



Single Mom's Secret Diary (The Forbidden Reverse Harem Collection)

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Category: Romance

Description: I've been hiding two huge secrets...

One? I've been sleeping with my three smoking hot bosses.

The other? CEO Ezra Nguyen is the father of my nine-year-old son.

Nine years ago, a wild spring break fling turned into a secret pregnancy.

I left without a word—never knowing Ezra was the father.

Now I'm back, working under him, and he has no clue about Charlie.

But there's more.

I've a dirty diary with fantasies about Ezra and his two irresistible partners, Ryder and Wyatt.

Boardroom confessions. Glass wall dreams.

Things that should never be written down.

When my boss finds it sprawled across his desk after I'm poisoned and hospitalized?

Let's just say Monday morning meetings will never be the same.

Ezra's determined to make my wildest fantasies come true.

On the conference table. Against those floor-to-ceiling windows.

Every inch of me begging for more.

Then, he learns Charlie is his son.

Everything explodes.

And I'm pregnant again—but who is the father this time? Oons

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 7:46 am

Avery

I grin at my father as he lays a special treat in front of me at the bar.

My son, Charlie, is already munching on his own offered pile of pastries.

My dad—Dominick Caruso—is a famous pastry chef, at least in the region.

He might not be nationally or globally renown, but he is damn good at what he does.

And that is to make the most flavor-intensive pastries in existence. That's my truth, and I'm sticking to it.

What's in front of me is distinctly green, and I purse my mouth. Matcha, mint, pistachio, green apple, or lime? Certainly not avocado, since I don't see any savory garnishes.

Dad isn't a fan of food coloring. He's too focused on flavors for that, and dyes change the taste. I would know. We had that argument when I was seven. He stopped using them altogether in his bakes.

For his chocolates and macarons, however, he uses a smidge. Their vibrancy is a part of their appeal. I get it. He uses as many natural colorants as possible.

I sniff, closing my eyes to take in the scents of sugar and flour and butter. Vanilla, green tea, and lime. My mouth waters. I reach for a fork.

Dad is grinning at me before I take my first bite. It's a cake of some kind, layered high like an opera cake, but I never can keep the different kinds of sponge separate in my head. I can, however, pinpoint every ingredient he includes in one.

A small triangle slides onto my fork. I start with it at the front of my palate. The sweet notes of the sugar and white chocolate hit me first, then the salt, butter, and almond. Sour from the lime comes after, and the green tea comes last before I swallow.

It's clean, refreshing, and combines the kind of complexity I've come to expect from my dad. I take another, larger bite, and he grins at me.

"You like?" His brows rise high on his forehead, hopeful.

"I do." I push around the second bite, enjoying the mouth feel. His buttercream is silky and smooth without being too greasy. The sponge is moist and soft but firm enough to hold against the layers. And the ganache with the lime in it is thick as it melts. "Clean."

His laugh is boisterous. "No notes?"

I tip my head to the side.

Dad points at me. "Ah. Tell me."

"Maybe a little less gelatin? Pectin instead? Or just let the chocolate in the ganache do the work instead." I smack my lips and go for a third bite. "Maybe pistachio flour instead of almond? Is that too much green?"

"No. I like it. They are in season soon, so it will match well." Ideas are spinning in his head already. It's a look I know far too well.

“Mmm-hmm. Just don’t forget that your grandson is here while you lose yourself in a new round of tests.” I steal one more bite for the road. I never seem to finish an entire full-sized treat. I’ve always been a fan of samplers.

For obvious reasons. The super-taster skills my dad has honed in me since I was young have set me up to try anything. Well, almost anything. That man will never offer my son a Twinkie or Oreos again after the fit I threw when they changed the recipes.

No. Thank you.

I wash my hands and straighten my jumpsuit. It’s sleek and professional, as smart as it is sexy, the kind of impression I want to make on my first day at my new job as a chocolate taster. I mean, talk about dreams coming true.

The little girl I used to be is practically screaming and jumping up and down in my head.

I round the counter to plant a solid kiss on my son, Charlie, ruffling his dark hair as he chews through a chocolate croissant. “Don’t eat too many of those. You need to eat real food, too.”

“That is real food,” my father scolds.

I plant my hands on my hips and watch him do the same. “ Balanced food. Fruits, vegetables, meats. And not all wrapped up in a buttery crust, as delicious as that might be. It will make you slow on your skates.”

The pout forming on my son’s mouth turns into a grimace. “As long as I don’t have to eat kale.”

I laugh. “No. You don’t have to eat kale.”

He nods and takes another enormous bite. Charlie truly looks so much like his father—the darkness of his hair and how it flops in his face, those almond-shaped eyes, the natural tan to his skin.

I shake my head and point at my father. “Not too many treats. Yes?”

Dad’s bluster vanishes, and he holds his arms open wide. “Yes. Come, hug your papa.”

I step into his arms and enjoy the way he squeezes me tight.

“You make me proud, bambina . Blow their socks off.”

I laugh. “Knock their socks off and blow them away, Dad.”

After another sharp squeeze, he releases me, waving his arms to usher me out the door. “Go, go, go. Don’t be late.”

Grabbing my oversized purse and heading out the door with a smile, I let the moment wash over me. It’s going to be a good day. I know it.

The route I plotted out last night will take me roughly thirty-seven minutes.

It’s a bit longer than I prefer, but it takes me out of the middle of town and down toward New Jersey.

Right at the border, industrialization has rooted itself among the rolling hills and trees of the Hudson Valley forests.

The building is squat and wide, the parking lot mostly full but not overtly large. How many workers did Nguyen Candy Company employ? I researched the variety of what they offer before my interview, having only gotten to taste a select few to remark on.

Apparently, I'd impressed HR with it, and that's what landed me the job.

From what little they told me, I will be working directly with their chocolatier—the man in charge of creating new recipes for various seasons. This one is particularly tricky—making a chocolate with all the health benefits of dark chocolate but with the pleasing, creamy flavor of milk chocolate.

It's not an easy ask, but I enjoy the gritty darkness of freshly ground Mexican chocolate. I still order disks of it from a company I found there nearly a decade ago. Something about the texture sends sweeter signals to my palate than others do.

Regardless, I am sure to enjoy the process.

Pulling through a gate has me showing my ID to a middle-aged guard who has a warm, fatherly smile. He places a short call inside before he lifts the bar and directs me to where someone will meet me to show me my way. I thank him as he nods me on.

All the bustle from the morning crew has passed. It doesn't make sense to drop me in the middle of that chaos on my first day. So thank you, Pam, from HR. I greatly appreciate it as I saunter toward the door with my bag snug under my arm and pressed against my hip.

Pam, herself, is waiting by the entrance with a grin, her blonde, modern beehive holding a jeweled candy pin in the front. Seeing this kind of enthusiasm for her job endears her to me more than her overly friendly attitude.

“Welcome, Ms. Caruso. We’re so excited to have you here.

Mr. Nguyen is waiting for you in his office.

He wants to properly greet you before we take you to our chocolatier.

Our CEO is very hands-on and passionate.

I think you will like him.” Pam waves me forward, and we ascend a set of cement and metal steps to the second floor, where the general feel of manufacturing is lost to the cushy luxury of high-end offices.

The carpet dulls the sound of my heels, the light turns more natural than fluorescent, and the windows showcase the expanse of the wilderness beyond us.

Oh, I can certainly fall in love with this place for this view alone.

Try not to dawdle.

Many of the doors open to offices and a large boardroom. More of them are closed as I’m led to the back corner, where a wide door made of dark wood is cracked open.

Pam knocks, peeks her head in, and waves me forward. “Right this way.”

I step in as she opens the door wider to let me pass, and she swings it nearly closed behind her.

The sight of the man sitting behind his desk stops me halfway into the room.

I blink as if he’s an apparition, but when he stands to approach me, I recognize the way he walks, the discerning glint in his eyes, and the recognition in them.

My new boss is Charlie's father.

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Avery

Ten years ago—Spring Break

Sophia, my cousin, drags me to another beach bar overloaded with drunk and rowdy college students. I've been ignoring most of it, slipping around those who easily jostle others and keeping most of my drink in my glass.

I've gotten myself a margarita at each of them. It's the only concoction of fruity and sugary alcohol that I can really handle without gagging. Most of the time.

A good wine will do the trick, too, but there's none of that to be had here. All the more to disappoint my dad.

Sophia's been smiling and flirting with every cute guy around. It's gotten us more than our fair share of freebies, and I'm feeling pretty happy. Pretty free.

A tall, shirtless blond slides a hand around her waist as she laughs, and I prop myself on a stool. I've had a few attempts, but I've brushed them off. I will not be falling on a grenade to get my cousin laid. She does not need my help.

My margarita is strawberry this time, sweet and salty and strong. I sip it meaningfully when some guy settles beside me. "You don't dance?"

I turn to take in the soft, natural tan of the man beside me. His arms are nice and muscled, but he's wearing a shirt to hide the rest of him. That makes me squint at him. Everyone else is more than eager to show some skin. Sophia even convinced me

to bare more than I normally do.

Granted, I'm showing off my legs and flat stomach since I don't have a lot on top. Not many have offered me beads to flash them. And it's not like I would, anyway.

"I'm afraid I don't dance. Not like that."

He turns, nursing a sweaty beer bottle that I assume is not his first but one he's had for a long time. "Like what?"

I laugh lightly. "Like an animal in heat."

His wide smile tugs at me, and I twist on my stool. His brows jump. "That is an apt description."

I laugh harder, mostly because he uses the word apt . And those dark brown eyes darken further as he watches my mouth.

He leans in closer without invading my space too directly. "You have a beautiful laugh."

"Is that your line?"

"No. It's the truth."

I purse my mouth at him, noting the differences again between him and the other drunken fools that crowd Cancún. "What are your plans for Spring Break...?"

I let myself trail off to see if he'll give me his name instead of simply asking for it.

"Ezra." He offers me his hand, which is cool from the beer but not cold. His palm is

rough and his fingers strong as they close around mine. “Do I get your name?”

I let my head fall to the side as I think about it. “Avery. If only to keep you from giving me some nickname.”

This time, he laughs. Its baritone is louder than I imagined without being grating. “What ones have you earned so far? Vixen? Angel? Wait, let me guess. Temptress?”

Sipping my margarita again, I find that I don’t pay as much attention to the separate ingredients and enjoy the mixture. He’s distracting enough to dim the wild obsession I can’t seem to turn off. “Angel. Yes. Goddess, too.”

“Mmm. I can see that one.”

I shake my head. “Not helping your case.”

“And what case would that be?” He leans against the bar, facing me.

“The one that will convince me to sleep with you. Or at the very least, consent to a make-out session.” My blunt words don’t seem to faze him.

“And who says that’s what I’m trying to do?”

I gesture at the writhing crowd again, all of them in some pre-mating ritual.

“Fair point.” He bends closer, by my ear. Ezra’s breath is hot against my skin, making me suppress a shiver. “Call me old-fashioned, but I prefer a bit of conversational foreplay than I do the mindless grinding that seems to be the norm.”

I tip my head to look at him better when he doesn’t retreat all the way. “So you do want to sleep with me.”

Ezra laughs. “That’s still to be determined.”

Something about this guy makes me comfortable, but more than that, the way he carries on a conversation melts my insides. It has me reaching out to touch his arm, and slowly, our hands link together.

Best of all, he knows how to make me laugh.

The sun sets behind us—one of the few things I’ve truly enjoyed since coming to Mexico, and when I turn to look, his nose presses into the skin behind my ear. The touch is so gentle and small that I’m truly surprised by the way heat flashes through me.

Every time part of him brushes part of me, sparks zap and tingle along my skin. So, once the sun’s colors bleed from the sky, I’m not surprised by how he turns me back to him, placing himself between my knees to cup my face.

His kiss is slow but all-consuming. I’ve never felt this with another guy—not even the one I lost my virginity to earlier that year.

My hands crawl up his chest as I pull him closer. His touch circles my waist, doing the same until we are pressed together. I have never wanted someone more, and I lose myself in him until Sophia taps my shoulder.

She offers me a sinfully sloppy smile and nods to the guy behind her. “I’m headed back to his room, which I also think is his room.”

Ezra shakes his head and laughs almost silently. “It is.”

“Mmm. Good, then if my cousin wants some company, she’ll have the privacy for it. And if not, you’ll know not to disturb us.” And my cousin stumbles away in the arms

of his friend.

When I look back, Ezra is watching me. I stare into those warm eyes and wait for him to ask, but he doesn't.

Instead, he bends down to kiss me again, gently.

It doesn't stay that way. As my hunger for him grows, Ezra responds with his own. Gasping for breath, I brush my nose against his. "Walk me back to my place?"

"Absolutely." He doesn't hesitate with his answer, even though it's not clear whether I'll invite him inside or not. I'm not even sure of that yet.

He doesn't paw at me or try to convince me to let him inside on the way. Ezra holds my hand, his grip light but firm. Twice, he spins me on the sidewalk and smiles when I laugh.

At my room on the second floor, I turn to him and lean against the door. A deep, sharp breath fills my lungs as he brushes my cheek with his thumb.

"You don't have to invite me inside," he says, like he doesn't think his kindness is a turn-on.

"So you're just going to kiss me goodnight and go back to that room to listen to my cousin and your friend fucking?" I blink up at him innocently.

His laugh feeds that needy feeling low in my stomach. "Yes."

When Ezra dips down to kiss me, I make my decision. I'm going to invite him inside. It's Spring Break, and I may not know his last name, but I don't need to. Not for this.

The soft noise he makes at the back of his throat has me tightening my grip on him.
“Spend the night with me.”

He takes me in for a moment, the brown of his eyes bleeding black with desire, but he still checks to see if I mean it instead of sweeping in for what I offer. “What’s four plus four?”

I howl with laughter. “Eight. Why?”

“I’ve watched you drink four margaritas since we started talking, and I need to be sure you’re in your right mind and won’t regret this in the morning.” His touch shifts, cupping the back of my head and playing with the loose strands that have fallen from my ponytail.

“Try something harder.”

“Square root of a hundred and forty-four.”

“Twelve. Easy.” My hand slides down his chest.

“Capital of New York?”

Another easy one since I told him that’s my home state. “Albany. Did I pass?”

His mouth drops over mine with a hunger that nearly matches mine. When we finally tumble into my room, it’s not far to my bed, and the weight of him is delicious when I pull him down over me.

Everything he does is slow, thoughtful, not rushed at all. It takes hours. Which turns into days. And it’s easy to spend nearly every second of every day with him, even as Sophia makes fun of me for it.

But Ezra just feels right.

He takes me to the sights I planned to see on my own, holding my hand, tucking me back against his chest to block the wind, kissing the side of my neck or shoulder as though he can't stop touching me. I can't seem to stop either.

I don't want the week to end.

Even though this all started with the presumption that we'd just have fun and leave this as the perfect Spring Break fling, part of me wonders what this could turn into if we let it.

Sometimes, I swear he looks at me with the same question filling his own thoughts.

The last night of break, we go back to his hotel room early, magic in the air between us from the moment the door closes to the time we fall asleep wrapped up in each other. I finally resolve to ask him if we can stay in contact after this.

When I slip from him in the middle of the early morning to pee, I stumble back to one of our phones lit up on the nightstand. I don't want to miss an SOS call from Sophia, so I check.

And my heart sinks.

Hey, babe. Can't wait to do dirty things to you when you get back tomorrow. I miss you.

From someone named Maddison.

Breath going haywire, I work to be as quiet as possible as I slip my clothes on and scoop up my shoes, sneaking out before the first tears fall.

This whole thing had been a ploy to get laid.

And I fell for it.

Stupid.

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Ezra

The woman standing in the middle of my office has to be an apparition, a matured version of the face that's haunted my dreams for the last ten years. And she's my new food tech—the taster for my new chocolate.

What a small fucking world.

Pain and nerves churn in my middle, like someone's sucker punched me in the gut. I let out a soft wheeze before I shake myself back to the present and stand to offer her my hand and hear the name I've been searching for over the last decade. "Avery Caruso."

Her long blinking tells me that she recognizes me, and I don't know what to do with the overload when her slender hand slides into mine. I offer her a smile. "Ezra Nguyen. Welcome to Nguyen Candy Company."

She nods, and I never imagined rendering her speechless. But it seems that I have.

"Let me give you the tour." I gesture her back out the door, and she spins in place, her stomp still as sexy as it was back then. I watch the sway of her hips the same way I did whenever she walked in front of me that week of Spring Break when we'd been inseparable.

She waits outside my office door, hands clasped tightly in front of her. Avery is more beautiful than she was then—sharper, stronger, and more striking. Those hazel eyes glow with an emotion I can't decipher, but the rest of her face remains a carefully

blank mask.

“This way, please.” I lead her past the two offices to the right of mine and to the elevator that will take us down to the factory floor.

When the doors close on us, I hand her a hairnet. She takes it without touching me and slips her long, beautiful hair into a bun before covering it. I slip mine on absently.

On this side of the factory, we have more people working hands-on. Chocolates need more human attention to come out with the quality I want. Although we have been able to expand with more machinery to help.

Our stretching and pulling machines are on the far end where workers hand-shape hard candies.

I can hardly read Avery’s reaction as she takes it all in, but the way she takes her time looking at the tables showcases her patent curiosity. My proximity doesn’t seem to affect her. Does she remember me?

The stony silence she gives me as she turns back says that she must. Not an inch of her confidence has wavered since I saw her last. I just wish I knew why she vanished in the middle of the night.

Poof. Gone.

Like I dreamed her up in my drunken haze. Until Ryder asked me where she went.

I have to remember I’m giving her a tour. I gesture at the twenty confectioners at their stations, filling molds with tempered chocolate to fill and layer, to coat already made centers, to package by hand.

“We make twenty-nine flavored chocolates that we rotate through seasonally and six signatures that we always keep in stock, sesame, strawberry cheese, and plum wine with our dark, milk, and whites.” I stuff my hands in my pockets when I detect the tiniest hint of movement at the sides of her mouth. I know she has to want to taste them.

She’d always taken her time with her first bite of something, closing her eyes and tasting it. Although Avery never did say what she was doing. And she only did it on her first bite or sip.

As some kind of unspoken rule, we never divulged the important things about our lives—what we were studying, what awaited us back home, nothing that colored the days we spent together.

Instead, we talked about the big and the small things.

Our likes and dislikes. Why the universe is so large and what might be in it.

It was the most breathtaking way to fall in love.

And to get my heart broken.

“They’re Vietnamese flavors. The plum wine is my mother’s favorite, which is why we stock it all year round.”

There. That is what I want to see in her. The smallest softening around her eyes. Avery gave me that look when I’d excuse myself to talk to my mom every morning to check in. I heard her softly talking to her father, too, so I knew she understood.

From the moment I slipped in beside her at the bar and she looked at me like I shouldn’t even try, I knew she wouldn’t take anything less than the real me. The

stupid, smartass but sweet guy I usually was. The one most women overlooked.

When she let loose her blunt tongue, I knew I'd caught that initial spark when she flashed a smile at her cousin, leaving me the opening to talk to her.

Her long, soft, caramel legs were exposed nearly up to her hips, those denim shorts a contrast to the bikini bottoms all the other women wore. Avery also had no beads. The only one I came across without them.

What made her stand out was her reserve.

I shake myself out of the thoughts of her and our past and nod her past the factory and into the lab, where she will work with Wyatt, my head chocolatier and chemist. The clack of her heels on the treated cement taps against my good sense, my willpower to not grab her and tuck her into a small alcove to take that goodbye kiss I've been missing for a decade.

When I open the door for her, she breezes past and stands in between two work tables like she owns the place, taking everything in with the swoop of her gaze.

"Here, you'll be working with Wyatt. He's in charge of creating our flavor profiles." I walk her to the table beside Wyatt's preferred station. "Have a seat, and I'll go grab him."

Avery slides onto a stool, crossing her legs and leaning back against the table like she had at the bar that first night. Her hazel eyes lock on mine as if she is completely aware of the reminder she's presented me with.

Those long legs are covered in tight, dark blue fabric that hides none of the shapeliness of her calves and thighs, the wide set of her hips and tapered cinch of her waist. She is a little fuller than she was back then, and I want to discover it all anew

with my hands. My mouth...

She clears her throat and raises a brow at me. I've been ogling her. Right. Wyatt.

I turn and knock on his half-closed office door where he's scribbling away on a notepad. His red hair has been mussed by his fingers running through it, and I know he's struggling with the new project.

He peers at me briefly, holding a finger up before scribbling away again. Tapping. Scribbling. Then, in a huff, he pushes away from his desk and stands.

When our eyes finally meet, he frowns. "The new taster is here. Right?"

"Yes."

His frown deepens. "Why do you look shell-shocked?"

I laugh. "I don't think anyone's used that word in fifty years."

Wyatt shrugs. "You're pale. And not quite frowning."

"Yeah. Come meet her." I wave him forward, sure that she can hear us. Wyatt isn't the best with social cues, which includes lowering his voice for private conversations.

He steps out before me, and I swear to God, he stumbles a step as she assesses him from her perch. She's still leaned back, body on display in that tight jumpsuit.

Avery looks like a fucking goddess. Venus in all of her glory.

Her plump mouth purses as she takes us both in before she stands and offers her hand. "I'm Avery."

“Wyatt Reid.” Wyatt takes her hand in a sharp pump before he drops her touch. He really is bad at this. Avery just smiles—a little one at the corner of her mouth, but her eyes blaze with humor. She doesn’t seem offended, which will serve us all well.

“I would have liked to meet with you before HR hired anyone.”

I cringe at the blunt confrontation in Wyatt’s tone, but Avery doesn’t flinch. She barely blinks.

“I think that would have been preferable, but I’m here now. And I am very good at what I do.”

The memories of what she’s good at plague me. These thoughts are not appropriate at the workplace. Not appropriate to be having about my new employee. Not anything that can be helped.

I almost apologize for his brusqueness, but she spreads her hands. “Where do we begin?”

Wyatt looks to me, and I nod before he grabs a tray from the small fridge at his station. It’s a small selection of our four most complex signature chocolates. He slides them in front of her and pours her a glass of water.

Those hazel eyes take him in for what seems like a full two minutes before she turns to me.

I shrug. Neither of us have seen any kind of demonstration of her skill, and I certainly want to be sure she can do what she says, but it’s Wyatt who speaks up.

“Show me what you can do.”

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 7:46 am

Avery

The panic that sets in when I recognize my new boss doesn't dissipate through our short tour, although the place isn't anything like I imagined it. I'd envisioned large machinery buzzing away with an assembly line of workers adding big bags of ingredients and checking for quality.

What Ezra had actually created was a group of artists who took painstaking care of the confections they made. It is beautiful, and exactly like what I would have expected from the Ezra I knew those first six days of Spring Break.

He gives me no outward signs that he recognizes me, other than the lingering looks, especially when I take my pose at the lab table. If I had a strawberry margarita in hand, it might have completed the picture, but the way he stares screams of knowing.

Good. Fine.

I'm not freaking out. Nope. Not me.

Even though my heart is still beating too fast and my palms are sweating. I take a deep breath through my nose.

The chocolatier, however, I know is going to be entertaining when I hear him clearly from his office. I try not to laugh when they bring me a test. Of course, they want to test me. As Wyatt said, HR hired me—not either of these two.

So, fine. I'll play the trick pony for this, but only to shut down their doubts.

I pick up the small, round chocolate with the dark shell. There's a small imprint on the top to help differentiate it, but I don't have any idea what it means. Bringing it to my nose for a sniff, I get only the notes of dark cocoa bean.

Closing my eyes, I take a small bite of the corner, only about a quarter of the actual truffle.

The shell breaks and melts against my tongue immediately, sharing a note of coconut I couldn't grab with my sense of smell.

Then, the smooth ganache hits with dark chocolate, heavy cream, and layers of sesame—tahini, roasted sesame seeds, maple syrup, and sea salt.

There's only a little bit of crunch in the silky texture, suspended at the top to create a good contrast.

And man, it tastes divine. No wonder he keeps this one available all the time. It must be a big hit with his target consumer. It is with me.

I take another nibble, getting more layers of flavor, down to the brand of vanilla he prefers and which coconut oil he likely uses.

The base chocolate must be ground specially for them because it doesn't taste like most that I've had before.

The closest thing I have to compare it to are the Korean chocolates Dad brought back to me three years ago after his trip.

When I open my eyes again, both men are watching me intently. And a third person stands at the end of the lab table, gaze pinched to analyze me in an unfriendly way. Like I'm intruding on her territory.

She's a pretty blonde, blue-eyed but with a natural tan. Mediterranean blood runs through her veins, much like it does mine. So maybe the coldness is a reflection of her the same way mine is of me.

I turn back to Wyatt and his pale green eyes, which are strikingly offset by his pale red hair. The lack of freckles makes me think he's Scottish, although he doesn't have an accent, so it must be the same way I'm Italian—by heritage.

After a deep breath, I give them what they want.

“The shell is 70% dark chocolate mixed with milk powder and unrefined coconut oil—Cocoxim, if I'm not mistaken—and the center is your sesame filling.

On top, roasted black sesames, clover honey, and sesame oil made into a crunchy butter.

The ganache is the same 70% dark chocolate, heavy whipping cream, pure maple syrup from somewhere north of here, probably Vermont, Tahitian vanilla bean paste, tahini, and sea salt. ”

I set the other half of the truffle back in its place on the tray and blink at them. The woman's face is blank, but her eyes have widened only a fraction. Ezra is smiling, like he knew I would pass this test with flying colors, even though I never told him what I can do.

And Wyatt... his cheeks have gone red and his jaw clenches.

“Did I pass your test?”

“You did,” Ezra says quietly. Confidently. And I wish I could unravel what he's thinking. I probably don't want to know.

Calmer now in my element, I fold my hands demurely in my lap. “Shall I do another?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary.” Ezra holds out his hand as though he expects to help me from my stool.

I slip to my feet without touching him. As far behind me as I’ve put him these last ten years, I don’t want to indulge in the feel of his skin against mine again. Shaking his hand had been enough of a shock—an unwelcome jolt to my system that made my nerves much harder to control.

I won’t show him any weakness. “Is there anything else you would like to show me before I see where I will be working? I was told I would have an office.”

“Wait,” Wyatt says. “How did you know every single ingredient in there? Down to the brand of oil I used to give it its shine.”

I regard him for a long minute. He doesn’t balk or turn away, facing the force of my stare as though it doesn’t affect him at all. I rather like that. Abrupt and honest I can deal with.

Smooth operators like his boss, using the nice guy facade to get what he wants, are much trickier to navigate without getting burned.

Wyatt’s breath comes a little quickly, like he doesn’t know what to do with my uncovering all of his secrets. He takes a step closer, towering over me, but it doesn’t seem malicious. It’s almost like he doesn’t know how the move can be seen as intimidating.

I offer him one of my blandest smiles. “I just do, Mr. Reid.”

Turning back to Ezra again, I'm prepared for a moment of peace. I deserve it after this shitshow. "My office, Mr. Nguyen."

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Wyatt

I can't keep my gaze off Avery as she saunters out of my lab behind Ezra. Fire burns under my skin, wrapping around my muscles and blanking my mind in a way I've never experienced before. The heat will not retreat, even as I will it to.

But fuck, the way she closed her eyes and took the tiniest bites of that truffle. How she rolled it around in her mouth to inspect it, to dissect it, to pinpoint every single ingredient in my formula has undone something in me that I simply can't describe.

I want to see her do it again. And again.

I want to test her. See if I can trick her. Check to see if she's as good as she seems.

It has nothing to do with my job, though. I don't know what to do with that.

Trying to shake away the image of Avery's mouth, the fan of her dark lashes across her cheeks and the four freckles dotting her nose, I clench my hands at my sides with a want to do anything else.

Laurel, my food technician, sets her clipboard down on the lab table with a sigh. I'm not sure what the stern look on her face means accompanied with the long exhale of air, but it's different from her normal.

"Why don't we get these out of the way?" She reaches for the tray of chocolates, three untouched and one half-eaten by Avery.

I grab it out from under her and turn. “I’ll take care of it.”

This reaction is strange. I know it before I see the widening of Laurel’s eyes and the way she jerks back. I’ll add it to the list of the weird things my body is doing in response to Avery and the few minutes she spent in my space.

I take the tray to my office and slide it into the small fridge I keep there. Stalling for a second, I tuck away the weird lack of gravity lingering in my guts and return to the lab.

Laurel has her clipboard in hand again, obviously waiting for me.

“What?” I don’t mean for the word to come out so clipped.

She stiffens. I nod to the clipboard and whatever business she’s here for.

She’s the one who keeps my lab organized, tending to the minutia I don’t really care about—taking inventory, adhering to standards for storing my ingredients, cleaning equipment, doing paperwork.

I mean, I care that it gets done correctly.

I simply don’t want to be the one to do it.

That’s why I have Laurel. She does it all for me. And she does it well. I rarely have to reprimand her.

“I need you to go through the new ingredients today. We need to test and rate them before we can proceed with the new project. And our new supplier of vanilla beans has sent samples as well.” Her pen taps against her clipboard as she checks things off mentally.

“What happened to our old supplier?” I ask, although I’m sure she’s told me before.

“They had contamination in their last harvest that didn’t meet our standards, so we’ve had to pivot.”

Nodding again, I remember her mentioning that. Vaguely. “Fine. Let’s start with the vanilla.”

Her heels clack against the sealed concrete, a distinct sound that always signals her coming and going.

The minute it takes her to retrieve the samples is a minute I spend replaying the way Avery’s hand felt in mine—small, soft, warm.

The zap that tingled up my arm at the contact.

How she smiled at me with the smallest corner of her full mouth and didn’t shrink back at my abrupt comment about HR.

How she agreed with me about it and moved us along.

Every little detail of her swirls around me like a suffocating weighted blanket that I can’t rip off.

Laurel’s clicking heels draw me back to the otherwise empty lab. Fuck, this feeling is insufferable.

She has six vanilla beans in petri dishes that she lays before me. First, I pull the magnifying lens over them, checking their color and crystallization. Laurel does the same.

We smell and squeeze, cut them open, and scrape the pods to taste. Laurel prepares a section of each to make extracts.

Once we're done, I check her notes and add my own. "Keep the remnants in their dishes and put them on my desk. I want to see if our new technician comes back with the same notes."

"You want to test her again, don't you? If only HR heeded your request to be part of the hiring process." Laurel's hand finds my arm, and my gaze narrows in on the contact. She rarely touches me, and only ever out of necessity.

I flinch back. "Yes. That would have been preferable."

Standing, I gesture her back to the storage room. "What's next?"

"The new carrier oils."

I wave her off and sink back into myself. Avery's eyes close in my mind, the small bite she takes, the slight softening of her features as she tastes one of my chocolates. A sharp breath punches into my lungs.

What does she taste like? Those rosy lips, that pale caramel skin, the softness between her thighs. Heat returns to my body, tunneling down my chest to my cock. I wipe a hand across my jaw and mouth.

People rarely stir these kinds of thoughts. A few women in my past slipped into my bed and then out of it. But it's never been anything I put much stock in chasing. Never been a need that I desire much help to satiate. It's more of an annoying task for maintenance.

But this—the obsession with seeing Avery make that face again. To discover the

other ones she can make. To know if she enjoys the flavors I created.

Heel clicks wipe away most of the lingering thoughts plaguing me. It makes the process of testing and tasting each new ingredient all the more tedious. Would it still be that way if Avery performed this task with me instead of Laurel?

The hard twist in my stomach is hard to interpret, but the answer seems to be an easy yes .

“Did you want me to save these samples as well?” Laurel asks as she scribbles my last notes on her paper.

“Yes.” I stand again. “Is there anything else?”

Her slow blinks stall me momentarily from stalking away. “No. I’ll inform you if anything else arrives for us to look at.”

“Good.”

“I’ll be in the store room if you need me, Wyatt.” Her voice softens on my name, and I bite my cheek, cringing as I turn and march into my office.

If this feeling—this desire —won’t go away, I’ll go challenge it. Taking the competitor’s chocolates I’ve been studying from my fridge, I take one that I’ve labeled “Spiced Mayan” and carry it in a paper cup up to Avery’s office.

Every step I take sends unhelpful questions at me. Why am I doing this? Why can’t I stop myself? What is the point of this? Will she make the same face she made when she tasted mine? Will she enjoy this one more than the one I created?

The knock on her door doesn’t shut down these questions, but when she lifts her

hazel gaze up to take me in, everything inside me goes silent.

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Avery

Finally, room to breathe. It took a dark, pointed look at Ezra to get him to leave me once he handed me the key to my office.

It's not giant, but it's not tiny, either. I have enough space to pace, to host a few guests, to spread out a little bit. I'd planned to decorate a little today—putting pictures of my family out with a couple of knickknacks.

The pictures will stay firmly in my bag, but I do put out the Emeril Lagasse bobblehead next to my computer screen. Dad bought it for me years ago since he's my favorite TV chef.

I tap his head and watch him wobble before I sign into my work computer, filling out a detailed form about my first tasting experience for Nguyen Candy Company.

It encapsulates everything about the sesame truffle but nothing of the interpersonal and internal drama that's left me swirling in a panic attack.

I pull out my traveler's notebook and my favorite pen and jot down the emotions fluttering in and out of my chest until I have them down on paper.

This opens me up to more. Something substantial that I dare not say aloud.

His brown eyes look the same, the gold flecks a stable circle around his pupil.

Those long lashes are still unfair because of the way they soften his face.

Everything else about Ezra seems to be sharper.

Harder. The muscles of his forearms when he rolled up his sleeves.

The expanse of his shoulders and back is wider.

The old parts of me—the naive ones—are desperate to press and test his flesh to see if he feels the same.

The roughness in his hands has softened, too. Is it all the time in the office? Has he given up a hobby? A passion? I wish I knew, had asked more about his life ten years ago. What's changed in that decade to alter these different parts of him?

By far, the worst part is how the way he looked at me is so similar to the way he looked at me in Cancún. Like he's surprised but pleased to have found me. That I'm not breathing down fire upon him, even though part of me still wants to.

It's that part of me that checked for a ring on his left hand, which I found empty, by the way. You fucking hypocrite.

Although, can I really blame you? The extra ten years look good on him.

But let's not linger on him, shall we? That's a deep hole we can fall into, and clawing our way out of it will leave us with a lot of scrapes and bruises.

