



# Double Dirty

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, New Adult

**Description:** Me.

The good girl.

I can't believe I'm about to say this.

But I'm lusting over two men.

When a drug dealer is out for my blood,

Rafe and Leo are my only hope.

Rafe, the protective self-defense instructor.

And Leo, the sexy playboy firefighter.

Team up to protect me.

The two beefy, alpha men are my obsession.

I think of their rough hands touching my skin.

Them sharing me in ways that are so wrong but feel so right.

I've been a good girl all my life.

Good and... in control.

Maybe it's time I surrender myself to my ultimate fantasy.

Let them own me.

Get double dirty.

So, now when my enemy attacks...

Two sets of strong arms have my back.

**Total Pages (Source):** 35

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Lexi

I took deep breaths to calm myself as I turned off the main road and onto the gravel. No matter how many times I'd been out there, I always dreaded it. I had just reunified a boy with his mother who worked two jobs and completed parenting classes and outpatient rehab before the deadline so that she could get him home. She was never late for a single visit and never failed to renew my faith in humanity. This guy though. He was the opposite.

When I got the case, a five-year-old girl had been removed from the home for neglect, and her dad had been charged. A neighbor had called the authorities in after she saw the child playing with what looked like a real firearm. It had actually been a stolen .357 magnum. Her dad had somehow gotten away with probation, but Elisa was in foster care until he completed some parenting classes and proved he was consistent and responsible in his visitation. In three months he hadn't even proven himself stable enough to get unsupervised visits much less an overnight. I hated going out to see the dwelling and talk to him. But he was on my caseload, and I had scheduled a visit to touch base and try to motivate him. I had a list of additional supports that might help him meet goals—transportation, a mentor, that kind of thing. Judging by the fact that his late model Harley was parked outside the trailer, I didn't think transport would be a problem.

Something about the guy made me uncomfortable. I had been a social worker for three years with the Child Protection Agency, and he made my alarm sirens go off. It wasn't just his arrest record from drug charges and domestic disturbances. It was his

attitude, like I was his enemy. As hard as it was, I reminded myself to be completely professional and respectful, to show compassion for the fact that he was separated from his child. I climbed the rickety wooden steps to the door of the trailer to knock. Before I got there, he flung the door open.

“You better get the hell off of my porch,” he said, leaning close to me.

I stepped back reflexively, smelling the alcohol on his breath, seeing the aggression in his every move. I backed down the steps.

“Mr. Watts, I’m sorry if this is an inconvenient time,” I began, my voice higher than I would have liked. I was nervous. I couldn’t help it.

“Unless you got my kid in that crap-ass Toyota you’re driving, get the hell off my property.”

“Sir, I see that you’re upset. I’m sure it’s frustrating having to go through this process to reunite with your daughter. I’m here to offer you support services so you can meet the court’s recommendations and speed up the process. Since you didn’t come to the scheduled visit on Tuesday—”

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about. I didn’t have no visit on Tuesday, or I would’ve been there.”

“You were notified by mail, email, and text message. If you look here, you texted me back.”

“Are you calling me a liar?” he said, coming down the steps at me.

He flicked his cigarette to the ground and came toward me, snarling. He was dressed in ratty jeans and a tank top that I remembered referring to as a wife-beater when I

was in college. At the time I'd thought it was funny. It didn't seem so funny with Mr. Watts looming over me.

He was wiry; his long black hair pulled back tight. I felt my breath stutter in fear. I'd dealt with plenty of angry parents, and I'd been able to help them all through building a rapport, a respectful relationship. Not one of them had those cold, dead eyes like he did. When he looked at me, I shivered because he was looking at me the way you look at a thing, an object, not a person. I was nothing, a piece of trash in his way. I backed up some more.

"I'd be happy to set up a visit for you. When do you have time in your schedule?" I said, forcing myself to sound bright and professional.

"I got no time for your bullshit. Get out of here, and don't come back until you bring my daughter home unless you want your ass beat," his voice was icy as he backed me toward my car.

It occurred to me that getting out of there was the thing I wanted most. I turned and hurried around my car, got in, and locked the doors. As I looked behind me to back up, I saw him standing at the passenger side, peering in at me. I jumped a little, startled at his closeness, his scrutiny. I wondered for a split second if he was going to bust out my window, drag me out of the car.

I backed out much too fast, my car pinwheeling crookedly onto the road as I sped away. He had told me to go. I had left. That was the smart thing to do. I called in at the office and reported that my visit had been unsuccessful, that I was not admitted to the home, and the client refused support services. We'd find out in a few weeks if he were in compliance with court order or not. Judging by his hostility and the alcohol on his breath, it didn't seem likely.

I was still shaking when I drove through a fast food place and got a cup of coffee. I

dumped lots of sugar in it. I wasn't much of a coffee drinker, but I remembered giving hot chocolate to some kids who were brought in after a house fire, remembered being told they needed the sugar after the shock. I parked and drank the coffee with shaking hands.

I knew I had to file paperwork about the client telling me not to return without his child, or he would beat my ass. It wasn't my first threat, but it was the first time I'd been truly afraid. It had run through my mind that when I didn't turn up at the two o'clock staff meeting, my supervisor would try to reach my phone. She'd leave a voicemail. Eventually, I'd be reported missing, and someone would go out to the trailer and find me dead in the driveway, eyes staring blankly at the horizon, my head twisted at an unnatural angle. I felt clammy and horrified at the image, but it had been a possibility — a real one.

I wasn't going to live in fear, and I wasn't going to let some jerk keep me from doing my job. I helped people and reunited families. He needed anger management sessions or something like that. But in the meantime, I had to look after myself.

I wished, for a hot second, that I had a boyfriend. Someone I could tell about this who'd hold me protectively and talk about the damage he was going to do if anyone tried to hurt me ever again. Never once had I regretted being independent or pursuing my dream to be a social worker and help fractured families. I just needed a way to protect myself, so I could feel safe in a situation where a client was belligerent.

I made sure there was a note in Mr. Watts's file about his behavior—it wasn't the first complaint. There wasn't much recourse. I talked to Janet, my supervisor, about it. She offered to get me into counseling if I felt traumatized, but the office was underfunded and short-staffed already. There wasn't another worker available to reassign to the case. I accepted that I'd have to continue working with Mr. Watts, and I promised myself I'd call Caitlyn, my coworker who was out on maternity leave, and ask her how she found best to deal with this kind of issue. She had a reputation for

doing well with difficult cases, and she might have some tips.

After going through the motions at work, never really shaking the sick feeling of fear I'd had that morning, I decided to take action. I ran down to the hardware store and bought a deadbolt. With the help of a screwdriver and some YouTube videos, I managed to install it. My apartment door was secure, and I felt accomplished, having put it in myself. Then I drove to the gym a few blocks from my apartment. Their web site said they offered a self-defense class on Wednesday nights, and I was about to join. I'd never felt comfortable with violence, but I wasn't exactly comfortable waiting around to be a crime victim either.

I paid my seven bucks and slipped into the room where the class was being held. It was probably an aerobics studio by day because there was a mirror along one wall and the scuffed up old floor was wood. I looked first at the reflection, seeing his back and looking past his face. The instructor was male, broad shoulders, dark hair that curled up at the edges damply. He stood slightly crouched, a fighter's stance, in a gray t-shirt and black athletic shorts. The sleeves had been cut off the shirt showcasing his big, muscular arms. Every visible inch of him was shredded, but he moved with grace and power. I stopped just inside the door and stayed in the back. He was just beginning the class, and he looked up and saw me. With a nod, he acknowledged my presence, but he didn't stop or make me introduce myself or anything.

"For those of you just joining us, my name is Rafe Sullivan. I'm a licensed personal trainer here as well as a certified self-defense instructor. Tonight we'll work on your stance, balance, and posture. A lot of self-defense is mental. You have to train to respond with practicality, not fear. If you find yourself in a situation where conflict is getting physical, you have to keep your head."

I nodded silently. I had lost my head earlier. I had to learn to keep my wits about me, to handle myself in a confrontation without sounding squeaky and bolting for my car. He talked about our centers of gravity and a balanced stance, how to put our weight

on the balls of our feet. He mentioned wearing shoes that stayed on—no flip-flops or backless sandals.

“It’s important to remember you don’t get points for sticking around for a fight. The goal of self-defense is safe escape, not to kick someone’s ass. You want to stun or disarm the assailant long enough to get away. So you need to make choices in your everyday life that increase the odds of success. No shoes that fall off when you try to run. No hoop earrings or ponytails. Those are convenient ways for someone to grab hold of you and control your movements.”

I reached back and fingered my ponytail self-consciously. I’d never thought of it as anything but convenient and sporty—certainly not as a handle for a predator. He kept talking us through a series of poses, some I recognized from yoga, that were all about establishing balance and a strong stance. Then he asked for volunteers. I looked around for something to hide behind. I did not want to go up in front of the class—fifteen or twenty people, most of which were athletic looking -- in my ratty sweats and t-shirt and my danger ponytail. When a girl in the front row bounced up and down and waved her hand, he chose her.

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I was relieved not to be picked, but as soon as he gave her a backpack and told her to walk by, I knew he was going to touch her. I realized I'd been biting my lip. Even while I'd soaked up every word he said, somewhere inside, I'd been noticing how handsome he was, how confident and strong. I was annoyed with myself for subtly lusting after the defense instructor. The guy was there to teach me how to keep from getting killed, and I was thinking like a thirsty teen. Way to prioritize survival, I told myself grimly.

He yanked her backward by the strap of the backpack, but she whipped around and struck him in the face with the heel of her hand. He dropped the bag and nodded, "Well done, Georgia. If she'd hit me full force, you would've seen my head snap back. I'd be bleeding, eyes watering, and she could get away. Here's the other thing, and you'll have to excuse my language here, but I can't stress this enough. Leave the fucking bag behind. Do not fight for stuff when you can get away with your life."

I felt like he was speaking just to me, like it was okay that I'd cut and run from Mr. Watts earlier. Like I'd done the smart thing instead of just a cowardly one. What it reminded me of was weird—as a kid I'd loved tomato soup. Even in the summer, I'd wanted it for lunch for how delightfully smooth and comforting it was. Rafe Sullivan's voice was better than tomato soup. I felt like someone had wrapped a blanket around my shoulders and told me it would all be okay. Which of course no one had.



She came in a little late. She was new. Most of the class had been around for a few weeks, and some had come back from last year. I would've remembered her if I'd ever seen her before. Her eyes were wide and dark, like she was nervous or scared. She kept to the back of the room. She never volunteered for the demonstrations. Maybe she was trying to scope out the class and decide whether to come back or maybe she was just anxious. Either way, I knew it was my responsibility to make her feel welcome. If she didn't feel comfortable in my class, there were other instructors I could refer her to in the city.

People didn't come in for defense classes if they weren't afraid. A very small percentage of students just wanted to be prepared. The rest had something in their past or present that spooked them into wanting to be able to fight back. I knew the look on her face, though. She didn't hide it well. It was naked fear. I didn't know what had happened to her, but I did know she needed help. Whether it was from me, a different instructor or a trauma counselor, I was going to put her in contact with the right people.

When class ended and some of my students came up to chat, I took a long drink from my water bottle and excused myself. She was going to slip out the door before I even got her name. I felt instinctively protective of her—professionally, of course. I quickly caught up to her in the gym, all the TV's blaring and the thump of feet on the treadmills drowning out any possible conversation.

"Excuse me," I said. I didn't reach out and touch her—didn't even raise my voice.

She turned to look at me, eyes still insanely wide and looking like she'd done something wrong.

"Are you okay?" I said.

"I'm fine. Thanks. Um, great class," she said, shifting her weight from one foot to the

other.

“I’m Rafe,” I said.

“Yeah, you introduced yourself to the class. I listened.”

“Of course. And you are?” I smiled and asked.

“I’m Lexi Conners.”

“Good to meet you,” I said, putting out my hand. She took it tentatively, as if she was reluctant to touch me.

“I learned a lot,” she said, “I may come back on Friday.”

“I hope you do. Listen, you looked a little freaked out in there. I’m done here and I thought I’d see if you wanted to go grab a cup of coffee. I can answer any questions you have about the class. And if this class isn’t a good fit for you, I can recommend another one about six blocks over. The teacher’s a friend of mine. It’s a woman, if you’re more comfortable with women,” I offered.

“I don’t have a problem with men,” she said, “But I’m okay. It was nice of you to be concerned.”

“The diner is right next door. They have great pie,” I said. I wanted her to say yes, but I wasn’t going to pressure her, especially if she’d been hurt or threatened, she didn’t need that. So, I stood back and waited.

“I like pie,” she agreed. “I guess I have time for one cup of coffee. I’m not in a hurry to get home just yet. I had a long day.”

“Great,” I said.

I grinned. I couldn’t help it. I knew that it was just business, that I was taking an interest in what she hoped to gain from a self-defense class, how to help her adapt her lifestyle to improve her safety. But I felt a rush of excitement, like I’d just picked up a really pretty girl.

“I’ll meet you there. I just need to run in here for a second,” she said, indicating the women’s locker room.

I went next door to Lacy’s and got a booth where I could see the door. I held the laminated menu in front of me like I was really reading it even though I’d eaten there at least twice a week for the last few years. When Lexi came through the door, I stood, lifted a hand to wave. She saw me and came to the booth. Her hair was down. That tight ponytail was gone, and in its place was a cloud of soft, shiny dark hair spilling over her shoulders. I couldn’t take my eyes off it. It seemed almost indecent, like I was seeing something so private.

She took a menu and scanned it, “I didn’t really eat lunch today so I’m starving.”

“Well, you said it was a long day. You were probably too busy to get hungry,” I said.

“Not really. I was just—not in the right frame of mind to eat anything.”

The waiter came over and took our order. I was having coffee and pie, and Lexi was having a patty melt with bacon. Extra fries. I admired her order, making conversation.

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“I think if you’d come here and just ordered tea or a salad, I’d tell you to have some protein so you could get stronger for self-defense purposes,” I said.

“The bacon ought to take care of that. Bacon makes you strong, right? Or was that spinach?” she joked.

“I think it’s kale,” I said.

“I hate kale. My supervisor at work makes kale chips at home and brings them in to share like it’s some big treat. I want to know who the joker is who came up with that idea. Like how about we bake some lettuce and see if anybody eats it?” she said.

I laughed. She was funny. I told her how I got interested in teaching self-defense as our food arrived. Lexi nodded along with my story while taking a huge bite out of her burger. I snatched a salty fry before she could protest with her mouth full.

“You know that’s why I want to learn that nose strike from class. So I can take down anyone who tries to steal my fries.”

“You’re pretty protective of your carbs.”

“Yeah, don’t try to talk keto around me. I love potatoes. And bread.”

“Relax, I’m not trying to take away your starches.”

“You’re a personal trainer. I figured you’d be all serious about the protein powder and the super foods.”

“Hello. I’m eating pie,” I said, pointing to my plate.

“Maybe you’re trying to lure me in with bait and switch. Tell me I can eat pie anytime I want as long as I follow the workouts, and then once I’ve signed up for a zillion training sessions you tell me I can only have raw blueberries and spelt.”

“Spelt?”

“Yeah, it’s a type of flour used for bread. I saw it on TV. It sounded healthy and boring.”

“I’m not trying to get you to sign up for anything, don’t worry. I just think in my line of work it’s better to be safe than sorry. I wanted to check with you and see what motivated you to come to the class tonight.”

“It’s a situation over at work. It’s been difficult before, but it got a little intense today. I thought, like you said, better safe than sorry.”

“Is there anyone you can talk to at work? Get you out of the situation?”

“Not really. I spoke with my supervisor. She’s great, but we’re understaffed to begin with, and now one of the other workers is out on maternity leave, so we’re spread pretty thin. I can’t just pile my case on a coworker.”

“Are you a doctor? A PA?”

“Social worker. I love my job, don’t get me wrong. I just—”

“I imagine you deal with all kinds of people. Some better than others.”

“Yeah, just like in any job, except it’s high stress to begin with, because I work for

the agency that took away their kids. So, it's hard not to be seen as the enemy."

"So, is this a parent?"

"I can't really discuss it. Privacy laws," she said, taking a sip of water.

"Okay, so I'll ask the right questions, and you can just say yes or no. Did someone threaten you with physical harm?"

"Yes."

"Shit. Okay. That's a pretty clear danger. Are we talking direct threat? The person said he or she would do something physical to you?"

"Yes. Beat my ass," she supplied, eating a fry. She was trying to say it wryly, like it was a funny story, but her hand trembled a little.

I wanted to hold her.

But that would be very unprofessional. Nothing I would ever consider doing. Why had I even thought of it? The way she looked at me so determined to be calm, to seem okay. I wanted to tell her she didn't have to act so strong, that it was okay to be scared and ask for help. I wanted to tell her that her supervisor should do something to keep her safe. Like possibly shoot the guy in both of his goddamn legs.

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I reached across the table where her hand rested beside her plate. I almost took her hand. At the last second, I swerved and stole another fry. It was a close call. I had wanted to assure her that she could trust me, that I would keep her safe as if I knew her, as if she were mine to safeguard.

I steered the conversation into shallower waters, told her about my self-defense training, how heavy the full simulation gear is and how many nut punches I took before I admitted I needed to wear the gear. She laughed, completely at ease. It was amazing how well we got along, how easy it was to talk with her, to make each other laugh.

When I looked at my phone, I was surprised to see that we'd been there two hours. I told her what time it was. Lexi was shocked, too.

"You're kidding. It's like we just got here. I've been on dates where half an hour seemed way longer than this. Not that this was a date," she said, flushing pink, seeming a little flustered.

"No. I know exactly what you mean. This was fun. Could I walk you home? Make sure you get there safely?"

"I drove, thanks. If you want to be extra protective though you can walk me to my car," she said.

We both stood up and I followed her out and down the block. She unlocked a little Toyota and got inside. She started it up and rolled down the window.

“Thanks for tonight. I feel a little better.”

“That’s good to hear, Lexi,” I said, saying her name just because I wanted to.

“Hey, I’ll see you Friday at class, okay?”

“I’ll see you then,” I said. I wanted to say something else, tell her to be careful or to lock her doors, but it seemed intrusive since we barely knew each other.

I walked home and found my best friend Leo already there.

“What, no fires tonight?” I said, popping a beer.

“No. I got off early. You, on the other hand, are out late. Did one of your self-defense girls need a little one-on-one tutoring in the locker room?” he joked.

“No, the opposite, you horn dog.”

“The opposite as in one of the self-defense guys needed one-on-one?”

I rolled my eyes at him, “No. There was a new girl in class. She stayed in the back and acted nervous. I wanted to make sure she was okay.”

“By nervous do you mean hot?”

“I mean nervous, like she was going to jump out of her skin if anyone even spoke to her.”

“Trauma victim?”

“Got threatened at work,” I said, sitting down beside him on the sectional.



“Ex-boyfriend?”

“Client.”

“Hooker?” he asked.

“Social worker. God, you’re a pervert. Does the Fire Chief know about your dirty mind?”

“He and I aren’t that close,” Leo said, “plus, I like girls. What does this one look like?”

“I dunno,” I said, setting my beer down on the table and rubbing my neck.

“You dunno?” he laughed, “You’re acting like we’re back in high school and you think I’m after your homecoming date. Just tell me what the woman looks like.”

“Dark hair. Big eyes like she was a lost puppy, at least at first. I swear to God, she looked like one of those woodland animals from a cartoon, all big eyes and eyelashes.”

“A cartoon. That sounds hot,” Leo deadpanned.

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“I didn’t say she was hot.”

“You never said she wasn’t,” he said, “So apart from the frightened bunny eyes, what else does she look like?”

“She’s got dark hair—it was in a ponytail, but after I gave my speech about ponytails, she took it down. She’s small, but curvy. Hates keto, loves carbs. She ordered extra fries,” I said with a smile.

“Sounds like my kind of woman there,” Leo said.

I gave him some side-eye and drained my beer, “Whatever,” I said. I wasn’t jealous exactly. I just didn’t want Leo and his hound dog ways messing around with Lexi who already had a hard time considering the threat some client had made against her.

“What’s her name?”

“Lexi,” I said.

“Like Alexandra?”

“I dunno. She said it was Lexi.”

“Sounds like she dots her i’s with little hearts,” he said. I shrugged.

“I got an early session tomorrow. I better turn in.”

“I think you don’t want to answer any more questions about Lexi. You’re acting so weird about it that she obviously got to you. You like her. Scared bunny rabbit Lexi who dots her i’s with hearts got to you,” he laughed.

“Fine, enjoy yourself. It’s total fiction,” I said crossly.

“You’re attracted to her. Just admit it.”

“I am, okay? We just met. I don’t really know her. We just got along great, and I like her. And she’s attractive.”

“There. That’s all I wanted to hear. Honesty is the best policy, Rafie,” he said with a chuckle.

“Go ahead and laugh till you piss yourself for all I care. I have to be at the gym at six. Good night,” I said, and went to bed.

3

Lexi

I had never had that much fun on a date. I mean, it wasn’t really a date. He was just my self-defense instructor who was a total gentleman and wanted to make sure I was okay. It’s not like that short-circuited all my knight in shining armor fantasies or anything. I totally didn’t think about kissing his neck, or what it would feel like to feel his stubble against my thighs. A low pull in my belly answered that thought, and I scolded myself.

It had been so easy to talk to him. He was kind and funny, and before I knew it, I’d told him more details than I meant to about what was bothering me. But instead of telling me I was stupid to go out there to begin with, Rafe gave me all these tips about

how to deal with people who were acting threatening.

He said that a lot of self-defense was verbal and also body language, that I should look off to the guy's shoulder and not right in his face and don't cross my arms. Crossing my arms was a big coping mechanism for me—a comfort thing, so I'd have to work on that.

“If someone grabs your arm, kick him in the knee. Flat with the sole of your foot, hard as you can. It's gonna drop him. He'll let go and you can run. That's the idea. Get away. Don't stay to stomp on him and kick him,” he told me. I had laughed.

