our childhoods had been as different as if we’d been raised on separate planets.

She probably did things like this all the time. I bet she knew how to escape a headlock and had experienced a wedgie at least once.

Not that I was jealous or anything. I didn’t long for headlocks and wedgies.

While she buzzed around the shop like a bee on a mission, I took a more leisurely approach. I wandered and waited for something to reach out and grab me. It was the same strategy I had when Cade and I were looking for haunted things. You didn’t go looking for them. They found you.

I wasn’t sure what drew me to the crafting section, but I reached out and pulled a volume off the shelf. The title made me gasp with surprise and then laugh. It was, ostensibly, a book about quilting, judging by the smiling woman on the cover wearing a quilted vest, standing on several quilts, but the title *Still Stripping after 25 Years* gave a different impression. No one could have told her that the title was suggestive? Or maybe she did it on purpose to try and sell the book? I didn’t know, but I knew I’d found what I was looking for.

I returned to the front and took a seat in one of the chairs to wait for Stace. She arrived just as the timer on her phone went off.

“Okay, I know I’ve won, but I still want to see what you got.”

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I'd kept my book face down in my lap and Stace had hers behind her back. She set the basket of our other books at my feet.

"Wait, how do we decide who wins?" I should have asked before I agreed to this.

"Oh, we'll know. Or we'll fight about it. Either way, it's fun."

I didn't think fighting about it sounded fun at all.

"Do you want to go first?" Stace asked, but I shook my head, wishing we'd done something else.

"Okay, may I present..." she pounded one hand on her leg in imitation of a drumroll.

"Fifty Shades of Chicken!" The guy sitting behind the desk near us looked up and glared at Stace, but she wasn't looking at him. She was waiting for my reaction.

"Oh, that's...oh."

The cover was a whole chicken on its side on a platter that had been tied with visible twine.

"Is it actually a cookbook?" I asked. Stace opened the book and paged through it.

"There are recipes, but also smut. I think more cookbooks should be like this, honestly. I'm totally going to get it because there are some good recipes in here. My mom makes a really good chicken and I'm always wishing I could do it at home for

myself.”

She flipped through more pages and then shut the book.

“Show me what you got.”

I held up the book and Stace’s laugh was so loud that everyone in the shop heard her.

“Oh my god, that’s amazing. Well done, Eleanor Burns,” she said, referencing the author. “I bet Eleanor is a freak. The ones who look the most innocent and harmless like that usually are.”

I just shook my head at her.

“You are unbelievable.”

Stace just kept grinning at me, those dimples popping and making me want to do all kinds of things. Not just sexy things either. What would it be like if she held me when I cried? Crying wasn’t something I allowed myself to indulge in most of the time, but I bet Stace had good shoulders to cry on. Broad and firm. She wouldn’t cave under that kind of emotion.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked me, her voice suddenly quiet as I realized that I’d been staring at her.

“Nothing,” I said. I’d rather eat the book in my hand than tell her.

Stace let that go, inhaling sharply through her nose. “It seems we have a tie. So I am calling it that we both win.”

I scoffed. “We can’t both win. That’s the whole point of contests. To determine a

winner.”

“Says who?” she asked as I stood up.

“Says everyone since the history of contests.”

Stace made a “pft” sound and carried the rest of the books to the desk. “That’s narrow-minded thinking. Contests can be whatever the participants decide.”

The guy sitting behind the desk got to his feet and he seemed annoyed that we were buying things from his shop.

“Did you find everything okay?” he asked in a gruff voice as he punched the prices into an honest to goodness adding machine that was probably ancient when my parents were young.

“Not everything, but we’ll just come back another day,” Stace said, and the guy blinked at her from behind his bifocals and let out a little grunt.

Stace gave me a look and shrugged her shoulders. I didn’t know what to make of him.

He gave Stace the total and she paid with cash. Something told me that this guy didn’t like dealing with credit cards.

Once again, she was paying for me.

“I’ll get our pastries and drinks,” I told her, ready to fight about it.

Stace just shoved all the books in a tote bag that the guy handed over that had come from a grocery store and nodded. “Okay.”

That was a first.

Stace wanted to drop the books off in her car, so she did, and walked down the street to a funky hole-in-the-wall coffee shop that was known for their pastries. They’d won awards for their food and drinks, but their prices were totally reasonable compared to some of the fancier places that weren’t as good.

“Get whatever you want,” I told Stace as she stared at the pastries in the case. They looked like works of art.

“What if I want everything?” she asked, practically pressing her nose to the glass of the case.

“Then get everything.” I could afford it. Stace still didn’t know that I had a trust fund and I wanted to keep that information to myself as long as possible. People got weird when they found out about things like that, and I didn’t want things to change with her.

In the end, Stace got three items and I got two, along with frothy lattes that had designs created with the foam.

“I’m going to have to come back here for sure,” Stace said, staring at the pastries on her plate. She dove in, biting into the Nutella-stuffed croissant and moaning. Stace never enjoyed anything halfway, I was coming to understand. Everything she did, she did to the utmost degree. Stace experienced life in a way that almost took my breath away.

“Good?” I asked. I’d also gotten the Nutella croissant, along with a delicate little apple and cherry galette. Stace had also gotten a slice of baklava and a small berry tart.

“Heaven,” she said, savoring. I took a bite and had to close my eyes. Oh, it was heaven. There was almost nothing like a perfect light and flaky croissant filled with rich, slightly warm Nutella.

“So, has it been a good day?” Stace asked me after she’d demolished the croissant and sipped at her latte.

“It has,” I said. Surprisingly good. I’d laughed and now I had new books and was eating chocolate. This morning I’d gotten up early so I could finish everything on my list so I wouldn’t have anything hanging over my head while I was with Stace. It wasn’t something I normally would have done, but I’d wanted to have this time with her without thinking about what else I should be doing.

“Think we can do it again? Not necessarily the bookstore, but we could do something else. I know our schedules are messy, but I want to keep spending time with you, Hunter. I like being with you.”

There it was. That thing she did when she just said whatever she was thinking and feeling. I was still getting used to it. Would I ever?

I wanted to snap at her and tell her to stop saying things like that, but I also didn’t

want to be a bitch. Being around someone so upbeat was showing me how negatively I saw so many things. That I always thought the worst out of every situation. Life had shown me that a lot of times, the worst did happen, and it was best to be prepared. But you could go too far thinking that and end up only seeing clouds and rain, and you missed out on the sun even when it was shining in your face.

“I like being with you,” I blurted out and then felt my face go up in flames.

“You do, huh? So I’m wearing you down?” She grinned and her expression was so smug that I wanted to throw something at her.

“Shut up,” I said, trying to glare at her and failing.

Her smile deepened and did that thing where her eyes crinkled at the corners making my heart thump too hard in my chest and my skin tingle with awareness.

Awareness and arousal punched through me and the pastries weren’t my focus anymore.

I looked away from Stace and down at my plate as I tried to talk my body down from flipping out about her smile. I’d never been this attracted to a smile before.

Hoping Stace couldn’t see the war going on in my body, I shoved nearly half the Nutella croissant into my mouth, which caused Nutella to drip down my chin, and I only saved it from going on my shirt at the last minute.

Stace reached across the table with a napkin to help clean off my face.

“I’ve never seen you make a mess before.”

“It doesn’t happen very often.” That was true. Attraction like this did not happen to



me. Most of the time I moved through the world and didn't think about what other people looked like. I was too busy with work and my friends and doing other things. Yes, I would see beautiful people and think about being with them, but it never went further than that. It had been at least a year since I'd even hooked up with anyone and that night had been fuzzy. Someone I'd met at Sapph. Couldn't even remember her face.

I'd never felt the lack of sex in my life when I had plenty of vibrators that wouldn't take up space in my bed or ask if we were going to hook up again.

Stace had disrupted all my regular routines.

We stayed quiet as we ate the rest of our pastries and drained our lattes. My body throbbed with awareness as I did my best to pour cold water on the inferno inside me.

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“Do you want to plan our next outing?” Stace asked me.

“Outing? Is that what this is?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Well. I figured if I called it a date I wouldn’t have gotten you here.”

She was right about that.

“Stace,” I said and sighed.

She put both hands up. “I know, I know. That’s why I called it an outing. If you have another word for it, then I’ll use it.”

I flipped through different words in my mind. Meeting was too corporate. Rendezvous was way too sexual.

“Fine, outing. You want me to plan it?”

She crumpled up her napkin into a ball and set it on her plate. “Only if you want to. I’m happy to take the lead.”

I bet she was.

“No. I have an idea.” I wanted to surprise Stace with something she wouldn’t expect from me.

“Color me intrigued. Just warn me ahead of time if I need to wear anything specific.”

We cleaned up the table and returned our dishes to the tray at the end of the counter.

“Good to know. Do you have a wetsuit?” I asked.

For a moment, she stared at me before laughing.

“I might be able to find one. Why?”

“Second question, are you afraid of sharks?”

Stace held the door for me and we emerged into the cool fall air. I wish I’d brought a scarf.

“No, I’m not afraid of sharks. But I am afraid of spiders. I know they don’t mean to harm me, but they freak me out. The way their legs move.” She shuddered, making me laugh.

“Are you cold?” she asked.

“No, I’m fine.” Before I’d even finished speaking, she had pulled off her sweatshirt and was handing it to me. Underneath she wore a long sleeve athletic shirt in a dark gray color that hugged her muscles and made the desire I’d somewhat gotten a handle on ignite full force again.

“I’m fine,” I said, staring at the sidewalk.

“Put on the sweatshirt, princess.”

Fuck. Her tone combined with calling me princess had me taking the sweatshirt and

pulling it over my head. It was warm and smelled incredible. Stace wore a woodsy rich scent that made me think of mahogany and old books. Laced with that was clean detergent and her natural smell that I'd grown to recognize. Trying to be stealthy, I tucked my chin toward my shoulder and inhaled, closing my eyes.

Fuck. I was enveloped in delicious coziness. Almost like a hug. Almost.

The sweatshirt was huge on me, so I had to pull up the sleeves to find my hands and the hem hung so low that it could have passed as a dress.

"Shit, you look cute," Stace said, clenching her jaw.

"Thanks," I said, feeling my cheeks heat up, and not just because of the sweatshirt.

"I know you probably have somewhere else to be, but do you want to come over to my place? Just to hang out."

She asked it so adorably that what could I say?

“Yeah.”

### Chapter Ten

Stace

Holy shit she agreed to come to my place. It was a spur of the moment decision, but I was happy I'd asked. She'd said yes.

Hunter was also wearing my sweatshirt and I'd definitely caught her giving it a sniff. She didn't make a face or say that I smelled gross or rip it off, so I took that as a good sign.

We each took our own cars to my place and I got a nice spot close to the entrance of my building.

I got out and saw Hunter up the street parking. I waited for her and watched as she walked toward me, still wearing my sweatshirt.

She reached me and smiled, and my heart did a slow somersault in my chest before settling again.

I held the lobby door open for her and then unlocked the front door.

“This is a nice building,” she said.

The place was over a hundred years old but had been renovated a few years ago and

they'd kept a lot of the charm. It wasn't the fanciest place, but it had felt like home when I'd walked in with Buck.

Hunter and I took the stairs to my apartment on the second floor. Barking greeted us as I put my key in the door and went in first to say hello to Buck.

"Okay, it's okay," I told him. It didn't matter how long I was gone, he always acted like I'd just returned from the war.

Buck settled down and then he realized that there was a new person here and he lost his mind again. It was only my commands and his training that got him to calm the hell down.

"Buck, sit," I said, and he did, but was vibrating and desperate to lick Hunter all over.

I set the bag of books down and wished that I had thought about inviting her over after I'd made sure my apartment was company clean. I kept the place pretty tidy normally but having Hunter here the first time would have been better if I'd done a deep clean. Having a dog meant that no matter how many times I vacuumed, there were always little tumbleweeds of dog hair everywhere.

After she said hello to Buck, Hunter looked around. The kitchen and living room were connected on the left side with a row of doors to the right with the bathroom, bedroom, and a closet for the washer and dryer. I knew how lucky I was to have that in an older building but there was no way I was hauling my laundry somewhere else to do it.

I tried to be objective about my place. I didn't know how Hunter lived, but I could imagine that her apartment was sleek and new and expensive.

She hadn't told me she came from money, but she hadn't had to. It was easy to tell in

the way she moved in the world and some of the things she'd said.

It didn't matter to me, but I could tell it mattered to her. That she didn't want me to know. As if I'd judge her for it.

I truly didn't care. It was such an irrelevant piece of information compared to everything else about her. I cared far more if she was kind. If I liked being around her. If I felt like I could be myself around her.

"I could make some tea," I said. I only had one or two kinds of herbal tea in my cabinets. If she came over again, I'd get some more so I could have her favorites on hand.

Hunter crossed the living room and looked out the window. My place got great light and had good views of the residential street. It looked absolutely stunning in the winter with the homes all coated with snow and twinkly lights in the windows.

Buck put his paws up on the windowsill and made growling noises at the birds.

"Buuuuuck," I warned him.

He looked back at me and gave me the dog equivalent of a pout that I was spoiling his fun.

"Tea would be great," Hunter said, drifting from the window to my bookshelves. I had two of them and they didn't match. They were also crammed full. I'd been wanting to get something new but hadn't gotten around to it with everything else I had going on.

I set the kettle on the stove and grabbed two mugs and the two boxes of tea I had.

I wish I had something fancier. Loose-leaf tea and delicate cups and a tray to carry it on. Things I'd never thought about owning for myself which suddenly seemed essential.

"Feel free to judge my book collection," I called out to her. Buck had gotten bored at the window so he'd gone to lay in his bed and rest his head on his paws until something more interesting happened.



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“I’m not judging,” she said, her head tilted to the side to read the spines of my books.

“Yeah, somehow I don’t believe you,” I said, rooting around in my cabinets for something to have with the tea. We’d just consumed incredible pastries, but you couldn’t just give someone tea when they came over. I found some crackers and had two different kinds of cheese in my fridge, along with some apples that my mom had given me when she took my little brothers to the orchard.

Getting out a plate, I started assembling a rudimentary snack situation. It wasn’t social media worthy, but hopefully Hunter wouldn’t care.

I sliced up the apples as the kettle went off.

“I’ve only got two kinds of tea, sorry. You can pick.” Hunter joined me in the kitchen. She poured water over the teabag and watched as I tried to arrange the snack plate so it didn’t look like trash.

“You didn’t need to make that,” Hunter said.

“I know. But my mom raised me to be a good host.”

Hunter still wore my sweatshirt. Seeing her hands peeking out from the too-long sleeves was really fucking cute.

It distracted me for a second and I almost chopped off one of my fingers. How embarrassing that would have been if I ended up in the ER with a silly injury. I knew all the local nurses and doctors so I’d never hear the end of it.

With utmost care, I sliced the rest of the apple and set it on the plate. Hunter carried our tea and I had the food.

Buck came over to investigate, but I shooed him away and sent him back to his bed so he wouldn't bother us.

"Your place is so cozy," she said, pulling her feet up on the couch and tucking them under herself.

Shit, I liked seeing her sitting on my couch. I'd thought about her in my space so many times and now she was here.

"Cozy usually means small in real estate terms," I said, knowing she was literally a real estate agent.

Hunter shook her head and rested her tea on her legs. "Sometimes it does. Maybe that wasn't the right word. Comfortable, maybe. That doesn't mean small. Warm. Your place is warm too. I could write a whole listing on how this place makes you feel."

Oh. That definitely sounded like a compliment. I was no decorator and so much of my furniture had come from my parents and old roommates and garage sales that nothing had a unified theme, but I did like everything I owned, even if it didn't go together.

"Anything haunted?" I asked, remembering her room of cursed items.

"Hmmm," Hunter said, looking around. "I'd have to look closer, but I think you're pretty un-haunted. Sorry."

I let out a dramatic sigh. "Well, you can't have everything I guess."

“Next time I go with Cade, I’ll pick you up a little something.”

Oh, she would? She’d be looking for something for me while she was with her friend? Why did that make me want to jump up and whoop for joy?

“Okay,” I said, trying to hold back a huge smile.

“I don’t see Cade as much anymore.” She’d told me that before.

“I’m sorry. It’s hard when your friends get into relationships like that. My college roommate and I were almost inseparable and then she met this guy and I barely ever saw her again.” I had also kind of sort of been in love with her, but that was a separate issue.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m thrilled for her. I am. Still a little skeptical, but supportive. But I miss her.”

She frowned into her tea.

“The book tour is coming up, right?” I asked.

“Yeah. It’s in a few weeks. Cade goes between excited and terrified. It’s going to be the experience of a lifetime, that’s for sure.”

I couldn’t imagine dating someone famous like that.

“My mom loves Eloise Roth books. I haven’t told her that I might actually meet her at some point or else she would make me bring all her books and get them signed.” I’d come honestly by my love of books. When I’d been young and my parents hadn’t had a ton of money, they’d always taken me and Tor to the library and let us get whatever we wanted. It had been so exciting, being able to grab a book off the shelf

and take it home to keep for a few weeks. Almost like you were getting away with something.

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I still went to the library when I could and borrowed ebooks like it was going out of style.

“Your mom and everyone else’s mom. Well, except mine. She doesn’t really read anything that isn’t a legal brief or court documents.” Hunter made a face.

“Sounds riveting,” I said in a deadpan voice.

“There are many reasons that I didn’t want to go to law school and having to read pages of legalese was one of them. I do have to read a lot of loan documents, but those aren’t as bad for some reason.”

I couldn’t imagine. I wouldn’t last a week in law school. I’d been lucky that so much of my animal science degree hadn’t been in a classroom. My school had a working farm on campus, and I’d gotten pretty good at milking cows when I was half-asleep and tending to chickens and goats.

“Yeah, give me a romance any day of the week. I think I’ve read Eloise Roth, but I gravitate more toward queer books. Wonder if she’ll write any of those now.”

Hunter snorted. “My friend Jo asked her about that and Cade got mad, but I think it’s an interesting question. I’m not saying that she has to or anything, but I wonder if someone like her, with her huge name and brand, decided to write queer books, if her readers would stick with her. Probably not.”

“Some would. But yeah, I think a lot would bail. And she’d definitely get backlash. I wish it wasn’t that way, but...”

Hunter nodded. “I gave Eloise a hard time about bringing Cade on tour and if she was going to pretend that Cade was her assistant or if she’d publicly claim the relationship. I was worried for Cade, but I was kind of an asshole about it.” I was surprised that she was admitting this to me.

“Wait, are you telling me that you’re not perfect? This is news to me, Hunter. I think I need a minute to sit with that.”

Her eyes narrowed to slits and I thought she was going to throw her tea at me, but she just kept glaring.

“Oh, come on,” I said, gently hitting her arm. “You were looking out for your friend. I get it. What did Eloise say?” Talking about Eloise Roth as a regular person was a weird adjustment.

“She said that she loved Cade and wasn’t going to hide her. And that she’d protect her. But can she?”

The look Hunter gave me was anguished and I wanted to give her a big hug and tell her it was going to be okay. Hunter probably wouldn’t like that, though.

“She can’t. She can do her best, but there are people in this world who hate us. Who hate the way we live and love. What has Cade said about it?”

Hunter sighed and picked up an apple slice only to stare at it instead of eating it. “She’s anxious, but I don’t really think she’s prepared herself for what could happen. At least she listened to me when I told her to lock down her social media accounts.”

That seemed wise.

“I just wish she’d thought everything through before getting into the relationship.”

Something other than her friend being hurt was behind this and I didn't quite know what it was yet.

"You don't really sit down and make a pro and con list before falling in love. At least in my experience." Hunter met my eyes.

"Do you fall in love a lot?" she asked, and this conversation had veered in a completely personal direction.

"Not as a general rule, no," I said. I had been in love before, a few times. Nothing like my parents kind of love though. That was something on a different level.

"Well, I don't," she said.

"Don't fall in love? You mean you haven't."

She shook her head. "I mean I don't."

That didn't make sense. "That's not really something you decide, I feel like. It can happen to you anyway."

Hunter let out a frustrated sound and finally ate the apple slice. "I don't want to talk about this. The point is, I just want Cade to be okay."

She pulled her knees up and set her chin on them.

"Have you told Cade any of this?"

"A little bit," she said. That meant not really.

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“I’m not saying that you should tell her everything, but I think telling her how much you care about her and that you’re there to support her would be something she’d want to hear.”

Hunter stared off into space. She was thinking hard about something.

Buck chose that moment to get up off his bed and come over. As if he knew that his presence was needed.

He whined and then jumped up on the couch, squishing between us.

“Is he allowed on the couch?” Hunter asked, squishing as far away from Buck as she could get until he settled with his head facing Hunter.

“You try telling him he’s not allowed.” I knew without being able to see his eyes that he was giving Hunter his most soulful and pathetic expression.

Hunter snorted and stroked his head. Buck sighed. “I see your point.”

We were both quiet for a few minutes.

“Sorry I brought the mood down. I have a tendency to do that.” Her voice was quiet.

“You didn’t. Promise. I know I seem like I can’t handle heavy, but I can. If you ever want to talk to someone about anything, let me know.”

I expected her to refuse.



“Thanks.” Her fingers continued to stroke Buck’s head and I knew from his deep breaths that he was asleep. Lucky dog.

“I should go,” Hunter said, carefully getting to her feet so she didn’t wake up Buck. He flinched in his sleep but went right back to snoozing.

“Yeah, of course. Thanks for coming over. And for hanging out with me today.” I followed her to the door.

Hunter put her shoes on and grabbed her bag, along with the books she’d picked out.

“Stace. You don’t have to thank me for spending time with you. I told you. I like you.”

Hearing those words made me so damn happy.

“I like you, too.”