The chocolatier, Wyatt Reid, has the kind of personality that I'm accustomed to in a kitchen. Not my dad's kitchen, mind you, but other kitchens he's taken me to. Chefs can be some of the most cold-hearted bosses, but I get it. Standards.

By comparison, Wyatt isn't bad. Abrupt. Honest. Maybe a little unfamiliar with subtler social cues. Nothing I can't deal with.

In fact, he seemed to appreciate my banter. I'm a straight shooter, too.

His reaction to my tasting skills was odd. I can't decide whether he's impressed or upset over it. I didn't even dig deep. I could have told him which vanilla bean he used, even which milk powder.

I don't think it would have endeared me to him, but I'm pretty sure I can win him over with my work ethic. I'm always tasting and cataloging new flavors, new ingredients for Dad.

A clipped knock on my door jars me from my notebook—my new diary, it seems. I stuff it back in my purse as the man I was writing about appears in the small gap I'd left to seem inviting.

"Mr. Reid. How can I help you?" I stand behind my desk as he slips inside, making the space seem smaller with his height, with how big his personality seems to be even in his silence. A paper cup is pinched between his long fingers. "Another test?"

He frowns down at the chocolate in his grip. "No. Not exactly. I didn't make this one."

My brow lifts, and I wave him inside. "Who made it?"

He takes two long strides inside, hovering at the seats in front of my desk.

"Please. Have a seat."

His body flops down like he has little control over it. Wyatt places the chocolate in its wrapper on my desk between us. I sit, too, folding my hands together as I wait for his answer.

The pale green of his eyes is a shade I've never seen before—the perfect balance of blue and yellow that's been left out in the sun to bleach.

“Mr. Reid?” I prompt.

He blinks at me. “Wyatt.”

I can practically see him shaking himself out of his thoughts.

“The chocolate was made by a competitor. I'm curious what the ingredients are.” He splay his fingers toward the small truffle almost like an order to divulge all of the little confection's secrets.

I tap the side of the paper and hide my smile as he twitches. Pulling it nearer, I lift the little guy and take a sniff. I get a small tinge of spice, but mostly, the medium dark chocolate and colorant in the cocoa butter spray come through.

The shine is good, and the snap of the chocolate under my teeth is nice.

Closing my eyes, I let the shell melt first. Again, the colored cocoa butter comes through first. Then, sixty percent dark chocolate. It blends into the small bit of semi-sweet ganache filling. A small bit of sweetness mixes vanilla, cinnamon, honey, and ancho chili.

I take a second small bite to confirm the notes before I open my eyes to meet Wyatt's intense stare. He doesn't flinch at being caught. I doubt he knows how unsettling it is.

“Why do you close your eyes? Why such small bites?” And his gaze drifts to my mouth when I pull my bottom lip between my teeth to get the last traces of chocolate.

“Smaller pieces allow me to move from the front of my palate to the back in a more

controlled manner. And closing my eyes merely helps me concentrate on taste and smell. The texture. I have put in earplugs for more complicated endeavors to home-in even more.”

“What did you taste?” He leans forward, those large hands balled into the fists on his knees.

I smile. “The chocolate is commercially made—by a machine instead of stone ground and hand mixed. It’s almost identical to the chocolate from Cadbury. They use a different oil for the shine—soy.”

I make a small face at that. It’s not my favorite carrier oil.

“Inside is a bit more basic—a semi-sweet ganache, fifty percent, with a clotted cream instead of whipping cream, Tahitian vanilla extract made with rum, which complements the cinnamon and ancho chili’s sweet, mild heat.

The honey used isn’t the usual clover.” I lick my lips again.

“Oaxaca Mexican honey. The colored cocoa butter on top detracts from the other flavors a bit.”

I let the second half of the chocolate rest in the paper cup he’d brought it in.

“And you never finish the piece?” Wyatt glances at the cup. Would he taste the other half after me? He doesn’t seem like the type to carelessly share germs.

“Since my job is to eat, Mr. Reid, it’s best that I not overindulge.”

His gaze darkens as he stares into me. “Wyatt.”

I smile at him softly. “Wyatt.”

A small shudder seems to run through him. Is the chocolate the real reason he came to my office?

His plump mouth opens as if to say something, but another voice cuts over him.

“But indulgence is part of our game, Miss Caruso.” In comes another handsome man—slim and styled with slick hair and a bright white shirt that’s left unbuttoned too low on his bronzed chest—without so much as a knock.

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Ryder

The moment I hear of the beauty that comes through our doors, I have to investigate. Already, there are whispers about this classic sophistication and mysterious gaze, and every little detail I hear about her only makes me more curious.

I miss the opportunity to see her taste test one of our signature truffles, but the effects trickle through the staff until they reach me in my office. Phone calls bog me down most of the morning.

The look on Ezra's face when he pauses in my office tells me an entirely new story. "You know her, don't you?"

He frowns at me, crossing his arms over his chest. "Whatever you're thinking, don't."

"I'm not thinking anything other than getting to see what everyone's in a titter over." I give him my best innocent face, but he knows a lie when he sees it.

"In a titter over..." He repeats my words with the obvious skepticism they deserve.

I shrug at him and stand. "Know where our new employee is?"

Ezra's frown deepens. "In her office."

I grin, and my best friend rubs his forehead. "What? I promise to behave myself. You know, for me."

“It’s the for you part of that disclaimer that worries me.” His arms drop as I near, and he grabs my arm. “Seriously. Don’t scare her off.”

“Oh ye of little faith.” But I see it in his eyes. He does know her. Biblically. There’s only one woman who leaves that haunted look on his face. “Wait a damn minute.”

He points his finger at my expression. “Whatever that is, don’t.”

It takes a supreme amount of control to suppress my smile. I don’t mean to taunt him. I just can’t help it. “My best behavior.”

I hold my hands up and sidestep him out of my office. Ezra whispers something under his breath as we part, and I’m fucking giddy over seeing whether my prediction is true.

Her door is slightly ajar, and my knock reveals Wyatt propped in the chair in front of her desk. I’ve never seen that look on his face before—gobsmacked. Absolutely without control and desperately flailing to regain it.

I’ve overheard their last few back and forths, and I try to hold it back, but the words slip out of my mouth unbidden. “But indulgence is part of our game, Miss Caruso.”

When I step in, her hazel eyes glide to me, and I understand completely why Wyatt is sitting there dumbstruck. Why Ezra had that haunted look in his eyes back in my office. Being the center of her attention is arresting.

I swear my heart is stuttering to a stop.

And I recognize her. That long, straight, chestnut hair, the purse of her wide mouth, the lift to her chin. She’s the girl from Cancún.

I only spent an afternoon with her and Ezra, doing a couples date with Francesca. We rode out to some ruins, ate lunch, and were carted back. They clung to each other nearly the entire time. It was sickeningly sweet.

But like I told him then, after she disappeared on him, there's magic in the Spring Break fling that fades when real life hits. It's better to let it go.

Only now, she's here again. Ten years later.

This is going to be the best kind of disaster.

I hold my hand out to her. "Ryder."

"Avery." She stands and takes my hand, and after the two pumps, I lift her hand to kiss her knuckles, but she pulls free of my grip before I can.

I grin at her and the small frown forming between Wyatt's brows. "Nice to see you again."

She blinks once, twice, and settles her judgment on me like a gavel banging the bench. Avery doesn't give away that she recognizes me, but she barely looked at me the entire trip. "Were you the one sleeping with my cousin?"

I laugh. "No, love. That was Franklin. I was the one with the fiancée."

She makes a pointed look at my left hand and the lack of a ring. At least she has the decency to not ask what happened. Because, no, we never did get married. The wedding we planned for after graduation fell apart shortly after the moment we tossed our caps into the sky and received our diplomas.

My chest aches at the memory. Seven years is a long time, but Francesca still has a

small spot in my heart that gets picked at every time I think it's completely healed over.

I point to the half-eaten chocolate on her desk. "Are you going to finish that?"

"No." Her arms cross. The defensive stance delivers some parts of her past with it. Avery isn't so sure she wants to be here.

I pop it in my mouth and smile as I chew through it. The little hints of heat play nicely with the semi-sweet chocolate. My wink has her rolling her eyes.

God, why does it breathe fire into me?

"I was hired for a reason. Wasn't I? Shall we begin? I'd like to go taste your base ingredients." Those hands fall to her hips, a power stance that accentuates the curviness of her lower half in that skin-tight jumpsuit. I bet her ass looks fantastic in it.

The glare she sends me only redoubles my natural instinct to flirt.

Or maybe she's remembering how much of her I've already seen. Cancún isn't a place known for covering up. And that tiny bikini she wore drew my attention even when Francesca dug her knuckle into my ribs.

Wyatt stands beside me, leading us out of her office. It's almost crowded with the three of us in there at once. A sudden image of having her pressed between us flashes through me, and I gesture for her to proceed me out to the hallway.

Her stride draws my eye as I follow, closing her office door behind me.

I sidle up close behind her. "So, what brings you back into our lives?"

My words are low and close to her ear. It makes her sidestep me and glare. Something about the way she doesn't warm to me immediately turns up the dial on my flirting.

"It's because you missed me, isn't it?"

Her exasperated sigh has me chuckling.

"No, I know who you missed. It'll only take me a quick second to grab him, and then you can have all three of us at your disposal." I lean in again. "For as long as you want."

"You should just stop. You are not as smooth as you think you are." Her hair whips against my chest as she takes a sharp corner to descend the stairs.

I press my hand there, feigning pain from an actual blow. "You wound me, Avery. So deeply. I am only trying to be accommodating."

"Mmm." She pauses mid-step, halfway down the stairs, and wobbles a little. Her hand lands on Wyatt's arm, and his entire body seems to tense.

"Sorry," she murmurs before she's stomping down those stairs again. Avery walks toward the lab like she owns the place.

We both chase after her.

Having her here is going to make things interesting. I rub my hands together at the thought and slip into the lab to see Laurel waiting for Wyatt's return.

The sour turn of her mouth when she spots Avery and then me cranks up my grin.

Laurel clutches her clipboard tighter, already stomping into the store rooms after the two of them like she can't stand the thought of her space being invaded. Like she doesn't want Avery to touch anything that's hers.

If only Wyatt recognized that he is a part of what she considers hers. He's too clueless to see the way she fawns over him. But she has certainly observed the way he's fascinated with Avery by the way she responds.

Oh, yes. Having Avery here is certainly going to be fun.

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Avery

My first day at Nguyen Candy Company was a whirlwind.

But after my first week, I've finally found my footing and settled into my position.

The pace is slow as Wyatt and I experiment with flavors and ratios.

He tries hard not to show me his frustrations with the process.

Laurel, his lab assistant or whatever her title is, reassures him with each failure that it took him a long time to get their black garlic truffle just right.

He settles back into his cool demeanor each time and pulls me into his office to taste a competitor's chocolate and take notes. I'm pretty sure Laurel isn't a fan of this since he shuts her out like she's a distraction.

I'm pretty sure I'm the distraction with the way I catch him watching me with an unfocused gaze.

It's not endearing me to Laurel even a little bit, but there's nothing for me to do about it.

The hardest part of the last week has been seeing Ezra every day. He greets me in my office every morning, bearing a fresh cup of coffee—exactly how I took it when we were together during Spring Break.

I want to hate him. To keep him at a distance. To avoid remembering all the ways he'd made me feel special when I was eighteen and vulnerable. But those small actions needle me with our past, and I'm struggling against my attraction to him.

I didn't think it would build like this again, but I find myself daydreaming about what it might be like if we'd never met back then. Whether this feeling would be so strong if we had no history, if he didn't look at me like he knew exactly what he was missing.

Because sometimes, I catch that look in his eyes, wistful and wanting, even if it's only a glimpse because he's being so careful around me. Like right now, he leans against the door jamb of my office, sipping from his own mug as he watches me settle behind my desk.

He won't leave me until I've taken my first sip and approved, so I do.

The flavor closes my eyes. A dark Columbian bean with sweet and aromatic notes of hazelnut, honeycomb, and dark chocolate.

The splash of milk and sugar highlights the profile for me, and the caffeine settles warmth in my stomach.

When I open my eyes, Ezra is staring at my mouth. Then his gaze flicks up to my eyes, holding me motionless for a breath before he nods and slips away.

I can barely breathe against the onslaught of heat and dirty thoughts in his absence. Pulling my diary free from my bag, I open to a new page in the hopes that I can unload all of these confusing feelings and clear my mind up for the rest of the day.

My dreams have become riddled with Ezra and me entangled in too many compromising positions.

Many of them are echoes from our past, but more and more, they're breaching our new reality.

Like having him slip into my office in the morning to bring me coffee—like he did this morning—but he doesn't simply slip away again.

He comes in and closes the door before cornering me against my desk, hands on my hips, pressing the two of us together so that I can feel him hard against me. But more erotic than the feel of him wanting me is the slow way he lowers his mouth to mine and takes his time in devouring me.

How he lifts me to the edge of my desk and pulls my leg around his hip, his hand sliding down my bare thigh as we rock together.

Sometimes, he settles me down on the love seat on the other side of the room, pulling me into his lap and inviting whoever knocks on my door to interrupt us—typically, either Wyatt or Ryder... or both.

They peel the layers off me and focus completely on my pleasure with their hands, their mouths, their cocks until I'm an absolute mess.

If only these thoughts didn't bleed into my day, especially alone in my office or when I'm in the lab with Wyatt.

My imagination pegs him as adventurous, sneakily sliding his free hand up my skirt to finger me as I taste his chocolates.

The cold, clinical way he asks me about the flavors as I grind down into his hand and try not to moan.

How once I've come, he bends me over the cold table and hikes my skirt up to take

me with his cock, the jarring of my hips spilling my small breasts free of my top.

The bite of the cold making them pinch tight as he pounds relentlessly into me.

How he doesn't stop once I'm spent until he's found his own release.

There's one of Ryder catching me in the elevator alone and pulling the emergency lever to stop us between floors. We grind together for long minutes before he lifts me in his grip and takes me against the reflective surface where we can watch ourselves fucking from all angles.

Filthy words fall from his mouth the entire time, paired with pet names and soothing remarks about how sweet my pussy is, how wet I am, how well I take him.

My office phone rings, jarring me from the unending daydreams. I suck in a slow breath and answer it. "This is Avery."

"Yes. It's Wyatt. Come to the lab. I have a new configuration for you to try."

"Be right there."

He hangs up without a goodbye, and I sigh, stuffing my diary back in my oversized purse. Standing and stretching, I work to convince my body to cool off. My thoughts are not appropriate, even if all three men would more than likely take advantage if they knew.

I weave my way down to the lab and find Wyatt waiting for me. The way his eyes darken when he sees me is at odds with the way his shoulders stiffen. He waves me to his side, and I sit on my designated stool at his station. He doesn't want me to touch anything but the chocolate.

I smile at him in a teasing way and hold my hand out for the new piece. He hands it to me gingerly, crowding my space more so than normal, but I take my first bite, closing my eyes to let it melt over my tongue before I drag it across my palate.

The sweet notes are better, but it's still too bitter, too gritty. I open my eyes to tell him so, and he is still so, so close to me. His features have softened in a way I don't usually see as he stares at my mouth.

I lick my bottom lip, and Wyatt's nostrils flare. His nearness makes me tip my head back to look at him properly.

He jolts, stepping away from me and running a hand through his red hair. "It's not right again."

Those large hands land on his hips, and his brusque tone makes me sympathetic. Our task isn't an easy one, and although he seems keen to rush through it, he's more of a perfectionist than anything. Perhaps it's pride hurting his feelings.

I try not to take his combative stance personally. "It's not."

"What do I need to change about it? I feel as though we've changed every part of the formula already." Wyatt faces me directly again, the challenge in his gaze making my heart beat faster.

"As much as I wish there were a perfect science to this, there's not. It's trial and error." I've said this to him before.

"I know about trial and error. But all we're getting is errors."

My mouth twists as I bite the corner, and he watches it again. He's always looking at my mouth as if it holds the answer to all of his success in the lab.

An idea strikes me. “Maybe we need a change of setting.”

“How does where we eat the chocolate change anything?”

I ignore the jibe and walk to the fridge where he’s collected the samples from the last week, all carefully labeled. Turning back, I grab his hand and pull him behind me out of the lab, up the stairs, and to the small kitchen I spotted by the boardrooms.

“Avery,” he says my name like a warning.

“Just trust me. Okay?” It doesn’t seem like too big of an ask since he already trusts me to do my job and to help him figure this out.

First, I try melting it in the microwave. Twenty seconds is all it takes. I taste it with a spoon, a wooden chopstick from someone’s takeout order, my pinky finger. We’re getting closer.

Next, I melt it on the stove, repeating the process. This is better than the microwave, although slower. And the salt on my fingers seems to enhance the sweeter flavors—or mellow the bitter ones. And the grittiness is gone.

“Here.” I grab his hand and dip it into the warm chocolate. When he doesn’t immediately stick it in his mouth, I pull it into mine, just the tip between my lips as I swirl my tongue around it and suck.

A small moan whispers out of me without my permission.

Wyatt sucks in a shaky breath and steps closer. I know I’m playing with fire here, crossing some boundaries, but if this is what it’ll take for him to bring it down a notch, it’s worth it.

“Salt, soap, and a bit of latex from your gloves,” I tease him.

He frowns. “How is that better?”

“I’m kidding. Here, let me show you the difference.”

I turn the tables on him. “Close your eyes.”

I wait for him to do as I say, which only takes a couple of prolonged seconds. I dip my fingers back into the cooling chocolate and wipe a little across his full bottom lip.

He grabs my wrist and envelopes my finger with his hot mouth, suckling a little. His eyes blaze at me, brightening that pale green as his pupils dilate.

The intensity and proximity have me breathing heavily.

His chest rocks, too, nostrils flaring again as he tips closer. My finger slowly pulls free from his mouth.

I swear he’s seconds away from dropping his mouth over mine. God, I want him to. Even if we’re out in the open and it’s such a bad, bad idea.

A throat clears behind him, and I rise to my tiptoes to see Ezra in the entryway. His brow lifts in question or challenge, I’m not really sure.

Busted.

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Ezra

Seeing Wyatt so close to Avery sends a pang of jealousy through me, especially when she peeks over his shoulder and her pupils are blown wide. Whatever they were doing, I want to be doing it with her instead.

It's a strain on my day to keep from crowding her. To leave her alone. I allow myself to bring her coffee in the morning, when she's most likely to glower at me instead of fight with me. Although if you ask me, I will take fighting with her over nothing.

Knowing both of my friends are attracted to Avery makes me a little more desperate to pull out ahead. I have the biggest hurdle.

Wyatt turns toward me, his chest heaving a little, but he's otherwise his usual intense self. And Avery has gone back to glaring. It doesn't matter. I can't convince my body that she's not mine. Not after what we shared.

"May I steal Avery for a moment?"

Wyatt nods, shares a look with Avery, and leaves us. Her arms fold over her stomach, feet wide in a power pose. I want to gather her up and pin her against the counter.

"Follow me, please?" I try not to order her around. She doesn't need me to tell her what to do. It's not like she'll do as I say simply because I say it.

After a second's hesitation, she steps behind me, and I escort her to my office and close the door behind her. We're closer than usual, a mere foot from each other, and

the air is charged. She looks like she wants to murder me.

It's reminiscent of the first time we met. A challenge to prove I'm not some sloppy idiot who can only think with my dick. That's not the part of me in control.

Her arms are folded again, creating a barrier that keeps me from pressing her against the door. "Yes?"

Her question is breathy but stern, and I catch the small twitch of betrayal at the corner of her mouth.

"Ezra?"

I'm staring. My plan didn't make it this far. I just want to kiss her. To hold her captive until she tells me what I did to deserve her running out on me in the middle of the night without so much as a goodbye.

I lean closer, arm above her head on the door, ready to trap her. But her shaky breath closes my eyes, briefly taking me back to the one she made when she invited me inside. I'd let myself go, allowed myself to be hungry and show it to her.

Because I've wanted her since the moment I laid eyes on her, and it's only gotten worse as time's gone on.

Avery's always seen more of me than I expected. She didn't roll her eyes when I dropped ten-dollar words into a conversation. Never distracted or redirected me from geeking out over something just because she didn't know anything about it.

Although I imagined she was ready to shut herself off from me the moment I did something that revealed my nerdy side, she remained open to me the entire time.

I want that back.

Her hand meets my chest when I get too close, and she slips around me, further into the office.

Avery's frustration is palpable because I can feel that she still wants me, even if she doesn't want to want me. And I'll only get the answers I want if I prod her.

"Why do I feel like you're always running from me?" I turn against the door, blocking her only way out.

"Why do I feel like you're always being dishonest with me?" She turns, her long hair taking flight and her hands planting on her hips.

I stalk toward her, trapping her against the back of my desk. I didn't lie to her once. It was easy not to with the way she shaped our conversations.

"What are you talking about?" The intensity from the past melding with the present pings between us.

"Why am I even here right now?" It's a hedge. This moment is not what she's talking about.

"That's not what you meant."

She shakes her head, staring at my chest instead of meeting my gaze.

"Avery." I take a deep breath. "Tell me what you're referring to."

Because I need to know. I can't fix what I don't know I've broken.

Finally, that ice queen she's been this week melts into the fiery Italian I remember. Her hazel eyes are blazing with anger. Her mouth twists cruelly.

"Does your wife know you get so close with your female employees?"

The question jars me like a punch on the chin. "I don't have a wife."

No one's made me feel even close to what Avery stirs in me.

She rolls her eyes. "Girlfriend, then."

Dread spreads through my chest, a sinking weight that deflates my pride. "No girlfriend, either."

"I don't believe you."

If I didn't have her trapped between my arms and my desk, she'd have bolted by now. "Why not?"

Her nostrils flare. "Because you lied about it ten years ago. You had a girlfriend when we were together during Spring Break. I saw her text."

This blow lands in my diaphragm, sending a gust of air between my lips. I remember that text. The one I woke up to instead of Avery.

I'd been ignoring Maddison's calls and texts the entire week. Not the mature way to deal with my situation, but I did plan to deal with it regardless of whether Avery was serious about me or not. That text had been more than suggestive, as was Maddison's response when I told her we were over.

She thought throwing sex at me was going to change things. But it couldn't.

“That’s why you left without saying goodbye.” She didn’t even wake me up to fight with me about it. To call me out on it. To tell me I’m an asshole.

“Yes.” Such a simple response. It took one text for her to totally give up on me.

Was I not worth the energy? Did she simply want to hurt me more? I search for the answer in her eyes, but I can’t read much beyond the anger.

I take a deep breath, working hard to keep my calm when my body won’t stop buzzing. “I was going to break it off when I got home. I didn’t want to do it over the phone.”

Her sneer only makes me want to kiss her. “So you just cheated on her instead.”

Yeah. Not my smartest move. But at the time, I thought I was being mature. “I was stupid. I thought I was doing the right thing. The moment I felt that spark with you, I knew that relationship stood no chance. I’d only been seeing her for a few months. And I was twenty.”

I’d never had a serious relationship at that point. Nothing that didn’t fizzle out after a month or two. I didn’t grow attached to women that even bordered on love. Not until Avery.

“I was eighteen, and I knew better.” Given the other things I knew about her, it’s true, but I’d already jumped in feet first by the time I knew the deal-breaking mistake I’d made.

I drag a hand down my face. “I never cheated before, and I haven’t since.”

“So you say.” Her words are soft, even with a little bite. It sounds like she’s resigned herself to that truth. I’m a cheater.

“You’re not going to believe me no matter what I say...” I’m panicking. I’m desperate. “Come meet my mom.”

I don’t have another way to convince her—other than introducing her to all of my ex-girlfriends. Which I will do if it’s my only option.

She laughs, incredulous. “Why?”

“Because she’ll tell you. She’ll tell you how fucked up I was when I came back—after you.”

I had been fucked up. I felt like I’d lost a limb, some large part of me ripped away without my understanding why. It was traumatizing.

Avery softens. It’s the smallest fraction, but it makes hope inflate in my chest again. Her silence only makes me antsy, drives me forward.

Tipping closer, I brace my hand at the back of her head and tip her face up toward mine. Desire pumps hard through me when her lips part.

“I’ve never felt anything like what we had since. Tell me you don’t feel it.”

Her hands meet my chest, but she doesn’t push me away. My other hand snakes around her back, more tempting to have a taste of what I’ve been missing all this time. What I’ve been craving, longing for. The ghost of her in my arms is like a physical ache.

“For ten years, I’ve been searching for it. For you. You have no idea how many times I tried to find you.”

Her nails curl into my shirt, and I can’t stop or the world will derail—crash and burn,

taking us with it.

Does her mouth still soften when kiss? Does she still taste sweet? Will every part of me burn from that simple contact? I lean in, even if this is nothing like the first kiss we shared—like any of the ones we shared before...

If I don't do this now, it'll kill me.

I swoop down and capture her mouth with mine. My office fades around us as I test and press and pry her open to my kiss.

And when she does finally kiss me back, I feel like I've won a piece of myself back.

Avery

The world disappears when Ezra kisses me. His fingers sink into my hair, supporting the back of my head and tipping me to access my mouth more fully. His thumb brushes along my jaw.

My fingers curl into the front of his shirt, needing to be closer. The broad expanse of his chest and waist press into mine, lifting me to the edge of his desk so we can eliminate every inch of space between us.

It's so, so easy to sink into him, to forget everything else as his tongue tentatively sweeps against mine.

I don't mean to moan, but I do. It's low and soft and vibrates through me like a drug.

Ezra's hand fists into the back of my blouse, traces of hunger hitting me in a feedback loop until nothing is left but him and this kiss.

Smoothing my hands out across his chest, I find and trace his collarbones, letting my touch meander upward until I stroke along his throat with a fingertip. I make lazy circles behind his ear until his grip tightens and his mouth falls to my throat in a smattering of kisses and bites.

His teeth pinch that sensitive spot he found that first night. A spot that primes me for detonation.

Another, lower, moan escapes me, and he grunts against my skin, nibbling and

drawing my head back farther until I'm grasping at his hair. Encouraging or fending him off, I'm not sure. I can't think straight.

My knees squeeze his hips, calves working against his thighs. I'm so utterly turned on that I've lost my control. God, how can he still do this to me?

When his mouth glides against mine again, I'm ravenous. Being with him is too fucking good, addictive like it all those years ago. And if I let myself get wrapped up in him again, I'll never shake loose.

I force myself to break away, tipping my forehead against his as I catch my breath.

His chest heaves under my hands, and it takes so much self-control to follow through, to push him back far enough that I can slip around him.

Cold air breaches my overly hot skin. I rack a hand through my hair and turn away. I can't even look at Ezra right now. The feel of him is too fresh. It worms into me.

I need to put much more space between us, but I can't seem to make myself.

His confession. His plea for me to meet his mother. It makes me want to believe him.

Because I looked for him, too, albeit for a very different reason.

Still, I'd looked.

I'm pacing in circles and find him leaning against his desk where I'd been a second ago. He's touching his mouth, like he can imprint the memory of me there.

A wild frenzy builds inside, something so completely overwhelming that I can't comprehend it properly. I have to get out of here.

Have to escape this.

I step toward the door, and he follows. I can feel him behind me.

Someone knocks. Good. We need the distraction.

But Ezra traps me against the solid wood, his mouth at my ear, refilling me with the heat I'm trying desperately to dispel.

"Wait."

I'm going to unravel, and I need somewhere private to do so.

His hand traipses down my bare arm, fingers fiddling with my own. "Come meet my mom. This weekend. Please."

I can't take a full breath.

Ezra turns me gently to face him. Fuck, that earnest look in his eyes, the unnatural downturn of his mouth. He will beg if I ask him to.

"I'll think about it."

His thumb brushes my bottom lip before he retreats, giving me the smallest nod. His gaze never leaves mine.

I have to turn from it, grasping the door handle and swinging it open to reveal Ryder on the other side. His bronze eyes take me in with a full, eager sweep, and he smiles. "Miss Caruso."

The low timbre of his voice slides over me, teases and twists me up further inside.

Then his gaze swings over my head. Ryder can see more than I want him to.

“Excuse me.” I push past him, charging down the hall to my office. Once the door is safely closed behind me, I slump back against it and suck in deep, gasping breaths.

What the fuck just happened?

Everything inside me buzzes, like my skin has shrunk and is ready to split me in half. Whatever that was, it resonates so deep against that old wound that I nearly crumple to the floor right in front of my door.

Anger lashes at me. At the old version of us. At the stupid decision he made. At the way I ghosted him.

Especially with the way he’s still able to make me feel so much .

I’m finally catching my breath. I just want this overwhelming feeling to subside, to dull enough that I can think straight.

When I’m able to climb back to my feet, every little movement makes my clothes grate against my newly sensitized skin.

My office chair presses my arousal back against me. Fuck, I’m so screwed.

How far would that have gone if I hadn’t already been disarmed and primed by Wyatt? Would nearly walking into Ryder have sent the zing through me if not for Ezra?

And Ezra...

I wish I could simply enjoy the man he’s become, but all of our baggage is heavy.

Part of me wants to just put it down and move on. And the other part...

I sigh and pull out my new safe haven. My diary.

I can't even...

I can't even...

What has my life turned into? My days are filled with chocolate and three testosterone and lust-filled men who mess with my head. And you know what? I can't even.

I've got all of this anger and grief wrapped up in my attraction to Ezra, but the way he kisses me sends me back to that first night with him—both tender and greedy. That's a good word for it.

Greedy.

The three of them make me feel greedy, make me feel like the slut I've never thought myself to be. It feels inevitable.

Ezra feels inevitable, just like he did when my assessment of him didn't run him off.

When our touch sank into a tangled knot of fingers.

When the free drinks and mutual attraction tipped us closer together.

When he'd cupped my face and kissed me as the sun set, I swore my barstool would burst into flames.

When he pressed me back into my hotel door, I swore we'd set it on fire.

When he slowly undressed and worshiped me on that thin mattress, I swore we'd burn the entire place down.

Every day and every night, it got better. I hated being away from him for more than a few minutes at a time. I didn't even try to play it cool.

Because he didn't either.

And he's trying so hard to play it now. Watching him break was intense. It's still fluttering through my chest.

He'd barely pressed us together, done not even a tenth of what we'd done before, and it had me sinking into a version of me that I'd missed.

An open one. A needy one. A dreamy one.

God, what would it be like to be with him as a mature adult? How much hotter would it be to sleep with Ezra now?

Would there be anything left of me?

Avery

Work is like navigating around landmines. No where I step is safe. I seem to be surrounded at all times by the three men who haunt my afternoons and evenings. My nights and dreams. My mornings. God, they're with me all the time.

My tightrope keeps getting thinner and thinner, and locking myself up in my office doesn't work. They all find me there.

Ezra hasn't kissed me since we both had that slip of judgment. He seems scared to touch me again, and part of me desperately wants to break through his control again. Even if I need the space.

Wyatt's deigned to touch me a couple of times, staring at my mouth more and more often. Although we're struggling with the formula for our new dark chocolate, his new ritual to recenter himself seems to be brushing my mouth with his thumb.

It's a slow glide that makes me want to bite him.

And then, there's Ryder. His version of intensity is the complete opposite of the other two. He's an over the top flirt. Naughty comments and innuendos. I can't tell whether he possesses more control than Wyatt and Ezra or less.

The combination of them all has me on edge with the constant sexual tension. It's mounting and mounting and mounting. I can't hide from it.

I tuck myself in my office, trying to catch my breath. I'm not sure how much longer

this can go on.

The moment I have some semblance of control, there's a knock at my door.

Taking a deep breath, I say, "Come in."

Speak of the devil, Ryder stands there with a cardboard box in his hands. His smile is softer than usual, but his bronzed eyes are bright and mischievous. I don't need to wave him in or clear him space. He makes himself at home straight away.

The box settles on the chair opposite of me. He slides my pens and outbox out of the way and settles a plate and cloth-wrapped utensils in front of me. A second set appears, and he pulls a chair around beside me before he sits.

"What are you doing?" I ask from behind my hands. I'm blinking at him like an idiot.

"Feeding you lunch." Ryder lifts a glass container and opens it, the scents of garlic and eggplant, mushrooms and olive oil wafting out of it. Peppers, onions, and buffalo mozzarella cheese. I spot the Pappardelle pasta, the traditionally wide egg noodle that makes the dish.

And then he hits me in my weak spot.

"I made it myself." Brows dancing, he smiles at me, and it's not the intense version I'm used to—it's softer, sweeter, more dangerous.

"How much of it?" I challenge him.

That smile widens with pride. "All of it. Although I didn't grow the vegetables, grind the flour, or make the cheese. Everything else was me."

I laugh wildly, leaning back in my chair as he spoons me a small portion. I have a feeling there's more to come.

"To what do I owe this honor?" For my family, food is a sign of love. Especially homemade food. It's the ultimate gift we can give each other.

Closing my eyes, I take in another whiff. It fills me with the feeling of home. A small mouthful eases the tension in my shoulders and back as the flavors hit and meld to perfectly balance with each other on my palate.

A low, pleased note vibrates in the back of my throat, and when I open my eyes, Ryder is beaming at me like I've just given him an award.

"Verdict?" His playful glint has me smiling back at him.

"Almost as good as my Nonna's."

His bronze hand covers the small triangle of exposed chest. The white of his shirt highlights the healthy tone of his skin even more. "The highest of praises."

I take another bite and enjoy the effort this meal took to put together right. There's no way he can know that eggplant is one of my favorites. I put it in every dish I can. It's meaty and soaks up flavor so well.

Plus, I can eat a pound of it and not worry about my hips gaining inches.

Talk about a win-win.

"So, how did you learn to cook like this?" The food disappears too quickly.

"My mother and Mimi. They were always in the kitchen, and I was always underfoot,

being waved out by towels, vowels, and wild hand gestures...”

I can’t hold in my laughter. My memories are filled with the same thing.

He laughs, too. “You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

“I do. Only, I was sat at the kitchen table to be seen and not heard. Until they wanted to know what touches I thought they needed to add. Which was a heady experience for a seven-year-old, let me tell you.” As Nonna’s memory faded, she relied on me to remind her of what she couldn’t remember.

Ryder’s hand touched mine, spreading warmth through me. “That’s a lot of power to have in an Italian kitchen.”

