

NIGHT is DARKEST

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SANDHAIN publishing, Ltd.

Night is Darkest

Some secrets refuse to stay hidden.

Lacey Daughtry's perfect weekend is interrupted by tragic news of her brother's murder in the line of duty. Plagued by a rash of mysterious phone calls, she turns to her brother's best friends and fellow officers for protection...and comfort.

Spending time in close contact with Mason and Tyler, the two men she's dreamed of since her first girlhood crush, seems like the answer to a prayer. Especially when they begin to explore the desire she's harbored for so long.

But the partners are holding out on Lacey. Determined to suppress the most extreme facets of their lust, they agree to settle for sharing the woman they crave while concealing their desire for each other. Until Lacey cracks their resolve, unleashing a torrent of emotions that threatens to distract them when they can least afford it.

Their blossoming relationship is complicated by secrets. And the only way to evade the killer threatening their lives is to bare their souls in the darkest hours of the night. Or everything will come crashing down, just before the dawn.

Warning: After reading this book you'll never look at a pair of hot cops, a cemetery or a can of Spaghetti-O's the same way again.

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.

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Night is Darkest

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ISBN: 978-1-60504-800-0

Edited by Angela James

Cover by Natalie Winters

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic
publication: November 2009

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Dedication

For all the members of the Samhain reader café yahoo group. I enjoy the time we spend chatting about our favorite books and all the wonderful feedback you've given me. Special thanks to the moderators, both past and present, for keeping the party going!

Prologue

Lacey Daughtry grinned at the grandfather clock standing sentinel in the moonlit entryway as she kicked off her orthopedic sneakers. Three seventeen a.m. She'd gotten off shift on time for once. A lack of bus collisions, late night fires, drunk drivers or second shift construction accidents had kept the ER relatively quiet.

She'd parked close to the house since Rob's absent patrol car left a gap in their cracked cobblestone driveway. The only response following her shout of, "I'm home," pinged from the century old pipes in comforting creaks. She rarely

got in before her big brother. She started singing the infectious melody of a pop song that the hospital's music system recycled often as she sloughed her scrubs en route to her girlhood bedroom. Funny, how it still felt like home even after years away at nursing school.

With a few moments to herself before her brother swung in from his beat, she kicked off three glorious days of freedom with a whoop. This had the makings of a world class weekend.

Lacey dumped the wad of clothes in her wicker laundry basket at the entrance to her adjoining bathroom then twisted the four-pronged knob on the bathtub faucet

until steamy water gushed into the claw foot tub. She filled the black and white tiled space with the echoes of her off-key rendition of Jason Mraz's "I'm Yours" while she waited for the relaxing bath about to leach away the aches inflicted by another shift on her feet.

After a luxurious soak capped with an extra dollop of the designer shower gel she'd splurged on, she snagged her worn but comfy bathrobe off the pedestal sink. She took mental stock of the pantry as she bounced down the scarred oak stairs. It'd take some creativity to whip up a home cooked meal to share with Rob but he'd enjoy a warm dinner ready and waiting.

A chuckle escaped her when she wondered if you could be late to a four a.m. supper. They'd both worked the graveyard shift long enough it seemed normal. Maybe Rob ran late because he'd stopped at the twenty-four hour convenience store. Though she did most of their shopping, he pitched in whenever he could. Cooking up something simple was the least she could do.

They'd split chores and looked out for each other since the death of their parents in a car crash, ten years before. At just eighteen, Rob had become the backbone of their family unit. He'd kept her thirteen-year-old world from

imploding. She worshipped him for never once shirking his responsibilities—for the endless sacrifices he'd made to ensure their life stayed as normal as possible.

Sure enough, within minutes, strobing red and blue lights tinted the kitchen in his silent signal for her to come help him unload. She turned from the enamel sink, wiped her hands on her terrycloth-covered hip then stuffed her pink-painted toes into a pair of abandoned flip-flops by the front entryway. Though the summer had waned, she could handle the few seconds of exposure it'd take to dash out and collect an armful of groceries. She swung open the heavy oak

door with its old-fashioned etched glass, nearly smacking into Rob's two best friends—and fellow officers—shifting from foot to foot on the whitewashed porch.

Her eyes widened.

Dread dispersed her giddy joy in a millisecond.

Lacey's heart plummeted through her stomach at the somber formality masking Mason Clark's rugged features. Her pulse pounded when her gaze flicked to Tyler Lambert, taking in his clenched fists and the copious blood smeared over his otherwise crisp uniform.

She stumbled backward, slamming the door in their startled faces as though she could bar the horror they attempted to deliver. This can't be happening. Not again!

The two men, who spent nearly as much time in their house as she and Rob, forced their way inside. Their grim expressions distorted in her swimming vision. A roar in her ears blocked out their familiar voices. Tunnel vision narrowed her world to the sage green walls whipping around her. Then she marveled at the intricate pattern of the well-worn hallway runner speeding toward her until strong arms plucked her from mid-air, crushing her against a

solid male chest.

The surreal sensations faded as she clung to Mason, floating into the living room cradled in his arms, before he lowered her to the practical microfiber couch. He knelt on the plank flooring in front of her, urging, “Breathe, sweetheart. Come on, take a deep breath.”

Lacey inhaled, drawing razor sharp pain along with oxygen into her lungs. A ragged gasp split the tense silence. Their lack of urgency to escort her back to the hospital answered all the questions she couldn't voice. There was no need to hurry. Tyler sank onto the cushion beside

her, gripping her hand tight enough to fuse her fingers together but she couldn't feel anything beyond the numb shock coating her gut.

Her unfocused gaze latched onto the maroon crust of congealed blood beneath his trimmed fingernails. This time she couldn't muster the disassociation she had perfected in the ER. The sinister smudges were the only part of her brother that would make it home tonight.

“What happened?” The hoarse whisper pushed past her trembling lips, which refused to allow her wails to escape the devastation taking up residence in her

heart.

Mason and Tyler looked to each other, ice blue and forest green eyes exchanging the silent communication they had mastered during a lifetime of friendship. Mason gave a short nod then met her broken stare head-on.

He cupped her free hand in his and cleared his throat once, twice, before the heartbreaking news tainted his rich baritone. "I'm going to give it to you straight, Lace. We're not sure what went down but it looks like Rob came across a mugging in progress. He called it in but didn't wait for backup. Said he heard a distressed cry for assistance. The

victim must have gotten free and made a break for it but, by the time reinforcements arrived, he had taken...” He hesitated. His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed hard. “...several knife wounds to the chest and throat.”

“How many?” The nurse in her asked before she associated the damage Mason detailed to her brother.

He ground his teeth then growled,
“Twenty-seven.”

Beside her, Tyler choked on a curse.

“You caught my brother’s murderer?”
She clung to the rage enabling her to

function. To say the unfathomable words.

“Fuck. Not yet. But I swear it to you, doll. I won’t stop until I get him,” Mason vowed.

She nodded, not doubting his loyalty or tenaciousness for a second. The three men, and Lacey by default, had been inseparable since the boys’ very first day at school when they’d shared a legendary bus ride that set the tone of mischief they’d indulge in over the years. A fourth-grade bully had met his match in the trio of kindergartners who took him out with a kick to the shin, a punch to the gut and a strategic whack to

the nuts with a Voltron lunchbox. Ever since then, they'd been a unit.

The three amigos plus a spare kid sister.

A constant staple in her life, Mason and Tyler were all the family she had left in the world. She stared over Mason's shoulder until her wandering vision landed on Rob's pride and joy. Who would shout encouragement to the favored team making its plays on the behemoth 61" DLP rear projection TV now?

"He wasn't alone at the end." Tyler's grief recaptured her attention. Unabashed tears tracked through the

crimson stain on his cheek. He leaned forward, braced his forearms on his knees and refused to abandon his hold on her hand like a drowning man clinging to a lifeline. Several strands of his shaggy midnight hair feathered over his creased brow when his head bowed. “I got there just in time. I held him.”

His voice cracked but he didn't attempt to conceal his misery from her. Instead, he turned his face toward her until she couldn't avoid the truth in his agonized stare.

“Rob said, ‘I’m not afraid. Tell Lacey I-I love her. It’s okay.’” He squeezed his eyes shut. “I tried to stop the bleeding. I

tried to hang on to him, to keep him here b-but he slipped away from me.”

By now, sobs wracked his massive frame. A sight she'd never seen in the twenty years she'd known him triggered her instincts to offer comfort even as her stomach cramped. She curled into his desperate embrace. His clenching fingers raked her back. Lacey attempted to shelter him from the misery she suspected would fester and infect his soul before it began to fade. She squashed the scream bubbling inside her, drawing on the barriers that had kept her sane during the aftermath of her parent's death to erect a blockade against the encroaching despair.

She couldn't let it drag her under.

“I'm sure you did all you could, Ty. With that amount of trauma... He wouldn't have stood a chance.” The reassurance faded into the room as her voice trailed off. It seemed like a hypothetical discussion rather than an account of reality.

Mason grasped her knee, shaking her as if to snap her out of a trance. “We've got you, Lace. It seems unreal but...”

“Stop.” She held his bewildered stare with her cheek still tucked against the defined pecs of Ty's heaving chest. “I'm not going to freak out. I'm not going to

shatter. There are things that need to be done.”

“Not tonight, Lacey. For God’s sake, it’s after four o’clock in the morning and you need some time to absorb...”

Had she ever heard Mason’s voice rasp out in that husky tone? One more second of his audible torture and she would lose it for sure.

“No,” she interrupted with a cut of her hand. “I want to throw him the biggest farewell party of all time. He loves... loved parties. It’s what he would want. And there are things to do.”

Chapter One

Schwulllmp.

Lacey could guarantee that the eerie sound of the first shovelful of dirt landing on the polished surface of her brother's coffin would reverberate through her nightmares for eternity. The skittering of pebbles adding one more barrier between her and her last blood relative caused her to flinch. A warm, gloved hand reached out to bracket her elbow. Tyler. She didn't have to turn around to recognize his steady, comforting touch. He and Mason stood resolute behind her in their dress

uniforms like her own personal honor guard.

Her spine straightened. She drew her shoulders back and lifted her chin against the agony she struggled to hold at bay. Rob would be proud of her stoic bearing. Though, in all honesty, she couldn't cry. She hadn't shed one single tear since she'd received the news of his ultimate sacrifice. Whoever he'd died to protect, she prayed they were safe. She had to believe his loss held some value.

With dry eyes, she scanned the monstrous crowd. Rows of black clad mourners, so deep she couldn't make out the end, ringed the gravesite beside her

parents' under the oak tree in the city's oldest cemetery. The preacher's speech—designed to comfort—couldn't penetrate the gloom in her heart, which complemented the dreary, overcast day. In her mind, she heard Rob's laugh, then replayed the petty argument they'd had over dirty dishes last Wednesday, before remembering his daily warning.

“Stay safe.” It was the last thing he'd ever said to her. He'd whispered the standard entreaty in her ear as he captured her in a bear hug before she'd headed off to work Friday evening. In her mind's eye, it seemed he held her tighter—for a moment longer—than usual, but she recognized the wishful

thinking.

If only he'd listened to his own advice.

She shivered against the October breeze as crispy leaves wandered past the pointed tips of her black leather boots. A few moments later, Mason's jacket enveloped her. Lacey tugged the lapels over her breasts, soaking up the heat of his body. She could make three fitted coats from the fabric that had so recently framed his broad shoulders.

Over the past several days she had thrown herself into the preparations for this service and the party—she refused to call it a wake—that would follow. At

no time had she been left alone. Though they'd stayed in touch with the fruitless investigation, one of Rob's best friends had accompanied her while she delivered Rob's dress uniform to the funeral home, selected music and readings, gave input into the obituary she'd penned and stopped just short of following her to the bathroom to see if she needed their assistance to wipe her ass.

They were driving her insane.

Mason nudged the base of her spine with a discreet pat. "Go ahead, doll. Do you need me to escort you?"

She blinked to clear the haze from her mind. The police commissioner now stood at the edge of the jagged hole in the ground, sparing her a glance drenched with pity. In his outstretched hand rested Rob's badge, hat and service revolver. The sea of miserable faces focused in her direction goaded her forward, fortifying her determination to stay strong. She picked her way across the soggy ground to collect the personal effects presented with honor.

The eleven baby steps seemed like a marathon but, though her legs wobbled, they held. Lacey pivoted, then appraised the two men whose suffering mirrored her own. The support and worry in their

glassy eyes, offset by the twin lines of their clenched jaws, spurred her to make the return journey to their sides without delay.

When the ceremony concluded, strangers pressed against her on all sides as they encroached on the open grave. They either wanted to offer their genuine sympathy or to gawk at the morbid spectacle, maybe both. Misery threatened to drown her. She couldn't bear to witness Rob's sweet girlfriend, Gina, weep through another silk handkerchief or observe the droves of people he'd touched say goodbye. Even the open arms of Tyler's mom couldn't entice her to linger. Instead, she snagged

a flower out of the elaborate spray at her feet, clutched it to her heart beneath Mason's coat, then turned to her brother's best friends.

“Get me out of here.” The plea had barely crossed her lips before Ty sheltered her under his massive arm and Mason took point, clearing a path.

While he navigated a course around the headstones, she focused on tactical things. Things like how many place settings they'd need, the logistics of heating up the food generous neighbors and strangers alike had donated for Rob's farewell party, and the ripple of Tyler's six-pack against her ribs as he

ushered her to Mason's waiting truck.

Only when they sandwiched her between them on the bench seat, isolating her from the morose gathering, did she surrender a tiny sigh. Mason turned over the big block engine with jerky motions of his stiff limbs as Tyler enfolded her hand in his, chafing it to infuse some semblance of warmth into the frigid digits.

“Take me home, please.”

Lacey wove between the lingering clusters of guests at Rob's party, picking up another empty hors d'oeuvre tray. She accepted Gina's hug as one of the young officers, James "Razor" Reoser, prepared to escort the wrecked woman home. It became a struggle to find things to keep her occupied as a troop of helpful visitors, including Mama Rose and Lacey's co-workers from the hospital, lent a hand without being asked. Though they meant well, their presence in her home and kitchen unsettled her.

"Lacey, why don't you come sit down

for a minute.” Her friend Jambrea patted the sofa beside her but even the comfy cushion couldn’t entice Lacey to grant her aching feet a reprieve. Like a caged animal, the pacing seemed to help.

“No thanks, I’m going to clean up a bit.” She waved the black plastic clutched in her fist then hurried in the opposite direction.

When she bent to retrieve a disposable cup forgotten under the side table in the living room, the intensity of Mason’s stare scorched her. She glanced up to find him scrutinizing her every move from his post near the front door where he thanked departing guests for coming

with a solemn yet composed grace while he handed out copies of the photo-collages she'd designed yesterday. Her knees bent of their own volition. She didn't want any observers to think she teased him by offering a glimpse of the bows edging her thigh-high stockings at a time like this despite the reputation she'd earned for tormenting him through the years.

Not that he'd ever taken the bait. After enduring the disappointment of a thousand rejections, she refused to delude herself into imagining he wanted to anymore. Only a greedy woman would wish to trade the enduring friendship he'd given her for a single

night of wild passion anyway.

“Want me to grab that, Lacey?” Her neighbor, Rhonda, started to reach out but Lacey lunged, snagging it first. She collected the stray glass along with several discarded napkins before heading out the backdoor to add her overflowing trash bag to the growing pile. Her shoulders sagged under the weight of the whispers she left in her wake.

“...so cold.”

“Hasn’t cried at all.”

“In shock...”

Out of space to retreat, she glanced around in panic at the fence surrounding their postage-stamp sized yard. The aged wood made her even more claustrophobic than usual. The lawn Rob had enjoyed manicuring now hosted a hodgepodge of folding tables, deck chairs and chimineas gathered from around the neighborhood. People had shared one final meal over fond memories of their co-worker, high school buddy or distant acquaintance by the fires but they'd abandoned the chilly evening with their obligation to attend fulfilled hours ago.

A burst of anger at life in general made her grunt when she flung the garbage,

harder than necessary, toward the pile of trash. The seam of the black plastic sack split in flight, depositing half-eaten food, plastic utensils and God knew what else in a five-foot swath of debris.

“Damn it!”

“I would have helped you with that, Lacey. If you’d just asked.” Tyler’s weary statement came from a nearby table. She hadn’t seen him sitting there in pensive isolation.

“I can handle it.”

He moved like lightning to her side and, with an unrelenting grip on her arm,

prevented her from avoiding the sight of his red-rimmed eyes to tidy up the mess. He'd always been the most sensitive of their group. Empathetic and kind. But the raw agony she witnessed now compelled her to break free and finish her task. He stilled her attempts with a shake.

“Enough.” No sign of his typical charm or easygoing smile could be found in the harsh set of his flattering features.

“You’ve done enough. Let me fix it. Before he died... I promised Rob I’d take care of you. And I will.”

“You think cleaning up this shit is what he had in mind? Fine, go ahead!” She

shook her head in disgust at the shrill tone of her outburst then schooled herself to release the tension in her spine before snickering at the fun-loving, shockingly handsome man. All her emotions bubbled and swirled in a confusing mix she couldn't control. It was too much to deal with at once.

“Little one, you need to take a break. Come relax with me for a minute. I'll rub your shoulders.”

As if that'll help. The sure massage of his hands wouldn't calm her down one bit.

“You have no idea what I need, Tyler.”

The bitterness in her heart overwhelmed her better judgment as she let the stinging truth fly. “You’ve never understood me.”

His emerald eyes widened, the sexy arch of his eyebrows raised and his luscious lips parted as his jaw hung slack. She wrenched out of his grasp before he could recover, rotating with a sharp motion that tore the grass beneath her heel.

Lacey stomped up the stairs into the kitchen without a backward glance, in search of another task to occupy her thoughts. But, when she got there, she realized someone had already washed, dried and stored the dishes. The floor

had been mopped, the leftovers boxed up and put in the freezer, the lavish flower arrangements she'd set aside to donate to the hospital had vanished and pointless conversations no longer echoed down the hall.

She blinked.

There wasn't a single thing left to do.

The haunting silence threatened to suffocate her. She bolted for the rear staircase then took the steps to the second floor two at a time as she headed for her parents' room. After their deaths, she'd often crept into their bed at night somehow hoping their essence would

linger in their personal space. Ten years had passed. The stale air in the room provided no comfort now. Instead, the oppressive weight of the emptiness reminded her of a mausoleum.

How dare they all leave her behind to suffer alone?

Irrational rage propelled her to lash out. She swept the photos of her and Rob as children from the dresser. The happier times she'd experienced before the harsh realities of the world corrupted her blissful ignorance felt like a minefield of cruel lies waiting to detonate with one misstep of fate. Lacey faced the windows, yanking down the yellowed

eyelet curtains her mother had prized. Maybe, if she could erase the memories, she could avoid the tsunami of misery zeroing in on her heart.

The flowered comforter suffered her wrath next as she ripped it from the king-sized bed, flinging it into a pile with the curtains in the corner. A primal roar escaped her chest as she climbed onto the bed to reach the framed portrait taken weeks before the accident that had stolen her parents. She twisted to drop it over the cushion of the comforter but lost her balance on the squishy mattress. The glass covering the photograph shattered on impact against the corner of the nightstand on her way down.

Her lost loved ones stared back at her with timeless grins covered in broken shards as she collapsed on top of the wreckage of her life.

“Lacey! What the fuck’s going on?”
Tyler’s shout snapped her out of her daze.

She raised her eyes to his but couldn’t force a sound past the constriction of her throat.

The spit-polished shine of his dress shoes captured her attention as they gobbled the distance from the door to her landing site in two huge strides. His hands curled around her waist in a

protective hold as he righted her. Instead of soothing her, the touch incited another bout of her righteous fury.

“Put me down!” Though he pinned her shoulders to his chest with one sculpted arm, she lashed out with the three-inch spike of her boot, hoping to connect with his shin.

“Mason! Where the hell are you? Get up here!” Tyler bellowed as he spun toward the bed then flattened her thrashing body to the mattress.

“Get off me, you overgrown asshole!” Lacey continued to squirm and kick but she moaned when the motion rubbed her

against every inch of the flexed muscles blanketing her, subjecting her to another kind of torture. She had to get out from under temptation before she did something crazy. So she turned her head and bit the vulnerable flesh on the inside of his forearm. Hard.

“Son of a bitch!” Tyler jerked. With the opening presented, she slithered from his grasp then made a break for the door.

Arms folded across his monolithic chest, thick thighs braced apart, Mason blocked her escape route. His imposing frame occupied the entire opening. He took an ominous pace forward, the dangerous glint in his ice blue eyes not

one she'd seen aimed at her before. The intimidating glower caused her to retreat a teensy bit before she could check her instincts. She bumped into the solid wall Tyler had formed behind her. Trapped between the two men, who overwhelmed her senses on a good day, she abandoned all vestiges of sanity.

“Leave me the hell alone, both of you!” She lunged to the side in a futile attempt to slip between them.

Mason's broad hands gripped her shoulders, though the gesture made it seem more like he cradled her instead of jarring her as she expected. “Hang on to her, Ty.”

One sleek arm wrapped around her hips while the other clamped above her breasts. A whimper snuck from her throat when Tyler accidentally brushed her nipples along the way. Her breath huffed in and out of her lungs beneath his embrace as she wished he caressed her for more pleasurable reasons. The tired dream refused to wither.

Lacey averted her gaze from the intuitive question on Mason's face but it landed on the raw mark she'd inflicted on Tyler's arm. The sight of his injury deflated some of the mad overtaking her system. "Shit, I'm sorry. I-I don't know what came over me."

She leaned forward to place a tender kiss beside the ring of bruises already forming beneath the raven hairs dusting his forearm. His husky whisper came close to her ear, washing her with the scent of the chocolate cake he must have eaten.

“It’s alright, little one. It’s about time you let some of this out. There isn’t enough room inside your itty-bitty bod for all that rage.”

His gentle understanding unleashed a torrent of emotions from behind her carefully constructed dam. If he hadn’t supported her, the force of the gush would have knocked her off her feet but

she squeezed her eyelids shut against the liquid threatening to seep out.

“You’re bleeding.” Mason’s rough timbre broached the awkward silence. He scooped up her hand from where it dangled at her side, raising it for inspection. When the moist, heated silk of his mouth surrounded her index finger, her eyes flew open. The vision of his lips suctioning the droplet of blood from the immaterial scratch punched her in the gut.

Lacey wanted nothing more than to let them care for her. But they wouldn’t soothe her the way she needed. They never had before, no matter how many

times she'd made a fool of herself in an attempt to entice them. Instead, they'd remained steadfast friends, always close yet never close enough. What did a nick on the tip of her finger matter when her heart had been through the wringer?

Sudden, rending pain slashed across her soul as one too many of life's disappointments annihilated her shaky composure. Her chest heaved with dry sobs a moment before an unearthly wail burst from her throat. Grief obliterated all perception of her surroundings. Tears poured from her, dripping off her cheeks in a steady stream.

Lacey thought she would drown in

sorrow. For her brother. For herself. Someone lifted her then deposited her on the flannel sheets with infinite care. She curled into a ball on her side. Dual heat sources bracketed her shuddering body. Even through the despair shredding her guts, some basic part of her recognized Tyler's attempt to comfort her by rubbing her back. She cried in horrid gasps, unable to stop the flood of grief now that it had begun.

Rob! Not him, too. It's not fair! She pleaded with the powers that be to transform this nightmare into some colossal mistake through divine magic. When that plan fell through, she emptied herself of heartache, crying until nothing

remained but a hollow shell, brittle to the touch. After what seemed like hours, the steady murmuring of Mason's soothing litany reached through her sniffing and the occasional cough.

“That’s right, Lace. We’ve got you.”

Unfortunately, his attempt at calming her incited another crying jag. Their intimate display of affection was temporary. She couldn't get used to having them so close—to relying on them. After all, they weren't hers to keep.

All her life, she'd craved her older brother's best friends. They'd indulged her girlish desire for adventure by

helping her climb the tallest trees, smuggling her extra pieces of her favorite candy or racing her on their bikes while always keeping her safe. Then, their wicked good looks had inspired her first teenage crushes. Instead of fading from puppy love to deep-seated friendship, her longing for them grew year after year as she watched them mature into amazing men.

Smart, funny, aggravating and sexy. Together, they were everything she'd ever wanted.

The Midwestern city they lived in maintained small town sentiments, meaning gossip reigned as the leading

pastime—especially within the community of police and hospital workers they associated with. The high-stress jobs relied on petty dirt to offset the danger and exhaustion of the demanding environments.

Therefore, it didn't surprise her that more women than she could count had inquired about the validity of the rampant rumors surrounding the guys' sexual exploits. They all wondered if Mason and Tyler together were the hottest fuck this side of the Rockies. No one believed she lacked firsthand knowledge of their carnal prowess considering how close they'd always been. So she'd heard all the wild tales.

From Mary Lou's first account of their proclivity for ménage to Rachel's recent description of the wicked bondage games they'd introduced her to, the vast creativity of the guys' encounters had fascinated—and angered—her. Why did it seem like every other woman in the entire fucking city make the grade when she'd never passed muster?

Masochistic tendencies had lured her into scouting out information on the naughty yet alluring sexcapades of the men who were partners on the force, roommates in their personal lives and a fixture in her home.

Now she wouldn't even have those

companionable visits to look forward to. She would truly lead a solitary existence. Despair choked her. Her blurred vision dimmed as she struggled to draw enough breath to feed her sobs. Someone shook her, rolling her to her back. Then Tyler and Mason's distant shouts penetrated her ruminations.

“Breathe, Lacey! You have to calm down and breathe.” She tried to obey Mason's order but couldn't.

“Mason, do something. She's turning blue!” Tyler's appeal resonated with a terror she'd never heard from him before. Yet, she couldn't compel her lungs to respond.

The buttons on her blouse gave way beneath the force of Mason's urgent hands. The constriction around her throat eased but not enough for her to draw ample oxygen. Before she realized what had happened, he sealed his mouth over hers. Air flowed into her lungs as he exhaled, creating a transfer. His wrists—braced on either side of her head—boxed her in until his stare claimed her entire focus, willing her to respond. He prevented her from expelling the breath by lingering against her now slack lips, stopping her cycle of hyperventilation, then lifted off to give her space to pull in more air.

Her breathing hitched and tears

threatened to renew but he stemmed the tide by pressing his luscious mouth to hers once more. He passed the seconds by rubbing his nose against hers. The motion caused his lips to glide over her mouth the slightest bit. The gentle nuzzle lulled her.

Lacey's nursing training goaded her to rationalize her instant euphoria as a side effect of near asphyxiation but her heart recognized the truth even as he repeated the motion. Mason Clark pinning her to the bed, caressing her in a very un-little-sister-of-my-best-friend way, inspired another bout of dizziness. When he separated them this time, she sucked in a lungful of oxygen to guarantee she

wouldn't pass out and miss the closest thing to a true kiss she'd ever had from him. Sure, he'd pecked her cheek a million times, but he'd only engaged in a full lip lock in her dreams.

“There you go, little one.” Ty relaxed, returning to lounge by her side. His long fingers entwined with hers while Mason performed a sensual equivalent of mouth to mouth. The delicious remedy restored her respiration and some of her strength but destroyed her common sense.

“Synchronize your breathing with his. Inhale now and hold it.”

The rhythm mashed her satin-covered breasts against the solid plane of

Mason's chest before he descended once more. This time she stole the opportunity to indulge in forbidden pleasure. Lacey angled her mouth and kissed him with ten years of pent-up need. His low moan, which sounded suspiciously like a growl to her ears, accompanied her advance. She cupped the back of Mason's head in her left hand, reveling in the way his short hair tickled her palm as she forced him into closer contact.

He paused until her lids fluttered open to absorb his questioning glance but she couldn't turn back now. Hunger and desperation outstripped inhibition as she clutched the one thing with the power to temporarily erase her suffering. She

nibbled on Mason's lower lip, arching against him until he couldn't deny every inch of her yearned for his touch.

She would beg if she had to.

Tyler's grip tightened on her hand when he spoke for both men. "Do you know what you're asking for, Lacey?"

In response, she squeezed Ty's fingers then devoured Mason's sultry mouth with long licks and flicks of her tongue. She had control of the situation for all of three seconds before his instincts kicked in. He wrested power from her with animal grace. Though Tyler stood several inches taller than Mason, and

possessed features worthy of a cover model, Mason's innate command had always attracted her like a moth to a flame.

Ice blue eyes pierced straight to her soul when he shifted on top of her, bunching her skirt around her hips as he settled into the cradle of her thighs. The smoky flavor of the whiskey he'd tossed back earlier mixed with his own unique essence to create a potent concoction she could easily get drunk on. With a primal groan, Mason surged against her as he continued his attack on her sanity. The trajectory of his torso caused his crisp uniform shirt to glide across her semi-exposed breasts, torturing her nipples

along the way, while the thick bulge of his cock beneath his trousers prodded the sensitive flesh between her thighs.

Lacey attempted to align their hips by shifting, restless, beneath Mason's powerful form, but she couldn't quite work up enough friction to satisfy the demands of her starving senses. Her whimper of frustration sliced through the room. She cursed the betraying sound when Mason froze on top of her, blinked, then ripped his reliable warmth from her embrace.

“Son of a bitch!” He scrubbed one hand over his face as though he could erase what he saw.

“No!” She attempted to follow him but he kept them separated with a palm planted on her sternum. Panic flared in her heart. She struggled against his hold but he had her pinned to the mattress. Her pleading gaze flew to Tyler where he’d tensed beside her. “Don’t let him do this. Don’t let him run now.”

Lacey hated the weak quiver in her voice but she couldn’t handle their abandonment today.

Tyler nodded then argued her case, “Mason, calm down. Can’t you see she needs you?”

She studied the tight knit of Ty’s brow,

the tick of the muscle in his jaw and the forced set of his broad shoulders. He didn't realize what she wanted. She could never choose between them. "No, Ty, I need you, too. I need you both."

At her whisper, his head swiveled in her direction. If she hadn't already been lying down, the force of his voracity would have leveled her. She held her breath while she waited for him to act on the raw longing whipping through those forest green eyes.

Chapter Two

“Quit looking at her like that!” Mason barked the demand. “She’s not thinking rationally. She’ll regret this later.”

Ty gritted his teeth and hung his head while he took several deep breaths. “Shit, you’re right. I’m sorry, Lace.”

He peeled their fingers apart before scooting toward the edge of the bed. Every inch in the widening chasm between them felt like a cold, lonely mile.

“No! Please, don’t leave me. Make me forget. Make me feel good.” Tears

gathered once more, decorating her lashes with glistening drops. It would crush her if they deserted her now.

“Please.”

Mason and Tyler exchanged glances above her but didn't come any closer.

To her embarrassment she collapsed, broken, against the mattress as the hot tracks of her pain renewed. Some of her anger rallied, causing her to speak without considering the ramifications.

“You p-promised Rob you'd take care of me.”

“Low blow, doll. We are taking care of you. Just like Rob always wanted.

We're leaving you the hell alone instead of taking advantage of the situation.” Mason sounded resigned.

Shame spread color across the displayed skin of her chest. The burning in her neck and cheeks assured her face flamed as well. But she'd play dirty if she had to. She couldn't handle even one more loss.

“Just like everyone else in my life. Fine. Get the hell out and don't come back. Ever.” Lacey let the grief, rejection, and aching arousal pour out of her at once. She didn't have the energy to resist anymore. She sobbed, her entire body limp as a ragdoll. She couldn't even bring herself to straighten her clothes or

cover the vulnerable spots their tussle had exposed.

“Let’s go, Tyler.” The bed shifted as Mason departed but, though she braced herself for the second jostling, it didn’t follow. “Ty! Move it!”

The intense order would have scared her into action but still the mattress didn’t rock. She couldn’t see through the torrent of tears filling her puffy eyes to gauge the situation but she refused to allow hope to infiltrate her crushed heart. It would only end up hurting twice as bad in the end.

“I-I can’t.” Gentle fingers swiped

moisture from her cheek. “I can’t leave her like this, Mason.”

“You should.”

“I know.”

“Don’t expect me to stand by and watch you ruin a lifetime of friendship.”

Lacey listened to their exchange through a fog of pain. She wished he’d do a hell of a lot more than observe Tyler comforting her but the conviction in his tone made it clear he wouldn’t touch her again.

“I’m sorry, Mason.”

No reply followed Tyler's apology but the snap of footsteps fading down the hall served as answer enough.

Then strong arms enveloped her. Ty sat cross-legged on the bed and scooped her up close to his heart. She laid her head in the crook of his neck and clung to his muscled shoulders. This time her tears were borne of relief.

“Shh, little one. I'm not going anywhere.” He rocked her until her sobs faded to hiccups then stopped altogether. “You're not alone. Never alone. I'm right here.”

He rested his lips on her forehead in a

tender gesture. It felt so right to discover solace in his embrace. She tilted her face up, offering much more than platonic intimacy. Tyler covered the damp skin with butterfly kisses, sipping the last of her tears from her cheeks.

Lacey turned her head, capturing his sexy mouth. When he hesitated, she enticed him with lingering caresses of her lips and tongue. He tensed as the rapid rise and fall of his chest rocked her. She clasped him tighter. Her nails sank into the powerful slab of his knotted back.

Yet he refused to return her kiss. She glanced up to find his eyes squeezed

shut. She watched the pounding of his pulse in his temple. Though inexperienced in the art of seduction, she attempted to goad him into breaking his restraint with tiny bites on his full lower lip followed by soothing laps of her tongue.

A cry of despair echoed around him when he put a miniscule gap between them. Struggle as she might, she couldn't force their mouths back together. Her desperation would have been horrifying if she didn't need him so badly. His eyelids cracked open and the single momentary glimpse he took did him in.

“Oh, God, Lacey. I'll probably go to hell

for this, but it'll be worth it." His fierce declaration obliterated the last shred of her rationality. She lunged up, crushing him in her embrace when words couldn't suffice. Of course, he understood. "Shh. I need you, too."

Fantasies came alive as he capitulated to her desire, devouring her with a frenzy of passion that rivaled her own need.

"I want you closer," she whispered between the intense clash of their lips. He lowered her to the bed, rising above her on outstretched arms. Compared to the polished women he usually selected for liaisons, she worried about what he saw.

She shut her eyes against his intense inspection but he descended over her prone form and whispered in her ear. “Even with your red nose and swollen eyes, you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, Lacey. Don’t hide from me now.”

He solicited a gasp when his teeth inflicted a wet trail of love bites along her neck to her collarbone. Then his fingers slipped beneath the straps of her bra and nudged them off her shoulders. The side of his smooth, clean-shaven cheek nestled in the valley between her breasts as the tip of his tongue darkened the edge of the purple satin cupping them.

She arched her back, pressing the aching tips closer to his exploratory touch. Tyler obliged her by surrounding a pebbled nipple with the moist heat of his mouth. He sucked the flesh through the thin covering until it stood out in proud, glistening profile when he moved on to the other. While he ravaged her needy flesh, she heard the dual clunks of his shoes hitting the floor after he toed them off, his long legs dangling from the end of the bed.

Lacey wanted to lose herself in the pleasure rising inside her. She reached between them to work the top button of his shirt free. In her haste, she fumbled around with the coordination of a

newborn. A frustrated moan signaled her distress.

“You want me to get naked?” Tyler asked. “Are you sure this is what you want, little one? I can stop right now, just say the word.”

“Don’t you dare,” she panted. “Make me forget about everything but you.”

“I can arrange that without taking my clothes off. I can take care of you.” He brushed a lock of hair from her neck.

“There are other ways if you’re not sure...”

“I need it all. Please.” She left no room

for misunderstanding.

He shucked his uniform in less time than it took for her to mourn the departure of the heat his close contact had generated. She'd admired his lithe build numerous times before when they swam during the steamy summers or when he helped Rob and Mason work on the house but nothing compared to the up close view of his six-pack abs when his emerald eyes blazed with sexual intent. Her stare wandered along the path of honed muscle to the scrap of black cotton shielding the impressive bulge in his boxer briefs from her hungry eyes.

“Take them off.” She didn't ask.

“Not yet, Lace. I won’t last. I want to make you so hot it burns away all our sadness. At least for a little while. I can’t stand to watch you suffer.”

Tyler dipped forward to ensnare her mouth in a passionate kiss. While he stole her mind with fluid strokes of his tongue, he eased her shoulders from the bed. He peeled her shirt and bra away as if he unwrapped a fragile gift. He licked his lips then gulped, “So pretty.”

Then he was back, skin on skin. She nearly shrieked at the electric glide of his chest against hers. The smooth expanse of his pectorals brushed across her nipples as he licked a meandering

path along the center of her body. He paused long enough to plump each breast before he worked his way lower still.

His tongue rimmed her belly button, sending sparks through her abdomen. When she bucked beneath his sensual assault, he wrapped his hands around her hips to lock her in place. He continued the sweet torture with glancing contact between his lips and the exposed swatch of her midriff until his mouth latched onto the material of her skirt.

She watched in fascination as Tyler unfastened the button with a shake of his head then lowered the zipper with his teeth. The operation tucked his chin

against her mound. A moan echoed through the room as the blunt pressure drove her further up the spiral of ecstasy. It lifted her higher and higher with each pump of blood blasting through her veins. If he hadn't restricted her motion, she would have ground her pussy against his face for the moment it would have taken to jump over the edge into climax. Days—no, years—of suppressed urges and violent emotion threatened to erupt.

He chuckled against the damp barrier separating her from what she wanted most. The triumphant laughter lifted a burden from her heart. “You’re so responsive, so demanding and greedy. I

love it.”

In one seamless motion, Tyler knelt between her legs and yanked the skirt from her body. He tossed the material over his shoulder without thought, his focus never straying from between her legs.

“You shave?” The question came out more as a groan when he took in the smooth lay of her matching satin thong. He stared up at the ceiling and blew out a sigh.

“Wax.”

“God help me.” His fingers balled into

fists at his side for the space of several ragged breaths. “And this underwear! Do you always wear such fucking hot lingerie under your baggy scrubs?”

Before she could affirm his suspicions, he shook his head while clenching his chest.

“Don’t tell me, I’ll never survive knowing you’re walking around the hospital in these.” His fingertip ran along the frilly bow topping the thigh-high stocking until it intersected with the garter belt securing it in place. A shiver shook her. She expected him to unhook the silk then roll it down her leg. Instead, he raised his ravenous eyes to hers.

“They stay on.”

His hands skimmed along the stockings until they reached her boots. He unzipped them then added the leather to the growing collection of clothes on the floor. The anticipation of a more intimate touch built until she could hardly refrain from begging. Again. Tyler crawled between her legs, spreading her thighs with the bulk of his torso as he approached her core. His hands slid beneath her. In a sudden movement, he cupped her shoulders and tugged her close until his face buried in her crotch.

The cool breeze generated by his

inhalation teased her soaked folds through her drenched panties. “Mmm. You smell delicious. I can’t wait to taste you.”

True to his word, Tyler’s hand moved in a flash from her shoulder to rip her thong away before tucking beneath her thigh once more. This time, his fingers caressed her arms until he braceleted her wrists, trapping them by her sides. Though his hold was light—his thumbs stroked circles over her pounding pulse points—the forced immobility ratcheted her arousal to epic proportions while freeing her to enjoy his ministrations instead of attempting to please him in return.

He dove for the dewy lips of her pussy, now bared to his whims. The first dab of his tongue against her swollen flesh threatened to rocket her toward a supernova orgasm. She'd wanted him for so long, to have him teaching her how amazing sex could be seemed like another fabulous dream. She feared waking unsatisfied as usual but even her vivid fantasies hadn't prepared her for the intensity of the real thing.

The long laps he used to trace her slit had her panting for release before he even brushed her clit. Then he thrust his tongue inside her pussy, fucking her while he devoured the arousal coating her channel.

“Mmm.” He hummed his appreciation for the flavor of her desire, sending a wave of pleasure up her spine. It took all the self-control she possessed to withhold her orgasm when he burrowed deeper into her pussy then sucked her clit with gentle pulls.

“No!”

He froze.

“I want you inside me when I come. Please, Ty. Please.”

“Don’t worry, little one.” He lifted just enough to murmur reassurance. “I promise I’ll give you want you need. Let

go, let me taste your passion.”

He worked a single broad finger inside her clinging passage. The muscles of her pussy clenched around the invading digit. It felt so much bigger than hers had on the nights she'd pleased herself while thinking of him and Mason. When he resumed his teasing suction on her clit, she didn't stand a chance at resistance. Tyler curled his finger until the pad trapped a super-sensitive spot against her pelvic bone.

She shattered. Spasm after spasm squeezed his hand and tongue while she screamed his name.

When the orgasm had waned to delightful aftershocks, he withdrew from her slick pussy. Lacey basked in the release while Tyler rose up and stripped off his underwear in one fluid sweep. His raging cock bobbed thick and heavy against his thigh.

Her eyes widened when she measured him with her stare.

She wanted to torment him in kind but, before she could make her request, he had tucked the flared purple head of his cock against her opening. Her lingering contractions caused the orifice to kiss the tip of his hard-on. The heat of his erection singed her sensitive skin.

Instead of flinching, though, she thrust her hips up, yearning for him to impale her.

“You’re so tight, Lace. I don’t want to hurt you.” His hand guided the blunt cap of his cock up and down her slit, nudging her still throbbing clit on every pass.

“Please. Take me.” His glans lodged in the mouth of her pussy as she shivered beneath his teasing strokes. Though she doubted he could rekindle the intense pleasure he’d gifted her with, she craved the intimacy of full intercourse. She needed to welcome him into her body. Then they would be joined in ecstasy as well as grief. “Now.”

She reached for him, wrapping her hand around the nape of his neck to tug him forward. The full length contact of their sweat-slicked bodies caused her to moan. His heated weight bearing on her fanned the embers of her lingering climax.

Lacey followed her instincts, which urged her to clasp him with her legs around his waist at the same moment he thrust into her empty, aching core. The thick expanse of his shaft tunneled through tense rings of muscle, stretching them open to make room for his impressive cock. Her spine arched when he sank a mere inch or so in her pussy. Awe illuminated the darkness in her

heart as they finally merged.

“More!” Her fingernails raked the expanse of his back as she encouraged him to ravage her.

“Jesus!” His arms trembled, dislodging a single bead of sweat which rolled down his temple as his laser-sharp gaze latched on to hers. “Slow down, little one.”

“No.” She rocked her hips beneath him, tugging him out a tiny bit to get momentum for the return thrust. The head of Ty’s cock penetrated untried territory as her pussy swallowed more of his length. The awkward angle infused a

component of pain to her rapture. When she winced, he withdrew.

“Shh. It’s okay, Lacey. Let me take you my way.” He kissed her with a tenderness that left her aching as he pressed forward once more. She never imagined he’d feel so huge, as though he could split her open. Yet, still, she craved more.

He worked his cock inside her, plunging deeper with each successive stroke. Meanwhile, he continued his lascivious multi-tasking on the rest of her body—licking, kissing, biting and caressing everything he could reach. The sparks of desire took hold. Reincarnated passion

flared in the wake of his experienced manipulation.

“That’s right, you’re such a good girl. Take all of me, Lacey.” He thrust until he encountered the resistance of her unused pussy. When the tip of his cock nudged the tissue that proclaimed her innocence, his head snapped up. “You’re a virgin?”

The shock on his face jumpstarted her instincts. He couldn’t stop now! She acted before it could morph to indecision or even denial. “Not for long.”

With a moan, she sealed her lips over

his and coiled her legs tight around his trim hips. Then she flexed her thighs, digging her heels into his firm ass. The motion impaled her on his steel-hard shaft. The last barrier between them ruptured.

Of course, she'd expected some pain but the burning snap in her abdomen stole her breath for several heartbeats. Tyler held himself stock still as he studied her expression with a combination of wonder and fear. Then he distracted her from the ache with a long, lingering kiss. His tongue slithered inside her mouth and teased her with gentle laps.

The atmosphere changed from desperate

desire to tender loving in an instant. Though she would never have admitted it, she was grateful for his perceptiveness. A moan escaped between sweet kisses. When her pussy clenched around him, she shivered in delight at the novel sensation.

“Are you all right, little one?”

“God, yes.” And it was true. The pain had morphed into a delicious inferno. “I want to please you.”

“I’ve never been so hard in my life. Seeing you fly was the most amazing thing I’ve ever done. I need to do it again. Are you ready for me to move?”

“Please.” She could only manage one word.

He cradled her beneath him as he began to rock his hips. Any residual discomfort evaporated as he attuned his sensual flair to enhancing her pleasure. When his lips travelled to her breast while he continued the long, measured pace of his fucking, the sweet pressure between her legs began to mount once more. She sighed in awe when her muscles squeezed the length of Ty’s cock, resulting in mind-blowing pleasure that multiplied exponentially until she hovered on the edge of orgasm.

In all the times she’d fantasized about

sex she had failed to realize the greatest pleasure could be derived from the unity it generated between two souls. Their synchronized heartbeats caused his cock to throb where it locked in her pussy, reassuring her she wasn't alone. The revelation amplified her ecstasy.

Tyler played her body like a sexual virtuoso. The angle of his penetration shifted until she rewarded him with a moan. He locked onto the motion that pleased her most then repeated the stroke with the accuracy of a precision instrument. He calibrated his penetrations to meet the specifications of her ardor. Every tap and glide of his cock head against her inner muscles

nudged her closer to heaven.

“You’re ready to come again for me, little one?” A pleading note tinged his gravelly question.

“Yes, Ty. Please come with me. Together.” She ground her hips against his the next time he returned, forcing his balls to nestle in the valley of her ass. When he groaned in response, she timed her motions to match his. Strange yet perfect sensations infused her with wonder. The arc he travelled stroked her clit across the flat muscle above his cock and his appreciative moans sealed the deal.

She fell over the edge and flew into another earth-shattering orgasm.

“God, yes. Lacey!” His cock jerked inside her a moment before the hot pulses of his semen washed over her inflamed tissue, soothing her even as it triggered a renewed round of spasms.

The look of pure devotion in his eyes as he spilled his desire made a permanent imprint on her memory. With trembling hands, she smoothed the bunched muscles of his arms and back. His fingers tangled in her hair as he repeated her name over and over. Between harsh pants, he rained sweet kisses on her neck, shoulder, ear and the side of her

face from his spot on the pillow beside her.

When he had recovered, Tyler settled her against his chest as he tugged the covers over them. Exhausted, she closed her eyes to sleep for the first time in three days, secure in the shelter of his tender embrace.

Her short, humorless laugh shattered the silence.

“What’s that for, little one?”

“I never thought the best and worst days of my life would be the same one.”

“I heard that. It’s been a hell of a day.”

“What’s going to happen tomorrow, Ty?” She hated the frailty in her voice.

“Let’s not worry about it ’til morning. That’s soon enough. Sleep now, sweetheart.”

Chapter Three

A rustling against the pillow roused Lacey from her restless slumber.

“Tyler?” Her voice, strained from both wails of despair and passionate cries, rasped out.

“Shh.” Comforting lips brushed her forehead in a chaste kiss. The pre-dawn gloom obscured his expression. What would she see on his face after the night they’d shared?

Grief and pleasure had paled beside the horror of her nightmares. But all through the blackest hours, he’d been there to

catch her when images of her brother's bloody corpse interrupted what little shuteye she'd managed to grab. Rob's gentle face had seemed crazed, crimson drops sprayed in slow motion from the sliced vein in his neck and the familiar yet repulsive tang of copper had burned her nose when he issued the order to stay safe.

The last thing she remembered was the security of Tyler's embrace placating her.

“Go back to sleep, sweetheart.”

Disoriented, she reached out a hand to locate him on the bed but encountered a

crisp sheet of paper instead of the firm warmth she expected. She crumpled the note in her fist as her brain began to function. Several blinks cleared the grit deposited by her evaporated tears. Enough to realize he stood beside the bed, fully clothed in his now rumpled uniform. The deliberate space between them turned her cold. “You’re leaving me?”

“Mason called. He’s got a lead on the case. I have to get down to the station.”

“Don’t lie to me. What did you write here?”

“Read it in the morning.”

“It is morning.”

“Shit, Lace. You need to rest some more.” The first rays of morning silhouetted Tyler as he scrubbed his broad fingers through his already mussed hair.

“You expect me to curl up and nod off without inspecting the bullshit reason you gave for sneaking out of here without so much as a goodbye?” Gathering steam, she levered up onto her elbows, causing the sheets to tumble to her waist. The darkness must not have impaired his vision as much as it did hers. The hiss of his rapid intake sliced through the silence following her

question. “Clearly, it’s not because you don’t want me. I bet you’re hard as steel again right now.”

He fled from her roaming fingers so fast he stumbled. “Don’t.”

“Why not?”

“There are things you don’t understand, little one.”

“So explain, Tyler.”

“I wouldn’t trade a moment of loving you last night for the world but that doesn’t make what I did right. I shouldn’t have touched you. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for taking my virginity?” She couldn’t prevent the note of vulnerability from creeping in.

“No. Yes. Damn it, I don’t know.” He paced off to stare out the window. Several harsh breaths sawed out of his chest before he faced her again. “It’s complicated. Fuck! I-I’m sort of involved with someone else.”

Neither he nor Mason had ever been in a relationship that extended beyond carnal exchanges before. She hadn’t imagined anything could hurt worse than the trauma she’d endured yesterday but she knew Rob would never have left her if he’d had the choice. Blinding agony

seared straight to her soul until she caught Tyler's tentative phrasing then honed in on the uncertainty in his fidgeting stance.

“You mean Mason?” Figures he thought her oblivious to their sexual preferences. Hadn't she asked them both to make love to her yesterday? The whole afternoon had blurred together somewhat but she distinctly remembered begging for what she wanted most. Hadn't she been clear enough to make them understand?

“What! How did you know?” She thought she caught a glimpse of unease in his emerald glance as her pupils adjusted.

“The rumors of your conquests reach far and wide. I’ve been hearing the details of your sordid threesomes for years. Every woman in the city hoping to become the middle of a Ty-son sandwich seems to ask me for advice. As if I’d know how to entice the pair of you!”

“Oh, yeah. That.” At least he had the decency to look ashamed. “I didn’t know people were harassing you because of us. This is exactly what Mason was talking about. I had no business dragging you into our mess.”

“Even if that’s where I want to be?”

“I’m sorry, little one. I asked Rhonda to come over so you won’t be alone.”

She didn’t deign to acknowledge him. Though she enjoyed hanging out with her next-door neighbor on occasion, no one could replace Ty. The shadowy form of his retreating body hovered on the threshold for a heartbeat. He whispered one final parting shot over his shoulder. “Some secrets aren’t mine to tell.”