“Who would stay and stomp somebody?”

“A criminal. Which is why you want to get away from one. Next thing is, if you're right up against him, smash your fist right below his jaw. Vagus nerve. Hurts like hell.”

“Good. Kick him in the knees, punch him in the head, got it,” I said.

“No, that's a last resort. Priority one is always to have an escape plan. Find the exits. Keep your distance. Don't be reckless, don't plan to punch your way out. Plan to cut and run,” Rafe said.

I nodded, feeling better and better about going out for coffee with him. Not just because the way he looked at me made my whole body light up with tingles. Maybe I was tired and lonely. Maybe I was still freaked out by my encounter with Mr. Watts and wanted a big strong man to hold me. But I wanted him to. Once I'd thought he was reaching for my hand, but he just went for another fry. I was deflated when that happened.

It was for the best though, because I would've ruined what had the potential to be a

good friendship by having my first-ever one-night stand. I wasn't the kind of person who hooked up with guys, but I was feeling vulnerable and didn't want to be alone. If he'd given me the slightest idea that he was interested, there's no telling what I would've done. I definitely would've let him kiss me. I probably would've let him come home with me, even though I'd never had a guy over to my apartment, not in the two years I'd lived there.

I was independent and focused on my work. I wanted to help children, to help families the way no one had helped mine. It was my calling. But for the first time ever, that felt really lonesome. Sitting across from Rafe in the diner had made it seem worse, not better. I felt a stab of longing for him, for anyone really, for a man to love and to wake up with every day. It made me ache somewhere in my chest.

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His suggestions gave me something to focus on, practical strategies to protect myself next time. Even though I couldn't take his advice.

“Lexi, I don't know you well enough to have any right to give you advice, but you can't go back there. Get reassigned, demand that your supervisor sends someone else. Refuse to go there. It's the only choice here. Nothing I can teach you is going to protect you 100% with this guy. Jesus, he said he was going to beat your ass. You have to take this seriously. Nothing against my classes, but they're not enough, not when you're already in danger.”

I had thanked him for his concern, but I'd told him the truth when I said there was no other way. Janet was busy with her managerial duties and still recovering from knee replacement. There was no way she was going out there. And Brody wouldn't trade me cases or do anything resembling a favor for me in this lifetime. I didn't tell Rafe why. He had already been compassionate enough to find out why I wanted to learn self-defense. He'd listened to me while I explained the threat against me, the impossibility of being reassigned. He didn't need to hear the details of every unfortunate thing that ever happened at work.

Part of me didn't want the guy to think I was a whiner. I already felt weak, cornered in my situation. It would help somehow if he thought I was brave, if he thought I could find the good in things. So, I told him I wished things were different, but mainly I wished they were different for the little Watts girl. She deserved better than this. She deserved a parent who fought to make things right and get her home, not one who made threats and neglected her and took no responsibility for the problems.

“It breaks my heart every day,” I told Rafe honestly, “That these babies deserve so

much better. The worst thing about today wasn't that I was scared. The worst part was knowing that this is all that his little girl has to hope for. That going home to a father like that is the outcome we're hoping for."

Again, I had wanted to curl up in his arms. There was something about him, about that man I'd just met. He had a burly, powerful body—I should have shrunk away from him. All that muscle could have been punishing. His sheer size could have been intimidating. Instead, because of the way he carried himself, because of his demeanor, he seemed confident and strong, not menacing. Rafe seemed like the kind of man who would put his arm around me on the couch, let me snuggle against his broad, muscular chest, and he'd hold me tight. I'd never had that; never known a man or anyone at all who held me, but I yearned for it. And my body or my hormones or something seemed to recognize him, to register his protectiveness, his innate goodness.

I trusted him. I never trusted easily, not after the way I grew up. But something in Rafe called out to me, made me feel safer. It was a wonder I didn't burst into tears. The only thing that really stopped me from crying was the fact that I didn't want to flat out horrify him.

When I got home and locked my new deadbolt, I distracted my worried mind with thoughts of what I'd like to do with Rafe Sullivan. Horrifying him wasn't even on the list.

4

Leo

I got a kick out of making Rafe squirm. We grew up together. We'd always been like brothers, and I never missed a chance to give him crap whenever I could. He was level-headed most of the time, so I didn't get as many opportunities as I did in high

school when he chased after the head cheerleader for an entire year. To be honest, I hadn't seen him that stupid over a girl since then. Until Lexi came into the picture.

I could tell from day one that she was different. Rafe clammed up and didn't want to spill details. If it was just some girl he met at a club, he'd talk about how they met and where they went for a late-night snack and what music she liked and if she had a crazy family. We never trash talked our dates, but we shared funny stories and kept each other in the loop. So when he wouldn't talk about this one, it was pretty obvious that he wanted to keep things private for a reason.

Rafe saying it was only professional concern was total bullshit. I knew my friend too well for that. He might not dip his pen in the office ink, but he sure as hell didn't act like it was the nineteenth century and avoid all the women who ever went to that gym. He closed ranks, acted like he needed to protect her. He only gave me the bare minimum of information when I asked. He never offered information freely.

The thing was, I knew he'd been seeing her for weeks. I knew because instead of coming home to shower and have a few beers after his self-defense classes twice a week, he always rolled in about three hours later than usual. I'd ask if she had come to class, and he'd say yes. They'd go to Lacy's afterward for a bite to eat.

His face when he talked about her—it was hilarious and pathetic at the same time. What little he'd ever say was said with a serious expression like he was talking about church or the Constitution or something else extremely important.

"Does she have a key to the apartment yet?" I asked him once, and he gave me the finger.

I was just talking shit, but I was concerned for the guy. He was in deep and didn't even know it. He hadn't brought her around the house yet, so I hadn't seen her, although he had finally showed me a picture on his phone. She had sent it to him



from work one day, a selfie with a bakery bag and the caption, ‘wish you were here but I wouldn’t share my bagel’. He had grinned when he showed it to me, like it was something really clever and adorable. He had it bad, and I told him so.

I’d just come off a fire call, showered, and went to Lacy’s. I figured I’d meet the girl he hadn’t told me much about. When I walked in the diner, I saw Rafe sitting in a booth, a dark-haired girl across from him. I went to their table to sit down with them.

Rafe took one look at me, stood up and moved to sit beside Lexi, “Come on and have a seat, man. We got room,” he said, indicating the empty side of the booth.

“You must be Leo,” she said, smiling at me.

I’d seen a picture of her. I knew what she’d look like, but I wasn’t prepared for how little justice the picture had done her. Her smile was enough to knock me on my ass.

“Hey. I thought I might get a chance to meet you if I dropped by. Since my boy here is ashamed of our house.”

“No way, we have a great house. You can see the house anytime. It’s this jackass I didn’t want you to meet. Thought he’d scare you off,” Rafe said to Lexi.

“I don’t scare off that easily, do I? I’ve been wanting to meet the hero fireman. Save any kittens from any trees today?” she asked me.

I had to laugh. I liked her humor. “Not today. I did slay a few dragons and stopped some old wiring from smoldering in an attic,” I said modestly.

“How many dragons?” she said, “I always thought a few meant three, like a couple is two, but I’m not sure about that.”

“At least five,” I said, boasting of my imaginary dragons.

“See, I think five would be several, not a few. That’s the problem with the English language as far as I’m concerned. We don’t have enough specific words.”

“I see your point,” I said, “but I think we have some great specific words. Like beer, for example. Nachos, there’s a good one.”

She laughed. Lexi had a great laugh. I had gone to the diner to meet the girl and have more ammunition to tease Rafe. But I liked her already. What was more, I could see how he felt about her. He didn’t have his arm around her, but he kept looking at her, then shredding his paper napkin or picking at his pie, like he was really busy trying not to put his arm around her.

## Page 7

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“As Rafe’s oldest friend, I would like to know your intentions toward him.”

Rafe choked on his coffee, and Lexi smacked him on the back until he could breathe. I chuckled.

“My intentions? I guess my plan is to pay the check when we’re done because he bought my dinner on Wednesday, and it’s my turn. Then I’ll see him at class next week.”

“That’s cute. But I’m talking about my boy Rafe here. He’s trying to be a gentleman, obviously. But I’ve known him long enough to say I haven’t seen him with a crush this bad since Ashley Potter in eleventh grade.”

“Really? How’d that work out?” she said.

“Well, they’re married now and have eight kids,” I deadpanned.

“Nah, he’s thinking of himself and Ashley. Poor guy. She wouldn’t even look at him,” Rafe chimed in. “He had a t-shirt made with her face on it that said ‘I heart Ashley’ on the back. They even put a picture of it in the yearbook. It was so sad.”

Lexi giggled, “Really?”

“No,” I told her. “He’s just trying to dodge the fact that he hasn’t acted that stupid since then. Until now. The amount of time he spends avoiding my questions about you should tell you --”

“Should tell you what a nosy bastard my best friend is. Asks me questions about you all the time. I think he’s obsessed with you,” Rafe said.

“Me? You’re the one obsessed with her. I never met her till tonight.

“We’re not even Facebook friends,” I said.

“I do follow your Instagram. And that’s a lot of selfies at the firehouse, I gotta say,” she said.

“Can I help it if I’m photogenic and the firehouse has a ton of props for background? Brick walls, fire trucks, pole, hoses --”

“Yeah, it’s like you’re auditioning for a Hot Firefighters calendar of your own,” she said.

“I wouldn’t say no to a deal like that,” I said.

“While it’s hilarious to scroll through my feed and see five selfies of you with your shirt off, you could seriously be a model. You don’t look like a real fireman. You look like the kind of firemen they put in those pictures in Cosmo and on romance novel covers. The too-good-to-be-true kind,” she said.

“We were both wrong,” I said to Rafe. “She’s the one who’s obsessed, and she’s obsessed with me.”

“Yeah, who knew you were online stalking my roommate,” Rafe said to her sternly. She laughed.

“I had to check out my competition for your time and attention,” she deadpanned. “I had to know what I was up against. And he was obviously too vain to be a threat.”

I laughed. I also stopped to marvel at how well she fit in with us, like she had always been part of our dynamic. She could trash talk with the note of fondness that let us know she was on our side. We were so comfortable going back and forth. We stayed there for hours just talking and laughing. When it was late enough, we all admitted we had to go home, and it felt strange not taking her home with us. That was the weirdest part of all.

The second weirdest was the fact that I was attracted to her. Even when she teased me or gazed at Rafe a little too long, I still imagined the things I'd like to be doing to her. Looking at her, hearing her laugh, all of it made me want her. I knew she was Rafe's, and I would never take my best friend's girl, but I was a flesh and blood man. I'd add her to my spank bank and never say word one about it.

As we were leaving to walk her to her car, I thought of something, a way to spend a little more time with her, the three of us. We meshed well, and it was fun. So I went for it without asking Rafe.

"Hey, want to come spar with us at the gym tomorrow around eleven?" I asked.

"What do you do?"

"We fight. Sometimes we box, kickbox, a little MMA. I don't do krav maga like Rafe, but I can hold my own."

"I'd like to see that," she said, "Thanks. I'll be there."

I found myself grinning. When I looked at Rafe, he was smiling, too. I wasn't the only one who thought we were a good fit. And if she was going to be his girl, I might as well get used to being with both of them.

Lexi

## Page 8

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Taking Rafe's classes gave me some confidence, but the biggest change in my life was spending time with the guys. I called them 'my boys,' said it jokingly at first, but it felt like they were mine. Like after twenty-seven years of not having a family, I was suddenly part of one. They had a bond like brothers, and nothing could shake that. At first, I envied their closeness, the ease of their back and forth rapport, but then I found I could slip into the conversation and match them burn for burn. I felt fizzy and happy inside, sitting with them in the diner, making them laugh.

From that first class, Rafe had gone out of his way to make me feel safe, protected when he was around. I was drawn to him, his strength and sureness, his kindness. Then Leo came into the picture, invaded our cozy supper, all brash and conceited and hilarious. He was more outgoing where Rafe was sincere and serious. Leo was a joker who knew how good looking he was, but he was also a firefighter, a bona fide hero. I only resented him for about five minutes. Then I realized he was friendly and funny and only wanted to hang out with us both. When I saw he meant to includeme, to invite me along to spar at the gym, I warmed up to him even more.

For the past few weeks, we'd spent a lot of time together. I found myself looking forward to seeing them after work, dropping by the gym or going over to their house. I even fell asleep on their sectional once and slept over. I woke up with a hoodie thrown over me in place of a blanket, because it wasn't like two guys had a lot of decorative throw blankets lying around the house. The truth was it had been the best night's sleep in as long as I could remember because I hadn't been alone. I hadn't propped a chair under the doorknob or stuffed my trash bag of belongings under the bed where I could reach them if I needed to leave in a hurry. I knew when I woke in the night, not in my apartment but in Rafe and Leo's living room, that I was secure. I was staying with a jacked personal trainer and a fireman, and I was safe as houses.

When I had to speak with Mr. Watts again, I had steeled myself for more confrontation. I'd run through all the verbal de-escalation skills Rafe taught me, planned to prepare an escape strategy and know all the exits. I even had Leo help me with a few practice drills—I made him grab my wrist, grab my arm, grab my purse to see if I remembered how to get away. I hadn't asked Rafe because I didn't want him to know I was worried, but Leo was too careful with me, gingerly taking my arm as if he was afraid to hurt me.

"You know Rafe leaves a bruise sometimes when we do this in class," I said.

"What you guys do behind closed doors is none of my business," Leo had quipped.

"It's not like that," I said. "We're friends. All three of us. I'm not sleeping with Rafe. I thought you knew that."

I felt myself blush. It wasn't like I hadn't thought about it. I had fantasized about Rafe, and about Leo, too. Even though I hated myself for it. They were both gorgeous, and they made me feel safe and cared for. I would never have done anything to come between them, and I had to keep my crushes to myself. But the last thing I wanted was for Leo to think Rafe and I were hooking up and feel jealous.

"I know that. I'm just giving you shit, same as I do with him. Relax, girl," he said.

I laughed, feeling relieved.

"You know, I've talked to Watts on the phone a couple times. I even set up a visit for him and his daughter, but he didn't show up. The point was I have nothing to be afraid of. On the phone he didn't repeat the threats, I just have to do a walk through at the trailer and ask if he's attending the parenting classes. I mean, the instructor said he hasn't been there, but I have to ask him anyway. He's part of my caseload."



“It sounds like you’re trying to reassure yourself, not me. Come here,” he said.

Leo opened his arms. I hesitated for a second, felt color bloom in my face. Then I went into his arms and let him hold me. Just for a minute. Just because it was an indulgence I could allow myself. It didn’t mean I was weak and helpless. It just meant that I had a friend who was really kind to me. And maybe he didn’t realize that the coiled strength I felt in his wiry body made my heart thump faster, made a wave of heat roll through me. I wrapped my arms around his back and shut my eyes. I could have this, even just for a second. I could pretend it was real, could pretend it was more than just friendship and fondness. I shut my eyes and imagined for an instant that I knew him inside out, that I knew how to touch his neck in the way that would make him groan and give in and put his mouth on mine. That he’d let me be with him, that I could be with Rafe, too. That somewhere there existed a fantasy world where I could love two men without hurting anyone or making anyone jealous or being called the thousand bad names there were for women who loved like that. Maybe a little sob shook my shoulders, and maybe Leo hugged me tighter.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to go back there. Just tell them it’s too much of a risk and refuse. They’d have to send someone else.”

I stepped back from him, out of his arms.

“No, they’d fire me for insubordination. I can’t. I know you don’t understand. Because what you’re saying makes sense. Anyone with half a brain wouldn’t go back there. But there’s a little girl involved, a little girl who needs her dad to be okay. I have to convince him to do what has to be done so he can get her back.”

“Whoever this kid is, she’s better off without him,” Leo said, stepping back from me. “Seriously, give me one reason not to kick his ass.”

“I’d lose my license. There are privacy laws to stop us from talking about cases and

clients.”

“You could find a safer job,” he said, jaw set.

“This is what I’ve always wanted to do, Leo. I used to be that kid, the one who needed an advocate, someone to make her family straighten up so she could be safe. I was powerless then, but I’m not now. I can help. I have all these resources I can provide to help them.”

“Lexi, please,” he said then.

I saw it then, the macho posturing slipping just enough that I could tell he was afraid for me. I almost crashed against him, burrowed back into his arms.

“I’ll be okay. I’m strong enough to do this. And it means the world to me that someone cares enough to worry about me. I’ve never—no one’s ever done that before.”

I swallowed hard, wondering why tears stung at the backs of my eyes and why I felt this weird, buoyant surge of happiness just because Leo was concerned for me. Because I mattered to him.

I’d had friends before, people I hung out with in college and at my first waitress job, but they weren’t the kind that checked on you if you were sick or sad. They weren’t like this.

“You’ll call me if you need anything? And you promise that if you feel afraid or even a little weird while you’re there, that you’ll get in your car and leave?”

“I promise,” I said.

“Call me when you leave there. I just want to hear that you’re okay.”

“I will,” I said.

When I made the turn onto the dirt road, I was going over everything Rafe had taught me about verbal de-escalation and escape strategies. I planned to pull in, then back up to point my car toward the road and the driver’s door nearest me before I got out. I’d have my keys in my pocket. I had on running shoes instead of my usual flats. I had my hair twisted and pinned flat to my head so there was no ponytail for a handle. I had rehearsed what I was going to say, how I was going to be calm and conciliatory and offer him choices about how to proceed with meeting the court requirements. I was going to be brief and let him know that I was expected at another appointment in half an hour.

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From my car, I called his number to inform him I'd arrived. He didn't answer. I left a voicemail. The Harley and a couple of pickups were parked at the trailer, so someone was there. Drawing a ragged breath, I got out and walked to the steps. I resisted the urge to call my supervisor and have her on the phone when I knocked so I had a witness. Needing a witness was too scary to contemplate. So I steeled myself and knocked.

I heard noises inside, voices, something hitting the ground, something small like a can or a plate. I tensed, making myself smile, open and friendly, not confrontational.

He ripped the door open. I was shocked at the suddenness, at the fact that the dirty white door didn't just fall off its hinges from the force. I swallowed hard.

"Good morning, Mr. Watts," I said, "I tried to call—"

"Where is she?" he demanded.

His eyes were dark, his pupils too big. Drugs?

"Your daughter? She's probably at school."

"I fucking told you not to come back here without her," he growled.

His voice sounded guttural. I stepped back as he stepped forward. I backed down the steps, put distance between us. I trembled, my knees turning to water. I wanted to whimper and scramble to my car, but that was cowardly. I made myself stand straighter.

“Let’s arrange for a visit. Would tomorrow be good for you?” I suggested in full placatory and productive mode.

“Get the fuck out of here and don’t come back unless she’s with you.”

“I’m sure you understand that I don’t have the power to return her to you. The court made a list of requirements you have to meet so you can—”

Watts loomed closer. I pulled out my phone, “This is the schedule for the parenting class.”

My phone hit the dirt. I watched it tumble in an arc and land as he grabbed me roughly.

He jerked me back by the arms and shook me. My teeth clattered together, my head swimming in shock as he dragged me close. I staggered back, but he had me around the neck. His hands, hard and pitiless, closed around my throat. I tried to scream, but I couldn’t. He was squeezing tight, gagging me, and cutting off my air, my eyes throbbing. I drew in what little air I could get in high gasps, tears pouring down my face. I was already getting woozy and weak. I gripped his wrists ineffectually. He was so much stronger than me. He wasn’t nearly as big as Rafe or even Leo, but he was so strong. I wanted to sob, sink to the ground, beg. He was going to kill me. His eyes were on my forehead, not even looking at me like I was a person he was killing. I dug my nails into his wrists, but he didn’t even flinch.

I was supposed to call Leo when I left. But my phone was on the ground, and I was going to die instead. He’d be so mad at me, I thought vaguely, for not calling him. And Rafe—Rafe! Rafe had taught me something about chokeholds. I tried to hold on to the thought, but I was so scared. I kept trying to back away and couldn’t. His hands were big and tight around my throat. It hurt so much that my legs were buckling already.

Step in toward him.

Drop your head straight down.

Dip to the side under his arm and run like hell.

It came back to me. Thank God it came back to me. I did it fast before I could lose consciousness. I moved in, dropped my head straight and ducked under his arm. He was on me then, dragging me to the ground. It knocked the wind out of me, but I kicked out, scrambled to my feet. I staggered toward my car, yanked open the door and locked it once I was in. I started the car and sped off, skidding and weaving until I was on the main road. I drove like hell all the way to the office. I stumbled in and started up my computer, pulling up report forms. I found my hands were shaking too hard to even type. I went into Janet's office. She was on the phone, but she dropped it at once.

"Jesus, your neck. What happened?"

I tried to answer but my throat felt thick and achy, raw. I managed a rough whisper, "Watts grabbed me. Choked me."

"Okay, we're going to the ER. Is there anybody I can call for you?" she asked. I shook my head.

"Can I use your phone? I lost mine when he grabbed me."

I used hers to text Leo. Lost my phone, but back at the office. See you at sparring. I didn't say I was fine because I wasn't, but I'd get a new phone tomorrow. I wouldn't have to face either of the guys till Saturday. If I'd had to see them or even hear their voices I would've crumbled under my thin composure and started bawling. It was better to keep them at a distance, not to tell them what happened.

Janet took me to the ER herself and filled out a lot of the paperwork on her tablet for me, just asking me the questions. She was great about everything and she insisted I file a police report. She called it in and had them send someone to the ER to question me so I wouldn't have to go into the station to make a statement. It made me shake just talking about it. I never wanted to think about it again. She talked about the implications for the case, about discontinuing visitation attempts until an investigation was conducted. All I could think about was the little girl, how I hadn't helped her. I'd just shown up, tried to show her dad a list and nearly gotten myself strangled in the process. I was sorry, so sorry that I had failed her. I shook my head again and again, even as the doctor worked me up and talked about bruising and resting and fluids and putting an ice pack on my neck.