My laugh is breathy. “Yeah. It is.”

“Is that when your family discovered what you could do?”

I nod. “You know who my dad is?”

His fingers surround my wrist, so big comparatively. “I do.”

“It was his mission to show me off when he figured it out. His not-so-secret weapon, although to be fair, he was already so well-known by then. He’d already earned a Michelin star for the restaurant where he still works.

” I shrug. “To his utter and absolute disappointment, I cannot bake, though. Not anywhere near close to the way he can. I don’t have that kind of precision. ”

“But you can cook.”

Warmth builds inside my chest. “Yes. It’s easier to adjust as I go, to taste my mistakes before they’re already baked in.”

He strokes my wrist with this thumb. “Most of us can only swing one or the other, you know.”

“I do.” I sigh. “I don’t actually enjoy cooking, though. Eating, however...”

Slowly, Ryder releases his grip on me and grabs another glass container from his box, opening it to the scents of meat and sauce. He spoons two meatballs on my plate and three onto his own. My mouth floods with saliva. It’s been a hot minute since I’ve had a good homemade meatball.

Since my Nonna passed a few years ago.

I breathe in the scent of home and a life I miss terribly and blink back tears.

Ryder catches the one tear that slips through, cupping my face and frowning. I cover his hand with my own and turn to kiss his palm, a small show of affection I don’t usually dole out.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Just remembering my Nonna.”

He nods, knowing and understanding without any explanation.

Ryder keeps his grip on my hand, kissing my knuckles.

Without the big show of it, the gesture sweetens and digs into my heart.

The way he doesn't want to relinquish my hand is also surprising.

He's not great at eating with his left hand, and it sends me into giggles.

The smile he gives me is so full of happiness that all of the others he's given me seem calculated by comparison.

"Are you full Italian?" I ask. "You cook like one."

He huffs a laugh. "No. My mom is full Italian. First generation Italian-American. But my dad is English—Nigel Ashcroft."

I sputter, trying to keep my own laughter inside. "That's very, very English."

His joy at making me laugh is obvious, glowing in those bronze eyes. "He is incredibly English. You should see them trying to communicate. Him reserved and level, and her fiery and keen on throwing things."

"Oh, that sounds like me. I can't control my limbs or the level of my voice when I'm mad. When my dad and I used to fight, the neighbors would call the police. And I'd yell at them, too." I roll my eyes at myself. I did have a big, big mouth. And far too much confidence that I was always right.

Some of that has curbed since.

"Are you full Italian? I know your father is, right? He emigrated from Italy when he was a teen..."

"He did. Moved with my Nonna and Nonno from Bologna. Mom came from Sicily as a babe. She went back, though." I stab the last chunk of meatball and take my time chewing through it.

“Mom left Dad and me when I was small. Five, maybe earlier. My Aunt Sylvia and Cousin Sophia came to live with us for a while. You met her in Cancún.”

“The wild one,” he confirms.

“Yes. Would you believe she’s married with four kids now? A preschool teacher.”

His laughter booms in my office, so much like my dad’s when he’s full of joy. Happiness that simply cannot be contained. I squeeze his hand, and he squeezes back.

“Crazy how much ten years can change,” I say sadly. My last ten years had so much joy in them because of my son and my father, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t missing something important during that time.

“Not the important things.”

I shrug. It’s hard to parse out what those things are.

“You have a son, too, yes?” Ryder relinquishes my hand and pulls out a final container. The perfect end to an Italian meal—Caprese salad.

“Yes. He’s nine. Full of energy and mischief, but overall, he’s a good kid.” I miss being there when he gets home, but Sophia takes him for the few hours between school and when I get off work. But it’s good for him to be around family.

“What’s his name?” Ryder is playing with my fingers again, tracing the lines of my palm and the blue of my veins across my forearm. I shiver under the electric current of his touch.

“Charlie.”

“You should bring him in for a tour some time.” The sincerity in his bronze eyes sets butterfly wings fluttering in my chest. “I bet he’d love to do some taste testing of his own.”

“He certainly would. That boy is a chocoholic.”

We chew through our tomatoes, mozzarella, and onions in relative silence, but he never stops touching me. It’s becoming intoxicating.

I like this version of Ryder. The one who’s not trying so hard, whose flirting is subdued and genuine, who’s willing to show me the softer pieces of himself. The food alone tells me he wants to take care of someone—me, maybe. If I let him.

He packs up what he’s brought, and I stand to walk him to my door. Even though we’re in the office, I can’t help but feel the need to reciprocate with my own affectionate gesture.

Ryder hugs the box against his side and tucks my hair behind my ear with the other. A soft nudge lifts my chin like he might kiss me, but when he leans in, it lands on my cheek instead.

“You’ll have to let me make you dinner sometime,” he says against my hot skin. “And then, perhaps, breakfast after.”

Wyatt

I pace around my lab and office, waiting for Avery to return after lunch for another taste test. It's difficult to wait, to not simply go and retrieve her, to find ways to keep her down here with me for the rest of the day.

Fuck, she's monopolizing my thoughts, and there doesn't seem to be a damn thing I can do about it. Her beautiful face takes over the numbers, ratios, calculations that I'm used to crowding my brain.

Ever since she led me upstairs for a brand-new way to taste chocolate, I've been floundering.

But the sight of her eyes fluttering closed as her lips pursed around my finger. The feel of her tongue against the pad, and the moan low in her throat... All of it sent a charge through me that hasn't found its way out.

I almost kissed her in that kitchenette. And that is all I can think about—how much I want to kiss her.

It's only been a few days, but I'm not sure I can go on much longer like this. I'm out of sorts. It's affecting my ability to work.

Hence the tray of chocolates in my office cooler waiting for her. I made them over the last few days, creating new flavors that I think she'll enjoy based on the comments she's made on the other chocolates we've tested from competitors.

The mango one will be her favorite, but the avocado one is the outlier. She'll love or hate it, and I need to know which it is.

My sanity is slipping.

Hands clenching.

I'm barely holding back from seeking her out when she glides into the lab. I watch from my office as she shakes out her hair and ties it up to keep it out of the way. I've discovered those long strands in my office chair, where she sits as we decide what our next steps will be.

Finding myself in the doorway, leaning and staring like some kind of invalid, I'm reminded once again that I've never met a woman before who's provoked this kind of reaction out of me.

I want to map every inch of her body, learn every little dip and divot and sensitive spot that makes her whimper and moan. I want to explore her wet center with my fingers, my tongue, my cock.

The desire burns me up inside until I'm left a husk.

Her smile is sunlight in this gray and chrome room.

I jerk away from the wall, stepping close until she has to look up at me. Her hands fall to her hips, and I wonder why she does that. Is it to not feel so small?

"I made something for you," I say instead of a greeting. I flinch at myself. Why can't I be smoother, like Ryder?

Her smile grows, though, stopping the downward spiral of my thoughts.

My hand finds her arm, leading her to the stool she usually occupies. Grabbing her by the waist, I help her up onto it, receiving a wild look from her.

I can't linger, and my hasty retreat seems to pull a soft laugh from her.

Returning with the tray, I'm crowding her again. I'm far too close as she leans in to inspect them. Her shoulder brushes my stomach, and I'm electrocuted. Avery peers up at me with those big hazel eyes—blues, greens, oranges, and browns of the wild. No wonder I feel like an animal around her.

Her hand meets mine, and she tugs me into my stool beside hers. "Stop towering over me. Am I going in blind or are you going to tell me what all of this is?"

I peer down at where her hand lingers in mine. Fiddling with her fingers has me mesmerized. They're so soft, her palm plump with clear lines. Is the rest of her just as soft? Softer?

Fuck, I want to find out.

"They're just something I thought you would enjoy. Based on what you've tasted so far."

Avery stops my fiddling, makes me look at her. She's sympathetic and sweet. "Are you making me a signature chocolate?"

I shrug, in new territory. I would make her twenty to keep her looking at me like that.

Her smile blooms, and colorful petals explode in my chest. Among all the drab gray and black, she's technicolor. It should blind me, but I just want to hunker down in her glow.

Without thinking about it, I brush a light caress against her cheek. Retreating, I relinquish her hand and point to the spread of six new flavor combos for her to taste.

“Where should I start?” Her lip pinches between her teeth.

I tap the one front and center. It’s the avocado one. The one I’m most nervous about. I’d rather get it out of the way and go up from there.

“No preamble?” Avery takes the little truffle between two fingers and slides her gaze toward mine.

Is she teasing me? I want more of it.

I shake my head, watching her mouth so closely, she must find me a freak. Her first bite, the way her eyes close as she tastes it, I’m on the edge of my seat, aching to completely surround her, tuck her against my chest.

Her second bite nearly finishes the small square, but how she never finishes one no longer rides my nerves, doesn’t knock down my confidence.

Instead, I’m a jumble of things I want from her. Need from her. Crave from her.

“What’s the verdict?”

“The texture of the avocado is so complimentary to the chocolate and spice. The hint of sweetness, and it carries the salty tones really nicely. It’s not at all what I was expecting.

” Avery sucks some chocolate remnants from her thumb.

“I think you could add so many flavors to it that would make it an entirely new

experience each time.”

“Like what?” I ask, frowning at my own brusque tone.

“Cream cheese, or maybe even feta for something more savory. Raspberry preserves. Peanut butter. Avocado is one of those flavors that takes on others well. I like avocado, so this on its own is a treat.”

I can’t soak in the compliment. I point at the next—the medjool date and pistachio combo.

A low noise in the back of her throat when she bites into it paired with the fluttering of her lashes puffs my chest up with pride. I want to beat my fists against my chest in victory.

It freezes me in place until those wild eyes open, and I’m sinking into a dungeon of my own making. Her hand finds my shoulder, squeezing. She’s a beacon. I can’t help but flock to her.

My fingers are rubbing the ends of her hair between them. I don’t recall reaching out to do that.

“Verdict?” I force my gaze up to meet hers.

Avery slides the rest of the piece into her mouth, and it floors me. My blood is pumping so hard that I can hardly control myself.

She’s on her feet when I blink, and she slides easily between my knees. Her hands are on my shoulders. Mine is fisted in the end of her ponytail, shaking from the want to tug her head back to spread my mouth across her skin.

Her fingers ruffle through the hair that sweeps across my forehead, pushing it out of my face and letting her touch travel across my scalp.

The usually cold room can't stave off the sweat gathering along the back of my neck, down my spine. My clothes are too tight. They're creating too many barriers between us.

Avery hovers just out of reach, looking down at me like she can see me. And I don't put her off. She doesn't steer me, doesn't deal with me. She enjoys me. Or at least, she seems to.

Her grip loosens, she blinks, and alarm pierces through the fog of sexual tension that's built between us.

Pallor replaces the pink from her cheeks. Her hand flutters down to her stomach.

"Avery?"

She drops, and I'm almost not fast enough to catch her. I save her head from hitting the cement and cradle her as her eyes roll back. Clanging between my ears has me reaching up on instinct to hit the emergency button under the table.

If it's something she ingested, we should get it out of her, but I can't do that with her unconscious. I need to wake her up. Keep her that way.

I pat her face as gently as I can manage. It still feels too hard, but she doesn't stir.

"Avery? Avery, come on. Wake back up for me. Come on. Avery ." I turn her to her side, wishing I'd been trained for this. But panic takes complete hold. "Help. Help !"

The buzzing of the alarm falls into the background.

This can't be happening. I should get her in my arms and carry her out to help.

The lab door bursts open, and Ezra is kneeling beside us. "What happened?"

"I don't know. I made something just for her." And I kept them in my office. Few had access to my things. Only people I trust, so that means I must have messed something up.

Avery jerks in my grip, and the shaking takes over her completely. She's seizing.

I'm holding her head to keep it from slamming, and Ezra's on the phone.

It takes too long for the paramedics to arrive, but once they do, everything seems to happen at once.

I stalk out of the building after her, letting Ezra take over. They've covered Avery's mouth with an oxygen mask. Her eyes flutter a few times, but she doesn't wake.

A crowd of people have gathered, and I can't snap out of my tunnel vision. If only my undivided attention could revive her.

Hollow emptiness fills the place my heart once existed as they load her into the back of the ambulance. What have I done?

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 7:46 am

Ezra

I forget how small Avery is until they strap her to that stretcher. The ambulance swallows her up, and a paramedic asks me quietly, “Who’s coming with her?”

I want to go, but it’s smarter to have Wyatt ride with her.

He’s got the chocolates in his grip like they’re the answer to her salvation, and they could be.

I grab his shoulder, and he pulls out of his stupor.

“I need you to go with her. Help them figure out what happened. Make sure you keep them focused.”

Not that I don’t trust the paramedics or doctors, but it gives Wyatt a purpose to ground him. I can see the changes in his body language—protective and focused. He’ll make sure she’s safe.

I have phone calls to make, like the one to her father to tell him his daughter is on her way to the hospital. It’s a terrible duty to have, but I can’t pawn it off on anyone else. It’s my responsibility.

But that doesn’t mean I can stay behind. My phone is open as I jog to my Lexus.

I can’t tell if it’s a blessing or a curse that I get Dominick Caruso’s voicemail. After the beep, I tell him, “Mr. Caruso. This is Ezra Nguyen, Avery’s boss. We’ve had an

incident, and an ambulance is taking her to the hospital. Please call me back so I can provide you with more details.”

And I’m behind the wheel, racing after the ambulance, my mind spinning on the unknowns of what’s happened, but also all of the possible ways I could lose Avery again.

When I make it to the hospital, I find Wyatt pacing the hallway beside the ER. He’s beside himself, guilt written all over him. He runs a hand down his face, through his hair. His arms fold and unfold, and he takes jagged steps.

“Hey.” I grab his arm and give him a little shake, making him stop in his tracks. Wyatt’s eyes focus on me. “Where is she? What’s going on?”

After a few blinks, he says, “They took her back. Told me to wait here since I’m not kin. I don’t know what happened. I made those myself. There’s nothing in them she’s allergic to. Nothing that should cause this reaction. Fuck. What if I’ve killed her?”

“Stop it. Don’t spin out of control before we know anything. She’ll be fine.” She has to be. “What were her symptoms?”

“Pale. Stomach ache, I’m guessing. She grabbed her stomach. Fainting. Seizing .” The last word is a whisper.

“But she was still breathing,” I remind him and myself.

“Yes. She was still breathing.” A small bit of clarity shines in his pale eyes, and he nods and squeezes his hands into fists.

“You’re not going to fall apart while I go check with the doctor, right?”

“Of course not.” He frowns, glowering at me like normal, so I smile at him.

“Good.” I march to the nurse’s desk and inquire about Avery, explaining that I’m her boss, something happened at my establishment, and I am responsible for her until her father arrives. This seems to sway her after a few seconds of prolonged eye contact.

“They’re running tests right now, Mr. Nguyen. She appears stable at the moment, but the doctor will be out to speak with you when he knows more.” Her sharp, no-nonsense brows lift as if to say, is that alright with you?

“Thank you.”

The nurse nods, and I walk back to Wyatt. “Time to play the waiting game.”

Or maybe not. Slicked back salt and pepper hair, a rough, tanned face, and the scowl that could only rival Avery’s appears in the ER’s doorway. He huffs inside, eyes scanning the place efficiently. It makes me step forward and regret that this is the first time I’ll meet her father.

He stomps forward, meeting Wyatt and me in the hallway away from the seating area. “Are you Ezra Nguyen?”

“Yes, sir. You must be Avery’s father.”

“What the hell has happened to my little girl? Who leaves that kind of message on a voicemail? Do you not know what that can do to my heart? Where is Avery?” Mr. Caruso’s face is red, and his hands are flailing from his wide gestures.

“Please. Mr. Caruso.”

“Dominick.” His voice is gruff, almost a growl as he properly looks at me, eyes

narrowing like he might recognize me. Who knows what his daughter has said to him about me?

“She’s stable. They’re running tests. It seems to be something she’s eaten, although we’ve taken the greatest precautions to keep it from happening. Your daughter is an asset?—”

His lip curls.

“And she’s important to us. All of us. She’s become a part of our family, and we don’t want anything to happen to her.” Especially since I’ve just gotten her back.

Dominick breathes heavily, like he might spray fire from his nostrils and burn us on the spot, but his gaze slides to Wyatt, who’s pale but steely. The hard swallow from my friend has its effect.

“It’s my fault,” he whispers, looking down the hall where she must have disappeared. “I checked and double-checked, but it wasn’t enough.”

That sobers Dominick. “Were you with her when it happened?”

Wyatt nods, meeting this man’s gaze with a near vacant sadness. “I made some chocolates especially for her. Things I thought she’d like based on her palate. She didn’t even get to try the mango chili one. That would have been her favorite.”

A renewed prickle of jealousy makes its way unbidden between my ribs, slithering like a poison to my heart. Wyatt has it bad.

I know that feeling with more exacting clarity than he might imagine.

“That would have been her favorite,” Dominick agrees.

A smile flashes over Wyatt's face, and even though it's gone as quickly as it comes, it's a relief to see.

"I'll take you to the nurses' station to see if you can get more information than I did." I gesture toward the desk and the nurse I'd just talked to minutes ago. She's peering at us with squirrely eyes.

A bulky, black phone receiver is pinched between her shoulder and ear.

We step forward together, and she has her finger up at us before we settle against the counter. Then, she points, and a doctor in his white coat is sticking a pen back into his coat pocket as he walks up to us.

He's Korean, mid-fifties, and has a reassuring smile, which he gives us now. "Avery Caruso's family?"

"Yes." Dominick clears his throat. "I'm her father."

"We got the results, and we've given her potassium ferric hexacyanoferrate—Prussian blue.

She should be just fine, but she's going to need to take it easy as she recovers.

We're going to monitor her for the next couple of hours to be sure she can keep liquids down and that she responds to her meds, then you can take her home. "

He smiles again, looking at the three of us in a silent bid for questions.

"Can we see her?"

"She's pretty out of it, and will be for a while, but there's no harm in going in to see

her. One at a time, though.” He taps the chart in his hand to accentuate his point.

“We’ll go gather her things and get everything ready for her to go home.” Still, I linger, even if just to get a peek of her sleeping. Just to know she’s breathing.

“Come. I will give you my extra key and a list.” Dominick pats my shoulder and soldiers on behind the doctor toward her room.

Wyatt and I follow, and hovering in the doorway, I watch a bundled up Avery with breathing tubes in her nose and a monitor beeping with her heartbeat. An IV is in her hand. God, the sight breaks my heart.

Tears spill down Dominick’s cheeks as he goes to her, his big hand brushing her hair from her forehead in the most loving, fatherly gesture. He leans down to talk softly against the top of her head, and I’m shook by the sight of it.

I back out of the room and spot Ryder at the end of the hall as Wyatt peeks in at Avery. Meeting him halfway, I hold my hands up, knowing we left him behind in the hysteria. “She’s okay. They just told us. Her dad’s in with her.”

He drags his hand down his face and bends over at the waist. “Thank fucking God.”

The strain on my oldest friend is another blow for the day. They seem to keep coming, and I hope they’re done.

“I’m sorry for leaving you behind.”

Ryder shakes his head. “I can’t say I’d have been much better if our roles were swapped. But fuck, I had about fifteen heart attacks on the way over.”

“Go look in at her.” I wait for Dominick to come out. He’s dangling a key from his

fingers and has resumed the deadly dad look.

“You care about my daughter.” It doesn’t sound like a question.

It still has an easy answer. “I do.”

“Then, you will take care of her. I will make a list.” And he does. Standing at the nurses’ station, he gives me her address, her favorite soup and candy, and even directions on how to draw her a bath with her finicky tub.

I try and fail not to laugh, but I’m off and only make it to her townhouse fifteen minutes before Dominick comes in with her. I’ve just put away some groceries and pulled back her sheets.

She moans lightly as he tucks her in.

He returns to me, hovering in her door. “Sophia and I have Charlie. You make sure she gets better. No leaving her alone. And you call me when she wakes up.”

“Yes, sir.”

Avery’s dad pats my cheek in mild threat and nods before he casts one last glance at his daughter and storms out the front door.

I pull a chair into her room from the kitchen and sit by her bedside, watching her sleep. My alarm goes off to give her medicine, so I go digging for it among the things I brought of hers from the office.

The bag from the drugstore is nestled into her purse, and a small notebook catches my eye. I’ve seen her writing furiously in that thing at the office. And she’s always quick to close it.

I take it out and set it on the nightstand beside her bed. It's not difficult to get the medicine in her. She doesn't move well on her own, but she's coherent enough to swallow before slumping back into sleep.

For the next few minutes, I can't help but stare at the notebook.

This is stupid. I'm being an asshole.

But I want to know what's in there. I want to know what she's writing about.

I sit there for another fifteen minutes, listening to the even keel of her breath before I break, slipping the notebook into my lap. Flipping it open to a random page, I spot my name.

So, is this for work or... No, it can't be. Not when I see the word cock jump out at me.

I flip back to the beginning of that entry, the lines about me, Wyatt, and Ryder, how much tension has built between us. And then—then she delves into a full-blown fantasy of the three of us taking her together, all at once.

Fuck, it's hot.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 7:46 am

Ryder

A very has been out of it for the last few days, sleeping most of the time, eating and drinking a little, but falling right back into La-La Land. So when she opens her eyes at me with renewed clarity, it takes my breath away.

I slip to my knees at her bedside and push back the hair from her face. “Hey, beautiful. How are you feeling?”

Her grunt is sweet and makes me smile.

“That good, huh?”

“I want to get out of bed. I’m sick of it. My body hurts.” Her hand comes down on top of mine, where it rests behind her head, lightly grazing her cheek with my thumb.

“Well, you’ve just come out of being really sick, darling. I bet you’re hurting.” I lay my head beside hers on my arm, and I can see that ornery personality rearing its head. “What can I do to help?”

She huffs. “Help me sit up, and let me move around.”

Without waiting for my answer, she shoves herself up on a shaky arm. I slide mine under her to keep her upright, and my body burns as she leans into me.

“Are you sure you have the energy?”

Another soft groan, and her arm flexes around my neck, gripping me hard. I gather her in my arms and swing her off the mattress.

“Let me walk,” she insists, and the fanning of her breath across my collarbone sends a small shiver through me.

Slowly, I lower her feet to the floor and keep her stable with my hands cupping her waist. It takes us a few minutes to walk out to her couch, where she unceremoniously flops down on the corner cushion, breathing heavily.

I retrieve some water and crackers, which she munches on slowly. I slide under her feet, bringing them into my hands for a squeeze. A small, whimpering moan escapes her, stirring my dick to life. Fucking monster knows what it wants but is completely out of line.

Refocusing, I drag a knuckle up her arch and watch her eyes flutter closed, her face pinching from the pressure points I hit. Popping her toes makes her grunt.

“So, what happened?” Her voice is soft and small.

My ministrations move up to her ankles, and I earn another of her sharp intakes of breath.

God, she’s magnificent. Hair tousled and half falling from its ponytail, wisps stick to her cheeks and neck.

The side of her face is lined from her pillowcase, and her natural tan has dulled, but she’s still so fucking beautiful it hurts.

Another nibble on the cracker has her narrowing her eyes at me. Not even a stint in the ER can stop this woman.

“Someone poisoned the chocolates Wyatt made for you.” How it happened is still up for debate.

We haven’t found anything on the surveillance tapes, no fingerprints or clues as to who accessed them.

The finished product was kept in his office, but while the different elements came together, anyone in the lab could have messed with them.

“Who was it?” Her voice dropped lower, seemingly more tired than angry or indignant.

“We don’t know yet. We can’t find any evidence. Don’t worry about it. We’re looking into it. You just rest.”

Avery makes a noncommittal noise, watching me from where her head slides onto the back cushion of the couch.

I lean my head to stare back at her. Those hazel eyes are more beautiful every time I look into them.

“Where’s Charlie?”

That’s right, her son that she doesn’t talk about. That she hasn’t even shown off a picture of. Like she’s keeping him a secret. It’s the opposite of what I expect out of a proud momma, which I fully imagine she is.

“Your father has him. And Sophia is helping him out. I haven’t gotten to see him yet.” My hands squeeze her ankles and calves again, and I track the sharp intake of her breath.

“I need a shower.”

“Unless you want me in there with you, I don’t think that’s possible.

” It’s the best threat I can think of because I’m sure she can’t stand in there on her own long enough to get clean.

And I’m going to hell for every part of me that wants to get in the shower with her, clean her skin, wash her hair, feel her against me.

She stares at me for a long time. I swear she can read every dirty thought that flies through my imagination.

“As long as we keep our underwear on, fine. I need one.”

I nod and slide out from under her legs, heat lingering as I bend to scoop her up again.

“Ryder.” Her admonishing tone leans toward amusement, and I lift my brow in response.

“Miss Avery. If you think you’re able to walk to the bathroom and stand in the shower long enough to get clean, you are sadly mistaken. Save your energy for where it will be the most useful.”

I’m surprised by how easy it is for me to carry her. By how much I enjoy doing so.

Her bathroom is small, but not too crowded. We fit just barely. Luckily, her sink is sturdy enough to hold her weight, but she still leans into me as I pull her oversized shirt up her back. Goosebumps sprout up her back and shoulders when I remove it from her. I stroke my palm against them.

Avery shivers and presses her face into my chest.

She's got a pale blue sports bra on, razor cut in the back and showing off the muscles of her shoulders. I drift my hand through her hair, taking too much time enjoying this rather than getting her in the shower.

Leaning her back, she slumps against the mirror on the wall, and I turn her hot water on.

"You have to turn it all the way up, no cold water, or it will never heat all the way." Her eyelids are drooping.

"Yeah, your dad left us instructions. Are you sure you're still up for this?" I tuck a knuckle under her chin so she can look at me.

"Mmm-hmm. Need to be clean."

"Okay. I'm going to take your sweats off now. Alright?" I hook my thumbs in the stretchy waist of her pants and pause.

"Who changed me to begin with?"

I let out a soft laugh. "Your father did."

Avery makes another noise in the back of her throat and nods. "Do I get to take off your clothes?"

A full, hearty laugh falls out of me this time, and I lean in to plant a kiss on her cheek. "You're not making this very easy on me, beautiful."

But her hands lift to the top button of my shirt. It takes her a second to undo it, and

longer to do the next one down. I suck in a slow, stabilizing breath. My hands close around hers to stop her.

“You’re going to wear yourself out like that.”

Her chuckle graces me with a weak smile. “Take it off, baby.”

Fuck, she’s going to be the death of my restraint. “Are you going to objectify me if I do?”

“Mmm-hmm.” Avery undoes the last button, her fingers brushing my bare skin above my slacks.

Heat tears through me, and my cock stirs again as she strokes a lazy line below my belly button.

Her lip pinches between her teeth, and I shake my head, pulling away. I strip off my shirt and check the water temperature. It’s piping hot now, so I dilute it with the cold until it’s not too hot.

Getting her to her feet leaves her wobbly, but she’s able to step into the tub.

Avery moans in relief when she steps under the spray. She tips her head in, and I’ve still got her by the waist.

“Wash your body first. I can help with your hair when you inevitably tire yourself out.”

“Washcloth. Body scrub in the corner. Purple bottle.” Bracing herself against the tiles, she nods. “I’ve got myself.”

I rush to get her the cloth and soap it up. Avery keeps one hand on the shower wall as she rubs herself clean, and she lets me wash her back. But as I predicted, she's running out of steam, so I help her down to the tub floor.

Taking down the showerhead and kneeling beside the tub, I make sure Avery's hair is wet before I dollop shampoo in her hair and massage it across her scalp. She leans against her knees, closes her eyes, and hums under the pattering of water falling.

Her hair is soft, long, luxurious. It darkens in the water, and I take too much enjoyment in simply running it through my hands to clear the suds.

"You want conditioner, too?"

Avery makes a thoughtful noise. "Do you know how to comb out snarls?"

I mock gasp at her. "Of course, I do. I have a younger sister. About seven years younger. I was the only one who could get her to sit still."

The corner of her smile peeks out at me, even half hidden between her knees. A nostalgic feeling overtakes me, but I like brushing Avery's so much more.

"I think I'm ready for a nap already."

Rinsing her hair and her back off, I can see the way she's swaying, even while sitting. "I bet. Let's get you dry and into some new clothes."

I uncurl Avery and help her out of the tub. Drying her off, I cringe at how her wet bra and undies cling to her and make her shiver.

"Trust me to grab you new undergarments?"

Her peal of laughter lightens my heart. “My undergarments? Sure, just don’t mess everything up in there. And no thongs.”

I can’t fight my grin as I prop her on the toilet. “Don’t move.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

I grab her clothes, laughing at how neat her drawers are. To redress her, I wrap her in a towel and help her out of her undies before helping her into her new ones. It takes imagining she’s my Mimi to keep my blood from pumping too hard.

The slide of her skin is soft and warm, and I close my eyes when I snap the elastic around her waist. Her bra is a bit harder to strip off without brushing the sides of her breasts. We both suck in a soft breath, and I force myself not to react otherwise.

But once she’s covered again, it’s easy to slip her into an oversized T-shirt and tuck her back into bed. Avery’s eyes are closed before her head hits the pillow, but the moment I step away, her hand is around my wrist.

“Don’t leave.” Her voice is half garbled.

Fuck, my heart twists with so much longing that I’m frozen for a second. Then, I crawl in behind her, over the covers, and roll her into my side.

A quiet moan escapes her before she’s weighed down by sleep.

I haven't even kissed her yet, and I’m falling for her.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 7:46 am

Avery

My reflection isn't winning me any beauty contests, but I'm not as washed out as I was this last week. After being poisoned by someone they still haven't found.

They won't tell me what the poison was. Or how it got into the chocolates Wyatt made for me.

I'm pretty sure it wasn't a contamination. The company didn't close manufacturing down, so it must have been isolated.

So, was it a mistake? Or does someone have it out for me?

Who would? It's not like my position can be done by anyone. Like I pose a threat to anyone's life or livelihood. So, what the fuck?

God, those thoughts have been circling nonstop, and I need work to distract me.

I'm going back to work because I'm finally feeling better. Although the tension between me and my bosses has shifted a little since my place has been crowded by the three of them for the last five days.

I'm not tasting anything today. My palate hasn't returned back to normal yet, but my doctor says it should. Apparently, I have paperwork to do, though, and I'm pretty sure it's an excuse to get me in the office since they don't need to watch me anymore.

I shoed them off the moment I was able to take care of Charlie.

Dad did a good job with him as always, and Sophia helped keep his mind off my being in the hospital.

And thankfully, no one seemed to rifle through my photo books or turn on my digital frame that slides through my favorite pictures of my son.

I don't have any big prints in our home, but my dad has them plastered all over his walls.

It's more that we move often enough that I don't bother decorating the walls anymore. Worked in my favor this last week.

Thankfully, no one spotted just how much Charlie resembles Ezra. That is a conversation I am in no way prepared for. I've only recently decided that I don't hate him. That I don't have to hate him for what he did. That what I did might have sucked for him, too.

Sigh. It was the point at the time, but it certainly hadn't been the mature move. So what leg do I have to stand on?

Well, I guess I had one, but it doesn't seem as important as before.

And it's not like I have any clue how to tell him.

Sighing, I slump a little behind my desk. It's time to distract myself with leftover paperwork and research, different kinds of roasting and different soil acidities that can change the flavor in a way that would be favorable for us.

It's a few hours before I stand again. My nerves are too jacked for me to sit still this long. It's not normally such a problem.

Standing behind my chair, I stretch with the stiffness from spending too much time in bed. My office seems kind of drab as I look around it—just as bad as my house, without any decoration or pictures of my family.

Ugh. I hate secrets. Hate keeping them. Hate them being kept from me.

I am the biggest hypocrite. Rubbing my face has me spinning in place.

A dark shadow looms in my doorway before Wyatt steps forward, head down, looking up at me from under the flop of his hair. He shuffles in a very un-Wyatt-like way.

“Wyatt?”

“You’re okay. Right? No permanent damage?” His hands curl into fists at his sides.

I smile. “No permanent damage.”

His worry is palpable as he takes a jutting step forward. I circle my desk and meet him by the door.

“It wasn’t your fault. I know that.”

My hand spreads across his chest in a reassuring stroke. It draws him closer, finally facing me straight on. That big hand of his lifts to run a thumb across my cheek. Pale green eyes glitter with emotion that’s been lingering in the looks he gives me when he thinks I’m not paying attention.

He doesn’t know that I’m always paying attention.

“Thank you for taking care of me.”

I pull him down into a kiss. His mouth is soft and yearning as it presses into mine. Then, his hands dive into my hair and his chest bumps mine. Wyatt backs me into the side of my desk as something seems to uncork inside him.

Lifting me on the edge, he steps between my knees, and our bodies align.

I cling to his collar as he swipes his tongue across my bottom lip, as if tasting me. His teeth pinch lightly and soothe me with another gentle press.

A firm touch at the small of my back sears me with heat, and I wish I didn't have barriers between his hands and my bare skin. Finally letting myself explore him, I slide my palms down his chest and around to his back.

Wyatt is solid but trim and overall so much bigger than me. It gives me a thrill to scrape my nails down his back and make him shiver.

The soft moan in the back of his throat is a delight.

His big hands cup the backs of my thighs, hips pressing into mine and showing off the other hard part of his body he's been hiding. God, he's long and thick and bruising the inside corner of my thigh.

I can't keep myself from rubbing against him. It starts a rhythm in his hips that has me whimpering in need.

Dropping his mouth to my throat, under my jaw, and the slope of my shoulder, he lays open-mouthed kisses along my skin. His teeth press and tease and nip at me.

Need builds low in my center, churning the thoughts that have been plaguing me between these four walls. How many times I've imagined him sliding up my skirt to explore the bare expanse of my thighs.

Pulling my blouse down one shoulder, his mouth softens. “I want to taste every inch of you.”

His confession makes me shake, and his grip on me tips my head back to suckle low on my throat. Licking that hollow and down a few inches to my cleavage has him humming against my skin.

My knees clench around his waist.

“I want to map out and taste every piece of you. Catalog your reactions. Learn every spot that makes you react and how.”

I laugh lightly, grip curling into his hair. “If I didn’t know how much you love to experiment, I might take that wrong.”

Wyatt lifts from my chest, and his pupils are blown wide. Like he’s high off my skin.

Our mouths collide again, and I’m so lost to him and how much he can tell me without any words. Everything winds me up tighter. My body is overheating. The need pumping through me arches my chest against his.