Then he slipped from the room.

“Tyler! What the hell does that mean? Wait!” She scrambled to disengage from the tangled sheets then rushed down the stairs with uncoordinated limbs but she

was too late.

He'd already disappeared.

Tyler huddled into his charcoal wool jacket to avoid the chill as he slunk across the frosted lawn to the backdoor of the apartment he shared with Mason. Above it, a single hundred-watt bulb made an ineffective beacon welcoming him home in the early morning glow. The dread pumping through his nervous system rivaled any he'd experienced as a teenager praying he'd evade MomDAR after a late-night excursion. Only, this time, his roommate inspired the

apprehension instead of the debauchery that had earned the repercussions.

He estimated his chance of making it inside undetected to be about as abysmal as the chance of wiping the memory of burying himself in Lacey's virgin pussy from his mind. But, son of a bitch, even a lifetime of torment—knowing exactly what he was missing—would be worth the taste of rapture he'd stolen.

Now he had to pay for it.

Tyler paused to consider the merits of jimmying a window before he abandoned hope and squared his shoulders in preparation for the come-

to-Jesus ass chewing he deserved. The metal stairs creaked by design as he ascended. They'd worked hard to make this place their own as much as possible for a no-frills rental unit. No one could slip in with them unaware. They'd seen too much shit during their time on the force to be less than vigilant at home.

He cringed when an image of the crime scene including Rob's mutilated body as a gruesome centerpiece flashed, unbidden, into his mind. Fuck Mason. Fuck his iron willpower. Ty'd needed Lacey as much as she'd needed him last night. Her soft innocence paired with fiery desire had cauterized the gaping wound in his heart, at least temporarily.

The award he and Mason had received for exemplary service rattled on its prominent shelf as the door slammed behind him. He'd just unlaced his shoes when movement from the scarred leather sofa caught his attention. Legs splayed, shirtless despite the chill, Mason poured a stream of amber liquid into the glass nestled between his bunched thighs.

Ty licked his lips. "I'm impressed. Whiskey before breakfast. We haven't done that in years."

"Haven't been to bed yet." Mason's pupils had dilated from sitting in the dim room. The ebony centers overshadowed his cerulean eyes, making them appear

ominous despite his calm tone. “That makes it a nightcap.”

The measured speech didn't fool Tyler. A telltale muscle jumped along the right side of Mason's neck and his knuckles whitened around the bottle of Jack before he set it, with overabundant precision, on the end table they'd scored off a buddy who'd moved in with his fiancée. It had been too “bachelor pad” for her tastes, which made it perfect for their eclectic refuge of hand-me-downs.

“You worked the case all night despite the captain's orders? You have a gut feeling on this one, don't you?”

Mason didn't answer the rhetorical questions. Instead, he fired a fierce stare in Ty's direction. Goddamn, would he ever blink?

Ty tried not to shuffle like a kid busted with his hand in the cookie jar but that's exactly what he felt like. "Shit! Say something already. Curse at me, let the bottle fly or kick my ass old-school. Just quit looking at me like that."

"Like what? Like you're the scum of the earth? Like you're a cock-sucking asshat who broke the shit out of a pact with his best fucking friend?"

A strong breeze ruffled Tyler's hair as

the bottle of alcohol whizzed past his right ear on its way to oblivion. It smashed into the brick fireplace with a tinkle of glass. The arm he'd instinctively raised to protect his face prevented him from witnessing Mason's charge but the impact of their collision rocked every joint in Tyler's body. The shorter man brought him to the floor without effort.

“Or...” Ty choked against the pressure on his windpipe but he didn't fight back. “...you could opt for all three.” Broad fingers spanned his throat, pinning him to the beige shag.

“She was off limits for a reason!”

Mason's temple bulged as he got right up in Tyler's face. His free hand fisted in Ty's shirt as he shook him. "We just lost Rob. Do you want to chase her away, too? You'll only end up hurting her and I won't fucking let you do that because you can't say no to your cock. After years of hard work, you had to fuck up now?"

Tyler winced as Mason shifted on top of him. The full weight of his powerful frame straddled Ty's torso while the other man's shins trapped his arms on the ground. Being manhandled didn't sit well with him. Every guy had his limits and the events of yesterday had pushed him beyond rational thinking. Up close

and personal with the bulging crotch of his roommate's jeans, self-preservation flew out the window as his smart mouth took over.

It wouldn't be the first time it'd gotten him in trouble.

“Jealous, Mason? Don't you wish you'd stayed? You could have slaked that woody about to drill a hole in your pants. I bet you jacked off at least three times since then. It didn't matter, did it?”

“Of course I'm jealous, asshole. We've craved her for nearly a decade. But I'm man enough to walk away if I have to. Even from something I want more than

my next fucking breath.” Ty had never seen him this pissed, and that was saying something. Mason possessed a legendary temper. He leaned down to snarl right in Tyler’s face. “And I suggest you keep your eyes off my junk unless you plan to do something about it.”

The combination of anguish and need radiating from every flexed muscle of the man on top of him dissolved the defiance Ty’d attempted to use as a shield. Mason’s suffering affected him as much as Lacey’s had yesterday. All resistance fled. He went slack in Mason’s hold.

A throaty growl echoed around them as

the dominant man's hand moved in a flash from its perch on Tyler's throat to rip the flaps of his own button fly apart. His glorious cock stood framed in denim, the veins pronounced and throbbing. Even as Mason's hips thrust forward, Ty opened his mouth to welcome the intrusion.

He'd never get used to the mammoth girth stretching his jaw, though he'd given Mason hundreds of blowjobs. Each time, the thickness impressed him as he savored the weight on his tongue and the ecstasy on his lover's face. Mason reached forward, cradling the back of Tyler's head in his palm as he urged him to take more. His fury

evaporated as desire replaced it.

“Fuck, yes. That’s right, Ty. Suck me.”

The urgency of the rhythm Mason set guaranteed their encounter would be short-lived. Tyler devoured as much of the engorged shaft as he could on each pass. He swore it was even bigger today than usual. The salty tang of pre-come washed his tongue as Mason plunged in again. This time the fat head nudged the back of his throat. His reflexive swallow tore another groan from Mason’s chest.

“Relax, Ty. Take me deeper.” Their positions made it more difficult, but Tyler tipped his head back as Mason

dropped forward onto his forearms until he could bury his erection full-length into Ty's throat. As he shifted, his jeans slid further down his thighs, freeing his balls. Tyler wished Mason's weight had shifted from his arms so he could stroke his own rock-hard cock. But when the hot skin of Mason's tight sac bumped his chin with each complete stroke, he knew it didn't matter. He was a goner.

“God, that's good.”

He flexed the muscles of his throat around Mason's cock as his tongue massaged the sensitive underside of the shaft.

“Just like that, Ty. Shit, don’t stop.”

Tyler redoubled his efforts. He loved pushing Mason beyond his usual control. When Mason’s abdomen tightened above him, he applied the slightest rake of his teeth.

“I’m gonna...” Mason hadn’t finished the warning before hot jets of his come blasted from his jerking cock. Ty’s hips rocked instinctively, rubbing his own hard-on against the satin boxers encasing it. Then he joined Mason. They grunted their release in simultaneous waves. Tyler still suckled the wilting mass of Mason’s cock, drawing out every last drop, when he retreated and collapsed

on the floor nearby.

The rough exhalation of their mismatched breaths slowed over time. Tyler hadn't recovered when Mason's iron grip encircled his wrist then tugged him close. He buried his face against the defined muscles of his lover's chest and sighed. Mason's suffering had to be great if he allowed this rare level of intimacy between them.

"You were right to go." His fingers clenched Mason's shoulders as he confessed.

Mason's hands stroked his back and one buried in his hair, tucking him against the

man's still pounding heart. "I'm sorry, Ty. You were hurting. We all were. I get why you stayed."

"She was a virgin." Ty registered Mason's surprise in the twitch of his slack muscles. The pause deafened him as he waited for additional recriminations.

"Then I'm glad it was you, Ty." Comforting fingers trailed down his spine. "I'm sure you made it good for her. You can be so gentle. And you love her."

"I hurt her." Misery spread from his aching heart.

“The first time is never comfortable...”

“No, uh...not that. I mean, she bled some but she definitely liked it.” God, when had he become such a blubbering fool? He wasn’t sixteen anymore.

“You told her about us?”

Tyler tried to ignore the hint of unease in Mason’s voice. Unlike him, Mason had never been with another man. He’d never accepted his bisexuality, swore only Tyler attracted him, and insisted they keep their relationship secret. Ty’d given up arguing about it years ago. Mason would never change his mind.

“No. That’s up to you. But I couldn’t mislead her either. I told her I was involved with someone else, then I walked out on her.” The memory of betrayal drowning her eyes cut him all over again. “Hit me if it helps. I kind of wish you would.”

“Ah, shit, Ty.” Mason damn near suffocated him in a bear hug. “That sucks.”

“Mason, I didn’t even use a condom. I didn’t want anything between us. I’ve never done that with a woman before.” He didn’t mention the times he and Mason fooled around.

“Well, we know she’s on the pill. Remember when Rob got all bent out of shape, freaking out over how bad her cramps were until she got on it?” They shared a crooked smile over the memory of their friend’s deliberation on the best way to tackle the awkward conversation with his sister.

He seemed like he was about to continue but didn’t. “Spit it out, Mason. What?”

“I didn’t think you’d come back. I’m a selfish bastard but I thought I’d lost you. Why did you give her up instead of me?”

Tyler squirmed under the uncomfortable pressure of their heart-to-heart. It didn’t

bother him to spill his guts, but he knew it could make Mason flee their emotional intimacy. Then again, it could have been Mason caught in the line of fire just as easily as Rob. He refused to regret withholding his emotions if the unthinkable happened. Again. “We’ve been through so much together. I can’t imagine my life without you.”

“You’re willing to sacrifice your friendship with Lacey? She means the world to you. To me, too. You know that.”

“Then why can’t we tell her, Mason? You heard her yesterday, she wants us both. Please...”

“No. I won’t make her the center of our freak show. She was a virgin for Christ’s sake! How would she cope with all the things I want to do to her? I’m no gentle lover. And no matter how I wish it were otherwise, I can’t deny what I need. She can’t handle me.”

One part of Tyler agreed. Lacey wasn’t ready for the rough passion they both craved. But another fraction screamed they were making the biggest mistake of their lives. He’d claimed her yesterday. In the heat of her passion, some of his preconceptions had been seared away. More lay beneath the surface of Lacey’s calm exterior than she let on.

Confusion, grief, longing and resignation swirled in his mind. He replayed their exchange this morning and her words reverberated in his mind.

“I’ve been hearing the details of your sordid threesomes for years.”

What would she think if she found out those were the least of their indiscretions?

“You’re right, Mason. I know you are. I just wish...”

“I know, Ty. I wish, too.” He sighed then asked, “Tell me, what was it like?”

Chapter Four

Lacey paced a circuit that led from the living room through the dining room, which they'd converted to an office, to the kitchen then back again while daytime TV droned in the background. Three days of lockup had her poised on the verge of insanity. Compared to the hullabaloo of organizing Rob's service and wake, the aftermath seemed eerily quiet when not occupied by endless tears.

Distant friends and acquaintances had obtained their closure then gone back to the grind but, for her, the reality of the

void in her life had just begun to sink in. Every once in a while she heard something—a car driving by, people chatting as they walked their dog or the sound of the mailman on the front porch—that made her think Rob was about to bound up the stairs and through the door before she realized all over again that he'd never come home.

It wouldn't be so damn obvious if she could pick up her regular schedule at the hospital but state laws mandated she remain out of action for a minimum of seven to ten days. The way her thoughts flitted from despair to vengeance and everything in between, she understood she would only be a hazard to patients in

the ER—people who could still be saved.

To make matters worse, the hairs on the back of her neck wouldn't let her forget that either Tyler, Mason, or both, sat across the street in an unmarked car staring at the house. She'd tried to walk over and shoot the breeze with them a few times but they always drove off when they saw her coming. Chickenshit Ty hadn't even had the decency to check up on her after he'd run out on their morning after.

Their constant quasi-presence rubbed her face in all she'd lost by indulging her fantasy during a moment of weakness.

Loneliness piled onto the grief threatening to paralyze her. What were they watching for if they wanted to avoid her so badly? The constant vigilance made her nervous.

The phone rang, startling her from her morose thoughts. The damn thing had been buzzing non-stop. She figured she might as well make some lucky reporter's day and answer their call. Rob had been regarded as an up-and-comer, a potential candidate who might even make it to chief one day. She'd responded to a few of the inquiries interspersed between the condolences and sympathies but, for the most part, she hadn't felt like rehashing her misery

for a lousy quote in the daily paper.

Most of the journalists had graciously accepted her “no comment” but one persistent newshound kept insisting Lacey return her calls. She’d deleted every one of the pushy voicemails without hesitation. This time she almost hoped the bitch would be on the other end of the line so she could vent some of her frustration. Mentally, she cracked her knuckles preparing to rip the caller a new asshole.

“Hello?” Instead of the high-pitched, scratchy female voice she expected, only static buzzed across the crappy connection. “Hello?” she asked once

more before shrugging and hanging up.

Ring.

“Hello?”

Again, no answer though she thought she heard a soft whimper. After several more seconds of silence, she decided she'd fabricated the sound while straining to hear anything on the other end of the line.

She smashed the receiver into the cradle with a thump. Great, now she had some prankster giving her shit, too. She marched into the living room then collapsed onto the couch. Just glancing

at the pitiful excuse for a talk show playing on Rob's TV brought tears to her eyes. She couldn't stand the solitude a moment longer.

Her gaze flicked to the gap in the curtains where she spotted another nondescript vehicle parked inconspicuously on the shoulder of the neighborhood road. The glint of tawny hair she caught beaming in the shaft of sunlight illuminating the driver-side window made up her mind.

Lacey returned to the kitchen and dug a stainless steel thermos out of the cupboard. A dash of creamer, two spoonfuls of sugar and a semi-stale

pastry—leftover from the wake—completed her package. She bundled the treats and a stash of napkins into a plastic grocery bag before creeping out the kitchen exit, like a thief, into her own backyard.

She slipped through the gate in the fence between her house and her neighbor Rhonda's then made her way across various lawns by dodging Mr. Roper's clothesline and circling around the Smith kids' gargantuan neon plastic playset until she reached the patch of evergreens blanketing the community park. Under their cover she slipped across the street then backtracked, keeping the brush on the undeveloped berm between her and

the average tan sedan.

As she drew closer, she paused to take in Mason's serious expression which reflected his focus on his observation of her home. Chills ran the length of her arm. What was he looking for?

Determined to have answers, she strode the last handful of paces to the car and yanked the door handle. Lacey practically dove into the passenger seat, guaranteeing he couldn't flee yet again.

The motion put her an inch from the business end of Mason's drawn Sig P226.

She blinked.

“Son of a bitch! Lacey!” He re-holstered the gun with cool efficiency. “Are you trying to get shot? Never sneak up on me like that again!”

“S-sorry.” She ducked her head between her knees and took a couple of cleansing breaths to chase away the spots cluttering her vision.

“Shit!” Mason’s broad hand pushed her hair aside to massage the nape of her neck, rubbing the tension away. “Are you okay?”

When her heartbeat had slowed to a mere gallop she rose and said, “Peachy. Brought you a snack.” She handed over

the now-slightly-squished cruller.

Their hands brushed when he accepted the goodies she shoved at him. She watched his stony features as he set the thermos in the cup holder but didn't move to drink from it. Judging by the pulsing muscle in his jaw, she'd swear he was grinding his teeth.

She took a moment to soak in his stoic grimace. Blunt cheekbones, a prominent forehead and a narrow nose should not have added up to the male perfection she saw, yet somehow, it did. She longed for him to say something, anything, to reassure her that she hadn't obliterated every last spark of their friendship.

“Go ahead, have some. You must be freezing out here. It’s barely forty degrees and you haven’t turned on the car in hours.” She twisted the cap off then poured a healthy steaming slug of his favorite mocha blend.

Still nothing.

A gulp blocked her throat for a moment but, when it cleared, she unleashed her fear in a direct question.

“Mason, are you going to avoid me forever because I slept with Ty?” Lacey clamped her front teeth on her bottom lip to stop it from quivering. When he didn’t answer for a few seconds, then ten, she

abandoned hope. Determination drained from her, slumping her shoulders.

“I’ll miss you,” she whispered.

She’d already turned to leave when his restraining hand landed on her thigh, making her jump.

“I’m going to avoid you because I wish it had been me instead.” The gruff admission made her heart skip a beat but, before she could respond, he continued, “And because I’m not sure I could walk away a second time when your eyes beg me to stay, even though it’s still the right thing to do.”

“The right thing for whom? And don’t you dare say for me, Mason Clark! I care for both of you and nothing you say will convince me that keeping us apart is the way to go. Unless you know about the secret that isn’t Tyler’s to share...”

The furrows on his brow coupled with his ominous frown and the inability to meet her stare convinced her of his guilt. “Tell me. Nothing you say could change the way I feel.”

“That’s romantic bullshit, Lace. What if I told you that Tyler and I got one of our women pregnant? It wasn’t supposed to be a serious thing but we’re taking responsibility and planning to raise her

baby as a family? Wouldn't that change how you feel? Wouldn't that alter the circumstances just a little?"

Her jaw dropped. "You're serious?"

"No." His cold response left no doubts. "But it would have impacted the situation. There are other explanations that would do the same. Don't promise what you can't deliver, doll."

Heat flared in her cheeks, generating anger to accompany her embarrassment. "Fine. But if you don't want me, then what the hell are you doing stalking my house? Am I in some kind of danger? What's going on with Rob's case?"

He rubbed his hand over the major five o'clock shadow surrounding his luscious mouth. Her thoughts drifted to the way his lips had felt against hers and she nearly moaned.

All business once more, he answered, "I honestly don't know, Lacey. I don't mean to frighten you. I don't have any proof but something's off. I can't put my finger on it yet but I'm working the case. Both of us are. Ty's out canvassing the neighborhood around the crime scene."

She noticed he couldn't say "where Rob died". They suffered, too. Of its own volition, her hand reached out to cup his face, her thumb tracing the line of his

cheekbone. He turned his head to press his lips against her palm before enfolding it in a light hold. Decades of friendship outshone their current impasse.

“You haven’t noticed anything unusual, have you?”

She shook her head. “No, there’s nothing going on inside except the freaking phone calls.”

“What phone calls?” His eyes narrowed.

“People ringing to say how sorry they are plus tons of reporters trying for a sound bite or an extra little scoop with a

couple of hang-ups mixed in for added aggravation.” She rolled her eyes.

One corner of his mouth kicked up. “No heavy breathers? Creepy messages?”

“Nah. Nothing that exciting.”

The artificial distance he’d kept began to erode. They leaned toward each other, reveling in their familiar closeness, but Mrs. Potter’s dog chose then to bark and Mason swiveled around so fast she feared he’d given himself whiplash. He dropped her hand then cursed under his breath.

“I have to go, Lace.”

“Because of this?” She gestured back and forth in the air between them.

“Because it’s almost time for me to go on duty. I need to take over for Ty.”

Probably true, but she still detected his relief. “You’re not on duty now?”

“The chief didn’t feel there was any reason to warrant a dedicated resource shadowing you. But I can’t shake this feeling so I thought I’d take a drive by.”

“And you ended up staying all day? When are you going to sleep, Mason?”

He shrugged, “I’m fine. Look, just be

careful okay?”

“I trust your instincts. I promise.”

“Good.” His sad smile devastated her.

“Now go ahead back in the house. I’ll stay until you’re inside. Keep to where I can see you.”

She shivered. “You think someone’s out here?”

“I’m not taking any chances with you. Go now and I’ll send Ty over with a call recorder. It can’t hurt to screen your incomings for a while.”

She studied the stained floor mat under

her sneakers.

“You have nothing to be ashamed of, Lacey. Here’s a secret. He’s miserable without you. He’s been irritable as a bear with a fucking thorn in its paw since he left. I think you two belong together.” He took a ragged breath. “And I’m going to tell him so.”

Mason’s declaration reverberated in her mind as she crossed the street. At the top of the stairs, she turned to wave before heading inside. He gave a curt nod in response. She shut and locked the door but couldn’t block out the vision of his tense expression.

She needed something to pass the time until Ty arrived or her head would explode with the possibilities. What would he say to Mason's advice? Would he pursue her? Why would Mason encourage them to be together if he didn't want her for himself?

He clearly knew the source of Tyler's reservation, his pained expression had told her that much. She got the feeling he had just sacrificed something major for her. Was it a woman they both were interested in? Could she accept Tyler knowing that whatever secret the guys had shared would rip apart two men closer than most brothers?

In the office, she flopped down at her desk. Lacey wiggled her mouse until her monitor hummed to life, displaying the hundreds of emails she'd procrastinated sifting through.

The subjects didn't vary much. "So Sorry", "Just Heard" and "Our Condolences" were sprinkled around her favorite, "Are You Okay?"

Of course I'm not okay! When would people quit asking her that? They meant well but, come on, already. The disproportionate flare of her temper made her realize just how on edge she really was.

She pinched the bridge of her nose between two shaking fingers while concentrating on her breathing. When she'd nearly gotten herself under control, she spotted it.

“We Need To Talk,” from Anon Y. Mous.

What the hell?

Furious, she double-clicked the message to open it in a new window. She skimmed the first obvious line, “Your brother’s murder was no accident...” before she realized the action had initiated a chain reaction. The obnoxious red icon flashing in her system tray

alerted her to the detection of a virus.

“No!” Struggling to react despite the way her stomach had dropped from the jolt of shock the message had inflicted, she pressed the delete key, banishing the message to the recycle bin. But the damage had already been done. A dialog box popped up over her email program. The status bar zoomed from 0% to 100% almost faster than she could see. Then the blue screen of death obscured everything else.

“Son of a bitch!” Lacey powered down her machine then paused before restarting. She prayed it wasn’t as bad as it had looked. She couldn’t remember

the last time she'd done a backup of her data. After a horrible grinding noise, a single line of text flashed on her screen.

Hard drive corrupt. Press F1 for help.

“Help! I’ll give you help!” She hauled off and kicked the tower beneath her desk before stomping upstairs.

At this point, she did the only thing she could. She fell into bed and gave in to tears for the umpteenth time this week. Her hand snaked beneath her pillow, as she hugged the downy puff to her, where it encountered the cool metal of Rob’s service revolver. Probably not an approved storage place but it comforted

her to have some piece of him close by.

She squeezed the grip tight then cried herself to sleep.

“What kind of fucked-up shit is this? You’re kicking me out? Fucking dumping me?” Tyler watched Mason wince. The clueless bastard had probably never thought of himself as being in a relationship in the first place.

What else would you call it? They spent

nearly every day together functioning seamlessly as partners. When they felt the need for a woman they shared one and, in private, they fucked each other. Hell, they'd even lived together since graduating high school nearly ten years before.

“You need each other. I can see the hunger in you both.”

“And you don't think I want you, too? You don't see how bad she needs you, too? Jackass!” Frustration spurred Ty to lash out.

“What can I give you, Ty? You deserve a life with her. Get married, have kids,

do all the regular stuff you want to do. We've fooled around long enough, now it's time for you to make something real, something lasting. Threesome's are fun but how can it work long term?"

"I know one thing she can't give me." He stared at the junction of Mason's thighs where, even now, a prominent bulge proclaimed his desire.

"And you'd trade it all for some cock? I'll buy her a strap-on for Christmas." Mason's face turned maroon but his voice got softer, a dangerous sign. "I saw the pain in her eyes today. I can't live with knowing I contributed to it. Just answer me this...can you be with

her and not want to fuck other guys?”

Ty's head snapped back as though he'd taken a jab to the face. “You motherfucking bastard! What the hell are you talking about?”

“Even if it were safe, Lacey could never handle it if you cheated on her. Can you be satisfied with a woman alone?”

Tyler refused to stroke the bastard's ego with the truth: Mason was the only person he wanted as much as Lacey.

“It's all about the person, douche. Not their equipment. Besides, she's the hottest lay I've ever had. I don't fucking need you.”

Instead of bristling, or fighting back, Mason gave a curt nod that crushed Ty's hope. Was his lie so easy for his partner to believe?

“What about you? Will you be happier without me?” Years of doubt bubbled up from the dark abyss he'd locked it away in. Mason had never allowed them to reveal the slightest hint of their clandestine affair. Ty had struggled to ignore the way it made him feel less than worthy but they were riding close to their raw emotions already. Lack of sleep, misery and the danger they both sensed had them on edge.

“Yes.” Mason didn't hesitate for an

instant.

The affirmation stabbed Tyler straight in the heart. Reeling, he grabbed the duffle bag Mason had already packed for him then strode out the door, intending never to return.

If Mason wanted him to claim Lacey, that's what he would do. At least she would love him honestly.

Chapter Five

Tyler pocketed the key Lacey had stashed under the welcome mat. Was everyone he loved crazy? She and Rob had argued often about that particular lapse in security but maybe her carelessness was partially their fault. They'd sheltered her from the crimes that had become routine in their jobs, preserving her illusion of safety in the lazy, mid-western city they lived in.

Well, he wouldn't be replacing it anytime soon.

He shrugged the duffle onto the entryway carpet before making a quick round of

the first floor to confirm the backdoor and windows remained secure. No lights shone downstairs, though Rob's big-ass TV murmured on low, and nothing seemed out of place. The quiet must have bothered her.

How could he have left her in isolation for three entire days? The time he'd spent hunkered down, freezing his man-berries off in the most uncomfortable car on earth across the street had seemed like some bizarre penance for what he'd done. If he'd still been her friend, or her lover, he could have manned his post from the cozy house. Instead, he'd destroyed both relationships with one fell swoop and he feared Lacey had

suffered for his foolishness.

He had to convince her to take him back. How could he do that without explaining why he'd left in the first place and how everything was different now? He wouldn't blame her if she told him to go straight to hell, do not pass go. When had his life gotten so fucked up?

A nightlight emitted a warm glow from the bathroom that adjoined both Rob and Lacey's rooms. She'd left the door ajar so that a golden beam spilled from the crack across her four-poster bed. His heart skipped a beat when he caught sight of the bruised circles staining the porcelain skin under her eyes. At times

like this, he understood why Mason called her doll.

Tyler didn't intend to disturb her, but the fragile rasp of her uneven breathing drew him closer until he perched on the lip of the mattress. She lay on her stomach, dressed in sweats and one of Rob's ratty old police department T-shirts. Her pillow obscured one delicate hand while the other clawed at the flannel sheet beneath her.

As he watched, helpless, she began to tremble. When she whimpered, instincts kicked in. He reached out to stroke her back but the second his palm connected with her spine, she bolted awake. Before

he could grab her, she'd scrambled away. Her shoulders slammed into the headboard with enough force to jar the entire bed.

In her shaking, doubled-fisted grasp—aimed point blank at his chest—she clasped Rob's pistol.

“Holy shit!” He lowered his voice to a croon, hoping to break through the feral zeal in her eyes. “It's me. Tyler. I'm here. I'm not going to hurt you. Put the gun down.”

“Ty?” Her faint question seemed to echo from a million miles away.

“Yeah, little one. It’s me.” He inched forward until he could deflect the barrel long enough to pry it from her grasp.

“You’re safe.”

He set the gun on the nightstand after verifying it hadn’t been loaded. Thank God. For a moment he’d been afraid she intended to harm herself. Why else did someone fall asleep with a gun in their hand?

The fog began to clear from her dazed expression as he crawled across the mattress to gather her into his arms. For several minutes, she allowed him to rock her while he whispered calming nonsense in her ear. The close contact

soothed his jangled nerves. He'd missed touching her after just one tiny taste of ambrosia.

Then, she asked, "What are you doing here? Is something wrong? Did something else happen?"

He hated the alarm in her voice and the tension that snapped into her muscles.

"Nothing like that, sweetheart." He continued to rub her back, more for himself than her at this point. "I came to install your call monitor."

"Oh." Her arms popped up, shoving until she dislodged his hold, then she

stumbled off the far side of the bed.

Goddamn, he'd been here less than ten minutes and he'd said the wrong thing already.

Lacey bolted in an attempt to escape to the bathroom, but her unsteady legs didn't quite hold her and she stumbled. She would have fallen if he hadn't rushed to her side to support her. In the dim light her cheeks were so pale they practically glowed.

“When's the last time you had something to eat, Lace?” As if on cue, her stomach growled.

“Does coffee count?” She grimaced.

“Hell, no. Come on, let’s go downstairs. I’ll fix you up a little dinner and we can talk. There are a few things I need to tell you.” He tucked a stray strand of her glossy walnut hair behind her ear while he hoped she’d give him a chance to make things right.

“I need a minute to freshen up first.” Lacey tried a tentative smile to persuade Tyler to buy her chipper facade but she doubted it fooled him for a second.

“You sure you’re okay? Were you

having the same nightmare as the other night?”

Of course I'm not okay, people! “It was nothing. I'm good now. Go ahead, I'll be right down.” Before he could argue, she slipped into the bathroom and locked the door.

She stared at herself in the mirror, hardly recognizing the woman looking back. She worked a comb through her tangles, brushed her teeth and then splashed cool water on her face in an unsuccessful attempt to eliminate some of the puffiness. Not that she gave a shit what the jerk in her kitchen thought of her. After all, he'd left her flat when she

needed him most only to return on official business.

Yeah, right.

She peeked at the clock. 8 p.m. She estimated she'd slept about five hours. Suddenly, she felt wide awake. What had she been thinking, luxuriating in the security of Tyler's arms? By now she should know the only person she could count on was herself.

Huffing out a sigh, she trudged down the stairs as a lump of dread settled in her throat when she anticipated their awkward conversation. Halfway there, she heard the microwave beep. Even

nuking pushed the limits of Ty's dreadful culinary abilities. Against her will, a tiny smirk lifted the corners of her mouth as she watched him grab two bowls, some spoons and napkins from around the kitchen as though it were his own. Dark jeans hugged his lean thighs and tight ass. A snug burgundy T-shirt layered over a long sleeve white thermal completed his casual ensemble.

He looked good enough to eat.

“Why am I not surprised?” She wrinkled her nose in an exaggerated sniff. Maybe she could force their interactions back into friendship territory. “Smells like world renowned Chef Boyardee. Aren't

we a little too old for this stuff?”

The radiant grin he flashed in her direction threw her off balance as her stomach flip-flopped. And not because of the aroma of their supper. Ty slid a stool out from beneath the butcher-block island then patted the cushion. “Hop up. You’re never too old for Spaghetti-O’s. Certainly not at twenty-three. Besides, why mess with perfection?”

They settled into a companionable silence filled only with the soft clinking of their spoons and her reminiscence. The taste of their favorite teenaged meal comforted her.

“I didn’t realize we had these in the pantry. The can was probably ten years old at least.”

“I brought them with me, little one.”

His thoughtfulness astounded her though it shouldn’t have been surprising. Tyler had always possessed an intrinsic empathy that made him the natural support system of their group.

“Do you remember how we’d fight over who got the most meatballs? I miss the days when that was the most pressing thing on our minds.”

He blanketed her hand with his before

giving it a gentle squeeze. “I didn’t count them out like Rob used to but I eyeballed it and it was pretty close.”

Derailing thoughts kept her from returning his levity. Thinking back, she supposed they’d all had their roles. Tyler, the shoulder to cry on. Mason, the protector. Rob, the responsible peacekeeper. And her... Well, she wasn’t quite sure how she fit in, unless it was as the pain in the ass rebellious little sister.

Not exactly a flattering thought.

She pushed the half empty bowl away from her as her appetite disintegrated.

Palms outward, Ty raised his hands to shoulder height. “Hey, come on. I only stole a couple extra out of your dish. I swear.”

The wounded puppy dog look he shot from under his long ebony lashes penetrated her gloom.

“No worries. Here, take the rest.” She noticed for the first time that his bowl had been scraped clean.

Uncharacteristic lines etched his brow. “Are you sure you’re finished? You didn’t eat very much.”

“Please, stop worrying.” Lacey reached

out to swipe a dot of sauce from the corner of his mouth but he caught her wrist and licked the dab from her finger before she could evade him.

Her eyelids fluttered as she battled the rush of excitement incited by the swipe of his tongue over the sensitive pad of her finger. He had flown right past the friendship barrier she struggled to reconstruct. Mason had warned them sleeping together would put a kink in their lifelong relationship but she didn't know how to fix things now.

“I can't help but worry. Don't you know how much I care about you?” Somehow, he'd managed to tug her closer until his

whisper tickled the fly-away hairs at her temple.

“You don’t have to do this, Ty.” She attempted to shake him off but he wouldn’t budge. “What we did... We can forget it ever happened.”

“I’ll never forget.”

“Don’t sound so irritated. I thought that’s what you’d want after you skipped out.”

“No, this is what I want...”

Before she could object, he covered her tense mouth with his then teased the seam of her lips until she surrendered.

The steamy kiss obliterated her rational thoughts of restoring their platonic status. They made out in the middle of the kitchen like horny teenagers. When he boosted her to the counter and situated his trim hips between her thighs, one of their bowls skittered off the platform. It shattered on the tiles below.

The clatter whisked her back to reality. With a shake of her head she braced herself on stiff arms behind her, creating a chasm between their heaving chests. What would she do when he changed his mind again? Mason had been right. She couldn't afford to lose him, too. "I'm sorry, Ty. This isn't going to work."

“Wait. Just give me a second here.” He swiped his knuckles across his reddened lips then shook his head as though to clear his thoughts. “I didn’t mean for this to happen like this. I know I fucked everything up, Lacey. It was your first time. I should have stayed...”

“It’s not that.” She interrupted before he could say something he didn’t mean, though it surprised her to hear anything over the pounding of her heart. “I understand sex is different things to different people. You gave me what I needed. I had no right to expect more. But I can’t do it again knowing that come morning you’ll be on your way. I’m not cut out for casual encounters.”

“I’m not going anywhere this time, little one.” He leaned forward to rest his forehead on hers. “If you’ll have me...”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep. I value your friendship too much to risk it for a few minutes of pleasure.”

“Minutes?”

A chuckle bubbled inside her at his typical wounded male pride. “You know what I mean.”

“Now you sound like Mason.” He grumbled beneath his breath before turning serious. “Things have changed, Lacey.”

“In the past seventy-two hours?” Her incredulousness rang through the question.

“Yeah.” He didn’t elaborate but his eyes shifted away for a moment. “I can’t give you the details but...yeah. Everything is different now.”

“I want to believe you.” A zing of discomfort made her realize she bit her lip as she considered her options. “But what about all the other times? I’ve practically thrown myself at both you and Mason before. You’ve always turned away.”

She thought she disguised the trembling

of her voice quite well but he noticed anyway.

“Ah, shit. I’m so sorry for hurting you. That’s not what I intended. You have no idea how painful it was to let you go, to turn you down when I wanted to devour you. Rob and Mason convinced me you weren’t ready but I think I’ve been screwing things up for a while now. Give me one more chance, Lace. It’s more than I deserve but I swear I won’t disappoint you. I’m in this for the long haul.”

Was he really saying these things straight from her dreams? She had only one option.

“Let’s take things one step at a time.” She smoothed his brow. “I’m not asking for forever. I’m just saying we give it a try and see what happens. Can you commit to that?”

“Hell, yes. You’re amazing.” He surrounded her in a tight embrace while he pressed light kisses to her face and neck. “You know that, right?”

“Of course.” She beamed up at him.

A laugh burst from his chest, lifting her heart. “And incorrigible.”

His hand swiped her wrists from the counter, dropping her flat as he pinned

them above her head. In the process, her bowl shot out from beneath her, spilling the contents on the counter.

Unconcerned, Tyler proceeded to tickle her.

Her legendary sensitivity made her a giant target for this kind of torture. She writhed on the cool surface, trying for some purchase to avoid his hands. Each squirm and thrash ground her body against his. She laughed through the sensual torment, feeling free. She didn't have to hide the way he turned her on with his intimate teasing for once. For the first time in three days she felt at ease.

When his fingers hit the vulnerable spot on her ribs, she shrieked, “Mercy! Mercy!”

“Hmmm... This has some possibilities.” Tingles ran up her spine as he towered over her, wicked intent gleaming in his bright green gaze. “What will you give me to stop?”

Lacey licked her lips in anticipation. “How about a blow job?”

Chapter Six

Tyler groaned when Lacey wriggled beneath him, getting unintentional revenge by grinding her pelvis against the growing bulge in his jeans.

“I didn’t get to taste you the other day.” She started to scoot off the island but he restrained her. “Please, Ty.”

“There’re broken dishes on the floor. You can’t kneel there.” The world spun around her when he positioned her as he pleased. On her back, her head hung off the counter close to where Ty stood. She watched upside down as he shoved up the hem of his cotton shirts then yanked

the button fly of his jeans wide apart. From the gap in the straining fabric, he withdrew his aching cock. “And, God help me, I can’t make it upstairs. Suck me, little one.”

One of his hands nudged the jeans past his hips far enough to free his balls before gathering the fall of her hair into his palm as he supported her neck. She moaned when he tugged her into position but, just before his other hand guided his erection between her lips, he paused. “Have you ever done this before? Don’t take more than you’re comfortable with.”

She winked up at him. “I’m not that

innocent, Ty.”

A low growl rumbled from his chest. “I liked thinking of you as mine.”

With deliberate languor designed to drive him insane, she stretched her neck to sip the glistening drop off the tip. Then she flicked her tongue against the sensitive underside of the head before licking a path along the prominent vein to the base of his erection, nestled in his trimmed pubic hair.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of his free hand clamped onto the edge of the island as he fought to restrain himself and let her have her way with

him. Encouraged, she engulfed his sac in her lips, sucking his balls with gentle pulls.

“I’m going to hunt down the dude who taught you that.” His rasp betrayed his arousal. When she chuckled around his vulnerable flesh, his cock jumped against her chin. “Shit! I want to see you. Lift up so I can get these off.”

The waistband of her cutoff sweats slipped over her hips. Ty flung them across the room. They hit the wall then slid to the floor. When he realized she didn’t wear panties to bed, he groaned then leaned over her torso to bury his face between her thighs. Her mouth

opened wide on a sigh just as he lunged forward to lap at the arousal coating her folds.

The position thrust his shaft toward her open mouth. In one long motion, she took him inside, stopping only when his impressive hard-on bumped the back of her throat. He widened his stance, giving her room to maneuver even as he flung an arm over the far edge of the island to perform a blind search of the contents of the drawer between her dangling calves.

If his cock hadn't stuffed her mouth she would have asked what the hell he was rummaging around for at a time like this but she didn't have to wait long to find

out. Content to savor his earthy taste, along with the shudders racking his steel-hard abdomen, her cheeks hollowed as she began to suck him with measured draws.

Lost in the act of gifting him with pleasure, the press of something smooth and cool against her swollen pussy surprised her. She flinched at the sensation, which contrasted the velvet warmth of Ty's gifted mouth and fingers.

He separated them long enough to reassure her. "Relax, little one. I'm going to make this better for you."

The bulk of his torso blinded her to his

actions, leaving her to focus on his touch alone. When he buried one long finger in her soaked pussy, the sparks of pleasure threatened to burn her to cinders. She paused in her seductive rhythm with his cock nudging her palate. The disruption caused her to choke.

“You’re alright. Breathe through your nose, sweetheart. You’re doing great.” The gravelly instructions reached through her panic. After she realized it worked, the technique spurred her to experiment. She tipped her head back further and swallowed. The shout of ecstasy that accompanied Ty’s slide into her throat provided all the encouragement she needed.

Her smug satisfaction at pleasing him flew out the window when he countered with a trick of his own. Beside the intrusion of his broad finger, something prodded the moist mouth of her opening. At first, the addition felt slim, cool and smooth but, as he inserted the object along the length of his embedded digit, it spread her further apart.

She moaned around Ty's girth. The wrinkled sac of his balls drew taut against her upper lip.

"Oh, yeah." He threw in a light lick on the tip of her clit for good measure.

"You like that, don't you? You're such a naughty girl—loving being fucked by a

turkey baster in the middle of your kitchen. Aren't you? The blinds are open, you know. What would Mr. Anderson think if he caught a peek?"

Her hum of acknowledgement inspired another curse from his direction. The taboo component of his actions ratcheted her arousal even higher just as he must have planned. The dual penetration of his finger and the cooking utensil filled her to bursting. In desperation, she attempted to urge him to match her increasing tempo as she continued to massage his cock with her tongue and her oral muscles.

The tapered section of the implement

tunneled deeper, enlarging her rings of muscle to accommodate it. When it lodged fully in her pussy, Ty dipped his head then feathered a light breath across her clit.

She tried to beg but the bulk of his throbbing erection overflowing her mouth garbled her request. It didn't matter. Ty knew what she needed. His tongue traced the valley of her slit, circling the tight bundle of nerves at the top, nearly launching her into orgasm. A moment later his lips surrounded her clit. She had to squeeze her eyes shut to concentrate on keeping her teeth away from his shaft.

Her nails dug into the backs of his thighs as she grabbed for an anchor in an attempt to force her aching flesh closer to the source of her overwhelming pleasure. Lights danced behind her lids. In her mind, angels sang the hallelujah chorus when his amazing tongue flicked across her clit in the perfect counterpoint to his rhythmic nibbles.

When she thought she couldn't stand another minute stretched tight on the rack of desire he'd transformed the kitchen island into, he began to thrust his finger and the baster in harmony with the delights provided by his mouth. She writhed beneath him, relishing the press of his ribs and the way his abdomen

teased her nipples.

The veins in his cock bulged as it grew even harder, longer, in her mouth a moment before she tasted the seductive musk of his precum. When he attempted to withdraw she refused to let him retreat, instead redoubling her efforts to make him erupt first.

“Shit! If that’s the way you want to play, baby...” Tyler twisted the plastic barrel until it undulated against the rough patch just over her pubic bone, trapping it between the two hard surfaces. She didn’t stand a chance. Pleasure washed over her, bathing every nerve ending in her body with delight. The reflexive

swallows of her throat matched the spasming muscles in her pussy as her climax crashed through her.

Tyler chanted her name against her clit as his seed flooded her throat.

When Lacey came to her senses, he was layering butterfly kisses along her thighs. She stroked his powerful flank. In response, he stood then smiled down at her as he tucked himself back in his jeans and finished arranging his clothes. He hopped over the shards of pottery on the floor, came to stand between her knees and pulled her upright until her head lay on his shoulder. Lightheaded, either from the intensity of her orgasm or

from her reclined position, she welcomed his solid embrace.

“You know, I’ve probably imagined being with you more than a million times.” His husky whisper fanned his breath over her ear. “But I never came close to understanding how phenomenal it would be to finally have you. Would it freak you out if I dropped the L-bomb right now?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, then I won’t. Yet.”

She didn’t expect his reaction as he reached around to hug her.

“What the hell?”

Curious, she turned to see the palm he held out for inspection. Covered in red sauce after touching her back, she realized they'd made quite a mess when they had each other for dessert.

“Oops.” She chuckled. “I guess we have some cleaning up to do.”

“It looks like you took the brunt of the damage. Why don't you head upstairs and shower while I get things in order down here?” His eyes sparkled with mischief. “Make it a long shower. Maybe I'll catch up with you.”

“Deal.” He placed a sweet kiss on her lips with easy familiarity that meant more to her than a hundred orgasms. Even the earth-shattering kind. Being with Tyler like this felt right.

He set her on the floor away from the unfortunate bowl then gave her ass a light smack. “Don’t get me started again. Go on. I’ll be up as soon as I take care of this and plug in the call catcher.”

The reminder of trouble caused her to flinch.

“Shit. Sorry, Lacey. I shouldn’t have said anything. It’ll only take me a few minutes then I’ll help you get to sleep.”

She had no doubt about how he intended to do that. Looking around one last time, she hoped the hot water lasted. Sauce had flown everywhere. It puddled on the counter, smeared on the wall and splattered across the floor.

At the far end of the hallway, she spotted an oversized gym bag abandoned in the middle of the floor. She flicked a glance over her shoulder as they made their way toward the front stairway.

“You presumed I’d invite you to stay?” she teased.

“Well, uh, Mason sort of kicked me out.”

“You’re fighting?” The guys never argued for longer than it took to land a few blows. Then they’d move on like nothing had happened. “Over what?”

He didn’t answer.

Oh, shit. “Over me?” She stopped dead and pivoted to face him.

“Now who’s being presumptuous, little one?” He tweaked her nose with his index finger.

Heat rose to her cheeks.

“I’ll sleep on the couch if I’m not welcome in your bed.”

Was it her imagination or was his teasing an attempt to cover his wounded tone? She placed her hand on his biceps then squeezed. “Of course you’re welcome. I’d love to snuggle with you. The truth is, Tyler...I’m so glad you’re here.”

He turned with brisk efficiency to gather his belongings, but not before she saw the moisture in his eyes. What was going on?

“I’m glad I am, too. Now, go ahead. This should be a quick job. I just need to plug it in then activate the device on the department’s website. It’s alright if I use your computer quick?”

She wondered if he had latched on to any excuse to stall in order to prevent questions about his reaction. “Actually, the stupid thing got hit with a virus this afternoon. But I suppose you could start up Rob’s if you disconnect it from our network first. Hopefully, it should still be clean. My mind was on...other things. I must have clicked something I shouldn’t have.”

“What do you mean?” His instant focus singed her with its intensity.

“There’s a reporter who keeps leaving me messages. She must have been pissed that I haven’t called her back. She seemed kind of desperate. I opened an

email from her and, next thing I know, my hard drive is whacked.”

“How do you know the message was from this woman?” Tyler’s cop face masked the vulnerable features of her lover.

“It had the same subject. We need to talk.”

Mason tried to convince himself the current situation warranted the perimeter check he conducted on the Daughtry house but, deep down, he admitted his late night stroll had a lot less to do with

security than his need to catch a glimpse of Tyler and Lacey. He didn't expect to find anything out of place. The more he and Ty dug, the more it seemed Rob's murder had really been a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, no matter what their guts insisted.

Maybe suspecting foul play had helped them rationalize the tragedy. Hunting leads might have been his equivalent of Lacey's frantic funeral arrangements. He'd never doubted his intuition before, but every place they'd looked for clues had turned up exactly nothing.

Helpless, he accepted that he'd failed Rob. Now, he missed Tyler after just

hours apart and the invitation he'd seen in Lacey's eyes the past few days haunted him. He paused to kick a rock out of the path into the trunk of the oak where they'd built forts in elementary school.

With a sigh, he braced his shoulders against the bark then dropped his head back to stare up at the stars. Why did bad shit always happen to good people? Rob had been the best of them.

Generous, rock solid and fun to be around, he'd never have begrudged his best friends a relationship. Even if it left him the odd man out.

But that was just another example of

how Rob had been a better man than him.

He had to quit moping and focus on something useful. There were more places he could canvass for witnesses. Some of the seedier nightclubs near the crime scene would be hitting their peak soon. If he hurried, he could make it across town to interview anyone willing to talk. For the right price.

Mason shoved off the tree—intending to cut across the backyard—when he noticed the kitchen light beamed like a beacon in the night, exposing anyone inside to prying eyes. He flipped open his cell to call Ty and give him hell

about leaving the curtains open when a crimson smear sent terror spinning through his guts.

Dropping to a crouch, he snuck from cover to cover until he'd made his way close enough to discern a trail of blood on the wall. A large splotch at the top continued with streaks beneath like someone gushing blood had slammed against it then slid down when they could no longer stand. Broken dishes littered the floor. Two of the stools had been knocked over. There had clearly been a struggle inside.

Instead of panic, or fear, ice cold rage honed his instincts. Whatever bastard

had done this would not get away with hurting another one of his friends. He couldn't stand to lose someone else he loved. Please let them be okay.

If the attacker still occupied the far side of the kitchen, he'd never make it up to the back door without being spotted. Especially since the top stair had creaked for years.

Mason ensured he remained out of the line of sight, tucked close against the house, staying below the windows. He had to act fast. Gun drawn, he swung over the banister on the side of the porch then crept to the front door. After a quick sweep below the mat, he cursed his luck.

The one time Lacey had actually listened to their advice and removed the key, he needed it.

Fuck! So much for stealth.

He wrapped the knuckles of one hand in his shirt, took a deep breath then punched out the front door's sidelight. In a flash, he'd reached around, flipped the lock and stepped through. A muffled curse from the office drew his attention like a neon sign. He swung around, gun aimed at the moron attempting to hide under Rob's desk. God help him if he was the one who'd hurt Ty or Lacey.

Please let them be okay.

Mason rushed into the study and yelled, “Don’t move! Police!”

The man under the desk banged his head hard as he straightened in alarm. “Have you lost your fucking mind, Clark?”

Ty backed out from beneath the desk with a network cable clutched in his hand. His face screwed into a mask of disbelief as he massaged the knot that must have been forming there.

Uneven thumps echoed on the stairs behind him as Lacey joined the ruckus. “Oh my God. Ty? What happened to the door? I thought I heard something from in the shower!”

She stood dripping all over the hardwood floor, dressed in a scrap of terrycloth. Caught between them, Mason nearly got whiplash looking back and forth. They were definitely not injured.

He addressed Ty. “You’re okay?”

“I was until you charged in here like a maniac! I’m getting damn sick of people pointing guns at me today!”

A delicate hand landed on Mason’s forearm, pushing until he realized he still aimed at Tyler. He flipped the safety on, then tucked the gun in his waistband. While Mason waited for the ringing in his ears to fade, Ty made his way over

to their sides. Mason caught the bewildered glance the other two exchanged.

“What the hell happened to the kitchen?” he demanded.

“Um...” Lacey blushed.

Tyler put his arm around her soaking wet shoulders and said, “We got a little carried away during dinner.”

“Carried away?” Mason strode through the doorway to have another look at the carnage. “Do you know what it looks like in here?”

They crowded up behind him to peek at the wreckage. Remnants of adrenaline pumped through his system, heightening his senses. He detected the scent of Lacey's vanilla shower gel as well as the familiar scent of sex from Ty.

He strode over to the wall to drag a finger through the thick crimson goo on the paneling before bringing it to his nose to smell it. The zesty tomato aroma along with the tiny noodle ring finally sank in. He whipped around fast enough to catch Ty's satisfied grin.

Before he could say anything, Lacey stepped between them and wrapped her arms around Mason's waist. "I'm sorry

we frightened you.”

Mason had to separate them fast before she detected his instant erection through the thin towel surrounding her. His imagination played through a whole new scenario. When he thrust her away, she flashed him a hurt look. “I’m going to run upstairs and throw something on then I’ll get this mess cleared away.”