Janet took me back to my car and insisted I take the next day off to recover. I drove home, changed to my pajamas and checked the lock on my door about twenty times. I couldn't concentrate on TV or my library book. I just iced my neck and lay there on the couch under a blanket, scared out of my mind and blaming myself.

Staring in the mirror, I shuddered. The white part of my left eye was almost completely red from the blood vessel that had burst from being strangled. My face was puffy. Bruising made dark stripes on my neck and cuffed my arms. I showered, wishing I could scrub off the marks he'd left on my skin. When I cried, my throat ached.

The next day I had to make myself go to the police station to sign my statement and answer a few more questions. I wore sunglasses. Everyone at the station probably thought I was a battered wife, I thought. Not that it made any real difference. Bruises were bruises, after all.

Later, I got a replacement phone. I couldn't make myself eat anything so I just sipped some water. I huddled under a blanket again with the TV on, desperate for company. Janet had called to check up on me, but I let it go to voicemail. She'd think I was

resting, not staring crazily at my door like someone was going to burst through it and finish me off. When Rafe called to see if I was coming to spar at the gym, I answered. Part of me needed to hear his voice, needed to connect with another human. I told him I'd be there.



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Instead of my usual tank top and shorts, I put on a t-shirt and zipped a jacket high at my neck. Maybe they'd think I was cold, maybe I was coming down with something and needed the jacket to stay warm. The eye—well, I couldn't wear sunglasses inside at the gym, so I'd have to say I hurt my eye.

I could claim I poked myself putting on mascara. Men didn't know much about makeup so they might believe that I could jab a wand in my eyeball hard enough to burst a blood vessel. Part of me wanted to curl up and hide, not go out, not let them see me, but the part that craved contact and friendship and the comfort of being with them spoke louder.

I walked into the gym, dropped my bag in the locker room and met them on the mats. I had my back to them, putting on the helmet.

"Here, let me help fasten it," Rafe said, touching my shoulder. I turned around, determined to brazen it out, daring him to see that I'd been hurt.

"Holy fuck, Lexi, what happened?" he said, his hands on my face, stripping away the guard helmet, touching my cheeks and jaw as if feeling for damage, "who did this?"

"It's nothing," I said, "I don't want to talk about it."

"Let me see your neck. Someone choked you. Was it the dad? Leo!" he called from across the gym.

Leo came in, still doing curls with a big dumbbell probably showing off, "What?"

“Look at her,” Rafe said, his voice almost accusing. “I thought you said she made it back to the office just fine.”

“I got a text. I figured it was okay. Jesus,” he said when he saw me. He reached for the zipper on my jacket, but I stepped back.

“Whoa,” I said. “I didn’t sign up for the full body inspection.”

“Let me see,” Rafe said. Instead of going for my jacket, he took my hands, inspected the fingertips, my ragged nails, “Defensive injuries.” He shook his head, “You clawed at someone who had a hold of your neck. Have you been to the doctor?”

I nodded.

“Were you going to tell us about it?” Leo said.

I shook my head, my throat tight and thick, unable to speak.

“Come here,” he said. He opened his arms to me. I hung back, resisting. I blinked hard, something making my eyes burn.

“We want to take care of you,” Rafe said, “I know you’ve had trauma here. But we’re not going to let anyone hurt you again. Come back to our place. We’ll talk about it, work out a plan.”

I sniffed mightily because my nose was running.

“Okay,” I said, my voice shaky.

“My truck’s around back,” Rafe said, unwrapping his hands from mine. “Take her on out there. I’ll grab her bag,” he said to Leo.

Leo didn't hesitate. I thought he was going to put an arm around me and help me to the truck like an invalid. I was wrong. He bent and scooped me up in his arms. I gasped.

"I got you. It's okay now," he said. I felt stupid, but I couldn't help thinking it was nice to be carried, coddled in that way. He set me down to open the truck and helped me into it. I slid across to the middle, "We're going to make a Lexi sandwich," he teased, "nobody's going to get near you again."

It was true, once Rafe got in the driver's side I was sandwiched between two big guys, hemmed in and safe. They didn't live far, but that didn't stop me from letting my head drift against Rafe's shoulder as he drove. I may have nodded off. When the truck stopped, I jostled awake.

"My turn," Rafe said softly, taking me in his arms and carrying me up the steps to their house.

He sat down on their big sectional couch, me in his lap. I stirred against him, my head on his chest. He kissed my forehead.

"We've got you. You can rest," he said. "We'll talk later."

"No," I murmured. "we should talk now."

"Have you slept since the attack?" Leo said.

"Not really," I mumbled, "I stare at the door like he's burst in."

Leo swore, then said. "You need to stay with us for a while. Until you feel safe again."

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“I feel safe now,” I whispered, nestling against them both. Leo had my legs across his lap, I realized, “you guys make a great bed.”

“Lexi, you need a nap. I’m going to put you in my bed. Is that okay?” Rafe said.

I nodded, felt him lift me again and carry me someplace. I was laid down on a soft bed, the smell of fabric softener like a summer breeze all around me. I curled up gratefully, a sheet pulled over me. Just as I started to drift off, I heard myself whimper. “Don’t leave me alone, please.” I sniffed, but tears were coming already.

“Shit, she’s crying,” I heard Leo say.

The mattress gave under the weight of someone sitting down. I knew it was Rafe pulling me up into his arms. I clung to him, crying. Leo joined us, rubbing my back and stroking my hair soothingly.

“We’re right here, Lexi. Nothing’s going to happen to you. You’re with us now. Nobody’s gonna lay a hand on you,” he said into my hair.

“He’s right. We’ve got you. You’re okay. Here, let me take that jacket off you,” Leo said. I unzipped it myself and he helped me pull it off.

“Motherfucker,” Rafe said, when he saw the bruises on my throat, the ones on my arms as well.

He touched my neck with his fingertips so lightly, but I still shuddered. He leaned close to inspect the marks. I felt myself shaking. Then I felt his lips, soft against my

skin, brushing the bruises, leaving the faintest trace of wetness on my throat. I felt a bright jolt of pleasure followed by a tidal wave of guilt. He'd kissed my neck the way you'd kiss someone's scraped knee or bruised elbow, and I got some kind of sexual charge out of it. It had sent a wave of warmth rolling down my belly. My nipples tightened, my teeth going into my bottom lip.

Leo dropped my jacket, his hands stroking my upper arms where I was bruised. He sat behind me, drew me back against his chest and held me. I rested against him, trying to calm myself from the touch of Rafe's mouth on my skin. I was privately disturbed that I wanted him. I wanted Rafe, wanted to be in his big bed with him, stripped bare and welcoming his hands and his mouth on every inch of me.

Then Leo took my hand between both of his, matching up our fingers and aligning our palms, his hands bigger than mine. I could shut my eyes and imagine his hands all over me, those big hands moving down over my stomach and sliding beneath the waistband of my shorts. I shook myself. I was having dirty thoughts about my friends, my best friends, who were trying to protect me and take care of me. I was awful for even thinking of such things. I shouldn't want them, shouldn't crave that kind of connection with them.

Rafe and Leo were like brothers to one another almost, lifelong friends. I would never do anything to come between them, to hurt either of them. I resolved to stop thinking of either of them that way, to resist any stray impulse I felt toward the guys. I was grateful to them. It wouldn't be more than that. If my body tried to respond, I'd shut it down without mercy. I'd think anything to get my mind back on solid ground.

But, God, it just felt so good to be held and touched. I wasn't used to any kind of affection. My body wasn't wired to understand nurturing and fondness, and I had to teach it to calm down, to be friends with no benefits.

"You could move in here," Rafe's voice startled me out of my reverie.

“You totally could. We’ve got room. And you wouldn’t be alone. You’d be with us, and you wouldn’t have to stare at the door,” Leo said.

I gaped at them. I couldn’t quite compute what they were saying. I didn’t need a babysitter, and I had a place of my own. I had even put in a new deadbolt without any help. I was perfectly able to take care of myself. I tried to put it into words.

“I know you’ve only known me for a few weeks, but Rafe here has been your self-defense teacher for what, a month and a half? And you’ve spent a lot of time with him. You know he’s safe, and even though you might be a little nervous about the temptation of living in close quarters with me, knowing how I look and that you might run into me in nothing but a towel after my shower, I assure you, any impure thoughts you might have about me are entirely normal and forgivable,” Leo said, trying to put me at ease.

I just stared at him and tried really hard not to laugh. I knew he was joking. I also knew that what they were offering made sense for the time being. Even in the short time I’d known them, I had come to rely on their friendship. I was really comfortable with both of them, and I’d spent time hanging out at their place enough to know that they were exactly what they seemed—best friends who shared the rent and the refrigerator and liked hanging out together. I trusted them completely. That wasn’t an issue at all. Agreeing to depend on them, to let them take care of me was the problem.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea for me. It’s really generous of you both, and I appreciate the offer more than I can say, but it won’t work. Thank you, though,” I said, struggling to sit up on the bed away from Leo’s arms and chest.

“Why won’t it work?” Rafe asked. “It could be temporary if that’s what you prefer—to keep your independence or your privacy or whatever. Look, there’s a guest room. It’s full of boxes. We can put a lock on it for you. You’d have the key. We’re not trying to lure you into our secret sex dungeon or anything,” Rafe said, trying to

make light of it. But Rafe was too serious for that, too sincere. I saw that he was really confused as to why I said no.

“We won’t threaten your dates or give them a hard time,” Leo said. “And if you decide to do it in the shower, just hang some panties on the door so we don’t interrupt.”

“I’m not dating anyone,” I stammered.

“Well, I hope not. Because if you were and he had let you stay home alone after that attack we’d have to go kick his ass to the curb for you,” Rafe said. “But what Leo said is true. We won’t get in the way of your personal life. Just let us keep you safe. Keep watch over you so you’re not alone until everything with Watts is resolved. It was him wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. I went to his trailer. He got mad because he’d told me never to come back unless I was returning his daughter. I ignored that and went for my scheduled visit to talk to him about showing up for his parenting classes and stuff. His eyes were really dark, like the pupils were too big. I was ready in a way, like I went over the stuff you’d taught me, Rafe. I pointed my car out toward the road, and I had my keys on me. I even got out of the choke hold. I ducked my head straight down—” I broke off crying.

Rafe gathered me in his arms and held me. He rocked back and forth, shushing me softly. I knotted my fingers in his shirt, slowly calming down.

“Come here,” Leo said. I looked up from Rafe and went across the bed into Leo’s open arms. He hugged me, kissed the top of my head. “I’m going to let you take a nap and think it over. I’d stay in here and hold you, but I know you wouldn’t be able to resist, and you’d try to seduce me. So don’t make it weird. I’ll see you when you get up,” he said. I gave him a watery grin. “There’s that smile, Lexi. We care about

you. Just let us take care of you for a while, okay?"

I shook my head, didn't turn to watch him leave. I was alone with Rafe, the strongest, safest person I knew. I turned back to him, threw my arms around his neck.

"I don't know what to do. I can take care of myself. I always have. I don't need anyone to watch out for me. But I don't want to hurt your feelings when you've been so good to me," I admitted, "It's just—no one's ever wanted me around. Not even when I was a kid."

"You're wanted here, by us. We both like having you around. You know Leo's full of shit, and he would never in a million years do anything to make you uncomfortable. Neither would I. We just want to take care of you, protect you. You've got this scrape on your face that's the least of your injuries—and I can't stand it. Come here," Rafe said.

He brushed his thumb over the scrape on my cheek, kissed it softly. "I want to take away everything that hurts you. Starting with the idea that you're not wanted. I want you here. We want you. So let us do this."



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Rafe stroked my hair, kissed my cheek again. I melted under the simple, platonic gesture, like I was some waif starved for affection. Except I wasn't a waif. I was a woman. A woman with inappropriate horny thoughts about her best friends. Both of them. And if Rafe didn't stop kissing my wounds tenderly, I was going to run screaming into the bathroom and barricade myself in there. He lay down on his side facing me, beckoned me to join him. I kept six inches between us on the bed, propped my head up on my hand. He touched my face, trailed his fingers down my neck so carefully and softly I thought I might moan. His hand rolled across my shoulder and down my arm. He took my hand in his and kissed it.

"We're here for you if you need us. I just want you to know that. Now get some rest. You don't have to give us an answer now. Do you want me to stay with you until you go to sleep?"

A tear seeped out of the corner of my eye against my will. He brushed it away with his thumb. The ache in my chest opened up, the feeling of being wanted and cherished just gutting me. I put a hand over my mouth and stifled a sob. He pulled me into his arms like I had known he would. His arms were the safest thing I'd ever known. I'd never be able to resist that, the dangerous sensation of being cared for and wanted by either or both of these men.

"Ok," I whispered, "I'll stay. But you have to promise to kick me out if I stay too long or become a nuisance."

"Never," he said, "Leo gets on my nerves all the time, and I let him stay. You can sleep here tonight, and we'll get a lock on that door and your stuff moved in tomorrow. I'll sleep on the couch. It's big and comfy."

“No, I’m not kicking you out of your bed. You can sleep in here. I’ll take the couch,” I insisted, my eyes drifting shut as I leaned against him.

I promised myself as I fell asleep that I’d never do anything to hurt them. That I wouldn’t let a hint of my attraction spill out to cause trouble. They were the best thing that ever happened to me, and I would walk through fire before I came between them. I valued their friendship with me and with one another too deeply to ever risk that.

6

Rafe

She hadn’t lived with us for three weeks before I noticed that we were all staying home every night. Lexi had picked up Thai food after work. We ate it on the sectional in front of some stupid reality show she had us watching. We passed the cartons back and forth comfortably, eating out of each other’s containers. Her bare feet were on my leg. I set my carton down and rubbed her foot, massaging her slim ankle and under her heel until I felt the tension drain out of her. “Mmm,” she said, “that’s even better than these noodles. But now you have to go wash your hands because you touched my foot.” She wrinkled her nose. It was pretty damn cute.

I was so tempted to take her foot in my hands, raise it to my face and lick the arch in one luxuriant stroke just to feel her shiver. She would. A shudder would go through her whole body. I knew how sensitive she was to touch, how starved she was for it. Sometimes I had trouble not crossing that line. I wanted to make her feel good. At night I’d hear her get up to get a drink of water or something and have to make myself stay in my room. If I got up and found her in the kitchen in some little white scrap of a nightgown—my palms itched with the thought of taking her in my hands and making her moan.

“When was the last time you went out, Leo?” I asked him as he stole a noodle from Lexi’s carton.

“I went out last Tuesday night with the guys at work. How about you?”

I shrugged, “Penny came by and asked me out this morning.”

“Who’s Penny?” Lexi said around a mouthful of noodles. “Do I need to set a place for her tomorrow night?”

“Nah. I told her we were making dinner. It was our Thursday thing.”

“Since when do we have a Thursday thing? Is it like our family tradition?” Leo teased.

“It’s my week to cook. You’re in charge of salad, Lexi’s doing dessert. Remember?”

“I remember she cooked for us the first week she lived here. God almighty, I haven’t had a roast like that since my abuela passed away. Where’d you learn to cook like that anyway?”

“Group home,” Lexi said. “We cooked on a rotating schedule. I had read in some magazine that one of the workers left there about a traditional family Sunday dinner. I figured none of us ever had that, so I always made Yankee pot roast. It was a nice change from the casserole with chips on top that most of them cooked. I liked to save recipes from the magazines I ran across.

“How long did you live in a group home?” I asked her.

“Six years. People only want to foster little cute kids. It’s hard to convince somebody that they should take in a teenager, especially when we’ve all had to struggle to

survive and that creates some habits that are—not adorable,” she rolled her eyes. “So being a social worker, it’s a good fit for me because I can sort of coach up the kids on expected behaviors and explain to the families what they may be dealing with. I think of it like being a translator almost. Helping them understand each other.”

I hated to think of her feeling unwanted, of her combing through old magazines for some kind of food that would make them all feel like they had a family for one night. I scooped her up into a hug, noodles and all and she laughed.

“Wait till you taste the dessert I’ve got planned for tomorrow night. There’d be plenty for Penny if you want to invite her. I’m going to do this chocolate pudding with layers of Oreos and whipped cream in it. Girls love that stuff. You might get lucky,” she teased.

“Oh, with Penny, getting lucky is a sure thing,” Leo said. “Those two have been on and off for about a year. Mostly off, but she shows up here for breakfast every once in a while.”

“Shut up,” I muttered. I didn’t want Lexi thinking about me with Penny. Not that I thought Lexi had sexual thoughts about me or Leo. Just because I didn’t want her to have to consider finding some strange woman in the house one morning.

“Come to think of it, she hasn’t been around for a few months. Are you giving up on casual sex, bro?” Leo asked.

“Penny and I had fun for a while,” I said. “But it was never going to be long term.” I hoped that would explain enough of it, enough of the fact that when I was given the choice, I’d rather eat pot roast with my roommates than hook up with Penny again. I had a woman in my life, even if it was platonic, and it would feel weird to go out with some girl, have sex with some girl with Lexi in the next room.

“Don’t tell me you dumped her because of me. I do not want to cock-block either of you. Just say the word and I’ll go to the library or stay in my room or something,” Lexi said.

She was cool about it. That just made it harder. Harder was a word that gave me problems—as in the more she draped her legs across my lap or hid her face in my shoulder during a scary movie, the harder I got.

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Lexi was my friend, and this was the closest to a home she'd ever had. I was determined not to mess that up for her. Even if it meant bolting suddenly to the bathroom and staying there to calm down. Even if it meant rubbing one out in the shower during a commercial break so I could settle in for cozy night with her. I liked her, and I wanted her to feel comfortable at home with us. She was here so we could keep her safe. That meant I could never make a move on her.

I'd just pass on any plans that came my way. Evenings were our time. We binge-watched dumb singing contests and one about some rich ladies who all had Botox and drinking problems. Leo was with us most nights too, trash talking the bad singers and the women who passed out in their chicken salad.

Lexi made me laugh. All the time. The more time I spent with her, the deeper my feelings for her grew. I hid them pretty well, even from Leo, who prided himself on knowing when I was even slightly interested in a member of the opposite sex. I was careful not to stare at her too long, not to let my eyes roll back in my head and my mouth drop open with lust when she rubbed my shoulders after a long day. If I spent way more time at home since she moved in, I told myself that was just a coincidence. Or if I hurried home after teaching a class because I knew she was there waiting for me, that was just the novelty of it. It would wear off. I'd go back to hanging out at the bar with the other trainers eventually. If it ever sounded the least bit appealing again.

Leo got called in to cover the night shift one evening, so he'd sleep at the station. When he left, Lexi sprawled out on the couch full length. "At last, room to stretch out," she giggled.

"You take up a lot of room for a tiny person," I said.

“Hey, I keep all my makeup and girly crap in a basket, I don’t leave it in your bathroom,” she laughed.

“I don’t mind your girly crap half as much as you think I do,” I said honestly. “I like having you here.”

“I like being here. In fact, I love it. I love you. Both of you,” she said quickly. I saw the flush creep up her neck and fan over her cheeks. I wanted to kiss her mouth so much that I clawed at my chest a little where it ached. I cleared my throat, took a swallow of my beer.

“I better clean this up,” I said gruffly, picking up containers and napkins. She jumped to her feet, eager to help. She leaned across me and grabbed a stray napkin crumpled on the floor. When she did, she bumped up against me, my upper arm brushing the side of her breast. I felt like I’d been burned, branded. I jerked back, “Sorry,” I said, taking a step back and colliding with the couch.

“Didn’t mean to cause a traffic jam,” she said, slipping past me to throw away the napkins she’d picked up. “I’ve got a date with a library book. I’m almost through with their entire cozy mystery section. Lots of old ladies with bakeries who solve murders.”

“Okay, good night,” I called to her as she went into her room.

She didn’t shut the door all the way. I knew she’d be changing into her pajamas. I could shut my eyes and imagine the lift of her breasts as she drew her shirt over her head, the curve of her ass when she shucked off her jeans. I shook myself, grabbed my phone and cruised Instagram for a while. When I was sure she’d be asleep, I went and took a cold shower, toweled off to get ready for bed.

I was brushing my teeth when I heard her. It was soft to start with, like a moan, but

then there were faster whimpers, a short cry. I dropped my toothbrush in the sink and headed for her room.

Lexi was asleep, twisted up in the white sheets, curled in on herself, hands clutched in the tangle of her own hair. She whimpered and moaned, crying out in a short scream. I was on her then, no more hesitating in the doorway. I pulled her up into my arms, whispered to her.

“It’s okay, Lexi. I’m right here. It’s okay,” I said into her damp, tangled hair. She fought against me weakly, pushing, shaking her head.

“Wake up!” I said, “Lexi!” I put her away from me for a second to look in her face. She was flushed and sweaty, tears on her cheeks. It wrenched something in my chest to see her frightened.

She blinked, rubbed her eyes, sniffed bravely, “I—I—Rafe—” she broke off saying my name. She buried her face in my neck, hot tears falling on my skin. I wrapped her in my arms, told her over and over that I had her, that she was safe. I felt the tension go out of her when her sobs subsided.

Lexi clung to me still, one hand on my bare back, one on my chest. I wished briefly that I’d put some clothes after my shower and not just the towel. Something, anything between us would have been safer. She was in a white t-shirt, her strong thighs naked below it. I swallowed hard, rubbed her back in what I hoped was a friendly, comforting way.

She looked up at me, her eyes bright with tears as they met mine. She leaned up and kissed my cheek or tried to. She brushed her lips at the corner of my mouth, probably by accident, but I was lost. I covered her mouth with mine, my lips nipping at hers, my tongue sliding inside her mouth, soft and welcoming. She gasped into my mouth, her tongue stroking along mine as I explored her slowly and sensuously. Her hands



tangled in my wet hair and I growled with satisfaction, I couldn't help myself, when she nipped at my lower lip with her teeth, sending a bolt of sensation straight to my cock. I wanted her so fiercely that I had to stop at nothing to contain it, had to content myself to stroke my tongue into her mouth deep and slow, making her tremble under my hands.

