

BODYBUILDERS FOR THE *BBW* GYM



Sam Hall

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OceanofPDF.com

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Bodybuilders for the BBW by Sam Hall

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Author Note

This book is written in Australian English, which is a weird lovechild of British and American English. We tend to spell things the way the Brits do (expect a lot more u's), yet also use American slang and swear more than both combined.

While many people have gone over this book, trying to find all the typos and other mistakes, they just keep on popping up like bloody rabbits. If you spot one, don't report it to Amazon, drop me an email at the below address so I can fix the issue.

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Trigger Warning

Triggers

- There is a dog that features in the book that was used to bait other dogs in fights. Not flashbacks, not details discussed, but the dog deals with the trauma of that and is heavily scarred
- This book deals with a plus size FMC who has had to dump her guy for insinuating she's not that attractive. There is a little bit of angst around that but not much, but there is an inference that plus size = not hot
- The FMC has to deal with some fatphobic stuff from complete strangers but it neither makes up most of the book, nor is prolonged
- The FMC DOES NOT go on a fitness kick to get slim/have her Sandy from Grease moment. She is focussed on health and personal best goals
- One of the guys is dealing with some mental health stuff around perfectionism/workaholism

Note about story

There are several characters that could be described as neurodivergent in this book. I don't go hard and underline to draw attention to it, but you're gonna deal with people who have intense interests. If you don't like animals, you may not enjoy this book as they feature heavily.

If you are a dog owner you may get frustrated with the representation of dog trauma. Writers tend to depict traumatised dogs in simplistic ways (always yelping, cringing etc) and that's fine, I just had a dog with mental health issues for quite some time and I based this dog on her. He swings from being high spirits and happy to freaked out and shut down seemingly randomly. That was my lived experience with my dog.

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Chapter 1

Katie

New year, new me, I thought as I stared into my rear vision mirror.

Well, I was definitely wearing new clothes. The leggings my sister, Mandie, had pestered me to buy were on my legs. Apparently they were ‘perfect’ because they stayed opaque no matter how far down you squatted. I even had on the cute sports bra that came with them, though I’d pulled an oversized t-shirt on over it. Mandie would have a fit when she saw it because—

Rap, rap, rap.

I looked up and there she was, my damn sister, standing beside my car door. Those keen blue eyes took me in, then narrowed when she caught sight of the t-shirt. I’m guessing it wasn’t because she’d taken a particular dislike to Aerosmith.

“Katie, we talked about this!” she said as I climbed out of the car.

“No, you talked. A lot, if I remember correctly. Told is probably a better way of describing that conversation.”

“This is about reclaiming your confidence!” Mandie said, following me over to her car. “New year, new you!”

“And not all of us had your level of confidence to reclaim.”

I stopped and stared at my sister. My beautiful, kind, funny, amazing sister. She worked full time as a fitness influencer, something that had Mum and Dad losing their shit, until they saw how lucrative the job could be for the right person. It was a hell of a lot of work. Sometimes it felt like Mandie was like a shark, always on the hunt for content, but...

Fat and Skinny, that's what the kids used to call us at school, reciting these shitty nursery rhymes, but while she'd been a bean pole that developed curves when she became a teenager, I was just... me. I didn't hate my body or love it. I was kind of... agnostic about it. It was the machine that got me around in the world, and right now, it felt like I needed a tune up.

"Have you got the sports bra you bought under that truly hideous t-shirt?" Mandie asked. "Well, that's baby steps."

"Baby steps," I agreed with a sharp nod. "So let's take some baby steps towards this gym before..."

I looked up and stared at the glossy facade of the gym, trying very hard not to be intimidated. I came here sometimes to use the treadmills but always scrupulously avoided the gym equipment. Men in very thin tank tops grunted and did manly things there. I shook my head. The reflective film on the windows, the black and white logo with a fist raising a barbell on it, did not scream inviting at all.

"Before you change your mind?" Mandie hooked her arm in mine and hauled me closer. "No chance. I've told Rhys and Andrew all about you."

Bloody hell, you'd never know that I was the older sister and Mandie was the younger. She was so damn bossy!

"So there's no point in telling you I wish you hadn't?" I hefted my brand new gym bag over my shoulder, complete with towel, change of clothes, and shower gel. "I need you to remember that this is your office." I pointed to the gym door. "You spend half your life here filming yourself exercising and the world thinks that if they just follow your routines, they'll look just like you."

When I paused, she frowned, but when she sucked in a breath to reply, I forged on.

"I spend my days mopping up dog wee." I worked as a receptionist at a vet surgery, a job I loved, but the only physical labour I did there was haul the mop bucket around. "Or walking the dogs at the shelter. They don't judge me when my butt jiggles when we're going around the block."

Mandie's face fell, and suddenly I was the one feeling bad.

"No one's going to judge you," she insisted, and that was the nature of our relationship.

My sister was the most loyal, fun, amazing person I knew. I had 'friends' at school who tried to pull Mandie down because they were jealous

of the way she looked and the attention it got her, but I would not stand for that. People wanted to see her as a bitch because she was beautiful, but nothing could've been further from the truth.

But there was a degree of privilege that came from looking like her.

Doors opened, people automatically fawned at her feet, and so she was protected from some of the ugliness of the world.

"Oh no, people will judge," I replied.

"We talked about this." Mandie stared down at me. "Other people's opinions are none of our business."

"Right." I nodded.

New Year's Eve, when we were all drinking hard and commiserating over my terrible break up, I'd agreed wholeheartedly with everything my sister had said. I was ready to kick drunk me in the butt for agreeing to all of this. Hadn't I gone through enough lately? That's when I remembered my resolution.

Doing the same thing and expecting different results was the definition of insanity. I was done with dating guys who weren't really interested, or were, but couldn't deal with the attention that came from walking down the street with me. Or worse, the guys who were using me like a bus stop, waiting for the woman they really wanted to come along so they could ride off without me. I was done dating, period, and so I wanted to focus on me now.

"Get stronger, get fitter..." I mumbled out the resolution I'd made that night, turning it into a mantra.

"Be able to take those pups of yours for a run," Mandie said with a nod. "So...?" Was I ready to go inside? The gym was still intimidating as fuck, but only if I let it be. I stared at that manly logo and then nodded. "Well, alright." Her grip on my arm tightened. It was like she was frightened I'd run away as she hauled me over to the door. "Wait until you meet Drew. He's a total crack up."

I didn't want funny, didn't want to laugh, I wanted to say, but I kept my mouth shut as the doors slid open. I wanted calm, assured, and, most importantly, someone who could meet me at my very low skill level and help me make some gains. My love life might completely suck, but that didn't mean the rest of it had to. I saw my ex's face for just a second, that twist of a sneer, but just as I did the last time we spoke, I shoved the

memory out of the way. I refused to spend another second thinking about a dickhead who didn't even deserve me in the first place.

I wanted me and that's what mattered.

"OK," I said, "introduce me to the amazing Drew."

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Chapter 2

Katie

The amazing Drew was like pretty much all of Mandie's friends: gorgeous. This massive, dark-haired guy with a full sleeve tattoo turned around when we approached the front desk and then grinned, sweeping my sister up into a hug.

"Hey, girl. So what're we working on today? Wanna shoot a tandem video? My man said my lats were looking pretty amazing this morning." He turned around and flexed, muscles all across his back popping. "The response to the last video was incredible. We had a ton of new signups."

"And I'm bringing in a new one today!"

This is the moment I hated. My friends and colleagues could meet Mandie and be like 'hey, how are you,' but her friends? They always looked me up and down, wondering how the hell I was biologically related to my sister. To my relief, Drew just shot me a huge grin.

"This is Katie? *The* Katie I keep hearing about?"

"Um..." I started to say, wanting to take a step backwards.

"My sister wants to start lifting as well," Mandie told him.

"So what're your goals?" he asked, but didn't wait for an answer. "Muscle definition, lift heavy?"

The temptation was there to be overwhelmed, but I forced myself to stand tall and answer the man.

"I have no idea what most of them mean, but..." I saw the dogs I visited several times a week at the shelter, one in particular. Bronson was a pit bull crossed with something, and while he looked like a scarred war veteran, he

was really this soft little cuddle bug. That's why he'd been used as bait dog in the illegal dog fighting ring he was rescued from. He was my motivator, so I thought of his funny face when I finally finished the sentence. "I want to be able to take the dogs for a run without feeling like I'm having a heart attack."

"Leg strength, then," he said with a nod, and then reached out and steered me into the gym. "You know that Mandie can help you with that, but let me give you a quick tour. You've come here before?"

"Casually," I said, feeling my cheeks start to burn. "Just to use the treadmills." I looked down. "Not very often though."

"I'll leave you in Drew's capable hands!" Mandie called up as we walked further into the gym. "I've just got a quick video to shoot while you get the grand tour."

That just left me and a strange man in a space that seemed to be a sea of black rubber matting and gleaming chrome. Just my kind of place. I shook my head and let Drew draw me along.

"So was Mandie always that full on as a kid or does she just drink way too many energy drinks?" Drew asked me.

I stopped, surprising myself with a loud laugh.

"Oh no, she's always been like that. Mum took her in to be assessed for ADHD as a child, but the doctors said no. Mum's still sure Ritalin could help." I glanced over to where she had set up her phone to shoot. "Mandie's always been..." I shrugged. "Mandie. Like she expects the world to be her oyster, and it always is."

"Soo..." He shot me a sidelong look. "I could be overstepping here, but have you thought about a personal trainer? I mean, your sister knows what she's doing, but you guys, you seem to have very different energy."

I was doing so well. I'd walked in here like I had a right to be in a place like this and made small talk with a complete stranger, and yet here we were again. People comparing me to Mandie and finding me lacking. I let out a long breath, ready to reply, when he continued.

"That isn't a negative comparison." His brown eyes seemed to see right down into my soul. "If the world was full of Mandies..." He glanced over at Mandie and snorted. "The world would be a whole lot noisier, at the very least. My partner is a bit like her. He's always super chipper about everything," he groaned. "Like first thing in the morning, he jumps out of bed."

“Oh god,” I snorted. “And wants to talk before you’ve had your first coffee?”

“Greg doesn’t even drink coffee,” Drew told me as a conspiratorial aside.

“No coffee!” I yelped. “OK, I don’t even know this guy, but you know you’ve gotta break up with him. That shit is intolerable.”

“Eh, he makes up for it in other ways.” Drew winked at me. “Forces me to lighten up, y’know. Sometimes high energy people can help boost your battery when you’re feeling flat, but sometimes they can just exhaust you.”

“Right.” I looked around the gym, considering the idea of working out here with someone I didn’t even know. It’d taken everything I had to walk in here with Mandie acting as a buffer. “Well, I’ll definitely think about it, but...”

As I scanned the gym, I saw there weren’t a heap of people here. Mandie deliberately came in the downtimes so as to not annoy other people working out while she shot her videos. She knew it’d make me more comfortable. So it was gym equipment, dumbbells, treadmills and...

Him.

Shaggy light-brown hair was blown out of his eyes as he pushed what seemed like an insane amount of weights up with his legs. I had no idea what the machine was, but I caught the quiver in those thick, muscular thighs, saw his face flush red. Every muscle strained, which was no doubt hard work for him and a delicious sight for me, because damn... There was just something about a guy who was bigger, stronger, than you were. As if he could hear my thoughts, he finished his rep and then looked back over his shoulder.

Oh shit.

I felt like some kind of weird perv as his eyes met mine. They were a strange grey colour. I noticed that because as adrenalin tore through my body, it made every detail crystal clear. His shirt with the sleeves ripped out, the way those big hands gripped the machine, the vein travelling down one bicep. I couldn’t seem to stop staring. He gave me a little nod, as if in recognition of my sin, and then a sly smile spread across his face. That was finally enough for me to wrench my eyes away. God, I was like one of those idiots Mandie talked about annoying them in the gym. Eye-fucking, that’s what she had called it. Actually, make that eye rape. He hadn’t consented to

me checking him out and that was enough to get me focussing back on Drew.

“I think I need to work out what I can and can’t do first,” I told him hastily.

That knowing smile made clear that Drew had seen everything. Great, that had me flushing bright red, my cheeks burning hotter as his grin spread. One thing I’d learned, though, is if you didn’t acknowledge you were embarrassed, only arseholes pushed the point, and I was about to test him.

“So maybe we should continue the tour so I can make a decision about membership?” I said briskly.

“Right this way,” he said.

TEN MINUTES LATER, I knew they had a wide range of machines here. What were they used for? That was still to be determined. It seemed like a well-stocked gym though, with many different instruments of torture—I mean, exercise equipment.

“Women’s change rooms are through there.” He pointed to the door. “Obviously I’m not going to take you in there, but we have the cleaners go through and tidy it up hourly.”

“Good to know.”

“So I think that’s about everything,” he said. “Were there any questions you wanted to ask?”

“How to make sure Mandie doesn’t freaking kill me in my first gym session?” I shot him a rueful expression. “You know how enthusiastic she gets. She’ll be loading up one of the machines with all this weight and be twittering on about how a positive attitude will have me lifting whatever the hell I want.”

He snorted and shook his head at that.

“Lift light. It should be a little hard, but not impossible. Pushing to the point of muscle failure.” My eyebrows shot up, but he clarified. “When you just can’t do another rep. I wouldn’t recommend that for you right now. Tell her you want some simple movements like a bicep curl or a hip hinge. If a light weight is too much, just perform the motion without one.” I frowned at that, sure I wasn’t that weak. “Getting your form right from the start helps prevent injury and means we don’t have to train you out of that later.”

“SO HOW DID YOU GO?” Mandie asked, jumping up from the weight bench she was sitting on. “It’s amazing, right? Drew’s a doll and his partner, Greg, is just amazing.”

“Amazing,” I said with a nod, smiling at her effusive use of superlatives. “So he said to start with simple movements, that getting my form right was more important than lifting heavy weights at the start.” Mandie sucked in a breath, no doubt ready to argue. “Which sounds like a smart plan, right?”

“Right.” Mandie smiled hastily. “Right, OK, so we’ll start with some of the whole body movements. We’ll go over by the mirrors.”

“Where I can see myself stuffing up in real time.” I shook my head. “OK, let’s do it.”

SIMPLE MOVEMENTS, my lily white arse. By the time I completed the last bodyweight squat, my thighs were trembling and sweat was rolling down my neck. We’d been at it for half an hour, but still, I felt like I’d been run over by a bus.

“Last one... Amazing!” Mandie said, performing the same damn exercise with ease. “You did it!”

“Pretty sure the exercise did me in,” I grumbled. “Can I have a shower now, little sister?” I flicked my hands. “I’m all sweaty and gross.”

“Oh, well, I thought—”

“Hey.” A deep masculine voice had us all turning around, but the only one he focussed on was Mandie. “I saw you finish your training session. Name’s Frank.”

“I’m hitting the showers!”

I used this distraction to make a quick getaway, my sister shooting me a murderous look, but I was out of reach before she could do anything about it.

“Smoothie’s up!” I turned to see Drew gesturing for me to come over.

“Oh no—” I started to say.

“You need something to rehydrate yourself.” Drew was using a very good dad voice right now. “There’s fruit, some electrolytes, and some

caffeine as a little pick me up.”

“You had me at caffeine...” I groaned, picking up the plastic cup, but doing that made me aware of how clammy and gross I was now that the sweat was starting to cool. “But I might drink this after a shower.”

“Shower’s through there,” he said, gesturing for the door.

I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going. My phone had pinged as I walked towards the door and I was scrolling through my notifications rather than looking where I was going. One of the vets had texted me for the alarm code yet again, so I was trying to tap in a response one handed while carrying the smoothie in the other. Science had shown that multitasking was not possible, and I was about to prove their point. Texting, focussing on getting one wobbly leg to move, then the other, almost able to feel the cool spray of the water on my skin.

So to say colliding with him and feeling his rock hard abs was a shock would be an understatement.

“Oh...!”

I looked up and saw those same grey eyes and just like before, they sparkled with amusement. The poor guy was probably choking back a laugh because I was a complete idiot and not able to walk into a damn change room without involuntarily assaulting strange men. I looked down, saw my hand was resting on a set of rock hard abs and then jerked it back like they were made of hot coals.

Did I mention that I was wobbly? My ability to successfully do simple things like walk without tripping was always not great, but after the hammering my body had just taken, my balance was completely screwed. I jerked back way too fast and his smile faded as he saw me start to fall, his arm snapping out to grab mine and set me to rights. The drink, however, did not like being jerked back and forth like this at all and decided to make that clear by spilling all over the strange man’s chest.

“Oh my god...” I stared in horror as the green liquid trickled through the furrows between each of his abs and started to drip. “I am so, so sorry. I...”

I needed to fix this, right fucking now. Clean him up! my brain screamed, which had me looking around for a towel, before spying the one around his waist.

Later, I would replay this moment over and over in my head, curling further into a ball of shame by the second. Right now, I was in survival

mode. My only way of dealing with my clumsiness was to try to rectify the situation immediately, so that's what I did. I grabbed the end of his towel, wrapped tight around his waist, not mine. I had a towel in my bag, using that would've been a far better solution, but I wasn't thinking right now. I was just reacting, and that was always bad. I lifted the hem of his towel, frantically mopping at his chest, when a hand covered mine.

"It's OK." His voice was deep, reassuring, like a hand sliding down my spine. "But unless you want us to get a whole lot more acquainted, you might want to leave this for me to fix up."

I stared into his eyes, heart thundering in my ears, before following his gaze down.

Just a shadow, that's what I saw, but enough to make clear that he wasn't wearing anything underneath that towel. Like a blurry photo of the Loch Ness Monster, I saw something stir. That was enough for me to drop the towel like it had caught on fire, forcing me to take a step backwards.

"I'm sorry..."

What the hell else could I say? Not only have I assaulted you with a smoothie, but I involuntarily took a peek at your dick? Even if I tried, my lips wouldn't move. I let out a small sound of distress and then moved, scuttling off to the bathrooms like a frightened little mouse. It wasn't until I was safely inside one of the shower cubicles that I could take a full breath. Over and over, I forced my lungs to inhale and exhale. It was only then that I dared to look at my palms.

I could still feel him there, warm, hard, alive. And perfect, I added belatedly. I flexed my fingers, because quickly enough I saw another set of abs.

Dave's.

He thought he was pretty hot, was definitely in good shape, and where had that got me? I wrenched my sweaty shirt off, and then the rest of my clothes, before turning on the shower. New year, new me? That meant ignoring pretty fuck boys and focussing entirely on myself, and so as I stepped under the spray, that's what I did.

Chapter 3

Rhys

Who the fuck was the babe?

I wasn't normally one to sport wood when a girl threw a drink at me. Usually that meant a date had gone completely south and she was making clear I had done something inexcusable, but this cutie? Big brown eyes, little freckles across her nose—I wanted to count every one—and best of all, red hair? Fuck, I loved red heads. I'd just gotten out of the shower and was ambling over to the office I shared with Drew to get some clean clothes when I collided with this hottie. My skin was sticky from the smoothie, but as I walked back into the men's change room to have another shower, it was her I felt.

Her little hands mopping at my chest. Her eyes widening when she realised what she was doing. Those pretty pink lips opening just for me, making me want to push things between them, just to see how that'd feel. I could've let her wipe all this mess away, but even I wasn't that much of a prick. *Get her number*, that need punched me in the gut, because it was the more acceptable one right now. A more primal side of me wanted to drag her under the showerhead I was now stepping under and see just how clean she could get me before I got her all dirty.

Fuck!

Working out always got me charged up, but her... This was something else. Her touch was like an electric volt pulsing through me, waking something I'd long thought had died a terrible death. It'd been years since I felt any sort of connection with someone, so I grabbed the soap, intent on

washing up fast and getting back out on the gym floor. I'd intercept the babe on her way out and see if I could get her to go out on a date with me as an apology for the collision.

Then my hand slid down.

Fuck, what the hell was this? I was rock hard and aching, my hand finding the base of my cock without thought, as if that would ease the situation. It throbbed like a sore tooth, making clear my erection wouldn't be going anywhere soon. With a hiss I slid my hand up and down the length, looking back over my shoulder to see if anyone was walking in.

I wanted her to. I wanted her to see what she'd done to me, that she'd made something flare back to life I hadn't thought to see again. I wanted to see those brown eyes go wider as she saw what I was doing to the thoughts of her, then draw closer involuntarily. Her eyes on my body, taking in all my hard work, then growing hooded when they saw what I was doing. Yeah, I liked that idea a lot.

I wasn't much of an exhibitionist, but I could be, for her. My hand moved harder, faster, the sensation so much more than the shitty, furtive wanks I took in my bed just so I could get to sleep. This was real, hot, amazing, and over far too soon, pleasure tearing through me as I erupted all over the bathroom floor. Taking a moment to catch my breath and then clean up, I was out the bathroom door and into the gym, scanning the floor for a sign of her, only to find it empty except for Drew.

"Where'd she go?" I snapped at my business partner.

He looked up and shot me one of those shit-eating grins that made clear he'd seen everything that happened.

"Which she—?"

"Don't fuck around with me." Whoa, that came out way sharper than I expected it to. I sucked in a breath, then let it out slowly. "Drew, where did the girl that spilled her drink on me go?"

"Took off out of here like her arse was on fire," he replied mildly, turning back to the computer screen. "What have I told you about traumatising new members?"

"Traumatising?" My brain replayed the moment at four times the actual speed and I shook my head. "Pretty sure she wasn't traumatised by what she saw."

"Well, Katie..." I stopped hearing what he was saying. My mind grabbed that name, declaring everything else extraneous. "...and she left."

He looked me up and down, as if he could see I was still half chubbed up after the exchange. “So, you can go throw some clothes on now. She’s not coming back to paw your naked chest today.” He frowned slightly. “Maybe not at all.”

Yes, she would. That innate sense that got me through everything was sure of it, so I just nodded, making a beeline for the office. I tossed the damp towel onto a nearby chair, something Drew would tell me off about later, before jerking on a clean pair of shorts from the boxes of gym merch we stored in here. Halfway decent, I jumped on the computer and did a very bad thing.

Client data was sacred. Mess with that, pass it out to other people, and you’d, at best, develop a reputation as a shitty gym and, at worst, face a criminal charge. So I really shouldn’t be scouring through the new members’ profiles, searching for hers. It was guilt that had me closing the files the minute the door opened, then opening a random webpage as Drew walked in. That knowing look made clear he knew exactly what was going on.

“So what’s going on, partner?”

He sat down in the chair opposite me, fingers forming a steeple, making clear he wasn’t going anywhere without an answer.

“She was hot.” Fuck, that sounded just about as convincing as a thirteen year old boy trying to deny he liked a girl at school. I let out a sigh and then scraped my wet hair back from my face. “Katie is hot and I dunno...” My foot tapped restlessly on the floor until I looked down and noticed it. “It’s a pretty dumb way to meet a girl, but...”

“You felt a connection.” Drew shook his head. “That hasn’t happened for a long time. Not since...”

We didn’t talk about what happened in my last disaster of a relationship. It was over and done with and I had moved on. Trying to make it work with a girl was hard enough, but when your two flatmates and best friends were openly sharing the same woman? Some people seemed to make poly relationships work, but I was definitely not one of them.

“No, it hasn’t.” I sat back in the chair, forced to press my body into the back, because it felt like my body was about to start vibrating on a cellular level with all the repressed energy I kept inside me. “So her name is Katie...?”

I was fishing for details and I didn't care that Drew knew now. He sighed and scrubbed at his face.

"Her name is Katie and she's Mandie's sister."

"Mandie...?"

That was unexpected. She was an awesome chick that had come through our door after getting hassled by guys in another gym. I admit, influencers took a little wrangling, but there was a way to keep them and our regular clients happy. While I know plenty of the guys were desperate to catch her eye, she wasn't my type.

Katie, however...

It wasn't just that she was fucking hot, because if she thought she was hiding that body under that baggy t-shirt, she had another thing coming. I shifted restlessly, replaying my memories of the glimpses I'd taken. Those tits, that arse, those thighs, they'd made it impossible to even register the smoothie dripping down my chest as I fought to take all of her in. The girl was one of my wet dreams come to life and somehow she'd ended up barrelling into me.

Almost as if it was written in the stars.

"Katie, huh?" I grabbed my phone from where it was charging and pulled up my contacts.

"Just cool your jets for a sec," Drew said. "There's more. Katie... she's getting over a bad break up."

"The best way to get over a guy is to get under another one, right?" I tapped out a quick message to Mandie, asking for Katie's number. Drew was scowling at me when I looked up. "I'm just talking shit, you know that. I'm hardly fuckboy material. I just..."

The guys, they always put shit on me for making up whole scenarios in my head after just meeting a girl, but I couldn't seem to stop when I thought of Katie. That feeling when she touched me, it was a sign, right? Our dreams of a poly relationship might've died a horrible death, but that didn't mean I couldn't find love on my own.

"I just want to take her out, show her a good time, and if she says no, I'll respect that."

But she wouldn't. Somehow I could just see those pink little lips returning my smile and then saying the one word I wanted from her. Yes, over and over, yes.

“Yeah, you will.” He walked over and gave my shoulder a shove. “Or we will be having a chat. A long, very detailed chat about consent.”

“Won’t need it.” As I jumped to my feet, the phone buzzed and one look at the screen let me know Mandie had texted me back. “Me and Katie? We’re a match made in heaven. We’ll be telling our grandkids about the smoothie you made that brought us together, just you wait.”

“God, you’re annoying when you’re into someone.” His smile made clear he didn’t really mean it. “But... it’s nice to see you back in the saddle, brother. It’s been a long time.”

I grinned and then opened the text from Mandie.

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Chapter 4

Katie

“Hello, my babies!”

The next day after work, I was in agony. Mandie warned me that the real pain would start the next day, and she wasn’t wrong. I was waddling down the aisle between the dog cages, every single pup there barking or wagging their tail as I passed, trying to get my attention. I’d spend time with each one of them, but first...

“How’s my boy!”

I needed to get Bronson out of the shelter somehow. I shared an apartment with my sister and the owner had made clear that bringing a massive pit bull cross was not going to happen, so I needed another solution, fast. Some dogs cope with being in a shelter, but some... In a noisy, crowded, unfamiliar environment, they close in on themselves, going into a depression-like spiral. Bronson barely looked up when I appeared at his cage, a little wag of his tail the only indication he heard me.

“Hey, fella.” I unlocked the door and then moved in slowly. “Hey...”

A quick sniff and he realised who it was. He scrambled to his feet and then ran into my arms as I crouched down. I didn’t even feel the pain of my protesting muscles as those frantic little whimpers started up. They killed me every time. I wrapped my arms around him, holding him tightly, giving him scratches on his stomach, then fondled his ears as I pulled back.

“I came back. I always come back, boy.” His muzzle nudged at my hand, demanding more pats. “So, how about a walk?”

The shelter staff loved it when I came to volunteer. Some of them were scared by Bronson, others found it hard to get him to respond. He'd just stay curled up in the back of his cage, unable to be drawn.

"It's such a pity you can't adopt him," Marg, the shelter manager, had said.

I might not be able to, but I could get him out for a walk.

He was such a good dog, his tail smacking the floor rapidly as I produced the collar and lead. If I could just get someone to see what an amazing dog he was, then at least I could get him out of the shelter environment. I slid the collar over his head, then attached the lead and headed for the cage door.

"Hey, do you...?"

That masculine voice had Bronson planting his feet, not willing to take another step, and I held back a curse as I looked up.

Oh. My. Lanta.

What the hell was it with hot guys right now? It was like the universe had heard my resolution to keep the hell away from men and was throwing them in my path to tempt me. The guy had thick brown hair, deep brown eyes, was dressed in medical scrubs, and I needed to look the hell away and stop staring.

"Hey," I said, just breathing that out.

Great, just great.

"Ah... hey." That smile was a killer and those damn dimples. I shook my head as his bicep popped when he went to scratch at his neck. "I'm Garrett, and you are?"

"Oh god." I slapped my forehead with my spare hand. "I'm Katie and this is Bronson. Say hello, Bronson."

The dog looked at me and then the strange man, a natural wariness keeping him where he was. His feet shifted restlessly, but I led by example, stepping forward to greet the man. That seemed to be enough to convince Bronson that Garrett was OK to approach. The dog stumped forward, tail wagging nervously.

"Hello, big fella." I watched the man go down to his knees, somehow knowing that would be less threatening to the dog, and that had Bronson feeling more confident immediately. All the sounds of the dogs barking frantically around me seemed to fade away the moment the two of them

connected. Garrett's hand went under the dog's neck, scratching at his chest, which had Bronson's back leg starting to kick. "You like that?"

"He does." I could barely keep the awe out of my voice, and while I knew I was staring openly at the hot stranger in medical scrubs, I didn't care. "He doesn't do that for very many people, especially men. He was..."

Keep your cool, I thought furiously. Do not mess this up. No one connects with Bronson. This might be his opportunity to find a forever home.

I felt a wrench in my chest at the idea of never seeing the dog again, but that's what shelters were about. Dogs were social creatures. Being locked in a cage drove them literally crazy, so finding good homes with people that loved them was all part of the job, but knowing that didn't stop it from hurting.

"Someone hurt him," Garrett said, his smile fading. His fingers followed the path of the old scars all across the dog's body. "A lot." He pulled back slightly to look Bronson over, but the dog had other ideas. I let out a little gasp as his front legs climbed onto Garrett's legs. He was straining against the leash, wanting more pats, and I blinked fast to stop the tears from forming. "What kind of prick would do something like that?"

"Dog fighting rings." His eyebrows shot up as he stared at me. "Bronson wasn't used to fight. We think they saw his size and breed and thought they had a fighter, but when his true nature revealed itself—"

"Shit." He barely breathed that out. "Shit." It was as if he could see the story behind each scar, and that had his frown deepening. "So, does he have anyone interested in him?"

"No." I sucked in a breath, then another. Some of the dogs here were dumped, some surrendered as their owner's circumstances changed, but it was dogs like Bronson that broke my heart. "He actually finds it really hard to warm up to people. When prospective adopters come past his cage, they see this massive scarred pit bull and either think he'll be some big tough guard dog or that he's too scary to consider."

"Scary?" His expression softened as Bronson pushed his head into the man's chest. "Not you, fella." Bronson nearly knocked me out with his tail as it began to wag furiously, those little excited whimpers going again. "No, you're a good boy, aren't you?" Garrett sat back on his heels with a rueful smile. "I came here to adopt a cat."

“Oh...” My face fell, and that was completely unprofessional, but right now I couldn’t seem to stop myself. For a minute, I thought... I shook my head and plastered on a smile, and Garrett caught every single shift in my expression. There was a strange kind of quiet focus about him. “Right, so the cats are through that door.”

I pointed to where he needed to go, but instead he just focussed on me.

“But I think my plans have changed.” He held my gaze for far too long, making me feel squirmier by the second. I could keep my cool around guys usually, but regarding the dogs? I wanted to hard sell every single one of them to prospective adopters, even though I knew that was madness. Not everyone who thought they wanted to adopt a dog should. “How do I apply to adopt this guy?”

“I...” My heart was beating too hard, too fast, in my chest. Surely, he could hear every single thud. “Did you want to hold his lead for a second? I’ll go get the application form.”

I had to stop myself from thrusting the lead at the man and that meant catching the moment those long, elegant fingers wrapped around the nylon rope.

“Yeah, I think Bronson and I need to have a bit of a chat.” He sat down on the ground and the dog rushed at him, almost clambering into his lap. “Alright, mate. It’s OK. I’m not going anywhere.”

The two of them looked like a match made in heaven, the dog flumping down on Garrett’s legs.

“God, we should get you to model for the calendar we do each year.” Shit, I just blurted that out as I got to my feet. “I mean we get models... guys... people! They have their photo taken with the animals and... You know what.” I shot him a shaky smile. “I’ll just go and get that application form for you.”

“OH MY GOD, did you see the hottie in the scrubs?” Joanne, one of the shelter workers, hissed as I walked into the office. “He can adopt me and he won’t even have to do a background check.”

“I didn’t notice,” I said, in a tone of voice that made clear the exact opposite had happened. Sigh... “Speaking of adoptions, where are the dog application forms?”

“He wants a dog?” she asked. “He said he wanted a cat.”

“Bronson,” I replied, looking up from the mess of Marg’s desk. “He wants to adopt Bronson.”

“Holy shit, really?” Jo looked ecstatic for a second, then her face fell. “Crap, but you really bonded with him. I mean—”

“The job means finding dogs a home. If Garrett—”

“Ooh, the hottie’s name is Garrett?” she said. “Noted. Did you get his birth date, zodiac sign, maybe his favourite sexual position?”

“What?” Why the hell did I see the way his thick thighs stretched the fabric of his scrubs right then? “No, god—”

“Pity.” She plucked a form from one of the piles, somehow producing exactly what I needed. “But right now, you could get his phone number.”

“We can only use that to contact him whether or not he’s successful in his application,” I said, looking blankly at the form.

“After we do a home visit. I’ll let Marg know I am ready and able to assist when that comes up,” she said, rubbing her hands together.

“OK.” I shook my head with a smile. “But remember the appropriate conduct seminar we all had to sit through?”

“It’s only inappropriate if he’s not into it,” she called out as I walked back into the kennel, but what I saw there stopped me in my tracks.

“I think he likes me,” Garrett said, because Bronson was half asleep on his lap. “Does he normally do this?”

“No.” I crouched down in front of them and ran a hand down the dog’s flanks. “I know it looks like he’s super lazy, but this... He’s relaxed.” I turned to smile at him. “I think Bronson really likes you....”

Jo had ruined this for me. All of her stupid suggestive bullshit had my words twisting in my head, staring at the gorgeous man. No matter what my brain thought, my eyes were determined to track the shape of his nose, noting the small bump at bridge, the sharp cheekbones that then descended down to a full pair of lips that were slowly curving into a smile.

“I like him a lot too,” Garrett said.

But his caress now was almost absentminded as he ruffled the dog’s ear.

“OK, well, if you fill out this form, we can start the process. We need some references, a phone number—”

“I’d love to give you my number.”

I swallowed hard, keeping my eyes on the application form.

“And an address. Marg or one of the other staff will do a property visit to make sure your place is a safe place for a dog to live.”

“Not you?” he asked, leaning a little closer.

What the hell was this? My eyes narrowed slightly as I looked him over. I wasn’t seeing the hot guy right now, but a prospective owner for Bronson. While never that discriminate when it came to picking guys for myself, this dog deserved more than just to have some guy take him in for LOLs and then ignore Bronson once the new puppy thing wore off.

“Not often.” I forced myself to smile to soften my now frosty tone. “I’m a volunteer, so I normally just walk the dogs, clean out cages, and that sort of thing, but all the staff here are awesome. Thorough, but awesome. If you pass the inspection and your place looks like it’s suitable for a dog like Bronson, they’ll approve your application.”

“Right.” Was that a faint blush colouring his cheeks? I didn’t know because Garrett seemed to recover himself quickly. “So what do I need to know about passing an inspection?” he asked. “We have a decent yard that’s fenced off.”

The we had me softening. It wasn’t hard to imagine Garrett with a wife and a couple of kids, each one cuter than the last. The idea of Bronson becoming a treasured family pet warmed my heart, helping set me at ease, though... Why was Garrett getting flirty if he had a partner? I shook my head. That was none of my business, but Bronson was.

“It’s not a test you need to have the right answers for,” I replied, and then handed the piece of paper over. “It’s kind of like dating.” His eyes widened slightly. “I mean, we want to find the right home for the dogs we look after here.” I looked down the cage at each one of the dogs in turn. “What you need, what the dog needs, it might not be the same thing.” The kennel faded away and was replaced by something else. A terse discussion held in my car the night of the fire station Christmas party. “It’s not that you’re a bad person, or he’s a bad dog. Sometimes people just need different things.” I blinked, catching Garrett watching me closely. “Y’know?”

He nodded slowly, and was that a little sadness there in those brown depths? If it was, he blinked it away in seconds.

“OK, so include all my details... and my housemates?”

He seemed surprised by that.

“Have to make sure everyone that’s around the dog isn’t going to hurt him any further.” At that, I did something really impulsive. I pulled a pen from my pocket and then scribbled my phone number on the top of the application. “Look, I think you’re the right person to adopt Bronson, so if you have any questions, feel free to send me a text.”

At that, I got to my feet, trying really hard not to wince. I had muscles I didn’t even know I possessed complaining about the movement, but I stifled back a hiss, reclaiming Bronson’s leash.

“But me and this gorgeous boy need to get a walk in before the shelter closes for the day.”

Bronson was a little reluctant to come with me, but he got the idea quickly enough. I might not be a hot guy in scrubs, but I was going to break him out of doggie jail, make sure he felt the sun on his fur and the wind in his face, and that was almost as good. I turned and shot Garrett one last look as we went out the back door of the dog kennels, catching the moment he was hunched over the application, filling it in while sitting on the concrete floor.

“DOCTOR HOTTIE FILLED out the application for Bronson,” Jo told me when we returned from the walk. “He tore off the top margin, though.” She held it out to show me. “Any idea why?”

I saw the spot where my number had been written was removed entirely, but I just shook my head.

“No idea.”

It didn’t matter, none of it did except the dogs. I gave Bronson one last big pat before putting him back in his cage, trying not to see his distraught expression, before moving to the next cage and the next, grabbing those dogs to take out for a walk.

Chapter 5

Garrett

I walked into the house I shared with Rhys and Rhett, barely feeling the key when I turned the lock. Not sure how I'd made it home, because my head wasn't on the drive over from the shelter, nor was it here. I walked down the hall, seeing the shelter, the poor old pup, Bronson, and...

Her.

I could see why the shelter had her working for them. I'd walked in ready to adopt a cat, but as soon as I locked eyes with that cutie, the simple, easy to look after, far more self-sufficient cat idea was shoved aside. There was only her. Bronson's eyes were trained on his mistress, and I had never felt such a moment of empathy with an animal. He stared at her like she was his whole world, and why the hell not? No doubt his fascination with the girl was for completely different reasons, but I saw that cloud of red hair and freckles, bloody freckles, her brown eyes almost hidden by her glasses, and was drawn closer.

Her babbled response, the way she delivered Bronson's story in a great rush, it made clear that a cat was no longer in the cards. The guy needed out of that shelter now, and there was part of me that could never say no to a damsel in distress. Made me a good nurse, because helping people was pretty much the job, but his story? As she told it, I saw every abuse victim that had come through our emergency department, the bruised and the battered, and my teeth ground together. I'd have taken the dog even if he didn't like me, but feeling him snuggle up against me. My hand had hovered, not wanting to freak him out, before giving his stout flanks a

stroke. That memory had me grinning as I walked into the kitchen to find my flatmates working on dinner.

“Well, look at you.” Rhys smirked at the sight of me. “All smiley because you got to choose your kitty cat today.” He looked around me. “Where is the bloody thing, anyway?”

“We’re getting a dog,” I blurted out.

“What—?” Rhett started to say, looking up from the dining table where he was going through the bills.

“A dog? Fuck yes!” Rhys left the stir fry to sizzle as he ran over and bumped knuckles with me. “I told you dogs are better than cats. We can take it for runs on the beach and out to the park—”

“And what do we do with a dog when we’re all scheduled on at work?” Rhett was a firefighter, so he had a weird schedule, just like I did.

“He can come into the gym with me,” Rhys said.

“You weren’t offering that when I was talking about getting a cat,” I replied.

“What the hell would a cat do at a gym?” Rhys spluttered. I’m fairly sure you could ask the same question of a dog, but I made no comment. “What kind? Do you have a picture of him?”

I pulled out my phone and showed him the photos I’d taken of the dog, but as I did so, a scrap of paper fell on the floor. I went to pick it up, but Rhys was already there.

“And what do we have here...?” He unfolded the paper to see the number. “A phone number, written down on actual paper? Damn, that’s old school. Your nana write her number down? Or one of those old ladies that keeps ‘having a fall’ to get to go to the ED to see you?”

“Better than the dudes that keep ‘falling on cucumbers in the shower.’”

Rhett flexed his fingers to make air quotes.

“It’s neither of those things.” I grabbed the piece of paper from Rhys’ hand and stored it safely in my phone case. “It’s a girl’s number.”

They wanted to give me a hard time, I saw that in an instant, but the usual rambunctious bullshit died a swift death. We didn’t get to joke about girls anymore, not after our last disastrous break up. We thought we were so smart, proposing to get into a poly relationship. Firefighters and health care professionals, they could live a pretty lonely life with the weird shift hours and demanding jobs. I’d never been able to devote enough time to a girl to keep her around, and Rhett was the same. Rhys was married to the job but

wanted someone to lavish all that frenetic energy on, and so we'd proposed finding a girl that we all liked who'd be interested in a poly relationship.

Only for it to end so badly the three of us had barely dated since.

"The girl who has been looking after the dog I applied to adopt." I held up the photos and Rhys' grin was immediate. "She said she'd be happy to help settle him in."

"A pittie?" Rhys was like a kid at Christmas, his whole face lighting up. "Shit, the stir fry!" He lunged for the wok, taking it off the heat.

"Are you sure we want a dog like...?" Rhett's brows drew down. "What happened to him?"

I knew then he was feeling the same thing I was. Dogs were so fucking pure. We'd taken wolves and turned them into perpetual puppies that loved us more than they did their own parents, and some people abused that blind loyalty.

"Bait dog," I replied, not needing to explain.

He and his team had stumbled onto an illegal dog baiting ring when answering an emergency call and he was shaken for weeks by what he saw.

"He needs a home?" I nodded. "Alright." He looked around the house as if seeing it for the first time. "So we need to clean up, make the place look respectable for when they do an inspection. The shelter is going to come by and make sure the place is safe for the dog, right?"

"Bronson," I replied. "His name is Bronson."

"Bronson." Rhys nodded as he started to spoon the stir fry onto bowls full of brown rice. "That's a good strong name. I fucking love pitties. They're total units of dogs."

"He's really soft." I stared the two of them down. "If you think you're gonna get some big tough guard dog, think again. We're going to need to take things slowly with him. He's gone through a lot of trauma..." My smile was back again as my mind raced ahead. "And I think we're gonna need to talk to the girl at the shelter for some advice about how to acclimate him."

"Doggie therapy date, huh?" Rhys said, then pushed a bowl my way. I glanced at the contents, mentally calculating the macros. I wasn't competing at the moment, but I didn't like to lose my gym gains in the down season. "Well, seeing as we're talking about girls, I met someone today."

"What?"

Rhett and I stared at him.

“This fucking smokeshow barrelled into me and spilled her smoothie all over my chest when I was coming out of the showers. She’s new to the gym and built just the way I like ‘em.”

His fork landed in his bowl with a clatter as he traced the shape of the woman in the air.

But I knew what she would’ve looked like.

Curves for days, soft enough to sink your fingers into, then your cock, once she was gasping after her first, second, third orgasm. Pretty too, with a ready smile and freckles... I shook my head, realising I was transposing Katie into Rhys’ story.

“She nearly tore my towel off trying to clean the mess up and nearly came face to face with not-so-little Rhys,” he continued. “I didn’t give a damn about the smoothie, especially as I was about to make a mess of my own if she kept touching me like that.”

“Still having issues with premature ejaculation, mate?” I said, cocking an eyebrow.

“So we’re doing this?” Rhett seemed far too serious as he looked from one to the other of us, but that was what he was like. “We’re dating on our own now?”

When Rhys’ smile faded, mine did too.

“I mean, it’s been years...” I shoved my phone back in my pocket. “It didn’t work, so I guess we need to go back to dating on our own.”

A sharp nod, that was the only response we got from Rhett as he reached for his food and carried the bowl out the back, onto the deck that overlooked the grass.

“Reckon he’s OK?” Rhys asked, coming to stand beside me.

“He will be.” I poked the stir fry, collecting a mouthful of meat, veg, and rice on the fork. “I mean, he’s been crushing on that girl that was dating that dickhead he works with for ages. Maybe this will be the push he needs to make a damn move.”

I needed to take my own advice. After we had dinner and cleaned up, then spent an hour or so making sure the backyard was inspection ready, I retreated to my room. Katie’s number was inputted in my phone first. There was no way I was losing that, but my thumb hovered over the new contact, switching between making a call or sending a text. Text, I decided that texting was less invasive.

Hey, this is Garrett from the dog shelter. Just wondering if you wanted to go out for coffee? I wanted to end the message there, making clear this was a date, but... What if she blew me off? Had a boyfriend? I frowned hard at that idea. *We could talk about how to help Bronson adjust if my application is successful.* My thumb tapped send, not letting myself overthink it, and then, I waited to see how she would respond.

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Chapter 6

Rhett

I was coming around to the idea of having a dog. It'd be good to have someone who was glad to see me each time I came home, but... I stared at the veterinary surgery window, tracing the shape of the cartoon dogs and cats painted on the window, then pushed myself away from my car bonnet. A dog also gave me an excuse to visit here.

I'd parked outside the place at least once a week since I heard Dave broke up with Katie. At first, I wanted to see if she was OK, then I wanted to just see her. Not so soon after her breakup, that was what kept me away, but it'd been six weeks and two days since, so surely now wasn't too soon. Fuck, I was about to find out. I put my hand on the door and pulled it open...

To find an old lady with a couple of chihuahuas in her arms walking out.

"Oh, thank you!" she said, stepping out with a smile.

Her dogs seemed less pleased, barking furiously, lunging at their carrier like they were possessed by the devil.

"Everything OK, Mrs. Collins?" a familiar feminine voice said. Fuck, I felt that like a punch to the gut. "Do you need help... Oh." Katie was there, standing behind the woman and her eyes went wide when she saw me. "Rhett?"

"Hey...um... Katie." Jesus, now she'd think I forgot her name or something. *Great start, dickhead*, I thought furiously. The woman with the little dogs looked from me to Katie and then shot me a devilish smile that

made clear she knew exactly what was going on, before taking her hellhounds to her car. "I'm here for a dog."

"You have a dog that's being seen by the vet?"

Katie held the door out for me, which was all wrong. When I imagined this in the early hours of this morning, I was one hundred percent more dashing. I swept the door open and into Katie's workplace, then whisked her out into the date of her dreams. Instead, she asked me a very appropriate question I didn't have a good answer for.

"Um... no." *For fuck's sake*, I told myself. *You run into burning buildings. You can do this.* "The boys and I, we're getting a dog, from a shelter." That was tacked on afterwards because people seemed very focussed on adopting, not buying from breeders. "And I wanted to get some advice on what we'd need to get before he arrives."

I met her eyes finally, and that was a mistake. Every time I stared into those beautiful brown depths, it felt like the whole world was falling away. It was only a faint sound like a far off siren going off in my head that had me finishing what I was saying.

"I don't really know that much about dogs, so I figured I'd ask the one person I know that does."

"You thought of me?" Her pleased smile had all the awkwardness evaporating. "Oh wow, I didn't realise you were paying attention when I was talking about work."

I did. Every single word she said was etched on my heart, but I couldn't tell her that. I followed her inside instead, where a waiting room full of people and their pets bore witness to my fumbling attempts to connect with my crush.

"So we have this checklist the vets put together." I watched real hard when she bent over and retrieved a printout from a folder, only looking away when I caught sight of her cleavage. Dave was the kind of guy to leer down a girl's top, so I would never. "You can get most of this stuff from a pet store, but they can be real rip offs. Like grain-free dog food can be a good thing or it can be just overpriced crap, and expensive collars are often just for aesthetics rather than due to any real improved experience for the dog. I..." She stared at me then, shooting me a lopsided smile. "When are you picking up the dog? If it's not straight away, I could meet you at a pet store."

“Yes.” I said that too fast, something no doubt the smirking ladies with the Siamese cats noted, but I didn’t care. “I mean, yeah, that would be really cool. You obviously know a lot more than us, and I could...” Fuck, I needed a drink of water badly, my throat turning to ash. I’d imagined this scenario a million times in my head and yet now it’d arrived, I was choking literally. “I could take you out for dinner afterwards.”

“To say thanks?” She waved her hand. “You don’t have to do that.”

But I did. Dave wouldn’t shut up about every dumb detail of his life, so I knew he did little more than Netflix and chill with Katie. She deserved so much more. I wanted to take her somewhere fancy, somewhere she felt special, and then—

“I’d like to.” My heart was beating too fast and I was staring way too intently, something she seemed to register. Her smile faded, but something else replaced it. A sweetness I saw in her eyes all the time, especially when hanging out with the station mums and their kids. I just never expected to see it directed at me. “We could go to the local pub and have a counter meal.”

No, shit, not that! I thought.

“Fluffy?” a man in a white coat said, looking out over the waiting room.

“OK, it’s a date,” she said hurriedly. “Gimme your phone.” I unlocked it and handed it over without question. She tapped out her number and then gave it back. “Text me your schedule and we’ll try to work something out. I’ve just started...” The bell on the front door jingled as a man brought his blue heeler inside, the dog straining against the lead. “I’ve gotta go.”

“Right, right.”

I turned and headed for the door, barely able to feel my face. This hadn’t gone as smoothly as I hoped, but... Katie agreed to go out on a date with me. That made up for everything.

“Wait!” I turned around slowly, sure this was the moment when Katie would change her mind, tell me she didn’t think about me that way, but she hustled over to hand me the print out. “You forgot your checklist!”

“Of course.” I grinned then, unable to stop myself. “Lose my bloody head if it wasn’t screwed on. I’ll text you about dinner.”

A little nod and she was sprinting back to the front desk to deal with the blue heeler’s owner.

“WELL, someone looks like the cat that got the cream.” Charlie looked up as I entered the break room, ready to grab a coffee before my shift. “You look like all your Christmases just came at once. What gives?”

“Katie...” I ground that out as I sat down heavily, my hands wrapped around the hot mug. “I just saw Katie.”

“And you decided to stop mournfully pining and asked her out?” Knox asked with a crooked grin.

“Yeah.” I nodded and then started grinning like a loo. “Yeah, I think I did.”

“Pay up,” Knox said, nudging Charlie in the ribs.

“Hang on...” Charlie leaned forward to peer at me. “Did you ask her out or not, because there’s money riding on this?”

“We’re going to go to the pet store and then dinner,” I replied, blinking as I realised what that meant.

“Sounds like a date to me,” Knox said as Charlie groaned. “So, how’s it gonna go down?”

Chapter 7

Katie

“There she is!” Mum looked up from where she was cooking up a storm in the kitchen with a grin. Her hands were hastily washed and she rushed over, throwing her arms around me. “How are you, darling? It feels like it’s been ages since I’ve seen you.” Her damp hands went to my face as she looked me over closely. “Have you done something with your hair? You look different.”

“Gorgeous is what she is.” Dad walked in toting a pair of barbeque tongs. “Hello, love.”

I pulled away from Mum to give him a hug as well, but my mother was not to be deterred.

“Something’s changed.” Her eyes, the exact same shade of brown as mine, narrowed then. “Have you gotten a new job?” Mum had never reconciled herself to the fact I was working as a receptionist at a vets. I’d gotten great grades in my final year of high school, just not quite great enough. To be a vet, you needed to get 99 out of a 100 and I’d only achieved a measly 95. High enough to get into almost every other university course bar the one I actually wanted to study. “Something better than working at that damn vet.”

“Janey,” Dad growled, shooting her a dark look.

“Nope.” I forced myself to smile. “Still working at the vets, though maybe it’s because I started going to the gym with Mandie?” I looked down. “Nope.” I grabbed a handful of my stomach and gave it a jiggle. “Same tummy, same thunder thighs.”

“Don’t talk about yourself like that.” Mum and I were carbon copies of each other, though she was sporting a few more greys in her red hair. “You’re beautiful. Just because things that awful man said—”

“Jane.” Dad grew serious. “Enough.” His expression softened as he turned to me. “So, how’s work? And those dogs that you love? Did Bronson find someone to take him on?”

I sucked in a breath to reply, but Mum piped up.

“What about your love life? It’s been a few weeks now. Time to get back on that horse. Any contenders hanging around?”

“Well, there’s one.”

We all turned around as Mandie strolled in through the door.

“Hello, baby girl.” Nothing made Mum happier than when we came around. She gave my younger sister a hug, then held her at arm’s length. “And what’s this about a guy?”

“Yeah, what guy?” I asked with a frown. “This is all news to me.”

“Ohh, apparently you made a big impression at the gym.”

Half the reason our sharing an apartment worked was because Mandie and I didn’t see each other all that often. I was at work or volunteering at the shelter and she was shooting videos in the morning and often attending glamorous events in the evening. Right now I wished she had such an event to go to. Her smile spread slowly and Mum and Dad started looking at the two of us intently.

“No,” I said, trying for authoritative and failing, especially when the memory came flashing back. “No.”

The smoothie, the towel... those abs. I held out a hand to ward Mandie off, but it didn’t work.

“Katie collided with a hot guy at the gym,” my baby sister told our parents with a smirk. “She spilled her smoothie all over him, and apparently that’s all it took for him to be smitten.” A text notification went off, and she peered at her screen. “He’s been blowing up my phone since, wanting Katie’s number.”

“Oh you didn’t.”

Mum slapped a hand over her face to smother her laughter. She failed utterly.

“Some guy at a gym?” Dad’s arms crossed as his brows jerked down in a frown. “What do we know about him? Is he another dirtbag like—”

Dave. He was going to say Dave. My situationship that kind of morphed into something else, yet was never defined, making it easy for him to twist things to suit himself. He was possessive and uncaring, sweet and a complete pig, depending on what was happening that day. My family had never liked him, and honestly, some days neither did I. The relationship... whatever it was, it kind of had a momentum of its own, carrying me to places I didn't want to go.

Including the last night we talked.

I blinked, shoving that memory away.

"Rhys is co-owner of the gym I go to," Mandie told Dad, yet she shot me a wink. That was the half-naked hottie's name? "He's a business owner and a good guy."

"Business owner..." Dad stroked his chin, then looked at me. "You could do worse, love."

"Is he kind?" Mum was all about my love life seconds ago, but now there was an actual person to discuss, her protective side was coming out in force. "Is he going to treat your sister well? I don't care if he's hot. That Dave certainly thought highly of himself and look at the way he treated your sister. Katie doesn't need a 'hot' guy who's too busy looking at the mirror, not her."

"Mum—" I started to say.

"She needs someone solid, dependable, and not too full of himself, just like your father."

She moved into his side and he wrapped an arm around her, staring down into her eyes.

"You saying I'm not hot?"

"You're a stud muffin and you know it." Mandie and I recoiled as Mum's voice became a throaty purr. "All these big, strong muscles."

"Oh my god, gag!" I said, spinning around as she stroked his chest, but when I did, I caught my sister in my sights. "And do you think maybe you could've told me about this situation before you announced it to the parental units?"

"Seemed too good an opportunity to waste," Mandie replied with a grin. "Now they won't start hassling me about settling down."

"So are you going to get this Rhys' number?" God, nothing threw Mum off the scent. "If Mandie thinks he's a nice guy—"

“He has to be,” I replied. “I walked head first into him and spilled my smoothie all over his very nice chest.”

“Well, that’s one way to get a bloke’s attention.”

My father was fighting to hold back a smirk.

“And then when I tried to clean him up with his own towel, I discovered he wasn’t wearing anything underneath it.”

God, that shadowy shape and all it promised had haunted my dreams since that moment.

“Oh, you didn’t!”

Mum started to giggle, tried to stop herself and instead let out a rude snort. My family, ladies and gentlemen. That started everyone else cackling, the bastards, and damn me, even I cracked a grin.

“So yeah, I saw his dick and apparently that was enough for him to want to get my number.” I sighed. “Maybe he thinks if I’m that keen to strip him naked, I’m an easy lay or something.”

Everyone went quiet then.

“Katie, no—” Mandie said.

“He wouldn’t want to,” Dad grumbled. “Give me this bloke’s number. I’ll set him straight. No bastard is coming sniffing around my daughters, looking to get his end wet.”

“He might not be a fuck boy,” Mum added.

“Mum, did you just say fuck boy?” Both my sister and I stared at my mother.

“I keep up with the lingo,” she said with a wave of her hand.

“Lingo...”

Mandie’s eyes met mine, and we both snorted.

“Mum, are you trying to be ‘down with the kids?’” I asked, trying for some kind of cool dude stance and failing utterly.

“Oh my god.” She stormed back to the kitchen. “I’ll have you know that I was very cool at school.”

“Gorgeous too.” Dad’s response, his steady gaze had us going quiet. No one, and I mean no one, loved my mother like my dad. “And funny, and sexy.”

“Oh no...” us kids moaned as he moved in behind her, cradling her body with his.

“And an amazing cook.” He nuzzled into her neck and she giggled. “Did I say sexy?”

“Well, if I’m to have any appetite at all, I need to go outside,” Mandie announced, grabbing my hand and hauling me outside. “So, did you want his number? I promised to ask tonight to get Rhys off my back.”

“New year, new me, remember?” I told her. “I’m done with dudes and am focussing on myself. And anyway, if things go south, and let’s face it, they will, how awkward would that make it at the gym?”

“You wanna go back?”

Mentioning exercise always had my sister changing gear. It felt like I was with a bouncy golden retriever and I was the one with a stick in my hand.

“I can actually sit down on the toilet without wanting to scream,” I replied, “so yeah.”

“Oh my god, I can fit you in tomorrow after work.” She was tapping furiously at her phone, not to give me a guy’s number, but to slot me into her calendar. “It’ll be busier.” I shrank back involuntarily. Spending another quiet morning at the gym would’ve been preferable, but I only had one morning off a week. “But it’ll be fine. I’ll see if one of the girls can come as well. We’ll do some cardio and maybe some free weights...”

I let her words wash over me. It all made sense to her and that’s what mattered, because if anyone knew how to make me feel stronger, it was Mandie. I nodded along to everything she said until our parents rejoined us outside.

“Nibbles and drinks,” Mum announced, trying to carry a platter outside, but Dad had it out of her hands in seconds. He placed it on the table and then pulled out her seat for her, Mum’s cheeks flushing in response. “Now, come and tell us about your week. What’s been happening?”

She looked expectantly at me, so I did the only thing I could and glanced over at my sister.

“Mandie’s been out at influencer events every evening. Didn’t you go to that big TikTok soiree the other day?”

“TikTok is the video thing, right?” Dad asked, popping a piece of cheese into his mouth.

“Only the biggest social media platform in the world right now,” she replied, then flushed. It was strange to watch her sit back, avoiding people’s eyes. “And yeah, I went to an event.”

“Tell them why,” I prompted.

She shot me a dark look, but hey, this bitch dropped me right in it. I could always return the favour.

“It was the awards night.” She started to sink down in her chair as her cheeks went bright red. “And I...” Her hand reached for her drink and she took a big mouthful. “And I won the award for best fitness influencer.”

“Oh my god, did my baby just win an Oscar?”

Right then, I couldn't have loved my mum more. When we were teenagers, we had been horrified about how excited she got about everything, but as an adult I appreciated it for what it was: love. I smiled and leaned forward to listen to Mandie explain what the hell the TikTok awards were in comparison to the Oscars.

“YOU KNOW you don't have to do that.”

We'd had dinner and I was in the kitchen, washing the dishes, when Dad walked in.

“The dishes? Could you have made that ruling when we were kids?” I flicked bubbles at him. “Because I remember doing a whole lot of this back then.”

“Not the dishes.” He pulled out a tea towel from the cupboards and started drying off the dishes. “I mean redirecting everyone's attention onto your sister.”

Mum and Mandie were still talking about the event outside.

“Got me out of talking about Towel Guy, didn't it?”

Dad's eyes met mine when I handed him a freshly washed plate. He took it with a gentle smile, drying it thoroughly before putting it away.

“If Towel... The bloke's name is Rhys, right? I can't bloody call him Towel Guy. If he's not the right one for you, love, then you'll get no argument from me. I want someone who appreciates my daughter for the amazing woman she is.”

I turned around then, because sometimes it felt like my dad was like a warm fire on a winter's night. He just warmed you right up, from head to toe.

“Like you do Mum?” I glanced over my shoulder, looking at the two of them through the glass sliding door. “I'm not sure they make guys like you anymore, Dad.”

“Course they do.” When I turned back, he pulled me close, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. “They’re out there, love. Don’t lose hope. The right guy? He could be waiting just around the corner.”

“Hopefully not literally around the corner, as that would be creepy and weird,” I told him.

“Katie.”

He put his hands on my shoulders and stared into my eyes, waiting me out, but I pulled away and turned back to the washing up.

“I’m not going to put up with another guy treating me like shit, Dad. I can promise...” I started scrubbing the fry pan really, really hard right then. “That there will be no more Daves in my future, but...” I pulled the pan out of the water and inspected it before handing it to him to dry. “I need to spend a bit of time with myself to make sure that doesn’t happen. I’m sick of dating, sick of putting myself out there.” I thought of my last time on the dating apps and winced. “I want to put me first for once.”

“Any bloke worth his salt would do exactly that.” He held up a hand when I sucked in a breath to answer. “Not saying you need to get back into the dating scene, just that if the right guy comes along when you’re ready, he should be putting you first every damn day. If he doesn’t...”

He smacked one fist into the other hand with a theatrical air, which just had me grinning.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Any time, sweetheart.”

“I’M JUST gonna tell Rhys I gave you his number,” Mandie said when we got back to our place. “That, or I’m gonna block him, because damn, this guy is persistent. I need to ask Drew what he put in that damn smoothie. Like an aphrodisiac or something?”

“Show me.”

Before she could react, I plucked her phone from her hand, intending to tap out a quick thanks, but no thanks message to Rhys. Of course, that’s when I saw the many, many messages.

Does your sister like flowers? What kind? I know most girls think roses are boring, so how about gerberas?

I blinked, not expecting this kind of puppyish energy from the big, muscly stranger I collided with.

What's her star sign? Is she a Taurus? She looks like she would be.

I was, but hey, no girl likes to be told she looks like a bull.

Like she has curves for days and I would walk over broken glass to rest my head on her thighs and feed her bonbons or something.

God, I could just imagine him doing that, which had me smiling involuntarily.

Look, I know you must be wary, giving me your sister's number, but I'm a good guy, promise. I just want to take her out, show her a good time, see if she likes me.

"So, what do you think?" Mandie asked, appearing at my shoulder. "I've known Rhys for a while now through the gym. Not super well, but enough to think he's OK to go out on a date with. I mean, if there's no chemistry—"

"Oh, there's chemistry." My fingers flexed, able to feel that hard body under my fingertips with little thought. "I..."

Instead of answering her, I pulled out my phone and tapped out the number into a new contact and showed it to her.

"Smoothie guy?" She smirked. "Nice. OK, I'll let him know the ball is in your court now."

MUCH LATER AT NIGHT, sitting in my bed, I stared at my phone screen. The ball was in my court, but was I ready to serve? The need to answer that question, coupled with a knowledge I couldn't, had me flopping back against my pillow.

When I closed my eyes, shut out the world, it was far easier to think about. Here, no one saw me. Here, no one made a comment as I conjured the gym change room entrance in my mind. In my head, there was no one to witness as my hand slid through the mess of the smoothie, smearing it across Rhys' chest. What would I have done if he just stood there, willing me to go on and no one else saw? As my eyes fell closed, I dreamed of just that.

Chapter 8

Rhys

“I need to cut my hair.”

I raked my fingers through it as I stood in front of one of the gym mirrors, looking at it critically.

“Oh my god, yes!” Drew came over, pulling out his phone. “I’ll call my barber and see if he can fit you in. Shit, I’ll tell him I’ll pay extra to make sure he can.”

“What?” I looked my business partner up and down. “Do I look that bad?”

I wasn’t used to dissecting my appearance. Usually the mirrors were used to check my form during an exercise, not to see if I looked pretty or not.

“This?” He went to ruffle my hair and earned himself an elbow in the ribs for his trouble. “You look like a mop. The whole scruffy skater guy thing was hot like ten years ago.”

“I was a skater guy ten years ago,” I replied with a huff. “I still like to go for a skate sometimes.”

“But you’re a man in your thirties, not some kid anymore.” He looked me over with a critical eye. “You could shave the sides, go all Viking looking, or maybe high and tight.” I stared at him. “Y’know, kinda paramilitary styled.” He reached out to grab my jaw, forcing me to jerk away, and that’s when his eyes narrowed. “Why are you suddenly interested in changing your look? I mean you’ve mastered basic grooming and

showering regularly, thank god, but you don't give a shit how you look..." He smiled slowly. "This is about that girl."

That girl.

I baulked at that classification. Katie was a goddess among women. She needed one of them plinth things to stand on and be all remote and gorgeous, like an ancient statue or something. I, of course, would get down on my knees and—

"It is." The prick started to wave his finger in my face. "This is about Mandie's sister."

"Katie." That came out 100% more mournful than I meant it too. "Her name is Katie."

"I know."

I was about ready to punch that smug smile right off his face.

"I asked Mandie for her number—" I said.

"And she hasn't replied." Drew crossed his arms and looked me up and down. "She also hasn't come back to the gym for another session. You want to clean yourself up to try to impress her." He shook her head. "You really like this girl."

"I mean, I think so." I started to pace back and forth. "I don't know. We've barely spoken two words to each other, but..." I stopped and stared at my reflection, but it wasn't me I saw. "It's been a while since anyone's caught my eye, y'know?"

"I know."

Shit, Drew was going all Yoda on me now, calm and quiet.

"And maybe I'm just building it all up in my head. I mean, she took me by surprise."

"That, or you have an erotic fascination with being doused with smoothies." My eyes narrowed as I stared at him, but the bastard just hit me with his biggest shit-eating grin. "Do you have wet dreams about girls making 'milkshakes?'"

"Great," I growled. "I'm being vulnerable, showing my soft side here, and you're—"

"Giving you shit, like you always do me," he replied. "Alright, so let's think about this logically. You think you might be into her and want a chance to find out?"

"Yep," I said.

“And the fact she’s not replying to you is kinda driving you crazy.” His eyes went to my hair. “So much you’re thinking about lopping off all that hair.”

“I gotta do something, right?” I looked him up and down. “Like how did you know Greg was the one for you?”

“I looked across a crowded bar and his eyes locked with mine.” Drew looked a little misty eyed then. “The loud music, the noise, the sweaty atmosphere, that all fell away and there was just him. I made my way over to him and introduced myself.” He shrugged. “And that was it.”

“See, that.” I stabbed my finger in the air. “That’s what I’m talking about. Sometimes this shit is just written in the stars.” I pulled out my phone, googling local florists. “I’ll ask Mandie where her sister works and have a bunch of flowers sent over.” I looked up for a second. “Two bunches. Not roses, they’re way too basic. Maybe sunflowers?” I scrolled through the flower shop’s catalogue. “What’s a lisianthus?” I turned the phone screen around to show him. “Do you think Katie would like these?”

“Whoa there, buckeroo.” He plucked the phone from my grasp and then placed it face down on the counter. “I get that you’re keen.”

“Keen was a day ago,” I replied. “I’m way past that point now.”

“Don’t let keen earn you a restraining order,” he advised. “Just take a breath and ...oh.”

“Oh what?” I spun around to follow his line of sight, and that was the moment when the doors slid open. Not an uncommon occurrence at the gym, but this was no ordinary client walking in the door. Just like in the movies, the sunlight framed her head, turning that red hair of hers fire bright. “Holy shit, it’s her.”

This had to be fate. My feet started moving before I did, walking towards Katie. I caught the moment she looked around, then blanched at the sight of so many dudes lifting weights before looking down at her phone.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “No, no, no. Goddammit, Mandie.”

“Anything I can help you with?” I asked. “We’ve got some fresh smoothies over there if you need something to toss around?”

“What?” That pretty pink flush had me grinning, and right then I swore I’d do whatever it took to make that happen over and over again. “Oh.” She took a step backwards. “Oh god...”

“Hey, I was just joking. You looked like you were having a particularly bad day.”

“In a way,” she admitted ruefully. “My stupid sister organised to meet me at the gym and then spaced without telling me. Apparently she’s got some ‘thing.’” Katie shook her head, then scanned the gym. “I’ll just go—”

“Or...” I stuck my arm out like gents did in those horny period dramas women like. “I could take you through your paces. I’m a pretty good personal trainer, if I do say so myself.”

Say yes, beautiful, I thought furiously.

“New year, new me...” She muttered that under her breath, thinking I didn’t hear her, but I did. “So, I don’t think I’m ready to tackle anything weight bearing right now.” She flinched when someone dropped a barbell weighed down with hundreds of kilos of plates. “That looks... scary.”

“Not scary if you know what you’re doing.” I wiggled my arm, and she stared at it, then shook her head and put her hand on the elbow. “And I know what I’m doing, no matter what people say about me.”

“What do they say about you?”

I was doing so well, but her feet instantly slowed as she stared up at me.

Impulsive, headstrong, more balls than brains, they were a few of the insults levelled my way, but none of them mattered right now.

“That I always look after clients and we run a chill place here. Anyone tries to give you shit? I’ll sort them out for you.” I turned to face her. “Its important people feel comfortable here, but if you don’t want to try weights today, could I interest you in some cardio?” As I walked over to the treadmills, I turned and stared, realising why Katie seemed so familiar. I remembered now the hot girl walking past when I was spotting my friend, Noah. “You know how to use these just fine.”

“Yeah.” Her cheeks flushed brighter. “I came here a bit after...” She shook her head. “Last year. That’s when Mandie started to get on my case about working out with her.”

“Alright.” I turned on the machine, tapping on the screen so she could adjust the settings to suit herself. That bag was plucked from her grip and then I took her ear buds out of their base and placed them in each ear, resisting the urge to stroke her hair. “Got water?” I saw the water bottle stashed in a side pocket of her bag and placed it in the drink holder. “Need an iPad to watch *Bridgerton* as you’re walking?” I asked. “You could pretend you’re a fine lady taking a turn about the gardens.”

“You lend clients iPads?” she asked, climbing up on the stationary treadmill. “This is some gym.”

“Umm... I could look to see if we have one,” I said, “or I could change the channel on the TV screens.”

We usually played sports replays on the big screens and while I was fairly sure you’d be able to hear the guys’ howls from space, I’d throw on Netflix for Katie, if that’s what she wanted. I don’t know what it was, but as my hand came to rest on the rails of the treadmill, something in me wanted to move. I wanted to cover it with mine, claim it, maybe cradle it against my chest as I—

“I’ll be fine, but thanks.”

She turned away, drawing out her phone to put on a playlist, which meant my job here was done. There were a million other things that needed doing around the gym, but I couldn’t remember one of them. *You’re gonna freak Katie out, staring at her like that*, a little voice told me and I was right. If she was already feeling weirded out, I couldn’t let myself make it worse, so I turned and walked back to the counter.

“That looked like it went well,” Drew said. “Though you’ve both still got your clothes on.”

“Shut up.”

I didn’t say that with any heat, settling back against the counter.

“Or maybe that’s the problem,” he said with a grin. “Maybe you should work off some of that barely repressed sexual energy hauling some cartons of drinks out here. The fridge needs restocking.”

I mumbled some insult in his direction, but went and did as I was told. That was how it worked around here. Drew was the brains and me? I lifted heavy things.

He was right, though. Once I’d carried out several armloads of drink cartons, some of the frantic energy in me started to settle. I was feeling calmer, more centred.

Right up until the point I saw him.

“Uh oh...” Drew hissed as we both watched Steve amble over and then point at his ear. Katie kept on powering on, ignoring him completely, until he moved into her line of sight.

“That prick...”

I hated the guy with a passion and wanted to rescind his membership but Drew always said no. There wouldn’t be an argument this time. The asshole loved to glom onto clients, particularly women, tearing them down

subtly, right before offering his nutritional and training routines for the tidy sum of \$54.99.

“You better go and rescue your girl,” Drew said, but I was already striding across the floor.

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Chapter 9

Katie

I thought this kind of shit only happened in videos, but apparently there were gym arseholes in the wild as well.

I was in the zone, my feet moving, my arms pumping as I walked up what was the equivalent of a steep hill. Runner, I might not be, but walker? I took the dogs out for hours at the shelter, so I always smashed my steps goals.

Then *he* appeared.

You know when you get that weird, prickling feeling on the back of your neck? Like someone is staring at you, forcing you to turn around. I dismissed that thought, because who the hell would be staring at me on the treadmill?

Him, apparently.

Tall, good looking, and wearing a thin tank top that was spotted with sweat, he smiled when he came into my field of vision and then pointed to my headphones. For a moment, I felt a jolt of horror. I was listening to one of those smut audio files on Quinn, and right as the raspy voiced narrator was telling her/me what a good girl I was being, taking all of him, a gym bro appeared. That easy smile, initially I thought it was a knowing one and that he was hearing everything I was listening to, but when I stopped the track and pulled my AirPods out, it was far worse.

He had interrupted my workout to give me some unsolicited advice.

This was my worst nightmare. It was literally why I wanted to come here with my sister. Her resting bitch face would force douche canoes like

this to back the fuck up. Instead, he smiled and came forward.

“Hey, I’m Steve.” I just stared as he offered me his hand, self-consciously wiping it on his shorts when I didn’t respond. “I saw you working out, and I thought you might need some advice.”