It wasn’t my imagination that she smiled when I said it. Fuck. I could live for a thousand years off her smiles.

“I’ll see you at yoga,” she said, stepping into the hallway. “And I’ll be planning our next outing.”

“I’ll be there. Let me know that you got home safe.” I needed to get those messages from her. I knew they were probably a little neurotic, but I saw too many car accidents as a firefighter. I never wanted to leave anything unsaid or have any regrets when someone got in a car to go somewhere. My job had really put a lot of things into perspective for me.

But Hunter didn’t need to know about that. She didn’t need to know how many times

I'd get a call and for half a second wonder if it was someone I loved. She'd joined the ranks of my friends and my family as people I had those moments about.

"I'll let you know when I get home," she said before heading down the stairs.

## Chapter Eleven

### Hunter

Torrin showed up for Thursday yoga and I couldn't stop myself from telling him that Micah had also signed up. His face lit up for a moment and then he smoothed everything into what he thought was a mask of indifference.

Just as he was setting up his mat, Micah walked in. He glanced around the room and went red when he saw Torrin. I did my best not to watch them as Micah walked over near where Torrin stood. Close, but not directly next to him.

What had gone down between the two of them? It was obvious, at least to me, that there was an attraction there. Maybe Micah wasn't out? Maybe he didn't even know he was attracted to Torrin. That was a solid possibility. I'd been out for years, but everyone had a different journey.

Throughout the class, I kept a fraction of attention on Torrin and Micah. They made eye contact a few times and Micah definitely blushed more than once. He was like Cade that way. Couldn't hide anything if he tried.

Torrin lingered after class and Micah seemed to be taking his time as he cleaned his mat for an unnecessarily long time.

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“Go for it,” I told Torrin in a low voice, my back to Micah so he couldn’t see what I was saying.

“He doesn’t... I mean he’s not...” He fumbled and I got it. “I tried and he brushed me off and I got the vibe that I made him uncomfortable. But I didn’t mean to do that.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Torrin gave me a sad smile that somehow reminded me of Stace.

“You can’t win ’em all, right?”

“You’ll get the next one,” I said, feeling a little weird. He was my yoga student, but he was also Stace’s brother. I wasn’t exactly sure how to act around him.

“Thanks,” he said, laughing and running a hand through his hair. “I’m going to go drown my sorrows in some ice cream. Early shift tomorrow.”

He left and I turned around to find that Micah was gone. He’d snuck out while I was chatting with Torrin.

Poor Torrin. Having crushes on straight people was all part of the queer experience, but it wasn’t a pleasant one.

Looks like Micah doesn’t play for our team I sent to Stace. It felt a little weird to be sharing something like that, but I figured that Torrin was going to tell her anyway.

Really? I could have sworn. Damn. But maybe he hasn't figured it out yet? Can't do much about that. Poor Tor. He's probably at the grocery store right now buying out the ice cream section.

That made me laugh out loud and I got a few looks as I left the locker room.

I'm sure he'll bounce back, but he might need his sister to comfort him I sent.

Yeah, I'll wait for him to tell me, but I'll be here for him when he wants to wallow.

She really was a wonderful sister.

I'd just gotten home that night when my mother decided to call. She'd been leaving me alone for the most part lately and I'd relaxed too much. I should have known she'd lull me into a false sense of security and then pop back up like a nightmare.

I let her go to voicemail and then tortured myself a little bit by listening to it. More law school guilt. This time she was having lunch with so-and-so who could write me a recommendation or something. Then there was the reminder that the winter charity events would be coming up soon and she didn't want me to miss them.

That was too bad because I was definitely going to miss them. Every other year I'd been willing to go along to get along, but I was absolutely over it. No more. I'd see my family for Christmas, but not for anything else. I was done.

Would I let them know that I was done? Not unless they pushed me. I really hoped it wouldn't come to that. I could handle confrontation with anyone else, but not with my parents. Whenever we spoke I somehow reverted into an absolute child who couldn't speak for herself. Who got tongue-tied and couldn't find the right words and couldn't fight for myself. It was awful and ugly and I hated it, so the best way to cope was to avoid. Ignore. Hope they'd give up.

My apartment was too quiet again and I actually thought about showing up at Sapph and pestering Reid. She'd give me a free drink and let me sit at the end of the bar and come and talk to me when she had breaks. I didn't want to bother her though. Not when she was on the clock. Maybe this week I'd agree to go on a hike with her.

Cade was probably in bed with Eloise already. Keeping my circle small meant that when I needed to turn to someone, my options were limited.

I didn't know if Stace was on call or currently rescuing someone from a fire, but I gave it a shot.

Hey, are you busy? Or awake? I felt a little foolish typing a message like that, but I hit Send before I could second guess myself.

Stace responded almost immediately.

No, I'm not busy and yes, I'm awake. What's up?

I typed out three messages before I finally sent one that I still wasn't happy with.

Just needed someone to talk to and I remember you offering. Is that offer still good? I sent.

Again, she answered immediately. Hell yeah it is. Do you want to talk via message? Or I can call you.

I wasn't going to tell her, but I wanted to hear her voice. Before I could type out an answer, she was calling me.

"Hey. I figured I could just call you and you'll tell me if you don't want to talk this way."

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The tension I'd been holding in my shoulders melted away when I heard her. I wasn't going to think about that too much.

"Hey, yeah, this is fine," I said.

"Everything okay?"

Now that we were talking, I felt foolish for needing to talk to her.

"I'm fine."

"You know, Hunter, you've said that to me a bunch of times and I haven't believed you once. If you don't want to tell me what's going on, that's okay. But don't lie and say you're fine."

Fuck.

"Parent stuff. That's what's going on."

"Okay. Anything specific?"

I decided to go lay in bed while I talked to her, curling on my side and propping myself up with my pillows so I was comfortable.

"No. Just the usual. It hits me hard randomly. And I didn't have anyone else to talk to." I hated admitting that so much. It made me sound pathetic. I should just hang up on her and forget all about this.

“You can talk to me, Hunter. I’m here.”

Her voice was deep and soothing, and I wanted to ask her if she’d ever considered narrating audiobooks or doing a soothing podcast or something. Her voice just put me at ease.

“Maybe I don’t want to talk. Maybe I want to listen to you talk. Tell me something. Anything.”

I could hear the smile in her voice. “You’re probably going to regret asking me that. You know I’m a yapper.”

“Then go ahead. Yap away. I’m giving you carte blanche.”

She laughed. “Ohhh, fancy.”

“Seriously. You can talk about anything you want.” I adjusted my pillow so my neck was supported.

“Wanna hear about some of my funniest fire calls?” I’d want to hear about her boring ones too. Anything. She could say anything.

“Absolutely.”

Stace launched into her story and within a few minutes had me laughing so hard that tears were running down my face and I could barely breathe. I couldn’t recall that last time that had happened to me.

“So then the cat escaped and ran up the tree again and refused to come down. It was like being in a cliché movie about firefighters that night. Finally, I got her down with a lot of begging and some treats. Someone took a video of it and I went a little viral

online for that one.” I could hear her rolling her eyes.

“Oh I bet you hated it,” I said.

“Shut up,” she said through a smile. I liked that I could hear her smiles now, even if I couldn’t see them.

“Someone as social as you likes attention. There’s nothing wrong with that. I wish more people would admit they crave attention when they do things to get it.”

“People usually see it as a negative,” Stace said.

“I know. But I feel like it’s a need, like everything else. Sure, some people take it to an extreme, but what’s wrong with wanting to be seen? To be acknowledged? That’s a basic human impulse.” I hadn’t meant to get all philosophical on her, but I was feeling raw and vulnerable, and my filter was off. I braced myself for her to laugh, or to make fun of me for getting too deep.

“Huh. I guess I’ve never thought of it that way, but it’s true.”

Oh.

“Do you think about that when you make your hair tutorials?” she asked, and I heard a snuffling noise that had to be Buck. I imagined we were on her couch together with the dog laying half on each of us.



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“I don’t know. Maybe. It was just something I started doing ages ago on a whim. I’d always liked doing something fun with my hair and I think Cade asked me how I did it and I replicated the look on her while I talked her through it so she could do it herself. She told me I should film it, so I did. People liked it, so I continued.”

I knew making hair tutorials wasn’t a career, but as long as I enjoyed doing it and felt creative, then I’d keep going. When it started feeling like more of a burden and less fun, I’d move on to something else. Same thing with making my watercolor art.

“I wish I had something creative like that, but I feel like I’m so worn out from already having two jobs that there’s nothing left over. I do art with my brothers sometimes. Eli is really talented. He’s writing and drawing this graphic novel right now and it’s incredible. I know he’s my brother, but it’s seriously cool. I hope he keeps his passion for it.”

We talked more about art and life and how you can change from the person you imagined you’d turn into when you were younger.

“I guess I didn’t care what I did, as long as it wasn’t being a lawyer. I’d join the fucking circus before I’d do that. And I’m not very flexible, so I’d probably end up washing sweaty costumes or something. It would still be better than law school.”

“You know, I’ve never met anyone with so many negative opinions on law school before,” she said, chuckling.

“I mean, it’s not law school, exactly. It’s the fact that from the minute I was born, I was cast in a role that no one ever asked me if I wanted to play. It was assumed I

would go, and I would do what my parents did. As if I wasn't my own person. Every time I did anything that they didn't approve of, they were absolutely shocked, and they'd say 'this doesn't seem like you' but they had no idea who I even was. Who I am now. If you asked my mom what my favorite color is, she'd get it wrong. If you asked my dad where I'd want to go on vacation, he'd get it wrong. I've quizzed them before. They don't know me, and they don't even try." The tears on my cheeks were a surprise.

"Fuck. I didn't call you to cry, Stace."

"Aw, baby. You can call me for any and all reasons. I wish there was something I could do."

She sounded like she meant it. This was the second time she'd called me baby. This time was different, though. This time it was soft, like a blanket she'd put over my shoulders. It settled on me and I didn't hate it.

"I don't need my hand held," I said, feeling a little defensive.

"Everyone needs their hand held sometimes."

I heard rustling and then Buck barking and more noises.

"I can let you go, if you're busy," I said.

The sound was muffled.

"Stace?"

"Yeah, gimme a second." There were a bunch of random sounds and I wondered what the hell she was doing.

“What are you doing?” I asked and heard more shuffling and jingling and what sounded like Stace breathing heavy.

“I’m getting in my car to come see you,” she said before I heard the hum of her engine turning on. “Putting you on speaker.”

“Stace, you absolutely do not have to come over, what the hell.” I wanted to tell her to go back upstairs to her apartment because I wasn’t a baby and I didn’t need her to come and wipe my tears and tuck me in. No one had ever done that for me before and I’d grown up fine. At the same time, I could see the appeal.

“I’m coming over and so is Buck.” I heard panting and then a soft whoof.

“You really don’t have to.” My protests were getting weaker.

“Listen, there’s a reason they have therapy dogs. Buck might not be a trained therapy dog, but he can pretend. Right boy?” Another quiet bark.

She did have a point about that.

I got out of bed and looked around my place, but it was clean. It was always clean. In addition to having a professional cleaner, I didn’t like it when anything was out of place. Made me anxious. I enjoyed living in a place that looked beautiful all the time. Gave me peace. Made me feel like my life was together. Or maybe it was a product of the way I’d grown up. Even when I’d been younger, you couldn’t tell that my parents had a child living in their home.

Going to the bathroom sink, I washed my face and made sure I didn’t look like too much of a mess.

Far too soon, my phone went off and I buzzed Stace in.

Not only did she arrive with Buck, she arrived with a bunch of other things.

“Sorry. I didn’t know how long I’d be here so I wanted to be prepared.” She shoved a dog bed in my arms and waltzed in with a gym bag slung over her shoulder that she set on the counter.

Buck sniffed at me and wagged his tail before running around my apartment to sniff everything else.

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“He’s not going to do anything, is he?” I asked.

“Other than sniff everything? Nope. I brought him his bed to lay on and some toys. He’ll be good, promise.” I’d never had a dog in my apartment, so I sort of stood back and watched as Stace set down the bed in a corner of the living room along with some toys.

“I’ve always got a Buck bag in my car because I have to drop him off with my brother or my parents all the time. He’s used to it.” After Buck ran around and smelled everything there was to smell, he raced to the bed and lay down, letting out a sigh.

“Oh. He seems happy?”

“He is,” Stace said, facing me. “Come here.”

She held her arms out and I walked right into them, letting her wrap them around me, leaning into her strength and her warmth.

Stace let one hand stroke up and down my back in a soothing gesture as we swayed just a little bit and it was so...nice. It was just nice.

Being held by Stace.

“See? Everyone needs a hug.”

Her voice rumbled through her chest as I fought the urge to snuggle closer to her. As

if I could. If I wanted to get any closer, I'd have to crawl into her chest cavity. Gross.

Stace made a little sound like "mmmm" and I let my body go even more slack against her. She was mostly holding me up at this point. My bones were essentially liquid and everything else was warm and syrupy and I didn't know if I'd ever been this relaxed in my entire life, not even after having an edible.

One of her hands reached up to stroke my hair, which I'd taken down.

"Your hair always smells so good," she said, and I didn't think I imagined her lips brushing the top of my head.

"Thanks." My voice was muffled in her shirt. She always smelled so good. Being this close gave me a concentrated dose and I was pulling it into my lungs like a drug. It almost felt like one.

Stace eventually let go of me and I had to brace my legs so I didn't just slump right to the floor.

My head was kind of floating and fuzzy as I looked up at her and found her smiling at me.

"Isn't that better?" Her fingers fluttered across my cheek for a moment. Just a moment.

"Yes." Everything was better now.

"Good. That's what I came for. Now. Can you show me around this incredibly beautiful apartment?"

I did.

Stace whistled loudly as we walked to the floor-to-ceiling windows in my living area. She took in my plants and bookshelves and I wondered what she saw.

“This place is unbelievable,” she said after minutes of silence. “Did you decorate it yourself?” She spun around to face me, her hands behind her back. Buck snoozed on his bed, apparently making himself right at home.

“I did use a company to help a little bit with the overall design, but the rest of it is me,” I said, feeling pride that she appreciated what I’d done.

Stace nodded, walking in a slow circle. “You gonna show me everything else?”

She raised one eyebrow.

“I showed you my office and the bathroom.” I’d avoided the primary and my own personal bathroom that was attached.

Stace nodded. “Oh, I see. I get it.”

“What?”

She flopped onto my couch and leaned back on the pillows. “It’s fine. You’re just afraid if you see me in your bedroom, you’ll be overcome with lust. It’s cool.”

“What the fuck?” She was always saying things like that. Just bold and out there and completely out of the blue.

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Stace rested one arm on the back of the couch and tilted her head to the side, giving me one of those cocky grins that turned my knees to liquid.

“You’re scared of losing control with me. But you don’t have to be. I’d keep you safe, princess.”

I threw my hands up in the air and made a bunch of noises that weren’t words. Stace just cackled.

“It’s fun riling you up. You get all cute and red and spluttery. Gets me every time.”

I grabbed a pillow from the other end of the couch and whacked her with it before she could put up a defense. “Fuck you.” I choked out a laugh and hit her again as she put up her arms.

“Hey, hey, I’m defenseless here! I’m a guest in your home! It’s bad hospitality to beat guests with pillows!”

Her words only kept me going as I hit her again and again until we were both laughing, and I found myself straddling her lap. When had that happened?

Panting a little, I lowered the pillow and took in her reddened face and messy hair. It made me wonder what she’d look like with really messy hair. Post-sex hair.

Against my better judgment, I reached out and ran my hand through her hair.

“Your hair smells good, too,” I heard myself saying.



“Does it?” she asked, looking up at me. I became aware that our bodies were touching in some crucial places and if she put her hands on my hips and nudged me just a little closer, we could almost be fucking.

Stace’s eyes were on my face and it was like she could read my mind. As if I’d said that thought out loud.

“So, you don’t need to get me into the bedroom to be overcome with lust.”

I snorted. “Who says something like ‘overcome with lust’? Reading too many Eloise Roth books?”

As much as she was talking about it, she hadn’t put her hands on me yet. They rested on the arm of the couch and next to my legs. Like she was waiting for me to make a move. Well, more of a move than crawling into her lap since I’d already done that.

Stace seemed to read my mind again.

“Ball’s in your court, princess. What are you going to do with it?”

I closed my eyes. “Fuck.” I didn’t mean to curse, but I couldn’t let this go any further. With unsteady legs, I climbed off her lap and stood up.

Stace didn’t seem to be upset at all.

“That’s not why I called you tonight.”

She nodded. “I know. You were sad and lonely and I was your last option. I’m not offended that I wasn’t your first choice. Someday I will be.” She grinned again and I thought about beating her with the pillow again.

“See? It’s so much fun,” she said. “Come on.”

I followed her as she went down the hall and opened the door to my bedroom.

“What are you doing?”

Stace turned around and faced me, our bodies so close that I forced myself to take a step back.

“I’m going to make you a cup of tea and a little snack. You’re going to go into your bedroom and put on your coziest pajamas and get in bed. I’m going to deliver your tea and snack and tuck you in and read you a bedtime story. Then I’m going to kiss your head and wish you goodnight and make sure there are no monsters under the bed.”

I burst out laughing because this had to be a joke.

“You can’t be serious.”

Stace nodded. “Yeah, I’m serious. When was the last time someone tucked you into bed and read you a story and waited until you fell asleep?”

“I think the nanny might have,” I said.

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Stace's face fell. "Shit, Hunter. That's kind of bleak."

"Not all of us grew up with loving parents, Stace," I snapped.

She set her hands on my shoulders and pushed me into the room. "I know that. Now go get in bed."

This was ridiculous. There was no way I was doing what she said.

### Chapter Twelve

Stace

This wasn't what I had planned when I came over. I hadn't exactly had a plan when I decided to hop in my car with Buck and go to see her. Her voice had just been so sad that I couldn't hang up and let it go.

The tucking her into bed thing came to me spur of the moment too, but it felt right.

I left Hunter to get her pajamas on when I went to her kitchen. Her place was so nice I was scared to touch anything. I knew she had money, but now that I was here, I knew for sure.

The kitchen was immaculate. Not a single crumb to be found. She hadn't had enough time to clean this well before I got here, so I bet it was just like this all the time. What the hell had she thought of my place? I was a slob in comparison.

Putting those thoughts aside, I went through her cabinets and found her tea stash, as well as her mugs. Her fridge was like something I'd seen from an influencer who did lifestyle content. The organization was next level.

"Jesus, Hunter," I said to myself as the kettle whistled and I tried to find something that resembled a bedtime snack. I found some fancy crackers and almond butter, so I put together some little sandwiches along with her tea. I picked a chamomile blend. If she'd had hot chocolate I would have made that for her. I'd bring some with me next time. Every year for Christmas my mom got me a huge supply of this expensive hot chocolate mix that I could share with her.

Hunter's door was closed when I approached the bedroom again with the tea and crackers and a book I'd pulled off her bookshelf. I'd thought about a newer romance novel, but that would be a bad idea, so I found a classic instead. It was still romantic, but there were no sex scenes or descriptions of heaving breasts or anything so it seemed safer. Less likely to cause lust.

"Hunter?" I asked, knocking softly.

"Yeah?" She was definitely still irritated and had a scowl on her face when I walked in, but she was in bed and wearing a soft-looking tank and no bra.

No bra and her blanket wasn't covering her chest. Maybe lust was going to be a problem, at least for me.

"Look at you all tucked in," I said, refusing to let myself stare at her nipples.

I passed her the tea and the plate and found a chair to pull over next to the bed. Her room was decorated in soft blues and yellows and tans. It was a gentle and floral space, more so than the rest of the apartment. This was a pretty space for a princess. Her bed was made of white iron that twisted in vines to form the headboard and

footboard. Definitely a bed for royalty.

The chair was upholstered and comfortable as I settled in and then realized that poor Buck was probably lonely.

“Buck! Come here, boy.”

He skidded on the floor in his haste to get to the bedroom.

“Is it okay if he gets on the bed?” I asked Hunter, considering that this was her room.

“Oh, I guess?” she said.

There was a blanket folded over the foot of the bed and I spread it out and commanded Buck to lay on it. He settled right down and stared at me, his tail wagging as if he was ready for a story too.

“This is ridiculous,” Hunter said, holding her tea.

“Why?” I asked.

She raised her eyebrows. “Because I’m not a child?”

“I know you’re not a child. I just wanted to do something nice for you. Isn’t this nice?” I asked.

Hunter let out a breath. “If I say it isn’t then I sound like an asshole. I don’t need you to do any of this, Stace.”

She kept saying that. That I didn’t have to do anything for her. What she didn’t get yet was that I wanted to. I liked doing it and she deserved it.

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Instead of answering her, I opened the book and started reading. My eyes flicked up to find Hunter watching me with a bemused look on her face. I paused.

“Drink your tea,” I said, just to watch her get annoyed. It was so damn cute.

Hunter narrowed her eyes at me but did drink her tea. I also saw her fingers reach for the plate of crackers and she munched on one quietly. Having a little snack in bed was one of life’s simple pleasures, in my opinion.

So I read. I turned the pages and spoke the words and every now and then looked at Hunter. She finished her tea and snack and went to brush her teeth before coming back to lay on her side facing me, one hand propping her head up.

Buck had fallen asleep and snored softly.

This wasn’t how I expected to spend my night but here I was, and I wouldn’t change anything that had happened. Well, I might have added some kissing. A good horizontal makeout session. Fuck, I loved kissing so much.

I stumbled over the words and looked up to make sure that Hunter hadn’t noticed to find that her eyes were closed.

She was asleep. Mission accomplished.

Pleased with myself, I closed the book and left it on the nightstand as I took the cup and plate to the kitchen and put them in the dishwasher. I called Buck and helped him off the bed, hoping it wouldn’t wake Hunter. She stirred briefly but went back to

sleep.