Slanting my mouth over hers, I slid my palm along her rib cage, my thumb brushing the underside of her breast. I stroked higher, felt her nipple harden into a tight bud under the slightest rub of thumb. She gave a small moan into my mouth, so I gave her more. I laid her back on the bed, working her sensitive nipple between my finger and thumb, making it into a hard, aching peak. Lexi wrapped both arms around me, whispered into my mouth, "Rafe, I've wanted you for so long." Her words undid me. I had meant to comfort her with a kiss, but she had set me ablaze.

I pulled back from her, trying not to let my gaze linger on her swollen lips, the drugged look in her eyes. I wanted to slide her shirt up and put my mouth between her legs. She'd let me, I knew from the look on her face. But she was too vulnerable, staying with us for safety and friendship, crying out in the night from a bad dream. It would have been dishonorable to take advantage of her. I helped her to her feet.

"You were crying in your sleep," I said gruffly. "I came in to wake you. I didn't come in here to—"

"I know," she said, "Thank you for waking me. It was an awful dream. I think that's why I—held on to you. It won't happen again. I don't want to lose your friendship. Yours or Leo's."

"What we have is too special to risk," I said, hoping she understood what I meant—that I was attracted to her, but I didn't want to lose the ease and closeness the three of us had.

“Good night, Rafe,” she said. She wouldn’t lift her face to look at me. “And for what it’s worth, no one’s ever kissed me like that. Not ever.”

I swallowed hard. I couldn’t think of anything to say to that, and I sure as hell couldn’t let myself touch her again. I tightened the towel around my hips and walked out. Back to another cold shower.

7

Leo

At the diner, she blushed when Rafe took a drink of her Diet Coke. And again, when he reached for one of her fries. She seemed bashful around him all of a sudden, after weeks of sprawling out over both of us on the couch or shoving him over to take a bite of his hamburger in the booth at the diner. She was acting weird around him.

I would’ve thought it was nothing, but he wasn’t exactly his normal too-serious self around her anymore either. Mostly he looked at her like he was a starving man and she was a ten-course banquet. The rest of the time he looked like he’d been whipped and didn’t dare look up. When she’d yanked her plate away from him after he reached for a fry, he’d had the look of a misbehaving puppy who’d been left outside in the snow.

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It was hard enough for me to be her friend and nothing else. But watching Rafe struggle not to flirt with her, watching her avoid touching him at all costs was exhausting. I told them about the fire call we went on the day before when some idiot dumped a whole can of lighter fluid on the grill before dropping a match in there just to try and dispel some of the awkwardness.

“Dumbass was lucky he only lost his eyebrows and burned his forehead. He could’ve been nothing but a pile of teeth after a fireball rolled over him,” I said.

“Pile of teeth? Mmm. Great dinner convo, Leo,” Lexi said.

“People do a lot of stupid crap that gets them killed. It’s like the unofficial motto of the fire department: Rescuing dumbasses who do stupid shit.”

“Aww, you should cross stitch that on a pillow for the couch,” she teased, “My job would be ‘Convincing drunks to try and get their kids back’. How about you, Rafe? ‘Making lazy people fit?’”

“Empowering people to get stronger,” he said.

“Ugh, so sincere all the time,” I groaned, “Why do we even hang out with him?”

“He makes good chili?” Lexi suggested with a shrug. Then she looked at him shyly and blushed when he met her eyes.

I wanted to throw my glass of ice water on them both. They were making googly eyes at each other, and it was ruining my chicken sandwich experience. I eased out of the

booth, saying I was tired and going to head into the station a little early for my night shift.

“I’ll go too,” Rafe said, jumping up to follow me, which was weird. “I should get to bed.”

“Well, I’m going to stay here and finish my milkshake. I’ll see you when I get home,” Lexi said with an eye roll.

When we got to the house, I turned to Rafe, “What’s the deal with following me out? It looked like you two needed to be alone.”

He shook his head and rubbed at the back of his neck in exasperation. “That’s the last thing we need. Last week when you had to cover Glen’s shift, she had a nightmare. Woke up screaming, the whole thing. I went in there to wake her up and comfort her. But I got carried away and I kissed her. So, go ahead and punch me. I deserve it. She moved in here so we could protect her and take care of her, and I put the moves on her.”

He hung his head, clearly ashamed. “Bro, it’s nothing I haven’t wanted to do. Living with Lexi has its own set of hardships. Like when she goes to reach for something on a high shelf and her shirt rides up and you see that little sliver of stomach, damn,” I said in full commiseration.

“Yeah. It’s that or when we’re on the couch and she leans back against me or drapes her feet in my lap—God. It’s a miracle our water bill hasn’t quadrupled with the amount of cold showers I’ve been taking,” Rafe said.

“I know,” I told him. “It’s rough. But she’s worth the trouble. And if she kissed you it’s because she wanted to. I know Lexi well enough to know she doesn’t do anything she doesn’t want to.”

“True. We just have to believe it’ll get easier, once we’re more used to living with her. It’s only been, what, a month or so?”

“Yeah, and we’ll make a pact. We don’t make any moves on her. If she wants you—which by the way she’s stealing looks at you, she does—we let her make the first move. No harm, no jealousy. Priority one is protecting her and making her feel safe with us.”

“She has to be able to trust us. No matter how painful it is to live with that temptation,” Rafe said.

“We should both try going out, getting laid. Maybe if we weren’t both sitting her with blue balls it wouldn’t be so bad.”

“I don’t want to go out with some woman who isn’t Lexi,” Rafe said.

“I know, bro. Well, I’m going to head into the station. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

My shift was almost done. It was six in the morning when the call came in. I was in the fire and rescue vehicle in less than a minute, and Donny scrambled in behind me. He had been asleep while I was eating an egg sandwich and thinking it would be nice to get some rest at home. I’d even wondered if Lexi would still be there when I arrived. I thought about picking her up a latte on the way.

It wasn’t a dumbass playing with lighter fluid that time. It was a car wreck, a couple of teenagers taking a curve too fast after being out all night doing God knows what. A woman in a bathrobe was spraying at the flames from a distance with a little kitchen fire extinguisher. We waved her off and tried to fight the blaze but it was too late. After half an hour it was obvious there was no way to save them.

I filed reports while Donny talked with the cops and waited around to speak to the family. My shift had been over for an hour and a half when I left the scene. I knew by that time it was a couple of sixteen-year-old girls, that they'd left a sleepover early to get to track practice, that they had been running late. Instead of showering at the station like I normally would, I just dropped off my bunker gear and headed home. I needed my own shower and my own bed.

My eyes burned, and my head ached as I unlocked the door and stumbled inside. Lexi should have been long gone like Rafe was, but she was home.

"Hey, are you okay?" she said, rounding the kitchen counter and coming to me. I tried to come up with a joke or a shrug, but I didn't have it in me.

"Tough call right at the end of my shift," I told her, my voice sounding like gravel.

"Oh, no, I'm sorry," she said, pulling me into her arms.

"No, I'll get you dirty," I said, lamely trying to push her away.

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“I don’t care about that. You look like you could use a friend,” she protested. Lexi was trying to hug me. I was trying not to hug her back. The next thing I knew, I had my arms around her, crushing her to me like I was trying to hold onto everything that was still pure and good in the universe. I choked out a sob, “They were just sixteen,” I managed.

She was kissing my smoky hair, my filthy, blackened face. I turned my head, captured her mouth with mine. She didn’t pull away. She responded to me hungrily, taking my tongue in her mouth, opening for me, her hands greedy on my shoulders and neck. Her hands roamed down my chest, pulled my t-shirt out of my jeans and dragged it off of me, breaking the kiss only long enough to strip me bare.

“Why are you home?” I said against her soft, sweet lips.

“Waiting for you. I was going to make you breakfast and tuck you in before I went to the office, but when you were late, I called in for half a day. I thought you might need me.”

“I do need you,” I said roughly. “I need you in every way right now.”

“Then you can have me in every way, Leo,” she said. She smiled at me knowingly.

“You’re kidding,” I said stupidly.

“No, I’m not. I want to take the pain away, Leo. I want to make you feel like the hero you are. Show me how.”

“God, Lexi—you can’t mean that. Do you know how long I’ve wanted you?”

“About as long as I’ve wanted you. When I got hurt, and you held me and kissed my hair, you were rubbing the back of my neck real slow. It made me so wet, Leo. I was so embarrassed, because here the two of you were being the best friends I’d ever had and wanting to keep me safe and I was getting wet for you,” she sounded embarrassed.

I had my hands on her hips then, my lips seeking hers, brushing against them, clinging. My hands were inside her blouse, the buttons on the floor somewhere and only her hot smooth skin under my palms. I held her against me, backed her into my bedroom. I stripped the blouse off of her, then her bra. Before I could say a word, I was on my knees like I was ready to worship. Her hands were in my hair as my lips closed over one rosy nipple, drawing on it, making it tight and stiff. I gathered all of her in my arms, wanting to hold everything at once.

Lexi gasped, her hands on my face, guiding me up to her lips and kissing me again. She tasted me, the soft feel of her tongue in my mouth making me hungry for more. We tumbled back onto my bed, my hands and mouth full of her. This was Lexi, alive and vibrant, safe, and mine at last. I was going to make it good for her, so good she’d never forget. I needed her, needed to bury myself inside her, remember what it meant to feel alive, to connect with someone. I knew in her body I could find everything I needed. All thoughts of my conversation with Rafe the night before left my head.

I rolled her onto her back, her arms still around me. I kissed her lips again and again, then her neck and her collarbone.

As if she’d read my mind, she briefly broke the kiss. “Let me say it’s because you had a bad call, you couldn’t save the people in the car. Let me say it’s that I wanted to comfort you, and we got carried away,” she says breathlessly.



Before I could tell her that I'd take the blame with Rafe, she pressed her lips to mine again and I was lost. I rocked back on my side, taking her with me, cradling her against me, my mouth on her cheek, her jaw. Holding her was a luxury; something I'd wanted to do for so long.

"You stayed home for me, to wait for me," I said, unable to tell her how much that meant to me, "to make sure I was okay."

"You needed me. I think maybe I knew you would."

"I don't even care why you stayed," I admitted, "I just care that you're here now."

"I'm here, Leo," Lexi said, my name in her mouth as I kissed her again.

It was fast and blurry, a sweaty coupling on my rumpled bed. She had been right about how long we'd both wanted it, because there was no time for finesse, no time for a slow and tender awakening. My fingers trailed down her stomach into her damp nest of curls. She'd writhed against my hand, proving how ready she was from just a few kisses. I reached over her head to the bedside table, fumbled in the drawer for a condom. I had it open and rolled it on before I dipped my head to taste her nipple, to nip at it and tease her, making sure she was slick and ready. I opened her with my fingers, stroking her seam, and settled between her thighs. I kissed her neck, behind her ear and whispered how much I needed her. I pushed my cock inside her, felt her spreading and flaring around me. She was small and tight, a pulse of pleasure rolling through me already.

I caught my breath when she wrapped her legs around my hips, urging me on. I brushed back her hair, my mouth on hers. I took her gasps and moans into my mouth, tasting every sound that I stroked from her with my thrusts. She was delicious, responsive. I came fast and hard, lost in hersweet, hot flesh. As I withdrew, I put my fingers on her, petted her, stroked her until I felt her legs quiver, her back arch. Her

teeth dug into her lower lip. I licked her ear, circled her sensitive nub with my thumb, dipping and rubbing until she came apart under my hand. I crushed her against me, letting her ragged breathing slow down and settle. She held on to me, my lips against her hair. She slept for an hour, naked and tangled up with me. I drew the sheet over us, reveled in the warmth of her soft body curled up against me, her hair tumbling over my shoulder and arm.

When she stirred, her arms went around me, hugging me to her. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“For what?” I said, still basking in the afterglow.

“That was a mistake, Leo. It was supposed to make it better. But it’s made everything worse,” she met my eyes reluctantly, her bottom lip quivering.

“What do you mean? It didn’t feel like a mistake, Lexi, it felt like paradise.”

I shook my head in disbelief, not wanting to hear that she regretted being with me.

“That’s just it, Leo. I knew what I was doing, and I thought if we gave in to it, to this attraction, we could get it out of our system and move on as friends. That we could, I don’t know, scratch an itch and get past it. I was supposed to stop wanting you. I was supposed to be able to share this with you and decide we were better off as friends and roommates. But this made everything worse. Because I still want you. I want you even more now,” she said, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

I felt like my chest had been clawed open and light spilled into it. I crushed her in my arms. It felt so good to hold her, to know that she was shaken by the connection that I had sensed too. That she didn’t get me out of her system, that she still wanted me the way I wanted her. I was overjoyed. There was no other way to describe it. I fell to kissing her, my mouth on hers as natural as anything.

“You’re everything I want, Lexi,” I whispered against her ear, moving my mouth to kiss her neck.

She shook her head and pulled away, “I’m sorry. I can’t stay here. This was a horrible thing to do to you and to Rafe, to your friendship. You were the best friends I’ve ever had and look what I did to you. I’ve ruined everything,” she said, her expression twisting in an agony of self-blame.

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“You didn’t do this alone. We’ll tell him together, Lexi. It’s okay. It was supposed to be like this, don’t you feel that? I don’t do this. I mean, I have sex and plenty of it. But I don’t get romantic. I don’t feel like this about anyone, not ever. Like I want to keep you.”

“I know we have to tell him, but this is on me. I wanted this. I stayed behind this morning so I could see you alone, see if you wanted me, too. I’ve never felt the way you made me feel this morning.”

“You act like you drugged me and took advantage, Lexi, and that’s not how it happened. I was wrecked coming off my shift. I found you here waiting for me. I wanted you instantly, body and soul. You comforted me, gave me the closeness I didn’t even know I needed. God, Lexi, I feel like I’m totally undone here. And you’re talking bullshit about how you ruined everything. Where is this even coming from?”

“Rafe is going to hate us. Hate me. Leo, we kissed the other night,” she said, shaking her head.

“I know, he told me. Listen, I don’t care about that,” I told her.

“You don’t?” she asked, disbelief thick in her voice.

“No, baby. I don’t. We agreed to let you choose and you chose me. I want you again and again. I want you moved into my room so I can reach out for you in the night. I want you falling asleep in my arms so I can watch over you and never let anyone hurt you again. You can’t know what it does to me that you trust me this much after all you’ve been through.”

I stopped short. I almost said it way too soon. It would be stupid and drive her away. She was already spooked. It wasn't a good time to say I had feelings for her.

"Rafe is the best guy I know. He's not going to kick you out or anything. He'll understand. He'll be upset, and he may kick my ass, but we're family, the three of us. Don't underestimate that. You haven't had family before, but there's a loyalty there, an understanding that our history together doesn't let this be disposable. We won't cut each other out, give up on a friendship like that."

"You're right. I don't understand it. And you two have a history together, but I don't."

"He'd walk through fire for you, Lexi. We both would. Don't sell yourself short here."

"I don't deserve it, Leo. Look at me."

"I am looking at you. You're everything," I said, meaning every word.

8

Lexi

I feel like a total piece of trash. I was scared enough to move in with Rafe and Leo, to let them protect me. I played house with them, best friends and a happy family all rolled in to one. Then I screwed it up by kissing Rafe after my nightmare. We got past that, just barely, and I brought in disaster. I slept with Leo when he was hurting because I was lonely and scared and wanted to be touched and held by someone I cared about, someone who cared about me.

I'd never had that before. I'd had sex, sure, but not like that. I was afraid to face Rafe

and tell him the truth, afraid to be rejected and kicked out like I had been all my life. Afraid that I'd come between two best friends. But I had to respect him and our relationship enough to tell the truth even if it cost me everything that mattered to me. I asked them both to have dinner with me at the house because we needed to talk.

Rafe came in with two bottles of wine after work. "So what's with the family meeting? It sounded serious." He kissed my cheek as he put down the wine.

I stirred the chicken and pasta I'd made, already steaming on the stove.

"That smells great. My mom never even cooked like that. Can I make a salad or anything?"

"You can get the biscuits out of the oven," I said, turning away from him, away from the fact that I wanted to go into his arms and cry and beg forgiveness.

Leo came out of the bathroom in a towel and went to get dressed. I couldn't look at him. I was ashamed of what I'd done, how I'd wrecked my own life and possibly even theirs.

A few minutes later, I put down the glass of wine Rafe had poured for me and served the food. We sat together, and I looked at them, so overwhelmed with a flood of regret. I could have had this sweet camaraderie, the friendship and protection of two extraordinary men, and I'd let my hormones run away with me.

"Guys," I said, clearing my throat, taking a long drink. "I need to tell you both something. I'm moving out. Tomorrow."

"What? No," Leo said. "You don't need to do that."

"Yeah, I do. I screwed up. I took advantage. Rafe," I turned to him, my heart twisting

in my chest, “It’s almost like I set out to sabotage the best thing in my life. I owe you an apology. I know I kissed you after I had that nightmare, and that was over the line. I just wish it had stopped there. But this morning, when I stayed here to meet Leo after his shift—God, it’s hard to admit this. I waited for Leo. I took him to bed because I wanted to. Not because he was upset over the casualties from the wreck he’d just come from. I’ve been attracted to him from the beginning. But that’s not even the worst of it. I feel the same way about you. I’m so embarrassed to admit this, but you both deserve better from me. Honesty is the least I owe you. I have feelings for you both. So that’s why I’m leaving.”

I swallowed hard, biting my lip and waiting for Rafe’s reaction.

He stared at me for a moment before speaking. “No way,” he said. “I mean, I can’t pretend I’m glad you slept with Leo, but I’m not surprised either. I always knew it would be one of us. There was no avoiding it. We were living in close quarters, both drawn to you. I wish it had been me, but I’m not going to kick you out over it. What about you? Do you want her to leave?” he asked Leo.

I drained my glass of wine and poured another, never taking my eyes off them. I felt like the verdict over my whole life was hanging in the balance. That called for a bucket of chardonnay. I noticed Rafe was hitting the bottle of red just as hard.

“Hell no. And I see where you’re coming from. I kind of thought it would be you, too. I was honestly surprised by it, but I’m not sorry it happened, bro. I hope you can forgive me because I might as well confess, if we’re admitting all our sins here, that I caught feelings.”

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“Oh God, not you,” Rafe laughed.

I couldn't believe he was laughing.

“What?” I said, not following the joke.

“Leo is the worst. He hooks up and moves on. The joke is if he ever catches feelings the world has ended, and hell froze over.”

“Then Satan's skiing down a snowy mountain right now,” Leo said with a lopsided grin. “Because, and I'm trying not to brag here, but it wasn't just next level hot. There was, and feel free to laugh your ass off here, some kind of major connection when we were together.”

“So essentially you're saying that she screwed your brains out completely and left me with Dr. Phil for a roommate?” Rafe said, glowering at Leo with so much amusement in his face that I let myself feel a little swell of relief.

I was totally and completely confused. It was not the reaction I had expected at all.

“And as for you, Lexi, I don't want you to leave. This is the situation we're in. We wanted you to move in. Then we both wanted you in our beds. We wanted you to choose if you wanted one of us, not to try and guide you one way or the other. I'm not going to be a sore loser. Yeah, it sucks to be me right now, but it would be worse if you left, if you moved out because of it. So, stay with us. We both want you here. And if you feel the need to hook up with Leo, just lock the door. I don't want to go in to borrow his phone charger and find you on top of him. I honestly have to jerk off



enough as it is with you living here.”

“What?” I said, nearly choking on my wine.

“So much jerking off,” Leo added, “It’s a constant need. You literally bend over to pick up the remote and I have to head to the bathroom.”

“Or when you come out of the shower in the pajamas with the sheep on them.”

“God, yeah, the pink ones? It’s so weird but the way they cling to you, it’s just sexy as hell.”

“My sheep tank top? And the flannel pants?” I said, shaking my head in disbelief.

“Yeah,” Rafe said with a sigh. “And that one night you fell asleep with your head on my chest.”

“When we were watching Sports Center,” Leo said. “I remember.”

“I was so hard for you,” Rafe said a little sheepishly. “I almost dumped you on the floor so I could go rub one out and get some relief.”

“If you’d told me I would’ve started wearing a robe and kept my hands to myself. I’m sorry. I didn’t know I was just driving you both nuts. Why didn’t you say something?” I said.

“Gee, I don’t know, Lexi. Wouldn’t it sound creepy? If the guy friends you lived with announced shit like, ‘damn you look tasty in those shorts, I’ve got to go jack off in the bathroom now,’” Leo said. “I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“But wasn’t I making you uncomfortable all along? I didn’t mean to like entice you,”

I said, but even as I said it, I knew it wasn't true. I'd considered wearing a baggy t-shirt instead of my favorite sleep tank, but I'd decided they could handle it. Apparently, they'd had to 'handle it' a whole lot thanks to that tank top.

"Don't stop wearing it," Rafe said. "God, sometimes I think that the promise of that tank top is keeping me alive."

He groaned, and I laughed, "Is it that bad?" I teased.

"Come here and see for yourself," he said. I got up and went to where he sat at the table across from me.

Rafe pulled me down onto his lap. I felt the shiver of his touch, the hard rod of his arousal against my side as I sat there.

"Damn," I said, not meaning to react but unable to hide how impressed I was, how turned on it made me to know that he was that wound up.

I met his eyes, feeling my face flush. His arms were around me, and his eyes were dark as he looked me over. "I can't help myself," he muttered, his mouth on mine.