I’m not sure if other plus size women felt like this, but there was nothing on God’s green earth that I wanted less. Complete strangers felt the need to tell me I had a pretty face, but I’d look beautiful if I lost weight. Others inspected my shopping trolley like they were drug-sniffing dogs, looking for a few cheeky lines of cocaine, and still others looked at my meals and asked, “Are you going to eat all of that?” Being fat and in public seemed like a red flag to way too many people. I punched the stop button on the treadmill, which was my first wrong choice, and stood still on the conveyor belt.

“So if you’re looking to slim down—”

How the hell was this happening again? Moments before, I was in the zone, feeling strong, powerful with every step I took on the treadmill. I wanted to listen to my horny stories, not dickheads like this.

But when did what I wanted matter?

Right then, I saw my ex’s facial features superimposed over Steve’s. Same cocky air, same arrogance that made him think he had a right to tell me what he thought. My hands wrapped around the handrails of the treadmill and I sucked in one breath, then another, feeling my heart pounding in my chest. How dare he interrupt me? How dare this Steve come and insert himself into my space? Why the hell did he look at me and just see a problem that needed fixing? And why did the world think the exact same thing? If I was exercising, it must be because I was finally, finally, taking myself in hand and resolving the issue of my size. My throat worked, not to suck in a breath, but to try and find the words to tell him to piss all the way off, when I was cut off by another masculine voice.

“And why would she do that?” Rhys was all cute Golden Retriever when he met me at the door, but now he was a German Shepherd. He prowled forward, then came to stand between me and Steve, arms crossed. Those biceps were popping, something that made even Steve go pale. “When Katie is perfect the way she is.”

Perfect? Steve and I had a little moment of simpatico, our eyebrows shooting upwards.

“Gorgeous.” Rhys bit that word off. “Stunning. Beautiful and most of all, not interested in your little spiel. Steve, did we or did we not talk about you giving unsolicited advice in our gym?”

“Look, mate, I’m just trying to build my client base,” Steve replied.

“By being a complete dick? What, you thought you were going to neg Katie into signing up with you?” Rhys looked back at me. “If there’s anything you need help with, you just ask me, but no one, and I mean no one, is going to hassle you about anything in my gym. We clear?”

I nodded on automatic as my brain tried to process what was happening right now.

“As for you.” All that gentleness was gone when Rhys turned back to Steve. “Get your shit and get the fuck out.” He stabbed a finger at the door.

“But I’ve got seven months left on my membership!” Steve snapped, and I was stunned to see him try to front up to Rhys.

“Not anymore you don’t.” Drew appeared with a receipt in hand. “Refunded to your account.”

“But—”

“You’ve been warned, more than once, and we told you what would happen if you kept pestering women,” Rhys said with a shake of his head. “So go, or don’t.” That casual lift of his shoulder had my eyes widening. “Drew’s been on me to take out the trash and I’d be happy to start with you.”

Steve seemed to come to his senses, turning on his heel and marching away. The jeers and claps from the guys working out just seemed to intensify Steve’s shame, the man’s face an alarming shade of purple as he stormed out the front door.

“Well, good riddance to bad rubbish.” Rhys’ expression changed when he looked at me. “How we doing, love? You OK? I should’ve kicked him out long ago. Steve shouldn’t have gotten within ten feet of you.”

“I...” Words failed me. While my family was fiercely protective of me, the outside world? Not so much. I blinked as my throat worked, knowing I needed to say something. “Thank you?”

“No need for that. I should’ve headed Steve off before he even got within ten feet of you.”

Rhys held out a hand, and I thought it was to help me off the treadmill, but when I got close, both hands went around my waist, picking me up and setting me on my feet.

OK, then.

“Were you finished with your workout?” Now that Rhys was close, his voice dropped down into a deep rasp. “I can stand by the treadmill and make sure no one bothers you.”

“I’m done.” I needed to get it together, that was clear. Step away from the hottie and go and get changed before heading home in time to kick my sister’s butt for flaking on me. “I might get a retaliatory cheeseburger on the way home as a big fuck you to Steve, but I’m fine.”

“Burgers are what you want, huh? Ever had the smash burgers in Unley?” he asked, moving closer so all I could see was that chest and his tank top. “They’re pretty amazing.”

“Um... no.” I cleared my throat. “But I hear good things about them.”

“Let me buy you dinner,” he said, hands rising, but not touching. “To make it up to you.”

Was he for real? I half wanted to reach out and touch every inch of him, just to reassure myself he wasn’t a figment of my overheated imagination. That low growl he used to put Steve in his place? It healed something in me that had been hurting since high school. Trouble was, that rush of feeling had me wanting to get closer, closer, eradicating the gap between us. That was the same impulse that had me running towards my ex the moment he crooked his finger. I sucked in a breath, ready to refuse, when he shook his head.

“Don’t say no. Well...” He shook his head. “Not unless you really want to. Look, this isn’t a date or anything. Not unless that’s what you want.” The German Shepherd was fraying to pieces before my eyes, a much less cocky Golden Retriever replacing him. “I... It’s just a burger. We could be just two people grabbing a really good feed, as friends.”

I looked up then, meeting his eyes, but this time it wasn’t the strange colour that had me transfixed. There was a warmth there, one that drew me closer, had me nodding, right as my focus dropped down. He hadn’t shaved this morning, maybe not for a few days. His full lips provided stark contrast to the coppery stubble around them. Would that scratch at my skin if I kissed him? Suddenly, I really wanted to know the answer to that question. New year, new me, that’s what I’d promised the night of New Year’s Eve, so that’s who I’d be. Maybe I could be the girl who could go and grab a burger with a really hot guy and not make it into a big deal.

“Um... yeah,” I replied, then snorted at my inadequate reply. “That would be amazing.” His big grin had my lips twitching in response. “I should get changed first, though.”

“No need.” He stepped back, and did those eyes sweep me from head to toe and then smile like he was really happy with what he saw? “The place is pretty casual. Do you know the address?”

I WORKED IT OUT, gripping the steering wheel tightly all the way over to the burger place. Part of me expected Rhys to not even be there when I arrived, but as I pulled up just down from the burger place, I caught sight of him standing on the curb, staring into each car as it went by. I smiled for a second, the dog metaphor unable to be avoided, but if that’s what he was, he went into alert mode when he saw me. Perfectly still for just a second, then running over to my door and opening it for me before I had a chance to do it myself.

“Milady.” I looked around in alarm as he swept me a bow while standing on the street, but there were few cars around this time of night. “Ready to eat the best double cheeseburger with extra cheese known to man?”

“That sounds like a heart attack ready to happen.” His grin didn’t dim for a second. “So, obviously the answer is yes.”

“Well, come this way.”

He steered me over to the front door of the place, his hand light on my shoulders, but the people inside didn’t know that. They looked up, and some frowned at the sight of us together. Rhys was in his gym gear, but that had him fitting in with the other cool kids seated at the tables. The walls had been painted black, with a massive graffiti mural on one side, loud rap music playing through the PA system. Me? I glanced down and for once agreed with my sister that it was time to retire this particularly ancient band t-shirt. It was one of Dad’s old ones, so it was soft as hell from frequent washing, but not something I really wore outside the house except for the gym.

“Here.” Rhys found us an empty table, and I took a seat gladly, conscious of the looks we were getting. “So cheeseburgers, obviously, but what about fries?” When I looked sideways, I caught the couple next to us staring. They looked away as soon as I met their gaze, but I was pretty sure

they'd go back to staring the moment my focus returned to Rhys. "And a milkshake? They do freaking amazing ones here."

For a moment, I just stared. Sometimes I felt like making healthy food choices was the rent I had to pay for existing as a plus sized woman. Rhys didn't seem to share that view at all, just looking at me expectantly. I shook my head, smiling despite myself and that just seemed to make him even happier.

"Sure," I replied, "that sounds amazing."

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Chapter 10

Rhys

Katie was here. I'd seen the hesitation, knew she was thinking twice about my offer and shit, I might've too if I had to deal with Steve's shit, but... I looked back over my shoulder from where I was leaning against the counter, watching her scroll through her phone. She came, and if this wasn't a date, then I had to make a good showing and hope she'd be down for a real one later.

"My man." Kosta was the owner of the burger bar and he knew me well. This place was my cheat meal go to. He held out his hand and I gave it a shake. "What can I get you this fine evening?"

I rattled off our orders, and he wrote them down, unconsciously shifting in time with the beat of the music. I remembered when he first set this place up and it looked amazing now.

"And to drink?" he asked.

"Two of your best chocolate milkshakes," I replied.

"Coming right up."

I paid for everything and turned around, my eyes instantly drawn to Katie. Of course, looking at her had me noticing the couple beside her. Were they giving her the stink eye...? My fingers dug into the counter, scratching at the black lacquer, but by the time I pushed myself away from it, Kosta had returned.

"Here you go, two chocolate shakes." He glanced out on the floor. "Who you here with?" Before I could answer, he followed my gaze to Katie. "Damn, that's a whole lotta woman." I was spinning around to face

him, straightening up, but he held his hands up to ward me off. “Ain’t making a big deal of it. She’s hot, but... you reckon you can handle her? Because if you can’t.” He straightened the seams of his t-shirt. “I’ll shoot my shot.”

“I’m just about ready to shove these drinks right down your throat,” I told him in a perfectly even tone. “And have you shitting chocolate milkshake for days.”

“Like that, huh?” Kosta grinned. “Well, alright, hope this pans out for you.” He winked at me. “Then I’ll cater your wedding.”

I gripped the shakes way too tightly, the plastic cups crinkling, but I turned and carried them over to the table.

“See me carrying drinks and not dropping them?” I said as Katie looked up. “Very mindful, very demure.”

“Oh my god!” she huffed and that was a mistake. If she thought that was going to put me off, she had another thing coming. It put a sparkle in her eyes, some colour in her cheeks, and that just had me wanting to pull her pigtails for more. “I’m never going to live that down, am I?” She threw her arms wide. “Toss the milkshake at me and then we’ll be even.” I wasn’t listening to what she was saying right now, because that baggy t-shirt was stretching tightly across her breasts. “Go on, throw it, and then we’ll be even.”

“These shakes are too good to use as projectiles.” I sat down and placed hers before her. “They put so much ice cream in them that drinking is like trying to suck a golf ball through a garden hose.”

“So you promise to never ever bring up smoothiegate again?” she asked, tentatively stabbing her straw into the drink. “I need to know that you’ve recovered from the emotional damage.”

I hadn’t. She could douse me with a million smoothies if she kept staring at me. I’d replayed that moment in the gym over and over in my head, turning the memory into something bigger, grander, with each recollection. It’d been so long since a girl held my attention for more than two seconds. It felt like I was coming home to something I hadn’t realised I’d missed. Maybe that’s why I pulled my straw out, still dripping with milk and ice cream and dabbed her on the end of that cute little nose.

“There.” She looked so cute as she blinked and spluttered. “Now we’re even.”

That determined look, the way her jaw muscle popped as her eyes narrowed. Yeah, I was in fucking trouble. That last time I felt like this... Now, be here, I told my mind. This is where I need to be. That meant I caught the moment when she worked the straw around in her drink and then took a defiant sip.

“Oh my god...”

Shit, that groan of hers had me shifting in my seat. My brain was in overdrive, imagining what I could do to inspire the same sound. I’d pull that damn shirt off, then every other piece of clothing, before kissing every inch—

“Two cheeseburgers.” Kosta appeared with a knowing smirk, placing each one of them before us, and I shot him a dark look. “Let me know what you think...” He looked expectantly at my girl.

“Oh, it’s Katie.”

Her hand went to her chest, and we both followed that movement, glad for an excuse to look at those tits.

“Lovely to meet you, Katie.”

Not a date, I told myself over and over as the prick offered her his hand. I watched her shake it and then pull away almost instantly. I thought I liked Kosta, but not so much now. A shout from the counter had him leaving our table, thankfully, leaving us to stare at the majesty before us.

“Damn...” she hissed, poking the massive stack of bread, meat and cheese. “How...? What...?”

“Like this.”

I demonstrated pulling the skewer out of the burger stack and then squashing it into something that might actually fit in my mouth. Damn, these were good burgers. Katie watched me chew my mouthful, then nodded, looking like she was ready to have a crack at it.

“Mmm...!”

She wanted to say something, but couldn’t with her mouthful. The burger was dropped back onto the plate, her hand going to her lips. The looks she was giving me made clear I’d made the right choice. Like she couldn’t believe she had something this good in her mouth, which just gave me ideas. Rather than scoop her up and rush her out to my car so I could whisk her back to my place, I reached out with a thumb and wiped the smudge of tomato sauce away. Her eyelids fluttered slightly, right as I licked my thumb clean. Fuck, I needed to seal the deal, get her to agree to

come out on a date with me, stat. I'd take her somewhere fancy, where the waiters wouldn't make eyes at my girl, and—

"These are freaking amazing." She stabbed a finger at the burger. "Like so, so good."

"Told you," I replied with a smug smile.

"Totally worth dealing with Steve's shit," she added and that's when my heart sank. That fucking asshole.

"Look, that should've never happened," I said, my appetite deserting me. "I should've been there, stepped in before he even thought to interrupt you. We try to create a good vibe where everyone feels comfortable."

"I guess he felt comfortable with the idea of giving me advice." For some reason, she looked around at the rest of the diners before her focus returned to me. "You take the whole gym thing really seriously. What made you get into the industry?"

I didn't want to talk about me. That it was a long line of fuck ups that got me where I was and there was no guarantee there wouldn't be more. Instead, I gave her a pat answer.

"I was just a skinny little skater boy at school." Her eyebrows jerked up. "And I really liked Maggie McGann. She was..." I traced the outline of that woman's outrageous curves, but when I was approximating the shapes of her breasts, I dropped my hands. "I figured if I built myself up, got big and strong, she might look my way."

"And did she?"

She asked that with a gentle smile.

"Nope." I shook my head. "To say I haven't been real successful with women is an understatement." I shot her a meaningful look. "Some people think I'm a bit extra."

"Noo..."

"Anyway, she went off with some dickhead with a big, shiny car. I think they ended up getting married or something." I shook my head. "But the gym? The adrenaline surge, the pump I feel after a good workout? That was damn near addictive. After fucking my ankle one too many times skating, I figured I'd stick to the gym. Routine, physical exercise to burn off all that energy." I shrugged. "It was either the gym or the army, and I'm not great with authority figures."

She was smiling as she listened to my story. So far, so good, I thought, right before I ruined everything.

“So, what about you? What brought you to the gym? You used to come to use the treadmills, right?”

The burger landed back in the basket and she reached for a napkin, wiping her fingers clean. That smile, it was like a flame trying to spark to life in the midst of a rain storm, spluttering and then finally going out.

“I...broke up with someone.” She was staring at the food, but I was willing to bet she wasn’t seeing any of it. “No, not really.” When she did smile, it was a horrible thing, full of remorse. “It was supposed to be just a situationship. We’d get together, hook up whenever we were both keen.” I watched her lips firm up to a thin line. “No strings attached.”

When her eyes met mine, they felt like they stabbed into the core of me, but I had no idea what was coming.

“But he kept wanting the boyfriend experience, even though he didn’t want the commitment.” Whoever this fuck was, I would hunt him down and punch the ever loving shit out of him for hurting Katie. He was the one who put those shadows in her beautiful eyes, I was sure of it. “At his work Christmas party, I got a bunch of texts from the other ladies there. Come and get your man, they said.”

This was like watching a car crash happen in slow motion, except I was powerless to stop it from happening.

“Except he wasn’t my man. Dave asked me to pick him up after the party. I knew he’d drink and drive if I didn’t, so I said yes. Not to this, though. Not to walking in on him trying to shoot his shot with someone prettier...” She let out a long breath. “Skinnier than me. He acted all guilty when I walked in the door, and we had it out.”

When she blinked, I was pretty sure I wasn’t the one sitting on the other side of the table, he was. Katie sat up straighter and stared me in the eyes.

“I asked him what the fuck he thought he was doing.” Her voice grew harder, flatter. “How he could disrespect me like this, and he...?”

I didn’t want to know what the fuck said. He deserved to die a horrible death in an alleyway, and right then, I wanted to be the one to deliver that final blow.

“He said, what did I expect? We didn’t owe each other anything, that I couldn’t expect him not to shoot his shot, when she looked like she did.” Her hands flattened against the table. “And I looked like this.”

Chapter 11

Katie

This is why I hadn't started dating again. Against the deep bass line of the music playing, I had spilled out all the details of my breakup. God, it wasn't even a breakup. Dave wasn't my ex. He'd made clear that there was nothing tying us together.

So why did I get up abruptly from the table and walk out of the burger shop?

"Katie!"

I heard Rhys' shout as I slid into the driver's seat of my car. One look in the rear vision mirror revealed him carrying my food out, but I knew now I wouldn't be eating it. My mouth felt gummy, as if the grease and the sugar had coalesced into a gross coating. My throat worked as I turned the car on, but before I could take off, Rhys was there, rapping at my window.

"Retaliatory cheeseburgers, remember?" he said, holding the basket up hopefully.

"I'm good." I forced myself to smile, because unless I wanted to find another gym, I'd see Rhys again. "Did you want some money—?"

"No." His hand landed on my window and I felt like I could trace every line there. "No, I don't need that. I need—"

"I've gotta go."

This was why I didn't like to talk about the whole Dave thing. The guy was a dickhead, a fact that was universally agreed upon, but what did that make me? I was the idiot who kept going out with him. Answered his calls, tapped back a reply when he texted 'WYD' at 3am in the morning. The

woman who didn't have enough self-respect to kick him to the curb like he deserved. Natasha and Mandie could slag off Dave all they liked, but they were damning me by proxy.

"I'll see you at the gym," I told Rhys, and then edged my car out into traffic. I wasn't even going in the right direction, but right now, I didn't care. I just wanted to get the fuck away from my confession, my feelings, everything.

When a tear rolled down my cheek, to say I was disappointed was an understatement. I was forced to pull over, and that's when more of them came. Dumb tears, stupid tears, that felt like they tore their way out of my tear ducts, because Dave didn't deserve a single one. I didn't miss him, didn't love him. I'm fairly sure I didn't even like him, but what I really hated was what I'd let myself become when I was around him.

Well, no more.

Never, ever again would I let some idiot treat me like an afterthought. I did not have to accept anyone's scraps. I deserved respect, love, to be someone's number one priority, and I refused to settle for anything less. With a sharp nod at my reflection, I turned the car on, blew my nose, and then drove home. I hoped to walk back into an empty apartment, but instead, found I had a welcoming committee.

"HOW'D IT GO?" Mandie asked, springing to her feet as soon as I walked in the door. The wine glasses, the pizza boxes, made clear her 'thing' was entirely made up. "Drew texted me and said you went out for burgers with Rhys? How was it?"

My sister wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed, but she wasn't stupid. As I stepped further into the living room, she took in my bedraggled appearance and her face fell. That was just as quickly replaced with fury.

"What did he do?" Her hands formed fists. "I might not be as big as him, but I will knock that fuckwit's head right off his shoulders next time I see him!"

"For what?" I walked in and helped myself to a glass, pouring it full of wine. I drank that down, feeling suddenly thirsty. Anything to wash the taste of milkshakes and burgers out of my mouth. "For taking me out and buying me food while listening to sad stories?" Mandie made a small sound of distress. "I made it awkward, not him."

“It’s not awkward if he asked,” she said, leaning forward.

“But he didn’t. He asked why I started to go to the gym and I...” I took another mouthful of wine. The astringent edge helped settle something in me. “I am not ready to date. If I can’t stop emotionally vomiting over near strangers, then I am clearly not over...” I couldn’t say Dave. That was too shameful to admit, even for me. “Everything.”

“Shit, I’m sorry.” Mandie moved in to give me a hug. “I shouldn’t have rushed you. He just seemed super keen, and I know he’s a good guy. I figured the best way to get over a guy—”

“Is to get under another one?” That was my sister’s motto at high school. “Thanks, but that’s not how this is going to work. We had it right at New Year’s.” I flumped down onto the opposite couch. “I need to work on myself, get comfortable in my own skin.”

“And is that the way you were feeling before you told Rhys about Dave?” she asked. “Were you feeling comfortable?”

I shifted on the couch. As far as I was concerned, this topic was done with and I just wanted to drown my sorrows in a glass of wine, then go to sleep.

“I...I felt weird in the burger place. It was all cool with graffiti murals and pretty people sitting down to eat.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Mandie prompted a little more gently.

“I didn’t feel like I fitted in there,” I continued. “I was dressed in Dad’s old t-shirt for one.”

“T-shirts like that are worth big bucks now,” my sister explained. “People are really into vintage streetwear.”

“Right.” I looked over at her and saw this inquisition would happen no matter what, so I forged on. “I felt people’s eyes on me.”

“Katie—” she growled.

“And I didn’t like it. I could feel the judgement coming off them in waves.”

“That’s their fat phobic bullshit, not yours.”

“But when he sat down and started teasing me about spilling drinks, I...” I let out a ragged sigh. “I didn’t care. It was just him and me.”

And that fact made me all the madder. It wasn’t hard to imagine meeting Rhys before I even set eyes on Dave, and what would that have been like? One long string of awesome dates, filled with laughter and good food?

“Look, I’m just still processing, y’know?” I waved my hand in their direction. “I’ll be fine. Time heals all wounds, right? This one is self-inflicted, so it’s probably taking a little longer than I hoped, but I’ll get there.” Mandie went to say something, but I got to my feet. “I need to get some sleep. I’ll see you later.”

HAVE a shower and go to bed, that was the plan, but once I was inside my room, something changed. It wasn’t just me in my bedroom, but everything that had happened today. Emotions, thoughts, resolutions, they swirled around, threatening to take over, especially when I pulled my phone out.

Mum always said that when I was a little kid, I’d just collapse in a heap after a tantrum, utterly spent. What she missed was what came with it. A deep sense of shame that I’d lost my shit, that’s what hit me right now. I was too old to be throwing myself on the floor and holding my breath until I turned blue.

So what did I do instead?

Say sorry to anyone I’d wronged and make amends, that’s what Mum had hammered into us, which had my thumb scrolling through my contacts until I ended up at Rhys.

There was no way he wanted to hear from me. I was riding the hot mess express and there was nothing that turned men off more. I sucked in a breath and started to send a text anyway.

Sorry about this evening. Was that enough? Maybe, but apparently I had more to say. *Everything’s still a bit raw. Turns out I’m good at dumping more than just smoothies on people.*

I added a little smiley emoji, feeling like anything but, then hit send before I could analyse myself into oblivion. That done, I tossed the phone on the bed and walked into the ensuite built between Mandie’s and my rooms. I was pretty sure I could wash just about anything away if I scrubbed hard enough.

So why was I looking at my phone when I got back out?

Now dressed in my PJ’s, I climbed into bed and the minute the covers were over me, my phone started to ring. A strange feeling built in my chest as I slapped around, trying to find my phone. Hope, I realised. It flickered to life as my hand closed around my phone, my thumb tapping on the screen to answer the call.

“Hello?”

That came out way too breathy, but if I hoped Rhys had called me back, I was about to be disappointed.

“Katie?” The masculine voice was familiar, but entirely different to Rhys. “It’s Rhett. Just wanted to make sure we were still on to go to the pet shop tomorrow?”

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Chapter 12

Rhett

“I’ll see you after work.”

Katie’s voice rang through my head all damn night, forcing me to toss and turn, but I didn’t mind. When I rang her, I half expected her to not pick up, and when she did, I thought she’d blow me off. She’d have forgotten our date or changed her mind about going out with me. I braced myself for every kind of rejection, only to end up stunned when she didn’t. When my alarm went off the next morning, I bounced out of bed, claiming the first shower as I scrubbed everything with the shower gel the girl at the chemist said smelled nice, before grabbing a razor. I shaved my face clean of all stubble and stared into the mirror once I’d washed the foam away.

I needed to do this right.

This was my chance to sweep Katie off her feet and I couldn’t fuck it up. I’d spent half the night researching restaurants before putting in a reservation at a place that had a ton of good reviews. A quick look over their menu and I knew there were a bunch of dishes Katie would like. We’d order every single one of them and see what took her fancy.

I’d need to have a shower after work. Couldn’t go wandering into a fancy place still in my uniform. I walked across the hall and then started to paw through my shirts. That shitty short sleeve printed thing my gran gave me one Christmas? Garrett made clear I should’ve donated it years ago. White shirt and a tie? I’d look like a damn waiter. Maybe the blue or the grey... I pulled out the grey shirt and stared at it for just a second, unable to stop myself from seeing the last time I wore it.

Rhys, Garret, and me, we'd been so optimistic. We'd dressed up to the nines, ready to wow the girl we wanted to make our girlfriend. Stupidly, we'd thought we were all on the same page, that this would be what she wanted. Instead, she'd looked almost pained when we fronted up to the restaurant. She was already waiting at our table, an apologetic look on her face, right before she dropped a bomb on us. That this had been fun, but she wasn't looking for anything long term. My hand crumpled the grey shirt, creasing the fibres, right before I tossed it halfway across the room. I did not need that shit in my head right now.

"Hey, I..." Garrett appeared at my door with a mug of coffee in his hand. His voice trailed away as he saw the mess I was making. I kept my room neat and tidy, austere is what he called it, so the mess was all the more noticeable. "What's going on? Got a job interview? An award ceremony I don't know about?"

I swallowed hard. This shouldn't have been this awkward, but it was. It was beyond time for me to get back into dating. Something had held me back, though, and perhaps it was this? Garrett looked almost wary as he entered the room, scanning the mess and deducting the cause before his eyes met mine. Pain, just a little bit, that's what I saw, even if he hid it quickly.

"A date." I answered him honestly, so why did it feel so damn weird? His eyebrows jerked up in surprise, but he quickly mastered himself. "I'm going on a date after work. That girl, the one that was going out with that dickhead."

"Dave's ex? She finally dumped his arse?" He set his mug down on my desk. "You're shooting your shot." Those dark brown eyes grew focussed. He was assessing my wardrobe, weighing up my options and making decisions on what to keep and what to discard by the second. "Where are you taking her?"

"This place up the road from work," I told him, half expecting him to tear that idea to pieces. Garrett had opinions, lots of them, when it came to food, clothing, drinks. Most weekends we were forced to go to some bougie market to buy artisan cheese or whatever, whereas Rhys and I would happily live on protein shakes, steak, and eggs. "They say they're a modern Italian place."

"So completely inauthentic," Garrett tutted, but he was moving towards my wardrobe and pulling out items in rapid succession. "Nope, washes you

out.” He dismissed a reddish brown shirt. “Grey does not work for you and I’ve told you that multiple times, even though you keep buying shirts that colour, but this...” He held out a dark blue shirt and held it near my face before shoving it into my chest. “That and some black slacks. Shoes, not boots.” He pointed a finger at my face, making clear what would happen if I dared disobey him. “And give them a polish.” My best friend stepped back, pursing his lips as he stared me in the eyes. “You really like this girl, don’t you?”

I hadn’t spoken much about Katie to him or Rhys. What the hell could I say? That the minute she walked into the fire station break room I was on my feet and taking a step towards her, like it was my arm that was meant to go around her waist, not Dave’s. Every damn firefighter there noticed my reaction, including that prick. He’d shot me a snide smile as he introduced her to everyone.

When she smiled at me, my heart beat way too hard, way too fast, and why the hell was that? She was gorgeous, but that wasn’t the reason. I felt... something, a rapid tumble of emotion I’d given up thinking I’d feel again, and that’s what had me hanging around another man’s girl like a bad smell. There were pretty girls, and hot girls, and even beautiful ones, but they didn’t get a reaction from me, not like she did. That, that feeling of connection, something I’d given up hope feeling was what had me stressing over my fit like a teenage girl.

“I don’t know,” I said in answer, but that didn’t feel right. “Not much opportunity to chat up a girl when she was going out with a colleague. I guess we’ll find out if there’s anything there tonight.”

“But you want there to be.” Garrett stared into my eyes, making clear he wouldn’t let me fob him off. “You want to see if something serious can come of this.”

“That’s all that any of us wanted, right?” I snorted and shook my head. “I know fuckboys are a thing now, but that’s not me. Just feels like masturbating in a hole, taking some strange woman home to fuck. Not good for her, not good for me either.”

“Funny way to say you’re shit in bed.”

I found myself smiling despite myself.

“Nothing’s changed for me,” I said, standing taller. I grabbed the shirt he’d chosen and some black pants, then inspected my shoes closely. A rub at the toes with my sleeve and they were looking alright. “We said we

wanted..." I stopped myself from going any further. We didn't talk about the break up, not ever, and I wouldn't start now. I didn't need the spectre of our failures haunting us now. "I still want someone to come home to, someone to look after, to care for." My breath escaped in a shuddering sigh. "Not just a roll in the hay. I want to wake up beside her, watch her sleep."

"Because that's not creepy," Garrett muttered.

"And be there when she wakes up." That was what had me pining after Katie. I was too much in my own head, creating scenarios that would never happen, but... When I listed all the things I wanted, I saw her every time. When I looked at Garrett, I shrugged. "I could be overthinking this."

"No..."

The prick, he could take a sip of coffee and still make it sarcastic.

"Maybe there's no connection there, but I need to know. You only get one go at life, and I'm not wasting it on might've beens."

"OK." He pulled a belt out of my wardrobe and a pair of socks and then handed it to me. "You're taking her somewhere nice. That's good, shows you're serious." He looked over his shoulder at me. "You're paying, right?"

"Of course I'm bloody paying."

"Open her door for her. Pull out her chair. Ask her questions about her day. Don't bore her with stories about yours." Garrett was like some kind of dating coach right now, ticking off each item. "Make everything about her." He came to a stop in front of me, and suddenly I felt like I was lined up in formation, ready to hear the station chief's speech. "If you give yourself a chance to get to know who she is as a person, then you can see if there's anything real there, but afterwards, I need you and Rhys to help me get this place tidied up. The dog shelter staff are coming to inspect the place, see if we're a good fit for the dog."

Still wasn't sure what the hell he'd do with a dog. Garrett was a cat person if ever I'd met one, strangely contained, but hey, the story he'd told me about the dog's background? I was in, 100%.

"Done."

I collected up everything he'd handpicked and threw it in a duffel bag, which just had him rolling his eyes. I think he said something about creases or some shit. I didn't think about that as I walked out the door, nor when I entered the station.

"RHETT," Gareth said as soon as I walked in the door.

"I've got a long day of paperwork ahead of me?" I asked, hopeful I wouldn't turn up to my date with the stink of smoke still hanging around me.

"You're heading over to the primary school." He thrust a handful of paper at me. "One of the fellas is out sick, so I'll need you..."

To try and wrangle a bunch of hyperactive little kids, apparently. We tried to convey some fire safety information to the preschoolers, but their little brains weren't able to focus, not with the massive fire truck there. I looked at my partner and we both nodded and then set the kids loose on the truck. They were like a pack of screaming monkeys, climbing like ones as they clambered over the vehicle. We were hoisting some kids up into the back seat, stopping yet others from trying to climb onto the ladders. They each got a turn at tooting the horn, the delight on their faces making the day worth it, even if I had to scramble when we got back to the station at the end of the day. Back into the showers, I cleaned myself up, then carefully changed into my date outfit, taking care to comb my hair just right.

"Well, well, look at you," one of the guys said as I made for the door. "Looking sharp there, Windy."

Mum had named me for Rhett Butler, the character in *Gone with the Wind*, which then devolved into a convoluted series of nicknames before everyone settled on Windy.

"What's going on?" Charlie asked, stumbling out into the hall and then looking me up and down. "Funeral? Dinner with the parents?" He stabbed a finger in the air. "I know—"

Knox stepped out, interrupting his team mate.

"You're going on that date." Those grey eyes seemed to see straight through me. "With Katie, if I'm not mistaken."

"Fuuuck, you're dating Dave's ex?"

"Have to be an improvement on that dickhead."

"She seemed nice, too nice for that idiot." Brent, the station commander's eyes narrowed as he stared at me. "So you better be good to her."

"I'm trying to make sure I'm not late, for one," I said. "So if you'll excuse me?"

I pushed past the lot of them, making for the door, but of course, my dear colleagues needed to have one last jab.

“Romance the shit out of her, Windy! Then maybe you’ll stop being such a miserable prick.”

Was that the answer to all my problems? I didn’t know, sliding behind the wheel of my car and turning the key in the ignition. The world seemed grey, bland, except when I was fighting fires or talking to Katie, and it was past time for me to work out if there was something real between us or just some fantasy that lived in my head.

I PULLED up the front of the veterinary surgery, and for a moment I just gripped the steering wheel tightly. I’d agreed readily when my best friends suggested we look for a girl to share, and it wasn’t just due to our brutal schedules. Some blokes had a way with the ladies, but not me. The plastic of the steering wheel made a small sound of protest, forcing me to pull back and get out of the car. I could do this, I told myself as I walked up the path leading to the surgery. Katie had already said yes. Just needed to turn on the charm, get her talking, and—

“Oh.” I looked up to see Katie had come out the front door, a bunch of keys in her hands. She was obviously ready to lock up, but instead stared at me. Was the blue shirt the wrong one? Mum said the colour made my eyes pop, but— “You said... I thought...”

Katie was studying my appearance like all the world’s secrets could be found within. Her eyes met mine and I was gone, ready to dive into those dark depths and just sink into their warmth. I watched her hand go to her forehead.

“This is a real date?”

Fuck, I thought I’d prepared for everything. I’d inspected the menu, looked at photos of the interior and checked to see if it looked nice. In my mind, I’d played a million scenarios in my head, but not this one. I thought I was clear about what I wanted. I thought... I shook my head sharply, then dared to smile at her.

“Well, it is if you want it to be.”

Chapter 13

Katie

How the hell was I on another date without even realising it?

My hand went to my forehead, feeling a headache start up almost instantly. How had I missed the signs? I took in Rhett's freshly combed hair, the very nice blue shirt, and had his eyes always been that blue? I shook my head, trying to dislodge that errant thought. I couldn't go out to dinner with one of Dave's workmates. I—

Couldn't I?

What loyalty did I owe Dave? My brows jerked down. None. No, less than none.

"Look, we've obviously got our wires crossed," Rhett said, and I felt like I was watching his lips move, but not really taking in what he was saying. "I thought I was being clear about what this was when I asked you out to dinner."

"I thought you meant a quarter pounder in a McDonalds car park," I squeaked out. "I'm not dressed properly for..." God, I was jumping the gun here. He'd said dinner, but by the way he was dressed, it looked like somewhere fancy. "Wherever you wanted to go. Like pet shop, then some cheap takeaway—"

"Hey." Suddenly he was standing right in front of me and two massive hands came to rest on my shoulders. His palms burned through the thin fabric of my blouse. "If that's what you want, we can do that." I looked up and saw exactly how blue Rhett's eyes were. Deep, cornflower blue, that's

why I had mistaken them for brown. They crinkled around the edges as he smiled down at me. "Whatever you want. I'll cancel the reservation."

"Reservation...?"

OK, now I was just being pathetic. I wanted to kick my own arse for being shocked he'd go to that kind of trouble. I was worth dinner reservations, dates, everything, that's what I'd vowed on New Year's Eve, right?

He took a step closer, and it felt like the world narrowed down to just the small space between us. His hands gave my shoulders a gentle squeeze before he pulled away.

"We don't have to go anywhere fancy," he said in a low rumbling voice that I felt all the way down to my toes. "The restaurant isn't what's important. You are."

My vow to stop dating and work on myself evaporated before my eyes, leaving just this. Rhett was always nice to me when I went to the station to meet up with Dave, but I'd never guessed there was something more there. I wanted to know now what he was thinking, feeling, so perhaps that's why I nodded.

"Let's..." Go to dinner, have a good time, I wanted to say. See if there's anything here. "Go to the pet store and then see how we feel after that." My eyes narrowed as something occurred to me. "You are actually getting a dog, right? That wasn't just an attempt to get me to go out on a date with you?"

That smile, those dimples popping, I blinked, suddenly dazzled, but he shook his head.

"I'd never lie to you, Katie." The mood shifted then, both our smiles fading, but that didn't stop him from staring into my eyes. "We are getting a dog. My housemate found one he had to have, but... Does he know I'm here, getting supplies for the dog?" He shrugged, his hands shoved into his pockets. "I may have left that part out."

His boyish expression, the way a fine blush coloured his cheeks, had me laughing despite myself.

"OK, well, do you have the list I gave you? I'll just lock up the surgery and then we can work out what your 'dog' needs."

HE DIDN'T, but I forgave him when we arrived at the pet store, because there was nothing cuter than a big, tough fireman looking embarrassed.

Actually, there was nothing cuter than this fireman.

I didn't check out Dave's colleagues, something that made clear I was not made for situationships, my sister insisted. I should've been keeping my options open, just like Dave was. Problem was, it would've hurt me if Dave did the same at my workplace, so I kept my eyes to myself when I was at the station.

There was nothing to hold me back now.

Safe, inside my car, I could let my eyes roam, taking in those long, powerful legs as they stepped out of his truck, those broad shoulders that tested the seams of his very nice shirt. Of course, that was the moment he looked up. A small smile made clear he had caught me checking him out, but as he drew closer, he didn't seem to mind at all. I grabbed for the door handle, but he was already there, opening it before I had a chance.

This was the shit people did in front of a camera. I didn't know any guy who opened a girl's door, and yet there he was, standing with his elbow propped against the frame, staring down at me. You know that look guys give when they like what they see? I'd seen it directed at plenty of women, but not me and that left me feeling flustered. I clambered out of the car, almost dropped my phone and then recovered quickly.

"So, do you know what kind of dog you're getting?" I asked, trying to steer the conversation to a place I felt was safer.

"Um... no?" He shot me a rueful smile. "I know it's a big one, though. Can't stand little yappy things."

"Puppy or dog?" I asked, if only to watch him dig himself deeper into a hole.

"That I do know. Definitely a dog." He clicked a finger. "A male one."

"OK, so you don't know what breed he is?" He shook his head. "Or what he likes?" Another shake. "So did you intend to go to the pet store at all, or...?"

That sheepish expression vanished as he leaned forward. He hadn't stepped back at all, leaving me pinned between my car and him.

"Or...?" he prompted, waiting for me to finish that sentence.

There were so, so many ways to end it. My ovaries seemed intent on showing me a rapid slideshow of at least some of them, but I shook my head.

“Maybe we’ll just focus on the basics for today,” I said, internally wincing at how prim my voice sounded, right as I ducked under his arm and then started walking towards the pet store.

“We’ll get whatever he needs.” My car door was shut and his suddenly serious tone had me looking back over my shoulder. “He’s had it tough, that much I do know. It was what convinced us to take the dog on in the first place. Look, I totally came by because I needed an excuse to ask you out, but... I gotta do what I can to make this dog’s life easier, y’know?”

Damn, that was the perfect thing to say. Dogs knew people and anyone who liked them, cared for them, was good in my book.

“I do know.” I breathed that out, feeling a pang in my chest. “You’re talking to the right person. I volunteer at a pet shelter and...” Bloody hell, my heart felt like it clenched, able to see each one of their fuzzy little faces right now. “There’s nothing better than helping animals that need it. I’ll talk you through the basics, and some other things that might help your dog adjust. They’re not essential—”

“Yes, they are.” Whoa, Rhett was intense. He seemed to realise that, frowning slightly before continuing. “I mean... just show me what you’d get if you were adopting a rescue dog. Whatever would be on your wish list, we’re getting.”

“OK, let's see what we can find.”

“A DOG NEEDS HIS OWN BED?” Rhett looked the display over critically. “He’ll be allowed up on the couch and in our rooms.”

“If he’s had a rough experience growing up,” I explained. “He’ll need somewhere he feels safe. Think like a den. Small, confined—”

“Like a kennel?” he asked, trailing over to where they were on the shelves.

“I mean, yeah, but they’re mostly for outside only dogs. If he’s going to spend a lot of his time inside with you guys, the dog needs...” I thought of Bronson and the way he snuggled down into his threadbare bed. It was one of the few things we’d given him that he seemed to like. “A space that’s just his,” I said finally. “It doesn’t move, doesn’t change, stays exactly the same, no matter what’s going on in the house.”

“OK.” He turned to inspect the beds, reaching out to grab a particularly plush one. “So soft and squishy? Or something that stays cool in summer?”

“The cool ones are a good idea, particularly if your house runs hot, but traumatised dogs often like these.” I grabbed one of the big fluffy ones we’d found worked well with our dogs. “I’m not sure, but maybe the fur makes them feel like they’re a puppy again. They can be expensive...”

My voice trailed away as he sized the beds up, then grabbed one of the larger ones, before placing it in the shopping trolley.

“Cool, we’ve got a bed. Now what?”

We went down the dog food aisle and I talked him through the range, giving him good options at the cheap, middle and expensive ends of the market. He shouldered a massive bag of primo dog food and placed it in the cart like it was no big thing. I just stared in wonder at how nonchalant he was being. Well, at that and the fact his biceps threatened to pop the seams of his shirt,

“Dog toys are really hit or miss.” I picked up a chunky silicone cone. “Kongs can be good as you stuff treats in here.” I showed him to the hole on one end. “For dogs who need a lot of stimulation, these can be amazing and stop them from digging up your garden...”

A high-pitched giggle had me turning around to see a little girl had come wandering over. She tugged at my pants and beamed at me with a gummy smile.

“Looks like you’ve found a friend.” Rhett smiled as he stepped forward, then crouched down to her level. “OK, sweetheart, where’s your mum and dad?”

“Mum mum!” the girl cried, pointing wildly across the floor to where a harried looking woman was scanning the store.

“Let’s get you to Mum Mum then,” he said. With one hand on the trolley and the other holding the girl’s hand, he walked over to the woman, who looked relieved when we arrived.

“Abigail!” She took the child from Rhett and held her close. “Naughty girl, running off like that.” Abigail started to squirm, making clear how this had happened in the first place. The little girl wanted to run around and explore, not be carried by her mum. Instead, her mother put her in the trolley and then handed her a well-worn doll to play with. “Thank you for bringing her over. I turned around for a minute—”

“And she was off?” I said.

Abigail had climbed up and over the trolley and landed on her feet expertly before running off again.

“Abby!” Mum looked harried. “Abby!”

She went after her daughter, leaving her trolley behind, but she wasn’t fast enough. The glass doors of the shop slid open and in came a teenage boy and his dog. One look at him and I could see exactly what would happen. The dog was a big mastiff, and the kid had him on one of those bloody extendable leads. They were perfectly fine with dogs with excellent recall and in a space where you didn’t need complete control over your dog and I was fairly sure neither of those things were true.

“Doggy!” Abigail cried and then went running towards the kid and his pup.

“Oh my god...” I hissed, ready to go sprinting across the floor, but Rhett was one step ahead of me. With a few long strides of his powerful legs, he was there the moment the dog saw the little girl.

Looks were deceiving with dogs. Plenty of big scary looking pups were gentle as lambs, but you couldn’t assume that when first meeting them. Abigail was too little to know that.

“Abby!” Mum shouted, running towards her daughter, but the dog had the exact same impulse. His whole body quivered with barely concealed power, the teenager finally aware of what was happening.

“Dozer!” he shouted, hauling back on the lead, but even when he mashed his thumb down on the button, the dog kept coming.

I took off at a sprint. We were always taught to anticipate and ensure situations like this didn’t happen rather than react, because you couldn’t always guarantee a positive result. Frantically, I racked my brain, trying to work out what to do, when a sharp command rang through the air.

“Stop!”

Rhett stood between the dog and the child, and both of them looked up at him in surprise. The child stumbled to a halt, the dog’s haunches planting themselves on the ground. Rhett didn’t take his eyes off the dog for a second, not being aggressive, but rather perfectly in control. He knew exactly what he was doing, and that was clear to the dog.

“Doggy!” Abigail cried as her mother swept her into her arms. “Doggy!”

“Abby, we don’t know if that dog is friendly.” You could hear the war being fought between fear and relief in the woman’s voice. “I’ve told you we can’t go rushing up to strange dogs.”

“And you need to keep yours under control in a store.”

The teenage boy's mouth fell open as he looked up at Rhett.

"Um, yeah—"

"And you need a shorter lead." I barrelled up, not feeling calm or centred, but right now that wasn't what was important. "You can't use a long lead like that in a pet store."

"But he pulls if I don't," the kid said with a frown.

"Then you need to lead train him before you can bring him into a space where there are people or other animals." I pulled out my wallet and flicked through the contents, pulling out a card. "This is a really good trainer. He offers classes to the public at little cost."

Rhett smiled as I handed the card over, a familiar mulish expression on the teenager's face. I saw this all the damn time at the vets I worked at, even more at the shelter. Whatever the kid had to say about it was cut off as a staff member approached.

"We're happy for customers to bring their pets into the store as long as they are well controlled..." they said, emphasising the last bit, as we turned around to check on Abigail.

"Oh my god, your brother was amazing!" the mother gushed.

Brother? Why wouldn't she assume Rhett was my boyfriend...

Oh.

I looked at him, then me, and realised what she was thinking.

"Date." He didn't say much more, wrapping his arm around my waist and pulling me against his side. "Katie is my date."

"Oh!" It was her turn to be surprised, and she didn't cover it very well. Her eyelashes fluttered like a butterfly's wings before she recovered. "Well, you'll need to lock him down fast," she told me, but her focus was still on Rhett. "Guy like that, who's good with kids and animals?" She stared at him like he was a horse on market day. "You don't want to let him get away."

"Like Abby is right now?" I said, pointing to where her daughter had sprinted off.

"That little..." she growled before stomping after the child. "Thanks for your help!"

"So, did you want to rescue more small children?" I asked as I turned back to Rhett. "Maybe pull a cat and her kittens from a burning building?"

"Well, I have done that before." He stepped closer again, making me feel like a tiny little thing, rather than... well, me. "But no, right now." I watched his hand move, barely feeling the way his knuckles grazed down

the back of my arm. "I want to work out what we need to get for the dog and then go and grab something to eat. Saving small children?" He shot me a lop-sided grin. "Makes a man hungry."

I watched his lips move, his tongue flick out, and I followed its path as he moistened his mouth. The sheen that was left, I stared at it, watching it slowly dry. What I was actually doing was standing there and staring like a gormless twit, so I turned on my heel and began to move.

"This way." Scanning a display of the worming tablet helped me get my head together. Talking about hookworms and roundworms was familiar territory, because this? No one had ever taken me on a date to a pet store before, but it was more than that. I felt like I had his complete attention the whole time I talked. He listened to me talk about the different pests that dogs could pick up and their effects on humans, nodding along as those blue eyes stared into mine, and that was a seductive thing. I didn't need flowers or jewels. I just needed someone who listened to me. In the end, he paid for all his purchases and then escorted me back to my car, a question hanging unsaid between us. I sucked in a breath and then smiled. "So yeah, we can go to the restaurant if you want."

"I want." He placed an arm on my car window and leaned in then, my eyes getting bigger the closer he got. "You can ride with me and I'll bring you back to your car after, or I can meet you there."

"Meet you there," I squeaked out.

I was left to watch him saunter away, taking in the way his pants clung to that perfectly formed arse. The man obviously did not skip leg day. Right as I was wondering how the hell I got myself into this situation, a buzz in my pocket broke the spell I was under. When I dragged my phone out, I saw it was Mandie.

"Gym," she told me in that no nonsense tone of hers. "No excuses. We need to get a routine happening and—"

"I've got a date."

"What?" It was about the only thing I could say that would shut her up. "I thought you said... Rhys called, didn't he? So you're gonna give him a chance?"

"Not Rhys," I told her as I unlocked the car. "Rhett."

I put her on speakerphone knowing she'd want to dissect the whole thing as I drove over to the restaurant.

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Chapter 14

Rhett

Katie said yes. She freaking said yes. Every damn day I dealt with one emergency or another, and somehow the words of one woman were the one thing to get my heart racing. I spent so much time with my eyes on the rear vision mirror, tracking her car's path, that I should've had an accident. Instead, I made it in one piece, jumping out of the car to meet her at hers, opening her door before she could.

"Oh..." I hated the way she looked surprised every time I did something nice. It lit a fire under me, though. If I could persuade her to date me seriously, I'd make sure she came to take all this stuff for granted. Katie smiled. "Um... thanks. Very gentlemanly." That smile faded when she saw the restaurant. I turned around, scanning the glossy frontage, looking for signs of what put her off. "Though is it too late to cancel the reservations?"

"Why?"

I was too blunt, just blurting out what I thought, and that's just what I did right now.

"Ah, well..." She looked down at herself, as if the reason was self-evident.

"I'm not following," I said.

"This place looks pretty fancy," she explained, "and I... Oh god, I've got a stain on my shirt from lunch."

"Is that it?" I smiled then and did what I'd been longing to do since the moment I saw her. My hand claimed hers and that feeling of rightness intensified. Her palm was so small I felt like I needed to cradle it like a

wounded bird. “Not sure about you, but I don’t give a shit about your shirt.” Her eyes flicked up to meet mine. “I mean, it’s very nice.” Very nice indeed. I wanted to feel that silky fabric under my fingertips, right before I freed the full breasts that heaved beneath it. “But tonight isn’t about getting dressed up all fancy. I just wanted to eat some good food in some good company. Can you do that for me?”

I was coming on too strong, I was sure of it, but her lips twitched despite herself.

“OK, if you want to eat dinner with a girl that had to wipe dog vomit off her pants...” she warned, taking a step towards the front door.

Get her talking about herself and be a good listener, that’s what Garrett had said, and he was always one for the ladies.

“Dog vomit?” I held open the restaurant door for her and waited for her to walk in. “Is that a bit of an occupational hazard?”

APPARENTLY IT WAS. Over a glass of wine and some nibbly things we ordered, I found out about a Maltese terrier that had an unfortunate habit of eating things he shouldn’t, hence the vomit, a neurotic Samoyed that hid under the chair the entire time, as if that made the twenty kilo dog less obvious, and a couple of Maine Coon cats who were struggling with pissing outside their litter boxes.

“You love animals, don’t you?”

Fuck, that was such an obvious question, but I just wanted her to keep talking. Not sure if she knew this, but her whole face lit up as she discussed the patients that had come through the door today.

“More than people, really.” She took a guilty sip of her wine, realising how that sounded. “I mean, you know where you stand with a cat or a dog.”

“Tail wagging means happy to see you or mad.” I shrugged. “Depending on the species. Kinda be easier if people did the same.”

“Yes!” She leaned across the table to snag one of these little spicy meatball things. I pushed the plate closer. “Like if clients came in with perked ears or ones flattened against their skull, then I’d know how to deal with them. Talk quietly, gently and maybe offer them some snacks.” I pushed another plate towards her filled with mini sliders she seemed to like. She took one while shooting me a suspicious look, but rather than eat it, it

got waved through the air as she spoke. “Or tell them they’re being a very good girl or boy.”

I shifted restlessly in my chair, almost able to imagine the scenario she was describing.

“And what would you do if they were being a good boy?”

Shit, that came out way more intense than I meant it to. Her slider stopped halfway to her mouth, then she dropped it onto her plate. One eyebrow cocked up, making clear she was picking up what I was laying down.

“Well, how good are we talking?”

Were we flirting? I always found women so damn hard to read. Like were her eyes shining, her smile spreading slowly because she was imagining the people bringing their pets to the vets, or...?

Was she thinking about a very different scenario? One where I was a very good boy or a very bad one, depending on how you viewed it. Only one way to find out. I leaned forward, placing my elbows onto the table. Her pupils blew out at that, but she didn’t retreat backwards. That was promising.

I wasn’t good at longing. I either wanted something and tried to get it, or I walked away and resigned myself to the fact it was never going to happen. Part of me knew I should’ve done that with Katie the moment I saw she was intent on staying with Dave.

But I didn’t.

The bittersweet sensation of staring at her, tracing the shapes of her curves with my eyes and wondering, wondering at the sounds she’d make when I stripped away every inch of her clothing... It hurt too much to continue, but felt too good to stop.

“Good.” I barely croaked out my answer. “Better. The very best you’ve had.”

Because I would be if, when, we took things to the next level. I’d make damn sure of that.

“The best client to walk in the door of the vets?” She was deliberately misunderstanding me, but I could play along. “Well, I’d save the best treat of all for them. I’d—”

“How are we doing here?” The waiter paled when I looked up, a barely contained snarl on my lips. “Ah... are we ready for another drink?”

Katie let out a little giggle, helping defuse the tension, if not alleviate the waiter's confusion.

"Um... I think I'll have a rum and Coke," she said, swilling her wine in her glass. "The wine is very good but—"

"Thank god," I groaned. "Can't stand the stuff myself." The waiter looked personally offended. Perhaps because the bottle was his selection. "A rum and Coke and a beer, thanks, mate."

The waiter nodded stiffly, removing the wine and the glasses before turning to get our orders.

"So why did you order wine if you didn't like it?" Katie asked me in a low hiss, as if the other diners might overhear.

I could tell her some story, some lie, but that wasn't me.

"My housemate told me to order wine, not beer, like a Neanderthal," I replied. "I said I wanted to impress you and that was his advice." My fingers played with the tablecloth. "So that's what I did."

She blinked at that, taking a second to process before shooting me an impish smile.

"Wine is just grape juice that's gone off."

"Tastes like it too." Now we had stopped pretending to be civilised, I ran a thumb through the barbeque sauce left from the meatballs and licked it off, cleansing my palate. Of course, that was when the waiter appeared with our drinks. They were placed on the table with a barely contained sniff before he removed the small plates before us in readiness for the main meal. I took a big sip of beer, relishing the bitter, hoppy taste. "Here's to being honest about what we actually want."

I had a plan in my head about how this was going to go. I'd spent half the night tossing it around in my head, amending that plan when Garrett gave me his feedback. I couldn't remember a single bit of it right now. It was going to my head, Katie was. The fact she was here and not with fucking Dave had me doing something really stupid.

My hand shot out and grabbed her chair leg and she was forced to put her drink down as I dragged it close. People turned to look, but I didn't care, not when I finally had her sitting close enough to me that I could smell her floral perfume, the sweet scent of Coke, the burn of rum, and her. She stared up at me, a question on her lips, but it died there.

"I hated that you were with Dave. He wasn't fit to touch the ground you walked on, let alone you. I wanted to break every single one of the fingers

that touched you, punch his teeth down the throat that dared to speak your name.”

I shook my head, the icy condensation of the beer the only cool thing in the room right now, because even I knew I was fucking things up. It was like everything I felt about her was a bucket filled to the brim, suddenly too heavy to carry another step, and so I doused her with it, killing whatever fire I’d managed to spark within her. I had more to say, so much more, but right as I tried to gauge her response, the bloody waiter returned.

“Steak for the gentleman,” the guy said, as if I didn’t remember what I’d ordered. “And the lamb for the lady.”

He wanted to say something, about our drink choices, the change in our seating arrangement, but I just met the guy’s gaze head on and said thanks, dismissing him. He wasn’t my focus, Katie was.

“OK, that was...” Her voice was a low murmur, her hands grasping her cutlery in a death grip as she cut into her meat. She chanced a sidelong look at me, but whatever she saw there had her looking away just as fast. “Hot. Unexpected, but hot.”

“I thought you could see it written all over my face.” My steak went ignored because I had no appetite at all. “Every bloke in the station knew.”

“Every...?” How the hell was this a surprise to her? The way she studied her plate made clear it was. “You hid that better than you thought. I wish you’d said something.” My hand rose from where it rested on the back of her chair, ready to tease that little tendril of hair that sprung free from her ponytail. “Hell, if you had, I don’t know if I’d ever gone out with Dave.” Her eyes met mine now, steady and unblinking. “I knew what he was like, that he wasn’t treating me right.”

I wouldn’t make that mistake, that I swore, but I stayed quiet and let her finish.

“But you didn’t, and I did.” It felt like I lost something as she turned back to her plate. “I did and I need to start putting myself first. I’m not sure if I’m ready for anything else right now.”

“Then I’ll wait.” My heart screamed at me, declaring that a very bad idea, but I was the one in control. “I’ll be a very good boy and wait until you feel ready.”

That little snort of a laugh was all I needed to keep hope alive. That and the way she shivered as I ran my fingers down the back of her neck, only to pull away. I grabbed my knife and fork and dug into this overpriced steak.

"THANK GOD YOU'RE HOME!" Rhys groaned as I walked into the living room. "Garrett is on another one of his benders."

"Garrett's doing what now?" The man himself appeared, still dressed in his scrubs as he carried around a bucket of cleaning supplies. "How'd the date go? Did you take my advice? Did you shut up and listen?"

"She's not ready." That should've been a death sentence, but something in me couldn't take it that way. "Not yet. She just got out of a thing with Dave and she wants to find herself a bit before she starts dating seriously."

"So why are you smiling?" Garrett asked with a little frown.

"Because I made clear that I'll be there when she is. She didn't screw up her face or run out of the restaurant screaming in horror."

"Probably should've," Rhys muttered. "Has she seen you when you first wake up? Scary."

"Instead, she seemed..."

Soft, sweet, pliant when I pushed her up against her car, supporting my weight on the arm propped above her head. I'd watched her eyes widen, her breathing pick up, right before I darted closer. Just a brief little kiss, little more than brushing my lips over hers, but they still tingled from that moment of contact.

"She seemed..." Rhys circled his finger through the air frantically.

"Open to the idea, at least I think she was. Better than watching her date that fucking idiot. He never treated her right, but I will." I nodded. "I'll make that clear when she's ready to see it."

"Seems like we're all hung up on unavailable women." Rhys sat down hard on the couch. "My gym hottie ran away from me."

"So she's not completely insane," Garrett drawled. "Noted."

"The idiot she was with saw her curves and turned his fucking nose up at her so he could chase after some skinny bitch." He shook his head. "Just wanna punch that guy so fucking hard." I watched Rhys leap to his feet. "I need to head back to the gym, go and do some real heavy lifts to get me out of my head."

"I'll—"

I was about to volunteer to do the same. Having a fairly easy day at work, coupled with the nerves I was battling during the date, that adrenaline needed to go somewhere.

“Help me clean up the house first.” Garrett shoved bottles of cleaning chemicals at us. “You two have had dates with Miss Right? Well...” He sprayed the glass coffee table, then started cleaning it aggressively. “I met someone too. She’s the reason why we’re getting a dog, not a cat.”

“I knew it!” Rhys said, stabbing his finger in the air. “I knew you didn’t get a cat for a reason.”

“This girl...” I knew exactly what Garrett was feeling as he shook his head. That same rush of excitement, surprise and fascination I felt when I first met Katie, I was sure of it. “She was with this poor, busted up looking dog and was looking so damn cute. Just started telling me the dog’s entire story and I’m not hearing a word.” He looked up then. “I just stared into her eyes and knew I would do whatever the hell she wanted, y’know? We’d have a house full of pets if that’s what she needed. Which is why you need to help me clean up.” Cleaning rags were thrown our way. “The shelter called and no one else could do the inspection but her, so she’s coming by after work tomorrow night.”

Chapter 15

Katie

“Katie, honey, I’m gonna need you to inspect the house of the people that want to adopt Bronson,” Marg, the shelter manager said.

“What?” I looked up as someone approached the reception desk and indicated I’d be with them in a second.

“Jo’s out sick still and I’m swamped,” she said. “Anyway, Bronson’s your baby. No one knows what he needs better than you. I told the guy—” Garrett, his name was Garrett, I remembered that. “That you’d come by after work. Will that be OK?”

“I was supposed to hit the gym with my sister,” I told her, wincing at the thought of it. “So the answer is obviously yes.”

“You’re a doll. I’ll text you the address.”

WHICH IS how I came to be standing outside a very nice house in the suburbs. I looked up and down the line of neat lawns and pretty garden beds, somewhat reassured. Trouble is a bougie neighbourhood didn’t preclude animal abuse. I looked down at the checklist Marg had sent through and then went to knock on the door.

“Hi.”

Garrett was there, opening the door for me before I even had a chance. I took a step backwards, let out an involuntary laugh before holding out a hand.

“Hi, I’m—”

“Katie.” His hand was big, strong, warm, and reminding me wayyy too much of another one right now. Would he give me whole body shivers when he touched my neck, like Rhett had? I thought I’d imagined how magnetic Garrett’s smile was, but nope, he was freaking gorgeous. “I remember. I’m—”

“Garrett Jackson,” I said, making a show of reading it off the form. “Did Marg call and tell you about the change of plans? She couldn’t make it for the home inspection.”

“Rang me last night.” He stepped aside and ushered me in. “Come through and see what you think.”

“Wow, your place is gorgeous!” I said as I walked down the hall. All muted shades of grey on the walls, polished floorboards, and a stylish lounge suite in the living room, I ticked off boxes on the form, all while harbouring some secret fears. Where the hell would Bronson fit in a place like this? Usually I would’ve just silently wondered, but not now. “It smells amazing too.”

“Fresh baked cookies.” He walked behind a polished kitchen counter and then pushed a plate towards me. “I hope you like chocolate chip.”

“Love them.” I took one and bit into it, letting out an involuntary moan at the taste exploding in my mouth. “But you didn’t need to bribe me. We assess potential adoptees’ places based on the dog’s needs.”

“Well...” He turned around and pulled some coffee cups out of the cupboards. “I sent you a text about going to grab a coffee.” Shit, I froze mid-bite, remembering that his text was left on read. “But you didn’t get back to me, so I figured we could do that now. How do you like your coffee?”

“In an IV, pumped straight into my veins?” I said, as he turned the kettle on. A fancy French press was produced, rich smelling grounds spooned into the bottom. “Though if we’re going to talk about Bronson...” I turned and looked out the big glass door at the back of the house. The garden was gorgeous, the fence secure. If Bronson was any other dog, I’d be bending over backwards to get Garrett to adopt him. “There’s nothing wrong with your house.”

“So we’ve passed? Phew.” He made a show of wiping his brow with the back of his hand.

“But it won’t stay looking perfect with a dog in the house. Bronson needs a safe space, one where he can come out of his shell, be messy even.”

I set the checklist down and walked over to the light grey sectional couch. “What if your lounge suite gets stained, the fabric snagged?” I caught his wince when I looked up. “You can definitely train a dog not to, but Bronson...”

It was clear then why Marg sent me to do the inspection. In general, we just tended to see if the dog would have adequate shelter, if there were other pets or kids to take into consideration, or the fence was in good order. Bronson needed more than that.

“This place is a million times better than the one we found him in, but that doesn’t mean it’s right for him,” I said finally.

Garrett sucked in a breath, ready to reply, but the kettle started to whistle. He turned it off and then poured boiling water into the press. Coffees were poured, milk and sugar added before he carried both cups over to the dining room table, indicating I needed to follow. He set mine down at the head of the table, taking the seat to my right.

“So tell me what he needs.” There was something quiet, contained about Garrett. “I came to the shelter to get a cat.”

“See, that’s a problem.” I sighed. “I know I kinda hit you with an avalanche of information about him, but I was just excited about the prospect of getting him away from the shelter.”

Something that still really needed to happen for the dog’s mental wellbeing.

“You convinced me.” He stated that simply, then took a sip of his coffee. “You told me his story and I knew I had to help. The couch...” He looked over at the offending item. “It’s just a couch. I could replace them all with La-Z-Boys and my housemates would be ecstatic. Would Bronson like his own recliner?”

I couldn’t help but smile. My fears sounded stupid now I’d started to air them.

“Like whatever he needs.” He leaned in closer. “You just let me know. We could do a trial or bring him around to the house and see what he thinks about it. Maybe do a gradual shift from the shelter to here. You could bring him over for an hour or two, see how he deals with me and my housemates.”

I shook my head.

“You’re saying all the right things.”

“But...”

That winning smile was back. I wanted to resist it, but that made me think about why. I knew that Bronson's days were limited in the shelter. The vet had made clear that they were running out of medical options. Dogs had been known to waste away from sheer misery. My motivations were selfish. If Bronson left the shelter, I'd never see him again, but I couldn't let that pain get in the way of his future.

"You know you'll be able to come and see him whenever you want," he said.

I looked up and blinked.

"How do you know exactly what to say?" I asked.

He shrugged.

"Comes from being a nurse, I guess. People are sick, hurting, unable to speak. If I waited around for them to tell me what they need, then I wouldn't be very good at my job. Instead, I watch, I listen."

He was doing that right now, and that attention was a little unnerving. It felt like the world worked hard to ignore me most of the time, and now all of a sudden I was basking in all of this male attention.

"You're scared of losing him. He's special to you." I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. There was no way I'd drink that coffee, because my throat was closing up by the second. His hand grabbed mine. "Sometimes it's like that on the ward. You have a special patient, one that's funny or sweet or just doing it tough, and for a while there, you're a part of their life. Then you have to let them go." I squeezed his hand hard. "Because you know the hospital isn't the right place for them to spend their lives, that they have somewhere else to go." He stared into my eyes. "Is there anywhere else Bronson can go? Any other families looking to adopt him?"

I let out a long breath, then straightened up.

"No." When I looked out at the living room, I saw it with fresh eyes. Bronson could make himself a little cubbyhole in the narrow space between the couch and the wall. He could trot out into the back garden, walk without being constrained by the lead or with the sounds of a million other dogs yapping. He could live a quiet life, a comfortable one, and maybe, just maybe, he could be happy. I forced myself to smile. "I'll approve your application." I looked down the checklist, then saw there was one more thing to add. "You said you have housemates. Are they going to be around

this afternoon? I need to meet everyone who'll be around the dog, just to make sure he's in good hands."

"Not tonight." Garrett winced. "They've both got work, but..." He stirred his spoon through his coffee. "I could make sure they're home tomorrow night? You could come by and have dinner with them, make sure they're a good fit."

"Dinner?" I'd had more dinner dates this week than I had in my entire life. No, this wasn't a date, I corrected myself. Just me getting to know Bronson's new owners. "Sure, I could do that. What would you like me to bring?"

"Just yourself," he said with a grin. "How do you feel about lasagna?"

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Chapter 16

Katie

“Gym!” I screamed when my sister leapt towards me the next morning, forcing me to drop my work clothes. “You, me, a set of weights.” She flexed her biceps in an exaggerated pose. “Time to feel the burn, baby.”

“I can’t. I—” I started to say.

“New year, new you!” Mandie stabbed her finger in the air in front of my face. “You said that was what you wanted.”

“I’m going out to dinner,” I explained, pulling on a shirt.

“Again?” Her grin was immediate as she flopped down on my bed, creasing my clothes. “Who with? Rhys? Rhett? Rhys and Rhett, and then the two of them devour you from head to toe for dessert?”

I tossed a pair of socks at her head, but the bitch caught them expertly. Damn sporty person.

“A guy who wants to adopt one of the dogs,” I told her, walking over to my dressing table and adjusting my work clothes. “I went round to his place last night, but he has two housemates—”

“Who are smoking hot and he and his best friends want to make you the meat in a three man sandwich?” Her elated expression shifted to one of confusion. “How exactly would you do that? Like would their arms—?”

“One very nice nurse who is going to give Bronson a home.” I turned to face her. “Get him out of the shelter. I don’t know how hot they are, but I need to make sure they won’t hurt the dog. That’s my focus.”

She went serious for a second, then cocked an eyebrow.

“Is the nurse hot?”

“Murse... Oh my god, we are not calling male nurses...” I stopped myself. “Nurses, that.”

“But is he hot?” she asked, a slow smile spreading across his face.

“It doesn’t matter if he’s hot or not.” I sat down on the edge of my bed and started pulling on my shoes. “It just matters if he’s going to be a good pet owner.”

“So he is hot.” Her arms went around me, locking me in place. “He’s hot, and he’s got two friends. You had dinner with gym hottie, then dinner with firefighter hottie, and now you’re bailing on me to dine with nurse hottie.”

A hard kiss was pressed to my temple.

“Lucky, I’m just glad you’re finally getting the attention you deserve.” She bounced off the bed. “Did I, or did I not, say you need to start playing the field?”

“There is no field. There is no playing!” I yelped.

“Look, I’ll let you off training for a night so you can get it in all holes from three hot guys.”

Her hands moved, obviously trying to work out how that would go. It was when her mouth started opening, ready to gobble down ghost dick, that I was forced to intervene.

“No dick, no holes,” I shot back, and that was a mistake. You just had to let Mandie run her mouth until she was done. Any attempt to intervene just set her off again. “I’m just having some lasagna—”

“Lasagna? Delicious layers of Bolognese and bechamel sauce, coupled with pasta and cheese?” Her grin widened. “Something that takes hours to prepare. Yeah, this has got nothing to do with dogs and everything to do with doggy style.”

“Did you have coffee?” I narrowed my eyes as I looked her over. “You know how you get when you have caffeine.”

“Nope, just high on life and the fact my big sister is building herself a roster. Rhys one night, Rhett, the next, the nurse boy.”

“Garrett.” She stopped still, lips twitching as she watched me closely. “The nurse’s name is Garrett.”

“Of course it is.” She fell backwards onto the bed, then started wildly humping the air. “Garrett! Garrett! Give me the good dick, Garrett!”

I was forced to shove a pillow over her face lest she wake the neighbours with her idiocy. I grabbed a travel mug of coffee and made a

beeline for the door to ensure I opened the veterinary surgery up on time. As I slid behind the computer and read through the schedule for the day, I lost myself in the details, right up until knock off time.

That's when the nerves started up.

AS I DROVE OVER, I realised that Rhys and Rhett had done everything right. By not letting me know they wanted me to go on a date, I was able to sidestep my usual anxiety. I had gone through a drive through bottle shop and bought a bottle of wine, never able to turn up to someone's house for dinner empty handed, but... My sister's stupid words haunted me.

The way Garrett had stared at me at the shelter...? That was just him being overwhelmed by the sheer amount of verbal diarrhoea coming out of my mouth, right? The way his eyes dropped down as I munched one of those cookies. That was just horrified fascination as I scarfed it down. This offer of dinner, to make me a labour intensive meal, was just him buttering me up... I came to a stop abruptly, blinking when I realised I'd parked outside Garrett's house.

It was fine, everything was fine.

I'd get the introductions over and done with and then go home to pelt my sister with gym equipment, if that's what it took to shut her up. That decided, I grabbed the wine and the checklist and then walked up to the front door. Before I could knock, it was pulled open.

"Oh... again." I shook my head as Garrett grinned at me. "Is that something you do to all visitors, because it's kind of unnerving?"

"Not usually." He peered out at the street. "My bloody housemates are running late and I thought you were one of them. I was gonna ream them out for not getting their arse home in time."

"Well, wine?" I held the bottle up, and his eyes were instantly drawn to the label. "It helps most things, I hear?"

"You didn't have to do that." Those long fingers plucked it from my grip. "But this is a bloody nice drop. Come in. We'll have a glass while we're waiting."

"Wow!" I stopped midway into the living room, the savoury scent of good food cooking coupled with an expertly dressed table had me staring. "This smells... This looks..."

“Amazing?” He popped the cork with expert ease and the rolled up sleeves of his button down shirt showcased his thick forearms perfectly. Wine glasses appeared from nowhere and he filled them with a flourish, offering me one before putting the glass to his nose. A little swish and he breathed in the bouquet, making me really nervous about my choice. One mouthful later and he was rolling it around on his palate, then drinking it down with an appreciative nod. “Mm... that is good.”

I took a sip myself, but before I could just scull the entire glass, his hand was on my shoulder, steering me towards the table. My chair was pulled out and he tucked it under, sitting down beside me.

“So, how was your day? Adopted out any pets?”

He sat with his elbows on the table, his hand cradling his glass loosely.

“Um, no. I only volunteer at the shelter, so I don’t usually have much to do with that side of things. I work at a vets.”

“You’re an animal doctor?” he asked.

“No, not even a nurse. I’m just the receptionist.”

“Just a receptionist.” He shook his head. “I’ve worked on the front desk of the emergency department. Dealing with people is hell.”

“Try overwrought pet parents.” I slumped back against my chair. “Ones who want their precious seen right now. Others who don’t think they should have to pay. The worst are the ones that bitch the vets out.”

“Biting the hand that’s trying to help them?” He reached over and clinked his glass with mine. “Nice to know it’s not just people in hospitals that pull that shit. After the pandemic, we dealt—”

“Hey!”

We both turned around at the sound of a masculine voice. A familiar one, it felt, but how could that be true? I stared at the doorway into the living room, hearing the sounds of boots clattering against the floor. It got closer and closer, my mouth falling open as soon as I realised who it was.

“Got caught up at the gym and...”

Rhys stood there, staring at me, then Garrett.

“Me too. The station chief...”

Rhett came around the corner and then stopped still, a smile forming instantly.

“Katie?”

Mandie theorised I’d be calling out the guys’ names before the end of the night, but it turned out they were the ones saying mine. Each man stared

at me, then each other, when they couldn't work out the reason why. Mandie told me that having a roster of guys was the only way to survive the avalanche of fuck boys out there, but she missed one crucial detail.

It was a really good idea to make sure they didn't live in the same house.

"How the hell do you two know Katie?" Rhett asked.

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Chapter 17

Garrett

Everything was going to hell.