She fled up the stairs before he figured out how to erase her misconceptions.

“Way to go, asshole. You have a real knack for making people feel like shit about genuine affections, you know that? She didn’t do anything wrong. If you

have a problem with this, take it out on me not her.”

“Shit. It caught me off guard, Ty.”

He nodded. Then the little fucker had the nerve to beam without even attempting to hide his amusement.

“Someday, this is going to be mighty funny.” Ty clapped him on the shoulder.

“I doubt that. Let me board up the window then I’ll get out of your way.” The flare of jealousy overtaking him now that his rage had worn off sickened him. He couldn’t have his cake and eat it, too.

Could he? He'd banished Tyler from their home though it immediately felt foreign without the laughter and the easy camaraderie they shared. He knew exactly when their boyhood friendship had morphed into something deeper but, on that pivotal day, he never could have foreseen the lasting implications of such an innocent act. And, once he'd realized the dangerous lure, he'd shut the other man out of his sex life.

Of course, that hadn't lasted long.

The dingy corridor of one of the seedier BDSM clubs they'd frequented in the early days popped into his mind. He'd never forget the things he'd driven Tyler

to with his harsh words and lack of understanding. It had taken just that single glimpse—in the flashing multicolor lights that illuminated the secluded area in debauched freeze frames—of the man abusing Ty in full view of anyone who dared to look, to get him to capitulate to his friend's plea for experimentation. As long as they were careful. Discreet.

Mason had fulfilled Ty's darker desires. He just hadn't realized that somewhere along the way, they'd become his own as well. He wasn't gay, even thinking of himself as bi rankled since it'd only ever been Ty that attracted him, but he couldn't deny he craved Tyler in the

same primal way he hungered for Lacey.

Mason had thought he could push the other man away, though he knew he'd suffer for it. The power exchange, the rush, and the wild way he could let go with Ty had addicted him but Tyler's patient, carefree love would be perfect for Lacey. He loved them both enough to be grateful they'd have each other. Neither would betray a bond this strong. Had he stolen years from them by being selfish, keeping Tyler separated from her in the name of her innocence?

He could only be sure of one thing anymore: he'd set the two people he loved most in the world on the path to

happiness. If he made a clean break, they might have a chance at making it work.

“Wait, Mason.” Heat blossomed from the spot where Ty’s restraining hand rested. The same place Lacey had touched earlier. “I want you to take a look at this with me. I think I might have found something.”

Chapter Seven

As Lacey scrubbed the wall then swept the shattered bowl into the dustpan, she wondered what the guys were debating in the office but some part of her dreaded asking. She'd stalled facing them about as long as possible when Tyler appeared in the doorway.

“Are you okay?”

Hell no... Well, maybe just a little bit better. “Yeah, just finishing in here.”

“You up to hanging out for a few? We'd like to walk through this with you.”

“Sure.” She discarded the evidence of their indiscretion while she tried to ignore the ember of lust that had been smoldering in her belly since her shower—and the promise of more—had been interrupted.

Tyler caught her hand, tugged her close then enfolded her in his arms. When she burrowed into the taut muscles covered by thin cotton, he brushed a kiss over her temple then whispered in her ear. “You didn’t do anything wrong, little one. It’s nobody’s damn business what you do in your own home. Least of all his since he chooses not to join us.”

“I know.” She smiled up at him then

sighed. “I just hate the distance I feel between us. I want things to be easy again.”

“If you’re tired or don’t want to deal with this shit, sneak upstairs to bed. I’ll come tuck you in after he goes.”

“Thanks, but I can handle it. I want to find out who this bitch is. Besides, I wouldn’t be able to fall asleep at this time of night anyway. I’ll wait until you can come entertain me.” She tossed him a wink.

“Did I tell you yet how amazing you are?”

“I’ll never get tired of hearing it.” She rose onto her tiptoes to peck his cheek before sauntering into the adjoining space.

Mason occupied more than half of the loveseat tucked along the inside wall next to the radiator with his masculine sprawl but, other than the desk chair where Ty had set up shop inspecting her computer, there weren’t any civilized options.

She refused to plop onto the floor like a vagabond just to avoid him. Instead, she squeezed in next to his splayed, muscular thigh, feeling awkward about where they touched for the first time in

her life. She shifted until the arm of the sofa dug into her ribs but she managed to maintain a miniature rift between them. The insulation did nothing to block the alluring scent of his delicious woody cologne.

“Listen, Lacey...” He patted her knee then drew away as though unsure of what to do. “You know I’m no good at this emotional shit. So, I’ll just say this. I’m happy for you and Ty. You guys surprised me before, that’s all.”

It would have been impossible to speak around the band constricting her chest so, instead, she nodded.

Tyler cleared his throat to break the extended lull in the conversation. “I noticed when I was hooking up the call monitor that the house phone had been switched off. Were you getting a lot of calls today, little one?”

Grateful for something else to talk about, she nodded again. “Nothing ridiculous but, like I told Mason before, a bunch of reporters tried to get in touch not to mention all the people who just found out about Rob one way or the other.”

This time Mason’s hand entwined their fingers and stayed. The knot of tension unwound a bit when she relaxed, eliminating the artificial gap forcing

them apart.

“It annoyed me after a while so I killed the ringer. But it really pissed me off when that shithead reporter crossed the line by infecting my comp with a virus because I wouldn’t answer her calls. Can I press charges if you guys can figure out who did it?” She frowned as she thought back. “I don’t think I’ve backed up my data in a while. I had some digital pictures of Rob on there from Ty’s birthday party that might be lost forever. Bitch.”

“I think I saved copies of most of those when you emailed them to us all.”
Mason displayed his rare, but awesome,

full-on smile. “I definitely kept the one where you busted Rob making out with Gina as blackmail. That’s a classic.”

She swallowed hard against the memory of laughing over that image the next day. Everyone had teased Saint Rob for getting drunk enough to haul his timid girlfriend outside for a few stolen kisses and maybe something more. It’d been so out of character for her brother, Lacey’d assumed Gina would be joining the family soon.

“After we’re done here, let me see what I can do. I might be able to restore them.” Ty was the most technologically savvy of the three of them.

“Thank you.” She stared across the room into the smoky depths of his eyes until Mason asked another question.

“Did the aggressive reporter identify herself in any way?”

“No. She just kept saying, ‘We have to talk’.”

“Did she mention the name of her publication?” Mason’s intensity made the query seem like part of an interrogation.

She thought back to the messages she’d erased from various sources. “No, I don’t think she did. Someone called

from all of the big papers and news channels though.”

“If she didn’t say she was a journalist or identify who she worked for, what made you sure she was a newshound?”

“I-I’m not positive. Let me think.” She tried to remember when she’d first come to think of the woman as The Annoying Reporter in her mind. “I guess it was because, in one of the very first messages, she said she wanted to get my side of the story.”

“How many times do you think she called, little one?” Ty seemed concerned which worried her in turn. Had she

missed something? For several days her mind had been scattered between grief over Rob and Ty's betrayal.

"Probably a dozen times a day." She shrugged.

"Do you remember what she sounded like?" Mason commandeered her attention again.

"Well, it was definitely a woman. She sounded average. Not young, not old. She didn't have an especially high or low pitched voice. The only thing I noticed besides her irritating demand was a slight scratchiness. Almost like... well, like my voice after I'd been crying

a lot. At first, I almost felt bad imagining she was going to get fired for not getting inside info but she was so pushy that I decided she probably couldn't get anyone to talk to her with such a bad attitude."

Ty winced before he asked, "And you deleted all the messages?"

"Yeah, they were overflowing my voicemail. Not just hers, all of them." She felt foolish now and it made her defensive. "But it won't matter, right? Except to us, this isn't going to be big news forever. She'll go away in a day or two."

Mason squeezed her hand. “I hope you’re right, doll. I’m going to head out for a while now and ask some more questions but, if I don’t get a hit, I’ll have to agree with the chief. Rob was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“I’m going with you, then.” Ty stood up from the desk.

“No, stay here with Lacey. I’ll come back as soon as the crowds play out to see how you’re doing tracking her caller. Put someone on the phone records while you work the PC. If you need help, we can bring in one of the guys from the cyber crimes division.” He didn’t have to say that any one of

them would pitch in to help Rob and his family.

The cushion rose when Mason's bulk unfurled from the dainty furniture. She peeled her gaze from his perfect ass at eye level, then escorted him to the foyer. On impulse, she hugged him tight. Trim muscles flexed under her grasp, which surrounded his waist. Surprise eased her worry when he put his arms around her instead of backing away. He held her close, breathing deep with his face pressed to her still damp hair. After a few blissful moments she forced herself to let go, reaching up to press a quick kiss to his cheek.

She borrowed Rob's line, "Stay safe."

"You too." He left without looking back.

When she turned, she caught Tyler staring at the spot where they'd stood. She couldn't decipher his cryptic expression.

"I didn't even think, Ty. Should I stay away from him?" She rushed to replay the moment and consider the appropriateness of her actions as she returned to the office. This changing dynamic would take some getting used to.

"You never have to worry about that,

little one.” He brushed her hair back from her brow. “You were clear from the beginning that you wanted us both. Do what comes natural when you’re around Mason. Believe me, I understand.”

“Because you’ve shared women with him before?” She tried to make sense of the situation. If he’d mauled another woman not ten feet from her she’d have been seeing red.

“No. Because I know you love him and I do, too.”

“Then why are you fighting?” The deliberate formality between the men

had been nearly palpable. “Life is too short to distance yourself from the people you love.”

“That’s exactly my point, Lacey.” With that, he plopped back down at the desk. He tinkered with the computer until she gave up hope of continuing the conversation. She curled into a ball on the loveseat, with a book she’d never be able to read, while a million thoughts clamored for her attention.

Mason winced when the sight of the board, covering the gap where he'd smashed the etched glass in Lacey's door, greeted him on return. He made a mental note to pick up a replacement pane to install on his day off.

The long, unfruitful night of getting hit on by cheap whores had put him in a bad mood. No amount of jiggling manmade cleavage, G-string-clad booty or mile high stilettos filling the dives he'd canvassed could rouse his interest. His cock had lain dormant in the face of carnal sights that would have enticed him just days ago. His body betrayed him, wanting only things he couldn't have.

The reminder of the incident earlier didn't help.

Despite what he'd told Ty, and himself, it stung to see desire arcing between the pair of them. It made his blood boil with lust. He'd bet his mint 1952 Mickey Mantle card that watching them fuck would be the hottest thing he'd ever seen. The thread of envy weaving through his desire ashamed him. He should be ecstatic for the new couple but he couldn't hush the niggling voice urging him to join in even though a committed threesome could never work long-term.

Both Ty and Lacey had extended open

invitations through their body language earlier in the night. He'd fled the house but going out hadn't served him any better. Worry had plagued his mind the entire time he'd been separated from them, even though he hadn't found a single fact to justify his unease. No one remembered seeing Rob, or hearing anything unusual, that night.

Before he could turn the knob, the door swung open and Tyler asked quietly, "Are you going to stand out there all night or are you going to come in?"

It wasn't sarcasm. The uncertainty in his best friend's eyes cut like a knife.

“I came back, didn’t I?”

“I figured you at fifty-fifty on that one.”

Mason didn’t clue him in to how close he’d come to breaking his promise.

“Did you find anything, Mason?” The weary timbre made it clear Tyler didn’t have high expectations but Mason shook his head anyway.

When Ty joined him on the porch instead of leading the way inside, he knew something was up. What did he want to keep from Lacey? “What’s going on?”

“I found something.” He tensed. “Well, a

couple somethings actually.”

Senses on high alert, Mason waited.

“Start with the worst and work your way back.”

“Right. Well, her computer was definitely targeted. I got it up and running but the email from her anonymous sender didn’t have a virus. I think opening it triggered code already lurking in the background of her operating system. We’ll have to call in some help to find out more than that because the entire message is corrupted. All the text is jumbled. I can’t make heads or tails of it. The complexity makes me think it was professional and

specific.”

“Son of a bitch.” Mason braced himself on the porch railing, arms locked straight as his head dropped. His exhalation puffed out in a white cloud. “I was hoping we were wrong on this one, Ty.”

“I know.”

“What else?” He sighed. How much more could he take?

“I spent some time trying to recover the rest of Lacey’s data files. You know, her pictures and shit. It wasn’t too hard to get it all back but there were some... uh...extra goodies in there, too.”

“Like what?” The run-around piqued his curiosity. Tyler didn’t often mince words like this.

“I think you better come see for yourself. She’s crashed on the little couch in there. Wouldn’t go to bed until she knew you were back safe.”

Guilt raised Mason’s hackles. “Fine. Let’s get this over with. I want to go home for a few hours before our shift starts.”

“You could bunk here. Lacey wouldn’t mind. She cares for you Mason...”

“It would never work. Not tonight. Not

ever.”

“Come inside and check things out before you decide. Just keep your voice low.” Tyler ambled away before Mason could object. He deserved the cool treatment but it rankled nonetheless.

In the office, Ty drew up a second chair he’d scavenged from the kitchen then situated the monitor so they could both view it. Mason kept his eyes averted from Lacey’s sleeping form to ensure he limited his temptations. Sitting knee to knee with Ty when frustration rode him hard was bad enough.

After he spared a quick glance in the

direction of the measured, steady breathing Mason could detect in the quiet room, Ty navigated through the folders on Lacey's hard drive. Under My Pictures, an innocuous looking directory titled Stuff caught his attention. When Ty double clicked then turned the thumbnail feature on, Mason's eyes bugged out.

Pornographic images littered the screen. Judging by the sliver of the scroll bar on the right, there were thousands more where these had come from. "Whoa."

"Yeah, no kidding." The husky tone of Ty's reply made it clear he sported a hard-on at least as painful as the one suddenly jeopardizing Mason's zipper.

Graphic pictures of full-frontal male nudity were the least outrageous items in her bawdy collection. Most of the photos featured women being pleased by multiple men in various ménage scenarios. A large percentage also depicted men engaged in salacious acts with other men—on their knees giving blow jobs, kissing, jerking off together and even having full anal intercourse. But the scores of BDSM scenes included in her fantasy repertoire fascinated him most.

Ty's left hand dropped to his crotch, rearranging the notable bulge there while he navigated the mouse with his right hand. The corner of his mouth pulled up

in a mischievous grin that did nothing to settle Mason's raging hormones.

"I made a copy of a few of my favorites to show you. There's more to her than you want to admit. More than we let her be when we're blinded by the little girl we knew growing up."

Mason didn't bother to mention Rob's threats about keeping their hands to themselves around her. The man had been right. They were too rough for his sister. Mason refused to disgrace the memory of his friend by betraying his wishes the moment he wasn't there to enforce them.

“You can’t change my mind with some dirty pictures, Ty.”

“Fair enough. But, come on, take a look anyway. She has some good shit in here.”

Mason knew he should get up and leave but he was horny, male and only human. The first image Tyler displayed full screen kept him riveted to the chair. A blindfolded woman lay spread-eagled and tied with silk scarves to a mammoth king-sized bed. One man fed her his giant cock while the other knelt between her thighs as he plowed into her pussy.

In addition to arousal, a sense of loss

rocked him. He'd never indulge in fantasies like these again. He couldn't see having a threesome with anyone but Ty. Though they'd never touched each other during one of their liaisons with an adventurous woman, the act itself was a kind of sharing he couldn't conceive of undertaking with someone other than his partner.

Ty had just flipped to the next file—a woman in a suspension harness flanked by several men with their cocks in hand—when something rustled behind him. They'd been so engrossed in the decadent imagery that they hadn't noticed Lacey yawn and stretch.

She'd already made it most of the way to their spot by the computer before Ty started frantically clicking windows closed. Those little X's in the corner must have been hard to hit accurately when most of his blood supply had ventured south because he'd only managed to get rid of a couple by the time she crossed the intimate space.

“You're back.” Her sleep warmed arms looped around Mason's neck in a fleeting embrace as she murmured, “Did either of you find anything?”

In an act of desperation, Mason gave in to his urges and stroked her hair, hoping to keep her face tucked against his chest

while Ty hauled ass on Operation Hide-The-Smut but she didn't hold the awkward position for more than a fraction of a second.

“What the... Are you guys looking at porn?”

Chapter Eight

“Busted.” Ty didn’t bother to conceal his lopsided grin.

“Did Rob ever use this computer?” Mason wanted to know.

“Are you asking if it’s my porn?” Lacey propped a hand on one hip and raised her eyebrow. Who were they to judge? The smell of cheap liquor and cheaper perfume billowed around them. And, if the hungry gleam in their eyes was anything to go by, they had enjoyed the fruits of her searches.

“Well, uh... Yeah. I guess that’s what

I'm asking." At least Mason had the good grace to clear his throat in chagrin.

Screw this. She was done hiding what she wanted most. Like she'd said to Ty before, life was too short to take detours. "Hell yes, it's mine. Can't a girl admire the scenery every once in a while?"

"Um, Lace, this looks more like a habit." Laughter danced in Ty's eyes.

"Well, what the hell good is an internet connection without porn? Besides, it's not like I've had any fun myself. Unlike you guys, I've led a repressed, chaste existence."

“Hey now, what about the Spaghetti-O debacle?”

“Your pride is so easily wounded, stud.” She winked at them. “I meant until recently.”

“So you’ve never tried any of these things, little one?”

Under the heat of their combined stares, she thought she might melt. How much should she confess? Had they found the other files on her hard drive? She settled for part of the truth. “I wanted to.”

“What aren’t you telling us?” Mason’s eyes crinkled as he squinted up at her.

She focused on untangling her fingers from the hem of her T-shirt. They knew all her tells. Instead, she tried to deflect his scrutiny. “Why do you care, Mason? I thought you weren’t interested in my sex life.”

“I just assumed you’d want to clue us in to any other personal tidbits so we can wipe this drive before we turn your computer over to our cyber detective in the morning.”

Her pulse raced and she put out a hand to steady herself on the desk. “Why are you going to do that? To track down the reporter?”

“Damn it, Mason. You have a big mouth sometimes.” Ty’s hands encircled her waist and lifted her across Mason’s imposing frame before settling her in his lap. The space in the room seemed to get much, much smaller as all three of them tucked into the tiny alcove together.

She peeked up at Mason. The serious stare he used to scan her reaction encouraged her to buck up. Though she addressed Ty, her words were meant for the natural leader of their little group. “It’s alright, Ty. I want to know what’s going on. I can handle it.”

He nodded, “I don’t think Anon Y. Mous is a reporter. I think someone else didn’t

want you to get their message, so they scrambled the email.”

Thankful she already sat, she tried to play off the ice freezing her veins. “No problem, I’ll just answer the phone the next time they call.”

Neither man said a word.

“Is the ringer back on?” The hair on her nape stood on end.

“There hasn’t been a single call all night, honey.” Ty situated her closer to his heat. “I think your informant might have given up.”

“We’ll get the data back, Lace.” It would be easy to believe Mason’s assured confidence. “Just let us know if there’s anything else we need to move off this machine before morning.”

The deliberation took a handful of seconds. She couldn’t risk anyone cracking her passwords. “There’s a folder named Jackson.”

A shiver ran up her spine just mentioning the title. Tyler buffed her arms. The lack of reaction from the guys confirmed they didn’t understand what it meant to her.

“All this time... I-I thought Rob had told you.” Though he’d promised to keep the

incident between them, she'd always suspected Ty and Mason knew and that it was the reason they kept their distance from her. She should have known Rob would never break a promise.

“You’re making yourself bleed, Lacey.”

A hint of iron tang burst on her tongue as she licked the spot on her lip she'd worried. “Please, just make sure that folder is gone before anyone else sees my computer.”

Tyler's biceps locked her in place as he reached around her torso. The screen flashed as he pulled up the offensive directory, preparing to transfer it

temporarily to Rob's old computer. As the files copied over, the content metadata flashed across the screen, sealing her fate.

OSPD-Report-2005-215437.pdf now transferring.

Tyler's legs went rock hard beneath her ass when every muscle in his body clenched simultaneously. Beside her, a fierce growl emanated from Mason's behemoth chest. Both men recognized the standard naming convention of a state police report.

“Open it, Tyler.” Mason barked the order.

“No!” She would have rocketed off Ty’s lap but his forearm banded around her waist, pinning her in place.

“What’s this about, Lacey? Tell me or I’ll open it, I swear. If someone’s giving you trouble we need to know the facts.” Tyler had an iron will when it came to those he loved. He would never back down if he thought she might be in danger.

“It’s ancient history guys. Look at the date.” She pointed to the file name.

“This is nothing relevant to either of you.”

Lightning didn’t strike her on the spot

because she crossed her toes while she lied.

“Open it,” Mason repeated.

“I’m sorry, little one.” Tyler sided with the other man. He reached out to select the file.

A huge sigh of relief deflated her when the password protection box popped up, blocking Ty’s attempt.

“Tell him the password, Lacey.”

She refused to obey Mason’s command.

“If you don’t, I’ll call down to the station and have someone pull a hard

copy of the records. Then we won't be the only ones who know your secret."

"It's a state record, not local. You don't have jurisdiction," she argued but she'd already lost. They'd never let it go now.

"You think they won't give us the information? Everyone knows we're like family," Mason persisted.

"I wish you'd trust us, sweetheart." The hurt note layered in Ty's voice convinced her to do things the easy way.

She twisted in his arms to cup his cheek in her palm. "Promise me it won't change things between us." They'd come

so far this evening, she didn't want him to retreat now.

“What did I tell you about that, doll?”

Mason interrupted the moment. “No one can ever promise something that ridiculous.”

“Shut up, Mason.” Ty drew her attention back to his reddened face. “Nothing’s going to keep me from you.”

“EatShitAndDie.”

“What?” His head snapped back.

“My password for this file. It’s EatShitAndDie. Capitalize the first letter

of each word. No spaces.”

Tyler pinched the bridge of his nose while Mason attempted to disguise a laugh with a cough. However, the mood didn't last long. As soon as he typed in the code and hit enter, the damning document polluted the screen.

“Mother fucker!” The viciousness of Mason's snarled curse caused her to flinch more than the gory photo pasted to the top of the scanned paperwork. She'd seen the reminder of her stupidity enough times to be numb to the shocking sight.

“Please tell me that's not you, little one.” Tyler crushed her to his chest. She

squirmed in his hold, which threatened to crack her ribs. Instead of reading the text for the millionth time, she watched their horrified faces as they leaned in to peruse it. The words were burned into her memory.

“It looks worse than it really was. I sort of passed out by the time the officer with the camera got up the stairs.” She could guess what they were seeing but, in her mind’s eye, she remembered how grateful she’d been for the darkness that obliterated her mortification after her rescuer informed her she was safe and that Rob was on the way.

An industrial space with exposed pipes

and vents painted midnight black, illuminated by hundreds of dripping maroon candles. Her limp body hung at an awkward angle from four shackles. The two affixed to the floor had ensnared her ankles while the two on chains bolted to the ceiling gouged her wrists. Bright blood matching the wax oozed from the lacerations she'd made in her wrists as she thrashed in the bindings, fighting to escape the lash of Jackson's whip. More crimson stained the skin of her back which had been sliced to ribbons beneath the cat-o-nine-tails.

“The hell it does! Who did this to you?”
Tyler's entire body shook with rage.

“I only knew him as Jackson.” She swallowed then turned away, ashamed of her naiveté. “I met him through an online chatroom.”

“Why weren’t we aware of this?” Mason broke his silence with a flat monotone that scared her.

“I begged Rob not to tell you. But, the way you two treated me like a leper all those years when I could sense your desire... I thought he’d spilled for sure.” Moisture gathered at the corner of her eyes. She focused on the ceiling and blinked a few times to clear the tears. She refused to shed a single drop more today.

“Rob threatened to destroy us if we ever touched you. Said we were too wild for you.” Ty’s deep sigh rocked her forward. “I thought it was just standard big brother overprotective crap but Mason always swore there was more to it. I should have seen it, too.”

“You turned skittish that summer you were home from school.” Mason looked mad enough to spit nails. “I thought it was because we crowded you, so we backed off. Way off.”

“All I ever wanted was for you to come closer.” So much for her no-more-tears resolution. “It hurt so bad to see you give all those women what I needed. D-

Do you remember my eighteenth birthday party?”

Ty groaned. “I couldn’t accept your offer. Mason and I promised each other we wouldn’t touch you until you turned twenty-one, no matter how hard it got. You weren’t ready.”

“I know it was stupid.” She hung her head not wanting to add to their guilt but, now that they’d started sharing, it felt cathartic to get it out in the open. Enough time had passed to dull the ragged edges of her pain and fear. “But I thought I’d show you both I could handle your needs.”

“What did you know about our needs?”
Mason fired. “You were just a kid!”

“That’s what you thought.” She scowled at him. “You don’t think girls talk? Cindy was my best friend and you screwed her older sister, Theresa, ten ways to Sunday. She told us all about the things you two did to her when I was still in middle school. At night I dreamed you were doing them to me instead. But when I turned eighteen and you still wouldn’t have me, I knew it was time to let go. Time to find someone who would teach me about my desires. I thought maybe then you’d want me.”

She paused to collect her thoughts while

they stared in shock, then continued. “I’d heard rumors about fancy bondage clubs and I wanted to know what it was like. Except, where the hell do you find something like that in our ho-hum town?”

Tyler looked like he was about to rattle off a suggestion or two but he opted to keep his mouth shut after he caught the death-ray glare Mason aimed at him.

“So I did something incredibly stupid and trusted this guy. Jackson. He seemed so normal and understanding. We met in person for drinks. He was charming, but I think I had too many martinis.

Everything got foggy. Next thing I knew, we were in...that place. He changed the

second he had me locked up.” She shuddered. “He flipped out and started yelling at me, cursing, telling me I was a whore to want such nasty things. That he was on a mission. And, well... You see how it turned out. I got lucky someone passing by heard my screams and kicked in the door. I was such an idiot.”

Mason reached for her then. He cupped her chin, forcing her to meet his gaze.

“I don’t ever want to hear that bullshit from you again. You were young and inexperienced but you didn’t deserve that. No one deserves that.” His ocean blue eyes darted to the screen, causing his nostrils to flare. “Where is this

fuckwad today?”

“Turns out this wasn’t his first offense. Rob made sure he went to jail but he’s up for early release due to good behavior. The hearing is in a few weeks.” She’d been dreading facing Jackson alone at the parole hearing but felt selfish for considering something so trivial so soon after losing her brother.

“Little one, can I ask you something?” Ty ran his hands up her back, down her arms, then over her thighs as though reassuring himself of her health. Exhausted after the retelling, she rested her head on his chest and soaked in his comforting touches. When she didn’t

object, he asked, “You’ve stashed all those pictures but you were a virgin. Are there still things you want to try in real life, or did this attack steal your curiosity?”

She winced at the reminder of her innocence but she’d come this far, she might as well go for broke. Staring straight into his eyes so he couldn’t discount her sincerity, she confessed, “I still want it all. I just didn’t trust anyone to give it to me except you.”

Her gaze shifted to Mason. “And you.”

“Everyone has secrets,” she whispered. “Now you know mine.”

Chapter Nine

Mason clenched his jaw as he faced off against Tyler. “This changes nothing.”

“It changes everything! Why can’t you man up and admit she needs everything we do? This can’t be about her anymore. It’s all about you and your hang-ups. For all you act like a certified Casanova, you’re letting your preconceptions blind you to what’s right in front of your ugly face.”

“Tone down the emo, will you?” A muscle in his jaw ticked but Ty kept right on going.

“Tell me you don’t want to be waiting for her the moment she finishes collecting herself in the bathroom. Swear you don’t need to take her to bed and erase all the lingering memories I saw lurking in her eyes. Convince me, and I’ll drop it.”

Mason stalked the hallway outside Lacey’s bedroom, where she’d retreated after her declarations. “How will you feel when we get lost in the moment and take things too far? You can’t suppress your nature forever, Ty. What if you grab her wrists to pin her instead of caressing her? What if you slip up and kiss me, beg me to fuck you? What are you going to do if she looks at you in horror? How

are you going to feel when someone attacks her for her ‘deviant behavior’?”

“Are we talking about me...or you?”

“Fine, douchebag. Me. Maybe you can keep things sweet and tender but we both know I can’t. What if instinct takes over and I want more than she can handle? How do we know she’s ready for a threesome?” He evaded the hand Ty extended in his direction. If they touched now he’d go up in flames.

“I’ll be there, Mason. I believe to the depth of my soul that you would never hurt her but I’ve got your back. I promise I won’t lose my head or let the scene get

out of control. It'll just be the three of us, making love, forgetting about all the bullshit in the background.”

“If I were to do this, I'd have some ground rules.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Ty always teased him mercilessly about his need for order.

“Don't bust on me or I'm out of here. I'm not joking around with her safety.” The fight leached from the other man as he slumped against the wall.

“Let's have it then. Christ, just hurry. I've never been so hard in my life.”

“I don’t want to hear it. You got some this evening. I’ve been suffering for days.”

“Really? You suffered? You could have had me anytime until you kicked me out.”

“Shh. That’s first. We take things slow. Both of us need to concentrate on her.”
Mason cleared his throat. “I don’t want you distracting me with your tricks.”

“Son of a bitch! You make it sound like I rape you.”

“Ty, we don’t have time for this right now. Please, let’s just focus on Lacey. This is like every other threesome we’ve

had.”

“No, it’s not.”

Mason didn’t argue further but continued laying out his stipulations instead.

“Nothing between us.”

“Yeah, I know the drill.”

Mason ignored the ripple of sickness attacking his gut at the hurt Ty couldn’t obscure. “And no restraints other than our hands. She’s not ready for anything hardcore yet.”

Tyler nodded. “I got it. Do you think I’m stupid? I’d never do anything to scare

her.”

“Are you going to be okay with this?”
Mason worried about the bitterness
tingeing his friend’s anticipation.

“The truth is, Mason, I’d do anything to
share her with you.”

Although there were many things he
would’ve liked to say in response to
Ty’s declaration, the creak of Lacey’s
door opening saved him from admitting
he was too damn scared to be as
transparent about his feelings as the two
people he loved were.

Lacey gulped then eased her trembling hand over the doorknob. She'd upgraded her ratty sweats to a pink satin baby doll nightgown with black lace trim—which did nothing to warm her in the chilly early morning air—just in case, by some miracle, the guys decided to grant her wishes. Even after she'd changed, fluffed her hair and checked the shave job on her legs, she'd perched on the closed toilet with her head between her knees for a good ten minutes before she got up the courage to see if she'd be disappointed yet again.

When she opened the door and spotted Tyler lounging shirtless on her bed, with one muscled arm behind his head, her

heart kicked in triple time. The tantalizing trail of dark hair that led the way to the opened button of his jeans made her drool. Topped off by his sexy bare feet, he looked like he belonged there.

He smiled, slow and easy, in invitation. She returned the gesture wide enough she feared her face might split in an attempt to cover her disappointment. How greedy did it make her that even a sensual feast like Ty didn't satiate her yearnings?

“Got any of that sugar for me, doll?”

If she'd spun around any faster, she

might have lifted into orbit. “You stayed.”

Mason didn't move from where he leaned one shoulder against the wall, feet crossed at his ankles. Unlike Ty, he still wore his grey hoodie—his hands tucked into the front pouch—over a dusty blue T-shirt, ripped jeans and his running shoes. The highlights in his honey-tipped hair glinted in the soft light.

Lacey bounded the two steps to his outpost. By the time she jumped, wrapped her legs around his waist and hugged him tight, he'd braced himself to catch her. She gripped the cotton,

softened from hundreds of washes, in her fists even as his broad palms cupped her ass.

“I take it that’s a yes?”

Even one more moment was too long to wait. She reached up and cut off his words by smooshing her lips to his. Like he had the other day, Mason seized control immediately. He shifted until her shoulders met the cool surface of the painted lilac wall. Then, with a groan that echoed her relief after years of frustration, he devoured her mouth.

Teeth, tongue and lips ravaged her until the world spun out of control. She tried

to meet his assault but he overwhelmed her with passion. Each thrust of her tongue earned a sharp nip before he parried with a swipe of his own. Beneath the hem of her short lingerie, his callused hands roamed her upper thighs and ass. Nothing had ever swept her away like this before.

Where loving Ty was easy, Mason was demanding. She reveled in his fierce possession.

When she squirmed in his hold, attempting to rub her aching core on the steel-hard shaft pulsing between her legs, he turned toward the bed. He tilted his head, breaking their mouth-to-mouth

contact.

“Look at what you do to him. To us,” Mason growled in her ear as he angled her so she could see what he referred to.

Spread out in front of her, Tyler had reached into his fly and extracted his cock. As she watched, he stroked it with long pulls while his other hand cupped his balls.

“You two look amazing together,” he rasped.

Mason pivoted again, setting her down on the mattress. She crawled between Ty’s splayed knees and tucked her

fingers in his waistband. With several tugs, she peeled the faded denim from his lanky form as the hair of his legs teased her knuckles.

As soon as he'd kicked free from the confining fabric, he dropped his cock against his taut abs and tugged her over him like a blanket. He undulated beneath her, gliding his erection over the silky nightgown between them until it grew damp with his precum. As he rocked against her, he clasped her hips to keep her in position. The grip caused the garment to ride up, exposing her ass and the tiny matching lace thong tucked between her cheeks. When he had her where he wanted her, he teased her lips

with gentle but relentless kisses.

The quiet thwap of shed clothing hitting the floor cut through the sensual haze in her mind.

Mason moaned, “You have a great ass.”

Then his thumbs traced the valley between the globes along the sliver of material providing her only protection from his searing gaze. She jerked when he stimulated her sensitive skin.

“Ohmygod.”

Tyler chuckled against the side of her neck. “I’m going to love corrupting you, babe.”

Mason's hands cupped her shoulders, lifting her torso from the heated slab of muscles pillowing her. He gathered the edge of her gown in his hand then drew it off. She turned her face to the side until she could nuzzle the place where his cock tented his boxer briefs. When she dragged her open mouth over the bulge, it jerked beneath her lips.

On a groan, his hands reached forward to cup her breasts. He played with them—squeezing and caressing—until she ground her crotch against Ty's shaft, still nestled below her soaked underwear. Mason placed one palm flat between her shoulder blades and forced her forward. He guided her toward Tyler.

“I want to see you suck her tits.” The request came out more like a demand. “Show me what she likes.”

He molded her breast upward, feeding her nipple into Ty’s seeking mouth as the other man ducked his head. When his suckling sent shocks of electricity up her spine, his hands directed her hips in concentrated swirls. Mason encircled her throat with light pressure from his fingers then tipped her head back so he could monitor her expression.

“Mmm, yes, doll. You like that.” His thumb tickled her cheek. “Let’s try it a little harder and see if that’s better for you, okay?”

She moaned in response to his rhetorical question when Ty followed his lead, pulling the tip of her breast into his mouth. Her spine arched to the limit of her flexibility as she fought to make him take her nipple deeper.

The sensation combined with the blunt pressure of his cock bumping her clit as she humped him until she came precariously close to tumbling over the edge of ecstasy into orgasm.

“Enough.” Mason tugged her away, her nipple leaving Ty’s mouth with a slurp. “I don’t want you to come yet. Not until I tell you, do you understand?”

She struggled to catch her breath, never mind answer him. In response to her silence, Mason covered her back and slid them to the other side of the bed. Pinned beneath his solid weight, she fought instinctive panic for a moment. As soon as it hit her, Ty appeared beside her, his face even with hers against the mattress. The pressure on her shoulders didn't shift but she no longer felt alone.

“Look into my eyes, little one.” Desire electrified the green until they burned like lasers. “He’s not going to hurt you. This is Mason. But he’s dominant through and through. When he asks you a question, you’ll need to answer him or he goes a little caveman.”

Tyler took her fingers where they rested against the sheet and nibbled the tips. All the while, Mason kept her still, letting her adjust to his presence. The rough, uneven cadence of his breathing billowed her hair as his cock throbbed against her ass and lower back in time to his racing heartbeat.

“Still okay?” Ty sucked on her finger as he waited for her to confirm.

Lacey nodded, the motion rubbing her hair against Mason’s chest, communicating her assent to both men. In a flash, Mason dropped lower, testing her. Instead of fighting, she went still. She absorbed his heat and the security of

being held so close by someone she trusted.

“Very good, doll.” His approval heightened her pleasure. “Now, let’s try this again. I want you to tell us when you’re about to get off. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.” She wasn’t being facetious. The appellation slipped from her lips natural as could be.

Mason’s response was instantaneous. He kept her tucked against his chest when he rolled to his back then situated himself so he sat with his shoulders braced against the headboard. Lacey reclined in his lap with her shoulders cradled on his

chest. One of his arms rested just below her breasts while the other hand wandered over her tummy to her mound. When his fingers encountered the drenched lace, teasing the engorged flesh below it, she cried out but instincts urged her to let them have their way.

“Ty, get rid of those panties so we can show her how we reward good girls.”

Tyler’s fingers skimmed her hips, tucking under the bands at the side of her thong. She lifted her ass to give him room to ease the material along her thighs. Bare to their perusal, she shifted self-consciously.

Mason's cock jerked in the cushion of her ass. It glided through the combination of their clean sweat and his slippery arousal. He tweaked her nipple, adding to her sweet torture. "Stay still."

Then, in one motion, he tucked his knees between hers, spread his thighs wide and propped his feet on the mattress so his knees bent, pinning her legs in the valley made by his thighs and torso. At the foot of the bed, Ty moaned as he enjoyed the view from his perfect perspective.

With his lower hand, Mason toyed with her exposed pussy. He ran his fingers along the ridges of her slit until he

teased her clit with the very tip of one digit. In her ear, he whispered, “Look at how much Tyler wants to taste you. Do you see how hard his cock is?”

She whimpered, the only response she could force past the longing choking her.

“Should we let him play?”

Ty observed their exchange from his position, unmoving. He had surrendered control to Mason as surely as she had. The knowledge caused her pussy to spasm, pushing more of her arousal onto her exposed vulva and Mason’s fingers.

“Hmmm... I think so, too.”

She nearly cried in relief.

“I want to watch him eat your pretty pussy. Get over here, Tyler.”

Lacey tracked the captivating progress he made as he lunged between their entangled limbs. For a moment, it looked as though he intended to lick her honey from Mason’s glistening fingers but her captor removed them at the last second. Instead, Ty’s amazing tongue flicked over her labia in the spot Mason’s hand had rested moments before.

A decadent vision of Ty servicing Mason overran her imagination. The proximity of his mouth to the other man’s

straining cock and tight sac only encouraged her fantasy.

An intense wave of desire wracked her body with shudders. Ty groaned and ingested the new evidence of her pleasure. Together, she and Mason watched as Ty lapped every last drop from her rosy skin. He twirled his tongue around her clit until his chin and lips turned glossy.

“I want to know what you taste like.” Mason’s chest heaved, puffing out her breasts. The tension in his muscles kept them tight enough to shatter beneath her. She started to move in order to facilitate his wish to switch places with Ty but

quickly realized he had other plans.

“I told you to stay still.” This time the pinch on her nipple came harder.

Lacey cried out. Pleasure, not pain, caused her reaction.

“Kiss her, Ty.” The bed shook as her dark-haired lover rose gracefully to his knees. His hard-on nudged her breasts before he hunched over to infuse her mouth with the scent and taste of her passion. The strokes of his tongue on hers incited a riot of need. She felt empty and abandoned. She needed someone buried inside her. Soon.

“Enough.”

Tyler braced his palms on the wall above their heads as he panted, catching his breath after their profound kiss.

“Now, is there something you want to tell me, doll?” His tone dared her to ask for what she needed.

“Please, Mason. I’m close. I need you to fuck me.” Desire obliterated her inhibitions, allowing her to beg.

“Shit, yes.” With one hand he struggled to shove his underwear low enough to free his cock. When he fought to pull the fabric over the huge bulge prohibiting

their descent, Tyler bent to assist him but Mason ripped the seams of his boxer briefs before his friend could reach them.

His cock bounced against her pussy and she screamed for him. "Please!"

"First, I want to taste you. Or have you forgotten my wishes so soon?"

Suddenly, Lacey knew exactly what he intended. She arched her neck until their mouths joined. He groaned and bit her lip before sucking hard on her tongue. After securing her submission, he presented her with his cock. His hand guided the thick shaft into place while he

continued to ingest her flavor.

With a shift of his hips, the head notched into her pussy. Consistent with their builds, he seemed much thicker than Tyler if not quite as long. Though he thrust his hips in a shallow arc, his cock got stuck just inside her channel.

He broke the contact of their mouths long enough to growl. “Doll, you’re so fucking tight.”

Ty sank from his position to kneel in the V of their thighs. He wrapped his hands over her hips, lifting her a fraction of an inch before impaling her once more on Mason’s erection. When he made only

slight progress, he groaned and dipped his head. He resumed his oral exploration of her clit, sucking and nibbling gently until the additional secretions, and gravity, coaxed more of Mason's cock to slide inside her.

She cried out as the intrusion stretched the walls of her pussy, inspiring delicious sensations tinged with pain. Beneath her, Mason groaned when the motions of Ty's chin tortured him in turn. Though she felt his muscles quivering beneath her, he caved in to instinct and thrust his hips just as her grip relaxed slightly, burying himself to the hilt.

All three of them froze.

Lacey panted into Mason's mouth. Unable to tell him how close she hovered to orgasm, she searched blindly for his hand, his leg, anything to signal her impending ecstasy. He broke their kiss and instructed, "Hold on, doll. I want us all to come together. Ty, get up here. Tits or mouth, your choice."

Lost in sensation, she didn't have time to consider his meaning until Tyler stood in front of her once more. "I want to come on your chest, little one. Will you let me?"

Mason began to thrust inside her, stroking all the right places when Tyler's intent sank in. She cupped her

breasts in her hands, squashing them together until they created a luscious pillow for his cock.

“Holy shit. Mason, I’m not going to last.” Ty called out his warning as he fit the dripping head of his hard-on into her cleavage. All the while, Mason held her hips still as he thrust into her faster and harder from below. The motion of his strokes pressed on a sweet spot with every entry.

Though passion threatened to close her eyelids, she fought to keep them open and watch as the purple head of Ty’s cock poked from between her breasts. She couldn’t draw breath into her lungs

fast enough. Every muscle in her body went taut as it prepared for release.

“Mason! Ty! Please, make me come. Please.”

Her begging alone threw Tyler over the edge. She observed another pump of precum squirt from his cock and drape on her breast, accompanied by a roar that signaled his imminent orgasm.

“Yes. Yes, Lacey. Come for us. Come on me,” Mason shouted as his fingers tightened around her hips. He drove inside her once, twice more and then the world tipped into slow motion. Ty pulled from her cleavage to pump

strands of pearly liquid from his cock. They dangled off her nipples like lewd jewelry.

The sight caused her muscles to cramp around Mason's rock-hard shaft, initiating both of their explosive reactions. Together, they came apart. Pulse after pulse of ecstasy squeezed her pussy around Mason, milking the come from his cock. He overflowed her until they collapsed in a tangle of arms and legs, replete.

She made no pretense of moving. Any attempt would be futile. Instead, she allowed the men to adjust themselves to keep from crushing someone or being

crushed in return. Then they lay breathing hard as the rest of the world came back into existence by gradual measures.

Content to wallow in utter relaxation for the first time, maybe ever, she nuzzled into Tyler's hairless chest while drawing lazy circles on the back of Mason's hand where it cupped her hip. Although she knew they'd claimed her, an odd possessiveness stole over her. Without questioning the impulse, she nipped Ty's pectoral hard enough to leave a mark.

He yelped then asked, in a groggy voice, "Did you just bite me?"

“Uh huh.” She made it up to him by licking the small hurt with a few soothing laps.

Mason chuckled into her hair, not caring enough to lift his head. “Feisty. I like it. You’re more than I ever could have imagined, doll. And, believe me, I’ve thought about it a lot.”

Remembering how he’d filled her, she shot, “Right back at you. You’re downright...hefty.”

Now it was Ty’s turn to laugh. “Isn’t that the truth?”

Mason propped one elbow under him

then laid his head in his hand while he took stock of the various signs of their loving. When he saw the bright red marks on her hips, he frowned. With one finger, he traced the outline of his hands where they'd clenched her with bruising force.

He tensed along her flank. "Did I hurt you, Lacey?"

"Not enough to dissuade me from coming back for more." She rolled over and met his worried gaze head on before giving him a quick, smacking kiss. She knew the time hadn't yet come to confess how she truly felt so she kept things light. "I loved every second. Now, will

you please hold me so I can sleep for a few hours? I talked Dr. Joy into taking me back at the hospital right away as long as I stay put, manning the nurse's station, for the remainder of the hiatus.”

“I’ve got you, doll.” Mason tucked her against his side.

Ty patted her ass. “Sweet dreams, little one.”

Chapter Ten

By the time Lacey parked her hand-me-down Civic in the hospital's employee parking lot late the next afternoon she could have yanked her hair out. Between Mason and Tyler they'd almost managed to drive her insane in less than twenty-four hours. If she'd thought they acted overprotective before, they'd redefined the concept for her this morning.

Before she could get up and make a pot of coffee, they'd snuck down the stairs like Rambo or maybe a pair of overgrown ninjas on the prowl. When—as she'd assured them prior to the

theatrics—they'd discovered nothing had gone awry while they slept, they then started in on making her eat a healthy breakfast.

They'd outright refused to listen to how much she despised having eggs at lunchtime on her skewed, late night schedule and proceeded to make her fork an omelet past her gag reflex before they cleared her to take a shower.

In her own damn house.

She'd had to put her foot down when they tried to insist on chauffeuring her to St. Ann's. Enough was enough, already. At least they'd listened to reason when

she admitted she'd rather they spend their time figuring out who had jacked up her computer.

Lacey grabbed her oversized, quilted bag containing her scrubs off the passenger seat. She began the hike, through the crisp afternoon air, to the massive concrete building she spent a good portion of her time in. The bustling line of cars and ambulances pulling under the portico brought some semblance of normalcy back to her life as she faced the truth.

The rest of the world continued on as it always had, no matter how much had changed in her microcosm this week.

Somehow, that made it all a tiny bit easier to bear.

Though glad to be back to work, she also dreaded the sympathetic looks and infinite retellings she'd have to endure from well-meaning friends and coworkers. At least she could spend some of the forced downtime helping people at the notoriously short-staffed nurse's station.

Taking one last deep breath, she stepped into the automatic revolving door that swept her into the hospital each day. She darted through the little used stairwell, up the three flights to the general ward she'd be assisting.

The route took her past a row of administration offices. She paused by one to read the brass nameplate, Dr. Joy Roach. Before she could change her mind, she knocked three times in quick succession on the cherry finish.

“Come in!” The distinctive melody of the Caribbean sang through the occupant’s accent.

“Hey, Dr. Joy.” She didn’t have to fake the smile that crossed her face when she saw the attractive woman behind the desk. Dr. Joy treated all the nurses like her own children.

“Lacey.” The standard mega-watt grin

she sported dimmed a notch or two as she rounded the sitting area and put out her arms. “I’m so sorry, sweetie. You don’t have to say anything, just let me hug you for a second.”

“Thanks.” Lacey blinked back the tears she’d tried to convince herself she wouldn’t shed today.

“Are you sure you’re ready to come back, even on the desk?”

“Yeah, I’m going crazy at home.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to turn you away. Theresa is on vacation, Angel’s got the flu and Sandie has a new

grandbaby she wants to take off to play with for a few days.” Dr. Joy tucked a strand of hair behind Lacey’s ear before patting her cheek. “Go ahead, get to it. If you need anything or decide to make it a short day you just let someone know before you skip out. No need to overdo it.”

“Really, thank you.” With nothing left to say, she accepted the other woman’s gracious nod and slipped out of the office.

When she got to the station, no one else seemed to be around. A nurse shortage made non-essential coverage sparse. She flipped open the schedule, glad to see

she'd be sharing shift with Jambrea and Valerie. Though she now worked in the ER, she'd started out at the general desk while earning her specialty degrees. The women had taught her most of what she knew about how to handle ornery patients.

Lacey thumbed through the case files to familiarize herself with the individual needs of the patients then organized her planned check-in times for rounds. She also dug out the giant binder of useful info the ladies stashed in the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet for newbies or temp help. Within minutes, status calls from family members, instructions from doctors, patient demands and the

usual chaos of the ward cleared her mind of anything other than the routine of the job.

An hour or so later, Valerie flew down the hall pushing a cart of empty medicine dosing containers. “Lacey Daughtry! What in the world are you doing in this hellhole?”

“Nice to see you, too, Val.” She set down the receiver of the multi-line phone before the florist—whose delivery couldn’t be completed since the intended recipient had already been released—picked up.

“Oh, honey, don’t pout. You know I love

you. I just wish you'd taken some more time to recover." The woman, who always had a spring in her step, and the cutest damn patterns on her custom-made scrubs, bounced over to Lacey's hiding spot behind the counter then smothered her in a violent embrace. "I'm so damn sorry about Robbie."

"You were the only person he let get away with that." Lacey bit the inside of her cheek to fend off memories of the feigned offense her brother had affected at the nickname. She'd always suspected he had a crush on the chipper nurse but the other woman had been happily married to her high school sweetheart for years. "So how have things been

around here?”

“Meh.” Valerie shrugged. The gesture drew Lacey’s gaze to the woman’s freshly dyed hair.

“Why did you cover the silver? You know I loved it on you.”

“Silver? It was grey!” Valerie shook her head and laughed.

Before they could reminisce any further, the call buzzer lit up like a Christmas tree. “Damn. I have to get that, Lace. I don’t like the way Mr. Hupple’s cough has been sounding.”

“Go ahead, I’ve got things under control out here.”

“You’re the best.” Valerie waved as she charged down the linoleum corridor.

Several hours later, Lacey admitted she might not be functioning at one hundred percent yet. Usually, she spent the whole day on her feet making trips here, there and yonder under high stress. The commotion of the station shouldn’t have fazed her but lack of sleep, grief and stress had taken a toll.

The yawns started around midnight. Unfortunate, since her shift didn’t end until three in the morning. A little while

later, Jambrea urged her to throw in the towel and head home. “It’s quiet tonight, Lacey. Val and I can handle this with one hand behind our backs. Why don’t you get out of here and catch some sleep?”

“I’d rather stay and chat with you.” She started to panic thinking of the dark, empty house waiting for her. “Tell me about that book you’re writing?”

“Not tonight. You’ve had enough, Lacey.”

She blinked as her friend hugged her then walked away.