I don’t know how long we kiss or how many times Wyatt’s hands tour my curves, indeed cataloging me with soft squeezes. I’m molten, about to set fire to my desk, when I draw back for a breath.

A few gasps of cold air send sense back into me. “Wyatt...”

My hands land in the middle of his chest as I gawk at the triangle of skin I’ve unearthed. I hadn’t realized I’d yanked his collar open.

His cheeks are pink, eyes hazy with lust, muscles roiling. Everything about him looks

wild. He leans in to kiss me again, but I keep him at bay with my palm.

Clarity washes back over him in a wave. I hate to see it, but it needs to happen.

“Is this not okay?” He searches my face, and I grab the front of his shirt as he retreats. I don’t want to push him away, exactly, but I’ve been back at work for a few hours, and I’m already making out with him in my office, more than ready to have him take me on my desk.

This isn’t good. Even though it felt really good .

I laugh lightly. “If you mean, do I want this? Yes, I do. But we’re at work.”

He nods, and since I haven’t shoved him away, he takes the liberty of spreading his fingers across my collarbones, tangling them in my hair, smoothing them across my nose and cheekbones and brows. His touch makes me feel beautiful.

I smile at him.

Wyatt smiles back with all of his teeth. It’s the first time I’ve ever seen him smile like that.

“I like it when you smile,” he says, reading my mind.

“I really like it when you smile.”

A knock on my half-closed office door jerks us both out of our reverie.

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Ezra

Walking into Avery's office and seeing her and Wyatt so close together doesn't send the same pang of jealousy it did a week ago. Not after reading parts of Avery's secret diary. Not after learning about her fantasies of the three of us all taking her together.

She has one filthy and wild imagination.

I take a deep breath to push away the thoughts those entries have spiraled out in my mind.

It doesn't surprise me that Wyatt's the first to corner her. He's been mooning over her nonstop and doesn't show a glimpse of remorse at being caught.

Avery glows bright pink, those hazel eyes sparking when she meets my gaze.

"I need Wyatt for a board meeting."

Her small nod is paired with a smirk as she looks at how disheveled Wyatt is. He's buttoning his collar when she reaches up to smooth his hair back in place. Wyatt hesitates before he backs away from her.

Avery steps back behind her desk. I grab her door to close it behind us as Wyatt passes, and I shoot her a wink that makes her laugh. It's the best sound in the world, and I tuck it into my pocket for the long, boring board meeting.

Sometimes, I wish I'd never made the company public and let outsiders come in and

question how I do things. But it allowed us to build a stronghold in our niche, and I provide twice as many full-time jobs with benefits now without having to give up on the quality we've always provided.

Normally, the entire process doesn't bother me, but today, I can't seem to concentrate for very long. My mind continuously sinks into the daydreams of Avery and all the things she might let me do to her.

Let us do to her.

We don't get much accomplished at the meeting, but at least no one has stormed off upset. That's happened before.

I stay in my seat at the head of the table as owner and CEO, gaze unfocused on the far wall and finally consumed with the unadulterated fantasy of closing Avery in here with us, locking the door, and making her come until she's boneless.

When I jerk back to myself, I find Wyatt and Ryder still in their seats, staring at me. Slowly, I lean forward and clasp my hands on the table. I clear my throat. "I found Avery's diary."

Ryder closes his eyes and sinks back into his seat with a grimace, but Wyatt's eyes widen in interest.

"And?"

"She wrote about the three of us, all taking her at once, in so, so many ways." How could the mere confession of this have my heart pumping like I might die?

Wyatt clenches his jaw, but he doesn't look irritated.

Ryder spreads his fingers across the table in front of him. “Sweet mother of God.”

Their wild looks only grow as I pull the notebook from my briefcase and slide it into the open. I tap the cover pointedly. “I want to make these come true.”

Because I would give her anything, and if this is what she wants, it’s what she’ll get. No complaints from me.

Wyatt reaches for it without hesitation and flips through a few pages before he settles in to read. “If this is what she wants?—”

“Give it here.” Ryder reaches out a hand for it.

It doesn’t take any more convincing to get them onboard. Reading her words bled the resistance right out of me. Now, we just need to make it happen.

“How?” Wyatt asks.

A firm knock at the door barely cuts the intensity brewing between us, and when the door opens to show Avery peeking in, I stand and beckon her in.

“Come in and close the door.”

Her steps are tentative, and Ryder goes to pull her in, closing and locking the door behind her. Wyatt meets me at my end of the table, and the three of us gather around her.

Avery’s clothes cling to her as she shifts, looking between the three of us.

“I have a proposition for you, Avery.”

She gives me long blinks before I cup her face and kiss her. One second, she's stiff, and then she's melting under me, her mouth opening, back arching as I pour myself into her. Avery whimpers, fingers curling into the front of my shirt.

When I pull back, I gesture behind her for the notebook, and Ryder retrieves it. The move turns her, and she swears under her breath when she sees what we've got. Only, she's staring at Ryder with her mouth open.

He hands me the notebook but steps in, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her into a kiss that has her knees giving out.

I flip open to my favorite sexual fantasy that she's written out.

They press in on me from all sides, splaying me out on the conference table, slowly stripping me of my clothes. Their hands are everywhere, and I can't tell who bends to cover my pussy with their mouth.

I read it aloud, and Wyatt slides behind Avery, reaching around to unsnap the waistband of her slacks and slip his hand inside. Her gasping moan tears through me.

Wyatt nuzzles behind her ear as he rubs her. Ryder undoes her buttons, spreading that silky fabric to expose her pale caramel skin and the white lace bra that barely covers her breasts. Dark pink nipples peek through the semi-transparent cloth.

Ryder palms a breast, and Avery's head falls back with a new moan.

Wyatt pulls her blouse off her shoulders and down her arms. Ryder gathers her slacks down her thighs. I slide in to rub over her core, marveling at how hot and wet she is.

Ryder and I spread her thighs, and I nod him on. He kneels with a grin as Wyatt unsnaps her bra and reveals those dark pink nipples. I can't resist bending down to

suck one into my mouth. Avery groans, and Wyatt covers her mouth with his own.

The moment she's bare and Ryder covers her core with his mouth, her muscles contract. His hands squeeze her full hips. I watch the flesh give and know how wonderful it is to have full access to her lushness.

Ryder moans into her. I pull her knee back farther and Wyatt takes her other one, splaying her open like she wrote in her diary.

I turn her mouth to mine, leaning us down to my elbow as her body trembles. Her hand dives into my hair, and I taste her moans across my tongue.

She's small enough that I can wrap my hand around her opposite rib cage as I hold us up. My fingers find her small but plump breast. I roll and tug on her nipple the way she likes until she cries out.

My kisses move under her jaw, and Wyatt swoops in to kiss her.

Ryder sucks on her clit, and the muffled noise of her pleasure makes my hard-on pulse with need. I never thought I'd share a woman, especially not one I've been pining over for the last ten years. But all of her pleasure creates a new need inside me.

I massage the inside of her thigh as it shakes, and when I make eye contact with Ryder, I shake my head. I want her on the edge.

The way his tongue slices her open and circles her sensitive nub has her whimpering and writhing.

More suction until she's at that brink, and he pulls back.

Avery whines, hips lifting for more, but Ryder kisses along the insides of her thighs, taking over my grip on her knee and trading me places. He descends on her tits and squeezes her thigh.

Kneeling before her sweet, wet pussy, I massage around her core, coming close to touching her without giving her what she wants.

I take my time working my way around her before I finally seal my mouth over her clit, glistening and swollen from already being brought to the brink.

Her legs jerk, like she means to clamp her thighs around my head. Fuck, yes. I groan into her, sliding two fingers into her puss.

Avery makes that wild noise that's haunted my dreams. One of my friends whispers a soft fuck above my head.

I devour her like I've imagined the last few weeks of having her here to tempt me every damn second of every fucking day.

I sink into it, toying with her, prolonging her pleasure until I feel her squeeze around my digits.

Rubbing that spot until she's trembling, I pull back and revel in the sound of protest that drops from her mouth.

I drop kisses along her pelvic bone, up her soft stomach.

Wyatt slides his hand down her inner thigh, and I know it's his turn, but there's still so much I want to do to her.

Slowly, I retreat, taking over her other knee as Wyatt's touch finds her core and he

sinks his fingers into her. He just holds them there as she writhes, and if I didn't know better, I'd say he was praying.

Tearing my gaze from the sight—she's just so pretty and pink and glistening from her own pleasure and the wetness of our mouths—I grab the notebook.

Wyatt slides down to take my place, and his movements are so slow and controlled that she's dropped back against the conference table in frustration. Ryder is laving at her tits, her nipples swollen and puffy from so much attention.

And when they've all tasted me, they take turns sliding their cocks into me, completely destroying my core before moving on to my other holes and their own pleasure.

I whisper her own words against her ear and grin as she shudders. "You're evil."

Laughing, I plant a teasing kiss on her. "Not my diary entry..."

She huffs. "Pure evil."

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Avery

Wyatt is diabolical. He sheathes his cock inside me with slow pressure and just stays there, filling me up, stretching me to the limit as he grinds his hips against my overly sensitive clit.

God, his eyes are dark, his face cold and serious, but his touch is gentle as Ryder and Ezra relinquish their control to him.

They ate me out for what felt like hours, bringing me to the brink before denying me an orgasm. I'm so fucking needy and riled up that just having Wyatt inside me is a small mercy. I shift my hips up against him and watch his jaw tighten.

Wyatt cups under my knees and bends them back, keeping me still as he slowly withdraws and slides back into me. The lazy momentum of his thrusts pings every pleasure point inside me, but it doesn't bring me any closer to the orgasm they've been denying me.

I lift my head to watch him thrust into me.

He's stretching me wide open, my thighs are soaked, yet so much of him is still clothed.

I barely catch a glimpse of the pale skin at his groin, the pale red hair stretching up his abs.

God, who knew Wyatt had enough muscle to make a vein pop across that swooping

V?

Biting my lip, I meet his gaze again, and it's transformed with hunger. When I reach up, he pauses until I undo the few buttons. My fingers reach to touch his skin. He's so hot, pulsing with a tightly-held energy.

He sinks down an inch, and his cock suddenly touches all-new spots that spring a new wetness inside me. My mouth falls open from the pleasure. It's overwhelming.

Wyatt smiles down at me as though he can feel the change. It's a promise to fulfill the dirty fantasies in my journal. The ones Ezra reads out loud to me when I'm whimpering.

A moment ago, all three of them had their hands and mouths all over me, and now, they hover, watching. Ryder is stroking himself over his pants, his shirt open and exposing wonderfully toned bronze skin.

Ezra just watches, much more stern now than the last time we were tangled together. Last time, we didn't have anyone else involved. No audience.

Fuck, this whole thing is hotter than I thought it would be.

Wyatt stretches me further, pinning my knees to the table, my hips arched to just the right angle for him to plunder me, plunging pleasure through me with an unending pace.

I'm on the edge of coming, back at that sweet spot before I fall over, eyes fluttering closed before his cock slips out of me. Aching and empty, I let out a frustrated cry. But Ryder is there to tease me with the head of his penis, dipping and testing until I'm trying to capture him inside me.

God, I just need to be fucked.

“Stop playing with me. Let me come.”

Ryder grins, leaning over me. “Oh, you’re going to come, beautiful.”

Hooking my legs in his elbows, he grabs my waist and thrusts into me with force. It takes a few rough tries until he’s seated, but he doesn’t tease anymore. He’s powering into the ends of me, reaching a tender spot that has my toes curling.

I can’t catch my breath. A chorus of swearing surrounds me. Heat tears through me as I clamp down around him. Ryder looks the most serious I’ve ever seen him, and he’s smart. He doesn’t change a single thing that he’s doing. I’m right there, and he intends to end me.

Yes. Please. Please. Please.

“Such a sweet little beggar.”

I groan. Apparently, I’ve been saying that aloud.

“Don’t back down now. Come for me.”

I grab his wrist, trying to anchor myself as everything spins out of control. Constricting and twisting under him, my core pulses and I’m falling through white-hot pleasure.

Gulping at air doesn’t help. I’m high on the pounding of his hips, and I’m not coming down.

Hands appear to stroke and soothe my skin as I whimper and whine under the

onslaught of Ryder's cock. His gaze is locked on mine, watching me struggle for a footing and flailing. It's too much. Too good.

And it won't end.

Tears gather in the corners of my eyes, leaking down my temples as Ryder prolongs my orgasm. I'm sobbing from the overload before he lowers my legs around his waist. He curls over me, seated deep as he brushes my tears away.

"Shh. I've got you." His hips rotate, but it's slow and shallow, and my thighs won't stop shaking. "You've got so much more to give me, Avery."

I wrap my arms around him under his shirt. The warmth of his body soothes me, although it gives me no more control over how he roots into me.

His hand smooths over my forehead. Who knew the devil could look so caring and soft?

Ryder drops his mouth to mine. "Do you want more, beautiful?"

I turn the question over. Do I? It stops my legs from shaking so hard. Yes. Yes, I do think I want more. I want to watch all three of them come to their own ends inside me.

It means so much more. So much more . Can I handle it?

I have no fucking idea.

But I do want to try. I nod, lifting my mouth more fully against his. His kiss is stern, demanding, preparing me for what's to come.

When our mouths break apart, he takes no pity on me, shoving me back up that cliff toward a new orgasm. This time, I get to feel him move against me, never farther than a few inches above me. It doesn't change his skill—one that pairs well with his ability to flirt, to adapt to me.

Ryder lets me see his pleasure, tells me again and again how much he likes my sweet little pussy, the shape of my hips, my hard nipples, and my perky tits. His sex-glossed voice leaves me shivering.

I swear he's going to come when I come a second time, but he rides it out and retreats.

And then Ezra steps between my thighs. He's still buttoned up tightly, tie knotted around his throat and eyes blazing down at my naked body—sweaty, sticky, pink, taut, and used.

Ezra spreads his hands over my thighs, across my stomach, under my breasts.

The progress is slow, but it's a reminder of the young man I had ten years ago.

What does he see when he looks at me now?

I grab his dangling tie and tug him down toward me. He cages me with his arms and bends down to get a front row view of my expression.

“Enjoying yourself?”

I run my hand through his hair, and I lift to nuzzle him, whispering against his mouth, “Yes.”

He grins against my lips. “Good.”

Ezra takes his time touching and stroking me before I'm practically writhing with need and nearly begging him to take me.

When he finally takes mercy on me, he doesn't even undo his belt, and the resulting slap of it against my swollen and sensitive clit as he thrusts into me with one swoop sends sparks behind my eyes.

His breath comes heavy against my ear as he sets a heady pace. I'm not sure I'll be able to come again, but he feels so good inside me. It's like every nerve ending is turned on high, and I'm floating on an electrical current.

But Ezra tips and spreads me in small increments until I'm out of breath, and my core is clenching around him with the deep burn of an oncoming orgasm.

"Oh, fuck."

He doesn't give me the cocky smile that I expect. Instead, it's like he's diving into me and what makes me tick. Like he can unravel my thoughts when he has me this way. It makes me feel more vulnerable than having my body bare and the complete intimacy I've experienced with these three men so far.

I feel like an obsession.

I can't last under the onslaught. Ezra has me whining and grinding under him until he completely shatters me. My muscles go loose, and I'm throbbing and delirious.

Ezra gathers me up in his arms and lifts me from the table. I swear I see an imprint of my back and ass on the surface. He settles us in a chair and leans back, spreading his legs and softly thrusting up into me as I rest against his chest.

"Have we destroyed you, Avery?"

My body is exhausted, mind reeling, and I nod into his shirt.

“That’s our girl.” Ryder’s hands roam over my hips and ass as Ezra lazily pumps into my core. I squeak when Ryder’s thumb brushes over my ass. A whole new set of nerves jolts under his touch.

Oh, God, we’re about to do something I’ve been daydreaming about for years but never had the guts to try.

His thumb presses harder, the tip wiggling against my tight muscles and making me clench. Ryder makes soothing noises at me. “Relax, beautiful. How are we supposed to fill you up if you’re fighting with my thumb? Surely, you know our cocks are so much bigger.”

I force myself to unclench, and his thumb pops in up to the first knuckle. The shock of it makes me jerk and look back at the way Ryder works to stretch and open me up for what comes next.

Ezra turns me back to him, claiming my mouth. The distraction works, and although I feel Ryder’s ministrations, the burn is bleeding into the pleasure. I trust them to make this feel good.

It takes long, precious minutes for Ryder to work me up to two fingers. Surprisingly, I’m panting into Ezra’s kiss, loving the pressure that ass play seems to add to my ruined pussy.

When something cold drizzles over his fingers and into me, I’m craving what I expect will come next. A few thrusts slick me up, and the head of Ryder’s cock is pressing against my back entrance. The pop through tears a strangled cry from my mouth, and Ezra swallows it.

Ryder and Ezra moan in unison.

I'm so full that I swear they're going to tear me in two if they move wrong. I have to breathe through the sudden pressure and pleasure.

But I don't get much time to acclimate before the tips of Wyatt's chilled fingers turn me toward him. He pulls my lips apart gently, and a thrill trills through me as I open for him.

Those pale eyes are soft and awed by me as much as he seems to be on the brink of something dirty and dangerous.

How am I going to survive this?

Wyatt spreads the head of his cock across my bottom lip and groans as I dip in to suckle on him.

Oh, that's right, by enjoying the fuck out of this and not thinking too hard about what it all means or how much more I can feel.

I can only say that I was wrong before.

They haven't destroyed me. They've turned me into a glutton, a needy beast that wants every stroke and pump, thrust and pinch, squeeze and bite. I want it all.

Ryder is the first to come, and when he slips from my ass, Wyatt pulls back to take his place. I swear my moan sounds as tortured as I feel, but he slides in without resistance, his pace punishing.

Ezra grips me like he's trying to hold on, trying to hold off, but it's only minutes before he's pulsing inside me. I'm dripping cum.

The ferocity of Wyatt seeking his own end has my body heavy and hot. It's so much easier to take it when I give in like this.

Ezra rubs the back of my head and neck as my mouth falls open and my eyes roll back. He whispers into my hair, "You're so fucking beautiful."

Wyatt drives home with a few punctuated thrusts, and he's pressing in hard, prompting one last-ditch orgasm from my wrung-out body. It's long and lazy, and I'm sinking.

I'm not sure how to recover from this. But God, I want to do it again.

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Avery

I t's been a couple of weeks, and my taste buds have finally realigned. I'm so happy to be back in the lab and back to work. Sitting around an office is not what I was made for. Although, having each of the men come visit me there for a little play hasn't been a bad consolation in the meantime.

Wyatt is bustling around as I watch, cleaning and double-checking every surface before he takes a breath.

His eyes are wild. He stands beside me at our preferred lab table.

Laurel has been scurrying across the room, checking and rechecking inventory for her quarterly review.

It's pretty clear that she chose now to do so because I'm here.

Too bad for Wyatt, who will only sneak a touch or drop a kiss in my hair when no one else is around. He tries to keep the lab a professional space.

He doesn't have the same qualms in my office, though. Or his office when the door is closed. Wyatt prefers to corner me behind my desk. He's more handsy than anything else, clearly intent on causing me pleasure instead of seeking his own. Like he gets pleasure from giving it.

I reach out to his hand dangling beside my hip and tangle our fingers together for a few seconds. Relief drops his shoulders an inch, even when I slide my hand back into

my lap.

Laurel is shooting us looks. She pays so much attention to Wyatt. Pair that with the perpetually cold and snotty response to me, and I can only imagine what their working relationship was like before.

She's infatuated with him, or at least, that's my guess. Perhaps she's as awkward and anal as Wyatt, and I throw her entire work routine off. I'm betting on the former option, though.

Call it a vibe. Instinct. Experience around other women. Insight from my cousin, Sophia. The number of single moms from her school who target her husband is ridiculous.

She did marry up, though. Wealthy, kind, caring, and hot? It's the only way I ever saw my cousin getting married.

Maybe I'm biased, though. Tanner is great with Charlie and always includes him when the boys play sports or venture out for outdoorsy stuff that I'm simply not interested in. Dad isn't either. We're the type of people who stick close to the kitchen.

Wyatt stomps into his office, unlocking it to enter and returning a few minutes later with a tray of chocolates.

Placing it before me, he leans against the table and crosses his arms over chest. On day one, I might have thought he was being defensive, but he's not being combative. He's just awkward.

I take one of the squares and nibble it, eyes closed to process the flavor. It's closer than when we started. Each batch is a step in the right direction, but there's still a lingering bitterness that we can't seem to get rid of.

My eyes open to Wyatt's intense stare, but it's not one of disappointment as it used to be when my face revealed that we still had work to do. Instead, his focus is on my mouth.

I lick my lower lip, and his nostrils flare, his gaze lifting to meet mine. The contact shoots through me.

After a few heartbeats and the slamming of something in the background, he jerks back to our surroundings, narrowing his eyes at Laurel before nodding at the partially-eaten chocolate in front of me.

"Verdict?"

"Those were the dark roast beans from Hau Giang?"

"Yes." His hands squeeze like he wants to reach out for me.

"Have we tried their medium roast?"

Wyatt nods. "Left a greasy film on your tongue."

"Can we mix the two? Pull back on the coconut oil."

He blinks as he processes this. "I see where you're going with that. Yes. We'll do that next."

Grabbing the tray, he stuffs it back in his office and waves me in. I sit across from him and cross my legs, knowing my skirt's small slit will expose more of my thigh for him. He catches it immediately, leaning his palms against his desk and staring me down.

My smile makes his pale green eyes brighten, even as his pupils widen.

He slowly sits, like having me here and not being able to touch me is torture. “I have the ratios from the last two batches. Let’s compare numbers and come up with a few options for the next one.”

We look them over and play with the numbers, and I can feel Laurel’s gaze on us for most of it. That woman really needs to get a life. I meet her glare as we leave his office—which he locks behind him—and walk into the store room to pick a different oil from our options.

It doesn’t take us long, but when we exit back to the lab, Ryder is there, chatting with Laurel. She tucks her hair behind her ear as she looks up at him, and his smile is infectious. As it always is.

He’s got a small lilac colored box with a bow in his hands.

When I step out, his attention shifts to me, and Laurel can tell. She glares over her shoulder before she touches his arm. He squeezes her shoulder back before heading my way.

From what I’ve seen of his flirting, the touch is mild.

Approaching me is another story. His hand is in my hair, and he slides it back to plant a kiss on my neck, coming behind me to present me with the box in his hand. He’s the complete opposite of Wyatt at the office.

But again, he’s known to be a flirt, so I’m not sure it’s at all unnatural for him.

I take hold of the box. “What’s this for?”

“A treat. Something to tempt you into an early dinner.” His mouth finds my ear. His breath is warm, sending shivers down my spine. “Or maybe a late one.”

Ryder is edging for a night over at my place. Or having me at his place. With Charlie, it’s just not a part of my schedule to spend time with him after work.

I turn my face toward him, close enough to easily lean in for a kiss, but I peer into his bronze eyes and let out one of my smallest smiles.

A grin breaks over his face before he retreats, clapping Wyatt on the shoulder and nodding him toward the door.

Ryder winks at me. “See you later?”

I laugh, agree, and wave him off. Wyatt looks me over before he follows Ryder out of the lab.

The stony silence left in their absence has me efficiently cleaning up. Putting ingredients back, testing that they’re closed tight and stored properly, and wiping off any residue that might contaminate the rest.

I wipe down the lab table and my stool. It’s a little overboard, but my precautions make me feel better about being back at my job more fully.

Laurel stands opposite me at the table, her arms crossed tightly under her breasts. It’s her smile that’s alarming. “Ryder, huh? You didn’t peg me as one of his flavors of the month.”

She slowly drops her arms and tilts her head to the left. “I thought you had more independence. But Ryder does have his ways, doesn’t he? That little thing he does with his tongue—right—here.”

Laurel touches the base of her neck in the back.

It sends heat into my cheeks and chest because I know the exact move she's talking about.

"It was one of his moves he used when I got here. Works on every new girl." Her head tips back and forth, and she steps away to grab her clipboard. "Still works on me."

Tuning my features into my usual bored look, the panic and hurt rampaging through me is half disbelief. I saw their exchange.

Unless I am just a new conquest. If so, he'll be done with me before long. The fact that it doesn't track will not keep me from confronting him about it.

"I had no idea the two of you were a thing at all. Thanks for being honest with me about it. I'll have to be more careful about his advances." I toss the cleaning wipes in the bin, putting me right back in Laurel's vicinity.

She's got a bland look on her face, but her eyes spark with premature victory. As much as I don't believe they're still sleeping together, the best lies are based on truth, and the rest rings true. I have to know how much.

"Of course. I just want to be sure he doesn't take advantage of you, dear." Laurel gives me a forced smile, and I return it before exiting the lab in a calm and measured way.

Even though I am fuming inside. For too many reasons.

I take the stairs at a moderate pace. It's enough to curb the hard pumping in my chest for actual exertion instead of my emotions.

Ryder's office door is closed, and before I can think better of it, I throw the door open and burst inside, hands planting firmly on my hips.

The other three men in the room turn to gape at me, but my heritage has gotten the better of me. Little can calm me down from this kind of perfect storm.

I glare daggers at Ryder.

Ryder

Avery stands like a goddess in my doorway, hand on her full hips, eyes threatening to set me aflame with a thought.

Oh, shit, what have I done to upset her, to make her look at me that way?

I stand, waving the team I'm meeting with away. They don't hesitate to scatter. Smart move on their part. Avery is a force to be reckoned with.

Approaching cautiously, she follows my movements as I close the door behind her, locking it for good measure. I don't want anyone to interrupt what's about to happen. Not if I want to truly deal with it.

When I face her, she's pivoted, arms crossed and her glare darker than before. "What is it? What have I done to deserve such a deadly stare?"

Her mouth purses as she takes me in. "How many women in this company are you sleeping with?"

I shake my head. "One. You."

That earns me a raised eyebrow like she's caught me in a lie. "Two. Don't forget about Laurel."

That's a surprise to me. I blink back my confusion and how in the hell she got that impression. I've always flirted with her, but it never amounted to anything more than

that. “Laurel? Maybe once, a long, long time ago. But certainly not anymore.”

“I don’t believe you.”

The words wound me. I’ve never been a liar. I am always upfront about my intentions with women. I thought I’d been clear with Avery about how I feel about her.

But then, maybe not if she’s here now, suspecting the worst of me.

Avery’s arms drop to her sides, hands clenching into fists like she wants to throw something. It shouldn’t send heat through me, but it does. I like the passion. Especially since I seem to be the cause of it.

“Listen to me.” My hands lift to pacify her, but her eyes narrow.

“Why should I listen? Why is every man a poon hound? Sleeping with any naive girl who crosses their path.”

I cup her face and bring her close. Traces of bittersweet chocolate hang on her breath. God, I just want to kiss her.

“Stop. Just listen. I cannot deny that I have had more than my fair share of women, but I have had no others since you walked on site.”

She slams her fist into my chest, defiant.

God, her anger reminds me of my mother. Why does that turn me on so much?

That Italian passion that strikes out swiftly and doesn’t dim until she has something else to aim it toward.

I'll have to admit that my father made the right choice.

This is as intoxicating as it is scary to be the focus of.

“You do not make a conquest out of every new female hire?”

I hate that this is my reputation. That she can think I am so desperate as to target unwitting females and press my power over them like that.

“I flirt, beautiful. But that is all.” My thumb traces her cheekbone, waiting for her to decide whether she believes me, trusts me.

Fuck, I need her to trust me. I'm so fucking gone for her that I won't survive otherwise.

She bites her lip, eyes narrowing as if excavating my long-lost soul. Avery's the first to make that dig in a long, long time. Nearly a decade of being buried and protected from the elements, and now it beats between her hands.

Please don't crush it, beautiful .

When she still hesitates, I kiss her. It's soft and pleading, and that she doesn't push me away is a triumph.

“Please tell me you believe me.”

She's already transformed my heart from the cold and broken thing it has been for so long.

Avery examines me for a few more agonizing seconds before she pulls me back into a kiss. My hand slips back into her hair, angling her head for better access to her

mouth. The tiniest of moans is like a sword to the gut. It cuts me open completely.

I turn us and pin her against the door. Her knee lifts, and I cup the back of it in my hand, pressing into her harder until she can feel how stiff she's made my cock.

"If you need me to worship you to prove my point, I am more than happy to oblige."

Her breath comes heavily, and her palms slide across my chest, fighting how much she wants to take me up on my offer.

"She knew about the thing you do with your tongue." Avery clenches her jaw and pierces me with those beautiful hazel eyes again.

I lift my brow. "I do many things with my tongue. Which one are you referring to?"

Her frown is sweet on her face because the lingering anger is fading.

"Or do you need me to remind you of every little trick I have acquired?"

A sharp intake of breath is my favorite reward, and I kiss her again softly, showing her one of the moves. The fact that it makes her cling to my shoulders and rock against me speaks volumes.

"That one?"

Avery is panting.

"Or maybe I need to lift this skirt and get on my knees to properly educate you."

Her chest heaves harder, her grip tightening. Her pupils are blown so wide that I can see my reflection in them. It's heady, and I'm tempted to show her everything I've

got.

Those slender fingers draw up my neck, sending shivers through me. Delight flits over her features before she sinks those digits into my hair, and she's pulling my mouth back against hers, meeting my need with a ferocity of her own.

I push my hard-on against her hip as I rub us together. Her grip on me is so tight that I swear she wants to climb me.

No worries, I can give that to you, love.

Reaching down under her other thigh, I lift her off her feet and pin her against the door. Her legs wrap around me easily.

We grind together until her soft, whimpering moans tell me she needs more.

“Do you want me to fuck you against my door, beautiful?”

Her grip on me tightens. “ Yes .”

It's the only word I need. Shifting her in my grip, I reach between us to unsheathe myself and pull her panties to the side. Avery is so wet that it barely takes two thrusts to sink completely inside her.

Our groans chorus against each other.

As much as I want to take this slow, to worship her, to prove to her that I'm more than a seriously good fuck, it'll have to wait until later, until I have all the time in the world to pleasure her.

“You're so wet for me, Avery.”

She clamps down on me, and I'm lost for a few beats.

"I'm taking that as a concession that you believe me when I say there's only you." My mouth finds her ear, licking the lobe before giving it a gentle bite. "There will only ever be you."

Her soft whimper tunnels into the ravenous beast inside me, and I take her with a little more force. Our bodies slide together perfectly. I'll never grow tired of it.

The sweet slapping of our hips together is driving me wild.

I wish she were completely bare to me so that I could see how her slick spreads across her thighs.

Granted, it's no contest to the way her features transform from the pleasure, mouth hanging open in a small O when I find the spot she likes.

The one that will detonate her in no time.

I may not have a lot of time, but I can—I will—give her as many orgasms as possible while I have her.

Avery shudders in my grip, core undulating around me, grabbing hold and making me fight for every thrust until I have her shaking and whimpering.

She bites back her cry as she comes on me. I press into her harder, trying to catch my breath.

After a few seconds, I set her feet down and wallow in her frown before I turn her around on shaking legs and pull her ass back against my still-hard cock.

I slip back into her ripe little pussy easily.

This time, she does cry out, hands braced against the wooden door, head turned to the side to show off the flush of her lovely skin. Her mouth hangs open as I unleash a quick, sharp beat to my thrusts.

Like this, I can touch her more freely, roam my hands up her thighs, grab two full handfuls of her ass, reach around and stroke her clit.

“Look at how well that sweet little pussy of yours takes me.” I whisper the words from her diary into her hair.

Her fingers curl against the wood propping her up. As furious as she was with our reading her diary—or parts of it, anyway—she’s reaping the rewards, and I haven’t gotten pushback about it.

Multiple orgasms and a boneless satiation can change a woman’s mind easier than anything else. Or at least, that’s my experience.

“Like you were made for me and my cock.”

She flutters around me again, and I stroke her clit harder.

“If I had the time, I’d show you just how well all of your holes can take my cock. How many times I can truly make you come. You’d lose count.”

Her moan is sweet music to my ears.

“You want that, beautiful? Hmm? You want me to completely ruin you?”

A higher-pitched noise answers me this time before she bites out the tiniest “ Yes .”

What a fucking dream come true.

I'm slamming my cock home when I feel her break again, the garbled cry in the back of her throat making me twitch with my own need.

I pull out to her weak protest and drag her over to one of my guest chairs, then I pull her into my lap with her back against my chest and lift her knees in one hand.

Dragging my cock over her swollen, wet folds, I give myself a new coating before I hitch her upward and press myself into her ass.

Avery's sharp intake of breath has me reminding her to relax. And the moment she does, I slide in, stretching her ass wide while pinning her knees together. It makes her even tighter for me.

I don't relent, picking up where I left off, ramming myself into her at an unrelenting pace until her head lolls back and her body slumps. How she forfeits control is mesmerizing.

"You like having your ass fucked?"

She whimpers. "Mmm-hmm."

It's not enough for me, though. I cinch her knees tight in one arm and reach down to stroke her dripping pussy. My thumb finds her sensitive nub as I shove two fingers into her.

The way her body responds steals my breath. I nuzzle her neck, behind her ear, darting my tongue out against that delicate spot. I enjoy the way it makes her writhe over me.

When she comes for me again, I still my fingers, keeping them buried inside her to maintain my hold and pound the ever living shit out of her ass until my own orgasm creeps along the base of my spine and spills my cum inside her.

Like a flashing bulb, everything turns bright then leaves the room dark as we recover. I'm still nudging the base of my cock against her ass, the pressure making her twitch and wiggle and moan.

God, she can take so much more, but we don't have the luxury of time.

An unbidden thought takes over, and I let it slip. "I wish I had a plug for that sweet little asshole so I could make you walk around the rest of the day with my cum inside you."

Her soft, hysterical laughter has me tightening my grip on her pussy. "I guess you'd better invest in one, then. Unless that was what you put in that pretty purple box you gave me."

I nudge her with my nose. "You didn't open it?"

"No. It's still in the lab, abandoned to Laurel and her need to take me down a peg."

That admission has my blood churning hotter. Laurel didn't want me for anything more than a good time and a job when we fucked. I don't like how she's using it against me now.

Instead of letting it ruin this moment, I taste Avery's salty skin. "We should go retrieve it together."