“How do I know Katie?” Rhys said. “I told you about the hot girl with the smoothie at the gym.”

“Oh god...” I watched Katie wince, her head going to her hands.

“How the hell do you know her?” he snapped at Rhett.

“Katie was with Dave.” Rhett said that like this was something we should all have known, but that couldn’t have been further from the truth. “She...” He blinked, staring wide eyed at the girl, but she didn’t see the pain there. “She’s the girl I’ve been crushing on all this time.”

“That was Katie.” I shook my head. “Your Katie—”

“Not his Katie,” Rhys growled. “You stood around with your thumb up your arse while that dickhead you worked with treated her like shit.” He turned to face us. “Babe, I would never—”

“Jesus, Rhys—” I started to say, the discomfort coming off the woman in question in waves.

“So how do you know her?”

Both of the men I called best friends stared me down, suddenly united.

“Well, I haven’t been pining after her or getting splattered with smoothies.” Katie wouldn’t even look at us right now. That meant I needed to shut the fuck up, but I ignored that impulse. “But she’s the hot girl that talked me into adopting a dog, not a cat. Katie...”

I had talked people off ledges before and I could do that again, but as I reached across the table, she jerked to her feet. For a second, I thought she

was going to run out the door screaming, but instead she poured a glass of wine, filling it right to the brim, then shaking her head and drinking straight from the bottle. I watched her swallow mouthful after mouthful of wine until she was forced to catch a breath.

“Well, it looks like you all have a lot to talk about,” she said finally, then nodded to me. “I’ll approve your application—”

“Katie—”

“How the freaking hell did we end up here again?”

Jesus Christ, Rhett could be blunt sometimes. He just opened his damn mouth and the words came spilling out. The change in Katie was immediate. Rather than spooked, her whole body went perfectly still.

“What do you mean, again?”

Tread fucking carefully, that was the message I got. There was no hiding now. She stared each one of us down, waiting for an answer. Of course, that was the moment I smelled the acrid stink of burning cheese.

“Shit, the lasagna!” I was up and out of my seat, wrenching the oven door open and pulling out a dish of pasta that had now burned to a deep brown.

“Don’t worry about the damn food,” Rhys snapped, stepping forward. “Look, Katie—”

“Is this some kind of kink for you?” I heard the pain in her voice and that distracted me from the mess in the pan far more effectively than anything my housemates had to say. “Do you guys like, pick up some girl and what...” Her brow creased. “Share her between you like a slab of beer?”

These were the words of someone who’d been really hurt and feared a repeat performance. I let out a shuddering breath, setting the tea towel down.

“Look, can we talk about this?” I asked. “Calmly, seriously. I’ll dish up the food—”

“The food doesn’t matter.” Rhett looked so damn pale right now. His hands clenched into fists, something that had Katie taking a step backwards. I was moving then, placing myself between her and my friend, before he finished what he had to say. “You think this is some kind of weird thing we have going?” I didn’t move an inch as he drew closer, but I felt Katie peer out from behind me. “It wasn’t like that at all.”

“Maybe Garrett has it right.” Rhys shook his head as he looked at me, then Katie. “Freaking Tauruses. Everything is better with food.”

“This has nothing to do with—” I started to say.

“Can you sit down with us, have a meal, and promise not to run out of here?” he asked Katie in a small voice. “We’ll answer every damn question you’ve got.”

“Katie?” I turned around to find a harried looking woman who was all too pale, except for the bright red spots in her cheeks. Her eyes flicked from one to the other of us as I stepped closer. “You want out? I’ll escort you to your car.”

She was going to say yes. My heart ached with every beat as I watched her swallow hard, then nod slowly. I had this all planned out in my head. I’d wow her with my cooking, have my trusty wingmen back me up, make me look good to the woman I wanted to impress, and instead she was backed up against the kitchen cupboard like a wild animal.

“Dinner...” she croaked out, nodding at the lasagna. “Answers and dinner, in that order.”

I could do that. A drawer was opened and a spatula was retrieved. I sliced up the pasta and was dishing it up in seconds. A side salad was added to each plate, a few shavings of parmesan added to each plate, along with a drizzle of balsamic vinegar over the salad. I had all four plates balanced on my arm and then carried them over to the table. This had to be what a UN negotiation between hostile countries was like. Everyone stared at each other, not the food. Once I was sitting down, I placed my hands together, elbows on the table, and then let out a long sigh.

“The last girl I dated...” I didn’t like to think about Natasha, but I couldn’t help but see her face right now. “Was the same one we all dated.” A wary look came my way. “Everyone knew. We were up front about it.”

“Met on a polyam dating site,” Rhys mumbled.

“She wasn’t.” Rhett hadn’t softened for a second. Instead, his eyes bore into Katie’s, demanding her attention. “Nat...” He shook his head. “Natasha... It said on our profile that we were looking for something serious. We had been dating for a couple of months—”

“When we met her for dinner to see if she wanted to be exclusive with us.” Rhys picked up a fork, but it was just to move some lettuce around his plate. “Felt like a foregone conclusion.”

“There was no indication that Natasha wanted something different to what we wanted.” God, this fucking hurt. It was like digging up old corpses, the stink of them filling the room, forcing us to keep our breaths shallow. “It was supposed to be a celebration.”

Suddenly, I understood Rhys’ demand that I ignore the food. The cheese, the meat sauce I’d laboured over, it felt like a congealing mess, disgusting to look at.

“We wanted to commit to her, wholly and solely.” Rhett studied Katie closely, and I knew why. He was trying to get a read on her reaction before she got a chance to say a thing. Anticipating the blow before it came. “And she...?”

I knew Natasha’s rejection hit him hard. It had for all of us, but right now I was beginning to think it was hardest for him.

“She didn’t want us like that.” Rhys pushed his plate away. “She thought it was fun and hot having the three of us panting after her, but that was it. Turns out she wasn’t looking for anything serious. Nothing wrong with that. Just would’ve been nice to know before we...”

Shut up, I thought furiously. *Just shut the fuck up*. We were vomiting up our past all over the table I’d worked hard to set, so I wasn’t surprised when Katie pushed her chair backwards.

“I know I said I’d stay for dinner, but...” Her throat bobbed. “I’m really not hungry.”

“I can put some pasta in a takeaway container for you.” It was a relief to stand up, retreat into the kitchen. “You can take it—”

“I’ll approve your application for Bronson.” A hand came to rest on my arm and that had me standing there, perfectly still. “I can confidently say that each one of you will be a great fit, if you still want him?”

“Katie.” I turned to face her, my eyes taking in the fall of her hair, the ten different shades of brown and gold in her eyes. “Of course, we do. I didn’t offer to adopt him because I wanted to...” Get in your pants, that went unspoken. “He’s an amazing dog and we want to give him a good home.”

“OK, I’ll let the shelter know. It was nice...”

Katie turned to face the rest of the room, but she didn’t finish her sentence, rushing out of the house, leaving the three of us to stare after her. I flinched when I heard the front door slam shut. Fuck, I’d organised to have the day off work, cooking, planning all day for this dinner, and for

what? I picked up the now cooled lasagna tray and started scraping it into the mulch bin, knowing none of us were going to be able to eat it.

“Gym,” Rhys announced, collecting his plates and Katie’s. Rhett clung to his.

“We’re not—” I said.

“We go to the gym and blow off some steam, lift heavy until our backs ache and our heads are empty.” He stared at the two of us, a challenge clear in his eyes. “Then when we’ve burned all that energy off, we work out how the fuck we’re gonna get Katie to see us as three guys she wants to date.”

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Chapter 18

Katie

And this was why I didn't want to start dating again.

People made out it was about sex, about attraction, about fun, but I knew. As I sped down the highway, trying to put as much distance between me and the three of them, I was forced to confront what it really was.

Hope.

Hope that you'd find the other half of your heart. Hope you'd find someone kind, loving, sweet. Hope you'd find that one person who'd be by your side as the world went to hell. I hadn't felt like that with Dave, and honestly, I was beginning to think I never would. Three guys sharing one woman... What in the freaking reverse harem—? My train of thought was abruptly caught off by the sound of my phone ringing. I'd texted Mandie the basics before I set off and figured it'd have to be her now. I tapped the button on the steering wheel to answer the phone hands free and said, "Bloody hell, you'll never guess what happened."

"What's that, dear?"

Shit, it was Marg, the shelter manager, not Mandie.

"Um... that Bronson has a new home!" I kept my tone light and breezy. "I met all three guys..." And they made clear they have a really unusual relationship dynamic. "They seem perfect for Bronson. The house is nice, the yard secure..." I remembered the pet store visit now and knew that the dog would have everything he needed. "They've already invested a fair bit of money into getting everything he might need." I sighed internally as I

remembered Rhett's promise to do everything he could to help Bronson. "I think he should go to them."

"Well, I'll let them know. Thanks so much for doing the home visit, doll."

"Cool." My throat was closing up and I felt tears prick the corners of my eyes. "I won't be in at the shelter for a week or so. I just need..."

I tried to explain, but I just couldn't.

"He's a special dog. I get it. You've always been the most amazing volunteer. Come back whenever you're ready."

She signed off then, but the minute the line was free, my phone rang again.

"What the freaking hell!" Mandie yelled down the phone. "The three hot guys all know each other and are polyamorous? Like I was joking before but—"

"Where are you?" I asked.

"Downtown at the Burgher Bar. You should come by!"

"On my way," I replied before ending the call.

Mandie hung out at fancy places I wouldn't be seen dead in, but right now a few overpriced cocktails were definitely in order. I needed to dissect what the hell had just happened, stat, and she was the best person for the job.

"Oh my god...!" Mandie got to her feet when she caught sight of me, shimmying over in a gorgeous gold-sequined dress. "The hottie wrangler, ladies and gentleman."

She was announcing that to the whole bar, but thankfully the music and din of everyone talking at once kept anyone from hearing her.

"Shut up!" I hissed, plonking my butt down in the spare seat she gestured to, only to be met by a barrage of curious looks.

"Girls, this is my fabulous sister, Katie. Kate, these are my girls, Natasha and Gwen."

"So is it true that three hot guys just asked you to be in an exclusive harem relationship?" one girl asked.

"Ahh..." I held up a hand as a waiter walked past and put in my order for a double rum and Coke, stat.

"Polyamorous," the other girl corrected. She was this freaking gorgeous plus size girl, lucky enough to have an hourglass shape rather than my more

apple proportion. “One girl and three guys that are in a relationship with either just her or her and the other guys? That’s polyamory.”

“Well, terminology doesn’t really matter.”

The waiter obviously knew my sister, because he reappeared with a tray of drinks, putting them down before us. I grabbed mine and took a long, grateful sip. Hell, yes, that sweet burn of the rum was exactly what I needed.

“The drinks are from those gentlemen over there,” the waiter said, gesturing towards a table full of men in sharp suits.

“Oh, well—” Mandie started to say, but I just held up my drink and toasted them silently before turning back to the other ladies.

“I swore off dating and now I remember why.” I had their undivided attention and, for once, that wasn’t an uncomfortable thing. “Men are...”

Shit, I couldn’t finish that sentence, because a messy tangle of all the disappointments, all the awkward surprises, all the treachery was dragged up from the depths of me. I sucked in a breath, the noise of the club fading away. For a moment there was just me and my rapidly beating, aching heart.

I said I wasn’t ready to date, but part of me...? It was beyond flattered by the guys’ attention. I wanted it to be real, wanted to be the girl two, if not three, guys were clamouring after. I hadn’t let myself think too far ahead. My brain was too burnt out by Dave for that, but... A few more dates, a few more speeches like Rhett’s, and I might’ve been ready to try. Of course, nothing could be that simple, could it? I sucked in a breath, sitting up straight and ready to vent, when a masculine voice cut me off.

“Hello, ladies.”

He sounded smooth, confident. Nope. When I looked up, suit guy was obviously pretty damn cocky, sure of his appeal. He smiled at the entire table, blinding them with those perfect white teeth, though they disappeared when they came to me. Instead, I got some tight, close mouthed thing.

Great.

And of course, where there was one well-dressed man, there were others. The four of them stood at the periphery of our table with an expectant air. These were the guys that bought the drinks and so they were now here to get a return on their investment.

“I’m Hamish,” the first guy said. “This is Jack, Leo, and Oscar.”

The guys all shifted slightly, edging towards the woman they'd chosen before they arrived at the table.

All except him.

I wasn't sure if he was Leo or Oscar. They weren't really my focus and anyway, his uncomfortable expression made clear that he was strictly here on wingman duty. I turned back to my drink.

"Right, so, thanks for the drinks," Mandie said, lifting hers, "but—"

"I've seen you somewhere before." Hamish shifted closer. "Are you in modelling or work for the media?"

"Um, no—"

"Oh my god, she's just being modest," Mandie's friend who I think was named Gwen said. "She's a fitness model. Mandie just won a TikTok award for her channel."

"Yes, of course!" Hamish grinned. "I admit I watch your videos over my morning coffee, not in the gym, but damn, you lift heavy for a tiny little thing like you. Maybe you could look over my routine and see what I could be doing to increase my gains?"

"Sure." Mandie looked flustered, then pulled out her phone. "I mean I do a bit of PT work, so maybe I could help. If you give me your number, I could touch base with you at some point about a training session."

Hamish's smile turned feline as he took the phone. I'm not sure how he got the numbers tapped in, because his attention was entirely trained on Mandie.

"So are you a trainer as well?"

I turned around, thinking who the hell would ask me that, only to find that Jack had sidled up to Gwen.

"No, I do mostly beauty regime stuff."

"I can see that." Jack was either inspecting her make up application closely, or he was interested in getting to know her more. "You're gorgeous." Gwen's cheeks flushed as she smiled shyly. "Some girls think they need to trowel on the makeup, but you really let your natural beauty shine through."

Did he see the way her smile faltered? Was that deliberate? It felt like her light dimmed slightly, which was freaking weird. She was stunningly beautiful and I could see why people would want to watch her beauty videos, because hey, maybe if you knew some of her secrets, you might end up looking half as good.

“And what about you, babe?” Natasha looked up with a slight frown as the leering guy shifted closer. “Are you an influencer too?” She opened her mouth to answer, but he kept talking. “Food blogger! Am I right?”

“No, I’m a fitness model as well.” His involuntary scoff was in line with how I expected him to respond, yet somehow it was still shocking to hear. One of Natasha’s perfectly manicured brows rose in response. “Mandie and I do a lot of collabs.”

“Oh, right, of course. I mean your body is a temple, right? And yours...” He raked his eyes over her curves. “Well, I’d get down on my knees, praying for a chance to enter it.”

It was now I remembered why I never accepted Mandie’s invitations to come out with her. The guys didn’t know any of us from Adam and were just shooting their shots, but... Did they have to be so freaking gross about it? I looked up at the hapless guy who had been assigned to me, saw he was scrupulously avoiding eye contact.

“And what about you?” I asked, because his answer would determine what I did next. “What do you do...?”

“Finance.” I got a tight smile, a brief look, before he turned back to his friends.

Yeah, I wasn’t doing this. The old Katie would’ve sat there in uncomfortable silence, not wanting to make waves, but I was done with that crap. I grabbed my phone off the table and slipped from the chair.

“Mandie—”

I was about to tell her that I was leaving, when my sister stopped all the conversations cold.

“Look, thanks for the drinks and everything, but we’re in the middle of something right now.” Her tone was perfectly pleasant and yet still the men frowned at being brushed off. “My sister is having a romantic emergency.” Shit, now the guys were all looking at me and none of that attention was friendly. “And she came here to debrief. So, in accordance with the girl code, we have to drop everything and talk about how men are pigs. Pretty sure you’re not down with that.”

“Right.” Hamish’s tone had cooled considerably, but he forced himself to smile and nod. “Well, you’ve got my number...”

“Yes, yes I do,” she said, holding her phone up with a smile that she kept plastered on her face as she watched the guys amble back to their table,

but as soon as their backs were turned, she opened her phone and deleted it instantly.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I told her.

“Yes, we did.” Gwen shuddered. “Those guys were slime.” She took a sip of her drink. “Good taste in cocktails, but still, not enough to make me want to chat to them.”

“And the line about the temple, Nat?” Mandie cackled. “How the hell did he think that was going to go?”

“They’re idiots,” Natasha agreed, before turning back to me. She had stunning hazel eyes that were almost green and they felt like lasers right now. “But we aren’t talking about those idiots. We’re talking about yours. So no one should be ambushed by polyamory. Did the guys give you any indication they were part of the community before this?”

I took a sip of my drink, shook my head and then told them everything.

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Chapter 19

Rhys

“When we’ve burned all that energy off, we work out how the fuck we’re gonna get Katie to see us as three guys she wants to date.”

Great plan. Pity it fell apart the minute we got to the gym.

“I’m gonna work the bag for a bit,” Rhett said, storming off without waiting for an answer and then pulling on some gloves. The heavy punching bag started to jump the minute he landed his first hit.

“Don’t think we should be talking to him right now,” Garrett said, appearing by my shoulder. “May as well get some reps in while he tries to cool down. Bench press?”

He nodded to an empty weight bench.

“Spot me?” I said, walking over and grabbing some plates from the rack, then adding them to the bar. I had the collars locked down tight, and then when I laid down on the bench, Garrett appeared above me.

“So what the hell are we gonna do?”

I didn’t ask him straight away. Hands clasping the bar, I felt the weight threatening to crush me as I lifted it up off the pegs and then in one slow, controlled movement, brought the barbell down. There was enough weight on each end to crush the life out of me if it landed on my chest, and that was exactly what I needed. Adrenaline pumped through me, making clear the danger and gifting me the strength to deal with it. I pressed the bar up again, holding it at arm’s length before finally replying.

“Do?” I breathed that out and then performed another rep. “Nothing’s changed.”

Garrett shook his head with a hiss.

“Everything’s changed, Rhys.”

“Did you spend the day cooking for a girl you liked?” I didn’t wait for an answer, performing another rep. My muscles strained, the burn that started up better than the ache in my chest. “Did you adopt a goddamn dog for her? Did Rhett buy half a pet store? Did I ban Steve from the gym for hassling her?”

“You did?” Suddenly I had his full attention. “Thank fuck for that. He was a total wanker.”

“I did.”

I’d loaded the barbell a little heavier than I normally did and right now my arms let me know. They quivered as I strove to press the bar higher, but right as I began to wonder if I’d bitten off more than I could chew, two hands landed on the bar. Garrett threatened to tear his swanky shirt sleeves as he helped me place the bar back on the pegs. For a moment I just sucked in breaths. That was the weird thing about lifting. The more adrenaline, the calmer I felt. My mind felt sharp as a knife, and one way or the other, it would cut through all this bullshit.

“And I’d do it again. So would you if Steve was here or any other bloke that was bugging her, including that fuck, Dave.” His growl was a replica of mine. We’d heard Rhett’s stories, our already low opinion of the prick dropping through the floor, but it was different now that we knew the girl he was hurting. I gripped the bar again, performing shorter, faster reps in rapid succession. “And that’s the thing. She got hurt by a bloke that didn’t even deserve to look sideways at her, let alone...” My lips peeled back from my teeth as I thought about that asshole touching Katie. “That has to have made her wary, but...”

I was coming to the end of my strength, the lactic acid build up making clear I only had a few more reps in me before I’d need to set the bar on the pegs again.

When the bar was safely back on the rack, I stared into the artificial lights, looking but not seeing them. “Who’s gonna look after her, get her smiling, laughing?” All I could see was Katie’s stricken expression, and right then, I vowed that would be for the last time. “Who’s going to look after the dog she loves so much?” I rolled up into a seated position, not even feeling the burn in my arms anymore. “Who’s gonna look after her better than us?”

Before Garrett could answer, we were all forced to look over as some of the guys moved to watch Rhett pound the bag like it owed him money or something. Some called out encouragement, others made comments about his fury, but he didn't hear them. When Rhett was this deep in his head, he couldn't hear or see anyone.

"Any reason why your mate is trying to beat the stuffing out of that bag?"

Drew appeared beside us, crossing his arms as he watched the proceedings.

"We found out we're all chasing the same girl," I told him, earning me a dark look from Garrett.

"Same girl... Katie?"

I watched Drew's lips twitch and knew what was coming. As I swapped the plates over, loading the bar lighter for Garrett, sure enough, he burst out laughing.

"Is this some straight guy thing? Like you can't get it up unless your mates are panting after her as well?"

"Fuck off, Drew," I told him, then nodded to Garrett.

"Are you sure you idiots are straight?" I ignored my business partner's question, watching Garrett lift the bar, then lower it towards his chest. "What am I saying? Of course, you are. None of you have any sense of style whatsoever."

"Pretty sure it's more about not wanting to suck dick..." Garrett hissed out, then pushed the bar up again. "Or have a guy do mine."

"We know what to do." I watched Garrett closely, my eyes trained to identify moments of weakness, when your muscles just couldn't take one more rep. My fingers itched to step in, take over, just to give them something to do. "The same thing we agreed to before. One girl, us three guys. This is a sign to try again."

The bar rested on Garrett's chest, making me think I needed to grab it, but he just stared up at me, a small frown forming.

"Try again? After..." He shook his head and then shoved the bar upwards, pumping out a few quick reps, then setting the bar on the pegs. "After the hell we went through?"

"This time's different." I grinned then, feeling it as soon as I said the words. A white hot flicker of something I'd given up feeling: hope. "We'll be upfront from the start, be clear about what we want."

“And if she doesn’t want us?”

Garrett shot me a meaningful look.

That flame threatened to be blown out by cold, hard reality, but I forged on.

“Won’t happen.” I was a fire sign, so I was happiest when I burned hot, and fuck me if I wasn’t on fire right now. “This is meant to be. How the hell else did each one of us meet and fall for the same girl?”

“OK, so you’re still straight.” Drew nodded. “If that’s the plan, how the fuck are you gonna get Rhett on board? Because right now he looks like he wants to cage fight every damn guy in the gym.”

“He’s a Capricorn.” They groaned at my reply. “I’m a Sagittarius. Goat’s no match for a centaur.”

I slapped one fist into my other hand, making clear I was ready to fight this out, if that’s what it took.

“Calm down, horse boy,” Garrett said, grabbing me by the shoulder to slow my roll.

“Bulls are all slow and methodical,” I told him. “Right up until something catches their eye. Then they go charging right in. Looking forward to seeing you lose control, Garrett.”

“Oh, this is gonna be good...” Drew muttered to himself.

Rhett dropped his fists as we came to stand beside him. Sweat was rolling down his face, but he just stared us down.

“I’m not backing down.” I knew what he was feeling. His blood pumping furiously through every vein, forcing him to stand straight, breathe deep, and note how alive he felt right now. “Spent too damn long watching that idiot, Dave, mess Katie around. If she says she’s ready... If she’s willing to take a chance on me, then I’m going for it.” He knocked his gloved fists together. “With everything I’ve got.”

“Wouldn’t expect anything less.” I walked up to him, stiff legged as a dog looking for a fight. “But just so we’re clear, the same goes for me.”

We turned then to look back at Garrett, who shook his head and then let out a ragged sigh.

“Looks like we’re all in then, but...” The look he gave us was the same one we got when we tried to use a knife on the kitchen counters. “Can I suggest that we make amends first?” He scratched at his head. “Not sure what for, but that feels right.”

“Whatever she wants.” Rhett jabbed a fist at me, forcing me to dodge out of the way. “I’m there. Make sure you keep up, because I will leave you all behind.”

“See?” I told Drew as we went back to the weights. “We’ve got a plan. It’ll all work out in the end.”

“Or it’ll end you.” He pursed his lips. “Promise me this time that you won’t let it break you like it did last time.”

“No need.” I threw my arms wide. “This time everything will be perfect. Natasha wasn’t the right girl, but Katie.” My hands went to my heart and Drew rolled his eyes. “She’s here already. Just gotta get her to let me in.”

As Garrett loaded the bar with weight, I scrolled through my phone, finding the website of the florist I’d selected before. Drew told me to cool my jets, but that wasn’t the way I worked. Go hard, or go home, that was my motto, so I added bouquet after bouquet to my cart and then as Garrett started doing bar squats, I paid for the lot and organised for them to be sent to the veterinary surgery Katie worked at.

“So are we ready to start really lifting?” I asked as Garrett huffed through his reps. “Or are we still fluffing around like a pack of old ladies?”

Chapter 20

Katie

This is where I should've gone as soon as I heard the news, because when I pulled up the driveway to the animal shelter, something settled inside me. I hadn't spent enough time here lately, getting distracted by other things, but the feel of the cool night air on my skin helped settle me in ways the conversation at the club hadn't.

I hadn't had anything more to drink so I was safe to drive home, yet somehow I found myself on the road out here, not parked in front of our apartment. I got out of the car, pulling out my keys, and then walked around the back to the dog kennels. I unlocked the big gate and then slipped inside.

Dogs jumped to their feet, some barking, some just watching me as I walked up the centre of the cages.

"It's OK," I hissed. "It's Katie."

I hadn't really thought this through. Of course the dogs would get all riled up. In for a penny, in for a pound. I went past each cage, pressing my fingers into the mesh and earning myself some little licks as I passed, until I reached him.

Bronson looked like some kind of polished marble statue in the moonlight. It pooled in through the window of his cage, illuminating his profile as his head lifted slowly.

"Bronson?" I whispered. "Bronny?"

He scrambled to his feet, rushing towards the gate. To anyone else, forty kilos of dog tearing towards them would be terrifying, but not for me. His high-pitched whines made clear he knew exactly who I was. I opened the

gate and then stepped inside, watching his stumpy legs move in an excited little trot as he whirled around me.

“Hey, fella!”

I dropped down onto the ground and he was in my lap, sniffing me vigorously, then climbing onto my lap. His heavy weight, the way he pressed into me, it helped ground me. Who gave a shit about anything when you had a cute dog to cuddle?

“Hey, bud.” I rubbed his velvety ear, feeling my breath catch in my throat, just like it did every time I touched the hard ridge of a scar. “Hey, buddy. It’s OK. You’re OK. Everything’s going to be fine now. You’re...” His head jerked up, and he stared into my eyes with that kind of preternatural focus only he seemed to possess. “This will be your last night here. Tomorrow...”

I stopped as I saw the three guys walking up the driveway towards the shelter. It’d just be Garrett, I reasoned, but that’s not what I saw right now. Them walking into the admin building and filling out the final forms, then bundling Bronson into their car, that new collar and lead I’d helped Rhett pick out around his neck.

“Tomorrow you’ll be going to a new home.” His ears pricked up, one crooked still. “You’ll be away from all this noise. A nice home.” I glanced at his mattress. “A new bed. It’ll be amazing.”

I stroked his face over and over as if I could memorise the shape of it. If I kept on patting, then this moment would last forever. I wouldn’t have to go to work. He wouldn’t move on and find happiness with his real owners. That was breathtakingly selfish, but right now I didn’t care. In the darkness of the cage, I could indulge myself one last time.

“I think you’ll be happy.” His head dropped down to rest on my thigh. “Not having to deal with all this noise, for one. Having your own space, feeling safe, I think that’s what you need. I checked out the place, interviewed...” I swallowed hard, then smiled. “Checked out each one of the men that will be your owners. They seem like good guys...”

I looked down at him, seeing those big brown eyes staring right back. People called their pets soul dogs, and that’s what it felt like right now. If the world was fair, he’d be my dog. I’d be the one with the big house and yard for him to run around in, but on a receptionist’s wage, that wasn’t going to happen.

“They’ll look after you.” My hand ran over his head and down his spine in long, slow strokes. “Make sure you have everything you need and then you’ll be happy.”

Bronson let out a thin whine at that, and was that in argument or agreement? I’d never know. Instead, his head jerked upwards, his whole body stiffening as we heard steps coming up the path.

“Thought it would be you.” Jo appeared at the gate. “Come to say goodbye to your boy?”

She lived on site as caretaker as well as one of the shelter workers.

“Yeah.”

“They nice, the people that are gonna take Bronson?” she asked.

“They...” I saw the dinner Garrett had prepared and the care with which Rhett had purchased all those items at the pet store, along with Rhys bristling when Steve approached me. “Yeah.” I nodded. “I think they’re going to give him whatever he needs.”

“That’s all we can hope for, right?” Her fingers laced in the wire of the cage door. “I mean it’s hard, really hard, to see the dogs move on, but that’s what the place is for. They get to move on and we get to create a new safe space for a dog that needs it.”

“Safe space...” I stared at Bronson, ruffling his ears. “Yeah, that’s it.”

“Alright.” She pulled away from the door. “You stay as long as you need. Just lock up on your way out, OK?”

“Will do.”

The sound of her steps faded away and so did the barks of the dogs, until there was only quiet. I leaned back against the wall and listened to the sound of the dog’s breaths. The little whimpers he made as he grew more and more relaxed told me what I needed to know. Most dogs didn’t do that. The shelter was a hell of a lot better than the place he’d been rescued from, but...

It wasn’t enough.

If Bronson stayed here, the vets were threatening to put him down. The rationale was that he wasn’t coping, wasn’t responding as well to the psych meds they’d prescribed. We were all trying to do everything we could to help him get past his trauma, but at some point, he had to decide to take that next step. Getting him out of the shelter was the only way to achieve that.

“You’ll be a brave boy, right, Bronson?” His head lifted slightly. “You can do that for me. Go somewhere new, somewhere quiet and safe and

where people are kind. It'll seem really scary at first, but after a while," I smiled down at him, "I think you'll expect everyone to treat you right. Let's work towards that, boy."

I didn't mean to doze off. Beyond tired, my eyes got heavier and heavier and so did Bronson. At first, I rationalised that I didn't want to disturb him, then it was me dreaming of him lying on my bed beside me, his doggy snores in my ears. So why did the door open slowly, the creak forcing my eyes to open, not to see Jo walk back into the dog cage, but them. Rhett smiled down at me, shirtless and carrying a paper tucked under his armpit, while Rhys carried a big bunch of flowers. Roses and sunflowers, lisianthus and gerberas abounded. Garrett walked in backwards, holding a tray laden with coffee cups and toast and a plate of bacon for Bronson. His head jerked up only to snatch a rasher from the air when it was tossed his way. They crowded in closer, the hard warmth of their bodies chasing away the morning chill, even as Bronson refused to give up his spot. Rather, his paws pressed into my sides, his nose ice cold as he snuffled my skin.

And that's what woke me up.

My butt was aching, gone numb from sitting in the same space, which forced me to move. Bronson made a sleepy sound of protest, but I had to get going. It was all part of working in dog shelters, to bond with animals and then let them go, and finally, I was ready to do just that. I bent over and pressed a kiss to his big head and that had him moving. I'd never had a dog that hugged like he did, making me marvel at the psychotic cruelty of the people who had him before. He stood on your legs and pressed his whole body into you, tail wagging, until you wrapped your arms around him. My face pressed into his shoulder, breathing in his doggy scent, then sniffing back to the tears as they came.

"It'll be OK, boy, I promise." I had to go now, or I'd never leave, and so I pulled back and gave him one last pat. "Everything will work out."

He tried to follow me when I left, and closing the gate behind me felt like it tore something inside, but I did it anyway. I locked the main gate and then got into my car, taking a moment to catch my breath. Not due to effort, but because it all hurt so damn much.

Caring for someone, something, did that to you. This kind of pain was something I knew well, but there was no escaping it. I'd have to turn into a monster like the men that threw Bronson into a pit to get torn apart by other

dogs, all humanity turned off. Love is pain, and part of me would never be able to stop seeking that out.

I had a later start at work the next morning, taking over from one of the other receptionists, who stood up with a smirk when I arrived.

“So what did Dave do?” She looked over at the buckets of flowers stacked on one side of the waiting room. “Must be pretty bad if he sent you that many flowers.”

But these could never have been bought by Dave. I don’t think it’d even occur to him to do something nice for someone else, even if it was in his best interests. I bent over and opened one of the cards.

Whenever you’re ready, I’m there, it read, and I could just about hear Rhys’ voice inside my head. *Even if it's just to throw another drink at. Just gimme a chance and I'll do whatever it takes to prove that I'm the man for you.*

Man, or men? I wondered, shoving the card in my pocket and then moving to relieve my colleague at the desk.

Chapter 21

Garrett

I might've screwed everything else up, but I couldn't afford to make a mistake now.

"Heading out!" I called to the shift supervisor. She looked up from where she was looking after a patient and nodded, turning back to the man seconds later.

"Getting your pup?" Helen was one of the veteran nurses on the floor. She'd been there to talk me off a ledge when I first started and still kept up on what was going on in my life.

"Yep." I glanced at my watch, mentally calculating the time it would take to get to the shelter. I was supposed to leave fifteen minutes ago, but a guy going into cardiac arrest in the emergency department waiting room meant it was all hands on deck until he was stabilised. "But I'm running late."

"Go." She gave me a squeeze on the shoulder. "Take a bit of extra time if you need it."

"Extra time..." I looked at the chaos raging around us. "Rhys is on dog sitting duty today. He's taken the day off work to make sure Bronson is OK."

"Well, take lots of photos. I wanna see this pup when you get back," she said.

"Helen...!"

Someone wanted her to put a line in, I bet. The woman could find a tricky vein more surely than an ultrasound could.

“Duty calls,” she said, pointing at me while pulling away. “Photos, Pretty Boy, photos.”

At this point, I’d be lucky if I could get the shelter owners to sign Bronson over to me. I’d set up the adoption meeting in my lunch hour, an optimistic decision I regretted right about now. The sound of an ambulance siren had my head jerking up, but when I took off at a run, it wasn’t to meet the medics at the door. There was always something happening in the ED and there were plenty of nurses on the floor. It was go now or go never, so out the door I went.

“Didn’t think you were gonna make it,” Rhys said as I jumped out of my car.

We were both standing outside the animal shelter, but I couldn’t see hide or hair of Rhett. He’d disappeared before we even got up the morning after the big reveal, making sure none of us tried to talk further about what happened with Katie. The intention had been that we’d all meet the dog, see how he responded to all of us to ensure we all meshed. I guess that was off the table as well.

“There was...” I smiled and shook my head. “Emergencies, many, many emergencies.”

“Of course there was.” He clapped me on the shoulder. “Well, let’s go in and meet this pup.”

“You’re here to adopt Bronson?” the girl behind the counter asked. I nodded. “I’ll just go get him.”

I wanted to pace, try to walk off the restless energy that burned inside me right now, but I needed to be calm and contained to put the dog at ease. I’d read article after article about traumatised dogs, glad that there seemed to be at least a degree of overlap with the techniques to use with traumatised people. Trauma-informed practise was something we’d had to sit through many a training session about. Dogs were even more sensitive than human beings, reading your body language and responding to your energy. I blinked, seeing those white scars that criss-crossed Bronson’s body and found my hands balling into fists.

“You OK?”

Rhys’ face swam into view, helping bring me back to the waiting room.

“Bronson, he was hurt badly...”

I want to be immune to it, the second hand pain of seeing people, animals, hurt for no good reason. God knew I’d seen enough of it to get

jaded. I never did. The hushed silence that fell over an examining room when a woman staggered in, wide eyed and staring, or a child was covered in bruises. The quietly terse conversations nurses had amongst ourselves, working out if we needed to contact the authorities.

I wasn't, and I never would be. Cruelty... it was this completely needless, wasteful yet persistently shitty part of humanity, and when I saw that dog... I didn't need a cat or a dog. I needed to help him.

"We need to make sure he adjusts to the change," I told Rhys in urgent tones. "That he feels safe and..."

Whatever else I had to say was cut off as the door opened. Not to admit Bronson, but Rhett. He strode across the floor, boots slamming down on the lino floor, the lead and collar he'd bought for the dog gripped tightly.

"Wasn't sure if you were coming," I said, and that earned me a hard stare.

"Said I would."

Rhett bit off every word, but we all turned at the sound of dog paws scrabbling across the floor.

"He's a bit reluctant," the handler said between gritted teeth. Bronson was digging his claws into the soft floor, lunging backwards so hard the chain of his collar was cutting into his throat. A small whine had me moving forward.

"Bronson...?"

Would he remember me? The dog stopped pulling for a second, plonking his butt down on the ground and panting as he surveyed me, then the others.

"Holy shit," Rhys hissed. "He's a beast!"

"And you need to be really quiet for a second," I said, moving slowly closer. "Hey, boy. Remember me?"

"He just might," the girl said as the dog's tail wagged momentarily.

There was something tentative about it, but it beat a rapid tattoo against the floor as I walked over. Slowly, surely, no sudden moves, those big brown eyes stared into mine. There was a mute plea there that was at odds with his appearance. He was this massive chonk of a dog, muscle thick on his frame, and yet what he was asking over and over was don't hurt me.

"It's alright, boy. It's alright."

I made sure I was wearing the same scrubs as the day we met, to help build a positive association. Down on my knees, the dog changed trajectory,

slowly but surely creeping forward until he was straining against the lead to get to me. His nose worked as he breathed me in, then he let out a strange little noise, right as the girl let him go.

“Hey, buddy!”

Why the hell did I think I wanted a cat? No feline would throw himself at me bodily, pushing his whole body into mine in a doggy cuddle, would they? My arms moved slowly, wrapping around the dog to ruffle his fur, then stroke his ears.

“Well, look at that.” The girl stood up, shooting me a broad smile. “Never seen Bronson react like that. Well, except for the girl that takes him for walks. Looks like Katie was right to approve your application.”

My pats slowed for a second as I was reminded of that shit fight. Not for long, though. I wasn’t entirely on board with Rhys’ plan, but part of me still held out hope.

“Looks like we need to introduce you to the others now, boy.” I turned around and gestured for Rhys to come forward. “This is who’s gonna look after you today.”

“Hey, boy!”

He was down on his knees and beside the dog in seconds, something that had Bronson shying back. The dog’s ears were flat against his skull, his tail working furiously, even as he pressed into my chest.

“Slow.” I glared at him. “Quietly, remember?”

“Shit, sorry.” His face fell. “Hey, buddy. I’m sorry for moving too fast. Honestly, I’m not a total dick. Just ask the guys.”

“Still to be determined.” Rhett came a little closer and stopped a few steps away. The dog’s ears pricked up as he pulled a packet of dog snacks from his uniform pocket, his attention entirely trained on my friend as he tore it open.

“Bronson loves snacks,” the girl said in a warm voice. “Just put some on the floor... Yep, like that.”

Rhett set the snacks down in a line before him, and Bronson pulled free of my arms. Head down, tail wagging furiously, he crept closer. One snack then another was scarfed down before he paused. The dog looked at Rhett, then the last one, the man waiting patiently where he was crouched down, not moving an inch when Bronson finally stumped forward. He scoffed the last snack down fast because Rhett lifted his hand slowly. Holding the

fingers out, Bronson stopped, then sniffed the air around them, finally moving closer to carefully lick the tips.

“You’ll be OK.” He moved his hand to the dog’s chest, giving it a scratch. We all watched Bronson’s back leg kick against the floor in response. “Won’t you, boy?”

Maybe, that was the final answer. I admit I felt a selfish satisfaction when Bronson came skittering back to me. It was an odd thing, to see a dog his size, with such powerful jaws, press into me, looking for comfort, but I gave him a pat and then swapped the leads over.

“Thanks for letting us adopt Bronson,” I told the girl.

“Thanks for taking him.” She shot a harried look over her shoulder. “He wasn’t going to last here much longer. We tried and tried to get him into a temporary foster home, but we couldn’t find one where he would be the only dog. He needs quiet and peace to heal, the poor thing.”

“Quiet and peace,” I reminded Rhys when we got the dog into my car. He was the only one who could take the day off work to help Bronson adjust. “No games, no balls, not even running the washing machine until we see how he adjusts.”

“So I’m off laundry duty?” Rhys grinned at me. “Bonus.”

“Look after him until five,” Rhett said. “I’ll be back after that in time for you to go into the gym tonight.”

He didn’t wait for an answer, turning on his heel and marching back to his truck.

“Well, maybe you can get him talking, boy.” Rhys gave the dog a quick pat. “Break down those walls, because god knows I can’t.” He pulled away. “Meet ya at home.”

“Ready, buddy?” I said as I slid behind the steering wheel. A massive head pushed through between the seats so Bronson could look out the window. “Let’s get you home.”

Chapter 22

Rhys

Don't stress the dog out. Don't move too fast, don't talk too loud. Fuck, I felt like I was back at school again, but it soon became clear why.

In my head all it took was to bring Bronson home, make clear there was no one hiding around the corner to hurt him, but instead, he baulked at the front door, clawing at the ground and not wanting to go inside, forcing Garrett to pick him up and carry him in. I'd expected the dog to run around the house and sniff everything like my old family dog used to. Instead, Bronson made a beeline for Garrett's room, clawing his way under the bed and then curling up in a ball there.

Right.

"I need to call in," he said, hand on his head. "I can't leave Bronson like this. He's obviously stressing."

"Quiet, calm, and let him get used to us, right?" I replied before taking a seat on the floor beside the bed. I had my phone out seconds later, scrolling through the many, many emails Drew liked to send me. "I've got this. He just needs some time." I dared to take a look at the dog under the bed. He was lying there with his head on his paws, watching me closely. "And I've got all the time in the world. You don't."

"Shit!" Garrett looked at his watch. "I gotta go." He made for the door. "Call me if there's any issues."

"And what would he do if there was?" I asked the dog in a low voice, noting the way his ears pricked up. "Garrett will be knee deep in blood and guts. He's a good guy, your new owner." The dog burrowed his nose in the

carpet. “He likes to save people.” I remembered the way we first met, when I was just some dumb, skinny kid who found it really hard to sit still in class. He’d sidled up, asked me if I wanted to play with him and his friends at my first lunchtime at the new school. “He’ll save you, if you let him. Now, I’m gonna get you some water and food.”

I rolled up into a stand super slowly, making the movement almost a yoga thing before padding down the hall to get the food and water bowls Rhett had bought.

Of course, going into the kitchen brought the ghosts up. I couldn’t look at that table, the nice tablecloth still spread out across the dining table, not without seeing Katie’s stricken expression. Had she received the flowers yet? I checked my phone again as I carried the water bowl across to the sink to fill. If she had, she hadn’t replied to my texts.

But she would, I was sure of it, so I filled both bowls and then carried them down the hall.

In my head, this was a whole lot more exciting. Bronson would come out of his shell, be at least happy for a pat, but he just stayed exactly where he was.

“Water’s really nice...” I said in a low voice, avoiding eye contact as I trailed my fingers through it, but he just watched the water drip off the tips and stayed right where he was. “Look, I get it. You don’t know me at all. I’m just some guy and some...” My throat closed up when I thought about what was done to this dog. The scars, they told the tale of needless fucking cruelty over and over. “And some people that no doubt looked and sounded like me hurt you.”

I met the dog’s eyes, seeing that they were a strange amber colour.

“But that’s not me. Anyone that knows me will say the same. Can’t hurt a fucking fly, not unless it’s defending someone I care about. That’s you now, hope you realise.” The dog’s tail began to thump slowly. “Can’t stand it when some bastard wants to prove himself a big man, hurting someone else for no damn reason.”

That’s when my head hit the wall, because as I stared at the ceiling, I didn’t see Garrett’s perfectly clean fan or the white paint, but her. The minute Katie told me what that prick had said to her, it all made sense. The wanton fucking cruelty of getting a woman to open herself up to you, allowing herself to be soft, vulnerable and he, what? Trampled all over the

precious gift he was given with a kind of carelessness that took my breath away. My head rolled sideways.

“If you come out of there, I’ll show you.” I was talking to the dog, not Katie. Wooing her would take a whole lot more, but somehow I needed a win here to convince me it was possible. “We’ll be friends.” Another little wag of that tail. “I know Katie would be real happy if you decided to come out.”

Apparently that was the magic word. The dog climbed out from under the bed, emerging almost shamefacedly as he crept closer to me.

“Katie? Is that who you want?” His gaze kept flicking from me to the door and back again, as he moved my way. “I know, mate.”

Slowly but surely the dog came closer until he stepped over my legs and pressed his head into my chest.

“You’re a soft one, aren’t you?” I lifted my hand slowly, calmly, just like Garrett told me to, and sure enough, the dog flinched when I rubbed his flank. My teeth grit at the feel of the scars, but I kept on scratching. His leg started to kickstart in response. “Me too, mate.” I wrapped my arms around him and while he tensed at first, he went still eventually. “Me too.”

I’m not sure how much time passed. Bronson laid down on my legs, his heavy weight reassuring, and I just patted him. Over and over, long and slow, until both our breathing evened out. That’s why I nearly jumped ten feet when my phone rang. I cursed silently as the dog went scuttling back under the bed, but when I picked it up, I saw it was Drew.

“What’s—?”

“Need you to come in early,” he groaned.

“But—”

“Went with Greg to this new seafood place last night.”

“Oh.” I barely stifled a snigger.

“Coming out both ends. Popped some pills but nothing is gonna keep this down. Urk...”

I swallowed, feeling a wave of nausea in sympathy.

“OK, I’ll ring around, see if someone can look after Bronson until Rhett comes home. Leave whoever’s on the desk in charge. I’ll be there shortly.” I shoved my phone into my pocket. “Hey, Bronson, I’ve gotta go out for a bit.” I picked up his discarded collar and lead, and somehow that had him scrambling out from under the bed. “I’ll find someone to come and keep an eye on you.”

Katie, my mind supplied instantly. *We could ring Katie.*

No, we couldn't. After trauma dumping on her last night, it wasn't right to rope her into dog sitting as well.

Bronson had his own ideas. He stumped forward, eyes trained on me, his tail wagging furiously. Did he...?

"Out?" That tail worked faster. "You want to go out?"

A sharp bark made clear his thoughts on the matter.

Keep him at home. Provide a safe space for him. Make sure it was quiet so he could orient himself. Taking Bronson to the gym was none of those things, and yet he seemed keen.

"Well, alright, boy. Let's go!"

His claws clattered across the floor as he went running towards the front door.

"You brought the damn dog?"

Drew looked all pale and sweaty, his skin gone a weird greenish colour, but Bronson was the complete opposite. He seemed energised by the ride over. Coming into the gym took a little longer, but as long as he was pressed into my leg, he seemed OK with it.

"I'm dog sitting today and you..." My nose wrinkled as Drew retched. "Are going the fuck home. No more dodgy seafood places for you. I'll get some of the staff on clean up duty, wiping down everything you touched."

"I..."

Beggars can't be choosers and Drew was forced to confront that fact right now. His hand slapped over his mouth as he went marching towards the door. They slid open, letting him run out to his car and...

For Katie to walk in with Mandie.

Bronson went on high alert, that's what caught my attention. He tugged at the lead and then broke free, going running across the floor.

And I knew exactly why.

If I was able to go sprinting over and sweep her into my arms, I would've. Instead, I watched her get ambushed by the dog. My mouth spread into an increasingly sloppy grin. The way she yelped in surprise, then fussed over him. It all made sense. This was meant to be, and so I strode forward to join them.

Chapter 23

Katie

“Gym!”

“Can you stop yelling that at me and help me with this bucket?” I asked as I struggled to get the massive bucket of flowers inside the house. The vets had found a couple spare buckets for me to carry them home in.

“Jesus, who freaking died and bought you a whole florist...” My darling baby sister smiled then, not even having the good grace to look hungover after last night. “Who sent them?”

“I’m not sure—”

“Who sent them?” She didn’t bother asking me again, snatching the bucket out of my arms and then plonking them on the kitchen counter before looking at one of the many cards.

“Mandie—”

“Rhys!” She bounced up and down. “I knew it. I bloody knew it. ‘Just gimme a chance—’”

“Shut up,” I said, dumping my bag on the floor. “Just shut up.”

She grabbed my hands and started waltzing me around the lounge room.

“He wants to make you the hinge of his polycule!”

“He wants to do what now?” I asked, then shook my head. “Don’t answer that. Help me get the rest of the flowers from the car.”

“There’s more? Damn, this boy is keen. He must really like the idea of you being an apple turnover.” Her catlike smile made clear I did not want to know what that meant. I asked the question anyway. “Sweet and filled with cream?”

I went to punch my sister, because hey, Mum wasn't here to arbitrate. She dodged expertly out of the way, dancing past to grab my keys and head for the door.

"So we bring the flowers up, put them in some water, and then—"

"Not gym." I made sure to inject all the sisterly authority I had into my voice. Trouble is, that wasn't much. "Not unless it's a completely different gym."

"Nope." Suddenly she was serious, standing there with her hand on her hip. "Nuh uh. You only just signed up there."

"And I'm sure Drew can organise a refund." I walked into the kitchen, looking through the cupboards for a vase or something. Instead, I just found a whole lot of protein shakers and water bottles. I considered one then another but was fairly sure they'd just tip over if I loaded them up with flowers. "I'll transfer to another gym—"

"Hey." Mandie was suddenly serious. "I picked that place for a reason. The guys are cool and make the place comfortable for women." She looked meaningfully at me. "All women. Natasha was telling me about the horrendous experience she had at this other place." I sucked in a breath to argue, but she continued. "Look, you either don't give a shit about Rhys and his man harem, in which case you can politely say thanks, but no thanks and work out with me, or...?" Her smile was wicked. "Or you're scared you're gonna get a moisty, which will be really fucking awkward when I get you doing lunges."

She gave me a couple of options to explain what was going on, but neither really encapsulated the slightly nauseating swirl in my guts. I didn't know what to think, basically. The idea of them... And wanting... It was like my mind fought the idea, rejecting it as ridiculous before I even got to consider what I wanted.

Of course, Mandie thought the whole idea was hilarious. She'd been fighting off guys with a stick since she was thirteen, whereas I... I couldn't even put down my lack of game to my size when there were goddesses like Natasha who still had guys falling all over themselves to get her attention. For whatever reason, I always had the finance guy or his high school equivalent doing everything he could not to engage with me as his best mates tried to chat up my friends or my sister.

As I went into my bedroom to change, I landed on this. New year, new me was the phrase that gave me hope as I was nursing a wounded ego after

Dave's bullshit. Well, new Katie could prioritise her wellbeing, not some guy's. Or guys, I added. Wanting to feel stronger, that was always helpful, so I gave in and pulled on my new gym gear and met Mandie downstairs in the car park.

"So should we do some hip thrusts?" my sister cackled as we walked into the gym. "Maybe some squats."

"Or you could..."

A familiar yelp had me turning around, only to find Bronson running towards me.

"Oh my god, Bronson!" He leapt at me, his impressive weight forcing me to stagger back as he jumped up. "What're you doing here?"

He answered as best as he could in a series of high-pitched vocalisations, the whines becoming more and more frantic. I knelt down only to get a full face lick from the dog. Just like always, he stepped onto my leg and pressed his body into me, making it easier for me to cuddle him.

And see Rhys as he ran up.

That fucking smirk. He'd worn the exact same one during Smoothiegate and he looked just as self-satisfied now. Well, he wouldn't be for long.

"Bronson..." He was making these long, drawn out sounds, a mix of misery and joy that broke my heart. "Hey, buddy..." I pulled away, grabbing his lead and then watched him plonk his butt down into a sit. "What the hell is the dog doing at the gym? Didn't Jo tell you he needs a quiet, calm environment to facilitate the adjustment of moving out of the shelter?"

"Oh, I'm gonna leave you two to duke this out." Mandie flicked a finger at each one of us before walking into the gym. "I'll be warming up over there."

I didn't follow her direction, too pissed with Rhys right now.

"God, you're so fucking beautiful when you're mad."

"What?" Had anyone ever said those words to me? If they had, I didn't remember, and that just made me angrier. "Look, enough flirting—"

"We're flirting?" He sauntered closer, then dropped down to scratch at Bronson's chest. "Good to know."

"Garrett adopted Bronson." I scanned the gym. "Where is he, by the way?"

"You want him in on this already?" His grin widened. "That's a positive sign."

“Rhys!” I snapped out his name way too loudly, something that had people passing by turning to stare, but it was his reaction that mattered. Bronson’s ears went flat against his skull and he let out an uneasy whine, his feet moving restlessly. “Shit, I’m sorry, boy.”

I gave him a reassuring pat before hissing at his owner.

“It’s really important that you acclimate Bronson slowly to a new environment,” I told him. “He’s been through a lot.”

“I know.” Finally, finally that smile faded, leaving just haunted grey eyes. “And I was doing everything you just said. We set him up in Garrett’s bedroom because he crawled under the bed the minute he got into the house.”

“A small, confined space.” I nodded in grudging approval. “With easy access to water?”

“And food.” He shrugged. “I sat down a small distance away and just... talked to him. About everything that’s been going on.” Those eyes seemed to stab straight into me now, seeing down into the depths of me. “I know he couldn’t understand any of it, but if he heard my voice, he might grow accustomed to it.” His smile was far gentler now. “Realise I wasn’t a threat.”

Who were we talking about now? I pulled away, but Bronson wasn’t having it, pressing into my legs.

“Drew got sick.” Rhys stood tall, reminding me of just how tall, how big, he was. “Him and Greg are always going to these weird places and eating seafood. If he doesn’t get gastro at least four times a year, I wonder if he’s even having fun. He said I had to come in right away and so I needed someone to look after Bronson.”

“You could’ve called me.” No, he couldn’t, I thought that as soon as the words came out. “I mean...” I swallowed hard. “I know the other night was weird.”

“Illuminating.” He made a show of considering his words. “Shocking.” Somehow I’d earned another crooked smile. “Tantalising, that’s how I saw it.”

“Right, so, whatever is going on with us, you should know that I will always put Bronson’s needs first.” I looked down and saw that the dog appeared to be hanging on my every word. The unconditional and complete love of dogs was a humbling thing that took my breath away. “You can always call me if you need help with him.”

“What about right now?” I looked up to see Rhys had edged closer. The lead had been picked up and he wrapped the loop around his wrist. “I’m just about to take him for a walk. It’s not exactly a treadmill, but...” He squinted at the sky. “Weather looks nice. We could head towards the beach and take him for a walk?”

I should’ve said no. That would be introducing a lot of new things to the dog, and yet when Bronson wagged his tail and then barked, as if to say, “Let’s go!” What else could I say but yes?

“OK, fine,” I grumbled, “but if Bronson gets scared—”

Another couple of barks, as if the dog was assuring me that this could never happen.

“You’re in control.”

Rhys’ eyes twinkled as he handed over the leash.

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Chapter 24

Rhys

This was meant to be. I could feel it in my bones, because why would Bronson be willing to come to the gym with me and why would Katie walk in the door at that moment? I fought the urge to grin as my girl took off down the road, our dog in tow. I scrambled to catch up, settling in to match her pace, assuming now we could really start to talk. Instead, she shot me a sidelong look, her eyes widening just a little.

Huh, the gods really were on my side. I'd pulled on an old tank top that was pretty threadbare and showed off the guns to good effect. I may or may not have flexed just a little. But instead of being impressed by my physique, she dragged her eyes sideways, focussing on the road ahead.

Interesting.

I forged ahead, getting out in front of them, and then started walking backwards to face her.

"So, are we going to talk on this walk, or is that too awkward?" More silence. Shit, I was dying out here. I leant down and peered into her eyes, trying to make eye contact. Bronson obliged me, giving me the best doggie smile ever. My boy was in his element and I knew why. He was happiest when he was around Katie, and I knew the feeling. "I mean..."

I had something smart to say, but of course, I had to go and collide with a metal sign one of the cafes had left out the front. It went down with a clatter, and the only reason why I didn't go with it was because I flailed around like a drunken octopus. The cafe staff and some of the customers watched my display with some interest, so I put the sign to rights and then

smiled at the server before walking more sedately beside Katie. A small snort caught my attention far more effectively than the stares of the patrons. When I looked sideways, Katie's lips twitched up at the corner, her mouth fighting the smile, but it was a war it wouldn't win. I grinned too, encouraging her to do the same and feeling a great big rush when she did. She shook her head, though, marching past the cafe and down the street.

"Oh, so that's what it takes to get a reaction from you?" I asked. "Me nearly face planting on the footpath?" I angled my body towards her. "I will eat concrete if that's what it takes to get you to go out with me on a real date."

She stopped and stared, but rather than smile and say, "yes, please," a small frown formed. My thumb itched, wanting to smooth it away. Bronson started to mill around her feet, obviously nervous now, but she said something to him quietly, getting him to sit by her feet.

"Why?"

"What?" I expected to deal with protests or rejection, but not this. I blinked and then shook my head.

"Why do you want to date me so much?"

Her arms crossed, the lead dangling from her wrist as her weight went to one hip, making clear what this was. The first hurdle. I needed to sail on over it, not come a guts at the initial obstacle.

"Why wouldn't I...?" A small shake of her head made clear that she was not going to go along with that. OK, vulnerability time. I sucked in a breath, feeling the street, the noise of the cars, all fade away. It felt like I was sinking down into the core of me. "Because all my life I've dreamed of finding that girl, y'know? Not just someone funny or pretty, but the one that steals the breath from your lungs. The girl you feel that instant connection with and it only gets better over the years. Deepens, strengthens, becomes something so powerful nothing can withstand it."

When I blinked, Katie was still standing there, which was promising. I was being way too heavy, way too fast, but hey, she asked.

"I thought I had that with my ex." I shrugged. "It felt like that's what we were moving towards, but now I know it wasn't real. She was in it for multiple dicks, and I..." I rubbed my hand over my face, not really wanting to put my whole arse on display, but here goes. "I just wanted someone to love. Someone to belong to. Someone I can look after, protect and make

feel safe, and maybe..." I swallowed hard. "Maybe she'll do the same for me."

"You..." She stopped herself, but whatever was going on in her head, it would not be denied. "You think that's what's happening here?"

"I don't know." It would've been better if I said yes and tried to sweep her up in this feeling, but even I knew that was too much, too soon. "All I do know is I feel something." I moved slightly closer and Bronson looked up at me as he was panting, as if assessing whether or not I was worthy of his mistress' time. "I've tried since the breakup, asking girls out, going on dates, but..." I shrugged. "Nothing comes of it. They're nice. I do my best to show them a good time, but there's nothing there. No spark, no connection."

I dared to reach out then, taking her hand in mine. It was small and soft and I felt a weird need to protect it.

"You're totally my type, but it's more than just a physical thing. We could spend the day in bed, fuck our way through whatever this is, and I think..." My eyes met hers and suddenly I felt like I was standing on the side of the road, completely naked for the world to see. "I think that wouldn't be enough for me."

I watched her facial muscles twitch. It was like she didn't know whether to smile or frown, but I knew which one I wanted to see. Instead, she pulled her hand away, using it to fidget with the lead instead.

"That's insane," she said finally, then turned to walk the dog up the road.

"Maybe." If she thought she was putting me off, she was mistaken. I bounded after her, the spring in my steps the same as Bronson's. "Maybe it'll all come to nothing. We go to dinner and don't know what to talk about, or worse, you like seafood."

"You don't like seafood?" she asked.

"You do?" I shook my head. "OK, I take it all back. No dates for you."

"I don't." This came out in a much smaller voice, but that little look out the corner of her eyes made clear she knew what this meant. "The smell kills me. Like maybe it tastes awesome, but—"

"You can't get past the stink?" I finished for her. "I'm the same. Drew tortures me with his stinky ass lunches all the time. Wasn't until the clients started complaining that he stopped. So you see, this is meant to be. Together we'll work to stamp out seafood eating." I wrinkled my nose.

“Starting with Garrett. He’s always cooking some shit with prawns in it.” I linked her arm with mine. “You and me, baby, we’ll save the seas from being raped and pillaged.” I pulled her closer, feeling a rush when she didn’t resist. “And create something beautiful.”

I was just talking shit. There was no real hope that Katie would agree to what I was saying. The fact she even listened to me at all was what I was focussed on, but right as she opened her mouth to reply, Bronson let out a thin whine. He was keeping pace with us the whole time, but now he hung back. He fought the lead, shaking his head and digging his claws in, forcing us to work out why.

We were near the beach and “suns out, guns out” was the motto, and these guys were doing just that. They piled out of their cars, pulling down surfboards and talking loudly about the waves they were going to catch. My eyes flicked between Bronson and them, seeing what he did. Not fellas looking to spend a lazy afternoon surfing, but a large group of loud men.

He was scared.

“We need—”

“Right there with you,” I said, darting forward and scooping the dog up in my arms. “It’s alright, mate,” I said, over and over in a low voice. I walked swiftly but surely, feeling him shiver in my arms as I put some distance between us and the beach. “It’s alright. Everything will be alright.”

I marched us right back to the gym, not taking a full breath until we walked in through the door and into my office. Bronson scuttled under the desk the minute I set him down, panting hard.

“This is why you need to take things more slowly!” I blinked and turned around to see Katie was obviously furious. She kept her voice to a low hiss, but the anger was palpable. “You can’t just... manifest Bronson being OK. He’s been through...” Her voice caught on that and I rushed towards her, but she held me off. “He’s been through a lot, and he needs you to be aware of that. You have to introduce him to new things slowly, otherwise his nervous system gets completely overwhelmed. Fear biting is a real thing. What if Bronson hurt someone?”

That didn’t seem possible right now. The dog was curled up in a ball, trying to make himself small.

“What if he hurts a child? The kid would face injuries or even death, and Bronson? The council would be around to put him down, no questions asked. Rhys.” I knew what she was going to say before she said it, because

so many people had said my name in that exact tone. “Do this right or... don’t do it at all.”

At that, Katie turned on her heel and walked out of the office.

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Chapter 25

Katie

“So how did that go?” Mandie asked me as I stormed across the floor. She was doing some kind of shoulder stretch, keeping pace with me easily.

“Bad, now want to show me how to lift something super heavy? I’m feeling like that’s what I need right now.”

“Whoa, whoa, Lady Hulk,” she said, holding out a hand as I made a beeline towards a piece of equipment I did not know how to use. How hard could it be? Guys did it every day, and so— “We’ll work up to really heavy, OK, but first?” She tilted her head towards the office. “What did Rhys do, and how hard do I need to punch him in the nuts?”

“Hard.” I frowned. “You can do that, right? I mean I know you’re a string bean and everything, but you’re strong, aren’t you?”

She punched one hand into the open palm of another.

“I can hold my own just fine. What did he do? Make some sort of shitty comment? Look at another’s girl’s arse when you went walking? Told you that you should have decaf when you ordered a coffee?” She bounced on her toes. “Just tell me. I’ll sort him out for you.”

“No...” I let out a long breath, feeling the tug of Bronson’s lead, hearing his whines in my head. I wanted to wrap the dog up in cotton wool, but of course, that wouldn’t work. “Look, it’s nothing.”

“You were ready to kick the hip thrust machine’s arse right then, so obviously it’s not.”

“Is that what that does?” I studied the machine but couldn’t really see it. “Huh, so—” Mandie stepped in front of me, hands on hips. “What?”

“Tell me what happened and I’ll show you how to do some deadlifts,” she said. “Girls kill at them. We have disproportionately strong glutes and legs.”

“OK...” My lips pressed together. “Bronson wasn’t supposed to be here. The rule is three days to decompress, three weeks to adjust, and then three months for a dog to find his place in a new home. Instead, Rhys brought him to the gym three minutes after he picked Bronson up and then wanted to take him for a walk three seconds later. He’s rushing the process, and as a result, Bronson got spooked.”

“Is the dog OK? Did he run away? Do we need to go look for him?”

“No, he’s in the office,” I replied. “It’s just...”

Dogs’ whines cut through me like a knife on a good day, but Bronson’s hit differently. Probably because it wasn’t hard for me to imagine the environment he’d been rescued from. I saw Bronson not long after he was brought in, when those scars were still pink and fresh. It felt like every time I closed my eyes, there the dog was, staring at me with haunted eyes.

“He got spooked by a bunch of guys at the beach because it was too soon. I told Rhys it was too soon, and he just kept pushing.”

“And you just love being pushed, amirite?” That was the problem with hanging around with my damn sister. She had an encyclopaedic knowledge of my childhood and wasn’t afraid to use it against me. Mandie slung an arm around my neck and then steered me towards a barbell that would’ve frankly intimidated me if it wasn’t for my bad mood. “So let’s give this a go. You remember the hip hinge I taught you.” There was much discussion about thrusting your butt backwards, so of course I remembered it. “I’ve loaded the bar up with some lighter plates. Let’s see how you do with them.”

Surprisingly well for some reason. My feet planted firm, my back kept in a neutral position, my hands struggled to retain my grip on the bar, but I pushed through the hip hinge, thrusting them forward, then controlling their shift backwards again and again.

“Damn, I figured you’d have pretty strong legs,” Mandie said, walking around me to check my form. “But you’re stronger than I thought. OK, let’s try some heavier weights.”

We did, over and over, until my heart was beating hard and fast in my ears, the sound competing with the fine tremor in my legs. As was often the case, when the anger ran its course, all that was left was me, feeling

somewhat smaller and emptier as a result. I straightened up after my second set, blowing out my breath for a brief rest, when I caught sight of Bronson. On the lead now, he wasn't able to come running over, no matter what he might wish. Rhys kept him on a short leash, something I approved of, but he didn't look my way as he walked out of the gym.

"Oh, looks like someone's in the doghouse," Mandie said, passing me a drink.

"Who, Bronson?"

"No, dickhead. Rhys." She nodded in his direction as the glass doors closed behind him. "That's about as quiet and withdrawn as I've ever seen him."

"Shit." I wiped my forehead. "Maybe I should apologise."

"Why?" She stared into my eyes. "Were you wrong? Should he have kept Bronson at home today?"

"Yes, but—"

"No buts." She poked me in the shoulder, so of course, I had to do the same to her seconds later. "That's what Mum and I keep trying to tell you. Don't let the people pleasing bullshit get in the way of making a valid point. If you reckon the dog shouldn't have been outside of the house right now, stand by that."

"But..."

I stared at the doorway when it opened again, but it was just to admit another couple of gym bros.

"Butt, not but." Mandie slapped me on the arse and my lightning-sharp reflexes meant I punched her hard in the very taut thigh, forcing me to grin as she winced and hopped away. "OK, just for that, I'm loading the bar heavier and you're doing twice as many sets."

She stayed true to her word, pushing me hard enough to extinguish all emotions other than exhaustion, but when we got back home and I collapsed down onto the couch in a wobbly-legged heap, Mandie remained buoyant. Her eyes shone as she described increasingly baroque training schedules, but I had to break it to her that I'd need more than one rest day. The next morning I was hobbling around bent double, my hamstrings screaming every time I straightened up.

"Ice bath," she said decisively, right as I tried to pull my precious, precious coffee towards me.

“After work,” I promised, sucking down a sip of coffee, the warmth spreading through me. “If I make it.” I started to mince towards the front door, but she just bounded after me.

“Get moving.” She was like a seriously annoying PSA on TV, extolling the virtues of an active lifestyle. “If you warm the muscles up and stop sitting around all day, they won’t hurt so much.”

Yeah, that was a lie. I winced every damn time I got out of my seat behind the desk at the vets, right up until the point the call came through.

“Good afternoon...” My eyes flicked up to check the clock and yep, I only had a couple more hours left of my shift. “Bayside Veterinary Surgery. How may I help you?”

“Do you have any appointments left today?” a deep, masculine voice asked and that had me stiffening.

“Ah, not at this point, sir. The vets are completely booked up, but I can see if I can get you in tomorrow? What seems to be the problem?”

“My dog isn’t eating,” he said, and I heard the fear in his voice.

“For how long?” I opened up a new client file and started taking notes.

“Just today.”

My fingers relaxed. He’d done the right thing, calling the vets. A change in appetite was worth checking out, but unlikely to be an emergency without other factors in play.

“Has he eaten or drunk anything he shouldn’t have?” I asked. “Sometimes dogs get in rubbish or eat a dead rat and that can put them off their food.”

“No, he hasn’t drunk anything either.”

That had my fingers moving, writing down what we’d just talked about. Dogs could survive for a day or two without food, but water was a whole other thing.

“Do you know when he last drank something?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. We picked him up from the shelter yesterday—”

“Rhett?”

I recognised the voice with a jolt.

“Katie? Shit... I wasn’t supposed to call you. Look, I’ll try another vets.”

“Is Bronson’s nose dry?” I asked, not waiting for an answer. “Is he listless or non responsive? Is he panting heavily?”

“None of those things,” he told me. “He’s just lying under the bed, not doing much.”

“He may be drinking when you’re out of the room.” I eyed the clock. “Give me an hour or two,” I told him. “I’ll come by and see how he’s doing, and if he isn’t OK, I know which vets are open for emergencies.”

“Alright.” He let out a long sigh. “Thanks. I’ll see you when you get here.”

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Chapter 26

Rhett

“How is he?” Garrett asked the minute he walked in the door.

This was his dog. He was the one who was supposed to take a few days off work to help the poor bastard adjust, but the flu season had nurses calling in sick left and right, and, as one of the few guys left standing, he got rostered on. Instead, I stayed home to keep an eye on the little guy.

“Hasn’t eaten,” I said, biting off each word. “Hasn’t drunk anything.”

“No water?” He stared at me like somehow I was responsible for that fact, which had my jaw clenching tight. I shook my head sharply. “Shit.” He dropped down onto his knees and peered under the bed. “How we doing, fella?” But when he reached under the bed, the dog did the same thing he did for me, shuffling back. “Is his nose dry? Has he been panting a lot?”

Too loud, that’s what I wanted to tell him. When he and Rhys went to work and left me at home, the place felt too big, too empty. The sound of the dog’s pants were a rhythmic soundtrack to the memories my mind seemed intent on replaying over and over all day. Walking in and seeing Katie sitting there and thinking for just a second that she was here for me. That she had come around because she decided she was ready to give things a go.

Trouble is, I wasn’t the only one.

“Some,” I admitted. “I called the vet.”

“Can they fit him in?” Garrett looked at his phone. “Maybe I should call the shelter and see what they think?”

“Call the shelter?” Rhys walked in with his gym bag over his shoulder. “What happened? Bronson?”

Suddenly, all three of us were on the damn floor, all talking at once to the dog. Big amber eyes viewed each one of us with something akin to anxiety, and I hated that. It was too damn similar to the look on Katie’s face. I’d had a long time to fantasise how things were going to go when she finally left Dave in the dirt, but it wasn’t like this.

“I’ve been reading up on dog training,” Rhys said. “The articles said that using high-pitched, kinda cutesy voices with a dog can help build a bond and make him more attentive.”

“What, like this?” Garrett asked, before turning back to Bronson. “Who’s a good boy? Are you a good boy? Yes, you are. Yes, you are!”

Rhys stared at me and couldn’t help but let out a snort.

“This was your bloody idea,” I growled at him.

“High pitched,” Garrett hissed. “He started wagging his tail a little bit until you got all grumpy.”

“Say something in a cute voice.” Rhys nodded to the space under the bed. “Tell the dog he’s a good boy.”

“Bronson...” I faltered, my voice cracking as I tried to imitate Garrett’s tone. “Bronson, you’re a very good boy!” The other two started to cackle, but the dog shifted his head slightly to put me in his sights. “You’ve done it tough, mate, but you’re safe now. Warm house, all the pats you could want.”

“And a Scotch fillet steak.” Rhys rustled in his bag and pulled out a paper wrapped bundle. “Along with the juiciest bone the butcher could find.”

“Just come out and have a big drink of water,” Garrett pleaded in an incongruous voice, as if that was the most exciting idea in the world. “C’mon, boy. You can do it. You can...”

It was working. The dog moved suddenly, scrambling out from under the bed and heading towards the bowl. I felt a hot rush of pleasure, grinning for the first time in days, only to find that we weren’t the reason he emerged.

“Hello, boy!” Katie stood at the doorway, obviously having let herself in. “I hear you haven’t been drinking? C’mon, let’s get you a nice, fresh bowl of water.”

Fuck, she was here. She said she'd come around, but that didn't change the fact that it felt like a gut punch, seeing her inside my house again. After the other night, I half expected never to lay eyes on Katie again. When I scrambled to my feet, so did the others, all of us following her down into the kitchen.

"Um... hey, Katie." I scratched at the back of my neck, searching for words and not finding them. "Thanks for coming by."

"You called her...?" Garrett hissed, but he didn't wait for an answer. Katie started rumbling through his kitchen cupboards, so he moved in and opened the plastic drawer. "Looking for a bowl?"

"Perfect," she said, taking it from him and then filling it up. Bronson started to dance around her feet, as if the sweetest of nectar was being poured into the bowl. Like I hadn't been trying to tempt him with tap water all day. He lapped it up gustily the minute she set the bowl down, and I let out a long sigh. Tension I hadn't even felt leached from my body, right as I shook my head.

"I gave him water." I was pleading for her to understand. "I emptied the old water and refilled it, then when that didn't work, I slid a shallow dish under the bed filled with water. He just edged away from me. I tried leaving the room, in case I was the thing he was scared of, but when I came back, the bowls were at the same level. I marked them."

Katie smiled then.

"I was supposed to be here." Garrett knelt down beside Bronson, and the dog leaned into his legs. "Every bloody person on staff is away sick at the moment and I had to go to work."

"I made sure Bronson didn't go anywhere today." Rhys held up his hands. "Rhett called into work to see if he could work from home."