“What’s this I hear? Are you wimping out there, Lacemeister?” Jerome, one of the orderlies assigned to the floor, loved to tease her. Since he also covered the ER, he often stopped in to the break room to shoot the shit about their mutual appreciation for the hot doctors roaming the hallways. He always had the best deets on the hospital drama since people tended to overlook him as he attended to the tedious but critical tasks that fell under his responsibility. She beamed when he refused to handle her with kid gloves.

“Nah, just need to grab a coffee or something. It’s sitting at this desk that’s throwing me off. I’m used to being up

and about.” She reached for the ringing phone. “See you next time around.”

“If you’re really nice, maybe I’ll snag you something resembling a caramel latte from the crapeteria.” The moniker was their loving tribute to the less-than-stellar fare they were forced to suffer through night after night.

Laughing, she waved in acknowledgement as the confused woman on the line insisted her son-in-law was at St. Ann’s not St. Steven’s even though Lacey had personally checked with the city’s other hospital a few minutes earlier.

By one thirty, Lacey battled exhaustion. She decided to take a quick break and laid her head down on her crossed arms. It figured Mason and Tyler chose that instant to amble into the ward.

“Son of a bitch, Mason. You were right.”

Her head snapped up at the familiar tone. “Right about what? I’m just resting my eyes a second. All these flowers are bugging my allergies.”

“My ass!” Mason’s glare cut straight through her bullshit. He stood, hands on hips, in his patrol uniform.

“And what a lovely ass it is, Officer Clark.” Dr. Joy bestowed a loving pat on it as she passed by to complete her final checkup of the night. She nodded at each of the partners in turn. They popped in enough to drop off suspects, take reports on injuries or accidents and to say hello to Lacey while on patrol that everyone on staff knew the notorious bachelors.

“Hey, Dr. McHottie.” Women soaked up Tyler’s incorrigible flirtations like a desert that hadn’t seen rain in a hundred years. Even Dr. Joy couldn’t resist his charm.

“Why hello there, Officer Lambert. What

kind of trouble are you stirring up here?”
Dr. Joy was nobody’s fool.

“We came to collect, Lacey.” He rattled her out in a flash. “She’s not ready for a full shift yet. She’s falling asleep on the job.”

“I trust you two will see her home safely?”

“Dr. Joy! I’m fine.” She sulked. “And I can get myself home, thank you very much.”

“Boys, I’ll be back through here in ten minutes. I expect you’ll have her bundled up and on her way by then.”

“Yes ma’am.” Tyler nodded for them both.

“You heard the woman. She is your boss, yes?” Mason’s tone brooked no argument.

“Yeah, whatever. I’m going.” Lacey gathered her belongings, shoving them in her bag with more gusto than necessary. Overruled, she agreed to go but refused to allow them to pamper her.

When she retrieved her car keys, Mason objected. “No way. You’re not driving in this condition.”

“Why do you think that just because we

got it on, you can order me around whenever you like?”

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that. Drive safe!” Jambrea spun on her heel where she approached and headed into the depths of the unit instead.

Lacey shoved back from the desk, preparing to make a break for the door when she spotted Jerome striding toward them and met him halfway.

“Special delivery.” He proffered a steaming cup of coffee.

“You’re a lifesaver.” She pecked him on the cheek. Behind her, Mason grumbled

then settled his arm around her shoulders.

“Down boy.” Jerome looked back and forth between the territorial display and Lacey rolling her eyes. “Your little lady isn’t my type...if you know what I mean.”

“Thanks, Big J. See you tomorrow.” Her sudden dismissal may have been rude but she didn’t need rumors of this flying around the hospital.

“Take care, Tiny L. I mean it.”

She shook off Mason’s hefty biceps then swallowed a big gulp of the rejuvenating

brew before marching toward her Civic with the guys in tow.

“I’m going to get the patrol car from out front. Ty, you drive Lacey.” Mason peeled off from their impromptu parade, heading toward the short-term lot.

Lacey vetoed that idea. “You can ride with me but I’m driving.”

“What are you trying to prove, little one?” Tyler played the voice of reason but her pride refused to concede defeat.

“I do this every single day. I’m fully capable of getting myself home.”

“Today’s not every other day and I happen to be available. You look like shit.”

“Nice. Just what a girl wants to hear from the new man in her life.” She belted back another shot of caffeine. “Aren’t you supposed to be a sweet talker?”

“Damn, you know what I mean. Let me drive, Lace.”

“Thanks, but no.” She covered the slight dizziness stealing her balance by pausing to take another sip of her latte. It had to kick in soon. If the guys figured out how she felt they’d never let her leave the

house again.

Especially right now, she needed to have some control over her life.

“Jesus Christ you’re stubborn, woman.”

“Better get used to it buddy.” She knew she was being a bitch but a sudden unsettling urge to surrender made her fight twice as hard. Sleepiness usually made her irritable but the vehemence of her reaction startled her.

Lacey concentrated on reining in her temper as they approached her car. A muted beep accompanied the flash of her taillights when she unlocked the doors.

“I don’t like the thought of you walking out here at the ass crack of dawn. It’s dark and there isn’t adequate traffic flow to discourage bad behavior.” Tyler scanned the lot as they climbed into her car and fastened their seatbelts. “I bet you don’t even have security escort you.”

“I’m a grown woman. I can take care of myself.” If he’d eased up on all the sudden, overprotective nonsense, she might have asked him to take the wheel. Instead, she reached for the paper cup then let a mouthful glug from the opening. She willed the potent concoction to jolt her system long enough to get her through the twenty-

minute drive, then turned the key in the ignition.

Tyler seemed content to let the topic drop before it escalated into a full-blown argument. Instead, he leaned his head into the rest and watched the traffic stream by as she merged onto the highway. In her rearview mirror, she caught sight of Mason drawing wild gestures in the air above the steering wheel of the patrol car as he followed close behind. No doubt, he verged on blowing a gasket because she hadn't done as he commanded.

The soulful strains of Leona Lewis singing about "Bleeding Love"

reverberated through their temporary truce. She hummed along to chase off the lingering exhaustion. Though she'd listened to the song about a million times, the lyrics wouldn't quite come quick enough to her tired mind for her to sing along. As it turned out, even such a beautiful distraction couldn't invigorate her.

She rubbed her burning eyes with discreet swipes she prayed Ty wouldn't notice from his angle. Then she snatched up the half-empty coffee, forcing herself to ingest more of the bitter liquid. She started to choke when a yawn startled her mid-swallow.

“Are you okay?”

No! She cleared her throat to rid her windpipe of the offending drops then replied, “Golden.”

Just when she thought they’d moved past the subject, Tyler continued his rational discussion. “No one’s saying you aren’t capable.”

“That’s how it feels to me.” He’d hit the nail on the head.

“Mason and I need to take care of you, Lacey.” He sighed when she tensed but dug himself deeper. “You’re our responsibility now.”

The lines of the road blurred, the headlights of oncoming cars transformed into starburst prisms, as stinging tears gathered in her abused eyes. Though they didn't fall, they must have impacted her vision. She couldn't focus. "That's how you think of me? I'm tired of being a burden for someone to look after. You think I don't know how much Rob sacrificed because of me? I won't let you guys pick up where he left off."

Alarmed by her limited visibility, she flipped on her blinker to exit the motorway for an alternate route home. Though longer, it made for an easier drive on less travelled roads.

“Where are you going, little one?”

They jerked to a stop at the traffic light topping the ramp, Mason still tailing. She took the opportunity to steal another fortifying sip from her cup. “The back way. I think it is some...”

“Some what?”

She shook her head to clear the distress retarding her thinking. “Huh? I meant it’s faster.”

Tyler didn’t argue but she noticed the curious stare he gave her.

While she waited for the signal to turn,

she scrunched her eyes to clear the grit pricking them.

“It’s green, Lacey.”

Irritated for being caught off guard, she stomped on the gas a bit too hard but Ty was wise enough not to remark on it. On their way again, she wound through the sparse woods hiding affluent properties that comprised this neighborhood of the suburb. Without the distraction of other cars and the high speed of the interstate, she managed better even though her body continued to shut down for the night.

She flipped on the heat to counter the chills wracking her.

“What I said before, it didn’t come out right.” Tyler tried one more time to explain himself. “I don’t want you to think you’re an obligation. I meant that because we care for you, we don’t want to see anything else happen to you. We want what’s best for you, always. Maybe we don’t know the right way to handle this shit yet, but we’re trying. We’ll learn together.”

Lacey composed an answer in her mind. Or at least she thought she had but she couldn’t make her mouth articulate the thought. She reached for the dregs of her coffee but her uncoordinated hand bounced off the side of the cup holder.

A garbled noise drew her attention toward Tyler but she couldn't make sense of the way his funhouse features swirled and rolled. She blinked to clear her vision, but her eyes refused to open again.

Then everything went dark.

“Lacey!” Tyler’s gut gave a sick lurch as her eyes rolled in their sockets. Then she slumped over the steering wheel.

He lunged across the cabin to grab for the free-spinning controls. They’d already drifted across the center line

into the opposite lane. The crescendo of a horn blowing scared ten years off his life. Awkward angles, combined with the pressure of Lacey's torso, resisted his efforts to correct their course. He yanked the wheel to the right, missing an oncoming dump truck with inches to spare. The tires squealed but held as he stabilized their trajectory on the gentle curve of the road.

In his peripheral vision, he caught the flashing red and blue lights Mason had engaged along with the siren to warn other motorists of whatever the fuck was going down here. The deadweight of Lacey's leg rested on the accelerator, preventing them from rolling to a stop

though his glance at the gauges confirmed they had slowed to about thirty miles an hour.

Tyler mentally raced ahead on their route, ticking off possible places to ditch the car, but he couldn't come up with an alternative that would guarantee Lacey's safety. He debated yanking the emergency brake but couldn't predict how much control he'd retain over the vehicle at this speed. Her older sedan wasn't equipped with all the safety features, like side-curtain airbags, that were standard in late models.

While steering with his right hand, he twisted in his seat to grab for her pant

leg with his left. The clink of gravel and branches slapping the side of the car returned his attention to the road. He swerved back onto the pavement with a bounce and a curse.

“Fuck!” He couldn’t reach over the center console from this position. Without a lot of choices remaining, he unclipped the buckle on his seatbelt and scooted to the left. The fabric of Lacey’s baggy scrubs crumpled in his fist as he contorted his arm between her limp torso and thigh.

Tyler tugged but her knee banged the dash housing and he lost his grip. The added momentum of her falling leg

surged the car forward. His eyes flicked between the road and her foot as he attempted to keep them on course while searching lower with frantic swipes of his hand until he encountered what he sought. Bingo!

Finally, he threaded his fingers through the laces of her ugly-ass white platform sneakers. He raised her foot free of the pedal and prepared to coast to the shoulder. When he glanced down to ensure the weight had shifted off the small pad, Mason flashed his high beams and laid on the horn.

Tyler looked up just in time to catch a glint of light sparkling off the chrome

bumper of the muscle car backing out of a driveway up ahead, right into the road. In the split second he had to decide, he chose to swerve around the guaranteed collision.

Still propping Lacey's leg off the gas, he spun the wheel in the opposite direction then yanked the parking brake and prayed.

Chapter Eleven

Mason couldn't believe the nightmare playing out in front of him on the dark, winding road. More than anything, it tortured him to be utterly helpless to prevent the unavoidable horror assaulting Ty and Lacey. Other than alerting other drivers and calling in an ambulance, which he'd done the second he realized something had gone haywire, there was nothing he could do.

What the fuck had happened to Lacey?

If she'd fallen asleep, Tyler would have woken her up then forced her to pull over. Why the hell hadn't he driven in

the first place?

Mason wasn't a religious person but, in those agonizing seconds that stretched into endless millennia of fear, he begged every source of supernatural power he could conceive of to let this clusterfuck end with minimal consequences.

Anything else would be asking for a miracle.

Illuminated by the super-powered spotlights mounted on the patrol car, he caught the determination and terror on Tyler's face as he wrestled the steering wheel for control. Lacey's compact body had vanished behind the mass of her seat. His heart seized in his chest

when Tyler ducked below the dash, leaving Mason to be his eyes.

That's when he saw it.

Up ahead, the rear panel of a classic car poked into the lane directly in the path of Lacey's car. He mashed the horn and the brake simultaneously to evade the imminent pileup. The backup lights of the hotrod disappeared but the distance didn't allow time for them to pull out of the way. They were going to crash.

"No! No, no, no, no, no, no." He didn't realize he repeated the cry like a mantra until the screech of tires drowned out his voice. At the last possible moment,

Lacey's car avoided collision with the heavy, steel-constructed vehicle by swerving toward the embankment lining the opposite side of the road.

With such a sharp change in direction, Ty had no hope of keeping control. Though it had slowed some, Lacey's car had plenty of momentum left when it skidded sideways into the mounded dirt. It clipped a tree then bounced before toppling into the ditch behind it, sending up a cloud of pine needles and torn grass.

The crunch of sheet metal and the shattering of glass pierced through the scream of Mason's siren. A fraction of a

second behind, he abandoned the cruiser off the side of the road. He scrambled down the far side of the trench. When he caught sight of the wreckage, he froze.

Lacey's car was totaled.

The entire right side had been smashed by the now cracked pine. One gnarled branch, the diameter of his wrist, had penetrated the windshield like a grotesque lance, stabbing straight into the passenger seat. Spider-webbed cracks radiated from the intrusion. The maze of fine white lines prevented him from seeing into the black interior of the car.

Mason's stomach heaved. Though he dreaded what he would likely find, he flew to the less damaged driver-side door and ripped open the bent panel.

Tyler and Lacey were mashed together in a jumble of limbs that didn't make sense to him at first. Then he realized the tree branch had skimmed the top of Tyler's back as he hunched over Lacey's limp form, pinning him in place.

"Hey." The wheezed greeting sounded like heaven to Mason. "That last step was a doozie."

"Don't move, Ty. Where are you hurt?"

“Uh, pretty much everywhere. Remember that time...” he paused to cough then winced, “...Vinny Mancuso found out we fucked his sister then sent those four street thugs to beat the shit out of me? It’s sort of like that.”

Mason choked on the ice in his throat at the sarcastic remark. “Thank God you’re okay. What about Lacey? What the hell happened?”

Tyler must have been more out of it than he wanted to admit. He shook his head then his brows knit together as he thought back.

“Shit, I don’t know Mason. Get her out

of here. She needs a doctor.” His anxiety ramped up as the initial shock of the impact began to wear off. He squirmed as he tried to face Lacey’s still form.

“There’s an ambulance on the way, Ty. Hang in there. You’re going to be fine. Both of you.” He hoped he wasn’t lying. “I’ve got you.”

“You do?” The question sounded fainter this time.

“Yeah, but you have to stay awake.” Mason didn’t like the way the color had drained from his best friend’s cheeks in a rush.

“You’ve got it under control, right?”

“Yeah, you just relax. I’ve got you covered.” His attention split between reassuring Ty and checking the stability of Lacey’s vital signs with enough discretion to avoid alarming the other man further.

“You won’t let anything happen to us.”
With that, Tyler checked out.

The distant wail Mason had caught a hint of had amplified. Paramedics would be on-site in less than a minute. Until then, he put one hand on Lacey’s shoulder and the other gripped Ty’s fingers. He held on tight while he murmured reassurances

to them. And himself.

Lacey woke in an unfamiliar bed. She struggled to surface through the fog threatening to send her back to oblivion for the fourth or fifth time since she'd first roused and found herself out of the hospital. On each return trip to consciousness she'd managed to stay awake a bit longer. So far she'd figured out the baby blue ceiling of the room she slept in had several cracks in it. She could reach both sides of the narrow mattress easily. The bright quilt covering

her kept her toasty and the air smelled like sugar cookies fresh from the oven.

“Mama Rose?” The scratchy whisper sounded nothing like the call she’d intended.

“There you are, Lacey-love.” A plump woman, shorter even than Lacey, came to sit on the edge of the mattress. Her hand, showing wrinkles Lacey had never noticed before, reached out to brush a stray lock of hair off her forehead.

“Don’t try to sit up yet, dear. Give it a minute. You’ve got a mild concussion and a few nasty bruises.”

“What happened?” she asked aloud

while she scrambled to bridge the gap in her memory.

Mama Rose didn't answer right away, letting her remember for herself.

Distorted fragments of action patched together—flashing lights, people shouting, the ER—until she knew enough to be terrified. “Ty! Where is he?”

The restraining touch on her shoulder kept her prone on the mattress though she should have been able to brush it right off.

“Shush, darling. That son of mine is hardheaded. Probably dented the dash of your poor little car. He went to the

station with Mason to file a report and wait for the results of a few tests. They're going to find out who did this to you."

Through the confusion in her mind, Lacey had a vague recollection of the fight that had precluded their crash. Under the care of Ty's doting mother, guilt swamped her. "I'm so sorry. I could have gotten him killed. So pointless..."

"Don't waste energy worrying about what might have been. Save it for learning from your mistakes and healing up now, you hear?"

“How’d you get so smart, Mama Rose?” Lacey felt like a fool but the other woman surrendered a belly laugh at her serious inquiry.

“By making lots of mistakes, of course. Now, do you think you can sit up for a bit? Let’s see if you’re still dizzy. I have a couple more pain pills the doctor sent home with you and some water here if you can keep them down.”

No wonder this groggy feeling had been so hard to shake. Grateful for the supporting hands that cradled her as she rose, Lacey took stock of her condition. Her training kicked in while she conducted a self-evaluation. A moderate

headache, slight motor impairment and some memory loss made up the symptoms she checked off her list but the lack of spotted vision or nausea reassured her. “I think I’m okay, Mama.”

“Okay! Don’t be ridiculous! Of course you’re not okay, Lacey-love. But you’ll survive anyway. You’re one tough cookie.”

The complete understanding destroyed Lacey’s inhibitions. She flung her arms around Ty’s mom and squeezed until she heard a muffled, “Ooomph.”

“I love you, Mama Rose.” She wondered if empathy could be

hereditary. The source of Tyler's uncanny insight stared straight into Lacey's eyes. The intensity of the woman's piercing gaze made her a little uncomfortable as she imagined all her secrets laid bare.

“You know I love you, too. Like you were my own.” The welcoming smile she usually wore morphed into a stern frown that transformed her from a harmless homemaker into a force to be reckoned with. “And sometimes that means laying down the law. I've watched the three of you kids tiptoe around this thing between you for far too long now.”

Lacey sputtered, “Th-thing?”

“You know what I mean, young lady. I saw those two boys when they carried you in here. Had their panties in a wad over you as usual but this time it was something more. Something real.”

She tried to interject—she couldn’t possibly discuss their unorthodox relationship with Ty’s mom, could she—but Mama Rose bowled right over her objections.

“Maybe it took losing Rob to make you all understand your time here is finite. What you have now is a good start.”

Lacey gulped. Maybe Ty's mom didn't realize they'd done a lot more than start.

“Don't you look ashamed, sweetie. There's nothing wrong with pure love in any of its forms. Anyone who would judge your happiness isn't worth the opinion they'd force on you. People will talk but none of it matters. You remember that.”

Something about the wistful note in Mama's voice roused her own intuition. “You...”

“That's right. Before Ty was born. Jack and I lived with another woman.” She stopped to clear her throat.

“Lucinda.” Lacey had heard plenty of stories about Ty’s eccentric, honorary aunt.

“I suppose I do talk about her quite a bit, huh?” Mama’s smile lit the room. “We were college roommates when I started dating Jack. The first time he came to pick me up at our apartment, I saw the chemistry between them. It was electric. We all tried to ignore it for a while but of course that didn’t work. So we decided to move in together and live as a triad.”

“What happened, Mama?”

“All I can say is that we weren’t

completely honest with each other.” The older woman sighed in regret. “Things fell apart. It got too painful to be close yet incomplete. Lucinda knew it couldn’t work that way. She left. A few years later she got cancer. It had already metastasized by the time they diagnosed her.”

Lacey laid her head over Mama’s heart as she gave her a hug and swore she could hear it break. Ty’s mom sniffled then patted Lacey’s back. “I’ll tell you this, Lacey-love. I know it’s ridiculous but I always felt like she knew but didn’t want to fight it. At the end, she came to us. Told us she’d never stopped loving us. I swear that’s what did Jack in.”

“Mama Rose, Mr. Lambert had a stroke.” The nurse in her rebelled. “As much as it might have seemed otherwise, their deaths had nothing to do with you. They wouldn’t want you to blame yourself for an act of nature.”

Ty’s mom pulled out of the embrace and left the bed. The shift of weight jostled Lacey’s sore head, causing her to wince. By the time her vision cleared, Mama stood in the doorway wringing her floral apron between restless fingers.

“Open your eyes, sweetheart. Don’t settle for less than everything they have to give or none of you will survive the disappointment. Tyler may be

hardheaded but he's soft-hearted. Don't hurt my baby. Please."

In the wake of such momentous conversation, Lacey couldn't rest no matter how hard she tried. Instead, she worked her legs off the bed inch by inch until she sat on the edge. She had to pee but she felt awkward asking Mama to help after their exchange. Taking time to adjust to her position, she scanned Ty's boyhood room. Along with posters touting baseball legends, lame hair bands and pretty girls, a scattering of old photos and newspaper articles had been tacked to the corkboard along one wall.

In an attempt to force her eyes to

uncross, she tried to decipher a few of the headlines. Several she recognized because she'd clipped them for her own scrapbook. One came from the article the local paper had done on Mason when he broke the state record for fastest lap times in five different swim events during a single high school meet.

Ty also had a copy of the program from the recital she'd had a solo part in during her stint as a dancer. He would have been a senior that year, she supposed. Pictures of Ty, Mason and Rob lined the walls. Inseparable, they'd passed each of life's coming-of-age hurdles in synch. The first day of high school, various Halloween costumes,

birthday parties, first dates, prom pictures, sports team rosters—even a shot of the young men holding identical acceptance letters for the police academy.

Each piece of memorabilia drew her in deeper to their shared past. She stood on shaky legs to traverse the few steps to the rickety dresser that held a framed photo she couldn't quite make out from her post on the bed. She abandoned hope of making it to the bathroom at the far end of the hall, instead returning to the mattress with her prize.

A laugh escaped when she saw what he'd kept in the place of honor. The

motion jarred her throbbing head but she didn't care. Lacey scooped up the image and took a closer look. As she lay on her side, she traced the familiar lines of their youthful faces.

Mason and Ty bracketed her on the tailgate of the rust bucket they'd pitched in together to buy with money they'd earned mowing a million lawns their last summer in high school. Crystal clear, the day replayed in her mind.

Soaking wet, they'd just finished swimming in the lake when they realized only Lacey had remembered to pack a towel. Together, they'd attempted to huddle under one scrap of terrycloth

until the thin cotton ripped, sending them all flying into the mud. Of course, they'd escalated the incident to a full out war until all you could see beneath the slime were their sparkling eyes. Rob, who'd made a quick escape from the drama, had captured the moment on film just as they'd collapsed together in a fit of giggles before diving into the sunlit pool to wash off again.

She couldn't count the number of times the four of them had jammed onto the bench seat to head off on whatever adventure caught their fancy. Now only the three of them remained. And she'd be damned if she would lose them.

The men she loved.

Though she'd never admit it to Tyler or Mason, the pounding in her head got bad enough that she swallowed the medicine Mama Rose had set out before lying down again. As her eyes began to drift closed once more, she studied the photograph clasped in her hands. This time she focused on what Rob had seen instead of her memory of the moment. Both Mason and Ty had an arm around her shoulders. As she grinned into the camera, they exchanged a knowing look over her head. A glance chock-full of friendship, mischief and...something more?

Had Rob seen what Mama Rose did?
Could the men she loved, love each
other, too?

How could they not?

Mason stood guard over the bed where
Lacey slept. It worried him that she
hadn't woken up when he collected her
from Ty's old bedroom or during the
bumpy ride in his truck over Mama
Rose's rural driveway or even when

he'd carried her up the stairs to her mammoth four-poster. Several calls to her doctor had assured him the unnatural slumber aligned with her injuries and the prescription she'd been given. She'd had a full examination, then regained consciousness in the hospital before they'd released her into his care but something about the deep sleep felt off to him.

All in all, she'd gotten lucky. They couldn't find anything out of the ordinary other than her concussion. The source of that wasn't in question. As long as he lived, he'd never erase the horrific scene from his mind. But what had caused her to pass out in the first place?

Tyler's account of their ill-fated car ride made it clear more than drowsiness had influenced Lacey's behavior. However, the lab hadn't turned up any abnormal substances in her blood or the last few drops of her coffee. They were going over her car, her clothes and anything else they could think of now.

Ty limped across the floor from the bathroom, disrupting Mason's circuitous pattern of thoughts. His raven hair spiked in damp clumps as he finished drying his torso with ginger swipes of the maroon towel before tossing it into the open hamper without looking. The grotesque line of bruises marching up his ribs stole Mason's breath. He'd bet

there were more beneath the baggy sweatpants riding low on Ty's slim hips as a result of his impact with the dash. His solid body had sheltered Lacey from the worst of the collision.

The tree branch that would have impaled him had he been wearing his seatbelt had prevented him from being thrown out the window but it had smashed into his exposed ribs. Mason would have sworn at least one or two were cracked but the X-rays the stubborn ass had finally agreed to, after insisting he be allowed to stay with Lacey, showed they were merely bruised. Still, Mason bet they hurt something fierce. They'd come so close to disaster, he still couldn't

entirely convince himself of their safety.

“I think I’m going to take a quick nap. My hip is throbbing like a bitch.”

“Wuss.” The jab came out half-hearted. Ty’d refused the pain medication the doctor had prescribed in order to stay alert. Mason could respect that but knew his partner would be paying for it now.

“Come lie with us, Mason. Today’s been hardest on you.”

“Oh yeah, because getting pulled from a mangled car had to have been the most relaxing thing you’ve done this year.”

“You’re so tense I’m afraid you’re going to crack a tooth.” Ty reached out to hug him when he neared but Mason drew away as if burned.

Tyler’s shunned hands fisted as they dropped to his side. His usually brilliant eyes seemed to dull further from pain or, maybe, betrayal. With stilted strides so different from his standard loose-limbed grace, he lumbered to the bed. When he eased onto the mattress he looked drained, like a hundred-year-old man. Defeat slumped his shoulders, making Mason feel like a royal bastard.

The man had been in a serious wreck then practically walked it off. Sure, he’d

zoned out for a minute or two but, as soon as he'd realized Lacey needed help to get extricated from her crunched sedan, he'd perked up. After guiding her limbs around the distorted steel, he'd hauled himself out before anyone could help.

In the next heartbeat, they'd crowded into the ambulance with a still unconscious Lacey. He'd deferred all medical attention in order to ensure she got premium care. He'd only permitted his own exam in the hospital once the doctor had assured them Lacey's injuries were minor and Mason had threatened to have him admitted if he didn't permit the check-up.

He'd grudgingly agreed, though Mason had watched him struggle to refrain from snapping at the staff to hurry. They still had no idea who'd fucked with Lacey. They'd stowed her at Mama Rose's where Mason intended to ditch Ty as well but he'd resisted being left behind. Together, they'd headed to the station with zero downtime for the badass to recover.

"You must feel like shit." Mason knew he'd compounded the physical discomfort with emotional trauma. Tyler didn't respond.

"Son of a bitch, Ty. Hang on a minute." He rushed to the other man's side when

he struggled to settle into a more comfortable position. “Want me to get some pillows from one of the other rooms?”

Instead of answering, the wounded man closed his heavy lids, refusing to acknowledge Mason’s presence.

“Don’t you get it? I can’t touch you, Ty. Not now. Not when everything is churning in my gut.” Silence. Tyler never shut him out like this. “You’re hurt! I won’t be able to stop once I unleash this...”

“Why would I want you to stop, dumbass?” Ty splayed on his back. He

flung a forearm over his face as though he could block out the world. He must not have expected an answer.

Mason dropped to his knees beside the bed. The erratic rise and fall of Ty's chest hurt him all over again. He had to explain. "Because Lacey is less than a foot away?"

"So?" He still didn't remove the defined arm to meet Mason's gaze.

When Mason didn't answer right away, Ty heaved a huge sigh. "Look, Clark. I just want to decompress for a few in case we get a hit on the second round of tox screenings."

The clear dismissal rankled. Despite his best intentions, Mason began to get angry. “We’d be cheating on her. I stand by what I said to you the other day. If we’re committed to her, we shouldn’t be with anyone else. Including each other. It’s not right. It puts her at risk!”

Ty went rigid. Mason tried to ignore the residual droplets of water that slid into the contours between Ty’s flexed abs but his cock noticed. It sprang to life in response.

“Do you hear what you’re saying, Mason? I don’t fuck around. You know that. And we’ve always used protection with other women. She signed up for

both of us. At the same time. Multiple partners and all that. What we want is only our dirty little secret because you refused to let her in on it.”

“She didn’t...”

“You never gave her the chance!” Ty struggled to sit up but collapsed with a groan.

Mason balled his fingers in his pockets to keep from soothing Tyler. He glanced at Lacey’s face to ground himself—to remind him of his beliefs. Relaxed but dotted with bruises, she looked like a fallen angel, not the kind of woman to take on two rough lovers. Never mind

the kind of person who would enjoy the explosion of base physical lust he and Tyler seemed to revel in when they got together.

“She would be disgusted.” He swallowed hard. “And I can’t handle that, Ty. I don’t understand it myself. How could I explain how I feel to her?”

“No, Mason. It’s you who’s always struggled with our attraction. Don’t make this about her. You saw the pictures she had on her hard drive. There were plenty of bi scenarios, not to mention all the hot gay action she had mixed in. You don’t have to say anything, just show her how it is between us.”

“I’m not gay.”

“You’ve buried your monster cock in my ass more times than I can count. What do you call that, Mason? Is it so hard to admit you want me?” Tyler turned his head toward Lacey. “Just think... She didn’t horde all those pictures overnight. I wonder how many times she’s kicked back in her desk chair to stroke herself while she added a new morsel to the stash. I can imagine her fingers sliding over the slick folds of her pretty pussy, coated in that sweet juice while she thought of...”

“Fuck! Shut the hell up, Ty.”

“Now imagine what she’d do if she saw the real thing.”

“That’s a cheap shot,” Mason growled as his cock rioted in his pants. After the adrenaline of the day, he needed an outlet to slake his bottled aggression. Fear of losing his loved ones incited a need to claim them all over again. He must be demented. Tyler’s reasoning was starting to make some kind of twisted sense.

“Fine. You’re immune to me. You can go forever without ever touching me again. But I don’t think I can live this way, Mason. I need you.”

Horror lanced through his heart when Tyler's eyes turned glassy.

“After being so fucking helpless while we crashed, I thought...I thought she'd died, too. I thought someone had killed her right in front of my eyes. Just like Rob. I'm fucking pissed off. I'm terrified that someone could hurt her again. And I'm horny.”

Tyler groaned then slid one broad hand across his smooth chest, over his shimmering abs and into the waistband of his pants. Mason's resolve began to crumble when Ty cupped the erection tenting the soft cotton. He tried to get up but his legs boycotted the decision.

“I jacked off twice in the shower. Nothing works. It’s driving me insane. Lacey is out of commission. She has a concussion, for God’s sake. Please, Mason. I need you. I’ll do whatever you want. Prove we’re okay.”

Ty’s other hand snaked out, wandering around Mason’s shoulders to bury in the hair at the nape of his neck. The tiny tug shouldn’t have propelled him forward at the speed of light but Mason couldn’t resist the temptation of a begging submissive. Every fiber of his nature harkened to the instinctive lure.

Before he could rethink the urge, he crushed his lips to Tyler’s then devoured

his mouth. The kiss acted as an outlet for all his rage, terror and relief. They exchanged moans, lashes of their tongues and not-so-tender love bites. Mason nipped at Ty's chin causing the other man to growl and arch his neck in invitation.

Lost in each other, they failed to notice the slight shifting from the other side of the bed. They didn't even hear the tentative but awestruck, "Guys?"

Instead, they continued to ravage each other until a delicate touch, unmistakably feminine, covered their joined hands on the pillowcase beside Ty's head.

Then they both froze.

Chapter Twelve

“Don’t stop.” Lacey’s whispered plea rang out like the report of a high-powered rifle in the deafening silence of her bedroom.

Tyler observed Mason with longing oozing from every pore of his body. She could almost feel him willing Mason to continue his sensual assault. But Mason spun to face her so fast she feared he’d fall off the edge of the bed where he braced his torso over Ty’s on straight locked arms.

“Lacey! I-I can explain.” His breath burst from his chest in giant pants.

“No need.” She tried to roll onto her side to watch them full on but a wave of dizziness stopped her in her tracks. Though she clamped her mouth shut to prevent it, a whimper escaped. Tyler reached for her but Mason got there first. Leaning over Ty, he rested the backs of his fingers against her forehead then stroked her hair. “I’m fine. Really. I just wanted a better seat for the show.”

Instead of resuming where he’d left off, Mason nibbled at her lips then brushed his own over hers so lightly she couldn’t say if they’d touched or if she’d detected the breeze of his mouth passing nearby until she caught a hint of the cinnamon gum Ty favored. Stealing it from Mason

made it taste twice as good.

“Excuse me.” Tyler nudged Mason’s face aside with his cheek as he butted in for a kiss of his own. Full, fluid strokes of his tongue tantalized her but the drugs she’d taken fuzzed her senses, restricting the pleasure that should have suffused her at his touch.

“I’m so sorry, Ty,” she murmured against his parted lips. Somehow he understood her reference to both the accident and her inability to relieve him.

“Shh, little one. We’re safe now. James, Mike and Razor are staked out around the house. All you have to worry about

is getting better.”

“You sound like your mom.”

He dismissed her concerns as the guys appeared to ignore the sparks she'd seen flying between them when she woke. Had it been a lingering dream? She might have believed that if the scratch of Mason's five o'clock shadow hadn't painted Ty's olive complexion bright red. They had so much practice cloaking their relationship, it had become second nature. But she refused to allow them to hide from her any longer.

She studied each man in turn. Mason refused to meet her stare. His fingers

clenched in the sheets and she thought he might start vibrating beneath the effort of containing all the tension trapped in his strung muscles. But the agony she read in Tyler's morose eyes, though he attempted to disguise it with a weak smile, tore her heart in two.

Another point for Mama Rose.

"Mason, could you help me to the bathroom?" She cleared her throat to cover her disgust. Playing into their misplaced notion of her helplessness couldn't be avoided.

In a flash, he'd scooped her up tight to his chest. She watched his still-pounding

pulse throb in the pronounced vein on his sexy throat as he jumped to accept any excuse for escape. Okay, so maybe their attention had its benefits every once in a while. When he turned toward the adjoining room, she caught sight of Ty as he crashed back onto the pile of pillows with a groan. The frustrated flop of his arms, not to mention the tent in his pants, cinched her resolve.

Lacey grimaced when her bare toes touched the chilled tile floor as Mason set her in front of the toilet. “Put the water in the sink on high and turn around, please?”

“I don’t want you to slip and fall, doll. Are you still dizzy?” The nearly translucent hue of her skin worried him further. He maintained a firm grip on her upper arms.

“I just moved too quick when I first woke up. I’m alright now, I promise.”

Though he didn’t necessarily believe she’d made a full recovery, he tested out her statement by releasing his support by degrees. When she stood straight and tall without a hint of wobble, Mason nodded then did as she asked.

He let his forehead fall onto the paneled wood door, straining for any hint of

distress from her direction as he castigated himself for the rash behavior she'd interrupted.

He'd been so reckless! Foolish!

A whisper of sound ghosted to his ears as she approached from behind but he stayed perfectly still, afraid to meet her gaze. He jerked when her palm pressed to his tight lower abs. The muscles of his back flexed when she laid her cheek between his shoulder blades. Though he knew he should return her straight to Tyler then concoct some excuse to leave, he entwined their fingers then drew her hand over the steady thump of his heart instead.

He was so fucked.

It wasn't right to stay, to expose her to all the censure an unconventional relationship would generate but he couldn't compel himself to flee yet. Her tiny fingers curled tighter in his grip.

Without facing her, he spoke. "I've never been so scared in my life as when I saw your car fly off the road earlier."

She tugged his hand until he had no choice but to turn, or crush her knuckles. He pivoted.

With surprising grace and speed, she flung her arms around his neck then

wrapped her legs around his waist. He caught her luscious ass in his palms, supporting her, then walked her forward until she perched on the vanity beside the still rushing water that would've drowned out their conversation if they hadn't whispered a hairsbreadth from each other. He rationalized the way he smothered her by telling himself he didn't want to drop her.

“You were afraid you might lose the two people you love most.”

With a fierce little growl, she captured the lobe of his ear between her teeth when he shifted to separate them. The gesture sent a surge of blood straight to

his rock-solid cock. The force of his desire prevented him from realizing she waited for his reaction for a solid ten seconds.

He couldn't admit his feelings to her or she'd never let him leave, no matter that it was the right thing to do. Instead, he hedged. "Ty is my best friend. Of course I care about him. And you, too."

"No, Mason. You're in love with him. Big difference." She cupped his jaw with trembling fingers, forcing him to look her straight in the eye as she allowed a fraction of an inch between their faces. Relief smoothed the jagged edges of her doubts when she observed

his acceptance of her declaration. Apparently, he couldn't hide a damn thing from her. He didn't argue about her use of the L word, as Ty would say, in reference to herself. Such a ridiculous denial would be pointless.

“How would you know?” He tried to play it off.

“Because I love you, Mason. I love you both and I can see the same emotion reflected between the two of you no matter how hard you try to hide it.” His insides turned to molten lava—gooey, churning and red hot—as her statement firebombed the last shreds of his control. She pressed a tender kiss to his parted

lips to soothe the sting of her next words. “Plus, Mama Rose pretty much said so.”

“What?” He flinched. “Ty told her about us?”

Too late, he realized he’d confirmed her suspicions. Shit, like that crazed kiss hadn’t already tipped her off. What had gotten into him? He knew better than to slip up and let his emotions run free. That went double when both Tyler and Lacey were near.

Lacey shook her head. “He didn’t have to, Mason. I can’t believe I didn’t see it before. You two had me so twisted in

knots, I doubted my instincts about how you felt toward me. I was too caught up in my own drama to pick up the friction between you.”

He scrubbed his hand across his face then swallowed hard. “Look, Lacey, I swear I won’t touch him again. I didn’t mean to kiss him now. It’s just that...”

“Mason Gregory Clark! Stop jumping to conclusions and listen to what I’m saying.” She gnashed her teeth when she shook his shoulders.

Stunned by her outburst, he only stared.

“Am I a casual fuck for you?”

“What the hell?” Caught off guard, he backpedalled. How could she even imagine that? God, he needed a minute to think when she wasn’t scrambling his logic into a mess. “No, of course not. Don’t you know I’ve wanted you forever? Still do.”

“I hoped.” She rested her forehead against his. “But I’m greedy. I want Ty, too.”

“Yeah. Shit, Lacey, I thought you realized that’s what we intended yesterday. This isn’t some kind of game.” No, he just needed to figure out how to give his lovers what they needed without putting them in danger.

“Perfect. Then let’s get back in there so I can watch you seduce Tyler.”

His cheeks flamed and his hands fisted in his hair. He tugged until the pain broke through his confusion. “Quit talking in circles! I didn’t say anything about being gay. Not that I have a problem with what other people do... it’s just not me. I’ve never wanted another guy in my life.”

He saw the mischief in her eyes a moment before she sprang her trap. That minx had him right where she wanted him! “If you don’t acknowledge your feelings for him, we’re both going to lose Ty. Would you take him from me

because you're too closed-minded to admit the truth? Straight with one exception, bi, gay... I don't care how you think of yourself. The end result is the same. Somehow, we were lucky enough to have met not one, but two soulmates. How can I love a man who's destroying the other man I love?"

"You don't understand, Lacey." Terror flavored the cocktail of emotions brewing inside him.

"Then explain it to me." Her open-eyed gaze stole his breath. Somehow he'd make her understand.

"There are a lot of people in this world

who aren't as indulgent as you and Tyler.” He winced as he thought back, remembering the agony licking along his ribs at the edges of the fractured bones.

“What happened to you, Mason? Why are you so afraid?”

She traced the crinkled edges of his mouth as he winced. Only she would see the fear he kept shrouded. Tyler might have too if he hadn't been so caught up in his misplaced self-doubts. That thought hurt far worse than the memory of forcing his broken body to crawl away, tumbling down the cement stairs in his father's sidewalk with jarring crunches only to drag himself across the

gravel driveway, never to return again.

“Tell me.”

The urgent whisper shattered his resistance. She wouldn't back down until he forced her to understand the consequences. He'd never spoken of that night to anyone but it seemed like the only way now. But how should he start?

“Tyler and I have wanted you forever. When we were seventeen Tyler came to me, nervous. He told me that he knew I was in love with you. Of course, I'd seen the way he looked at you. I knew he felt the same. We made a pact that it would never come between us. When

you were old enough to decide which one of us you wanted, the other would concede.”

He ignored her hiss and a whisper that sounded suspiciously like, “Morons.”

She cleared her throat and arched an eyebrow. “What if I didn’t want either of you?”

“I...uh...” He must have looked horrified because she let him off the hook with a reassuring smile. The unbridled lust in her eyes made it clear that wasn’t the issue here.

“So, why can’t we all get what we want,

Mason?" This time her tone held curiosity. "You guys enjoy threesomes and we all love each other. What's the problem?"

"We only started having threesomes because of you." He latched onto the easiest subject for discussion.

"What?" She snorted. "I wasn't born yesterday!"

"It's true. After our agreement, we decided we should learn everything we could about sex before you came to one of us. We wanted to make all our mistakes on women who didn't matter."

“That’s a lot of practicing, Mason.”

The resentment she couldn’t quite conceal ate at his conscience. “I know, doll. Things got out of control. No matter how many women we took, or the things we tried with them, it was never enough. They could never be you. Then you came home from school that summer. I could tell you were scared. Rob came to us and told us you were off limits. That we were too rough for you. I agreed. I should have looked more closely but I think I was afraid of what I might find. But I never stopped wanting you. Wishing you were the one in our bed.”

“Now you have me. Why are we wasting

time talking in the bathroom? Let's go to Tyler."

He stared at the ceiling while he counted to ten, reining in the desire to do just that.

"Because you haven't heard the whole story yet." Fuck! He didn't want to say this out loud, to make it real. It'd been years since he let his mind relive that terrible night.

She waited in patient silence, stroking his cheek until the words began to tumble out.

"You know my dad wasn't around much

growing up so we'd usually use my house to...practice. One day, we'd finished messing around with a girl but we were still so green, so clumsy. Shit, I can't even remember who it was.

Afterward, Tyler and I were hanging out. In my bed. I made fun of him for coming so fast when she'd sucked him off. Tyler insisted she'd had some trick, hit some magic spot on the underside of his cock. I didn't believe him. So he...umm. He offered to show me."

Lacey whimpered. When he glanced down, the hard points of her nipples distorted her silky top. He had to focus and get it all out before he lost his nerve.

“I’d seen the way he looked at me sometimes, the same way he looked at pretty girls. Once he’d told me he had a wet dream about making out with the mailman. It didn’t bother me. Back in those days, everything made us horny. So when he came closer, I didn’t move. I figured, ‘it’s just sex’. It didn’t mean anything with the girls we’d slept with, it wouldn’t mean anything if he touched me.”

Mason had to stop to clear his throat as he remembered the searing bliss of that connection.

“But it did. The moment his lips surrounded my cock, it felt better than

anything I'd experienced before. It was so powerful. So much more than sex. I came in his mouth in half the time he'd gotten blown by that girl but it had nothing to do with his fancy technique. I made some excuse about homework, which I'm sure he knew was a lie since I never gave a shit about school, and he left. I just needed to think. But when I watched him back out of the driveway in our truck, I saw the carport wasn't empty. I think he must have been too upset to notice. Thank God, he kept going."

Mason hadn't realized the fury rising inside him caused his body to shake until Lacey gathered him close.

“This is why your dad kicked you out?” She, like everyone else, had been led to believe he’d spent the last few months of his high school career living with the Lambert’s because he argued with his father about going to college. “That jackass!”

Mason nodded. “He saw Tyler... He told me he’d been hoping he wouldn’t have to teach me this lesson. He told me it wasn’t safe to be gay, even in today’s world. He yelled that people would hurt me. They’d hurt Tyler. He took off his shirt and showed me his scars.”

“From the fire he’d been in?” Her choked gasp made it clear she was

starting to get the picture, even if she didn't want to believe.

“He said a group of men had seen him with another man when he was ‘young and reckless’. They’d smashed a bottled of alcohol on him, beat him up and left him on the ground in a pool of the vodka. Someone dropped a match as they walked away. He told me it was for my own good as he cried, as he kicked me over and over. He told me he couldn’t bear to see me killed. He told me he loved me even as I heard my bones crack.”

Mason swiped the tears from Lacey’s cheek with robotic movements, lost in

the recollection.

“You never ran away?”

“No. Those two weeks I went missing, I hid out in your shed. Rob knew. He brought me food, got me cleaned up, taped my ribs. He never told a soul. Like you, I begged him not to. I knew that if Tyler found out, nothing would stop him from seeking retribution and I couldn’t stand for him to get hurt. My father said...”

The words clogged his throat. His hoarse whisper reflected the panic he’d felt all those years before. Not for himself. But for Ty.

“He said he’d kill Tyler if he ever found out we were lovers. Don’t you see, Lacey. There are crazy people in this world. I will protect you. And him. Because I love you both. Don’t make me put you at risk.”

“Your father’s been gone for two years, Mason. He can’t hurt Tyler.”

The logical plea couldn’t soothe his unease. Maybe now she’d understand why he’d refused to attend the bastard’s funeral after he’d drunk himself to death.

“I know, but there are other people like him. I can’t count the number of times we’ve been called out to hate crimes.

What if...”

“What if I get hit by a bus tomorrow?
What if Tyler gets stabbed by a random
mugger in an alley while he’s on duty?
What if...”

“Enough. Please.” He slammed his eyes
shut on the terrifying images she
conjured but he knew she was right. He
was tired of fighting the inevitable.

“Mason, I’m sorry, but you’re looking at
this through the eyes of a helpless
teenage boy instead of the wiser,
stronger lens of a man. I’m not blaming
you after what happened. God knows, I
understand what something like this can

do to your psyche but I'd be willing to bet that no one has the power to hurt Tyler the way you have."

"What are you saying?" He got still and quiet.

"It has to be all or nothing, Mason. I intend to sing my good fortune to the world. I won't hide. I won't live a secret life, like we're doing something wrong. That will never work."

"I know." He sighed. For a moment he'd been teetering on the edge of believing they had a chance. It hurt to hear her confirm his morose thoughts. It couldn't work.

“Stop that!” She tapped his shoulder. “Don’t go all half-empty on me. I love you. I love Tyler and I can’t watch him suffer every time you discount his affection. What I meant, is that we have to be honest with each other and the world. Anything else is an injustice to our bond.” She attempted to allay her harsh mandate with a kiss but he stayed stiff and unyielding as his heart raced.

Could she be right? Was he holding onto fear of a threat long past out of habit? Had he used the horror instilled in him by his father as a crutch to avoid his feelings?

When she inhaled, he prepared for

another assault by the diminutive warrior. Instead, she teased, “Did I mention how much it turns me on to think of the two of you locked together, muscles glistening with sweat, while you drive each other insane with raw desire?”

To prove her point, she spread her legs wider. She rubbed the aching heat of her pussy through the silky pants they’d changed her into while she slept. A damp spot darkened the crotch.

“Do you love to tease him like this before you grant him what he begs for? I bet his ass is smoldering hot around your cock.” Her hips rocked in a primitive

dance designed to entice. “I’d give anything to see the two of you together, unleashing your sexuality. Destroying the careful boundaries you’ve drawn. Imagine what it would be like, if you were honest with him. Imagine how much further you could take him. Imagine the limitless ecstasy he could give you in return.”

He licked his lips before a wry grimace tilted one corner of his tight mouth. “I’ve really been fucking this all up, haven’t I?”

She nodded. “I think so. But I know how you can make it up to him.”

Mason growled as he clamped her to his side then burst through the door into the adjoining room. He strode to the bed, set her carefully into her spot against the mountain of pillows, then climbed over her to tackle Ty. She grinned when the other man's lids flew open.

Mason stared straight into the surprised depths of Ty's eyes while he took his mouth in a crushing kiss. Their tongues clashed and dueled while she watched. Tyler surrendered to the driving fervor of Mason's passion. While Mason continued to ravage him, Tyler lay stunned.

After long minutes filled with grunts,

nips and rough claiming, Tyler attempted to object. Mason's lips muffled his first attempt. "Wait." He freed his mouth long enough to pant. "Wait."

While Ty caught his breath, Mason stripped in two seconds flat. From her vantage point, she admired the flex and play of his athletic body. The slash of ink encircling his right biceps enhanced his rugged beauty. He wrapped his fingers around the waistband of Ty's sweatpants then yanked them to his ankles before Ty could react. Instead of wasting effort resisting the onslaught of Mason's primal hunger, he faced her instead.

“What the fuck did you do to him in there?” His eyebrows got lost beneath the fringe of his hairline.

“Who, me?” Lacey pasted on her best imitation of an innocent expression. “Not a thing.”

His eyes turned serious as he faced their lover. “Just tell me this...is this a permanent change or are you just giving me a taste of what I want because you’re too horny to resist?”

“Ah, shit, Ty.” Mason knelt by the side of the bed until he could stare straight into the depths of the other man’s searching eyes. “I’ve been a complete

moron. Forgive me. I came too close to losing everything I've ever wanted today. I don't want to waste another moment of our time together pretending. I'm not going to hide from the truth ever again. I'll tell you the rest later. But I need you now."

Lacey heard Tyler's gulp clear across the bed. He peeked up at her and she nodded in encouragement.

"I do love you." Mason sealed the vow with a kiss, this one less forceful yet more potent than anything she'd witnessed before. "I'm sorry I ever gave you cause to doubt it."

“I love you too, Mason.” Tyler beamed then surprised her by lunging across the small gap between them to sear away her lingering sadness for the boy Mason had once been with a smoking hot kiss.

“And I love you, Lacey Daughtry. More with every minute that passes. You’re the key to everything that makes me happy. Thank God you’re safe.”

She patted his cheek to dispel the rejuvenated panic in his expression. “I love you, too. Now, stop tormenting me. Show me what it’s like between you guys. As much as I wish I were, I’m not up for taking on both of you just yet. So, entertain me instead.”

Tyler blinked back the emotions clogging his throat. She thought he did an admirable job of holding himself together when every inch of his body sagged in relief. He didn't make a single aggressive move toward Mason, mandating the other man come to him this time. Somehow, the hesitation gave Mason pause.