"To show her it didn't work?"

“Something like that.” I should think better of that kind of pettiness, but I’m having a hard time with it. “Unless you’d prefer another orgasm to fortify you instead.”

Avery reaches back to tangle her hand in my hair. “Don’t threaten me with a good time.”

No threat intended, I set to work, fingering her pussy as I stay lodged in her ass. Her orgasm comes so quickly that I aim for two.

Avery

The whistle sounds, and Charlie skates to the side of the rink with his fellow teammates as the coach goes over the plays they were running. Hockey season starts next weekend, and my son has dialed into it with intensity.

They're running drills—passing the puck back and forth, shooting goals, and skating sprints.

It's pretty monotonous for me, and I'm not friends with any of the other hockey moms since they're all ten years my senior.

So I sit in the middle of the bleachers with a book open on my phone.

I feel like I'm slogging through it, but really, it seems like my brain has been slower the last few weeks.

Even though my taste buds have returned to their normal equilibrium, or a new normal, it's taking me longer to identify ingredients that came to me instantaneously before.

I sigh and set my phone face down in my lap to watch Charlie wait in line before he takes a shot at goal. It goes in the corner—no goalie, of course—and he pumps his fist before returning to the back of the line.

It's time for a snack to keep my blood sugar up. I've already eaten the croissant my father packed for me, so I venture down to the concessions stand to get a diet cola and

a pretzel.

While I'm waiting, a smartly-dressed woman approaches, ordering a lemonade and power posing beside me. She meets my eyes, snaps, and points at me. "You. You're Avery Caruso, right? Charlie's mom?"

I nod. "Yeah, I am."

The woman reaches her hand out to me. "Bobbi DuBois."

I shake her hand, trying not to be wary, but she doesn't let me linger in it for long.

"You work for Nguyen Candy Company."

My shoulders draw back, straightening my spine as I look her over. "I do."

"I've always wanted to work at a candy company, but I imagine I would be eating chocolate until I get sick. I'm sure it gets old after a while." Bobbi brushes back her straight red hair from her shoulder and gives me a disarming smile.

I smile back. "The trick is to take small bites and not too many a day."

"But that's what you do, isn't it? You taste the chocolate." She stirs her lemonade with her straw as I take a sip of my soda. The pretzel comes out next, and its warmth is nice in this chilly rink.

"It is. Sorry, I'm going to go back and watch my son. It was nice to meet you." I take two steps before she's beside me again, a card extended between two fingers.

"I'd love to take you to lunch and talk about where your skills might be a better fit with a bigger company." Bobbi shrugs as if the offer is no big deal. "I know a few

who'd love to have a powerhouse taster like you on their team."

I take the card—if just to get past this. I don't plan on leaving Nguyen Candy Company any time soon. Not with the perks that come with spending so much time in the office with Ezra, Ryder, and Wyatt.

"Thanks." I point up to my seat to reiterate my plans and sit, watching the boys speed skate back and forth across the rink.

My eyes slip out of focus, and a new daydream takes over my brain.

One that I won't write down for fear of the guys finding it.

It's still a sore point, although a small one, given the kind of fantasies they've fulfilled from it.

They don't get all the credit, though. It's much easier to get things right when you have written instructions from your lover.

But this one doesn't center on sex. Other parts of my life seem to be missing them. How nice would it be to have one or all three of them here for Charlie's practice, keeping me company, chatting and teasing and cheering my son on?

I can just imagine Wyatt analyzing every move on the ice, talking to the coach to give him pointers based on physics.

Ryder would flirt and wink at the other moms, engaging them in a way I can never fully muster the energy for.

They'd fawn over him and make me jealous.

And Ezra would hold my hand, speak low about any of the various topics that would slip in and out of our conversation.

He'd also have the full pride of a dad watching Charlie.

The moment those two meet, my biggest, scariest secret will be as clear as day. It's the reason they're not here. The reason I can't invite them, even though I know I can shoot off a text right now and they'd be here because I asked them to be.

Coach blows the whistle again. It's break time, so I descend the bleachers to offer Charlie a snack, which he takes with a smile. Dad packed him a chocolate croissant with raspberry jam. "Want anything else? I can go to the concession stand."

My son shakes his head. "Nah. Teddy is going to let me have a slice of his pizza for half my croissant. Is it alright if I go eat with him?"

"Of course. Go have fun, baby."

He frowns. "I'm not a baby."

"You'll always be my baby. Go on. Shoo. Be a grown boy." I wave him on as he tries to hide his smile with a frown, but when I make an exasperated face at him, he can't hide it anymore. The full grin with all of his bright white teeth makes me happy in ways I can't properly put to words.

As I climb back up the bleachers, I spot Bobbi texting on her phone before she lifts her head and smiles at me. It seems genuine, so I walk over and sit. "Know a good place around here to grab a quick lunch?"

Bobbi perks immediately. "I do. Come on. My treat."

She leads me out the other side of the bleachers to exit around the back of the rink.

We're comfortably silent on the two-block walk to a Cuban food truck with a small line.

I order Picadillo, fried plantains, and rice pudding, and we sit on a small brick half-wall nearby with our to-go boxes and forks.

After my first bite, the one I close my eyes to taste every little thing added to it, I open to the curious gaze of Bobbi.

"You have to tell me what you taste. I can never get every ingredient in there no matter how hard I try." Her pale blue eyes are full of wonder, and I'm not sure whether it's put on for my benefit or not. She's already mentioned other job opportunities, so I can't completely trust her intentions.

"Mmm. Chopped beef—chuck roast—they braised it, given its tenderness. Tomatoes, peppers, garlic, and onions..." Honestly, those are a staple in so many cuisines. "This also has cumin and bay leaf—Turkish. Raisins, both gold and red, and capers."

I take up another spoonful before she comments.

"Wow. You even know the kind of bay leaf from that small taste?"

"Mmm-hmm." I could tell her more, like the kind of olive oil they use, which type of tomato, their use of elephant garlic rather than the usual kind found in the stores, and how they used both green and red peppers instead of just green.

But I keep my mouth shut about those things. I really don't need them to show off.

Frankly, only my dad would ask me about those things because he knows I can tell

him.

“I bet you can pick out where they sourced each ingredient, too, can’t you?”

I shrug noncommittally.

“That’s an impressive skill. Are they paying you enough at your current job?” Bobbi spoons in her own beans and rice as I nibble on a plantain.

“Enough that I don’t need any more.”

The corner of Bobbi’s mouth quirks. “Everyone could always use more, especially for the kind of project you’re working on. It’s the kind of thing you could live off for the rest of your life if you figure it out.”

I shrug. “Is it?”

“Does your current company plan to compensate you for the breakthrough once you’ve reached it? Any incentives to stay and finish it for them? Some kind of bonus?” That gleam I’ve seen before nearly twinkles with dollar signs.

“I don’t feel comfortable discussing my income with a stranger.”

Bobbi nods, not at all put off by my dismissive and chiding tone. The mom in me can’t help it. I close up my box and take a spoon to the rice pudding, which is mildly sweet and the perfect amount of creamy. It’s almost as good as when my dad makes it.

This woman stares as I taste, and I’m pretty over the inquiries. Standing, I brush my hair back and hug the box against my stomach. “Thanks for lunch, but I should really get back to my son.”

Bobbi stands, too, holding out her hand, and I shake it.

“One last thing before you go. I’ve been given permission to offer you a job at Lindt to work on a similar project for a six-figure salary, plus a seven-figure bonus once you’ve completed it.”

Shock tears through me, my heart beating wildly to get out of my chest and run around in a panic. I blink at her, unmoving and unresponsive. The job offer itself doesn’t come as a surprise, but the money does.

It’s too bad for Bobbi and Lindt that money isn’t my biggest motivator. I laugh softly and shake my head. “I don’t think?—”

Bobbi presses her hand to my arm. She looks more sympathetic and understanding than what I imagined a poacher in her position would. Maybe she thinks she’s got her hooks in me. “Just think about it. You have my card if you change your mind.”

I nod and head back to the rink without her following me. So, she was there for me. How did she know not only what I was working on—granted, in vague terms—but also where I would be and when?

Shaking the adrenaline out, I find my spot in the bleachers to follow Charlie’s movements around the rink and finish my lunch in peace. The rest of practice goes smoothly, and Charlie is hyped when we make it to my car.

He chatters excitedly to Dad during our family dinner, and I find myself finally relaxing after the long, strange day.

Sunday is more of the same. Charlie talks me into bringing him back to the rink to practice his skating moves without the rest of the team there, so we go for the morning and walk around for some window shopping afterward.

By the time Monday comes, I'm ready to get back into my usual routine, but Pam's waiting for me at my office.

"Hey, what's going on?" I ask as I slide off my bag and set it in my chair.

"We need you in the conference room immediately." Her usually jovial face is serious, and I feel like I did back in school being escorted to the principal's office for something I didn't do.

"Is something wrong?" The possibilities swarm around my brain. Someone else has been poisoned. My taste buds have failed me again because of my own brush with the deadly stuff. But Pam just shakes her head and walks on, showing me the way even though I know it.

Opening the door for me, she offers me a sad smile and closes the door once I've stepped inside.

Eleven men and two women sit around the table, packing it tight. Ezra sits at the head, Ryder and Wyatt flanking him on either side. My nerves rattle me down to my bones, so I pull on my armor, clasp my hands in front of me, and straighten my spine.

I wait for someone to address me. Sure, it's a power play, but it's the only one I have. They're the ones who've bombarded me with their attention.

"Thank you for joining us, Miss Caruso," Ezra says, and the change in decorum rankles me even more.

"Doesn't seem like I had much of a choice." I stand perfectly still. Poised. And I wait some more.

"Won't you please come in and sit?" He points to an open chair to my left that I

didn't see, too blinded by the thirteen sets of eyes aimed my way.

“No. I think I'll wait until you tell me exactly what warrants this kind of behavior.” Because suspicion is warring with an underlying guilt I can't place. I hate situations like this. I hate being on the defensive. I've spent too much of my life this way.

Ezra closes his eyes and takes a deep breath as if I'm the exasperating one.

“You're selling secrets to the competition,” says one of the women. She's leaned back in a chair that's too large for her, her dark eyes and hair both shining in the low light of the overhead fluorescents.

I blink, narrowing my eyes at her, then sweep them around to the others waiting there for my response. Anger dumps across my shoulders and expands my chest with the need to scream.

Finally, I drag my gaze back to Ezra sitting at the far end of the table. The CEO. He's waiting for my response just like the rest of them.

Well, you know what? Fuck him. If he believes that, he's a goddamned idiot.

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Ezra

The shock and subsequent absolute fury on Avery's face convinces me immediately of her innocence. I've never seen her look quite so much like a momma bear before, but she looks ready to swipe at the next person who makes a move.

Her mouth purses, and her hands slot onto her hips. "You had better have good evidence to make an accusation like that because I did not give out company secrets."

I hold my hands up as a few members of the board open their mouths. "Tell us what happened."

She shifts on her feet, standing even taller, chin higher and looking down her nose at me.

I wish I didn't have to confront her like this, but I can't seem like I'm playing favorites.

Because I certainly am. I'm past the point of wanting her.

I need her. Love her. Can't let her disappear from my life again for any reason.

It's why I'm giving her the chance now to get it out instead of being peppered by accusations.

"I was approached at my son's hockey practice on Saturday at the World Sky Rink.

I was getting a pretzel and a diet cola.

She introduced herself as Bobbi DuBois and already knew about my job here and what I do.

Made some offhand comments about my having the dream job at a candy factory.

I excused myself back to watch my son, and she gave me her card and offered to talk more about my skills. ”

Avery produces the card from her pocket and tosses it on the conference table.

“When my son’s team broke for lunch, Bobbi DuBois and I went to a Cuban food cart, where she paid for my meal and asked me to show her what I can do. Which I did since it’s no secret that I am good at what I do.”

Slowly, Avery’s arms cross, and she shifts to another foot, pinning Kennedy—the member to make the blunt accusation—with narrowed eyes.

“She asked about my income, and when I excused myself again, she offered me a job at Lindt for a six-figure income and a seven-figure bonus. Which I turned down.”

The flare of her nostrils prepares me for her final remark. Her eyebrow lift makes heat boil in my center.

“If you don’t believe me, call Bobbi Dubois yourselves. I don’t need her card back.” After another haughty pause, she spreads her hands. “Are you done with me now?”

I nod. “Thank you, Miss Caruso. We’ll talk after the board discusses.”

She spins on her heel and marches out of the boardroom in a huff, leaving the door

swinging wide open.

I take a deep breath. Avery is all the more beautiful when she's mad.

Ryder meets my gaze, his eyes wide and a bit wild. Wyatt appears more pleased, leaning back in his chair. He's already expressed his contempt for the board and their shortsightedness—his exact words.

Pam appears and closes the door for us, disappearing on the other side.

I spread my hands on the table. "I believe her."

It's best to make my stance clear, so that's where we start. Silence spreads for a few seconds before Ryder agrees with a simple, "Me, too."

Wyatt crosses his arms in defiance. "This entire thing is ridiculous. Of course she didn't do it."

Everyone but Kennedy waves it away with ease. For some reason, she glowers. "You all believe her just because she says so? Why? Because she's pretty?"

"Slide that business card down here. I'll call Miss DuBois on speaker phone so we can clear up any doubts." I wave for the card, which sits less than a foot from her hand.

Glaring, Kennedy pushes it down, exchanging it between four hands before it reaches me.

The phone rings twice before a chipper voice answers, "This is Bobbi DuBois."

"Miss DuBois. This is Ezra Nguyen. You spoke with one of my people over the

weekend.”

“I did. How can I help you, Mr. Nguyen?” Her tone doesn’t change, still bright and in control.

“I’d like to know how that interaction went, if you don’t mind.” I try to keep my voice level and bland, but my heart is racing. Don’t incriminate her .

“Sure. I spoke with Avery Caruso about her job with you, we had a nice lunch where she showed me her truly impressive skills—bravo, by the way, on snagging her level of talent. She didn’t even try to show off.

Then, I offered her a job from Lindt that they shot over to me last week. She turned it down.”

I shoot a look at Kennedy, who’s frowning. She’s the one who brought in the anonymous tip. Does she know who it is?

“Did she tell you anything about what we’re working on?” I ask. It’s the only other piece of information we need to put this to rest completely.

“She did not, but you should be aware that your idea isn’t a secret even if your formula is. Need anything else?”

“No. Thank you, Miss DuBois.”

“Good luck!”

I swipe the call away and look at the board members. “Let’s take a vote. Now. All in favor of keeping Avery on the team.”

I raise my hand, Wyatt and Ryder in unison, and the rest of the hands lift in different waves. Kennedy is our only hold-out.

“I want one concession. She’s never left in the lab alone. Just in case.”

It’s not an unreasonable request, and not a difficult one for us. We all want an excuse to spend more time around her.

“Objections?”

Soft nos and head shakes.

“Then, agreed. If there’s nothing else, I have work to do.” I stand and head for the door.

Ryder grabs my arm. “I can tell her.”

We share a beat. Avery is going to be furious. I shake my head. “No. I’ll tell her.”

It’s my responsibility as CEO, just as convening the board was. I can take her anger. I deserve to absorb more of it than they do.

Besides, I have my ways of distracting her, and after the weekend without her, I want to press my advantage.

She’s waiting for me in my office, arms crossed and surly. Her hazel eyes are wild and bright.

I close the door gently and face her.

“This is bullshit. Who accused me? I have a right to know.”

I step closer, and she doesn't back down. I've always liked that about her.

"It was anonymous. The board believes you, but they have conditions."

She looks about ready to throw something. "What conditions?"

"You can't be left in the lab alone."

Avery narrows her eyes. "How's that supposed to help? Am I going to steal a sample? I help Wyatt tweak the formula. I know it forward and backward. This is ridiculous."

I reach her, cupping her face and kissing her to distract her. Avery's shoulders relax an inch, and her mouth softens under mine.

"The board is looking out for the company first. This was mild, considering the accusation. Okay?"

I caress her jaw and neck, letting my fingers weave through her hair. It's soft and long and wraps so easily in my hand. Tugging her back to me, I kiss her with a little more gusto, letting her know just how much I've missed her.

I've spent so much of my life missing her.

She grabs onto my jacket lapels, and I might convince myself that she's missed me, too.

When I release her mouth, she's panting and holding onto me like she might wobble. I use an arm up her back to support her.

Taking a deep breath, she opens her eyes to look at me. "Okay."

I grin as if it were my kisses that coaxed out that agreement. Untangling myself from her hair, I reluctantly let a few inches spread between us.

“So, your son plays hockey?”

Avery finally smiles. It’s wide and proud. “He does. He’s pretty good, too. Loves it.”

“I used to play, you know. I’d love to come watch one of his games.”

Her eyes narrow in contemplation.

I’ve been getting the feeling she doesn’t want me to meet her son. I haven’t even seen a picture of him, and as much as I don’t want to be suspicious about why, I am. Why doesn’t she want to show him off when she’s so proud of him?

She talks about Charlie all the time.

Something breaks in her gaze, both fear and hope. But over what?

“He’s got a game this weekend.”

Wyatt

It doesn't feel right to escort Avery in and out of the lab. I don't like it. Not that I'm not reaping the rewards. It means that she stays longer. Sometimes, she eats lunch with me.

I enjoy how she can sit with me in silence and not feel the need to fill it. That she's not uncomfortable around me when we don't have a task. I don't like it when she leaves.

She sits at our shared lab table as I scribble the last of my notes and looks up at me when I hesitate. Her smile flares the new ever-present warmth in my chest, and a small version of my own smile surfaces.

"Do you want to sit with me as I plug this into the computer?" Because I don't want her to go yet.

"Do you want me to sit with you as you plug those into your computer?"

I hesitate, but she's teasing me. "Yes."

"Okay, then yes."

That pulls a bigger smile out of me, and I offer her my hand to help her down from her stool, although she doesn't need it. Once we're in my office, I peek out to see whether Laurel is hanging about.

My food tech has been hovering lately. Much more than she used to. Or, I'm noticing it more than I used to. It's been annoying. Her presence used to go unnoticed until she needed something from me. Or I needed something from her, more often than not.

But now... she's always lurking, drawing my attention when it's not necessary.

Annoying.

When I don't spot her, I close the door and lock it.

Avery is in the corner, looking over my bookcase. It's a lot of chemistry, statistics, and recipe books. A few hard science-fiction books that don't have any romance.

I wish I ventured into those more now. I might have a clue as to what I'm doing with Avery if I had.

She turns to me, tipping her head to the side as she meets my stare.

Tossing my paperwork on my desk, I advance on her, wrapping my arm around her waist and pulling her against me.

Avery's mouth parts, her breasts pressing into my chest and her hands gripping my shoulders. Maybe I don't need the help. Maybe I just need the right woman.

I sweep a hand into her hair, tip her head back, and kiss her. She opens to me without resistance. The touch of her tongue tears heat through me. My skin is tight and uncomfortable, need pulsing down my center and making my cock hard.

Avery notices, rubbing against it with a moan muted by my kiss.

Fuck, this is exactly what I've been daydreaming about.

I reach down to lift her in my grip, and her legs wrap easily around my waist before I turn and set her on the oversized, plush chair.

Her skirt gathers high on her thighs, and I vaguely register how much more often she's worn them recently instead of her slacks as my hands cup her thighs and slide up to her hips. I shift back to look down at her and the soft, tanned skin under my palms.

"You're so soft." I stroke her thighs, amazed by how my pinky and thumb span perfectly across the inside and outside of her pliable flesh. Fuck, I want to sink my teeth into it.

Her laughter is sweet and husky. "You look like an angry god."

My brow jumps. "Why?"

"So intense and stony, like you're planning to destroy me." The way she says it doesn't sound negative.

To be fair, I am thinking of ways I could destroy her, mark her skin with my mouth, my teeth, my hands, my cock until her skin is pink and red from my attention. I know she can take it. She has before.

"You're not wrong."

She wriggles under me a little, eyes hooded and dark as her knees spread higher.

Sinking lower, I kiss the inside of her knee and tug her slender panties down her hips, needing to regulate my breath as I lean down to splay her folds open with my tongue. I moan against her clit.

Her back arches, so I grab a firm hold of her and get a better, slower, more thorough taste.

I'm addicted to the small noises she makes as she tries to keep quiet.

To the way her hand grips my hair, twisting and tightening with her pleasure.

To how her hips writhe under my ministrations until she comes.

I peer up at her as she cries out against her forearm, her teeth pinching the fabric as I slide two fingers inside her and suck on her clit. Her cry gets a little louder, lower as she takes it.

My cock strains against my slacks, throbbing, hard, and ready.

I may not have a lot of time, but I'm going to take as many orgasms as possible. Making her come is much more satisfying the fourth and fifth time when my cock is finally deep inside her. Avery gets tight, and her muscles squeeze me...

Sucking harder has her whimpering. My fingers twist inside her until I find that spot that makes her toes curl and her legs shake. Circling my tongue over her clit and giving a few flicks, I settle into a steady stroke.

She squeaks and jerks before her moans mimic my movements. When she bears down over my fingers, I'm prepared for her second orgasm, keeping my grip firm as she bucks against me. I slide my tongue along my fingers, stroking her in opposition as she sobs above me.

So fucking wet. Like devouring ripe fruit, but hot.

Avery trembles, but she's not writhing so hard anymore. I lay her leg over my

shoulder and down my back so I can reach around her hip to press her clit with my thumb.

Her groan sounds painful, but the agony on her face propels me harder. It's only been a few minutes. She can take more. And she doesn't push me away. It makes me search for the new sensitive spot that's going to make her break apart again.

This one takes a little more time, a little harder thrusts, a third finger, but Avery grinds up against my face with the sweetest little pleading sounds. I want her to take it, to claim the climax I'm offering.

When she finally breaks, I spread my mouth over her hips and the insides of her thighs as I wiggle my fingers deep in her core, wanting to draw out every last quake.

Then, I retreat in inches, catching her glazed gaze and unzipping my slacks. Avery bites her bottom lip before her eyes drop to watch me pull my cock out. I use the slick from her pussy to stroke myself.

She sinks down another inch, and the offering has me spreading my head against her pulsing lips. We both watch as I push myself inside her at an agonizingly slow pace. After a few short thrusts, I'm fully encased in her heat. It draws a groan out of me.

I will never get used to how good she feels. Like someone is running a light current through us.

Grinding myself into her, I bend down for a nuzzle. Avery is so damn responsive, lifting to rub her nose against mine, her hand finding my cheek and bringing me back from my tight control. Something about this woman undoes me.

She makes me want to be nice. To understand her. To make her happy.

My cock twitches inside her, and her smile blazes up at me. It's so wide and pure that it becomes my new goal. I want to make her smile like that as much as possible.

Moving my hips, I set a slow pace, dragging myself against her every dip and ridge until we're both shaking. Until I can't hold back anymore. I rear back, circle her waist with my hands, and use leverage to bring us together.

The new angle has her gasping, her nails finding purchase in my skin as she grabs my bare forearms. The way her mouth hangs open tells me I'll be able to get another orgasm out of her before I come.

A deluge of wetness spreads across her thighs, creating soft sucking noises between us.

"I love the way you feel," I tell her, my voice low and more gravelly than I'm used to. Avery has turned everything I knew about myself on its head.

Who knew I would love fucking her so much? That she could drag this clawing pleasure out of me instead of the tepid kind I've always experienced before? That I would become so attached to her that I actually want her near me as much as possible?

Even if she's just in the same room as me.

I stare down into her eyes as I cross that threshold. No stopping now. My hips are slamming against hers without any conscious thought.

Avery contorts beneath me, straining against where I hold her in place as I plow through her orgasm.

My own grabs me by the base of my spine and bucks me against her, keeping us

locked together as I spill into her.

Her hands grab at me, drawing me down over her. I go. I'll do anything she asks me to.

Avery holds onto me, arms around my neck and shoulders as we shake. Her thighs squeeze my sides. I stroke them with long, slow movements, savoring every inch of her skin, every second I have her.

I mourn not uncovering all of her. Not getting to watch her small breasts bounce with every thrust. Not getting to suck them into my mouth. My cock twitches with the line of my thoughts. But I only get that kind of access after work, when the four of us play in the boardroom.

It's too easy to get caught here.

I pull back far enough to kiss her, and it's quickly made obvious that I want more—would take it, given different circumstances—because we're both breathing hard and pulsing together when I retreat.

“Mmm. I like this new code. Plugging numbers...” Her small smile and the wicked glint in her eyes break me. I'm laughing from the delight of being in her presence. Of her making jokes with me.

Avery's smile grows wide, and I'm absolutely done for. She's everything I never knew I wanted.

Avery

Being with three men, who are miraculously not jealous of each other, is mind-blowing, especially at work. They love to share me in the boardroom after business hours—sometimes before the end of the day—and we’ve sullied every surface of that room, especially the conference table.

My favorite by far is when Ryder propped me against the floor-to-ceiling windows and took me from behind, my breasts pressed and scraping against the cold glass as he powered into me. Fuck, I’m wet just thinking of it.

It always starts in the same vein, focused on my pleasure, building me up into a needy frenzy that takes all three of them to soothe. God, it’s the hottest thing I’ve ever experienced, and it happens every single day. Well, besides the weekends.

Sometimes, I get one or two of them during lunch, but the mornings seem a bit more special. They like to have me to themselves before everyone else comes in.

This morning, I slip into Ezra’s office, silently closing the door behind me and flipping the lock. I lean against it and smile at him.

His jacket is strewn over the back of his chair, his hair is ruffled from his fingers, and his tie is loose around his collar. Ezra advances on me from where he’s bent over his calendar, sweeping me up with one arm and kissing me like it’s been years since he’s seen me last.

It breaks through a new barrier—an old one that I erected shortly after our Spring

Break fling. He's getting close to knocking them all down, and the thought terrifies me.

I cling to him as the world opens up under my feet.

His mouth falls to my throat, that spot beneath my ear that does me in every time. I'm shaking in his grip as he kisses and nips every inch of exposed flesh. When he pulls back to look me in the eyes, we're both breathing heavily.

I trace his brow softly with my fingertips, down across his cheekbone and jaw, and brush my thumb across his bottom lip.

Ezra tips his forehead against mine, eyes closed, and he presses me to him more tightly. It cranks a new tension around my heart.

When he retreats, he drags a hand down my arm and tangles our fingers together, pulling me in slow steps over to his couch, where he sits and tugs me forward to straddle his lap. I settle over him easily, and he just looks up at me for a long minute.

"Do I have something between my teeth? Eye boogs? What?"

He finally grins up at me. "No. I'm just... still amazed that this is real. That you're here and not one of my vivid dreams."

Cupping my cheek, he's being so tender and sweet. It's at odds with what we've been these last few weeks, but it's so reminiscent of the way we were together back then.

"I've had them a lot over the years."

I have, too, but it's harder to admit that than I thought. Instead, I lean in and plant a soft kiss on his mouth. "I'm here. I'm real. I'm not going anywhere."

Ezra's grip on me tightens, and he kisses me again with much more fervor.

Spreading my thighs wider, I sink down against his stiff length. It presses hard against the inside of my thigh, and we start a slow roll together. It's luxurious and not at all rushed, the same way we'd been with each other ten years ago, but somehow, it's better.

Our kiss drops off as we grind together, simply enjoying the way we feel like this.

The old needs creep up on me. The ones that made it hard to be away from him long enough to grab clothes and change, to check in with my cousin or dad, to let him take care of things he needed to. The ones that made it hard to think of the end and going back to real life.

Now, we don't have the looming end, and still, I wish I had him crawling into bed with me every night, hugging me against his broad chest and wrapping me up in his limbs.

I wrap my hands in his loose tie, and he blinks up at me in wonder.

"I want to take you on a date." His low voice curls around me with an embrace of its own.

"You do?" I'm stalling when I should just be saying yes, but a date means coming to my place, meeting my family, learning my best kept secrets.

"I do."

I hate how those two simple words tap into the deep, hidden cavern of my chest, so I roll my hips hard enough to make us both moan a little. "What would we do on this date?"

Reaching between us, I unbuckle his belt and spread his slacks open. My hand curls around his hard-on to pump him over his boxers. His small groan is sweet and heavy with unsaid things between us.

Ezra's hands crawl up my legs, lifting my skirt around my hips so that he can squeeze the plumpest part of my body.

"I'd—" He sucks in a sharp breath as I press on that bundle of nerves under the fat head of his cock.

"I'd take you somewhere you haven't been before, like the ruins near the city, and watch as you imagine what it was like in its prime.

Encourage you to tell me stories about what it must have been like, who must have lived and worked there, how it fell into ruin. "

His words come out at the same pace as my hand as if he's trying to keep himself from rushing.

But that's what I'd done when we visited the ruins in Cancún. Mostly romantic with a tinge of horror. I am my father's daughter, after all. Ezra took me very seriously through it all, no matter how ridiculous I got.

"Then, I'd take you to the best Vietnamese restaurant I know and have you taste all of my favorite dishes to see which ones you like the best." He sucks in a slow breath. "Because I love to watch you eat."

I chuckle as I finally free him of his boxers and wrap my hand around his bare flesh. Fuck, I love the way he moans when I touch him. He's always been responsive, letting me know how much he enjoys my attention.

When I lift up on my knees, he wraps his thumb in the crotch of my panties and tugs them aside. It doesn't take much work to drop myself onto his cock. We fit together perfectly, and I resume my rocking motion.

God, it's so much better with him inside me.

With a steady rhythm and his hands cupping my bum, I hold onto the back of the couch and sink into the comfortable space that naturally builds around us.

"So, what do you think?" Ezra pumps his hips up to accentuate his question. "Let me take you on a date?"

"Mmm. How can I turn that down?"

He grins. "Oh, I'm sure you could find a way."

I prolong us for another minute, working him with my core and teasing him with my mouth.

"Avery?"

"Yes. Yes, you can take me on a date." Although when we'll find the time for one, I'm not sure. "Now, concentrate."

That breaks a laugh out of him, but he nods. "Yes, ma'am."

Fuck. Now, he's moving under me like he's on a mission, finding the right angle to pump us together and submerge me in pleasure. He feels so good. He always has.

I bat away the intrusive thoughts of what my life could have been like if I hadn't run away all those years ago. How many moments like this I could have had with this

man and his deliberate aim to make me feel like a goddess.

I clamp down over him as he works his cock against the spot deep in my core, pushing and pulling a bare inch to give it constant stimulation. My moan is low and deep.

“Ezra ...”

He groans, holds his breath, pants. “Fuck, Avery.”

He’s shaking as his arms close around me, like he wants to say more but can’t bring himself to.

I kiss him hard as he works me toward my own end. It doesn’t take long for him to nudge me over the edge.

Settling me over him, he soothes me with a few rubbing circles before he swings me over to lie on the couch and taps my hip.

My insides go gooey as I slip over to my stomach and arch my hips up for him. I more than remember this move from Cancún as Ezra hovers over me and his cock slides home. I moan as he swears above me.

And then, he’s rolling into me, the hard muscles of his hips slapping my ass with soft smacks. The lingering quakes from my orgasm spark new pleasure with his languid pace.

In Mexico, beyond our inability to be separated from each other for long, beyond being unable to keep our hands off each other, beyond his silly ass simply carrying me around because he didn’t want to let me go, Ezra would sneak me off to a hidden corner, lift up my skirt, and take me like this.

Body pressed against mine, hips pumping in short, strong moves. His mouth pressed behind my ear as his hand rubbed my clit. Ezra always ended up covering my mouth to muffle my moans.

His entire body moves over me now, and it's so much better at this slow pace with an orgasm already docked.

Chest and shoulders caging me, Ezra's nose nuzzles the back of my neck, and his angle sharpens. God damn, I'm blissing out, squirming under him, unable to keep the new orgasm at bay.

Ezra's hand covers my mouth as I cry out, and his other hand dives under me, finding my clit and applying a steady pressure that only heightens the tumultuous ecstasy roiling through me.

He's making soft noises in my ear as he ruts against my ass.

I'm struggling against the weight of the pleasure. It's growing and stretching wide, and I'm stuck, shaking until he bucks against me, mumbling something against the back of my neck that I can't quite make out.

But his hand slides from my mouth to entwine his fingers with mine. His other lifts along my thigh and squeezes my ass cheek reverently. It's similar to how he used to touch me, but now he seems more possessive. Like he's not willing to let me go again.

When he does retreat, he helps me clean up and walks me down to the lab to deliver me to Wyatt.

I don't have a hair out of place and my pink cheeks have faded, but when Wyatt sees me, he gives me a small, knowing smile. It's the slightest thing, but I know the

micromovements of his features.

Laurel must, too, because she looks between the three of us and gives me a disapproving scoff before she goes to the big storage rooms to monitor supplies. It's the kind of move that makes me more suspicious of her.

Like she's conceding a battle to regroup and come at me harder. I don't understand it, but it's something I've seen before.

Ezra

Being back in the rink with the raucous noise of parents and fans in the stands, the scents of cold ice, sweat, and the concession stands, brings me back to my youth. The crazy energy before a game has my blood pumping with old adrenaline.

Hockey was such a big part of my childhood. Gave me grit and a purpose. Kept me out of trouble when my mom worked her second job. It got me a college scholarship and a trip to Northeastern University, where I earned my MBA and met Wyatt.

It gave me enough insight and networking to open Nguyen Candy Company. It only took three years to make enough profit that my mom got to quit both of her jobs.

It wasn't how I thought I'd get her out of that one-bedroom apartment we'd rented my whole life, but I did get her out.

The cold makes my knee ache as I descend the bleachers, spotting Avery and her father in the front row beside the home team's box. She smiles at me when I make my way to her, and I try not to sit too stiffly, but I'm not successful.

Avery frowns a little as I rub my knee. She places her hand over it with a silent question.

"Old injury," I tell her, and she helps to rub it.

It's the one that ended my dreams of going pro after college, a torn ACL during my senior year nine years ago.

Ancient history, and honestly, I'm more than happy to have what I have now because I didn't pursue that dream.

The thought has me linking my fingers with Avery's.

It's not exactly the date I am waiting to take her on, but I finally get to meet her son, Charlie, and spend some time with her outside the office.

She peers sideways at me from under her lashes before I lean forward and extend my hand to her dad. "Nice to see you again, Mr. Caruso."