"I know how long humans can go without water, but I wasn't sure about dogs," I said. "I looked online, and they said that they can last seventy two hours, but after twenty four you risk serious organ damage and—"

"And you did the right thing," she said. "All of you." I frowned as she winced, then hobbled over to a chair in the living room. I was there, pulling it out for her, my hands resting on the back of her chair for a second. My fingers itched with the need to touch her. "It looks like Bronson is finding it harder to adjust than we thought."

The dog himself lifted his head from the bowl, his muzzle dripping. He trotted over and then rested his head on her lap. The way she stiffened, that

clawed at me.

“You’re injured,” I said, scanning her for signs of why. “What happened? Did someone hurt you?”

“Just Mandie.” She rumped the dog’s ears and his eyes fell closed a little, his tail wagging back and forth. I looked up and met the other guys’ eyes, wondering what the hell that meant. “She took me at my word and pushed me hard in the gym yesterday.”

“Delayed onset muscle soreness.” Rhys said that with a smirk. “You must be in a world of pain.”

“Not right now.” She caressed the dog’s face. Anyone could see the drastic transformation in the animal. Bronson loved Katie with his entire doggy heart, and I couldn’t help but sympathise with him. If I had the choice between Katie or me, I wouldn’t be choosing me either. “But what are we going to do with you, boy?”

She didn’t use a high-pitched voice like we had, just one filled with love and affection. The dog knew that, letting out a huff of breath.

“I can’t take you home.” His tail wagged furiously, somehow able to glean some of her meaning. “This is where you live now, and you need to stop scaring the shit out of everyone by not eating or drinking.”

“Maybe...” I shook my head as she looked up to meet my eyes. “Maybe you could help him with the adjustment process? We could pay you—”

“I can’t accept money for helping you guys with Bronson.” Her forehead creased. “Half of me expected you would have returned him to the shelter by now.”

“That’s not how shit works here.” Rhys drew up a chair beside him and Bronson went very still, giving him the side-eye as Garrett retrieved the meat Rhys had bought. He had a chopping board out and was slicing the meat into thin strips within seconds. “No man left behind, hey buddy?”

Bronson watched Rhys’ hand as he drew closer, every muscle pulled tight, but when he reached out and gave the dog’s flank a scratch, Bronson tolerated it.

“We’ll get through to him,” I promised her, just to see the look of relief in her eyes. “Look.”

Garrett came over with the chopping board in hand. The dog sniffed, no doubt smelling the scent of primo steak in the air. He grabbed a sliver and then held it out. Bronson’s nose worked, a thin string of drool forming, but he didn’t move, not until Garrett got closer. The slice of meat hovered in the

air and then snap...! The dog's jaws snatched it from the air and he gobbled it down with an almost abashed air.

"Good dog!"

My voice was creaky but high pitched. Somehow, I couldn't have been prouder than if Bronson was my own child. He looked up, shooting me a doggy grin as if to reassure me this was all very easy and straightforward, dismissing the fact I'd been low key panicking about the dog all day. His tail wagged as he stared up at me, then was quickly distracted by Rhys getting in on the act. He tossed the dog a piece of meat and damn me if the pup didn't rise up on his back legs and snatch it from the air. He ate the meat with gusto and then turned around, looking for more.

"You're hungry now, mate?" Garrett asked, grabbing one of the brand new dog bowls. He shoved the rest of the steak in there and set it down before the dog. A moment of hesitation as he looked back over his shoulder at Katie, only for her to nod.

"Go on."

He wolfed the meat down in seconds, then went to work licking the bowl clean.

"Shit." I sank down into a chair. "Katie, I'm sorry. I literally tried everything. I didn't want to call you and tried the vet instead..."

My voice trailed away as her hand came to rest on my arm. The need to flex beat down hard, but I didn't. I just stared at those delicate little fingers, the pale skin contrasting with my more tanned arm.

"You didn't want him to get sick or hurt." I felt her eyes on me and couldn't help but meet her gaze. "You care."

"Didn't really want a dog," I grumbled, shooting Garrett a dark look. "A cat would've been easier, but..." I stared at the dog, shaking my head as he pulled away from his food and went and lapped up more water. "He's a part of the family now. That means we need to make sure he has everything he needs."

"So... This isn't exactly what you signed up for," Garrett said with a sheepish smile, "but would you be willing to help us settle him into the house? There's a tray of the best lasagna in the city in it for you. Maybe some chocolate chip cookies?"

She sucked in a breath to refuse, I was sure of it, so I cut her off.

"Need your oil changed or your shower regROUTed?" I asked, then shook my head internally at my offer. "I'm pretty handy with the tools."

“I—”

“I’ve been told I’ve got magic fingers.” Rhys wiggled them in the air. We all shot him a dark look which forced him to explain. “Massages, I meant I could massage away any muscle pain.”

“If you’d all stop talking for a second.” Katie looked at all three of us. “I’d be able to say that of course, I’d help out.” She bent down and pressed a kiss to the dog’s forehead, forcing his tail to wag even faster. “Anything for my boy.”

Goddammit, I would’ve given anything to hear her say something similar about me. Fuck my life, I was jealous of a damn dog.

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Chapter 27

Katie

“Gym!” Mandie announced the minute I emerged from my bedroom the following morning.

“Absolutely freaking not.” I shuffled forward. “I can barely move right now. Yesterday was bad, but this...” I shot her a dark look. “I thought getting fit was supposed to make you feel better?”

“It does!” She blinked. “Well, after the muscle soreness wears off.” She shrugged. “Then sometimes you get some persistent joint pain or injuries.” That was waved away. “But you get stronger, fitter, faster.”

“I’ll settle for weaker, slower, and pain free,” I replied. “I’ve gotta go to work so I can do dumb stuff like pay rent.”

“And then gym?” she asked hopefully.

“I take it all back. You shouldn’t be a fitness influencer.” I waved my hand at her face. “You’re turning it into your whole personality. What about the little things in life like good movies and a pizza with all the toppings?”

“We could do that then.” She shot me a bright grin. “I’ll grab a bottle of wine and we can watch *The Notebook* and ugly cry.”

“Now you’re talking...” Mandie peered at me as my voice trailed away. “Well, not straight after work.”

“Why not straight after work?” My sister’s smile grew carnivorous. “What’s going down when your shift ends?”

“Bronson’s finding it difficult to adjust—” I started to say.

“Bronson.” When her hands went to her hips, I knew I was in trouble. “I thought you found that dog a home. Is Rhys not looking after him? That’s

not your job to take on, you know.”

Mandie was sucking in a breath, ready to give me another of her famous tough love speeches, but I stopped her dead.

“They are looking after him. He’s just struggling with the adjustment. That dog’s been through a lot, you know. He—”

“Was treated disgustingly by the people that owned him?” She shot me a meaningful look. “I know. Half the animals in that shelter you volunteer at are treated like crap, which freaking sucks, but...” Her hands came to land on my shoulders. “That doesn’t mean you have to be the one that saves them.”

“I’m not saving him.” That came out way grumpier than I intended and she shook her head as I pulled away. “I’m just going around to take him for a walk, make sure he’s eating and drinking, and then it’s weepy movie marathon time, promise.”

“I’m holding you to that,” Mandie said, waving her finger in my face. “If I have to come around to the guys’ house and drag you away from that dog, I’ll do it too.”

I just waved to her as I walked down the hall, towards the front door.

Are we still on for this afternoon? I saw Garrett’s text as I started packing away my stuff, vacating the front desk at the vets to let my colleague take over. *Bronson’s a lot better.* This was followed by a photo of the dog sitting pretty on his legs in the backyard. *Still misses you though.*

A man could say a lot of things, but it felt like that was what it took to get my attention. I said goodbye to my workmates and then headed for the door. My eyes were on the phone, analysing the photo, looking for signs that Bronson was really starting to relax. Ears back, mouth open, and panting in a big doggy smile, limbs loose, he was—

“Oh!”

Holy shit, I was so damn focussed on the phone I almost collided with some poor woman. She blinked, understandably pissed, as she stepped back and looked at me pointedly.

“Oh my god!” I gasped. “I’m so sorry. I wasn’t paying attention and—”

“Babe.” That masculine voice had me stiffening. I didn’t need to think about who it belonged to, though he’d never used that kind of tone with me. “I’ve got Fifi, and...” Dave’s voice trailed away, and he stared just like I did. “Huh.” I watched him straighten, the little pink dog carrier incongruous

in his grip, but Dave didn't blush or look embarrassed. Instead, his gaze hardened as he looked me up and down. "Forgot you worked here."

He glanced up at the vet sign, as if to confirm that I did not change workplace just on the off chance I'd run into him again. Not bloody likely. I'd literally rather walk over hot coals than deal with him. I took in the too-long hair, the stubbly chin, and the bags around his eyes and wondered what the hell I saw in him.

The girl he was with obviously wanted to know the same thing.

"Who's this?"

She pointed a finger at me like I was an animal on display in the zoo, not a living, breathing person.

"This?"

That cruel smile, the way he slung his free arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer, it was weird to see. It felt like ten years had passed since I'd been the recipient of his hugs, his smiles. And I didn't want to be now, either, that hit me hard. I felt that unconscious sense of revulsion one might feel if faced with a bucket filled with vomit. I felt no sympathy, no loss and also no loyalty, so I answered for him.

"We used to hook up," I told her baldly, rewarded by the sight of her eyebrows shooting up to her hairline. "Not that long ago. I was his regular booty call, I guess."

"When?" She asked Dave that, not me. "When we started—?"

"What? No, of course not, babe."

It wasn't his denial that stabbed deep, nor the way he looked at her. Right now, he was proud for the world to see him with his girl, and why not? She was conventionally pretty. Far too pretty for him, really. Now that I was looking closely, I could see the stains on his shirt, smell the sour stench of beer wafting off him and the way his shirt was starting to stretch over a softer belly. No, it was the part of me wondering what the hell I was doing wasting my time with him.

"Katie's just a friend," he said, hopeful that would pass as an explanation.

"Not a friend." My voice was as flat and hard as a sword's blade. "Absolutely not a friend, girlfriend or otherwise." I swallowed hard, my mouth filling with bile. "Actually, I'm nothing to him at all."

I didn't dream of this moment. There were no revenge fantasies to entertain because I just didn't give a shit about him, so I moved past them,

walking towards my car. I heard some muffled voices, hers getting shrill, his deeper, louder, but they didn't matter.

I did.

For a second, I felt it, something I kept stuffed way too far down. A throbbing sense of myself that was irritated, then outraged, by the bullshit Dave pulled. He thought he was the shit, and I wasn't worthy of him, but really...

He wasn't worth mine or any woman's time.

Perhaps this is what it felt like when your shackles were unlocked and fell away, because that's what my mind did. I'd carried around the weight of his rejection, and why would I do that? Some people thought I was wasting my time working at the shelter, that I should've had some kind of side hustle going to get ahead, but helping animals made me happy and I dismissed their poor opinion without a second thought.

I could do that with Dave.

He wasn't worth it. Not my time, not my pain, nothing, and that had me straightening up, staring at my car blindly as my mind rushed to make new connections.

Of course, he had to go and ruin it.

"Katie and her animals..." He appeared beside my car with a sneer on his face. The girl he was with had walked inside the vets. "Save any dogs from choking today? Some cats from bleeding out? No, you wouldn't have." His arms crossed his chest. "You're not an actual vet, just a receptionist."

"A receptionist who booked your..." I stared past him to the door. "Girl...whatever's appointment for Fifi. Speaking of which, shouldn't you be over there, pretending to care?" I faced him head on. "Heard you lost your job at the station." The sight of his expression souring was just delicious. "What're you doing now?" I glanced back to the surgery's door. "In house dog minder?"

"You little..." His growl should've worried me, scared me, but right now it felt like nothing Dave did mattered. He wasn't just a dick, he was irrelevant. "I guess you would get jealous of a pretty girl like Felicity."

"Jealous?" I couldn't keep the laugh back. "I feel sorry for her. She hasn't had the epiphany I had. That it'd be far better to be alone than to have you rub her left labia a few times and then ask her if she's ready to come."

“Is that right? Well—”

A ping from my phone let me know another notification had come in. I held up a hand, cutting him off to read it. A smile came unbidden as I saw the newest photo. Bronson had his collar on, a lead attached.

Looks like someone’s ready to go for walkies with his best girl.

Dave, work, and the world all dropped away as I went to my happy place, because I could almost see Bronson’s reaction when I arrived. That whole body wiggle of his was enough to brush away all the other bullshit.

“Who’s that?” Dave was mean, but he wasn’t stupid. I saw the glitter in his eyes as he took in my every response. “Your next ‘hookup?’” He flexed his fingers in the air to form quotation marks. “Probably just another guy that has you on speed dial because you come running every time he wants his dick sucked.”

I knew I needed to make some kind of smart retort, but all words died in my throat. He smirked, shifting his weight from one hip to the other.

“That’s one thing Felicity will never have on you.” He glanced back at the vets. “Fat chicks? They’re hungry for it in ways pretty girls never are.”

Just walk away, I told myself. Pick up your feet and move. He doesn’t matter. Nothing he says matters.

But I didn’t. It was like my body went into freeze mode the moment men showed who they really were. From cruel boys in primary school, to coercive ones in high school, it felt like I saw a side of mankind that others didn’t. They saved their smiles, their pleasant demeanour, for people who looked like Mandie or Felicity, but never for me.

“Fuck off, Dave.” God, that came out all wavering and weak, which just had his smile widening. “Not everyone has the same poison in their fucked up head like you do. I’m going to help a guy with his dog—”

“Is that how he sucked you in? Fuck.” His hand went to his temple. “Why the hell didn’t I think of that? What’s he doing? Using you as an unpaid dog walker?” I looked down at my phone, not wanting to see Dave anymore. Bronson seemed to treat me like a therapy person and right now, I needed the same from him. The joy in those amber eyes, it was a lifeline. “No doubt he’s got you thinking you’re ‘helping,’ whereas really, he’s just getting you right where he wants you. A desperate, low effort side piece that’s only good for a fuck when you’ve got no other options.” He snorted. “God, you’re pathetic.”

Was that what was happening? I'd love to say that I'd only settled for Dave before, but unfortunately I had a habit of letting people who didn't deserve it get close. It felt like I could see what they needed so damn easily and I just knew I could give it to them.

No matter what it cost me.

For a moment, I just stared at Dave like he was a thing, dissecting the parts of him into smaller and smaller pieces before I pulled away and got into my car.

Without even a look backwards, I pulled my car out of the carpark and then drove down the road.

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Chapter 28

Garrett

“It’s alright, boy.”

I told myself I was waiting out the front of the house with Bronson to help accustom him to the noises of our street. Really, it was because we were waiting for her. Bronson could at least show it in the way his ears perked up every time a car passed by, his muscles quivering as he held himself in a seated position. Me? I couldn’t do anything but plaster a friendly smile on my face as Katie’s car pulled up. That faded when I saw her.

“C’mom.”

I didn’t need to give the dog a prompt. He was on his feet, straining against the lead as soon as he saw her. We half-walked, he half-dragged me closer.

“Hello, boy!” She started smiling the moment she saw the dog, but I saw it. How pale she looked, the furrow in her brow as she pulled up outside the house. “He is looking better.”

“Much.” I didn’t get where I was in my job by ignoring people’s subvocal cues. “How about you?”

That furtive look away, the press of those full lips. Yeah, something happened today, but she shook her head, as if to brush that off.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not.” I moved in closer, offering her the lead, and she took it readily. “But we don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“Don’t have time to,” she said firmly. “I’ve got about twenty minutes to take Bronson for a quick walk around the block and then make sure he eats and drinks something.” He had already today, seeming to come out of his shell. Her eyes met mine and there was something hard and brittle there. “Then I’ve got a pizza and a movie date with Mandie.”

I swallowed, trying hard not to think about the pasta sauces I’d been working on all day. The hope was that if I enticed her inside, maybe we could have a take two of the other night. Instead, it looked like the boys and I would be eating pasta leftovers for every meal for the next few days.

“Can’t be late for that,” I said. “I figured we’d take Bronson down the street. It’s pretty quiet down here, not a lot of kids or other dogs.”

“Right.”

Whatever happened to Katie today, it was still on her mind. A ghostly presence, it left me feeling like I was a third wheel in my own front yard.

“So we take it slow,” she told me. “Let Bronson lead the way.” The dog gazed up at her, panting happily at the sound of his name. “If he starts to get skittish, we pause, let him centre himself and if that doesn’t happen, we bring him back home. Slow, controlled, calm exposure.”

“Trauma informed practise.” She turned my way, really seeing me for the first time since she got out of the car. “Makes sense. We use something like that at work.”

None of this was going the way I planned it. The question I wanted to ask Katie was sitting there on the tip of my tongue, but it went unsaid.

“So you managed to get a day off?” she asked as we started forward. Bronson paused, sniffing around madly, then presumably feeling like it was safe to do so, he followed our steps. “Good boy!”

“Yeah, today and a day next weekend,” I replied. “You?”

“I get the whole weekend off for working through a few Saturdays and Sundays for my colleagues,” she replied. “I’m going to sleep in and watch way too much TV and read books.” Her nose wrinkled. “If I can stop Mandie from trying to drag me to the gym. She threatened to pick me up bodily and carry me there, and I said she couldn’t, and somehow that ended up with her showing that she could do squats using my body as the weight.” She shook her head. “Never tell my sister she can’t do anything.”

“Noted.” My eyes scanned the suburban street, looking for stimuli that might stress the dog out. Kids weren’t home from school yet, so there

weren't any of them yelling or screaming. Most people were at work, so the houses were still and quiet. "There's—"

It was all going so well. Bronson was trotting along, tail wagging, looking like a dog that was having the time of his life, when some idiot came roaring around the corner on his motorbike. The engine roared, and I knew exactly how this would go. Without thinking, I sprang into action, leaping over the dog, putting my body between him, Katie, and the road.

"It's OK. You're OK."

I spun around to find Katie down by the dog's side, rubbing his chest in soothing strokes. Bronson quivered, his eyes darting from side to side. Was he seeing us, the street, the bike as it took off down the street, or something else?

"Hey, boy." I put myself in his line of sight, deliberately blocking off his view. Close down the space, reduce stimulation, and help him find his centre, that was the plan, but right when I thought we were getting somewhere, he yanked hard on the leash.

"Ow!"

My focus wasn't Bronson right then. The dog went pelting back up the street, but I had Katie's hand in mine, inspecting the red mark there. I pressed the skin around it, heard her involuntary hiss, and felt her try to pull away.

"How much is it hurting?" I asked. "How're your fingers?" I started to move them gently. "Any pain?"

"No, but Bronson..."

She was up and on her feet and running after him seconds later, which was something I should've done.

He was my dog, my responsibility, and I should be focussed on his well-being, but beating myself up didn't stop me from feeling the shadow of her palm in mine. We didn't need to go far. Bronson had thankfully bolted for the front door, and right now he was pressed into the corner by the window, his tail wagging furiously.

"Bronson..." Could a dog have looked any more pitiful? I didn't think so, which had me crouching down and taking a step towards him. He let out some anxious little whines. "Bud, it's OK. You did so well. That stupid damn bike—"

"Maybe keep it light and fluffy right now?" Katie whispered.

“New things can be scary, bud,” I told him, sinking down to the ground. “For all of us. You should’ve seen me the first day I needed to put an IV line in...”

Bronson couldn’t understand the words I was telling him, but my actions, my tone, he read them all too well. He dared to pull his face away from the wall, shooting me a brief look before trying to make himself small. The fact he was probably forty kilos of dog didn’t make a difference. Ancient instincts were kicking in to help him survive this.

“C’mon, you big baby.” Slowly, carefully, I slid my hands over the dog’s ribs, and when I felt the fine tremor leave his body, I picked him up, hoisting him up into my arms. “I’ve got you.”

There was, of course, the problem of how to open the front door, but Katie was already there. The bright smile I caught as I passed by helped lighten my load. Instinctively, I walked towards my bedroom and as soon as I let him down, he was back under the bed. I’d left an old, sweaty tank top under there to help him get used to my scent.

“Well done.” I hadn’t felt a rush like this since my first year of nursing and Helen grudgingly praised my performance. “You stayed calm. Well...” Katie shot me an impish grin. “Except for the leaping over the dog bit. That was very brave, protecting us from the big bad bike.”

“I was trying to block out the noise, the sight of the bike.”

“Yes, well, I think my instincts are right. You and Bronson will be fine together.”

So why did she look so sad? I watched Katie’s smile fade.

“I think we make a great team.” Shit, shit, was I going to say it? “All of us. You could stay for dinner and we could talk about the best way to help him overcome his fears.” I flashed her my most winning smile. “Not only do I make a damn fine lasagna, but my puttanesca could make the gods themselves cry.”

Her lips twitched. I knew she wanted to smile, but somehow, she resisted with a shake of her head.

“You don’t need me.” She said that in a quiet, matter-of-fact tone that demanded I refute the statement, but she forged on. “The offer is tempting, but Ryan Gosling and pizza awaits. If Bronson goes off his food or won’t drink...” She glanced down at the bed. “Then give the vets a call. You should do a consult anyway, to see if there’s another medication that might help him with his anxiety.”

That was a brush off if ever there was one and I could take a hint, but... I couldn't help but feel whatever had her looking so pale and drawn when she turned up was the problem.

"You know you can talk to me." Where the hell had that come from? Her confused expression made clear I'd just blurted that out without context. "I mean, no matter what was..." I shook my head. "People tell me I'm a good listener. I've got an amazing bottle of wine in the kitchen. You could have a glass and tell me about your day."

"Nothing happened." She was lying despite that bright smile, because there was a sadness in her eyes that wasn't there before. If some client, some vet, put that there, I'd be having words— "I'm fine, but there's no point in me hanging around here. I..." She swallowed hard. "Was reminded that I tend to get overly involved in other people's lives. Well, not anymore. New year, new me. I'm going to put myself first for once, and tonight that involves pizza and ugly crying over movies."

I watched her crouch down and, thankfully, Bronson scrambled back out, seemingly having found his centre again.

"Bye, buddy. Be good for Garrett. He knows what he's doing and he'll look after you."

As if in response to her words, he came and pressed his body into my legs. I reached down and ruffled those velvety ears. While I wanted to pet the dog and make sure he was OK, I also wanted...

Katie to stay. To walk down the hall and into the kitchen. For her to tell me the sauce smelled amazing, right before I grabbed a spoon to give her a taste. I could just imagine holding it out for her, resisting her urge to feed herself, right as those pretty pink lips parted. She'd flush with pleasure, tasting the saltiness of the pepperoni, the tartness of the tomatoes, and the brine of the black olives. Over a bowl of pasta and a glass of wine, I'd ask her the question that had been burning inside me all day.

But she'd made clear that was not an option.

"OK, well, if you're going to eat what is no doubt an inferior pizza from some terrible takeaway." She grinned at my snotty tone. "Then I guess I've gotta shoot my shot now."

Bronson watched me closely as I moved towards Katie. He knew what was up. We might have very different motivations, but I was willing to bet the turmoil inside his head went quiet the minute he was around her. She

was like a glass of crisp, white wine, with just a touch of acidity to balance out the sweetness.

“I’m heading down to the Smiling Samoyed Brewery on the weekend.” I watched her smile falter and her eyes go wide. “I mean, I can take Rhys, but he whines and bitches and then gets hangry really easily. He fills up on roadhouse food on the way and won’t want any pizza when he gets there.” Her little giggle was everything. “I’d much rather bring someone who would actually enjoy the trip and the scenery. There’s some cute dogs to pat.”

“I...” She was going to say she’d love to, I just knew it, but instead she closed her mouth and let out a little sigh. “I’ll let you know. I’ve got your number, right?”

“Right.”

Girls had knocked me back before, so why did this feel like a punch to the gut? I crouched down as she went to leave, giving Bronson a hug. To her it would’ve looked like I was preparing him for Katie leaving, but really? His whines, the way he strained to chase after her, was a perfect reflection of how I felt. I just couldn’t make pathetic noises as she walked out the door.

“C’mon, boy,” I said as I heard it click shut. “Pretty sure Rhys still has some steak in the kitchen for you. I’ll slice you some up and then...” I shook my head. “We can work out how the hell we’re going to convince Katie to become part of our lives.”

Chapter 29

Katie

“Here she is!” Mandie cried as I walked in the door, only for me to discover she wasn’t alone.

“Hey, Katie,” Natasha said, setting her glass of wine down.

“Hey.” I sank down in a chair and gladly took the glass of wine and box of pizza pushed my way. “Looks like this party has already been started?”

“Pizza just arrived and Tash just cracked the wine.” Mandie grabbed her class and clinked it against mine. “So I wasn’t sure if you’d make it. Didn’t end up on another accidental date again?”

“No.” I took a tiny sip of the wine and then set it down. “I’m not sure if that will ever happen again. I’ve decided I don’t need to go around anymore.”

“Why?” Mandie’s shift in mood was abrupt. One minute she was joking, the next her lips formed a thin line as she stared me down. “What did they do? I can kick their arses—”

“Take a deep breath there, Kick Arse Barbie.” Natasha turned to me. “What happened? Mandie said there was some dog...?”

“Bronson.” I took a long swallow of my wine. “He’s a shelter dog I’ve been looking out for.”

“Soul dog,” Mandie explained. “I started looking for another place for us to rent that was pet friendly, but it’s insane out there right now.”

“No need.” I saw Garrett and the way he threw his body in front of Bronson and knew my work was done. They would find a way through this. “He’s in the right place now.” I met her concerned gaze. “Someone told me

that it wasn't my job to look after him, so..." I threw my hands up. "I'm not."

"Just like that?" she asked in a smaller voice.

"Wasn't that what you wanted?" I couldn't understand why she was making a thing about this. "You told me." I sucked in a breath, but before I could say his name, I saw Dave and his sneer. "Let's just say I've had a few people tell me how pathetic my obsession with animals is."

"Pathetic?" Mandie plopped into the seat beside me, that wiry arm of hers holding me tight. "You're not pathetic. There's just too much love in that heart of yours and I get scared people will take it for granted." Her eyes narrowed. "Who called you pathetic? Tell me and I'll—"

"Do you feel pathetic?"

We both turned to see that Natasha was watching us steadily.

"Um..."

A quick kaleidoscope of memories rose then, showing me all the moments when I was happily engrossed in something, only for someone to stand in front of me and put shit on me about it. I didn't even get that they were mocking me at first. So lost in what I was doing, I didn't even understand what they were saying at first.

That came later.

"I like working with animals." That was like saying water was wet or the sun was hot, but I forged on. "Focussing on one doesn't help, though. Bronson has been rehomed, and that's the point of what we do. I'll give it a couple of days and start volunteering back at the shelter again." I shot Mandie a sidelong look. "Around the vicious gym schedule you've no doubt got planned. There's a whole building full of animals that need my help and that's what I need to focus on."

"You didn't answer the question. That's what you're going to do." We both stared at Natasha. "I asked if you feel pathetic."

Yes, I wanted to snap. Yes, of course I do. Dave wasn't the first guy to sneer at me, and he wouldn't be the last. The only thing stopping me from being a crazy cat lady was the landlord. Instead, I swallowed hard and smiled.

"Not pathetic..."

As everything went out of focus, the soft gloom of our apartment was replaced by the harsh concrete of the shelter. Even with the cacophony of barking, I felt this. A strange kind of peace that came from a cat purring as

you scratched under his chin, or feeling a dog snuggle into you as he rolled over and revealed his belly for a big scratch. Animals were so much easier than people. No subtext, no inference, they either liked you or they didn't, and those that did were always grateful for attention, as long as it happened on their terms. I knew their body language, their cues, and could respond without thought, restoring calm and then both of us enjoyed that hard won peace.

Of course, I couldn't say all that.

"Peace, quiet." My reply was lame, but it was all I had. "Contentment."

"You would've been an amazing vet."

I shook my head as I watched Mandie's eyes get all misty.

"Shut up."

"You would—"

"Shut up, Mandie." I stared her down because this was a fight we'd had so many times before. It wasn't on the cards, and all I could do was move on. Just like I needed to move on from the situation with Bronson. "Look, I saw Dave today—"

"No!" Mandie bounced on the couch, moving into a crouch. "Why the hell didn't you lead with that?" She turned to Natasha. "He was the deadshit ex I told you about."

"Because it doesn't matter. He doesn't matter." I felt so good to say that. "I don't miss him. I'm not mourning him. If I'm honest, I'm glad he's gone." I blinked and saw him and Felicity, and right then, I was most worried about the dog. With effort, I shoved that memory aside. "But he said what you did, Mandie."

"He did?" My sister shrank back in horror. "OK, whatever it was, I take it back. I take it back!"

Another slow sip of wine and I was ready to continue. It felt like my mind was joining dots together that I'd never made connections between before.

"I like helping people, and that makes it really easy for them to take advantage. Assuming people will return my energy has not worked well for me so far. New year, new me." I stared my sister in the eyes. "That means I need to start doing things differently and put myself first, not spending all my time looking after someone else's dog."

All of it sounded logical to me, so why did I feel this wrench in my chest at the thought of it? I scratched my breastbone absently and Natasha

noted that.

“But that’s not who you are.” Hands landed on my arms. “I love how much you’re prepared to do for other people,” Mandie said. “I just want a guy in your life, or guys.” Her mischievous grin had me shaking my head. “That give back as much as you give them. Someone’s gotta fill your cup when you’re busy filling everyone else’s.”

“Well, I’ll tell you when I find one...”

That was supposed to be a definite statement. Instead, my voice trailed away. Never show a second of weakness around Mandie, I knew that, and of course, she pounced.

“You did find one.” Her finger hovered in the air. “Nurse guy!”

“His name is Garrett.”

Shit, I hadn’t meant to say that.

“Garrett.” Mandie flopped back against the couch. “Is he the one that adopted the dog? He did, didn’t he? See, that means he’s perfect for you. Does he have a nice house? Is he a good cook? You’re a Taurus, so you need those things.” I rolled my eyes because the idea that my personality was shaped by celestial bodies seemed completely ridiculous. “Is he into you?” I sucked in a breath to answer, but the fine flush on my cheeks had her beating me to it. “He is, isn’t he!”

“If you shut up for just a second, I’d be able to tell you he asked me out.” For a second I let that memory wash over me and that felt infinitely warmer, sweeter than anything else that happened today. “To the Smiling Samoyed Brewery?”

She clapped her hands together.

“That would be perfect—”

“I turned him down.”

When Mandie’s face fell, I wondered if I’d done the right thing, but then I remembered my vow. How the hell could I properly judge if someone was worth letting into my life if I didn’t spend some real time getting to know myself? So I told her that. Silence fell over the room, so I took the opportunity to snag a piece of pizza.

“You know what your problem is?”

I rolled my eyes at Mandie’s retort.

“I have an overly invested younger sister who thinks way too highly of her own opinion?” I asked.

That had her making a rude noise in response.

“You read way too much into all this shit. You know what I always wanted for you?”

I grabbed another slice of pizza, suddenly starving. My inability to eat all day was now kicking my butt.

“Oh, do tell,” I said.

“You never got a chance to just play the field.” I froze mid-chew. Mandie was sweet and operated like an overly caffeinated squirrel most days, but she was also like a baby elephant when it came to people’s feelings. She’d tread all over them and wonder why you were left bleeding. “Just go on lots of dumb dates with random guys and get a sense of what’s out there.”

Because people didn’t ask me out, I wanted to shout, and I couldn’t even put that down to being fat. There were plus sized influencers everywhere that were beating guys off with a stick.

“To not get so caught up in things. To have fun.”

She didn’t realise she was coming from a place of privilege when she threw her hands up in the air. We had the same mother, the same father, but somehow when the genetic dice was rolled, she came out gorgeous and I... I was just me. There was a reason I’d put up with Dave’s shit, and it wasn’t a pleasant one.

Because no one else was interested.

I felt like it was answer his booty calls or let my hymen grow back, re-virginising me.

“Go out with all three of these guys.” Mandie was really warming to this idea. “Go and have fun. Let them fall all over themselves in an attempt to get your attention.” Her elbow jabbed into my ribs. “Do it for the plot.”

“Can we just watch *The Notebook* now?” I asked. “I want to watch Ryan Gosling make mad declarations of love.”

“Noah is completely toxic,” Natasha said, settling in with a pizza box of her own. “Hassling her into dating him by threatening to kill himself?”

“It’s romantic.” I let out a sigh. “Find me a guy that will write me a letter every day for a year and renovate my dream house and I’ll date him.” I snuggled down into the couch cushions. “Noah or nothing, that’s what I want.”

AFTER THE MOVIE WAS DONE, the wine drunk, and the pizza boxes put away, I went to bed feeling wrung out and empty. It was the ending that always killed me. The actors that played the young Noah and Allie were amazing, but it was the older versions of the characters that broke my heart. Dementia was a part of life, but the filmmakers did an amazing job of turning that into a one, two gut punch. I flopped into bed, then reached for my phone, ready for a quick doom scroll to reset my brain before sleep.

Only for the phone to open on my messages.

It was hard to reconcile the happy pup in the photo with the one that scuttled back as the motorbike roared past, but with that memory came something else. Garrett throwing himself in front of us, trying vainly to protect Bronson from the sound, then him crouching down, talking to the dog in a low voice. Calm words, reassuring words, I'd watched him closely, ready to give advice when needed, but he knew exactly what to do. Bronson had chosen Garrett for a reason.

And could I do the same?

I let out a puff of breath, thinking about what Mandie had said. I couldn't admit that to her without her kicking down my door and performing the 'I told you so' dance on my bed, but... The Smiling Samoyed was a pub/brewery outside of town and the pizzas were supposed to be amazing. The fact there were a couple of gorgeous Sammie dogs there was the icing on the cake. Maybe... Perhaps... My fingers moved across the screen, tapping out a message before I could think twice about it.

If the offer is still open to go to the brewery, I wrote. I'm in.

Mandie was right. I did invest too much into these things. She was the one that became blasé about male attention, not me, so my heart started race. Garrett wouldn't see the text right away, so I couldn't expect an immediate response. He could be asleep or—

A ping cut my train of thought off abruptly.

You made my night, came his reply. *Pick you up at 11am, Saturday morning?*

Chapter 30

Rhett

“No,” Garrett said in a definite tone to whoever decided to call him at this stupid hour on a Saturday morning. “No, I can’t...”

“Who’s that?” I whispered as I poured myself a coffee.

I’ll say one thing about having a housemate that was obsessed with getting good quality ingredients. There was always amazing coffee brewed and ready to drink. I took a sip, the bitterness of the black coffee the perfect approximation of my mood.

“Work,” he mouthed back.

No. No fucking way.

If I thought firies had difficulty getting enough staff to cover shifts, we had nothing on nurses. Turns out being around sick people had medical professionals getting ill at record levels. I settled my butt against the counter and watched this shit show play out.

“I’ve got... Yes, I know... I need...” Garrett’s hand scrubbed at his forehead. “I know.”

That note of resignation had me shaking my head, because I knew how this was going to go. He had Katie agreeing to go on a date with him and he was gonna blow her off for work? Honestly, I wouldn’t even have answered my phone if I was the one taking her out. Garrett looked completely defeated when he ended the call.

“I can’t—”

“Take Katie out on that date?” I finished his sentence for him.

“Fuck... Fuck!”

He turned around, gripping the counter tightly as every muscle tensed.

“Why are we yelling fuck?” Rhys came in with Bronson and then bent down to cover the dog’s ears. “You’re scaring the baby.”

The pup was starting to settle in, as evidenced by the fact Rhys had just taken him around the block for a run. We’d reasoned that all that adrenaline coursing through him on the regular needed to be used more productively than getting anxious all the time. Bronson seemed considerably more balanced and calm. He even walked over to me, tail wagging, obviously wanting a pat. I couldn’t help but crouch down to indulge him. The way he pressed into you, staring up as he made clear how much he loved this, was pretty damn cute. That’s just not something I admitted too often.

“I have to cancel the date.” Garrett didn’t need to explain. We all knew what that meant. Bronson and I watched him pace back and forth. “I can’t. She wasn’t going to say yes and then she did, and now she’s gonna think I’m some dick who’s breadcrumbing her and—”

“I’ll take her instead.” Rhys looked totally pumped by the idea. “I’ll explain that something happened at work and I’ll... shit.”

“Shit? What’s shit?” Garrett asked.

“Drew’s still sick and I don’t think I’ve got anyone that can cover me at the gym.” Rhys looked down at his phone. “I’ll make some calls.”

“I can go.” Why the hell had everyone turned to stare at me? Oh, because I said that. Shit. “I mean, if Katie’s OK with that.” Did she even want to go on a date with me? And how the hell was I supposed to be someone’s stand in when it was obvious to anyone looking on how into her I was. “Would she be OK with that?”

My voice trailed away.

“So we’re doing this?” Rhys shot the lot of us a triumphant grin. “We’re dating Katie as a team.”

“I mean, I guess...” Garrett was not entirely on board, I could see that plainly, but faced with his options, he quickly recovered.

Rhys punched me in the arm.

“So, you’re going on a date with our girl. Don’t fuck this up, because you’re doing this for all of us.” I had a stinging retort ready to deliver, but Rhys transferred his attention to the dog. “And you’re coming with me.” That high, excitable squeak had Bronson’s tail thumping on the floor. “Yes, you are! Yes, you are!”

WHICH IS how I came to be standing outside Katie's door an hour or two later.

I'd scrubbed and shaved, then carefully combed my hair back and found a nice shirt and some jeans. Garrett vetoed the nice shirt and found me another, better one and I got dressed and then sped over to her place, making a pit stop at a florist to pick up some flowers. Taking the steps two at a time, I raced all the way up to her door and then... stood there. She was going to open it and see me, not Garrett. He was the one she agreed to go out with. I should've called her, explained and—

"Oh." Mandie opened the door and took me in, one eyebrow jerking up when she saw the flowers. "You're not the murse."

"Murse?" I asked.

"Male nurse."

"Stop calling him that!" a muffled voice said from deeper in the apartment. "I'm nearly ready." Katie's voice grew louder, clearer, and my grip on the flowers tightened. Mandie's eyes widened as she heard the cellophane crackle, then smiled. "I just need..."

Finish that sentence, babe, I thought as Katie appeared in the doorway. Just lemme know what you need and I'll do it.

"Rhett?"

She was confused. Of course, she was. She thought she was going on a date with Pretty Boy, but I turned up instead. Should've texted her first, I told myself over and over, right before I cleared my throat, ready to explain.

"Garrett got called into work, Katie. He tried really hard to avoid cancelling, but they're so short staffed in the emergency department, he didn't have a choice. He's going to text you about it. We... I..." Mandie nodded in encouragement. "I figured rather than cancel on you, I could take you to the brewery instead."

Mandie turned to see what Katie thought about the matter, but I barely noticed what she was doing. It was Katie's mouth falling open, her blink, that had my attention. She was gonna say no, thanks, that she was only interested in one of us, so her smile took me by surprise.

"Sure. Who can say no to cute Samoyed dogs?"

"Right." I'm not sure if I knew what one of those was, but all I knew was they were now my favourites, because Katie liked them. "Well, these are for you."

I handed over a bunch of tulips. They were a fiery orange-red, just like her hair, and it felt like her freckles popped as her cheeks flushed pink. With a nudge from Mandie, Katie stepped forward and took them from me.

“Oh, well, thanks. I’ll just put them in some water.”

“You better come in, not murse,” Mandie said, looking me over closely. “So which one are you?”

“Rhett.” I held out a hand, and she just looked at it before taking it eventually. “I’m a firefighter and—”

“You want to make a triple decker sandwich from my sister with those guys you live with.” I stopped mid-stride and stared, catching Mandie’s smug expression. “Don’t worry, I’m not adverse to Katie getting all the peen, as long as you’re all just giving her your dicks, not being one.”

My feet shifted restlessly as I felt not so little Rhett perk up at that idea.

“I’ve liked your sister for ages,” I told her. Katie was in the kitchen opening cupboards and looking for a vase, so she was missing this. “Before all the others.”

“You’re the one that let her waste her time with that arsehole you work with.”

Mandie’s eyes narrowed.

“I’m the one that had to force myself not to punch Dave’s teeth down his throat every time he opened his mouth because I was worried that it would hurt Katie,” I replied, crossing my arms.

“OK.” She nodded. “Ignore those noble instincts next time. That guy was a fucking bastard. He tried to crack onto me more than once.” My hands formed fists, something she noted. “Don’t you dare tell Katie. She has this stupid idea that guys aren’t into her.” I wasn’t staring at her anymore, my gaze instinctively finding Katie and watching her closely as she removed the flowers from their wrapping and then arranged them in the jug. “But you are.”

I met Mandie’s gaze reluctantly.

“I am, and you have to know I’d never hurt her. None of us will. No offence, because you seem nice and all, but I really, really like your sister.”

“Good.” She turned to Katie as she rejoined us. “You can go out with this one. He seems cool.”

“Thanks for your approval.” Katie rolled her eyes and then smiled at me. “So, shall we? Cute puppies await.”

I moved forward, placing my hand on her lower back as we walked towards the door.

“Want to jump in my truck?”

SO THERE WAS a reason why I would never have chosen a road trip as a first date. It was over an hour’s drive and that meant I had a problem. I could break down a door, carry someone almost twice my bodyweight out of a burning building, but a conversationalist I was not. I looked over at Katie for the tenth time since we got into the car and knew I needed to say something.

“So how was your...”

We both broke off and she flushed prettily, because we’d said almost the same thing simultaneously.

“You first,” I said.

“How was your week?” she asked. “Save any damsels from distress?”

For once I wished we’d had a big fire to attend. Not due to the death and destruction, but then I’d have a suitably manly story to tell.

“Not really. Well, if you count getting Millie some lollies to help with her nausea, then maybe.” Katie stared in incomprehension. “She’s pregnant and...” I wasn’t sure how this was going to go over, but it had to be said. “Noah, Charlie, and Knox are the dads.”

“A baby?” Her voice got all squeaky as she bounced in her seat. “Oh my god, Charlie will be the most amazing dad, and Knox has been dying to settle down. Millie’s the girl that Noah was pining over for ages, right?”

Pining. I knew a thing or two about that. Noah had me beat, though, holding a candle for his girl for over ten years.

“Yep. It looked like it could get a little awkward there for a bit because all three guys were into Millie...” I shot Katie a sidelong look, trying to get a read on her response. “But they figured that all three of them working together would be better for the baby, and so they’re all together now.”

“Right.”

Katie went quiet, studying the road ahead.

“But what about you?”

“What about me?”

I saw that she had misunderstood me because Katie’s eyes went wide, her cheeks burning bright red as she stared at me. She thought I was asking

about how she felt about a polyam relationship. I couldn't help but smile as I turned back to the road. The thought of sharing her with the guys I counted as brothers was delicious, but right now I needed to work out if I could talk to the girl, let alone have group sex with her.

"How did your week go?"

Her sigh of relief was music to my ears, right before it was ripped away again.

"Pretty boring. Difficult clients, sick dogs and cats. Oh!" My hands tightened instinctively around the steering wheel, because some part of me knew I wouldn't like this. "You'll never guess who walked into the clinic."

Not him, I thought furiously. Not fucking Dave.

"Dave." Her word was like the whistle of an axe, right as it came down on the back of your neck. "He's got some girl now." Of course he fucking did. That was one of life's little mysteries. Guys like that seemed to get the girl with shocking ease, whereas I struggled to make even small talk. "Didn't stop him from coming over and getting stuck into me."

"He did what?"

That came out as a harsh bark and the car veered sideways as I turned to stare at her. Forced to take my foot off the accelerator, I slowed the car down and then came to a stop on the shoulder of the road. I was too angry, too fired up, and in no state to be talking to a girl, but I couldn't help but twist in my seat to face Katie. She smiled then, a little wistful thing.

"It wasn't enough that he walked into my workplace with a dog called Fifi," she said and I saw the pain disguised by a smile. "Harsh words were exchanged and he... made clear how pathetic he thought I was, helping out with Bronson."

Chapter 31

Katie

I had not meant to share this information. Talking about your ex on a date was universally acknowledged as a terrible thing to do, and yet if I had to, Rhett was the perfect man to share it with.

“That fucking prick...” His rage wasn’t scary. Instead, it felt like a balm on irritated skin, soothing me in ways that talking to my sister hadn’t achieved. “How dare he say a damn word to you? If he comes within ten feet...”

Rhett caught himself, looking away and taking one deep breath, then another. I watched him get a grip in real time before turning back my way, considerably calmer.

And I wasn’t sure if I wanted that.

The way that muscle ticed in that firm jaw, forcing the hollows in his cheekbones to become more pronounced. The way he looked like he was ready to go Hulk smash seconds before turning to me, concern plain in his eyes. I soaked every bit of that in.

“You’ll what?” I asked.

“I’ll...” He swallowed hard. “Make sure he thinks twice about talking to you ever again. You don’t have to go out on another date with me ever, and that offer still stands. He’s a prick. He doesn’t deserve to breathe the same air as you and I would gladly make sure he doesn’t.”

“OK.”

That was a completely inadequate response, but I lost my ability to put words together the minute my eyes dropped down. Those full lips were

pursed, tense with barely repressed anger, but as I stared, they softened. I wanted to trace the shape of them with my fingertips, not my eyes, feel the rasp of his stubble under them, and that feeling was as foreign as it was welcome. I wanted to tug Rhett's head down, draw him closer and see what that fury transmuted into when I kissed him.

"OK." He nodded and then turned towards the road, unaware of just how close I'd come to throwing myself at him. A few long breaths and I was back in control, not my hormones. His fingers tapped the steering wheel and then he eased the car back out onto the road. "The brewery. Heading to the brewery."

I couldn't help but smile as Rhett coached himself through what to do next. So I wasn't the only one spacing out here. The motor hummed as we picked up speed, racing towards the brewery, but I liked to think at least part of him was right there with me, still sitting beside the road, wondering what to do next.

"So what else did he say?"

Rhett didn't bother to specify who as his hand landed on the small of my back. He steered me towards the brewery, the two of us walking through the big open doorways. Before I could answer, a cloud of white fur came bounding over with a bark.

"Oh. My. God." I was down on my knees, not giving a damn about the dress I'd put on, not when this cuteness existed. The dog sensed it had an easy target and barrelled up to me, pushing his head into my hands. "So soft!" I luxuriated in all that soft fur. "Rhett, you've got to give him a pat."

He was watching me the entire time, an indulgent smile on his face. Before he could answer, a slightly harried woman appeared.

"Looks like you've met Hoppy," she said. "Can I get the two of you a table?"

"Reservation under the name Romano," he replied smoothly.

"Excellent." She gestured for us to follow her, but I just wanted to hang out with Hoppy. "This way." Hoppy obviously had the same idea, following hot on my heels as we walked over to our table. It was set up near one of the windows, away from the main bar, giving us a little privacy. "Now, can I start you off with some drinks? A beer perhaps?"

I fought the urge to wrinkle my nose. Beer was not my drink of choice, but evidently it was Rhett's.

"What do you have on tap?" he asked.

“Pale ale, golden ale, stout...”

The woman startled to rattle off a list of words that made no sense to me at all.

“I’ll have a schooner of pale ale,” Rhett said before turning to me. “Katie?”

“Just a glass of Coke,” I replied, but then the woman and Hoppy started staring at me. The dog wagged its big plume of a tail, as if encouraging me to try some of the beer made in his name. “And what would you suggest beer wise for someone who doesn’t really drink it?”

“The hibiscus Saison is probably your best bet,” she replied. “Sweeter and fruitier than your usual bitter beers.”

“OK, I’ll try that.”

“You don’t have to drink beer,” Rhett said the minute she turned to get our drinks.

“You say that, but Hoppy has other ideas.” At the sound of his name, the dog jumped up, putting his paws on my lap. “You think I should have a beer, right?”

He gave a sharp bark in reply and then leaned in for more scratches.

“So what else did Dave say?” Rhett’s dark tone was in stark contrast to Hoppy’s Samoyed smile. “If he upset you, Katie.”

“He didn’t.” I met his intent gaze over the dog’s head. “He can’t. I think we can both agree that Dave is an idiot and isn’t worth a second of either of our time. Anyway, do you want to talk about your ex on this date?” He shook his head. “Thought not. So...”

This was where we had a conversation and got to know each other. It was also the thing I sucked at. Like small talk? What the hell was that?

“OK, well...” He looked surreptitiously at his phone. Great, the guy was bored already. “What is the theme song of your life right now?”

“What?”

I blinked, the question having come out of nowhere so I definitely didn’t have an answer for it.

Which had me thinking.

“Where the hell...?” I reached over and tipped his phone down so I could see the screen. “Twenty seven questions for next level dates?”

“Hey.” He was about to give an inspired defence of researching what to say on a date, but the woman reappeared with our drinks. They were set in front of us and we smiled and thanked her. Rhett leaned forward when she

turned to go. “Defend you from that dickhead you dated? I can do that as easily as breathing. Need a fuse changed, a door rehung? I’m your guy. But sitting around and talking about...” His hands swam through the air. “Pretty much anything else, I suck at.” His phone was twisted back and forth. “That’s what the internet is for.”

“You researched this?” I’m not sure why I was giggling, but the thought of seeing the big firefighter looking up conversation starters loosened something inside me. My hand went around the beer glass and I took a sip, recoiling the minute it hit my palette. “That’s supposed to be sweet and fruity?” Hoppy watched me with rapt interest, his tail wagging as soon as he had my attention. “Hoppy, you did me dirty.”

“I woke up this morning thinking I was going to have an exciting day of mowing the lawn and catching up on laundry,” he said. “The other day, before I came by your work, I rehearsed what I was going to say over and over.”

“I thought I was the only one that did that.”

He smiled then, making me wonder what the hell he needed to practise for. It was so bright girls would be falling at his feet even if he recited the periodic table backwards.

“No girl’s ever going to want me for my small talk,” he said, staring into my eyes. “I’m much better at listening than talking about the weather.” I felt like I saw something real, something raw, then. “Part of me is too damn impatient. I just want to get to the good part.”

“What?”

Before he could answer, the proprietor reappeared.

“Were you interested in ordering some food?”

No, I wanted to snap, even as my stomach grumbled. Instead, we both perused the menu and put our order in. When we were finally alone again, I watched Hoppy run back to the bar with his owner, then turned to Rhett.

“The good stuff?” I couldn’t keep the betrayal from my voice. “Like having sex?”

He blinked and then smiled slowly.

“Sex is definitely part of that, but... most of all, it’s that moment when you find a rhythm with a woman.” He shook his head. “Outside of the bedroom,” he said hurriedly. His focus shifted, looking over my shoulder to the lake and the forest beyond. “When you know how the other person

takes their coffee and when to get it for them. What they like for breakfast and when it's safe to give them a kiss. When it gets comfortable, y'know?"

I just stared for a second, almost able to see what he described. The two of us moving around in his sun-drenched kitchen, orbiting slowly until finally we collided. I knew exactly how his arms would feel, what it would be like to feel pressed against his chest, his hand rumpling my hair.

"No." I said that honestly. "That's never really happened to me, but..." I took a sip of my Coke. "But I want it to."

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Chapter 32

Rhett

“Well, if small talks off the table...” Katie’s lips quirked up in a smile. “What topic could you talk about for five minutes straight, without any kind of preparation?”

I sucked in a breath, already knowing my answer, but then forced myself to pause.

“Did you get that question from a list to use on a date?”

“Nope.” Her grin was everything. I felt this weird tightness in my chest each time I saw it, yet somehow I wanted to lean into that ache, not away from it. “It’s what I always wish presenters would ask when you have to do those horrible ice breaker activities.”

“Name one thing that’s interesting about you?” We both grimaced at that example. “Alright, gym or firefighting.” I shrugged, sure she wouldn’t want to hear a word about either one of those things. “Take your pick.”

Her lips twitched and she turned to the dog.

“What do you think, Hoppy? Gym?” The dog just panted, completely transfixed by Katie. “Or firefighting?” He barked at that, sealing my fate.

“Alright, here goes.” I opened the timer on my phone and started it. “Five minutes on firefighting.”

I wasn’t going to talk about the recent changes in firefighting appliances. Even fellow firies got bored of that shit, so I settled on this.

“When I was a kid, like almost every other young Aussie boy, I wanted to be a firefighter. Unlike every other guy, I was obsessed.” She snorted at that, but stayed quiet as I continued. “Fire engine bed sheets. Wouldn’t

accept any other LEGO sets other than the city ones with fire engines in it. Watched *Fireman Sam* on repeat on TV. By the time I was ten, I could recite the names of every firefighting appliance used by the Australian firefighting service both currently and historically.”

Her eyes widened, and I knew then that this was the moment I killed any opportunity of getting another date. Shit, in for a penny, in for a pound, or so my mum used to say.

“Other boys grew out of it. I pestered my parents to take me to every single open day the local fire station held. When fires came to school, I was there quizzing the firefighters about the differences in the appliances while all the other kids were climbing the fire engine or tooting the horn. I knew how tough it would be to get into the service. Plenty of fit blokes think they’d be a great fit for the job. It’s how I met Rhys and Garrett. I started going to the local gym as soon as I was old enough, building my frame, my muscles, trying to guarantee that I’d make it through the physical exam and studying guides to make sure I’d pass the rest.”

“Whoa...”

This is why I didn’t date. When I started packing on the muscle, girls started to hang around at school, but then I’d go and ruin my chances by opening my mouth. I took a long sip of my beer, the bitterness a perfect counterpoint to what I felt.

“You’ve always known what you wanted to do?” I nodded. For some reason, people thought that weird. Apparently, working out what you wanted to do was supposed to be this circuitous journey, not a straight line. “Me too.”

My eyebrows jerked up.

“You always wanted to work as a receptionist?”

She smiled as she shook her head.

“Not a receptionist. Does anyone feel called to deal with difficult customers? Nope, animals. I wanted to be a vet.”

“Are you still studying?”

There was so much I didn’t know about Katie and that was killing me. Something about her pricked at me, demanding I research her, learn her, just like I did all aspects of the fire service.

“No.” I watched her shoulders droop. “You have to get perfect score in year 12 to study veterinary medicine and I got close, but not close enough. But animals? I was the same. My gran bought me a book about dog breeds.

It illustrated each one and discussed their temperaments, characteristics. I had every single breed memorised and could identify them by the time I was ten.”

She turned to Hoppy, who was watching this exchange with interest.

“Like the Samoyed is a spitz breed.” I shook my head, not knowing what that meant. “It’s the curly tail thing. Akitas, Siberian Huskies, Malamutes, Shiba Inu, they’re all spitz dogs. Different bodies, different temperaments, and different regions they originated in, but yeah, they are classified as part of the same category.”

Did Katie talk to Dave about this sort of thing? I couldn’t imagine him sitting down and listening to anyone, let alone her.

“That’s why you work as a receptionist and volunteer at the shelter,” I said. “To be close to animals.”

“Animals are easy.” She reached over and ruffled Hoppy’s fur and the dog leaned into her hand, obviously enjoying every bit of it. “What they want and need, it’s really easy to work out. If they aren’t enjoying a scratch behind the ear.” Hoppy shifted his head then so she could reach under his chin. “They let you know. Food, shelter, stimulation, and comfort, that’s all they want and I...” Her eyes slid sideways. “I know exactly where I stand with them. People are way more complex.”

“I can be simpler.” Fire was an unpredictable thing. In some ways it drove me mad, trying to keep in front of it. But there were times when every sense was engaged as I watched how the flames, the wind shifted, and moved accordingly, lest we all get killed. My heart would race so damn hard, pumping adrenaline through me and that’s exactly how I felt right now. “I know you don’t want to talk about Dave.” Her smile faded and she pulled away from the dog. “But I’d love to know what made you keep hanging out with him.”

“Here’s your pizzas.”

I nearly snapped at the poor server. Katie was about to say something, but the woman swept in, placing the pizzas before us.

“Thank you,” my date said as the server pulled away.

I’d killed the conversation dead. Smothered the fire before it got a chance to spark. I grabbed a piece of pizza, knowing it’d taste like cardboard, and nearly choked on it when she finally spoke up.

“I don’t know.” A long, shuddering sigh and then she forced herself to go on. “No good reason, that’s the easy answer, but the harder one?” She

met my gaze and I refused to flinch away from the pain there. “I settled for him because he was easy. He was there, would ring me up, even if it was two in the morning and just for a hookup. I didn’t have to decipher any subvocal cues, date him and pretend to be someone I wasn’t, just to catch his eye. He sucked, wasn’t worth a second of my time, and yet I gave him far too much of it because that was the path of least resistance.” She picked up a piece of pizza, staring at it for a second. “But not anymore. I’d rather be on my own than let someone treat me like that.”

“Or with someone who’ll treat you better?”

I hung on her answer like I did the shift in the wind the meteorologists predicted would come.

“Someone better?” Part of me loved the way her back snapped straight, her eyes sparking with a fire I wanted to fan into out of control flames. “Someone who actually wants to be around me, that likes me for who I am, who’s willing to put the time and energy into getting to know me?” Her eyes slid sideways, looking out the big open doors to the lake beyond. “Yeah, that. I’m pretty much not interested in getting together with anyone without that.”

“I’m in.” That was not what I intended to say. Get some chill, that’s what Rhys always said, but I had none and never would. “I mean...” I shook my head. “We’ve done everything wrong. You expected Garrett and got me. We talked about your ex and this list of twenty seven must ask questions was nowhere near as useful as I hoped, but...” My hand slid across the table and I grabbed hers. That moment of contact was like a hot brand, searing my soul. My thumb moved, tracing the indentations of each knuckle, treasuring how small her hand felt in mine. “But I’d like to do this again, if you want to.”

My eyes roamed, taking in every shift of her body, catching the moment when her lips twitched and then curved into a smile.

“So you want to date me?” That had to be a rhetorical question, because she knew what I was thinking. “Let me infodump my top ten interesting facts about different dog breeds? For example, did you know that these dogs have a Samoyed smile?”

“Me too.”

I couldn’t help but grin right along with Hoppy. Katie hadn’t run out of the brewery screaming, so hope flared to life.

“I’m warning you,” she said. “I know a lot about dogs. Cats too.”

“And I know a lot about firefighting gear and gym routines. Maybe we could...” I remembered a video I saw on social media. “Do puppy yoga or something? Great for flexibility, and stretching helps your muscles recover more quickly.”

“Puppy yoga?” Her hands went under her chin. “Oh my god, sign me up. That sounds so much better than the hell Mandie’s been putting me through.”

“It’s a date.”

“WERE YOU FINISHED WITH YOUR MEAL?”

I looked up, and it felt like the server had appeared out of nowhere. She shot me a motherly smile, as if she’d seen exactly what was going on.

“Mine was amazing” Katie cradled her stomach. “You might have to roll me out of here like one of those beer kegs, though.”

“There’s a lovely track by the lake,” the server said, shooting me a meaningful look. “Goes up into the forest. Can be good for helping a meal settle.”

“At this point, it would be more of a waddle than a walk,” Katie groaned.

“C’mon.” I was up and out of my chair and offering her my hand. She looked at it and then smiled, grabbing it with hers. “I’ll carry you if I have to.”

“My prince...” She affected a dramatic pose before dropping down to pat the dog. “Bye, Hoppy, you were amazing company.”

For a moment, I found myself jealous of a dog, but that evaporated the moment her hand slid into mine. I grabbed on tightly, then led her out the back of the brewery, the track to the lake immediately apparent.

“That pizza was incredible. I want a nice long nap now, though,” she said as we walked towards the trees. It was peaceful here, away from other people, the brewery, everything. All I could hear was the hush of the breeze in the trees and her.

“Well, if we’re talking about what we want...” Could I do it? Could I be honest with Katie about what I wanted? I turned to stand before her, studying the way the sun turned her hair to the colour of fire. My eyes dropped down for the millionth time, tracing the shape of her lips. “Katie, I really want to kiss you.”

“Kiss...?”

I expected her to jerk free of me, my hold already loosening, but instead, her eyes seemed to light up even as she began to grin.

“Look, I’m probably rushing things but—”

I was silenced by a pair of very soft lips pressing against mine. My arms moved without thought, wrapping around her, and I held her pressed closely as I took over. Her kiss was a sweet thing, but I wanted, needed, more. Kiss after kiss, the salty aftertaste of the pizza and her mixed, driving me nuts. My breath whistled through my nose as I parted her lips and claimed her mouth.

Hot, wet, slick, it was a sensory overload that threatened to overwhelm me, but more than that. Her, that’s what I felt, Katie. Her scent in my nose, the feel of her softness against my hard body, but it was that little sound that caught my attention. A helpless little sound of pleasure, I realised belatedly. That’s what had me pulling back, staring down at her, just to make sure.

“Whoa...” She touched her mouth and some savage part of me loved how swollen her lips looked. “That was...” Her finger pointed aimlessly in my direction. “I did not expect that.”

“You told me to be blunt.”

“Did I?” Her eyes dropped down to inspect my mouth and I wondered what she saw. Lips hungry for another taste of hers. I watched her smile slowly. “Maybe I did.”

She moved in, claiming a kiss of her own, though it was much softer. Mine claimed her mouth, she introduced herself to my lips, and we were both very glad to make her acquaintance. Finally we were forced to pull away or make a very public scene in the forest.

“Tell me we can do this again,” I rasped as I pushed an errant strand of hair behind her ear.

“Puppy yoga, remember?” she said. “I’ll never say no to that.”

I’d find the puppies myself and import them into a yoga studio if that’s what it took, sure that Rhys would help me find a space.

“You got it,” I told her.

Chapter 33

Katie

“That went well.”

I didn’t even get a chance to take a breath before my sister was waving a finger around with a knowing look. It was like she could see the good food, good conversation (even though Rhett was convinced it wasn’t), and good kisses. My fingers went to my lips and that was a mistake. Mandie’s wicked grin spread wider.

“Really well.” She slung her arm around my shoulders and steered me towards the kitchen. “Did you pash a boy, Katie?”

“We are not fourteen anymore,” I replied as I shoved her off me. “No one pashes anymore.”

“You did.” She went to the fridge and pulled out a couple bottles of water, cracking one and handing it to me. “So c’mon, bitch. Spill!”

I was going to, but not in the way she thought.

“You were right.”

“Yes!” She threw her arms up as if she’d just scored a goal at the footie or something. “Hang on, what was I right about?”

“I need to do things differently,” I explained, then sucked down a mouthful of water. “Live my life differently. That’s what new year, new me really means. The old me would’ve freaked out when Rhett turned up instead of Garrett. She definitely wouldn’t have gone on a date with him.” I shook my head. “She didn’t do dates at all, but...” Her smile had dimmed a little as I stared at her. “Apparently I’m going on another date to do puppy yoga.”

“At that cute place a couple of suburbs away?” she asked, suddenly excited. “They’re amazing and the pups are so cute.”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “I don’t know because I’m going to just play it by ear. Say yes rather than trying to plan for every eventuality.”

“OK, who the hell are you, and where’s my sister?” Mandie wasn’t completely convinced, I could see that, but I’d just have to prove to her that I was capable of this, just like I needed to prove it to myself. “And if you’re saying yes to things...”

“Gym?” I snorted at her suddenly hopeful expression. “Sure. I ate my body weight in pizza, so go gently on me.”

“So just an hour of free weights then?”

I groaned and went to my bedroom, pulling on my gym gear, even if I wanted to just roll into bed and relive that kiss.

RHETT SURPRISED ME. That confession was disarming enough, but that kiss? I was still floating a few feet off the floor as we walked into the gym, barely registering the blare of loud music, the clang of weights being dropped on the floor. It was the sound of scrabbling paws that broke the spell I was under, warning me that I had someone barrelling towards me.

“Bronson!”

The dog’s paws hit me so hard I was forced to stumble backwards, but I recovered quickly. He didn’t know his own damn strength, but I loved that he’d lost that haunted look. A week out of the shelter and he was slowly coming back to himself.

“Hey boy!” He snuffled me all over, furiously seeking the scent of another dog. “You smell Hoppy on me.” The dog looked up then, as if wounded I’d do him dirty like that. “He’s very cute, but not a patch on you.” His tongue lolled out in a doggy smile, right as Rhys ran over.

“Bloody dog!” He said that in this high, squeaky tone, as if he was super pleased with Bronson. “I told you... Oh.” Rhys blinked, smiled, tried to stifle that, and then just gave in, grinning as he sidled closer. “Hey, Katie. Should’ve known that it was you when Bronson took off like his arse was on fire.” He looked me over closely, making me suddenly conscious of how thin this old t-shirt was. “Did you have fun with Rhett?”

“I’m going to go and set up,” Mandie announced. “That way you can ask Katie out without interference.”

“Mandie...!” I hissed, but the bitch just sailed past, leaving me to face Rhys alone. “So Bronson is looking a lot happier.”

“He is.” Rhys moved closer. “About that date.”

The brand new Katie would’ve stood there and flirted with the big strong personal trainer, but it appeared that I was still working my way up to that.

“He’s eating well and drinking?” I asked in a little voice. Bronson panted, as if shaking his head at my feeble attempt to make this about him.

“B-boy is doing just fine.” A hand went to my chin, tilting it up until I was forced to meet his eyes. “How are you?”

I swallowed because a pat reply came and went unsaid. Something self-effacing where I quickly redirected his attention to something, someone, else.

“I’m...” His lips twitched as I searched for an appropriate adjective. “Good.”

So, that was a freaking lame reply.

“Just good?” His eyebrow curled upwards as he shot me a slow smile. “Well, I’ll have to get on Rhett’s case, make sure he ups his game.”

“No, don’t do...” His smirk made clear he was just joking. I crossed my arms and cocked my hip, fixing him in my gaze. “The date was amazing, thanks for asking. The food was incredible. There was a really cute dog there, though not as cute as Bronson.” The dog barked in response. “And Rhett is a really good kisser.”

“He is, is he?” I expected Rhys to back off, perhaps look disappointed, but instead, a heavy arm went around my shoulders, steering me over to where Mandie was preparing for our session. “Care to do a comparison?”

My feet slowed, then stopped.

“Um... what?”

I was trying hard to be a cool girl and kissing Rhett spontaneously fit that bill, but kissing Rhys in the gym just to see who was better?

“Let me and Bronson take you out for a coffee afterwards,” he said, squeezing my shoulders and then turning to face me when we got to my sister. “We’ve been going down to the beach a bit.” I sucked in a breath, ready to lecture him about that. “At his pace, of course. I follow his lead.” His thumb brushed my neck, forcing me to shiver. “When he’s done, if the vibes are off, I bring him back. Been working well so far. I reckon the pup would like to show you how well he’s doing.”

“Using a dog to get me to agree to a date?” I said, but Bronson stepped forward, looking up at me as if wondering how I could possibly say no. Turns out he was right. “OK, but fair warning, I’m not sure how far I’m going to be able to walk after Mandie is finished with me.”

“Go easy on her,” Rhys told my sister. “Maybe focus on arms today. Or legs.” His eyes slid down to take in my new leggings. “That’ll give me an excuse to carry Katie when we go out afterwards.”

Mandie had thoughts, lots of them, but as she approached, he sketched a jaunty salute and whistled to Bronson to get the dog to follow him.

“Two dates in one day.” Her elbow came to rest on my shoulder until I shoved it off. “You go, girl.”

“Just taking your advice.” I turned to look at the array of free weights and equipment she had set up. “Is there any way to turn me into someone new without it hurting quite so much?”

“Pain is just weakness leaving your body,” she said, handing me a weight. “OK, let’s see your bicep curls.”

RIGHT NOW, I wished Mandie hadn’t taken Rhys’s advice. My arms felt like wet noodles, but as she was putting the weights away, he was there.

“How we doing, slugger?” Rhys asked, running his hands down my arms, looking at my hands.

“I wouldn’t touch me,” I groaned. “I’m all sweaty and gross.”

“Horses sweat, men perspire, and women glow, that’s what my nan always said.” He continued his inspection of me, then when satisfied, mopped my brow with a hand towel he’d brought over. “Babe, you’re glowing. So, ready to go to the beach?”

“Ready to hit the showers.” I looked up at him wearily. “I’m not sure the beach is on the cards this afternoon.”

“Have a shower and see how you feel afterwards.” The towel was put around my neck, a bottle of water placed between my fingers. “I’ll be here when you’re done.”

“You’re going out with him,” Mandie announced when we got into the showers.

“I went on a date today,” I whined. “I peopled and I exercised. Isn’t that enough?”

“A date with a hot guy who’s only got eyes for you and owns your soul dog?” She yanked her sports bra off. “This is the kind of date Dave should’ve taken you on.”

So that meant I needed to say yes. I emerged from the shower damp, in clean clothes, and feeling somewhat shy. Probably because Rhys was watching the door to the change rooms and started walking across the floor as soon as he saw me.

“We came in your car,” I hissed at her. “How am I getting home?”

“Rhys will take you.” Mandie grinned when he got close. “You can drive Katie home, right?”

“My pleasure.” He had Bronson’s lead in his hands and the dog was stamping his paws on the rubber floor, eager to get going. “Shall we?”

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Chapter 34

Rhys

Happy looked good on Katie.

She didn't realise it, but she was glowing well before she started working out. That smile, the spring in her step, and especially those swollen lips. They told me things had gone very well for her and Rhett today.

And now it was my turn.

"So we can take my car up to the beach or we can walk."

Bronson's ears perked up at that last word, and then he let out a couple of sharp barks. Turns out the little guy loved exercise almost as much as I did.

"Walking it is," Katie said, giving the dog a pat.

I wasn't jealous of Rhett, but sometimes I envied the way Katie and Bronson got on. Part of me wanted her smiling at me, reaching up to...

Anyway.

"Alright, we'll grab a coffee at the little cafe on the way," I said.

"And you won't kick over the sign this time?" she asked.

"Not unless you want me to. Did you want this guy's lead or...?" I offered her the nylon rope.

"I'm not sure if I've got the strength to hold him back right now."

Her hands rose and fell limply.

"I got you," I said.

Bronson strained against the lead, but I wasn't going anywhere, not until I had my arm wrapped around Katie's waist. She stiffened for just a second, making me rethink what I was doing, but with a long breath out,

she relaxed again. Part of me was dying to know what was going on in that head of hers, but as I tucked her into my side, I found I was content with just this. The sun was slowly setting, turning the sky to beautiful shades of purple, orange, and red, the last almost the same colour as her hair. Bronson's tail was wagging furiously as he led the way, and I knew exactly how he felt.

That the three of us were in sync, each one of us feeling the cool evening breeze on our faces, blowing the shit of the day away.

Which reminded me...

"So you went to the brewery and kissed my housemate," I said, shooting her an impish smile. Each time I mentioned it, her eyes went wide, as if she was expecting me to be pissed. Nah. I was just glad it'd all worked out. Rhett was a good guy, if intense. I'd tossed around sending him some dating tips via text on their drive down there, but it looked like he'd made it work. I'd be proud of him if I wasn't so intrigued about how it went. "What did the two of you end up talking about that led to that?"

"Want to work out how to replicate the results?"

My mouth fell open at Katie's cheeky response.

"No, I mean yes." She watched me splutter with an amused look. "OK, how the hell did that happen? Dudley Do Right is usually all business. Like did he tell you all about fire engines?"

"Yes."

She was giving me nothing, and her smirk made clear she knew exactly what she was doing.

"OK, have mercy. How the hell did that work? Like he has a career in creating those meditation tracks people listen to when they can't sleep. It's an appliance not an engine, Rhys..."

I mimicked snoring, only to hear her cackle, but in the end, she shrugged.

"I like hearing people talk about their passions. To be fair, he listened to me infodump about dogs."

Huh.

I'd played a whole lot of scenarios in my head, trying to find a way to get Katie to let me in, but this was not part of that. My mind raced, trying to think about a topic I knew a lot about.

"Tony Hawk completed the first 900 degree turn on a skateboard," I said. "Well, the first one that was actually caught on film."

“What?”

“He invented over five hundred different tricks.”

“He...” She grinned. “I get it. Skateboarding is your hyper focus.”

“Was,” I replied. “Back in the day, I was sure I’d be the next skateboarding great. God knows I put in enough hours practising it. Trouble is, I turned out to be no Hawk. No nothing, really.”

“Oh, wow.”

Suddenly she looked incredibly serious, and that wouldn’t do. I shrugged and shot her a winning grin.

“It’s no biggie. Millions of dollars of sponsorship deals and skating in competitions all over the world wouldn’t really have suited me.” I looked around, seeing the cars passing by, the beach getting closer with every step. “My head would’ve gotten too big and I would’ve sold out, become a complete asshole, spending my fortune on blow and hookers.”

“That is an oddly specific prediction,” she replied.

“I am but a simple man. I like the gym, the same neighbourhood I grew up in, hanging out with the guys I knew at school, and I like you.” That was just blurted out. I blinked, pretty sure this wasn’t the right time for confessions. “And here we are at the cafe. Black coffee or are you one of those girls that drinks those milky sweet things with all the cream and toppings?”

“Chocolate mocha with cream,” she said.

“Ugh, that’s a dessert, not a drink.” I looked down at Bronson. “Look after our girl and I’ll get you a pup cup.”