Rafe's tongue was in my mouth. Not soft and questing like it had been after my nightmare. It was full and filthy, his arm hard around my hips, one thumb stroking the underside of my breast. I felt myself tremble, the deep, lusty kiss rocking me to my core. My hands were on his shoulders. He tipped my head back so he could mouth my neck, licking and sucking until I knew he had to be marking my throat, but it felt so good. The haziness of the wine warmed my veins. I arched into his hand until he took my breast in his palm, the achy nipple hardening like a bead in his fingers. Gasping, I pulled away.

"We made a pact," he said, low and raspy, his mouth still brushing mine, "Leo and

me. We'd let you make the first move, that we wouldn't get jealous or let it come between us. So tell me you're making a move. On me," he said.

I kissed him hard, desperate with longing. I cut my eyes to Leo. His eyes were bright, his lips parted. He had been watching us. Not only had he watched us making out, he had liked it. I saw the arousal in his face, in the taut lines of his body, tense and motionless. I climbed off Rafe's lap, reached for Leo's wineglass and drank from it, the sultry red rich in my mouth.

Boldly, I slid toward him, "Your turn," I breathed.

"Oh God," he said, opening his arms, "come here, Lexi."

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Leo stood up, his arm anchoring me to him, pulling me flush against his hard body. My own body flared in response, remembering a few short hours ago when that thick hardness was buried inside me, stretching me to grip the heavy thrusts. I swallowed hard, gripping his arms for balance as he backed me up. We were on the sectional couch, and then his fingers were on the buttons of my blouse, sliding them free. His big, hot hand moved inside the fabric to find my breasts that were already achy and heavy with arousal. He palmed one with the big, rough hand and I knew he felt me shudder.

“You like that, baby?” he said, his mouth on mine. He parted my lips, opened me effortlessly for his tongue.

I felt a heaviness low in my belly, a needy impulse that made me twist in his grip as he dragged his tongue along the roof of my mouth. I was panting.

“I want you, Leo. How can I ever stop wanting you?” I whimpered.

“Never stop, baby. You never have to.”

“I have a new idea,” Rafe said, emptying the last of the wine into his glass, taking a drink. He joined us on the couch. I shuddered with anticipation, every filthy fantasy I’d been afraid to admit to myself rushing forward. I knew my cheeks flushed red.

“I have feelings for you both. I’m attracted to you both,” I tried to say, but I was slurring a little from all the wine.

“You can have anything you want, Lexi,” Rafe said, his mouth on mine.

I was still on Leo's lap, Leo's fingers plucking at my sensitive nipples, his hands hot inside my blouse. But it was Rafe who was twisting my hair away from my face so he could kiss my jawline, my cheek and the corner of my mouth. It was the same way I'd kissed him that first time, the tentative brush against the edge of his mouth. I wrapped one arm around his neck as he kissed me.

While Rafe was kissing me, Leo fastened his mouth to my nipple, sucking me hot and wet through my lace bra. I gasped, and Rafe took my cry in his mouth, drawing on me low and deep. A long shudder rolled through me, their mouths on me both at once. I was whispering yes into Rafe's mouth, my tongue mating with his. Then I wrenched my mouth from his to meet Leo's eyes. He took my mouth with his, kissing me so deeply I could have wept. I groaned and ground myself against his growing erection. I reminded myself I was safe with them. They wanted me like this. I could go a little wild if I wanted to.

So I did.

I took Rafe's hand, the one that was caressing my bare neck, and guided it down inside my open blouse, let him fondle and pluck at my nipples. I felt his hands drag my shirt the rest of the way off, his mouth travel from my shoulder and collarbone to the slope of my soft breast. Teasing the tip of his tongue around the rim of my nipple, he drove me mad. I whispered please, please into the heat of Leo's mouth. I didn't know what I was begging him for, because I was already getting everything from two gorgeous men.

Then Rafe was pulling me up. Confused, I looked at him. "This way," he said, turning my body, lying me across Leo's lap. Leo grinned and bent over me, his lips on my forehead, my nose, my mouth again. He was an amazing kisser, tender and lewd at once. I felt my body rev up, wetness coating my sex and my upper thighs. That was where Rafe was, my upper thighs. He worked my pants down, yanked them off. Before I could ask what he was doing, his mouth was low on my stomach, a

thrum starting just below my belly button, a throbbing as my sex started to clench around nothing, empty and longing. Then his mouth was hot and wet, flitting between my legs. He dragged the warm flat of his tongue along the seam of my sensitive, throbbing slit. I whimpered. Even through my panties it was a sharp sensation. My head went back, Leo's tongue sliding fully into my mouth. The strokes of his tongue somehow matched up with what Rafe was doing, flicking his tongue against my swollenbud, his thumbs stroking the puffy, quivering lips of my pussy.

I was crying out in no time, legs jerking on either side of Rafe's head. I felt his stubble scrape the inside of my thighs, my fingers tangling in his dark hair. I bucked against his mouth, shaking. Leo trailed his blunt tipped fingers down my neck and chest, dipping his fingers into the lacy cup of my bra as my breasts strained against the fabric, my chest heaving with every breath. He plucked at my nipple, pinched it softly, sent a bolt of sharp, white-hot pleasure down my body. I bucked against Rafe's mouth again, screaming my pleasure into Leo's parted lips, his tongue lapping up my cries, soothing me at the same time he drove me to the brink of madness. Still jerking with shocks of pleasure, I curled in on myself, trembling. I pulled away from them both, a sob catching in my throat. It had been too much, too intense. I had felt claimed, ravished, and worshipped all at once. I'd had two mouths, two wicked tongues, four questing hands lavishing attention on my body. A shudder of remembered bliss racked my body again at the thought.

"Hey, come here," Rafe said. I shook my head but crawled into his lap as he had asked.

He cradled me against his chest, kissed my hair and stroked my back. Leo came close, took my hands and kissed them. I stroked his face, his cheeks and jaw with tears in my eyes.

"How is this possible?" I whispered incredulously.

“How is it not?” Rafe said. “We were open with each other from the beginning that we each wanted you. That we were up for anything if you made the move, that we’d never fight over you. Doesn’t it make sense that we could share? That the three of us together had such an easy time fitting together that it’s a natural extension of that closeness. We both want you. We both protect you. We both go crazy over you in the white t-shirt you sleep in or the sheep tank top—really, all your pajamas are filthy to look at,” he smirked.

“Really? I thought they were just worn out and cheap.”

“Trust me, baby,” Leo said, his hands stroking my wrists and arms, “Nothing about you is worn out or cheap. Whatever you have on I always want to peel off. Have you even found all the buttons from this morning?”

I shook my head, “I didn’t know this was possible. I never knew I was allowed to want this.”

“Do you then?” Rafe pressed. “How are you feeling? Are you uncomfortable?”

I shook my head, let my grin break through, “No, I feel like the luckiest woman in the world right now. You’re both incredible. I can’t believe you even still like me, much less that you want to—”

“Be with you,” Rafe finished for me.

“Stay together,” Leo said.

“So where do you want to sleep?” Rafe said, “His place or mine?”

“Until this morning when I fell asleep with you,” I said to Leo, “I’ve never shared a bed.”

Leo gathered me into his lap, kissed my temple and the top of my head. He rocked me back and forth softly. I felt something unknot inside me that I didn't realize was there, something tense and lonesome. Tears sprang to my eyes. I felt so loved, so cherished. I felt Rafe's big hand on my back, stroking in slow circles, soothing me. I was surrounded by people who cared about me, extraordinary, compassionate men who were sexy as hell. Men who were strong and confident enough to share me without jealousy or silly macho posturing. The kind of man a girl meets once in a lifetime if she's damn lucky. And here I was, twice in a lifetime, with two of the best, most incredible guys ever.

"I want to stay here with you. For as long as you'll have me," I confessed, reaching out and hugging them both at once.

I was right. I was the luckiest girl in the world.



Rafe

Every night was a night in for us, curled up on the couch with popcorn and beer and Lexi. We watched bad reality TV. We played a cutthroat game of Call of Duty, in which we found out that adorable social worker Lexi cussed a blue streak into the headset when she was cornered. She accidentally called me a motherfucker because I wasn't in the right spot when she needed me. Leo had rolled off the couch laughing so hard. I had choked on my beer. She hadn't even realized it until we told her.

Her competitive side was another thing we liked about her. One morning, I hid behind the laundry room door and jumped out to scare her. She screamed and swore and smacked me on the arm, surprised and embarrassed. She tried to get me back, but she got Leo instead.

The shrill screech I heard sent me careening into the bathroom where Leo was pointing at her and breathing hard, his dick in his hand, while she was laughing, doubled over on the bathroom floor.

"She was in the goddamn basket!" Leo kept saying over and over, "I could've pissed all up and down the wall. I could've fallen and hit my head."

"Yeah, explain why you need a sick day for that," she chuckled. "My roommate scared me, and I bumped my head on the toilet."

I had high-fived her, and Leo gave me the finger.

When Leo had to go back on nights at the fire station, I knew I had an evening alone with Lexi. We'd talked about our boundaries, our expectations, among the three of us. We wouldn't date other people. We all tested clean at the clinic. She was on birth control. We were open to sharing her without jealousy as long as we were open in our communication. So when I planned dinner and more with her, I wasn't going to keep it a secret.

When she got home from work and kicked off her shoes, I had ordered Chinese and run her a bath.

"A bath? You're an angel," she said, unbuttoning her shirt as she disappeared into the bathroom. "I'll be out in a few minutes. Maybe more than a few. It's been a hell of a day."

She was in there for maybe ten minutes before I knocked on the door.

"Come in," she said. Her voice wasn't seductive or shocked. It was just Lexi, just accepting and sweet.

She was still in the bathtub, her hair wet and hanging around her shoulders. The bubbles were only in places floating on the filmy water like islands. My hands itched to reach for her.

"The food's here," I said, unable to keep my hungry gaze from feasting.

I ran my hand over my hair, rubbed the back of my neck, feeling like I was a teenager again. I could see the swell of her breasts under the water and wanted to put my mouth on them. I wanted to drag her out of the tub, dripping wet, and put my mouth on her slick nipples, see if I could make her scream again with my mouth between her legs. I blinked to clear the image of her writhing and kicking with release on the blue bathroom rug.

“What’re you smiling about?” she said, but she was smiling too. I shook my head.

“I better not.”

“Why not?” she challenged, “You don’t have to be shy with me, Rafe. We talked about this, all three of us.”

“Suddenly, the only thing I want to taste is you.”

I saw her shiver, right there in the tub. She blinked faster, her cheeks flushing.

“Come here,” I said, bending over her.

I leaned in and kissed her mouth, soft and sweet, just like I remembered from the night she woke up crying. But I went deeper, stroking my tongue in her mouth, her wet hands gripping my shirt.

“I got you wet,” she said, biting her lip.

“Then I should return the favor,” I told her archly.

I picked her up out of the tub and stood her on the rug. She grabbed a towel, not to cover herself, but to start drying off. I was glad she wasn’t hiding her body from me. She was short and curved in the right places, her hips fuller than I expected, her small breasts perfect with tight pink nipples. I snaked my arm around her waist and covered her left nipple with my mouth, sucking it between my lips and rolling my tongue over it. I felt her jerk, heard her gasp. Her wet, slippery skin, the flowery taste of her soap, all of it threatened to overwhelm me. I went to my knees, kissed my way down the curve of her stomach. I lifted her right leg, hooked the knee over my shoulder and buried my face between her legs.

“Oh God,” I said against her soft heat. I loved it, loved the slippery salty flavor of her, the plump lips I spread with my fingers and made her shudder. I ate her for a few minutes, licking and sucking. When I reached her clit, I tugged it with my lips, flicked the tip of my tongue over it as her legs quivered and she sobbed my name.

I stopped, leaving her right on the edge, and stood up. I kissed her with the taste of her sex still in my mouth. “I’m going to have you tonight. All of you.”

She whimpered, a pout of frustration on her lips. She rocked against me, her nipples tight and hard against my wet shirt. She tipped her face up to mine, her fingers playing at the back of my neck. She rubbed her lips along my jaw, her hands in my hair. She kissed my neck, softly at first, and I felt the roll of warm arousal until she bit me, sucking hard at my neck. I groaned.

“So, did you get the chop suey I like?” she asked brightly, moving past me and slipping on the sheep tank top and stepping into her pink flannel pants.

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She combed her wet hair and twisted it up into a messy bun. While I stood there with my mouth half open just contemplating the fact that she had bitten me on the throat and wasn't wearing underwear of any kind. My brain couldn't compute either of those things, much less how cheerful she sounded. I was pretty sure I growled low in the back of my throat before turning to follow her to the kitchen.

I watched her open a bottle of wine without even offering to help. She poured two glasses and handed me one. I drank like I was parched. I wasn't sure that I could sit across from her at the table and eat. It was possible that I'd climb up on the table, knock everything off of it and start devouring her from head to toe. She sat down like it was nothing, like I hadn't just taken her to the edge of ecstasy and backed off. Maybe it was revenge, her driving me crazy as payback.

She stared flipping paper cartons open and poking around at the contents like she was a normal person ready to eat supper and not the woman I was five seconds from ravishing on the nearest surface. She cut her eyes to me, looking ready to laugh.

"You look like the big bad wolf right now," she said.

It was all I could do not to growl in response. As it was, she rounded the table and perched on my knee, "What's with the crazy eyes?"

"God, Lexi," I groaned, dropping my forehead against her shoulder, my arms tight around her. "I want to take things slow with you, show you everything I feel, but I don't know if I have the willpower to do it that way."

"I kind of doubt it, since you came in to tell me the food was here and started going

down on me like a horny teenager, only with better skills.”

“I’m not sure I can hold off.”

“Have you tried thinking about basketball? That’s what my boyfriend used to do senior year,” she teased.

“Did it work?”

“No. He never lasted more than about twenty seconds. I wouldn’t describe it as a satisfying experience.”

“That doesn’t make me feel better. I may be just as much of a disappointment tonight.”

“What?” she said, her hand on my face, making me look up at her. “You could never disappoint me. Never. God, Rafe, I think I fell for you the first day we met. I didn’t say it, and I’m still scared to say it now, but there was no way to help it. I just knew from how you were so careful with me, so kind, and then you wanted nothing more than to teach me how to protect myself.”

“That’s not true,” I told her. “I wanted to protect you myself. I wanted to rip that guy’s fucking head off with my bare hands. Then I wanted to take you out to my car and show you what back seats are for. None of that sounds anything like the guy you say you fell for.”

“Sure it does,” she said. “You were strong and patient and a total gentleman with me, but that doesn’t mean I need you to be a saint. In fact, I’m hoping you’ll be more of a sinner tonight.”

She licked her lips. She was two inches from my face and she fucking licked her lips.

What did she think I was going to do then?

I took her face in both my hands, cradling her jaw, stroking her cheeks, and I bumped my lips against hers. Her lips clung to mine, soft and longing. She opened for me easily when I parted her lips, when I flicked my tongue along her top lip playfully and felt her shiver. It was delicious. I tasted the crisp, sweet wine and the flavor of her that I got from going deep in her mouth, bending her head back and taking her mouth all the way. I didn't hold back, didn't try to be gentle or tease a response from her. I did what I had to, getting my fill of her. She rubbed against my chest, her skin hot and her nipples hard. I palmed her breast, brushed her nipple with my thumb just to feel her buck.

We were about a minute and a half from fucking on the kitchen chair, and the only thing that stopped me was the knowledge that the table and chairs weren't in great shape. They wouldn't stand up to the pounding I was going to give Lexi. So I picked her up. She twisted, got her legs around me and held on. It was hot as hell knowing she wanted me to carry her, that she was ready to climb me.

I took her to my bed, my mouth never leaving hers. I stood her on the mattress and jerked her flannel pants down, burying my face in her belly. She clutched my head, hands sifting through my hair, as I kissed her navel. I slid my hand between her legs, cupping her mound and tracing her outer lips with my fingers, teasingly soft. She was wet for me, God, so wet. I ran my tongue over the rim of her navel and felt her legs quiver. I took my hand away and she mewed a protest. I grazed her thighs, her ass, gave her a squeeze. Then I put my mouth to her, licking her clit in one tight stroke. She slumped to her knees as if her legs gave out. I chuckled. But not for long.

Lexi wound her arms around my neck. She kissed my cheek, licked my ear and then whispered to me. "I care about you, Rafe. I always have. I think I'm falling for you. I can't wait any longer to have you. Please."

Her words were like a fire in my blood then, and my body heated, my already throbbing cock hardening painfully. I ground my teeth. She was wrapped around me, naked from the waist down. I had to get myself under control or it would be over faster than her high school boyfriend got off. I wrapped her in my arms and held her against me. My mouth found her neck. I leashed myself, kissing and nipping lightly, not letting myself mark her or flip her onto the bed and bury my cock inside her without the slightest warning. I loved hearing her say that she wanted me and had all along. It melted me and wound me up at the same time.

Crushing her against my chest, I kissed her damp hair and unwound it from the elastic she'd used to bind it. I threaded my fingers through her locks, dragging my lips down her cheek until I could meet her lips with mine.

"I love you, Lexi," I said into her mouth. She shook her head and drew back, apparently less sexually galvanized by my confession than I had been by hers. I saw tears shine in her eyes.

"You can't mean that," she said.

"Why the hell can't I mean that? It's true," I said. I wanted to shake her, to fuck her helpless until she believed me.

"Because no one has ever said that to me. Never. Not my whole life," she said, her voice shaking. Her words twisted in my chest.

"I'll be damned if you live another day without hearing it. Without hearing it every day. Maybe no one saw you before for who you really are, but I see you and goddammit, Lexi. I love you. You have to believe that," I practically growled. She slumped into my arms. I held her close, her tears gutting me.

"How does someone like me get you and Leo? Even one of you even for one night,



that would be more than I have any right to expect.”

“You have every right. Do I need to show you?” I said, torn between passion and anger that she’d been taught she didn’t get to have love or devotion in her life.

“Show me, please,” she whispered into my neck, her voice small and lost.

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I moved back from her long enough to peel off my shirt just to get her skin-to-skin with me. She took off her tank top, pressed her chest to mine, her soft stomach against mine, her hard nipples rubbing sensuously against my chest. They were almost sharp, and I wanted to devour one, but she needed reassurance, comfort, a romantic kiss, not my greedy mouth on her gorgeous little tits.

I ran my hands up her sides, stroking the curve under her breasts with my thumbs. I dipped my face to hers and our lips met. The soft sweetness, the tender cling of her lips ran through me like fire. It was so delicate, so restrained that it drove me wild. It was all I could do to keep kissing her like that, to touch my tongue to hers and slide my hands up her naked back like a man making love and not a starving man at a feast.

She moved against me rhythmically, the same way my tongue was stroking the roof of her mouth, soft and sinuous, like the sexiest dance. I loved the wet strands of her hair brushing my fingers as my hands gripped her back, loved the way her hands were on my face, as if she couldn't bear the thought of my moving away from her mouth.

"I want you bare," I said. "Nothing between us. I've never had a woman that way, and I want it to be you. I want you to feel how deep I am inside you skin on skin."

"Yes," she said into my mouth, almost a whimper. "I can't stand it, Rafe. I need that."

Lexi was trembling under my hands. If I moved away from her, I knew she'd collapse onto the mattress because the only thing holding her up was me. I cupped her head in my palm and wrapped my other arm around her waist, taking her down, lowering her onto the bed. She was spread bare for me, and I wanted her every way imaginable in

that moment. I could see her sex, plump and glistening with wetness between her creamy thighs, her curls damp from the flood of moisture her arousal had let loose. I wanted to lick it all up, wanted to curl my fingers inside her until she creamed all over my hand. I wanted to flip her over and fuck her face down on the bed and make her sob with pleasure as I filled her with my aching cock. I wanted to sit her in my lap and pump her up and down on my dick until she fell apart and admitted that my dick was the best she'd ever had. No matter what I said about not being jealous of Leo, in the heat of the moment, I wanted to make her all mine. Taking her bare would be a mark on her sure as a tattoo, and he might make her come but she'd never be his, some primal caveman voice in my brain insisted.

Most of all, I was proud that I was the first man to love her. I knew Leo was falling for her, that he'd say it, too, and she'd love him soon if she didn't already. Now this was just the two of us. If I felt more possessive toward Lexi than I ever had in my life, I had a chance to show her that.

She didn't just lie there like some centerfold, like a doll I had posed so I could look at her. Lexi sat up, kissed my cheek and my lips, leaned her forehead against mine. It made me shake all over, just her hand so tender on my face, her thumb stroking the corner of my mouth.

"I'm cold," she said softly, "please."

I could've pulled a blanket over her. I could have done that, but I knew what she meant, the kind of cold that loneliness makes you, the kind where you feel like you'll never get warm again. So I took her in my arms and lay down beside her, our legs tangling up together in a way that was somehow sweet and hot at the same time.

"I want you to be ready. I won't rush you," I told her. I needed her to know she was safe with me, that I'd always keep her safe, even if it meant protecting her from the wild lust coursing through me.

“I know,” she said. “But I think I’m ready. Didn’t I feel ready to you?”

I kissed her eyes, her cheeks, her chin. “God, yes. But you’re too much. There’s no way a woman can be that wet after so little.”

“You kissing me and touching me isn’t so little. It’s amazing. Do you realize how it feels when you just stroke my neck like that? It’s crazy, but I feel it all the way down my body, see,” she trailed her fingers lightly down the side of my neck and my cock clenched and jerked in response. She smiled wickedly at me.

I tried to unbutton my jeans, but hand to God, I was shaking too hard. She pushed my fingers aside and unfastened the pants herself, pushed them down. We were naked together on the bed. I felt the strangest mix of thrilled and terrified. This was Lexi. This mattered. If this ended up being a mistake, I was risking someone precious to me. If it was as good as I thought it would be, neither of us would live through it. I actually wondered if I could survive making love to Lexi after wanting her so fiercely. I’d never been this aroused, this painfully hard before. I worried that I would be too much for her, that no matter how she tried, she’d never be able to stretch to accommodate me. I’d had girls before panic when they saw it, freak out and say it would never fit. I wanted to get Lexi as wet as possible. I didn’t want to hurt her. I wouldn’t risk that.