“Good boy,” I told him, stroking his head. He’d done so well.

I gathered up his things and set them by the door, making him stay. There was one last thing I needed to do before I left. Scratch that, two things.

Firstly, I found a notepad and pen and wrote her a note and left it on her nightstand before leaning over and giving her a soft kiss on her forehead. Her inhales were deep and she looked at peace.

Goddamn she was beautiful. So beautiful.

In my fantasy, I would pull back the comforter and climb into bed with her and hold her all night. And if I took the fantasy further, she would wake me in the middle of the night with a kiss and I’d strip her slowly and we’d fuck for hours and hours.

No, that wasn’t going to happen tonight. She needed more time. I wanted her to trust me. To open up to me. To want me and reach for me.

Right now, she was still holding herself back. I could see it in her eyes. I could see the way she looked at me. Part of the teasing was to provoke her. To get a response. To see the heat flare between us as it always did.

Buck and I left and went back to my place and got ready for bed myself. I kept my phone with me in case Hunter woke up and realized I was gone. Would she panic? I had left the note where she would find it.

It took me a long time to fall asleep that night, even with Buck laying on my feet like he always did.

My mind was miles away, still in bed with Hunter.

I don't know what to say to you after last night. But thank you. It was unexpected, but in a good way.

Her message came in when I was yanking myself out of bed. I had picked up a shift later, but I had some time before I had to be ready to run errands and clean and get shit done since I was off from the animal shelter today.

I wished I could lay in bed all day, but that wasn't going to happen.

"Come on, let's go," I said to Buck. He yawned and then lay back down. My dog wasn't a morning person.

Lazy animal.

I got up and made myself some breakfast and tried to figure out what to say to Hunter. Last night I was all confident and in the light of day I was feeling a little too exposed. Like I'd shown her too much. I kept doing that.

You're welcome. It was my pleasure. Truly. How did you sleep?

That didn't sound too clingy or desperate, I thought.

Better than I have in a long time. You didn't put anything in my tea, did you? she sent.

I laughed as I cleaned the kitchen.

No, promise. I guess my voice can be used as a sedative, good to know. I responded.



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I wouldn't say that. I'd say that you have a very soothing reading voice. If the firefighter thing doesn't work out, you might get into audiobooks or podcasting or something. Hunter replied.

You can't say things like that to me. I'm going to start blushing. I sent the message with a picture of me covering my cheek with one hand and tilting my head in a bashful pose.

I'm supposed to be working but you're distracting me. You're much more interesting than doing admin. she responded.

I liked that I was a distraction for her. That meant she was thinking about me when we weren't together.

You know the best way to get me to do something more is to tell me to stop doing it, right? I sent.

Fuck, now I was the distracted one. Hunter and I traded messages back and forth until I had to go out on a call. Thankfully just a fender bender. The passengers were taken to the hospital as a precaution, but no one was seriously injured. We were just wrapping up from that call when we had to rush to help with someone who had a medical emergency in a grocery store and then it was just one of those days. Third call was a guy who'd been trying to cut down a tree with a chainsaw and managed to drop the tree on himself and get stuck. The last call was a potential missing kid who we managed to find hiding in the bathroom in a store.

By the time I got home, I was absolutely beat. All I wanted to do was shower, eat,

and lay on the couch until I passed out.

There was a new message from Hunter that I read as I was stripping out of my clothes and heading for the bathroom.

Is your shift over? I hope you didn't have to deal with anything awful.

I didn't answer until I was clean and wearing a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt and laying with Buck on the couch. I was definitely ordering something. Even pulling something from the freezer to heat up was too much effort.

It was busy, but not too bad. How was your day?

A warm feeling took up residence in my chest as we spoke about mundane things until I decided to call her.

"Hey," she said, but she didn't sound annoyed.

"Hey. I'm too tired to type tonight. So if you want to talk to me, this is what you get." My voice was tired too, but not as much as everything else.

"You do sound exhausted. Have you eaten?"

I sighed. "No. I'm so hungry I think my stomach is currently digesting my spine. I'm going to order something, but I hadn't gotten around to it."

"Okay. What were you going to order?"

"Hmmm, let me think. Birria beef tacos from Casa Julia and queso and chips and churros and tortilla soup. I think that's it."

Hunter was silent for a moment. “So, the entire menu?”

“Yeah, basically. Ugh, I need to order.”

There was silence on the other end, and I thought the call had dropped.

“No, you don’t. I’m going to pick it up and I’ll be there in, say, thirty minutes? Can your stomach hold out until then?”

I sat up, jostling Buck, who glared at me.

“Wait, really?” Did she think she had to pay me back for last night?

“Yes. Don’t make a big deal out of it. I’m simply feeding a public servant. Or something. Aren’t they supposed to feed firefighters at the station?”

I explained to her that ours was so small that we didn’t really have the space or the budget for that. Small department.

“I still think they should feed you, but for tonight, I’ll be in charge of it.”

Fuck, the authoritative tone of her voice was doing it for me. I knew she didn’t want to be a lawyer, but if she used that voice in a courtroom? She’d come out on top every time.

“Okay fine, you win,” I said, as if I was going to put up a fight.

“Hey, don’t fall asleep on me before I feed you,” she said, and I snapped awake again.

“Sorry,” I said through a yawn.

“No, take a nap. Do you have a spare key or anything? I could pick up the food and let myself in?” She really was going out of her way tonight and I liked it. I really liked it.

“I’ll leave it for you in the plant pot by the entry. Hopefully no one will steal it.” I managed to get myself upright and get my spare keys into an envelope and shove it in the back of the pot behind some leaves. Not the best strategy but I didn’t know a better one.

Staggering a bit, I made it back upstairs and headed straight for my bed, collapsing before I was absolutely dead to the world.

A soft voice woke me up and I came awake with a jolt. Fuck. What time was it? I was still on my stomach on my bed, so I fished my phone out of my back pocket and checked the clock. I’d been asleep for almost an hour.

Rolling over, I rubbed my eyes and tried to find enough energy to stand.

“Hunter?” I called out.

She appeared in the doorway.

“Hey. I found the keys. Are you hungry or do you want to sleep more?”

She looked rumpled and soft in a sweater and yoga pants with her hair pulled back

into a clip. Her feet were bare, toes painted a very light pink.

“No, I need to eat,” I said, and my stomach chose that moment to scream so loud that I bet my neighbors heard it.

Hunter laughed. “I made a plate for you and kept it warm.”

Why was that so sexy? Hunter bringing me dinner was just so domestic.

“Thanks,” I said, putting my feet on the floor and shoving to my feet. I was still tired, but not as bad as I had been. Food would perk me up even more.

Hunter bustled around the kitchen as if she’d been here dozens of times. Before I knew what was happening, I was sitting on the couch with a plate of food, a paper towel covering my lap, and a cold drink in my hand.

“I haven’t had birria tacos in forever, so I got a double order. I assume you’re the kind of person who eats leftovers,” she said, joining me on the couch. Buck was doing his best to hover while pretending he wasn’t hovering and waiting for crumbs.

“Buck, place,” Hunter said before I could open my mouth. Buck looked at her for a second with a shocked face, but he knew the command, so he went and lay down on his bed.

“Wow, he listened to you. Good job,” I said.

“Sorry. I wasn’t sure if I should, but I was practicing with him while you were asleep.”

If she wasn’t careful, I was going to fall even more, and I was already in so deep.

Hunter looked up at me, uncertain. “Was that okay?”

“Hell yeah it’s okay. He should learn that you’re an authority figure too. If you’re going to be around.” My voice hitched on the last part. I hated how much I wanted her to say that she was going to be.

Hunter was quiet for a moment as I let my food get cold again and waited for her to answer.

“I think I’d like to be around.” She said it quietly, as if the words scared her.

“I’d like to have you around. And I know Buck would too.” At the sound of his name, he sat right up.

“Lay down,” I told him, snapping my fingers. He did but huffed in irritation.

“Thank you for bringing dinner.” I finally grabbed my first taco and dipped it in the bowl of consommé that came with my order. Everything was lukewarm, but so good that it didn’t even matter.

“Fuck me, that’s good,” I said, moaning. My stomach yelled again, but in victory this time that I was putting something in it.

Hunter also let out a satisfied sound that made me wish we were both naked so I could try and get her to make it again for different reasons.

Hunter must have been hungry too, because we both went mostly silent as we devoured tacos and chips and queso and split the tortilla soup. She had hers with a spoon and I basically tipped back my head and drank it.

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By the time we were down to the churros, I was starting to feel less murderously hungry.

Casa Julia gave you chocolate and caramel sauce with the churros, so Hunter and I took turns dipping the churros in the sauces before licking the sugar off our fingers.

“Okay, I think I’m done.” I sat back and stared at the empty plates.

“I’m a mess,” Hunter said, and I turned to look at her. She had sauce on her face and hands too, and she’d even spilled a little bit of consommé on her sweater.

“Wow, so you can spill. I didn’t think it was possible.”

She glared at me. “Shut up. I’m going to wash my hands.” She headed to the bathroom and I decided to use the kitchen sink. I’d spilled on my shirt, so I went to my bedroom to swap it out for another. I’d just pulled it over my head when I heard a little intake of breath.

I turned around, the new shirt in my hands. I hadn’t meant to leave the door open, but I had and there was Hunter, standing in the doorway and staring at me.

She blinked and looked away. “I’m sorry.”

Slowly, I pulled the shirt over my head and waited for her to go back to the living room. She didn’t. She stayed, even if she wasn’t looking directly at me. I hadn’t been wearing a bra under my shirt, so she’d seen my entire back until I turned. Then she could see everything and I’d let her.

“I did leave the door open, Hunter,” I said. She didn’t need to know that it wasn’t intentional.

“Sorry,” she said again and disappeared. I pulled the hem of my shirt down and went back into the living room to find Hunter in a cleaning frenzy.

“I should probably get going,” she said, sounding breathless.

“Hunter.” She froze with the plates in her hands, her blue eyes wide.

“What?” she said, her cheeks flushing.

Walking slowly, I approached her and took the plates from her hands, setting them on the coffee table.

She looked up at me and I wanted to kiss her so much that I dug my fingernails into my palms so I wouldn’t grab her and push her up against the wall.

“Did you like what you saw?” I asked. Her attraction was obvious, but I still wanted to hear her say it. Hear that she wanted me. That she was thinking the same kinds of thoughts that I was. That this thing that pulsed between us consumed her too.

Hunter closed her eyes like she was trying to shut me out.

“It’s not that simple,” she said.

I decided to go for it. To see how far I could push.

“I think it is,” I said, moving even closer so we were almost touching. Raising my hand, I tucked a few strands of hair behind her ears. Delicate, lovely ears. Nothing like my giant jug handles that I’d been teased for.



She inhaled sharply but didn't move. She also didn't open her eyes.

"Hunter? Can you look at me?" I asked.

## Chapter Thirteen

### Hunter

No. I couldn't look at her. I couldn't look at her because I wanted her. So far, I'd been able to keep a leash on myself around her, but then I'd seen the acres of naked back and all of my common sense and reason had completely shut down. All I could think about was digging my fingers into that back, tasting her skin. Watching those muscles flex as I touched her for hours. She'd feel so good. Too good.

"Come on, baby. Open your eyes." There it was. The word that unlocked me and would make me do anything for her.

I opened my eyes. She was right there. Crowding my space. The only thing I could smell was her.

"Stace," I said, my voice shaky.

"Tell me that you don't want to kiss me." One hand touched my face so gently, completely at odds with the fire in her eyes.

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“I can’t tell you that.” I couldn’t tell her that because I did want to kiss her. I wanted a whole lot more than that. I had since the first night we’d met. The second she’d taken off her helmet and I saw her smile in the flashing red and blue lights.

“So, what do you want me to do?”

Of course she was forcing me to say it.

I opened my mouth but no words came out.

“Do you want me to kiss you, Hunter?” she asked.

This was it. The moment that would change everything. Two paths and I had to choose one.

Except there weren’t two paths because right now, looking at her, I could only see one. Stace left me only one choice.

“Yes. I want you to kiss me.” I could have nodded, but I knew she wanted the words.

Her smile stopped my heart. It was unlike any of her smiles I’d seen before. This one was radiant. Pure, clear happiness. She was so fucking gorgeous.

“Well, if you wanted me to kiss you so bad then all you had to do was ask,” she said.

“I’m going to beat you with a pillow again,” I said, my voice still not very steady.

Her fingers traced my jaw like she was drawing a map of my face.

“No, you’re not,” she said before our lips met.

I wasn’t going to beat her with a pillow, that was true. The contact of her mouth sizzled through my veins. Her mouth was warm, so warm. Her lips cradled mine as if she was trying to be gentle.

Gentle was fine for other times, but for right now? I didn’t crave gentle. I didn’t need gentle.

I tilted my head and sucked her bottom lip into my mouth, causing her to make a sound of surprise and it was as if she’d been waiting for me to do that.

Stace backed me up until I hit a wall and rattled some picture frames. At some point she’d pulled the clip from my hair and had wound one hand through the strands. Buck barked, but Stace didn’t remove her mouth from mine to tell him to calm down. No, her mouth was busy as she licked her tongue into my mouth and nibbled on my lips and turned me inside out while her hands grabbed and pulled at my clothes.

The kiss was aggressive and claiming and too much and not enough. Our teeth clashed and our noses smashed each other and none of it mattered because Stace was kissing me and this was what I’d wanted. What we’d both wanted.

“What are you doing to me?” she moaned into my mouth as she squeezed my side and pulled gently on my hair which caused me to whimper.

“What are you doing to me?” I threw back at her, my lungs stuttering as if they’d forgotten how to work properly.

Stace rested her forehead against mine as she panted and the hand in my hair

trembled.

“I can’t even think anymore,” she said, and I knew exactly what she meant.

I’d never had a kiss like this. Never, ever. It hit me with all the intensity of a car crash. But in a good way.

No, I was definitely not thinking coherently anymore.

“Fuck,” Stace said, leaning back a little. She almost looked scared.

“Yeah.”

She started to back away, but I dug my fingers into her sides that I’d apparently been using to hold on for dear life.

“No!” My voice was way too loud.

“What is it?”

With one hand, I grabbed the back of her neck and tried to draw her face closer to mine again. “Don’t stop.”

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“Don’t stop?” she asked, freezing a millimeter away from my mouth.

I squeezed the back of her neck. “Don’t. Stop.”

A second later, I was being lifted into the air and carried as if I weighed no more than a gallon of milk.

Those firefighter muscles were no joke.

Stace deposited me on my back on the couch before straddling me and bracing herself on her forearms.

“Are you comfortable?”

“Yes,” I said, grabbing the front of her shirt to pull her back down so she could resume kissing me to devastation.

Instead of doing that, Stace arranged a pillow under my head. She couldn’t turn off the impulse to take care of people, even now. I should be annoyed, and I was. But I was also so charmed that it made me want her even more.

Stace even arranged my hair so it wouldn’t get stuck under me and pull when we started kissing again.

“You’re so hot,” I blurted out.

Stace grinned. “Thank you, princess. You’re unbelievably beautiful yourself.”

She slowly lowered herself down, as if she was scared to crush me, but she could absolutely do that, and I'd be happy.

"Stace?" I asked.

"Yes?"

"Why aren't you kissing me?" I thought that her tossing me on the couch was a prelude to kissing, but it wasn't happening, and I needed to know if she was going to continue.

"Oh, you thought I was going to keep kissing you? What if I just wanted to snuggle?" There was that look in her eyes.

"One of these times you're going to fuck around with me and find out," I said.

She raised her eyebrows. "I don't mind the finding out if I can have the fucking around part first."

With the words "fucking around" she pressed her hips into mine and wrung a moan from my mouth. Every time I thought I had the upper hand, she turned the tables on me.

I grabbed her hips and squeezed. "Don't say fucking if you're not going to follow through."

"Mmm, I don't think you're ready for me, baby," she said. That was number four. I was collecting those words like little treasures.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

“Hunter. I’m going to fuck you. I promise you that. But if I fuck you right now, you’re going to run home and then I’m never going to hear from you again. You’ll get spooked and I don’t want that. Don’t deny it,” she said as I started to protest. “Yes, I want to fuck you, but even more than that? I want to seduce you.”

Her words took a few moments for me to understand.

“What the fuck is the difference?” Now I was getting annoyed.

Stace leaned down and kissed the tip of my nose.

“You’re going to find out.”

The next thing I knew I was still on the couch, but she wasn’t.

Stace stood next to me and I felt like I’d been doused in a bucket of ice water.

What the actual hell had just happened?

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Stace smiled at me.

She'd done all that work to get me comfortable and then just...stopped?

My thoughts were sluggish and confused and I couldn't make any sense of what had changed.

I gave her my hand and she pulled me to my feet, and then into her arms.

A hug? Nothing made sense right now.

Stace stroked the back of my head.

"God, I love holding you."

Even through my confusion, I still curved my arms around her because she felt good and smelled good and I didn't want to let go.

"That's my girl," she said, and it was like she had unlocked something inside me. Oh. I liked that. I really liked that. In combination with her holding me and touching my hair? I completely melted.

Stace held me for a long time and I was the one who eventually leaned back.

"This isn't a casual thing for me, Hunter," Stace said, stroking through my hair with both hands. "It hasn't been from the first minute I saw you. I knew you'd be someone to me. I'm all in. But I know you're not."



“I don’t do relationships, Stace. Sometimes I do sex, but not very often. And never with people that I’m going to see again. This thing you want from me? I can’t give it to you. I don’t have it to give to you.” If the choice was between love and everything else in my life? I was going to choose everything else. Either Stace and I would end, and I’d be miserable and brokenhearted, or we’d stay together and eventually make each other miserable. Love was easy, in the beginning. But it didn’t last, and when it turned, it was ugly and cruel and bitter. Was it worth it? For a few good years?

No. It wasn’t.

Stace nodded and I expected her to argue with me. “I know you believe that. But I don’t. And I’m going to prove it to you. You see, princess, I’m a little competitive. And proving you wrong? Oh, that’s the ultimate challenge.”

What the fuck?!

She was smiling. She was actually smiling.

“I don’t even know what to say right now.”

Stace kissed my mouth so softly and gently. “That’s okay, baby. It’s all going to be okay.”

One minute I’d been lusting after her back muscles, the next minute we’d been sharing the best kiss of my entire life and the next we were cleaning up Stace’s kitchen. Or rather she was cleaning and I was standing around and trying to figure out what I was even doing anymore.

No one had thrown me off-kilter quite like Katrina “Stace” Stacey.

Chapter Fourteen

Stace

I shouldn't have let the kiss go so far, but I'd completely lost control when her lips met mine. She tasted divine. As if she was some ethereal creature dropped to earth. She certainly looked like it.

Hunter had been right there with me and I knew if we'd gotten naked, we would have fucked, and it would have been incredible. Probably the best sex of my life. But I couldn't think about after, when she'd inevitably tell me that she had a good time, but she didn't want anything further from me. She'd leave and then cut off contact. Or she'd do it slowly, ghosting me over the course of a few days.

Even more than I wanted sex with her (and did I ever), I wanted time with her. If I had to wait for her to get there? I'd damn well wait. I couldn't take chances with this. With her.

So I'd stopped, as much as that had sucked. I'd stopped and removed my body from her lush curves that were making me lose my mind. She was confused as hell, and I couldn't blame her. I was confusing myself.

I'd explained my reasoning and I could tell she was annoyed and frustrated with me.

That was fine. As long as she knew that I was serious about her and that I wasn't giving up.

Awkwardness filled the apartment as we cleaned up from dinner. I was almost ready to eat again, but I'd wait until she left to take down the rest of the leftovers.

Silence filled the room as I waited for her to tell me that she was going home.

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But she stayed. The kitchen was clean, and she wasn't leaving. I asked her if she wanted some ice cream.

She hadn't said much, but she nodded. I got us two bowls and we sat on the couch with Buck. I let Hunter pick something to watch even though I didn't think she was paying attention.

"What's going on in that pretty head of yours?" I asked her when I couldn't take the silence anymore.

"Nothing," she said immediately.

"I don't believe that for a second. It's okay, you can tell me." She ate some ice cream before answering.

"I know I said it before, but I've never met anyone like you. And as much as I know should leave, as much as I think what you want isn't going to happen, I don't want to stop coming here. I don't want to stop seeing you. I like you, Stace. Can't that be enough?"

She had a valid point, even if I didn't like it.

"It can be enough. If you don't want me to flirt with you and annoy you and tell you how much I want you, I will stop. I don't want to harass you. But I don't think that's the case." I knew it wasn't the case. There had been two of us participating in that kiss. And she had asked me to fuck her.

Hunter let out a frustrated sound and rubbed her forehead.

“I don’t... I...” she trailed off and then shook her head.

I couldn’t help but smile.

“Stop it,” she said without turning her head.

“Stop what?”

“Stop smiling.”

“You’re not even looking at me.”

Hunter scowled into her bowl. “I can feel it.”

“That’s cute.”

Hunter lifted her bowl as if she was going to throw it at me, but she didn’t.

“So cute and so violent.”

“Do you want me to get violent? Because I will. I know I don’t look it, but I know how to throw a punch. I may not have broken a bully’s nose, but I could if I had to.” She finally faced me.

I’d heard that one before. “Okay. Show me how to make a fist.”

We both set our ice cream bowls aside and she turned on the couch to face me as I did the same.

Hunter took her right hand and made a fist, closing her thumb around her fingers exactly the way you were supposed to so you didn't break your fingers.

“Okay, I'm impressed. Where did you learn that?”

She made a fist with her left hand and held both up in a ready stance.

“I took a self-defense class in college and then got really into kickboxing briefly. This was before I was doing yoga. I guess I still have the muscle memory.” She made two quick jabs that weren't close enough to worry about.