The bugger barked at me, making clear neither part of that statement was negotiable.

Walking away from Katie sucked. Half of me expected to turn around and to see her and Bronson gone like some kind of fever dream. I stared out the window as I waited to get served, watching her rub at the dog’s chest, Bronson staring at her like she hung the moon.

I reckon I knew exactly how he felt.

I didn’t want to look away, couldn’t, not while she laughed at his clumsy attempts to keep her giving him chest scratches. Not even when the barista spoke to me.

“What can I get you?” I had to put the order in, get my girl her coffee and my dog his pup cup, and yet I had to drag my eyes away to meet the

barista's. He smiled expectantly, no doubt wondering what the hell was going on, right before I rattled off our order.

"Here we go," I said, carrying out the drink tray. "Frou frou coffee for the lady." Katie snorted as she took the drink from me. "Has Bronson been a good boy? Does he deserve a pup cup?"

The dog started to dance on his back legs, making clear that he thought he really, really did.

"Of course, he does," Katie said, right as I got him to sit and then put the pup cup down for him.

"Damn, boy," I said, watching the dog lap the milk up in a series of frenzied licks. "I'm not sure you even tasted that."

"I think he wants mine now."

Katie was forced to lift her coffee higher as Bronson came to sit very still in front of her, eyes trained on her takeaway cup.

"C'mon, boy, it's beach time."

His rumpled ears pricked up, and he lunged on the lead, knowing what that meant now.

"Wow..."

Katie stopped when we reached the sands. Her eyes were on the sunset, tracking the way the colours shifted in the sky, whereas I couldn't help but stare at her. Her little pink painted toe nails, wiggling in the now soft, cool sand. Her lips parting as she smiled, then took a sip. The way the colours of the sunset were reflected in her eyes, right as they refocused on me.

"Wow indeed," I said, making clear it wasn't the sky that had my attention. Her cheeks flushed the same pretty pink as the clouds, right as Bronson started to tug at his lead. "Ready to go, boy?"

"You let him off the lead?" I didn't love that note of fear in Katie's voice and when I looked up, she was frowning.

"Only when we've got the beach to ourselves," I said. Bronson pulled against the lead's constraints, obviously making it harder for me to undo the clasp. "And not at first. I did some exercises at home and at the local park, testing his recall." Her eyebrow cocked up as I used proper dog training terminology. Yeah, I did my research. "He knows better than to go too far and doesn't get himself in trouble. Take a look."

Bronson went flying off the lead as soon as it was unclipped, going barrelling towards the surf. Katie let out an involuntary giggle as he chased the seagulls. I was concerned about his prey drive, but the seagulls weren't

about to let some mutt bring them down. They flew up into the sky, hovering there lazily on the air current as he barked furiously at them. Not for long, because a small wave rolled in. He ran into that, snapping at the waves, right before it went out again. Then the dog looked over his shoulder as if to say to Katie, 'Look, Mum, I've got this.'

"He's..." She lifted her free hand and then let it fall. "He's a different dog. I knew getting him out of the shelter would help, but... I didn't expect this. Rhys." I loved the sound of my name in her mouth. "You've done an amazing job."

"We've done an amazing job." It was tempting to take credit for everything, and while I looked after Bronson the most, it was Garrett's room he slept in every night, Rhett he sat beside at breakfast, eating all the crusts of toast the man fed him absently as he read the newspaper. We didn't get to spend a lot of time together, but the group chat we'd always used was a great place to share what was working. "But we wouldn't have gotten very far without all you did in the shelter." I moved closer, hooking my arm around her waist and tucking her body in against mine. "We're a pretty good team." My fingers teased the ends of her hair. "Imagine what we could achieve if we all put our minds to it?"

A little gasp, barely discernible over the hush of the sea, it was what made clear that Katie was thinking about it.

"What was that?" I asked, watching her blush deepen. She tried to pull away, but I held her fast. "I was talking about the dog." I moved so the sun was at my back and I could see her face more clearly. "What were you thinking about?"

Chapter 35

Katie

I was busted.

One minute my heart swelled, seeing how happy Bronson was playing by the ocean and the next... I was visualising my own *From Here To Eternity* moment as the waves rolled over us. It just wasn't Montgomery Clift I was kissing. Rhys replaced him, the Rhett, then... I swallowed hard and smiled, glad that Rhys couldn't see what the hell was going on in my head.

His grin said otherwise.

It spread slowly, and the setting sun formed a halo around his head. The tips of his hair shifted in the breeze as he drew closer.

"I'm gonna need you to tell me what you were thinking."

"I..."

My mind started to race, trying to think of something benign, when I turned to see Bronson barking at the birds again. He had come out of his shell, racing along the sands with complete abandon, and that had me smiling. My eyes met Rhys' and I saw the gentle good humour there, but something else. There was an edge to his smile, something hungry.

I liked the heavy weight of his arm around my waist. I liked the unusual feeling of being able to indulge in public displays of affection. I especially liked the way he edged closer and closer, like he couldn't bear even the smallest measure of distance between us. My eyes dropped down, tracing the shape of that grin, catching the moment it faded and was replaced by something far more intense.

“Kissing.” I just blurted that out. “In my head, we were in that scene in the old movie, kissing as the waves crashed down— Whoa!” He had me up in his arms and was carrying me at speed towards the water as I slapped at his shoulders. “I didn’t want that for real!”

Thankfully, I was deposited back on the sands, safe from the ocean’s embrace.

“So what do you want for real, Katie?” Had anyone said my name with that kind of raspy edge? I didn’t think so. “Because I’m trying real hard to play it cool here and I’m failing.”

“Tell me a fact about skateboarding,” I said.

“What?” He looked befuddled. “Ahh, Santa Cruz decks are the best.” I went up on tiptoes and kissed him chastely on the lips. “Ohh, so that’s how it works.” When I went to pull back, his arms locked tight around me. “Skateboarding was originally called sidewalk surfing.”

“What?”

It was my turn to be confused and Rhys took advantage of that moment, moving in to claim my lips far more thoroughly.

How the hell was I kissing more than one guy in the same day? That was a dim thought, there and gone again, as he deepened the kiss. My lips parted in a small gasp as I felt his body pressing against mine, and if I had any doubts of how into this I was, they were quickly dispelled. That shadowy shape that had lurked under his towel? It began to stir right now. I let out a little moan as I felt something heavy and steadily hardening pressing into me.

“Katie...”

My legs parted, and he surged in, rocking against me, his fingers sliding into my hair. He bunched it at the base of my neck and then parted my lips with his tongue. Mine tangled with his, wanting, needing, the taste of him. Bitter coffee, the salty air, and him. Each man was completely different and yet exactly what I wanted. The beach faded away as my hands raked along those massive shoulders. I clutched at those thick biceps that had carried me with ease, right up until—

The shrill sound of a dog barking had us breaking apart, and I looked around blindly to see we were no longer alone. A family with their yappy little terrier was coming our way and their dog made a beeline for ours.

“No,” I said. “No!”

“Bronson!”

It was no surprise the dog had good recall, because Rhys' voice could be heard from the car park, I'm sure. Our pup's head jerked up and I could see the moment when he remembered we were here and was ready to come running over.

Right as the terrier slipped its collar and went barrelling towards Bronson.

"Fuck..."

I tossed my coffee cup to one side, starting across the beach, but Rhys was already sprinting across the sand. Powerful legs worked as he ran towards Bronson, rushing to intercept the terrier.

But he wouldn't make it.

My entire focus was on the two dogs' trajectory. Bronson's tail wagged a few times tentatively, then he began to shrink back in a way I was well familiar with. He'd come out of his shell, but now he was ready to go right back into it. His body collapsed in on itself. Ears flat to the skull, tail down, he scuttled back, but the terrier just kept on coming.

Terriers can be amazing dogs, but sometimes it felt like people downplayed bad dog behaviour because of their size. Many of the breeds were created to hunt vermin or larger prey, so they had plenty of the tenacity, the prey drive, to do the job well, but nowhere to direct it.

"Max!" one of the owners shouted. "Max!"

Children squealed and the wife started saying something in a high-pitched voice, but all I could focus on was my dog.

"Bronson...!"

I had to up my cardio. That came out in a gasp as I fought to catch my breath, but my dog heard me. A high-pitched whine and he made a beeline for me. Past Rhys, past the family, past everything, except for the damn terrier. Despite the other people's shouts, their dog was hot on Bronson's tail, right up until he reached me.

Bronson was making high-pitched whining sounds, completely panicked, but I stepped in front of him, ready to face down this terror of a terrier. Sharp fangs flashed, a crazed look in its eye, right before a hand snatched the dog from the sand, holding it at a distance as it snarled and scrabbled.

"Don't you dare hurt my dog!"

The mother came marching over, her face almost as red as the setting sun as the crying children were herded after her by their father.

“Hurt...?” Rhys’ jaw flexed, making apparent he was barely resisting the urge to drop kick the dog right now. Instead, he shoved the ball of aggression into the woman’s arms. “Pretty sure if there’s an aggressor here, it’s Max.”

“My dog...?” The woman’s mouth fell open, as if she was the one to almost tear off Rhys’ towel. “Your dog is one of those fighting animals. A... Pitbull! You let a Pitbull free roam in a public place?”

“C’mon, Max.” Her husband caught up with them, taking the dog from her and putting it back on the lead, making sure to tighten the collar. “Look, no harm done.”

“No harm...” I looked down when I felt something hot and wet and saw that Bronson had peed a big puddle on the sand. He cringed when he saw he had my attention, but I dropped down to scratch his stomach. “It’s OK. You’ll be OK.”

“There,” the husband said in a fake jovial tone. “No one’s hurt.”

“But they could’ve been.” I wouldn’t have taken the family to task. Standing up to people rarely got me anything other than a mouthful of abuse, so I admit, I stiffened when Rhys stepped forward. “Your dog got off the lead.”

“Your dog didn’t have his lead on!”

The woman was obviously spoiling for a fight.

“Mine doesn’t randomly attack other dogs in public,” Rhys snapped back.

“Max didn’t attack—”

“He was clearly intent on taking a piece out of my dog! Max chased him all the way back to us.”

“Your dog could’ve chewed Max up with one bite,” the man said, trying to jolly Rhys out of his thunderous mood with a smile.

“But he wouldn’t.” I rose to my feet and felt Bronson pressing hard into my leg. He wanted out of here, now, but first I needed to do this. “He never has. Our dog was a bait dog.” The two adults recoiled at that, even as the children stared in confusion. “Bronson wouldn’t even hurt a flea. Max, however...”

The dog was standing at the very end of his lead, his lips curled back from his fangs.

“Yes, well...”

The woman ran out of things to say, turning on her heel and marching away, dragging Max and her family along with her.

“Are you OK?” Rhys turned and looked me over, then Bronson. “How’re you doing, bud?”

“I think...” I wanted to claw back that good feeling, like the world was turned to gold and me along with it. “I think I’m ready to head home.” When I looked down, Bronson’s tail thumped a few times. “And so is he.”

“Right.” I could see the disappointment there, but this was the moment when I felt like the new me might become something far more permanent. I didn’t make his feelings my responsibility. Instead, I stood my ground and waited for his nod. “You got it. C’mere, bud.”

Rhys had carried me down to the water’s edge, but he carried the dog back up the beach, not letting him down until we were walking along the footpath back to the gym. Rhys reached out, his fingers brushing mine and I clasped it tightly until we walked back into the gym to grab his car keys and my gear. Bronson hid under a nearby desk until we were ready to leave, then bounded for the front door.

“Tell me I can have a do-over.”

We’d arrived at my apartment building and for a second, Rhys sat there, hands on the wheel, as Bronson panted from the back seat.

“What?”

“I had this whole grand scheme planned out,” he admitted, shooting me a sidelong look. “One where you fell into my arms as the sun set behind your head...” He shook his. “Give me another chance at a date and it’ll be better. One hundred percent less yappy dogs, promise.”

“Promise?” I found myself smiling. “Tell me a fact about skateboarding.”

“The US military trialled using skateboarding as a means to navigate battlefields in the 90s,” he said, but before he could say much more, I leaned over and pressed a kiss to his lips. His hands went to the back of my head, stopping me from pulling away. It was a slower, sweeter kiss, because this was one of goodbye, not of starting something. “The first bowls were pools forced to empty due to an extended drought,” he said hurriedly as I pulled back. “Some of the greatest skateboarders of the 70s were the Z Boys, sponsored by Zephyr surfboard shop.”

“Save those facts for next time,” I said.

“There’ll be a next time?” I ignored him and turned to Bronson. The dog was subdued but OK. “When? When, Katie?”

“You’ve got my number.” I got out of the car before I asked him to turn around and take me back to his place. There I could’ve helped Bronson resettle, and then when he was quiet and relaxed, I could...

Nope, not yet. My mind rebelled at that reality. I wanted to be the free-wheeling girl that jumped into bed with three guys like it was no big thing, but I wasn’t quite there yet.

“Texting you now,” Rhys said, pulling out his phone. “We can do a group date to puppy yoga. Dinner? Dancing?” I smiled and shook my head, turning towards the steps.

“Home alone?” Mandie appeared with two glasses of wine in hand. I grabbed one gratefully. “No harem to drag back to your lair? I half expected you to fill the apartment with the dulcet tones of you having multiple orgasms. Natasha and I were prepared to turn the TV up real loud to cover it.”

“Too soon for that,” I said, sinking down into the lounge chair. “Hey, Natasha.”

“Good date?” she asked, taking a sip from the other glass of wine as Mandie went to get another.

“Amazing, then terrifying, then amazing again.” I looked down at my phone as a flurry of notifications came in. Rhys was peppering me with suggestions and pictures of Bronson, letting me know which options the dog preferred. “And kinda confusing. I know you’re just talking shit, but...” I frowned slightly. “I struggle with dealing with one dude, let alone three.”

My sister sucked in a breath to answer, but Natasha interrupted her smoothly.

“Same as any other relationship,” she said. “Lots and lots of communication.”

“You dated several dudes at once, Nat?” Mandie asked, sitting down and setting a charcuterie board before us. My stomach rumbled as I speared some cheese and salami.

“I’ve been in polyam relationships since high school, when I couldn’t work out if I should go out with Greg Kennedy or Adam Wills.” Her lips curved as she went on a little trip down memory lane. “I don’t know if I’ve ever been with just one guy.”

“Yeah?” I leaned forward. “Well, I have questions. So many questions.”

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Chapter 36

Garrett

“I can’t go.” It was five in the morning, the day he was supposed to take Katie to puppy yoga, and yet when I heard his raspy voice, the hacking cough, I knew why. “Last day of night shift and we had a bloody factory fire.” He broke off, coughing and coughing in a way that had my fingers itching for a stethoscope. Was he wearing PPE? Did he inhale toxic fumes? All good questions, but needless, as I knew the fire service would’ve had him checked out after they put out the fire. “I’m gonna pass out. Didn’t want to just text Katie that I need a rain check. Can you touch base with her at a more reasonable hour?”

I paced back and forth across the kitchen floor. The week felt like it was filled with moments like this. Tentative bookings that ended up getting pushed back due to work, life, everything. I felt like we were already on thin ice, though Katie was always cool about it, probably because Rhys swept in and took over when we couldn’t make something.

Maybe I needed to change my career. I could run a gym too. Be my own boss, make my own hours... I shook my head as I turned the kettle on.

“I’ll go,” I told Rhett. He made a grumpy sound, but I cut in before he could say no. “You went to the brewery in my stead. Makes sense that I should do the same for you.”

“Fine, just... tell her I’ll make it up to her. I’ll buy her a damn puppy if that will help.”

I looked down at Bronson, who was sprawled out on the kitchen floor. He was like a shadow, following me everywhere I went around the house.

“Let’s just look after the one we’ve got, OK? Look, I’m gonna take him out for a run while it’s still quiet.” Bronson was getting a lot better about other people and dogs, but he was definitely at his best in the quiet of the early morning. “I’ll make sure Katie knows what’s happening. Hopefully she’ll understand.”

“That’s why we came up with this whole poly dating thing, remember?” Rhett’s voice sounded like gravel under car tyres. “Together we make up one whole boyfriend.”

“Rest,” I ordered. “Drink lots of water and I’ll talk to you in the afternoon.” When he hung up, I turned to Bronson. “Ready, boy?”

He was. I got changed, and he milled around the door the moment I picked up his dog chain, making excited little noises. That changed when we got out. The dog was exquisitely aware of his surroundings and he went perfectly still, eyeing the place next door. The previous tenants had moved out and a strange car alerted us to the fact someone else had probably moved in.

“C’mon, Bronson.” I started out at a slow jog to get both our muscles moving and then took off down the street. We got to the end, went around the park, the sun just starting to rise. Dew stained the grass and my shoes, his feet, as we went. The sound of a dog barking as we passed had Bronson moving faster. No matter what we’d done so far, we hadn’t gotten him used to that yet, and when he started to bolt, I kept pace with him. “You’re alright.” He glanced up at me. Didn’t stop running, but he held eye contact for a few seconds. That and the fact we were now away from the yard that held the other dog seemed to settle him a bit. “That’s probably enough for you today, hey boy?”

We both stretched our legs, running full pelt back home, burning through worries, adrenaline, everything until we ended up back home again.

“Where are you off to?” Rhys asked, stretching and yawning as he emerged from his bedroom hours later.

“Puppy yoga,” I said, shoving a mug of coffee into his hands. He grabbed it gratefully, blowing on the top and then taking a sip.

“What? I thought that was Rhett’s date. Where is he, anyway?”

“Sleeping off the effects of a factory fire,” I told him. “He took Katie to the brewery. I’m taking her to puppy yoga.”

“No fair,” he grumbled like a child. “I wanna go.” The guy actually pouted. “Except I’ve got stupid work at my stupid job.”

“At the gym you own.” I glanced at my watch. “We’ll be there for an hour or two, then we might stop for brunch at that nice cafe a couple streets away.”

“The one that does the Nutella croissants?” He rubbed his stomach. “Grab me one.”

“Have fun in a gym full of smelly men.” I punched him on the arm. “And take Bronson with you. I’ve got a date with a girl and a room full of puppies.”

“Hey!”

I stood in Katie’s doorway and she blinked and then stared up at me, a yoga mat tucked under her arm. Was I supposed to have one of them? I didn’t ask Rhett.

“Hey, I know I’m not Rhett, but he rang me this morning to let me know he’s stuck at work.” I explained the situation, and she nodded in understanding, but... Was that a tiny frown, there and gone again? I was adept at reading tiny micro expressions, but it happened so fast, I couldn’t be sure. My words came tumbling out, as if I talked fast enough, it would make this all OK. “He was up fighting a factory fire all night.”

“Is he OK?”

The look on Katie’s face almost had me wanting to sign up to become a fire. Saving someone from a drug overdose, resuscitating someone whose heart stopped beating, they were all kinda heroic as well, but just not as glamorous as stopping a fire from tearing through the city.

“Yes. I mean I think so. He sounded kinda hoarse when we spoke early this morning. Rhett didn’t want to text you and cancel, particularly as he’s probably asleep right now. We figured since he took you to the brewery—”

“Hey!” Mandie popped up in the doorway, then looked down at her sister. “I thought you were going out with the firefighter today.” Her eyes narrowed. “Which one are you?” A hand raised as she stabbed a finger in my direction. “You’re the nurse!”

“We are not calling people that!” Katie hissed, and when her sister went to reply, an elbow was jabbed hard into Mandie’s ribs. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s OK.” I waved her apology away. “But you could come to puppy yoga with me by way of an apology.”

“Go,” Mandie croaked, shoving her sister out the door. “Apart from the fact you nearly broke my ribs, puppies. You freaking love puppies.”

So today wouldn't be a complete disaster. My arm shot out as I offered her my elbow. Katie shook her head and then took it, stepping clear of the apartment.

"Do you know much about this?" she asked as we walked downstairs.

"There's puppies and yoga?" I replied, shooting her a sheepish smile.

It was chaos.

I'd never done a lot of yoga, but I always assumed it was kinda peaceful and Zen. Instead, there was beautiful, tranquil music playing, lots of people in active wear, mats spread out across the floor, and puppies. Romping, running, yapping, nibbling puppies.

"Oh my god..."

Katie's hushed tones had me kicking my own butt. Why the hell didn't I think of a date like this? Didn't matter, I could take advantage of Rhett's stroke of genius, because that's what being in a polyam relationship meant, right?

"Hi." A very slender woman with an earnest expression appeared in front of us. "Ready for the yoga class today?" I pulled out my phone and showed her the booking Rhett had forwarded onto me. "Come in and be welcome, Katie and Rhett."

OK, this was never going to work. I borrowed a yoga mat from the studio, and as I tried to roll Katie's out, then mine, puppies converged. They thought this was a great game, a couple grabbing the end of the mat and tugging at it.

"Hey...!"

People turned around to see what the fuss was about, but Katie came to the rescue. She swept a couple of the puppies up in her arms, laughing as they licked at her face. Right then I forgot about the yoga. Her wild smile, the way she completely gave in to the moment, giggling as she tried to get the pups under control had me forgetting all about the mats and just staring at her. Finally, she gave the dogs a couple of commands, setting them down and getting them to sit obediently before she turned to me.

"Need help?"

"No." I shook my head. "I've got this."

And so I did, trying to cover my preoccupation with preparing for the class.

I'm fairly sure the dogs were there to challenge old hands at this. We started with a mindfulness exercise, sitting cross legged and bringing our

awareness back to the room. My breath going in and out of my lungs—

Did I follow up on those blood tests the doctor asked for?

Feeling the way my head was stacked on my neck, the length of my spine, the way my hips were grounded on the mat.

The new nursing student seriously needed some lessons on putting in IV lines. She bruised the hell out of a couple of patients, destroying both her confidence and the patients’.

Taking a big breath in and—

Lick! My eyes opened to find a mischievous pup had jumped up and licked the side of my face and was about to go back for more.

“Sit...!” I hissed, trying not to disturb the tranquillity of the studio, even as I noticed plenty of other people were dealing with similar distractions.

“Alright,” the instructor said, “we’re going to try some standing poses now. Let’s start with the mountain pose. Let’s stand tall, lengthen our spines and ground ourselves through our heels...”

A little giggle dragged my attention away from the instructor. I looked across to find two puppies were back and gnawing at Katie’s toes. She wrinkled them up, while still trying to ground herself through the heels, I’m sure. Her eyes were on the instructor, but her focus? Entirely on the puppies, then when she noticed I was staring, her eyes met mine and I caught it.

I’d thank Rhett ten times over for suggesting this, because right now Katie looked completely and utterly happy.

We moved through a few different poses as the pups fought hard to get our attention, when the instructor said the words I hoped she wouldn’t say.

“Now, grab yourself a partner, because we’re going to move into adho mukha svanasana or downward dog.” She held up an adjustable belt. “We’ll be using these because when we first start practicing these poses, it’s difficult to get our hips back far enough. You’ll be feeding the belt around your partner’s hips and then standing behind them and gently pulling backwards, helping them to lengthen their spine.”

Fuck my life. I was about to stare down at Katie’s perfectly proportioned arse and try really bloody hard not to pop a boner.

Chapter 37

Katie

Whose idea was this?

I watched the very slender, very bendy instructor go through the movements of the pose like it was no big thing. All I saw was me with my head down and arse up to the room. Going to the gym with Mandie was nerve-racking enough. Suddenly I was questioning her assertion that these tights would not reveal all when I bent over.

“Everything OK?” Garrett came and stood beside me, and the sceptical way he was watching the movement lightened my heart. “I admit, I didn’t think this through. Rhett has been standing in all of these weird poses all week.”

“He has?”

The idea that the burly firefighter did homework in preparation for this date had me staring at Garrett all misty eyed.

“Yeah, and I’m starting to wish I’d joined him. I lift heavy things.” He tapped his chest. “Not do... that.”

“Now, if you are struggling to get down on all fours—” the instructor said.

“Yes, yes I am,” Garrett muttered.

I tried to hold back a snort but failed entirely. He shot me a conspiratorial smile that had me flushing for an entirely different reason. Those dark brown eyes were like a vat of coffee, ready for me to sink into, transporting me out of this room to somewhere else entirely.

“At home, you can use a chair or the edge of your bed instead.”

Oh, that created a mental image that was completely at odds with the tranquil vibe the instructor was trying to create. In my mind's eye I saw not my bedroom, but his, and as I bent over slowly, as he... Garrett's eyebrow cocked up, a dimple popping as he made clear he saw the exact same thing.

"While it's important to keep your back and knees straight, take your time to work up to the proper form. Listen to your body."

I couldn't help but do that. My heart was pounding fast, loud, in my ears, competing with the woman's instruction as it urged me to do something else entirely. His smile faded, something darker and more intent rising to replace it. My fingers twitched, wanting to reach out and touch Garrett. To drag him closer, our breath mingling, right before his lips grazed mine and then—

"Right!" I jumped at the sound of the instructor's voice, forced to turn around now. "Move into pairs." An arm wrapped around my waist, pulling me back and anchoring me against his body. It wasn't the first time he'd done it, but it felt different. Was it because his breath shifted the little baby hairs on my neck? Or because I could feel the warmth radiating from his body? "Help each other move into the correct form and then use the belts to anchor the other person's hips, help them lengthen their spines..."

"I'll get the belt."

Was there a gruff edge to Garrett's voice? When I watched him walk off, I was treated to a searing look, right before he grabbed a belt from where they hung on the wall. A lick at my foot had me turning around, seeing a puppy had returned and was intent on gnawing at my toes.

"No..." I said in a low growl. The pup looked up and then barked a couple of times, making clear what he thought of that, but my reprieve was a short one.

"So who's doing it doggy style first?" Garrett asked me, leaning in so only I would hear him.

I fought the urge to laugh, shaking my head and then saying, "You, obviously."

"Want to see my arse?" He flipped his shirt up to reveal two perfectly shaped glutes outlined by the compression tights he wore. His hip popped, a sassy move if ever there was one. "Just had to ask."

I couldn't say a damn thing. The puppies near us sat down abruptly, panting to catch their breath, and I understood why. My tongue would've lolled from my head if I had the chance. Instead, I surreptitiously wiped

saliva away as he went down on all fours, the muscles in his legs clearly defined by the leggings.

“How’s my back?”

Back? I blinked and then moved to the side, dutifully checking his form, but that just made everything worse. Turned out he was hiding a whole lot under those scrubs. Massive lats, biceps and forearms popping, strong fingers splayed across the ground.

“Um... good. Good.”

My choked reply earned me a sidelong look and another sly smile. The bastard, he flexed his whole damn body, the muscles standing proud.

And that wasn’t all.

My eyebrow popped this time, catching the moment when not-so-little Garrett twitched in his pants.

“Right. Might be belt time then.”

His smile faded, his eyes widening as he realised what was happening. Huh. So I wasn’t the only one responding.

“You want the belt?” I slapped the canvas in my hand a few times, forcing him to watch him as I went around the back of him and fed the belt under his hips, the same way the instructor was demonstrating.

I didn’t mean to grope him. I wanted to, but I actually did try not to. It’s just that feeding a belt around someone’s hips means at some point you’re going to touch them and that meant—

Whoa.

“Not sure if that’s where the belt is supposed to go.” He choked that out. “Not that I mind, but there’s...” His ribs worked as he sucked in one breath, then another. “Puppies watching.”

“Puppies, right.”

I got the belt situated and then slowly, carefully, anchored his hips back, allowing him to push his heels harder into the ground.

“Very good!” the instructor said with a clap of her hands. Yeah, it was. Puppies and cute boy butt. There were worse ways to spend a Saturday morning. “Now swap over and do the same for your partner.”

Garrett sprung up, yanking down his shirt and shooting me a dark look when I giggled. Of course, I looked down, and the laughter died in my throat.

“Do you...?”

I waved a hand vaguely.

“Want to bend you over my bed and practise our own version of downward dog for at least an hour,” he muttered. “Yes, yes, I do. Trouble is, if I pick you up and drag you bodily from the yoga studio, that will probably ruin the Feng Shui or something.”

“That’s a whole other thing that has nothing to do with yoga.”

“Don’t care.” He stepped in closer, earning the two of us a look from the instructor. “I’m both wishing like hell I wore a pair of shorts over these compression pants and that this class was over.”

“Got somewhere you need to be?” I asked.

“In you, if I play my cards right.” My eyebrows shot up, but he just shot me a cocky smile. “Now bend over like a good girl. Did you need a block?”

No, I did not. I pitched forward, slapping my hands on the ground. Position them a bit further than shoulder width apart. Ground myself on the spots between my finger and thumb and—

Lick!

The pup was back, dancing away, mischief shining in his eyes as if he knew exactly what he was doing. I spluttered, but right when I went to stand back up, a hand landed on my back.

“Can’t blame him for going in for a kiss,” Garrett said in a low voice. “I’m barely holding back myself. Now, form’s looking good. You’re quite flexible.”

“Hypermobility, Mandie tells me,” I told him.

“Well, that could lead to some interesting possibilities.” He ran his hand up my back. “Spine flat, though you need to let your head hang free.”

“And let this little guy come in for another lick?” I protested.

“I promise all licks going forward will be consensual things. Uh!” His sharp correction had the puppy plonking himself on his butt and looking up at Garrett. “Now, I’m going to put the belt around your waist.”

This was when all the fun went out of the morning.

Not all plus size women are sensitive about their stomachs. Some are shaped like Natasha and carry their weight more on their hips and thighs. Some are completely comfortable with their bodies, a state I wanted to achieve some day, but right now? I did not want the sexy, sexy man to come face to face with the fupa. He paused the moment I tensed and then drew closer.

“Katie?”

The question was clear. Did I want him to stop? Did I want to make a big deal out of this and ruin what was a fun morning? New year, new me, and that meant I needed to fake it until I made it and pretend I was all body positive and shit.

“I’m good. Belt me.” His snort had me flushing even redder. “I mean... You know what I meant.”

“I got you.”

Were there any three words sexier than those? His hands were gentle, almost impersonal, as if I was a patient rather than his date. Right then, I could see how Garrett would be on the ward. A comforting, confident presence, he had the belt around my hips and then used it to pull me back slowly but surely.

It worked. My spine lengthened and with the belt to anchor me, I could push my hips back further than I managed to before. I was doing it, really doing it, achieving the same form as the instructor. Right then I rode a small wave of exhilaration, until Garrett’s guttural groan cut through it.

“Fuck...”

Not loud enough for anyone else to hear him, but I felt it all the way down to my toes.

“What?” I asked, trying to look back over my shoulder. “Garrett? What—?”

“You look so damn hot right now.” Thumbs pulled away from the belt and grazed the side of my hips. “Like I knew you would, but knowing and seeing is not the same thing. Katie...”

There was nothing that dispelled a feeling of insecurity like a man’s growled compliment. I shook my head and then forced myself up, turning almost shyly towards him. Garrett looked like a naughty boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar right then and was completely unapologetic. The belt fell to the floor, no longer needed, but that’s when one of the puppies jumped on it, grabbing it and running off with it.

“Shit!”

I strode after the dog, sure the whole class was watching us carry on, but it appeared everyone was dealing with the same level of chaos. Little jaws gnawed mats, belts, even hair. Little tongues licked faces. Little tails wagged furiously as people laughingly brushed them away, the dogs thinking this was a grand game to be played. I hung the belt up, hoping we

were done with that section of the class, only to find Garrett dealing with a whole other issue.

Deprived of the belt, the pup looked for new prey and found it in the form of his tights. The man had a death grip on his waistband, forced to haul them up lest he be bare arse naked in front of the whole class.

And that would be a major problem.

“You little...!” he hissed, looking back at me when I returned, then down, following my gaze. Yeah, Garrett didn’t care one little bit about my fupa. Christ, maybe that’s what had him sporting a huge boner right now. The black Lycra caressed the thick form, almost picking out every vein. I was never as jealous of a piece of fabric than I was now.

“Well done, everyone.” The instructor’s voice cut through the air, dissipating the tension, or was it just holding it at bay? Garrett didn’t watch the next demonstration, as his focus was trained on me. “Alright, now we’ll try—”

“How long is this damn class?” Garrett whispered hoarsely as I moved closer. “Tell me it’s over soon, then...” He drew me closer. “Then tell me you’ll come back to my place and do a little practise with me?”

My mouth contorted, trying to keep the grin from my face.

“I’d love to.”

Chapter 38

Garrett

I have no idea how we made it home in one piece. I had our mats rolled up the second we were dismissed, the blocks back in their place and then was hustling Katie out the door before she could even thank the instructor. That was rude, because she had done me a great favour. I felt like I was hovering around Katie, waiting for her to notice me, but Rhett's idea was genius. It forced us to get more hands on, and that's what I needed right now.

The front door slammed open, and we spilled inside, cracking up laughing for just a second, before my mouth found hers. Fuck. I knew she'd be soft, sweet, but not this sweet. I wanted to bake cakes that imitated the taste of her and then gorge myself on them. Over and over, my mouth claimed hers, trying to get some satisfaction, but there was only a growing hunger.

"Bedroom?" I rasped.

"To practise our yoga?"

That mocking little voice had my nose pressing into her pulse as I let out a groan.

"I mean, if you want..." My voice was cut off as I felt her hand slide down. Stomach tensed, her fingers wandered until they cupped me right where I needed her. "Fuck, yes..."

It'd been so long since anyone else touched me like this. Her eyes staring into mine, watching my every response as I felt a traitorous throb.

My balls wanted to pull tight and unload all over Katie, marking her as mine, but—

“Looks like you had fun at yoga.”

Rhett’s ragged voice had Katie spinning around and I nearly grabbed her by the wrist, putting her hand right back where it was.

“Rhett...” Katie gasped.

“Hey, gorgeous.” He stepped in closer and stroked her hair. “Did you have fun?”

“Um... yes.” She shot me a look over her shoulder. “Garett got a bit riled up by some of the poses.”

“I’m not sure if you’re a madman or a genius.” I slid in behind Katie, intrigued by the way her pulse started to flutter under my palm. A kiss was pressed to her neck and sure enough, her heart raced faster. “Our girl in tight pants, contorting this body into poses that had me mindful of things that have no place in a yoga studio.”

“Hmm...” Rhett reached out, slowly lifting the hem of the baggy t-shirt Katie was wearing. The well-worn fabric did little to disguise those fantastic tits of hers. “Didn’t think of that at the time. Just puppies. Gotta admit...” He was forced to let out a hacking cough. Rhett had obviously had some sleep, but was still looking worn. “Now I’ve seen what you look like in yoga pants, I reckon this needs to become a regular thing.”

“Are you OK?” she asked, trying to pull free of my grip, but she didn’t need to. Rhett drew closer. “Garrett said you were in a factory fire.”

“Better now.” We worked together, sandwiching Katie between us. My fingers trailed down her arms as he tipped her chin his way. “Nothing that couldn’t be fixed with a kiss.”

I couldn’t have agreed more. As he claimed her mouth, I trailed kisses down her neck, breathing in the pretty floral scent of her. My hands went to her arms, trapping them as I kissed along the line of her shoulder. Forced to let go to push the neck of her t-shirt to one side, it felt like my lips were seared by all that creamy skin.

Then she let out a breathy little moan.

My eyes jerked upwards, my mouth pulling away as I watched the two of them kiss.

I knew that ferocity. Rhett wanted to eat Katie all up, but he’d need to get in line. I hadn’t endured that torture chamber for nothing. First, though...

“Katie...?” She was reluctant to stop, her mouth kissing Rhett’s even after he pulled away. That little flutter of her eyelids, it had both of us smiling as she finally opened her eyes. “You’re in control today, babe.” My dick was about to jump off my body and storm off in protest, but this needed to be said. “We’ll only go as far as you want.”

I shot Rhett a look, but I knew him. He’d never push a girl past her limits, ever. The man nodded slowly, then stared down at Katie.

“Stop whenever you want to stop.” His thumb brushed her lips, and I knew how soft they’d feel. “But it’d be good to get some limits on the table now.”

“And if I don’t have any?”

An involuntary grunt escaped me at the idea. Katie, naked, screaming over and over as we forced her to take more and more pleasure. I pressed my forehead against her shoulder and then let out a shuddering breath.

“Everyone does.” No, not now, I wanted to say. “And that’s healthy.”

“Don’t be afraid of asking for what you want,” Rhett said. “Or telling us what you don’t want. Like I’m pretty sure Garrett wants you in his room right now, spread out on his bed.”

“Naked,” I prompted. “I want to stare at every damn inch of you...”

And that’s when she stiffened.

“That.” Rhett stood taller. “That’s a boundary. You don’t want that?”

“I do.” She couldn’t have sounded less convincing. That small voice made clear the same confident woman of moments before was not with us now. “I...” Her huff of frustration made clear what was happening. “I’m just a little gun shy, y’know?”

“So we’ll go to the kitchen.” My eyes closed as I struggled to master myself. “I’ll make you some tea and—”

“Why?” Rhett was too damn blunt sometimes and now was one of them. I shot him a meaningful look over Katie’s shoulder, but his focus was trained entirely on her. “Why are you gun shy? If you don’t want us—”

“Not the problem,” she admitted in a tight voice. I watched her hands rise and fall. “It’s just... history. I haven’t... done anything since... since...” My hands went to her shoulders, rubbing the muscles there, trying to relax them. “Since the moment Dave told me that he preferred Millie over me.”

When his hand slapped down on the wall above her head, Katie jumped, but right as I went to intervene, he leant in.

“Dave’s a fucking idiot. He was before and he is even more so now. Millie’s a nice girl.”

Jesus, shut the fuck up about her, I thought furiously.

“But I would walk past a million Millie’s to get to you, Katie.” Shit. It wasn’t just the smoke inhalation that had destroyed his voice. Rhett sounded broken. “I don’t know how to prove it to you, but—”

She silenced him with a kiss and I watched them move. His hands surging around her, dragging her close until she could feel the truth of his words.

Our words.

I pulled her hair away from her neck, balling it as I claimed her skin anew. Wanted, needed more. We were a messy mass of limbs, kissing, touching, stroking, until finally we all broke apart.

“I...” We both hung on her words. “It’s been a while and watching Garrett sport a massive boner during yoga was both really, really funny and...” Her eyes trailed down. “Really, really hot at the same time. Can we just—?”

I had her scooped up into my arms and was carrying her down the hallway, the sounds of her shrieking music to my ears. She bounced on the bed when I tossed her down, then I went to wrench my t-shirt up and over my head.

Only to find her there to do it for me.

Her eyes met mine, staring as she smoothed it up. I worked damn hard on my physique, but right then, every painful recovery day was worth it as she took me in.

“Oh, that’s...” She pointed at my abs. “And they...”

“Speechless?” Rhett strolled in, yanking his shirt off and then our girl didn’t know where to look.

“You’re like a kid at Christmas,” I said. “Like you don’t know which present to open first.”

“Both of them.” Katie met my eyes then Rhett’s as she smoothed her hands across both of our chests. “I want both of you.”

“Good, because I don’t think I could lie in bed hearing the two of you going at it without butting in,” Rhett told her. “Just because Dave was too stupid to treat you right doesn’t mean we will make the same mistake. Tell me you want this, Katie.”

I'm willing to bet her dickhead ex didn't hang on her every word like we did right then.

"Yes." I loved that determined, that devilish, look in her eyes. "The answer is yes."

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Chapter 39

Katie

So. Much. Muscle.

I didn't know where to look, following the dark treasure trail of hair down Garrett's stomach, only for my eyes to jerk across to try to count every single hair spanning Rhett's broad chest.

"Seems like things are a little unequal." Garrett's eyes shone with devilry as he smirked down at me. "We've lost our shirts..."

And I still had mine on. I sucked in a shuddering breath as two different emotions fought a pitched battle inside me. My old shirt wasn't comforting anymore. It was suffocating, and the Lycra of the cute sports bra underneath was just making me really aware of my nipples, the fabric slipping against those swollen points with every breath I took in.

Trouble is, light was flooding in through the window, pooling innocently on the floor and making every damn thing so bright. That let me follow the erratic path of the vein that stood proud against Garrett's olive skin, tracking the way Rhett's loose shorts hung from his hips.

But if I could see them in all their technicolour glory, then they'd be able to do the same of me.

I frowned for a second, the tension in my forehead a small reflection of the kind building inside my head, but my hands went to the hem of my shirt, rubbing the too soft cotton for a second before I flipped it up and over my head.

"Oh fuck..."

I liked Garrett's groan a whole lot. Rhett's guttural grunt, the way his eyes flashed as he took me in. This was the standard all men would be judged by going forward.

"So this is what you had under that shirt all this time." Garrett's finger traced the shape of the sports bra, down the strap and then along the cup. "I think I'm glad you wore that t-shirt."

"I'm not." Rhett moved closer, hands moving as the muscle in his jaw flexed. "Pretty sure I'm gonna set it alight in the backyard."

"I've got more." Where the hell had that come from? I just blurted the words out. "My dad gives me all his old ones when he's sick of them."

"Burn them too." Rhett dared a tiny smile. "You want some oversized tee to wear? You come and see me." I found myself nodding along with that. "But right now..." His finger went under the strap of my bra and started to push it down.

Garrett followed his lead and part of me wanted to shout, "Wait!" Wait for what? I asked myself, ready to walk out of here and away from this if it wasn't what I wanted. Never again would I let some dickhead pressure me into doing something I didn't want.

No, I had the opposite problem.

Their touch burned as they peeled the strap down until it trapped my arms against my sides and I couldn't work out which to focus on first. Garrett's smile, that was both gentle and carnal by turns. The way Rhett's entire focus seemed to narrow down onto the small bit of skin he revealed.

"Fuck..." he cursed. "You're beautiful."

Part of me wanted to grab my phone and force him to repeat that into the speaker. I'd record it and play it over and over again, analysing the way he rasped out the words. My soul felt like a desert, and it soaked in that compliment far too hungrily.

"Katie." He tilted my head up so my eyes met his. "You have no idea how long I've wanted this. How many times I told myself I couldn't, shouldn't, because you were his. Because I thought you'd never look at me the way I look at you. I used to come into the station, see you waiting for him, and I'd have to pretend like my heart didn't lurch every damn time you smiled. Like I didn't watch the way you tucked your hair behind your ear or hugged your arms when you got nervous. I saw *everything*, Katie. And I wanted all of it."

He swallowed, and I watched his Adam's apple bob.

“And when he hurt you? When he let you go? I nearly went to his house and broke his jaw for being too stupid to stay. But I didn’t. Because a selfish part of me was glad he walked away, because...”

I watched his hand slide down my arm as if seeing those big, broad hands for the first time.

“I never wanted to be your rebound. I want to be your safe place. The one you fall into when everything else feels like too much. But right now... right now, I just want to *feel* you. All of you.” His hand rose, the backs of his knuckles grazing the top of my breast. “If you’ll let me.”

“Feel us.”

I blinked as Garrett shifted closer.

What could I do, but this? I tore the bra up and over my head, feeling my breasts bob free. It took me weeks, months, even years to feel safe enough to be naked around someone new, and here I was, literally letting everything hang out.

Not for long.

They both lunged forward, hands smoothing over my shoulders, burying themselves in my hair. Rough, raspy, stubbly kisses and then the feel of callused hands as they covered my breasts.

What the hell did I have to worry about? That thought blew in and then out of my head again, because it couldn’t coexist with them. My lips stung, and yet I chased their mouths for more. My hands slid over hard chests, gripped bulging biceps, never able to settle and just enjoy the feel of their hard bodies, because something in me wanted it all. Perhaps that’s why my fingers slid down. Garrett let out a muffled grunt as I found that swollen length again.

“None of that.” He bucked helplessly into my hand, but Rhett had far more control. My hands were snatched away and then dragged up over my head. “Little minx.” I blinked, adjusting to my new position. “What do you think, Garrett? Should we show Katie exactly how well we work together?”

Garrett answered by moving forward, kissing the soft skin of my stomach, his fingers finding the waistband of my yoga pants, right before he began to peel them off.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Apparently, that meant ruining me for all other men.

Rhett didn’t let me go for a second, one hand holding me right where I was as the other began to roam. He seemed intent on tracing every curve,

my skin feeling way too sensitive as he drew lazy circles on it. That smile, it was everything. A secret one he'd never shared with me before, right as his head dropped down. I panted, watching him watch me as his mouth closed around my nipple. The first harsh pull nearly had me shrieking, pleasure racing through me. I'd been so deprived for so long that everything was hypersensitive.

As Garrett was about to find out.

Self-consciousness was tossed to one side as he yanked my yoga pants off, then my underwear.

"Damn..." I couldn't reply, couldn't work out what had Garrett cursing, until I felt his thumbs split me wide. "Our girl's all wet for us."

"Is she?" I fought Rhett's hold, wanting to claw him right back where he was as he pulled away to take a look. "Seems like you better have a taste." His tongue flicked over his bottom lip. "Before I take over."

"Wait your fucking turn."

A kiss on my inner thigh had me jumping, then a sigh escaping my lungs as Rhett turned back to my breast, kissing the slope, forcing me to wriggle to try and get the nipple back between his lips. Somehow, they coordinated it. Rhett caught my nipple gently between his teeth, then sucked hard, right as Garrett licked the length of my seam.

"Oh..."

I couldn't form words, sentences, anything as the two of them went to work. My wrists were let loose as Rhett covered the other breast with his hand. Mine went to his head, caressing the loose waves—it felt like silk between my fingertips as I made wordless sounds of pleasure. Because Garrett was tracing the shape of my nub with the tip of his tongue. My hips followed that lazy orbit, needing more.

"Think she likes that."

Rhett pulled away to make commentary, but before I could make a sound of complaint, his fingers clamped down tighter on my other nipple. Shooting bursts of pleasure/pain had me grinding up and into Garrett's face.

"Fuck, yeah," Garrett mumbled, going back for more.

The flat of his tongue flicked across my clit, and it felt like I caught every tiny bump. His tongue moved faster, firmer, the two of them driving me insane as something twisted tighter inside me. An itch that needed to be scratched. I tried to specify what, but just let out a string of incoherent

moans. My legs rose, wanting to wrap around his head, but Garrett's hands slapped down, dragging me closer to the edge of the bed and onto his face.

Somehow they knew how close I was getting. They moved as one, pushing me harder, faster, but right as my pants took on a desperate edge, Garrett jerked away. My heart sank. I'd been here before, brought to the edge and then my partner lost interest in pushing me over. My eyelids fluttered as I realised what was going to happen. Garrett would shove his pants down and push himself inside me, pumping once, twice, three times before he—

"Look at you, so close." Garrett's voice had turned into a dark purr, but was he being seductive or mean? I couldn't work out which. A finger made me jump, tracing the aching entrance of me. "But you can't come yet."

I felt like I followed the orbit of his fingertip and yet my hips still bucked when he thrust his finger inside. The tip raked upwards, forcing explosions of pleasure from me. This is not what I expected. I stared blindly at the wall, trying to process this new feeling. It was a deep, intense, and yet completely different pleasure to the one experienced when he stroked my clit.

"How're we feeling?" Garrett asked. "This got you humming, Katie?"

I tried to answer and ended up making some sound that was a lot like a hum instead.

"If one finger's got you feeling good." Rhett moved behind me, scooping me up so my torso now lay against his chest. He reached down and pushed my thighs open wider, letting Garrett sink deeper. "Maybe we should find out how more make you feel."

Garrett grinned as he pulled his hand free, licking his finger and then before I could make a sound of protest, forced two fingers back inside me.

Chapter 40

Garrett

I was right where I needed to be.

My dick throbbed like a sore tooth, still mad that we'd let Katie stop stroking it, but our time would come. First, she needed to, more than once. The way she watched me as if all of this was completely new, the slight frown forming and then fading away as Rhett's hands covered her breasts. I freaking loved that. What I loved more was what was spread before me.

Pink, wet, slick, and so, so soft, it would feel like heaven sinking into her hot little pussy, but we had a way to go before that happened. My thumb landed on her clit, working the hood, but not touching the too-sensitive tip yet. The muscles in her thighs tensed instantly. Now to ratchet them tighter. I worked my other hand in and out of her, curling my fingers up and searching for that little rough spot... there. Her hips bucked in response.

"Just there, right?" I wasn't really asking for verbal confirmation because it was plain to see. Her whole body twitched with every pass.

"That's the spot." Rhett tilted her mouth up to meet his. "He's hitting you right where you need it." Katie couldn't even nod, but the kittenish little sounds she was making made that clear. His hand moved almost idly, playing with one swollen nipple, then another. "But he's not giving you enough." His eyes met mine for just a second. "Give her another finger."

"Another?"

I made it sound like it was this momentous thing, but she'd need at least three if she was going to take me. While I was a bit above average in length,

thickness wise, I was punching above my weight, and I needed Katie to want every inch I was going to give her.

“You like the stretch, don’t you, Katie?”

To demonstrate, he pulled her nipple just a little and that squirm, the way her cunt clamped down around my fingers then fluttered, was all the answer we needed. She nodded anyway. A small, frantic thing, and I loved that. Some part of me craved her being needy for us, so I pulled my hand free, glorying in the slick shine there, right before I pushed three fingers inside.

“Tight,” I groaned, knowing just how that’d feel, but right now it was her pleasure I focussed on. I moved my thumb and replaced it with my tongue. Her clit was perking up in interest, swollen now, and I strove to kiss it better, closing my lips around it, and...

“Fuck...”

Her moan was everything, because with it came a little gush and then a rhythmic pulse that made clear what was happening.

“That’s it.” Rhett used a soft voice now, a comforting one. “Good girl. Come all over his face.”

I licked her through her moans, her twitches, and then used softer, lighter strokes to lull her into a false sense of security. Her cat-like stretch made clear how she felt about this.

“Maybe I should—” she started to suggest.

“Come again.” The steel was back in Rhett’s voice. The same command he used when barking orders in a fire throbbed in his voice now. “You can do that for me, can’t you?”

“Usually I’m...”

She had more to say, a protest that she was done, but I knew better. Her cunt hugged my fingers, clearly wanting more. My tongue started to move faster and so did my fingers, the passage easier now. She was almost dripping all over my hand.

“You were saying?” Rhett punctuated his amused question with a kiss to her neck, then a little nip. “You’re what?”

“I’m...” Her voice was all high and breathy. “I’m...”

Gonna come. I could read her like a book, knew instinctively what needed to happen next. My knuckles ground against her entrance as my lips locked down around her clit. I rode every wave of pleasure, surfing it as I

began to crest, and then when she broke? I pushed her through it as she came crashing back down.

Only for me to rise up from where I was kneeling by the bed.

Hard, aching, it felt like whatever restraint I had was fraying to pieces as my mouth came down on hers.

I wanted her to taste herself on my lips, taste the need and desperation there, hers and mine. She grabbed a handful of my hair and pulled me closer, our tongues warring for control. This angle had me slotting between her thighs, feeling the wet kiss of her cunt, and I couldn't help but rut against it. It was everything I needed, and yet I wanted more.

"Katie... Katie..."

Now I was the one unable to get a sentence out as she pulled back. Her eyes locked with mine as her hand slipped down between us, circling the base of my cock, the squeeze nearly undoing me. Feeling a pearl of precum ooze free was like a slap to the face, reminding me of the reality.

We were near strangers and hadn't discussed anything when it came to birth control. That sensible, sensible thought felt like it frayed as she jacked me once, twice, three times, then angled my cock down.

"No..." She blinked, froze, and then went to pull away, but my hand went around her wrist. "Birth control... STIs..." Fuck, explain things properly, you idiot! "Condoms!" The word finally came to me. "Need condoms."

"Shit, do we have any?"

Rhett looked around the room, but he wouldn't know. This was my room, not his.

"Bedside table," was my answer.

"You seem well prepared."

Her lips twitched, and right then she couldn't have looked more beautiful. Pleasure, mischief, they sat well on her, and I had to make sure her life was full of that going forward.

"I was hopeful." Rhett tossed the brand new packet on the bed, but before I could grab it, she had the box in hand, pulled a wrapper free, and then tore it open. "Katie..."

She rolled up and pushed me backwards so I was standing, but it wasn't just to roll the condom on. Her tongue traced a line up the length of my cock, making me feel just a little apologetic for the torture I'd put her

through. My hand went to the back of her head, cradling it instinctively, right as her lips parted and she sucked the head of me in.

This was how it'd feel if I ever got to fuck her raw. Wet, soft, and volcanic hot, her tongue flicked around my length, but right when I was about to pull her free lest I spill down her throat, she looked up and drew back with a smile.

"You..."

Whatever I had to say was cut off as her hand rolled the condom down my length. For once, I was glad for the slight dulling in sensation. It meant I might actually last as I pushed her back on the bed, ready to shove myself inside her.

Only for her to turn around on the bed, presenting that beautiful rounded arse I'd ogled at yoga.

"Gonna take both of us at once?" Rhett rasped, like this wasn't a wish come true. "Fuck, babe..." As she kissed her way down his stomach, I lined myself up, rubbing the head of my cock around in all that wetness, then when she angled his cock away from his body, Rhett watching intently the entire time, I pushed myself inside as she swallowed his cock.

"Fuck..."

I don't know who growled that, whether it was Rhett or me, but no other response was fitting. To feel her gripping me tightly, almost fighting me, dragged a strangled sound out of my throat. It'd been too damn long since I'd felt this. Locked tight, connected in the most brutal of ways, when I bottomed out, I couldn't help but pull back, only to slam back, deep.

"You're taking us so well. That's it. Relax your throat, but..." Katie's spluttering sound had him reacting swiftly. "Not so deep." His thumb moved, brushing away something from her cheek. "No tears for me, Katie."

Did she see it? Rhett was half in love with the idea of her when she was with Dave, but now? It was so much worse. I don't know if he felt a thing as she sucked him off, his eyes boring into hers. There was a connection there, new, fragile, and just as easily blown away as fanned to life.

And I wanted the same.

My fingers sunk into her hips, loving the softness there, the way she gave under me. We were a perfect contrast because I felt hard, too fucking hard. I wasn't going to last, so my hand snaked around, finding her clit, feeling her clench around me in response. My cock thrust past that, stirring more flutters that made my balls boil, my hips snapping as I sought more,

more. She met me stroke for stroke, pushing back into me and then back onto Rhett.

Our breaths were ragged, more hoarse than if we were running on the treadmill for hours on end. Cardio I could do with my eyes closed, but this? This was destroying me, right as it was remaking me into something else.

Hers, if she'd have me.

"Katie... Katie, I..."

I couldn't get it out, because the wave was rising in me right now, unable to be held off any longer. Her thighs spread wider, her hips tilting just a little, and that was when I slid that much deeper. Sucked in greedily, she took everything I had to give and then gave it all back. Her muffled sound of pleasure had Rhett roaring, right as her orgasm hit. I felt every damn pulse because the tight clasp of her wrung the cum from my balls. I emptied into her, only the thin membrane of the condom stopping my seed from sinking deep. As shudders ran through the both of us, Rhett made clear what was about to happen.

"You need to pull off if you... Katie... I'm..."

I watched her look up at him, stilling Rhett with whatever was in her eyes. Permission, that's what it was. He took it gladly, his face screwing up as he stroked her cheek and then burst down her throat.

I was completely empty, but I wanted to do this again and again, just to feel the rush of pleasure. That had me collecting Katie up in my arms, her giggles music to my ears as I laid us down on the bed.

"We should clean up," Rhett said, still kneeling there like an idiot. "Katie would be more comfortable."

"Mm..." She was nestled in my arms, her soft curves fitting perfectly. "Can't move. No bones." My hips flexed and she gasped because I was still half hard. My dick was so happy I remembered it could be used for more than just to piss out of, it was keen for another round. "Well, maybe one."

I stroked my hands over her flanks, her breasts, kissing the back of her neck, just glorying in the feel of Katie, but Rhett couldn't settle.

"Katie, I—"

She dragged him down beside her, forcing him to settle against her front, then kissed him so slowly I'm pretty sure every thought left his head.

"Just like this," she murmured, her tone obviously sleepy. I could feel it in the way her body relaxed against mine, sure her eyes were slowly closing.

A lazy Saturday afternoon nap with a gorgeous girl. Part of me needed this so damn badly, I realised, right before I drifted off to sleep.

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Chapter 41

Rhys

How did the date go?

I'd sent a message in the group chat I shared with the fellas but got no response. That wasn't that unusual. We were all so damn busy that we rarely had a chance to have an actual conversation.

"Maybe it went really well, Bronson." I winked at the dog that was sitting in the passenger side seat next to me. Garrett lectured me about that, reciting car accident statistics, but when my boy scrambled into the front to ride shotgun, who was I to say no? "Maybe our girl's waiting for us when we get home."

Bronson barked at that because this was no dog. He was like some old soul wrapped in fur, and right now he grinned at me, as if he knew exactly how it all went down. I got my first clue when I walked in through the door.

Shoes were scattered in the hallway, which was unfortunately not uncommon, but unless the boys' feet had shrunk drastically and they'd decided a pale blue pair of Nike's were their jam, Katie was in the house. This was confirmed by Bronson, who made a beeline for the shoes, snuffling them furiously before barking and running deeper into the house.

Katie was sitting down and having a coffee with the guys. She was helping Garrett cook. Nope, no fragrant smell of good food cooking. She was outside and listening to Rhett discuss what he'd done to the garden.

She was in Garrett's room.

The dog plonked his butt down in front of the door, then nudged at it with his muzzle, which had me grinning.

What kind of perv put his ear to the door to listen and see if they'd decided to try out naked yoga at home? This guy. Garrett needed a nut so fucking bad. It'd wipe away that little line that was always there between his brows, and Rhett...? Was he in his room? I walked down and stuck my head in the doorway and saw that apart from a rumpled bed, it was completely empty.

Huh.

He might be out on a run or was called back into work or...? I jumped into the locator app we were all signed into and saw that nope, both my housemates were on our property, which meant...

"Bronson." I used a hushed voice, jerking my head and hoping he'd follow me. The dog let out a low whine and remained stubbornly where he was. "Bone, buddy?"

Apparently, his stomach spoke louder than his heart and he scrambled after me, wheeling around on his back legs as I retrieved a bone from the freezer. I took it out onto the back deck and got him to sit for me before handing it over and then scuttled inside, closing the door behind me. He was an amazing dog, but subtly wasn't his strong point. I needed to open Garrett's door quietly and see if I could work out what happened.

Heaven apparently.

The sun was starting to go down and it was turning the light in the room a faint, bluish grey. Every ray that filtered in past the curtains seemed to caress her body. Wedged between my two best friends was the girl that had featured in every dirty dream I'd had since the moment we collided outside the gym showers.

Get out, I thought, but my feet didn't move. I had proof of life, so I needed to GTFO of a place I wasn't invited to. So why didn't I? My cock for one, he rose so damn hard and fast it hurt, making clear that he was exactly where he needed to be.

Almost.

Those lush hips, that soft belly, those thick thighs, I could see them spreading just for me. I'd go down on my knees and worship each one, starting at her cute little ankles. Then when I worked my way up, and I'd...

"Mm..."

She shifted on the bed and that was my warning to get out and shut the door behind me. I vaguely heard a dog barking in the distance, as if making

clear what needed to happen. Instead, I stood there, watching her shift and then...

Open her eyes.

It felt like we'd come full circle. Katie collided with me and damn near stripped me naked before the whole gym, and now I caught the moment when her eyes met mine, widened, and then she made a small squeak of alarm, slapping around wildly in an attempt to cover herself.

Shit.

Not quite the come-hither stare I was hoping for, I bent down and found her t-shirt and tossed it to her. As she wrenched it on over her head, the others woke up. Heads jerked up blearily from the bed and then blinked as they took me in.

"Rhys...?" Garrett rasped.

"Looks like yoga was a success."

"Fuck." He grabbed a pillow and pegged it at me, but I caught it expertly. "Don't remember you being invited. Out. Now."

I went, but with a smile on my face. Hoping that Garrett would get his end in was one thing, but seeing all three of them together gave me hope. It wasn't hard to change the array of bodies on that bed, forcing the others to make room so I could insert myself among them. We'd worship Katie, and—

As I walked into the living room, the barking got louder and louder. The frenzied note had me racing over to the door to where a frantic Bronson was pawing at the door. Not to get to Katie. That wild look in his eyes made clear he was panicking, badly. I slid the door open, ready to make it up to him, but the dog went pelting down the hall, finding Garrett's bedroom, ready to slide under his bed, I was sure.

And now I knew why.

Good fences make good neighbours, but while ours was made from a sturdy colour treated steel sheet, it didn't stop the sound of another dog barking from coming through. Paws digging at the ground, then more barks made clear what was happening.

"Oi!"

The neighbour's dog stopped then and the muffled sounds made clear it'd taken off, but the damage was done.

"What happened?" Shock and accusation made an ugly combination in Katie's tone as she stumbled out onto the deck. Her hair was rumpled, her

shirt hanging loose, making clear she hadn't stopped to put a thing on, but her expression made clear that ogling was off the table. "Was that another dog?" A far off bark confirmed it for her. "Shit."

She didn't wait for an explanation, making a beeline for Garrett's bedroom. We all followed hard on her heels, catching the moment she slid to her knees.

"Hey, buddy." That was the high-pitched, comforting tone that the dog trainers talked about in the videos I watched. "Hey, it's OK."

I was half terrified Bronson wouldn't respond, but with a heart breaking yodel, he clawed his way out from under the bed.

"What did you do?" Garrett jerked on a pair of shorts and then sat down beside them. "And what the hell were you doing in my room?"

"Rhys—" Rhett rumbled, but right as I looked from one of them to the other, feeling about ten inches tall, Katie answered for me.

"It's the dog next door." She helped the massive dog up onto her lap, and he panted hard as he pressed his head into her chest. "Half the reason why I chose you guys was because there were no dogs close by."

"Must be the new neighbours," Rhett said.

"Bronson was a bait dog," she explained. "Used to rile up more aggressive dogs before a fight."

"No..." I wasn't trying to negate what she was saying. It was just that I didn't want to go back there again. Every time I heard about our dog's history, I saw it. The motherfucking cruelty of it all, to throw a dog like Bronson... I blinked and then crouched down beside him, reaching out slowly, but he didn't spare me a second look. We'd gotten closer, but right now, he had his human, and that was all he needed. "I'm sorry."

It felt like I was always saying that. To Garrett when I forgot to replace the milk when it ran out. To Rhett when I didn't lock up the house right. To Drew when I neglected to inform a staff member of a change to the schedule. Right then, I sat back on my heels and sat with the sense of shame that flamed through me.

I had to stumble in and ruin shit. Everyone was taking a massive step forward in the relationship, in helping Bronson fit in, and I—

Katie's hand slid across the carpet and grabbed mine.

"You didn't know. It's not your damn dog next door that's barking and carrying on."

“Something I’ll be having a chat to them about,” Rhett growled as he got dressed. “Letting your dog bark over a certain period isn’t legal.”

“Not now.”

Katie hugged Bronson tightly, stroking his broad back over and over as he snuggled into her. This was our cue to do the same. Right then, I could see how it’d be, if we could just convince Katie that this could work.

Our girl and our dog were at the centre of the circle we formed around her. Each one of us mumbled those nonsense words you used with dogs, even Rhett. He looked distinctly uncomfortable, searching our faces for some sort of cue about what to say, but he found his own. Over and over we told Bronson what a good boy he was until he stopped shivering and then flopped down on the floor.

“So what do we do?” Garrett asked carefully, giving Bronson’s belly a scratch when the dog rolled over. “We can’t soundproof the backyard.”

“I’ll have to have a think about it,” Katie answered. When she smiled, it felt forced. “There are devices you can use that stop dogs barking, but they’ll affect Bronson as well as the neighbour’s new dog. Having a chat with them at some point would be smart, but they’ll need to engage in some kind of behaviour modification if their dog is so reactive now.”

Would they be prepared to put in the work? None of us vocalised that because we knew we wouldn’t like the answer.

“I should get home, make some calls, and check in with the shelter.” She blinked. “They knew I was taking a few weeks off, but it’s time I went back. I can talk to Marg—”

“You can talk to us.”

I never got jealous, ever. The reason why I’d suggested us forming a polycule was for that exact reason, so why did my heart sink as Garrett edged closer, pressing a kiss to the back of Katie’s neck? It wasn’t just that I wanted to be doing the same thing, but I wanted to have the right to. To possess the kind of familiarity that apparently came from one morning of yoga. Looks like I’d need to sign up for a class or two. She looked back over her shoulder almost shyly, and he smiled.

“We’ll work this out, Katie. Won’t we, bud?”

Bronson peered over our girl’s shoulder, his ears flat to his skull. The frantic beat of his tail made clear he wanted to do whatever it was we were asking from him, especially now his nervous system wasn’t being flooded with fight-or-flight hormones.

“You could stay for dinner.” The hopeful note in Garrett’s voice was clear. “I could cook you something nice, and we could talk about a plan for Bronson.”

“I can duck out and grab a nice bottle of wine.”

Katie snorted at Rhett’s offer.

“You hate wine.”

“But you don’t.”

Fuck, I watched the three of them get closer and closer and couldn’t help but pipe up.

“Me, I’ll stay here with Bronson, make sure he’s OK. Have dinner and work out a plan, then let me know what I need to do.”

Katie’s eyes met mine, and now they were a lot softer. She smiled and pulled away slowly, pressing a kiss to my lips. I could barely feel my face right then, my mouth tingling long after she pulled away.

“I can’t tonight,” she said. “Mandie and some of her friends have a thing on and I said I’d be there for it.”

“Tomorrow night.” I blurted that out, not knowing what the other’s schedule looked like. “We could take you out to dinner somewhere nice.” I looked down at Bronson. “Somewhere dog friendly. Is there a place that’s black tie and lets dogs into the venue?”

“Doesn’t need to be black tie,” she said with a giggle, then got to her feet after giving Bronson one last pat. “But yeah, that would be nice. Text me with the details.”

We all rose then, even Bronson. He pressed into her leg, her hand stroking his head as the others swooped in. Rhett turned her lips his way, claiming them real aggressively for a guy who’d just got his rocks off with the girl of his dreams. Garrett was much slower, more considered, and me? I just hovered there like an idiot.

“I’ll organise it,” I told Katie. “I’ll book a table, let you know when, and come and pick you up. I’ll—”

“Rhys.” She didn’t know what it did to me to feel her arms go around my neck. My fingers flexed, then I wrapped them around her waist. “That would be amazing.” Our kiss was far sweeter, and I was more than OK with it. My eyes remained closed even as she pulled away, my mouth wanting more, more. Instead, she laughed and stepped away. “Just keep an eye on Bronson. He can be really easily overwhelmed. I wouldn’t leave him in the backyard unattended, not until we’ve worked out how things are going to

go with the other dog. He's made so much amazing progress, haven't you, boy?" The dog wagged his tail furiously. "We don't want him to take a step backwards."

"You got it." Bronson seemed to have forgiven me, following me out as Garrett walked her to his car. "We'll work out a way to handle this, won't we, boy?" I said as they drove off. He gave me a big doggie smile, right before eyeing the next door neighbour's house.

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Chapter 42

Katie

“That’s the spot.”

I was walking across the pavement towards the swanky night market when I heard Rhett’s voice. It was like his mouth was still just by my ear, his arms around me, not me standing on the footpath. I glanced around me, sure someone else could hear the filthy words in my head, but all I saw were pretty people streaming towards the gates. My hands smoothed down my dress and then I started forward again.

“He’s hitting you right where you need it.” My cheeks flushed bright red. I kept my eyes on the ground, trying to focus on the pretty shoes I’d put on, not this memory. *“But he’s not giving you enough.”* Bloody hell, that was the killer. It was like Rhett saw deep inside me and discovered my inner size queen. That stretch... *“Give her another finger.”*

“Another?”

I stopped still, my hands shaking, my legs still feeling all wobbly. Part of me was still there, riding the high of three orgasms, or was it four? Right as I was congratulating myself, a couple shot me a dark look, because I’d obviously stopped dead in front of them. They walked around me and towards the entrance, reminding me I needed to do the same. I saw Mandie in the distance, giving Gwen a hug, obviously having just arrived, and made a beeline for them.

Only to see the sight of Bronson pelting up the hall and under Garrett’s bed replay in my head. Some irrational part of me felt like his pain was the price I had to pay for all that pleasure. It was easier to feel guilty, to feel

mad at Rhys and his thoughtlessness, than to just sit with what happened. With no input from them, new people had moved in next door and brought an aggressive dog.

And I'd had my first threesome.

I fought back a smirk as my sister looked up and caught sight of me. She smiled at first, then her eyes narrowed, and I caught the moment when she sucked in a breath. As soon as I got within reach, I slapped a hand over her mouth, much to the shock of people standing around us, waiting to get into the market.

"Don't you dare say a word."

I'm not sure when our relationship got so co-dependent that she could tell when I got laid, but the look in Mandie's eyes made clear she knew. Her muffled sounds, her frantic attempt to claw my hand away was then replaced by the unmistakably disgusting feel of her licking my hand.

"Ew! Why the hell would you do that?" I asked, rubbing my palm on my dress.

"Not sure why you're getting all squicky." Her hands went to her hips. "Hopefully this is not the first time you've been licked today."

That had Gwen and Natasha turning my way, a curious gleam in their eyes, along with some of the other people milling around, waiting to be admitted.

"Can you—?" I started to say.

"Was it the nurse or the firefighter?" Mandie's grin grew wider. "Or the nurse *and* the firefighter."

"Shut, and I say this with all love—"

"Next."

A beautiful woman toting a clipboard looked the lot of us over with a jaundiced eye. It landed on me and stayed there as she frowned slightly.

"Mandie Miller," my sister said, handing over her invitation. The girls did the same and the woman gave them a cursory look before handing them back.

"And you?"

Her perfectly plucked eyebrow rose slowly as she looked me up and down.

I'd put on a nice dress and makeup, but it looked like it wasn't enough. The woman's face hardened, as if preparing herself for an onslaught of bullshit from me.

“This is my sister,” Mandie explained.

“I don’t have a sister on the list.” The woman didn’t even consult the clipboard. “You’ll need—”

“No, but I’m down for a plus one.” My sister spent a lot of her time being a goofy idiot, but when it came to door bitches, no one was going to intimidate her. “You can check the list.”

No please or can you, the door bitch seemed to sense she’d met her equal and then looked down the list again before placing a tick beside Mandie’s name.

“So you do. Enjoy the launch.”

“Ooh, this looks pretty,” Gwen said, staring at all the fairy lights that had been strung up across the market grounds.

“So who was it?” Mandie was not to be deterred. “Was it one, two...?” She stared into my eyes, but spoke over me when I tried to answer. “Three? Was it three?”

“I need to move out of the apartment,” I said, stroking my forehead. “We need our own space.”

“So you can have orgies in your own home, I get it.” Mandie shrugged. “So—”

“I’m going to get a boba tea,” Gwen said, not paying attention to any of this. “Tash?”

“Grab me a mango tea.” Natasha handed over some cash. “I think I’m gonna need to arbitrate here.”

“Garrett and I went to puppy yoga,” I told Mandie. “It was so cute. Some of them tried to pull his compression tights off and I saw... not-so-little Garrett. We did some downward dog and then went back to his place for some more practice. Rhett was there and—”

“He’s the firefighter?” Mandie asked. I nodded, watching her grin fade. “The one that was supposed to take you to yoga?”

“Um, yeah.” I shook my head. “He got sent home to rest after fighting fires all night, and I guess we woke him up.” I couldn’t stop the grin from spreading across my face. “Didn’t seem too stressed about it, though. Quite the opposite.” It felt like I was fighting to keep the memories of what happened today back and right now I gave in to it. My cheeks had to be burning bright red as I stared at the ground and saw them, not the crushed grass. “So yeah, I was with the firefighter, Rhett, and the m... Garrett. It

was amazing, and all four of us are going out for dinner tomorrow night. Five, if you include the dog.”

So why wasn’t my sister happy for me?

“Oh.”

Watching Mandie blink, then try to smile and fail dispelled the warm fuzzies almost immediately. Natasha was looking anywhere but at us. The second hand embarrassment was like a knife stabbing into my heart.

“Oh?” I stepped forward. “Oh? Weren’t you the one that was telling me to go out there and try new things? I did.” My smile threatened to return. “A few, actually.”

“Right, but doesn’t it bother you?”

The careful way Mandie spoke had my spine stiffening. It felt like people were doing that my entire life, talking to me as if they had to get the sock puppets out to explain stuff like I was five.

“Having multiple orgasms with two hot guys is supposed to bother me?” I turned to Natasha, hoping a third, neutral party would intervene, but she just watched this all unfold, palpably uncomfortable.

“Having guys space on you when they plan a date.”

Mandie said that real quietly, but it felt like a punch to the gut nonetheless.

“He didn’t space.” Why the hell was my voice rising? “Rhett was—”

“At home, sleeping, when he was supposed to take you out.” My sister shook her head. “Look, none of this matters if you don’t get serious about them. Are you getting serious?”

“I…”

Any answer I might have died in my throat.

“I guess you can make a decision after dinner tomorrow night.” Her smile seemed brittle somehow. “I mean, if they all turn up when they say they do…”

Unlike Dave.