I kneaded her ass, her back as I kissed her neck. I tried to slide my hand to her breast, to flick that tiny, diamond hard nipple, but she caught my hand.

“Rafe, please. I’m gonna go crazy if you don’t give it to me already. Stop playing around. I need you.”

“I want to make sure,” I said. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“If you’re hurting me, I’ll tell you,” she said, sounding exasperated. I kissed her chin

and her bottom lip.

“Don’t be scared, I’m right here,” I told her.

“I think I should be saying that to you. Trust me, Rafe. I want you. If going bare makes you nervous, you don’t have to.”

“It’s not that. I’m having trouble holding it together here. I don’t want to take you too roughly.”

“Come here,” she said, “you’re always saying that to me, and I always listen. Even when I’m sure I don’t deserve it, I believe you. So come here, Rafe, come here and let me feel you inside me.”

I stroked her hair and kissed her forehead. Then I shoved my boxers down and ran the slick head of my cock between her thighs. I just moved around, tracing her slit and her folds, bumping the tender head of my dick against her clit. She shuddered, her mouth dropped open, her hand trying to cover mine, trying to grip my cock. I shook my head, “Let me,” I said.

She held my shoulders, her body still and yielding as I pressed in, just at the rim of her sex. The head of my cock flared with the contact, at the feel of her damp, hot pussy consuming it.

“Talk to me,” she whispered, gathering me close. I teased her, every fold, every curve, every sensitive spot, I found. I was jerking hard, unable to hold back. I thrust into her about halfway. She was so tight, so small around me that I stopped, dragging in a breath.

“More,” she whispered.

“What?”

“I want more of you. All of you,” she said. “Rafe, you’re my man. The one who saved me. Don’t hold back now.”

Her words released me from the tight hold I’d had on myself. I plunged into her, going balls-deep, filling her to the hilt. She cried out ‘yes’ again and again, her arms around me. I had her pressed on her back into the mattress, her legs around me, her arms holding me tightly against her.

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It was all I could do to pull out of her again. I would've stayed there forever, her tight seam so inviting, so perfect around me. She was wet, easing the way, and it was so incredibly hot to be inside of her without a condom. I was afraid for a minute that I'd romanticized it, or that she wouldn't be willing to take it at the last second. But she had been. I was seated deep inside of her, no regrets, no tears, A dance of her hips, a shift. I lifted her hips by one hand on her ass and thrust in and out again. That time, she keened. She gave a high shrill sound as I pumped rhythmically into her yielding body. The sounds she made were invoking heaven, not thanking him for sending her a man like me but begging like she was coming apart. Then she did. She clenched hard around me, her inner muscles seeming to strangle me as she clamped down on my cock. I spilled out into her then, hard pulses of thick fluid shooting into her body. I cradled her and kissed her then, my mouth in her hair. She wrapped her arms around my back and kissed me.

"Thank God," she said. "You have me. I couldn't have lived another day, not with just hugging and kissing you, not having you completely."

"I've needed you like this for so long," I said, feeling the closeness, the intimacy that she gave me.

"It was perfect," she murmured.

"Was it the same as with Leo?" I asked, even though the answer could kill me. "It's not even that I want a five-star review. I just want to know you're taken care of always."

"I know I am, Rafe. And no, it was nothing like Leo. We were intimate in a different

way, kind of a sultry and affectionate way, but he's not like you. You're different. I don't want you comparing yourselves or stressing out over who did what with me. Otherwise this isn't going to work."

"Then we'll do what it takes to make it work because I know neither of us is willing to let you go."

"Come here," she said to me again. I shook my head and let her hands play in my hair, let her gather me to her. She was asleep in five minutes. I turned her over and spooned up behind her. She felt amazing in my arms, like her body was the thing I'd been missing every time I slept.

10

Leo

I wasn't surprised when I got home to find Rafe and Lexi giggling over breakfast in the kitchen. They leaned their heads together as Rafe kissed her cheek and fed her a bite of pancakes. I wasn't jealous. I just felt left out perhaps. I came up and rubbed her shoulders. She turned around, happy to see me and hugged me.

"I missed you," she said. "How was your shift?"

"Eh, we only went out on one call. I slept most of the night. How was your evening?"

She smiled, looked at Rafe and back again.

"I think we need to talk, you and me," she said, taking my hand and leading me to her room.

I was a bit hesitant to follow, a sudden fear that she was going to tell me she really



only wanted Rafe. But I let her lead me anyway.

“Here’s the thing,” she said. “I know you two said there wouldn’t be jealousy or competition or anything, but I think it’s still difficult for you. Even if you don’t resent it exactly, that I was with Rafe last night, you probably feel left out or like we shared something you can’t be part of. I told him I’m falling for him. But I want you to know for certain that I’m falling for you too Leo. You are just as special to me as he is. Never doubt that.”

My heart almost burst out of my chest as I hauled her against me, kissing her.

“I wasn’t jealous, but it damn near killed me to know he was with you last night, and I had to stay at work. I could’ve—”

“Been with us. I know. That’s what I want, but I need to know if you’re okay with it.”

“I’m not screwing Rafe. Ever,” I said, a smile on my lips.

“I know that,” she laughed, kissing me again. “I just want to be with both of you, and not have you trying to be so polite and give me space and time with him and vice versa. If you don’t think it would bother you to see me with him then I want to try it.”

“I don’t think bother is the right word. I had to count backward from a thousand last night to keep from having to go jerk off at work, just thinking of the two of you together. It was like a porn reel in my mind.”

“Okay. So you’re not threatened by the idea?”

“I’m thinking we should all call in sick today so I can show you how unthreatened I am,” I said, my mouth on her neck. I felt the satisfying shiver of her body as her fingers caught the front of my shirt.

“I have to work today.”

“Tonight then?”

“We’ll talk to Rafe and see if he’s up for it. If so, then tonight. We lock the door and make our own rules.”

I heard Rafe call out from the kitchen and the door slammed.

“I’m going to go finish my makeup. I have to get to work myself,” Lexi said.

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I kissed her cheek and went to take my shower and sleep for a few more hours. I met her at the grocery store when she got off of work. We were buying ingredients to make my grandma's empanadas. I teased her about the way she pronounced it wrong. She teased me because I'd had the recipe for ten years and never tried to make them.

On our way out, loaded down with the reusable grocery bags she insisted on, she stopped so suddenly in the parking lot that I nearly bumped into her.

"What is it?" I said.

"Him," she said, her voice barely above a breath.

Some guy was coming toward the entrance of the building. He had dark hair in a ponytail. He was skinny but wiry, mean looking and he was on his phone.

"Watts?" I said, my eyes going right to his hands. The hands he'd had been around Lexi's throat the day he'd hurt her. I dropped my bags just like that, crossed the distance between us in four long strides and got him by the arm. His phone clattered to the concrete because of where I'd grabbed him, the nerve I'd pressed on. I marched him to the side of the store, pushed him up against the wall. I had his other arm by the wrist and pressed it against the wall by his head so he couldn't knife me while I was talking.

"Listen, you fucking punk," I hissed at him, "Do you see that girl over there?" I pointed to Lexi where she was gathering up the bags I'd dropped. She was in a crouch, but her eyes were on us, wary.

“What about the bitch? She yours?”

“You will never lay another hand on her, do you hear me?” I hissed. He was mean, but I was bigger and mad as hell. “If she calls about your case and tells you to do something, you do it all polite like I’ve got a knife to your balls. Don’t touch her, don’t threaten her, don’t look her in the eyes. I will know and I will come for you.”

“Pretty boy like you?” he scoffed. “Gimme my fuckin’ phone back.”

“Be a shame if I stepped on it after I was done with you. You hurt her once. I let you live. That’s a gift, because she told me not to kill you. I won’t be generous a second time no matter what she says. She may want you to have another chance to turn your life around. You better take it while you have the chance because as far as I’m concerned, my hands are already filthy and one more piece of trash like you isn’t going to do much more harm to my immortal soul.”

I picked him up and just threw him down, wiped my hands. I crushed his phone as I went by, picked up my bags and took Lexi home. I drove her in her car because she was too shaken to drive separately. I’d pick up my car later, once she was okay. I got her home. I wanted to hold her and talk to her, but she shook her head, went to lie down.

I wondered if she was mad at me, but I didn’t really care if she was. Somebody had to warn him off, and I knew he’d keep clear of her now. He would’ve been an idiot to do otherwise, and from what I’d seen in his face, he wasn’t an idiot, just a bully, a mean son of a bitch who wouldn’t want to go up against me.

I had to go back into the station right after Rafe got home and drove me to pick up my truck. When I checked on Lexi, she was asleep. I told Rafe to keep an eye on her because she might be upset after we ran into Watts and I got my alpha on.

“She’s not big on macho displays of dominance you realize,” he had said.

“Yeah, but this asshole didn’t seem to understand the situation. I made it clear for him.”

“Better you than me. I would’ve beat the hell out of him and possibly lost my license as a self-defense trainer.”

“Right. Still would’ve been worth it.”

I went to work and had an uneventful shift. I filled out some reports, worked on a grant for some training. I was getting my stuff together to leave the next morning when my phone rang. It was Rafe who had probably only called me five times in the last decade. He was a hardcore texter so I answered it immediately.

“Hey,” I said.

“Get to St. Vincent’s now, Leo, come in at emergency,” he said.

“Shit, what’s wrong?”

“We don’t know yet. We’re waiting on the toxicology report. It looks like—somebody drugged Lexi or poisoned her or something. You need to be here.”

“I’m on my way,” I said.

I don’t remember how I got there, only that it was incredibly fast but seemed to take forever. I didn’t even bother to try and charm the admissions receptionist at ER. I just barked Lexi’s name at her in a voice that sounded choked. I couldn’t even focus on the woman’s face or what she said to me. All I could see was the bruises on Lexi’s neck when he’d choked her, the arrogant expression on Watts’s face when I’d left

him at the grocery store, when I'd stupidly believed he wouldn't bother her again.

What he had done this time was worse. When I got to see her, she'd be hooked up to monitors and have wires and tubing coming out of her. It made me sick to think about it. She'd said to me once that I'd made it worse—she'd said it in the sexiest most romantic way, like she needed me. But it was true in the literal sense now. I had made everything worse, and she had paid the price. I sat in a plastic chair, rubbing my hands over my face. My phone buzzed and I stared at it, Rafe's name not even registering in my mind when I looked at the caller ID.

“Where the fuck are you, man?” he demanded.

“What? I'm here. I'm in the ER,” I stammered.

“You're not back here. I'm in cubicle six. I thought you stopped for a goddamn pancake breakfast it took you so long.”

“The woman, the lady at the desk, she told me to wait,” I said lamely.

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“Since when are you that easy to boss around?” he said. “She’s out having tests right now. I don’t understand half what they’ve told me, except that they really don’t know anything yet about what caused this or if she’ll be okay.”

I got to my feet and told the woman I was needed in cubicle six. I was buzzed in and made my way back there. It was freezing cold. There was a terrible quiet back there after the roar of televisions and phone conversations in the waiting area.

Rafe paced the length of a small curtained area. He was carrying Lexi’s purse.

“What are you doing with that?” I said.

“They offered to put it in a safe for her, for when she needs it, but I kept thinking, what if she wakes up and wants her lip balm,” he said, clearly needing something to keep his mind occupied.

“She’s hooked on the cherry lip balm, I know,” I said. I took it from him and set it on a chair. I stood in front of him, not knowing what to do.

“Jesus, Leo, she wouldn’t wake up,” he said, his voice fierce.

“It has got to be Watts. I wish I’d killed him,” I said, and I meant it. I, who had never considered taking a life. I spent my time saving lives, not ending them. Right then, I would’ve traded my soul for a chance to go back and kill the son of a bitch who put Lexi in the hospital.

“She was just found in her office unresponsive. She had a coffee cup with her. They

think she ingested something. I don't know how they figured it out or how someone would've been able to mess with her coffee. She wasn't even really much of a coffee person."

"Isn't, goddammit, Rafe. She isn't, not she wasn't. She's not gone," I said. I needed to believe it, to make him believe it too.

He just nodded, and we took turns sitting in the single plastic chair while we waited.

"If she comes out of this, I'll do anything," I said.

"Give up meat and go vegan? Become a priest?" Rafe teased.

"I doubt they'd have me in holy orders, but I could be a tofu eating celibate if I had to."

"Yeah, for about a week. What would be the temptation that took you down? Meatball subs or women?"

"Lexi, for damn sure," I said ruefully.

"I'd give anything for her to pull through this," Rafe said suddenly.

"Anything? Me, too."

"I'd give her up to you. I wouldn't even hesitate if that was the cost," Rafe said.

"So would I. Or I'd just let her go. Let her live her life without me, without you. Never see her again as long as she was okay, as long as it was what she wanted."

"Exactly."



“It won’t work, will it? Offering God or the universe anything down to our lives—it won’t buy her a minute,” I said grimly.

Rafe clapped me on the back. I think it was meant to be comforting, but we just weren’t the hugging type.

I stood and paced, let him have the chair. It seemed to go on forever. At last, someone came in, a guy with an LPN tag.

“The toxicology report is back, and the patient is being set up in ICU now. Dr. Cavanaugh will be in to speak with you in a few minutes,” he said.

“Thank you,” Rafe said.

I couldn’t speak for a minute. Then I looked at him.

“ICU?” I said.

“At least she’s still alive.”

“Yeah,” I said faintly. “Anything that she might survive. Did she, has she been awake?” I said.

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“No. They even gave her Narcan to try and bring her around. But since that didn’t work, they said it probably wasn’t an opioid. When they asked me on the phone what she was taking, and I said nothing, I told them it might be that. I knew Watts had a couple convictions for pushing Vicodin and fentanyl and shit like that.”

“That makes sense. It’s good that you knew that, that you could tell them.”

“It didn’t work,” he said miserably, as if he’d failed at CPR or something. I put my hand on his shoulder.

“You did everything you could. We just have to hope she’ll be okay.”

The doctor came in, a tiny redheaded woman with an iPad.

“So, it looks like acute overdose of a powerful sedative. That would explain why the opioid antagonist wasn’t successful. Her respiration is slow, but her oximetry is decent. I’m going to keep her in ICU until she regains consciousness, normally within forty-eight hours, and then we’ll assess where she is.”

“She’s going to wake up though?” I said.

“I can’t make guarantees, but she will most likely come out of the coma, yes. At that point we determine if she was without oxygen and for how long. Any length of time is damaging to brain function, and we won’t know if she’s lost until she’s responsive.”

“Thank you,” Rafe said.

“I’ll check in on her tonight to see if there’s any progress. Go up to the nineteenth floor and they’ll fill you in on the regulations.”

She left and we wandered out to the elevator.

“She’s not going to die,” Rafe said, his voice hollow with shock.

We were silent as we listened to the visiting restrictions and learned that we’d have to sleep in the waiting room. It didn’t make sense for us both to stay—we could switch off, sleep at home, could schedule a way to go to work. But we stayed anyway.

For two days we slept in short snatches, ate out of vending machines, shuffled silently into Lexi’s ICU cubicle, a cold glass box of sorts with a bed and a lot of noisy monitors and one chair. Only Janet from her workplace came to visit—no other friends, certainly no family if she’d ever had one.

Right after sunset the second night, while I had gone to see if they’d refilled the spicy hot barbecue chips slot in the snack machine on the seventh floor, she woke up. I wasn’t there, but Rafe was. When I returned, bitching about the snack offerings, the cubicle was full of nurses and doctors. Rafe beckoned me from the corner. His eyes were red.

“Oh God,” I said, searching his face for a clue. Had she flat lined? Coded?

He shook his head, “Awake,” he managed.

I gripped his arm, “She woke up!”

He nodded. I started to pull him out of the cubicle to give them room to check her, but I heard her say my name. Over the din of voices and the beeps and noises of the machines, I knew her voice, though it was gravelly and low.

“Leo?”

“I’m here!” I said, probably shouting, probably too loud for the small room. I didn’t fight my way through the crowd—I wasn’t stupid enough to get in the way of medical professionals doing their job. But I knew she wanted me there, that she knew now that we were both sitting vigil for her.

“What did she do?” I asked Rafe as we sat in the waiting room, anxious for a chance to visit her after she’d been assessed.

“She kind of moaned, and I was holding her hand and talking to her—she moved her fingers a little. I went to let go, like maybe me holding her hand was uncomfortable with that damn oxygen thing on her finger, but she said ‘no’ like she didn’t want me to let go. Then I said her name and she said mine. I hit the nurse call button and that was it.”

We breathed relief and waited. It was hours later. He had fallen asleep, and my phone battery was low.

“You can see her now for a few minutes before they transfer her down to twelve,” the nurse’s aide said.

“Thank you,” I told her, jostling Rafe to wake him.

Lexi looked like shit. I went to one side of her bed and Rafe crowded in against the IV pole and the heart monitor on the other side.

“Hey, girl,” I said. “Welcome back. Don’t ever take a nap like that on us again.”

“You won, Lexi,” Rafe said, “You did it. You scared the living shit out of me.”

He scrubbed at his eyes. She tried to lift her hand toward his face, but it dropped weakly on the blanket.

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“Sorry,” she said, her voice barely a rasp.

“No. No, no, don’t be sorry,” Rafe said, gathering her hand in both of his. “We’re just glad you’re awake. If they’d let us, we’d carry you out of here right now. We can’t wait to have you home.”

“Yeah, we still have to make those empanadas. Which means you’re going to have to figure out how to use the deep fryer. No lie, it freaks me out,” I said.

“You’re a fireman,” she said with a wheezy laugh. She was smiling. It felt so good to see her smile, but her weakness, the gray pallor to her lips were like a punch to the gut.

“You’re about to bust out of here to a better room. I hear they have TV and more than one chair. Maybe they’ll even give you breakfast in the morning,” I said.

11

Lexi

“What happened?” I said. Everything felt heavy. My skin was itchy. My eyes didn’t want to stay open.

“Oh, honey,” Rafe said, “You’ve had an overdose. Somebody drugged you.”

“Oh no,” I said, tears leaking from my eyes. Sobs shook my body, little gasps and coughs that racked my shoulders. Even crying felt wrong and different, everything

seemed far away and frightening.

“It’s going to be okay. You’re safe now. We’re here, we’re not leaving you alone again,” Leo said.

I was two more days in the hospital before they pronounced me well enough to go home. Leo held my hand while I answered questions for police detectives, but I was still confused about what happened. Counselors and social workers talked to me and I was given a pamphlet on how to manage anxiety after trauma. Rafe made me pancakes and smuggled them into my hospital room.

They settled me in at home, and Rafe brought me a bottle of water. “It’s important for you to stay hydrated,” he said, waving the paper packet of discharge instructions we’d signed.

“I’m fine, guys,” I said. “I’ve got to take next week off to get back on my feet, but I’m okay. I’m a little weak, I get dizzy once in a while, but the doctor said in a week or so all the drugs will be out of my system.” I didn’t want them fussing, but mainly I didn’t want to inconvenience them any more than I already had. It was like I’d been plucked out of my life and dropped into a new, nightmare version where I was helpless, and someone had tried to kill me. I clutched the blanket over my lap, trying hard not to bite my nails or burst out crying.

“Tomorrow we have to go for a complete deposition,” Leo said, “but we wanted to let you know, we’ve worked things out at the station and the gym so that we’re working opposite shifts for a while. That way one of us will always be here with you.”

“No! You shouldn’t have done that for me. I don’t want you rearranging your schedule so you can babysit me. Please,” I said, the tears coming to my eyes again. Rafe sat on the edge of the couch and stroked my hair.

“It’s okay, baby,” he assured me. “We want to be here for you. You know, in case you need a foot massage or something.” Rafe teased, trying to get me to smile, but I shook my head.

“I’ve ruined your lives. It’s such a mess,” I said, sniffing.

“You have not,” Leo said. “All we did the last week was talk about how we can’t lose you.”

“Yeah, Leo said he’d become a celibate vegan if it would bring you back.”

“Wow, giving up bacon? You must have been serious,” I teased, but it wrenched me that I’d put them through all that worry.

“I’m serious,” Rafe said. “We talked this over while you were unconscious. This isn’t a competitive thing. I mean, we shared practically everything growing up anyway, right? The point is, I love you. And—” he looked at Leo and nodded.

“I’m in love with you, too. We had a kind of extreme situation to figure that out in, and it was pretty clear. We’re both in love with you. And we’d both give you up if it would make you happy. So when all this is over, when the Watts thing is cleared up, when you’ve had time to get your equilibrium back, we’ll all have a talk about how to move forward and what you want,” Leo said.

I nodded, biting my lips to keep from crying. They both loved me. I didn’t have words to say to that, other than the obvious.

“Thank you,” I said.

“I’ve got to head into the station in about an hour,” Leo said. I nodded.



“So I’ll be here,” Rafe said, sitting beside me and gathering me against him. I let my head loll against his chest. He reached for the remote and switched on some reality show I usually liked, but I was asleep in no time.

It was Leo who took me to the deposition while Rafe was at work. Then Rafe took off early the next day to take me to a doctor’s appointment. It was like having a pair of overprotective nursemaids—really hot ones. One of them was always there, making sure I drank water, took a short walk in the sunshine, got plenty of rest. Rafe brought me a burger from the diner and watched old episodes of *The Office* with me. Leo and I gave up on the empanadas after producing a greasy, inedible batch and we ordered a pizza to eat while we watched cooking shows.

They made me laugh. They held me when I was too scared to sleep. I could never hope to repay such care and kindness. The week I’d planned to take off work stretched into two and then three. Janet stopped by and insisted I take a formal leave until the legal action was resolved to give myself time to adjust.