“Now you make a fist.” I showed her my fists.

“Let me guess, you learned to fight your brothers in addition to bullies?”

I smiled and nodded. “Yup. Tor and I fought a ton when we were kids. Our parents were at their wits end. They did karate and everything but then we did boxing and worked it out in the ring. We still spar together every now and then.” Some of my best memories with Tor were when we were competing together. These days it was on the softball field or the basketball court during a pickup game. Things could get intense during family game night too, though.

Our ice cream melted as I told Hunter more stories about growing up with Tor and she told me about her college days and meeting Reid and Cade. The tension between us was still there, but to a lesser degree. I still wanted to lean over and kiss her until she begged me to get naked, but I resisted. Not an easy task. Every time she laughed or tilted her head a certain way or I was aware of her body I had to talk myself down.

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It got later and I wondered when she was going to say she needed to go home. I wasn't going to kick her out, if she was waiting for that. She'd be waiting forever. If she wanted to stay here, I'd make her a key tomorrow.

"Is it bad that I don't really have any big career aspirations?" she asked me. It was cozy having Buck between us, but I wished her head was in my lap and I was playing with her hair. Only Eli had ever let me braid his hair when it was longer, and I hadn't gotten in much practice other than on sports teams. Hunter had the kind of hair that begged to be braided and twirled and run through your fingers like strands of gold.

"No, I don't think there's anything bad about that. I'd bet you that a lot more people are pretending to have career aspirations than actually do. It seems more likely that people get into a job they can tolerate and just sort of talk themselves into pretending it's what they had in mind for their lives. Like when you have to apply for a job and write a cover letter about how much you dream of working for XYZ company." That had always seemed ridiculous to me. The company knew you were lying. The applicant knew they were lying. It was one big performance.

"Hmmm," Hunter said, pondering. "You're a really honest person, Stace."

I grinned at her. "I know. It makes a lot of people uncomfortable. I'm lucky I've got a face that puts people at ease or else I'd be in real trouble." Many, many times I'd been able to smile my way out of a tricky situation. It always made my parents sigh and roll their eyes.

"You should have been the lawyer then," Hunter said, leaning her head against the back of the couch and smiling at me. Buck's head was in her lap again as her fingers

stroked a path between his ears.

“Definitely not for me. I think you have to be a bit more ruthless. Or able to put aside your personal feelings.”

Hunter snorted. “Or just don’t have any feelings for anyone but yourself.”

“Personal experience?” I knew both her parents were lawyers.

“Oh yeah.” And we were back to her parents again.

“I’m so tired of them taking up space in my life. They think because they’re family they get to claim me. Control me.” A lot of parents thought that way. Thankfully not mine.

“Have you ever considered going no contact?” I asked. That was something I’d wondered for a while.

“I mean, yes. But I don’t think I could. I can handle them in small doses. Those are fine. It’s when they demand more, and they always demand more. But this year for the holidays I’m going to put my foot down. I’ll do Thanksgiving and Christmas, but nothing else. I’m not going to yet another cocktail party where they shove me toward someone’s son and pretend that I’m someone that I’m not. It’s like...if they pretend that I’m the daughter they wanted that I’ll give up one day and they’ll win. Sorry. I know I keep saying the same thing on repeat.” She cringed and I gently moved Buck onto the floor. He was indignant, but I slid into the space he’d vacated and put my arm around Hunter.

“Come here,” I said, nudging her to get closer. After a moment of hesitation, she leaned her head on my shoulder.

“You’re so warm,” she said, leaning more into me. I’d love to pull her right onto my lap, but that would lead to other things that I’d already had to put the brakes on earlier.

Hunter exhaled a long breath. “If I stay like this I’m going to fall asleep.”

“Go ahead. I’m not on call tomorrow, but I might respond if they need me.” I had my regular shifts, but then if I wasn’t doing anything, I was also ready to go. It seemed like the right thing to do since I was unavailable a lot during the week and with family obligations, and it was a way to meet your minimum amount of calls for the year, not that I was ever in danger of not meeting that percentage. When I’d first started, I’d gone too hard and had to pull back. Now I was really strict with myself. It had taken some work.

“No, I can’t stay,” she said, patting my arm. I moved it and she got to her feet, yawning.

“Are you going to be good to drive home? I could call you a ride and bring your car over tomorrow.” I’d seen too many accidents where people thought they could drive home and crashed behind the wheel.

Hunter stretched her arms. “I’m fine, it’s not that far.”

She met my eyes and she must have seen something in them. “I can call a ride.”

“Thank you.”

Not that she couldn’t get in an accident in someone else’s car, but I wasn’t going to think about that.

The tension that had stretched between us after the kiss and the conversation on the



couch returned and I didn't know how to say goodnight to her.

Hunter put her shoes on and scrubbed Buck on his head before leaning down and giving him a little kiss, ducking away when he tried to swipe her face with his tongue.

"My ride will be here in two minutes," she said, standing up.

"Okay," I said, wanting to put my hands in my pockets or shuffle my feet or something.

"Tonight has been...something," she said.

I let out a huff of a laugh. "Yeah, you could say that." Her hair was all mussed so I stroked a few strands off her forehead.

"I meant what I said, Hunter. I want to seduce you." I watched the words hit her and savored her reaction. It never disappointed.

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“You are a confident woman, Stace,” she said.

“I go after what I want,” I said, stroking her cheek.

She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth and shook her head slowly.

“You’re going to be very disappointed.”

I smiled again. “Oh, I don’t think that I am.”

### Chapter Fifteen

#### Hunter

I was still shaky when I got back to my apartment after I got dropped off. It was so silly to pay for a ride when I could have driven, but Stace had been insistent. I sent her a message that I was home safe and then turned off my notifications.

It was late and I was tired, but I was also hungry again.

There was cookie dough in my freezer, so I preheated the oven and got out my cookie pan. My apartment felt too big and quiet, so I put on some music and tried to process everything that had happened.

Not only had Stace and I kissed, but she’d told me that she wouldn’t fuck me, but that she would seduce me and that she basically wanted me to fall in love with her. No, she hadn’t said that last part in so many words, but that had been the implication. She

hadn't seemed defeated at all when I told her it wasn't going to happen. That if it came between choosing to start a relationship and choosing the life I had now, that I had built myself, I was going to choose me. No way was I sacrificing myself for someone else when I could get left with a busted heart anyway. It was like gambling in Vegas thinking you could outwit the casino. Could you? Sure. Was it likely? Not at all.

I didn't gamble with money, and I sure wasn't gambling with my heart and my future. Plus, think about how much money I could save on not having a wedding. Down the road I might want to have a baby. Maybe. I'd have to have two, though. So they'd have some company and could gang up on me when I had to be strict with them. As much as I didn't know what kind of mother I'd make, I knew what kind I would never be.

Things would really come to a head with my parents if grandchildren were going to be in the picture. I'd have to make some serious decisions about how much I wanted them in my life. But that was far, far down the line. When I had plenty of money to give them the best. Not a mansion and a nanny who saw them more than their parents, but a house with a yard. A swing set. Summer camp. Pool parties and trips to theme parks and college funds with no strings. If they wanted to use that money for something else, they could.

Why was I thinking about kids all of a sudden? The oven went off so I put the cookies in to bake and took a super-fast shower before putting on my pajamas. The ones I'd worn when Stace had come over were in the hamper.

What a strange night that had been. I couldn't have predicted that she'd literally tuck me into bed and read me a story. It was a Jane Austen novel, but still. All of it had been so unexpected, but I hadn't hated it.

No, I'd slept so well that when I woke up I actually smiled. I hadn't felt that good and

ready to take on the day in a long time. I was strict about my sleep schedule, but something about the combination of the tea, the snack, and Stace's voice steadily narrating one of my favorite books was better than an edible combined with melatonin.

On the other hand, when she'd kissed me? That had been the exact opposite. So very opposite.

I touched my mouth, still remembering the demanding way she'd kissed me. As if she was asking a question and anticipated my answer.

No one had kissed me like they needed me more than oxygen in a long, long time. Maybe ever. Kissing had always been nice, but it was usually a pit stop on the way to other things. Given the choice between having someone's mouth on my lips or my pussy, I would choose the latter every time. If Stace could tear me apart so effectively with just a kiss, what could she do to the rest of my body? I was almost scared to think about it.

If only she could let us be casual. I'd be perfectly fine doing that with her. No expectations. Not owing each other anything.

I needed to go to bed and stop thinking about her. Instead, I shoved a cookie in my mouth and picked up my phone.

Heading to bed, but glad you're home. Well, not really. I wish you were here. I wish I was tucking you in my bed and watching until you fell asleep on my pillow next to me. Sweet dreams, princess.

Jesus fuck, she didn't give up, did she?

I was making breakfast for myself the next morning when Reid sent me a message

asking if I wanted to go on a walk with her. Not a hike. I could handle a walk. She had to be exhausted from her shift last night, but she said she wanted to get out in the fresh air away from the city. I wanted to tell her that the city had an absolutely gorgeous park that had lots of fresh air, but I didn't. She said she'd pick me up and we'd head to one of her favorite nature trails. To sweeten the deal, she promised we could get coffee on the way.

Sold I responded.

Reid picked me up an hour later.

“No Cade?”

“No, she's at some book thing with Eloise this weekend. They went to see her agent in New York or something.” Right, I'd seen that in the group chat. No doubt we'd shortly be inundated with pictures of everything they were doing.

Reid sighed and adjusted the air.

“How's work been?”

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She lifted one shoulder. “Same old, same old.”

“You know, you could always diversify. Do something else.” I’d been bugging her about getting a side gig so she could work fewer hours at the bar, but she always got mad when I suggested it.

Today was no exception.

“I’m fine! Jesus, I didn’t ask you to go on a walk with me so you could nitpick every single part of my life.” Okay, she was in a mood today. I’d have to be gentle.

“You know that’s not what I’m doing,” I said.

Reid let out a frustrated sound as she merged onto the highway.

“Fuck, I know. I’m sorry. I really don’t know how you and Cade put up with me. It’s like I use up all my social skills at Sapph and then there’s nothing in the tank when I have to be a regular person. And I’m not even that nice at Sapph!”

She banged her hand on the steering wheel and I was glad we were going for a little nature walk because she clearly needed it.

“Anyway, what’s going on with you? I don’t want to spend the whole day bitching.” She made a face.

“Work. Parents. Never enough hours in the day.”

Reid nodded. “Nothing else?”

“Not really,” I said.

“See, you might not know this, but I can tell when you’re lying, kid. So what’s going on? You’ve been hiding something for a while.”

Shit. I guess it was time to talk to someone about Stace. All of it was so confounding that I had to unload it on another person just to attempt to process it for myself.

“Okay. But I’m going to need you to stay quiet and promise you won’t offer any kind of advice.”

Reid raised her eyebrows and flicked me a look. “I don’t know if I can promise that. The whole point of having friends is telling them things and then they give you advice. Like you just did when I was complaining about Sapph?”

She had me there.

“Fine. Just...hold most of your judgment.” I knew there would be some. Maybe a lot.

The rest of the drive to the nature trail I gave Reid a short rundown of everything that happened with Stace. Not everything, of course. I left out the more salacious bits, but I gave her a general idea.

“Wow, she sounds hot. Has she ever come to Sapph?” I’d never asked her.

“That’s irrelevant.”

“Oh, I think it’s relevant. If she’s been one of my customers then I could tell you what she’s like when she’s at a bar. You can learn a lot about people when they have

a drink in their hand.” Wasn’t that the truth?

“I’ll find out. But that’s not the point. She literally said that she wanted to seduce me, and I told her that wasn’t going to happen. We want different things. I know I need to cut her off, but I just...” I trailed off.

“You like her,” Reid said. “That’s obvious. You really like her.”

“I don’t like her, like her, Reid.”

She turned into the lot and found a parking space. The place was crowded with people walking their dogs and families with kids and backpacks and couples with matching walking sticks. The weather was surprisingly warm today. One of the last warm days we’d probably have this year until we fell face first into winter.

“What if you did like her? What’s wrong with that?” she asked as we adjusted our bags. I had a backpack I brought with me just for trips like these that I didn’t use any other time. I liked having enough snacks and water on hand, as well as a first aid kit and extra shoes and socks. Just in case.

“Liking leads to relationships and you know I don’t do those,” I said as we passed a woman and her dog. It was the same color as Buck and for a moment I froze, wondering if Stace ever brought him here for walks. I bet she had.

“Oh, right. Your relationship ban. I forgot that you’ve just...decided that’s a thing you can do.” Reid and Cade always scoffed when I said I had no interest in relationships. When I’d first told them about it, they’d wondered if I was asexual or aromantic or a combination of the two. I almost thought about telling them yes, I was, but that wasn’t true. Instead I’d explained my reasoning and they’d been skeptical and had tried to tell me that I was going to change my mind when I met someone who knocked me off my feet. I’d told them that even if I did, I would simply choose not to



let things get that far. Can't fall in love if you never open yourself up to someone else.

“It is. I'm not getting into a relationship with her. Other than a friendship, anyway.”  
If only she hadn't said the seduction thing. I kept going back to that. Shocking thing to say to someone.

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“Then just keep being her friend and control your feelings,” she said as we walked along the leaf-strewn path. You had to be careful in the fall because the leaves were slippery and one minute you were stable and the next your feet were flying out from under you. I didn’t need to hurt my ankle again. Although, I wouldn’t mind that much if Stace had to come and rescue me again in her fire gear. If we were going to have a sexual relationship, I definitely would have asked her to role play with her turnouts and the rest of her uniform. That would be so hot. I hadn’t done a lot of roleplay because that seemed like the kind of thing you did when you had known someone for longer than an hour, but the appeal was there.

Something told me that Stace would find taking role playing seriously difficult. She’d probably break character and laugh and show those dimples, but it wouldn’t matter because she was so fucking cute.

“Hunter? You there?” Reid asked, and I realized I had completely drifted off into the fantasy and forgotten about Reid.

She grabbed my arm so I wouldn’t trip over a branch.

“Yeah, thanks,” I said, blushing.

“Would it be so bad to just see where things go with Stace instead of cutting things off before you even figure out if you could have a relationship? You don’t have to jump into anything. No one is going to force you to fall in love with her.”

I snorted. Stace would. She wanted to make me fall in love with her. It was almost hilarious how she thought that was something she could do. That she could just

decide that for me.

“It doesn’t matter. She’s going to stay in the friend box. I’m not risking it.”

My phone went off and I found a message from Stace. Speak of the devil.

It was a picture of Stace and her two little brothers. The younger one, Carson, was in her lap, and Eli sat beside her. All three were making funny faces and I couldn’t help but smile.

I was dragged to the apple orchard for apple picking and a hayride. Cross your fingers I don’t get paged and have to bail. LOL. Bail on the bales.

I choked on a laugh and Reid gave me a look. I ignored her and typed out a response to Stace.

That’s one of the worst puns I’ve ever heard in my life. Congratulations.

Her answer made my entire body tingle. Thanks, baby.

We were going to have to talk about her calling me that.

My walk with Reid was more intense than she had prepared me for, but she took me for lunch after which included huge bowls of ramen before she took me to get some of my second-favorite cookies.

“Sorry for pushing you,” she said through a mouthful of double chocolate chip cookie.

“It’s okay. I need to do more cardio.” I had a membership at the gym where I taught, and I should probably take advantage of it. Stace could definitely give me some

pointers, probably in exchange for helping with her yoga.

“Fuck, I don’t want to go to work,” she said, rubbing her face.

“I’m sorry,” I said, because she didn’t want me nagging her. She just wanted sympathy. “Written anything new lately?”

It was an open secret that Reid wrote fanfiction in her spare time. She’d get grumpy when we mentioned it and she still hadn’t told us what name she posted under or where she posted, so Cade and I had been speculating for ages about it.

“Not really. Inspiration hasn’t been hitting me. I need a new show with a good ship.” I was always on the lookout for her because I knew what she liked in fiction. Reid was an avid book lover and had recommended me some of my favorites. Every time I saw her, she’d found something new.

“I haven’t been watching much TV lately. Sorry. Anything new to read, though?” Maybe instead of ruminating about Stace I could use that time and energy to read some really good romance. Since I wasn’t going to have it in my life, I loved getting to lose myself in fictional love stories that always had happy endings.

“Mmm, yes. How do you feel about orcs?”

I nearly choked on my cookie. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Orcs. How do you feel about them?”

I got back after seeing Reid with a list of five new books I wanted to try. It had started drizzling just as I parked my car, which was perfect. All I wanted to do was spend the rest of my afternoon and evening reading.

After making a pot of tea, I settled in to chill the rest of the night, but just as I'd opened my first book, I got a message from Stace.

Fireworks are a menace. Just thought you should know.

Is there context? I asked. Or is this just a general sentiment?

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It'll be in the local paper. Some genius was storing fireworks in his garage and dropped a lit cigarette. You can probably guess what happened next.

Oh no. That didn't sound good at all.

Was everyone okay? I asked.

By some miracle, no one was hurt and we managed to save most of the house. But I think his wife is going to make him sleep on the couch for a while if she doesn't outright divorce him.

Well, he probably deserved that.

Are you done for the night? I asked.

Yeah, that was a pain in the ass so I'm heading home. What are you up to?

I told her that I was spending my night reading.

Oh shit, that sounds really nice. Would you like some company? I always want to spend more time reading and then I get busy doing something else. I promise I won't distract you. I think reading in a room with someone else will actually help me focus.

That sounded ridiculous and I doubted our ability to ignore each other to read, but of course I told her that she should come over whenever she felt like it and that I'd make her dinner.

You don't have to cook for me. I can bring pizza. Freddie's gives us a discount. What toppings do you want?

I told her that most anything was fine except for anchovy or mushroom. We agreed on pepperoni, olives, and green peppers for toppings. Stace said she'd grab some salads, drinks, and cake as well.

Not having to figure out what to do for dinner was a relief, so I made sure the apartment was spotless and grabbed an extra blanket from the chest in the corner so Stace could use it if she wanted to. I always liked being cozy when I was reading.

I buzzed her up less than an hour later and she burst in with two pizza boxes, several bags, and that smile that buckled my knees. Lucky for me, I could put my hand on the kitchen island to prop me up until Stace put everything down.

"No Buck?" I asked.

"My brothers dognapped him. They're having a little sleepover." Strange how I was going to miss his sweet little face begging for scraps and then laying on my knee. Petting his fur was so meditative in a way. No wonder they used dogs for therapy.

"Okay, I have paperbacks and ebooks just in case. I'm a big mood reader and I didn't know what I was going to want so I brought a bunch of things." She started unpacking her bag and she had everything from non-fiction books about specific subjects to romances to a few literary titles.

"I went a little overboard at the library last week. Oops?" she said as we both looked at the stack.

I always forgot about the library. I had a card to the city library, but I was always so busy that I forgot to go or check their catalog for ebooks. Usually I'd just buy the

ebooks and if I didn't like them, I'd just delete them from my library. Books were one expense that I never limited myself on. Books and cookies.

"What are you in the mood for?" I asked her, spreading the books out.

"Hmmm," she said, tilting her head and tapping her chin with her forefinger as she pondered while I tried not to think about how adorable she was. "I think I want some romance. Romcom kind of romance."

I picked up one of the books that I'd already read myself and pushed it toward her. "This one. But you should show me your ebooks too just in case there's a better option."

She turned on her ereader and handed it to me. I paged through her library and I did have to say, she had excellent taste in books.

"Yeah, definitely this." I tapped the cover of the hardcover I'd picked out first.

"Perfect. What are you gonna read?" she asked, and I got my ereader to show her.

"Interesting. Is it any good?"

"My friend Reid recommended it, and she's almost never wrong about books, so we'll see."

"Cool. Let me know. Should we have pizza first?"

"Yes, please."

Stace and I ate sitting on the couch and I wasn't shocked at how much pizza Stace could put away with little effort. Her grocery budget must be astronomical.



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“Should I have another piece?” she said to herself as she looked at her empty plate.

“Might as well. You brought plenty.”

Stace nodded. “You’re right. Do you need anything?”

“A refill?” Stace took my glass and came back with two more slices and a full glass of soda for me.

She let out a little sigh as she looked out my windows.

“I always feel like reading in the rain.”

“Me too. I should do it more often. I always get so lost in the things I should be doing and forget about the things I want to be doing,” I admitted.

“I think we all do that,” Stace said, finishing another pizza slice with only a few bites.

Once we’d finished eating and each had a piece of cake, I put on some soft music that I listened to when I read and grabbed my ereader. Sitting on the couch with Stace while we read was going to be distracting, but I did enjoy having her here. Her presence was so bright and warm that it was like turning on an extra light after squinting in the darkness.

“Do you want a blanket?” I asked as I settled myself on the couch.

“Yeah, sure.”

I pulled the extra out for her and she draped it on her lap. “Thanks.”

For someone who had joked about loving to talk, I guess I expected Stace to make a lot of noise when she read, but she didn't. The only sounds that came from her were the turning of the pages and her gentle breathing.

If anyone was distracted, it was me. The book was interesting, but every few words my eyes would flick up to watch Stace. I couldn't help it: I liked looking at her.

She rested one elbow on the arm of the couch and rested her head against it as she held the book in her lap with the other hand. As I watched, I noted her reading speed by how fast she had to turn the pages.

It wasn't an exact science, but I think she was faster than me. How annoying and unfair.

My current speed was even slower due to all the Stace watching I kept doing. I was the one who'd wanted to read in the first place and here I was, not reading. Not reading my book, anyway. Reading Stace was better.

And of course, the longer I watched her, the more I thought about her and when we'd kissed and how she'd laid me on her couch and we'd been so close to having sex. If either one of us had removed even one piece of clothing, it would have been all over. For me, at least.