He gives my hand a nice squeeze. "Dominick, please. Avery tells me you used to play."

"I did. All through college. How long has Charlie been playing?"

"Two years," Avery says beside me. "Been skating since he could walk, though."

I grin. "That sounds familiar."

The seats are filling up, and there are four teams on relay today, which means four games.

It's tiring, but it was always a fun day for me at that age.

My mom would drop me off in the morning and pick me up in the evening with a carton of takeout from her second job at the restaurant—the one I want to take Avery to tomorrow if she'll let me.

Charlie's team is up first, and he waves at his mom and grandpa as he skates out to position at left wing. He bangs his stick on the ground, nodding to his teammates,

ready to play.

The moment the puck hits the ice, Avery is on her feet.

Any time her son has the puck, she's cheering for him.

She puts her entire self into it, jumping, punching the air, and screaming when he checks, steals the puck, or makes a shot.

I love how unwavering her support is no matter how well he does.

And he's doing pretty well. Charlie has confidence on the ice and with his stick. He's made a couple of goals and taken a few good hits. The goalie on his team is a beast—bigger than the others at his age—and he's fast. The opposing team doesn't seem to have a chance.

Although one of the defensemen stays on Charlie through the game, blocking eighty percent of his shots. The kid's frustrated, and I can understand it. Avery frets beside me, so I step behind her and tug her back against me by the waist.

"He's doing a good job. He'll figure out how to get around number nine."

She sighs and slumps against me.

"I like how into it you are. I never had my mom screaming her head off in the stands. Not that she wouldn't have if she could have been there." I snuggle her into me and simply enjoy the feeling of her in my arms before she shoots out of them to cheer on Charlie some more.

They win their game, and it's fun to see Avery transform into the supportive mom, wild and loud and the complete opposite of her usually quiet, stony, intense self.

Every part of me screams to take advantage of the change, but I don't.

It's not the first impression I want to make on her kid.

Breaking for a snack, I grab nachos and pretzels from the concession stand, and Dominick hands me what he calls a cruffin. It's glazed with maple and has an apple compote filling that makes my eyes roll to the back of my head.

I almost forget that this is the man who taught Avery what she knows about food. No wonder she's so fucking good.

Avery laughs at my face as she nibbles on her pretzel.

"What?" I ask around my second mouthful. I'm making an absolute mess, and I don't care.

"It's just fun to see someone else's reaction to our test batch. I think he took my suggestions well." The pride in her is softer when she's teasing.

I take a giant third bite in answer, enjoying the way her head tips back as she laughs. I've missed that laugh.

"I take direction very well, bambina. You are the difficult one." Dominick pats Avery's knee and maintains his view of the ice rink.

It cracks a laugh through me, especially when he gives her a shifty side-eye.

Avery merely shrugs and takes another bite of her pretzel. "Perk of being the woman of the house."

I will take a twice as difficult Avery if she wants to be the woman of my house. That

thought spirals through me. I want a real relationship with her. Not one based on sex and fun and sneaking around the office.

I want to wake up with her in my bed, to bring her coffee and feed her breakfast, to have her sprawled across my couch to watch shows or read a book, to argue about what we're going to order for takeout, to have her tell me to pick up my dirty socks and not leave my dishes in the sink.

My chest aches with the possibilities of making any of that true. I've been dreaming about her for so long, and having the reality within my grasp spreads a desperate feeling between my ribs.

I blink and find Avery examining me. "Where'd you just go?"

Shaking my head, I give her a half-hearted smile. "Nowhere important."

She frowns at me, but a loud Mom draws her attention away. Her son is leaning over the edge of his team's box.

Avery goes to him immediately, and even though he has his helmet on, I get a better look at him. Something familiar tugs at the back of my mind as he complains about number nine blocking him so much.

She brushes his helmet like it's his hair and pouts down at him. It's sweet. "What does your coach say?"

Charlie huffs. "That we'll practice after the game, but we're up again. And I don't want someone else to do it to me, too."

Her pout turns into a frown. "It's a learning process, baby. Remember? We can't be perfect all the time."

He groans, head back to look up at her, but he doesn't argue.

I sneak up beside them because I actually have experience with this. "Hey."

Charlie looks at me, and again, I get that tinkling familiarity at the base of my skull that I can't quite access. Is it because he's Avery's?

"I had that issue when I first started, too. Being smaller meant they could push me around, but there's an advantage to it. They're going to swing high, so duck and reach back with your stick to drag the puck with you. It'll surprise them."

"Like how?"

I mime it for him, ducking and pretending to scrape the stick behind me. He's nodding when I stand up.

"How do you know my mom?"

The answer sticks to my tongue. I'm her boss. Her boyfriend. Her long-lost lover. And the longer I consider it, the more I think I could be your father. I clear my throat and say, "It's complicated."

"My friends say when adults say it's complicated, that means they're dating."

A buzzer sounds, and Charlie looks back at his mother. Avery smiles down at him. "Have fun. First and foremost. Fun."

He sigh-groans but smiles at her. "Fine."

And he's being sent out on the ice.

Avery takes my hand, and we sit again. Her gaze stays glued to Charlie, but I watch her more closely. She's closing down like she does at work. When she needs to compartmentalize.

I turn back to the game as a gong goes off in my head. And the truth sinks in. Charlie is mine. He has to be.

I vaguely track how he struggles with another big kid opposite him, but he ducks and drags and makes a shot. It doesn't go in, but it's a big improvement. Avery shoots to her feet and cheers. Charlie pumps his fist, and someone knocks into him, slamming him to the ice.

Then, he doesn't get up. He hugs his arm, and Avery is pressing against the team box, shouting for them to let her see her son.

I'm behind her without thinking about it, grabbing her by the waist and speaking in her ear. "Let them look at him. They've got people here for exactly this. We'll meet them in the locker room. Come on."

Avery stiffens, but she lets me lead her back.

Avery

I 'm panicking. Absolutely, heart-wrenching, I'm gasping for breath, panicking. Ezra's arm guiding me is the only reason my feet are still under me.

Charlie's been hit before. Knocked down. Bled. But he's always gotten up after.

"Hey. He'll be fine."

Ezra's voice breaks through, and I nod, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath. He cups my face as I open them again.

"You ready?"

He's so steady, calm. I place my hands over his and nod.

"Okay." Ezra looks behind me, and I realize Dad has gathered up our things and followed. He's as calm as Ezra, so I must be overreacting. I am. I know I am, but it's so hard to stop.

I stuck in two deep breaths, and then we walk into the locker room. Charlie is sitting on a bench with the medic. A brace and ice are on Charlie's arm, and they're fitting him into a sling.

Covering my mouth, I pause to keep myself from crying. Charlie spots me and rolls his eyes.

“It’s just a broken arm, Mom. I’m okay.”

I give him a watery laugh.

“Did you see? I did the trick, and it worked.” His enthusiasm and bright spirit are keeping me together if only for the moment because we still have to take him to the hospital to get checked out. X-rays, a full cast, and pain. It’s going to come when the shock and adrenaline wear off.

Ezra is talking with the medic as I sit beside Charlie.

“You did an amazing job.”

“Mom. Why are you crying like I’m dying? I’m fine.” He looks absolutely aggravated with me.

“You broke your arm. It’s going to start hurting pretty soon. And we need to take you to the hospital.”

He sighs. “I know. But most of it got better after they set it.”

Ezra is shaking the medic’s hand and returning to me. “We’ll take my car. Come on.”

“What? Why?” I stand and meet Dad’s eyes. He shakes his head.

“It’s a smooth ride, less bumps to jar him.”

I don’t have it in me to fight with him about it, so I just nod and let him and my dad usher us out. I buckle Charlie in and hold him against me to keep him from sliding into the door on turns. Ezra’s gaze catches mine in the rearview mirror every time we stop.

It takes us twenty minutes to get to the ER, and it's a longer wait inside. I'm pacing, trying to keep my temper in check as Ezra sweet talks to the nurses and Dad distracts Charlie. But we get a room in a few hours, and the nurses take Charlie off to get X-rays.

Ezra pauses next to the doorway, where we're all hovering. "I'm going to go grab some coffee. I think we could use it."

"Thanks." My voice is far quieter than I'm used to because even though we're in the middle of something big here—for me, for Charlie, for my dad—Ezra and I have something big going on, too. He's been watching more closely since Charlie asked who he is to me.

Now that Dad and I are alone, though, he turns to me with his arms crossed and that patent disapproving look from when I'm in trouble. It might have been a rare occurrence, but I still recognize this arrangement of his features and the spark in his eyes.

I sigh, waiting for it.

"He's the father, isn't he?" The softness of his tone drives my guilt deeper.

I gnaw on my lip and nod.

"Does he know?"

I shake my head, wrapping my arms around myself to keep it all from falling apart.

"Bambina. What are you doing? Why have you not told him?" Finally, he steps forward, bracing me by my shoulders. I'm ready to break, but I struggle hard against it. Dad's softness doesn't shake the disappointment.

It amplifies it.

“How am I supposed to after ten years?” The task feels insurmountable, but what did I expect when I invited him to one of Charlie’s games? It’s not like my son looks like me .

Dad tips my forehead into his shoulder and hugs me—hard. “Before, you had an excuse. What do you have now? Fear? You get over it and do what must be done for Charlie.”

Because that’s the crux of it. Charlie. He deserves to know his dad. And Ezra deserves to know his son. Just because it wasn’t possible before doesn’t mean it shouldn’t happen now.

But this is going to disrupt both of their lives so much. How can I do it to them?

“You’ve done much harder things, bambina . Much harder. You can do this.” Dad rubs my back for long minutes before Ezra returns.

He hands us both paper cups of coffee, and Dad pats my shoulder. “I’m going to stretch my legs.”

Once Dad is out of sight, the silence stretches, and I’m so, so tired. I sink down into a chair and cover my face with my hand.

Dark sneakers appear on either side of my feet. My coffee cup is lifted from my hand without my even having tasted it, and I collapse into myself a little further.

I’ve never shied away from having a hard conversation before, but the shock of seeing my son get hurt and winding up in a hospital has worn me down. Maybe the adrenaline is breaking, leaving me weak-kneed and fragile.

But I haven't been fragile in a long, long time. Not since I came home from Spring Break and discovered I was pregnant with Charlie and had no way of finding Ezra. I'd lived in a fragile space for so long because of my own stupid decisions.

Although having him is the best thing I've ever done, I grieved losing what could have been with Ezra for so long after.

Sucking in a breath and steeling myself, I drop my hands and stand. Ezra is less than a foot away, watching me with a mix of worry and frustration. It's so similar to my first week at work for him that I nearly laugh at putting myself in this position.

"So, Charlie... He's, um..."

Ezra lets out a humorless laugh and shakes his head.

He knows. He already knows, so why does it feel impossible to admit?

Those dark brown eyes take me in, and he sighs.

Fine. Just rip the Band-Aid off. Say it, and let the chips fall where they may. Because I can't play this off, and I can't keep it in any longer.

"He's yours." Somehow, I've found the strength to say it with a steady voice, like we're talking about the weather and not that I gave birth to a son he didn't know about for the last nine years. That he should have known about for at least these last five weeks I've been working at his company.

My shoulders draw back to keep me from wobbling as Ezra closes his eyes. His head tips back, and he takes a deep breath.

I can't tell how upset he is, but as much as I try to pull myself into my usual ice

queen, nothing can touch my state of mind.

I'm trembling. Folding my arms around myself is my only defense as I wait for him to condemn me.

To stomp off cursing my name. To promise he'll fight me for custody.

To tell me he wants nothing to do with me now.

I wish I hadn't let all of those walls fall from around my heart because being vulnerable is not easy for me.

Neither is waiting, but I do. I wait.

Ezra

God, I knew it. The moment I saw Charlie, I knew. The boy looks just like me when I was a kid.

My jaw clenches in acknowledgement and frustration. And part of me is so, so angry at Avery for not saying anything. Especially after she accused me of lying to her. Which, granted, I did. But this is so much bigger than having a girlfriend back home whom I planned to break up with.

And she held that against me for so, so long.

If she had just talked to me that morning instead of running away, we might have been able to stay in touch. I could have been there for her pregnancy, for Charlie's birth, for the last nine years of his life.

Fuck. I have a son. With Avery.

It's something I've dreamed about for the last decade.

"Why didn't you tell me?" It's the only question I can ask. How could she still not trust me after the last month?

No wonder she never shows off pictures of him around the office like every other mother I've met. I can't believe it never even dawned on me that she could be hiding this.

“How was I supposed to?”

I open my eyes and stare at the ceiling, trying to rein in the anger that’s settled low in my chest. She should have found a way.

“I don’t know. Seems pretty simple to me.

‘Hey, Ezra. Remember when we had that whirlwind romance ten years ago? Well, I got pregnant and had your son. Want to meet him?’”

When I finally look at her again, tears are swimming in her eyes. It takes too much effort to keep from trying to comfort her. Right now is not the time for that. Not when I’ve had to force her to admit that Charlie is mine.

He’s mine . The thought catches on a myriad of emotions that I can’t quite decipher yet.

“I didn’t want to blow up your life.” Avery almost sounds like she believes it.

Her tone lets me latch back onto that righteous anger at her selfishness. “No. You didn’t want to blow up yours.”

“His,” she counters, her arms tightening around herself like she’s barely holding it together. When was the last time I’d seen her on the brink of falling apart like this?

Never. I’ve never seen her like this.

That hits me square in the chest. I know she is a protective mother. Was this all to protect him instead of herself? Could I fault her for that?

I imagine all of the things my mother did for me as a single mom.

How she escaped Vietnam when she was pregnant to come to America and give me a good life.

How hard she worked. How she refused to tell me stories about my dad when I asked about him.

When I threw fits and wouldn't talk to her for days because she wouldn't answer my questions about him.

When I grew up and did my own research at college, I didn't like what I found.

My father, whose name I'd only heard in passing once, was a Communist general known for abusing the local poor women.

Like my mom. And she'd been trying to save me from knowing.

To let me grow into myself instead of thinking I might be like him.

I'm not my dad, and it makes me wonder what Avery told Charlie about me all these years or if she simply refused to talk about me at all.

Is it selfish of me to be angry with her over this? Over protecting her son in the best way she knew how? That as much trust as we've built, she still wasn't going to tell me?

Am I weak for wanting to forget about the secret and just be with them both?

Avery closes her eyes, and a tear falls. I can't resist brushing it away, cupping her face, kissing her forehead.

"Were you ever planning to tell me?"

“Eventually.”

God, I hate how defeated she sounds, like I’m going to tear her down right this second and leave her to put all the pieces back together on her own.

A soft laugh escapes, surprising me and her, but I pull her into me, wrapping myself around her to show her what I truly want. The family I never knew I had. The love of my life. Our child.

As devastated as I am, I’m more overjoyed that I finally have a chance at it.

“I want to be a part of his life. Just as badly as I want to be a part of yours.” I say it into her hair, and her arms finally unravel from around herself to close around me instead.

I forgive her as she hugs me back.

We stand like that for a while, and I rock her on her feet until her trembling stops.

Somehow, I feel more complete than I have in years. In my entire life.

A nurse is carting Charlie back into his room when Avery finally pulls away. Dominick returns with a few snacks and a nod as if to say, Good, I see you’ve made up .

The nurse waves us away as she gets Charlie settled, and a doctor follows with a file in his hands, a middle-aged man in good shape, his hair thinning on top.

“Are you the parents?”

“Yes,” Avery says, and a new pang of longing and belonging hits my heart.

The doctor simply nods. He doesn't know the life-changing few moments I've just had. The world has shifted, and I'm a father. A parent. I'm responsible for the boy in that hospital room.

"His X-rays look good. It was a clean fracture, and the medics on site did a good job setting it. Honestly, I couldn't have done much better, and their quick thinking is going to save him a lot of pain."

She sighs and nods. "Good. That's good."

The doctor's smile is warm. "We've got him in a more permanent cast. You'll want to take him to his regular physician in six weeks to see if it's ready to come off, which it should be. I suggest paying them a visit in the next week if you can afford it. Just to check in."

"We can do that," I say, as if I know who his regular physician is. Either way, I will ensure he has anything he needs. The reaction is so strong that it surprises me again.

"He'll have to take the stay off the ice for the rest of the season, but he should be just fine. I'll start the paperwork to release him. Just let the nurse know where to have his prescriptions sent, and we'll get you on your way home. To rest." He points at us as if to ensure we've heard him.

We nod, and Avery turns to offer her dad a small smile.

Dominick sits and sips his coffee. I imagine he would usually be right behind her, ready to insist he needs to check on his grandson, but he's letting me take that role, take his spot.

I shake my head at how surreal this is.

As the doctor wanders off, the nurse comes out to let us into Charlie's room. He's smiling and holding up the cast on his arm—covering him from wrist to elbow on the left. He looks so small on that bed.

“Look at that. And it's orange. Everyone's going to see you coming a mile away.”

Charlie grins wider. “I know, right? Jenny's going to have to watch out. This thing is hard. I wonder if it will hurt if I whack her with it.”

Avery laughs and brushes his hair from his face. “I think it will hurt you more than it will hurt your cousin. So, no whacking.”

He pouts, but only mildly.

Avery settles herself on the side of his bed and reaches out for me, pulling me further into the room.

“Baby. I want you to meet someone.” That soft, motherly tone is back, and I'm in awe of how easily she's able to slip into it after the turmoil I witnessed her go through just minutes ago.

“But I met him at the game.”

“No, honey... That's not what I mean.”

Charlie looks at me for a long moment. It's the same kind of scrutiny he gave me before, the same kind of analysis I'd done when I first saw him and had that familiar tug in the back of my mind before I saw the resemblance.

I watch as the understanding dawns on him. His eyes go wide, glittering with something new.

Charlie turns back to his mom. “He looks like me. Is he my dad?”

Her hand smooths out his hair again, and she nods. “He is.”

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Avery

Ezra drives me and my son back to my townhouse before he takes Dad back to his car. Dad promises to be by in the morning, and Ezra promises that he will be back shortly.

I get Charlie washed up with a trash bag around his new cast. I comb his hair and feed him a snack before I have a chance to think about what's happened today.

Ezra knows about Charlie being his son. He seems to have forgiven me for not telling him right away, but how can he? Even after ten years, I couldn't forgive him for the secret girlfriend he had when we were together.

And what does this mean for Wyatt and Ryder? Will this change things? Will they not want to be with me because of this? Will Ezra go back to being possessive and jealous?

Will Ezra actually want to stick around when the shock wears off, when he realizes how much work it takes to be a parent? Taking care of my son is second-nature to me. And he's more than worth it. For me.

And now that Charlie knows, can put a face to a name, will this change a lot for him? Will it be good?

My mind is spinning when the doorbell rings, and I open it in a daze.

Ezra is standing there with the evening sky darkening behind him. He's holding a

paper bag, and smells waft out to curl into my nostrils—savory, sweet, spicy.

“I thought I’d pick up that food I mentioned the other day... when I asked you on a date.” He lifts it to confirm. “I’ve rethought the kind of date I want to have with you.”

I lift my brow, willing myself not to feel fragile.

“We don’t have to do anything fancy. I just want to be around you. As much as possible.” Ezra’s confession springs new tears to my eyes, and when his brow furrows, I step out to give him a chaste kiss.

A new zing trills through me. I reach down for his hand and escort him inside. As we approach the table, where Charlie is munching on pizza rolls, I notice Ezra lose inches of his confidence. I brush Charlie’s hair from his forehead and plant a kiss there.

“Hey. Look who’s here.”

My son peeks up at his dad with the kind of shyness I’m not used to him having.

“He brought us a treat. Probably better than what I’m feeding you.”

“Mom. Almost anything is better than pizza rolls.” He rolls his eyes at me, and I can’t believe my nine-year-old has such discerning taste. I wonder where he gets that from.

I make a face back at him and gesture for Ezra to open the bag.

“It’s traditional Vietnamese food. Not homemade, but made by two women from Hanoi, which is where my mom is from.

I call her M? .” Ezra starts to pull out cartons of food, giving us the traditional names

of each dish.

He smiles and repeats, “Fried dumplings, sticky rice, spring rolls, and a beef noodle salad.”

Charlie leans forward, his nostrils flaring. “Smells good. What would I call your mom? In Vietnamese?”

He’s balancing on one arm and bouncing his feet under him on his chair, and I cringe at how easily he could fall and hurt himself. I’ve promised him for his birthday that I would try to trust him and not micromanage him so much.

I cross to the kitchen and grab some plates.

“You’d call her Bà .”

“Does she speak English?” He’s hopping again, and I bite my lip.

“She does. And she understands more than she can say. Reads a lot, too.” Ezra is smiling when I return to the table and hand one over to him.

I scoop a little bit of everything on a plate for Charlie to try, and Ezra frowns. He hasn’t had a kid, and he doesn’t have any siblings, or he’d know the key to wasting food is to pile too much on a kid’s plate.

“Cool.” Charlie finally sits and grabs the dumpling with his right. “Thanks, Mom.”

I clear my throat at him.

“Thanks... Can I call you Ezra for now?” He fiddles with the dumpling over his plate, avoiding eye contact.

“Yeah. You can call me whatever you’re comfortable with.”

Charlie nods and takes a bite of the dumpling. His eyes light up as he chews, and he munches through it quickly.

He’s not that picky and eats a bit of everything with good spirits as he asks Ezra questions, and Ezra asks his own. They share a lot of the same interests.

I enjoy the meal he brought, trying them the way I do with everything. Small tastes to get the full flavors before I simply dig in to eat.

I open my eyes to see them both looking at me. Charlie shakes his head.

“She always does that.”

I stick my tongue out at him. “Blame Papa.”

Charlie rolls his eyes again, and Ezra laughs.

Once food is finished, I give Charlie his medicine and send him to bed. He’s fighting fatigue but doesn’t argue with me too much.

Closing him in his room, I find Ezra cleaning up in the kitchen. It makes me laugh quietly.

“What?” he asks. “I did this when you were sick.”

“I’m just... not used to having so much help.” I slide in next to him and watch his forearms as he rinses off the last of the utensils to put in the drainer. “He likes you.”

“I like him, too.” He wipes his hands off before he hooks one around my waist to

press us closer together. “I feel really protective over him, even though I barely know him. Is this how you feel?”

I laugh and lean into him. “Yes. All the time. Being a parent is the scariest and most rewarding thing I’ve ever done.”

He lets me pull him to the couch. I play whatever’s on deck and relax into him. It doesn’t take long for us to end up sideways with him spooning me. I always did fit perfectly into the nook his body makes.

With my head on his bicep, he reaches around to fiddle with my hair and breathes down my neck. “Move in with me.”

Tension sweeps down my back, fear at how quickly my insides scream yes . But I can’t throw Charlie’s life into chaos like that so soon. “I don’t know if I’m ready for that yet.”

He grins against the back of my neck and plants a kiss there. “Let me spend the night.”

“A fair compromise.”

We laugh a little together, and the TV turns into background noise as his mouth spreads warmth over my neck and shoulder. The hand wrapped around my middle dips lower, pressing my hips back against his hard length.

My insides heat up with desire, drowns out the worries spinning in my head. I want this reprieve from my thoughts. I want to enjoy having Ezra back in my life. I want to enjoy the things he can do to my body.

Rolling my ass back into him earns me a soft groan. It vibrates across my skin as his

teeth pinch the curve of my throat.

Ezra nimbly unbuttons my jeans, his hand dipping underneath to cup me over my slim panties. He works me slowly, letting the pleasure rise until I don't know I'm submerged in it. Ezra has me writhing, hips seeking what his hand promises me, and he pins my shoulders with his other arm.

I like how he keeps control of my body even as I can't maintain my grasp.

When he has the time to draw things out, he does. And we have all night.

I'm in for it.

I can't wait for it.

Ezra whispers hushing sounds in my ear as my pleasure builds—as it peaks. I'm shaking as an orgasm racks through me. His touch teases me for another minute until I settle, then he lifts himself over me to grab my mouth in a soul-searing kiss.

When he releases me, I'm captured by the look in his dark brown eyes. The feeling that started growing more than a decade ago reflects back at me.

I run my hand through his hair, afraid to let that last wall around my heart fall. “We should take this to my bedroom.”

He smiles at me, and my mouth curves up in return.

I'm in the air the next second. My legs and arms wrap around Ezra as he carries me back to my room, closing the door quietly behind us and crawling onto the bed with me still in his grip.

I let myself laugh, happy when his joins mine. Then, I'm yanking his shirt up his back and marveling at all of his skin. I don't get to bask in it as much as I've wanted to.

His body has changed over the ten years—bigger, more defined, but I remember this scar along his side from a skateboarding accident and the mole just below his belly button. Mostly, I remember the way it feels to simply touch him.

Ezra unwraps me slowly, taking his time to caress and kiss every inch of newly exposed skin.

By the time he has me down to my underwear, I'm already primed and ready for more.

He unclasps the back of my bra and peels it off me at an excruciating pace. My nipples perk in anticipation, and my back bows as he closes his mouth around one. Sucking hard has my knees squeezing his waist, trying to trap him and yank him closer.

God, he resists me, lavishing both breasts with so much attention that I'm overheating, ready to beg him for more. But I know I'll only be denying myself the pleasure he has planned for me.

I'm not disappointed.

He dives between my thighs to lick and suck and stroke me until I'm shaking and coming again.

I'm a goner by the time he hovers over me again, his clothes finally stripped off to leave him bare against me.

Gathered up in his arms, he refuses to rush, sliding into me with ease. The satisfaction of being stretched and full is chased off by the new need he builds.

Desperation claws my nails down Ezra's back.

He bends down to plant a small kiss on my mouth and tip his forehead against mine. "You are everything I never thought I'd have."

"You've already had me."

He shakes his head. "It wasn't enough. It won't ever be enough."

Wyatt

It's my morning to have Avery to myself. I show up far too early, but I don't want to miss a second of her. I'm already pacing between my office and the lab when Laurel arrives. She's here earlier than normal.

I don't like it when she changes her routine. I like it even less when she hovers, which she's been doing lately. Other people's social cues don't generally penetrate, but Laurel is acting strangely. Or at least, differently than I'm used to. Clingy.

I try not to grumble about it, although I'm sure I'm unsuccessful based on the way she keeps shooting me glances.

When Avery arrives, she's quiet and tense. Somehow, I can see all of the subtle changes in her demeanor, even though she's so restrained and reserved most of the time.

I cross the lab without thinking about it, taking her hand with a small squeeze and tugging her to my office and closing the door behind us. "What's wrong?"

Her eyes are bright as she blinks up at me, smiling even though her mouth is turned down into a small frown. After a deep breath, she asks, "You know of my son, Charlie?"

"Yes." I don't believe something has happened to him because she would not be here if it did, so I push her hair from her face and wait for her to continue.

“He’s Ezra’s son. I’ve just told him. Introduced them to each other this weekend.”

I look into her hazel eyes, noting more of the worries there. Negative possibilities grind through my mind at a million miles a second. But there’s only one question whose answer truly matters to me. “Does that change anything about the two of us?”

She’s searching my gaze before she shakes her head. “No.”

I nod. “Okay. That’s all I need to know.”

Her eyes brighten, and her smile blooms across her features before she lets out a full laugh.

I’m addicted to the way she responds to me. How happy she seems to be with me.

I never thought it was possible.

My hand sinks into her hair and pulls her mouth up to mine.

Avery moans into my kiss, always so receptive to me. Even though I feel like a bull, crashing my way through my feelings for her.

Her touch finds my chest, running up across my shoulders as I lean into her, trapping her against my office door to kiss her properly. She opens to me as I dive deeper.

My desires shift. Yes, I want to touch her, lick her, fuck her, but I also want to show her that she’s more to me than that. And the thought that pops up is an odd one, but my whole experience with her has been outside of my comfort zone. Outside my wheelhouse. Odd.

I pull back to peer into her eyes again, distracted a little by the way her chest rises

and falls with her heavy breaths.

“Can I meet him?” My timing is off. I know it is, but it will linger as a distraction in the back of my brain if I don’t ask. I won’t be able to fully enjoy my time with her otherwise.

“You want to?”

“Yes. He’s a part of you.” And I want all of you. Every piece you’re willing to give me . Some kind of self-preservation keeps me from admitting the entire truth. Even if I don’t completely understand the impulse.

A new, joyous smile breaks over her face. “Okay.”

I smile back, and she touches my mouth before I descend on her again, no lingering thoughts beyond the need to please her, to drive her to the heights of pleasure and make her crash down, only to do it again.

Her body molds against mine, grinding us together in the sweetest roll.

I spread my hands down her body, marveling at how small she is. How delicate she feels in my grip until she’s writhing with the power of pleasure. Avery turns into something more powerful than I can fathom.

A force to be reckoned with.

And she lets me touch her the way I please.

Sweeping my touch up her ribs, I squeeze her breast in my palm and rejoice in the soft sound caught in the back of her throat. I’m fucking drunk on her.

She's in pants today, tight against her body.

It's easy to find the spot that detonates her orgasms. Rubbing it over her slacks makes her squirm.

Avery tangles her hand in my hair and grabs a handful of my shirt.

Her thighs spread to give me better access to her, and her mouth drops from mine so she can catch her breath.

I'm so desperate for her that I slow myself down, drawing my touch along the seam of her pants in long strokes.

Coiling against me, Avery's struggling not to make noise, to control how much pressure I give her.

I lower my mouth back to hers, and she sighs, tugging my hair and rolling her hips. Her thigh brushes my stiff cock, and I dig in a little harder. She's growing hot against my hand, her arousal clear.

It begs me for more.

I am more than happy to give her everything.

Her soft mewl of discontent when I stop rubbing her has me grinning against her mouth. Eyes dreamy and hazy as I pop open the top of her slacks, Avery murmurs quietly as I slip my hand down the front of her pants and under her panties.

"God, Wyatt." Her grip squeezes in my hair again, the small pain making my cock jump with need. I don't give a shit about what she might do back to me after. I just want to touch her, to hear her moan, to watch her writhe, to feel her tighten and come,

and to know I gave it all to her.

I draw my fingers through her folds. She's so damn wet that I'm coated in a few swipes. I groan into the side of her throat as I tease her opening and that well of moisture and trace my teeth over her neck.

Avery whimpers and shifts, seeking my fingers. I want to sink them right in, but I enjoy the way she squirms too much.

"I like how wet you become for me." My voice is garbled against her skin.

Head falling back with a laugh, she cuts it off with a firm press of her lips. Her nostrils flare, and she hums.

I draw my thumb around her clit and thrust into her with two digits. It's a long, slow glide that has her dropping into my palm. Hips tilting, she gives me a better angle to curve my fingers against that spot she likes.

Her mouth falls open and her breathing changes.

A firm knock on the door by our ears jolts Avery, but I recognize the force and cadence of that noise. I might have been ignoring the shuffling out in the lab, but I registered Laurel out there.

I just don't care.

"What?" I nearly bark it, which has Avery turning to give me wide eyes.

Laurel clears her throat. "Well, I have a list of things that need your attention this morning?—"

“Is it an emergency?” I nibble on Avery again, hand thrusting a little faster. Because if it is, I still want to make her come first.

She clamps down as I work her, biting her lip, being a good girl and keeping quiet. I can hear the slick slide of my fingers inside her. Can Laurel?

There’s a pause on the other side of the door. I can almost see her sputtering. “No.”

“Then, go away. I’m busy.”

Avery’s hand comes up to cover her mouth, but she isn’t fast enough to catch her soft snort. Her giggles are silent, but they shake her whole body, even as she sinks down into my palm.

The more she grinds, the harder I rub that spot.

She’s lit up, even as she squints at me. Her cheeks flush bright pink. Tears glitter in the corners of her eyes.

She grabs onto me, burying her face in my shoulder and gasping softly into my shirt.

I can slow down and drag this out some more, but she’s so close to coming. And I’ll just give her another since I have the time.

The moment her body gives in, she drops in my grip. My fingers are relentless. I don’t plan on stopping. Her noises make me ache, my balls drawing up, my cock so stiff it's leaking.

One more, and I’ll bend her over my desk and take her from behind.

I’m going to wring every ounce of pleasure out of her before work hours officially

begin... in twenty minutes.

Avery

When I'm shaky from all the orgasms, Wyatt gives me what I can only call a cuddle before he helps me clean up and settles me behind his desk. He braces the arm rests on his chair, barricading me in place. Not that I plan to get away.

My legs are Jell-O, and my insides are warm and gooey for many, many different reasons. The stern lines are gone from Wyatt's features, making him look younger—more my age. I brush my hand over his cheek and earn myself a smile. Then a small kiss.

What would it be like to have him at home? Away from the office? To see his natural environment?

Wyatt retreats before he returns with a tray of little breakfast quiches and a bowl of fruit and yogurt.

And a cup of coffee, of course. That will help reset my palate.

"Eat. I'll be back." Wyatt goes out into the lab to take care of whatever Laurel tried to interrupt us for. She has to know what we were doing. It was so obvious.

The point of hiding me away here—beyond the softness I see in him when he wants to take care of me—is to let my skin cool off and to regain the strength in my legs. Maybe fix my hair. Wyatt doesn't keep a mirror in his office.

Mostly because he's not that kind of vain, and his hair is a lost cause to the way he

runs his hand through it when he thinks.

Or how mine run through it when we're touching each other.

Okay, supposed to be settling, not thinking of manhandling Wyatt . Although I do enjoy it a great deal. Almost as much as I enjoy the way he manhandles me.

I run my fingers through my hair before pulling it up into a ponytail to keep from looking any more frazzled.

The quiche is good—creamy, flaky, salty. It has small pieces of shallots and ham. I wonder if he made it himself. But I know better than anyone that some skills don't transfer between the different kinds of food preparations.

Either way, I like how much he enjoys feeding me. Just like Ryder and Ezra seem to. It's always good food, too. I have absolutely no complaints.

Wyatt returns as I'm sipping the last of my coffee.

“Did you want another cup?” The casual coldness from the first day I came to work here is gone. At least, when he speaks to me, it is. Poor Laurel is getting the grumpier version of her boss. I heard him snapping at her as she walked him through whatever task she felt was urgent this morning.

Is she regretting that now? Probably not as much as most people would. Some are simply gluttons for punishment.

She stopped a few times to shoot a passing glare at me in his office. Like she's checking to be sure I'm not rifling through his things.