I hated the sight of the police station, the small fear that knotted in my belly every time I had to go sign a statement or clarify an answer, or just to answer the same set of questions again. If I hadn’t had Rafe or Leo with me, I probably would’ve hidden in the car and said I was too sick to make it there. I was suddenly afraid of everything.

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The first time I ventured out on my own, I went to buy a hot chocolate, the fancy kind that costs five dollars and has whipped cream on top. I paid the clerk and carried it out to my car. Then I sniffed it to see if it smelled contaminated, to see if, despite the fact that Watts was in city lock-up, maybe one of his friends could have gotten the barista to slip me something. I looked at it, told myself I was being silly, and went to take a drink. I couldn't do it. I turned around and dumped it in the garbage. Sweating, I drove home and took a shower and tried to forget my paranoia.

The guys took me to the gym for sparring. I spent most of my time watching them after I was done on the treadmill. It had been a slow return to my usual level of activity, and I didn't have all my endurance back yet. So I sat and watched them spar, and felt the flare of desire rekindle in me for the first time in a long time. Just watching the flex of Rafe's broad shoulders, the way the muscles of Leo's butt bunched and extended when he kicked made my pulse race. I felt like part of me was waking up after the coma, a part that had still been asleep all that time.

They stopped to take a break and drink some water. Toweling sweat off his face, Rafe asked me if I was okay. "You're all flushed. Is it too warm in here for you?"

I cleared my throat, "Um, no. I need to talk to both of you later. When you're done. There's no hurry," I said a little bashfully.

They wrapped up their sparring and took showers. I sat outside playing on my phone and trying hard not to think of them in the showers, two gorgeous naked men with water cascading off them, when all I wanted to do was to storm into the locker room and burst into their shower stalls. Probably inappropriate, especially since other people used the locker room and women weren't allowed in there.

We rode back to the house in awkward silence. They tried to get me to talk about what was bothering me, and I shook my head, stared out the window. I was determined to have a real discussion about this, to let them each have time to think about it and talk about their feelings.

Inside, I grabbed a bottle of wine from the fridge and three glasses and we sat at the table.

“We’ve been through a lot together,” I started.

“You’re not moving out,” Rafe said.

“No,” I said, “I’m not. This morning I had a call that Watts has accepted the plea deal. He’s going to prison for five years. The soonest he can get out is in twenty months, and that’s with good behavior, which I think we all know isn’t going to happen. So, he’s gone for a good long time.”

“That’s not as much as he deserves,” Leo said.

“But she’s spared having to go through a trial,” Rafe argued, “and that’s worth a lot.”

“I’m with Rafe on this one,” I said. “I wasn’t looking forward to facing him in the courtroom and having to go over everything again. Now I feel like I can start trying to put this behind me. Even my counselor said that it would be a big step for me once I realized I was free of him, that I didn’t have to look over my shoulder everywhere I went.”

“You’re safe,” Rafe said.

I nodded. “Listen, before all this—shit—happened, I had talked with Leo. I don’t know if you two have discussed this, but I need to say it. I’m in love with you, with

both of you. I would never do anything to hurt you or to damage your friendship with each other. I want to be with both of you. If that's something you're okay with. I don't mean the open relationship thing—that felt awkward to me, like someone was always trying to be polite and give the other two space—I want us all to be together.”

I blurted it out super fast in one nervous run-on sentence. I bit my lip and waited, palms sweating. It was too much to hope for, that they would agree to it. It seemed conceited to even ask it of them, to expect them both to consider it. I watched them look at each other briefly.

“So, um, is now a good time for you?” Leo asked, grinning.

“What?”

“Instead of having a long talk about it, why don't we just give it a try?” Rafe suggested. “It's different, but I, for one, think you're worth it.”

“Dude, it's not that unusual. It's called a polyamorous lifestyle. Don't you read Cosmo?”

“No. I'm a man.”

“So am I. We have a subscription at the station, along with Men's Health and Forbes and a bunch of other shit. We're well rounded. Educate yourself,” Leo said.

I laughed. The tension was defused. Smiling, I stood, held out both my hands.

“You both saved me, a hundred times over. I can never thank you enough,” I said fervently, tears stinging my eyes. “I love you both so much.”

“I love you too,” Rafe said, kissing my temple.

I leaned my head against his shoulder. Leo lifted my other hand to his lips and kissed my knuckles softly. “I love you, Lexi,” he said. I nodded, too overcome by emotion to speak.

I felt Leo’s arm go around my waist. He scooped me up, carried me in to Rafe’s big bed.

“I told you we’d lock the door and make our own rules. Here we are. The three of us,” he said.

“We’re all yours, Lexi,” Rafe said.

I went to him and wound my arms around his neck, my face tipped up to meet his eyes. He was tall, bulky, every inch of him a man. I stood on tiptoe to press a kiss to his jaw. I felt Leo come up behind me, his hands on my hips, drawing me back against him. I reached behind me with one arm, draping my arm back around his neck. Rafe bent and slanted his mouth over mine. I shivered as his tongue breached my lips. Leo’s arm snaked across my belly, his hand sliding down until the heat of his palm cupped my pussy. I moved against him almost involuntarily. It felt so good, the warmth and pressure of his hand while Rafe’s tongue moved in my mouth, tasting me.

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The kiss was tender and deep, and Rafe cupped my face in his hands. We made our way, stumbling, to the bed. I was between them, my two men holding and kissing me. Leo kissed my neck while Rafe continued to take my lips with his own. I hummed a little as Leo wrapped his free arm around my waist, still cupping the hot place between my legs that grew more drenched by the minute. I finally broke the kiss, dizzy and breathless, and started pulling at Rafe's shirt. Leo took off his own shirt, and I turned to unfasten his pants while Rafe muttered about how I was wearing too many clothes. I knelt so he could pull down my shorts and panties while I watched Leo shuck off his track pants.

I was completely naked in the midday sun slicing across the bed between the blinds over the window. I saw the way shadows spiked across Rafe's bare chest, along Leo's face and neck. Instead of asking what was next, wondering how not to make it awkward, I just let it happen. There were some things that came naturally, and even though it would seem like threesomes would be tricky with lots of pauses and elbowing someone in the face by accident, it wasn't like that in the moment. There were these two men I knew better than anyone in the world, men I felt close to and understood by. I was touching them in ways I'd wanted to since the days we met. Instead of feeling rushed, feeling slightly guilty for leaving someone out, I felt complete, whole in a new, beautiful way. I felt myself smiling. I turned so I could sling an arm over both of them and pull them to me for a hug.

"You guys," I said, shaking my head in glorious disbelief.

"So do we flip a coin?" Rafe joked.

"Rock paper scissors," Leo said, faking seriousness. I laughed.

Then everything got still and intense at once. As if a wild wind rippled through the room, silencing us, dialing up the sexual tension to eleven and beyond. I swallowed hard, turned to face Leo and kissed him softly.

His hands were in my hair, his teeth nipping lightly at my bottom lip. I gasped at how good it felt, how turned on I was. Then Rafe's big hands reached around and stroked my breasts, rubbing my sensitive nipples with his thumbs. I jerked, sucking air in at the powerful jolt of pleasure that slid suddenly down my spine. I held on to Leo's shoulders and kissed him back with passion. His hands went to my hips and drew me into his lap. Leo's long fingers slid between my thighs, just stroking teasingly back and forth, dipping into my folds and making shivers run over my body. Two fingers curled into my slit, driving a whimper from me.

"Please, baby," I said against his lips.

Leo spread me open, guided his cock to the entrance of my passage. I was trembling, my arms, my thighs, everything shaking, taut with awareness. Rafe's lips moved down the slope of my neck to my shoulder, his fingers pinching my nipples. He whispered to me then, and the brush of his lips on my ear, the heat of his voice charged me up, brought him intimately into the process.

"You want it, don't you? Both of us touching you, kissing you, worshipping you. You want my hands on your perfect tits just like this, and my voice in your ear when he fucks you. One of us wasn't enough for you. You want both of us screwing you, touching you all over until you can't hold out. Until you scream for more and then beg for mercy," he said, his voice low and rough. It turned me on even more, the filthy words he said as he rubbed and twisted my nipples, making me cry out.

Leo pressed the wet, velvety crown of his hard cock to my slit, rubbing my own moisture around, making a mess as I gripped his shoulders, my eyes dropping shut. I was overwhelmed with sensation, with the throbbing emptiness between my legs, the

tightness of my nipples and the pull low in my belly of an orgasm building. The sensory overload was from having both Leo and Rafe, from being draped across Leo's lap so intimately and feeling Rafe's fingers, trail down from my breasts, dipping intrusively between my legs and rubbing my clit in slow, naughty circles as Leo penetrated me, feeding his dick into me inch by inch like sweet torture. I trembled violently in his lap, gripping Rafe's arm with one hand, the other hand clutching at Leo's hair. I needed both of them holding me steady or I felt like I'd fly to pieces.

I felt jittery, restless, wanting more and faster when they seemed insistent on teasing me, making love to me with wicked slowness. A whimper escaped my lips when Leo finally thrust forward all the way, burying himself in my body. My inner muscles clenched around him and his arm around me brought my breasts flush against his chest. His tongue went into my mouth, stroking the roof of my mouth as he rocked me on his lap, on his cock. He turned and twisted, screwing me in every sense of the word, hitting places inside me that made me go wild and try to climb him even as Rafe stroked my clit with maddeningly deliberate movements. His teeth grazed my neck and he stroked me harder and faster as I bucked my hips against Leo. My bare stomach was pressed to Leo's washboard abs, with Rafe's wrist and hand between us, rubbing frantically as we fucked, slick and fast.

"Oh God, Lexi," Leo groaned.

"Not yet, baby, please," I whispered, rocking faster to get the friction I needed from Rafe, bucking forward so Leo could fill me up. I felt the root of him, the brush of his sac against my tight lips and I bit my lip at the sensation, at how far he'd buried himself in me.

"I can't hold out," he said, his jaw set, his teeth clenched, lips rubbing against mine as he tried to master himself and hold back his climax.

"I'm almost there, baby," I said, desperate. I gripped his hair, tugged his mouth down



over mine. He roared, his tongue plunging deep as I felt him spill inside me. I clenched around him, the flutters of my orgasm beginning. He fell back on the bed.

“I’m sorry, baby, I’m sorry. It was too much, and you felt too good. I’ll make it up to you,” Leo gasped, breathless, his chest heaving from exertion.

“No, it was great, you were great,” I said earnestly, pulling away from Rafe’s hands long enough to kiss Leo softly.

I turned to Rafe who grinned wickedly, “You ready for me?” he challenged. I looked down, saw his long, hard cock in his hand where he’d been stroking it as he fingered me. I felt my mouth water at the sight. I wanted him, wanted all of him inside me instantly. First, I crawled back across the bed to him and kissed his lips.

“You make it hard for a girl to concentrate.”

“I make things difficult? You should try teaching a self-defense class and acting like a professional when all you want to do is yank down a student’s shorts and eat her out right there in the studio in front of the mirror,” he said.

I shivered at his dirty talk, at the very idea of it.

“Then maybe I should sign up for private lessons. Do you take on private students?” I teased.

“No, but I’ll take you now,” he said, his eyes growing dark with desire.

There was an edge to Rafe, the sensitive, considerate man I’d trusted from day one. He had a hint of danger, a knife’s edge to his voice and his eyes that promised a dark pleasure that might just be my undoing. He took me by the arms, hauled me against him.

“That bastard nearly took you from us. All I’ve wanted since that moment was to be inside you again, to remind us both that you’re alive, that he didn’t take this,” he said, his voice ragged against my tangled hair.

My body thrummed with desire, with the desperate urge to have him inside me. I wanted to beg already, when he was only holding me by the arms. He kissed me, sudden and intense. My arms went around his back, that muscular broad back that my eyes had lingered on that first night in class. Oh yes, I thought, at last.

He bore me down to the bed, his delicious weight on top of me. Rafe spread my legs with one powerful thigh. I was panting, gasping for breath under his weight and the onslaught of his tongue. I rolled my head to the side so I could breathe, and he sank into me, his cock buried deep. I felt my slickness ease his entry, the heavy length of him driving all the way in with a single thrust. I cried out at the stretching sensation, the fullness. My back arched as he began to move, circling his hips wickedly, plunging into me without a second’s respite to catch my breath. I held on to his shoulders for dear life, the momentum of his heavy thrusts scooting me across the mattress.

His gaze bore into mine. I had to shut my eyes to try and catch my breath. He caught one nipple in his mouth, sucking hard until I bucked under him. Then as he lashed my nipple with his tongue, I felt Leo above me, his mouth covering mine, lush and slow, with his skilled tongue as Rafe fucked me. I shattered then, even before Rafe could sink into me again.

Rolls of pleasure dragged me under, racking my body with shudders as I came and came, screaming into Leo’s mouth with the intensity of the experience. Rafe pounded me harder, building to frenzy. My fingers clawed at the sheets beside me, feeling as if the earth itself were tilting and splitting in two as he gave it to me hard and relentless. I felt Leo’s teeth, felt an enormous pressure on my clit as Rafe pinched it before slamming into me with a final thrust. I screamed again and wept as a second climax

ripped through me, a hot brightness radiating up from my throbbing clit as Rafe emptied himself into me, thick ribbons of liquid spurting inside me, dripping down my thighs as he finished. Quaking, I lay there, my head tossing ineffectually on the mattress.

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Leo pulled away, returned with a damp cloth. He washed me, so gentle and caring. My fingers tangled with Rafe's as we lay side by side, spent. I started to drift off to sleep when wet heat shocked me. Leo put his tongue between my legs, his lips kissing my sex the way he'd kiss a lover's mouth. My hips twisted, trying to get away from him, too sensitive and glutted with pleasure already. He held me down, his fingers gripping my hips, forcing me down onto the mattress and opening me with his tongue. Fiery strokes of his velvet tongue slid through my folds, probing every tender spot, flicking the underside of my clit in a way that made my vision go dark and blotchy. I keened and moaned. Rafe rolled toward me onto his side. He put my hand to his lips and sucked one finger into his mouth, tonguing it as if it were my clit. He raised his eyebrows at me, naughty. I wanted to laugh, but the relentless pleasure gripped me in its pitiless fist. I whimpered, too weak and overcome to form words.

Bright violet spots filled my vision. My hips pumped against Leo's mouth, shamelessly. Rafe kissed my palm, teeth scraping sensitive flesh. Slowly he kissed his way up my arm to my shoulder and neck. All the while, Leo licked and sucked me, drawing first one lip and then the other into his mouth, ravishing my clit with the flat of his tongue and then parting my folds to thrust two fingers inside me as he lapped at me. I was coming apart under his hot mouth when Rafe took my nipple between his lips and drew on it. I came up off the bed, keening high and long as if my chest had been ripped open when I came. Leo pumped a third finger into me as I started to thrash. Slowly, I stilled, Rafe drawing me into his arms and cradling me against his chest. Leo covered me with the sheet as the sweat chilled on my skin. Eventually Rafe lowered me onto the bed, my cheek resting on a pillow between the two of them. Leo stroked my damp hair and kissed my forehead. Rafe held my hand. We all drifted to sleep.

I woke hours later to a hand insinuating its way between my legs. I stirred, parted my legs. I felt his thumb brush the tender lips of my seam. I wriggled because it felt good, better than good. I wanted more. I made a soft noise, never opening my eyes. I spread my legs for him, for the pleasure I knew he would give me. He rubbed something slick over my sex, then pressed his thumb deeper, past the entrance and into me. Curling it forward, I felt the calloused pad of his thumb rub a spot that seemed to shoot lightning through my body. I stiffened, twisting under his grip.

“Rafe,” I whispered. I opened my eyes only to find thick darkness.

“How did you know it was me?” he said, his mouth close to mine. I turned my face, rubbed my lips against his.

“I know your touch,” I said as he kissed me softly.

This was paradise.

12

Rafe

I woke with Lexi curled against my back; her knees drawn up. I looked at the clock, remembered that Leo had an early shift that day which meant that I had her all to myself. I kissed her awake. She touched my cheek and smiled.

“Good morning, handsome,” she said. Then she giggled. “That sounded so cheesy. I meant for it to be romantic.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Pathetic. I’m no longer attracted to you at all,” I said, sliding my hand down the slope of her breast and capturing her nipple in my fingertips. I felt the goose bumps rise on her skin as a chill of arousal raced along her flesh. I dipped my

head and mouthed her breast, tasting the salt of her skin, the pebbled texture of her taut nipple as I scraped my tongue against it. I loved the loud breath she dragged in, almost a comical sound, like a vacuum switching on. I laughed softly.

“What? Are my breasts funny?” she said, gasping a little, trying and failing to sound insulted.

“Not at all. They’re heaven. The sound you made when you took that big breath, it was like the noise of someone hoovering the carpet. That’s all.”

“Nice. You’re the best at pillow talk, Rafe,” she said sarcastically.

“What if I try less talk and more action?” I said.

“What if I make fun of the noises you make when my mouth is on you?” she countered. I felt myself harden at the thought of her sweet, soft lips surrounding the head of my cock.

I moved up her body, my lips against hers, licking into her mouth. I took her hands, laced our fingers together. “I need you again,” I said, my voice rough against her mouth as I caught her lower lip with the edge of my teeth. “Please.”

“I’m a little—,” she murmured.

“Sore?”

“Yeah,” she said, turning her face a little shyly.

“I love what we have together, all of us. The complete union of it, the fact that it’s this unbreakable—God, I don’t know, that sounds stupid when I say it out loud. I love you. If you’ll have me, I’ll—,”

“I’ll always have you, Rafe. Here, in the kitchen, in the laundry room, across the hood of your car. You can’t doubt that now. You brought me back to life, both of you, and I’d walk through hell for you. So asking me to take you into my body again, that’s what I want. I want to give you everything. Maybe then you’ll understand how deep this goes,” she said.

I took a long breath, swallowed hard because my throat felt tight all at once. I pulled her up into my arms and held her for a moment.

“I need you, too,” she said, “in case you wondered.”

I could taste the yearning in her kiss, could feel that she needed a tender joining. It had been easy for me to take her with passionate frenzy. To go slower, to be tender and vulnerable would be a challenge. I shied away from it at first. I was a man who had sex, a man who fucked. Not a man who made love.

But I remembered vowing I’d do anything if only Lexi came back, if only she survived the attempt on her life. If she could come back from an overdose, from being poisoned, then I could find the courage to be softer, more open with her. I brushed her hair back from her face, caressed her cheek. I banked my own desire, held it back, certain that I could control myself for her sake. For the sake of the closeness I wanted with her.

Lexi dipped her head, kissed my neck. I liked it, liked it well enough that my first instinct was to growl, to roll her onto her back and spread her legs. I had to take it slow, to make this different but no less pleasurable. So I let her kiss my neck as I rubbed slow circles on her bare back, the ends of her hair tickling the back of my hand. Gradually, I moved her across me so she was lying on top of me. When she looked up from kissing my shoulder I could see understanding flicker across her face. She blushed a pretty pink that made me want to tease her about all the naughty things we’d already done. Instead, I trailed my fingers lightly down her stomach and smiled

up at her.

I wasn't used to building anticipation, putting off my own satisfaction. I traced my hand down her side, into the curve of her waist and watched her wriggle a little and smile.

“You were the opposite of what I expected, you know? When I met you, you were this sensitive, protective guy and then in bed you're so alpha, so fierce and in control. I like you both ways. You don't have to be anything else for me,” she said. She was sitting on top of me, totally naked, and I felt like I was the one exposed the way she saw my thoughts and knew what I needed to hear.



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“I’m not being someone else. I’m being what you need, which is all I want.”

“I just want you. However you’ll have me,” she said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Lexi rose up on her knees, smiling at me like the cat that got the cream. I fisted my cock and fed it into her as she lowered her lush hips over me. Her lower lip drooped as she gasped. I filled her, felt her spread her legs more to try to adjust to my thickness.

“Yeah, take it, take it all,” I hissed, trying to hold myself under control when I wanted to rut in her hard and fast.

“Aahhh,” she said, eyes big and dark. She rolled her lips under, bit them. Her hands rested on my chest and she started to rock on me, moving my shaft inside her, hitting all those places that made her squirm.

I could tell she liked the control, got off a little on setting the pace even though it was killing me. She rolled her hips, her beautiful breasts rising and falling with every stroke. She panted as it got harder to breathe. I stroked her breasts, her thighs and hips, tried to keep it as leisurely as I could, but I was on the edge. I flexed my hips up to meet her down stroke and filled her all the way. That earned me a moan from her kiss-swollen lips. Softly, I reminded myself, because she was sore, and because she needed intimacy from me sometimes, not just wild passion. I pushed myself up until I was sitting with her in my lap. I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her close and rocking with her, kissing behind her ear, down her neck.

“I love you, Lexi,” I whispered.

“I love you, and I love it when you whisper, when you touch me like this. It’s—it’s too much,” she said, turning her face. I saw a tear track down her cheek, and I kissed it.

“Don’t cry, baby. This is what you have now, and what you deserve. I’m not letting you go. Neither of us ever would. I want you to stay forever,” I said, my voice ragged as I moved inside the hot satin of her passage.

“Oh!” she said, burying her face in my neck and rocking harder against me, my cock trapped inside her.

I flattened my palm on her back, cupped her head with the other hand and kissed her hair as she came in long clenching rolls around me. I gritted my teeth against it. As the last flutters of her orgasm subsided, Lexi started kissing my neck, grazing my throat with her teeth lightly, giving me an edge to the pleasure that wound me up like she knew it would. Until I rolled her onto her back and stroked into her, getting the friction I needed from her tightness, the pleasure of her nipples rubbing my chest as I lay above her. I climaxed, shoulders shaking as I held myself up. I kissed her forehead after I came, then leaned my forehead against hers. When I rolled onto my side, I held her in my arms. We napped together, wrapped up in each other.

When I woke, she was shaking me, “Are you okay?” she said.

“Yeah, yeah. Why?”