As I watched her, those feelings and desires reignited. Like they'd been waiting for me to think them and as soon as I did, they were all I could think about. I couldn't even pretend to be reading my book anymore.

“You know, I am reading, but I can feel you looking at me, princess,” she said without taking her eyes off the book. She flipped to the next page and was still

reading while I kept staring at her. Like a stalker.

“Sorry,” I said, forcing my eyes back on my ereader. I’d been so distracted by Stace that it had gone to sleep, and I hadn’t noticed. I turned it back on and wished I could hide my flaming face.

“You can look at me alllllll you want, baby.” That word. That one word undid me every single time. I hated how much I liked it. How much it seemed to dismantle all of my rules.

“Stop that,” I said.

“What? Calling you baby?” She drew out the word.

Fuck.

I closed my eyes and I could feel her smiling. I could hear it. I hated how much I liked that too.

“Can we just go back to reading? Please?”

“I was reading. You were the one who wasn’t,” she said.

I blew out a frustrated breath and opened my eyes to find her smirking at me.

“Guess I’m just better at compartmentalizing my attraction than you are.” Another page turn. I would accuse her of faking, but I could see her eyes scanning while she said it. I definitely couldn’t carry on a conversation and read at the same time. Apparently, she was good at compartmentalizing.

There was only one solution.

I got up and went to sit in the reading chair that wasn't quite as comfortable as the couch, but it would have to work. I turned it so I'd be facing away from Stace and looking out my windows instead.

I could still hear her breathing and turning pages but cutting out the visual of her helped somewhat.

"Wow, okay," she said as I settled in.

"Sorry. You're distracting."

Stace laughed. "I know I am. It's one of the main parts of my charm. I'm like a song you get stuck in your head that somehow becomes your favorite."

No, she wasn't like that. She was like something that crawled under your skin and snuck into the spaces between your cells and before you knew it, she was there and she was a part of you and there was nothing you could do about it, but did you really want to?

She was more like that.

I ground my teeth together and tried to read my book. I did try. I truly did. It wasn't Stace's fault, even if I wanted to blame her. Closing my eyes, I did some deep breathing and counted to fifty. Stace turned a page. I heard it even over the music.

What was wrong with me? I never should have said she could come over. It was too soon. What I should have done was held her off for a few days and gotten my head together before seeing her in person. Hearing her voice on the phone was bad enough, but the combination of her body taking up space and air in my apartment and her voice when she spoke was more than I could take.

Mistakes, mistakes, I had made mistakes.

“Hunter?” Her voice was soft but made me turn and look at her over my shoulder.

“What?” I asked. She’d put one finger in her book to hold her place. I should have given her a bookmark. I had a beautiful collection, including a set of carved wooden bookmarks that I’d gotten from Reid for my last birthday.

“Are you okay? Do you need me to leave? I don’t want you to be uncomfortable in your own home.” Why did she have to say things like that? It would be so much easier to kick her out if she would just be an asshole. But no, she had to be sweet and kind and considerate. She had to bring me pizza and tuck me into bed and give me dozens of smiles and call me baby. She had to kiss me like it was the most important thing she’d ever done.

“No,” I said, my voice rough. “I don’t want you to leave. I mean, I do, but only because...” I couldn’t finish.

Stace’s smile was slow and dangerous. “Is my seduction working? I’m not even trying right now.”

No, she didn’t have to try anymore. Her very presence was doing it for me. Her presence and the memories of what we’d already done and the anticipation of what could come next.

“This is already hard enough, Stace.”

“It’s hard for me too. I know that you want me. And you know that I want you. So really, the only one standing in our way is you. So it’s time to make a choice, Hunter. Because I’m not going anywhere.” She leaned back on the couch and set the book aside. Slowly, she pulled the blanket from her lap and hung it on the back of the couch.

As I watched, she pulled her shirt over her head and set it on top of the blanket.

“Should I keep going?” At least this time she had a bra on. It was a simple black cotton bra with thin straps, but the sight of her shoulders and her toned stomach was more than enough to make my mouth water.

“Fuck,” I breathed without meaning to.

That made her smile and tilt her head to the side. “Like what you see, baby?”

There was no point in denying it. “Yes.”

“Want me to keep going?”

No. Yes.

I kept my eyes on her face.

“Why are you doing this to me?”

Her eyes were steady on mine. “If you tell me to stop, I’ll stop. I promise.”

I didn’t want her to stop. I also didn’t want to not want her to stop. It was all very

complicated.

“I...” I trailed off.

“Okay,” Stace said, reaching for her shirt.

“No, wait!” She paused with her shirt in her hand.

“I’m getting some mixed signals here, baby.”

“Stop calling me that,” I growled.

“Okay.”

“Shit,” I said again. “It’s not that... I do want you, Stace. I do. So much that I sometimes can’t even think about anything else. But we want different things. Very different things.”

Stace put the shirt down and then got to her feet.

“Okay, Hunter. We’ll do it your way.”

She stopped when she was a few feet away from me.

“What does that mean?”

“It means that this has been building between us and if the only way I can have you is to keep things casual, then that’s what we’ll do.”



I raised both my eyebrows. “Just like that? After the whole thing about seducing me and getting me to fall for you? You’re just going to drop that and have casual sex? I find that hard to believe.”

Stace nodded slowly. “It’s true. I can compartmentalize, remember? If all you want to do is casual, then we’ll do casual. Friends who have sex when we want to. People do that all the time.”

I absolutely didn’t believe her.

“But what if you develop feelings for me?” I asked. “What then?”

She nodded. “I’ll tell you before it gets to that. And we’ll decide. But it’s a bridge we’ll cross if we come to it. We may not. A lot of my past relationships started out hot and then we grew apart and parted on amicable terms.” Oh. That was interesting. I wanted to know more about these past relationships.

“I’ve never really dated anyone seriously. In addition to my family relationships being disasters, I saw how everyone around me was pretty much falling apart after every breakup and it just confirmed everything I thought.” I shrugged. “I think it can work out, but it’s much more likely that it won’t. And I’m not taking the chance.”

Stace nodded and licked her lips, drawing my attention.

“I can appreciate your hesitancy. And your desire to keep things casual. So let’s do it. Let’s be casual.”

I stared at her, waiting to see her flinch or blink. She didn’t. For someone who was always smiling and showing emotion, she also had a hell of a poker face. At least she did right now.

I kept underestimating her and she kept turning the tables on me.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “You’re not going to get all your feelings tangled up?”

Stace shook her head slowly, not taking her eyes from me.

“I’m sure.” I didn’t believe her, but she sure sounded confident.

This was a bad, bad idea. Possibly the worst idea that I’d ever had.

I should ask her to go home. I should tell her to go right now.

“Okay,” I said.

“Okay?” she asked. “Not a ringing endorsement.”

She raised one eyebrow as if in challenge.

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This woman was going to be the death of me.

“Take off your bra,” I said, my voice sounding much steadier than I felt. This was it. Our path was chosen and now we had to move forward.

“As you wish,” she said, reaching back and flicking open the clasp before pulling the straps over her arms.

“Fuck. Your body is unbelievable.” I could hear the awe in my voice.

Stace laughed and looked down at herself and then sat back down on the couch. “Thank you. It’s an occupational benefit. Gotta be able to carry my gear and pretty girls when they require it. Come here.”

As if she’d reeled me in, I stepped toward her until I was standing between her legs.

“Take your hair down?” she asked.

I’d just done a pretty simple high-volume ponytail after leaving my hair overnight in my heatless curlers.

Moving slowly, I released the elastic bands from my hair and let it fall on my shoulders.

“God, your hair,” Stace said. She rose to her feet and reached for me. I couldn’t stop tracing her chest with my eyes, looking at all that skin and muscle and her high, tight breasts with sweet little nipples that were already stiff.

Her body was incredible and she worked hard for it.

“Mmmm,” Stace said, running her fingers through my hair. “I’ve never thought I had a hair kink, but I’m reevaluating my stance on it right now.”

I let out a little breathless laugh. She could do whatever the hell she wanted to with my hair, as long as I got to keep looking at her.

“Can I touch you?” I asked. It wasn’t so much that I wanted to touch her. I needed it.

“Yeah, baby. You can touch me.”

I’d planned to go slow. To torture and tease her until she was a complete begging mess. To give her just enough until she was screaming.

In practice, that wasn’t what happened.

I kind of ended up tackling her. She let out a little grunt and caught me as I threw myself at her and the momentum took us back to the couch, with me on top.

“Shit, Hunter,” Stace said, looking up at me her eyes wide.

“Sorry,” I said, but I wasn’t all that sorry. I ran my hands up her shoulders, almost whimpering at the feel of her skin.

“You’re sooooo sexy. Fuck,” I said, unable to stop touching her.

“Come here,” she said, using her hand on my hair to bring my mouth down to hers. She kissed me hard and it was somehow even more intense than that first kiss we’d shared.

Then we both sort of lost it.

## Chapter Sixteen

Stace

I didn't even have her naked yet and I couldn't even breathe or think or do anything but want to touch her and smell her and taste her. I'd told her I wanted to seduce her, but I also wanted to wreck her a little bit, too.

Ruin her for anyone else, no matter how selfish that was. I wanted her to be mine. Be mine and only mine.

I'd told her we'd keep this casual, but I was absolutely lying through my teeth and I didn't expect her to actually buy it.

By the time she realized, it would be too late. I was going to be so good to her that she threw all those ridiculous rules out the window.

Being good to her probably didn't involve ripping her shirt in my desperation to get it off her, but that's what happened anyway. Hunter didn't seem to notice. If she did later, I'd sew it up for her.

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Before we got completely naked, I had a moment of sense when I picked her up and carried her to the bedroom with her legs locked around my waist and her fingers digging into my back and her hair fucking everywhere.

I really was obsessed with her hair. I wanted to wrap it around my wrists and use it to guide her head and steer her kisses and maybe even pull on it, just to see how she'd respond.

We were both a little feral, but at least we were on the same page.

Reading between the lines, it had been a while for Hunter and it had been a while for me, so we were both wound up and desperate to touch another person.

I got her on the bed and pulled back just to figure out what I wanted to do with her first.

"Come back," she said, grabbing at me.

This princess had claws.

I smoothed her hair back from her face and stared at her swollen lips and her eyes full of blue sparks.

"Gonna let me take these off?" I asked, pulling on the waistband of her yoga pants.

"You'd better," she said, and I laughed.

Then I was taking her pants and underwear off and Hunter was finally, finally naked in her bed and my dreams were almost coming true. Almost.

“Fuuuuccckkkkkk,” I drew out the word as I looked down at her.

“Take your pants off,” she said, reaching out and wrestling with the drawstring of my sweatpants.

She let out a frustrated sound and ended up pulling me until I crawled on top of her, my sweatpants still sort of on.

“Hell yes,” she moaned as she shoved her hands between my skin and my underwear, grabbing onto my ass and squeezing.

“Fuck!”

“Your ass is amazing, holy shit,” she said, squeezing and kneading my ass.

That should not feel so good, but everything Hunter did felt incredible.

I leaned down to kiss her hard.

“Show it to me,” she demanded, pinching one of my cheeks and making me yelp.

“You wanna see me?” I asked, wanting to tease her a little bit.

“Obviously,” she snapped.

“You gonna punish me if I don’t?” I asked to see her reaction.

Her eyes lit up.

“Maybe.” She pinched me again and I sat up to pull down my sweatpants and my underwear at the same time, throwing them to the other side of the room.

“Happy?” I asked her as I lay my body on top of hers again. Her hands instantly went to my ass again.

“Yes, thank you,” she said.

“You’re welcome.”

We both had one of those moments where time seemed to stop and we both got lost in each other’s eyes.

Feeling all of my skin against hers and having her under me was unbelievable. This gorgeous creature was naked in bed. Looking up at me with so much desire in her eyes and in the way she held me and reached for me.



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“Don’t look at me like that,” she whispered.

Instead of arguing, I kissed her and grabbed her hands from my ass and pressed them down on the bed.

You never knew how someone was going to be in bed until you got them naked. Sometimes they didn’t know. I’d been knocked off my feet before when a shy girl turned into an absolute demanding control freak in my bed and I was happy to let her live out her fantasy with me.

As far as my own preferences, I thought of myself as a service switch. My partner’s pleasure was my main goal, and however I got her there was fine with me.

I slowed the kiss down and then pulled back.

“What do you want, baby?” I asked.

“I want you to fuck me, Stace, don’t make it complicated.” She wiggled a little under me and I had to take a breath to focus.

“It’s not complicated, but we’ve got to have a little conversation first.”

Her eyes narrowed. I still had her hands pressed against the bed and she pulled so I let go.

“What do you like?” I asked and she made a frustrated sound.

“I like getting off,” she practically growled.

I sat up.

“Maybe I won’t fuck you. Maybe I’ll just get myself off while you watch.” I caressed my breasts and pinched my nipples and let my head drop back before looking down to see her reaction.

Her mouth fell open and her breathing accelerated. Interesting.

“What should I do next, baby?” I asked. Heat flared in her eyes.

“Put two fingers in your mouth.” I grinned at her and did what she said.

“Get them wet.”

I did.

“Circle your nipples.”

Fuck, this was absolutely working for me. Her eyes were intense as she watched me do whatever she commanded. I was surprised that she wanted me to touch myself instead of her, but I wasn’t complaining. She was still going to get off first. I never allowed myself to come first.

“Mmmm, that feels good, baby,” I told her. Talking during sex always got me off. I was a yapper in and out of the bedroom.

“Touch your pussy,” she said, and I almost came from just her words.

“God, that’s hot,” I said, stroking myself. I was so wet that I was dripping on her.

Hunter had kept her hands on the bed until now. She slowly stroked them up and down my thighs, making my skin sizzle.

“Your legs are amazing, Stace,” she said, her voice almost reverent.

“Thank you,” I gasped as I carefully circled my clit, avoiding any direct contact so I didn’t come too soon.

“What should I do now?” I asked her.

“Let me taste,” she said, shocking both of us. Hunter opened her mouth and I slid my fingers in, moaning as she swirled her tongue around them.

“Fuck, Hunter,” I said as she sucked on my fingers. If I wasn’t careful, she was going to get me to come just like this.

She grinned up at me and that was the moment I knew I was doomed. Absolutely doomed. I’d wanted to ruin her, but this woman was absolutely going to ruin me, and I was going to let her.

“Can I touch you, please?” I begged.

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“If you want,” she said, but her voice trembled.

“I’ve never wanted anything more.”

Hunter gazed up at me as I ran a hand through her hair and down her face, stroking a finger down her nose. My other hand brushed across her neck and across the top of her shoulders. She arched into me, and I knew I was being mean, giving her little light touches that caused her skin to pebble with goosebumps.

I drank in every little response from her, collected them all and hoarded them like treasures.

“Stace,” she whined, and I’d been waiting for that.

“What is it, baby?” I asked.

She glared at me. “You know what.”

I chuckled. “You’re gonna have to tell me.”

She let out a frustrated sound. “Just fuck me, Stace. Get on with it.”

Oh, this was going to be fun.

“No, I’m not going to slam my fingers into you a few times until you come and call it good, Hunter. If that’s what you want, you are perfectly welcome to go to Sapph and pull someone into the bathroom. That’s not what you’re going to get with me. That’s

not how I have sex.”

I watched those words hit her and waited for the reaction.

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. Then show me what you do. I’m ready.”

She wasn’t. She absolutely wasn’t.

“Okay, baby.”

Hunter

She was awfully cocky for someone who had barely touched me. A quick hard fuck had been what I’d had in mind, but Stace had turned the tables on me and I was flailing and unsure, but I didn’t want to stop. I wanted her to show me. I wanted to see. Wanted to know how this woman would be in bed. I had to know.

Hunter leaned down and kissed me, immediately licking her tongue into my mouth.

I had just settled into the kiss when she pulled back.

“If there’s anything that I do that you don’t like, you tell me, understand? The only way this works is if we’re honest with each other. Can you promise me that?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I promise.”

“Good girl,” she said, and my body jolted so hard that I knew she felt it.

Stace rewarded me with a wicked grin.

“Fuck,” I said, wanting to cover my face.

“Hey,” Stace said, holding my chin in a light grip. “There’s no shame when you’re with me. No embarrassment about what you want. You can have it, as long as you tell me.”

I’d never really voiced my feelings during sex like this. I’d always just kind of...went along with whatever happened. It usually went so fast that I didn’t have a whole lot of time to think about what I wanted. As long as I came, and I always did, was the rest important? All those fantasies and times to go slow were for when I was alone.

“Okay,” I said.

Stace’s fingers stroked my chin before she leaned down to kiss me. Hard and deep, making my head spin. While she kissed me, she continued to touch me in that soft way that was absolutely maddening.

My pussy ached so much that it would be so easy to sneak my hand down there and make myself come, but I managed to hold back. Barely.

This woman was going to kill me, but I wasn’t going to tell her to stop. As much frustration as I was drowning in, I wanted to know what she was made of. Wanted to see how we could be together.

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While Stace systematically wrecked me with her kisses, her hands were on a mission of their own. I was content to trace the lovely muscles of her back with my fingers. Later, I was going to make her lay on her stomach so I could lick every single one of those muscles. I wondered if she'd sit for me and let me paint her. Move the couch or have her pose on a chair with sunlight pouring in across her. I didn't normally paint people, but Stace's back was more than a little inspiring. And those thighs.

"You're thinking too much," Stace said, breaking the kiss and gazing down into my eyes. "If you're able to think, then I'm not working hard enough."

Well fuck.

I opened my mouth to comment but then she swept her tongue inside, making my head spin.

Stace kissed my mouth and then smiled as she moved to my cheeks and my forehead, stroking my hair back.

"You have the prettiest ears I've ever seen," she said, pulling one of my earlobes into her mouth and making me let out a little sound of desire and surprise. "They're so dainty."

I let out a giggle when her breath tickled.

"I like your ears," I said.

She snorted. "You mean my satellite dishes?" I traced one with my finger.

“They’re sexy.”

Stace laughed into my neck, which tickled even more so I started laughing with her.

“I’m glad you think my ears are sexy,” she said, licking a spot on my neck that definitely wasn’t funny.

“Oh, do that again.”

She did and I dragged my fingers through her hair. It was so soft and smelled slightly minty.

I gasped a second later when she dragged her teeth across the same spot and then licked and sucked again.

“Mmmmm,” she said, kissing across my neck to the other side which was just as delicious.

She gave my other ear the same treatment and who knew ears could be so sensitive? Everything Stace did was so good that I could only make noises instead of words to tell her how much I liked it.

“Fuck, you’re so pretty,” Stace said as she licked across my collarbones and nibbled my shoulders and skimmed her fingers along the curves of my breasts.

“Touch meeeee,” I whined, hating how needy my voice was.

“I am touching you, baby. Could you be more specific?”

How she could make me go from “fuck me now” to instant annoyance was amazing.



“Touch. My. Nipples.” I enunciated every single word.

“Touch your nipples, what?” she asked, smirking down at me. Those devastating dimples.

“Huh?” I asked, completely forgetting what we’d just been talking about.

“What’s the magic word?”

“I have no fucking idea. Abracadabra,” I said. “Can you just touch my nipples, please?”

Stace grinned again. “There it is.”

Oh. She’d wanted me to say please? What was I, a five-year-old asking for an extra cookie?

Just to be a brat, I said, “Please, please, please, pleaseeeeee.”

That made her laugh just before she dipped her head and dragged one of my nipples into her mouth. Instantly my hands went to her head, twisting in her hair.

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“Yes, fuck yes.”

Stace wasn't gentle with me and it was like she was reading my mind. She went for it, biting and licking and sucking hard until I was twisting under her and so ready to come that all it would take was her whispering near my clit.

Just as I was about to tell her to do that, she gave me a few soft kisses and met my eyes.

“I love the way your skin looks right now,” she said. I looked down to see what she meant and there were red marks all over me. I looked like a fucking leopard.

“What the hell, Stace?” I asked, but she just chuckled.

“Sorry princess. Couldn't help it. Wanted to give you something to remember me by.”

She was so pleased with herself.

“You asshole,” I said, pretending to shove her off me. She grabbed my arm and kissed my palm instead.

“I didn't hear you complaining.”

I narrowed my eyes and she gently bit my thumb.

“You ready for more?”

“Jesus Christ, I’ve been ready for you to get me off this whole time!”

Stace sucked on my thumb for a second before letting it go with a pop.

“Then let’s get you off.”

“You’d better,” I grumbled, and she swooped in to kiss me senseless.

“I will. Don’t you worry. My mission tonight is absolutely to get you off multiple times.”

I’d have to see that to believe it. I could get off many times on my own, but with a partner? I was usually one and done. Get in, get off, get out.

Stace moved until she sat with her legs folded under her and my thighs draped over hers. She stroked my legs and I could feel myself getting even wetter as she stared at me.

The room was too quiet.

“Stace?” I asked.

“Don’t worry, baby. I’ve got you.”

I gazed into her eyes and she nodded. In that moment, I believed her.

Stace stroked across my belly slowly, as if she was soothing me. I was fine. I was ready. I wanted her to get on with it. Her hands stroked my belly and my hips and the tops of my thighs, going closer and closer to where I really needed her to touch me. My clit was almost angry, pulsing like a heartbeat.

As if she sensed my frustration, Stace readjusted until she was laying on her side with her mouth inches away from my pussy. I pushed up on my elbows and then grabbed a pillow to prop myself up so I could see what the hell she was doing down there.

And then I almost screamed when she blew a warm breath across my clit.

“Fuck!”

Stace looked up at me and smiled. “Someone’s sensitive.”

I wanted to yell at her to just eat my fucking pussy when she licked a long line up my inner thigh, almost in the crease. Then she did lick that place and I moaned so loud that I was almost embarrassed.