“Go ahead.” She nudged the indecisive pair. “I want to watch.”

Chapter Thirteen

When both Lacey and Tyler prodded him with such heated expectation in their eyes, Mason buckled beneath the pressure of their joint desires. He had no hope of resisting what he needed when their cravings matched his own. He nodded at Lacey then faced Tyler head-on. A fierce, wolfish grin erupted as a byproduct of his emancipated lusts.

He needed to fuse them together so they'd never come apart again but the thought of exacerbating Ty's injuries stopped him in mid-motion.

“I need you. Please don't hold back

now, I'll be fine. I'll take the damn medicine if I have to. Come here?"

Mason should have tempered his reaction but he couldn't. Damn Ty and his begging.

Ty grunted when he mashed their bodies together from head to toe but the trim muscles that banded around Mason's back allowed no possibility of retreat. The solid mass of his best friend's form made for a stark contrast to Lacey's soft curves. Chest on chest, hips on hips, cock on cock, he ground against the prone man as he prepared to claim him. Mason reached backward, clamped his hands over Ty's then nailed them to the

mattress.

“Hell, yes.” Tyler arched beneath him.
“Take me, Mason.”

“When I’m ready.” The power of their arousal roared through his veins. He let Ty get drunk on the anticipation. “Know this first... You better be sure this is what you want because there won’t be any turning back after today.”

“I’ve wanted this forever.” As Tyler echoed his own words to Lacey, Mason knew they were fated to be together. How could he have forced them apart all this time?

“Take me as I will take you. No more hiding. I swear, Ty.” The other man’s heart, and cock, pounded in synch with his own. With that, the talking concluded. Mason capitulated to instinct, joining his mouth to the tantalizing lips working beneath his for an unnecessary response.

He bit Ty’s jaw, then followed the sharp lines of his neck and collarbones as he treated them in kind. Mason worked his way to the firm tips of Ty’s nipples, which he flicked his tongue over before gifting them with same stinging pressure. Tyler struggled beneath him but Mason kept Ty pinned by spreading his weight onto the other man’s thighs and wrists.

He worried again about compounding the injuries Ty'd sustained but the desperate sounds emanating from his delicious throat were born of pleasure, not pain.

As they thrashed against each other, Mason detected sticky slickness pooling on their abdomens. Whether it leaked from his rock-hard shaft, Ty's, or both, he couldn't say but the moisture enhanced the glide of his hard-on against the ridges of the other man's ripped abdomen. He accompanied the claiming actions of his mouth with the humping of his hips. His balls tapped Ty's shaft with every flex of his pelvis, driving them both wild.

Mason could come just like this. In a matter of ecstasy-soaked minutes he could shoot his load on the glorious, smooth skin of his lover's torso. In fact, he had many times before. Something about ejaculating on Ty's face, ass or chest soothed the impulse to claim him. Maybe because he'd never allowed the slightest hint of his possession to show in public. But, if he stayed locked close as they were, Lacey wouldn't be able to witness the action.

When he glanced up, he saw Tyler's face turned to the side against the pillow. He followed the other man's hungry gaze to where she lounged, playing with her ripe nipples as she

observed their exchange. Ty reached out to tease the extended tips but she evaded his seeking fingers.

“Not this time, I want to watch. You guys are so hot together. Show me more.”

Mason’s attention skittered to the side of the bed where she lounged, one hand beneath the pretty violet pants conforming to her luscious legs while the other had fallen to draw light circles across her sensitive tummy. As if he’d needed extra incentive to slake his raging passion.

When he ripped his mouth from Ty’s

near-perfect body, the other man moaned and tried to follow him but Mason halted the enticing motion with one look. “Lie still, Tyler. Let me have you.”

“I’ve always been yours, Mason.”

When Tyler submitted to his whims, Mason had to grab for the base of his cock. He squeezed hard to keep from shooting right then. His head dropped back as he looked heavenward and groveled for the stamina necessary to satisfy his lover. Though the urge to bury his cock in Ty’s ass grew, he wanted their first time with Lacey to be different. He wanted to demonstrate the power of their sexual chemistry even

without the added thrill of full intercourse.

He admitted to himself for the first time the magic stemmed from him and Ty together instead of the physical intensity of two men fucking. They didn't have to get extreme to experience mind-blowing pleasure together. Though, God knew, he loved it when they did.

Mason sat on his haunches between Tyler's spread thighs. He dragged the tip of his index finger through the precum glistening on Ty's stomach then lifted it to his mouth for a taste of their combined fluids. He sucked the flavor of their desire from the digit without flinching

from Tyler's green laser vision. An evil smile spread across his face when he heard Lacey gasp in the background.

Ty's long cock twitched in response, drawing his attention. Mason wrapped his fingers around the stocky flesh. It never failed to amaze him. Hot, hard and yet silky, touching Ty's hard-on felt completely different than stroking his own. He gave the pulsing erection a few tugs for good measure before skimming his now slick hand to the wrinkled sac beneath it.

Mason rolled Tyler's balls in his palm, savoring the trust Ty placed in him. When he flicked his finger across the

sensitive spot behind the sac, Tyler moaned and arched toward him in invitation. Mason shook his head. “Not this time.”

Instead of continuing his exploration of the valley splitting Ty’s ass, he walked his fingers back up the prominent vein decorating the underside of his cock. Then, with two fingers on the base of his own erection, he forced it into contact with Tyler’s. They both moaned at the dull thud accompanying the slap of their cocks.

The rustle of fabric sliding down Lacey’s satin thighs only made him harder, if such a thing were possible. He

stole a peek at her hand slipping between her legs before returning his attention to Ty's body, which strained beneath him.

Mason used his stiff dick to draw swirling arches dotted with interspersed whaps of the blunt head on Ty's abdomen. Finally, with one shaft in each hand, he pressed the two together until he could fist them both at the same time. He choked up, allowing room for his other hand to grasp their straining hard-ons in a matching hold. Above the ring made by his top finger, the furious purple head of his cock nudged the bundle of nerves ringing the base of Ty's glans.

“Shit, yeah.” Tyler’s head thrashed on the pillow. “Do it, Mason. Jerk us off together.”

Another seductive moan echoed from Lacey’s direction. The slick noise of her fingers burying in her pussy told him all he needed to know. He hadn’t pegged her as a voyeur. Full of surprises, the little minx continued to amaze him.

With a tortuous glide of his palms, he fondled their compressed cocks from base to tip. As he returned his hands to their starting position, Ty’s shaft twitched against his as it released another spurt of milky secretion. Mason’s thumb swiped over the slit to

collect the opalescent strand then incorporated it into his escalating motion.

At the pinnacle of every stroke he clenched his hand around the dual heads, making them work to penetrate his fists. When Tyler shuddered beneath his ministrations, their balls bounced together before their fresh sweat adhered their sacs once more.

He smelled the salty evidence of their lust scenting the air. The sweet fragrance added by Lacey blended perfectly. If she wanted a show, he'd give her one.

“Oh, damn. Mason!” Ty’s body clenched

beneath him even as his hips began to thrust in perfect counterpoint to the rhythm Mason set, driving his cock harder into Mason's waiting grasp. "I have to come. Jesus! It feels so good it hurts."

"That's right, you're getting harder in my fist. Show Lacey how much you like this." He gave a twist of his wrist at just the right moment to ensure he hit Ty's sweet spot. His lover didn't stand a chance. His looming eruption guaranteed to rocket Mason off the cliff into orgasm. Nothing in the universe compared to giving Ty and Lacey ultimate satisfaction. It turned him on beyond belief. "Come on, Ty. Come for me."

Come for us.”

Normally, he reveled in the moment his come splattered on whatever exposed surface of Tyler’s body he found handy. Today, a new craving fired his blood. Mason hunched his upper body at the same time he aimed their cocks at the center of his chest.

When Tyler saw what he intended, his entire body stiffened. The thick flesh filling Mason’s hands bulged then throbbed. Creamy jets of come flew through the air, landing with surprising force on his chest. The spurt that blasted into his nipple proved to be his undoing.

“Fuck, yes! Ty!” Mason roared as he joined their simultaneous release. More scalding fluid coated his chest before sliding onto his abdomen. The rush of orgasm stole his mind with unrelenting waves of ecstasy. Just when they’d begun to fade, a feminine cry reached through senses saturated with desire.

Tyler groaned, “You’re killing me.” His cock heaved one final burst of sperm then stilled in Mason’s shaking hold. Every muscle in his body turned to mush. He barely managed to throw his weight to the side to avoid crushing Tyler’s bruised ribs when he fell, drained, to his back on the bed between Lacey and Tyler.

Both of his lovers panted as they matched his struggle for breath in the wake of mind-numbing release. As though one person, Tyler and Lacey turned to him in unison. Their tongues lapped at his gooey chest, stealing a taste of their mingled pleasure before meeting in the middle for a soul-stealing kiss. As they explored each other's mouths, their hands—one tiny and delicate, the other broad and strong—massaged the remaining essence of their loving into him until his skin, and the light fur coating it, gleamed.

Mason lay entranced as he observed the sealing of their lips as though it were a sacred oath. One thing was certain in his

blown mind. Nothing could ever come between them again.

A bond this powerful could never be broken.

Lacey monitored the even breathing of her men from her resting place on the left side of Mason's chest. Her head lay over his heart, which beat slow and steady. Curled on the other side of their lover, Tyler mirrored her position. Mason had flung a burly arm around each of their waists, tying the unit

together.

After sleeping all day, she couldn't stand to close her eyes again. Instead, she preferred observing the way Mason's fingers tightened to ensure they stayed nearby and the peaceful smile gracing Tyler's handsome face. She'd easily been staring at the pair of them for an hour after the brief nap she'd stolen in the wake of her orgasm.

It would be easy to forget the horrific events of the past week when faced with paradise but fate obviously hadn't gotten the memo regarding their vacation from reality. The muted buzz of a vibrating cell phone caused Tyler to bolt upright.

His left hand flew to the purple discoloration on his ribs as he fished around on the floor for Mason's discarded jeans with his right hand.

“Yo? Nah, this is Lambert. What's up?”

Mason dislodged her when he slid his legs off the far edge of the mattress. The guys sat side by side with the phone between them, close enough that their spread thighs touched, sharing whatever news the caller had. While their backs were turned, Lacey gave her head an exploratory shake.

No dizziness.

With as much stealth as she could manage, she crawled behind the pair in an attempt to eavesdrop but all she caught was Ty's sharp intake accompanied by Mason's pungent curse before they flipped the phone closed to end the call. Tyler's longer hair stuck up in stylish disarray only a man could manage without effort. She reached her hands out to massage the base of each man's neck.

“What's wrong?” Neither one of them answered her. “Please, don't make me wait. Tell me what they found.”

Tyler twisted to face her. He pulled her into his lap then nuzzled the crown of her

head with his chin. She recognized his futile attempt to disguise his communication with Mason when his jaw bobbed against her hair.

“You won’t hide this from me!” She shoved out of his hold but only ended up on Mason’s lap instead. “Who the hell was that?”

“Little one, are you sure you’re up to hearing about this right now?”

She nodded, biting her lip.

“When we left the station earlier today, the lab hadn’t been able to find any anomalies. The stuff you drank was

really just coffee. But, we had them run the tests again. They didn't find it the first time because we were convinced you drank whatever the fuck that bastard gave you."

"Find what?" The suspense knotted her guts. "Which bastard?"

"Someone spread Harnytal on the lid of your cup. Every time you took a sip, you breathed it in until it knocked you out."

"I really didn't fall asleep at the wheel?" A simultaneous rush of relief and dread blossomed in her chest.

"Shit no, sweetheart. I could have told

you that. You were seriously fucked up before we crashed. I should have realized your violent reactions were abnormal before we even pulled out of the lot.” Tyler tucked her hair behind her ear. “You don’t remember it at all, do you?”

“Not very much.”

Mason tightened his arms around her waist as she shivered in his hold.

“Thank God,” Tyler whispered under his breath. “It’s better that you can’t, trust me.”

“We should have filled you in, doll.”

Strong hands chased the goose bumps from her arms as Mason reassured her. “First you were sleeping, then...well, you know. You didn’t do anything wrong. Harmytal is hot on the street right now. People are using it as the new date rape drug. Other than memory loss and a killer headache, there are no lingering side effects. It clears out of the blood stream fast, making it hard to prove someone’s been a victim.”

The blood drained from her face. “Who would do that to me? Why?”

Tyler enfolded her hand in his then brought it to his lips before Mason dropped the bomb.

“They’re bringing Jerome in for questioning now. Do you think you’re up for a trip downtown? Ty and I have some things we want to ask about in person.” The rage underlying his calm assertion terrified her. “Neither one of us wants to miss out on the fun but we’re not leaving you alone again.”

“Wait a minute!” Their intent finally penetrated her shock. “Jerome wouldn’t hurt a fly. There’s no way he’s involved in this.”

“We’ll see about that, little one.” Ty tried to lighten the mood. “I promise I won’t let Mason pound him into the dirt until we know for sure.”

She didn't laugh or even crack a smile. Suddenly, she couldn't shake the sick dread in her gut. "Is all of this related to Rob's murder? What the hell is going on here?"

Her mind raced to think of any tiny detail she could have missed, anything that would link the bouts of insanity invading her life, but nothing clicked into place.

While she thought, Mason lifted her. He carried her into the bathroom where he filled the tub with steaming water and a dash of bubbles. "Take a quick bath then we'll get some answers, doll."

"A shower would be faster," she

mumbled, already knowing what he would say to that.

“It’s not safe, yet. Harmytal can affect your equilibrium for up to twenty-four hours.”

“We could take one together.”

The spark of arousal in his blue eyes reminded her of the core of a flame.

“That would take ten times as long.” He deposited her in the soothing liquid. “I’ll get cleaned up while you’re soaking, then Ty can have his turn. Be ready to get out in fifteen minutes.”

As if she'd wait for their assistance.

In the end, she did settle in for the entire show as the guys soaped up then rinsed off in the glass-doored shower. The heat of the bath infused her aching muscles with welcome relief. Plus, the scenery rocked her world, distracting her from stressing out over things outside of her control.

She had a feeling she'd know more than she cared to soon enough.

Chapter Fourteen

Tyler slipped into the dim, closet-sized room where Lacey stood ramrod-straight behind the one-way window overlooking the interrogation room. Without a care for the other officers, the DA—or even the chief, who flanked her in a protective semi-circle—he cut through the crowd of guys. Though Mason had kissed her on the lips in front of their co-workers before they'd had one final private conference in the hall, he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her shoulders snug against his chest.

Whatever happened, they would watch it together. Since he had no intentions of skirting his relationship with Lacey—or Mason—ever again, he shrugged off the cleared throats, elbow nudges and stares of the few gawkers. Most of the men in the room he trusted with his life, both public and personal. The rest could go to hell.

His hands fanned out over the fuzzy, cornflower blue sweater Lacey had thrown on over the sexy jeans molding to the rise of her hips. From this angle, he caught a glimpse of the plump swell of her breasts framed in the V-neck.

Son of a bitch! He forced himself to

concentrate on the action unfolding under the horrid green glow of the fluorescents next door. Mason stalked across the cracked linoleum to the mustard colored bucket chair that barely held all of Jerome's massive build. The giant dwarfing the tiny plastic seat appeared at ease despite having been detained for close to two hours already. The detective on the case hadn't been able to make any progress. He'd gladly turned the suspect over to Ty and Mason for a change of pace.

"If you planted that shit on Lacey's coffee, I'm going to fuck you up." Mason got right in Jerome's face as he snarled the threat.

Behind them the chief cursed. “Is he going to be able to keep his act together?”

“Depends on if he believes the dude or not.” Tyler shrugged. If Jerome had caused the wreck, Mason was likely to kick his ass but someone would probably pull him off before he did permanent damage or got himself fired.

Lacey shuddered in his hold. “Jerome wouldn’t hurt me, Tyler. I keep telling you guys that.”

“We’ll see, little one.” He refused to entrust her safety to blind faith. “I hope you’re right.”

If not, maybe Jerome would get his ass kicked twice. Once for causing the crash and once for betraying her friendship.

Jerome laughed at Mason's bluster. "You expect to come in here and scare me into confessing with that bullshit? What is this, some bad TV show from the 80's?"

"That man must have a death wish," the rookie, Razor, mumbled as he shook his head.

Mason slapped his palms on the stained Formica table. "You only have something to worry about if you're the bastard who drugged Lacey. Only if

you're the fucker who caused her to crash into that tree."

Jerome grimaced, his chocolate eyes matching Mason's heat for a moment. "I don't know jack about any drugs but I'd never do something to put that girl in jeopardy. In fact, I'd gladly give you a hand in taking out whoever did."

"Not a smart thing to admit in a police station, shithead. Especially not when you've got two priors for assault on your record."

Lacey gasped at the news her friend wasn't the gentle giant she'd thought.

He lifted one mammoth shoulder. “I ain’t no saint but you’ve got the wrong guy this time.”

“Then why wouldn’t you talk to the detective?” Mason studied the other man while skepticism rang in his voice but his posture had relaxed a bit.

“I was waiting for you, blondie. Or that dark-haired hunk who hangs with you.”

Razor snorted but settled at a glare from the chief.

“I’m here now.”

“I’ll spill. But first, I want to know one

thing.” Jerome crossed his thick arms over his chest.

“What’s that?” Mason continued to stare him down.

“Is she alright? Tiny L?” His forehead creased. “They wouldn’t tell me anything ’cept that she’d wrecked.”

Mason reached behind him to unknot the tension in his neck. He shook his head as though to clear the red from his vision then plopped into the chair next to Jerome. Tyler felt some of the tension leach from his bones. Lacey heaved a sigh of relief beneath his forearms.

“Yeah, she’ll be okay. They got her with Harnytal. She blacked out and drove off the road but my ‘hunky’ sidekick saved the day. They’re banged up. A concussion and a hell of a lot of bruises sprinkled between them but they’ll make it.”

The DA shuffled as Mason confided in the man he no longer suspected. He picked up his briefcase, flung his overcoat across his arm then made to leave. “Call me when you’ve got someone legitimate, Chief.”

“So here’s what went down.” Jerome drew their attention back to the interrogation room with his deep bass. “I

saw the Lacemeister working desk. I wasn't really surprised to see her back so soon 'cause she's a fighter. I passed by a few times even though I'm not assigned to that wing this week so I could check on her and maybe cheer her up a few degrees. After midnight, she started fading so I put in an order for that ridiculous imitation latte she digs from the crapeteria. When I came back through I went to grab it from the spot David, the hot cashier, usually stashes my shit. Only it wasn't there. I figured that was good enough excuse as any to strike up some convo with the stud. He told me some broad already grabbed the drink. I was pissed. You know, I thought she stole Tiny L's juice. But when he

started to make up a fresh one, the cup was sitting on the machine. We had a good laugh over it, like he'd lost his fucking marbles. It happens when you work such suckass hours. Then I snagged the cup and hauled ass upstairs. That's when I ran into you three in the middle of your little domestic drama."

Mason cut him off before he exposed the nitty-gritty of their possessive snit in colorful detail they'd never live down. "How did David describe 'the broad'?"

Jerome scratched his chin as he thought back.

"I remember he said she was cute 'cause

it bummed me that he might not be batting for my team after all. You never can tell with some guys.” He winked at Mason, drawing another chuckle from Razor. “After that I didn’t listen too close. Maybe he said she was brunette? Sorry, man, you’d have to ask him.”

“I’ll do that, Jerome.” Mason stuck out his hand. “Thanks for cooperating. And for being a good friend to Lacey. Let me call you cab home.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Jerome leaned forward, planting his elbows on the table hard enough to make it creak. “One more thing.”

Mason raised an eyebrow.

“You and your hunky sidekick hurt her and you’ll have to answer to me.”

Mason threw back his head and laughed. Jerome didn’t.

“I promise, hurting her is the last thing on my mind.”

Lacey squirmed from Tyler’s hold as the two men made their way out the interrogation room door. She flung herself at the mountain of a man while the rest of the men studied their shoes. “I knew it wasn’t you.”

“You got that right, Lacemeister.” His diner-plate sized hand patted her back. “Who else is going to dish with me about the fine young specialists roaming the halls of St. Ann’s? Though, I have a feeling you’ll be less interested in the selection of Grade A beef than you once were.”

Mason growled, “Don’t push your luck, Jerome.”

They parted ways at a fork in the labyrinthine corridors when Tyler guided them farther into the bowels of the station rather than toward the front desk. “I want to check in with the tech guys. The decoding of your emails

should get bumped to high priority now. Make sure to smile and bat your lashes a lot, these geeks will do anything for a pretty lady.”

“Like you wouldn’t?” Lacey wrinkled her nose. She’d seen some crazy and inventive ploys by women hoping to get Ty’s attention over the years.

Mason laughed. “She’s got you there.”

The closer they got to the labs, the more drastically the atmosphere changed. By the time they’d made a handful of turns, shoulder-length hair replaced buzz cuts as the style of choice while an array of ripped or faded T-shirts advertised a

plethora of heavy metal bands. She ducked her head to conceal a tiny smirk when Mason greeted a techie with a clap on the back that resulted in a dislodged pocket protector.

The way the male dominant culture of the station dealt with Rob's death struck her as polar opposite from the nurses' reaction to her return. Not one person mentioned the tragedy but several gave brusque nods in the partners' direction that communicated respect all the same. She supposed they had to compartmentalize their work from the personal in order to survive. Not that different from working on a family member at the hospital, she supposed.

Hopefully, she'd never have to find out for sure.

With light pressure from the fingers resting on her elbow, Mason nudged her into a bustling hive of activity. Cubicles lined the outside walls of the cramped room while long conference style workstations allowed for collaborative pursuits. Tyler scanned the chaos for a second then took off for the far corner.

A monitor angled away from the action for the maximum privacy afforded by the communal space. As they neared, she realized a familiar face huddled behind it. The neat man with classic Roman features felt so out of place in the

mishmash of wires, data ports and social ineptitude that she had forgotten he belonged to the cyber crimes division. Lacey had always found her brother's friend attractive. He'd even taken her out to dinner a few times and to the movies once but the chemistry between them hadn't transcended the platonic phase.

“What's taking so damn long, JRad?”
Mason never beat around the bush.

Lost in his work, Jeremy Radisson blinked several times but didn't even look up from the screen. Tyler whapped the mesh back of the ergonomic chair cradling the young computer whiz, who disengaged the miniscule, state-of-the-

art earphones none of them had realized he wore.

“Hey guys. Lacey.” He flashed her a sad smile. “Sorry, it gets kind of crazy in here. If I don’t tune it out I’d never get anything accomplished.”

“Have you been able to descramble the email yet?” Tyler usually had more patience than Mason but today it looked like they were both fresh out.

Jeremy frowned. “I made some significant progress here in the last ten minutes or so. I wanted to clean up the artifacts a tad before I called you guys in.”

“Yeah, well, we need to put a rush on the job.” Mason bordered on rude.

She covered his fist with hers, prying his fingers open until she could slip her hand into his palm.

Jeremy glanced up from his station for a closer look at the three of them. “Shit, Lacey, what happened to your face? What aren’t you guys telling me?”

“Some piece of shit made her a Harmytal cocktail. It’s a bad idea to drink and drive.”

“Oh, man. You guys aren’t going to like this, then.” Jeremy rubbed the lower half

of his face. His dove grey eyes flicked to her then away.

“Whatever you have to say to them, you can say in front of me.” She propped her hands on her hips. They wouldn’t dare send her away now. Would they?

He sighed. “The email looks like it was from some guy named Jackson. I tracked the header info back to a mail server at Rocky Forge Penitentiary. From there it was a breeze to secure the IP address of the terminal it was sent from.”

Jeremy paused instead of blurting out his findings. She appreciated the opportunity he provided for her to come clean before

he filled in the details. Though unnecessary, his thoughtfulness improved her high regard for the conservative officer.

“We already know about what that bastard did to Lacey.”

He wouldn't meet her gaze when he said, “I did some research to figure out why some slimeball in lockup would be contacting her. I, uh, secured a copy of the state's report on the incident four years ago as well as this jerk's records. Now, you can't use any of this in an official capacity yet—the request hasn't come through the proper channels—but it looks like he's up for parole in a few

weeks, if he can convince the state he's a reformed man. The subject of his email pretty much sums it up. The gist is that he wanted to talk to Lacey in an attempt to convince her that his time in jail had made him see what a fuck-up he was. I haven't decoded all the lines of the message yet but I deciphered enough that my program can fill in most words with possible alternates. From that, it seems like he was asking for her to attend the trial and plead on his behalf or, at the very least, to not show up at all."

"I didn't know they let people smoke crack in jail." Tyler shook his head.

"No kidding." Jeremy shrugged. "But

here's the weird part. Like we talked about when you called this in to me, Ty, the message was clean. There was no virus in it. I mean the dude wanted Lacey to read it. Trashing her computer would be counterproductive."

"So you're saying someone else didn't want me to talk to Jackson?"

Tyler rubbed her tense shoulders.

"Yeah." Jeremy hesitated.

"Tell us the rest, JRad," Mason rumbled through clenched teeth.

"The virus was introduced through the

USB ports on Lacey's computer."

"Fuck!" Mason pounded a fist into the workstation. The commotion of the room paused for a second or two while nearby technophiles stopped to stare.

"Does that mean what I think?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, Lacey. Unless your computer has left your house before this trip downtown, someone's been inside."

She had to sit before she fell. She pulled out a chair then collapsed into it, ignoring the concerned stare the three men exchanged. "It's been on that same

desk since I got it two years ago.”

Jeremy attempted to relieve her. “If the guys hadn’t called this in I might have thought it was one of them trying to protect you in their Neanderthal way. Could Rob have done this to keep you from talking to this jerk ever again?”

“I-I guess it’s possible.” Her mind spun. “But it doesn’t seem like something he’d do. He was a straightforward kind of guy. After this happened, we promised never to keep secrets from each other. I think he trusted me more than this.”

“I agree.” Tyler had always been a good judge of character. “It doesn’t feel like

the way Rob would approach a problem.”

“Then someone else had access. Could you assemble a list of who’s been over to visit?” Jeremy thought aloud.

“Jesus Christ. There must have been two hundred people who showed up to the going away party after the funeral.” Mason paced back and forth behind her chair as he realized the magnitude of possibilities. “Even you were there, JRad.”

“Can you pinpoint the time of infection?” Tyler asked.

“I can try. I just haven’t gotten that far yet. I need more time.”

“One thing doesn’t make sense to me.”

Lacey interrupted before Mason could hammer Jeremy for more information.

“All those calls and messages...the voice was a woman. And not one I know. Believe me, even if Jackson tried to disguise his voice I would remember. I hear it enough in my nightmares.”

Tyler’s grip tightened until she winced and shrugged off his hand.

“I can check the call logs from the jail. That should be easy enough to verify. But I doubt it was him. I already started

a run on the calls into the landline but since they came in before the call tracker, it's taking longer to trace through the phone company. Paperwork and all that nonsense..."

"Thanks, Jeremy." Ty heaved a sigh. "I'm not sure there's much else we can do at this point."

"You three should head out until we know more. I'm going to fill in Lieutenant Graves. Even though he's the lead detective on the case, I'm guessing he'll bring you guys in to question this asshole up at the correctional facility tomorrow but it'll take time to bust through the red tape. There's no use in

hanging around.” Jeremy stared pointedly at Mason.

“I got you. People expect us to be here. You were our last stop. After this, I think we’ll head back to our apartment. Call us as soon as you know anything else.”

“Of course.” Jeremy trailed a finger over Lacey’s cheekbone, which sported one of the darker bruises she hadn’t had time to cover with makeup before their dash to the station. “Stay out of trouble, huh?”

“I’ll try.” She leaned over to press a kiss to his cheek. “Thank you.”

Lacey zoned on the ride home. Sitting between the two guys on the bench seat of Mason's truck reminded her of their happy summer days even though the cloudy grey weather did not. She snuggled into Ty's good side and tried to ignore the tension in his thighs. Both men were strung tight, checking the rear and side view mirrors every few seconds to guarantee no one tailed them.

When they pulled up in front of her house, the guys exited the cab with their guns drawn. Before they'd let her go in

to pack an overnight bag, they checked every inch of the exterior then the interior. She'd never felt unsafe in her own home before. When she shivered, Mason patted her on the ass.

“Go ahead, doll. Grab a few changes of clothes. Enough for two or three days, I'd say.”

Tyler said, “I have my duffle already, I'm going to raid the pantry. You should be able to borrow some of Rob's clothes.”

“I thought we were going to your apartment?”

“No, little one. It’s the first place someone who knows you would look after here. Mason just said that back at the station in case anyone was listening.”

“You guys think someone we know did this? And Rob? Was it another cop that killed him?” She tried to swallow the hysteria threatening to bubble up.

“We just don’t know right now, Lacey. Anything’s possible. We’re not going to risk your safety.” Mason laid things on the line.

“It’s not as bad as it seems, little one. We’re probably going to have to take a ride up to Rocky Forge tomorrow or the

next day anyway. Just think of this as a head start. There's a sweet mountain resort about a hundred miles from the penitentiary. I've always wanted to check it out. We'll make a vacation of it." Tyler stepped over his luggage to surround her in his embrace then he whispered, "I'm going to call right now and see if they have a cabin with a Jacuzzi."

She recognized his ploy to distract her but, sadly, that didn't make it any less effective. Fantasies of Tyler and Mason's hard, wet bodies next to her in refreshing, bubbly water flooded her mind. "Mmm."

Ty laughed then tossed her a wink. “No need to pack your bikini, though.”

On that note, she dashed up the stairs as fast as she could without reinstating her dizziness. She collected essential items, like the naughty nightwear her friends had given her for her twenty-first birthday. She tried to cling onto arousal to ward off the fear, violation and guilt also swirling inside her. At least her headache had vanished. She checked the bedside clock when she realized she’d lost all sense of time. It read close to ten o’clock. How could nearly an entire day have gone by since the accident?

On impulse, she fished under the pile of

pillows they'd left in their wake earlier. She snagged Rob's gun then tossed it on top of her other sundry items. The rich scent of sex wafted up from the sheets, causing a flash of desire to spread as she remembered the beautiful display of Mason and Tyler's passion.

"Are you ready, Lace?" Mason leaned one hip against the jamb. He had a backpack slung over one shoulder. His arms folded across his chest, legs crossed in his usual pose. Her heart skipped a beat.

Oh, yeah.

"Uh. Yes. I'm good." She stumbled

while trying not to swallow her tongue.

He met her halfway across the room to take her medium-sized bag in one hand. When he bent toward her, she put a restraining hand on his chest then swooped in for a ferocious kiss. From far away she heard their suitcases hit the floor as she lost herself in the hot depths of his mouth.

Tyler shouted from the bottom of the stairs, “Let’s get a move on. They have an available cabin but the front desk closes for check-in at midnight.”

Lacey broke away, panting.

“What was that for?” Mason studied her. Even in the dim lighting she could see his eyes burn.

“Because I felt like it.” She shrugged, then sauntered from the room.

When Tyler saw her flushed cheeks and mussed hair, he groaned. “Why do I always miss the good stuff?”

“Just remember you promised me a skinny dip when we get there.” Lacey patted his cheek then walked out the door, trying to ignore the twinge of sadness at leaving their little house cold and empty.

Chapter Fifteen

Darkness shrouded the mountainside as they wove their way up the steep, twisted road but, even in the chilly night air, Lacey could see hints of the beauty surrounding them. For her, it felt natural to be out and about when the rest of the world slept. Though there were times, like now, that she wished she lived in a world of sunshine and color. At least, if she timed her sleep schedule right, she had most of the morning and early afternoon to herself.

The tires of the all-wheel-drive truck rumbled as they crossed a wood-plank

bridge spanning a rocky ravine and the spring water that bounced off boulders as it tumbled over the streambed. The serpentine course of the narrow drive as it stair-stepped up the cliff face allowed them clear visibility to the lower reaches.

No one could follow them unnoticed here.

Mason tapped the brakes as a doe and two fawns bolted across the rural landscape.

“Would you crack the window, Tyler?”

“You were shivering a minute ago. Do

you have a fever?”

She regretted the worry that had his hand darting out to test her forehead. “It’s not that. I just wanted to smell the fresh air.”

Mason dialed the heat up a notch while Tyler rolled his window down an inch or two. She inhaled until her lungs puffed out her chest then released the breath by degrees. “It’s perfect.”

“I’ve always wanted to come here.” Ty smiled at her. “Mason and I thought about it more than once but we agreed to save it for a special occasion. I’m glad we waited for you.”

Lacey rested a hand on each man's thigh and squeezed. "I couldn't have survived the last week without both of you. I love you."

"If you two are finished with the sappy bullshit, you could help me spot the main lodge on the right." Mason's gruff interruption couldn't mask his emotion though he pointed to the GPS, which flashed as they neared their destination.

She patted his knee. "It's okay, Mason. I know you love us, too."

"'Til death and all that. I just don't feel the need to discuss it on the hour like you two."

“Every person I’ve ever loved has been stolen from me, Mason. I won’t waste a minute of our time together. So you’ll just have to learn to cope with our smothering.”

Tyler chuckled when Mason huffed. Though no cars shared the road for miles, he still obeyed the traffic laws by engaging his blinker when he turned in beneath the carved wooden arch proclaiming Mountain Springs Lodge. The elevation had climbed until they reached this perch on the summit. Patches of snow littered the grounds as though it were December instead of October.

When Ty opened his door, they slid out and stretched after the two-hour drive. They'd made it with less than ten minutes to spare. She would have loved to stare up at the sapphire sky, counting the brilliant sparkling stars, but Mason grabbed for her hand to draw her toward the door.

“Come on, doll. You don't need to catch cold.”

If she'd thought the landscape beautiful, the rustic splendor of the lodge blew her mind. Geared up for fall, the russet and gold accents highlighted the thick oak beam construction and natural wood floors of the huge open space. Stone

fireplaces flanked the sitting areas arranged around woven area rugs. Tasteful décor including photographs of trout, fly fishing gear, horse tackle and antique riffles rounded out the ambiance.

She followed Mason's stare to the braided whips hanging with the bridles and shivered.

“Don't worry, doll.” He turned to stroke her hair. “No one will ever abuse you with one of those again.”

Lacey considered chickening out but gulped, then forced herself to admit what she'd really been thinking. “You misunderstood, Mason. I saw the look in

your eyes. I wondered what you'd do to me if we had this place all to ourselves right now. Would you tie me up on the bear rug by the fire and teach me what it could be like to experience sensual pain at the hands of someone who loves you?"

"Holy shit." Tyler darted toward the bathroom. "I gotta take care of something. Be back in a minute."

Mason braced his palms on her shoulders. She brought her hands up to cup his elbows. "You really want to know, Lacey?"

She peeked from beneath her thick

lashes toward the inferno of passion roiling in the depths of his eyes. “Yes. Enough that I might have brought this hell on us all by trusting the wrong person to teach me.”

Regret banked the lust in Mason’s expression. “If you’re going to blame anyone, it should be me. I wouldn’t let Tyler accept your advances even though we intended to claim you eventually. Once you were old enough, or I ran out of excuses. Shit, I pushed you into that psycho’s clutches. I won’t ever do it again, I promise. If there’s something you want to experience, all you have to do is ask. Nothing is too outrageous for me. Or Ty. Understand?”

Her breath came in shallow pants as she nodded.

“The proper response is ‘Yes, sir.’”

“Yes, sir.” Lacey swore the crotch of her panties had never been so wet.

“Excuse me. Sir?”

They both laughed when the desk clerk waved for their attention. The silver-haired gentleman gave them a curious stare before continuing. “We’re about to close the lodge for the night. Are you, by chance, Mr. Lambert?”

“Actually, no, I’m Mason Clark. We’re

the other two in his party of three, though.” Mason gave her ass a tap. It stung a bit. She understood his dismissal and wandered off to investigate some of the pamphlets promoting various activities such as horseback riding, target shooting and hiking as he arranged the details of their stay.

When warm arms surrounded her from behind, she leaned into Ty’s steady chest. “Better now?”

“Damn, Lacey. It took three cycles of the presidents to erode that woody.”

“Cycles of the presidents?” She spun in his arms, wondering what the hell he

meant. Mason strode up next to them.

“When Tyler is having control issues, he depends on American history to bore him flaccid. Let’s get to our room before he has to resort to naming all the major battle sites in the Civil War.”

She laughed as they each claimed one of her hands in theirs and returned to the truck.

It took less than three minutes to drive to their cabin, though it seemed ultra-secluded. No other signs of habitation were visible from the lovely wraparound porch she crossed while Mason dug the key from his pocket. He

unlocked the painted forest green door then ushered her inside. When he flipped on the wrought-iron chandelier, she had to stifle a gasp.

A humongous, hand-carved bed acted as the centerpiece of the one-room cabin. The style mimicked the rustic elegance of the well appointed lodge. The head and footboard design incorporated sweeping sculptures of trees whose branches entwined to form an intricate latticework. In one corner, floor-to-ceiling windows surrounded a kitchenette complete with a cute, round table. She bet the nook made the perfect place to enjoy a cup of morning coffee while overlooking the scenic mountains.

On the other side of the room, two doors led off the main space. One stood open, showcasing a moderate yet comfortable bathroom. She guessed the closed door beside it housed a linen closet or a utility room.

“Guys, this has to have cost a fortune.” Her reverent whisper echoed off the polished wood surfaces.

“Don’t worry, little one. You deserve something special.” Ty dropped a kiss on her forehead. “I’m glad you like it.”

“This is the most wonderful hideout in the history of man.” She flopped back on the quilted duvet with a sigh. “I feel

more relaxed already.”

“Wait until she sees the rest.” Tyler winked at Mason. They both beamed at the reception of their selection. While she kicked off her shoes and tried to ignore their actions, the guys engaged the deadbolt on the door, drew the curtains and double-checked the closures on the windows before joining her.

“Are you tired, doll?” Mason towered over her when he stood next to the bed.

“Not even a little.” Normally, she’d just be getting into the middle of her work day plus she’d slept a ton yesterday as she recovered. “Think you can entertain

me for a while?”

“Ready for that skinny dip?” Tyler joined Mason by her knees.

Though she'd scanned the bathroom and the deck on arrival, she hadn't spotted a hot tub. She hoped Tyler wouldn't be too disappointed.

“I don't think there's a Jacuzzi but we could all try to squeeze in the bathtub and pretend.”

“This room has something better. Come on.” Ty and Mason each reached out a hand to help her to her feet.

Curious, she followed their lead. They headed for the paneled door she'd assumed was a closet. When they got closer she noticed a wood plank about the size of a postcard. One word had been burned into the surface in a fancy script.

Spring

Beneath the board, a tiny green LED shone.

“Looks like we have the place to ourselves. The rest of the guests must be early birds.” Mason and Tyler exchanged a resounding high five.

Lacey replayed their approach to the cabin. She could have sworn this side of the house faced the gravel driveway. There hadn't been any other structure beyond the slight bump for the bathroom.

“Where does this go?” she wondered aloud.

“Better get those clothes off, little one, before Mason gets impatient and rips them off.” Even as he scolded her, Tyler peeled his charcoal thermal over his head. He tossed it onto the cedar chest at the foot of the bed. When she glanced back, Mason had stripped to the waist as well. The sight of all that golden skin and rippling muscle made her knees

weak.

“Careful.” Mason steadied her while Tyler shimmied out of his faded jeans.

“Lift up.”

Naked, Tyler nudged her hands until she raised her arms. Then he gripped the hem of her sweater, drawing it free. The crisp air beaded her nipples beneath the thin silk of her bra. He didn't even try to resist the temptation, bending to surround a hard tip with his mouth through the fabric.

“I bumped the heat up when we first walked in. I'm sure it'll be more comfortable when we get back to the

room.” Mason hadn’t missed their display.

Warm fingers slid beneath her waistband, causing her stomach to clench. Mason chuckled at her reaction as Ty unbuttoned her jeans. Behind her, the thud of his belt hitting the plank floor and Tyler’s sharp inhale made her painfully aware of Mason’s lack of clothing. A memory of the two hard-bodied men grinding against each other drew a moan from her throat.

“You’re so fucking hot, Lacey.” Tyler spread open mouth kisses on her abdomen as he knelt before her to finish ridding her of her clothes. Mason

reached around her ribs to cup her swollen breasts, kneading the sensitive mounds for a moment before he unclipped the front clasp of her bra then exposed her chest to Ty.

Strong hands spanned her waist, lifting her the spare inch necessary for Tyler to rid her of her jeans and panties. He placed a tiny kiss on her mound before surging to his feet. “Hurry, Mason, or we won’t make it out of this room.”

“We’re leaving like this?” Lacey thought of herself as adventurous but the idea of strolling around naked in the chilly autumn air didn’t seem conducive to seduction.

Mason turned his back then squatted in front of her. “Hop on.”

“A naked piggy back ride?” she squeaked. “The rumors about you guys seem tame compared to reality.”

“Trust us, little one.” Tyler licked a path down her spine.

The flare of arousal made her jump. He boosted her onto Mason’s back. Instinct forced her arms and legs to entwine around his torso. She whimpered when her nipples rasped against the heated mass of his strong back. Though she tried to stay still, her spread pussy brushed against him. Her forehead

thumped into his shoulder blade.

Tyler moved around them to open and hold the door. When Mason carried her into the narrow hallway, she peeked over his shoulder. She saw why he'd picked her up. The floor dropped away in a set of uneven stone stairs that had been worn smooth in most places but sported the occasional pebble. It seemed like a passage into a root cellar or a storm shelter but she had a feeling something a lot more interesting awaited them below ground. As soon as they all passed the threshold, Ty turned to a box on the wall. He flipped a lever from its current setting of Vacant to In Use.

The LED indicators on the sign turned from green to red. Satisfied, he let the door to their cabin shut as the faint click of gears shifting pinged from the passage in front of them. A moment later, a strip of rope lights along the base of the corridor began to illuminate like an expanding runway guiding the way deeper into the space.

“What is this place?” Lacey whispered in awe. “It feels like the bat cave.”

“When I was little I never would have imagined a world in which I’d say this, but... I think this is going to be way cooler than the bat cave could ever hope to be.” Tyler grinned in anticipation as

Mason's thumbs rubbed her thighs.

He turned to smile over his shoulder then started along the sparkling path. After twenty or so stairs, the ground leveled out. Transfixed, she took in the formations of crystals shining against the darker granite of the walls. "This is so amazing."

Behind her, she heard Tyler moan. "The view from back here is unbelievable."

His finger teased her spine. She wriggled when it dipped into the exposed seam of her ass then heard Mason's curse as he continued the exploratory stroke.

“Damn it, Ty. Don’t make me drop her.”

When she tore her gaze from the natural beauty surrounding them to peek at the other man, she caught him stroking his hard-on while he focused on their swaying bodies on display.

The melodic tinkle of dripping water returned her attention to their surroundings. With each step, the air became more humid. The tang of minerals wafted to her. An elbow in the path prevented her from spotting their destination but the rush of white noise crescendoed until she wished Mason would hurry. She felt like a spelunker on a journey to an undiscovered natural

wonder.

If it weren't for the lights leading their way, she would have sworn they were the first humans to ever pass through this subterranean paradise.

Mason turned the corner then stopped dead in his tracks. Ty bumped into her from behind. All three of them were stunned silent by the oasis before them. Oil lamps, perched on outcroppings of rock, illuminated a cavern about the size of their cabin but twice as tall. Four other tunnel mouths opened into the space but each of the little runways leading up them flashed red where theirs shimmered green.

Lacey scrubbed her eyes to make sure the vision before her didn't disappear. A gentle waterfall spilled from a crack high on one craggy wall. Vapors rose in lazy spirals from the rippling stream that fed a pool as clear as glass. Tendrils of verdant green pathos draped from shallow ledges. Spotlights shone from the bottom of the carved stone hot spring, casting a cerulean glow that beamed upward from the depths. Reflections danced on the ceiling.

“Oh my God.” Tears stung her eyes at the raw splendor of their Eden.

Mason let her legs slide to the floor though she didn't relinquish her hold on

him. Her fingers glided over his arm until she squeezed his hand. She held the other behind her until Tyler took it.

Together, they crossed the last few yards to the edge of the pool. They stood on the brink, letting the miniature waves lap over their toes while they soaked in the atmosphere.

“You like it?” The flickering lights softened the planes of Mason’s cheekbones and jaw. Powerful and cut, he looked like Neptune straight out of legend.

She tried to explain what it meant to share the experience with them but her tongue seemed glued to the roof of her

mouth.

“I think that’s a yes.” Ty cupped the nape of her neck then bent to steal a tender kiss.

Lacey melted into his hold then returned the sweet caress of lips. Mason tugged her into the crook of his arm. He held her close while he took up the intimate exchange with Tyler. From her vantage point she watched Ty’s cheeks hollow and his throat work as he sucked on Mason’s tongue. The gesture escalated what began as a slow melding of emotion into a fierce claim. She wanted in on it.

She cut in, latching onto Mason. He bowed her over the taut muscles of his arm as he slaked his craving for her passion. Some part of her brain registered the ripple of waves expanding out from Ty's sleek entry into the spring. When he surfaced, shaking his head to clear the lush mane of midnight hair from his soulful eyes, droplets of liquid crystal refracted the ethereal light into a million dazzling rainbows.

Mason abandoned her mouth in favor of the exposed skin of her neck. Over his head she watched Ty glide near like a merman while Mason destroyed her composure by implanting lust in every molecule of her being.

“My turn, hand her over.” Tyler encircled her ankle. He drew damp swirls over the protruding bone, the top of her foot and along the ridge of knuckles on her toes until Mason nudged her closer. With a solid grip on her waist, he controlled her descent into the heated bliss. The silky texture of the water enveloping her attested to the high mineral content. Every muscle in her body cried out in relief as the healing properties of the fluid began to work their magic.

It only got better when Ty perched on a submerged outcropping worn smooth by the spring's currents over several millennia. She straddled his thighs,

noting how the rounded edge of the floor they'd stood on so recently made the perfect headrest for him. Between their bodies, his stiff cock bobbed. With each ebb and flow, the water bounced his engorged flesh off their abdomens. The motions teased her swollen pussy, too.

Mason sat on the floor, dipping his feet and shins to her right. Tyler inclined his head to rest against the side of the other man's thigh. Almost absently, Mason's right hand stroked through Ty's hair then along the other man's cheeks while his left hand curled around his own thick erection. Bliss wiped all traces of fear and sadness from her soul, leaving only spectacular shades of devotion to her

two mates. All three of them needed this brief escape from bitter reality.

Lacey wanted to make the moment as memorable for them as it would be for her. She undulated in Tyler's hold until the head of his cock stroked the furrow of her pussy in time with the receding waves. Buoyancy guaranteed his shaft played with her clit on every pass. Then she urged Mason to slip into the pool. He stood by her side on the ledge. When she glanced through the glassy liquid to witness the glide of Tyler's cock, Mason's left a wet trail across her cheek.

She collected the opalescent fluid with

the pad of her thumb, then offered the delicacy to Ty. He devoured the essence of their partner as though it were a gourmet dessert. While he licked off every last drop, Mason knelt to sample the tops of her breasts where they floated before him. Her pebbled nipples danced across the smooth plane of Tyler's chest, creating bolts of pleasure that enhanced the sensations originating with the glide of his cock.

When she arched closer, Mason positioned the head of Ty's cock so that it notched inside the vestibule of her pussy instead of passing by. They moaned in unison. The sound of primal longing echoed through the cavern.

Reverberations of ecstasy matched the need spiraling through her.

Lacey ground onto the tip of Tyler's cock, guided by his hands on her waist. Next to them, Mason rose. Streams of fragrant water sluiced from his powerful thighs. His cock protruded from the trimmed patch of hair surrounding it. A single drop of viscous liquid dangled from the tip.

“Are you going to lick that off, or should I?” Tyler rasped.

Chapter Sixteen

Tyler's cock jerked inside Lacey when she extended her tongue to gather the precariously perched bead of moisture but she didn't stop there. Even as Tyler worked her onto his shaft, she encouraged the fusion of Mason's body with hers. For each inch Tyler tunneled through her tight rings of muscle, Mason matched the penetration.

The sight of his two lovers pleasing each other affected him almost as much as the firm grip of Lacey's pussy hugging his dick. Almost. His hips lunged, driving himself deeper into her swollen channel.

Torn between the spectacle of Lacey's lips wrapped around Mason's cock and the tantalizing mounds of her breasts bobbing in the water, he thought his head might explode. In the end, he elected to taste the berry ripe tips of her breasts while stealing glances at Mason's erection where it disappeared between angelic lips.

By the time he sheathed himself to the hilt in Lacey's welcoming pussy, he'd already started to conjure a list of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. The animalistic whimpers and the rhythmic contractions of her muscles made him realize she might not be far behind. Mason's hands were

fisted, one in the long strands of Lacey's unruly locks and the other clamped at his side.

They both increased the pace of their pumping cocks, filling their woman with their hard flesh.

When Ty looked up, his mouth still surrounding her sweet breast, his gaze locked on the electric blue of Mason's wild eyes. He saw surrender there when Lacey reached around to trail her fingers across Mason's wrinkled sac with tantalizing swipes. Ty increased the pressure of his mouth, applying the barest hint of teeth, then angled his hips to grind his pelvis against the tender

bump of Lacey's clit.

Sure enough, her garbled shout rang through the stony room an instant before her pussy smothered his cock in pulse after pulse of endless contractions that triggered his orgasm. He came so hard inside her, he felt the streams of come jetting against her tensed pussy. He filled her with his seed even as he renewed his pledges of undying love and devotion.

He forced his eyes to stay open through the torrent of pleasure to witness Mason toss his head back. Glorious in his climax, the tendons in his neck raised, his abdomen bunched and released to

propel his own load far into Lacey's hungry mouth. Her throat flexed as she swallowed his semen. Her jaw worked in time to the clutching of her pussy. Shudders wracked her slender frame in his hold.

Lacey continued to lave the other man's cock until he withdrew the wilting flesh from her enthusiastic ministrations. A strand of glistening come connected them. It thinned as Mason separated their bodies until it snapped, leaving a tiny trail of moisture at the corner of her mouth.

Tyler wrapped his hands around her shoulders then crushed his lips to hers.

He stole a taste from her, delighting in the mingled flavors of his two lovers. Though they'd both experienced intense orgasms moments before, the fire of passion continued to burn strong within them.

Still joined, he waded through the shallow sections of the spring near the edges with Lacey draped around him. Mason must have realized his intent, as usual. The other man exited the pool heading toward a stash of supplies he hadn't noticed earlier while spellbound by the beauty of the place, and his friends.