“You were making some noise in your sleep, acting like something was wrong.”

“It was just a dream,” I said dismissively, rubbing my hands over my face.

It had been another dream about Watts, a dream where we didn't get to her in time. It was good to have her arms around me, reminding me she was fine, that she was healthy and whole, and we hadn't lost her.

"I wish I'd been there," I said finally. "When Leo confronted Watts at the store. I would've beaten the hell out of him. I wouldn't have let up either, not until he was dead. He never could've hurt you again."

"Don't. Don't say that. You'd be in jail, and I would've lost my job."

"Let's have a shower and go spar for a little bit, since it got cut short last time."

"I don't know if I have the strength. I've got two sex gods putting me through my paces in the bedroom, Rafe. I may not be up to sparring."

"You've got to build up your endurance. You've got two men to satisfy now. We'll let you rest—a little—but we both crave you too much. Go take a bath, get dressed," I said.

"Okay, but you're a total slave driver. I don't want abs, I told you that. I just want to be able to defend myself if I have to."

"So we'll practice that. Although I want some stakes to fight for. If I get you in a hold you can't escape using techniques I've taught you, then you'll have to give me something."

"Are we talking breakfast in bed or like fifty push-ups?" she said dubiously.

"I'd consider a kiss as payment."

"So what about you? When I get away and prove that I'm a badass, what do I get?"

“Bragging rights. And maybe I’ll do push-ups with my shirt off. I know you like that.”

“That’s a deal,” she said, shaking my hand.

At the gym, I couldn’t believe how much she’d improved. Since the first time I’d worked with her when she was shy and anxious, she’d changed so much, gained such confidence, both in and out of the sparring ring. In and out of bed, as well. She escaped hold after hold, ducking under my elbow, striking at my nose and my ears. I was proud, but I mainly loved the flush of pride on her face, knowing she got away from me whenever I tried to attack.

“Push-ups!” she commanded, pointing at the mat.

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I yanked my shirt over my head as Leo came in. “Ooh, are we doing it here now? Should I go tell the people in the locker rooms to leave?”

“Nah,” she said. “I bested him at sparring finally. So he owes me shirtless push-ups. We have a deal.”

“Want me to give you a shoulder rub or anything while you enjoy the show?” Leo said, “Or I can rub anything else you’d like.”

“Maybe not right now,” Lexi said. “I have push-ups to count. I have a feeling he’d try to cheat me out of some reps.”

“Hey, I’m a personal trainer. You’re insulting my professional integrity,” I said as I positioned my palms on the mat.

“Whatever get to work,” Leo chuckled, his arm slung around Lexi’s shoulders.

They kept roasting my form and miscounting on purpose until I finally doubled over laughing and gave up. The three of us went out for dinner, burgers and shakes, to offset all that healthy exercise according to Lexi.

13

Leo

We settled into a routine easily. We hung a dry-erase calendar in the kitchen to keep track of my shifts, Rafe’s classes, and which nights we had to be together. Some

evenings Lexi and I went out to hear some jazz or find the best empanadas within walking distance of the house. Other nights when I worked, she and Rafe went to the movies or made lemon pancakes from one of their cooking shows. But the best nights were the ones we all spent together. We'd order takeout, catch up on our worst and funniest work stories and then fall in bed together after a bottle or three of wine.

After three months of that, of everything beautiful in a life I hadn't known I needed to feel whole, I decided to take them out to a salsa club on our Saturday night. I even popped into a shop near the station and bought a ruffled turquoise mini-dress for Lexi—perfect for dancing and for showing off those gorgeous legs. I surprised her with it after work.

"I have the perfect shoes. I bought them at Goodwill two years ago, probably somebody's prom shoes, but they're these silver strappy heels that look like something a really coordinated hooker would wear. I had no idea when I'd ever need them, but tonight's the night. I'll have two big strong men who can carry me if my feet start to hurt," she said.

"Great, go try it on."

"This is a four and I'm a six," she protested.

"Good, I'll be able to see some boob and some ass," I said.

"You may see the seam rip up the side if I try to shake my ass," she shot back with a laugh.

She came out in the dress and the sky-high sparkly heels. I ogled her shamelessly while Rafe wolf whistled.

"Damn, woman," he said, "I won't be able to keep it in my pants at this rate."

“We’re dancing first,” she reminded him. “And I don’t know anything about salsa moves so someone will have to teach me.”

“I’m a natural,” I boasted.

“Yeah, and when he sprains his ass, I can teach you something worth learning,” Rafe said.

“I don’t think asses can be sprained,” I told him, “and you insult my moves. I’m an excellent dancer.”

“You’ll have to prove it,” Lexi said with a grin.

“Leave in half an hour? I have to go find my leather pants and ruffled shirt so I can dress the part,” Rafe joked.

“You can’t salsa in leather. You have to move the hips more than they’ll allow. You need something with stretchy material,” I said seriously and Rafe burst out laughing.

“He’s gonna come out wearing my yoga pants now,” Lexi accused.

After some more joking around, we went to the club. I taught her a few moves, did some showing off on the dance floor because I did, in fact, salsa like a beast. Rafe tried to learn a few steps, but for an athletic guy, he couldn’t dance worth shit and I told him so.

“You got no rhythm,” I said with an eye roll.

“Oh, I have rhythm, it just belongs in the bedroom, not on the dance floor. They can’t handle my rhythm,” Rafe said.

“I’m pretty sure that kind of rhythm would get you arrested here. So keep it to yourself,” I told him, spinning Lexi back out onto the floor.



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We danced until we were sweaty and tired, and she took off her shoes and set them on the table.

“They were beautiful, and they were fun, but they hurt like hell. I don’t know whether to donate them back to Goodwill for some other poor idiot to buy and suffer in or if I should just give them a decent burial in the bathroom trash,” she said.

“Oh, you should keep those,” Rafe said, “They’re dead sexy. Here’s a deal: You keep those shoes, wear them once in a while, and I’ll carry you anywhere you want to go while you have them on.”

“I’ll agree on one condition. You have to carry me to the car now. Because I’m not putting those back on tonight!” she said.

Rafe rounded the table and scooped her up right off the chair. She laughed, kicking her bare feet. I picked up her shoes and paid the tab. Once we were in the car, I joked that I got the shitty end of that deal.

“You got the girl, and I got the bill.”

“Yeah, but you got to dance with her all night and I had to drink water and be your designated driver,” Rafe said.

“Fine, fair enough,” I said, “but I want to talk to you both when we get home.”

“Is this a serious talk?” Lexi said, “Cause those make menervous.”

“You have nothing to worry about. It’s nothing bad. I just want everyone’s full attention when we discuss it.”

“Okay, not making me less nervous here, pal,” she said a little shakily. I took her hand and kissed it.

Once we were in the house, I sat them down on the couch to talk.

“Here’s the thing,” I said.

“Uh oh, he’s announcing the thing. There’s going to be a thing,” Rafe said.

“Guys, this is serious,” I said.

They both snapped to attention, sat quietly and listened.

“Thank you. Now, Lexi, Rafe and I have been like brothers for most of our lives. We both make enough money that we don’t have to share a house if we didn’t want to. We chose to live together, split the bills, because we like hanging out. And that friendship, that brotherhood is strong. He knows I’m not going to bail on him and vice versa. There’s no way he could ever piss me off enough that I’d give up on him, and he’s put up with me for years. We know we have each other’s backs. And we grew up with families, I mean, we’ve had that kind of support growing up and now from each other, too. You didn’t have that. So this is like your first real family.”

“Yeah,” Lexi said softly, nodding. “And I never want to be something that comes between you two.”

“We know that, baby,” Rafe said. “And I think that may be what he’s getting around to. The connection we have, that we all have with each other, is a lot more durable than what you’re used to. It’s permanent.”

“That’s exactly it,” I said, “I think we should do something, some kind of formal pledge that we’re in this together. That we’re your family now. That we’ll always be here for you, no matter what.”

She was crying. She didn’t even try to hide it. She just let tears roll down her cheeks before sniffing once bravely and reaching for our hands.

“I know from being in social work that families come in all shapes and sizes, but I never really, in my heart, thought I’d be part of one myself. So it’s amazing that you’d think of this and want to reassure me. It’s very sweet and romantic, and I love you both for it. But you don’t have to do this. There’s nothing we can really do to formalize it the way that monogamous couples do.”

“Now, I have this friend down at the station, Pedro, he does some metalwork in his free time. He even sells it at craft fairs. And I wondered if the two of you would want to wear rings. Like the three of us, with matching rings. I mentioned it to him, about maybe making us three rings and he had the idea to make them each out of three strands of silver twisted together. Like us,” I finished, waiting expectantly.

“I’d like that,” Rafe said finally.

“I want to wear your ring. I like the idea,” she said, and hugged me.

I wanted to see peace in her eyes, assurance that we loved her not just for today or this week, but for life. I wanted to give her that kind of commitment. It was a deep thrill to see her accept that, to let herself believe it was something she could have. I kissed the top of her head. She leaned against my shoulder, still holding both our hands, and the three of us sat in silence for a while, just letting it sink in. This was our life, the one we’d chosen and built with our own rules. And it was even more beautiful than I could have imagined.

Lexi

Growing up, I never thought of myself as lucky. In fact, I felt pretty sorry for myself a lot of the time—no family or real home, no best friends, not even a guarantee that I'd have a winter coat or rain boots when I needed them. Now it seemed like the universe had decided to settle up with me. That all the years I spent uncertain and lonely were the dues I paid to get to where I was now. It sounded dismissive of my unhappy childhood to say it all seemed worth it from where I was standing, but it was the truth.

Sometimes, you appreciated things more because you never dreamed you could have them. I figured it's like if you grew up really poor and finally saved enough from your first job to make the down payment on a car. Like, you grew up riding the bus or walking and a car wasn't something you were used to having—it was something that your richer, luckier friends had. But then you get one, and it's not just a convenience, it's like your own personal miracle.

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That's what Rafe and Leo were to me, my miracle.

So when Leo suggested we exchange rings, I thought it was sweet. A nice gesture, but one I didn't really need. Still, when he said Pedro had the rings ready, I picked up a cake from the grocery store, and a bottle of sparkling wine just so we could celebrate, make it an occasion.

I kind of hoped no one read a poem or anything. Because I loved the idea of the commitment, but I felt a little bit like Leo was making a big deal out of this for my benefit, like I needed a ceremony or a secret handshake to make me feel like I was part of the family. I knew it deep down already. They'd kept vigil at my bedside. They'd taken me to depositions and doctor's appointments and taught me what it was to be supported and nurtured and wanted, really, deeply wanted. The acceptance they'd shown me was unlike anything I'd ever known. It came with a bone-deep trust I had in Leo and Rafe. I could be vulnerable with them and silly with them and cuss a blue streak over Call of Duty with them. So the rings were kind of an afterthought for me, a formality on top of all the more meaningful parts of the relationship we'd formed together.

When I got home, I showered and changed. I felt the need to put on a dress. Not a wedding gown or something stupid, but a sundress with little yellow flowers on it. I put the cake out on a nice plate and set the table with it in the middle. I wondered whether I should put a candle on it, or three candles like one for each of us. I decided candles were overkill. I wondered if I was fussing too much, but Rafe came in with flowers. They were pink roses, a dozen of them.

"Wow. Here, I'll get a vase," I said.

“I had the stems wrapped. I didn’t know if you wanted to, I don’t know, hold them or something.”

He shrugged, looking a little sheepish that he’d tried to buy me a bridal bouquet. I smiled, touched by the thought, and kissed his cheek. Then I got a jar to put them in and set to work cutting the ends off the stems. When I was done, I went to find him. He came out of his room in jeans and a button-down white shirt, looking as dressed up as I’d ever seen him and handsome.

I held out a pink rosebud to him, “I trimmed it so you could wear it. Like, you know, a boutonniere,” I said shyly. He took it and thanked me. Then we both looked around and couldn’t find a pin or anything to stick it on his shirt with.

“Do you have a jacket? Like a suit jacket? That would have a buttonhole for it.”

“Nope. But I can find some way to stick it on here. Do you have one for Leo?”

“Yeah, I think the flowers are beautiful. I guess I’m getting excited. Is that dumb?”

“Excited to spend your life with us? No, I think that’s how you’re supposed to feel. It’s how I feel about it,” Rafe said.

I felt myself relax a little. It wasn’t weird to them that I was so happy, so enthusiastic about it. The flowers weren’t too much. My feelings and my hope weren’t too much for Rafe and Leo. I wasn’t going to be rejected or met with scorn. No one was going to laugh into their sleeve because I wanted them to wear a flower or that I put on a dress or made a big deal out of things. It was humbling to feel so accepted, to know deep down that they were never going to reject me or send me away when I’d had a life of nothing but that, a life of trying so hard to be perfect just to win approval, just to persuade someone, anyone to let me stay.

Leo came out of his room in a full-on suit like he was going to Sunday school. His hair was slicked back. He looked so dressed up and so handsome. I couldn't help but smile.

"I didn't even know you were home!" I said.

"Hell yeah. I took off half a day so I could get ready," Leo said, "I ain't half-assing this. You're getting the whole ass."

Leo grinned, his brash humor making me run to him and hug him. We all laughed, because he really was hilarious, but it was the warmth, the connection we all shared that really melted my heart.

"So I thought we'd stand over here by the window because it faces west and, you know, sunset," Leo said.

"Really? I thought we'd go on the deck out back," Rafe said.

I bit my lip. They'd both really thought about this. They took it seriously. Both of them looked at me.

"So, it looks like you're the tiebreaker. Where do you want to have this?" Rafe said.

I shrugged, "I'm happy with either place. Whatever works for you."

"Okay, traditional method of decision making deployed," Leo said, his face solemn.

I had a fleeting idea they might be about to beat the shit out of each other in some ritual tiebreaker from their teen years. I didn't know if I should intervene and make the decision to prevent bloodshed or if interfering would just annoy them. I waited for a second to see what they'd do.

“Fine,” Rafe sighed heavily, “Rock. Paper. Scissors. Shoot!”

I watched, dumbfounded, as the two hottest alpha males I’d ever known reverted to a playground contest to decide the location of our commitment ceremony.

“Shit!” Leo said. “You always win.”

“Don’t you dare call me a cheater. We’re going to the deck,” Rafe said, “And never forget: Paper covers rock.”

I snorted, failing to contain my laughter. I couldn’t help thinking no one could have ever had this much fun at a regular wedding. I gave my hand to Leo, took the arm Rafe offered and walked out to the deck. It was pretty, the golden sunset light bathing everything in a soft glow.

“Before we begin,” Leo said. “I have brought a gift for us all to share.”



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“If this is some creepy dildo you saw on an infomercial, just know you are not sticking it anywhere near me,” Rafe grumbled as I stifled a giggle.

“No, it’s much better than that. It is a selfie stick,” Leo said.

He was serious. He pulled a selfie stick out of his suit pocket and brandished it like a weapon. He attached it to his phone, held it at arm’s length, and we pressed our cheeks together, smiling partly because it was so silly. He took probably twenty pictures before we insisted that he stop and put it away.

“I’m going to have a canvas of one of them—like an 18x20 so we can just relive this moment larger than life,” Leo said.

“I’ll give you a hundred dollars cash right now if you promise to keep it down to an 8x10,” Rafe said.

“No way. Size matters, no matter what the ladies tell you to make you feel better,” he teased.

I elbowed Leo, and he knocked it off.

“I want to start,” I said.

They both nodded. I took their hands in mine and swallowed hard.

“I never thought I’d be lucky enough to find one person to love, who would love me back. So it’s unbelievable, magical to me that the two of you wanted me to move in

with you and asked me to stay. I can never thank you enough for the family you've given me, the acceptance and just the novelty of being wanted here and cared for."

"Baby, you know we love you," Rafe said.

"Yeah, Mr. Paper Covers Rock here is right," Leo said. "Neither of us ever wants to imagine life without you. We belong together."

"I know that now. And I never imagined how much it would mean to me to do this, to take time to stand here facing you and tell you exactly how I feel. You've saved my life in more ways than you could ever know. I love you both so much. More than anything," I said, blinking back hot tears. One tear trickled down my cheek.

"You have made me feel so safe and so cherished. I can never find the words to tell you how much I love you," I said to them. "So if I can have the rings?"

I released Leo's hand and held mine out, palm up to receive the two rings for the men. Leo reached in his pocket and took out a little velvet drawstring bag. He emptied the contents into my palm. Light as a feather, they fell into my hand. Three bands, each woven of three strands of metal—a copper, a gold, and a silver thread braided and twined to make a circle both delicate and strong. I was strangely moved by the sight. By the three identical rings that were so beautiful and so perfectly matched.

I was overwhelmed. I heard a strange, squeaky noise and realized too late that it was my breath, inhaling on a sob and catching in my throat. I pressed my lips together, squeezed my eyes shut. It was all too much and too beautiful. I let go of Rafe's hand and picked up the first of the larger rings. I kissed it and slipped it on to Leo's ring finger.

"I love you. Everything about you—your crazy, loud-mouthed style and your humor

and your tenderness. The way you're so loyal and so sure. You are brave and loving and you see the best in people. I am honored that you love me back. I give you this ring to symbolize the love I have for you and how much I treasure you, Leo."

He squeezed my hand, and I swear his eyes were bright with unshed tears. He nodded, unable to speak. I put the second ring on Rafe's finger with a watery smile.

"I've loved you since you came to check on me after the first self-defense class. You are so compassionate and strong and protective and such a secret alpha male. I am lucky to have you, and I give you this ring to symbolize the love I have for you and how much I treasure you, Rafe."

He pulled me into his arms and kissed the top of my head. Together they took the smallest ring and slid it onto my trembling hand. I sniffed bravely, trying to hide my emotion and failing completely.

"I love you and can't imagine my life without you," Leo said. "You made my entire life the day you said you were falling for me. I pledge myself to you, to being with you in this, to support you and protect you no matter what, for as long as we live."

He slid the ring to my knuckle and stepped back. Rafe smiled, lifted my hand and kissed it.

"Lexi, you're the girl of my dreams. I can be myself with you the way I've only ever been able to trust Leo before. Only much, much sexier, I promise," he said. "And you said he was the funny one. In all seriousness, baby, I am yours forever. We are all in this together, nobody backs out, nobody breaks trust. This is real and it's permanent. We make our own rules. I promise to love you and be faithful to you for the rest of our lives."

I sobbed, tears of joy coursing down my face. I flung my arms around their necks and

held on. I kissed first Leo and then Rafe, putting my whole heart, all my loneliness and fear and hope into those kisses. Rafe darted into the kitchen and got me a paper towel for my mascara streaked face and my runny nose.

“I love you both. Thank you,” I said. “Forever. That means the world to me.”

“Let’s go inside. The sun’s in my eyes—making them water,” Leo grumbled.

“That’s not from the sunset,” Rafe said. “You’re crying.”

“Fine, I’m crying. This is worth crying over,” Leo said.

We went inside, with me walking between the two of them. I loved being flanked by two gorgeous, strong men. It made me feel so safe, like I belonged.

“So I think we should cut the cake,” I said.

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I led them to the table, and we sliced the cake, feeding each other bits of it. I smeared them both with frosting pretty severely and laughed over it. We ate cake, and I kissed them both at least a dozen times.

“So, what do you want to do now?” Rafe said. “Should we consummate the relationship?” He waggled his eyebrows until I rolled my eyes.

“Did it really bother you that I mentioned Leo’s sense of humor in the vows?” I teased.

“Maaaybe,” he said with a grin.

“Well, I, for one, definitely want to consummate a whole lot. But later, please, I just ate like a fourth of a cake,” I said, patting my tummy.

“Then let’s meet back here and bring your phone,” Leo said.

I changed into my sheep pajamas for the occasion and washed all the frosting off my face. I was as quick as I could be, but I was still the last one on the couch. I sat down between them, my legs draped across Rafe’s lap.

“So why did I have to bring my phone. Are we playing Angry Birds or something?” I said.

“I want you to check your calendar and see when you have vacation time. I have plans for us,” Leo said.

“What kind of plans?” Rafe said. “I am not going rock climbing with you again. He has to stop and rest like all the time.”

“You were the one who drank all of your water and then wanted mine. Yeah, we’re both city boys. Anyway,” Leo turned back to me, “I was thinking we might take a vacation together. Someplace with a beach maybe.”

“That sounds amazing! I’ve never been on a vacation. I mean, I stayed in cheap motels when I aged out of the group home and overstayed my welcome on friends’ couches. But not like a real resort or anything.”

“It’s settled then. We’re spoiling you. There’s going to be a beach, a swim-up bar, and a spa,” Rafe said. “We’ll get massages. We’ll go swimming, we’ll hang out in the hot tub with a bottle of champagne.”

“I looked at a couple of resorts in the Caribbean that are for lovers, designed for romantic getaways. What do you think? I’m sending you the link now,” Leo said.

I checked out the web page, full of golden sunset photos of couples kissing on the beach and in the infinity pool, looking flirty and happy and tanned while windsurfing and swimming with dolphins.

“Okay, I’m in,” I said. “I need to work for a few months before I take actual vacation time since I took a sick leave.”

“That makes sense,” Rafe said. “What about November? We could really have something to be thankful for. Our honeymoon.”

“Honeymoon?” I said in disbelief, looking down at the pretty ring on my finger. “I just love you guys.”

I leaned back against Leo, smiled up at him. “You have the best ideas,” I said.

“Thanks,” he said with a grin.

“But I give the best foot massages,” Rafe said, taking my bare foot in his hands and stroking it.

“How did I ever get so lucky?” I said.

“I don’t know, but you’re going to stay this lucky. Forever,” Leo said.

“Yeah, we have rings to prove it,” Rafe said. “Forever.”

They were my family, the love and security I had always dreamed of but never thought I’d have. Right there, stretched out on the couch with my two lovers, surfing travel web sites for the best airfare deals, I had my happily ever after. Everything than I could ever want and more.

The End