“Yeah, that’s what I want to hear,” she said, stroking the other thigh and pushing my leg out wider.

“Stace, please!” I heard myself begging.

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I expected her to tell me to be patient again, but it seemed like she'd tortured me enough. With warm fingers, she gently stroked my entrance, circling up and around my clit.

Another embarrassing sound left my mouth, but I didn't care. I didn't give a fuck if I started barking like a dog if she would just fucking get me off.

"Hmmm," she said as she stroked me again.

"What the hell does that mean?" I glared down at her.

She frowned. "Nothing. Just that this isn't the best angle. Hand me two of those pillows?"

"Jesus Christ," I said, but I passed her the pillows that she proceeded to stack and then lift me onto. She was just so strong.

Stace settled in between my open legs and gave me that heart-stopping smile again.

"Much better."

And then she finally, finally put her mouth on me.

I did scream.

Chapter Seventeen

Stace

She was so pissed at me for drawing this out and she had no idea that I was going to tease her for even longer.

Fuck, she tasted divine. Musky and salty and her. Just her. I could get drunk on eating her like this. I took my time, sucking her lips into my mouth and nibbling at them before dipping my tongue to lick her entrance and upward, to flick the underside of her clit, making her legs jump and her fingers in my hair dig into my scalp.

I never stayed anywhere too long and kept moving around so she never knew where I was going next.

“No!” she gasped when I left her clit again to go back to kissing her inner thighs. “What the fuck, Stace?”

She was sweaty and messy and livid, and I’d never seen anyone look so gorgeous.

My irate princess.

While she watched, I licked one of my fingers and then slid it inside her. She was already drenched and so desperate.

“Oh, fuck,” Stace gasped as I stroked my finger inside her, looking for the one place that would make her lose her mind.

“There!”

Perfect.

I pressed the spot again and she thrashed and cried out. Hunter was so responsive,

and it was so damn hot.

Rhythmically I pressed against her until I added another finger and gave her three thrusts and a press, three thrusts, press.

Her hips were almost levitating off the pillows, her head thrown back and all kinds of sounds coming from her mouth and I was so happy. I was responsible for turning her into a begging mess. I'd made that.

I slowed my thrusts and added my mouth to her clit, sucking gently and painting the sides of it with my tongue and that's when she really started to lose it.

Hunter started chanting complete nonsense in time with my thrusts and I considered pulling back and edging her, but she might just rip my hair out and kick me in the face, so I decided to finally let her come for the first time tonight.

I fucked her hard with my fingers and was relentless with my mouth on her clit until I felt her inner walls trying to strangle my fingers as her entire body shook and spasmed with her release.

With one last gasp, she went still and her legs dropped to the bed, her arms going limp.

"Holy fucking shit," she panted.

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I kissed each inner thigh before making my way up her body to her mouth. Her eyes were bright and dazed.

Gently I placed a kiss on her nose.

“Are you okay?”

Her eyes finally focused enough to look at my face.

“I think so,” she said, blinking a few times. “Wow.”

That was quite the compliment.

“Thank you,” I said. My own desire simmered in my veins and it had been hard to hold myself back from coming when she did. I’d only had an orgasm hands-free a few times, but tonight I’d gotten extremely close.

Hunter slowly turned on her side and faced me, kicking away the pillows.

“So. That was the Katrina Stacey experience,” she said with a smirk.

I stroked one hand up and down her hip. “That was a part of it, yes. I’ve got so much more planned.”

“Don’t you want to come?” she asked. “Give me like five minutes.”

“It’s okay. I thought we could come together. Or maybe even race each other.”



Hunter's eyes lit up with interest. "You get competitive with sex too?"

"Yeah, it's fun. Sex should be fun, right?"

"I mean, yeah, but I've never thought about making it into an orgasm competition."

I smiled and couldn't resist the urge to kiss her. "I'm teaching you all kinds of things."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm not a virgin, you know."

"I know. But I get the impression the kind of sex you've been having isn't the kind of sex I have. If I'm wrong, sorry." I didn't think I was wrong.

Hunter huffed out a breath and looked at the ceiling. "Fine. Your kind of sex is different. Are you happy?"

I slid my hand around and squeezed her ass. "Ecstatic."

Hunter

Her sexual ego was way too big. Unfortunately, she'd made me come so hard that I had literally left my body for a few seconds and transcended time and space. I had never, ever come that hard. Not by myself, not with someone else, never.

And she was acting like she fully expected a repeat performance. I was skeptical about that, but I was willing to see what she had in mind. I guess I wasn't that creative sexually. A few licks of my clit and fingers on my G-spot and that was what I needed. No need for gymnastics or fancy positions or stuff you only saw in porn.

"Do you have lube?" she asked.

“Uh, yeah, in my nightstand. Why?”

She reached over to rifle through my drawer until she found what she was looking for.

I stared at her. “What is that for?” My mind was going all kinds of places.

“You should see your face right now. Calm down, I’m not coming for your ass. Unless you want me to.”

That wasn’t something I’d ever tried with a partner and I wasn’t up for going down that road with Stace, but the way she licked her lips and looked at me had me wondering if I should reevaluate my stance on butt play.

Stace snorted. “No, the lube is for something else.” She set it down on the bed and made peace signs with her hands before turning them and fitting them together.

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“Wow, you are ridiculous,” I said when I understood what she was demonstrating.

“It’s fun, if we can get everything to line up. This might not work, but you wanna try?”

Her enthusiasm was rubbing off on me again.

“Yeah, why not?”

Stace took the lead and had me lay on my back while she turned on her side and scooted closer and closer until she stacked her leg on top of me.

“Okay, here we go.”

Stace drizzled the lube first on herself and then on me. It got all over the bed, but I didn’t think Stace cared. My comforter was a lost cause, but I could throw it in the washer.

She shifted closer and closer until we brushed against each other.

“Oh fuck,” I said at the same time as she moaned.

Stace adjusted and had me bend my leg, grabbing onto my knee to get closer.

She rolled her hips and I almost blacked out again. I thrust against her and she threw her head back.

“Yeah, baby, just like that. Shit, you feel so good.”

So did she.

The two of us moved against each other, taking a few moments to pick up each other’s rhythm, but then ohhhh, it was magic.

“Good girl, right there,” Stace gasped, and I moaned at her words.

Our movements became frantic as we chased our own releases.

“I’m close,” I said.

“Me too. You first.”

I wanted her to get there before me.

Her face was intense concentrated bliss. “You’re so fucking hot, Stace. I’ve been wanting to lick you all over since that time I saw you at the gym. Just after you’d worked out and you were all sweaty. I’d push you up against the lockers and go down on you right there. Make you scream my name so everyone could hear.” I had no idea where the hell those words had come from, but judging by their effect on Stace, they were the right ones.

I bit my lower lip to stop myself from coming and pulled back just a little so I didn’t. She was going first, no matter what I had to do.

“After you come this time, I’m going to make you come again. Gonna pull you onto my face and let you ride me until you break. Make you so wet that I can taste you in the back of my throat and listen while you scream my name so loud everyone in the building can hear what I’ve done to you.”

She cried out and shook which in turn detonated my own climax as we thrust together. Coming at the same time as someone else was utterly incredible. My vision whited out as I gave myself over to what Stace and I had created together.

Both of us collapsed on the bed.

Stace patted my leg. “See? That wasn’t so bad.”

“Not bad at all.”

Since we’d made a disaster of my bed, we got up and Stace helped me strip everything and bundle the blankets into the washer.

“I would have put down some towels or something if I would have thought ahead,” I said. I wasn’t used to having sex with someone in my apartment.

We were both still naked and she didn’t seem self-conscious at all, just walking around when I was looking for my robe. Not that I was ashamed of my body, but I didn’t walk around my apartment naked, as a general rule.

“Want a snack?” Stace asked, sneaking toward the kitchen.

“Uh, sure?”

Her tank was still draped on the back of the couch, so I grabbed it and pulled it on instead of something I owned. It wasn't long enough to cover everything, but it was close enough. And it smelled like her, so I wasn't taking it off.

“Let's see what we've got,” Stace said, opening my fridge and looking through it. “Cheese? We've got some strawberries here, and hummus. Good for protein.” She started stacking containers on the counter. “And I see bagels and mozzarella and sauce? You want a pizza bagel? Because I'm having one.”

I leaned on the counter, watching Stace move around my kitchen, and it wasn't strange. It was...comfortable.

“Yeah, I'll have a pizza bagel.”

While I watched, Stace put pizza bagels in the air fryer naked, sliced strawberries naked, and arranged cheese and crackers on a plate naked. It gave me a chance to admire her body and I had to admit, it was making me want her all the more.

“You gotta stop looking at me like that,” she said as she spooned hummus into a small bowl.

“Can't help it,” I said. “Have you seen your body? I could stand here and bounce quarters off your ass.”

That would actually be fun. She turned and gave me a full view of said ass and

wiggled it side to side.

The air fryer went off, interrupting my ass-ogling session.

Stace and I carried everything to the couch, and she put her sweatpants back on and I gave her a shirt that didn't quite fit.

"I'm not getting burned by post-coitus pizza bagels," she said when I pouted.

"Oh, that's probably smart," I said. She thought of so many potential disasters that I didn't consider.

"Have you seen a lot of sex injuries?"

Stace grinned. "Oh hell yeah. People are constantly putting things in their butts that they shouldn't put there. And without lube. You gotta use lube."

I almost choked on a bite of pizza bagel.

"I'll keep that in mind."

"My main advice in that area is to buy a toy specific for the purpose with a flared base." She gave me a serious look and then we both burst out laughing.

"Thank you for the advice, Stace."

She grinned. "Anytime, baby."

I'd never laughed this much with someone I'd had sex with. I'd always kind of separated sex from friendship. From any other kind of relationship.

We moved close to each other on the couch and eventually Stace was feeding me strawberries.

Stace let out a sigh. “You’re so beautiful.”

The way she said it made me smile and blush.

“So are you.”

She grinned. “I don’t usually feel beautiful. But when you look at me, I do.”

I traced her jaw with one finger.

“You are. You really are. Would you let me paint you sometime?”

Her eyebrows went up. “You want to paint me?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I can’t guarantee it will be any good. I haven’t painted people in a long time. I usually stick to flowers and landscapes and that kind of thing.”



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Stace grabbed my finger and kissed it. “I’d model for you. Even if you were bad at painting, but I know you’re not. I’ve seen your work.”

I laughed. “You’ve been stalking me online, haven’t you?”

She held her finger and thumb about an inch apart. “Little bit.”

Grabbing another strawberry, I shoved it in her mouth. “If you request my personal account I’ll let you follow me. That’s where I post all the good stuff.”

“Where the hell is my phone?” she said, starting to get up.

“No, don’t go anywhere,” I said, practically throwing myself on top of her.

“Okay,” she said, pulling me down for a kiss.

She tasted like strawberry sweetness and I wanted her again.

“Remember that thing I said about you sitting on my face?” I asked, as she licked at some caramel on my chin.

“Mmm, yes I do.”

I stroked my hand through her hair and pulled her head back.

“How about now?”

“Now?”

“Now.”

The next thing I knew, Stace was carrying me back to the bed and throwing me on it.

I could get used to this.

Eventually we were too tired to have any more sex so we pushed each other into the shower and got clean before toweling each other off. Stace never asked if she could stay over and I never offered. I just found an extra toothbrush and handed it to her, along with a baggy T-shirt and a pair of drawstring shorts.

We made up the bed again and collapsed together. She pulled me until I was laying half on top of her. I slung my leg over both of hers and sighed.

“Goodnight, princess,” she said, kissing my head, fingers playing with my still-damp hair.

“Goodnight, Stace,” I said through a yawn.

Sunlight spilled in between the curtains and I was pressed against a warm body. I was in bed with someone else.

For half a second I panicked, and then the night came back to me.

Me. Stace. Sex. Lots of sex. Falling into my bed together.

“Good morning baby,” Stace said, her voice rusty from sleep.

“Good morning,” I said, looking up to find her gazing down at me. Her hair was all

over the place and I bet mine was, too. My eyes were definitely puffy since I hadn't done my skincare routine. I'd been too exhausted last night.

"I was right," she said, moving some hair out of my face.

"Right about what?"

"How stunning you'd look in the morning. Unfair. Completely unfair."

"Stop it," I said, trying not to smile.

"Never," she said, kissing my forehead and pulling me into a hug. "Ugh, I don't want to get up."

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“Do we have to?” It was Sunday. I didn’t have any major plans today, but I knew that Stace was always spending weekends with her family.

“I’m supposed to have lunch with my family. Eli won an award so we’re all taking him out to celebrate.”

Hearing that made a little bolt of pain go through me.

“What’s that face?” she asked, tucking some hair behind my ear.

“Nothing. What time do you have to go?”

Stace studied me for a few moments.

“What if...what if you came with me? Just as my friend. Nothing else. You’ve already met Torrin. And you’ve met Eli. That’s already like half my family, including me. It’s going to be at a restaurant, so it’ll be chill.”

My first instinct was to say absolutely not. Hell no. The very idea of meeting her family and being under that much scrutiny made me want to run back to my apartment and lock the door.

But under that scary, run-for-the-hills feeling was something else. Something that both surprised and shocked me.

“Okay?”

She sat back and stared at me. “Are you sure about that?”

“Yes?” I didn’t sound sure because I wasn’t.

“It’ll be super low pressure, I promise,” she said.

It absolutely wouldn’t, but she wanted me to go. Would it be that bad?

“I don’t know if I’ll make a good impression on them,” I admitted. I’d always clammed up before when I’d met my friend’s parents. Especially when they’d been kind.

“Oh, you’ll be fine. I’ve told them all about you. They practically know you already. They’re not scary, I promise.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I’ll come.”

Stace’s smile was worth saying yes.

## Chapter Eighteen

Stace

I couldn’t believe that she had agreed to come with me to Eli’s party. Mom was going to be thrilled. She’d been pestering me to bring my new friend over every single time I talked to her. Explaining that Hunter was shy and that meeting everyone would be overwhelming didn’t hold water as an excuse with her.

Was it because of the sex? Not that it would matter, but I was curious about her change of heart.

Waking up next to her had made this one of the best mornings of my life. It felt like a dream but then it turned out to be real. Her hair was all tangled and her eyes were squinty and she was absolutely and completely perfect.

Then she upped the ante by agreeing to come to lunch and I was almost floating.

“What would you like for breakfast?” I asked as we lazed together. I was used to having to be up to take Buck out, but he was still with my family, so there was nowhere else I needed to be.

Nowhere but right here with my girl.

She was now mine. Last night had confirmed it. Hunter might not know that yet, but she’d figure it out.

She played with my fingers as she thought about it.

“I can make you breakfast. Or we can order something so we can just stay like this,” she said after a few minutes of pondering.

“Or I could make you breakfast. You can have whatever you want.” I wasn’t just talking about breakfast and I hope she understood that.

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She lifted her eyebrows. “Can you even cook? I don’t think I’d be good at faking enjoying bad pancakes and burned bacon.”

I scoffed. “Excuse me, I can make an excellent breakfast. It’s only my favorite meal. And I’m an older sister, remember? I’ve been making breakfast since I was old enough to use the stove without adult supervision. I can even make pancakes in different shapes and everything.”

Eli and Carson always requested silly pancake shapes that I’d attempt to make for them with varying success.

Hunter grinned up at me. “Okay. Show me your pancakes. And bacon. And eggs. Can you do eggs?”

There she was. The girl who asked for what she wanted. I’d been waiting to see her.

“I can do any kind of eggs you want.”

She bit her bottom lip. “Poached?”

I tapped her on the nose. “I make excellent poached eggs.”

Making breakfast did require us to get out of bed, but I dragged Hunter to the kitchen and made her sit while I cooked. That didn’t last long because my girl wasn’t going to stand by and let someone else take over her kitchen. I let her be in charge of the bacon while I mixed up the pancakes and poached the eggs.

“I’ve never been brave enough to try and figure out poached eggs, but I love ordering them,” she said as I made my first pancake.

“Really?” she asked when she saw the shape.

“I’m a romantic.” Of course I’d made it in the shape of a heart. An imperfect heart, but all the best ones were.

Hunter rolled her eyes, but she didn’t make any other snarky comments. I think I was finally wearing her down.

“You coming to yoga tonight?” she asked when I flipped the first pancake. Once I’d made a few more, I’d poach the eggs.

“Yeah, I can skip my workout and come to class if you want me to.” Rivera and Coop would give me shit about it, but I could handle that. They’d been up my ass about wanting more details about Hunter. At last I finally had some good updates to tell them. Incredibly sexy updates.

“No, don’t skip your workout. I’ll just see you on Monday.” Her cheeks pinked.

“You gonna miss me, baby?” I asked, bumping her hip with mine.

“Shut up,” she said, her face going redder.

“You totally like me,” I teased and then yelped when she pinched my ass.

“Keep saying stuff like that and I’ll kick you out of my apartment.” Oh, she was asking for it. I turned the burner off and whirled around, grabbing her hips and lifting her onto the counter.



“You’re not gonna kick me out of your apartment,” I said in her ear as I yanked on her shorts, pulling them down her legs.

Hunter gasped and shoved her fingers into my hair as I pushed her legs apart and dove right in to lick her pussy.

She shouted and dug her heels into my back as I fucked her with my tongue and restlessly licked her clit until her entire body was shaking and collapsing around me as she came.

I looked up at her from my position on the floor.

“Yeah, you’re not kicking me out.”

She let out a breathless laugh and raked her hair back from her face and gave me a sated smile.

“Fuck you, Stace.”

Hunter

I wanted to make a good impression on her family, so Stace and I agreed that she would go back to her place to get clothes and get ready and I’d do the same at mine before we met at the restaurant.

She’d said goodbye to me with a kiss and it wasn’t until I closed the door and was alone for the first time since yesterday that I realized what the fuck I’d done.

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I rested my back against the door and slid to the floor.

Now that my brain wasn't being poisoned by sex hormones, it dawned on me that I'd made a huge fucking mistake.

I got up on shaky legs and went to my bedroom, crawling into my bed.

My sheets and blankets smelled like Stace.

"God dammit," I said as I buried my face in the pillow where her head had rested.

Last night had been a revelation. Sex had never been like that. I guess I'd always thought other people were blowing it out of proportion. It had always been decent for me, but never anything that made me scared that it was going to kill me. I thought I'd died at least six times last night and then again this morning.

No, I'd never had the kind of sex I'd had with Stace. I sure as hell wasn't going to tell her that though. Her ego didn't need to get any bigger.

Last night had definitely been a mistake, but did I regret it?

Yes. No. A tiny bit?

No. I didn't. I couldn't regret the most mind-melting body-scorching sex I'd ever had in my life or probably would ever have. Who would be mad about that?

I should have cut her off sooner. Should have ghosted. Shouldn't have let my

attraction to her override my own common sense and rules that I'd made so I wouldn't get myself into a situation exactly like the one I was currently in.

Everything was wonderful when my brain was soaked in sex but now I had to deal with the reality that I'd agreed to go meet Stace's family.

What the hell was wrong with me?

I absolutely shouldn't meet her family. It was a bad idea. It was too much. She was dragging me into a stronger commitment, and I was just going along with it because I was all dopey from being around her.

Help. I fucked up I sent to my group chat with Cade and Reid.

We're going to need some more details Cade replied.

I've been saving my tips but I can dip into my savings if I have to Reid added.

Stace came over last night. And she stayed. And for some reason I agreed to go to lunch with her and her family. It looked ridiculous all typed out. Like a story I'd written about someone else.

Who are you and what have you done with my friend? Cade asked.

Yeah, same question Reid sent.

Can good sex make you lose your mind? Because that's what this feels like.

I swore I could hear them laughing even though they weren't here with me.

Oh kid Reid responded.

Yeah it can, in my experience Cade sent.

Fuck I replied.

I typed out the details (not all of them) and begged them to tell me what to do or say to get out of this. To extricate myself from this situation I'd found myself in. Yes, I'd been a willing participant, but how willing could I really be when Stace was around? She was too fucking hot to resist. How was I supposed to withstand those dimples when she unleashed them on me?

What is the worst thing that could happen if you go to lunch with Stace's family? For real. Cade asked.

It could ruin my entire life I responded.

Hunter be serious Cade sent.

Okay fine, we end up dating and then in a year we move in together and all the little things that I thought were cute start to annoy me. We start fighting about money and work hours and what we should do on the weekends and when to have kids and before we know it, we hate each other. We hate each other but we stick it out because there's still enough love left. And we feel like we owe it to each other. And then we get married, because people won't stop asking us about it and we want to make her family happy. It's beautiful and we think it's going to work. And then we do have kids and then life gets hard and we hate each other even more but we have to stay together for the kids even though it eats away at us every day. It adds up, little by little until we're nothing but two people in a house who resent each other more than they ever loved each other. That's what could happen.

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I was breathing hard after I hit Send, like I'd been running while I typed everything that had been going through my head.

Whoa, Jesus Hunter. She's just asking you to meet her family. Not get married. I think you need to slow your roll and stop writing doomfiction Cade sent.

Ohhh, doomfiction. I like that. But Cade's right. I think you're trying to sabotage this in your mind because you're scared. That's what your relationship rules are all about. You're just scared to trust someone and there's a chance you might get hurt Reid added.

There wasn't a chance that I'd get hurt. There was a certainty.

I can't make you understand I sent.

Listen. I know that your parents have fucked you up, because I know mine have fucked me up, but I feel like you've got to give yourself a chance Reid responded.

Since when did you become so pro-relationship? I asked.

You know deep down, DEEP down, under all my bitch layers beats the heart of a romantic. I will deny this if you tell anyone else. But. You like her. And she really likes you. I haven't met her, but I can tell from what you've told me. It could blow up in your face. But wouldn't you like to at least try and see where it goes before you assume the worst-case scenario? There IS a chance that you could end up living happily ever after.