I shake my head. “No. I'm okay. Do we have a new batch to taste?”

A small smile flashes across his mouth. “We do.”

He unlocks his small fridge where he keeps the chocolates he makes for me to try. How easily he pivoted to protect me makes me warm inside. Wyatt hides so much of himself behind that brisk exterior. That intellect. The disinterest in other people.

But he’s attentive. Sensitive. Focused on what’s important to him.

He sits in the seat opposite me, letting me keep his comfy computer chair. I grin at him and am rewarded with another small smile. His pale eyes are shining, though. He really is beautiful, especially when he’s happy.

That strikes me in the heart, makes it skip a beat. I’m part of what makes him happy.

Can he see the new level of emotions in my eyes? I don’t think he can see it. His focus is on the tray in his hands. Which is good for me. I’m not quite ready to confront what’s going on inside right now.

Setting the tray down, he points to four groups of chocolate pieces. “Control. One-to-two ratio vanilla and oil. One-to-one ratio. Two-to-one ratio.”

We’ve gotten really close, and every tweak seems to get us closer to perfection. This one works with the new oil we’ve tested and the new vanilla paste Wyatt made himself. I got to watch the process, although I’m not allowed to do more than taste when I’m down here.

I take the control piece and taste it. The greasy flavor and the tang of bitterness are still just there. Tasting the next is not better. Even though he emulsified the oil with the cocoa more thoroughly, it’s still greasy. The one-to-one is a little better.

God, we’re so close.

When I bite into the last one, eyes closed as it slowly melts over my tongue, my shoulders relax and fall back. I'm smiling before I meet Wyatt's intent gaze.

I find no faults with this one, and it must show on my face because Wyatt is standing.

Laughing, I get to my feet, too. "This is the one."

He pumps his fist before I'm off my feet. Wyatt has me in his arms and is spinning me around. I can't stop laughing.

Grinning like a fool at him, he matches my smile. The kind of wide, toothy thing I only get to see when he's on the brink of making me come. Wyatt plants a kiss on my mouth, brief but intense.

Then, he sets me down, hands still on my waist. The wild look he gives me makes me think of someone just registering that they've won the lottery. "I have to tell Ezra."

"Well, go on, then. Tell him." I cup his cheek before shooing him along.

Hesitating, he nods, a smile flashes across his face again, and he's marching out of his office. Out of his lab.

I take the second half of the sample and try it again.

It's so good. No one would ever guess that this is dark chocolate. That it has all of the health benefits. But it tastes like the milkiest, smoothest chocolate bar I've ever had. Wyatt did an amazing job.

I make my marks on the papers underneath each chocolate to indicate my notes and initials.

Laurel appears in the doorway with her hands on her hips. She's wearing a tight blouse that highlights her perfect curves, blonde hair styled perfectly to highlight her bright blue eyes and full cheekbones.

She really is quite pretty, could be a bombshell if not for the constant scowl from my presence.

I'm sure I derailed her monopoly on the hot men here. I mean, fuck, I'm sleeping with three of them regularly. Daily. Right under her nose.

It sucks that it means she has to hate me in her own way. I don't want to hate her, but I'm reactionary. I can't stay pleasant when someone is being awful to me. It's simply not in my DNA.

Just ask my dad.

I smooth down my blouse and wait for her attack. The best offense I can have is to appear unruffled.

"You aren't supposed to be in here alone." Her tone is not the mild version she uses when someone is nearby to hear. It drips with disdain and suspicion.

"I'm not. You're here with me." I tilt my head and watch her innocently. I know I haven't stolen any secrets, but if someone said I was, it means that someone has thought about it. I don't trust Laurel.

The feeling is mutual. She narrows her eyes at me and takes a step forward, blocking the doorway.

"You might have the bosses wrapped around your little finger, but I know better. You're a snake, waiting for your chance to poison us all."

Her word choice is convenient. Telling. “Am I? And what do you know about poisoning? I’m the one who went to the hospital from it, after all. And I certainly didn’t poison myself.”

Her scowl deepens. The frustration of not being able to intimidate me is obvious in the reddening of her cheeks. “I wouldn’t put it past you.”

I shake my head. There really is no chance that she’ll change her mind about me, no matter what I say or do to prove her opinion of me is wrong.

So, there’s no point in being nice. Or polite. “Think as you will, but I’ve met women like you before. Green is not your color. And it’s not my fault Ryder doesn’t want you anymore. Or Wyatt, for that matter.”

The red in Laurel’s cheeks travels down her neck and to her chest. I meet her blue gaze and don’t waver as we stare at each other.

When it’s obvious she doesn’t have a retort on hand, I gather up the tray Wyatt presented our new test on, the notes I took down, and his notes. Piling them together, I put them in his mini-fridge and lock it with the padlock. Something only he has the key to.

I refuse to leave it out for someone else to find.

Laurel’s eye is twitching as I walk toward her. She doesn’t move until I’m close, nearly running into her as I grab Wyatt’s office door to close behind me.

It locks automatically as it latches, but I check it to confirm.

Then, I leave Laurel to her fuming and plotting and return to my own office to do my job.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 7:46 am

Ryder

I put down the phone none too gently and rub my face. It has been a long morning of back-to-back phone calls. And I need a break.

Standing and stretching, I don't have to question where my feet are taking me. I know exactly where I want to be. With Avery.

Marching down to her office has my heart beating fast already. It never fails. Avery excites me. Everything about her. Just being in her presence is thrilling, exciting, and relaxing in varying degrees.

But when I turn the corner and see her door closed, my shoulders fall.

Stepping closer shows a slew of papers covering her door. Tension reblooms. My shoulders and back tense. I'm ready for a fight because I know whatever I find there is going to ruin my happy plans for lunch.

Taking a deep breath, I breach that point of no return. The words scrawled across Avery's door send pure, hot rage through me.

Office whore. Slut. Cum dumpster. Slam pig. After hours ho.

There are more, but my vision goes red. I'm moving before I can think about it, tearing down every scrap of paper. I barely have the wherewithal not to tear it all to shreds.

What happens with them is more important than that.

I do my best to rein in the manic energy coursing through me as I burst into Ezra's office, who looks up, ready to tell me off until he gets a good look at me and what's in my hand.

"What's that?" He points. Concern narrows his eyes.

I spread the papers out, hastily uncrumpling them. He reads, and the anger boiling inside me is mirrored on his face. "Plastered all over Avery's office door."

Ezra stands very slowly, hands planted on the edge of his desk. "Who did this?"

"I don't know. I'll hit up IT to access the cameras. This cannot stand." I've never been a particularly violent man, but the urge to put my fist through something is overwhelming.

"Has Avery seen it?"

That sends a cold wash over me, deepening my initial anger into something much more dangerous. "I don't think so."

Ezra meets my gaze, and I'm glad I'm not alone with my reactions. "Good. Let's keep it that way."

I nod, gathering the papers again with a little less rough handling, and ease my way out of his office.

My purpose hasn't dulled, but I need to put on the appropriate air in this office.

I don't want to tip anyone off, don't want the gossip to get ahead of me before I

figure out who has the gall to attack Avery this way.

It takes minutes to make my way down to the IT office. It's a small crew, three employees running the whole shebang. They're housed right beside our customer service people and HR—or Pam, as it were.

I should stop in with her as well. After we search for who's vandalizing office doors.

Jared nods at me, so I go to him, the papers still bunched in my fist.

“What's up, man? We don't usually see you down here.” He glances at the papers, brows rising in curiosity.

“I need you to access the cameras upstairs. The footage from this morning. Please.” I hate that I only just thought to tack that please onto the end. I've always prided myself in being cordial. Polite. To the point of flirting.

I sigh, but he's already typing and clicking on his computer. Setting the papers on the empty spot near his desk, the top unfurls, and his glance makes him jerk. His focus homes in, and I'm grateful.

After a minute, he's frowning and clicking more frantically. He waves Jeremy over.

“What's going on?” I lean in to see the screen. A few windows are up, the video feeds around the office part of the building.

They bend over the keyboard together, each trying something.

I work to hold my patience, running a hand through my hair as I wait.

Jeremy shakes his head. “It's not there.”

My hand hits the papers a bit harder than I mean to. “What’s not there?”

Jared grimaces at me. “The footage of the upstairs hallways is gone. For an entire hour.”

Of course, it is.

“Just for those two hallways?” I ask. How could someone without access to the cameras or computers make the recording stop? Unless they have someone else doing it for them.

I examine the three IT people. None of them are fidgety or squirming. No one is acting out of the ordinary.

“Yeah. Just the upstairs hallways.”

“What about the stairs or elevator cameras for that time?” Jeremey suggests.

Jared points at him and goes back to clicking around on his computer. It takes another five minutes for him to wave me closer to look.

Right when the cameras go out on the second floor, Laurel enters the stairwell with a file folder under her arm. She’s got a little black remote in her hand before she steps out to the upstairs offices. Twenty minutes later, she’s in the elevator—no remote or folder on her.

It could be a coincidence. She could have been dropping something off... but to whom? Laurel works directly under Wyatt. She doesn’t need to seek out Ezra or myself for anything...

My intuition says she’s the culprit. Given the things she’s said to Avery to create

trouble, and the accusation made against Avery, too, who else had anything to gain from getting her out of the way?

Anger flares again, and Jared flinches away from my gaze. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. “Anyone else on those recordings during that time?”

“No, sir.”

“Good work.” I grab the papers again. “Can you send those clips to my email?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you, Jared.” I nod to the other IT guys and march out of the office and back to Ezra, who waves me in the moment he sees me. Closing the door behind me, I approach slowly and take a deep breath. “Laurel. I’m pretty sure it’s Laurel.”

Ezra’s features turn stony, like the things he’s noticed about her behavior are clicking into place, too. “Pretty sure?”

“No direct proof, but enough that she’s the only logical conclusion.

And there’s the thing with Kennedy. They went to school together.

It can’t be a coincidence that she’s the one who came to us with an anonymous accusation of espionage.

” If only we could prove that, it would make the rest of this process so much easier.

I come around to his computer. Ezra simply leans back as I pull up my email. Jared was quick. Both clips are waiting in my inbox. I play them for Ezra, and I swear that I can hear him growling by the end of it.

He stands, smoothing out his shirt before pulling his jacket on. “Let’s go down to the lab. We need to talk with Wyatt before we proceed.”

I nod and follow him out the door. We ride down in the elevator, and the calm in Ezra’s movements is a lot scarier than I imagined, but I’ve also never seen Ezra mad before. The quiet stillness radiates danger. I hope I don’t have to hold him back, especially since I’m not inclined to.

Downstairs, we make a straight line to the lab, which is empty, but Wyatt’s office door is open.

For all his failings in reading people, Wyatt stands when Ezra steps in. I close the door behind us.

“What happened? Is Avery okay?” The small tremor in his voice gives my heart a squeeze. We’re all under her spell, aren’t we? Smitten. Addicted. Completely devastated by her. In love.

“She’s fine.” Ezra waves me forward, reaching for the papers still in my hand. “Pull up the email.”

I hand the evidence over and pull up the video for Wyatt, too. He isn’t able to hide his anger when he looks through what Laurel wrote about Avery. What she plastered on Avery’s office door.

Wyatt’s red in the face, eyes glinting with murder. “How dare she?”

He reaches down, clicking his mouse and pressing a couple of buttons. Then two images of Laurel pop out of his printer. He gathers it all up and marches toward the door, flinging it wide open so that it bangs loudly.

Laurel scampers in with her clipboard clutched to her chest. Those blue eyes are wide as she takes in the three of us and Wyatt's obvious sour mood. "Something I can help you three with?"

Her movements are slow as she approaches, taking in the papers Wyatt is gripping.

"Yes." Wyatt slaps down the papers scrawled with slanderous words on the lab table between them.

Her eyes rove over them, but there's no recognition on her face—just a blank stare. "What are those?"

"I found those plastered all over Avery's office door." I'm looking for anything to give her away.

She looks again, as if she didn't already know what they all said. "I can't say I'm surprised."

The sad tone of her voice has the slightest tremor to it. One of victory? Of self-satisfaction?

"Do you know who did it?" Ezra frowns. He's looking for the same clues, gently pushing for her to admit it, giving her the chance.

"No, of course not. Why would I?" Laurel's hand flutters to her chest in mock offense. I've seen her offended before, and this is not it.

Wyatt slaps down the two pictures of her from surveillance, and he leans forward, catching her gaze. Finally, the boundaries around her facade crack before she glances at the pictures.

“It was you,” Wyatt says coldly.

She points at the damning pictures of herself. “That’s not proof.”

“You don’t go upstairs. You don’t have anyone to report to up there. You report to me .” Anger leaks into his voice now, and she steps back as if she’s trying to protect herself.

Laurel remains stony and composed. She’s too fucking good at this.

Wyatt shakes his head. “You’re fired. Get out of my lab.”

Another step back has her shaking her head as if she’s been slapped. Then, she regains those two steps, slapping her clipboard down over the papers. “You can’t. You don’t have cause.”

“I can . And I did .”

Ezra’s on his phone, talking low enough that I can’t hear. When he hangs up, he tells Laurel calmly, “We’ll have your things packed up and sent to you. Please remove your ID badge and vacate the premises.”

Her eyes cut to him, then to me, like I’m going to save her from this. Not a chance. But she doesn’t move.

Two men step into the lab, and she finally moves. Security is here to escort her out.

With a huff, she takes off her badge and stomps out ahead of them before they can lay hands on her.

Avery

The lab is quiet when I show up to work. Wyatt isn't in his office, but I find him in the bigger storage room. I never see him in there. He's got Laurel's clipboard in hand and a pencil to make marks with.

Frowning, I approach and lay my hand on his arm. The dour expression on his face transforms, grows a bit easier when he sees me.

"Hey. What are you doing? Isn't that Laurel's job?" I peer around for her again. "Did she call in sick?"

She doesn't seem like the type.

"No." Something twists in his face before he goes a bit more blank than I'm used to seeing. By now, he's usually touching me, leaning in for a kiss or something.

"What happened?" My hand falls away, back to my side.

"I fired her." A rough edge enters his voice.

"What? Why?"

He relied on her for so much in this place. Why would he fire her? I mean, she's a piece of work, but she was good at her job. Good at handling him as a boss. Even if she obviously wanted more from him.

“She vandalized company property.” Those big hands clutch the clipboard a little harder, like he’s ready to snap it in half.

I shake my head in confusion. “That doesn’t sound like her.”

He blinks at me and softens his tone. “I’m not sure how much I’m legally allowed to tell you.”

Ah, that makes more sense. His usual struggle with most kinds of human interactions is present, and our personal relationship is at war with our professional one, so I don’t push it.

“Okay. I’m going to go check in with Ezra.”

Wyatt nods, falters, and then reaches out for me before I take two steps away. I go to him easily, giving him a soft, sweet kiss before I retreat. On my way upstairs, I try to puzzle out what Laurel would have vandalized and why she would jeopardize her job for something so trivial.

Not that I’m not relieved to have her gone. She made my time in the lab less pleasant, although I’ve gotten used to ignoring the daggers she shot at me any time I was near.

When I peek into Ezra’s office, he’s not there, so I step down two doors to Ryder’s. He’s on the phone, wiping a hand down his face. Seeing me has him gesturing me inside.

I close the door behind me and step forward slowly. He stands, attention focused on me as I come around his desk and within reach.

“I need confirmation,” he says into the receiver as he tucks a lock of hair behind my ear.

I smile up at him, placing my hand on his chest.

“No, I’ll wait.” Ryder leans down to kiss me. It’s soft, chaste, but it drives hot need through my center. He rubs the back of my neck, staring into me before his attention is split again. “Yes. Monday at the latest.”

A smile cracks across my face at how good he is at multitasking. I press myself into him to test that balance, kissing along his neck, throat, jaw. He sucks in a slow, staggering breath, fingers tightening in my hair.

It’s another long minute, and I let my hands roam his sides and back.

He grows hard against my belly, barely restrained by his slacks.

Ryder’s chest expands under my mouth as I tease the skin bared by the extra undone button.

If he were a woman, it would be scandalous, but on him, it merely makes him look roguish.

Which is hot.

My tongue dips out to the little indent between his pecs, and he barely restrains a groan.

Another deep breath, and the receiver turns toward his mouth. “Thank you, Susan. You’re a life saver.”

The phone dropping back into its cradle frees Ryder’s hands and attention. He grabs me by both ass cheeks, turns, and lifts me to the edge of his desk. Stepping between my knees, he presses us more fully together so I can feel just how much I’ve turned

him on.

His mouth descends on mine, kissing me soundly and making me wish we didn't have so many clothes on.

I wrap my legs around his waist, and he rolls us together.

He cups my face in both hands, laying the most earth-shattering kiss on me before he retreats. "It's not my morning. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

Ryder sounds like he's drunk off a few kisses. I can only grin up at him.

Apparently, he doesn't need an answer because his mouth is back on mine and then traveling down my throat, biting at that sensitive spot that curves into my shoulder. His hands slide and squeeze every curve and valley of my body.

The questions I came up here for are slowly fading to the back of my mind as Ryder palms my small breast and pinches my nipple until it hardens. It zaps pleasure down to my core and gathers moisture between my thighs.

It's so hard to think straight when his hands are all over me.

Breaths coming in soft waves, his mouth is hot at my ear. "Did you lock the door?"

"No."

He growls at me, tipping my hips to thrust his hard-on against me through our layers of clothes. I'm not in a skirt today, though, so there's no easy way for us to fit together.

Maybe that's a good thing since I still have questions lingering, prodding at my

enjoyment, dampening my arousal.

“Ryder...”

Another kiss finally shatters my thoughts. Fuck it. My questions about Laurel can wait. There’s no reason I should let that woman ruin this moment. I tug him closer, scraping my nails down his back through his dress shirt. He rewards me with a low groan.

When Ryder pulls at my belt loops, he curses. “Damn this jumpsuit.”

I laugh. “There are other ways to play that don’t need a locked door.”

Those bronze eyes blaze at me. I plant a palm against his chest and push him back a step so that I can slide off his desk. Slowly, I guide him to his chair, and he sits for me.

When I sink between his knees, his eyes widen and his nostrils flare. I swear his cock twitches against his fly, ready to be freed and played with. Dropping his zipper slowly has his chest expanding in anticipation, and I grin as he pops free.

Ryder’s fingers weave through my hair as I wrap my hand around his length and stroke him. Tipping him forward, I press my tongue flat against the underside of his head, cupping and licking him in slow, firm movements until his grip in my locks tightens.

I smile before I take him in my mouth.

“Oh, fuck.” That low, sultry tone eggs me on, so I suckle on him, adding pressure until another string of curses falls from his mouth. He sinks in the chair, knees spreading wider as he sprawls for me.

I trace the ridges of his cock as I bob slowly, enjoying the way his eyes shine as he watches me and the soft, panting noises he makes the more I work him.

A knock at his door jolts him upright, but I only suck him deeper.

Ryder's mouth falls open for a breath before he snaps it shut and clears his throat.
“Yeah?”

With his voice a little garbled with pleasure, relief flashes across his features. After a few tense seconds, Ezra asks, “Have you seen Avery?”

Ryder, the traitor, looks down into my eyes.

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Ryder

I look down at Avery, my cock buried deep in her mouth. She sucks. Hard. And swallows me down further.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. My hand locks into her hair, desperately wanting to recline and fuck her face.

When I peer back up at Ezra, he's smirking. With a knowing nod, he starts to close the door. "Come find me when you're done. Both of you."

"You got it."

The door closes, and I fall back, dropping into the pleasure of Avery's mouth and how she works me. Slowly, my hips cant up, seeking the end she's promising me.

"Fuck, Avery. I want your puss so badly." Even though it's hard to catch my breath, she's already got me on the brink of coming. "I want to plunge myself into that wet heat and hear you moan for me."

She moans around me, and I'm swallowed into her throat. My hips push harder, and that soft gagging noise as she takes it has my balls drawing up.

How is she so perfect?

Time disappears, and I'm lost in the way she takes me, the tears streaming down her cheeks, how her mouth is spread wide around me, completely lax to take most of my

cock down her throat.

Submerged in the pleasure, my orgasm slams into me out of nowhere, one pump just like the others, and my muscles seize me. My cum pulses out of me, and Avery sucks it down.

Fuck .

I'm still twitching as I glide out of her mouth. After a few strokes, she tucks me back in my pants. My hand falls down the side of her face, tracing her bottom lip with my thumb.

Avery blinks up at me, a mix of sultry and innocent as she draws my zipper up and puts me back to rights.

She stands, leaning over me to plant a chaste kiss on my mouth, but I pull her down against me, chests pressed together, and kiss her deeply.

God, I enjoy the way I can taste myself on her tongue.

I'm so fucking in love with her.

I never thought it would be possible again. But this feeling is so much more than what I ever experienced with Francesca. And we were weeks from getting married when she broke my heart.

"I want to eat you for lunch."

Avery laughs, hazel eyes bright as she runs her hand through my hair, almost grooming me. I want more of this. I want it all the time. I want her. All the time.

“I’m serious. Promise me.” I nibble her bottom lip, enjoying how she wiggles against me.

“How can I turn down that offer?”

She could, but she wants it, too.

I finally let her go so that she can stand, and I follow her, brushing her hair back from her face and admiring her beauty—the plumpness of her lips, the strength and softness in her gaze, the silkiness of her hair, the smoothness of her skin.

It’s more than that, of course, that makes her beautiful. The better I get to know her, the more beautiful she is. A proclamation of my love lingers on the tip of my tongue. It’s too soon to confess it. Maybe.

Avery gives me a small smile and spreads her hands down my chest and stomach. “You look freshly fucked.”

My laughter booms so hard that I rock with it. “I’m not the one who looks fucked, my dear.”

“Mmm. Supremely satisfied, then.”

I lean in to whisper against the shell of her ear. “As you will be soon.”

Her delicate shiver is enticing, but then she pulls back and points a finger at me. “Straighten yourself out, Mr. Ashcroft. We have a meeting.”

I can’t help but grin as I do as I’m told, adjusting myself, brushing my clothes back into place, and combing my hair with my fingers. Presenting myself to her, I ask, “Acceptable, Miss Caruso?”

Avery makes a soft noise of assent and stalks toward the door like a predator.

I chase after her, watching the alluring way her ass sways as she walks. In Ezra's office, Wyatt is already waiting for us, so I close the door.

"What's going on?" she asks, stopping behind the empty chair opposite Ezra. Her hands grip the back, and the tension in the room cranks tighter. This isn't a personal meeting, although it certainly feels like it.

Frowning, I watch Avery re-erecting the walls we've been battering against. This isn't something she needs to do that for.

"We've had a leak. One of our competitors has filed a patent for the project you've been working on." Ezra sits with his hands folded together on his desk. It's almost a pleading gesture.

Avery's shoulders stiffen, the playful glint in her eyes vanishes, and she shuts down completely. She doesn't say anything, staring at Ezra as if waiting for the accusation. She's already been accused once, of course. Falsely. We all know that.

"The board checked your cloud and determined it wasn't you." Voice even, gentle, but the news he breaks is bad. I can see it transform her even further.

Her eyes narrow, and her hands ball into fists. "You did what?"

She's whisper quiet. My heart rockets in my chest.

Shit. This isn't going well. Not at all the way we'd talked about when the news broke and the board did what it always did. Overreact. That was its main function, however, to take big steps to secure the company's future.

Ezra slumps back in his chair like he's been beaten. His jaw clenches as he meets her glare. "Sit, please."

I touch the small of her back to guide her around to sit, but she bats my hand away, putting distance between us. It's like a blow to the chest I wasn't expecting.

"And what? Did you need to check my personal phone, too, just to be sure about me?" She pulls her phone from her pocket, unlocks it, and tosses it onto his desk.

A picture of her son—Ezra's son—smiles up at us from the background.

Avery crosses her arms and waits.

Ezra makes no move to take the phone, maintaining her eye contact without flinching. "I never thought it was you. But I'm only one vote on the board."

Red splotches form across her cheeks, but they don't spread like they do when she's embarrassed or aroused. She's spitting mad, and I'm braced for her to throw something.

Ezra doesn't seem to be.

I chance a glance at Wyatt, who's watching Avery with the same concern growing in my gut.

Avery plants her hands on her hips, brow lifting in accusation. Then, she turns to pin Wyatt and me with her gaze. Calculating. Dissecting. Judging.

"Why did you fire Laurel?"

I shake my head to clear the discombobulation from that sharp turn.

Why would she ask about Laurel? It's been clear this entire time that she and Laurel didn't get along.

None of that is Avery's fault. She's never been anything but polite and professional as far as I've seen, and I really can't imagine that she would behave any other way while at work.

Except for with us.

Numb shock spreads its icy tendrils between my ribs.

"Was that a board decision, too? Or do you only hide behind them when it comes to me?"

Fuck, she sounds so cold. Cut off.

I won't be surprised if ice sprouts across the carpet and up the walls.

Ezra turns and pulls something from a drawer in his desk. The file in his hand is the one we said we wouldn't show her.

He bats her phone away, back toward Avery, as he sets the folder on his desk. And he stares into her when he flips it open to show her the papers Laurel plastered over her office door. They spread, and Avery doesn't offer even a flicker of emotion as she reads them.

But my anger rises, like it did when I found them. When I tore each paper down and crumpled them in my fists. When I wanted to punch something or someone for being such an awful human being.

Avery gives us nothing as a response, and I have to wonder, how many times has she

had something like this happen to her? In how many ways?

Should we have responded differently?

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Avery

The file splay across Ezra's desk, papers calling me the office whore, a slut, and other less than original names spread before me. I'm not surprised. Not with the things Laurel said to my face. Not with the way she glared every time we were in the same room together.

"And does the board know about this, too?"

After a short pause, Ezra says, "No."

I have to give it to him. He's composed like the perfect businessman. Like the in-control boss.

How stupid of me to forget that he's my boss. That his business has to come first. Before me. So very stupid.

Even if I can read the tension in his shoulders, the displeasure in the line of his mouth, the pleading in his eyes for me to not take this personally.

How can I not?

They went through my work computer without saying a word to me. I would have unlocked it and offered them free reign had they asked. But they didn't.

It pisses me off more than anything else.

I can't be their equal in bed and then be less than that when we're at work. I can always find another job.

And the fucking board. One unfounded accusation and the lockdown of my movements in the lab I can accept, but I refuse to be their scapegoat for it again. I didn't do anything wrong.

The three men in this room should trust me, believe in me.

Maybe once trust is broken, it can never be repaired. Not completely.

"How convenient. Don't worry, then. I'll save you the trouble and clear my desk out before lunch. It's not like you need me now, anyway." I snatch up my phone from the edge of his desk and stomp toward the door before I throw it.

"Avery," Wyatt calls. "Wait."

It slices through me, but I can't stop. Because if I stop, I'm going to break down in tears. Instead, I wrap that anger around myself more tightly and slam Ezra's door behind me on the way out.

It doesn't take me more than a few minutes to collect my things. I'd never truly unpacked. Maybe that should have been a sign.

I don't bother wiping anything from the computer. There's no point. They've been through it all already.

Slinging my bag over my shoulder, I head for the stairs. Luckily, I don't have to pass Ezra's office again on my way out.

Once I'm behind the wheel of my car, I have to take a second to catch my breath.

Tears blur my vision, and I blink them away, refusing to let myself succumb to any modicum of sadness. Not when I have a shit-ton of righteous anger to cling to.

I'm halfway to my father's house by the time I'm able to breathe without gasping and heaving. Until I'm finally able to unclench my jaw. Until defeat slumps my shoulders.

How could I think this would turn out any other way than this?

And as mad as I am, as much as I might have punched or slapped one of them for coming after me, I'm more disappointed that none of them did.

That says it all. Doesn't it?

Climbing to my father's porch, I knock before going in. Charlie is sprawled across the couch playing a video game, and Dad is in his favorite place—the kitchen. The moment he sees me, he's heading my way.

It takes less than a minute for his big arms to surround me. I sag against him.

“Let me make you something, bambina . And we talk.”

I nod into his chest, and he rocks me for another minute before he guides me to a stool at his bar counter. I used to sit here as a kid to watch him bake, to taste and refine his recipes with him. It was our spot, will always be our spot.

It puts a small smile on my face to know that I'll always have this with my dad.

He pulls free a few cannoli shells from his oven, already fried to a golden perfection. The ingredients for a filling materialize in batches—ricotta and mascarpone cheese, an orange and a lemon, sugar and a zester, vanilla and mini dark chocolate chips.

Watching him scoop, pour, zest and mix has my mouth watering. He fills his piping bag and raises his brow at me.

I sigh. “Don’t I get to taste it before I get the inquiring Dad face?”

He fills a shell, hands it over, and waves for me to go ahead and take my first bite. I do. I’m not shameless enough to turn down the offering. It’s sweet and creamy, the flavors amplified in a way I’m not used to, but all the more tasty.

I eat a lot of sweets, but I’ve always been a savory girl. I hope my palate isn’t still having strange side effects from the poisoning. It really wasn’t so long ago, even though it feels like it.

When I open my eyes, Dad’s face is more indulgent. “Tell me what happened.”

I nod and slowly unravel the story for him. He knows most of the important parts about Ezra, Wyatt, and Ryder. That we’re mixing business with pleasure. That Ezra is Charlie’s dad, and what happened way back then. About my trust issues.

But I didn’t ever tell him about Laurel or that I’d been accused of business espionage, leaking confidential formulas to competitors. That my movements in the lab were restricted. How that hadn’t kept me safe enough to not get poisoned.

Now, I have today to add to it all. The second accusation hurt worse than the first. Especially after I almost died and still came back to work.

“Honestly, if I were going to steal and sell the formula, I never would have confirmed which one it was for Wyatt. I would have kept my mouth shut and gone on my way.”

Dad laughs and fills the last two cannoli shells, putting all but one in the fridge to set up completely. “You were always too smart and assertive for your own good. Too

honest.”

I make a noncommittal noise. “I’m the most obvious suspect. I’d be stupid to sell it. But maybe they think I’m stupid.”

“Avery.” The way Dad’s voice lowers has me putting up my defenses. I know this is going to be a hard blow. “You know better. There’s no way those three think you’re stupid.”

“They think I’m stupid enough to let them hide behind their board votes. I didn’t tell you the best part.” My cackle is a bit too loud, and Charlie peers over the couch at me. I blow him a kiss, and he turns back to the TV.

“That woman, Laurel, vandalized my office door. They fired her pretty much on the spot and didn’t involve the board.”

“Vandalized how?” Dad’s eyes are dark with violence.

I wave my hand away. “Juvenile shit. It’s fine, really. Nothing worse than what she said to my face. That’s not the point.”

“What is your point?” He chews slowly on another bite of cannoli.

“Why didn’t they tell me any of this when it happened?

Why did they vote with the board without even giving me a chance to defend myself?

Why didn’t they defend me? Why didn’t I hear about the leak when it happened instead of this morning when I got to work?

That’s my project, too.” Tears burn in the back of my eyes, and I blink the wetness

away with a few quick moves.

I hate it when people keep things from me. Yes, I'm a hypocrite. But this is a lot. It's more recent. And I didn't wait that long to tell Ezra.

And that was mostly due to shock, fear, and a lack of trust.

Here we are again.

Dad smiles at me sadly. "Should you not give them the benefit of the doubt?"

"Why? They didn't give it to me."

I don't understand why. That's what makes it hurt so much. Why I stormed out of there like I did. Why it broke my heart when they let me.

"Is that really what upsets you?" He takes my hands and makes me look him in the eyes, like he's pleading with me to see something as plain as day.

"I've tried so hard to trust them. But how can I when they do this to me?"

"Bambina ." He pats my hand and shakes his head. "Do you love them?"

"I..." Do I? Maybe? I don't know. Probably.

"Because it sounds like you're afraid. That makes you lash out."

My mouth drops open. Dad gives me another meaningful look before he goes about preparing lunch.

Avery

I 'm still stewing in my dad's comments as he puts together lunch, boiling a fresh pot of water, and the homemade noodles he has sitting under a towel go in. We sit in silence as they cook.

Do I love them? Maybe that's an easier question than I'm letting it be. Am I afraid? Yes. I've been afraid this entire time. Afraid of feeling something similar to that fairytale week in Cancún with Ezra—something more and real—and having it ripped away from me again.

Dad drains the noodles and sets three plates of artfully twisted spaghetti topped with his homemade sauce, sausage, and a meatball the size of my fist. A slow grate of Romano cheese and a sprig of basil complete the meal.

I miss this when I'm not here. It's like eating at a restaurant, and even though his meals are simple, they're always beautiful. Tasty. Fulfilling.

I help him set the table as Charlie washes up, and we sit to eat. The meatball is dense but soft and covered in a rich tomato, garlic, and parsley sauce. The sharp cheese adds the perfect accent. But as I chew, something sours in my mouth.

It's not the ingredients, though.

This confirms that something's wrong, but the more I chew through the odd flavor lingering on the back of my tongue, the more suspicious I become of the culprit.

The last time my tastebuds were off like this was ten years ago... shortly after my trip with Sophia for Spring Break. About a month after, to be more specific.

Oh, God.

Pressing a hand to my stomach as it churns, I excuse myself to the bathroom, snagging my bag on the way. Once I'm locked inside, I bend to the nausea and turn on the taps, running my wrists under cold water until the sickness passes.

I splash cold water over my face before I fish out the pregnancy test I bought last weekend. The moment I woke up with heartburn three days in a row, I'd given in and gotten one.

And now, I'm done fighting the inevitable question looming before me. It's time to find out the truth.

I pee on the stick and set a timer on my phone as I wait.

Then, I stare at it as it counts down. I can't bring myself to do anything else.

Except worry over the possibilities. Whose it might be. How we will handle it. If we will handle it together, or if I'll be on my own again.

What both of those options look like.

It's so many unknowns, all at once. I'm overloaded and ready to crawl out of my skin by the time my phone beeps. I don't hesitate. I've been antsy for this moment.

Turning the pregnancy test over, the clearly printed Pregnant appears on the small screen. Well, there's no guessing how many blue lines there are.

My stomach roils again, but this time, I puke up everything my father's fed me.

The doorbell rings as I'm washing my mouth out. It can't be for me. None of them know where my father lives. Who else would come looking for me?

I swish more water through my mouth, spitting out traces of acid.

"Avery?" Dad calls.