The guys were so damn different to my ex, I hadn’t made the connection, but Mandie had. Somehow in her mind, they’d shifted from being hot rebound dudes to what…?

Potential partners, and that meant they were being judged by a whole new standard.

“Tash, back me up here,” Mandie said.

“Natasha,” she corrected, “and I think I should keep out of this part.”

“C’mon, you’re the only person I know who understands how polyam relationships work. It’s not that different to straight guy/girl ones, right? Flaking on plans, that’s a red flag in that community as well?”

“Communication.” I wasn’t sure if Natasha was on my side or Mandie’s, or her own, but she stared into my eyes. “That’s the most important thing. Being clear in your own head about what you want and then communicating that to your partners. Everything else.” She shrugged. “That’s for you to negotiate and not anyone outside the relationship.”

A meaningful look was shot Mandie’s way, forcing my sister to step off her high horse for a moment, and that was when Gwen returned with the boba.

“These are amazing!” She handed each one of us a plastic cup and a thick straw. “You’re gonna love it. The lady running the stall, she wants to shoot some content...”

I watched the three of them cluster together, not really hearing what they were saying. I couldn’t, not when I was still processing what had been said. Communication... I looked down at my phone and saw a bunch of messages had popped up from Rhys.

Found a cool pub in the hills we can go to. You’re allowed to have dogs in the beer garden, so find something pretty to wear, we’re taking you out. Seconds later, another message had been sent. Not something too pretty. I don’t want to be fighting guys for looking sideways at you on our first real date. I mean, I can and will. The timestamp showed that another couple of minutes went by before the next message was sent. Garrett told me to say that you should wear whatever the hell you want and we will love it. So, you gonna come out with us, Katie, and let us show you how good we can be together?

My lips twitched without meaning to and I’m sure I looked like a loon, smiling at my phone like that, but right now I didn’t care. I typed out the only answer I could.

Love to.

“Look.” Mandie appeared by my shoulder. “I’m sorry. Tash made clear I was overstepping.”

I looked past her to where her friend was standing, watching the two of us. She shot me a small smile.

“She did, did she?” I focussed back on my sister. “You won’t listen to me, but you’ll listen to her.”

“The point is, I’m listening,” she said. “Do you like these guys? Do you want something serious with them? Because if you do, I have ideas.”

I shook my head. She’d dimmed the light that glowed inside me momentarily, but I could almost hear Rhys’ excitement in his texts and somehow that got me through this.

“You do, do you? Why am I not surprised?”

“Dress shopping,” Mandie said, like that was the answer to well, everything. “You, me, Tash—”

“Natasha wants to come dress shopping with us?”

“She’s a freaking guru at dressing different sized bodies.” Her hand scratched the back of her neck. “A lot better than I can.” I crossed my arms, mentally replaying some of the times we’d fought pitched battles in dress stores. She grabbed my shoulders. “I want you to go on a proper date, where the guys don’t cancel on you. I want them to open your door for you and treat you right and most of all, I want you to feel beautiful doing it.”

Everything Dave hadn’t done, that was what she was saying, and perhaps that’s why I nodded in agreement.

“Alright,” I said, “let’s do this.”

Chapter 43

Katie

The next day Natasha, Mandie, and I were standing in one of the big department stores. I looked around with not a small amount of apprehension.

“You’re thinking that you don’t fit in here.” Natasha stood in front of me, a wry smile on her face. “Those mannequins...” We both looked at the slender figures placed around the floor. “You know your clothes will never hang the same way on your body.”

So why the hell am I here? I thought, and with a twitch of her lips, it was clear she was thinking the same.

“The whole vibe they’re creating here.” She waved her hand vaguely at the room. “It’s to subconsciously reinforce that idea. If you just diet, exercise, have surgery, deny yourself, you too will look as amazing as this.”

“I do most of those things,” Mandie said, shifting her body into one of the mannequin’s poses. “And I still don’t look like that.”

“It’s a bullshit vibe,” Natasha continued. “But businesses often have to create a problem which they can solve with a product they sell. Mandie and I do that all the time. We try to take women’s body or fitness dissatisfaction and channel it somewhere more positive through fitness at any size or skill level, but it’s still selling them a product.”

“OK, but what the hell do I do when they have so few products that even fit me?” I plucked at the folds of a dress that was my size and winced at the extremely busy pattern. “And when those that do are butt ugly.”

“Glad to see we’re on the same page, because that is hideous.” Natasha dismissed the dress with a flick of her hand, then wandered deeper into the racks. “Now this...” She pulled out a pair of flowing, wide leg pants. “You’re an apple shape.” I blinked, knowing from all the health warnings that this was the worst kind. Not sexy, not hot like an hourglass. I was like a ball on legs and that had me flushing, something she seemed to notice. “That’s just genetics and environmental factors coming together to make you who you are. When we accept who we are, then we can find a way to work with what we’ve got and be happy with the result.”

My arms crossed without thinking, and then I stared at the pants. Mandie had built this whole thing up on my head, where I’d float into the beer garden, looking like a picture of feminine perfection and wearing black pants didn’t really mesh with that mental image.

“Say what you’re thinking.” I blinked at Natasha’s forthright words. “Say it. You can’t upset me, I promise.”

Was I going to do this? A whole bunch of stuff felt like it was jammed up inside me, but I kept it firmly hidden behind the mask I wore near constantly. Don’t let your anxiety show, even as we passed rack after rack of clothes that wouldn’t fit me. Don’t let Mandie or Natasha know how stressful this was. Don’t alert anyone to the fact that the lights were too bright here, the floor too reflective, and that every sound seemed to echo off it, rebounding and growing louder. I swallowed hard, trying to keep the words down, but Natasha had to go and ruin it.

“I can take it. Whatever you have to say, I can take it.”

Her manner was soft, reassuring, even if what she was saying was terribly abrupt. I stared into her eyes, hearing my heart racket around in my chest and then channelled Mandie as I opened my mouth.

“That’s easy for you to say.” I kept my tone as neutral as possible, because honestly, I didn’t wish harm on Natasha or anyone for that matter. “If a woman has the poor taste to be fat, society dictates that they should look like you.” I waved my hands in the air, making an exaggerated version of her shape. “You have curves.” I grabbed my stomach way too hard, feeling the pinch. “I have flab.”

“Every body is capable of being dressed well.” I let out an irritated huff, but when I went to look away, Natasha was there in my line of sight. “Every body. Marketing will have you thinking you have to shrink down, be a

certain number on a scale or a tape measure, but you don't have to buy into that bullshit. Anybody is capable of looking beautiful, especially you."

She hung the pants back on the rack.

"And I'm thinking you don't want to rock wide leg pants and a pretty blouse to this date."

"A dress," Mandie announced, picking up one and holding it against her.

"I mean—" I started to say.

"A dress. Something floaty and pretty that makes you feel all woman." She spun around in a circle, forcing the hem to flare out. "A dress that makes every one of those guys swallow their tongue the moment you walk into the beer garden."

Mandie was always trying to shoehorn me into the kind of clothes she thought worked for me, and for once, she was right. I did want that. I couldn't remember the last real date I'd been on, and I certainly wasn't wearing anything like what Mandie described. Was that possible? I wanted to reject the idea of it outright. Nothing in my past led me to believe that it was, but...

Maybe this time would be different?

Maybe I'd find the perfect dress and I'd look amazing. Maybe all three guys would actually deliver on their promise. Maybe this could be the start of something amazing. Hope was like a tiny little flame that became a roaring fire with just a tiny bit of fuel, and that had me standing tall and nodding to Natasha.

"Yeah, that. Let's try that."

"Pretty, floaty dress it is."

Natasha was like a machine, flicking through clothes racks and pulling out items, either selecting them or dismissing them without a second thought. Finally she ended up with an armful of them, which was thrust my way.

"Let's try these ones on. They may all suck." Her brows wrinkled. "But they'll give me an idea of what lines, what fabrics and colours, work best for you. Once we have an idea, I can start looking more seriously." I took the dresses from her, my knees buckling slightly under the weight of not the fabric, but the expectations. "We'll find you something you love, Katie, I promise. If not here..." She looked around the room. "Then I know some other places that might work better."

“Ready to try on some frocks?” Mandie asked.

I wasn’t. I really, really wasn’t. There was a good reason why I avoided the department store change room, and it was this. Nothing seemed to make me feel worse about my body than harsh overhead lights and full-length mirrors. New year, new me. That refrain was getting battered, bruised, by how often I’d used it, but it got my feet moving, towards the change rooms and into a spare cubicle. I hung up the dress, stripped down to just my underwear and then pulled the first dress on.

“How’s it going?”

This felt like a performance in some ways, one I was ill prepared to carry off, but as I tweaked the folds of the dress, I remembered Natasha’s frank words. Really, her vibe was what had me opening the door to find the two of them standing there. Accept the shit, find a way forward, that seemed to be what she was saying, and this was the shit.

“Oh...” Mandie not having much to say was the reddest of flags as she looked me up and down.

“It’s hideous,” I said.

“Oh, no, it’s—”

“Dear god, woman.” Natasha bustled forward. “Of course it is. This fabric is too stiff and is giving you a uniboob, so it’s a definite no, but you don’t need to patronise Katie.”

I put my hand on my very stiff fabric covered hip and then shot her a smug look.

“Yeah, this is a patronising free zone.” I looked down and plucked at the fabric. “I look like a sausage casing that’s been stuffed with too much meat.”

“Meat...” How my sister passed high school. I don’t know, because mentally she remained about twelve. My eyes narrowed as she snorted. “I mean, maybe this dress works. If the date goes well, you will have tons of sausage and a whole lot of stuffing.”

“Hate you,” I said. “Hate you so very much.”

“Next dress.” Natasha was the only one willing to be an adult here, so she rifled through the dresses and then pulled out another one. “Try this. Softer, more flowing fabric. Sometimes that’s a good thing, sometimes it just shows all the lumps and bumps.”

It was definitely better, but when I opened the door, they weren’t wowed. The colour apparently washed me out. Some dresses were too big,

more too small, despite them all saying they were the same size, and then, there was this one.

I didn't care what they thought, this was the dress.

Black and made from a burnout velvet, the subtle floral pattern was replicated across the whole dress. As Natasha instructed, it nipped in at the smallest part of my body, just under my bust. The bodice criss-crossed in what she called a surplice bodice, making sure I didn't have uniboob. No, each one was cradled and thrust forward, showcased with a plunging neckline. The skirt flared out around my legs, swirling as I moved and my arms were covered with a fluttery bell sleeve.

It was perfect.

"Everything OK, Katie?" Mandie asked. I didn't reply, shifting back and forth just to feel the fabric play around my legs.

"If this one doesn't work, we can find other dresses." Natasha was using her best stay cool voice, but she didn't need it. With a shaking hand, I undid the latch and the door swung open.

"Oh my god..." Some people might wonder why I was so close to my sister. She was a pain in my arse most days, but then there were moments like this. Mandie blinked, blinked, and then holy crap. Were those tears? "Katie, you look..."

"Beautiful." Natasha gave me a satisfied nod. "But how do you feel?"

"Beautiful," I agreed, and that had Mandie rushing forward, folding me into a hug.

"Those guys... If they don't all turn up, I will personally go around to their house and kick their arses. Don't think I won't."

"No one would doubt you, Maddy Pants."

I ruffled her hair, just like I used to when we were kids, and that had her pushing away.

"OK, so now we've got the dress sorted, we need pretty undies, new shoes. Ooh! What about a facial?" Mandie was getting excited and my bank balance was cringing in anticipation. "Perfume."

"Just a dress." I waved a finger in her face. "You told me just a dress."

"Yeah, but you should go all out." She stared down at me. "This is special. My baby..." Her hands fanned her face, doing a fair approximation of Mum's bullshit. "She's all grown up and getting all the good dick."

"Underwear we are definitely going to another place for, and Mandie can pay for it," Natasha asserted.

That evening, I was standing in front of the mirror, dressed in new underwear, my new dress, and applying the new makeup Mandie had insisted I buy, carefully outlining my eyes with mascara. I'd started this year wanting to become a new person and, for the first time, I looked like one. When I stepped back, I tried to take everything in and failed.

There was a reason why I didn't get dressed up a lot. My skin felt weird and it was like I couldn't take a proper full breath, the new bra cutting into my ribs. But Mandie and Natasha had done the job. I was tense, on edge, ready to run out of the bathroom and toss everything off, but at the same time, I felt beautiful. That, I wanted to lean into that hard, and as if in response to the turmoil inside me, Mandie appeared.

"You look amazing." She stepped into the small bathroom and stared at my reflection. "Your outside is finally matching the insides." Her hands landed on my shoulders and she turned me around to face her. "And this change needs to go further than skin deep."

"Mandie—"

"You've never really had guys that have made an effort for you." Apparently today was the day for truth bombs, and everyone was dropping them. "They're idiots, but also..." Her hands rubbed my arms. "You let them. Do me a favour and treat this like a real date. If you think you want to pursue things with them, spend some time getting to know them and make them prove they'll be good for you."

That was the accepted wisdom about relationships, right? Men could be anything from lovely or serial killers, and you'd never know without spending some time with them, and even then, there were no guarantees. Mandie was right. I just seemed to... fall into situations. Some guy said he was into me or wanted to fuck and I went along with it. He never went home, and I didn't make him. Could this time be different? I tweaked the dress, hoping to get it to sit better, but before I could answer my own question, we heard a knock on the door.

"I've got it!"

Mandie ran out of the bathroom and towards the front door like a woman possessed, forcing me to shove the mascara wand back in the bottle and then move, lest she harangue my date on the doorstep.

Only for me to stumble into the living room and see Rhys standing there.

I almost didn't recognise him. No longer in his uniform of gym gear, he looked amazing in the dark pants and pale grey shirt. His hair was still damp and combed back from his face, showcasing those brutal cheekbones, a dimple popping the moment he caught sight of me. Part of me worried that he wouldn't like the dress, that it would be too formal for a date in a beer garden, but the way those grey eyes lit up? I knew for certain that this was a winner.

"Where are the others?" Mandie peered over his shoulder, not letting him take a step closer. "Tell me they didn't have a 'work emergency' or something, because I will march down to that hospital, that fire station, and kick—"

"The guys are waiting at the pub with Bronson," he replied, though he remained completely focussed on me. "After the other day, I wanted a little one-on-one time for the drive. Katie, are you ready to go?"

"Yes." I finally dared to smile. "Yes, let's go."

Chapter 44

Rhett

Earlier that day

“Why the hell didn’t you talk to us about going to dinner tonight, before you asked Katie?” Garrett said. He paced back and forth, his phone to his ear, because he was trying to get someone else to take his shift.

“Because you guys took a massive step forward,” Rhys replied, reaching down to twiddle with Bronson’s collar. Somehow he’d found one that looked like a bow tie. “Because I want a chance to catch up.” Garrett sucked in a breath and I knew what he’d say. That Katie and Rhys should go out on the date tonight by themselves. “Because if we’re going to do this whole polycule thing, then we need to start trying that on for size and see if it fits all of us.”

That stopped Garrett in his tracks. His brows creased and then he was nodding, but before he could reply, someone answered the phone.

“Hey, Gloria? Yeah, it’s Garrett from work. Look...”

He walked off, talking fast as he tried to convince the woman to swap shifts with him.

I’d had it easier. Brent, my boss, wasn’t keen to see me back on deck after yesterday as it was. The factory fire was one shit fight after another. Nothing went right, and the hours stretched on and on, even when teams from other stations were brought in to relieve us. I worked fast now, rolling up my shirt sleeves over my forearms, and waited for Garrett to return.

“She’ll do it.” He looked harried as he strode over to his bedroom and started yanking shirts out of his wardrobe. One was dismissed, then another,

until Bronson pulled free of Rhys' grip and went trotting into the bedroom. He put his paws up on the edge of the bed and then pawed a gunmetal coloured shirt. "This one?" Garrett held it up against his chest and stared into the mirror on his wardrobe. "Yeah, that might just work. You've got good taste, fella."

The dog wagged his tail in response, barking once Garrett was dressed. He was raring to go, and I knew exactly how he felt.

Yesterday... I woke up this morning hard, aching, the dream I'd had a glorious re-enactment of everything that went down in Garrett's bedroom. No, even better. In my dream, Katie climbed on top of me, her brows creasing as she reached down between us and then there was a little sigh, then a long moan, as she slid down my cock.

Fuck...

I didn't just want a repeat of yesterday. More, that's what my heart beat, more. Every word I'd said to her, about not being her rebound, but rather becoming her final destination. I meant each one of them.

"Ready?" I asked in a gruff voice.

"Here." Garrett squirted some spicy cologne on, then rifled through the other bottles he kept on his dresser and handed me one, then another to Rhys. "Not too much. Just—"

"Enough to enhance our natural scent." Rhys mimicked Garrett's tone perfectly. "I know. Where's Bronson's?" The dog wagged his tail in response to his name. "Got some eau de doggy somewhere?"

"Cologne would be murder on a dog's olfactory system," Garrett said, feeding a belt through his pant loops. "Now, before we go, don't go signing me up for anything next weekend. I'll have to spend the entire weekend at the hospital in return for Gloria taking my shift."

"Even though you bailed her out all those times her kids were sick?" Rhys' hands went to his hips, his button down stretching. The guy never seemed to wear anything other than activewear, so non-stretch fabric always sat badly on him. "When she was sick?"

"I'm the one rostered on tonight," he said and we both shook our heads, having heard this time and time again. "It's my responsibility to find someone to replace me and no one is obligated to take over." So how do other people's obligations fall on his shoulders all the time? His phone started to buzz, but when he went to look at it, I plucked it from his grip and then pocketed it. "I need—"

“To get to Katie’s on time.” His gaze locked with mine, but I wouldn’t be the one to look away first. “We’ve already spaced on her more than once. One more time...”

He saw it. We all did. A girl like Katie, she wasn’t going to put up with this kind of crap infinitely, and I didn’t want her to have to.

“OK, let’s go. Bronson, bud, you’re riding with the fellas and I...” Rhys walked over to the front door and opened it with a flourish. “Am going to pick up our girl.”

“Meet her at her door,” I instructed.

“And tell her she looks pretty... no, beautiful,” Garrett said.

“Won’t be able to stop myself.”

We walked out, Bronson following on his lead, tail held high, and that started the bloody dog barking next door. An angry shout from the new neighbour shut the bloody mutt up for a second, but the damage was done. Bronson yanked on the lead, dragging Garrett over to his car. Looks like we were going in his sedan tonight. We all scrambled inside and Garrett turned the key in the ignition.

“Ready?”

I was never more ready for anything in my life.

RHYS HAD FOUND a nice little pub in the hills. The menu passed Garrett’s stringent inspection and when he rang up, they allowed dogs in the beer garden out the back. The night was cool without being cold and Garrett and I sat at a table, a beer for me, a bottle of cider for him, and a glass of wine and a rum and Coke sitting there, waiting for Katie to arrive.

Bronson let us know when.

He scrambled to his feet, straining against his lead, forcing me to grab it lest he rush up to Katie. I understood why.

“What the hell is she wearing?” I barely breathed that out, standing up without thinking, and Garrett did the same. “That dress...”

Like some kind of angel, she floated up the path to the pub on Rhys’ arm. The skirt swirled around her legs, flowing over those damn hips my hands had memorised, and then there was that plunging neckline. I was hard as a rock and standing there, almost about to start whining pitifully like Bronson was.

“I see it.”

“The way it...” My hands moved vaguely through the air. “And her curves...”

“I know.”

His choked off reply had me glancing at him momentarily, but my eyes were always going to be dragged back to Katie. That little smile as she approached. It was everything. I gave Bronson his head, letting him drag me closer, uttering a quick command when he went to jump up on her.

“Well, look at you.” She bent down to scratch behind his ears, and the dog started to wriggle his butt in excitement. “And you...”

When she looked up, my eyes locked with hers and my mouth opened, wanting to say something, anything. It was like there was all this stuff inside me, and it was all coming to a head at the same time, creating a log jam inside my head.

“You look incredible,” I mumbled out.

“Beautiful,” Garrett added.

“Stunning.”

Rhys stared at her then like he couldn’t believe his luck, having her hang off his arm. Turns out that was accurate because I was halfway towards shoving him to one side and claiming Katie for myself. Instead, I darted forward, pressing a kiss to her cheek, only for Garrett to do the same.

“Thanks.” That blush, it had me thinking of whole other things that had her cheeks colouring pink. Her hand rose, tweaking the collar of my shirt, then running it down the front of Garrett’s. “You look pretty good yourself. Smell nice too.”

“That was me.” Garrett shook his head. “I mean, I chose the colognes. I... Shit. I’m pretty sure you need to do a twirl for us, because that dress...”

“Yeah, I nearly swallowed my tongue when Katie answered the door.” Rhys looked inordinately pleased to have our girl on his arm. “The boobs, the hips, the butt...”

I was about ready to punch his teeth down his throat when I caught her flush. She looked away and then back again with a smile. That had to mean she was flattered, right?

“So should we...?”

She nodded to the table and then Garrett and I were there at her chair, fighting to pull it out for her. I won, drawing it back with a flourish. Rhys just shook his head, taking prime position at her right, and as my hands gripped the back of Katie’s chair, Garrett took the other side.

Fine.

I sat opposite her, and in some ways that was perfect. It gave me the perfect opportunity to stare openly at her. The drinks I'd already bought for her were pushed forward, and she accepted them gratefully.

"What looks good here?" she asked, glancing down at the menu and that had each one of us freezing. She leaned over the printed card and, for a moment, I both feared and hoped her breasts would spill free. "What?"

Katie glanced at all of us in confusion.

"I'm pretty sure we all want to see if we can order that dress in ten different colours." Rhys had his eyes trained on her breasts. "That and get you a jacket or something..."

Shit, if we were openly ogling her, then so could everyone else. The place wasn't packed yet, but still, people stopped to stare. I moved to place myself in their line of sight, blocking the world out.

"Because...? Oh!" She looked down and then straightened up, and it felt like the gates of heaven just clanged shut in my face. "Mandie made me buy this dress."

"Send flowers to Mandie. Got it," Rhys said.

"And it's a bit more revealing than I usually wear."

That's when I felt a flush of warmth. My hand snaked across the table and grabbed hers.

"You wouldn't have worn something like this for Dave."

Her eyes met mine, right before she shook her head.

"Nope. There was no point. We never went anywhere as nice as this." It felt like I saw the beer garden for the first time. The barn-like structure of the pub, the stout wooden tables, I took them in but my attention refocussed back on Katie. "He wouldn't have gone to all this trouble."

"Because he was a fucking idiot," I said.

"Because he was a fucking idiot." She repeated my words back to me with a definite nod, then reached over to pat Bronson's head. "But this?" Her hand made a gesture at the table. "This is the standard all other dates will be judged by."

"Because you've got all three guys standing to attention for you?" Rhys said, reaching over to snag her rum and Coke and then taking a sip.

"Standing? But you're all..."

Katie looked around and then blushed in earnest, realising what that meant.

“I’ll drink to that,” I said, clinking my beer glass against hers.

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Chapter 45

Katie

So this was what real dating was like.

Mandie's hatred of Dave made sense now because for the first time in forever, I was the centre of attention. The pub, the beer garden, none of it mattered, because the guys' attention was completely focussed on me.

"So yeah, the owners thought the dog had bloat," I said, relieving a particularly horrendous experience that had happened at work. "But really they just had gastro of epic proportions." I shook my head and took another sip of wine. "It took me, two of the vet nurses, and one of the vets to clean up the mess the dog made everywhere." I shrugged. "Working with animals sounds cute in theory, but the reality is kind of gross."

"Tell me about it." Garrett shot me a long suffering look. "Working as a nurse—"

"Is all hearts and flowers." Rhys shut him down quickly. "Don't let him start talking about work, Katie. I'm still not over some of the stories about things he's removed from people's rectums."

"Cucumber," Rhett said with a smirk.

"Banana." Garrett nodded. "Fruit and vegetables are frequent offenders."

"It was the football trophy that traumatised me." Rhys screwed up his face. "Like all the pointy bits and the sharp edges?"

"Nah, that kid's toy was the worst." Rhett leaned forward. "What was it?"

“A Buzz Lightyear action figure,” Garrett admitted with a groan, then took a long drink from his glass. “Could not watch *Toy Story* with my nephews ever again.”

“To infinity and beyond...” Rhys cackled.

“OK, but why?” I looked at each one of them in turn. “What makes someone look at poor old Buzz and think yes, he belongs up my Emperor Zurg?”

“Usually it’s ‘I slipped in the shower,’” Garrett replied. “Always suspiciously slippery showers.” He shrugged. “Honestly, I think it’s just dudes not feeling safe and secure enough to buy something purpose built. I just wish they’d use something with a flared base.”

“You seem well informed about this sort of thing.” The mood was pretty playful, so I figured I could join in. “Anything I need to know?”

And just like that, the vibe changed. The three of them weren’t men anymore, not with that hungry look in their eyes. They looked like wolves on the hunt. Garrett met my gaze, staring all the while as his lips twitched into a smile.

“Is that something that turns you on?”

My brain couldn’t help but conjure a scenario, one where we were back on Garrett’s bed. He was naked, golden and gleaming in the half light, and bent over... It wasn’t something I’d ever done, pegging a guy, but—

“My mum always said you shouldn’t answer a question with a question.”

Where the hell had that prim little retort come from? What was I, twelve?

“So answer his, and we’ll answer yours.”

Rhys’ eyes danced with amusement, but it was more than that. He was leaning closer, edging into my space. That little movement had me seeing other things. Him prowling across the bed, the others doing the same, right before—

“I...”

My heart beat fast in my chest as I felt a sudden pressure. To answer them, to say the right thing. I blinked and then watched my fingers toy with the stem of my glass. This wasn’t a test I needed to pass. It was then I remembered what Mandie had said to me. Treat this like a real date. Spend some time getting to know them. Make them prove they’d be good for me. My jaw flexed and I looked up with a smile.

“I just find it educational. And I’m suddenly *very* glad none of you own action figures.”

“Yeah, no plastic toys here,” Rhys said with a grin. “Just the real thing.”

“You won’t need toys around us.”

When I glanced across the table, Rhett looked suddenly serious.

“Not unless you want them,” Garrett added.

It was now that I realised why I sucked so hard at dating. I didn’t want to test anyone on anything, except their stamina in bed tonight. Instead I got to my feet, feeling the rush of the wine go to my head.

“What I want right now is to find the little girl’s room,” I said.

“I’ll come with.” My eyebrows jerked up as Rhys moved to join me. “Inside. I’ll escort you inside. We all need another drink and...” He shook his head and then held out his elbow. “Milady.”

Bronson barked, ready to come with us, forcing Rhett to grab his lead.

“I’ll be back in a sec, boy.”

Rhys took my hand once we got inside the busy pub, and we wound our way through the crowd until we finally found the toilets. Of course there was a long line of women waiting.

“I can hang out here,” he offered when I let out a little groan. “We can talk about work, or action figures, or—”

“It’s fine.” It was when he pushed me backwards slightly, forcing my back to rest against the wall, and then leaned over. The noise, the other women, they all fell away when he was like this. “Sometimes I wish I wasn’t a woman, and lining up for the toilets is one of those moments.”

“Well, I for one...” His eyes slid down to the ridiculously revealing neckline of the dress. “Am very glad you’re a woman.” That mouth drew closer, hovering over mine. “That way I’m safe from having action figures shoved up my butt.”

I giggled, snorted, then went to clap my hand over my mouth in horror at the sound I made, but his lips were already there. They brushed over mine, sweet but also promising so much more. I sighed, wanting to deepen the kiss, when he pulled away.

“So, wine or a rum?”

What? My brain took a few moments to come back online.

“Um... surprise me?”

“Mm... I’d love to.”

Before I could ask what the hell that meant, he pulled away and disappeared into the crowd, aiming for the bar.

That just left me standing there, conscious that the women on either side were sneaking looks my way. Were they wondering how the hell I bagged him? I didn't know, instead catching his eye when he finally reached the bar as he turned and smiled my way. I smiled back, unable to help myself, before dragging out my phone to find messages from my sister.

Did they all turn up? she had written. And if so, how many died of cardiac arrest at that dress, because damn. You and Mum got so blessed by the boob fairy that there was none left for me.

I obviously hadn't responded, but that didn't stop her from continuing the conversation.

No reply. Promising. Either they're all there, showing you a good time, or you decided fuck buying overpriced, watered down beer and went back to their place to have an even better time.

My head shook from side to side as I read more.

Maybe don't do that. Look, I get I'm the younger sister and you've got this weird idea that I should listen to you. Never gonna happen, by the way. I just think if you want to get serious about these guys, maybe don't fall into bed with them.

She'd waited five whole minutes to amend this by the time stamp.

Or do it. I'm not your mum. I can't tell you what to do. Speaking of which, Mum called and we're on for family dinner tomorrow night. Seeing as you're giving me nothing to work with here, after spending all that time looking for the perfect dress, you can spill the deets there.

It was lucky Garrett didn't have a blood pressure machine with him, because mine would've spiked dramatically. Right as I was about to furiously tap out a response, the line ended and a toilet door opened. I shoved my phone into my bag and went to do my business, emerging out of the toilets moments later after washing my hands. I gazed out over the crowd, wondering if Rhys was still waiting to get served, when this guy stumbled into me.

"Oh, sorry... boobs!" Those bloodshot eyes, that glassy stare made clear that he was drunk. His hands rose, fingers flexing, as if he was about to cop a feel. I dodged to one side, and he followed my movements, forcing me to move faster. I thought I was safe when I managed to outwit him, faking jerking left and then dipping right and slipping past the guy.

Then he said the words.

“Fucking fat bitch.”

They didn’t need to hurt. I knew from experience Mandie got called shit like that when she shut guys down, and if she copped it, so did every woman. Didn’t stop me from stiffening, though. I could’ve turned on my heel, given the guy a serve, anything, but instead I stood tall, took in a deep breath, and then kept on walking.

He was just some drunk idiot. What he thought of me didn’t matter, and there was a strange kind of freedom that came from that conclusion. I worked my way through the crowd, finally finding the back door.

And them.

Not just my three dates. Garrett, Rhett, and Rhys were all waiting at the table, fresh drinks in front of them, but hot guys like them would never sit on their own for long. Three girls I didn’t know had dragged up seats, inserted themselves in the spaces between the guys.

Including the seat that Garrett and Rhett had pulled out for me.

Chapter 46

Rhys

“Hiii...!”

I looked up at that feminine greeting, ready to smile up at Katie. Part of me hated leaving her in the toilet line, especially after that kiss. My lips were still tingling as I turned to smile at her.

No, them.

Three girls came teetering over, their heels getting caught in the gravel floor of the beer garden with broad grins on their faces.

“Hi, handsome.” I looked down when a hand landed on my shoulder, letting out a growl as soon as she made contact. No, that was Bronson. My boy stuck his head up and made a sound to warn the girl away. “Oh! Didn’t see you there, fella. Aren’t you a cute doggy?”

How fucking drunk was this girl? Bronson was giving off touch-me-and-die vibes, and yet she was reaching out to pat his head.

“He’s not friendly,” I snapped.

And neither am I, I thought. I’d caught sight of the girls when Katie and I walked in. Some women are like big cats. They size up their prey, assess the odds, and then pounce when they think the time is right. I don’t necessarily have a problem with women being forthright, but when I walked in with a girl on my arm? That shit was not cool.

“Right, so I’m Ashley.” I did not give her my name, instead watching her pull up a chair and wedge herself into a spot between Rhett and me. “This is Tracey and Tammy.”

She gestured to her friends, but I didn't take any notice. My eyes, like Bronson's, were trained on the back door. I did not want Katie walking out here and seeing these girls sitting in a spot where only she belonged.

"And you..."

For once, Rhett's bluntness was going to work in our favour. He was about to give the girls their marching orders when the back door opened. Bronson jumped to his feet and then let out a bark, announcing Katie's reappearance.

"Is that your sister?" Ashley asked, and I did not like the sharp edge to her smile at all. "That's some dress—"

"That's my girlfriend." I didn't know if I had the right to put that label on what we were yet, but I wanted to. Bloody hell, I wanted to.

"Our girlfriend." Garrett was all sweetness and light until you crossed him and then the bull's horns came out. I could almost see the steam blowing out his nostrils right now. "So we're going to need you ladies to go back to your table. Now."

"What?"

The girls were moving far too slowly for my liking, my muscles tensing in response. Katie took a tentative step towards us, but no more, and that's when I realised how this must've looked to her. Like we were actually interested in talking to these strangers, when in reality, it was the complete opposite. The way her spine straightened and she forced herself to walk over with her head held high, I was glad to see it, no matter the reason why.

"Hey, babe." My arm snaked out and I pulled Katie down on my lap the moment she got close. Her body slotted in against mine and she felt perfect in my arms. I nuzzled the back of her neck, breathing in her perfume, and her involuntary giggle helped ease the tension in my chest. "Everything OK? I got you another wine."

"Perfect." She turned around to face me and that had my eyes dropping down to her lips, tracing the shape of them as they began to curve into a smile. "And thank you. Did you want some money?"

"No money," I replied. "Just a kiss."

Let them see what you are to me, I thought silently. Let me show the damn world how much I've wanted to toss up the hem of that dress since the moment I picked you up and buried my face between your thighs. Let me show the world that you're mine.

For a moment, I felt like Katie had read my mind. The look in her eyes couldn't be anything else, could it? Her arm went around my neck and her head dropped down as her lips touched mine. I took over, my hand sliding up her neck and forcing our mouths to collide. The world fell away because I couldn't focus on the noise, the other people, not when she was opening herself to me. Soft, soft lips and a tentative little tongue, that was followed by her little squirm on my lap, had my hands slapping down on her thighs, stopping her from moving. I was so damn close to the edge.

"My turn now."

I blinked, my hands moving too slowly because Katie was plucked out of my arms and then tucked against Rhett's chest as he settled her on his lap.

"So you're serious?" Ashley looked like she was smelling someone else's fart, her lips curling as she jerked herself to her feet, the other ladies following suit. "Fucking freaks."

"Well, that worked perfectly," Garrett said with an air of self-congratulation. "Hang on, you better kiss me too. Tracey, or was it Tiffany, is looking this way."

Rhett dipped Katie expertly and Garrett moved in, just like I imagined he did the afternoon when the three of them got together. His hand collared her throat as he claimed her lips, making clear to everyone who she belonged to.

This was going to work. I had no basis for coming to that conclusion, but I felt it like a kick to the gut. She was ours. Katie belonged to each one of us, and we just needed her to realise it.

When Garrett let her go, Katie blushed, seeming to realise we'd created a bit of a stir in the beer garden. It wasn't just Ashley and her little posse, but other people turned to stare as well, and I didn't like that. I both wanted to shout about what we had to the rooftops and protect it, like what we were building was a fragile flame, needing shelter from the blow of hostile winds. Katie seemed to feel the same way, wriggling out of Rhett's grip to slide back into her seat.

"So, have we dated enough yet?" she asked, daring to glance sideways at the venue. "Do we need to hang out here for a set amount of time, or...?"

"Or...?" I prompted, my eyes locking with hers. "What did you have in mind, Katie?"

“Nothing involving action figures or the produce drawer,” she replied hastily, before looking at each one of us in turn. “But everything else? Yeah, that’s on the table.”

I grabbed my drink and drained it in one mouthful, taking her hand in mine. My keys were tossed at Garrett.

“You’re driving my car.”

“Why the hell am I driving?” my best mate snapped.

“Because you two enjoyed an afternoon of naked yoga with our girl, while I worked. I need to get a few runs on the board with our girl to level the playing field a bit.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Katie asked with a giggle as I dragged her to her feet and then spun her around in a circle.

“It means I get to make out with you in the back of my car while Daddy Garrett drives us home,” I replied and then tugged her towards the car park.

“Bronson, you’re with me,” Rhett said, the dog wagging his tail and reluctantly following him towards Garrett’s sedan. B Dog wanted to be with his girl right now, but what I intended to do was not safe for children or small animals.

“Rhys, what—?”

She gasped as I pushed her up against my car. My hand slapped down on the glass above her head.

“This,” I said, my free hand sliding down her throat, just to thumb her pulse. That rapid drumbeat reassured me that she was feeling it, just like I was. “Just this.”

Away from the prying eyes of the other drinkers, I could take my time, reacquainting myself, learning her lips. The way she parted them all too quickly, as if she was hungry for this as much as I was. The little whistle of her breath through her nose as she sucked it in, right as her hands clung to my shirt front. I wanted to kiss her breathless, if just to see her pull back and take a breath, staring up at me with eyes dazed.

“Alright, lovers.” Garrett appeared by the other side of the car, tossing the keys in the air. “Get in and try not to get us pulled over for public indecency.”

Chapter 47

Katie

Girlfriend?

When I walked into the beer garden and saw the women there, it felt like history was repeating itself. The guys had come here with me, but now they had options...? I took in each woman's clothing, hair, perfectly applied makeup and couldn't help but see it. The three women were a perfect match for each man. My heart had beat faster and faster, my feet wanting to move, but to where? Out of here, my heart beat. I'd march out into the car park and get into my car and...

I'd come here with Rhys, I remembered. I'd let him escort me downstairs, open my door for me and bring me here, thinking we'd enjoy a few drinks and a nice evening.

Yet here I was, right back in the same situation I had gone through with Dave.

I grabbed my phone, hands shaking, thumbs skating across the screen as I went to open up the Uber app, not sure if rides came this far out of the city. I could call Mandie...

"Is that your sister?" That bitch. She knew exactly what I was by the sly look she shot my way. Her eyes performed an insultingly slow inspection. "That's some dress—"

Then right as I was writhing in indecision, Rhys said the words I needed to hear.

"That's my girlfriend."

The need to kiss Rhys had my tongue sliding over my bottom lip.

“Our girlfriend.” Nope, now I wanted to kiss Garrett. “So we’re going to need you ladies to go back to your table. Now.”

Everything that happened after that was a blur, right up until now.

“Fuck...”

I liked that animalistic growl a whole lot. The way Rhys crowded me into one side of the car was even better. Those broad shoulders blocked out the artificial lights of the car park and turned him into a dark, shadowy figure. One whose hand slid along my jawline, tipping my head up so he could claim my mouth seconds later. Hungry kisses followed soon after, ones that threatened to bruise my lips, right before they trailed down my neck. I felt his stubble, smelled the cologne Garrett had carefully selected and him, my hands going to his shoulders, then the top button of his shirt. I flicked it open, then another, my hand sliding across the hot, hot skin of his chest.

“Good idea,” he rumbled, his hands going to the shoulder seams of my dress, ready to wrench it down, when a cool voice from the front stopped him.

“You are not getting Katie’s tits out in the car park.”

“I’m not?”

Rhys sounded pissed off and cautious, all at the same time. When we scrambled to get in the back of the car, I caught Garrett watching us steadily in the rear vision mirror.

“Katie’s ours.” I felt like I’d been waiting my whole life for one man to say those words with that kind of certainty, let alone three. “And only we get to see what’s under that damn dress.”

“Right.” Rhys nodded, then glanced around the backseat, spying a gym bag and then hauling out a hoodie with a grin. My seatbelt was clipped on and then the hoodie was smoothed over my body like a massive fluffy blanket. “Home, James, and don’t spare the horsepower.”

Garrett snorted and turned the key in the ignition. Rhys slid in beside me, and for a moment I thought that we were going to play it cool on the way home, and part of me was disappointed at that. I liked his growls, his impulsivity, because I felt like I was being swept up in it. It forced me to stop thinking and just feel. His arm curled around my shoulders, tucking me in tight against his body, and that’s when I felt every inch of those muscles I’d seen on display that day at the gym. I looked up almost shyly, sure he’d see the look of adulation there. Imagine my surprise to find him gazing

down at me with the same small smile on his face, as if he was just as transfixed.

His kiss was far gentler, slower and more considered, now we were away from the pub, and as we pulled out of the car park, he deepened it. Faster, harder, my body melted into his, right as his hand worked its way under the hoodie.

“Fucking hell...” I blinked, blinked, like I was waking up from a spell, only to find both men staring at me. Garrett shook his head, then dragged his focus back to the highway we were now hurtling down. “If you’re going to do this.” Rhys’ hand moved lower, easing the bodice of my dress to one side. It took very little for my breast to pop free. “Then I want Katie soft, wet, and ready for me by the time we get home.”

“He’s always so fucking bossy.” Rhys shot me an impish smile. “Put the toilet seat down. Wipe the kitchen benches after you make a coffee.” He shifted so his body was turned towards mine, and his hand dropped closer. “Give our girl orgasms on the drive home.” A kiss, then another, to quieten me when I tried to reply. “This at least is one order I’ll happily follow.”

The hoodie was useless, little more than an obstacle, because when his mouth crashed down on mine, his hands surged under it. Caressing me, tracing the shape of my body until I was panting into his mouth, and then when I was about to whine for more, he pulled back, watching me closely to catch the moment my mouth fell open as his fingers traced the shape of my nipple, then clamped down upon it.

That sharp little tug was a perfect representation of how I felt about the evening. The pain that burst so bittersweetly when I found three women in my place. The pleasure that rushed through me as they were given their marching orders. Then the wordless madness of Rhys unclipping his seatbelt and shoving his head under the hoodie.

The car instantly responded, an alarm ringing through the entire cabin, making clear what was happening. Not safe, not secure, even I could feel that as my hand cradled the back of his head. Mandie had it right. I should be getting to know each one of them, seeing if I even wanted the title of girlfriend. Instead, when his other hand slid down, raking at the skirts of my dress, I let my thighs fall open.

“Is he looking after you, Katie?”

Garrett’s clipped tones jerked me out of the haze I was marinating in. It brought the cool glass of the window, the whoosh of the cars speeding past

us, back into stark relief. I wasn't safe, in their room or mine. I was out in the world, and right as Rhys grunted, his fingers hooking the cute underwear Mandie had made me buy to one side, then groaning as he discovered just how wet I was, I couldn't have felt better.

"Katie?"

Garrett was going to get bossy and demand an answer, I could see that, so I tried. Of course, right as I tried to answer, Rhys traced the shape of my entrance, right before pushing his fingers in. All I could let out was a guttural moan, something that seemed to please Garrett even more than anything else I could say.

The car was wrenched to the side of the road, the hazard lights flicked on, and the rapid tick, tick, tick of the indicators felt like they matched the pace of my heart rate. Garrett unclipped his seat belt and then spun around, staring through the gap between the seats.

"Has he got his fingers buried in that tight little cunt, Katie?" His brown eyes were cool, merciless, right now. They forced an answer from me, if even just in the form of a quick nod. "Give her another finger."

"Working on it." Rhys' voice was muffled until he pulled his head free. "But you're so damn tight."

I didn't feel like that at all. Instead, I was flayed wide open, gasping, as he pulsed his fingers in and out before pulling back and doing as he was told.

Shit.

The stretch had me clawing at the seats of the car while bearing down and wanting more.

"You're going to need more than that if you want to take all of us tonight." Garrett's hand idly caressed the headrest of the passenger side seat. "Do you want that? No sleep, just pleasure, one after the other, until we've filled you to the brim."

"Made you ours, finally."

Rhys growled that out, then kissed me hard.

"You tell us now what you want and we'll make sure that happens," Garrett said, forcing my eyes to flick back open. He saw everything, the mess I'd devolved into, and yet would not look away. "We will give you everything you could possibly want, if you just say yes."

The idea of it, the brush of Rhys' thumb over my clit, then when it pressed down harder, it made clear to anyone driving past what we were

doing. Tearing me apart, all the pain, the bullshit of the past burning up just like my skin was, leaving just me.

I answered the only way I could.

“Yes...” I panted, feeling the tension twist tighter inside me. “Yes...”

“Then come for Rhys like a good girl,” Garrett said, his gaze softening. “Soak his fingers. Leave him aching to replace them with his cock.”

“Already fucking there.”

My focus was dragged back to Rhys as he hung over me, watching every tiny response, nodding when I felt sensation spike inside me. I did exactly as I was told, pleasure spilling through me, waking every damn nerve ending up and making it sing as I fell apart, only for Rhys to put me right back together.

“So beautiful.” His kiss was far gentler now, even as I felt the tension in his body. “Fuck, Garrett, get our girl home. I’m this close to just coming in my pants.”

“Really?” I croaked that out as I smiled, shuddering as his fingers pulled free. “Well, seems like I need to do something about that.”

Chapter 48

Rhys

Katie was going to kill me.

My dick had been in hibernation right up until the point she collided with me outside the gym showers, but now that he was awake, it felt like he was trying to claw his way beyond my zipper. He just wanted to get to her, and then she had to go and shoot me that sexy little smile, right before her hand started to ease the zip down.

“Katie, no...”

I covered her hand with mine, ready to stop her from unmaning me completely. That wet little secret I found when I eased her underwear to one side? It was fucking everything I wanted, needed, and right now I had to start counting backwards or thinking about world politics or something to calm down before we got her back to our lair.

“So are blue balls a real thing?” Katie asked Garrett with a smile full of mischief.

“No.” He said that with a snort, but then her steady gaze had him reconsidering. A shit-eating grin made clear I was not going to like the next phase of this game. “Well, in some cases prolonged arousal can cause epididymal hypertension. It makes your testicles ache.”

“Guilty as charged,” I said, shifting in the seat. Fuck, I was so damn pent up. Why hadn’t some smart person invented a transporter or something like they had on *Star Trek*? Then we could be home and I could be—

Oh fuck...

She slid down my zipper while my attention was elsewhere and then slid her hand in. The feel of skin against skin had me clenching my teeth. Hot, immediate, her palm was perfect.

Then she had to give me an experimental squeeze.

“OK, unless you want shit to get real messy, real quick,” I panted out. “We need to stop. I can recite my ten times tables and—”

“Where would be the fun in that?”

Katie moved too damn fast for me to stop, or that’s what I told myself. She eased my cock out of my pants and then was there, licking a stripe across the crown. My hand went to her head, wanting to push her down, force her to take all of me. My balls were boiling, ready to unleash right down her throat, but rather, I tangled my fingers in her hair, trying to focus on the slip of those silken strands rather than what she was doing.

Yeah, I failed at that.

That hungry little mouth sucked the head of my cock in, and the feel of all that hot slickness had my hips shifting. I hadn’t felt this restless since I was in high school. Making out with some girl in the back of my car was nothing like this, though.

Katie was perfect. I knew that before, but now? The way her mouth opened and sucked me in, not a single tooth grazing my cock as she swallowed as much as she could. A hand wrapped tightly around the base, increasing the sensation, right as I was fighting to retain control.

Part of me wanted to buck up and into her open mouth, feel that cunning tongue, those soft lips suck the seed out of me. The other half retained control, staying perfectly still as she swivelled down and then pulled back. The way her tongue lashed my shaft, then pressed hard against the underside of the head, it was like she was sucking the soul from my body.

“You’ve got him on edge,” Garrett said. I forced my eyes open to catch his sly smile. “Keep Rhys there the entire drive home.”

“No...” I didn’t get to finish that sentence, because Katie seemed to be disobeying him. Her bobs grew faster, deeper, the lewd sound of sucking filling the cabin of the car. “Baby, that feels so fucking good. Needed this for so damn long. That dress. Your smile.” I wanted to say more, but my eyes were starting to roll back in my head as I felt a prickle in my balls.

Only for Katie to pull off.

“Like that?”

She was a sensual mess right now, her hair falling in lazy waves, her lips swollen. Part of me wanted to keep her exactly like this going forward.

“Just like that.” Garrett shot me a rakish grin. “We’re about twenty minutes from home. Bring him to the edge over and over again.”

“No, Katie, please...”

My hands pawed the air ineffectually because that was the moment she sucked me deep again. That torturous climb to orgasm started all over again.

I WOULD DO anything to come right now.

My eyes flicked open to see the headlights reflected off the garage walls, and that was my cue. I pulled Katie free, my cock waving in the wind as I dragged her out of the car. My keys were snatched from Garrett’s hands and I stabbed them into the lock of the house and then pulled her down the hallway.

Thank god, my bedroom was the one closest to the garage door. I didn’t even bother turning on the lights as I pushed her against the wall.

“Rhys—!”

I had her hands in one of mine, pushed them up against the wall and held them there as my other one raked at that dress. Before it was pretty, now it was just an obstacle. My hands shook as I pawed at the fabric, finally seeing the pale skin underneath it. Sexy black, lace knickers, I spied them, right before I yanked them free. They were tossed aside, because I didn’t need the wrappings, just the prize inside.

“Tell me you want this,” I said, kicking her ankles wide and settling into the gap I made. “Tell me you want me.”

A little groan at the feel of my cock grazing her bare cunt. She was shockingly hot, wet, and felt like pure heaven. I wouldn’t move an inch further, though, even as I notched myself against her entrance. Not without her saying so.

“Yes...”

“Fuck yes,” I hissed and then drove myself forward.

Her body fought me, but this was a war we’d both win. I drew back, only to slam back inside. Her cunt was already starting to twitch around me, forcing my hand to slide down. Find her swollen little clit and roll it around

between my fingers, like a marble in oil, her cries matched mine. Sharp, desperate things that cut through the air as I fucked her against the wall.

“Been thinkin’ about this since the second I saw you. That day with the towel? Nearly dropped it just to get a better look at you.” She didn’t have a reply. Well, not one with words, but her moans were music to my ears. “You ruin me, sweetheart. Every fuckin’ time you smile, every time you laugh. Thought I was gonna go mad wanting you.”

My lips found her neck, kissing her softly, sweetly, even as my body wreaked havoc with hers.

“You pushed me too hard. I was trying to stay cool, keep this shit locked down, but...” My heart was thundering in my chest, even as the door creaked open. Rhett and Garrett stumbled in. Everyone would be witness to my fall, and right now I was perfectly OK with that. “You’re it for me, Katie. The end of the line. My girl. Mine. Now come for me, baby.”

It felt like more than just her cunt clamping down on my cock. We were locked together on a whole other level. The pub, the gym, everything, they were just obstacles getting in the way of this. It wasn’t just my seed pumping into her, sucked free by the frantic pulses of her cunt. It was everything. That’s why I cradled her in my arms, holding her close as we both shuddered through this. I’d probably regret every damn word afterwards, but right now...? I was exactly where I needed to be.

“Mine...” I whispered one last time, completely unrepentant.

“Ours.” Rhett stepped forward and tilted Katie’s face his way. He stroked her cheeks, then her hair, until she leaned blindly towards him, forcing him to kiss those pretty lips. “I’ll take you on dates every damn night I have off from work, but I need us to stop kidding ourselves. I’m in. Rhys has obviously jumped feet first, and Garrett’s trying to keep his shit together until you give us a sign.” His thumb stroked her jaw. “Give us a sign, Katie. Put us out of our misery and—”

“Yes.” Suddenly that was my most favourite word in the English language. “Yes.”

Chapter 49

Katie

I woke up the next morning gloriously sore.

Sleep? Never heard of it. We'd replaced the need for rest with one for each other. Even after I'd drifted off for a little while, someone would rouse and reach for me, and then I'd be clawing at their back or their shoulders, riding them to another screaming orgasm. A cautious scratch at the door had my head jerking up and off the pillow, making clear that I wasn't going anywhere.

Somehow, we'd all piled onto Rhys' king size bed, and to say it was a tight fit was an understatement. I was lying enmeshed in a tangle of limbs, a cage I had no interest in escaping, until I heard a thin whine.

Bronson!

I wriggled, and that earned me a groan, then a snort, their grip on me tightening. Fighting back a little laugh, I pushed back harder, finally pushing Rhys off me. Who knew the gym bunny was a total snuggle bug? Deprived of his hold on me, he rolled over and into Garrett, the picture the two of them made as they cuddled closer was something that needed to be recorded for posterity. Right as I went looking for my phone, a sharp bark let me know Bronson was done waiting. The guys snuffled, snorted, and started to move, letting me escape the bed. I plucked a huge t-shirt off the floor and yanked it over my head as I opened the door to a frantically wriggling Bronson.

He whined, yodelled, and sang the song of his people to me, and it became clear why. The poor boy needed outside to pee badly. I stifled my

own need to do the same, putting the lead hanging by the front door on him and then letting him outside. I was yanked over to the closest tree, and thank god it was still early. The neighbours missed the sight of my bare legs as I stood there, supervising Bronson.

But the neighbour's dog didn't.

It started barking furiously as soon as it realised we were here, and the change in Bronson was instantaneous. Mid-pee he started for the door, leaving a trail behind him.

"Bronson!" I hissed, desperately trying to rein him in and dodge his pee trail at the same time. "Bronson!"

"Oi!"

Rhett appeared at the door, bleary eyed, but scowling at the fence. His sharp command had the other dog quietening down. Bronson went into full submissive mode, rolling over onto his belly at Rhett's feet, only to earn himself a tummy scratch.

"Morning."

That knowing look, that sly smile, it made clear he was still thinking of everything that had happened last night. Of course, that had me revisiting some of the highlights, the cool breeze playing over parts of me that were no doubt red raw after last night's crazy.

"Morning," I replied. "I should jump in the shower, get dressed. I've got an afternoon shift at the vets, but—"

"Or..." He steered me towards the front door, and Bronson scuttled into the safety of the house gladly. "You could spend the morning with us." His arm tightened around my shoulders and he pressed a kiss to my temple. That small gesture of affection, my soul slurped that up, somehow needing that more than even last night's sex romp. "We've all got the day off for once. Garrett can make us some ridiculously complex breakfast."

"Eggs Benedict on sourdough English muffins." The man himself met us in the hallway dressed in just a pair of shorts. I saw all his hard work on display as he stretched. Yawn over, he darted forward and pressed a kiss to my cheek. "Some freshly squeezed orange juice. Maybe we could grab some of those croissants from the bakery down the road."

"The local bakery?" Rhys emerged, scratching his stomach without a stitch on. Turns out I should've tugged that towel off when we first met. Then I would've been treated to the sight of all that muscle on display. He winked at me, making clear he saw me checking him out. "Must be letting

your standards slip, Gar.” He went to muss Garrett’s hair, but the other man shoved his elbow into Rhys’ ribs. “Usually we have to trek out to some bakery in the hills where nuns roll the pastry out on their bare thighs.”

“Do not,” Garrett grumbled. “The ones down the road will do in a pinch, though there is that place...” He fished his phone out of his pocket and went to look another bakery up, only for his face to fall. “Shit.”

“What?”

We all clustered closer.

“Gloria didn’t turn up for my shift.” All the lazy, good feeling was leaving the building. “Shit. Shit! My shift manager rang me... ten times. Fuck.”

“Take a breath, dude.” Rhys put a hand on his shoulder, but Garrett threw it off. “You’ve covered how many people’s shifts? That’s gotta count for something, right?”

“Not on a busy night in the ED when no one else answered their phones to take my shift,” Garrett groaned. When he shoved the phone in his pocket, I knew how this was going to go. He stepped forward with an apologetic look, cupping my jaw in his hands. “I am so sorry, but I’ve gotta go into the hospital and talk to the shift manager, see if I can smooth this over.”

“That’s why I have three boyfriends, right?”

I made myself smile, even as I felt my stomach sink. That wasn’t fair. Garrett wasn’t spacing on me. He had an actual work emergency and he needed to attend to it.

“Look after Katie,” Garrett instructed the others. “Back rubs, breakfast with some protein in it, and lots of water.” I snorted. “Babe, aftercare is important.”

“Nothing an ice pack on my nether regions can’t fix,” I said, trying not to wince and failing.

“We hurt you?” There were two Garretts, and right now the caring, gentle one had control. “Shit, I knew we went too hard last night. Paracetamol and ibuprofen can be taken at the same time, alternating one for the other every four hours, with no more than eight tablets of each taken in a twenty four hour period.”

“Go,” I said, grabbing his wrists and squeezing. “I’ll be fine. The others will just have to deal with hand jobs or blowies if they want anything from me today.”

“Mm... would your pussy feel better if I kiss it better?” Rhys slid in behind me. “I know what I want to eat for breakfast, and it's not bacon and eggs.”

“Enough sex.” Rhett stepped forward and scooped me up into his arms before carrying me down the hall. Bronson followed along, thinking this was a fine game. I was placed on the kitchen counter. “If aftercare is what’s needed, that’s what we’re doing. Now, I can make you a protein shake.” I wrinkled my nose, remembering the horrible, chalky tasting things I’d drunk in the past. “Scrambled eggs? An omelette?”

“Stick to scrambled eggs.” Garrett grabbed a bottle of water and a protein bar. “Rhett can’t flip an omelette to save his life, so it’ll just end up scrambled, anyway.” I let out a little giggle, but he pressed a kiss to my lips, silencing me. “I’ve gotta go, but will you be around tonight? I can make you dinner?”

“Maybe...” I slapped my palm to my forehead. “Actually, scratch that. Mandie organised a family dinner tonight.” Usually those words were enough to strike fear into the heart of any red blooded man, but not these three. They all went perfectly still, watching me closely. “Can I take a raincheck for tomorrow night?”

“You got it.” Garrett made for the hall. “Give me time to grab some real ingredients. How do you feel about a genuine carbonara, with no bloody cream?”

I didn’t get a chance to answer. He was in his room, having a quick shower before getting ready.

“Scrambled eggs it is.” Rhett spun a frypan around in his hand, then put it down on the range, turning the gas on. “And how about a bit of toast?”

“A GIRL COULD GET USED to this,” I moaned.

We were all lying on the couch now, watching the shadows shift in the late morning light. Rhett might not use artisanal eggs when cooking, but he made a massive pile of scrambled eggs we did our level best to get through.

“A girl will get used to this.” Rhys stretched me back on the couch, following me down with a little kiss to my nose. My head ended up resting on Rhett’s thigh and he stroked my hair as he stared down at me. “Now that we’ve got you right where we want you.”

“This girl needs to call work if she’s not going in,” I said, going to rise, but Rhett pushed me right back where I was. Those big, strong fingers started moving, digging into my scalp and forcing my eyes to flutter shut. Responsibilities, life, it all got shoved to the side, right up until the sound of a phone ringing cut through the air. “Shit!” I sat bolt upright. “Work.”

I was right, just not about which person’s employer was ringing. Rhett’s boss had called, not mine.

“Brent,” Rhett grunted, shooting me a sidelong look. “Yeah, I’m off... A big fire in the hills? You’ve called all the on-call guys?” You know how sometimes things feel too good to last? This was one of them. I gave him my best understanding smile. “They’re all there? Shit.”

He pulled the phone away from his ear and I knew what I was going to say. “Go,” I mouthed. I had no idea how this worked, but I was assuming that being a firefighter was a little more high key than being a receptionist. A vet nurse could sub in for me at the front desk, but the same couldn’t be said for a fire.

“Katie—”

Rhett was going to apologise and I hated that he felt he had to, so I moved forward and kissed him.

“It’s OK. Go and save the world or whatever it is you’re doing.” I glanced at my phone and saw I still had time to make my shift if I moved my arse. “I need to get going myself.”

“What?” Rhys threw himself down on the floor and wrapped his arms around my legs. “No. You’re staying.” Bronson started to bark and lunge at the two of us. “See B Dog says the same thing.”

“B Dog?” I cocked an eyebrow at the new nickname. “Well, Bronson here is going to be a very good boy for Rhys and keep him amused, and I might see him tomorrow.”

I pressed a kiss to the dog’s head, and he gave me a hearty lick in response.

“So much for the lazy morning I had planned. I was gonna let you have the remote and everything.”

Rhys threw himself back on the couch in a dramatic pose, which just stirred Bronson up. He jumped up and started licking Rhys madly. We left the two of them at it, Rhett walking me down the hallway so we could both get dressed.

“So, is it a really serious fire?” I asked as he drove me back to my place sometime later.

“Not enough back burning done after the record rains of last winter,” he told me as we pulled up outside my apartment block. “The extra rain creates unprecedented levels of growth, and because we’ve had higher than average rainfall...” He brought his truck to a stop and then smiled, turning to face me. “Letting me infodump? You really are perfect.”

“Just stay safe,” I told him, leaning forward to kiss him goodbye. “Come back to me in one piece.” I looked him up and down, now dressed in his work clothes. “That uniform? It’s giving me ideas for role plays.”

“Want me to rescue you from your parents’ place?” His voice got deeper, more intense as he stared into my eyes. “I can do that. Carry you out over my shoulder—”

“With my parents following hot on your heels, asking questions about every aspect of your life, up to, and including, school reports and references from past employers?” I shook my head. “You don’t want that heat.”

“I do if it matters to you.” His hand flexed around the steering wheel. “Whatever you need me to do.”

My lips moistened, my mouth wanting to form the words that sat there in my chest, not even formed into sentences yet.

“Go and fight that fire.” That wasn’t what I was thinking, but it needed to be said. “And stay safe.”

I reached for the door then, forcing myself to get out before I changed my mind and dragged him back towards me.

“Katie.” I was doing so well, marching towards our stairs, when I heard Rhett call out to me. “Ibuprofen and paracetamol.” His eyes slid down my considerably more bedraggled form as if I was wearing the finest of couture. “I need you fighting fit for the next time I see you.”

Deep inside me, I could feel a pulse flutter, reminding me of everything that happened last night. I’d raid the medicine cupboard and have the meds lined up, ready to take every four hours if that’s what it took to have a repeat performance. I didn’t tell him that, just turned and ran upstairs with a grin on my face.

Chapter 50

Katie

“There you are.” I wandered out onto the deck at the back of our parent’s place only to find Mandie was sitting there, a frothy drink in front of her. With one eyebrow cocked, she was one step away from becoming a Bond villain, complete with a white Persian cat. “What happened to you last night? The guys break down in the hills and you were forced to walk home? Got so drunk you all passed out in the gutter?”

“Hello, darling!”

Before I could answer, Mum appeared with a tray of nibbles. By the look of it, she’d found a new dip recipe on the internet again and had paired it with some *crudité* to ‘make it healthy.’

“That looks amazing, Mum,” I said, and I wasn’t lying. Thank god I didn’t actually call in sick. We were short staffed at work anyway, and I’d been forced to work through my lunch hour. “I am starving.”

“Well, eat up, but don’t ruin your appetite,” she replied, turning to go back into the house. “Your father is cooking steak again, and you know how particular he is about his meat.”

“Dad’s meat...”

Mandie sniggered that out as Mum bustled back inside, and when we both burst out laughing, I thought I’d earned myself a reprieve.

I was wrong.

Her eyes narrowed after we stopped cackling, and then she leaned forward, taking me in.

“The dress was a big hit and the guys barely restrained themselves from tearing it off you, thanks to me.” Her hand came to rest on her chest. “Then you spent the night fucking those guys, despite the fact I told you to take it slow.”

“After telling me to take it fast.” I crunched on a carrot covered with dip, looking at it more closely when an explosion of spices hit my palate. It was kind of tomatoey, but also spicy, like Spanish food. “It’s hard to keep up with all your contradictory orders, so I’ve decided to ignore them altogether.” I grinned at her. “Older sister privileges.”

“Yes, but when it comes to getting guys to commit, I have valuable expertise.” She leaned forward abruptly. “I can teach you the ways to land your man... men, young padawan. As much as I want you to follow my fuckgirl ways, you seem distressingly determined to settle down, so sue me for being invested in your future happiness.”

“Well...” I grabbed a chunk of cucumber and dragged it through the dip. “Rhys called me his girlfriend last night.” The silence became deafening, making clear I had Mandie’s complete attention. “And as three hotties tried to chat the guys up, they all made clear they are committed to me.”

I went to take a bite of my *crudité*, but Mandie reached across and knocked it from my grip.

“Shut the fuck up.” She stared openly at me, suddenly too pale, but quickly enough, a smile spread across her face. “They didn’t.” Her elbows hit the table, and I was shocked Mum didn’t appear to tell her off for that. “Why the hell didn’t you lead with that story? So you had committed relationship orgies afterwards?”

“Yes.” I shifted slightly. “Which is harder on the body than you’d expect.” My eyes rolled her way. “Got a training schedule for sex marathons, because I think I pulled a hammy last night.”

Mandie sat back, a smug smile on her face.

“Katie’s got a boyfriend. Katie’s got a boyfriend.” Of course, as she started to chant that in a singsong voice, Mum walked in. I frantically gestured for my sister to shut the hell up, but when did Mandie ever listen to me? “Katie’s got three boyfriends!”

“She what?” Mum looked from one to the other of us. “Well, it sounds like one of you has news to share. Bill! Your daughter has apparently got three boyfriends.”

Well, at least this wasn't awkward.

The table was uncharacteristically quiet. Dad kept poking his steak that was a little more than well done, obviously traumatised by the fact his favourite dinner got burned. That and the fact I was getting the good dick from three guys.

"So what do they do again?" he asked, daring to meet my eyes.

Dad seemed to be taking it the worst.

"Rhys is the business owner. He runs the gym Mandie shoots content in," I explained.

"And he's a good man?" Mum asked my sister that, not me, as if my judgement wasn't to be trusted.

"Seems like it." Mandie winked at me. "He's got good taste in women and he's looking after Katie's soul dog."

"Well, he likes animals. That's a plus."

Mum's tone was too bright, as if she was one step away from a nervous breakdown.

"And the others?" Dad sighed and pushed his plate away, facing down the table with his arms crossed. "What do they do? Do they like dogs as well?"

He didn't sound like he wanted to know the answer to that, but I forged on.

"Garrett is a nurse."

"A male nurse? That's a good solid job, isn't it, Bill?" Mum was trying so damn hard, nudging Dad in the ribs, but he didn't move an inch.

"He's the one that adopted Bronson," I said.

"And he what? Decided to adopt you and share you with his friends?" Dad raked a hand through his hair. "Sweetheart, you know I love you—"

"Now, Bill, kids today, they do things a bit different. There were plenty of swingers when we were growing up," Mum said.

"I don't want my daughter being passed around like a set of car keys, Janey." He fixed me with a steady gaze. "I wanted better for you."

"Better than three guys that treat me like a princess?" Who was telling my parents off? Oh, that was me. I remembered each one of the guys' declarations then, and that had me forging on. "That make sure to take me out on real dates, who tell other women to piss off because they belong to me and only me." I stared at each person at the table, mutely pleading for them to understand. "It may have taken me way too long to find a guy that

treats me right. The fact it's actually three isn't a big deal for me, and if it doesn't worry me, I'm not sure why it would you."

"I don't care what consenting adults do in their own homes," Mum said in a placating voice. "But it's different when it's your own daughter. You'll understand if you ever have kids."

"What about kids?" Dad said, patently grabbing at straws. "How will your children deal with having three dads?"

"We've gone straight to theoretical children." Mandie took a long drink from her glass. "Glad to see we're dealing with this logically, not emotionally."

"Kids are cruel." Dad was using the same 'see sense' tone he used when I wanted to pierce my nose and dye my hair green. I still wish I'd gone through with the dye job. "You'd remember that better than anyone, love." Ouch. I flopped back against my chair, because that felt like a body blow. "Can you really say you'd want to bring a child into the world with the odds stacked against them?"

"I don't want kids." Mum gasped at that, but hell, was that really that much of a surprise? "I've never wanted to have them. When Mandie..." Now it was my sister's chance to wave her hands frantically, trying to stop this conversation dead. "Decides to have them, I will happily be the best damn auntie I can be, but..." I stared each parent in the eyes, making clear how serious I was. "I'm not having kids myself, so if there's any other objections...?"

Silence, blessed silence, returned to the table, but right as I picked up my knife and fork to try and redirect our attention back to our meals, Dad had the final word.

"I want to meet them."

Mandie snorted noisily, trying to cover that with a nervous laugh, but I spoke up before she could.

"What?"

"If these fellas reckon they want to get serious with my daughter, then... I want to meet them." Dad nodded decisively. "Have a beer with a man and you find out who he really is."

There were so, so many things wrong with that statement, but when Dad dug his heels in, nothing moved him.

"Bring them around to meet my parents one day after we decided to be in a relationship?" I said, waiting for someone to start talking sense.

“Not one day.” Mum looked at the calendar on her phone. “How does in a week sound?”

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Chapter 51

Garrett

I made my way down the hall to the unit manager's office in a series of long strides, but before I could get there, Nora stepped out into the hallway. She crossed her arms and cocked an eyebrow, making clear that the ED gossip network had reported to her before I got there.

"Garrett.." Her lips formed a thin line. "So nice of you to join us. Wasn't sure if you still wanted to work for the hospital?"

Some days I wondered about that too, but my situation was different to people like Gloria's. I didn't have a permanent position, having worked here on a series of long-term contracts, waiting for a permanent placement to open up.

Which meant I needed to suck up to Nora.

"So I just want to apologise—"

"For leaving us short staffed when we had a record number of patients walk in through the door?" she said, and I let out an almost silent sigh. "When we were forced to bring some of the other ward nurses down to cover you?"

"I asked Gloria—"

"You were assigned to that shift, Garrett." Her eyes hardened as she looked me up and down. "You were, not Gloria, not the other nurses that had to leave their own patients to come down here to deal with the chaos. You—"

"Covered at least three shifts this week." Hell, I hadn't meant to say that, but the words just came out. There were still more to come. "More

during flu season. I'm the first one everyone calls—"

"Because you don't have a wife or kids." Nora shut me down with a reproving look. "I thought you were a team player."

"I am." Why the hell was I explaining myself to her? "And I have a girlfriend. She was who I was out with last night. We had a chance..." At something amazing, that's what I wanted to say, but Nora wouldn't understand. Didn't want to, I amended. "To go out with... friends for once, and I didn't want to cancel on her again."

"Well, this is new." By the way Nora crossed her arms, it wasn't a good thing in her book. "Obviously I can't advise you against getting into a relationship—"

"Because that would be a gross overstep and something our union rep would need to look into." Helen wandered over to come stand by me, the grin she shot my way helping dissipate the tension. "So you finally found a girl to put up with your shit? Thank god. I was starting to think I'd have to ask my son to find some poor girl to take pity on you."

"Yes, well, be that as it may—" Nora huffed.

"The shift manager is responsible for staffing," Helen said bluntly. "They schedule and are responsible for ensuring all nurses don't do more than the agreed number of hours set out in our award. Yesterday was the last day of the week. Garrett not coming in saved you from having to answer some awkward conversations about overtime." She turned to me. "C'mon, we've got a full house and I need a decent set of hands on my end of the ward. That new intern..."

The woman had seen more hours in the ED than I had hot dinners, as Helen often liked to tell me, and in this case, it worked in my favour. She could've easily been the unit manager. Only a complete disinterest in management meant Nora got the position. I walked away from our boss gladly and right into the madness of a packed emergency department.

The exhaustion that hung over me like a grey cloud dissipated as I walked over to the first bed, consulting with the chart. Familiarise myself with the patient's situation, follow procedure, ensure people get the best quality of care possible, and then move to the next person. Rinse and repeat until Helen stepped in some time later.

"Break time."

"Hang on, I just need to—"

I was finishing off a set of observations, having taken the patient's blood pressure, and now I needed to record their heart rate and temperature.

"Sylvia will take over." Helen gestured imperiously at one of the trainee nurses, who scurried forward, probably glad for something to do. "You need to eat something, drink something, and sit down for a moment." I sucked in a breath to argue, but she cut me off. "I bought some of that soup you like."

"OK, you had me at soup."

I had a brief conversation with Sylvia, then let the patient know what was happening before joining Helen in the breakroom.

"So a girlfriend, huh?" She unpacked her thermos and poured the contents in two bowls. I'd given up protesting that she shouldn't make me food. It was always important in my family, a way to bring people together, show affection, and Helen was the same. "Is this serious?" Helen shook her head. "No, you've only just started seeing her."

"I think it is serious." She pushed my bowl towards me and handed me a spoon, and for a second, I just breathed the savoury scent in, only to find Helen sitting opposite me, waiting expectantly. "I mean..." How the hell did I explain this? Usually I was wary, taking a while to warm up to people, deciding whether or not they were worth investing in, but Katie? "Sometimes you just know, y'know?"

Helen snorted at my clumsy wording, then shook her head, her spoon dropping into the soup.

"That right there is the dulcet sound of a man in love." She had a mouthful, then considered what she was saying. "Or infatuated. How did you meet this girl?"

"At the dog shelter."

I couldn't help but smile, remembering the way Katie looked that first day.

"How am I only hearing about this now?" Helen nodded to my bowl. "Eat up and then spill the tea. That's what kids say today, right?"

That had me laughing, but it was clear she would not be dissuaded.

"Right. So I went into the shelter wanting to adopt a cat..."

"Damn, how the hell does that work?" Helen was hung up on our unusual relationship dynamic. "Like, what's in it for Katie? I mean, I get you three think access to your pee-pees is reward enough, but she's signing herself up for a life of never having the toilet seat down."

“Excuse me. My mother made sure all us boys learned to put the seat down. The lid as well.” I shook my head. “I’ll put electric dog collars on the other guys’ necks and zap them every time they leave it up, if that’s what it takes.”

“Shit, you do have it bad.” Helen seemed inordinately amused by this. “So what’s the plan? Woo her on Tuesday, have her moved in by Thursday? I mean, you adopted her favourite dog.”