Reid's words made me roll my eyes. My friends absolutely didn't get me. I argued with them for a little bit longer, but I really needed to get ready if I was going to do this. I hadn't decided if I was actually going to show up. Even if I didn't go, I was still going to get ready in case.

That meant picking out something to wear that would impress Stace's parents. And fixing my hair. Heatless waves weren't an option, so I did a few small braids and then pulled them back, twisting two bunches of hair together into something that looked like a braid. It was cute and kept my hair back and people always gave me compliments on this style.

I picked out a dress and then thought that looked a little too formal, but I didn't want to be too casual either. And I definitely didn't want to wear anything that I would wear if I was seeing my parents.

Yoga pants weren't going to work either.

Eventually I settled on a pair of jeans and a baby-soft sweater with a heart embroidered on it in pink that made me think of the pancakes she'd made this morning. Casual, but not too casual.

I did a simple soft makeup look, sticking with mostly pinks that worked with my skin tone. I couldn't look like I was trying too hard. Stace's parents might not notice, but Stace would see extra effort and she'd read too much into it.

Stace sent me the address of the restaurant. It was a chain place that I was familiar with that also had games for kids. Cute. I bet she was going to get competitive with her little brothers. Bet she'd let them win to make them happy.

I still had at least thirty minutes before I had to leave, and I was still on the fence about going.

Could I do this? Stace had sent me a few messages as if in anticipation of my reluctance, saying that she'd told her parents we were just friends and had asked them to be cool.

I didn't believe her for a second, considering the time her mom had sent her little brother to spy on us and report back. That didn't speak to a woman who was going to look at me and pretend that Stace and I were casual friends.

Time ticked by and I kept sitting on my couch and staring out my windows and smelling the scent of Stace still lingering in the air even though she'd left hours ago. We'd cleaned up from breakfast before she'd gone so I didn't even have any evidence that she'd been here. Like I'd dreamed her up and she'd vanished when I awoke.

Don't freak out, but my little brothers have presents for you Stace sent.

What kind of presents and why? I asked.

They'd be so mad if I spoiled the surprise. It's nothing big, but I wanted to warn you. You're still coming, right? Please say you're still coming.

I closed my eyes and wished I could shut her out. Shut all of this out. She wasn't even here, but I could feel her. Could see her face and hear her voice pleading with me to not let her down.

Fuck. I didn't want to let her down.

I knew Stace well enough to know that if I bailed, if I told her it was too much, that she wouldn't hate me. That she would smile even though she was hurt and say it was okay.

I didn't want to be the reason she was hurting.

I'm still coming.

Stace met me at my car when I parked.

“I was about twenty percent sure you were going to show up,” she said, beaming at me when I got out of the car. Her smile hit me just as hard as it always did, and my stomach twisted with guilt that I'd ever thought about not showing up for her. Because really, was this the worst thing that had ever happened to me? No. Eating some food and making small talk with her family wasn't medieval torture.

I wasn't even going to have to pay. Free food and I got to spend time with Stace. Definitely not the worst way to spend an afternoon.



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“Relax. Breathe,” Stace said, putting her hands on my shoulders. “Everything is gonna be fine, baby.”

That word always made me melt. She stroked my shoulders and I could feel her touch through the fabric of my sweater.

“Okay,” I said.

Stace bit her bottom lip. “I wanna kiss you so bad right now.”

The feeling was mutual. Whereas all my other kisses with Stace had made me float, I felt like a kiss with her right now would ground me.

Instead of telling her it was okay to kiss me, I just rose up on my toes and pressed my lips to hers.

She let out a little sound of surprise and then kissed me back, pressing me against the door of the car. The heat from her body seeped through my clothes and I wanted to cling to her.

“God, Hunter. You can’t do that to me when we’re going to see my family. Kissing you makes me have very impure thoughts.”

I smiled and dragged her bottom lip through my teeth, making her moan a little.

“What kind of impure thoughts?”

She laughed and pressed her forehead to mine. “The kind that make me want to drag you somewhere we can get naked immediately.”

“Oh, like my backseat?”

She let out a laugh that made me feel like I’d drunk a glass of champagne. Being around her just felt so damn good. Why would I ever deprive myself of this?

“You’re trouble,” she said, kissing me one more time before stepping back and closing her eyes.

“Okay, we can go now. I’ve put all my naughty thoughts away.”

I surprised myself by winking at her. “I haven’t.”

“Hunter!”

## Chapter Nineteen

Stace

I really didn’t expect her to come. When she showed up it kind of felt like a miracle. And then she kissed me, and I wished we could have gone straight back to her place or mine, whichever was closer.

I lied when I told her I put all my dirty thoughts away. That wasn’t possible when she was nearby. But I could shove them behind a door and put some plants in front of it to hide that and hoped for the best.

I had to clench my hands into fists so I wouldn’t reach for her hand as we walked through the restaurant to the table my parents had reserved.

“Stay!” Carson yelled and ran over to throw himself at me.

“Oh, hey,” I said, picking him up and giving him a huge bear hug.

“Who’s that?” Carson asked, staring at Hunter over my shoulder.

“That is my friend Hunter. Can you say hello?”

I set Carson down and he walked right up to Hunter.

“Hello, I’m Carson. I brought you this.” He held out one of the colorful rocks that he’d painted in art class.

Hunter glanced at me as if she didn’t know what to make of him. I pressed my lips together to hide a smile.

“Hi Carson. I’m Hunter. It’s lovely to meet you. Thank you so much. This is beautiful.” She studied the rock and then slid it into her pocket.

He nodded. "It's nice to meet you too."

I snorted.

"Okay, bud." I put my arm around him and led him back to the table where Mom was practically vibrating in her seat and Dad had a hand clamped on her shoulder to keep her from running over and hugging Hunter. I'd warned her about that.

"Hi, Hunter. Good to see you," Torrin said, getting up and shaking Hunter's hand. "Sorry. That was formal."

"It's okay," she said, smiling.

She was so pretty I couldn't even think. Her hair was twisted back, and her makeup was lovely, and it was obvious that she'd put effort into her look. More effort than she usually did, at least when I'd seen her.

"Stace, bring that lovely girl over here so I can meet her," Mom said, finally losing her patience.

I gave Hunter a look and nodded at her to try and give her courage.

Hunter approached the table and Mom popped to her feet.

"Mrs. Thomas, it's a pleasure to meet you. Thank you for inviting me." Of course, Hunter had perfect manners.

Mom beamed. “Oh please, you can call me Maggie. Aren’t you pretty as a picture. Can I give you a hug?” I’d told her not to offer the hug at all, but old habits died hard. My mom was a hugger.

“Oh, sure,” Hunter said, and let my mom hug her. She didn’t flinch back or freak out, so that was something.

My dad shook her hand as well and then it was time for us all to sit down.

“Mom, can we go play games?” Eli asked, his eyes bright. He had a drawing for Hunter, but I knew he was going to be shy about giving it to her.

“Please, Mom,” Carson begged, clasping his hands together and pouting.

“Yes, you can go play games until the food gets here.” She gave them money and they ran off.

I sat down with Hunter on the outside and Tor on my right.

Mom and Dad were on the other side with Eli and Carson’s empty chairs beside them.

“So, Hunter, Stace has told us so much about you, I feel as if we’ve already met,” Mom said.

“I’ve heard wonderful things about you as well,” Hunter said. Her spine was straight as an arrow and she had her hands folded in her lap. She was so tense that I couldn’t help but reach under the table and put my hand on her leg, squeezing lightly.

Telling her to calm down. That she was safe here. Safe with me. Safe with my family. No one was going to be rude or awful to her. No one was going to treat her the way

her parents treated her.

“You’re so sweet. And I’m loving your hairstyle. Stace showed me your social media and it’s so impressive. I got exhausted just seeing all the things you’re doing.”

“Oh. Thank you. I like to stay busy,” she said, and I stroked her leg again while I watched her relax by millimeters.

She really was stressed about this but she’d come anyway.

This woman. I would do anything for her. Anything.

Hunter made small talk and I tried to keep things moving and smooth over any rough edges. Tor helped, talking about how much he loved Hunter’s yoga classes and Mom started peppering her with questions about fitness and if she should be doing yoga.

“You’re more than welcome in any of my classes. I have students of all ages. One of my favorites is this woman who’s in her seventies and she’s more flexible than I am,” Hunter said with a laugh. Her shoulders had been nearly up by her ears when she sat down and now they were much lower. She’d smiled and laughed, and I didn’t think it was my imagination that she was having a good time.

Food arrived as Eli and Carson rejoined the table with their prize tickets.

“I think we should have a toast,” Dad said, raising his plastic soda cup. Everyone hurried to do the same. “To Eli, for winning the student of the month award in his classroom. We’re all very proud of you, Eli. To Eli!”

“To Eli!” we all cheered, even Hunter. Then came tapping our glasses together and trying not to spill. Carson held his cup in both hands and only dripped a little bit.

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The boys ate fast and then dragged Tor back to the games with them so it was just my parents, me, and Hunter.

She sipped her drink and I could see some of her tension return. My hand went back to her leg again. I wished I could say something to her without my parents seeing.

Mom sat back in her chair and I could see her trying to read Hunter. I didn't like it. I wanted to kick her under the table, but she'd probably ground me.

"It's so nice to have you here, Hunter," Mom said. "I'm just hoping some of your style will rub off on my daughter."

"Hey!" I said. "I dress fine."

Mom turned her glare on me. "Sweatpants are not appropriate for family meals in public, Katrina."

I cringed. "Seriously? You're going to first name me?"

My face went red and I turned to see how Hunter was taking this.

"I'm afraid I'm not an authority. I wear a lot of yoga pants," she said, shrugging.

"I'm not asking for her to dress like a model, but can you convince her to wear an outfit that looks like she didn't just come from the gym?" Mom said to Hunter.

"I'll see what I can do," Hunter said, giving me a mischievous look.

“Wow, I did not come to this lunch to get ganged up on!” I said, pretending to be offended.

“Well maybe you should have dressed better,” Dad said, winking at me.

“Wow. I think I’m going to try my luck with the kids,” I said, pretending to get up.

“No, don’t go,” Hunter said, grabbing my arm and laughing. “Stay.”

“Okay,” I said, dropping down into my chair again. “But only because you asked.”

She smiled at me and I smiled back at her and I knew we were being obvious but I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t stop being like this around her.

“Should we get dessert?” Dad said, his voice loud.

“Absolutely,” I said.

“Yes, please,” Hunter agreed.

“Has Stace told you that she won the state spelling bee championship?”

I rolled my eyes. “Mom, that was a million years ago. It doesn’t mean anything. I’m literally almost thirty years old.”

Hunter let out a little snort next to me.

“Spelling bee champion, huh? Can you spell perspicacious?”

I looked at the ceiling and spelled the word without pausing.



“How about choledocholithiasis?” Mom asked, her eyes glittering. She loved this game and always threw in tons of medical words for fun.

I spelled the word and Mom nodded. “That’s my baby.” There were tears in her eyes.

“Jesus, Mom. Get a hold of yourself.”

“I’m not allowed to be proud?”

My face was on fire and I wished Hunter wasn’t seeing this, but she had a soft smile on her face next to me.

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Dessert came and the boys returned. It was messy and loud, and I worried that Hunter would get overwhelmed, but she actually started talking to Eli about art and I literally watched him fall in love with her right there.

He showed her some pictures of his drawings and she showered him with praise and tips and he was absolutely beaming. He finally gave her the drawing she made and she exclaimed at how good it was and thanked him until he was bright red and stammering.

I needed to get home to Buck, and Hunter had other things to do today so we said goodbye before the check came.

“Thank you for coming,” Mom said as she squeezed me. “And thank you for bringing her. She’s lovely.” That last part was said low enough so only I could hear.

Everyone else got huge hugs and Hunter also embraced everyone.

“They’re wonderful,” she said as we stood together at her car.

“Sorry, they can be a bit much. But that wasn’t horribly painful, was it?” I braced myself.

Hunter gripped both my arms and gazed up into my face.

“It wasn’t bad at all. Your family is amazing.” Her voice caught on the last word as a few tears slid down her cheeks.

“Oh, baby, what’s wrong?” I brushed her tears away with my thumb.

“Nothing,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s just that...your family loves you so much. And you love them. And it’s beautiful.”

She sniffed and I wished I had a tissue or something to give her.

“I’m sorry,” she said, more tears leaking. I pulled her into my chest and held her as she cried.

“Shhh, it’s okay. Everything’s going to be okay.”

Hunter cried for a few minutes and finally took a few deep breaths before leaning back, her arms still gripping onto my coat as if she was worried I’d run away.

“You gonna be okay?” I asked her, wiping her nose with the sleeve of my coat. She could snot all over me if she wanted to.

“Yeah.” She nodded and sniffled again. “I’m just not used to seeing love like that. It’s overwhelming.”

I bet it had been.

“Listen. I know you haven’t had an easy time and even if you don’t want to be with me or just want to be friends, you can always talk to me. Always.”

“I know,” she said. “Everything feels better when I’m with you.”

Shit. She couldn’t say things like that. They made me hopeful. They made me picture what the future could look like with her by my side.

## Chapter Twenty

### Hunter

I'd built everything up in my head and I'd expected monsters to be waiting for me at the table with stares and uncomfortable questions.

It was nothing like that. Maggie and Hamilton, Stace's parents, were lovely. Maggie was boisterous and happy, and Hamilton was content to sit back and let his wife have the lion's share of the conversation, but he participated when there was a moment of silence. I could see a lot of Stace in her mother.

When I'd first sat down, I'd been absolutely panicking, but Stace had rested her hand on my leg and that had made me stop spiraling. With just her hand she reminded me that she was there. That she wouldn't let something bad happen to me. That the first time we'd met she'd rescued me. Funny how that had set the tone for everything else we'd been through.

And then I'd cried in the parking lot. Cried because I was jealous of what she had with her family. Not just jealous, but sad. Sad for what I might have been like if my parents had been like hers.

It didn't matter, but at the same time it did. All my feelings were angry and tangled and they came out in the form of tears.

Of course, Stace held me and let me cry and told me she'd be there for me.

Because she was wonderful too. How could she not be?

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“I know you need to teach later, but do you want me to come with you? I can bring Buck over. He’ll make you feel better.” He would. And having her with me would make me feel better too.

“Okay,” I said. “Yeah. Come over.”

Stace showed up at my place a little bit after I got there with Buck and books and a deck of cards and a bag that looked suspiciously like an overnight bag.

“That? Oh, that’s uh, just in case,” she said when I asked about it.

“In case of what, exactly?” I asked.

“In case you are so overcome with lust for me that you drag me to bed and won’t let me leave. I have to work tomorrow, you know. As much as I’d love to spend forever in bed with you, I can’t.” She stroked my cheek and I was instantly picturing spending forever in bed with her.

“I, um, might have also brought some other things.” Her cheeks went a little pink and I wanted to grab the bag and go through it to find out what she was talking about.

“What kind of things?” I asked as Buck went to lay on his bed. He really was a sweet boy.

“Do you really want me to show you now? Because I think if I show you, then you’re not going to make it to your yoga class.”

Color me intrigued. I definitely wanted to know.

I held my hand out. "Come on, show me."

"Okay. You asked for it."

She unzipped the bag and from under her clothes and a bag of toiletries she pulled out...

"Oh," I said as all the oxygen left my lungs in a rush.

"Pink and sparkly seemed right for you," she said as she held up the strap-on harness and a very pink and very sparkly strap. "All of it is brand new. Ordered them recently. Just in case."

"Wait. When did you order these?"

Now her cheeks were as red as a firetruck. "Uh, two weeks ago?"

Wow. She really had been planning to seduce me.

"But if you're not into it, then that's absolutely fine. I just wanted to give you the option," she said, moving to shove both items back in her bag.

"No!" I said, grabbing for the strap. Not only was it a nice size, but it had all kinds of ridges and bumps that I knew would feel amazing.

"I've never been fucked with one of these before," I told her, stroking it and making sure she was watching. Oh, she was.

"You haven't?" she asked. "Really?"

“Nope. But I’ve wondered. And just to be sure, you’d be the one wearing this, correct?” I asked, looking up at her through my lashes.

The heat in her eyes was blazing as she gave me one of those slow smiles that made my knees stop working properly.

“I’ll be whatever you want me to be, baby. But I can’t lie and say that I haven’t thought about fucking you with that.”

I smiled back at her. “That’s what I want too.”

Teaching yoga is not something that’s easily done when you’re desperate for sex. I only just managed to keep it together and fumble through the class. No one made any comments so I don’t think it was too bad, but I couldn’t even look at Stace. Her being in the same room was basically torture. She didn’t help matters by giving me heated looks and moving her body in ways that she knew were going to set me off. If anyone else would have looked, they’d have seen her just going through the poses of a yoga class, but I saw differently. No, she was trying to turn me on, and she was doing a spectacular job at it.

Stace lingered in the room until it was empty and then walked up to me.

“That was a great class. I got really into it,” she said with a smirk.

I looked around to make sure there was no one else to overhear me.

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“You are such an asshole,” I said, clasping my hands behind my back so I didn’t grab her and shove her up against the wall and fuck her right here and inevitably get fired from the gym for violating the code of conduct I signed when I started teaching. That wouldn’t be very good for my brand.

Stace just gave me that smile that made her eyes crinkle and my stomach swoop and entire body tingle.

“I need to get you out of here. Immediately.”

Stace nodded slowly. “Agreed. Unless you wanted to make good on your words last night? Take me up against the lockers?”

I let out a sound that was very close to a whimper.

“Fuck, don’t say things like that when I can’t follow through.”

Stace just dived forward and kissed me briefly before winking and walking backwards while she was still staring at me.

“I was thinking we should stop and get pie before we go back to your place. Have a nice longggg chat about life over lemon meringue pie. What do you think?” She reached the doorway and paused.

As much as I wanted to get her naked in the next five seconds, the mention of pie was also extremely appealing.



“We can get pie to go,” I said, and she laughed.

“Perfect idea.”

I’d been a little apprehensive about leaving Buck at my place while we went out, but when we returned with pie, he was snoozing on the bed and nothing was out of place.

Not that I really had time to check. Stace set the to-go container of pie on the counter and slammed my back against the door, claiming my mouth.

“I could barely get through that class. Couldn’t stop wanting you. Do you know how sexy your voice gets when you teach?” she said between fierce kisses.

“My teaching voice is sexy? News to me.” I didn’t know that my teaching voice was different than my regular voice.

“Sooooo sexy,” she said, nipping at my bottom lip and then leaning back.

“Come on. I need you naked.”

I squealed as she picked me up and carried me to the bedroom.

I would never get tired of that. Ever.

Stace set me down gently on the bed this time, kissing me and instructing me not to move.

“Where are you going?” I asked, sitting up.

“To get supplies,” she called as she left the room.

Oh. The strap.

We hadn't used any toys yet, and I'd wondered at her stance on them. I guess if she was going to use a strap, then she probably had a positive opinion of other toys.

Maybe if I was still conscious after she fucked me senseless with the strap, I'd tease her with one of my vibrators until she begged. That was something I definitely wanted to see. She'd said she was a switch and I'd never thought too much about my own preferences, but I thought I might be the same. Happy to give and take as the need arose. Plus, something about having her completely at my mercy was unbelievably hot. I wanted to see her beg and plead for me.

Stace returned with her bag and set it on the bed.

"So," she said as she pulled out the harness and the strap and set them on the end of the bed.

"Yes. The answer is unequivocally yes."

Stace's eyes lit up.

"Good."

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We stripped each other quickly, laughing when my yoga pants got caught on my ankles and my hair tangled in her watch band.

This time I remembered to put down towels to protect the comforter as Stace adjusted the harness and put it on. I couldn't stop watching her as she adjusted it and then added the strap.

"Oh," I said, and she looked up at me.

"You like?" she asked, and there was a hint of nervousness in her eyes.

"Yes. Very much." Much more than I thought I would. Or maybe it was just Stace. Everything she did was designed to turn me on.

"Yeah?" she asked, stroking the strap with one hand and oh fuck. Yeah. That was hot.

"You ready for me, baby?" she asked, stroking the strap again.

"Yes," I gasped, nodding.

Stace climbed on the bed and straddled me, sitting back to stare down at me. She did that a lot. Just paused and looked at me in this way that made my breath catch. It was an overwhelming look.

"I can't believe I'm here with you," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Hey," I said, making her meet my eyes. "There's nowhere I'd rather be than here

with you right now.”

Her smile was radiant.

“And we’re only getting started,” she said, stroking the strap again before she reached back and grabbed a small bottle of lube.

She slicked up her fingers as she leaned down to kiss me while she slid two fingers inside me and stroked my clit with her thumb. It didn’t take long until I was reaching for the strap and trying to get her to put it inside me while she laughed into my mouth at my eagerness.

“So ferocious,” she said.

“No, just ready,” I said, yanking on the strap again.

Stace added a little more lube before pressing the tip of the strap inside me.

“Yes, more,” I gasped, but she pulled all the way out and I growled at her.

“You’re so cute,” she said as I glared up at her.

“Come on, Stace,” I begged, grabbing her ass and trying to shove her back inside me.

She loved this teasing and I pretended to hate it.

Stace thrust inside me about two inches and froze. No amount of yanking on her ass or moving my hips would get her to go any further.

Stace just laughed. “Is that what you wanted, baby?”

“If you don’t fuck me, I’m going to bite you,” I said, baring my teeth.

“Sexy,” she said, and I pulled at her again, desperate.

“Please?” I asked and that turned out to be the magic word again.

Stace thrust her hips forward until the strap was fully inside me and I gasped as it filled me, my head falling back on the pillows.