Lax in his arms, Lacey didn't resist

when he ducked beneath the heavier splash of the waterfall. He rested his back against a wedge of stone that inclined at a shallow angle to make a tiny cubby behind the thin curtain of spray. Then he pushed himself up, one foot at a time, until he lay on the heated surface with Lacey resting on his chest.

Together, they soaked in the surroundings without breaking the sacred silence. In less than a minute, Mason's blurred figure neared then broke through the sheet of water. He carried an armload of now damp towels. He tucked one beneath Tyler's head.

The others he folded into puffy square

pads which he arranged as the four corners of an imaginary square in their cozy alcove. When satisfied, he came over the resting pair. He dropped a kiss on Lacey's cheek as she nuzzled his face. The tender gestures made Ty's heart expand until it ached. Mason didn't stop there. If his half-hard cock was any indication, he didn't intend to stop anytime soon. Instead, he nibbled a trail across the light pink skin covering Lacey's spine.

When he bit her ass with more ferocity, she jumped. The motion dislodged Ty's semi-aroused penis from her pussy. He groaned at the loss. Mason made up for it by licking a path from Ty's balls over

the base of his cock to the stretched mouth of Lacey's pussy. She trembled on top of his chest, then Mason lifted her. He twisted, placing her so that her hands and knees each occupied one of the cushions he'd crafted.

Tyler rolled to his side to watch Mason at work. The brawny man lay on his back then positioned himself between her thighs. She turned to him for reassurance, which he gladly supplied. "Let him taste you, little one."

"Both of you." Mason groaned as he plumbed the depths of Lacey's pussy with one broad finger.

She cried out, her eyelids fluttered shut and her mouth parted.

“I need to taste both of you.” When his digit retracted, Mason retrieved a sticky mass of mingled fluids from the bowl of Lacey’s pussy. He surrounded her hips with his heavy arms then flexed the muscles there to force her slit onto his waiting mouth.

Tyler’s cock pumped up in response. How long had he waited for Mason to accept him?

Mason drank from her. His Adam’s apple bobbed as he sipped their juices. She cried out from the direct contact on

her over-stimulated nerve endings. Ty soothed her with a combination of crooning and long strokes of his palm on her back until the panicked edge to her whimpers morphed into renewed desire. Long after every drop of honey had been stripped from Lacey's pussy, Mason continued to lick, suck and finger the mesmerizing surfaces of her delicate anatomy. Soon she rocked her hips to encourage his touch where she wanted it most. Fierce dominance spurred Mason to avoid her questing motions.

“Sweetheart, I’ll give you a hint.” Tyler loved the dazed look in her hazel eyes. “Mason likes to do the leading. The more you try to force him to do

something, the longer he'll make you wait for it. Let him seduce you however he likes. You'll both enjoy it more."

Her head hung between her elbows as she surrendered to Mason's skilled touch.

"Mmm. That's right, doll." He rewarded her obedience. Then he shifted until he spooned her before rolling to his back so she sat in his lap with her shoulders braced on his contoured pecs. He scooted forward until their legs protruded through the line of falling water.

Tyler snagged the towels and used them

to form a pillow for Mason. The other man smiled then reclined. When he adjusted a fraction of an inch, Lacey moaned. The waterfall bathed her clit with inconsistent ripples of drumming liquid that proceeded to run down her slit before trickling across Mason's sensitive balls.

“It's not too much, Lacey?” Tyler ran his hand under the flow to test the pressure. Nice.

“It's perfect.” The husky note in her melodious voice helped to resuscitate his half-hard cock.

By raising or lowering his hips, Mason

controlled the exact location of the waterfall's most intense stream. Tyler loved watching the devious man mold her desire like a blacksmith honing a glowing rod of molten metal into a precise instrument of destruction. His broad hands roamed every exposed inch of her body, undermining her composure with strategic caresses, pinches and tiny slaps.

When he tapped the sides of her breasts, her back arched high enough that Ty could have put his fist between the taut bodies of his lovers. So beautiful. Sometime during their display, his fingers had collared the base of his cock. He indulged in idle strokes while Mason

alternated sharp, stinging spanks with feather-light glances of his fingertip across her breasts, bellybutton and lips.

Tyler observed the rebirth of Lacey's yearning. Soon she struggled in Mason's hold. She hadn't listened to his advice. After she attempted to align her clit beneath the shower instead of remaining where Mason placed her, their lover spread his fingers on her throat. The loose hold did nothing to restrain her physically but the reminder stilled her rebellious dance in an instant.

Her instinctive submission to Mason's implied power thrilled Tyler.

“Shit, yes. That’s right, doll.” The swift allocation of her reward enforced the lesson Mason taught without words. He cradled her hips in his white knuckled grip then aligned her with uncanny precision. “You’re going to come again for us, aren’t you?”

“Yes! Please, let me. Make me.”

The rounded surface of her abdomen flexed as her body prepared to shatter.

“Only because you remembered to ask so nice.” Mason shifted one hand to roll her nipple between his rough fingertips. “Kiss me while you come, Lacey. Feed me your gorgeous cries.”

He directed her jaw while she strained to fuse their mouths. She screamed Mason's name a second before her entire frame shuddered in his hold. The inferno of need peaked for Lacey but Mason refused to let her go. The expert stroke of his lips and tongue on hers drew out her pleasure until her shriek faded. Long moans replaced the desperation of her squeals but still she returned for more.

Tyler couldn't stand to watch from the sidelines for another round. He caught Mason's attention. With a pointed lift of his chin, he motioned to the other side of the waterfall. The smug man nodded then raised their prize to him. Ty caught the

precious cargo, taking up where Mason had left off in worshiping Lacey's mouth.

His lips never once broke from hers as he picked his way across the slope, through the waterfall and onto a half-submerged rock worn smooth from countless other bathers who'd taken advantage of the convenient formation. He laid her onto the platform then followed her down. The water covered their legs and midriffs but their upper bodies anchored them in the shallows. Silken strands of her hair fanned out in a halo around her face.

Mason followed two steps behind. The

rigid shaft of his jutting cock swayed as he ambled closer. Tyler groaned at the sight.

“Oh no you don’t, Lambert. You had her first. If I don’t get inside her I’m going to die. Move over.”

“There’s enough of me to go around.” The breathless tease accompanied her bold statement with the glide of her fingers between her plump breasts—rosy from Mason’s handling—below the line of the waves, across her belly then into the nirvana he’d discovered between her legs. She spread those sleek thighs until they fashioned a cradle for even their much wider builds.

He rubbed his eyes but the vision remained.

“Big words for such a little lady, doll.”
Mason eyed her wanton pose then arched an eyebrow in Ty’s direction.

Could Lacey handle another degree of their intimacy? Could she take them both at once?

Tyler’s mind argued in favor of her innocence. She’d been a virgin mere days before. But she sensed their waffling and continued her assault on their good sense. Before he knew what she intended, she’d flipped to her knees, folded herself nearly in half and

presented her luscious ass to them. Her forearms and cheek rested flat on the glossy surface of the wet stone.

The firm swells of her heart-shaped bottom crested the surface of the pool. Waves splashed her pussy in rhythmic pulses. “Mmm. Please, I need to be fucked. I want you both. Together.”

Tyler couldn't deny the honest plea in her eyes. Not when he needed it so bad. He blanketed the graceful curve of her damp back, grinding his painful cock in the valley of her ass. When the tip of his cock nudged the puckered ring of her rear passage, she flinched.

He stole a glance at Mason who shook his head. Negative.

Neither one of them had the control, or the supplies, to initiate her properly into that dark pleasure. Instead, he tucked his throbbing cock against her succulent pussy and sank into her slick passage with one fluid motion. He couldn't stop himself from fucking her a little.

Tyler stole several seconds of ecstasy, pumping in and out of her tight clutches, but Mason's warning growl alerted him to his transgression. He blinked. "Sorry man, I can't help myself when it comes to her."

“Let me in, Ty.” Mason’s ultra-independent façade slipped for a nanosecond. The vulnerability cut straight to his heart.

“Always, Mason. We’re in this together. All of us.” Tyler rotated to his back, still locked with Lacey. Her relaxed muscles conformed to curve of his body.

“Can you take me, too?” The uncertainty flickering in Mason’s gaze seemed so out of place. He’d never hesitated in their wildest adventures.

“I want to try.” Lacey raised her arms in welcome.

Mason knelt between their legs. The coarse hair on his thighs abraded the inside of Ty's. Then he bent forward until his sturdy chest transformed their woman into the meat of a Ty-son sandwich. She planted her feet on the bottom of the spring then thrust her pelvis toward Mason's cock. The motion stroked Tyler's embedded flesh.

"Join us, Mason." She attempted to tether him with the length of her arm.

"Who's the boss here, doll?"

Tyler groaned when Mason withheld the treat they both craved.

“I don’t give a crap as long as someone fucks me soon.”

“That’s so not the right answer.” Mason grabbed hold of the base of his cock. He smacked his hard-on against the inflamed knot of Lacey’s clit, which peeked out from beneath its hood.

Tyler’s head dropped back against the rock when her pussy clenched around his cock. The resulting pain cleared the haze from his mind long enough for him to register her irresistible begging.

“That’s better.” Mason bit the tip of one floating breast. “Now, try to relax. Tell me if it’s too much. There are plenty of other ways we can play.”

“No!” Panic shrilled the outcry. Her vaginal muscles clamped on Tyler tight enough he thought his cock might dent.

“Please, give me your cock. Please fuck me.”

Mason grabbed the base of his erection. He guided the bulbous head over the seam in Tyler’s ball sac then traced the raised ridge of the vein there as he followed the leading line straight to the mouth of Lacey’s pussy. The heat of Mason’s erection singed Ty when he probed the taut opening. All three of them gasped simultaneously when the tip of Mason’s cock began to penetrate.

Mason pressed on his shaft to coax it through the ring of muscle guarding her entrance but it popped out of alignment and glanced off the target, poking Tyler's sac once more. He tried to contain the moan of disappointment and pleasure, but failed.

With an evil grin, Mason checked the seal. His fingertip circled Ty's cock just inside the grip of her humid tissue. Even that made for a snug fit. Warm water gushed inside her when he withdrew. Just when he figured the other man, whose thick cock posed a challenge to average sexual partners—never mind tiny, unused ones—had given up, the spongy head probed once more.

The intensity returned when Mason's erection compressed against Tyler's shaft as it squeezed past the initial resistance. Steady pressure built as their erections crammed together to invade Lacey. The tempo of her shallow pants increased. Her questing fingers found Ty's then practically squashed them. After tense seconds colored only by the rush of water, and Lacey's plaintive whimpers, the ridge of Mason's glans passed the bottleneck. Once the head had breached, her greedy pussy swallowed a third of the massive cock.

Lacey whimpered at the stretching of her delicate structure.

“Shh. You’re okay, little one. You’re doing great. The hard part is over.”

“No. I think that’s just the beginning of the hard part.” Her chuckle reverberated along the length of Ty’s buried cock.

“Son of a bitch!” Mason felt the rippling effect, too. He initiated a restrained tempo of fucking, which insinuated his cock further with each forward nudge. The incremental penetration rasped over zillions of nerve endings in Ty’s throbbing hard-on. Lacey’s head thrashed on his chest as she absorbed them both. Tyler traced light circles around Lacey’s clit, encouraging her arousal.

The musical splash of displaced water joined the white noise of the falls and the haunting echoes of their grunts, whimpers and passionate moans. Ty supported her slight weight as well as the additional burden of Mason's bulk. Though his ribs protested, he reveled in the closeness—in becoming their foundation.

His cock twitched at the thought, massaging Mason where they burrowed inside Lacey's saturated heat. Mason resettled her hips, anchoring them while he began to increase the frequency and range of his lunges. Soon, he'd impaled her fully on his shaft. Each motion excited the sensitive underside of

Tyler's cock.

Washington.

Mason caught his tortured groan then tossed him a predatory smirk.

Adams.

“You hear that, doll? Tyler's getting close to shooting in that sweet pussy. Is that what you want?”

Jefferson, Madison, Monroe...

The unadulterated lust in her moan of assent took three presidents to overcome. She raked her nails down Mason's spine, inspiring him. Adams.

Tyler scooted up several inches on the block when the other man strengthened his thrusts. Jackson. Now, on each circuit, he withdrew to the brink of slipping free before plunging to the hilt. Van Buren. The walls of Lacey's pussy flexed, hugging them tighter than a fist.

Harrison.

“Such. A. Good. Girl.” Mason punctuated each word with a slam of his hips.

Tyler, the best president. Polk. Taylor. Fillmore.

“Oh, shit. Fillmore!” The thirteenth

president had never seemed so naughty. Mason, who'd skimmed a hair from failing history, took him literally.

He fucked without tempering his need. Ty would bear bruises on his back and ass but the pain spurred him higher. Who the hell came after Fillmore?

“Mason! Ty!”

“Got you.” He growled against her neck then licked, sucked and nibbled whatever fell into his reach. In turn, she left a dark red mark on Mason's chest when she bit him.

“That's the way, doll. Milk our cocks.”

Mason angled his hips for the ultimate penetration. The position put his torso closer to them. “Come around us. Push Tyler over the edge.”

He sealed the demand with a fierce kiss. Ty watched up close as they exchanged thrusts of their tongues in time to the pace of their fucking. The sight destroyed his last shred of control. Like a madman, he lunged into Lacey’s quivering pussy from below. When she shattered, screaming their names, he couldn’t help but follow. He understood what it felt like to be consumed by the chain lightning of Mason’s desire.

Spasm after spasm splattered his come

against her cervix and the head of Mason's still thrusting cock.

“Fuck, yeah!” Mason stared him straight in the eye. His blue stare practically glowed. “I can feel you spraying on me.”

For one instant, Tyler wished he could say the same about Mason. Nothing could compare to the jets of the other man's come scalding his prostate as he blew his load. In an instant, Lacey had been shifted to the side. Her lax pose combined with residual moans as aftershocks zipped through her.

Then Mason was on him. “I saw that moment of regret, Tyler.”

“I’ll never regret this. I love you. Both of you.”

“Love you too.” Lacey’s strained voice came out as a scratch. Now lying beside him, they exchanged a sweet kiss a moment before she stifled a yawn. “Let us take care of you, Mason.”

Though primal power surged in his veins, Mason nuzzled her before smiling against her lips. “I’m not sure you can move, doll.”

“Just need a second.” She propped her cheek on Tyler’s shoulder to keep her face above water when she could no longer hold it up herself.

“You lay back. Relax. Enjoy the show.” Mason kissed her brow. The jumping muscle in his jaw attested to the inferno of desire raging in his system.

“Show?” Tyler grew suspicious as his mind gained clarity.

“On your knees, Ty.”

He didn't hesitate a single heartbeat as he opened his mouth and prepared to take Mason's glistening cock into his throat to drain it.

“Not like that. Hands and knees. You need to be fucked, don't you?”

“Hell, yes.” He spun to mimic Lacey’s earlier pose. On his knees, shoulders and the side of his face pressed to the heated stone. His softening cock dangled between his thighs. The head dipped into the tepid spring which felt like the welcoming heat of a mouth. He reached behind him to grab his ass, spreading it to tantalize his stubborn lover.

Mason snarled as he wrapped one bulging arm around Lacey’s waist before lifting her hips from the pool. The fingers of his free hand delved inside her swollen pussy. She groaned, trying to escape, but he pinned her in place while he scooped the remnants of her arousal and Ty’s come from her sated body. She

surrendered the lubrication with a sigh of relief when Mason re-submerged her tender flesh in the healing waters.

Ty attempted to watch, fascinated, when Mason spread the slippery proof of their lust across his puckered hole. Instead, he had to settle for witnessing Lacey's spellbound expression. Appreciation for their intimacy radiated from her satisfied eyes, ratcheting his need to epic proportions.

“Please Mason, take me.”

The other man's slick finger rimmed his asshole then nudged inside the clenching ring. Ty took a deep breath then focused

on relaxing. Mason's broad digit sank into his welcoming body, spreading the natural gel over every surface he could reach.

Tyler moaned as the wriggling invasion stimulated forbidden territory. Lacey scooted closer for a better view. She knelt beside Mason, repeated his collection process then added another dollop of lube to his hole.

"You want to try it, doll?" Mason's gruff tone exposed his lust at the idea.

When she probed Ty's hole, thick and thin fingers penetrated him in tandem, working the cream into his rectum. He

moaned and thrust back to encourage them to delve deeper. His cock responded, lengthening once more, extending further into the heated liquid below him.

“I want to see you fuck him.”

Mason’s cock bumped against his ass. They both jerked at the contact.

“Hands off, doll, or I won’t last another minute.”

Resounding smacks and moist slurps indicated the pair exchanged a wet kiss while Mason aligned his cock. The bulging head rode the seam of Ty’s ass

until it aimed for his orifice.

“I can’t go easy, Ty,” Mason growled.
“Brace yourself.”

“I’m ready. Do it.”

Agony and ecstasy raced up his spine when Mason buried himself to the hilt in one powerful thrust. Tyler couldn’t say who moaned loudest, but he thought it might have been Lacey. She lay beside him, capturing his mouth for a soul-stealing kiss while Mason gave him time to adjust to his intrusion. Her dainty hand snaked out to fondle his cock and balls. The triple stimulation had him pushing back against Mason’s quivering

abdomen within seconds.

“That’s so fucking good, Ty.” He withdrew his steel-hard cock until just the head remained.

Tyler clenched, afraid he’d pull out. Instead, Mason slammed back inside as far as he could go. The impact thrust Ty’s cock through Lacey’s fingers, which cupped him. He forced his eyes open to meet her languid gaze. She flexed her hand around his burgeoning erection.

“Impressive, Ty.” She bit her lower lip while working her hand in counterpoint to Mason’s thrusts which began to come

faster, longer. “Take his fat cock. You should see his face. You’re driving him wild with that tight hole.”

When the hell had she gotten so wicked?

“Shit, yeah!” Mason confirmed her taunting even as his balls began to swing against Ty’s in time to his escalating thrusts.

Lacey’s thumb swiped over the head of his cock beneath the water just as Mason hit the sweet spot in his ass. Every muscle in his body tensed. That went double for his asshole, which strangled Mason’s pounding hard-on. The skilled bastard nailed his prostate with each

rapid slap of his hips until his body strung tight with pleasure.

“Ty!” Mason’s fingers clamped on his waist, digging in as he held him where he wanted and drilled his ass. “Fuck! I’m going to come.”

Lacey moaned then stroked him faster.

Stars exploded in his vision when Mason’s cock bulged a moment before scalding come decorated his ass. Tyler absorbed each ounce of pleasure and made it his own. Knowing he had fulfilled both his lovers brought him unfathomable joy. It tipped him into one of the most intense orgasms of his life.

Lacey milked his cock as seed bubbled from his balls. The lustrous strands swirled in the water beneath him before floating gently away, disappearing into the depths of the spring. Exhausted, he went limp in both of his lovers' clutches. Mason settled them on their sides, still joined, while Lacey snuggled up to his chest.

He wrapped his arms around her, tucking her close as he continued to shudder. Entwined, they soaked in the refreshing pool and their love for each other without another word.

Chapter Seventeen

When Lacey awoke the next morning, she dreaded opening her eyes. Please, God, don't let that have been a dream. Cruel doubts pricked her heart. She'd hit her head, taken multiple painkillers. The entire utopia could have been nothing more than a vivid hallucination. The cloudlike mattress she lay on didn't feel familiar but that didn't necessarily mean anything.

“Come on, sleepyhead.” Tyler stroked her hair. “Quit faking. I know you're up.”

She gulped, then squinted in the dazzling

light pouring through the now open curtains in the cabin. Her entire body sagged in relief.

“What’s that for, little one?” He bent over to examine her from his position near the side of the bed. “Are you feeling alright?”

She nodded but the frown lines marring his striking features didn’t fade.

“What’s up?” Mason strode from the other room with a towel wrapped around his waist as though he had some kind of sick radar that monitored her stress level.

“Nothing. Relax, boys.” Lacey brushed off their concern as she exited the huge bed. When she bent to unzip her duffle in the hunt for some decent clothes, Mason groaned.

“Give a guy a break here, doll.” He sauntered close then tugged her upright until he could envelop her in a bear hug from behind. He kissed her cheek then murmured in her ear. “I want to put some distance between me and this place before I use the sat phone we borrowed to check in with the department. But I’m not going anywhere until you spill. What’s wrong?”

Their stubbornness precluded any lie. At

least she didn't have to look them in the eye when she admitted her insecurity. "I was scared last night was another amazing fantasy or some kind of delusion."

"Son of a bitch. Lacey, I know we fucked up. Me especially." He spun her around to face him. Tyler crossed to bracket her between them. "But you never have to worry again. We're not going anywhere without you. We love you."

She refused to cry. She'd had enough of that to last a lifetime. Instead, she nodded then laid her head on his chest while Ty settled his cheek on Mason's

shoulder to kiss her nose. He broke the tension as though nothing momentous had just passed between them.

“Looks like it’s you and me for a while. I’m going to cook us some breakfast, then we can sample some of the facilities. Want to try horseback riding? Maybe go for a hike?”

“That sounds like a plan. Except, if you truly love me, you’ll let me cook instead of subjecting me to burnt toast or more Spaghetti-O’s. They just don’t sit well for breakfast.”

Mason barked out a laugh. “Good point. I could go for an omelet right about now

but you should put some clothes on first. It's still a little chilly in here."

He smacked her ass then swung her bag onto the bed for her. When she unzipped it, Rob's gun glinted in a shaft of golden sunlight. Mason's breath hissed out.

"You can't be carrying that around, Lace. It's not a toy. You don't have a permit." His cop face returned in an instant. "Hell, you've probably never held a freaking gun before this one, have you?"

She blushed. "No. I-I'm not sure why I grabbed it. It just felt right to have something of his nearby."

Tyler stepped between them, shielding her from the brunt of Mason's displeasure. "I agree with one thing. If you're going to have it on you, you better know how to use it. After we eat, and Officer Hardass leaves, I'll take you to the target gallery for a quick lesson. We can get you the proper paperwork when we get back to town, okay?"

"Thank you." Something in her chest felt lighter, though she couldn't say why it meant so much to keep the relic. Rob had seen the weapon as a tool of his trade, nothing more. Yet, for some reason, she felt compelled to keep it close.

"Fine," Mason grumbled. "Am I doomed

to a lifetime of getting overruled by you two?”

“Nah, we compromised.” Tyler winked at her.

“Whatever.” He grabbed his jeans and a navy crew neck sweater then tugged them on. “Let’s get going. I want to hear the latest.”

Tyler savored the delicate weight of Lacey’s hand in his as they strolled

through the dappled patches of sun on the forest floor. They shared a companionable silence while they made their way to the range he'd spotted on the map of the grounds. He carried both his and Rob's guns in the waistband of his jeans.

Birds whistled in the branches overhead while animals disturbed by their presence rustled the brush. The air smelled like damp leaves and pine. The crisp morning had forced them to shrug into hoodies but didn't require the bulk of heavy jackets yet. He could stay in this paradise forever. The prior evening would remain burned in his memory until he died and maybe beyond. To the

depths of his soul, he understood his relationship with Lacey and Mason was fated.

They rounded a bend in the rough dirt trail. Up ahead, a weathered wood stand sat at the top of a long, narrow clearing. A row of multicolored targets and an assortment of animal forms stretched into a line at the other end. A shed, covered in flecking maroon paint as well as a healthy dose of vines, perched at the entrance to the practice area.

Ty fished out their room key to disengage the padlock. He jimmied the door until it creaked open. The dim interior overflowed with stacks of

compound bows and hunting rifles. Shelves lined each wall of the storage space complete with neat stacks of ammunition in a variety of calibers. He selected a box of .40 Smith & Wesson cartridges.

“Maybe this isn’t such a good idea, Ty.” Lacey worried that poor spot on her lip again. “We could just keep walking or head for the stables.”

“Don’t be nervous, little one. There’s nothing sinister about a gun. You just have to respect it and get comfortable with it.”

She inhaled then nodded. “Okay, show

me what I need to know.”

They squeezed into the first wooden cubby together. Tyler pulled the guns from his pants and set them on the counter in front of him. “Most important. This lever is called a safety. When it’s flipped on, the gun won’t fire. You should always check its position first. With a semiautomatic you didn’t load yourself, like this one, there’s no easy way to tell if it’s loaded. Assume that it is.”

He knew hers wasn’t since Rob would never leave it lying around that way, not to mention the fact that he’d personally verified it after she’d pulled it on him

the other night. So he handed her his identical weapon then gestured for her to proceed.

“Go ahead. Check the safety then pick it up. Always point the barrel away from yourself.”

She curled hesitant fingers around the grip then did as he instructed. “It’s always heavier than I expect.”

“Yeah, we’ll get to that in a minute.” He mirrored her actions with Rob’s gun. “Now, press this little switch here to release the magazine.”

The metal container hit the surface of the

shelf and spilled bullets. “Damn!”

She grabbed for them and, in her instinctive reaction, tilted the barrel.

“Stop.” The stern tone shocked her since he used it so rarely.

She froze. When she realized her mistake, she grimaced. “You did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

“Yes. It’s the same way Rob and Mason taught me. Your focus has to be on the gun at all times. Everything else is background.”

“I understand.” She collected the

scattered ammo while keeping the barrel aimed straight down the range. He swapped their pistols, feeling odd about having his out of reach.

“Perfect. There’s one more critical step. The top of the gun slides back to chamber the first round in the magazine. Once you start firing, the action of the gun will take care of this for each remaining bullet.”

“How many will it hold?”

“If you use .40 caliber in this gun, you get twelve shots.”

She nodded, still keeping the barrel

aimed away from them. She learned faster than he had.

“To be sure the gun isn’t loaded you can make to chamber a bullet while the magazine is detached. This will eject the loaded bullet, if there is one.”

She mimicked his action but nothing happened. “It wasn’t loaded.”

“Right.” He beamed. “You’re doing great, little one. To load it, we’ll fill the magazine.”

He cupped her hand. Together they shook the cartridges into the hopper.

“Then snap it back in. Now you’re ready to chamber the first round, switch off the safety and shoot.” He set his gun on the shelf then moved behind her. “For the first few, I’ll guide you. Then you’ll try it on your own.”

“Do I need to shoot it to know how? I mean, I know enough now not to hurt someone, right?”

“If you don’t plan to use it, there’s no point in toting it around. It’s not a paperweight, Lace.”

She released the tension in her shoulders with one long exhale. “Show me.”

Tyler squatted to adjust her stance.
“Keep your legs spread, one slightly in front of the other.” He put his arms around her then extended her arms.
“Lock your elbows. For now, you’ll use a two-handed grip.”

His hand blanketed hers as he folded it over the top of the barrel then slid it back to chamber the round with a smooth action. Then he guided her thumb to the safety, flicking it over to the other side. He aimed their joined hands toward the closest target. “Curl your finger over the trigger. When you’re ready, go ahead and fire.”

A shot echoed through the quiet morning.

The peaceful twitter of birds morphed to angry squawks as they took flight. The power of the firearm awed him like it was his first time. His cock bulged against the seam of his jeans. Damn, he should have put on some fucking underwear. He always had this reaction to target practice. Having Lacey tucked against him increased the effect exponentially.

“Did I even hit the target?” She sounded glum.

“Nah. No one does their first time, little one.” He nuzzled her fragrant hair under the pretense of realigning their aim.

“Let’s empty this magazine together, then

you're going to try it by yourself.
Ready?"

The gun fired in rapid succession. He controlled the kickback, guided her closer to the target and counted the shots. When the gun clicked, he didn't even have to remind her to verify all the bullets had been disposed of. She released the magazine and chambered air like a pro.

"Jesus, woman." He stepped back to keep from throwing her to the ground and ravaging her in the wild grass.

"Did I do something wrong?"

“No. You’re amazing, remember? Want to try it solo now?”

She grinned. “I wish I’d done this a long time ago. It’s empowering.”

Tyler swallowed hard at the sight of her wicked grin and confident but cautious posture. He had to clear his throat, twice, before he could talk. “This time, try counting while you’re shooting. Remember, you have twelve bullets. Technically, you could chamber the first then load one more in the magazine for thirteen but don’t worry about that now.”

“Right.” She gave a crisp nod then set off on reloading the weapon. “I’m going

to hit the target, even on the edges, with each shot this time.”

He didn't want to rain on her parade but, at this distance, he doubted it.

“Remember how you mentioned the weight? When you shoot by yourself you'll have to aim a little higher than you think you should because the gun will tend to sag in your grip. You also have to brace yourself against the kick. Take it slow...”

The bang of another shot drowned out the rest of his direction. This time, she hit the target about a third of the way in. Impressive. With a slight pause between rounds to adjust, Lacey emptied the

magazine once more. Not only did every bullet penetrate the target, but each shot came closer to the center. When she finished, she made sure the chamber cleared then set the gun on the shelf with the barrel pointing away from them.

“Nothing to it.” She dusted imaginary lint from her sleeves then tossed a spectacular smile over her shoulder.

His heart lurched.

“One last note, little one.” He had her full attention. “Never point a gun at someone unless you’re prepared to pull the trigger.”

She nodded.

“Good job, kid.” Mason’s deep timbre filled the range.

They both turned, startled. He’d snuck in undetected.

“You’re a natural. Now get your asses over here so I can drive you back to our cabin. Watching you shoot turned me on.”

“What’s new about that?” Tyler teased.

“Gotta point there. But you’ll be ready to burst through those designer jeans when you see what I managed to gather in my

travels.”

Chapter Eighteen

“Close your eyes and turn around.”

Lacey obeyed Mason’s command. A band of supple fabric that smelled like the guys’ spicy laundry detergent covered her eyes. She reached out on instinct, her hand encountering the solid wall of Ty’s chest.

“What are you doing?” Curiosity, more than nervousness, prompted her question.

“Blindfolding you.” Mason tugged the knot tight. “I don’t want to spoil my little surprise.”

She shrieked when he swept her off her feet, into his arms.

“I won’t let you fall, doll.”

Disoriented, it surprised her to hear Ty bounce up the stairs and across the porch of their cabin a moment before Mason began to ascend. The creak of the door sounded then she turned in midair, presumably as he carried her over the threshold.

“Holy shit, Mason. You weren’t gone that long. Where’d you find this stuff?”
Awe mixed with desire to roughen Tyler’s voice.

“I went to Ferndale to call the chief but he didn’t answer. So I rang JRad instead. After we talked...” He paused, probably mouthing something to Tyler.

“Hey! If you’re going to tell secrets then I deserve to know, too.”

“There’s nothing to worry about right this minute, Lace.” He continued before she could ask more questions or lose the spirit of the moment. “I asked JRad to do a web search for goodies.”

“Oh my God.” Lacey’s cheeks heated.
“You didn’t!”

“Fuck. That punk wasn’t lying, was he?”

Mason's fingers tightened on her ribs and knee. "You dated JRad?"

Tyler cursed under his breath. With her sight stolen, audio inputs seemed amplified. "At least we know he didn't sleep with you."

"You hypocritical barbarians! How many of my friends have you fucked?"

She could have heard crickets chirping if there had been any. Then the world lurched as Mason dropped her onto the mattress where she bounced. Though the blindfold stayed put, she came up swinging, trying to locate one or both of those jerks.

Instead, tickling fingers snuck beneath her flailing arms, attacking her vulnerable ribs.

“Even though we were complete morons, we hated watching the hope in other men’s eyes when they looked at you,” Tyler confessed while they destroyed her ire. “Mason would go insane every time he saw you dancing with some lucky bastard at a party or heard you’d actually said yes to a date with one.”

“This is for all those times, doll. I want you to know who you belong to.”

“I’ve always known,” she whispered

between bouts of laughter as the devilish teasing wormed onto her sides and the backs of her knees. The idea of them claiming her appealed. She'd thought they didn't care, or worse, didn't notice when she taunted them by flirting with other guys.

“If it makes me a savage, so be it.” He growled when she quit fighting the onslaught.

Two giant hands secured her arms above her head. “Strip her, Tyler.”

He rid her of her sneakers then socks so fast she thought they'd vanished. Next, his hands fisted in the extra fabric at the

ankles of her curvy jeans. He yanked them from her, still fastened. Her black thong provided the only barrier from their prying eyes. Though she couldn't see, she sensed their stares on her pussy.

“Damn, that’s hot.” Mason pressed one of her hands to the bulge at his crotch. She basked in his excitement.

Tyler’s more graceful fingers cupped her hips, keeping her still as Mason did his part. She tested his firm grip but didn’t manage to squirm more than a centimeter. Her fleece pullover and long-sleeved shirt disappeared together. A single finger dipped below the string of her bottoms to test her arousal then

painted a wet trail along the embroidered edge of her matching bra.

A moist sucking sound came a second before Mason moaned, “Delicious.”

“Roll her over.”

Tyler rotated her hips until her face nestled against the flannel sheets.

Callused hands opened the clasp of her bra then reached beneath her to free her breasts. The contact with the fuzzy fabric she lay on caused her to moan. Then Ty peeled her thong off.

With simultaneous motions, Mason’s hands stroked from each of her

shoulders, along her arms to her wrists while Tyler's patted her ass then trekked across her thighs and calves to her ankles. They tugged at the same instant, spreading her limbs to the four corners of the bed. Cool air danced over her exposed pussy and ass.

"Stay still, little one." Tyler's reminder made her aware of her restless movements.

"I can't." The need for them overwhelmed her inhibitions.

"Then we'll help you." Mason's matter of fact response accompanied the snap of something restrictive around her

wrists. They felt velvety yet unbreakable. A flash of apprehension blocked out her pleasure before she could rein it in. In the artificial darkness, her mind skipped to the black warehouse where she struggled, rending her flesh on the metal manacles, but still couldn't get loose.

“Shh.” Tyler came beside her in an instant. The restraints were removed.

“You're safe. It's us, Lacey. We would never hurt you.”

“Unless you ask for it, doll.”

“S-sorry. I know that. Really, I do.” She rebuilt the vision in her mind until she

saw herself held open for whatever pleasures the men wanted to bestow.
“Please, tie me up.”

When fingers unknotted the blindfold, she thought they had quit.

“No! Please, I need you to replace the nightmare with something beautiful.”

“Shush, little one. We’re not going anywhere.” Tyler’s reassurance came close to her ear.

“But you’ll do better if you watch us. I want you to know who you’re with. That you’re safe.” Mason finished Ty’s sentence. “Just remember, we don’t want

you to turn around. If you do, you'll be punished."

She blinked against the sunlight while she considered defying them on purpose. "What will you do to me?"

Mason groaned. Ty's cock jumped against the back of her thigh. When had they shed their clothes? "You're not ready to find out yet. So you'd best behave, doll."

"Yes, sir." The appellation seemed appropriate given the circumstances.

His pupils dilated. "Do it, Ty."

They captured her wrists and ankles once more. This time she watched as Mason threaded the sturdy fur-lined leather around her until she couldn't escape the snug yet comfy binding. He pushed a shiny D-ring through a slit in the band then clipped it to a fastener he must have secured to the fancy headboard before catching up with them at the range.

Tyler worked with efficient movements until her ankles became immobile as well. She gave an experimental tug. Nothing budged.

“That’s right, sweetheart.” Mason’s erection bobbed in time with his heart.

“You’re not going anywhere. Now, would you like to play a game with us?”

The sweeping strokes of Ty’s hand kneading her ass distracted her from the question.

“Answer me.”

Her eyes shot to Mason as she struggled to think of what he’d said. “A game? Y-yes, sir.”

“Good girl.” He ground his cock against her palm but when she tried to squeeze him, he pulled away. “Here are the rules. I want to test you. Give you a sampling of my favorite varieties of

torture. Some will hurt, some will leave you begging for more.”

Lacey moaned. Her hips rocked against the mattress in an attempt to generate even a hint of friction between her legs. Tyler spanked her. Hard. She yelped but the sharp burn dissolved into heat that only drove her arousal higher.

“You’re only allowed to take what pleasure we give you, understand?” Mason’s hand fisted in her hair until she met his stare.

“Yes, sir.” She concentrated on stilling the reflexive motion.

“Very nice. Now, as I was saying... Tyler will clock you. For every second you withstand my tests, you'll earn an equal reward. You decide when you've had enough but, remember, the longer you hold out, the bigger the prize. Doesn't that sound like fun?”

“Yes, sir.” Holy hell, she would spontaneously combust if he didn't quit yapping and start handling her soon. “Please, touch me.”

“If you insist.” Mason snagged a stopwatch from the nightstand and tossed it to Tyler. “Start the clock.”

The digital beep reached her ears a split

second before Mason hopped onto the bed and straddled her torso, facing the foot of the bed. His shins rested on top of her arms, increasing her sense of immobility. She felt the displaced air whoosh across her right ass cheek just before his palm landed over the heated area Tyler had spanked.

A medium stroke followed the light tap before the sting had morphed all the way to pleasure. Mason's balls slid across her back with every movement. The sensual pain began to cross the line into discomfort but the reverent exchange between Ty and Mason kept her from calling uncle.

“Shit, she’s amazing,” Ty whispered between the cracks of Mason’s palm on her ass.

“Keep your hands off your cock. I didn’t tell you to play with that thing.” Mason cut her moan short with another slap, this one harder still.

“Look at how rosy her skin gets.” Tyler groaned. “This really is torture, you know?”

The next spank landed on a spot tender from the first blow. She cried out. “Time!”

The double chirp of the stopwatch

accompanied her surrender. “Twenty-seven seconds.”

Pitiful! It had seemed like an eternity.

“Rub out the sting, Ty.” Smooth hands soothed the burn with a tender massage.

“Now.” Mason returned to the head of the bed, reclining against the sculpted headboard. “What would you like to request as a reward? You might want to consider for a moment. I’ll only allow you each treat once. If you can’t think of something to ask for, you’ll go without.”

She wanted to feel Ty’s talented tongue on her clit but she could do better than

twenty-seven seconds. Lacey opted for a simple pleasure. “I’d like a kiss, please.”

“Tyler, give the lady what she desires. Make it good. I’ll be watching.” Mason took his cock in hand, making slow passes from root to tip. The single signal of the stopwatch commenced their make-out session. Then the molten green desire in Ty’s eyes consumed her field of vision when his mouth latched onto hers. They exchanged frantic licks, desperate nips and parries of their tongues. All too soon, Mason wrapped his fingers in Ty’s hair then forced them apart. She hadn’t even heard the second signal.

“You devious bastard.” Tyler panted with the effort of tamping down his lust.

“At your service.” Smug confidence rang in his tone. “But since you’ve done such a good job, I’ll let you pick the next torture. Go select something from the chest.”

Through the fog of lust dulling her brainpower, Lacey realized he must have laid out his tools before coming to get them. No wonder he’d blindfolded her.

She whimpered then attempted to pull her hands back before she remembered they were well and truly held.

“You have nothing to fear, doll.” Mason petted her shoulders. “Remember, you can call time as soon as you like. All you forfeit is the reward.”

His attention shifted from her face as the bed dipped beneath Ty’s weight. In her limited field of vision she focused on Mason’s cock. The way it thumped against his belly told her all she needed to know.

“Mmm. Very nice choice.” Mason traced the seam of her swollen lips. She opened for him, sucked on his finger, as he said, “Go,” then started the timer again.

Shock spurred her to scream when

intense sensations radiated from her pussy. It took her several panicked moments to realize that what she felt wasn't pain but cold.

“Make sure you don't keep the ice cube in any one place longer than a few seconds, Ty.” Mason directed the scene.

Tyler drew freezing circles across her slit then pushed the wicked shard inside the opening of her pussy. She squeezed it out. He soothed her still stinging cheek, which bought her more time, then teased the crack of her ass. When he touched her clit she gasped. “Time.”

Her body sagged with relief but not for

long.

“Tsk. Only fifteen seconds.” Mason shook his head in mock disapproval.

“No way!” She objected in outrage.

He flipped the gauge so she could read the damning truth for herself. “And I should punish you for doubting me. I don’t need to cheat when I make the rules, doll.”

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry.”

Tyler groaned behind her but Mason patted her head. “What would you like this time?”

One of her favorite pictures from her collection popped into her mind but she ducked her head. Would it be too weird?

“Five seconds to decide or you get nothing.” Mason began to count backward.

Her frantic mind couldn't think of another delight with her initial idea front and center, so she blurted it out. “I want someone to suck my toes.”

“Very nice, doll. I love how unpredictable you are.”

The mattress shook beneath her as Tyler adjusted his position. She delighted in

the press of his body against her right side as he flipped around. His hands glided up her calf as he leaned over her.

Beep.

Warm suction separated her pinky from the next toe as Tyler made his way across the ultra-sensitive skin. His tongue ran over and between her toes while he sucked. The resulting wave of desire triggered the clenching of her pussy. Arousal squeezed from the depths trickled toward her clit. He worked his way toward her big toe, finally taking it alone between his pursed lips. She called his name while her head thrashed on the bed.

Her bindings tugged at her captive limbs when she writhed with the intense pleasure.

Beep. Beep.

She didn't think her panting accounted for all the heavy breathing she detected through the rush in her ears.

“Next, Ty.”

She saw Mason's hands lift, could tell from his torso that he gestured to the other man, but couldn't see what he indicated. A plastic-sounding package crackled then something like cardboard ripped. What the hell were they going to

do to her now?

The actions of Mason's hands distracted her as he returned them to his crotch.

This time, he concentrated on his balls, staying away from the steel-hard erection bobbing against his abdomen. The sight mesmerized her enough that she stayed relaxed when the stopwatch chimed once more.

Then something cool ran down the valley of her ass. She would have jumped when Tyler nudged her puckered hole but the bonds jerked her to a stop. "Relax, doll. This will go easier if you do."

She concentrated on loosening the tension in her muscles but each time she made some progress, Ty's finger hit new nerve endings. A moan escaped her chest when he breached the ring of muscle there. The jolt of pain would have had her shouting time but she forgot all about their game in the face of Ty's handiwork. As he continued to stroke, boring deeper on each pass, the tinge of discomfort transformed into wonder.

“That’s it, Lace. Take it for us.” Mason coached her through the moment.

Just when she’d accepted his girth, the digit retracted and didn’t return. In its place, she felt something slick and hard

press against the forbidden orifice. She braced herself for penetration but gritted her teeth and groaned when it began to vibrate while tucked at the entrance to her ass. Then, pressure built as Ty worked it into her unused passage. The device seemed to flare, spreading her wider with each fraction of an inch she accepted.

The burn of pain outstripped the pleasure it generated until she gasped. “No more!”

In an instant, the buzzing stopped. Her empty body cried out with simultaneous disappointment and relief.

“Very good, doll. You did so well on this one, I’m going to make you a deal. You can accept it or not, it’s up to you.” She strained toward his comforting hand as he ran it through her hair, across her back. “Ty was very close to fitting that plug in your ass.”

From the foot of the bed, Tyler groaned. “So close.”

“After the widest part, you’d have been home free. If you take the whole thing, and keep it in, I’ll double your reward time.”

The shock of pain had scared her but she also missed the fullness. She could

handle a little more, couldn't she?

“How long?” Her scratchy voice rasped.

“You went for seventy-three seconds. I'll be generous and award you a full three minutes after the plug goes in. Do you want the deal?”

“Yes!”

Tyler smacked her ass hard.

“Yes, sir.”

“That's better. I'll give you a bonus minute for sucking my cock if you can keep your teeth off me while Ty works.”

“Son of a bitch!” Tyler cursed under his breath. “You two are killing me.”

“Please, let me taste you.”

“Mmm. Yes, doll, I will. Now, can I guess what you’d like for your extended reward?”

They’d destroyed her inhibitions. “I need him to eat my pussy. Please!”

Mason reached behind him for a pillow. Ty raised her hips as much as the cuffs allowed then propped them in place with the cushion. Mason returned, his legs splayed wide on either side of her shoulders as he scooted close to her

face. She didn't hesitate for an instant. She opened her mouth and swallowed his cock in one long motion. He angled her head so she rested on his thigh while she suckled his throbbing hard-on. Lost in the taste of his passion, she whimpered when the plug touched her ass once more.

“Take a deep breath then bear down as you release it. Remember, no teeth.” Mason trailed his fingertips over the side of her face then traced the line of her lips surrounding his cock. She followed his command without question.

When she did, Tyler inserted the device with a steady motion then held it in place

while she bucked. Son of a bitch, that hurt! Both men pet her wherever they could reach—shoulders, spine, ass, thighs. As the initial wave passed, Ty situated himself between her legs. She imagined him on his back below her elevated pelvis.

Mason continued to murmur reassurance as he brought one fist into her field of vision. In it, he clasped a remote control. He pressed a button and the plug came alive. She sucked him harder as the vibrations chased away the lingering pain. Ty's tongue danced over her clit as Mason dabbed a tear she hadn't realized she shed from the corner of her eye.

“Four minutes, starting now.” Mason’s cock throbbed against her tongue. “You have my permission to come if you can.”

She moaned around his erection, making it jerk again. Tyler worked magic on her soaked pussy. His lips surrounded her clit, sucking with gentle pulls that coordinated with the rhythmic tensing of her anal and vaginal muscles. She wished one of their cocks filled the empty channel. As though he heard her mental plea, Tyler snuck a broad finger inside her.

Her muscles clamped so tight around him, she felt his struggle to withdraw then tunnel inside once more. When he

curled the digit and teased nerves she didn't know she had, she almost violated the no-teeth rule. She devoured Mason's cock as Tyler did the same for her.

When her muscles contracted further, the novel sensation of the plug spreading her ass multiplied her ecstasy.

“One minute warning.” Mason's growl incited a frantic desperation. She ground her pussy against Tyler's face. Her body absorbed the vibrations until she shook all over with need.

“There you go. Come on Ty. Feed him your desire.”

Her world exploded in a paroxysm of

dazzling colors. Mason retreated from her mouth, leaving it free to shout out her pleasure. The prick of her nails scored her palms. Her toes curled as spasms ripped through her pussy and ass. Tyler continued to draw every last drop of ardor from her with sweeps of his tongue and finger.

She went limp on the bed as she fought to catch her breath.

“So beautiful,” Mason whispered as he pet her.

Lacey spaced out for a minute, only rousing when they unhooked her from the clips. She didn't have time to wonder

about their actions because they flipped her over onto her back then reattached the D-rings before she had a chance. Lying face up now, she watched as Mason caught the back of Tyler's neck then dragged the other man to him for a scorching kiss.

When he parted their lips, he reached out his tongue to lap her glistening arousal from Ty's chin. He pinched Ty's tight nipple as he turned to her. "Our Ty's done a good job of pleasing you, hasn't he doll?"

"God, yes." Aftershocks still trembled through her.

“Should we let him take your next reward?”

“Please, let me give it to him.”

Tyler moaned as Mason gave a magnanimous nod of approval.

“I need to fuck her.” Ty’s jaw clenched as tight as his fists. A bead of ivory liquid dripped from his cock, leaving a string of moisture in its wake.

“So, here’s what we’ll do.” Mason shot them an evil grin. “Since Ty gets your equal timed reward, there’s no reason you can’t go at the same time. Get that cock in her, Ty. All the way, but don’t

move.”

“Son of a bitch, you’re the king of sadists.”

Mason slapped Ty’s ass as he made his way to the chest at the foot of the bed.

“Untrue. If I were, I’d take away your reward for having such a disrespectful mouth. If your cock isn’t in that sopping pussy in the next ten seconds, you’re out of luck.”

Ty looked contrite. “Yes, sir.”

He covered Lacey in a heartbeat, his long hard-on sliding deep as he claimed her. She moaned when she realized the

implement remained embedded in her ass.

“Oh fuck, I can feel that plug against my cock.”

Tyler dropped his forehead onto hers. His hands came up to twine with hers while he struggled to remain still. Though he stayed right where directed, Ty’s shaft jerked inside her, renewing her fading twitches of orgasm.

“Hurry.”

“Please, Mason.” They begged together.

“Tyler, get on your haunches between

her thighs. Don't let your cock slip out.” Their torsos separated, leaving her breasts exposed. Mason stretched out on the bed beside them and dropped a large handful of black clothespins on her abdomen.

“Oh, fuck.” Ty's cock jumped again.

“Since you're both in such a rush, let's just get started. I think you'll figure out the rules soon enough. Begin fucking, Ty. Slow and deep. Don't you dare shoot, yet.”

Chapter Nineteen

Tyler roared as he started to move. His hands clenched on her thighs.

She didn't have long to luxuriate in the strokes of his cock. Mason selected a clip, squeezing it open a few times to loosen the brand new spring. He took her breast in hand then pinched a section of the fleshy mound. He applied the clothespin. The gradual release of pressure allowed it to close lightly.

The tolerable bite stoked the embers of her passion. Her gaze bounced between the bulge of pinched flesh and the longing on Tyler's face. He moaned, his

next stroke harder than the others. The motion jiggled her breasts and tugged at the trapped flesh. She thrust her hips up to meet his.

“I see you like that, huh?” Mason teased her. “I’m going to go a lot faster now. Just remember how good Tyler ate that pussy. The moment you beg out, he’s done fucking. Be strong for him.”

Mason switched to the other breast then applied three pins in a triangle around her nipple. They hurt more this time but the steady thrusts of Ty’s steel-hard cock distracted her from the pain. Mason added two more to the original breast, until it matched. She groaned when he

flicked the end of one of the wooden devices, making it sway and tug.

Her pussy shuddered along with the rest of her body. Tyler moaned.

“Oh, yes, I should have mentioned... You can come again if you like. Just remember that Ty isn’t allowed and you’re going to add to his torture if he has to resist the lure of your pussy trying to wring him dry.”

“Mason!” The tendons in Tyler’s neck bulged.

Their lover only laughed while applying the next round of clothespins. This time

there were five for each breast. All the while, Tyler maintained the controlled motion of his hips. She wondered what history lesson he conducted behind his clamped eyelids. Though Mason had not approved, she detected the tightening of Ty's thighs and abdomen on hers.

“Uh oh. Looks like Tyler might be getting himself in trouble, doll.” He clipped the tip of her right nipple.

She wailed as the intensity multiplied tenfold. Ty's eyes bulged when he opened them in response to her curse. He dropped his hands to her waist and fucked her deep. “Please, Lacey. You can do this. Please, just a little longer.

Concentrate on me, not the pain.”

How could she deny him?

“Touching.” Mason grinned between them then applied the last pin to her left nipple.

She cursed and shook, which only served to jiggle the instruments transforming her into a human pincushion.

“Oh fuck, yes. Hang on, little one. Please, don’t quit.” Tyler’s penetrations came faster now despite his instructions to stay slow and deep.

His demonstration of desire fueled her own reaction. The walls of her pussy hugged him closer.