“I didn’t adopt Bronson just to impress a girl,” I replied.

But that was at least part of it. Some part of me wanted to see Katie smile, and she did the minute I said I’d take him. The scars, the mistreatment, each was enough to tug at my heartstrings, but her... I shook my head and couldn’t keep the smile off my face, something that had Helen crowing.

“But you want to. Damn, I’ve never seen you this messed up over a girl. Well, not since that Natasha girl.” I frowned slightly, not really wanting to talk about her in the same sentence as Katie. “OK, so what’s your next move, loverboy?”

I looked down at my phone and saw a new message had popped up, and it felt like my breath seized in my chest when I saw it came from Katie.

“Meeting her parents.” I swallowed hard, my mind already racing, trying to work out the best way to deal with that situation. “Try not to fuck things up.”

“That’s a motto that will get you through most days,” Helen said, moving to collect up our bowls, but I got there first. “Every day you wake up, pledge to find a way to do that and you’ll be fine.”

I carried that piece of advice with me until the end of my shift, then thought upon it as I drove home. It got tossed aside when I pulled up out the front of our place and saw a familiar car. Not Rhett’s, not Rhys’, but hers.

Opening the door I was hit by the familiar scents. The sandalwood candles I set up in the lounge room, the faint stink of dog, and then something much more savoury greeted me as I walked down the hallway.

“Stop...”

Katie said that with a giggle, not really meaning it as Rhys crowded in. He was trying to ‘help,’ his arms around hers, his hands taking over cutting the vegetables on the chopping board. “I need to do this right. Garrett—”

“Is here.”

Rhys looked up as Bronson came skittering down the hall. How the hell had I thought cat would suit us? I knew they could be affectionate, but would they whine happily while dancing around and around in circles, eyes shining with love?

“Hey, fella!”

I picked him up, the dog letting out a grunt and then licking the side of my face enthusiastically as I moved closer.

“You’re home early!” Katie protested. “We were trying to get dinner on the table before you got home.”

“You didn’t need to do that.”

And she didn’t. The fact she’d thought about me, planned something, and worked with Rhys to put it together was the exact way I wanted to end this day, so I gave Bronson a scratch and then set him down. The dog didn’t know who to look to as I leaned forward and kissed Katie. The way the knife clattered on the chopping board and she turned and fell into my arms was all I really wanted.

Well, that and to rescue her from trying to slice up the capsicum.

One kiss, then another, it took serious effort for me to stop myself from getting lost in her lips, but I managed to move her to one side and then grab the knife.

“So what’re we making?” I looked at the ingredients on the bench. “Beef stir fry?”

“We’re supposed to be making you dinner for once,” Katie said, her hands going to her hips, and that was almost enough to distract me. I knew them now, their shape, the way her skin dimpled under my fingers as I gripped—

“Told you not to bother.” Rhys grabbed Bronson’s lead from where it was hanging up, and the jingle of his collar had him barking. “Garrett’s got some kind of OCD about food prep.”

“I like to cook.” My stomach tensed as I felt a couple of hands slide around it, then I blinked as I felt Katie lean into me. “You’re good.” My hands covered hers. “There’s not much that will distract me, but you...” I picked her up and set her on the edge of the bench, staring at her smile. “Are more than enough.”

I wasn’t sure what I said exactly, but her smile faltered for a second and something else rose. Soft, vulnerable, open, I treasured every second of it, right up until Katie mastered herself and her grin widened.

“So the oyster sauce and cornflour slurry is a good idea, but we might add a bit of garlic and ginger...”

I had plans, many of them, but when Katie tilted my head her way, my voice trailed away. Never had I waited for someone else’s response to a meal before.

“Sounds amazing.” She reached out and touched my lips. “You’re amazing.”

“Ugh, two Tauruses in the kitchen.” Rhys rolled his eyes. “That’s my cue to GTFO, hey boy?” Bronson replied with a couple of sharp barks. “Alright, mate, let’s go for a bit of a run and see if we can build up an appetite.” Katie leaned back over the counter and I managed not to swallow my tongue as her shirt stretched tightly over her breasts as she kissed Rhys goodbye. “Kisses for B Dog too.”

He had the dog up in his arms, something that alarmed Bronson at first, but then his tail was wagging furiously as he licked at her face.

“OK, have fun,” Katie told them. “Now.” She dropped off the counter. “How can I help?”

Just by existing, I wanted to tell her, but I couldn’t.

“Grab a bottle of wine from the fridge and pour the two of us a drink,” I said and then started chopping.

Chapter 52

Katie

If you'd told me a man could make cooking a sexual thing, I wouldn't have believed you. Mandie and I saw the film, *9 1/2 Weeks* when we were teenagers, finding an old DVD at the back of a friend's mum's wardrobe. Watching the fridge scene had us howling with laughter and feeling uncomfortable, because you didn't need to lick honey from someone's navel to be hot. You just needed to walk around the kitchen like a king in his castle, your thick forearm muscles flexing as you cut vegetables up with complete proficiency.

"OK, I get it." I looked down at his neatly cut slices of capsicum vs mine. "If I could use a knife like that, I'd kick me out of the kitchen too."

"Not kicking you out." His arm wrapped around my waist and he slotted me into the space between him and the chopping board. The knife handle was slid between my fingers, but I couldn't focus on that, not when he pressed his body into mine. My hips may or may not have popped backwards slightly to press back into him. His huff of breath tickled my ear as he covered my hand with his. "You're not going anywhere, now..."

Our hands moved together in a slow rocking movement.

"If you don't lift the knife totally off the board, the point acts like an anchor, helping you control the size and shape of the cuts you make. It's easier to make them even and uniform."

"And that's important?"

I didn't really care, but it gave me an excuse to look back at him over my shoulder. That meant I caught the way his pupils flared, a small smile

forming.

“Not if you don’t want it to be.” His eyes dropped down to my mouth and stayed there. “I mean, it ensures that every mouthful has a consistent mix of the different vegetables, making the dish more homogenous.”

“And who wouldn’t want that?” I was trying to tease him, but that came out all breathy. “Nothing worse than a meal that’s heterogeneous.”

“Are you teasing me?” That damn dimple popped. “Is that even a word?”

“Look it up if you don’t believe me,” I said, turning back to the vegetables.

Following his advice, I stopped making such a dog’s breakfast of the chopping up. Garrett nodded with satisfaction, then turned to start pre-heating the wok.

We fell into a comfortable rhythm that was curiously deceptive. It was like I’d known him my whole life, not just weeks. We were like stars orbiting each other, moving around the kitchen, but never clashing.

Well, until I wanted to.

I got a little cheeky, sliding in against him as I brought the chopping board laden with chopped vegetables. Garrett reached for the board, but I ducked under his arm and went to scrape everything in at once.

“A bit at a time,” he said, stopping me from sweeping everything into the wok. “Don’t want to overload the wok, force the temperature to drop.”

There was no risk of that. Dimly, I was aware of the crackle of the food in the wok, that we were supposed to be doing the stir part of the stir-fry, but instead I found myself staring into his eyes. Part of him wanted to take care of the cooking. I was willing to bet there was a part of his mind that never switched off. I needed to test that, holding his gaze, snaking my arm around his waist, leaning in closer until the acrid smell of burning vegetables hit our noses.

“Shit!” Garrett spun around and started scraping stuff off the sides of the wok. It was only slightly singed, but he seemed inordinately unhappy about that. I tried to fight back a smile, failed and then let out an ugly snort, which caught his attention. “Demon temptress.” He pointed the wooden spatula at me. “You won’t be laughing when your dinner is inedible.”

“We’ll manage,” I said and then dumped the rest of the vegetables in.

“You little...”

He couldn't curse me out and stir fry the food at the same time, so he focussed on the more pressing need, as I indulged mine.

Part of me couldn't believe I had a right to touch Garrett, Rhys, or Rhett. My fingers flexed in the air, feeling like I needed to shove them down by my sides. Instead, I peeled his scrub top up.

"Katie..." Whatever protest he was going to make, it was silenced by a kiss pressed to his spine, then another. "Fuck, why does that feel so good?"

Because that was the effect we had on each other. Just when I'd given up hope of ever feeling chemistry with anyone, I'd found three guys who were my perfect match. That's why my hands spanned his fanning lats, feeling the muscles shift and contract. There was something possessive about it, like I was claiming him as mine.

Or I wanted to.

My hands stopped. I was getting too much into my head, remembering belatedly how quickly this was all moving. That had me pulling back, but only for a second. The gas was slapped off and Garrett turned around, taking my head in his hands.

"I thought of you all day today." How did he know exactly what to say? "When my boss was tearing strips off me." I sucked in a breath to ask about that, but he forged on. "On the ward. Patients caught me staring into space, remembering..." His grin was infectious, forcing my lips to form the same smile. "Remembering everything that happened. I told my work wife about you."

"Work. Wife?"

I went to pull away, but he stopped me.

"Work mum is probably a better description. Helen was nursing when I was still in primary school. She wants to meet you."

I flushed bright red, but as I was cursing my stupid pale skin, I remembered the text I'd sent.

"Speaking of mothers—"

"Yes, I want to meet your parents." I'd expected some push back, reluctance at least. Instead, I got wholehearted approval. "You have to give me the scoop on what they're like, what I need to say to impress them, but..." My tongue flicked over my bottom lip as his head dropped down. "I'd be more than happy to meet your family."

"So that's two down and one to go." Rhys walked in with a hand towel around his neck, mopping the sweat away. He shot me a rakish grin, right as

Bronson bolted towards his bowl of water only to lap it furiously. "Rhett will be in, don't you worry. Speaking of which." He hefted his phone. "He's stuck at work until late. Not sure when he'll get in."

"So we'll save him a doggy bag of food," I said, turning the gas back on. Bronson barked again, coming over with a big doggy grin. "Not you, pup. People food is no good for dogs."

Of course, he disagreed.

"I should get going."

Sometime later we were all sprawled out on the guys' couch, letting our food settle as we doom scrolled movies to watch.

"No, you shouldn't." Rhys rolled me closer so my head was tucked in the curve of his shoulder. "You're tired and we all know what that does to reaction time when driving."

"Like being drunk." Garrett rolled into a seated position and then topped up my glass from the wine bottle. "Do you know how many critically injured drivers are admitted to the ED each week?"

I looked down at my phone and saw yet another message from Mandie had come in.

Gym, bitch. We haven't been in days, and you know what that means?

Starting conditioning all over again. Trouble is, I couldn't seem to muster the requisite level of concern right now. Maybe I was mistaken. The new me didn't need to be tougher, stronger. Maybe I could just enjoy the soft life... As if to contradict that, the muffled sound of a dog barking had me stiffening, because seconds later, Bronson came scuttling back into the lounge room. His ears were flat to his skull, and he looked at us almost shamefaced as he wriggled into the narrow space between the coffee table and the couch.

"Boy, you've gotta bark back at that yappy little thing," Rhys told him.

Apparently, the dog next door was a little terrier. It was filled with an unreasonable rage that should've been directed at the small animals it would've been used to hunt in years gone by, but it was locked up in a yard all day, going slowly mad from the lack of stimulation.

"Pretty sure you could swallow that dog whole," Garrett added, but that wasn't how it worked.

"You're OK." I kept my voice soft, almost neutral. Being emotionally reactive would just have him doing the same. "It's all going to be OK."

Except it wasn't. I watched his little body shiver, those big amber eyes pleading for me to do something with the endless faith of dogs. I'd gotten him out of the shelter, hadn't I? Couldn't I get him out of this?

"I need to text Marg—"

I'd barely gotten my phone out when I was yanked back down onto the couch.

"You guys choose a movie. I'll take Bronson out for a quick walk so he can piss in peace," Garrett said. "Then we can try that pheromone diffuser thing and see if it helps."

Rhys had dropped into the pet store and picked one up on the shop assistant's recommendation.

"And then what?" I resisted Rhys' pull, going up on one elbow. "What do we do if that doesn't work?"

"We've got the appointment with the vet you suggested," he told me. "He fit us in as soon as he could. We'll find a way, promise. Now, one thing I read was if we're calm, that helps B Dog be calm."

I felt a pang of guilt as I nestled into his side, but Bronson perked up as soon as Garrett walked towards the front door. For all his terror moments before, he seemed bright and bouncy now.

"C'mon, boy," Garrett said in the same squeaky voice they all used. The incongruity of it coming from such a big man had me smiling despite myself.

"So, movie?" Rhys bestowed the remote upon me like a queen during her coronation. "I never give up the remote willingly, but I needed to make a gesture to show you just how much I like you."

"I will treasure this moment." I held it to my chest, which had his eyes lighting up as his smile faded. "By refusing to put on any action movies."

"Uh huh."

"If it has the word *Avengers* or *Justice League* in the title, it will be rejected without even watching the trailer."

"Right."

Rhys remained completely transfixed by my hand and where it was placed.

"I want funny, soppy, with big declarations of love. Maybe even a costume drama."

I waited for my words to sink in, and finally he looked up at me with a smirk.

“Pretty people falling in love on the TV screen.” He snuggled closer. “Suddenly, that seems a whole lot more appealing than car chases and explosions.”

“*10 Things I Hate About You?*” I asked as I scrolled through the options.

“Whatever you want, babe.”

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Chapter 53

Rhys

This was perfect.

My day was done, so no wall-to-wall testosterone, no Drew trying to shove paperwork in my face about setting up a franchise. No dramas, no stress, just me, my dog, my best friend, and our girl.

Bronson came back a lot calmer after the run and was now lying on the floor, snoring quietly, and while it was getting late, I wasn't feeling tired, not when I was feeling Katie. Heath Ledger was doing something on the screen to try to win the heart of the girl with the pinched face, and I felt for him, I really did. Some blokes got caught up in the chase, losing interest the moment they got the girl, but me... I just wanted to be right where I was.

Katie was lying on the couch between Garrett and me, watching the screen with rapt attention while I couldn't stop watching her. The way the colours from the TV screen flickered across her face in the gloom, the way her eyes lit up at some bit of dialogue, then those pretty lips started to curve into a smile. Garrett was the same.

It was that little giggle, then a cute snort that seemed to come after every real, spontaneous reaction, that had me looking across at Garrett. The man was exhausted, anyone could see that, and yet we both moved as one. I felt the moment when her breath caught in her chest, her whole body stiffening as I pressed a kiss to her throat. Gar did the same, and that turned her giggles into something else.

A gentle sigh, one that was barely detectable over Bronson's snores, but it was music to my ears. It gave me the go ahead to slide my hand up her

hip, over her stomach, and then higher up.

“Is this you trying to reclaim the remote?”

She meant that as a joke, but the effect was ruined by her voice turning breathy.

“That’s not what I want my hands on,” I mumbled into her throat, feeling her heart rate begin to pick up.

“Rhys—”

“Watch your movie,” Garrett ordered. “Eyes on the screen, Katie, or all of this stops.”

The hell it would. I shot him a dark look, but he just grinned, flicking his eyes up, and that’s when I saw the possibilities. Katie was being a good little girl, staring fixedly at the screen now. Oh, right. It meant we could do our very best to distract her, like when my lips grazed the perfect shell of her ear, then my teeth across the lobe. Another little gasp. Made me want to spend my time getting to know that ear really well, finding out all her erogenous zones, but no one ever accused me of being patient. My hand slid down, flicking open the first button of her blouse, something I’d been dying to do since the moment she came around. Katie broke the rules for a second, her eyes rolling sideways, even if she didn’t move her head, only for her hand to snake out and make contact with my shorts.

I wanted it to creep up, to ease the elastic down and my cock out, but we were playing a game. I never did anything without wanting to come out on top, so I grabbed her hand, kissed the knuckles, and then placed it back on the couch.

“Focus.”

On us, on the way I eased her shirt off her shoulder to kiss the curve of it. On the way my fingers spidered down, down, closer to my goal. Hard not to get distracted though, by the way her skin prickled in response to my touch.

Were her breasts swelling, growing heavy? Were her nipples all hard under her bra, begging for my fingers, my mouth? Time to find out. I looked across at Garrett and saw he had the same idea. We unbuttoned the blouse, then eased it back far enough to trap her arms and leave her bare but for her bra. I let out an involuntary groan.

Katie had fucking amazing tits. I didn’t like to slice and dice a woman into parts, but damn, I was only fucking human. Big enough to fill my hands, their softness inspired something primal in me. I wanted to set her on

her hands and knees and drive myself into her over and over, as I gripped them tightly. I wanted to bury my face in them, lick and suck until she was squirming. I wanted—

“Uh uh.” Garrett said, shaking his head. “Eyes on the screen.”

Katie was obviously of the same mind, reaching behind to undo her bra clasp. My hand moved to take over. The beige cotton sagged away from her body, and Garrett and I worked fast to pull it free, then set Katie back on the couch. Now the really good stuff could start. My mouth on hers in time to suck down her moan as my hand covered her breast.

“Fuck, I’ll never get used to this...” Garrett hissed, and a sharp little gasp from Katie let me know what he was doing to her.

The same as I was.

Drowning in the softness of her mouth as my fingers traced the circle of her nipple, then when it was beaded tight, rolling that hard point between my fingers, only to pull away and see her eyes had fallen closed.

“You’re supposed to be watching the movie.”

“Looks like we need to stop.”

Garrett’s tone was cool, clipped, forcing my head up and Katie’s eyes open.

“Are you serious...?” she asked.

No, that’s what I wanted to say, but fuck me if the guy couldn’t be a hard head sometimes. Fucking bulls, they dug their heels in on the dumbest shit, and right now it appeared this was the hill Garrett wanted to die on.

“I want you to fight it,” he said, his voice a low purr, competing with Heath Ledger’s right now. “The need to focus on us, on what we’re doing. I want you to try to focus on the movie, right up until the point you can’t.” She dared to meet his eyes then, and they seemed a whole lot wider now. “Then when you fail, we’ll fuck you so hard you forget there was even a movie on.”

I watched her jaw flex, wondering what the hell she thought about this. Was this the moment that Garrett would push her too damn hard? I wasn’t sure, right up until the moment she pointedly stared at the TV screen. That way she missed Garrett’s immediate grin. He flashed it at me, making clear what this meant.

Time to drive our girl to distraction.

My fingers gripped the breast closest to me and Garrett did the same, both of us moving at once. Katie let out a low hiss, but kept her eyes fixed

on the screen. It was anticipation of a sensation I don't think she'd ever felt before as the two of us moved to tease each nipple at the same time.

"Oh..."

That little moan nearly undid me. I was lying on my stomach, sprawled across the couch and could feel my cock rubbing against the silky polyester of my gym shorts as I sucked hard. It felt like the rub of her nipple against my tongue, both of us swelling with arousal until the point of exquisite pain. I pulled away, staring down at that now scarlet point, only for her hand to move and push me right back where I was.

Fuck yes.

Garrett might get off on being bossy, but me? I liked a girl who knew what she wanted, and if it was me tugging on her breast with long swallows, I was down. Not for long, though. Her body shifted like waves, slowly at first, then growing more and more frenzied.

"Rhys..."

I answered her with a kiss, rising up, only for my mouth to come crashing down upon hers. It was hungry, messy, completely ignoring Garrett's order, until he pushed his way forward, tilting her chin his way.

"You aren't watching the movie."

"Patrick and Kat get together after a long, tortuous courtship," she said between breaths, before tugging him back down. "And right now I don't care about watching other people making out as much as doing it with the two of you."

As her fingers teased the curls at his nape while she kissed him, her hand grabbed the front of my shirt and dragged me closer. She was like a kid let loose in a candy shop, taking from my mouth, then Garrett's until she was forced to stop and breathe.

"Well, if we're to be the main event," Garrett said, "we need to make this good for you." He yanked his scrubs top over his head and I didn't pause to inspect his gains. I was stripping out of my clothes with ridiculous levels of haste.

Just in time to see Katie's mouth fall open.

We were both kneeling on the couch on either side of her, and she reached for us without thought. My whole body jumped when I felt her fingers curl around my cock. The head wept openly and she smoothed the pre-cum all over it, making it shine, something that had her drawing close.

As I felt her breath fan over my skin, I couldn't believe I was going to say this.

"Not now."

My hand balled her hair at the nape, and part of me wanted to use it to drag her closer, force her mouth down my aching length. Blowing my load in seconds was both tempting as hell and a future I couldn't abide. Katie, I wanted her wet and wanton and on my fucking face first. That thought had me moving forward, kissing my way across her stomach.

"Rhys..."

There was a small note of worry there. Stomachs were more than just a vulnerable place. For too many women, they were a site of all this shame. If a girl wanted to work hard and rock a six pack, I'd help her every damn time, but if I had a preference, my girl would look like this. Soft where I was hard, yielding, because one of us had to. I kissed my way across her belly, looking up and into her eyes as I moved.

"You're beautiful, Katie. So fucking much it hurts."

"Right there with you, brother," Garrett said, scooping her up into his arms so her back was pressed into his chest. "Seems like we all need to work together to ease that ache."

He kissed her neck as his hands grabbed her breasts, caressing them until her eyes fell closed again and she sighed. I made quick work of her pants and underwear, eager to get to the core of her. Bloody hell, she was pink, swollen, and dripping already.

"Yeah, I'm gonna need you to ride my face."

My knuckle slid through her juices, and then I sucked it clean.

"I can't—" she protested, stiffening again, but Garrett was there to soothe her.

"Are you saying no because you don't want to or because you're scared of what might happen?" he asked.

"I'm kind of fond of Rhys." Katie was trying to crack a joke, but the nervous tremor in her voice told a different story. "I mean, I know you're a medical professional and all, but being forced to perform CPR on him might be a buzzkill."

"I love that you think you can hurt me." I plucked her from Garrett's grip, her little yelp everything as I rolled backwards music to my ears. Probably because it turned to something else as the beautiful cunt hovered over my face. "You can't, won't, and even if you could, what a fucking way

to die. Pretty sure you're guaranteed to get into Valhalla if you die eating pussy, so make this Viking really happy and stop hovering and sit."

Pulling her down onto me, feeling the wet kiss of her cunt against my lips was pure heaven. My cock sulked sullenly, wanting me to stroke it as my tongue flicked out, but as the salty/sweet taste of her burst on my tongue, everything else fell away. My thumbs spread her wide, my tongue sliding along her entire seam, only to encircle her clit. Worries were obviously shoved to one side as she began to move. A guttural moan, a shift of her hips, she was searching for her rhythm, but I knew exactly when she found it.

"Oh god, yes..."

That, that was what I needed to hear over and over. My grip on her tightened as I dove in.

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Chapter 54

Katie

Oh. My God.

One minute I was half asleep on the couch, watching the characters circle around each other warily on the screen and now... Every sense had come to life and that was amazing and tough, all at the same time. I'd never dared ride a guy's face before, and the change in position had me feeling exposed.

My bare skin prickled in the cool air, but Garrett was there, smoothing his hands along my arms, my shoulders, then my breasts. There was a tension in my thighs, forcing the muscles to shake slightly, but any attempt to hover was taken from me. Rhys was like a man possessed, dragging me down onto his face and onto his tongue.

What was I worried about again?

I wanted to slump forward, give myself up to the sensation, when Garrett moved closer.

"Got you feeling good, Katie?" His voice was a dark purr as he tilted my head his way. My mouth was claimed before I could even respond. "I need you to come all over Rhys' face." A muffled sound vibrated through me, forcing my hips to twitch, because apparently Rhys wanted the same. I was already so close, he might just get his wish. "Do that for me so I can bend you over and fill you with my cum."

My cunt twitched, obviously interested in that idea, and Rhys seemed to anticipate that. His fingers speared inside me, harsh and forcing me to stretch, but not able to delve deep enough. There was a particular kind of

pleasure I'd only get while riding their dicks, but this was more than enough right now. It was the contrast between hard fingers and soft tongue that was driving me closer and closer to the edge.

"He's drowning in you." Garrett now had a running commentary of what was happening. "Tossing up whether he needs to take a breath or more of you." That had me shifting restlessly. The thought of Rhys suffering didn't sit well, but he gripped my thighs harder, pulling me right back onto his face. "He's choosing more of you every time. Seems like you better give him what he wants."

Garrett plucked my nipples expertly, like I was an instrument on which he would play a savage melody, right before he shifted into the next movement. One hand disengaged and slid down my belly. I didn't care if my lumps and bumps were on display right now. How could doubt and bliss operate in the same space? I could only choose one, and right as my breath started to come in rapid pants, I picked the only possible option.

Them.

"I'm coming..."

I was snatched off Rhys' face and set on all fours, and right as my cunt was twitching through the waves of one orgasm, Garrett shoved himself inside me. I was fluttering higher and higher, feeling completely out of control, and he thrust through each pulse, provoking more.

"Fuck, babe..." Rhys emerged out from under me, his face red and shining as he shot me a rakish grin. "That was amazing, but I'm going to need..."

My hand landed on his chest, pushing him back down and then when his back was flat on the couch, I swallowed him as deeply as I could. My intent wasn't to suck the cum out of him, but to get him all slick for this.

My breasts ached, somehow needing more stimulation, and they were about to get it. Rhys let out a hiss of frustration when I pulled off, but his eyes snapped open when I folded my breasts around him.

"Oh fuck yes..." His brows creased, his entire focus on the way his cock thrust between them. "That is so fucking hot. You're so fucking hot, Katie."

For some reason, this was the moment I believed him. He said sweet things all the time, but there was something about him being utterly destroyed that got through to me.

“I just wanna come, paint your pretty tits with my seed, then rub it in to mark you as mine. I want...”

I was so damn close. Garrett was setting the punishing pace, and that delicious friction was loosening something in my spine. It grew longer, uncurling and letting him in deeper. A series of little grunts let me know how close he was. We all were. I stared into Rhys’ eyes as I lowered my head and then did what was needed to force him to burst. As his cock thrust up, it did so into my mouth.

“Shit! Shit!”

We were kindling, too dry and brittle, ready to snap, right as a match was thrown on top of it, but what a way to burn. I sucked, licked, shuttled back and forth, right up until the point of no return. Garrett was hitting that spot inside me that made me see stars over and over, my cunt twitching, spasming with each pass, but right as his fingers dug into my hips and Rhys roared, we all came undone.

Spacey, free-floating pleasure that was all encompassing like a great big cloud. Salty cum jetting down my throat. Garrett grinding against me, forcing one last pulse of pleasure out of me as he unloaded. For a moment, it felt like we were suspended in this perfect place where only bliss existed.

But what goes up, must come down.

We crashed into the couch in a messy tangle of limbs, our pants filling the lounge room.

“Fuck... I... Fuck...” All three of us laughed at Rhys’ incoherent pants. “You...” He leaned down to kiss me. “You’re—”

“Incredible. Amazing. Perfect.” Garrett cradled me against his chest. “Staying over tonight?”

“I don’t have a change of clothes with me,” I mumbled, even as my eyelids felt so very heavy.

“Wear some of my clothes.” Rhys snuggled into me. “Or start keeping stuff here. I’ll clear a drawer for you.”

“We all will.” I was forced to look over my shoulder at Garrett’s solemn tone. “Whatever you need to feel comfortable here, Katie.”

There was more to what he was saying, something big and intense, but I couldn’t deal with that right now. Just as I’d been riding waves of bliss before, now I was trashed. Stick a fork in me because I was done... The couch was soft, so soft, and so I snuggled into it, into them, and then fell asleep.

It was the sound of the front door that woke Bronson and hence me. He let out a little hesitant woof, which had my head jerking up off the couch. I was tucked in against Rhys, blinking blearily, when Rhett trudged inside the house.

These were the footsteps of a man who was exhausted. He could barely pick up his feet, his head hanging low. That's what had me fighting free of Rhys, picking up a shirt as Bronson grew suddenly bold. He bounded over to Rhett who bent down slowly, slowly to give the dog a pat.

"Hey, fella..." His face was covered in soot and he stank of a bushfire gone wrong, his eyes blinking owlishly as he saw me appear. "Hey, didn't know you were coming over tonight." Rhett took in his state as if for the first time. "Look, I am beat, so—"

"You need a shower," I said with a small smile.

"Katie, I was just going to flake out and wash the sheets in the morning. I don't even know how I drove home, let alone how I would lift a hand to wash myself."

"So don't." I took his hand, the limp hold telling me everything I needed to know as I tugged him down the hall. His boots clumped noisily on the floor right up until I went to work removing each one.

"Katie, you don't have to do this."

He protested right as he wavered on his feet, obviously exhausted.

"No, I don't." I stared up at him, noting the way the light created a halo around his head, tarnished by soot. "But I want to, so shush."

His body swung closer as I stripped him down, working to remove all evidence of his day and just leaving him.

"Shoulda slept at the station," he mumbled. I could see that, but I let him talk. "Hoped you were at home, though."

My hands froze midway through undoing his shirt.

"You drove like this for me?"

"Anything." His voice broke on that word. "Can't keep pretending. Whatever you want, I'll get it for you, because..." He swallowed hard, then coughed, and I was forced to wait for him to recover. "Because I need you here, waiting for me to come home."

Bloody hell, I could just see it. Him breezing through the door, dumping his uniform in the washing machine as Garrett and I cooked. Rhys would be playing with Bronson, getting him barking, right as Rhett walked over. Forehead kisses and then we'd talk about our day, sharing all the little

moments between us. Damn me if I didn't want that more than anything else. Grand gestures, romantic dates, they weren't what made me tick. It was all uncomfortable underwear and feeling like a fish out of water, but all of us creating a safe space? Yeah, I wanted that a whole lot.

"Shower first." I turned the water on and tested the temperature before stripping off and stepping in myself. "We can talk about the future another day."

"Tonight?" His hands gripped the entrance to the shower cubicle. "You'll stay tonight. I'm not much use to you." He looked down, his whole body limp and beaten down by fatigue. "But you in my bed, in my arms—"

"Pretty sure we can make that work, but I draw the line at dirty bed partners. C'mon."

He stepped in then and I went to work.

It was strange how intimate it was, to smooth soap all over him and scrub until all the soot went spiralling down the drain. I'd felt his cock pulse inside me, and yet there was something far more personal about this. Perhaps because he let me see it, the complete and utter exhaustion. No masks, no pretences, just him and just me. I worked quickly, trying not to luxuriate in the feel of his big, strong body under my hands, then washed his hair clean before the two of us stepped out again. Then he was there with a towel.

I could feel it, the ghost of desire that haunted the bathroom but would not actually materialise right now. He dried me off and I did the same, then we staggered down the hall. I was lifted off my feet before he dropped us both down onto the bed, snuggling into the pillow. Covers were pulled over us, creating a cocoon that cut out the entire world.

"Katie—"

"Shh..." I stroked his hair back from his face and his eyes fell closed, his breath evening out almost immediately.

For just a moment, I lay there, surrounded by the feel, the scent, the presence of Rhett, and somehow that was enough to send me off to sleep as well.

"Katie, coffee!" Garrett followed me to the front door the next morning, handing me a travel mug. "Milk, a metric fuck ton of sugar, and that caramel syrup you like."

"God, you're perfect." The words just spilled out, and the two of us stood there for a second. It was too soon for these kinds of declarations,

right? I smiled nervously. “Bring this kind of energy at my parents’ place. They can be tough to win over.”

“You told me what kind of wine your mum likes to drink and your dad’s favourite football team. We’ll nail it.”

“Who’s nailing what?” Rhys bounded over with Bronson at his heels. “And why in the hallway? We have a lovely bed just in here—”

“Morning.” Rhett emerged bleary eyed. He pushed past the others and then pressed a kiss to my temple. “I slept so good last night. Thanks for staying with me.”

“And I need to go.” That was said as much to get my arse into gear as to say goodbye to them, because it was all too tempting. Blow off work and just hang around here having multiple orgasms. The gleam in Rhys’ eyes made clear he knew what I was thinking about. But when he sucked in a breath to persuade me, I opened the front door. “I’m running late, which reminds me. Don’t be late to Mum and Dad’s. On time is late, early in on time—”

“And getting there hours before is just early.” Rhys nodded. “Don’t worry, we’ve got this.”

“See you tonight.”

A hot coffee in my hand, my cheeks bright red from multiple kisses from hot guys. There were definitely worse ways to start my day. Now all I needed to do was make sure it ended on a high note as well. I tapped out a quick message to Mandie and then started my car.

Chapter 55

Rhett

Are you two on your way?

I sent the message to the group chat, then went to take a shower in preparation for meeting Katie's parents.

It felt like I wasn't the only one stepping in under the water. I had company, but it wasn't one of the guys. Not Katie either, but the memory of her. I'd hated that she'd seen me so beat down. If I'd known she was home, I might've just crashed out at the station. But rather than freak out, pull away, there was a softness there in her eyes. I'd eaten my heart out, watching her look at Dave like that, sure she'd never turn that gaze on me.

But she did.

She saw me, dirt, soot, sweat, and all and then took me in hand and scrubbed me clean. Her arms went around me once I was done and she just... held me. My soul sucked that up like it was barren earth and she was the first drops of the summer rains. I'd slept with her in my arms and had the best rest I'd had in my life.

So that meant I needed to get my shit together and prove to her parents that I was worthy of her time. I emerged from the shower, and as I towelled myself off, I expected Rhys to barge in. The prick had no sense of boundaries. Unexpectedly, I had the bathroom to myself as I shaved my face clean, then raked my hair back neatly. Teeth brushed, deodorant applied liberally, I stepped back from the sink and stared into the mirror, surveying my handiwork.

Katie's parents were going to clock me the moment I walked in the door. Even I could see how freaking desperately I wanted this to work in my haunted reflection. What if they didn't like me? Shit, what if they had a very understandable negative reaction towards the idea of us sharing our girl? What if...? I quietened my mind with the same technique I used when we were on our way to a fire. I couldn't fight possibilities, just deal with realities. The three of us had talked about how tonight would go, planned it down to the last minute. Garrett had raked through our wardrobes and pulled out the clothes he approved of. Just like a job, I had an objective, a uniform to wear and a procedure to follow.

So where the hell was the rest of my team?

"Rhys...?" I called out hopefully, but the house had that quiet, still quality that told me no one was home. "Garrett...?" With a shake of my head, I pulled out my phone and looked at the group chat.

Trying to get out of this damn franchise meeting, Rhys had replied. Should be leaving shortly.

Shortly? That wasn't what we had planned. Katie had stressed that we needed to be on time for dinner and that meant we needed to leave in... shit, twenty minutes. Rhys was on his way. Garrett hadn't even replied and — My hands turned to fists as the front door was jerked open and Rhys came stumbling in. I sucked in a breath, ready to bollock him out, but he held up a hand, Bronson coming barrelling along with him.

"I know. I fucking know." Rhys never seemed to lose his shit, so it took me a few moments to work out what was happening here. "I'm having a shower."

"We don't have time for that." I glanced down at my watch. "We have—"

"Fifteen minutes." He strode down the hall, tossing clothes off as he went. "It's either the world's fastest shower or I spray myself with half a can of anti-perspirant."

My nose wrinkled, already able to feel the congestion that came from being overwhelmed by the cloying scent.

"Five minutes," I barked.

"Got it. Get Bronson ready and find out where the fuck Garrett is, because he should've left work an hour ago."

Work out what needed to be done and make sure that happened, it was a philosophy that got me through any number of scrapes, so I whistled to the

dog, his head jerking up from his water bowl.

“C’mon, boy.” I nodded to the rear of the house and he came scuttling after me.

A piss in the corner of the garden, Bronson’s eyes on the neighbour’s fence the entire time, and then I was able to get him inside, place a bowl of food for him to wolf down before clipping his lead on. Rhys went stomping back to his room, the muffled sounds of his curses filling the air, but when I locked up the house and went to the front door, he was there.

“Aftershave!” he said, but I shook my head.

“We’ve gotta go. With peak hour traffic, I’m not sure if we’re going to make it on time.”

“What about Garrett?” A line formed between Rhys’ brows. “We can’t go without him.”

“He’ll need to meet us there. We can’t wait for him.”

But apparently we could wait for everyone else.

“Fuck!” I slammed my palm into the steering wheel because traffic had slowed to a trickle. Half the reason why we planned to leave early was for this exact reason. Every damn peak hour it felt like someone’s car gave up the ghost, or worse, there was an accident. The whine of familiar sirens had us both turning around to see not one but two fire engines in the distance.

“Accident?”

Rhys ground that out as he rumped Bronson’s ears, staring fixedly at the windscreen.

“Only one way to find out.”

We were in the far lane, so it was easy enough to wrench the car sideways and mount the curb, parking it out the front of someone’s house. Rhys watched me unclip my belt and then did the same, grabbing Bronson’s lead. I retrieved the flowers and wine Garrett had selected and then wrenched the keys out of the ignition. Long steps took me up the footpath and closer to the sight of the accident.

“Rhett?”

Charlie was a firie from my station. He and two of the other guys were having a baby with our admin girl, Millie.

“What’s going on?” I looked around and then blanched. “Shit...”

It became evident as soon as I took the accident site in.

“Major collision,” Charlie explained. “Someone t-boned the other trying to get across the road and into this lane.” He gestured to what was left of the

cars. They looked more like crumpled pieces of aluminium foil than cars. “Everyone survived, thank god, but the ambos had to work overtime to get everyone to the local hospitals.”

Which would explain where Garrett was. That was how it worked when you worked in emergency services. Sometimes you had hours, days, even weeks where little happened, but when it did? It was all hands on deck, adrenalin pumping as you moved your arse to save the day. In Garrett’s case, to save someone’s life.

“You need to be somewhere?” Charlie looked me up and down, seeing the smart clothes for the first time. “Got a date or something?”

“Worse,” Rhys groaned, raking his hand through his hair. “We’re on our way to meet Katie’s parents.”

“Whoa, that’s moving fast!” Charlie frowned as he stared at the traffic trickling past, waved forward by Noah, his team member and co-parent. “Unlike the traffic. When are you due at the parental units’ place?”

“Twenty minutes,” I replied.

“Shit. Shit...” People did things all the time I didn’t understand, but Charlie’s grin set my teeth on edge. The bloke was an idiot most days of the week, cracking jokes and playing the fool, but right as I sucked in a breath to ream him out, he found the perfect solution.

“Knox!” Charlie shouted.

“What?”

The other fireman looked back at the three of us with a small frown, obviously in the middle of talking to the crash unit.

“Taking Rhett and Rhys to Katie’s parents’ place.” He jingled the keys to one of the 4WD rescue vehicles we deployed when being called out to a major car crash.

“What?” Knox started storming over. “No—”

“Let’s go!” Charlie started loping towards the vehicle, a grin plastered across his face. “C’mon, buddy,” he said to Bronson, urging the dog on.

“Fuck yes,” Rhys said, sliding into the backseat. “Can you put the sirens on or something.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

Charlie and I looked at each other as he turned the key in the ignition.

“If this isn’t an emergency, I’m not sure what is.”

He grinned at the rear-view mirror where Knox was sprinting towards us, his smile growing wider as he turned the sirens on.

“An emergency vehicle is only an emergency vehicle when it is being used in the course of duties in relation to an emergency.” I was pretty sure I was reciting the handbook words perfectly, but Charlie didn’t care.

“Pretty sure if we don’t get to Katie’s parents in time, they’re going to need to call an ambulance to take what’s left of us away,” Rhys said through gritted teeth. “How fast can this thing go, Charlie?”

He shot my friend and my dog a look over his shoulder.

“Let's find out, shall we?”

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Chapter 56

Katie

Where the hell were they?

I was sitting in my car outside my parents' place waiting for my so-called boyfriends to arrive. My knee bounced and my thumb tapped on my phone screen for the tenth time, looking for something, anything to indicate where the hell they were.

We'd agreed to meet outside and go inside as a united front. Surely if we all stuck together, we'd get through this without issue. I'd mistakenly assumed that if I had three boyfriends, at least one of them would turn up on time. I watched another minute tick over on the clock on my phone screen. My teeth ground together, my thumbs rising. I needed to ring them, text them, ask them what the hell...?

What the hell?

I looked up at the sound of a siren's wail, only to see a 4WD with Metro Fire Service stickers on it roar up. The doors were jerked open, thanks shouted at the driver as they arrived. My fingers went lax, nearly dropping my phone as I found myself grinning.

They were here.

Well, three of them were. Rhys straightened his shirt and Rhett raked back his hair, hastily finger combing it as they led Bronson over to my car.

"Evening, ma'am." Rhys leaned in through my car window and planted a kiss on my cheek. "Heard you were in need of some backup for family dinner."

“Where the hell have you been?” I hissed, eyeing the front windows of Mum and Dad’s place. I knelt down to scratch Bronson on the chest. “And where’s Garrett?”

They sucked in a breath, ready to answer, but that was when Mandie strolled up.

“Well, two of you made it.” Bronson wagged his tail and walked up to her. “Make that three. Hey, fella. So, you ready for this bloodbath or what?”

“Not intimidating.” Rhys slid his arm around my waist, and I welcomed its weight. “Not intimidating at all.”

“Hi...” Mum came trotting over, arms wide. “I’m Janey, Katie and Mandie’s mum.”

“I can see where Katie gets her looks from,” Rhys said, holding out his hand. “I’m Rhys and—”

“These are for you.” Rhett thrust the flowers at Mum who blinked in return, her smile faltering for a second. “Sorry, I’m Rhett.”

“Rhys and Rhett...” She nodded and then gestured for them to come into the house. “That almost rhymes. So, can I get you all a drink?”

“Beer?”

Dad appeared in the doorway of the living room, not a smile in sight.

“I’d love a beer if you’ve got one,” Rhett replied. “Janey, Garrett asked me to pass this on. Katie said you like wine and he says it’s a nice drop. Can’t stand the stuff myself.”

“Hmph.” Dad looked the two of them up and down and I swear to god, my heart started clawing its way out of my chest. “You’ll do. Come through to the deck.”

“That’s Bill,” Mum said and that’s when I noticed her nervous smile. The idea that she was on tenterhooks just like me was a small revelation, but not one I got to examine closer. “He can be a bit of a grump—”

“That’s it.” Mandie cut her off with a smile. “He’s a grump. Good luck, guys.” She gave them a little finger wave. “Face the firing squad on the deck while us girls finish up things in the kitchen.”

Rhett followed Dad, the prospect of a beer obviously setting him at ease, but Rhys turned around and mouthed ‘help’ as he joined them.

“Well, they’re definitely handsome boys,” Mum said. My sister moved to stand beside her, and by the weight of their collective gaze, I knew I wasn’t going to like this conversation at all. Bronson stayed with me, sitting

down at my feet, his body leaning into my thigh. “But didn’t you say there were three?”

“Yeah, where’s the nurse?”

“I swear to freaking god, I will kick your arse every time you use that word,” I growled and as I shaped up to Mandie, my sister made clear she was ready to throw down.

“What, nurse?”

“Mandie—”

“Girls!” We both spun around to see Mum staring at the two of us, knife in hand. She flushed and then set it down on the chopping board. “We’re supposed to be having a nice dinner with Katie’s boyfriends, so let’s contain the crazy for just one night? You can do that for me, right?”

“Yes, Mum.”

Suddenly we were both ten years younger and standing there downcast as we got told off.

“Good. Now Katie, is Garrett going to join us for dinner?” Mum asked.

A perfectly reasonable question, but one I didn’t know the answer to.

“Garrett’s stuck in the emergency department,” Rhys hissed when we went to join the guys outside. Rhett and Dad were talking about my father’s barbeque set up, a topic they both seemed to have a lot to say about. “There was a massive car crash on the way in. That’s why we had to jump in with Charlie to get here on time.”

“Car crash?” My mother could hear a mouse fart from ten feet away. “I hope no one was seriously hurt.”

“We’ll find out when Garrett gets here, I guess.” Rhys shrugged. “We’re really sorry this happened, but it’s the occupational hazard of being a nurse.”

“Of course. Bill’s a bit on edge, but he’ll understand.” Mum was using her best soothing tones. “This is literally a matter of life or death.”

So why didn’t that make me feel any better?

“So you’re in talks to start franchising your gym?” Dad asked Rhys.

I’m not sure if he really wanted to know about the ins and outs of gym management or if he was just trying to fill the deathly silence that hung around the table. Once the guys had finished talking about the barbeque, they seemed to run out of topics to talk about. I reached down and rubbed Bronson’s ear, the dog whining a little as he stared up at me.

“Um, yeah.” Rhys took a sip of his beer, winced, and then forged on. Dad’s frown deepened. “I don’t know too much about it really. My business partner, Drew, he’s the brains of the outfit...”

And this was exactly the wrong thing to say. Dad’s brows pulled down further. Rhys blinked and then straightened up, nodding at Rhett’s hard look.

“But we were approached by a big name chain. They like our branding, the vibe we’ve created in our gyms, the focus on creating a more inclusive environment, and are interested in buying the name from us and employing us as consultants to help set up a chain that replicates the user experience.”

“I wouldn’t be caught dead anywhere else.” Mandie provided some social proof almost grudgingly. “Most gyms can be super blokey. When a woman steps into those places, she’s either a nuisance or someone to hit on. Rhys and Drew make sure everyone knows that kind of behaviour is unacceptable.”

“Hmph...”

Dad didn’t say anything else, because his stomach spoke for him. A loud grumble had Mum leaping to her feet.

“Sounds like someone needs some more nibbles.”

“I’m not filling up on chips and dip,” Dad said. “Not when there’s steak on the menu. How—?”

“Let’s just eat.”

I flushed bright red, suddenly the centre of attention, right when I didn’t want to be. Part of me felt responsible for this whole situation. We’d sat there trying to make small talk for three quarters of an hour, hoping Garrett would turn up, and I think we were all done with that. But I wasn’t responsible. I’d made clear to the guys that they needed to be on time, that Dad got hangry if he didn’t have dinner on the table by 6.30 sharp, and we’d all agreed... I blew out a breath. I couldn’t even be angry. Garrett had to be working his arse off, the team desperately trying to save people’s lives, and I was what? Getting huffy about dinner with my parents?

Except a small part of me was. I didn’t like to admit it, probably because it was a breathtakingly selfish thought, but... Part of me couldn’t help but wish that this time was different.

Dave was like a feral cat. He turned up when he felt like it and took off the same way. I learned quickly not to rely on anything he said. If he actually appeared when we’d made plans, I’d pull on some appropriate

clothes and go. If he didn't, well, I just Netflixed and chilled on my own. The guys were different. When they said they'd do something, they did.

It just wasn't always with the person who I made the plans with.

As if sensing my traitorous thoughts, Mandie stared at me across the table, then nodded.

"Steak time, Daddy-O," she said.

"Oh, we need—" Mum started to twitter.

"To feed Dad before he goes Hulk Smash?" Mandie finished for her. "We can make a plate for Garrett and set it aside *if* he can make it." I'm not sure if anyone else caught the emphasis on *if*, but I did. "So Rhett, if I set the barbeque on fire, you'd know how to put that out, right?"

"Of course." Rhett sat up straighter. "You'd have a dry powder extinguisher on hand, wouldn't you, Bill?"

"In the shed and inside the house," Dad replied, holding out a hand to stop my sister, then waving Rhett forward as they ambled towards the outdoor kitchen. "So you like your steaks rare, right?"

"Can I help you ladies out?" Rhys asked. "I mean standing around outside and talking about meat is exciting, but I think I really need to start getting more greens in my diet."

"This way," Mum said with a smile. "You can help carry out the salads."

I was starting to think the evening wasn't a complete wash. Dad seemed to love talking to Rhett, and Rhys had Mum eating out of his hand the moment his eyes rolled back in his head at the taste of her salads. He was quizzing her on the ingredients to her potato salad when Garrett walked in.

"Hey." He looked done in, wavering slightly on his feet, hair all rumpled. "Just wanted to say how very, very sorry I am that I've gotten here so late. I'm Garrett."

Chapter 57

Garrett

I had made it to the end of my shift and was making a beeline for the door when I heard the ambulance sirens' wails. One was bad. Multiple ambulances meant something really bad had happened. Not my problem, I told myself, my feet moving faster.

"Garrett!" Helen jogged over with a smile on her face, ready to give me another pep talk. We'd prepared for the meet-the-parents situation when we had a break at the same time, but when she saw the ambulances, her face fell.

Then the patients started rolling in on gurneys.

I hated car crashes. Far too often I'd seen exactly what a tonne of metal could do to a person when it crumpled like a soft drink can around them, but the worst was this. That ragged, desperate cry of a hurting child, it stopped me in my tracks.

"Garrett..."

Helen said my name in a completely different tone now, and I knew what it meant. Patients, so many patients, were being rushed into the emergency department. Contusions, whiplash, braces to support broken limbs, it was like a grim pageant of pain.

Fuck...

I felt my pocket vibrate and knew it was the guys checking in, making sure I was on my way, but I couldn't even stop to answer it. A completely different part of me took over.

"What've we got?"

One of the doctors had come running out to meet the train of patients, the paramedic giving him the rundown. Major car collision at high speed. Broken limbs, concussion, some possible brain injuries.

I couldn't leave.

My bag was swung across my body and Helen and I moved as one to the closest gurney.

"Hi there." A little girl with the most beautiful brown eyes looked up at me, the fear plain. Tears had made tracks in the blood smeared on her cheeks. "I'm Garrett and this is Helen."

"Hi," Helen said in a falsely upbeat tone. "We're going to help you feel all better."

We both grabbed the sides of the gurney and then pushed it through the swinging doors and into the ED ward.

One of the things I always loved about my job was the way adrenaline seemed to calm my brain down. I couldn't think, worry, plan, or ruminate on anything. There was only moving, doing, fixing, cleaning, and helping. Nurses and doctors swarmed as the patients were triaged, each case assessed and then dealt with in order of urgency. My world narrowed down to observations taken, to finding veins and putting a line in, of making sure blood pressures remained stable, then bringing beds up to surgery when a surgeon became available to see the next patient. I was moving to the next when Helen stepped in my way.

"Garrett—"

"We need to get a hold of the extended family of the little girl in room number five," I told her. "I've tried all the next of kin on record, but no one's picking up." The ragged wail of a child felt like a knife, stabbing right into my heart. "Mum's in surgery. Dad's still in a coma, and—"

"Garrett." She put a hand on my arm. "I'll deal with that. You need to go."

"What?" I blinked and looked around me, the bright artificial lights, the white walls and floor stabbing me in the eyes. It was like I was seeing the familiar sights of the ED for the first time. "Yeah, after—"

"No, now." She squeezed my forearm. "You've got that dinner, remember? You're meeting Katie's parents." It felt like I was hearing her talk through a speaker of an elevator that was plunging in freefall down its shaft. "You were supposed to be there hours ago."

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck...

I swallowed hard, my throat suddenly bone dry, as it all came back. Our plans. The way each one of us guys worked out a way to ensure we all arrived at Katie's parents' place on time. We'd worked out schedules, gifts, conversation starters...

And I hadn't even made it to my car on time.

"Thanks."

That's all I could say as I turned and bolted for my locker. I stripped out of my scrubs and into my street clothes (not what I had planned to wear) and then made a beeline for my car. Other staff waved or called out goodbye as I left, but I couldn't spare the time to reply. Not when I pulled out my phone to see a million missed calls, increasingly hysterical texts from Rhys, and...

Not one from Katie.

Fuck.

It was only the knowledge of what could happen that stopped me from putting my foot to the floor. Instead, I obeyed every road rule carefully, trekking across town to Katie's parents' place.

Which brought me to here.

"Hey." I stood there like an idiot, staring at each one of them as they enjoyed their meal. Right now I felt like some kind of Dickens orphan, lurking around only to beg for more. "Just wanted to say how very, very sorry I am that I've gotten here so late." That wasn't going to cut it. I watched Katie turn around in slow motion, all those observational skills that helped me at work helping me to see her face fall in real time. That forced smile, coupled with very real disappointment that just seemed to deepen by the second. It was killing me. I raised a hand lamely and tried to smile. "I'm Garrett."

"I'm Janey, love." Katie's mum was a spit of her daughter, and her warm smile had me wanting to rush forward and wrap her in a hug. "You look done in. Let me get you a drink."

Bronson barked and then ran over, his feet slamming into my legs, forcing me to stagger back.

"Hey, boy!" Dogs were so damn pure. I couldn't disappoint him because he lived in the moment. I was here now and that was all that mattered, but I knew that wouldn't cut it with everyone else. "Have you been a good dog? Have you?"

“He likes you,” Janey said, returning with a glass of wine, handing it to me.

“Thank you.” I took a sip and then felt something uncoil inside me at the first fruity notes. “Damn, that’s good.” She smiled at that. “Did you get a glass? Katie said you like white wine, and I thought—”

“I did.” When she gave my arm a squeeze, it was a perfect echo of Helen’s motherly gesture. “Have a seat. Katie made you up a plate in case you were able to make it. The others said there was a car accident.”

A car accident. A guy that came in because he was short of breath and turned out to be having a heart attack. A kid with a broken arm. That clinical cool that protected me was fading fast and just leaving me behind. Everything I’d seen, done, today was flickering before my eyes.

“Right as I was walking out the door.” I smiled at the table because right now I had everyone’s attention. “That wasn’t how things were supposed to go. We had things planned down to the last second to ensure we’d be here on time, but apparently those patients didn’t get the memo. Again, I’m sorry.”

“We’re all here now.” That had to be Katie’s father, Bill. He nodded at my plate. “Steak tastes best when it’s still hot.”

“You let it rest for twenty minutes.” I felt the meat dimple under my fork, its firmness telling me so many things. “And you marinated the steak first?”

Bill snorted. It felt like I’d passed some test I wasn’t aware I was sitting.

“My own recipe. Katie says you’re a helluva cook? Be interested in what you think.”

My girl looked at me for what felt like the first time, her hand snaking out under the table to grab mine. Just a tiny secret smile, and then she let go and turned back to her plate. Maybe, just maybe, I’d get through this in one piece.

“Oh god...” I moaned the moment the meat hit my tongue. That came out more of a muffled sound and I closed my mouth and chewed. “Tender... spices...”

“Garrett’s having a foodgasm,” Rhys said with a grin. “Happens all the damn time.”

“Can’t ask for better than that. Dig in everyone.”

At Bill’s command, a comfortable quiet settled over the table as we all dug into our meals.

There was nothing like a big meal to settle me back down again. When I couldn't fit in another bite, I pushed my plate away, leaning back, suddenly glad I'd put on a stretchy pair of track pants after work.

"That was incredible."

I looked at the plate mournfully, wanting to squeeze in a couple of more bites, but my stomach made clear what a mistake that would be. Janey got to her feet, taking my plate and hers.

"Wait until you've tasted my apple pie."

I knew enough about human physiology to know we had only the one stomach, but damn, when she said that, suddenly I had room for more food.

"Let us." I pushed myself to my feet, feeling the wave of exhaustion hitting me hard. I'd have to get Rhys to drive us home. Exhaustion was as bad as alcohol for impairing reflexes on the road. "You've done all the cooking."

I shot the other guys a meaningful look, ready to take the rest of the plates.

"It's alright, us girls have got it," Janey replied, giving the same kind of look to her daughters. They got up and removed the rest of the plates, but all I could focus on was Katie.

Were we OK? She'd been disappointed by her ex so damn much. Was she feeling like this was just a repeat times three? I had so many plans. As my eyes followed her as she walked back into the house, I remembered each one of them. That we'd be the right guys for her, that we'd never pull the bullshit that Dave did, but today brought an uncomfortable truth to the fore.

We'd opted to create a polycule because each one of us wanted something serious and yet none of us were really able to devote the time required to a serious relationship. By the look on Bill's face, he was pretty leery of the whole polyam relationship dynamic, but if he could see what I did, maybe he'd relent?

"So..." Bill sat back in his chair, his hand wrapped around his beer. "The three of you think you're good enough for my daughter?"

"Not really." Rhett and Rhys shot me incredulous looks. I was going off the very script I'd created with them in preparation for tonight. "I was late tonight, and with my job, there's every chance I will be again. Your daughter can't rely on me to turn up when I say I will." The muscle in Bill's jaw flexed but he nodded, giving me permission to continue. "It's why we

set up the whole polycule in the first place. My job, Rhett's, even Rhys' at times, it means we can't always be where we need to be, but..." Bronson put his paws on my lap, demanding a pat and I was glad for the warm presence by my side. Maybe he'd get me through this. "Together the three of us will work to ensure Katie has whatever she needs. If I'm not available—"

"I'll be there," Rhett said with complete certainty, "and if I'm not—"

"It's a lot easier for me to get away from the gym than a fire or a medical emergency," Rhys added. He leaned forward, placing his elbows on the table. "Don't blame you for being wary. This is a weird situation."

"But it works." Rhett stared the man down. "We'll make sure it works, because nothing, and I mean nothing, will have us hurting your daughter willingly."

I sucked in a breath, ready to say more. Debate Bill, make him see the possibility that beat hard and fast in my chest, but the man cut me off with a shake of his head.

"I can't say I understand what's going on here, but..." A small nod to each one of us in turn. "Three blokes that want to do right by my daughter? Can't say no to that, can I?"

I sank back into my chair, feeling my heart beat furiously. Adrenaline and oxytocin coursing through my veins made for an intoxicating mixture that rushed straight to my head faster than the wine.

"I'll drink to that," Rhys said, holding his beer up high.

Chapter 58

Katie

“What?”

I waited until we were in the kitchen to ask the question that was hanging around unspoken. My mum and my sister were all shooting me long looks throughout dinner, ensuring that Dad’s amazing steak tasted like nothing in my mouth. Mum started scraping the plates clean and Mandie filled the sink with water, but I stepped forward.

“You’ve obviously got something to say.”

Mum straightened up and shot me a long look. “The guys seem lovely. Rhett is a quiet one, but he got your father rabbiting on about the differences between LPG gas and smoking meat with wood, so he’s happy. Rhys seems sweet and is very focussed on you.”

“But...”

I waved a hand impatiently, which was rude, but right now it felt like I was standing before an executioner with no means to get away. The axe was going to fall on my bare neck and I wanted the process done with.

“But right now those guys are on their best behaviour,” Mandie said, turning around to face me. The sound of the water filling the sink was setting my teeth on edge, my head pounding in time. “This is as good as it gets.”

Which was amazing, I wanted to say. Rhys and Garrett teasing me as I tried to watch TV, then finishing the night sleeping in Rhett’s arms. I couldn’t have planned a more perfect evening if I tried, and it was clear that neither member of my family could see that.

“Which is pretty damn good,” I snapped. A pause and I shook my head, wanting to control my temper. I hadn’t wanted to bring the guys here yet. To my mind, it was all early days, but now I realised it was more than that. It wasn’t just the guys who were being judged. I was too. “They are so sweet. We have fun, go out and do cool stuff, or stay in and they wait on me hand and foot. Rhys faced down some dickhead who was hassling me at the gym, then rescinded the guy’s membership. Rhett took me hours out of town just to go to a brewery with cute dogs. Garrett is amazing with Bronson.” The dog wagged his tail at the sound of his name. “He’s an incredible cook. We went to yoga...”

My voice trailed away as the two of them heard each one of my pieces of evidence impassively, like I was the accused and they were the judges hearing my case.

“So Garrett was late. It’s not a big deal. He was literally saving people’s lives.”

“No one is criticising Garrett for being stuck in the emergency department, Katie.” Mum’s hand rubbed my arm. “Anyone can see he’s dedicated to what he does.”

“You’re doing it again.” If Mum was good cop, Mandie was the bad one. She stared me down, willing me to see it. “Accepting people’s scraps like it’s some kind of banquet.”

“That’s not fair,” I replied.

“New year, new you? No, you’re reverting back to the same damn patterns.”

“Mandie...” Mum growled.

“No, it’s gotta be said.” Mandie crossed her arms. “When’s the last time you did a shift at the shelter?”

“Well, I—”

I didn’t get to reply, because that just got in the way of her making her point.

“You’ve stopped going to the gym. You’re doing the same thing you always do. Your life is always uprooted, changed to fit around his, or in this case, theirs. Firies have to fight fires. Nurses have to help people heal.”

“You’ve finally stopped calling him a murse.” I tried to smile, but they both just stood there, perfectly impassive. “Look, they were up front with me from the start. The whole polyam thing? That’s their way of dealing with the situation.” I watched them shift and it was like the axe was being

drawn back, leaving me powerless to do anything other than stare up at the sharp blade. “With the way their jobs work, they can’t commit to being anyone’s boyfriend full time.”

“Katie...” Mum’s hands went to my shoulders, giving them a squeeze, as that would help get me through this.

“But between the three of them, they’ll work it out so I’m never left in the lurch. Someone will always be there to take me out, be with me. It might not be the person I made plans with, but who cares, right? They treat me so much better than Dave ever did.”

“Baby.”

Mum wrapped her arms around me and she held me tight, but rather than being comforting, I felt like I was suffocating.

“Katie, I don’t know why the fuck it always ends up this way. You are smart, so much smarter than me.” Mandie couldn’t have hurt me more if she grabbed a knife from the sink and stabbed it into my back. “You’re way more organised, caring, sweet, funny.”

“Thanks, I guess?”

My reply was muffled by Mum’s shoulder.

“But I didn’t bring my daughter up to be satisfied for one third of a person.” Mum’s tone made it seem like she was pulling her punches, but she wasn’t. “Not when she deserves someone who’s prepared to give her their whole heart, the way she always does when she cares about them.”

I couldn’t bear this for one more second. We’d come here in good faith, and somehow this turned into an intervention? My hands went to Mum’s shoulders and I pushed myself free, my face feeling red raw as I sucked in a breath.

“I...” This was where I came up with a snappy retort, where I made clear how wrong they were. “I...” My throat worked, words forming and then fading, unspoken. “I...” My eyes shifted sideways, grateful to stare at anything but them, only to land on Mum’s apple pie. Golden crust, dusted with sugar, the sweet scent of stewed apples had my guts roiling. My mouth filled with saliva, making clear what I had to do. “I need to go.”

Without thinking about the guys for a second, I snatched my keys off the side table and then strode towards the front door. My name echoed throughout the house, but I didn’t let their shouts stop me. Bronson kept pace, his doggy smile the only bright point. I should’ve gone back to the

guys, slid into the space between Rhys and Garrett, and rescued them from whatever inquisition Dad was putting them through.

But I didn't.

I couldn't take a full breath until I was walking down the driveway, so I sucked them in noisily. It was like I'd finally gone running on the treadmill. My chest was tight, my heart pounding.

But why?

My family was protective. They'd grilled every guy that I brought around and they would again. Their love for me made clear that they wouldn't just welcome them with open arms. There was a willingness to get to know any guy in my life, to judge him on his merits, but if he didn't meet their perilously high standards, they'd stay polite, but I'd know that they didn't think he was good enough for me. With Dave, that made sense. With any of the other guys I'd dated. I opened my car door and Bronson scrambled in, sitting in the passenger side seat, shooting me a doggy grin. But this time...

This time I finally, finally thought I'd found guys that were good enough to earn their approval.

My hands wrapped around the steering wheel, and that's when I heard the sound of the front door opening. I shoved the keys in the ignition, turning on the engine, because I needed to get the fuck away. Mum and Mandie had made their point, but I was done talking about it. There was no way to process it, not when my head felt like it was stuffed with cotton wool. Everything was speeding up and slowing down at the same time, which meant I probably shouldn't have been driving. Perhaps that's why Rhys appeared by my window.

"Katie?" He took me, the car, Bronson, then my shaking hands in before yanking the back door open. "Shove over, bro," he told the dog when he came to sit in the middle and stared through the gap, Bronson desperately trying to lick his face. "What's up? Did that not go well? Everyone seemed cool. A lot cooler than the last girl's parents we met. Let's just say they weren't as progressive..."

As his voice trailed away, I looked in the rear vision mirror and saw his eyes staring back. That look of concern, it broke something in me, smashing it to pieces when his hand went to the back of my neck. Small, soothing strokes, it was the same kind of thing I'd use when one of the animals was

distressed. Turns out it was effective, because with each caress, the tears were summoned forward.

“I need to go.” That was torn from me. “I need to get the fuck away from here. Bronson—”

“Move over, boy.” Rhys was out of the backseat and waving the dog into it before opening my door for me. “I’ll get you out of here, babe. We don’t have to spend a second more in this house, not if you don’t want to, but I’m gonna drive and you.” He produced a clean handkerchief with a flourish. “Are going to dry your eyes and tell me what the hell went down in the kitchen.”

I blinked up at him, catching the way the streetlight turned his sandy hair to white blond and found myself smiling despite the tears.

“You had me at move over.”

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Chapter 59

Rhys

Where the hell was Garrett? He was the one best suited for this kind of thing. I heard one little sniff from Katie and then tapped out a quick message in the group chat.

Katie's upset. Follow us in the car.

That done, I turned around to see my girl dabbing at her eyes.

"Hey..." I was gonna say don't cry, but that wasn't how this shit worked. If Katie was hurting, she needed to feel safe enough to let it out. My hand snaked over, grabbing her free one, feeling a wrench in my chest when she squeezed back. "Where did you want to go?"

I watched her throat work, her eyes flick to the windscreen and then back again, just in time to catch a tear slide down her cheek. Fuck... I wanted to tear her family apart, throw them up against the wall and demand answers, because Katie wasn't capable of giving right now.

"You can't tell me." I said that with some certainty. "It's OK." My hand reached across and pulled her seat belt across her body, making sure she was safe before I eased the car out onto the road. A quick glance in the rear vision mirror showed me that Garrett and Rhett had gotten the message. They came running over to the car, but when we pulled away, they climbed into Garrett's sedan and followed behind. "I'm gonna take you somewhere that was special to me."

It took a bit to remember the way there, and in some ways that made this easier. I couldn't press Katie, force her to answer, so instead I focussed on the street names, the traffic lights, as I drove towards the sea.

“I fought a lot with my parents when I was a teenager.” My voice felt too loud in the cabin, punctuated only by Bronson’s rhythmic pants. “My dad mostly. School wasn’t exactly my focus. I was going to be the greatest skateboarder to come out of Australia, remember.” A little snort had me stealing a look at Katie and her watery smile had me grinning along with her. “He wanted me to have a backup plan, which to me showed a fundamental lack of confidence in my abilities.” I shook my head, realising I should give the old man a call again. It’d been a few weeks since we last talked. “After one screaming argument or another, I’d end up here.”

The skatepark was built on the foreshore. During the day, you’d have the waves crashing behind you, the sun beating down on you. Some surfers came to skate when the waves were too damn cold, winter biting them on the arse. Others, like me, were skating rain or shine, and so I pulled up in the now empty car park.

“Skating in the dark.” If I squinted my eyes slightly, I could see my younger self out there. Hair too long, falling in his face and yet he still slammed his foot into the concrete, propelling himself forward, rolling over the concrete and then swooping up and across the ramp, grinding along the lip, before rolling back down again. “Practising over and over, able to see it.” I looked over at Katie, glad to see the tears had stopped, but there was still pain in those beautiful brown eyes. “The tours, the girls, the awards..”

I shook my head.

“Turns out my dad was right, of course, but...” My throat felt suddenly dry, so I was forced to swallow hard. “That doesn’t mean your family is. What did they do?” Then I got to the question I really wanted to ask. “What did we do?”

“You...?” Bronson stepped on the centre console the moment the car stopped, straining to get those massive shoulders between the front seats. Anything to get closer to his girl. With a whine and a wiggle, he was through and scrambling onto her lap. Her laughter when it came, helped ease something inside me I didn’t know was hurting. “You came and met my parents despite only going on a couple of dates.”

And I’d do it all over again, if that’s what she needed.

“You dressed nice and brought Mum some flowers, which is more than any other guy I’ve dated has done.”

That little note of outrage in her voice, it was for my sake, I realised. That had me shaking my head, wanting to tell her she didn’t need to be

angry for me, but if I'd learned one thing from hanging out with Drew, it was shut up and listen when a woman was talking.

"But that wasn't enough." Her tone transformed into a little growl. Bronson decided that deserved a kiss as he planted a big lick on her cheek. "Arrgh, Bronson! Bronson!"

"B Dog." I shot the pup a dark look, and he sat back on his butt, having the decency to look a little sheepish as he nestled down in her lap. "So we didn't go hard enough? That's OK, we can regroup and try again. Don't worry, we'll win your family over."

"Just like that, huh?" Katie looked out at the skatepark, missing the moment when the others arrived. "Sure, it's not just another big dream, like skateboarding awards and babes?"

"Can't be harder than pulling off a 1080 on a vert ramp." She blinked, having no idea what that meant, which forced me to smile. "Hit me with it. What did we do wrong?"

That's when I fucked up. Katie's smile faded, and she kept on staring at the ramps, as if the answer lay there. I wished that was the case, because I'd looked hard for them each time I rode out here.

"They aren't happy about the whole polycule thing," she said finally.

My breath came out in a long, almost silent sigh. This was to be expected. I mean, it was a pretty left of centre way to live your life, but I was confident that we could—

"My family has never approved of the guys I date. There's always something not quite good enough."

OK, my confidence wavered for just a moment, because yeah, I was pretty sure I had to agree with the fam here. Katie deserved better than us, but every day I woke up, trying to work out a way to be better for her.

"I thought this time it would be different." Her eyes finally met mine, and they felt like they stabbed right into the core of me. Anger, pain, they combined together to form a righteous fury. For our sake, I realised belatedly. "You own your own business. Garrett saves people's lives. Rhett fights bushfires, but it's more than that. You..." Her throat was working again and that had me grabbing for her hand. "You guys are amazing, but..."

This was it, the moment of truth. Somehow her family had seen past our neat clothes and spiels about our lives, and I was beginning to think it wasn't just the fact that Garrett was late.

“But they’re hung up on the idea that your lives, your jobs, mean I’ll never really be able to rely on any of you.”

My mouth opened as I sucked in a breath, ready to refute the charges laid against us, but my brain stopped me. What she was saying, it was just paraphrasing our own words back to us. We had been real with her from the start, made clear that the lives we lived restricted the amount of time we could spend with a girl. Thinking we were so smart, we’d come up with this plan. Together, we’d worked hard to make sure someone was always there for Katie, but... In that moment, I understood exactly why her parents weren’t on board with us.

One third of my heart, one third of my time? It made sense when we came up with the idea, but now? It was a whole lot dumber than my big plans to go pro skateboarding. My mind raced, thinking about the talks we were currently in about the gym, about everything, when she opened her door. Bronson and my girl spilled out, walking across the car park and towards the ramps.

“What’s going on?” Garrett snapped as he joined me. “What did you do?”

“What did we do,” I corrected, then trailed after Katie, running up one ramp, only to jump down beside her. She looked up then smiled when my arm went around her waist, tugging her closer. A kiss, then another, each one was a promise I made silently to find a way through this.

Chapter 60

Rhett

Something was wrong, and I needed to fix it, now.

“Maybe we should...”

Garrett’s voice trailed away as I strode past him, closing the gap between us and Katie. She was standing there, nestled into Rhys’ chest, but when I appeared beside them, she looked up. That’s when I saw the tears. My shoulders tensed, my hands forming fists without thought. I wanted to tear apart whatever was hurting her, but the slight smile she shot me disarmed me completely. Tension bled out of my body as I cupped her face in my hands.

“What went wrong?” Fuck, I was being too blunt again, but I couldn’t seem to stop myself. How the hell did I fudge around the issue, skirting it until some predetermined moment when it was OK to ask? “Katie, if we messed up—”

“It’s our jobs.” Rhys shook his head, then pulled her closer. Those long, soothing strokes down her back, I wanted to be the one doing that. Anything but stand here and listen to this. “What parent is going to be OK with a guy or guys who can’t be trusted to turn up to the date he organised?”

“That’s it?”

It seemed like a small thing, and yet so immeasurably huge at the same time. I wanted to refute the charge, prove that I was reliable as fuck, and I was, at work. Always there on time for my shift, prepared to go the extra mile, fill in for teammates when one of the guys was sick. Fires were unpredictable, so I couldn’t afford to be.

“I mean, yeah.” I hated the self-effacing way Katie said that, the way she turned back towards Rhys, like he was the only one who could comfort her. “I tried to make them see...” She shrugged. “You guys work hard and save people—”

“Not me.”

Rhys smiled down at her, but there was an edge to it I didn’t normally see.

“You help people feel better about themselves,” she said. “That’s what you did for me.”

But it wasn’t enough. I nearly took a step backwards then, an instinctive need to put distance between myself and a threat riding me hard. I didn’t get to where I was paying attention to that though.

“I...” My mouth was moving as my brain was trying to come up with solutions. “Is that the main problem, because I can...” I saw Charlie, Knox, and Noah then. They’d managed to find a way to make things work with Millie. Surely I could do the same. “I can talk to the guys at work, the married ones, and find out what they do. There’s gotta be a way forward.”

“Helen’s been telling me I need to start putting up boundaries with our unit manager.” Garrett scratched the back of his neck. “I was trying to be a team player, but I think I just ended up becoming the department doormat.” He shook his head. “I’ll talk to her, talk to our union rep about how to navigate this better.”