Trepidation creeps in, but I wipe my mouth on a towel and come back through the kitchen to the front door. I'm braced for one or all of the men, but when I spot the small, middle-aged Asian woman on the stoop, I know exactly who she is.

She's holding a bag full of containers. They jiggle when she points at me past my father's shoulder. "Time for us to speak."

This must be Ezra's mom, Mai.

"Yes. Why don't you come in?" I gesture her inside and my dad out the door. We gather toward the kitchen when Ezra's mom stops in her tracks.

Charlie looks up from his plate, his broken arm propped on the table in its cast.

She gasps, hand going to her chest as she mutters something I can't understand. I step up beside her, winking at Charlie, who smirks. "Would you like to meet your grandson?"

Mai marches over to the table and puts her bag down in the empty space. Pulling things out, she looks at him and shakes her head. "You look just like my Ezra at that age. Nine?"

Charlie perks up. “I’ll be ten soon.”

I peer at my dad, who’s silently taking in this exchange. He reaches a hand out to me, and I take it, letting him reel me into the kitchen to give them some space. We’re being ignored, anyway.

I’m handed another cannoli. Like my dad knows. He’s too observant. I crunch into it as Charlie tastes a little of everything he’s offered. Mai tells him about everything she brought while I sit here, wondering what the fuck?

How did she find us, exactly?

When they’re through, she pets his hair. “Will leave for you.”

“Cool. Thanks, Bà .” And he’s up from his seat. “I’m going to finish my tournament on my iPad while you and Mom talk.”

I laugh. Talk about observant. He’s too much my boy sometimes.

When Mai turns to me, there’s a glimmer in her eyes, and her hand is back against her chest.

“Would you like a cannoli and a cup of coffee?” Dad offers. He’s much better at the niceties than I am, but it’s been a day, so I’m not feeling too nice.

Mai nods and pins me with her sharp gaze. “Why do you keep me and my son from my grandbaby?”

I blink at her, understanding a bit more how Ezra isn’t put off by my abrupt inquiries. “I didn’t know how to find him?—”

“Yet you still wait after finding him again. Very disrespectful.”

I shake my head, folding my arms over my stomach. “Your son and I have trust issues.”

“Psh. Does not matter when you have a child.” She bats my answer away like it's a fly.

Anger simmers as I narrow my eyes at her, and Mai narrows hers back.

“It matters more when there’s a child involved.”

The pang of new life low in my belly makes the cannoli creep back up. I wasn’t being careful enough. Again. I should know better by now.

All of this stress is not helping.

“No. He is not dangerous to Charlie. Personal feelings are for you and him. Not Charlie.” She waves her hand. “You listen. Yes?”

“Sure.” Not like I seem to have a choice in the matter.

“You are the girl he mooned over in college. Was never the same after. No girl was good enough. No girl was you. And now, he has you again, you throw his heart back in his face. Again. What does this teach Charlie? To run from his problems? To remain a child and not grow up? To take easy way? Is that how you raise him? Let me tell you how I raise my Ezra.”

I take the hot chocolate my father offers me, and he gestures for us to sit back at the kitchen table where our lunch has been abandoned. And she tells us about the things he’s done to take care of her.

The odd jobs as a teen, getting a scholarship to go to college with his hockey skills, working on the weekends while he was away to send cash back to her, getting injured and earning his degree.

Opening the candy business based on her favorite treats back home.

The ones she missed so much but couldn't afford.

Ezra moved her out of their small apartment and in with him as he started to build. She quit one of her two jobs, then the other. He offered her her own house, but she stays and cleans and cooks for him because he is such a good son.

He never brought home girls. Didn't go out to party. Mai gives us countless examples of Ezra going out of his way to appreciate her.

I remember how he did that when we first met. How he's been doing it since we stumbled upon each other again. So why did he blunder this one so badly?

And then to sic his mother on me so unexpectedly?

Dad pats my hand and tips my cocoa up for me to finish it. I comply.

I've been sufficiently brow beaten.

"How did you find me here?"

Mai holds her hand up, then scrolls through her phone to show me a few text exchanges between her and Ezra.

She's run off, and I can't find her.

She's not at home, and she's not answering her phone.

This can't happen again. I'll never recover.

She won't believe me, but I'm in love with her.

I suck in too big of a breath and have a hard time letting go of it. My panic must be in my face because she reaches out to pat my hand like Dad usually does.

"I work for long time in restaurant. The cook knew Dominick Caruso enough to point me here when I asked. Only took two cases of Vang Dalat to get address."

I laugh disbelievingly.

Mai smiles at me for the first time, and it lights her up most beautifully. "Now you know. You believe me. And you call me M?."

Ezra

I slump back in my chair behind my desk, wiping a hand down my face from the mere exhaustion of the day. After the late-night phone calls and early morning research, I knew today wasn't going to end any better than it started.

If only the bright spot of the morning—seeing Avery—had gone better. If only it had gone to plan. But I didn't get out what I wanted to say to her, to let her know that we were searching in other places for the corporate spy in our midst.

I didn't handle the situation well. Maybe I waited too long to tell her what was going on. Once again, I thought I was doing the right thing by keeping her out of it, by letting her sleep through the night and share with her in the morning.

To allow the board to keep a barrier between me and my biases. I failed there.

And I don't give two shits that I'm biased about Avery.

There's no way she would sabotage me and my company. No way she would give up on a project. No way she would hurt me, or Ryder, or Wyatt.

Except when she stormed out of here, it tore into us all a little deeper than we thought possible.

In order to deal—to divert my thoughts—I dove into the mystery.

It took all damn day, but our IT team, as small as it is, is made up of people I trust

from college. People who got caught doing things they shouldn't be doing and struggled to find jobs from it. They uncovered our perpetrator—Laurel Ricci.

She tried to cover her tracks, but Jeremey is better. He caught her trail and documented every transaction and indiscretion to hand over to the police. They're on their way to arrest her as we speak. I'll get a phone call when it's all said and done.

I wish I felt triumphant.

Not only did we catch her, but she didn't get the entire formula out. It's an older version. One from right when Avery started with us.

The recipe is relatively safe.

Now, if only my heart were. Because the formula leak isn't the only leak we had.

A puff piece came out roaring late this morning about Avery's relationship with Wyatt, Ryder, and me, including suggestive pictures of the four of us.

Laurel's been busy since we fired her. Been busy for a while, given some of the pictures are from before Avery was poisoned.

IT plans to look into my suspicions that Laurel is at fault for that, too. In the morning. I let them go home early for all of their hard work.

Now, I'm in a full-blown sulk. This feels worse than when I woke up to find her gone.

I won't let it take as long to find her again. Not over this.

But I hate how she left. I hate how I can't find her. I drove to her townhouse, but it

was empty. Her car wasn't parked in her spot.

Fuck, she's never going to come back. Being here without her doesn't feel right.

My phone dings, and I flip it over in the vain hope that Avery's texted me back.

It's my mom.

I break her open. You come now.

My heart kicks up, pulsing blood through me at a roar.

A small kernel of hope blooms in my chest. Leave it to my mother to cut through that Teflon armor Avery hides behind.

Dominick Caruso's address pops up in our chat.

I stare at my screen for a long minute before I'm on my feet, grabbing my coat and charging to Ryder's office. He peers up from his desk, looking as haggard as I feel.

"M? found her. Come on."

He's shoving his arms through his coat before I finish my sentence, and we take the stairs to grab Wyatt. I can't imagine how hard it's going to be, driving across town at this time of the day.

Just remember to breathe, dumbass .

The moment Wyatt sees us, he's heading our way. "You found her."

I laugh. "You really home in on those facial cues when it comes to Avery."

Wyatt glares at me. “Wishful thinking, but yes, your body language is triumphant. I’ve seen it before.”

Ryder’s grinning, too. Wyatt’s cheeks redden, but he offers a small smile at the corner of his mouth.

Everything’s locked up, and we’re in my car before the nerves trickle sweat across the back of my neck.

Please don’t shut us out.

The thought runs laps in my head, and every stop light has my foot shaking the car.

Her dad’s house is a one-story Colonial with pretty blue shutters and a carefully landscaped lawn. But when I pull into his driveway, I see that some of the greenery is edible—berry bushes and herb clusters. It makes me laugh, hard, dissipating some of the tension in my shoulders and back.

On the porch, I pick a leftover blackberry and hold it up to the guys, ready to lose it again. I pop it in my mouth before the front door opens to reveal Avery.

Her skin is paler, eyes red, and her frown twists that joy from a moment ago back in itself, forming a sharp knife between my ribs. Avery wraps her arms around herself as she looks us over.

“It was Laurel,” I say, cutting through the awkward silence. “She tried to scrub her computer, but IT caught her. She didn’t get the full formula, either.”

Avery nods. “Good.”

I want to reach out and touch her, gather her in my arms, and it hurts to stand here not

doing it. Apparently, I'm not the only one to think so. Wyatt nabs her pinky, pulling an arm free from her defensive posture and holding onto it.

He clears his throat, but his voice remains husky. "I'm not sure what we did wrong, and I need you to tell me so that I don't do it again."

Her eyes round and grow glossy.

"I don't ever want you to walk away from me like that again." He works her palm between his hands, rubbing it as if not touching her will be the end of him.

God, I know that feeling.

"When did you learn about the leak?" Her voice is soft, not accusatory.

"This morning. Around one."

"Why didn't anyone tell me?" She squeezes his hand. "It was my project, too."

I swallow back the guilt of her words, confirming what I'd already guessed. We left her out. Dismissed her contribution. Made her feel like she wasn't integral to this entire thing.

That she wasn't important to us beyond our personal feelings for her.

"But we did tell you..." Wyatt starts, but Ryder pats him on the shoulder.

"No. We ambushed her at the office."

Avery nods, eyes bright again.

“There’s something else,” I say, earning a renewed glare. I’ll take it, as long as I’m nearby enough to see it. “Our relationship broke on the news. With pictures—nothing scandalous, but enough to support the story.”

“Let me guess, one that spins me as a woman climbing the corporate ladder with my vagina?”

Ryder snorts and dissolves into laughter, waving his hand. “Yes. That’s pretty much it exactly. But we’re no better, mindless men who can only think with our dicks.”

Finally, a small crack in Avery’s face. She’s actively frowning to keep the smile off her face. Oh, how many times I’ve seen that exact look on her. “If you’re smart, you’ll use that to spin marketing on the new formula. Good for your heart and an aphrodisiac to boot.”

We all let out a little laugh, relief unspooling slowly through us.

“We didn’t mean to ambush you. It was my fault. I thought I’d let you sleep in while we figured it out. I was wrong.” It had been entirely my idea. Besides, she’s very used to being upset with me.

Her shoulders slump, and she shakes her head. “Stop trying to play the hero and just tell me things.”

I nod and step forward, taking her by the shoulders and dragging her into my embrace. She doesn’t fight me, and I close my eyes as she hugs me back.

“Forgive me. Us.” I pull her outside with me.

Ryder and Wyatt are right there, surrounding her, too.

“You three are utter idiots, but yes, you’re forgiven.”

Thank God. I can’t keep it in anymore. I whisper in her ear, “Good, because I’m in love with you. Don’t ever run away from me again.”

Her grip tightens around my waist, and I kiss the side of her head, just happy to drink in the feel of her, the scent of her.

“If we’re going to profess things, I’m in love with you, too.” Ryder draws his hand through Avery’s hair.

She retreats from my chest to look up at me, then Ryder. He plants a kiss on her forehead.

I catch movement inside the house—my mom grabbing Dominick’s hand to quit spying on us. Although wherever they retreat, I’m sure M? will still be able to hear us.

Those two will make the kind of team that scares me a little.

Avery turns to Wyatt. “Nothing from you?”

My friend looks so intense and uncomfortable. “I just say it? It seems too simple for how big the feeling is.”

Her laughter lights me up, and I’m not the only one.

“God, this isn’t at all what I imagined.”

“Imagined for what?”

“For how the day was going to turn out. For my life?” She sucks in a hard breath, and her hand drops to her stomach.

I watch the move with a sprinkling of alarm, and a whole lot more excitement if that means what I think that means.

“I love you all, too. But...” The pause kills me. “What does this all mean?”

“It means we want to be a family.” Ryder traces the curve of her elbow as she presses her hand lower.

Well, it’s now or never. Will she take all three of us? Totally?

Her eyes flutter closed, and she gives another small shake of her head. “Good. Because I’m pregnant.”

Avery

I did it. I told them. Fuck, this is going to be the end of everything, isn't it?

Granted, yes, they just told me they loved me, but a baby makes this a completely different situation. Right? Especially since there's no way to know, right now, which one of them is the father.

At least I can say that it's one of them. I brace myself for their reaction.

When I open my eyes, I watch as the shockwave rolls through the three of them. Disbelief followed by... happiness? Awe?

No. They can't actually be happy about this.

Ryder reaches for me first, pulling me into a firm, chaste kiss and placing his hand over mine, low on my belly where the cluster of cells that will grow into a baby is still a speck. "Really?"

I nod, biting back my smile. "Yes. Really."

His grin fills my heart up. He brushes my hair back, sharing his joy with me before he turns me to Wyatt.

Those pale eyes are so bright and intense. He cups my face in both hands and lays the sweetest kiss on me. His forehead meets mine, and the breadth of his grin blows away the debris around my heart.

I've been shattered and rebuilt in a matter of seconds.

Ryder is still at my back, arm around my middle, before Ezra joins us.

He takes my hand, lifting it to his mouth and meeting my gaze.

Ryder kisses the side of my neck, and I'm surrounded on all sides, smothered in kisses, caresses, and the crushing force of their bodies. It's hard to know whose hands are whose, which one of them kisses my hair and cheek.

I couldn't be happier, but the pessimist in the back of my brain won't shut up until I ask. "Are you guys really happy about this?"

All three of them give me a resounding, "Yes," in unison.

I laugh, and they laugh with me. We huddle together for another blissful moment before I hear Mai's voice cutting through us, although I can't understand what she's saying.

Ezra buries his face in the side of my neck and murmurs, "How she heard you, I will never understand, but I swear that woman has bat sonar."

"You don't disrespect your mother." Mai slaps and shoos the three of them away from me, and I'm crushed in her grip as soon as there's enough space for her.

Her arms are tight around me as she rocks me back and forth in a hug.

"New baby is greatest luck. You will move in with us. My son take care of you."

"Don't forget that it might not be mine, M? ," Ezra says from behind me, and Mai swats her hand through the air.

“If she is yours, and baby is hers, baby is yours. Simple as that. We spoil.” She pulls back to look me up and down before patting my cheek softly.

“I think we’re going to need a bigger house.” Ezra’s voice is laced with amusement. How often does his mother take over for him like this? I imagine far more often than he cares for. But he also seems used to it.

Her thumb strokes my cheekbone, and she gives me another one of those brilliant smiles.

It makes me love her a little, even if I’m a little terrified of her, too.

“We must feed you. You have birthing hips, but you need more padding.”

“ Mom .” Ezra blanches with horror, but my head falls back with my laughter.

“You can feed me, M? . I lean a little sweeter during the first trimester.” I squeeze the hand she’s holding. It’s easy to see that her words come from a place of love. If not for me—yet—then for the baby. And that’s all I can ask for.

Besides, my Italian family will react much the same. And they did when I was pregnant with Charlie. The constant baked goods had Dad in his happy place and me fighting morning sickness behind a mountain of pastries.

Mai nods and tuts at the boys, waving them all inside. Ryder slips an arm around my waist and thankfully escorts me to the oversized couch. He lowers us both to a cushion and keeps my side pressed against him.

His mouth teases my ear. “I can’t seem to let go of you now. Is that normal?”

I purse my mouth and side-eye him. “I don’t really know. I haven’t done this with

other people before.”

Dad clears his throat behind me, his hands on his hips as he raises a brow at me.

“I had you. I know. That’s not what I meant.”

His eyes narrow, but he bites back his own smile. It crinkles the corners of his eyes before he bends to kiss the top of my head. “I knew it.”

“Too observant for your own good, Dad.” I take his hand, and he squeezes mine.

“I’m glad you don’t have to do it alone this time.” He drops another peck into my hair before he pats Ryder’s shoulder and returns to the kitchen where Mai is banging around his cupboards and pulling things from his fridge.

“Dom. Show me where you keep your pans. They are not in the right place.”

The horror that flashes across my dad’s face has me laughing as Wyatt lowers himself on my other side. His long fingers filter through my hair and graze the side of my neck in such a tender way. His soft side is getting softer.

“How long until we can see it...” Wyatt clears his throat. “Him. Or her?”

“Probably not for another month. I will have to go to the doctor before then.”

Wyatt nods and seems content to be near me, like Ryder.

Ezra props himself on the coffee table across from me, touching my knees. The soft, kneading pressure of his hands lets me relax a little further into Ryder’s side.

“How are you feeling?” His voice is soft and comforting, and emotion clogs my

throat at what my pregnancy with Charlie could have been like if I hadn't run away from Ezra in the middle of the night. If I hadn't expected it to be just a Spring Break fling.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Hormonal."

All three of them laugh a little as I try to get control of myself again. I suppose my overreaction this morning makes much more sense to me now. I've always had such tight reins on my emotions—or as much as my Italian heritage would allow.

"But really, I'm good. A little queasy, but good." I look into his brown eyes and decipher the question lingering there. "I only found out this afternoon. Literally two minutes before your mom showed up."

Ezra's head falls forward, half hiding his grin as he shakes his head. "That woman has uncanny timing."

I peer back at her and my dad in the kitchen. She's wagging a finger at him as if lecturing him about how to properly organize a kitchen. But Dad doesn't seem put out by it. If anything, he's as entertained by her as I am.

"So..." I start. There's so much to figure out, and it feels urgent to get as much done as I can before I'm waddling around and miserable.

Not that the next few weeks won't be miserable.

Morning sickness is a beast. "They can do tests to determine paternity around when they do the first sonogram. In case you guys want to know?—"

Ryder leans closer and hushes me with a soft, "Shh."

Well, I know how he feels. Ezra shakes his head, and I peer up at Wyatt's soft green eyes.

"It won't change anything so long as you don't want it to."

I let out a long sigh and finally relax fully. "Good."

"I do think we'll need a bigger house, though," Ezra says again. "Do you think you'd be up for a little house hunting?"

"You mean before I'm the size of a beached whale and am no longer mobile? I think I can manage. But you guys really?—"

"Stop it." Ryder squeezes my middle. "You're not getting rid of us, so stop trying."

"I'm not?—"

"No. You're giving us every opportunity to turn tail and run, though. Quit." His voice is a sweet, honeyed rumble along the shell of my ear.

My insides quiver with the anticipation I'd felt this morning on the way to work—the one that I can barely contain when I know I'm going to be the center of their attention, wholly and completely.

"About quitting..."

"I want you back in my lab," Wyatt says before I can finish my thought. "Without restraints this time. But then again..."

His eyes grow dark, and I know he's thinking of restraining me in more explicit ways. That sends heat coursing through me, surprisingly batting away the lingering

nausea. Which has me thinking... would morning sex combat morning sickness? It's something we'll certainly have to try.

The tension between the four of us changes. Their thoughts have turned down the same path mine have. Too bad we're not at my place where we can lock ourselves in my room for a little play time.

Ezra's hands slide up the insides of my thighs in inches, squeezing and testing my flesh under my slacks.

Ryder's hand slides up my ribs, under my breast, his breath so hot against the side of my neck.

Wyatt traces my bottom lip with his thumb, pulling it down as if he can slip inside me right here.

A door opens and closes behind us, and little footsteps head our way. The way each of them straightens in a jolt has me giggling and grinning at Charlie as he stands at the end of the couch looking at us.

His brows draw downward as he takes the four of us in. I can see the pieces clicking into place behind his brown eyes—so much like his father's. Charlie holds up his iPad. "Can I show you this cool trick I just figured out?"

"Of course. Come here." I hold my arms out to him, but he hesitates.

Ezra waves him closer, offering him an opening between us. Charlie takes it, settling against his father instead of in my lap. It brings me more happiness than it does pain. I'll always want my baby in my arms, but they look so perfect together. Even when Ezra places an awkward hand on his back.

With the iPad between us, Charlie shows us a new trick jump on one of his racing games, and we all preen over how smart he is. Well, mostly me, but what can I say? I'm a proud momma.

When he's done, he doesn't run away, settling in Ezra's lap more fully.

"We've got some news for you," I say, hoping Charlie won't be upset about a new baby.

His brow lifts, so much like the look my dad just gave me. He looks between the four of us and offers a simple, "Uh-huh."

Meeting Ezra's gaze, I'm silently telling him that his son gets this from him .

"You're going to be a big brother." Ezra delivers the news softly in a voice I'm far too familiar with. Like he's prepared for a battle.

Charlie seems unimpressed over this news. "That's why you were puking in the bathroom. I should have known. You're never sick."

Uncontrollable laughter hits me before I'm wiping away happy tears. "Yes. You're absolutely right. Nothing gets past my baby."

He grunts. "Since you're having another one, you're going to call them baby from now on instead of me, right?"

I lean forward and smoosh his cheeks in the way he hates. "Not a chance."

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 7:46 am

Wyatt

Avery is grumpy and very, very pregnant. Her belly seems too big for her to hold as her hands brace her back and she stretches. The physics of it look more uncomfortable by the day. She's waddling in circles around the kitchen island, even though I've told her to sit and rest.

Her gaze snaps onto me, and if the dominating nature of her in mothering mode wasn't so damn hot, I'd wither under the glare she gives me.

The doctor told her walking would help induce labor. Spicy food, too, which is why she's dousing everything she eats in the stuff. And sex, lots and lots of sex, might help the baby come.

Avery pauses, leaning her hands against the counter in front of me.

I can't help but imagine her bent over the side of our bed like she was just a few hours ago.

My hand delved between her thighs to stroke and thrust into her wet heat while she moaned into the comforter.

Remembering how easy it is to get her off right now makes me harden against my jeans.

Making her come is my favorite thing.

I barely refrain from rubbing myself into her ass as she stretches herself, one hand cupping her belly and the other wavering on the edge of the counter. Instead, I dig my thumbs into her lower back and hips.

Avery collapses over the counter and moans. It's half pain and half pleasure. My cock twitches, and I pull in a breath to keep myself steady.

I rub and press into her hips with my knuckles and bend over her a little when she gives me another naughty noise. "You keep that up, and I'll have you under me in that bed again."

Her laugh is a bit hysterical, and she bites off another groan. "That feels so good, though."

"Not. Helping." I tip my cock against her cheeks, which has her laughing and groaning again.

"Don't tempt me." But her noises turn toward frustration again—half growling. "This baby needs to get the hell out of me."

She places her hand over mine and pushes herself upright again with a whimper. The weight is wreaking havoc on her pelvis and lower back.

I reach under her, cupping our baby and lifting her.

Avery's head falls back against my shoulder as she sighs in relief. "If I didn't have to pee right now, this would be the most wonderful thing in the world."

She doesn't try to wiggle out of my grip, so I hold and rock her. I'm always surprised by how much I enjoy these slow moments with her. I've always hated people being in my space, needing my attention, but I'm the one who's needy. I want to be with her

all the time.

Another huff of her breath has me nuzzling the back of her neck.

“This didn’t happen last time. Charlie was two weeks early,” Avery mutters. She’s mentioned this a few times over the last few weeks, praising her son for being a good boy and knowing it’s better to be early than late.

I nibble on her ear, making her tip her head to the left to give me better access to her skin. I take advantage of it, spreading kisses down her neck.

“He knew better than to make me wait.”

Laughing against the soft curve of her, I know all too well that she doesn’t like to be kept waiting. Most of the time.

We rock for another minute before she disengages to go pee. When she returns, she’s grumbling again.

A knock at the door precedes its opening to Mai.

She’s got a plate in her hands as she practically trots to where Avery is swaying in the kitchen.

Our new house has a mother-in-law suite on the other side of the attached garage.

It gives us the semblance of space, but she refuses to be too far away from her son and grandbabies.

Avery is the only one who can growl at her when she oversteps, which is far less often than it used to be.

I don't really mind. But I didn't grow up with an overly affectionate mother, so I don't have much to compare it to.

Mai places the plate in front of Avery and points at it. "Special trick from Vietnam. Works every time. You eat."

There's no hesitation. Avery grabs a fork and starts eating as Mai nods in approval.

She's only a few bites in before she stops, and a dark spot appears down the inside of her sweatpants, spreading down her thighs.

Avery breathes hard, taking practiced, measured inhales and blowing out hard. Those are what we practiced in her Lamaze classes.

Panic seizes my chest, and I'm frozen for half a second. Is she in labor? Did that trick work?

Mai is going to get so much praise from Avery if this is the real thing. And it must be because Mai circles the kitchen island and rubs Avery's back.

"See? What I say? Works every time. You breathe. In, two, three, four. Out. Yes. There you go." The house is silent except for Avery's breathing and the ringing in my ears.

Holy shit. She's in labor. It's happening.

"You go get Ezra. Ryder, too. Chop-chop," Mai orders.

Finally, my limbs break from their paralysis, and I'm on the move—running, actually—to grab everyone. Thankfully, Charlie is with Dominick. They can meet us there.

I run into Ryder first, panting. “Avery. Labor.”

It’s all I can get out before I take off again for Ezra, who’s baby proofing the new SUV.

When we all return to the kitchen, Mai is laughing at us. “Run around like chickens with heads cut off. Just like men.”

Part of me wants to take offense, but she’s not wrong. There’s not enough practice in the world for the real thing. The absolute frenzy working its way between my ribs feels like I’m going to die, but when Avery looks up at me and smiles, my world turns soft.

I get an arm around her back and help her straighten as we waddle fifteen feet before she’s clutching her stomach and growling.

“Breathe,” Mai reminds her.

Ryder slings a bag over his shoulder and stands with Ezra as we wait.

“Fuck,” Avery spits as we start moving again. “I forgot how much that hurts.”

We stop two more times before we get her in the BMW.

Ryder’s on the phone the moment I’ve got her buckled in. She’s yelling and arching against the seat. He reflects back the same awe and fear I’m undulating between.

And then, his mouth dips toward the mouthpiece of his phone. “Dom... yeah. The baby’s coming.”

Avery’s hand squeezes mine to almost breaking.

Shit. This is real. The baby is coming.

Avery

Five Years Later

I'm walking around my blissfully silent house in nothing more than Ryder's shirt and a pair of panties. It's been so long since I've been able to do something like this. Nothing like having a fourteen-year-old and a four-year-old to put a damper on your smaller freedoms.

Although, to be fair, Charlie is so good with Bridgette. He really takes the role of big brother to heart, and my life has gotten easier in ways I never imagined.

Having three dads helps, too.

I glance in the fridge, seeing if Mai left us any treats before she and Dad took the kids to the waterpark. She did—cartons of pork ribs and rice and soup. Thank you, Mai.

Ezra's arm circles my waist before I feel the heat of him at my back. His chest is hot, searing me through the thin cotton shirt. He, too, has taken advantage of the lack of kids.

Better yet, when his hips press the hard length of him against my ass, I know our day is going to be more than blissfully quiet.

I arch back, rubbing against him in invitation.

"Mmm," he hums in my ear. "The things I plan to do to you."

Gathering up the hem of my shirt, he exposes my bare legs to the cold wafting out of the fridge, and his hands smooth along my stomach, up and up and up until he's cupping one of my breasts.

Ezra kneads it until he's got my nipple in a hard peak, and only then does he tug on it, brushing his fingers back and forth until I'm moaning and dropping my hips back against his.

He half groans, half growls. "God, I want to fuck you right here, with the fridge open and spilling chill bumps down your skin."

Dragging my shirt higher, he pulls it over my head and bends me forward a little more so that I have to brace against the lower freezer door. The cold air laps at me, giving me a full-body shiver. Then, he yanks my panties down, and his cock is pressing against my core.

I'm already wet. It doesn't take much with him—with any of them—especially when we're so prone to sneaking in a quickie. Kids.

It takes two thrusts for him to fill me up, and I'm moaning low, arching back to meet him.

Hands squeezing my hips, he's taking his time, dragging himself out of me slowly before pumping back in with a bit of force. At the very end of each thrust, he hits a spot that makes my knees more and more wobbly.

My breasts sway each time his hips meet mine, nipples taut and begging to be touched. And now that he's found his pace, one of his big hands reaches around to cup me, fondle me. The contrast of his warm palm and my cold skin makes me more sensitive.

The noise he pulls out of me sounds like a wounded animal, but I'm so ready to

succumb to his attention, let him do whatever he pleases with me.

Then I hear footsteps.

“Fuck, that’s hot.” Ryder appears in my peripheral, and I turn to take him in. His bronze coloring has grown darker from the summer sun, his chest exposed and glistening and his cock straining against his shorts.

He meets my gaze and cups a hand around himself.

Ezra’s thrusts grow faster, harder, and I can barely hold myself upright. Not that I need to. Ezra has an arm locked around my center, hand gripping one breast, keeping me right where he wants me.

Ryder bites his lip as he pulls himself out, stroking his hard length leisurely.

God, knowing that we have most of the day free makes me want to fight the orgasm slowly creeping up on me. Usually, we’re rushing, not that it ever takes them long to make me come, but I want this to last as long as it possibly can.

Still, the pleasure creeps higher, constricting around me until I’m tightening around Ezra. His mouth is at my ear again, the low noises of his own pleasure making me clamp down harder.

“Fuck, you feel good, Avery. Better every time I have you.” His teeth nip my ear, then my throat, and his fingers tweak a nipple. That’s all it takes for me to tumble into an orgasm.

Not that it stops Ezra. It never does. He’s pounding into me as reality wavers around me, but as I come back, he slows, sliding me free of the fridge and closing the door as I try to catch my breath.

I'm weightless as he turns us, his cock slipping free and leaving me empty as he props me on the kitchen island. Spreading my knees wide, he lifts them to the edge and flattens me out before he thrusts back into me.

God, this angle makes him feel so much bigger, and he's hitting new spots that have me writhing and moaning.

Ryder appears at the other edge, cock bobbing inches from my mouth. Peering up at him, I open for him, tongue already out and finding his head before he presses his cock inside.

I love the way he swears under his breath as I suck hard. His hand tangles in my hair, gathering it into his fist as he pushes to the back of my throat. Ryder finds a gentle but demanding rhythm that keeps me grounded as Ezra works to build me back up.

When I have more than one cock to play with, I get a little distracted, which serves them fine. It means I can play longer.

That's when I hear Wyatt. He's standing at Ryder's shoulder, watching him fuck my mouth with a dreamy expression.

Wyatt's learning to like having me do things to him, but he still prefers to hold off, to make me come and come and come until I'm a blob of loose muscle, and then he takes his own pleasure.

His expression is a bit more calculating now, as if planning out just how to wring every ounce of pleasure out of me that he can before the three of them are done with me.

I peer up at Ryder. His jaw is clenched as he works himself with my throat.

Nostrils flaring, I know he wants to come, so I moan around him, letting the

vibrations fuel him.

It does the trick. Ryder picks up his pace, pulls back to take shallow thrusts, and the pulsing of his cock warns me before he spills himself across the back of my tongue.

I swallow every bit of it down, sucking and lapping at him until he pulls away. He'll be ready for me again in no time. That's one thing I can always count on with these three.

Ezra is grinding against my ass, reminding me that I've got another cock to milk. But he pulls out, too, and Wyatt is the one gathering me up, flipping me over, and spreading me open again.

His fingers delve inside me, and you would think after being split open by a cock that fingers wouldn't provide the same pressure, but Wyatt twists and taps and finds that spot that threatens to detonate me almost immediately.

I'm gasping, shoulders lifting off the cold marble to watch his digits plunder me. Knees pulling back, hips lifting into his touch, I'm barely holding on. My toes curl with the impending orgasm.

My cry echoes under the high ceilings, but Wyatt doubles down, pressing into me harder, digging deeper for the other spot he likes to toy with.

His mouth descends, sucking on my clit until I'm wriggling, trying to break free.

Or trying to find another peak, I'm not so sure, but I feel absolutely out of control.

Two sets of hands find my shoulders, pressing me back, fondling my breasts, slipping fingers into my mouth until I'm on the verge again.

This one is like an explosion. My vision grows dark and bright lights burst behind my

eyes.

When I come back to, all three sets of hands are stroking my flesh softly.

Until I catch my breath.

The trembling in my limbs won't stop, but I don't imagine I'll get the time to fully recover for a long, long while.

Wyatt gathers me up again, and Ezra is behind me. It takes them a few seconds to position me just right for Wyatt to slide himself into my overheated and swollen pussy. Ezra guides himself into my ass, and the stretched, full sensation makes me weightless.

Makes me lose all track of time. Of reality. Of anything outside of this tiny bubble encompassing the four of us.

Before I know it, we've moved into the living room. They keep changing positions, taking me in turns and giving me so many orgasms that I've lost count.

Wyatt is hammering into my ass as Ryder strokes my back, his cock twitching in my core as Wyatt bucks and comes. Filthy words spill into my ear as he spills into me. His retreat is slow, but once he steps out of the way, Ezra is back.

It doesn't take long for him to come, too, and Ryder minutes after. They recover like that, stuffed inside me, all of us breathing heavily.

I moan weakly, murmuring, "God, I've missed this."

We laugh together, groaning in unison as it makes me squeeze around them.

Wyatt appears with a glass of water, and I guzzle it down like I'm dying of thirst.

“Thank you.” I brush my hand across his face as he plants a kiss on me.

Ryder snuggles me down against his chest with a sigh of relief. “So, what do you think? Snack break?”

I laugh and nod. “Then do it all over again?”

I get three groaning yeses as a response.

Once I’m on my feet and my men are preparing to feed me, I give them a naughty, secretive smile.

“You know, we’re going to have to make use of this time before life gets busy again.”

Ezra laughs. “You mean busier than having a teenage son and a four-year-old daughter who puts the Energizer Bunny to shame?”

I bite my lip and wait. It takes a few seconds before I have all of their undivided attention.

“Yes. Busier than that.” My hand lowers to cup my flat stomach as I meet each of their gazes. Then, I raise my brow in challenge.

“Really?” Wyatt asks, his eyes lighting up. He’s, surprisingly, one big softie as a dad. Maybe because Bridgette looks just like him. That red hair is hard to deny.

“Yes, really. Round three. We’re having another baby.”

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