Mason whispered in her ear as he stroked errant locks from her forehead. “Here’s a secret about clothespins. They hurt worse when you take them off.”

As his intent penetrated the sensual fog that had settled through her mind, he unclipped several of the wooden clamps and tossed them onto the floor. At first, the grind of Ty’s abdomen over her clit disguised the delayed sensation but the rise of the steady burn eclipsed her pleasure.

“Oh, God, Ty! I-I can’t take this.”

“Please, little one. They’re on already. He’s going to have to take them off regardless. Please, keep playing.” His hips made a figure eight that tantalized her swollen clit even as it nudged the base of the plug in her ass. He did what he could to distract her. “I need to fuck you.”

Mason removed the entire outer ring of clips from each breast.

She screamed.

Her mind transcended the situation. Instead of seeing each man clearly, she

became immersed in sensations. Pain, pleasure, it all blended together. Her mouth joined her breasts, pussy and ass as a receptacle for sensory input as Mason kissed her, swallowing her cries.

From a distance, she realized only the two clothespins on her nipples remained.

Mason's deep voice came close to her ear. "You're doing so well, doll. You have this. Turn the stinging into the heat of passion. Make it yours. When I remove these you're going to shatter. You're going to come for me. For Ty. It's going to be the most amazing orgasm of your life. And when you think you

can't go any higher, I'm going to take my reward."

"Fuck!" Tyler shouted as he drew out to the brink of slipping free then buried himself balls deep.

Just as he penetrated fully, Mason unclipped her nipples. She couldn't breathe through the searing poker that raced along her spine but then he snaked one finger across her torso and manipulated her clit. As he had prophesized, she exploded.

She flew off the edge of a cliff so high she couldn't imagine finding the ground again. Tyler paused inside her clenching

channel. Still, it didn't matter. Wave after wave pounded her. She shuddered around Ty's cock and the toy embedded in her ass until the reflexive motions squeezed the plug from her body. Tyler groaned as the pressure shifted against his cock then he began to withdraw.

From far away, she heard Mason command, "No way, Ty. Stay right where you are."

"I'm going to come if I don't get out."

"Not yet, you're not." She came back to reality as Mason, now kneeling behind Tyler, reached around to press his thumb hard against the base of Ty's cock where

it intersected his balls.

Then he finished setting her free but he was nowhere near done with them. He reached for the bottle of lube Ty had used to ease the toy in her ass. A liberal squirt filled his palm before he smeared it over the purple head and veiny shaft of his cock. It looked huge.

“Get on your back with her draped over your chest. Don’t let your cock out. Or else.”

“Shit, yeah.” Tyler moved faster than she’d have thought possible. The room spun around her as he rotated them together. The shattered boundaries of her

ecstasy soaked mind made it impossible to resist even if she'd wanted to.

Mason's hand brushed her thigh when it reached between her legs. Then he guided her head so she could see what he held. The butt plug that had been buried inside her looked so much smaller than it had felt invading her. Compared to his fat cock, it looked downright puny.

"I want your ass, Lacey." It wasn't a question. "I think you can take us both. If you want to work up to that some other time, I understand but I'm going to have your ass now unless you stop me."

Her gaze shot to Tyler. Though he didn't attempt to influence her, she could see his desire raging in the depths of his green eyes. "He's huge."

She rode the rise and fall of his chest as he laughed. "Trust me, I know."

"Will it hurt?" She trusted him to be honest.

"Yeah, it's going to hurt. At least, in the beginning. But, little one, you're going to love it. You react so beautifully to the pain. You were made for this. For us."

She agreed. "Do it, Mason. Please, take me. Gently."

“That’s not always best, doll. But I’ll do what I can to make it good for you.”

“I know.” She decided to distract herself by indulging her craving for Tyler’s lips.

He stroked her neck and back, his cock pumping up again inside her pussy while Mason applied more lube. The cool gel soothed the stretched muscles. She flinched when Mason tucked the tip of the bottle against her hole then squeezed.

“Trust me, doll. You’ll appreciate that in a minute.” The wet, fleshy slap of his hand slathering his cock with another coating sounded decadent. Tyler’s cock flexed. He bit her lip then sucked on her

tongue.

Mason wiped his hands on his discarded T-shirt then settled himself between their spread legs. His palms bracketed her hips, pinning her in place, when the blunt tip aimed for her stretched ass. Ty sensed her panic. He whispered instructions in her ear.

“Remember, little one. Don’t fight. Let him in.” The pressure built as Mason’s impossible girth attempted to breach her opening. She moaned. “Relax, Lace. Push out if you can. Just think about how amazing it will be when we’re all joined together.”

The concept flooded her soul with joy. Then Mason's cock prodded her, sending stinging fire through her ass.

"That's it, doll." He grit out the encouragement. "The head's almost in."

Tyler paused in his delicious kiss to whisper against her lips. "It'll get easier in a second. You're almost there."

An instant of doubt fogged her trembling body but, before she could beg Mason to stop, the ridge of his glans popped through her tight sphincter and he tunneled several inches deep in her ass.

All three of them cried out together.

“Yes! Good girl.” Mason collapsed over her back, squashing her to Ty’s pounding chest.

“God, that’s good. I can feel your cock on mine. Fuck her, Mason. Fuck us.”

She screamed when the twin pressures of their shafts pinched the thin wall of tissue between them, then stroked it. They’d never last long like this. All three wobbled on the razor’s edge that fused their souls with ecstasy.

“I have to move, Lace.” Mason had allowed her all the time to adjust he could afford. His tense muscles quivered against her back, ass and thighs. He

retreated until her ass hugged the tip of his cock, keeping it buried inside, then drove deeper than before. With each fluid stroke, he shuttled further into her virgin passage. It felt right to have him take the last untried piece of her.

The gift of sharing with him and Ty aroused her more than the touch of their silky skin. Already, small twinges began to build, carrying her toward the inevitable end of their adventure. No matter how hard she tried to resist, to suspend them in their ultimate closeness, she was unable to discover her version of Tyler's history lesson. Instead, lust blossomed, turning into sweet anticipation and desperate need.

From below, Ty rocked his hips in perfect counterpoint to Mason's exploratory strokes. They alternated filling her with their generous erections until Mason had managed to seat himself completely. His hips smacked her ass. She moaned when he bit her neck.

“You have all of me, Lacey. Now and always.”

While he stayed embedded to the root, Tyler thrust inside her. The motion caressed Mason's cock through her skin. “And me, Lace.”

Emotion blended with the pleasure, driving her higher with every ragged

breath. She reveled in being the fitting that joined them all together. The significance of their positions magnified the substantial physical ecstasy coursing through her. Any lingering discomfort was obliterated by the potent combination.

Now her lovers moved together, as if following a rhythm known only to them. They fucked her in perfect unison. Tyler mimicked their motion with his tongue as he drowned her in affection. Mason bit her shoulder and held on as he added fierce possession to the claiming. Her love for the two men had her poised on the verge of orgasm in minutes.

The rush of sensation blasted through her, startling her with its intensity and suddenness. Just thinking of the three of them locked together stimulated her mind along with her body. The consuming flare of passion, impossible to deny. She stiffened between the flesh prodding her closer to the peak with every pass.

“Get ready, Ty.” Mason panted around her flesh. “Want us to come together.”

“I’ve been ready for this my whole life.” He rubbed their noses together then flashed a rigid smile as she clamped around them.

“Ty! Mason!” she yelled as she

shattered. “Love you!”

Their bodies seemed to meld with hers when their cocks expanded even while she contracted on them in never-ending waves of pleasure. Her heart raced in her chest, beating hard against Tyler’s even as Mason’s breath blasted her shoulders with scalding pants. Their arms locked around her, keeping her close as possible to the two men she loved. Nothing had ever felt so right.

She dragged them under with her. Their shouts of completion filled the room like a sonic boom. Their cocks pumped their seed deep inside her, jerking against each other in release. The hot squirts of

their come scalded her sensitive tissue, prolonging her endless convulsions.

First Ty, then Mason, went limp around her yet still her world imploded. Their hands ran over every exposed inch of her body, soothing her as she returned to earth. After long minutes, their breathing grew steadier. Mason withdrew his flaccid penis with effort. He groaned then made his way to the bathroom where she heard him rummaging through the linens followed by the whoosh of water.

Tyler disengaged their bodies then rolled her to her side. He covered her face in butterfly kisses while Mason

cleaned them both without a word. When he joined them in bed, they snuggled together under the covers. Both men took turns gifting her with tender kisses and gentle touches until spent passion, and their adoration, lulled her toward sleep.

“I love you, Lacey,” Mason vowed.

“I love you, too,” Ty added.

She smiled slow and sure. Her life was starting to turn around. Fate had intended her to be with these two men. Nothing had ever been so clear in her life.

“I love you. Both of you. Forever.”

Lacey allowed her eyes to close while they continued to worship her and their union. As she drifted off she heard them kiss each other over her prone body. Then she slid into peaceful sleep filled with dreams of a bright future.

Lacey took a final look around the heaven on earth they'd discovered in the midst of the hell her life had become. She sighed, choking back a sob.

“We’ll come back, little one.” Tyler guided her hand to his heart.

“Someday.” Mason nodded. “I promise.”

The correctional facility had granted their request to speak with Jackson. The official sign off had come through less than an hour ago. She checked her watch. Two thirty. Maybe if she stalled a tiny bit longer, they’d miss their four o’clock appointment, though the guys had insisted they could make it in time.

“What if we go all the way there only to find out the email was totally unrelated to Rob’s murder?” Her gut ached at her

cowardice but she hadn't quite wrapped her logical side around the surreal developments of the day before.

“That could be, Lacey. But my instincts say this jerk is involved.” Mason refused to budge from his position. “Even if he isn't, I still want to set him straight on a few things.”

They'd packed the truck and checked for any items they may have forgotten in the bathroom or under the bed. She couldn't generate even one more excuse to linger so she watched the quaint cabin until it disappeared behind a copse of trees.

Tyler patted her hand when she sighed.

During the drive, Mason peppered them with potential scenarios while he developed the lines of questioning he intended to use to uncover the truth. Ty devised suggestions she would never have imagined like, “Did you take out a contract on Rob Daughtry?” Things that made her blood run cold to consider. She tried to ignore their strategizing.

The insistent chirp of Mason’s phone put an end to that delusion. He hit the speakerphone button to initiate hands-free operation. “What news?”

“Hey. It’s JRad. You’re not there yet are you?”

“No. We’re about ten minutes out. Why?”

“I finally scored the records from the phone company. We traced Lacey’s caller. The woman attempted to make contact one hundred thirty-seven times over five days. Mike and James headed over to check out the address on file.” The efficient cop seemed unusually rattled. A huge sigh crackled through the pathetic output of the phone.

“What is it, Jeremy?” she whispered.

“Oh, crap. Am I on speaker?”

Tyler didn’t give her a chance to

answer. He radiated tension from beside her. “Spit it out. What’d they find?”

“Another body. The woman, Irene Stolkholm, bled out on her living room floor.” He hesitated again.

“What aren’t you telling us, JRad?”

“You sure you want Lacey to hear this?” His skeptical tone filled her with dread.

“Go ahead, Jeremy. I’ll find out sooner or later. Do it quick.”

It irritated her that he didn’t continue until Mason said, “She has a right to know.”

“The vic was stabbed to death. The angle is awkward but looks self-inflicted. Her prints are on the knife handle, a single wound to the abdomen. The blade matches our general guess for the murder weapon. The forensics lab is taking it from here.”

“Oh, God.” She buried her face in her hands.

“I’m so sorry, Lacey. The woman left a note. Said she made a terrible mistake. That she felt guilty and deserved to suffer for what she did. It...it took her a while to die.”

Her stomach cramped until she feared

she might be sick. The men exchanged rapid-fire questions she couldn't understand through the roar in her ears. It took her a few minutes to realize Mason had pulled to the side of the road.

Then their conversation penetrated her shock. "Did the woman match the description you got from the food prep guy at the hospital?"

"No. Her hair was platinum blonde." Jeremy's disappointment rang through.

"She could have worn a wig." Lacey wanted it to have been random, to have been threatened by someone who could no longer hurt her.

“Possible. But we haven’t found any sign of one in her apartment. And she’s nowhere near the build the barista indicated. He’d have to be way off. From her appearance, and the enhancement work she’d had done, I’m guessing she used to strip at the club near the alley...”

He cut off just short of mentioning Rob’s murder.

“If we don’t get going now, we’re going to miss our appointment.” Tyler broke the tense silence.

“We’re still going? I thought...this woman... Jackson couldn’t have done

this. He was in jail.” She scrambled to sort out the chaos in her mind.

“We’re almost there, we might as well pay him a visit. I can’t shake this feeling that we’re missing something, doll.”

Tyler broke his pensive silence. “One thing doesn’t make sense to me. When this woman called Lacey, she kept saying she wanted to get her side of the story. Remember, that’s why Lacey thought she was a reporter. What’s that all about? Mason’s right. We don’t have all the pieces yet. I think we better keep digging.”

Lacey wished she’d worn a heavier

sweater. Tyler put his arm around her shoulders as Mason guided the vehicle back onto the road.

“We shouldn’t be longer than an hour, JRad. Call us if you get anything more by then.” He ended the call.

She nestled into Ty’s secure embrace to soak up his warmth as they crested the top of a ridge. In the valley below them sat a huge, ugly, cement compound ringed with sniper towers and miles of barbed wire fences. The gaping black windows seemed hostile. The dull walls flamed red in the last rays of the sun dipping below the mountains.

“You don’t have to go in with us if you don’t want to.” He peeled her fingers from where she had clamped them on his bruised ribs.

“I’m sorry, Ty. Did I hurt you?”

“Nah, I’m fine.” His grimace called him a liar.

“It hurts us more to know you’re frightened of this bastard.” Mason’s white knuckles glowed in the dusk. “If you’re not up to this, you don’t have to come. Ty can stay out here with you while I run in and chat.”

“I want to go. If he had something to do

with Rob's murder, or the accident, I want to know. I need to know why. Did I cause all this?" Shame tinged her response. Of course, Ty caught it.

"You're not responsible for what some whack job does, little one."

"I know but I made some spectacularly awful choices. Then, for a while, I forgot all about this mess. Even about Rob."

"You've been through so much in the past week. You needed a break from the stress. We're going to get to the bottom of this. I promise."

“I just can’t untangle it all. I don’t know anyone named Irene, I’m certain of it.”

“Let’s just take things one step at a time, doll. We’re here. We’ll ask some questions, do a little fishing and see if we catch anything worth keeping.”

Mason turned into the penitentiary entrance, rolling to a stop at the guard shack. He retrieved his badge from his coat pocket then flashed the shield at the burly man on duty. “I’m Officer Clark of the OSPD here to speak with prisoner number 34625202. Chief Leigh made the arrangements.”

After verifying their identities and

clearance, the linebacker gestured with his pump action shotgun. “Follow the main road to the visitor entrance on the left. Good luck.”

“Thanks, man.”

Mason tucked the four-by-four into a narrow space, disengaged his seatbelt then turned to face her. He cupped her cheek in his palm. “We won’t think less of you if you don’t want to face him.”

“I’m good. Let’s just get it over with already.”

He leaned in for a tender kiss then whispered, “So brave.”

“Easy when he’s behind bars. He will be, won’t he?”

“He’ll be cuffed but I want you to let me and Ty take the lead in case the moron tries to make a move. He’s never going to touch you again. I swear it.”

This time, she kissed him. “I’ll be fine. Let’s go.”

Chapter Twenty

Mason took point while Tyler linked hands with Lacey then stayed glued to her side. Funny, never having been in a prison, she had no idea what to expect. Other than the double locking doors like they used at her jeweler—or to keep butterflies in the local conservatory—and an impressive metal detector, there weren't a lot of differences from a typical police station. The same dingy tiles clashed with snot colored paint made more horrid by the florescent lighting beating over the entire design disaster.

They strode to the front desk then explained their purpose once more. Uncomfortable plastic chairs full of static punished her sore ass while they waited fifteen minutes for the warden to meet them in the lobby.

“Ms. Daughtry. Officers.” He shook their hands with brusque formality. “I’m very sorry to hear of your brother’s passing, ma’am. It’s always a shame when we lose one of our finest.”

She hated the way he acted like he’d known Rob. Something about the man curdled her stomach. When Tyler wedged himself between them, relief washed over her.

“Well, let me escort you to our fine specimen straight away then.” Affronted, the official spun on his scuffed heel, a giant key ring jingling at his hip with each step they took into the bowels of the facility.

Mason added his hand to the base of her spine, steering her along their route. Their guide approached a sheet of tinted glass Lacey recognized as one way. Behind it, grinning like mad, sat Jackson. The neon orange of his jumpsuit shone through the smoky window. His greasy hair, shaggy beard and cuffed hands made him appear even more sinister than she recalled.

Her knees went weak. Mason had her secured against his side in a flash. “I’ll have the warden escort you back to the lobby.”

“No! I’ll be fine.” The thought of being alone with that creepy man almost seemed worse. “I just need a second out here to catch my breath first.”

After her heart stopped pounding, she nodded at the men. “I’m ready.”

“You’re sure?” Tyler tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Positive.”

“You heard the lady. Buzz us in, please.”
Mason addressed the attendant.

He entered in the lead with Lacey in the middle. They’d agreed to stand while questioning Jackson both to seem more intimidating and to allow for an easy escape. Just in case. When Jackson caught sight of her, he beamed. His once handsome face still carried an iota of charisma, which made him even more dangerous in her book. He lounged, relaxed, in the sterile holding pen as though he were a sultan occupying a harem divan.

“Ah, lovely Lacey. You’re looking sweet as ever.” His tongue made a full

circuit of his cracked lips. “Did you miss me?”

“Quit fucking around, asshole.” Mason wouldn’t stand for any bullshit.

With her men by her side, the terror she had expected never materialized. Instead, disgust crawled across her skin. Beneath the morass of conflicting emotions ran a surreal kind of pity. Though he’d raced past crazy a long, long way back, he’d possessed immense charm once. Busy studying him, she left the initial questions to the guys. Let them blow off some of the steam pressurizing their machismo.

“Why did you email Lacey last week, dirtbag?” Mason jumped straight into the heart of the matter.

“Haven’t you heard?” He winked at her. “I’m up for parole soon, baby. Being in this center has reformed me. I wanted to tell you how sorry I am for what I did.”

She refused to acknowledge his false apology. Even worse, she kicked the part of her that wanted to believe a core of decency could exist in his blackened soul.

“Honey, I’ve seen the error of my ways. I promise I’ll be good if they let me out.”

“Don’t fuck with her, Jackson,” Mason growled.

The prisoner continued to ignore everyone else present and speak only to her. A decent imitation of a remorseful wince exacerbated the recent grooves in his cheeks. “I wanted to tell you how sorry I am for what I did...”

“Who else wants you in lockup? Someone set a virus to make sure Lacey never received your message. That’s a lot of trouble to go to for no good reason.” Tyler joined in the fray.

A glimmer of unease betrayed Jackson’s smooth response. “I’m sure I don’t know

anything about that. It's easy to pick up some nasty code. Maybe it was coincidence?"

"And I suppose you don't know anything about the murder of her brother, Rob, who was also a police officer. Do you?" Mason slammed his hands onto the surface of the desk as he leaned on stiff braced arms to stare the criminal straight in the eye at point-blank range. He could smell a lie a million miles away.

"I did read about the incident in the paper a couple days back. A tragedy, I'm sure." The slick retort flipped off his tongue too fast to be natural. He'd practiced the response to the obvious

question but he had no preparation for the next attack.

“Then tell us... What do you know of a brunette about five-seven, one-forty, who tried to drug Lacey into running off the road and killing herself?” Mason described the grainy likeness Jeremy had sifted from the hospital surveillance cameras.

Jackson’s pupils dilated. He didn’t flinch or gasp but sweat beaded on his forehead. He had to clear his throat to continue. His scrunched eyes flicked to Mason for the first time. “That’s fucked-up. I sure as shit didn’t do it.”

At least that much was true.

“No, but I think you have an idea who did. I can see the pulse hammering in your throat. You’re one slimy bastard, playing it cool like this, but you fucking know. And you better come clean now or the Board isn’t going to look very favorably on your parole hearing when we figure out how you’re involved.” Mason’s voice dropped to a menacing hiss. “I promise you I will find out. No one hurts Lacey and gets away with it. One of my best friends is dead. A cop. How long do you think you’ll rot in maximum security before you die?”

“Son of a bitch! Fine.” Jackson shoved

back in his chair with alarming speed then crossed his arms over his chest. He'd lost weight in jail. His physique had gotten chiseled, too. "I have an idea."

"Who?" Mason skimmed close to the edge of his patience.

"The fucking bitch who started all this in the first goddamn place. Look, I never meant to hurt you." When his chocolate eyes pleaded with hers, Lacey saw something in them that had drawn her to the creep in the first place. A spark of need that matched the yearning she'd lived with most of her adult life.

Loneliness she understood.

“It was her idea. She told me to find a girl. She wanted pictures, an offering, proof of my devotion, before she’d fuck me again. She’d tested me before but each time it got worse. I wasn’t myself. I was on drugs. She got me hooked then kept giving me more. Kept demanding more.”

His gaze stayed locked on Lacey’s as though he begged for absolution.

“Who?” Tyler echoed Mason’s earlier question.

“The love of my miserable life.” He

wiped his knuckles over his mouth.
“Gina Stephanos.”

“No!” The room spun as though Lacey rode a wild rollercoaster. Tyler put a steadying hand on her elbow. She took several calming breaths. Her vision distorted but, when she reopened her eyes, she could have sworn she read truth in his expression. “Rob’s girlfriend? Why would she do that?”

“She’s mine, goddamn it!” Jackson bolted from his chair so fast it went flying behind him. “Your goody-two-shoes brother didn’t know enough to keep his hands off my fucking property! He didn’t earn her like I did. She

belongs to me.”

In an instant, three guards stormed the room. Ty and Mason hauled her to the corner of the cinderblock walls opposite the fracas then boxed her in behind their defensive postures. The jailers subdued the crazy bastard then stayed, standing guard, over his panting form.

“You had my brother killed because he fell in love with Gina?” Lacey hated the way her voice cracked.

Jackson spit at her. The wad of phlegm splattered on the industrial concrete several feet short of where she peeked between Mason and Ty’s puffed-up

chests. “Your dumbass brother got himself killed because he trusted a monster. Just like his moronic sister. Then he tried to steal what was mine! If I can’t have her, no one can.”

“You mean you tried to get Rob to help you? Why would he trust you?” She attempted to shove the guys aside but she would have had more luck budging the walls.

Demented laughter ricocheted around the tiny space. Jackson resumed his struggles, tossing off one of the brutes restraining him.

“I’ve heard enough. We’re getting out of

here.” Mason interrupted her line of sight when he positioned her between his and Tyler’s hard bodies.

They’d reached the door when Jackson bellowed, “So I guess you won’t testify for my release either, will you, bitch?”

The buzzer guaranteed the thick steel latched behind them. Lingering curses, scuffles and deranged cachinnations penetrated the divider.

Lacey stood reeling in the hall. The guys ushered her toward the front door, pausing long enough to collect their weapons at the desk before escaping into the clean night.

They piled into Mason's truck. Only when they'd reached the road, in silence, did she start to cry.

Mason thanked God for Tyler. When rage had threatened to obliterate every shred of control he possessed in favor of pure violence, which would have dragged him into the murk where that lowlife Jackson dwelled, Ty had kept him sane.

He shuddered as he thought about the diamond fall of tears that had leaked from Lacey's distant eyes in absolute silence. Ty had gathered her close. He'd

rocked her while he sang line after line of heartfelt lyrics that expressed emotions Mason could never have put into words. The melodious comfort had eased the knot of fury in his gut and lulled Lacey to a fitful doze. Each time Ty had paused, she stirred.

The glowing gauges and the occasional headlights from oncoming cars had illuminated the tender intimacy his lovers shared. Mason's pulse raced each time he caught a glimpse of them curled around each other, Ty's lips brushing her hair or her fingers balled in his jacket as though she feared he'd vanish.

Three hours later, they'd made it back

within city limits but still Ty crooned. James Taylor's "You've Got A Friend" never sounded so perfect. Mason didn't want to interrupt but they needed a game plan. Hiding wouldn't work anymore.

He reviewed the facts of the case on a constant cycle while the miles rolled by. In his mind, he constructed a timeline. Four years ago, Lacey had fallen victim to the insane lowlife they'd interviewed today. He and Ty had misinterpreted the signs, wasting more than twelve-hundred days of their lives together. Mason shook off the morose thought, refocusing his attention on the mystery at hand.

Somehow, several years later, Rob

hooked up with Gina Stephanos. He'd be willing to bet Rob had somehow discovered another of the bastard's victims and fell for her. Then, he'd been attacked, stabbed multiple times in a dark alley, seemingly by an off-duty stripper who later developed a severe case of regret. Along the way, someone had gotten spooked and tried to take Lacey out of the game.

Damn it! There were too many holes for him to plug with the information they had at the moment. He started again at the beginning, combing his memory for any trace of a clue he might have missed.

The vibration of his cell in the cup

holder interrupted the pattern of his thoughts. He snatched it up then tossed it to Tyler. Neither one of them talked while driving if they could avoid it but he'd learned his lesson about speakerphone. Ty flipped the thing open though he kept his voice low when he answered.

“Chief. It's Lambert. Um, we didn't mean to cause a scene but I think we got some interesting info. We're about thirty minutes from the house. Yeah, if Razor and the guys can check it out, I think she'd do best where she's comfortable.”

Mason nodded when Ty glanced over for confirmation.

“Could you also send someone to pick up Rob’s girlfriend? Gina Stephanos. 435 Richmond Boulevard.”

A brief pause, then he continued, “I’m not sure. Approach with caution. She’s either in a world of trouble or a suspect. I can’t decide which.”

Son of a bitch, neither could Mason. They had to find some answers pretty damn quick.

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.” The phone snapped shut, snuffing out the turquoise glow that had reminded him of the light from the spring. If only they could have lingered in their temporary haven.

“Mason. Are you listening to me?” Ty shot him a curious stare.

“Huh? Yeah.” Mason cleared the memory of wet, glistening flesh from his mind. “What’s up?”

“Chief says JRad’s taken on some extra shifts to help out. He and Razor are going to do rounds then set up shop at the house. Chief’s sending a car to pick up Gina.” He scratched his jaw. “How could that asshole hope to convince us she’d fooled us all? I know you never warmed to her, but you’re not the kind of man to fold people into the inner circle after meeting them a handful of times.”

“Shit, Ty. I don’t know. It’s not like I despised her or anything but... Well, there were times I wondered if some of her coy bullshit went over the top. You know how some women play into that fake shit?” He shook his head. “Then again, you fall for that crap every damn time.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“The young, sweet and innocent ploy.” Mason snorted. “Works like a charm on some dudes. You’re one of them.”

“I am not!” His indignant objection would have woken Lacey if she hadn’t already watched them with wide eyes.

“Ty...” Her sleep-roughened voice drew both men’s attention.

“Sorry, little one. I didn’t mean to shout. Mason was fucking with me.”

“No, he wasn’t.”

Ty’s mouth gaped. “Whose side are you on, Lace?”

Mason didn’t think it possible but laughter rumbled from his chest despite the apprehension making the nape of his neck tingle.

“It’s true. You’re a sucker for the pretty, girl-next-door type. Even when they’re

faking.” She patted his chest to soften the blow. “I mean, I can name six women off the top of my head who told you guys they were virgins once they heard you’d make their ‘first time’ special.”

“What! Who?”

“Tracey Lieberman.” She extended her index finger as she began to count off.

Ty clamped his hands over his ears.

“You know what? Don’t tell me. I don’t need to know. It doesn’t matter anymore. Fuck, you guys are right. I guess the down-to-earth, wholesome girls reminded me in some ways of Lacey.”

All three of them sighed as regret hung heavy in the cab.

“Anyway.” She broke the pregnant pause. “I agree with Mason. I sometimes caught the way she looked at Rob and thought she had grand designs. I never got a malicious vibe from her but...”

Mason’s attention darted from the road at the hesitant note.

“What is it, doll?”

“I know this is going to sound bad but I believe Jackson. I could see it in his eyes. As hard as it is to stomach, I think he could be telling the truth about Gina.

At least as he imagines it in his deluded mind.” She slumped against the center of the seat, leaving a gap between her and both men while she stared up at the fabric covering the ceiling.

Mason exchanged a frustrated glance with Ty who mouthed, “You say it.”

“Sweetheart...”

“Don’t you sweetheart me!” Her hands balled to fists, which she rubbed over her eyes.

“That silver-tongued devil managed to con you out of your better judgment once already.” Before she could protest, he

continued. “I’m not saying what happened was your fault. Not that at all. Never that. I’m saying I understand after meeting him how persuasive he might have been once—before he went off the deep end. You can’t trust your instincts here. We’re going to get the facts.”

As if on cue, Ty’s cell rang. “What do you have, Razor?”

His face went ash grey. “Son of a bitch. How bad is she?”

Lacey nearly crawled down his shirt trying to shove her ear against the other side of the phone. Then she jumped into the conversation. “We’re turning onto

Johnstown Road now. We can be there faster than an ambulance. I can work on her.”

Mason didn't need the details to put the pedal to the floor.

Chapter Twenty-One

Lacey flew from the truck before it had lurched to a stop between a cruiser and an unmarked sedan that screamed copmobile parked in Rob's usual spot in their driveway. She bolted up the stairs toward her house. Ty and Mason followed on her heels. Bright crimson splatters of blood stained the whitewashed boards in a thin but steady trail along the way.

Lights sparkled from within but the cracked open door hinted at something amiss. She shoved inside then followed the sound of faint arguing to the kitchen.

“Please, it’s not necessary. I’ve had far worse. I just have to talk to Lacey. I need to warn her.”

The shaky feminine plea had her stumbling to a halt in the hallway. What if Jackson had been telling the truth? The guys stole her chance to consider when they steamrolled her, sweeping her into the midst of the commotion. Jeremy, Razor and Gina turned as one to face the clamor.

She gasped when the gesture revealed the cause of the young cops’ concern. Gina’s left eye had swollen shut, blood dripped from her broken nose and sick bruises covered her from forehead to

split lip.

“Oh, Jesus,” Tyler whispered.

“That bad?” The half-smile, half-grimace Gina managed didn’t upgrade their opinion of her condition. Her muscles drooped in contrast to the puffy injuries.

Lacey ignored the four men on high alert ringing them as she approached Gina where she perched, shaking, on one of the stools at the island. Her nursing training rose to the surface. The truth could wait one damn minute. This battered woman needed immediate assistance. Gina gripped the butcher

block surface in front of her.

“You’re dizzy.” Lacey didn’t have to ask. “How long did you lose consciousness for?”

“I need to tell you...”

She cut the woman off by raising her hand, palm out. “If it doesn’t mean life or death in the next ten minutes, you’ll have to wait until I’m finished.”

“You’re as stubborn as Rob is.” A single tear squeezed from her battered eye to paint another grotesque track across her cheek. “Was.”

“How long? Do you even remember?”

Lacey ignored the pain impaling her heart at the thought of her lost brother and what it would do to him to see his delicate girlfriend in this condition. The guys had been right, Jackson warped her perspective until she lost sight of the truth. She angled Gina’s chin with careful precision to examine her injuries in better light.

“Not really.” Gina sighed. “I think just a minute or two at my apartment then I sort of fell asleep outside while I waited for you to come home.”

“You drove here in this condition?”

Razor choked on his outrage. He

vibrated with tension Lacey had never witnessed in the fun-loving rookie. He'd been the life of several parties she'd attended. In fact, she'd even flirted with him a bit until Mason had chased him away. She'd misjudged his carefree attitude while off duty but now she understood what made him so well regarded on the force. The familiar combination of attention to detail, righteousness and protective instincts she'd witnessed in Rob, Ty and Mason oozed from his bunched muscles.

“Help her to the living room while I grab a few things from upstairs. Settle her on the couch but stack lots of pillows behind her.” Though ugly, Gina's

injuries could be treated at home for now.

She bolted upstairs while the testosterone entourage attended to the wounded woman. A mental checklist formed as she rummaged through the medicine cabinet. Gloves, gauze, ibuprofen, butterfly bandages, lip balm, Q-tips, peroxide, tweezers, an empty glass jar and an ice pack rounded out the selection.

Lacey tugged on the hem of her shirt. She used the pouch it formed as it lifted above her navel to store her supplies. Things rattled and sloshed as she rushed to rejoin the concerned gang.

Razor hovered over Gina's prone form like a concerned mother hen just as he had at Rob's going away party. Lacey dumped her cache on the coffee table then dragged it near the couch. "Ty, grab my bag from the truck, please?"

He raced to do her bidding as she arranged the supplies into neat rows.

"Jeremy, please bring me a bowl of lukewarm water, a can of soda and the bottle of brandy. Could you also fill this with ice?" She tossed him the waterproof bag.

He nodded then disappeared into the kitchen where the distant clunk of

slamming cabinets tracked his progress. Mason stood, feet braced shoulder-width apart, wrists crossed at the base of his spine. His eagle eyes never once strayed from where she knelt beside Gina.

“Did anyone check her for weapons?” He addressed Razor.

“Stand down, Clark.” He shot an incredulous look over his shoulder. “Can’t you see she’s the victim here?”

“I don’t take chances.” He made no apology for the implication of his question.

Jeremy's quick stride faltered at the tension radiating from the two men when he returned. He must have caught the gist of the conversation as he neared. "I don't either, Mason. I patted her when we hauled her inside. She's clean."

When Razor turned to him with raised eyebrows, he shrugged. "I've seen a lot of fucked-up shit on the job. No offense intended, Gina."

"None taken." She sighed. "Please, just let me explain."

"When I'm through here." Lacey refused to let her sidetrack them until she'd done what she could to alleviate the woman's

suffering. She drew on the latex gloves with a snap then nudged Razor's bunched thigh with her shoulder. He never let his grip on Gina's trembling hand slip though he positioned himself behind the couch to give Lacey room to maneuver. His other hand rested on Gina's shoulder.

"I'm going to do a quick manual exam. I'm pretty sure your nose is broken—" Razor's curse scathed her ears, "—but since it's still basically straight, a doctor wouldn't usually call for x-rays. I just need to make sure nothing jagged is blocking your nasal cavity or pressing on your sinuses. I'm sorry, but this is going to hurt."

Gina's throat flexed when she gulped.

“Squeeze my hand if it helps.” Razor's stormy eyes reflected his helpless distress. “No one will think less of you if you scream.”

“Thanks.” Gina nodded to her. “This isn't the first time, though. I'm prepared. Go.”

Lacey followed the bruised but intact cheekbones to the woman's nasal cavity. When the crackle of cartilage and bone realigning confirmed her suspicions, Razor groaned then clutched his stomach. “Is that necessary? Be gentle!”

“She’s doing what she needs to. If you can’t handle it, get the hell out.” Mason leveled a no-nonsense stare at Razor but Lacey ignored all the misplaced aggression to focus on her patient. Tyler set her bag within arm’s reach then took his place, shoulder to shoulder with Mason.

Next, she dunked the towel in warm water and wiped away the excess blood. When she could see, she cleaned the cuts, sterilized the wounds then applied the butterfly bandages to the tear bisecting Gina’s eyebrow and the split in her lip. Lacey placed gauze packing inside one nostril to stop the persistent bleeding. The other remained too

swollen for similar treatment. She rounded out the first aid by checking for loose or chipped teeth. Thankfully, she didn't find any.

Finally, she spread brandy along the woman's swollen gums, cheek and lip. She'd sat like a trooper through excruciating pain, impressing them all. Rob's petite girlfriend had turned out to be tougher than any of them had given her credit for. When the initial burn of the alcohol eased into an anesthetic numbness, Gina sighed.

Razor unclenched his jaw for the first time. He ran his thumb in a soothing pattern over the back of her hand. Lacey

daubed the woman's lips with a generous coat of lip gloss both to keep the cut supple and to prevent massive chapping while she breathed from her mouth. Then she unzipped her bag, glad to see Ty had removed Rob's gun before handing it to her.

She rummaged through the contents until she located the Vicodin her doctor had prescribed for her concussion. "I'm no doctor, Gina, but I think you could desperately use one of these."

"You're an angel. Really." The grateful woman accepted the medicine as well as the can of soda, complete with a straw, to wash it down. All eyes were on her

when she handed the half empty drink to Razor.

Searing pain hadn't caused her to shed a single tear but when Gina faced their expectant stares, her eyes brimmed then overflowed. Razor stroked her hair then whispered something in her ear but she shook her head and said, "I don't deserve all you've done for me. It's my fault Rob is dead."

Lacey's legs gave out. She dropped flat onto her ass from her previous crouch before Tyler knelt beside her. She wanted to ask a million questions but none of them would cross her lips.

“Explain yourself, Gina.” Razor’s encouragement seemed to give her strength.

“The men who did this to me... They said you’d gone to see him in jail. That I’d ruined his chances of getting free.” It made her cringe to listen to Gina’s indistinct pronunciation but Lacey needed to understand. “So you must already know. I was stupid enough to date Jackson once. I believed his compulsive lies. I thought he loved me. He has an unbelievable talent for fabricating compelling emotion.”

Lacey bit her lip, nodding. She wrapped her fingers around the woman’s free

hand and squeezed.

Jeremy turned his back but his ragged breaths were clear in the sporadic heaving of his chest.

“Who the hell is Jackson? What aren’t you guys telling me?” Razor shifted his furious stare from one man to the other but none of them broke her trust. Their trust.

Gina raised her watery stare to his.

“He’s a monster. He’s in jail for abusing Lacey though, God knows, he deserved to go there for a lot more than that. And it’s all my fault. If I’d just turned him in when he beat me the first time...”

Razor shushed her when her pitch climbed. “Take it one step at a time. This fuckwad was your boyfriend?”

She nodded but refused to meet his stare.

“And he hit you?”

Another nod.

“More than once?”

Her entire posture drooped. “I’m an idiot, I know.”

“Stick to the facts. This bastard preyed on young, naïve women. Why did you stay with him once you realized how

sick he was?” Mason earned a glare from Razor with his line of questioning but he didn’t seem to care or even notice.

“That’s just it. I tried to leave. First he beat me harder then tied me to the bed and...” She couldn’t finish.

“He raped you.” Razor turned an unhealthy shade of purple.

“I don’t know. I mean we were dating and then we weren’t and I don’t remember a lot of what happened...”

“He raped you,” Razor repeated.

“I guess. The next day I packed up and left while he was at work.” More tears streamed down her face. “But it didn’t matter.”

“He came after you?” Mason asked.

“Worse. He slid a folder of photos under the door of my motel room.” She choked. Razor tilted the straw to her lips so she could wet her scratchy throat. “Thank you.”

“What kind of photos were they?”
Mason pursued the lead.

Gina’s bloodshot eyes begged Lacey to understand. “Pictures of a woman. Tied.

Whipped. Bleeding. Crying. Burned with cigarettes. I'll never forget. Oh God. It was my fault!"

"You can't control a lunatic." Razor gripped the cushion hard enough Lacey expected his fingers to poke through the upholstery.

"No. He controlled me. On the bottom of the worst picture he wrote, 'Come back or I'll have to play with another.'" Sobs wracked her frail frame as violent memories punched to the surface. "What else could I do? I went back."

The wail of misery that escaped the other woman's throat sent shivers up

Lacey's spine.

“But it got worse and worse. He tested me. One day, he got angry at some perceived slight and broke my arm. I felt it snap and something inside me fractured with it. I hit him in the head with a lamp. I thought I'd killed him. I ran and ran. He couldn't find me but the pictures kept coming to my email. Dozens of women. Tortured. Raped. All because of me. I was afraid to go to the police. He said he'd kill me if I ended his fun. Th-that's what he called it. Fun.”

Lacey cried with her now because she knew what came next. Yet, when compared to this woman's suffering, her

tragedy seemed like child's play. She tugged Gina's hand until she hugged it to her breast over her heart. "It's okay. I understand. They would understand."

"One day everything stopped. I was so stupid. I thought he'd given up. I thought I was free. Until I got an email from him saying he'd been locked up. He thought I'd ratted him out. He blamed me for getting caught but I knew someone else had saved me. I researched the court documents and found several references to Officer Daughtry." Her battered face contorted at the mention of his name.

"When I tracked him down, I called him once. Anonymously. I told him my story. He was so kind. So understanding. I

think I fell a little in love with him right then.”

Her voice trailed off as she got tangled in her memories.

“This had to have been years ago, Gina. What happened during all the time in between?” Mason’s relentless focus on the truth earned another frown from Razor.

“When I talked to Rob he said we needed proof to make sure Jackson never got the chance to destroy another woman. He said the emails I had saved wouldn’t be enough until we could track down some of the victims. Otherwise,

they could have been consensual partners. Jackson was careful never to write anything damning in his emails. But I knew.” She ducked her chin again. “I was too frightened at first. I was sure Jackson would find out and kill me like he had threatened. I-I hung up on Rob.”

“No one is going to judge you. You did what you had to in order to survive.” Razor wiped the tears from her cheek with a gentleness Lacey wouldn’t have believed he possessed.

“There were times over the next three years Rob came close. He called my apartment. I moved again. He found my email but I didn’t answer. One day, I

was working the night shift in the grocery store when he walked in. God, he was so handsome. I remember watching as he held the door for a pregnant woman who came in for ice cream when her cravings drove her out of bed then he carried a gallon of milk to the counter for Mrs. Hallister who's in her late eighties. I didn't think there were people like that in the world anymore."

Her eyes turned glassy either from the drugs or the memories, Lacey couldn't say which.

"When he came to the register with a candy bar, he looked at me. Really

looked. I felt like he saw all the way to my soul with those blue, blue eyes. He knew. All along, he'd known it was me. He said, 'Don't run, Gina. I want to help. You can trust me, I swear. Think about it and I'll come back tomorrow. Just to talk. That's all.'” The undamaged corner of her mouth tilted in a tiny smile. “He paid for the snack then left. And he never broke his promises to me. Not that time and never after, either. And it's because of me he's dead.”

For long minutes, they couldn't console her as she suffered from agony far worse than any physical pain. When Mason finally asked his next question, his gentle delivery brought a wave of relief to

everyone in the room. The clear leader of their group had granted absolution. “Were you and Rob conducting your own investigation to identify Jackson’s other victims?”

“Yes.” She sniffled then winced. “I have all the emails. All the horrifying pictures.”

“What made Rob pursue this on his own instead of taking the evidence to the force?”

“He showed the chief first but Leigh said we didn’t have enough for a new trial. He said Jackson wasn’t getting out anytime soon and told Rob to dig more

before they made an official move. So we did. Together. Over the last year, we've gotten close. So close, to several of the victims, but nothing had come through by the time we got word Jackson would be up for parole for good behavior." She sneered the description. A flash of hatred, so violent it stole Lacey's breath, obscured the pain in Gina's uninjured eye.

She scooted back a few inches, into Tyler's open arms.

"Why was Rob in the alley that night, Gina?" Mason put her back on track.

She gulped then squeezed her good eye

shut. “We got a lead. A stripper in the district hit on one of our victim’s names. Irene Stolkholm. Rob wanted to arrange a meeting with her but she refused. I went to see her. I begged when I told her Jackson was going to get out if we didn’t have another witness. She agreed to meet us in the alley after work. Rob called the chief but he decided there wasn’t time to put a team in place—that we should back off.”

Gina covered her face with her frail hands. Sleek red nail polish stood out against her pale skin. “I convinced him to ignore the orders. I forced him to go with me. But, it was a trap. The woman was still under Jackson’s spell. That

bastard must have contacted her from prison, spun a web of lies to taint her opinion of us. She pulled a knife, went crazy, ranting about how much Jackson loved her. About how we wouldn't lock him away for good.”

Jeremy sat on the edge of the coffee table. He rested his elbows on his knees and dropped his head in his hands. Gina kept right on going as though she no longer saw the room in front of her but, instead, the horrifying night she described.

“Rob pushed me out of the way. He screamed for me to run. I thought he could subdue one skinny woman. I

figured he'd be fine, so I did it. But, when I turned back, I saw he didn't even fight her. He raised his arms to block the knife but he wouldn't hurt her to disarm her. He never broke his promise. Even when the knife glanced off his forearm and buried in his neck. He just took it. I couldn't watch. I ran."

Lacey had thought the uncertainty of not knowing her brother's fate was the worst part of his death. But hearing, knowing what his last moments had entailed, scarred her deeper. She could imagine every gory detail of Gina's retelling as though she watched it herself. There'd be no erasing this from her mind. No escaping the nightmares it would inspire.

The truth shattered her. She collapsed in Tyler's shaking arms but Gina kept talking as though she hadn't just destroyed a piece of Lacey's heart.

“After the funeral, I was so messed up. I loved Rob. He was the only man who's ever cared for me unconditionally. I was scared. If he couldn't stop Jackson, who would? That bastard called me from jail to rub it in my face.” Her tortured eyes begged Lacey to understand. “He convinced me his next step was to reach out to you. He said he would email you, rekindle your relationship—that you were going to testify for him. After seeing that psycho woman, I believed. I'm so sorry. I believed his lies again.”

Lacey commiserated. She'd been swayed by him only hours before.

“I put a virus on your computer at the wake so that you couldn't talk to him anymore but he kept taunting me. He told me it was too late. I was desperate. I just wanted to keep you away from him and the trial. I bought some Harnytal, I was going to take you away. I thought I could convince you. It all sounds insane now but I couldn't see any other way. I—”

She cut off as everyone in the room held their breath.

“I put the drugs on your cup. I did it. I never expected you'd be leaving early. I

almost got you killed. God, Lacey, please forgive me. Rob never would. He loved you so much.” She gestured to her ruined face. “I deserve this. The men, who did this, I think they intended to kill me, too. Why didn’t they just get it over with? What if they come back?”

Gina’s face turned white as a ghost. Her head lolled against the pillows. The pain pills had kicked in. Her unregulated emotions swung from despair to regret to self-loathing to terror.

“No one’s going to hurt you again.” Razor dared any of them to contradict him when he claimed, “I’m going to watch over you. I’ll take care of you

until we catch these bastards.”

She struggled to keep her heavy lid open. “Really?”

“You sleep now. You’re safe here. I’ll call the chief and work out the details.”

“Thank you. All of you. Don’t deserve...” She drifted off mid-sentence.

Lacey watched the ensuing commotion through overwhelming numbness. A cacophony of ring tones formed a macabre symphony as the cops made arrangements—with their superiors, with a safe house, with a doctor, with

each other—to ensure the protection of the women.

Then Mason's measured voice cut through the clamor. She overheard him relate Gina's culpability for the accident to the chief. Although he'd developed obvious empathy for the woman's situation, he wouldn't forget that she, too, had committed crimes against his loved ones. He kept his urgent explanation quiet to avoid Razor overhearing.

The patterns of deception had sickness roiling in Lacey's stomach. She had to escape the insanity.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Lacey retreated to the relative quiet of her bedroom. She collapsed onto her bed, a little disappointed not to encounter the solid butt of Rob's Sig beneath her pillow. Her fingers had gotten used to tracing countless circuits around the grooves in the cold metal when she couldn't sleep. Before she could muster the energy to search around for its new resting place, sluggish footsteps tracked along the hallway.

Mason and Tyler filled the room with their tense energy but she rolled to avoid facing them.

“It’s okay, doll. Everyone’s gone now. Razor took Gina to a safe house. JRad is tracing the email files Gina gave Rob. The chief dispatched two other cars to stake out your property. You can relax.” The bed dipped when Mason sat on the edge behind her.

“You don’t get it! So many secrets. Each one rippled outward, affecting someone else. I hid Jackson from you guys. You hid your relationship from me. Rob hid his investigation from us. The chief hid his involvement from the detectives on Rob’s case. Gina hid so many things. It’s a vicious cycle. None of this had to happen.” Lacey curled into a ball in an attempt to snuff the agony searing her

guts.

The guys surrounded her. Mason lay at her back while Tyler tried to gather her stiff form close.

“We’re being honest now, little one. We love you and we’re not going anywhere, no matter what anyone thinks. No more secrets. No more lies.” Ty nuzzled her cheek. “We have each other, and that’s all we need.”

“You have everything you need, Tyler?” Dread curled around her frantic heart as she recognized the root of her distress. She knew it wasn’t true. They weren’t complete yet.

“I have you, little one. I have Mason. That’s all I need.”

“Liar!” She bolted up but Mason halted her progress when he wrestled her back to the mattress.

“You’re lying, too.” Her accusation flew in Mason’s face.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Lacey?” The hint of doubt swirling in his blue eyes pushed her over the edge. If she didn’t force them to be honest, they risked destroying everything. Secrets would erode their foundation.

“You’ve never let Ty love you, have

you?”

Mason froze when Tyler groaned.

Longing transformed the taller man's green eyes into the focused orbs of a big cat on the hunt. She'd witnessed the same intensity for a moment in the spring then glimpsed the predatory hunger during their rougher play yesterday. Tyler looked like a man on a diet who was seated at an all you can eat buffet. The things he wanted were in reach, but off limits. The power of his love gave him the strength to abstain but it shouldn't have to be that way.

“He's never wanted to.” The automatic

response popped from Mason's lips without hesitation but he peeked at the other man in his peripheral vision before focusing on her once more.

“Is that true?” They both turned to face Tyler's unswerving gaze while Lacey questioned him. “Or has he never accepted you completely? He's rough with you. He takes you hard when he can't deny his urges. Is that what you want?”

“Most of the time.” Ty's resigned acceptance pissed her off.

“Always?” She refused to surrender to the easy path now. “Be honest. Please.”

He gave a brief shake of his head but refused to look at Mason.

“You want to love him. Don’t you, Ty?” She cupped his cheek in her palm then traced the seam of his trembling lips with the pad of her thumb.

“Hell, yes.” When his stare finally rose, the laser beam sliced through the years of suppressed longing.

“Tell him the truth.” She prompted him to voice the malcontent stewing in his expression.

“Mason, I need you. All of you. Not just the animal lust that slips its chain when

you're stretched tight with desire. That's amazing. But I've given you both all there is of me and now I want to have all of you."

Lacey held her breath as one heartbeat turned into five and still Mason said nothing.

"I didn't mean for things to happen this way, Ty. I'm not trying to shaft you. I-I just don't know how to do this. I've never wanted another guy, you know that. The last couple days have been so different. Amazing. I just don't know how to love you yet." The veins in his throat throbbed when he swallowed hard.