Without pause, Stace withdrew her hips and slid back inside me, slower this time. Making me feel every single inch until I was almost crying.

“Fuck, Stace. Fuck.”

With just a few thrusts, she turned me into a shaking, panting, trembling mess. Grabbing one of my legs, she lifted it and changed the angle that she fucked me, hitting me even deeper, alternating between hard, punishing thrusts and deeper rolls of her hips that had stars exploding behind my eyes.

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“Yes, yes, yes,” I started chanting as she fucked me and told me how beautiful I was and what a good girl I was and how much she loved seeing me like this.

It was all so good, too good. And then she somehow slid her hand between us and pressed on my clit so the strap dragged against it every time she thrust.

My orgasm shot up my spine and gripped my entire body as pleasure ripped through me. Stace continued to fuck me until I winced. She withdrew the strap, fumbling to get the harness off.

I lay there as she viciously rubbed at her clit and gasped as she came in spasms above me, saying my name before she collapsed on top of me, twitching a few times.

“Sorry,” she panted. “I couldn’t wait.”

My arms felt like overcooked noodles, but I managed to lift one and put it on her back, stroking her shoulders.

“It’s okay. The way you get so turned on by me is hot as fuck.”

Stace laughed into my neck and gave me a little kiss.

“Would you maybe want to switch things up and fuck me? You don’t have to, but if you wanted to...” she trailed off.

“Oh yeah, I want to,” I said, and she lifted her head.

“Yeah?”

“Absolutely.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

Stace

Hunter punished me for teasing her. Did she ever.

“Holy shit,” I gasped as she looked down at me with a brilliant smile of satisfaction. Seeing her wearing the harness and strap was almost enough to make me come without any other stimulation.

“I liked that,” she said, stroking a hand down my chest. “A lot.”

“Good,” I said. “If you’re happy, I’m happy.”

I twisted our fingers together and then heard Buck whining. He needed to go out. Of course he had the worst timing.

“Is he okay?” Hunter asked.

“Yeah, he just needs to go out. Gimme a few minutes.” Hunter fell onto her back next to me, wrestling with the harness.

“I’ll come with you,” she said, finally figuring out the buckles.

I turned my head and kissed her shoulder. “You don’t need to. I’ll be right back.”

Getting up took too much energy, but I managed to get to my wobbly feet and throw

on my sweatpants, sweatshirt and my shoes.

Buck waited patiently for me to clip his leash to his collar. It only took a few minutes outside for him to do his business and then we went back upstairs to Hunter.

She was still on the bed, naked, and I hurried to get my clothes off again. I loved being naked with her.

Hunter sat up and smiled as I climbed back into bed with her.

“I like having you here,” she said, as if that wasn’t glaringly obvious.

“I like being here with you, Hunter.”

She bit her bottom lip and I sensed that she was about to say something I wasn’t going to like.



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“I know I said we had to keep things casual. That I don’t do relationships and I still think my reasons are valid. But. Being with you...it makes me happy. You’re good, Stace. I’m still scared that all of this is going to end or destroy us both, but what if? What if it doesn’t?” She said the last part with such hope and hesitation.

I combed my fingers through her tangled hair. “Even if it doesn’t work out, would you trade these moments we’ve had together?”

Her answer was instant. “No. Even if you left tomorrow and I never saw you again, at least we had this.”

I laughed and kissed her cheek. “I’m not going anywhere, baby. I told you. I’m in. I’m all in. I’ve been all in since the first moment I saw you. Even if it was unprofessional. I knew you meant something to me.”

Hunter’s eyes went wide and she studied my face as if she was searching to see if I was joking.

“You’re so sure of things.”

“Only certain things. And certain people. I’m sure about you, Hunter.”

She let out a shaky breath.

“I can’t tell you that I’m sure. I can’t tell you that I’m all in. But I can tell you that I’m in. I want you in my life. And I want to give this a shot. I want to see if we could be something together. It scares the shit out of me. You’re going to have to be patient

with me when I have my freakout moments, because I will have those. I'm going to have moments where I'm probably going to run. But chase me, Stace. Chase me and bring me back. Remind me about this. About us."

I kissed her hard.

"I will, baby. I'll remind you every single time."

She nodded again. "Okay. Then let's do this."

I had to work the next day, but we stayed up late into the night talking. Talking and kissing and fucking slowly. I edged her again and again until she threatened my life if I didn't make her come. We ate lukewarm pie and got crumbs everywhere and I couldn't stop smiling so much that my cheeks started hurting.

There was still one thing left that I hadn't told her, but it could wait. She didn't need to know that I'd absolutely and completely fallen in love with her yet. This thing between us was delicate and tentative and she could still run if she got too scared.

It wasn't going to be easy. There would be times when she gave in to those fears and I'd have to reassure her and remind her. We were going to fight and have bad moments and good moments and in-between moments. But life would be so much better with her than without her. I didn't want to live a life without her.

I loved this woman so much that I could barely hold myself back from flinging open her window and screaming it so the whole city could hear. So the whole city could know that I loved Hunter Olivia Larson. I wanted to put it on T-shirts and sweatshirts and inform every single stranger I met.

I needed everyone to know that she was mine. That she had chosen me.

The following week was one of the best of my life. I was busy with work, but there were always messages from Hunter waiting for me. Pictures and jokes and dirty things she was going to do with me when we were together again. All of it lit me up and everyone around me commented on my mood.

Coop and Rivera immediately knew what was up and I told them about Hunter. They demanded to meet her as soon as possible and I said I'd work on Hunter and see if I could get her to come out with us for drinks.

"I knew it!" Mom screamed when I told her. I'd stopped by the house to drop off Buck for my overnight shift. I'd thought about asking Hunter to stay with him, but she was still getting used to having him around and that was a lot of responsibility.

"Yeah, yeah. And before you ask, I'll try and get her to come for family dinner."

"You'd better," Mom said, pointing her finger at me. "I need to get to know this girl who you're in love with."

"Mom. I didn't tell you I'm in love with her."

She touched my face. "You didn't have to."

I rolled my eyes and said I'd be back later to get Buck.

While I was out on calls, I tried to keep Hunter in the loop. She knew that I was a first responder, but actually dating one was different. She'd have to get used to the fact that I went into potentially dangerous situations on a regular basis. I planned to sit her down and have a talk about it at some point. Not yet. Soon.

We alternated which apartment we stayed at, but hers was much nicer. The kitchen alone made me want to move in.

“Guess who was at yoga tonight,” she said on Thursday night when she walked into my apartment. I’d had keys made for her so we didn’t have to constantly swap back and forth. She’d accepted the set of keys with raised eyebrows but had pulled out a set she’d had made for me.

“It’s annoying having to get up and buzz you in,” she’d said in explanation.

“Who?” I asked, getting up from where I’d been cuddling on the couch with Buck and reading an Eloise Roth book.

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Hunter dropped her stuff and set a bag of groceries on the counter.

“Micah,” she said as I kissed her and got my hands all over her. All I wanted was to drag her into bed, but I knew she needed to decompress after her day.

“Oh really?” I asked, my hands on her hips as she rested hers on my ass. That was a thing she did now. We’d be standing together and she’d just hold my butt. Like a security blanket.

“And?”

“And he and Tor definitely talked and there was blushing and they left together. I may have followed them a little bit and watched them just outside the locker room and it was steamy. Like, I’d be surprised if they didn’t get into the shower together.” She wiggled her eyebrows.

“Get it, Tor,” I said, and she snorted.

“Really, though. Not sure what changed, but I want details.” She poked me in the chest.

“I’ll see what I can get from Tor. How was your day otherwise?”

I picked her up and carried her to the couch, setting her down and pulling one of her feet into my lap.

“Oh, that feels good,” she said, closing her eyes. The other night I’d come back from

a call and she'd been sleeping. I'd tried to get into bed without waking her, but she had woken up and asked me how it went. I'd told her while she pushed me until I was sitting up and sat behind me, digging her fingers into my tense shoulders. I got regular massages to work on my tired muscles, but Hunter's massages were so much better.

"You know, for someone who doesn't do relationships, I'd say you're doing pretty good so far," I said when I switched to the other foot.

"I think so. This is my first one, but I'd give myself a good grade."

"I'd give you an A+, baby," I said. I called her that all the time now and she loved it every time.

"Aw, thanks babe," she said, and I stared at her in surprise.

"Was that too much? I wanted to see how it felt."

I set her foot aside and hauled her into my lap.

"It wasn't too much. It was just right." I kissed her deeply, sweeping my tongue into her mouth as she clutched my shoulders.

"Babe, babe, babe," she chanted.

"Stop it, you're going to make me swoon," I said, and she laughed.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Hunter

It turned out that relationships weren't that bad. Well, they weren't bad when they were with Katrina Stacey. I knew we were still in the beginnings, but we'd adjusted to being with each other so easily that I couldn't believe that I'd been so reluctant.

Cade and Reid weren't as shocked when I informed them I was seeing Stace as I'd thought they would be. They'd come over on Friday while Stace was at work and before Reid's shift at Sapph started.

"I really, really like her. So much that I can taste it in the back of my throat. It's like I can't breathe when I'm not with her. I know how that sounds. But it's how I feel."

Cade and Reid shared a look.

"Can I say something and you not freak out?" Cade asked.

"Maybe? Depends on what it is."

We were sitting in my living room and eating salads from the fancy place that Cade had picked up, but she'd also brought cake for dessert.

Cade looked at Reid who gestured for her to go ahead.

"I want you to consider, just consider, the idea that you might be in love with her."

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I dropped my fork and it fell onto the floor.

“What?” I asked, my stomach dropping along with the fork.

“Just think about it,” Reid said. “Just for a moment. It’s not going to kill you.

“It might,” I snapped, my heart suddenly racing. “Ever heard of Romeo and Juliet?”

“Hunter, they’re fictional,” Cade said gently.

“I fucking know that!” Okay, I was losing it.

Cade put a hand on my shoulder. “I just asked you to consider it. Breathe.”

I didn’t want to breathe. I wanted to run away from all the feelings crashing into each other in my head. Too many feelings for one person to have. I’d never wanted them. Never wanted this.

“Maybe I’m just high on the sex,” I said, and I knew how silly that sounded.

“I don’t think it’s just sex,” Reid said gently. They were both looking at me as if I was going to throw my salad on the floor and start screaming and tearing my hair out.

While that course of action had its appeal, I didn’t want to clean up the mess afterward.

“Well, fuck,” I said, staring into my salad. “How the hell did this happen?”



Cade and Reid shared another look.

“It just kind of happens sometimes. And before you know it, you’re in the middle of it,” Cade said. She would know.

I blew out a breath. “She did say she was going to seduce me. So I guess I should have seen this coming. She told me she was going to make me hers. I guess I thought I could resist.” Resist those dimples? I’d been a complete and utter fool.

“I shouldn’t have had sex with her.”

“But you did. Sex can change everything,” Cade said. Again, she was speaking from personal experience. A lesson I should have heeded. Why hadn’t I listened to my own rules that I’d made when I was a kid? I’d repeated them so many times to myself. I’d thought I could bend them and they wouldn’t break.

And now here I was. In love with Katrina Stacey.

Even if I threw everyone’s salads on the ground and broke every window in my apartment and screamed until my throat was raw, it wouldn’t change the fact that was definitely in love with Stace.

“I didn’t want sex to change everything,” I whined.

“Too late, kid,” Reid said and, if I didn’t know better, I would have said that she was enjoying this.

I grabbed the pillow from behind my back and screamed into it. Cade rubbed my back.

“It’s gonna be okay. Being in love isn’t that bad. Promise.”

I screamed into the pillow again.

I let myself into Stace's apartment and dropped the bags of groceries I'd hauled up the stairs. She'd be back from work in about a half an hour and she was going to be hungry so I was making her dinner. It was just a simple chicken dinner with pasta that I'd seen online. The fact that it was called Marry Me Chicken was irrelevant. That wasn't why I'd picked it.

I filled a pot with water to make the pasta and set it on the stove.

When I'd first come over to Stace's, I'd said that her place was warm, and I hadn't been lying. Her place was like her. I guess I loved it too.

"Fuck!" I yelled when I got one of my fingers too close to the burner. I quickly ran it under cold water and pulled out the first aid kit that I knew lived under the sink. Stace was the kind of woman who had first aid kits in nearly every room. I put some ointment on my finger and then a band aid. She could fuss over it later.

Stace's key rattled in the door just as I was simmering the chicken on the stove. I'd also made a quick side salad.

"Hey, baby," she said, beaming and making my heart pound and my knees go weak.

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Buck rushed in to say hello to me and then run to find one of his toys to play with.

“Hey, babe,” I said. I’d adjusted to the term of endearment with a little too much ease for my liking.

Stace always kissed me when she got home from work. Or when she took Buck out to use the bathroom. Or sometimes when one of us left the room and returned.

It was cute as hell and I wanted to hate it, but I could never hate kissing Stace.

“Ohh, this is fancy. What’s the occasion?” she asked, putting her arms around me from behind and resting her chin on my shoulder.

“I just wanted to have a nice dinner with you. I feel like you’re always doing this for me, and I want to make sure that you’re not the only one.”

Stace turned me around in her arms.

“You know I do things for you because I want to. Not out of obligation, right?”

“I know,” I said, resting my hands on her ass. It was something I’d gotten addicted to. I just loved touching her there, and not necessarily in a sexual way.

“But sometimes you are so busy doing everything for everyone, who’s doing something for you? I want to be that person.” Shit. I hadn’t meant to say that much.

Stace tilted her head to the side. “You do?”

“Yeah. I do.”

She rested her forehead against mine. “You’re incredible, Hunter. You’re everything I could have wished for.”

“You don’t have to wish for me. I’m right here.” I squeezed her cheeks and she laughed.

“Mmmm, you can’t do that, baby. Because I’m starving and if you keep touching me like that, I’m going to want to take you to bed and you worked hard on this beautiful meal.”

Stace stepped back from me and groaned.

“Don’t look at me like I’m the bad guy.”

I patted her abs and bit my lip.

“You’re not the bad guy. Okay, fine. We’ll eat first. How was the shelter today?”

We did manage to eat dinner before we ripped each other’s clothes off and ended up in her bed. I’d started traveling with several vibrators and Stace had pulled out a few of her own and we’d both discovered that we liked adding them to our repertoire.

“You didn’t want to go out tonight?” Stace asked as we lay tangled together.

“Did you want to go out? We can.” This week we’d been kind of in our little bubble, but we’d have to go out sometime.

“No, I just didn’t want you to feel like we had to hide away. I can’t lie; I want to take you out and show you off all the time.”

I kissed her bicep and propped my head up so I could look at her face.

“You wanna go out to Sapph tomorrow night? Reid is working so we might get free drinks.”

Her smile was slow. “I was going to volunteer Saturday night but I can go out with you. If you want.”

I nodded. “I do. And maybe we can invite Cade and Eloise. You can finally meet the great Eloise Roth.”

Stace raised her eyebrows. “Meeting your friends? That’s kind of a big step, baby.”

It was, but I’d already met her family. It only seemed fair since she probably wasn’t going to meet my family if I could help it. Eventually. Probably. But far, far in the future. I didn’t want to subject Stace to my parents. She’d probably charm them, though. I had faith in her skills.

“I know. But I’m not scared of a big step,” I said, the words I’d been holding in all day pulsing beneath my skin.

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“You’re not? This is new.”

I rolled my eyes. “Shut up. I’ll still beat you with a pillow.”

“New isn’t bad. New is good,” she said, reaching for my fingers and kissing each one, making my heart flutter in my chest.

“I have to tell you something,” I said. I could try and hold it in. Live with the itch under my skin and the way my brain kept screaming the words over and over.

“Okay. That sounds serious. What is it?” I hated the way her eyes looked right now. Like she was bracing herself for me to tell her that I was done. That I was running.

“I love you,” I blurted out. “Sorry. There was probably a better way to say that. I didn’t figure it out until today. And I just—” I couldn’t say anything more because she was kissing me, and my mouth was busy.

And then she was laughing and kissing me and I was laughing and we were rolling on the bed and I was guessing she was happy about this.

“You love me?” she asked, grinning down at me, bright as the sun.

“I love you, Stace,” I said, stroking her face.

“I thought I was going to say it first, but you beat me. Holy shit, you never stop surprising me, Hunter.”

“You don’t have to say it back.”

“Are you kidding? I’ve been wanting to say it all week and I almost said it about fifty times.”

“Wait, really?”

She kissed me again. “Yes, really. I love you, Hunter. Fuck, I love you so much.”

I kissed her this time and then there was nothing more we needed to say.

Contrary to what I’d believed up until now, the world didn’t end when I told Stace that I loved her. No. It got better. After the first time saying it, I found that I couldn’t stop. The words felt good, so I kept saying them so much that Stace teased me about it, but I didn’t mind.

We went to Sapph with Cade and Eloise, and even Jo joined us. She was in grad school and rarely had time even on the weekends, but she’d made time to come and meet Stace.

Of course everyone adored her, especially Eloise. She and Stace got talking about books and I had to tear Stace away so we could go hit the dance floor and I could put my hands all over her and make everyone jealous that she was mine.

I’d never understood the appeal but seeing all the people who gave Stace covetous looks made me want to drag her into the bathroom and have my way with her. So I did.

“Come with me,” I said in her ear before leading her into a stall.

“Remember when you said that the kind of sex you have isn’t like the kind of sex I

was used to? Well, how about you find out what kind of sex I used to have?” I slid my hand into her jeans and found her already wet for me.

“Fuck yes, baby,” she said, claiming my mouth in a searing kiss. “Show me.”

Safe to say she liked any kind of sex, as long as it was with me.

Stace and I settled into a routine, even with her unusual hours. I got used to her crawling into bed early in the morning with me and getting up to take care of her and then having naps during the day to catch up on my sleep. I started working a little less so I could watch Buck while she was out and make dinner and do her laundry. I’d never really taken care of someone other than myself and I found that I liked it. I liked when she came home from work and I had dinner ready for both of us. I liked it when she always kissed me goodbye, no matter when she was leaving. I liked it when she came home, still smelling slightly of smoke from fires and told me about her calls. Yes, I was scared for her running into danger, but I knew she was a professional and she had a whole team with her. I got to meet her friends from the station, Cooper and Rivera, and they seemed like great people. I was glad they had Stace’s back.

The best part about being with Stace was how easy it was. We had disagreements, but Stace never yelled. She just sat me down and we talked about whatever it was until we came to a compromise or we got out what was really bothering us.

It was so much better than giving each other the silent treatment and being petty and passive-aggressive for decades like my parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins.

Every time I tried to retreat into those patterns, Stace grabbed me and made me confront it. To see that doing things like that wasn’t productive.

In some ways she was teaching me how to be in a relationship, but I was teaching her



too. Teaching her how to let someone else carry the load. To let someone else pick up the slack. She didn't have to do everything for everyone all the time. We balance each other out in ways I never expected.

"You'd want to have a library, right?" she asked me one night when she'd come back from a particularly upsetting call and couldn't get back to sleep. I liked staying up with her and talking about anything as a distraction.

"What do you mean?" I asked, lifting my head from her stomach.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:20 pm*

“In our house someday. We’d have to have a library, right? And probably a room for all your haunted shit.” She made a face. Stace was still on the fence about my haunted collection.

“Our house?” I asked.

“Yeah. Our house someday. Or did you want to live in an apartment? I always pictured a house, but I can be persuaded.”

“You speak about our house as if you’re ready to put in an offer,” I said. Talk of the future like this still had a tendency to scare me. It was getting better, but I couldn’t change overnight.

“No. Just thinking. Wondering. It’s not serious. Don’t you ever dream about things like that?”

I turned on my side so I could look at her gorgeous face.

“I guess. I was always alone in those dreams, though. I’m going to have to make all new ones.”

Her smile made my heart beat faster.

“I want to be in your dreams, Hunter.”

I kissed a spot right above where her heart beat. “You are.”

That was a lie. She was the dream. The dream I never knew I wanted. But now I had her and I was never letting her go.

I was all in.

## Epilogue

“Please?” Stace said as we looked into the kennel at the puppy that was currently trying to break its way through the bars to get to us.

“A puppy? Are you sure?” Buck was enough of a responsibility. I’d never believed my parents when they told me why I couldn’t have a dog, but after Stace moved in with Buck, I understood.

“Just look at her,” Stace said, getting down and opening the cage to bring the puppy out. She was all black and kind of looked like a lab.

Stace picked up the puppy and laughed when the puppy licked her face.

“I don’t know, but I just...I know she’s ours,” Stace said, looking at me. “Like I knew with Buck and I knew when I saw you. I can’t explain it.”

“Really? That’s how you’re going to convince me we need another dog?” I asked.

Stace smiled that specific smile she knew would get me to cave and give her anything she wanted.

“Yeah.”

A second later she dumped the puppy in my arms and then I was getting licked all over. I giggled and held the puppy back so I could look into her eyes. She gazed right back at me and I was hit with a strange feeling.

“Oh,” I said.

“Did you just feel it too?” Stace asked, putting an arm around me.

“I don’t know,” I said. The puppy was quiet now, her tail wagging gently back and forth as we looked at one another.

“It’s okay, baby,” Stace said, and I realized there were tears on my cheeks.

“Dammit, Stace. You knew this was going to happen.” I clutched the puppy to my chest and faced her.

“I wasn’t sure. But something told me you’d love her too.”

I kissed the puppy’s head and held her close.

“I do. Shit. Fine. We can take her home. But I don’t know how to train a dog, so you’re going to have to help me.” Buck had already been trained.

“We’ll go to class together. It’ll be great. What do you want to name her?”

I looked down into our new puppy’s eyes.

“How about Princess?”

Stace tipped her head back and laughed.

“I think it’s perfect.”