“Follow my lead.” Lacey drew her sweater over her head then wiggled out of her jeans and panties. After the massive doses of adrenaline the day had supplied, they were all on edge. She opened her heart to the truth of their bond. Everything came into focus. She knew what she had to do. She unhooked her bra then lay before them naked before switching her stare from Mason to Tyler. “You, too.”

The guys stripped in less time than it took for her to peel back the comforter. When she reclined against the soft sheets, she held out her arms to Mason. “I love you, Mason, for all your good traits—your gallantry, your

protectiveness, your loyalty—and promise to accept your faults.”

She spread her legs in invitation then sighed as his powerful hips settled between them. Though uncertain, his clear reaction to their discussion reinforced her resolve. His erection felt huge against her thigh. When he smothered her lips in a kiss ripe with his emotions, she guided his cock to her pussy. He slid home as though they were made for each other because that was the truth.

Buried in her to the hilt, he rested his cheek on the pillow beside her head. He stared into Tyler’s hopeful expression

when he covered the other man's clenched fist where it rested on the bed.

Mason's hard-on throbbed inside her when he said, "I love you, Ty, for all your good traits—your sensitivity, your eternal optimism, your generosity—and promise to accept your faults, though I'm not sure I know of any. You're the best friend a man could ask for. I'm sorry I didn't see how much you needed from me, how selfish I was. Please take what you need. Take me."

Ty groaned then sealed their mouths. This time their kiss held more than desperate passion. The slow melding of their tongues and lips mesmerized her.

Lacey smoothed her hands along the tense muscles of Mason's back to his ass. She massaged his clenched cheeks as her lovers continued their sensual exploration. His cock inflated, spreading the inflamed tissue of her pussy further apart. Without breaking the contact of their ravenous mouths, Tyler reached behind him with one hand to rummage through her nightstand drawer. He must have stashed the rest of their toys there when he dropped off the pistol.

His long fingers directed Mason's jaw to turn toward Lacey. He shared the delicious heat of their love with her as he shifted to kneel between their legs. She spread the cheeks of Mason's ass,

inviting Tyler to complete the circle by claiming their mate. Mason groaned then resettled his cock as his hips thrust involuntarily into her welcoming pussy.

Cool gel ran between the tips of her fingers when Tyler dribbled lubrication into the crack of Mason's ass. She reached lower, to stroke her slick fingers across the tight sac housing his sensitive balls.

"Fuck, yeah. You're killing me. Both of you. Just do it, Ty."

"That's not what I want." Tyler covered Mason's back to nibble the shell of his ear. He winked at Lacey then sucked the

lobe between his teeth for a sharp nip.

Where she'd been sure he'd persist,
Mason went lax beneath the reprimand.
“I want to be what you need. Both of
you. I love you, Lacey, for all your good
traits—your spirit, your empathy, your
strength—and accept any faults you may
have.”

The beautiful words triggered a spasm in
her pussy. Her muscles flexed around
Mason's hard shaft, drawing moans from
both of their chests. Tyler coached
Mason in the background. “Relax, I'm
going to prepare you to take all of me.”

Mason's cock surged inside her dripping

pussy as Ty's fingertip brushed hers. The rest of his tense fist stayed steady for a moment before his digit began to invade Mason's virgin passage. His knuckles sank beneath her grasp, which still focused on Mason's sensitive balls, by gradual increments.

"There you go. Your ass is so hot." Tyler's other hand glided along the length of his erection with a moist, slapping sound. Then the steady trajectory of his knuckles against her fingers made it easy for her to match the rhythm of his other hand's penetration with coordinated rocks of her hips. Every time Mason swallowed Ty's finger, she sheathed his raging hard-on.

Ty peppered Mason's shoulders and spine with tender kisses.

Soon Mason sought more as he ground his hips between their bodies. "If you want us to come together, you'd better get in there soon, Ty."

He didn't have to ask twice. Tyler squirted another coat of lube on both his cock and Mason's ass before blanketing his back. He used his height to his advantage, meeting Lacey's lips for a scorching kiss over Mason's shoulder. Then their three tongues met in a dance that had her pussy rippling around Mason's cock.

Mason groaned, burying his face against her neck. The rough pants of his heated breath scorched her shoulder but she felt the tremor of his fingers buried in her hair.

Their combined weight pressing on her should have been uncomfortable but, instead, it drove her crazy with lust. Each time the head of Tyler's cock probed the opening of Mason's ass, he jerked, driving his thick hard-on deeper inside her. While they traded licks, nips and kisses, Tyler ground against Mason's back until his cock locked against the other man's puckered hole.

Tyler froze but Mason thrust back

several inches, impaling himself on Tyler's patient flesh. Lacey chased his retreating cock but she didn't have to wait long since the sharp bite of pain caused him to pull off Ty's shaft and bury himself in her soaked pussy in the next instant.

Both men groaned.

"Put it back in, Ty. Fuck me." When he attempted to repeat the process, Ty rested his forearm across Mason's shoulders, pinning him in place. "Yes!"

This time, Tyler penetrated the tight ring of muscle with a long thrust that buried him to the hilt. The force drove Mason's

throbbing cock against her cervix. His pelvic bone bumped her clit. Her shout echoed through the room.

“Please, Mason. Let me fuck you. Please.” Ty waited for permission as Mason adjusted to the intrusion.

“Do it,” he snarled as he lowered his head to ravage Lacey’s neck. “Hurry. I’m not going to last between both of you.”

Tyler roared as he cupped Mason’s hips then began to thrust in a gradually escalating rhythm. Each of his strokes moved Mason within her grip. The walls of her pussy tightened around his bulging

erection. The motion set off a chain reaction as Mason's ass hugged Ty's cock.

He picked up the pace, fucking them with deliberate strokes punctuated with soft touches while still murmuring his love. Lacey watched the awe and fulfillment blossom on his face. It made her heart soar, dragging her body with it.

“Mason! Lacey! I'm going to come.” His eyes were wide open as he absorbed every second of their lovemaking.

“Bust in me, Tyler. Give it to me.”

Ty threw his head back, his abdomen

flexed then he growled as he erupted. “Love. You. Both.” He ground out the pledge between the waves of his orgasm.

Then heat flooded her as Mason joined him in release. Jet after jet of hot come seared her. The idea of their love flowing from Tyler to Mason to her triggered her own response. The world turned a million different colors as her whole body tensed then exploded. She drew out Mason’s renewed spurts until she lost contact with reality.

Her eyes closed, all she knew was that her men were nearby. Their heat, weight and ragged breathing communicated their

presence less than the love filling her soul to bursting.

After the day they'd had, Lacey didn't fault the guys for falling into a deep sleep while they cuddled. Mason remained at the center of the bed, now on his back. She and Tyler each occupied one side of his firm chest. Their hands intertwined on Mason's cut abdomen.

Though the synchronized rise and fall of their chests soothed her, she couldn't subdue the thoughts running rampant through her mind. Something wouldn't

let her join her men in their slumber. Everything had happened so fast since they visited Jackson in that horrible holding cell.

Even unconscious, Mason tightened his arm around her waist when she trembled.

Her scattered musings jumped to Gina. The way the woman had sat and cried as she confessed to drugging Lacey had been disturbing. She hadn't been able to meet Lacey's gaze when she uttered the description of Rob's murder. Lacey's mind replayed the moment. Gina's fingers had obscured her eyes behind those ultra-red nails.

Nails that had reminded Lacey of blood.

Nails that had been perfectly manicured...

She frowned then disengaged herself from Mason's clinging grasp. Soft cotton draped to her knees as she drew on one of the guys' discarded T-shirts. The fizzle of unease climbing her spine prompted her to take a little walk. She snagged the nearest cell phone off the floor before she stepped into the bathroom.

She took in the mess she'd made in her haste earlier. To pass the time while she debated, she replaced the supplies she'd

scattered. When she opened the drawer next to the sink, the pleasant glint of Rob's gun winked up at her. Figures, Ty'd put it somewhere handy but safer than under the pillow.

By the time she'd finished the task, she still hadn't been able to convince herself of the foolishness of the errant thought she'd had. Doubt slithered around her revelation but she figured, worst case, she'd look like a fool. She flipped the phone open then selected JRad from the contact list. After a deep breath, she punched Send.

“What's up, Mason? Is Lacey okay?”

“I’m fine, Jeremy. Thank you for asking.” She grinned at the silence from the other end of the line. “I know it’s only been a few hours, but...have you made any progress?”

“Not much. We were able to track down the stripper, Irene. A co-worker admitted to witnessing the stabbing, Lacey, but she’s sticking to some crazy hearsay story to keep us from pinning anything related to the murder on her. She said Gina told Irene that Rob was teamed up with Jackson and planned to abduct her in the alley. That he’d hunt her down if she ran so she killed him in self-defense.”

Lacey chewed her fingernails at the news, reminding herself of her purpose.

“What if the woman is telling the truth, Jeremy? What else did she say?”

“You sound like you’re fishing. Why don’t you tell me what you’re thinking?”

“When Jackson took me...you know...”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I fought him, Jeremy. I kicked, I screamed, I scratched and punched.”

He probably held the phone away when he cursed, but she still heard the scathing

phrase.

“What I’m saying is, I remember afterward how bad my hands hurt. How ripped up they were. My fingernails were ragged. Several even tore off part of the way. But, remember when Gina confessed to us, her nails were perfect. If someone attacked her, beat her up, why didn’t she fight back?” Lacey waited for Jeremy to shoot holes in her theory but he didn’t.

“Son of a bitch, Lacey. You’re right. Something’s off here. I’m going to call Razor back to the station. Don’t go anywhere, just hang tight for a second.” The connection clicked as he put her on

hold. Her overactive imagination conjured an odd sound from the other room but when she listened harder there was nothing. Probably just one of the guys shifting in their sleep.

“Lacey? You there?” Jeremy sounded frazzled.

“Yeah.”

“Razor’s not answering. Where are Mason and Tyler?” The panic in his tone lifted the hair on her neck.

“They’re sleeping, I’m going to wake them right now.”

“Good, do that. I don’t like this. It’s too quiet. I’m sending someone to fetch that damn rookie. There are four officers staking out your house. There should be chatter. No one’s reporting anything suspicious but you guys better get down here as soon as...”

The unmistakable report of a gun discharging ripped through the house. Though she’d dropped the phone on the bathmat, she heard Jeremy’s frantic yells of “officer down” followed by her address. Her ears rang when the echo died away. The noise had come from the bedroom.

Now her pounding heartbeat made the

only sound beside the horrid reverberations in her mind. There had only been a single shot, hadn't there? Where were the guys, why were they silent? Instinct smothered the curious shout poised on the cusp of her lips.

Lacey dove for Rob's gun then clutched it in her trembling grip before sliding the safety off. She chambered the first round with a barely audible slide of oiled metal. Terrified of what she'd find, but determined to help them if she could, she flung open the bathroom door.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Gina stood silhouetted in the moonlight from the window as she towered over the crumpled forms of Mason and Ty. Tyler had a clear lump on his forehead which oozed a dark patch of blood. She must have hit him with the butt of the gun.

“Ah, there you are. So sorry to have to kill off your boy toys but this one here...”

She gestured with the barrel to where Mason lay unmoving. From this distance she couldn't see where he'd been shot or if his chest still rose and fell. Her hopes

grew dim when she realized he didn't make a sound. Horror stunned her as Gina kept talking.

“...ruined everything. I told them my story. They were supposed to forgive me. How could I be held accountable for my actions with a monster after me?”

Her insane laughter terrified Lacey.

“And he still told the chief. That fucker. I had everything tidied. I got that skanky stripper to get rid of your nosey brother then I helped her get her courage up to fix her mistake when she realized what a freaking saint he'd really been. I even paid some thug to smash my face! No one should have believed that pathetic fool, Jackson, after that!”

Lacey latched onto any excuse to draw Gina's attention from her men. "You really did use him, didn't you?"

"Of course, darling. You'll find it's quite easy to manipulate men to do your bidding. Looks like you've gotten a nice start with this pair. I'm proud of you. Jackson, Rob and now dear sweet Razor are the latest in a long line of dumb men who have served my purposes."

"What did you do to Razor?" She hated stroking this monster's ego but when Gina beamed, she took a step away from the bed in her earnest storytelling.

"I seduced him, of course. With tears

and a few well-placed faux self-recriminations. Though he's been quite useful until now, filling me in on the details of the case so I could stay one step ahead, it was nothing to steal his gun and use it to blow him away. Stupid boy. As if I'd want a wimp like him to comfort me! I don't need any man to fuck me. I'm the one that does the fucking.” She made wild gestures with her pistol though she hadn't seemed to notice Lacey's yet.

“Well, it's no matter now. I've already sent word and supplies to Jackson. He'll hang himself as the ultimate test of his love for me. I can't have him blabbering on as he did today, he really should have

known better. You did meet another of my disciples, yes? The warden can't wait to get rid of Jackson so he can have me all to himself! Ha! With him out of the way, along with these meddling assholes and—of course—you, sweetie, I'll be back in business. But it pisses me off that you've made me break my favorite toy. I suppose it's only fair that I break yours, too."

"If you really think you're going to get away with this, you're crazier than I thought!" Lacey tempted the woman to charge her. She couldn't flash the gun until she was sure the guys were out of range. She had to believe they were all right. She'd only heard one shot. Hadn't

she?

“Who’s going to stop me?” Gina stalked closer. When she’d reached the foot of the bed, Tyler lurched up and made a grab for her waist. Lacey raised her gun but couldn’t be sure she wouldn’t hit Ty. Her heart froze when Gina swung around and clocked him on the head again. The dull thud of metal on skull threatened to make her stomach heave.

Tyler crashed to the floor.

“Ty!” Lacey struggled to focus on Gina. It was the only real way to help him.

“You people are starting to get on my

last fucking nerve.”

Before she realized the insane woman’s intent, Gina spun around then opened fire. With only one good eye, her aim wasn’t particularly accurate. Lacey dropped to the floor then scrambled beneath her bureau as a trail of splintered wood exploded behind her. She kept moving as the shots ringed the room.

One bullet pierced the wall just inches from her toes. The next struck close enough to her head that she felt the breeze. She crouched behind the hamper like a sitting duck. Lacey didn’t even realize she’d counted each shot until the

tenth one shattered her mother's antique mirror.

That pissed her off.

When the crazy bitch's footsteps neared where Ty lay on the floor, Lacey didn't have time to wonder at the precision of her instincts. Instead, she popped up from her meager shelter and strode straight for the lunatic.

"You know, Lacey. I think I could have liked you. Too bad that asshole got lucky and broke in on Jackson playing with you. I'd finally gotten him worked up to killing someone. You could have been his first. Too bad your brother couldn't

leave well enough alone when I called him afterward to see if he was on to me. Too bad he tempted me by falling in love with me. How could I resist that kind of power?”

They stood less than five feet apart, right arms outstretched. Identical police-issue sidearms aimed at each other's chests.

“I'm up for a game if you are. Which one of us can pull the trigger first you think, Lacey?”

“Count to three and let's see.”

Tyler groaned then shook his head. His eyes fluttered open. They bulged when

he saw their pose. “Get down! Lacey!”

“One...”

“Lacey!” Tyler lunged for Gina but he would never make it in time.

The cheating woman cackled then squeezed the trigger on, “Two.” Lacey watched the slight motion as though the world had slowed to a crawl. She responded in kind. If nothing else, Tyler would be safe. A metallic click transformed Gina’s evil grin into a bewildered circle a moment before Lacey’s bullet destroyed her black heart.

Both Ty and Lacey ignored the crumpled

body where it dropped. Together, they turned to Mason.

A rivulet of blood trickled from the cut above Ty's temple but he refused to sit still. He shook Mason's shoulder.

"Mason! Answer me!"

"Jeremy called an ambulance but I don't think we have that kind of time. Where was he hit, Ty?" Lacey kicked the covers the rest of the way off Mason's limp frame then searched for his wound. The pool of blood slicking the right side of his abdomen hid the point of entry. She wadded the sheet into a compress then applied pressure to slow the bleeding.

Ty knelt near Mason's shoulder, watching her in shock.

“Snap out of it! I need you to hold this. Please, Ty. He needs you.”

Tyler lurched for the bloody sheet, clamping it in place as she had moments ago. She leaned over Mason's face, hoping for even the faintest whisper of breath but nothing stirred against her cheek. Sirens wailed in the background. She prayed they came from an ambulance. With calm efficiency borne of endless practice, Lacey tipped Mason's head back then started CPR.

She inflated his chest with two quick

breaths then started chest compressions. Thirty counts later, she covered his mouth once more.

Please, please be okay. Come back, Mason. We need you. Come back.

Halfway through the second set, Mason coughed then groaned as his eyes fluttered open. Though she wanted to smother him in desperate words of love, she focused on treating him. Lacey rolled him onto his side so that his blood didn't spill as freely from his wound as she tugged him into the recovery position. From this angle, she could gather another wad of fabric to tuck against the exit wound on his back.

“You’re going to be okay, Mason.” Tyler promised things she wouldn’t. She’d seen patients in better condition slip away from them in the ER. “We’ve got you.”

Mason glanced up at her with pain-drenched eyes. He nodded when she didn’t reassure him. “Take care of each other. I love you.”

He slipped into unconsciousness as the cavalry stormed up the stairs. Jeremy flew into the room first, with paramedics two steps behind. “Christ!”

Lacey ignored his wild stare at the destroyed room, their state of undress,

the noise and flashing lights. She ignored everything but the head EMT. A point by point account of Mason's injuries and status as she knew it flew from her lips even as she assisted them in loading him onto the board for transport.

“Tyler needs attention. Blunt trauma to the right temple.” Another medic swooped to inspect the damage despite Ty's attempts to rush to Mason's side.

In a herd, they poured outside and piled in the ambulance for the second time this week. The police escort cleared the way as they raced to the hospital.

Please, God let us make it.

Tyler crushed Lacey to his chest as she cried uncontrollably. His brave, smart, coolheaded woman had kept her shit together until it no longer mattered. Now, she was inconsolable.

Another round of sobs wracked her diminutive frame against his chest. It didn't surprise him when the racket roused Mason from his fitful, drug-induced slumber on the hospital bed beside them.

“I thought you said I’m not gonna buy the farm, doll?”

Even though she still cried, Lacey laughed, too. The impressive combination resulted in a very unladylike snort. “Not. You’re not. Promise.”

Ty smoothed her hair as best he could in spite of the clumps of dried blood making it stick out like a porcupine’s needles. “I tried to take her home. She needs to shower then crash. She assisted the ER team as they worked on you for six hours. But she’s being stubborn again. She won’t go.”

“Yes. You will.” Mason’s declaration wheezed between tight lips. “I can’t rest until you’re settled.”

Lacey objected. “I can shower here. I’ll take a nap in the lounge. I do it all the time when I pull a double. I’ll be fine.”

Even hopped up on pain meds, Mason saw through the ruse. “You’re afraid to go home.”

“I-I killed Gina. In my bedroom.” Fresh tears coursed down her puffy face.

“You had no choice, little one.” Ty squeezed her trembling body closer to his heart. “I think you scared twenty

years off my life when I saw you facing off with her. How did you know she was out of bullets?”

“She told me she’d shot Razor. Then Mason.” She shuddered again. “I counted the rest.”

“What if that bitch had reloaded after Razor?” Their fellow officer hadn’t fared as well as Mason. His fate still hung in the balance. They’d managed to revive him but he lay in a coma in the intensive care unit. The doctors were split on their prognoses.

“I didn’t have a lot of time to consider it. I knew that if I didn’t pull the trigger,

you could be next.”

Ty kissed her salty cheek. “Then you did the right thing, Lacey.”

“Take her home.” Mason directed the order at Ty. When she began to object once more he added. “Our apartment. For now.”

She went lax in his hold. “For now.”

“I love you both. Now get the hell out so I can sleep.”

Tyler grinned. “Oh, don’t worry, I’ll put Lacey to bed the right way. Enjoy your Jell-O.”

“I love you too, Mason.” She wriggled from Ty’s grip to drop one last kiss on Mason’s forehead before holding out her hand. Ty grasped it, tugging her close.

“We’ll be back before you know it. Rest up.”

Epilogue

Lacey clutched the newspaper to her chest as they picked their way across the hilly terrain. Mason had lost so much weight during the past month, she knew he struggled to keep even their slow pace but he’d never admit it.

She had intended to keep her face

averted from the two fresh graves at the bottom of the hill but she couldn't help but look. It seemed a fitting reward for Jackson, and punishment for Gina, to bury them side by side. The twisted couple made the perfect pair. Seeing the dirt, with just a few sprouts of grass poking through, somehow gave her closure.

Their nightmare was over.

They continued up to the giant oak tree. Lacey tucked the sports section against the headstone of Rob's grave between the dozens of flowers left by myriad friends. She kissed her fingers then pressed them to the granite, surprised it

felt warm to the touch in the early winter morning. They'd come straight after picking her up from work. Recent events hadn't done much to tone down the guys' protectiveness but, suddenly, she didn't mind so much.

After all, she loved them more with each passing hour.

Lacey didn't realize she'd been talking out loud to her brother until she caught the nod Mason gave Tyler in response to some unvoiced question.

“Look, little one, I realize this is probably the weirdest place on earth to do this but...” Mason and Tyler both

dropped to one knee at the foot of Rob's grave.

“What are you two doing!” She covered her gaping mouth.

“We thought it appropriate to propose here. We hope he would finally approve.”

The first shaft of morning light to break over the mountains illuminated the contents of the jeweler's box Tyler cracked open in front of her. The diamond burned with unnatural brilliance.

“This is your grandmother's ring!”

“The last time I saw her before she passed away, she gave it to me. She dropped it in the center of my palm and told me she thought it would look stunning on you.” Tyler slid the ring onto her trembling finger.

“She was right.” Mason added, “Accept this promise from us, Lacey. We love you. Forever.”

“But...how will it work?” she whispered, in awe of the hushed intimacy. In a place others might have found creepy, she felt surrounded by loved ones. Rob, her parents, even Grandma Lambert were all here. For one moment, she thought she could see them

just beyond the trees.

“The vows we exchanged that night, doll.” Mason drew her attention from the vision and when she looked again it was gone. “Did you mean them?”

Her heart filled with love all over again. “Of course.”

“So did we.” Tyler took her hand. “I consider us hitched. Mostly.”

She frowned. “You and I never said the words to each other.”

“How about we fix that in a traditional wedding? You can have your big white

dress and we'll make it official. As for the rest...we know."

Lacey looked to Mason. He nodded in agreement. "You're already mine in my heart."

"Mine, too." She kissed him.

"Then marry me?" Tyler asked.

"Yes!" She kissed him, too. "With one stipulation..."

"Uh oh." He raised one brow.

"I don't want to wear a big, ugly dress." She grinned.

“Thank God,” the guys muttered together as they rose and headed back toward the truck.

Locked together, they crossed the wrought iron gate of the cemetery. Tyler boosted her into the cab. When they crammed onto the bench seat, Mason asked, “How about we grab some breakfast at the diner then drop by Morgan Wheeler’s place? I hear he’s into real estate now.”

Lacey hadn’t been back inside her house since the shooting. They’d agreed it might be time to move on from the past.

“I think that sounds like a great idea.”

Grandma Lambert's diamond flashed when Lacey rested her hand on Mason's thigh. She held the other out for Ty, who entwined their fingers.

“Do you think they have Spaghetti-O's?” he asked.

They filled the cab with laughter as they began the journey of their life together.

Just before the dawn.

About the Author

Jayne Rylon's stories usually begin as a daydream in an endless business meeting. Her writing acts as a creative counterpoint to her straightlaced corporate existence. She lives in Ohio with two cats and her husband who both inspires her fantasies and supports her careers. When she can escape her office, she loves to travel the world, avoid speeding tickets in her beloved Sky and, of course, read.

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Look for these titles by Jayne Rylon

Now Available:

Nice and Naughty

Dream Machine

Three's Company (Ménage and More
print anthology)

Coming Soon:

Kate's Crew

She can cover him with one hand tied behind her back. Maybe two.

Personal Protection

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Hauberk Protection, Book 2

Sam Watson excels at keeping other people safe. Now a stalker is targeting him, but so what? A few doctored photos and a couple threatening phone calls are no big deal. He can watch his own back. Then again, the view from behind the sexy spitfire assigned to protect him isn't so bad...

Rosalinda Ramos has managed to keep her attraction to Hauberk Security's owner tightly under wraps. It's just as well he doesn't know. One slip—in the bedroom or on the job—will cost her her heart and her career, so she's got only one thing on her mind. Protect Sam,

whether he wants it or not.

The stakes—and the heat—rise exponentially when she discovers Sam belongs to an exclusive sex club—one she must investigate for potential suspects. Suddenly she finds herself immersed in a world that pushes her boundaries.

Sam delights in leading Rosie deep into his sexual shadows—until they go one game too far. Making him wonder if he can allow the woman he loves to take a bullet for him.

Warning: May incite the reader's protective instinct, forcing her to throw

herself on the nearest man.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Personal Protection:

The limo pulled into the underground parking lot and past his Jag. A sigh escaped Sam as they cruised past his Harley. The crisp October day would have been perfect to drive his Road King. Instead he was cooped up like a damned dog in the back of the limo that finally stopped near the elevator where Rosie was waiting.

Damn it, why had Chad insisted on

Rosie Ramos as his lead CPO? If he'd wanted a woman to accompany him to any upcoming parties or meet 'n greets—the reason Chad had given him—why not McKee or Anderson? Neither of those women got his cock twitching like Rosie did.

The fantasy he'd had of getting her alone in his apartment hadn't included her wearing a gun and acting in as his personal bodyguard. All right, maybe one had. But, damn it, if a bullet was going to be aimed in his direction, there was no way in hell he wanted the little spitfire throwing herself in its path. He'd rather have her throw herself in his bed. Go down on her knees and unzip his

fly... Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!

“All clear, Mr. Watson,” Rosie said quietly.

“Of course it is.” Sam ducked his head and clambered out of the limo, then stomped to the elevator. Goddamn it, she’d even acquired a key to the elevator, locking the door open so no one else could use it. He ignored that it was standard operating procedure and lashed out, “You think other people might not need the goddamned elevator?”

“Better than having the door open and somebody shoot you from inside.

Besides there are other elevators still available.”

Her voice was so damned reasonable. Placating. Like he was some baby to be soothed out of a tantrum.

Which is exactly how he was behaving but goddamn it, his people were supposed to be protecting others. Not him.

She turned the key and let the door close, pressing the button for the penthouse. The elevator began to rise, a quiet chime announcing each floor they passed. And with each ding, Sam became more and more aware of the delicate smell of

apricot shampoo and woman filling the confined area. He closed his eyes, trying not to deliberately inhale great lungfuls of that amazing scent.

As long as she was around him, he'd not sleep. Instead he'd be staring at the ceiling imagining what it would feel like to cup her breasts in his hands, to unzip her pants and nudge aside that blue thong. Imagine going down on her and tasting her honey. When she'd been in the gym doing those stretches, he'd obsessed about some of the positions she could get into while he fucked her. Then in his office while Chad had been briefing her, he'd pictured her stretched out over his desk, her legs hitched over

his shoulders. And now she'd be in the next apartment, so damned available.

Damn it!

“Mr. Watson, do you have a problem with me guarding you?”

“Nope.” He couldn't help that his answer sounded like a growl. He had one helluva a problem and at the moment it was punching against his zipper. He shifted his briefcase so she wouldn't see his hard-on.

“I mean, do you have a problem with a woman guarding you?”

Shit! She thought he didn't want her because she was a woman? Why not add sexual discrimination to the mix today? He exhaled and opened his eyes. "No, Ms. Ramos, I do not have a problem a female operative leading my team."

"Then do you have a problem with me personally?"

Was it a problem that he was imagining pinning her up against the wall and ramming into her until she screamed her release? How the hell did he explain that to her without getting slapped with a sexual harassment suit in addition to the discrimination one?

“If I didn’t have complete confidence in your abilities, you wouldn’t work for Hauberk, and Chad wouldn’t have personally chosen you as team leader.”

That must have been the answer she was looking for. She nodded, and her shoulders imperceptibly relaxed. “Thank you.”

“I’m pis—ticked off at whoever is sending those damned photographs, and I fu—frickin’ don’t like having to accept that I had to ask my own people to protect me. Leaves me damned twitchy. So don’t take my grouchiness personally, Ms. Ramos. It’s not directed at you.”

No, what was pointing directly at her was his goddamned dick.

The elevator bounced once before the doors slid open, and Sam waited for her to precede him.

Aw, crap. Now he had to watch that bitable ass of hers walk along the hallway and that did nothing to help him control his raging hard-on.

She's your employee. She's a crack shot with that Glock 11 she carries. He almost groaned as the image of her bending over on the firing range, wiggling that ass at him, had his cock so hard it hurt.

She can stomp on your nuts and have you singing soprano without breaking a sweat.

Didn't work. All his dick thought of was wrestling on the ground with her body pressing against him, over him, under him. Around him.

What was in that coffee of Sandy's today that left him so fucking horny? Spanish fuckin' fly?

As they approached the door to his apartment, the door to 1202 opened and Kris nodded. "Evening, Mr. Watson."

Sam couldn't help but notice his newest

and youngest operative standing at attention, a worried frown marring that baby-smooth face of his. Aw hell. He'd stomped on that poor boy's ego pretty good earlier. Hadn't he been a bucket of sunshine today?

He stopped, and blew out a breath. "Look, Kris, I owe you an apology. I shouldn't have yelled at you this morning. I've been..."—a festering pile of self-centered dogshit?—"under a lot of pressure lately."

Yeah, right, and if you buy that one, I've got some land in the Okefenokee for you.

"It's all right, Mr. Watson. I don't think

I'd be feeling too happy if someone threatening me had access to my apartment and personal information either."

He might have bought Kris's smile if it hadn't been for the Mr. Watson. Unlike some of his employees, Kris had never had a problem referring to him as Sam. Or even "buddy" on occasion in the gym. Mr. Watson meant he still had some fencing to mend.

"Chad told me you and Walters got those cameras in place."

"Sir, yes, sir. It was no problem at all, sir."

First Mr. Watson and now sir. And not just sir, but the military sir, yes sir. Well, he supposed it was natural for Kris to fall back on his naval training.

“I didn’t expect you’d have a problem with it, son.”

Son? Son? Kris is twenty-five, you idiot, not eight the way you’ve just made him feel. He’s not young enough to be your son.

Okay, technically he probably could have been a father at fourteen thanks to Becky Sue’s idea of a birthday present that year. Thank the good Lord above, she’d stolen a condom from her brother

Billy's bedside table before sneaking out. Not that he'd needed another condom for a coupla years after that, but if she'd not had the forethought that night, he could have been a daddy by his fifteenth birthday. But he sure as hell wasn't old enough to call Kris son.

"Mr. Watson?" Rosie said, touching his arm. "Are you okay?"

An electric shock jumped from her fingers and crawled under his skin in a tingle that caused his breath to hitch. He'd noticed that she was a toucher, seen her patting people's arms or hands to calm them or support them, but she'd never touched him before. His cock

hijacked his thinking processes and started him imagining her tiny hands closing about Sam Junior, milking...

Shit on a stick! She's your employee, not a member of the Rouge.

"Yeah." He pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled as he forced his mind back onto the scene in the hall. "Look, Kris, I didn't mean to imply you're not a good CPO. Chad wouldn't have assigned you to the team if he didn't have confidence in you."

Color crept up Kris's neck. "Thank you, sir."

“Sam.”

“Sam,” Kris repeated, his smile breaking out.

Feeling that at least one corner of the world was back on its axis, Sam headed toward the end of the hall and his sanctuary.

Rosie stopped him as he pulled his keys from his jacket pocket. “Let me get that for you.”

His teeth threatening to splinter when his jaw locked down, Sam stepped back and let her unlock the door with her own key. She drew her gun and entered his

apartment. Chad had reported they'd monitored the cleaning service doing their thing that afternoon, so they knew the apartment was clear. Though he couldn't fault her vigilance, it was what she'd signed on for when Hauberk hired her, but damned if it didn't shrivel his balls that she was willing to take a bullet meant for him.

This professor's final exam includes a spanking.

Dear Sir, I'm Yours

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There's no house restoration too challenging for Rae Jackson, a.k.a. "The Fix-It Lady". There's no fixing the past, though. Like the day she left college. A semester of flirting with her English professor ended when he spanked her to the best orgasm of her life. Afraid of her own eager willingness to comply with the sexy dom's commands—no matter what—she fled.

Yet not even five years can dim her memory of his masterful touch.

Conn never forgot the one student who gave him a big fat "F" on the greatest

test of his life. After all these years, he's still haunted by his uncharacteristic loss of control. When he finds the very object of his shame—and desire—crawling around under his grandmother's house, he swears to do anything to win Rae's trust.

Rae finds herself helpless against Conn's slow seduction. Exactly the way she likes it. Instead of poetry, this time she learns the erotic pleasure to be found in bondage...and submission to the sexiest professor alive.

Warning: Explicit sex, spanking, light bondage, a crazy old lady who talks to ghosts, and one lethal pink parasol.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Dear Sir, I'm Yours:

Dear Dr. Connagher:

We all wear masks, whether to protect ourselves or others. Sometimes the mask slips, and it's a very frightening thing when the beast is revealed beneath the pleasant exterior.

Richard has so many masks that I can't keep track of them all. He has the supervisor role he plays with the contractors, the good ole boy role with his buddies, the dutiful son-in-law with

my father. All of them are fake—I just never noticed it before. One by one, those masks slipped enough for me to see the truth.

Last night, he looked at my poor crippled father in that wheelchair with contempt, and I wanted to leap on Richard and beat him to death with my own fists.

To be honest, it never occurred to me that he was only pretending, even with me. Especially with me. Oh, Conn, he can be so terribly mean. Of course, only at home where no one can see his mask pulled aside. It sounds ridiculously immature to whine about someone being

mean, but I always thought that someone who loved me, really loved me, would never be able to speak to me so harshly.

Like I'm stupid. Worthless. Dog manure to wipe off his boots.

Later, he apologized, but the damage had been done. I saw, I heard, and I can't forget. The man I thought I loved and loved me in return is no longer there. I suspect he never was.

Whether in class or the hallway, you treated everyone the same, from lowly non-English students, to returning students you mentored year after year, to fellow professors. You never acted

differently, until it was just you and me behind your locked office door.

That's when the real Conn peeked out.

I loved him as much as the professor, even if you scared me half to death.

I wear a mask now, putting on an "everything's okay" face as soon as I get out of bed in the morning. I hate that damned mask. I hate pretending, losing myself a little more each day.

I'm scared, Conn. I'm scared that I'll forget who I am until I am the mask. You're the only man who ever saw the real me. I hold on to her, but I feel her

slipping a little more each day beneath
this cold, numbing mask.

The night I stop dreaming about you will
be the morning I don't have to put the
mask on any longer. I'll be a zombie,
then, a ghost, the girl you knew dead and
buried beneath a false façade of vapid
smiles and broken dreams.

I wish you could bend me back over
your desk and spank me until I feel
again. Help me, Conn. Help me
remember who I am.

~ Rae

Sitting down at their table in the semi-private darkened alcove of Mythos, Rae glanced about the restaurant. Greek statues, arches, carved cherubs, even mosaics decorated the elegant restaurant, but she didn't pay much attention to them.

Everybody in the restaurant was staring at them.

Conn scooted her chair in and she snagged his arm, drawing him down to whisper in his ear. "Why's everybody staring at us?"

Chuckling softly, he kissed her cheek and moved to sit beside her. “Because you’re gorgeous, darlin’.”

Her heart skipped a beat and shot off to the races. “The dress isn’t too much?”

“Oh, it’s too much alright. But you look gorgeous in it, Rae. You’re giving off a divine mixture of innocence and seductress that’s driving every poor man in this restaurant insane.”

“What about you?”

“Well, darlin’, I’m imagining turning you over my knee.”

Heat scalded her cheeks and she quickly buried her face in the menu, hoping to hide. “I knew you’d hate this dress. I tried to tell Miss Belle—”

“I don’t hate it, Rae.” He slid his hand beneath the table and stroked her thigh beneath the skirt. “I love it. It’s perfect and she knew it. And I still want to spank your delectable ass while I find out whether you wore anything beneath it or not.”

Heat pounded through her, heart racing, palms—and other areas—dampening. Sparing a furtive glance at the other patrons, she hesitated. She needed answers, especially about what had

happened in his office that day. Perhaps in public would be for the best, as long as they whispered. No one sat close enough to overhear, and at least he couldn't actually act on what they were talking about. "Did you spank other students?"

"Now that's a very interesting question." Conn laid the menu down. "These past years, I've worked harder at understanding myself, what makes me tick. I learned how I should have proceeded with a woman like you."

Tired of scanning the menu, she laid hers down and took a sip of water. Not sure she really wanted to know, she asked,

“Like me?”

“Eager to please, untrained and unsure, afraid of and attracted to a big bad man like me.” He laughed softly at the look on her face, whatever it was, and took her hand in his. “I took a few trips for conferences these past years and made connections with people who could help me.”

She frowned, trying to imagine him asking for help. “With what?”

He leaned closer and whispered, “Kinky shit.”

The waiter came over. Blood was

pounding and rushing in her ears too loudly for her to hear what Conn told him. Nodding, the waiter left them alone once more.

“I needed help figuring out how to break you in, so to speak, if I ever tracked you down again. I needed help reining myself in, the proper things I should do to ensure you’re safe and unafraid. The right way to build a long-term committed relationship and not just a night playing. It’s a huge difference, Rae, and even five years ago, I intended to play for keeps.

“So that’s the long answer of saying I did spank a few other women—who knew what they were and what I was. It

was playing. Did I ever spank any other student? Absolutely not; I never had any relationship at all with a student before or after you. Did I ever fall for any other woman? No. Not like this.”

He waited until she met his gaze. Fingers trembling, she gripped his hand harder.

“I loved you then, Rae, and I love you more now. I’m not losing you again.”

“But—”

“We’ll work out every single objection you have as they come up. I won’t push, rush, or bully you into anything, but I’m not letting you run. You run, and I will

follow, come hell or high water, and you can bet I'll spank your ass fire-engine red when I catch you." He leaned over and kissed her shoulder, her ear. "And then I'm going to make love to you so hard and long you won't ever be able to run again."

Her stomach tightened, that familiar knot of nerves insisting she should run or fight, anything but stay. But his deep blue eyes locked on her, smoldering with intensity, and she couldn't run, not even for the fun of the chase. She didn't want to.

The waiter returned and poured two glasses of red wine. Rae took a hesitant

sip, braced to not like it. But it was sweet and warm, thick, very, very good. Sip by sip, it flowed through her spreading heat. By the darkness in Conn's eyes, it affected him the same way.

“What is this?”

“Black Opal Shiraz. I typically drink Merlot but I thought you might like this better. It's sweeter than I usually drink.”

“So you don't always want the sweetest?”

“Ah, now, darlin', that's a loaded question.” He stretched out his arm

along the back of her chair, his fingers trailing over her arm. “I want my wine red and strong with a kick. The only problem is it really heats my blood. I’ll only drink one glass tonight, or I won’t be driving us home. I’ll be too busy making you mine in the backseat of my car. My libido doesn’t need any assistance right now in running amok.”

With trembling fingers, she took another sip while he talked up the waiter. Evidently they knew him enough to recommend a new dish they thought he’d enjoy. He asked what she wanted, and she let him choose. It was probably a very submissive thing to do, but she really didn’t care, as long as it made his

eyes darken. At a restaurant like this, they wouldn't serve a single bad dish. She was bound to get something good.

Nothing as good and wicked as Conn.
“So tell me about you.”

“What do you want to know, darlin’?”

“Everything.”

He talked about his family living in Texas, his mama, Miss Belle's first-born daughter. He had an older brother, Victor, and a younger sister, Vicki, all hell-bent and trouble according to him.

“If your mama is anything like Miss

Belle, then I'm really not sure I want to meet her."

Conn laughed, his fingers making lazy circles on her arm. "As a matter of fact, Mama is worse than Miss Belle. She inherited many of Colonel Healy's more obnoxious bossy traits."

Rae shuddered, thankful her possible in-laws lived so far away. "You're still teaching at Drury, aren't you?"

"Sure am. I'd like to be here until the day I die."

"What are you doing this weekend?"

“A little fencing with a friend of mine. We make the Ren Faire circuit.”

“You fence? Like with swords?”

“It’s a hobby of mine.” He turned quiet, somber, the grooves in his face pronounced. They ate quietly, Rae trying to enjoy the chicken despite the capers.

“What’s wrong with your dish?”

“Nothing.”

“Rae, you’ve got to tell me if you’re not happy with something. Every time you take a bite, you frown. How can I take care of you if I don’t even know what you need?”

Her brain retorted that she didn't need anybody to take care of her, but her heart melted. "I don't like capers. I should have read the menu closer."

"My fault, darlin'. You let me order, remember? What else don't you like?"

They talked about food while enjoying the incredible dinner, but tension wound higher, subtle at first, but more and more pronounced. She kept jumping every time he moved or spoke, unsure why she was so tense. Her nerves jangled, sensitive to the least signal from him. Pushing his plate away, he stretched out his legs beneath the table, deliberately wide and sprawled so his thigh rubbed

hers.

She moaned softly before she could silence it. The tension mounted, thick and oppressive, matching the darkening storm in his eyes.

Finally, he leaned over and breathed into her ear. “I think it’s time to give you that extra credit.”

Startled, she glanced around the restaurant, but nobody sat close enough to hear. The alcove was dark and made for lovers. Surely he wouldn’t— “What, here?”

“Yes, here.”

The waiter brought a thick slice of death-by-chocolate layered cake. Conn loaded the fork and fed her bite by bite, his eyes locked on her mouth. Every few bites, he put the empty fork in his mouth and licked it clean. His eyes blazed. From the chocolate? Or her taste?

She tried to quell the heat spreading through her. “Don’t I get to feed you?”

One corner of his mouth quirked. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Leaning down, he licked her neck, his teeth grazing her collarbone. Just a nibble, but she jolted with surprise just the same. He slid his arm behind her, his

palm sliding hot down her right arm. His body heat seared her left side, back, and thigh. Sitting in public, she felt covered by him, possessed by his little touches and potent stares. It was odd, terrifying, and thrilling at the same time.

How far would he go? How far would she let him go? In public?

As she lifted the fork to his mouth, her hand shook. She put the empty fork in her mouth as he'd done, and he rumbled with approval. "Do you taste me, darlin'?"

Maybe it was her imagination, but she did taste just a hint of that sultry darkness of the mastery of his mouth.

Shivers took hold deep in the pit of her stomach. Tightening her thighs together, she closed her eyes, trying to calm the roaring desire.

“Put the fork down.” He whispered the words against her ear, but she recognized it as an order. Silverware clattered against the dessert plate. He breathed deeply against her ear, his breath warm and moist. With his left hand, he slowly turned her head toward him.

Wildly, her gaze flickered about the room. Was anyone watching? Did she care?

Smoldering with heat, he stared deeply into her eyes, drowning her with his will, his control. Tension mounted, his gaze a physical touch sliding down to her mouth. Lazily, he let his gaze drop lower, and her breasts burned to feel his touch, to feel the heat of his mouth, the stroke of his tongue. Trembling, she made a soft noise, desperate and needy yet so afraid she'd embarrass herself.

His gaze worked back up to her mouth. Her lips fell open; she couldn't help it. She couldn't stop her tongue from wetting her lips in invitation, either. He lifted his gaze to hers and she sucked in a deep breath, bracing for attack.

Tilting her head just so, he slanted his mouth across hers. His tongue slid deep, conquering and claiming every inch of her. This was no little torment or play; this was total domination. His mouth took hers, his tongue thrusting like his body would, not fast, not unsure, but deep and steady, demanding thrusts which left her no defense. One, two, and she quivered, crying out softly into his mouth as climax roared through her. Her hands scrambled on the table, her body shaking against his. She finally got one hand under the table, her left, and reached for his groin.

He made a rough sound against her lips, his hips jerking, thrusting his erection

firmly into her palm. God, he was big and hard, swelled against those black jeans. Her body tightened down all over again, aching to feel him sliding inside, claiming her as his mouth had just done.

Releasing her mouth, he bent his head and lightly kissed her shoulder. The waiter approached with their ticket, so Conn gently peeled her hand off him, placing a kiss in her palm. She could only sit there, panting quietly, trying not to rub herself all over him. She'd just climaxed in the middle of a busy restaurant. From a kiss. Had anybody noticed? Torn between embarrassment and need, she kept her gaze down.

Her hard nipples were very, very prominent against the thin white of the dress. She crossed her arms, hoping the waiter didn't get an eyeful. Noticing her discomfort, Conn slipped his leather jacket around her shoulders. The coat was heavy around her, smelling incredibly of leather and him. Wrapped in that coat, she fought not to rub her face against it and see if she could come again.

Can one man satisfy Alexa's appetites?
Or will it take two?

Nice and Naughty

After a disastrous lesson in heartache, Alexa Jones confines her adrenaline rushes to intense boardroom negotiations. Her legendary control cracks and she indulges in a high-octane encounter on the hood of her sports car. She never planned to see the enticing stranger again. When she finds herself across the boardroom table from him, there's suddenly more at stake than just her career.

Justin Winston got more than he bargained for on his summer drive, but

he should have known nothing is ever that easy. He's met the woman of his dreams yet he doesn't know who she is. Luckily, he can always count on his practical brother for the things that matter, and this time is no exception. But, when a web of corporate espionage entangles them all, it's clear Justin isn't the only one who's fallen for their mysterious siren.

In Justin and Jason, Alexa finds something as unique and rare as the patent they will risk their lives to secure. The freedom to explore—and satisfy—the full range of her desires. From naughty to nice. Can Alexa accept the love of two men?

Enjoy the following excerpt for Nice and Naughty:

“Kiss me,” she demanded.

He didn't need to be told twice. With a low groan, he closed the narrow gap between them, sealing his mouth over hers. He dropped the hood in place and put his hand to better use, wrapping it around her hip, yanking her tight against the hard plane of his chest. His height made Alexa strain on tiptoes to return his kiss. Eager to help, he tucked his other hand around her thigh, just beneath the curve of her ass, and hoisted her up

higher on his body.

Even as he bit at her lips, the growing evidence of his desire prodded the fly of her shorts. The denim she wore couldn't prevent the thick ridge of his dick from imprinting the soft curve of her belly as it filled with each rapid beat of his heart, pressing into her. She squirmed against him, instinctively aligning them so her pussy rubbed against the bulge in his jeans.

They fit perfectly together.

Her hands tangled in his hair, loving the way the silky strands teased the sensitive crevices between her fingers. She

kneaded his scalp, urging him to take her mouth deeper. His head angled over hers, intensifying the kiss as his tongue lashed playfully against the seam of her lips. She drew it inside her mouth and sucked. He tasted like peppermint.

She moaned with regret when he pulled away.

“I’m going to set you on the hood.” He rumbled in her ear in between nibbles of her neck.

“No! Wait.”

Though he looked disappointed, he stopped without hesitation.

The heat suffusing her face highlighted her discomfort with being so brazen. “I...I don’t want to scratch the paint. Take my shorts off first.”

Strained laughter burst from his chest. It transformed his features from rugged to unbearably handsome.

“Honey, you’re my every fantasy.”

Kneeling in front of her, he flipped up the hem of her shirt to place hungry kisses on her stomach as he unbuttoned her cutoffs. He lowered them down her legs, following the fabric with his mouth, kissing a trail of fire down her inner thighs.

Alexa shuddered when work-roughened hands grabbed her ass and placed her on the car like some erotic hood ornament. Guiding her feet, he rested them on the front fender, straddling his torso. Her arms fell back, braced behind her. Although the metal warmed her skin, bare now except for the sexy thong she wore, the shade kept it from burning her.

His hands ran up her abdomen, pushing the halter top higher to expose her breasts. She would have begged him to touch her but he seemed to know exactly where and how she wanted to be stroked. One of his hands cupped a breast while his tongue laved the aching center of the other. With the side of his

face tucked against her skin, which glistened with a fine sheen of perspiration, he looked up.

The desire burning in his eyes matched the lust roaring inside her. Their gazes locked. He waited for her to take the next step.

“More,” was all she could say.

“Yes.” His hands raked down her torso, fingers grazing each rib with tantalizing precision. When they feathered over her abdomen, her muscles reflexively tightened. Alexa wasn’t sure who moaned when the contraction caused the arousal building inside her to flow out

onto her pussy lips, soaking the tiny cotton band tucked between her legs.

She thought she heard a gruff, muffled curse just before he tugged the strip of her underwear to the side and buried his face between her legs. Then she didn't care. The combination of her copious fluids and the heat of his mouth against her shaved mound wiped away everything else. When his tongue dipped between her labia to circle her clit she almost came on the spot. His enthusiastic lapping drew out her arousal, which he devoured as though he couldn't get enough of her taste.

Pleasure flowed from his skilled mouth

directly into her veins. With her head tilted back, her half-closed eyes facing the fluffy clouds in the perfect blue sky, she concentrated on the intoxicating way he manipulated her flesh and didn't notice his hand moving until the blunt tip of his finger tested her dripping pussy.

She moaned and thrust her hips at his seeking hand. He worked her open, dipping in further each time he drove the digit inside. When his finger tunneled within her, palm facing upwards, he curled the long length until it pressed against her G-spot. The sensation overwhelmed her with pleasure. This man had moves she had only read about.

Hovering on the edge of an orgasm, she shrieked. Mistaking the cry of pleasure for surprise or pain, he paused, keeping her climax just out of reach. In that moment of clarity, she craved more. Having the most amazing orgasm of her life no longer seemed like enough.

“I want you inside me. Now.”

It may not have been the most graceful move she ever saw, but he somehow managed to balance her thighs on his shoulders while he ripped his wallet from his back pocket. He retrieved a condom before dropping the billfold on the ground, unconcerned about the rest of the contents. With one hand, he got the

button of his jeans undone and the fly spread open. The other hand shoved his pants and dark gray briefs out of the way, allowing him to thread the most magnificent cock she'd ever seen through the opening of his leather chaps.

As he rolled the condom over his raging hard-on, he stepped between her legs and claimed her mouth. This kiss was a thousand times more potent than the first, so stimulating it shocked her.

Unrestrained now, he possessed her with a natural dominance that coerced her body to bow even closer to his. While he claimed her mouth, he massaged her clit. The contrast of his harsh kiss and tender teasing had her writhing beneath

him.

“Now. Please, now.”

His knees bent forward, resting on the edge of the hood, and the head of his cock notched against her a moment before he thrust, driving his broad shaft a few inches inside her tight, clinging sheath. Her arms came up, banding around his solid back.

“You feel so fucking good.” He groaned.
“I’m not going to last.”

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