“Does that help?” Katie was like an ember rising up in the air and floating free, ready to set someone else alight, but I couldn’t let her go. “If we find a solution, keep on talking—”

“That’s one hundred percent more than any other guy has bothered to do.” Katie shrugged. “I’m in uncharted territory here, so in theory, yes? We need to communicate clearly, like adults.” Her mouth turned down at the corners. “Be responsible. Gross.”

“But not tonight.” Garrett stepped in closer, ready to turn Katie’s head his way, when Bronson started barking. A couple of kids came rolling up, eyeing us and then the skatepark.

“Cool dog,” one said, approaching Bronson with his hand outstretched. The dog took a step backwards. “Is he friendly?”

“He is when he feels confident.” Katie pulled away to go and stand beside Bronson. “What do you think, boy? Can they give you a pat?”

The kids ended up dropping their skateboards on the ground, asking a million questions about the dog while giving him a pat. The two of them, they were in their element, and that had me looking at my best friends. Garrett watched everything that took place with hungry eyes and Rhys, he nodded, then ambled over.

“Nice board.” He picked up one and checked the line of it, then spun the wheels.

“You skate?” one of the older teenagers asked, looking Rhys up and down.

“Used to. Lend me your board?”

The kid shoved the skateboard into his hands, the lot of them watching sceptically as Rhys set it down. Eyebrows shot up as he started to roll forward. With an ease I rarely saw, he upped the speed, then approached the ramp at a speed that seemed way too fast. The board’s wheels lost contact with the concrete in what appeared to be a controlled movement, because Rhys spun it around, hitting the ground and then rolling back with a grin.

“Shit...” the older kid said, then grabbed a board off one of the others. “How about this?”

The sound of the sea meshed with the raspy rattle of the wheels along the concrete, punctuated by the laughter, the chatter of the crowd, Katie among them. Her grin, then her cackle when Rhys came flying off the board, having failed to replicate the kids’ trick, had me drawing closer.

“We’ll find a way to fix this.” When she looked up at me, when I put my arms around her, I was reminded of the other night. She’d taken care of me so perfectly. Now it was my turn to do the same. “I promise.”

“And tonight?” The spark was back in her eyes, lighting me, lighting us up.

“We’ll look after you tonight.” Garrett came to stand beside us but didn’t even spare a sidelong look at the skateboarders. “In every way you’re open to.” He held up his phone. “Notifications on silent. I’m not on call tonight.”

“What if there’s an emergency?” she asked, which had my hand stroking her cheek.

“There is one.” Her brows creased in confusion. “Right here.” Bronson was barking furiously, chasing Rhys up and down the ramps. “You’re not happy and we need to step up to fix that situation.”

“I’m OK—”

She said that way too quickly.

“No, you’re not.” I ran my hand through her hair. “But you will be. Rhys!” My shout had his head popping up. The skateboard was handed back and he said goodbye to the kids moments later. He and Bronson jogged over. “We’ve got a job to do tonight.”

“One we should’ve made our top priority a while back.” He looked Katie over then with heavily lidded eyes. “It’s time to make clear how sorry we are.”

“In a way you still feel tomorrow.”

Her little gasp, the way she stared at me open mouthed, that’s what had me sweeping forward and hoisting her on my shoulder. Rescuing someone from a situation that threatened to destroy them? That was just another day for a firefighter.

I don’t know how the hell we made it home. My car was still sitting on the side of the road because we couldn’t seem to stop for long enough to pick it up. Tomorrow, because tonight was all about Katie.

I was kissing the back of her neck just to hear her giggle, my hands tracing the shape of a body that haunted my dreams. My cock was so damn hard it ached, and yet it wasn’t my focus. Just a dull counterpoint to the feel of her pressed against my body, my skin against hers.

“Uh uh...” Garrett knocked her hands away when he climbed onto the bed. Katie reached for him, and right when I was about to argue that we should be giving her whatever the hell she wanted, he made clear his vision. “Tonight is all about you.” Those hands were collected up and then a kiss was pressed to her knuckles. “It’s time for us to make amends.”

“That’s what we’re calling it?” Rhys shuffled closer on her other side and tilted her lips his way, right as his hand dropped lower. He kissed her through her gasp, then her sigh, as his hand closed around her breast. If she liked that, then she’d like... Katie pulled away, looking back over her shoulder open mouthed as I traced the hard bead of her nipple, then grabbed it between my finger and thumb. Her breath came in time with the little tugs. “You like that.” Rhett pressed a kiss to her throat. “Does that make you feel better?”

I let out a hiss at the same time Garrett did, shooting him a dark look, because rather than flutter closed, Katie’s eyes flicked open. She smiled though, helping ease some of the tension.

“Better...” She barely breathed that out. “So much better.”

Katie had no idea how much I needed to hear those words. They drew me closer, kisses, so many kisses, raining down on her neck and shoulders. It felt like I needed to map every inch of her, lest she slip away.

“Katie...” Why the hell was I mumbling her name with increasing urgency? “Katie...” She looked back over her shoulder, staring into my eyes. Whatever she saw there had her smile fading. “Need your eyes on me,” I insisted, despite her change in mood. Perhaps because the moment my hand covered her breast, fingers sinking into her softness, her eyes grew heavily lidded and as I toyed with her nipple, they threatened to fall closed again. “No, babe, eyes on me.”

I wanted to see her respond to me, us. The need to see all that pain wiped away and replaced by passion, pleasure, was overwhelming. It was the only way I could take a full breath. Oxygen starved, my lungs sucked it in and her scent with it.

“That’s a good game to play.” Garrett picked her up like a doll, Rhys and I losing our grip on Katie, only for him to set her back down facing us. Her thighs were spread wider, and then he was pushing his head through the gap, kissing the soft skin there as he went. “Eyes on Rhett or we stop.”

Garrett’s brain never seemed to stop, always concocting some new ploy to use, but that wasn’t what I needed right now. I loomed taller, gazing down at Katie as I went in for a kiss.

“Eyes on me,” I told her. “See me. See us and everything we can become. See a future with us and...” I couldn’t pretend, not like Garrett could. “And I’ll do whatever it takes to make you happy.”

Chapter 61

Katie

Part of me felt wrung out, empty after the angst of this afternoon, but perhaps that made it easier to be filled by this. The feeling of each man clustering closer to get to me, the feel of their hands running over my body. This was what Mandie didn't understand, what I couldn't tell my mother. In their grip, I felt... special, beautiful, perfect in every way, because why else would they do this?

"Fuck, been waiting for this..." Garrett's growl was followed by a kiss, then another, close but not close enough to where I needed him, and my hips moved blindly in response. "Stay still." His hands gripped my thighs, forcing me to obey him. "Feel me and keep your eyes on Rhett."

Garrett getting bossy wasn't a new thing, but this was. I felt almost shy, panting out my response to Garrett's tongue sliding along my entire seam as Rhett and Rhys watched, but it was more than just embarrassment. Connection, that's what came to me belatedly, right as my body rippled. There was something fluid about Garrett's caresses, turning my bones to rubber, my body shifting in response to his licks.

"Got you feeling good?" My attention flicked to Rhys, who was moving closer, his fingers trailing down my breastbone. "How about now?"

I couldn't reply, just letting out a hiss as his hand slid down and separated my folds, a finger finding my clit. My whole body jerked in response to that first caress, a burning pleasure building in response. I reached out for Rhett, trying to grasp that cock standing proud from his

body so I wasn't the only one falling to pieces right now, but he gripped my wrist.

"That's not what this is about." Rhett pushed my hand away gently, keeping it pinned in his grip. "This is about you. Today hurt." I frowned slightly, able to see Mum and Mandie all too clearly in my mind. I didn't want them here with me right now, disrupting what was happening. "Eyes on me." Mine flicked up obediently to meet his. There was a gentleness and a savagery in the way he looked at me that I needed so much. It made clear it wasn't just me that rode the knife edge of pleasure and pain. "We let you down."

"No—"

I went to protest, wanting to refute all the things that had been said. None of that mattered now, right? We'd made promises, decided on a way forward, and that meant I could—

"Yes." He moved closer, pressing his forehead to mine. "I fucking hate that it happened. Need to make up for it." One hand covered my breast, Rhys' doing the same, and that's when my body changed. I was a lightning rod, struck over and over again by bolts of pleasure. "Reset everything, because that's what's gonna happen when you come."

Garrett's fingers slid over what he'd just licked, then found my core, dipping in, but not pushing forward. I let out a little grunt of frustration, but Rhys had me focussing back on him.

"You can do that for us, can't you? Come and we can all start again. Like this is the first time. That we didn't screw up."

They were seeing things in far more dire a light than I was, but I couldn't help but nod, because when I did, his fingers moved faster. Stroking my clit, pinching down slightly to force sensation to spike higher.

"Come for us."

Rhett pressed his lips against mine, his stubble scraping my skin, but before I could respond, Rhys was taking over. Garrett pulled me down hard on his face, not letting me hover for a second as he pushed his fingers deeper. One of them I might've been able to resist, but all three? I was helpless as a tree swaying in the wind, tugged back and forth by them.

"I'm..."

I didn't need to announce it. They knew, talking me through the process in low, husky voices. Each one of them told me how well I was doing, Rhys and Rhett in words, Garrett in action, licking me through this climax and

halfway to the next. But for all their chivalry, that's not what I needed. When I pulled away, Rhys grinned.

"Feeling better?"

"Not quite."

I shoved him down onto the bed and then clambered up his body. His smile widened, then was extinguished entirely as I wrapped my hand around his cock and then thrust down. Right. There. He was hitting the spot perfectly with every stroke.

"Fuck yes."

He wouldn't let me take over for long, flipping me onto my back so that my head was hanging off the bed, not stopping his thrusts for a second. Rhett and Garrett dropped off the bed like big cats, prowling closer.

"Fuck, look at those lips." A thumb was pushed between them and I sucked helplessly, caught up in the terrible storm of pleasure Rhys was brewing. "Makes me think about them around my cock every damn time she smiles."

I grinned then, eyes hazy as I reached out and pulled them closer.

"Katie..."

Whatever protest they were going to make was cut off as I sucked one in, then pulled off and moved to the other. Back and forth I switched, my heart pounding harder, faster, and each time I returned to one man, I found him harder than before. It was my moan, long and guttural, as I reached my peak, that had them losing their shit. Garrett hissed, grunted, and then stroked my hair as he unloaded down my throat. Rhett was there, pushing in before Garrett had even stopped pulsing, unable to hold off anymore. I stared into his eyes, watching the moment he finally lost control.

"Bloody hell..."

Everyone collapsed down onto the bed, ensnaring me in a messy tangle of limbs, but we weren't allowed more than a moment of peace. Sharp barks let us know that Bronson was done waiting outside. Garrett clambered to his feet, opening the door, and the dog came scuttling in. Not to get pats, he dove under the bed, and that's when we heard the bloody dog next door losing its shit again.

"Fuck, we've gotta do something about that dog," Rhett mumbled, pressing his face into my hair.

"Tomorrow." Garrett settled back down with us. "I'm on late. I'll call the council in the morning, find out what can be done."

We had a plan, I thought that dimly, right before I dropped off to sleep.

“Rhys, can you take Bronson today?”

The next morning we were all moving around the kitchen, to get coffee, to grab a bite to eat before work, to get Bronson’s breakfast ready. Our bodies kept bumping into each other, but rather than get angry, shy smiles were traded. Garrett asked Rhys that question as he set Bronson’s food down.

“No can do.” Rhys gave the dog a brisk pat. “We’re in meetings all day. Drew said that having a dog around sends the wrong message to the potential partners.”

“I can’t take him to the station,” Rhett said before Garrett could even ask. “The whole dalmatian thing? Didn’t happen in Australia. There’s rules and regulations.”

“Looks like I’m ringing the council...” Garrett looked at the back fence, because the stupid bloody dog had started barking again. Bronson’s head hovered above his bowl, then he turned and ran off deeper into the house. “Not going in.”

“Video and record the noise,” I said, having had some experience with this at the vets. “They need evidence of the level and occurrence of the noise to take action. Have you talked to the neighbours at all?”

“I spoke to the woman that lives there once,” Garrett replied. “She said to talk to her husband and shut the door in my face.”

“Let them know you want to settle this between yourselves, but you’re about to talk to the council because you’re at the end of your tether. Might be worth talking to the other neighbours as well and see if they’re also getting frustrated.”

It was hard to see how they wouldn’t be. The dog’s barking was loud and persistent, not stopping for a second. It appeared it thought the whole neighbourhood belonged to it and it needed to be vigilant about protecting this expanded turf from threats.

“You could also give them my work’s number.” I fished out the company business card. “Some of the vets have a lot of experience working with highly reactive dogs. If they’re open to solutions, that might be one of them, now I...” I looked down at my phone. “Need to go if I’m going to get home in time to grab some clean clothes.”

“Seems like you need to start keeping some here.” Rhys shot me a hopeful look. “I mean, it’d make sleepovers easier. You could take longer to

have breakfast..." He pressed a kiss to my temple. "With us."

"Maybe." I was trying to play it cool, but the grin on my face? It made a liar out of me instantly. "I'll think about it."

And I did, all the way to my car, then by the side of it as they kissed me goodbye, then on my drive home. Even as I scaled the steps to my apartment. I only thought about Mandie when I walked in the door, but me tiptoeing inside was pointless, because as I walked past her bedroom, I saw the door was open and it was empty. Left to my own devices, I got dressed and wondered exactly how it would work with the guys. I was running scenarios through my head as the hours ticked by at work, right up until the point I was forced to look at my phone. It wasn't something I usually did at my desk, but a few messages had come through in a rapid flurry. I opened my notifications to find this.

Katie, can you drop by our place on the way home? At first I was smiling, thinking this was another invitation to hang out with the guys. Didn't have much luck with the council and the guy next door is a dick. There's been an emergency at work...

I didn't read the rest, going perfectly still as I realised what this was about.

...look in on Bronson for me?

That last bit grabbed my attention and didn't let go, jerking me to my feet.

"Katie?" one of the vet nurses said as I grabbed my bag. "Everything OK?"

"My dog." She looked confused, because as far as she knew, I didn't have one, and legally, that was correct, but emotionally? I remembered the conversation this morning, that Garrett was the only one who could look after Bronson today and it was him that sent the message.

Right after promising to change things, he'd left Bronson on his own, inside his house, with that damn dog yapping next door.

"I've gotta go," I said. "Cover for me."

I didn't stop to see if that was OK, because somehow I knew what I would discover when I reached the guys' house

The neighbour's dog wasn't the only one that was barking, though the sound was completely different. Theirs was rhythmic, persistent, aggressive, but Bronson? There is nothing, and I mean nothing, that sounds

worse than the sound of a terrified dog. His screams were muffled by the front door, but that changed as soon as I stepped inside.

“Bronson...”

My voice cracked on his name and his yelps changed pitch, getting more and more hysterical. He was like this the first time I left the shelter. I’d cried then, and I cried now at the sound of it. I’d been the one to approve the guys’ application to adopt him, but it was only now I was realising what a mistake that was. I opened the bathroom door and found him balled up in the shower recess, damp and covered in the stink of his own urine.

“Buddy...”

He wouldn’t come near me. His head was tucked into the wall, trying to block everything out, but his tail told a whole other story. It beat at double time, frantically attempting to self soothe. Bronson had water, food, an old t-shirt and his favourite toys, so Garrett had tried to do the right thing, I’d give him that.

It just wasn’t enough.

“Hey...”

It felt like I was watching months of work flush down the plughole. Bronson didn’t even want to turn to face me. He was in his own personal hell right now, and I’d put him in it. I didn’t realise I was crying until I felt a tear roll down my face, and that brought on others. One by one, they hit the shower tiles as I leaned forward.

Bronson stiffened then started to scream in earnest. I couldn’t help but haul him closer, holding him tightly in my arms. He fought me at first, which made this super dangerous, but I wasn’t thinking with my head, but my heart. That couldn’t let me do anything but cradle him close. I rocked him back and forth, having no idea if that helped dogs like it did babies, and mumbled nonsense words until he seemed to snap out of it. One snuffle, then another, he drove his nose into my neck, smelling my scent and then whimpering as he fought to get closer. He was a heavy weight that stank to high heaven, but he was back here with me, not in that fighting ring all over again.

Of course, that was when the sound of the dog next door filtered in.

“I’m getting you out of here,” I said, even though I had no idea what to do once that was achieved. He couldn’t stay at my place, but there was no way he was staying here. “C’mon, boy, let’s go.”

Those words sank in and he pulled away, running at full pelt towards the front door. I found the collar that Rhett and I had chosen hanging up on the hook and put it on Bronson before clipping on the lead.

“Don’t worry, boy, I’m getting you out of here.”

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Chapter 62

Katie

“That your dog making all that noise?”

My teeth were clenched tight, my grip on Bronson’s lead even tighter, so of course that’s when *he* comes marching up.

The dickhead who lived next door.

“You’ve got the balls to make complaints about my Max?” That was the yappy dog’s name. “When yours has been going off its head for hours.”

Hours? I looked down at Bronson and saw his defensive body language. Hunched back, ears flat to his head, he was trying to make himself as small as possible, and I understood that impulse perfectly.

This guy was standing over me, way too close, trying to use his height, his mass, the deep timbre of his voice to get me to back down, and normally I would. If this was happening at work, I’d bring out my best arsehole whisperer voice, trying to defuse the situation before it got worse. Outside of work, I shrank down just like Bronson did until the person left me alone.

But not this time.

I loosened my grip on the lead as I stepped forward, letting Bronson stay behind me, and got right in his space, making clear I wouldn’t back down.

“Like yours does? Day in, day out, the minute anyone makes a move in any of the neighbouring yards, your dog barks and barks and barks without stopping.” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw some of the older people that lived on the street come out of their houses to watch what was going on.

“Probably because the poor dog is just left in the backyard with nothing to do, going slowly insane.”

“He—”

I held up a hand.

“I’m not done talking. This is a nice street, a quiet street, and your dog is a bloody menace. The reason why mine was howling for hours was because he was traumatised by your dog’s aggression. Bronson is a rescue dog. He’s been through hell, and I thought he was being adopted into a home that could look after him, give him the peace he deserves. He had that until you and your stupid mutt moved in.”

The guy’s brows jerked down abruptly and his lips parted, ready to snap back at me.

“You don’t need to worry about Bronson. I’m taking him...” That’s when I faltered because I didn’t know where he could go. The man decided that was his time to interject, not knowing I had no interest in talking to him at all. “But you’ve got bigger problems than him. People are recording the noise your dog is making and they’re submitting it to the council. Unless you take some serious steps at behaviour modification, there won’t be a dog to complain about. He’ll be removed from your place and dumped at the pound.” I watched my hand like it was someone else’s, as I stabbed it into his chest. “Get your shit together, or that dog will get put down due to your negligence.”

“You fucking fat—”

That was the moment the man surged forward. Don’t kill the messenger. There was a reason that saying existed, because of this natural human urge. The man didn’t want to hear what I had to say, wouldn’t. He’d much rather direct his aggression at me, just like his dog did Bronson, to deflect the truth of my words.

Well, Bronson wasn’t going to stand for that.

Pit bull terriers have a pretty bad reputation, and some deserve it and some don’t. My dog was usually a smiley goof who just wanted endless tummy rubs, but as the man went to grab me, some primal instinct kicked in. Not when his own life was on the line in the fighting ring, but because mine was. His snarl was ferocious and he propelled himself forward, all of that muscle used for explosive effect. It was the lead that saved the man, because it jerked on Bronson’s collar, stopping him from snapping his jaws around the man’s arm.

That had him finally stepping back.

One, two, three, then he scurried off to his front door, unlocking it and then slamming it shut. Bronson let out a few more warning growls and then sat down at my feet, looking up at me as if to say, 'See Mum, got it sorted.'

Which meant I needed to fix everything else.

"You're a good dog." My eyes filled with tears as I bent down to scratch his tummy. He just panted, shooting me a doggy grin. "I have tried so hard to find the right place for you, and this..." I blinked and blinked, trying to see the house, but only getting a blur. "I don't think this is it. I'm not sure where that is, but I'll find it, I promise. Now, we need to go for a drive. Do you want to do that?"

He was up on his feet, scrambling towards my car and then leaping into the passenger side seat when I got in. Mandie's words came back to me then, but not in the way she intended.

"I think it's past time we went back to the shelter and talked to Marg. She's got lots of experience with this sort of thing. We'll talk to her and see what she has to say. Sound like a plan?"

Bronson let out a sharp bark, indicating his approval.

"Hey!" Jo came out from behind the counter of the shelter office as soon as she caught sight of me. "Long time, no see, and you brought Bronson. Hey, buddy..." She wrinkled her nose as she got close. "Boy, you smell awful." Her eyes flicked up to look into mine. "What happened? I thought the hotties were gonna be great dog dads."

"They are... mostly. Look, do you mind if I use the dog bath for a second? I need to clean Bronson up and then have a chat with Marg."

"OK." She nodded and then held out the keys. "I'll let her know."

Washing the dog was a grounding thing. It felt like as I washed away all the crap on his fur, my troubles went through it. Of course, that's when my phone started to buzz again. Notification after notification came through, and while I was tempted to glance at them, Bronson looked back over his shoulder at me. One look at those amber eyes and I knew I needed to focus on him, not them. I finished washing the shampoo off him and then grabbed some old towels to dry him off.

"Still know how to do that, huh?" Marg stepped out into the caged enclosure where the bath was kept. "And how's our boy?"

I was doing so well. I hadn't cried on the way over here, nor when I saw Jo, so why did my eyes start to ache the moment she asked that question? I

looked down at Bronson and knew what I was about to say wouldn't make any sense. He seemed chill, happy even, right now.

"Um... not great. I think I made a mistake about approving his adoption application."

"So that's why you've got the dog and they don't?" She didn't sound especially pleased by that fact. "Dry him off and come into my office and let's see what can be done."

Minutes later we did just that. I settled down in the chair opposite to her and filled her in on everything that had happened.

"Like they obviously love Bronson." He looked up at the sound of his name. "But I don't know what to do. They can't give up their life to babysit him 24/7, but each time he's left by himself, he's retraumatized." I ran my hands through my hair. "If I get them to agree, could he be put up for adoption again? Maybe someone with land outside the city would take him?" I could almost see it, him running through big open fields. On a farm, he'd be away from all the noise, all the clatter of the city. She let out a sigh. "Or one of the rural shelters...?"

I wasn't going to like her answer, I could see that by the set of her jaw, but she forced herself to smile.

"Katie, you have always been one of our best volunteers. If we had the money, I would've hired you on the spot." I blinked, never even thinking that was possible. It filled me with a warm glow for a moment, only to be quickly dispelled. "But you and I both know the realities of running a shelter. We don't take all the dogs that need rehoming. Far too many are put down every day. We wouldn't have signed up to take Bronson if we knew what he was like temperament wise. You're right. He does need an environment with low stressors, and that's not here."

My throat worked, ready to dispute that, but she continued.

"Trauma does funny things to our nervous systems. It's supposed to be a motivator to get us the hell out of a situation or to fight against it, but only for so long. Prolonged trauma with no hope of ending changes us. In some ways, our response to stimuli can be a bit like having allergies. My nose thinks rye grass is a terrible toxin that's going to kill me if I breathe it in, so my nose closes up, it gets hard to breathe and my eyes water non-stop. The response to the threat is actually worse for me than breathing in rye grass. Bronson is the same with whatever triggers him. Being around dogs that bark non-stop..." She looked over her shoulder and we could both hear the

rowdy yaps of so many dogs in the shelter cages. “Not feeling safe. That pushes him right back into the same fight-or-flight mental state he was in when we found him.”

“So we find a rural shelter.” My voice started to rise despite my best efforts. “We advertise in the country newspapers, put his picture on the community Facebook pages, and find him a new home.”

Her hands formed a steeple in front of her.

“If Bronson wasn’t adopted by Garrett, he was going to be euthanised.”

“No...” I said, feeling a ridiculous urge to cover the dog’s ears so he couldn’t hear this.

“He has behavioural issues that mean I couldn’t let him be adopted by families with kids or anyone with pocket pets.”

“No. No.”

My tone firmed up as I shook my head.

“Finding a rural rescue will be hard, because so many backyard breeders are pumping out pit bulls that no one wants. Shelters have finite resources and they can’t waste them on yet another pittie.”

“No.”

I glared at her then, as if that would stop the truth bombs being dropped.

“He’s a lovely dog, with you, with someone who understands his needs and is able to cater to them, but you can’t have dogs where you live. It seems like Garrett was having some success with Bronson before today?”

“He was.” I stared at the desk, but I didn’t see the wood printed laminate. Instead, I saw Bronson curled up in a tight ball, face pressed into the corner of the shower. “He’s just not...” I didn’t want to say it, but here I was, forced to face that reality. “He’s just not reliable. It’s not that he doesn’t want to be, but being a nurse...”

“A tough job.” Marg nodded slowly. “With not a huge amount of flexibility, but... If he’s willing to put in the work, I think he’s your best bet. No solution will be perfect...”

Her voice trailed away as I jerked to my feet. This was unconscionably rude, but I didn’t want to hear it. I just didn’t. The part of me that was wide eyed and idealistic about animal rehabilitation had died a horrible death years ago, watching people refuse to pay for simple things that would ease their pet’s pain so often at the vets, or the state some of the surrenders came in to the shelter. But not Bronson. My mind insisted stubbornly on that. I could accept the fate of every other dog, but not him.

“I’ll find one.” My mind started to race, realising now this was my problem to fix. “I’ll find one. Thanks for talking to me.”

“Any time.”

Marg shot me a sad smile as I walked out of her office.

“We’ll find a way, boy,” I told the dog when we got back into my car. “We have to.” When my voice started to waver, he moved closer, snuffling at my neck. “I won’t let you go through that again.”

Easy enough to say, hard to put into practise, but where there’s a will, there’s a way, right? I clung to that aphorism as I drove back to my place.

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Chapter 63

Katie

“Hey...”

I was really hoping Mandie wouldn't be here when I got home, and yet there she was, and with company to boot. Natasha hung back and gave me a little wave as I walked in.

“Don't want to talk,” I said, and then Bronson and I walked into my room.

I paced back and forth, trying to put it all together. I knew his medical background, because I'd been filled in by the staff at the shelter. Antidepressants, sedatives, pheromone sprays, we'd tried the lot and with little effect. It was why the writing was on the wall for him, because if he didn't respond to treatment... his cage would be better served by housing a more adoptable dog.

Maybe Marg was incorrect. Maybe there was someone outside the city that would take him. Maybe—

“Katie, we need to talk,” Mandie said, appearing at my door. I frowned as her hands wrapped around the frame, as if making clear she wouldn't be dislodged. The same rage that burned in me when accosted by the guys' neighbour roared back to life.

“Talk?” I snorted at that, my smile pure bitterness. “You mean where you lecture me and I listen? Where you tell me what to do with my life and I scurry to obey?”

“That's not—”

“You said enough last night.” It felt like my whole body was quivering right then, and when I heard Bronson’s whine, I was the one standing, face pressed into the corner of the shower, not him. “Too much, really, but...” I swallowed hard. “All true. I do give up everything when I like someone, because that’s who I am. It makes me happy to do things for others, to help them.” I looked down at Bronson who wagged his tail in response. “But yeah, people take advantage of that.” I shook my head. “You take advantage of that.”

My phone was in my hand, and when I unlocked it, I dismissed all the notifications. None of them were from people I wanted to hear from right now. Instead, I tapped through to my contact list and onto the one lot of people that could help.

My grandparents still had a farm outside the city. They’d scaled back things in a big way due to their age, but they were determined to remain on the land for as long as possible. Quiet, just outside a tiny little town in the hills, it was the perfect place to take Bronson, at least for now.

“You were right,” I told Mandie before I put through the call. “I do need to prioritise what’s important to me, and it’s not the gym, it’s not work, and it’s not keeping my family happy.” Bronson stared into my eyes and I don’t know what he saw, but there was something beyond doggy comprehension, I was sure of it. “I need to make myself happy, and right now that involves making sure Bronson has somewhere he can feel safe.”

The phone buzzed as the phone rang.

“Hello?” I heard my grandmother’s voice down the line.

“Nanna? It’s Katie.”

“Katie, love! How are you? How’s working at the vets?”

“Um... about that.” I glanced down at the dog. “I need to get away for a bit and I was wondering if I could come and stay on the farm for a week?”

“Come and stay?” I heard her pull the phone away from her mouth. “Larry! Larry, Katie’s coming to stay!”

“Is that my Katie?” I let out a little laugh as I heard my grandpa come on the line. “You’re coming down for a visit? We’ll get your room sorted out for you, love. What time do you think you’ll get here?”

“As soon as I can.”

Mandie’s lips thinned down as we made the arrangements, but that didn’t affect me like it normally did. I got off the phone to my grandparents, then went to work, packing my bags.

“I don’t know how long we’ll be there, boy.” Bronson jumped to his feet and started to whirl around. “But I do know it’ll be amazing. No dogs barking. No city shit. I think...” I swallowed hard. “I think you’ll love it.”

“So you’re just leaving to go and stay at Nanna’s and Pa’s?” Mandie asked as I wheeled my suitcase out.

“Yep. Rent’s paid and my half of the utilities as well. I’ve done a bank transfer for the lot. I’ll...” I looked around the apartment, seeing, feeling, all the memories we’d created here and felt like somehow I was saying goodbye to them all. That didn’t make sense. I could walk away from my life for a week, but not forever. “I’ll see you around.”

At that, Bronson and I swept out of the apartment and down the stairs, getting into my car. I started the engine and then eased the car out onto the road. Getting on the freeway, being able to put my foot down, speed away from the city, I felt something lift.

“Everything will work out, Bronson, just you wait.”

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Chapter 64

Rhys

“You fucking idiot.”

I’d heard that often enough in my life to not be too fazed by it, but from Mandie? She came storming up, finger pointing, obviously pissed.

But she wasn’t the one I was focussed on.

“Natasha?”

What the freaking hell was my ex doing in my gym?

Her mouth twisted as she stepped forward and Mandie watched her do so in confusion. So she didn’t know our history. Got it. She was about to, though. My arms crossed as all the frustration at being locked in a meeting with some suits came roaring out and then some.

This was the girl I thought I was going to live happily-ever-after with. She more than broke up with us. Natasha obliterated each one of my best friends, me most of all.

“I said I never wanted to see you again.” I was keeping my voice low, not shouting, because even now, I knew the difference between right and wrong. “So there’s the—”

“And I wouldn’t have come here if I didn’t have a good reason.” She shook her head, mouth tightening before she forged on. “You like Katie?”

“Like?” That was too thin, too small a word, for what I felt. In some ways, Natasha had done me a favour. I was infatuated by her, her confidence, her personality, but I... I loved Katie. She got me, made me feel ten feet tall when I was around her. Now that we’d worked things out, all I could see was a glorious future spread out before us. I thought I’d get that

by skating on the world circuit, but really, all I needed was Katie. “Yeah, I like her. More than any other woman I’ve met before.”

My hand scratched at my chest, feeling the ache start up there the minute I started thinking about my girl.

“And if you’re here to fuck—”

“Did you like the dress she wore to the pub?” Natasha skewered me with her gaze as she stood taller. “It was gorgeous, right?”

“Beautiful.” I breathed that out. “Stunning.”

“Yeah, well, you have me to thank for that. When Katie started talking about dating three guys from this gym, I thought no, it couldn’t be and then, of course, it was.” She shook her head slowly. “You three.”

“So you...?” Mandie pointed at Natasha. “And you...?”

“Natasha dated the three of us for a while,” I told Mandie. “Didn’t work out. We said we were looking for something serious on our dating profile, and Natasha wanted—”

“Three whole guys.” Natasha bit the words off, leaving me wondering where the hell she got this anger from. “Not the scraps they decided to give me. Three whole people prepared to go all in, just like they wanted me to.” Mandie’s eyes narrowed as she looked me over, as if for the first time. “When it became clear that there would always be a hierarchy in the polycule, I was out.”

“Hierarchy?” Polycules founded on a couple opening things up to include other people got a bad rap in some circles of polyamory. The idea that two people were more important and had more say over the people in the arrangement didn’t sit well with everyone. From unicorn hunters (couples wanting a girl that they could share) to having the power of veto that other members of the polycule didn’t, it created a power imbalance some didn’t like. “What hierarchy? I’m not in a sexual or romantic relationship with any of the guys. I’ve never tried to have a say over what they do.”

“No, you’re not married to each other.” Natasha sighed. “Just to your jobs. I knew I’d always be second best, so I got out, and now...” She glanced at Mandie.

“Katie’s taken Bronson and left the city.”

Seeing Natasha wasn’t a gut punch, but Mandie’s words were. I had to think by her expression it wasn’t just for a scenic drive.

“She... left?”

“Something happened.” Mandie’s jaw flexed. “I don’t know what, but you need to work it out. Katie doesn’t show it much, but... she’s hurting.”

That was enough to get me moving. The gym, the girls, nothing mattered but those words.

“Drew!” My business partner turned around from where he was still talking to the potential investors. “I’ve gotta go.”

He was going to argue, but I brushed past him, walking out the door.

As I drove around to my place, I saw notifications on my phone. Helen, Garrett’s work mum, had been forced to ask him to cover her shift. Her daughter was pregnant and apparently had gone into early labour.

So what happened to Bronson?

I didn’t have him, Rhett couldn’t, and Garrett... I walked down the hallway of our house and into the bathroom, my eyes fighting to take in the mess all at once. Piss soaked towels, scratch marks on the door, on the walls, Bronson’s toys torn apart and left strewn on the floor. It was like the room had transformed into a cell.

“Fuck!”

My phone was in my hand, and I was about to read Garrett the riot act. There were literally hundreds of nurses working at that damn hospital. Why couldn’t one of them help Helen out? Why was it always fucking Garrett? And most importantly, why did he say yes, right after we’d sworn to Katie to stop this bullshit? The only answer I got was a heavy thump on the front door.

“What?” I snapped as soon as I jerked it open, to see some middle-aged fuck standing there in high-vis gear. He stumbled back, obviously expecting something else, but he collected himself quickly.

“Your dog attacked me today.” I started to laugh, the idea ridiculous, but this idiot just got angrier. “Tried to go at me on your front lawn. I’ve rung the council, reported a dog attack. They’ll put that bastard down for sure.”

“Bronson?” I shook my head. “He wouldn’t hurt...” We both turned as his dog started fucking barking again, over and over. “Is this about your bloody mutt?”

“It’s about your bloody wife, dickhead.” I watched his finger move in slow motion, ready to poke me in the chest, but I intercepted it, bending it backwards and forcing the man to jerk his hand away. “I tried to have a civil conversation with her about the dogs...”

His mouth moved, spittle flying through the air, but I didn't hear what he had to say, not when my brain was putting two and two together. I checked the group chat and there it was. Garrett explained what was happening and asked Katie to look in on Bronson when she had a chance.

Fuck.

"Out of my way." I shoved him backwards, not even watching him stumble, before locking the front door behind me. There was nothing I needed here. He was still swearing and waving his hands around in the air, spouting some bullshit, when I got into my car and took off.

"Rhys..." Rhett got to his feet as I marched into his office. "What's going on? Are you OK? Is Katie OK?"

"No." I was aware we had an audience, but I couldn't keep it in. "She's not. Garrett left Bronson at home on his own." He frowned. "Katie looked in on him and found him messed up in the bathroom. The new neighbour had a go at her about it, and Bronson had a go at him."

"Good," Rhett growled. "And Katie?"

He didn't wait for me to answer, pulling out his phone and looking for something from the woman herself, but he wouldn't find it. She hadn't made contact, despite me calling and calling her.

"She's gone." When adrenaline wears off, you feel like someone's pulled your plug. No energy, not even enough to stay standing. I sank into the chair, head in my hands, and closed my eyes as I tried to focus. "Natasha and Mandie came into the gym to let me know that she's gone."

Chapter 65

Garrett

I was beyond exhausted, yet I didn't feel a thing as I stared at my phone screen.

"Helen, she's beautiful."

The proud grandma was standing next to a humidicrib, a tiny figure nestled inside, covered in sensors.

"Thanks for covering me today. Things were..." Helen looked back over her shoulder to where I think her daughter was resting. "Hairy. Anna developed pre-eclampsia. I had my concerns when she started putting on weight really rapidly and looking really puffy. Thankfully, she got in to see her obstetrician, and they realised what was happening. She got induced early and..." Helen was as tough as nails. I'd seen her go toe-to-toe with tweaking meth heads and not even blink, so when her voice broke, I knew this was serious. "She's going to be OK, both of them. It's just going to be a bit touch-and-go for a while."

"Look after them and yourself..." My voice trailed away as I walked down the hallway to find the guys standing there. I glanced around and didn't see Bronson, which forced me to refocus on what was happening here. "Look, I've gotta go."

"Of course, and thanks again. Talk to you at work tomorrow."

I shoved my phone back into my pocket and dropped my bag, then faced them down.

"What happened? Where's Katie? Where's Bronson? I left him in the bathroom—"

“We know.”

Rhys nodded to the bathroom doorway and I walked in, starting to put two and two together.

I thought I was doing everything right. Dogs with separation anxiety need enclosed spaces like crates to feel safe and things like dirty clothes with your scent on them to reassure themselves. The bathroom seemed the perfect place for Bronson for just a few hours. I remembered his big amber eyes, the way he'd reluctantly allowed himself to be lured inside, but... That wasn't the picture I was getting right now. The claw marks, the stink of urine...

“What happened?”

“We wanted to ask you that,” Rhett snapped, making clear how he felt about my decision.

“Helen's daughter was induced early,” I explained. “It was a medical emergency.”

“It always is.” Rhys shook his head, none of his usual good humour evident. “But fuck, why does it always have to be you that rides in on your horse and saves the day? You can play white knight if you want to, but not with a dog that depends on you.”

“And not if it hurts Katie.”

Rhett was beyond pissed. Every word was bitten off as if it personally offended him.

“Where's Katie?” I asked, something spiking hard in my chest. “Where's Katie, and where's my dog?”

“Gone.”

I don't even know who said that, their reply half obscured by a weird ringing sound inside my head. It shook from side to side, as if that would dispel the sound. Right then I saw it, the moment when Natasha turned around and rejected the lot of us, but rather than her lips forming the words, they were Katie's.

It was happening again. No matter what I did, no matter how hard I worked, everyone always walked away. My heart was beating too slowly, years passing between each pulse, my face cold and numb.

“Gone where?”

It hurt to say those words, but I said them anyway.

“To her grandparent's place, at least that's what Mandie said. She didn't want to tell me where, but I've been bugging her, and I've got an address.”

“We need to go.”

As soon as I said that, all my commitments rose up, demanding my attention. I had work tomorrow morning, and I’d need a good eight hours of sleep if I was to be useful at all. My intention was to visit Anna and Helen in the maternity ward and see if they needed anything. It felt like hands, so many hands were reaching out, asking for help, and I didn’t know how to meet the needs of them all besides the same way I did everything. Push myself harder and make it happen. I sucked in a breath, ready to negotiate something, when Rhett shook his head.

“If we go, then we jump in feet first.” His arms crossed his chest. “We made a commitment to Katie the other night. It’s past time we made good on that.”

Before I could reply, Rhys spoke up.

“Natasha came by today.”

“Natasha?”

Rhett seemed as surprised as I was by that information.

“She had a whole lot to say, but most of all about Katie. Natasha’s friends with Mandie and has been coaching our girl through the whole polyam thing.” Rhys looked at Rhett, then me, his brows pulled down in a frown. “She hoped that we’d gotten our shit together over the years, but apparently we’ve failed on that front.”

I didn’t want to know what Natasha had to say about this, somehow I knew. If I could’ve left this room, I would’ve.

“That we have a fifth entity in our relationship, stopping us from properly committing to a girl. Natasha didn’t break up with us because she didn’t want anything serious.” Rhys said.

“It’s because we couldn’t get serious about her...”

It all made sense now. The look on Natasha’s face when I had to slip away and go into work, the complaints she made about not knowing which one of us would be there when we made plans for a date. Initially, it had been exciting, new, but then reality had to show its ugly face, and Natasha had decided she wasn’t down with that. In my head, I thought we did things right with Katie. We were upfront about our work commitments, let her choose to be with us or not, but...

Not all choices, even ones freely made, are the right ones.

“So do you know where Katie is?” I unlocked my phone and tapped out an email to Nora, the unit manager. A text would mean I would get an

instant response, and I knew I wouldn't like it. "Can we go and find her?"

"Mandie relented and let me know where Katie and Bronson are headed. She'll be at her grandparents' place in the country by now," Rhys replied.

"Do you have an address?" I asked. He nodded. "Alright, let's go."

"We're not coming back." Rhett grabbed my arm, forcing me to stare him down. "Not until we've worked this out."

"Got the message loud and clear." I held up my phone, displaying the email I'd just sent. "I've notified Nora that I won't be at work until further notice. I screwed up." I looked both men in the eye. "I shouldn't have said yes to Helen. I should've..." My hands rose and fell hopelessly. "But I didn't, and now I need to try to make amends for that mistake. Let's go get our girl."

Rhys smiled for the first time.

"Let's go get our girl."

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Chapter 66

Katie

“Hello, darling.” Nanna walked out of the house, arms outstretched, with Pa coming in close behind. Bronson was all excited until he saw two strange people. His tail wagged cautiously as he pressed into my leg. She gave me a hug, then pulled back to look down at him. “And who do we have here?”

“Bronson,” I replied.

“He looks like a Bronson,” Pa said, sizing him up. “That’s one solid dog. How are you, love?”

It was his hug that cracked the thin veneer of normality I wore like a mask on the drive down here.

“I...” My throat worked as I tried to answer them, I really did. “I...”

“Come inside and have a cup of tea,” Nan said, wrapping her arm around my shoulders and steering me towards the house. “A bowl of water for the dog, Larry.”

“Maybe a nice big bone?” Pa looked Bronson over speculatively. “We’ve got those big shin bones left over from that size of beef.” At his kind voice, Bronson seemed to come out of his shell. He stepped forward with a big doggy smile, and Pa grinned along with him. “Yeah, I think you’d like that a lot.”

“So, tell your old nan what’s been going on,” my grandmother said once we got inside the house. Her messing around in the kitchen, finding mugs and tea bags, had a comforting familiarity about it all. “I hear a lot about your sister’s antics. Who knew you could make a living exercising in front

of a camera? Though Jane Fonda seemed to make a pretty penny doing just that.” Once the kettle was boiling, she looked squarely at me. “What about you, love?”

“Still working at the vets.” I looked at my phone and saw some missed calls from my boss. “Though maybe not for much longer. I walked out on my shift.”

“But you had a good reason, right?” she prompted gently.

“Maybe...”

I sucked in a breath, wrapping my hands around the mug once the tea was poured, the warmth bleeding through the ceramic, thawing out my too cold hands. That was when I told her everything that had happened. I didn’t even leave out the polycule. It was like a boil being lanced. All the poison had been building up for some time, and now it was oozing everywhere.

“Always were one for the animals.” Pa had returned and was sipping his own tea. “Thought you might become a vet one day.”

“Didn’t get the grades,” I replied with a wince.

“Well, there’s more than one way to work with animals. Vets, that’s an important job, for sure,” Nan added. “Though I think your pa just wanted a vet in the family so as to reduce the bills.”

“Charge like a wounded bull, they do,” he muttered.

“But what about this shelter thing? Seems like there’s a need for more shelters outside the city,” Nan said.

“Probably because they make little to no money and survive off donations.” I was reciting the Marg playbook word for word now. “Land prices have gone through the roof, so existing shelters are selling up, and new ones can’t afford to buy anywhere.” I shook my head. “It’s really tough work, heartbreaking really.”

“Never thought you were one to be scared of hard work, Katie girl,” Pa said, shooting me a sidelong look. “You were always a tough little kid, bouncing back after a setback faster than Mandie ever did.”

“She was always a drama llama, that one,” Nan said with a shake of her head. “A beautiful little girl, but... sometimes it felt like she expected everything handed to her.”

“But not you.” Pa gazed steadily into my eyes. “You always stood back, let your sister, your cousins, go first.”

“I was the oldest,” I began to rationalise.

“The most responsible.” Nan tipped her head my way.

“The most caring.” Pa drained his tea and then got to his feet. Bronson eyed him from where he was sitting in the corner of the kitchen, gnawing his bone on the lino floor. “So, how about giving your pa a hand to feed that cattle? Hasn’t been enough rain this year, and we’ve had to supplement their feed.”

“You got it.”

It felt like I’d stepped back in time then, and it wasn’t a grown woman, but a child who followed him out to the truck. Bronson did too, toting his bone hopefully.

“Want to come too, boy?” Pa asked. “Well, up you get.”

“He’ll need...”

I was going to say a boost, but somehow he ran at the tray of the truck and threw himself up and onto it with a scrabble of his back paws. Pa nodded and locked the tailgate before getting in on the driver’s side, turning the key in the ignition. We drove past the house, up the hill, past some old cottages shearers used to use, and Pa’s shed, then out to the storage shed where all the hay was kept.

Bronson jumped down as we went to work, loading the bales up on the back, and that was far harder than any gym workout. Then we were off, the fence posts whizzing past until we got to the gate and I jumped out. Opening it, Pa drove through and the cattle came running. I clambered onto the back of the tray, fighting to keep my balance as Pa drove slowly forward, Bronson barking in excitement. The cows paid him little mind, eager for the hay. I dropped it in chunks behind us, creating a trail of feed and the cows creating a line, chewing on the dried grass. I worked and worked until my back ached and a strange kind of exhaustion set in, sitting down in the tray as the sun began to set.

“Beautiful place,” Pa said, leaning against the tray as he rolled himself a cigarette. Nan wouldn’t let him smoke anywhere near the house, hating the stink of it. “That old stone barn...” He gestured to the old buildings that had now become a black silhouette against the reddening sky. “Never could find a use for it. Pity really.”

His sidelong look, that sly smile, it got me thinking.

“What about...?” I didn’t want to voice my idea out loud, because as soon as I did, I’d cop criticism. What a ridiculous idea, Katie. How impractical. Thing was, I was done being the bitch of the voices inside my head. “What if we turned them into a shelter? That one could be the office.”

I pointed to the smaller cottage. "And the barn could be turned into a series of kennels. That'd cost a lot of money though."

"Makes no sense working on the land." Pa nodded, then took a long drag from his cigarette, exhaling a plume of bluish smoke. "Weather's always against you, and you either have a good year and prices are down because there's a glut, or you're trying to keep the cattle alive during a drought but can charge a premium for the animals you bring to market."

"So why do people do it, then?" I asked.

"Because they love it." He watched me closely, the reddish orange of the sunset reflected in his eyes. "The head makes sensible decisions." A finger tapped at his temples. "But the heart...? It's all pie in the sky thinking, preoccupied by dreams, by visions. When they work together." He winked at me. "Well, anything's possible."

As the air grew cooler, as the sun sank lower, I stared at those buildings and did something I hadn't done since I got the news about my Year 12 grades: dreamed. Of the ruins of the stone buildings rebuilt better than ever. Of dogs coming to the property beaten down and broken, only for me to use every trick I knew to help them recover.

Just like I had with Bronson.

As if summoned by my thoughts, the dog went to the edge of the tray, his whole body tensing as his nose worked. A rabbit stood up on its haunches, and that was enough for Bronson. He launched himself off the tray and went barrelling after it, scattering cows in his wake.

"Get it, boy!"

Pa laughed, and the sound of it, the way Bronson sprinted after the rabbit, it had me laughing too, right as I jumped down.

"Bronson!" I called, hustling after him. "Bronson!"

Of course, he ended up empty-handed and panting in the remains of the stone buildings.

"What do you think, Katie?" Pa looked around at the buildings. "Reckon you could make something of this place?"

"But how...?" He smiled as I spun around. "And this is your farm...? My job...?"

He watched my hands rise and fall with a patient smile, just waiting me out as I turned back around. Being a vet was my dream, and it'd failed to come to fruition. Working as a receptionist? That was never what I wanted to do. I coasted along because it was easy, and what he was talking about? It

would be beyond hard, but... If I closed my eyes, I saw shadowy shapes moving around the place, rebuilding the shed and turning it into something completely new.

"I put a roast on for dinner," Nan said when we returned. "It's going to take a bit, so we'll have a late meal, but seeing as we have company..."

I thought she meant me and was going to protest that she didn't need to go to this much trouble, when she nodded to the living room. Bronson went barrelling in, barking enthusiastically, which should've given me a hint who was here. I blinked as I walked in, seeing all three of the guys sitting there, cups of tea on the coffee table.

"Katie...?" Rhys was the first one to speak, to take a step towards me, but he stopped himself from going any further.

"What're you—?" I started to ask.

"We're here for you." Rhett did close the gap between us, grabbing my arms and then giving them a squeeze. "As soon as I heard what happened, we got in the car and drove down here."

"Pretty sure I just quit my job." Garrett looked a little stricken by that admission, but when he approached, the fear faded away and was replaced by something far warmer. "And honestly, that's probably a good thing. I fucked up."

His eyes dropped down to look at my dog.

"You trusted me. Bronson trusted me, and I wasn't there. The entire drive down here, I've gone over it in my head. How scared he must've been, left alone as that damn dog next door..." He shook his head. "I can't go back and undo what I did. I thought I was doing the right thing, and it's really clear that wasn't it, but..."

I watched his hands rise, as if he was going to reach for me, but at the last minute, they fell back to his sides.

"I swear to you, Katie, if you give me another chance, I will spend every damn day making sure neither of you feel abandoned again. And if..." He swallowed hard. "If that was the last straw, if I blew it for good, just say the word. I won't try to talk you out of it. You deserve someone who shows up." When he glanced at the others, my eyes followed his. "And I will do anything it takes to prove I'm capable of that."

Had anyone ever apologised to me like this before? If they had, I couldn't remember it. I felt the urge to say something, anything, but instead,

I just stared. Back when I was with Dave, I would've died a happy woman if he'd shown even half the kind of contrition Garrett did now.

So why wasn't it enough?

"New year, new me." I smiled at their confusion. "That was my new year's resolution, and I think it's only now I'm realising what that means. In my head, it was getting fitter at the gym." I shook my head. "I think I could never lift another free weight and die a happy woman."

"You got it, babe," Rhys said. "You're banned for life from the gym."

"When I started dating each one of you, I thought that was who I needed to be. Someone who was cool with keeping things casual, not getting in too deep." I could see my sister's smiling face then, and, for once, it didn't feel like my end goal was to become just like her. "But I don't do casual. I fall easy and I fall hard, and that's just who I am."

"It's why I was always drawn to you." Rhett pulled me in closer and, resting my head on his chest eased a tension I hadn't realised I was carrying around. "Your heart, it was always too good for dickheads like Dave. I just... didn't realise you'd be too good for us too."

I looked up at him, then Rhys, and then Garrett as they drew closer, but I was forced to take a step backwards. Rather than look at them, my eyes were drawn to the crazy paisley carpet Nan had put in when Dad was still a kid.

"I think that's what I need to get back to." Instead of the dark purples and greens of the pattern, I saw all the different me's that had walked across the carpet. With the toddling steps of a baby, then running as a child, sitting down in front of the TV and watching cartoons early in the morning, then with the more sure steps of a teenager. There were so many different Katie's, and right then I knew I needed to honour each one of them. "My heart."

I couldn't believe I was going to do it, and yet I knew I had to. The same girl who had put up with Dave's bullshit without a word was going to break up with these three men for something far less heinous.

"That's why I need to stay here." I looked down at Bronson. "We need to stay here. The city is no place for him. Too many noises to trigger him."

"But Katie—" Rhys said.

"And I think I want out too."

I remembered the drunk resolutions I'd made with Mandie and Natasha in the early hours of the morning. Flush with wine, the world was my

oyster. Well, if that was truly the case, it meant I had to make some tough decisions. I didn't know if I could turn the old stone buildings into a rescue. I might go scuttling back to the city the minute I discovered how bad the lattes were at the local cafe, but... I needed to know.

For the first time since I got my year 12 results, it felt like there was something worth me focussing on. When I refocussed on the guys, I saw how pale Rhys was, how tightly Rhett was clenching his jaw, how wide Garrett's eyes were. I was the one doing the hurting this time, and I don't know how Dave bore it. I didn't want to. I really, really didn't want to, but this was my chance. To stop coasting through life and really try.

"I'm going to stay here," I said.

"For a while." Rhys seemed intent on believing that. "To get your head together, right? It'd be good for Bronson too."

"I think I'm going to stay here and see if I can set up a dog shelter on my grandparent's farm. I'm not sure how yet." My brows came down in a frown. "Where the money or the labour is coming from, but..." I nodded. "I'll work it out. I'm sorry, but—"

"You're breaking up with us." Garrett stepped backwards, shaking his head as if I'd struck him. "You're breaking up with us." When he recovered, he looked at me with narrowed eyes. "I've gotta go."

"Gar..." Rhys sighed and then said, "I need to go after him, but we're not done here."

I watched him rush out after Garrett, the atmosphere getting more awkward by the second.

"This is what you want?" Rhett's words came out in a clipped tone. "To be here and look after dogs?"

"I think so." I dared a smile, one he didn't mirror. "Animals were always my special interest. You discovered yours and started work for the fire service, following your passion." If this was the right thing to do, why did it hurt so much? "I need to do the same."

"Of course you do."

That was when the mask broke. He shook his head, let out a small hiss, and then lunged forward. His lips collided with mine, and I couldn't help but kiss him back. This was the last time I'd do this, so I had to make it good. To remember him. To remember us. But all good things come to an end, and that was what happened now. We stood there, foreheads pressed together, until he pulled away.

“I...” Hearing Rhett’s voice crack broke something in me. “You do what you have to, and I’ll do the same.”

And with that, he walked out the door.

For a moment, all I could do was stare at the open doorway, as if willing him, them, to return. The sound of a car starting made clear that wouldn’t happen. A tear rolled down my cheek, unbidden, and that’s when Nan and Pa arrived.

“Didn’t go so well?” she asked, and all I could do was sniffle in response. “Oh darling, everything will end up alright in the end.”

Maybe, but that didn’t mean this bit didn’t hurt like freaking hell right now. I was like a butterfly fighting my way free of its cocoon, and it was only now I realised what a torturous process that was. What you were, your past, everything, it conspired against your every attempt to fight free. But I would, I vowed, as I wrapped my arms around Nanna’s shoulders. I would. Because the new me I kept bleating on about? I wanted to get to know her most of all.

Chapter 67

Rhys

“Do you have the vision statement presentation?” Drew was looking at me expectantly the next time, but I just stared at him blankly. It was like a complete stranger just asked me how to get to Hogwarts or something. He let out a sigh as he raked his fingers through his hair. “Tell me you got that done.”

“I...”

There was nothing worse than disappointing a friend. Actually, I could think of one thing. Katie’s eyes, the sadness there, it haunted me, but not as much as this. Not disappointment, not anger, which Drew was clearly feeling right now, but resignation. Katie had come to grips with the fact we had let her down, let Bronson down, and it felt like I was watching the light die in her eyes in real time. Right there, in her grandparent’s lounge room, I wished I was a fire, because then I’d know how to coax those flames back to life. Everything in me wanted to fight that numbness that seemed to settle over her like a grey cloud. I was about to tell him all of that, when the suits arrived.

“Morning,” the head guy said. Couldn’t remember his name to save myself. That oily smile, it had me wanting to shiver. “Come through and let’s get the presentation out of the way.”

Drew glared at me, making it clear I needed to go first. Put me in front of the firing squad it appeared. I shook my head and stepped into the boardroom. The canned air, the interior done in monotonous shades of grey,

then that big projector on the wall, they each had my whole body stiffening. Not since I was at school did I have such an intense reaction to a space.

Not here, my heart told me with every beat. *This is not where we're supposed to be*, because if I blinked, I saw something, someone completely different. Katie, standing at the end of the table, the sunlight that was coming pouring in through the windows turning her hair to red gold. She looked like an angel, in my imagination and in reality, and right next to her was her soul dog.

"So..." My lips twitched, ready to snarl as the suit took his seat, the rest of his identically dressed team doing the same. "You were going to give us an overview of your vision for this new chain of gyms." It was weird, because he'd approached us about the whole thing and yet now we were being asked to Shark Tank this shit and 'wow' him. "What's your vision for the future?"

Drew turned to look at me, making clear this was my part of the presentation, but he didn't get it. We'd met at a gym when we were both just out of school and somehow because I wasn't a homophobic dick, that made me his token straight friend. We'd sat around on weight benches, bitching about the way the gyms we went to were run, but he was the one that started spitballing ideas for a different kind of place. It was always his vision. I just helped make it happen.

And that's what made me happy.

Seeing Drew go from a skinny kid who copped stupid levels of abuse about a part of himself that he could never change, to the confident man he was now, complete with adoring partner. That was what got me out of bed every day, not the gym. It smelled. Guys were dicks and never put their damn weights away and don't get me started on the mess they made in the bathrooms.

It would be no great tragedy if I never spent another day in the gym.

That realisation had me smiling, knowing now what I needed to do.

"Drew's got a presentation for you," I said, which earned me a dark look from my partner. "It has the facts, figures and forward projections, but he asked me to talk about the vision. I didn't prepare a PowerPoint for that." This had the suits shifting restlessly. "Because no stock images of pretty people working out will help you to understand the vision, Drew's vision."

I sucked in a breath, willing my business partner to see it. It'd all be OK.

“Drew came up with an idea that I think makes our gym completely different to others. We’re not a couple of ‘roid heads flexing our muscles and making people feel inadequate about themselves, before signing them up for year long memberships in the vain attempt they could look just like us.”

When I nodded slowly, Drew let a long breath out, finally relaxing. My focus shifted back to the suits. Get them on board, have them draw up the contracts and then...

Then I could walk away from all of this and towards Katie.

“If you decide to invest in the company and take the gym idea Australia wide, you’ll be creating a solution to a need that most gyms can’t or won’t deal with. I won’t cite the stats on obesity in this country.” I tilted my head Drew’s way. “He’ll have them all in his presentation along with charts.” A small chuckle went up around the table. “Nor cardiovascular fitness or preventable diseases. Most health organisations in Australia treat this as a problem with willpower. If people just made healthy choices. If they just ate less and moved more...”

My focus shifted to the window behind them, and as I spoke it felt like my consciousness left the room.

“A big thing holding people back is feeling like exercise, sport, movement is something you either excel at or don’t do it all. In our gyms we go above and beyond to ensure people of every size, every level of fitness feel comfortable enough to take the first step towards a healthier version of themselves.”

“Interesting.” The head suit spun an expensive ball point pen around between his fingers. “Alright, tell us more about how your gym differentiates itself from others in the market.”

“That’s where I come in,” Drew said, connecting his laptop up to the projector, then bringing up his presentation.

“YOU DID IT.” A couple of hours later, Drew and I were walking together towards the car park.

“You did it,” I corrected. “I had no idea we did that kind of money.”

“You don’t pay any attention to the reports I send you, do you?” He shook his head. His arm went around my shoulders as he messed with my

hair. “That vision statement? It was exactly what we needed to convince the investors. We’re on the brink of something huge, Rhys.”

“You’re on the brink of something huge.”

I stopped then and so did he, searching my face for clues about what I was about to say. Not all of it could be put into words, my throat already feeling like it was closing down. Drew and me, we’d been friends almost as long as I had with the guys I shared a house with and right now...

Right now I was ready to walk away from every single one of them, if that’s what it took to get Katie to see me as boyfriend potential.

“I’m gonna sign my half of the gym over to you,” I told him.

“What? No—”

“Yes.” I didn’t put my foot down often with him, but as he stared into my eyes, he saw it. “Katie...” My eyes roamed across the car park, taking in each car one by one, because it was easier than looking at him. “The city’s not where she wants to be.”

“OK.” He was trying to keep a lid on it, but I could hear the tension in his voice. “So what the hell happened between now and yesterday?”

I smiled despite the fact my heart was hurting so much it was hard to take a breath.

“Everything,” I replied finally, “and that’s why I need you to buy me out of the gym.”

AN HOUR later and I was on the road, driving over to the fire station. Rhett had barely spared either of us a second look this morning, his face like thunder. Well, I had a cunning plan, one that would put a smile on his dial. When Drew floated a number past me, my eyes had bugged out of my skull. All that money would go a long way towards helping build Katie’s dream dog shelter. I’d helped build Drew’s dream and now I was gonna do the same for my girl and my dog.

“Rhys!” Noah loped over to say hello as I walked in the door of the fire station. “Looking good, mate.” He punched my arm, forcing me to shove him away. “Look like you’ve made some gains.”

“In more ways than one.” I couldn’t keep the grin off my face. “Do you know where Rhett is?”

“In there, but...” Noah pointed to one of the offices. “He’s in a shit of a mood. I’d steer clear if I was you.”

“No can do.”

I strolled on in through the doorway and sure enough, Rhett scowled the moment he caught sight of me. That didn’t stop me for a second. I strolled on over to his desk, then shut his laptop screen.

“What the—?”

“Want to get our girl back?” I had his attention now. That frown smoothed away and naked interest shone in his eyes. “Well, I’ve got a plan. How hard is it to get transferred from this fire station to one in the country?”

“Katie doesn’t—”

“How hard is it?” I insisted.

“Why?”

Rhett wouldn’t give an inch, not until you did first. Bloody Capricorns. I just smiled. I could lock horns with the best of them, but not right now.

“Because I just sold my half of the gym and looked at what our house is worth on the real estate website. Rhett.” I shook my head. “Our girl needs money, needs labourers, need people to invest in her dream and you and me? We’re just the guys for the job. So, are you gonna sit here looking like someone just pissed in your breakfast cereal, or are you gonna tell your boss the news?”

Chapter 68

Rhett

“I quit.”

“What?” Brent looked at me like I’d grown an extra head or something. “What’re you on about? Rhett, you’ve been one of my most reliable guys, and then you up and leave mid shift yesterday, only to come in here this morning with this announcement? What the hell has gotten into you?”

I couldn’t tell him, not really. My lips curved into a small smile as I thought about it. My truck was loaded up with every tool I’d kept stored in our shed, ready to drive back down to Katie’s grandparent’s farm. If she wanted to build a dog shelter, I’d be there helping her through every step. Last night I’d barely slept, so I’d spent time looking at the design of dog shelters, then started deep diving into dog psychology.

“Katie,” I replied and Brent just stared. “I started seeing her, and she’s moving out of the city, so I need to go too.”

“Dave’s ex?” Brent shook his head. “She’s a lovely girl.” He was damn lucky he made that statement, because my hands formed fists the moment he mentioned her previous partner. “But mate, you’re throwing away your whole career for—”

“The woman I love?”

Because that’s what this was. Everything I’d read or heard people talk about made it seem it should happen later, but what else was this? It’d felt like my heart was being ripped out of my chest when I was forced to walk away from Katie. Rhys was sitting in the passenger side seat of my truck waiting. He’d made clear that Drew could handle the deal with the gym

going forward and that he was open to being bought out. He was one hundred percent in, so we had one more stop to make.

“You’re going to tell me I’ll regret this.” Brent’s brows drew down. “That I’ll lose my permanent position in the service and that my career will never recover.” I looked out the window to where some of the guys were cleaning off one of the trucks. “I’m OK with that. What I can’t do...” My throat threatened to close off, but I forged on. “Is say goodbye to Katie. If this is her dream, then it’s my job to make it happen.”

“Tell me where you’re going.” Brent busied himself with finding a piece of paper and a pen, but I saw the slight shake in his hands. “I’ll put some feelers out. Positions don’t come up often in the Country Fire Service, but maybe...” One last look my way. “You’re sure about this?”

“More than anything.” I smiled freely, the muscles stiff and unused to it. “She’s it for me.”

“Alright, I’ll email the paperwork over and see what I can do and Rhett.”

I strode out of the office feeling like I’d just dumped the weight of the world off my shoulders.

“So you’re doing it?” Charlie appeared from nowhere, and that brought the rest of my colleagues. Ex-colleagues. No one likes a good gossip than a bunch of firies. “You’re going after Katie.”

“Oh my god...” Millie, Charlie’s partner, had stumbled out into the hallway, her eyes going misty as soon as she heard the news. “You’re quitting the service for Katie?”

“I’d totally quit for you, babe,” Charlie spluttered, wrapping an arm around her waist.

“We would,” Knox said, moving closer, but in the end, it was to hold out his hand. “That’s some sacrifice. You’ve been at this station your whole career.”

I had. I liked routine, the well known. It helped keep my head clear, ensure I knew where I stood in the station. But I’d give it all up for Katie. I looked across at Rhys, seeing his grin and knowing what he was thinking. All I wanted to do was look after Katie and now...

“It doesn’t matter.” I stared at the floor, unable to bear direct eye contact right now. “None of it does but Katie.” Guys were coming out of the nearby rooms, massing in the hallway to get the gossip. “If I never work as a firie again—”

“It shouldn’t come to that.” Brent joined us. “I’ve been on the phone. It looks like there’s some options on the table.”

“So when do you finish up?” Gareth, one of my team members asked.

“Today.” Rhys and I looked at each other and then grinned. “We’ve got a dog shelter to build.”

“Well, if there was ever an occasion that warranted a visit to the pub...” Charlie said, looking hopefully at Brent.

It felt like every man drew in a breath, and every woman. They all stared at Brent, and I just shrugged when he turned our way.

“Since we’re not going to get another chance at a farewell...”

The man barely got the words out before everyone started to move.

“Farewell drinks before we hit the road?” Rhys asked.

“One,” I growled. “I’ve scraped enough people off the road to know it’s stupid to drink and drive.”

“One drink and we go and get our girl.” He pulled out his phone and started tapping out a message. “I’ll let Garrett know and hopefully he can get his head out of his arse.”

“That I will drink to.”

After a long, shitty day staring at the computer screen and not really seeing the words of the report, I was glad to be doing something, anything. Every song played on the radio on the drive over to the pub seem to be declaring the same thing. Love triumphed over all and that meant I had to as well, right?

“SO ARE ALL the young people doing this... poly thing?”

Brent was several drinks in and was now peering at Rhys and me owlishly. His wife would need to pick him up from the pub before the night was through.

“Not all.” Jason, one of the other firefighters, pulled his wife closer.

She giggled and then pressed a kiss to his cheek.

“Jase is too jealous to share,” she explained. “Though having other guys to split the chores with?”

“Shit, you could have one boyfriend take the rubbish out, the other one clean the gutters.” Jason warmed to the idea. “And I could take care of you...”

Watching people make out usually made me feel weird, but not now. It wasn't too hard to imagine myself in his shoes, Katie on my arm. Maybe one day we'd have the same easy connection.

But right now I had other issues.

Some blokes got too fucking loud the moment they got a beer into them, as if they were a pressure cooker that popped a valve. A raucous male voice had us all turning around.

And I wish I hadn't.

Dave walked in the door looking a whole lot scruffier than when he was with the service. That slow smile, the sharp edge to it, that was the same though. He zeroed in on me, strutting over like he was cock of the rock.

But right now, that was me.

People started to mutter as I slipped from my seat. I'd had exactly one light beer hours ago so my head was crystal clear as I fixed him with my gaze.

"Rhett..." Brent growled. "Don't do anything stupid."

"Not my boss anymore," I told him, because this needed to happen. Every damn day I'd been forced to work with this fuckhead, I'd kept my mouth shut. Not now.

"You're still a firefighter with the Metropolitan Fire Service," my former boss told me. "And you're in uniform."

His words washed over me. I'd barely kept a lid on my hatred of Dave, but now...? It was like the brakes had failed and I was hurtling down the hill to destiny.

Dave was about to obliterate them.

"Where's your fat little bitch?" he asked. Someone cried out at that as I shoved myself away from the table. "Got sick of your shit already." His hand went to his fly. "I could slip her my dick if yours didn't satisfy her."

"Dave—"

Joe worked with Dave when the man was still part of our team, but when he stood up to intervene, Dave shoved his hand off his shoulder.

"Don't." Just one word and I took a step forward. "This has to happen."

"Is this dickhead Dave?" The scorn in Rhys' voice was like a cold beer on a hot day. It expressed perfectly how I felt. "How the hell did you get a girl like Katie to look twice at the likes of you?"

Dave's head whipped around and for a moment I saw pure venom in his gaze. He mastered himself, looking Rhys up and down with a sneer.

“You fucking her too, are ya, mate? If I knew she was such a—”

The last time I grabbed the prick by the throat was in the fire station lunchroom and it’d felt so damn good. It was surprising to note this was better. I wasn’t a firefighter and neither was Dave. We were just two blokes, and he was mouthing off about my girl.

“Say another fucking word,” I growled, watching him claw at my hands. “And I’ll knock your fucking block off in front of these nice people.”

“Rhett—”

I shoved Dave away from me, watching him gasp for breath.

“Keep your mouth shut and I’ll do it at the back of the pub, away from all of these prying eyes.”

“It’s on!” Charlie shouted, grabbing his beer and all the other firefighters did the same. They surged outside, Joe forcing Dave to stumble after him.

“Rhett.” Brent appeared in my line of sight. “Look, mate, I know you want to put that idiot ten feet under—”

“Deeper,” I growled, stretching my arms and back out in preparation.

“But you’re still a member of the service and in uniform. Don’t throw your career away over petty revenge.”

“Uniform?” I wrenched my shirt up and over my head before tossing it aside. “Now that’s sorted...” People had formed a rough circle in the lot behind the pub and Dave was shoved into the centre of it. “It’s time to take out the trash.”

Chapter 69

Rhys

I'd heard all about Dave. He was like the ghost of shitty boyfriends past, but right now I stared at this scruffy prick and wondered what the hell Katie saw in him. Didn't matter. By the way Rhett flexed his biceps, all of the strength he'd worked hard at my former gym about to be put to work.

"So what're you gonna do?" Did everyone else hear the thread of fear in Dave's voice, because I sure did. "Beat the shit out of me? I still go there first, fucked..."

His mouth snapped shut as he was forced to dodge backwards as Rhett swung hard at him. By the smile on my best friend's face, it was clear this was just a feint, something to get Dave dancing.

"No, you didn't." Rhett kept his weight on the balls of his feet, dancing across the cracked concrete and weeds, like this was a prizefight ring. Another swing and Dave was stumbling back, not lifting his fists. "You could never touch Katie. Balls deep, staring into her eyes as you blew your load in a few furtive strokes." The guys started to snicker at that and I just grinned, feeling like a shark as it sped through the ocean, the water playing along my teeth. "Whatever cum you ejaculated prematurely inside her would be wiped and away and she would still be beautiful."

Dave's lip curled and he tried to sneer, but Rhett was striking out, replacing his expression with one of fear.

"Still incredible, caring, sweet."

Dave sucked in a breath to reply, only for Rhett to force him back. Ducking, ducking, Rhett getting closer with each strike.

“But most of all, mine.”

Rhett stopped still, and Dave stumbled at the sudden change of pace. His smile was smug as he stared down at Katie’s shitty ex. No, he didn’t deserve to be associated with her. Dave, the loser. Dave, the fucking idiot. Dave, who was about to question his life decisions.

“So you finally got her...” I knew blokes like Dave, who puffed themselves up real big, as if that would assuage the feeling of emptiness inside themselves. “Big fucking deal. I don’t need a girl that needs two dicks to satisfy her.”

OK, I was done watching this shit go down. Dave needed his behaviour correcting.

“Sort this out, Rhett,” I shouted. “Or I will.”

It was perfect in a way. Rhett’s fist snapped out, going sailing through the air, right as Dave turned around, seeking the person who dared to diss him. That meant that Rhett accidentally sucker punched the guy, the crack of his fist against Dave’s chin audible across the lot. People sucked in breaths, let out oohs of shock, right as Dave went sailing through the air, eyes wide, right before hitting the ground like a sack of shit.

Only to try and claw his way back up again.

There was something of a rattish about Dave. It was like the animal of his body sensed danger and scrambled to get away, right as his head spun. That wouldn’t be happening. My foot slammed down on his chest, forcing his breath out of his lungs, then his back hard against the concrete.

“That’s enough,” Brent said. The rest of the guys disagreed, but the man made clear his will would be obeyed. “The man’s down. No point kicking him while he’s there.”

“No point at all.” Rhett blinked, looking down at his fists, flexing the fingers. “You don’t matter.” He stabbed his finger in the air. “You never did.”

My friend was having a moment just like I’d had in that boardroom. Where all the shit was burned away and all that was left was her.

“Katie...”

Rhett barely whispered the word, but I heard it, smiling and nodding.

“You took out the trash,” I told him. “Now the good stuff starts.”

“We’re gonna get her back.” He nodded, the movement growing more confident by the second. “She’s the only one for us and we’re—”

“Gonna do whatever it takes to make her see that.”

I swiped his shirt off the ground and handed it to him.

“Good luck.” Knox stood there, arms crossed and a small smile on his face. “Now, you might be done with Dave, but Charlie, Noah and me...? We’ve got some unfinished business.”

“I give up,” Brent said, throwing up his hands and heading back towards the pub.

Not us though. We had a long drive ahead of us and the only way forward was to get on the road.

“What about Garrett?”

We were standing beside Rhett’s truck, the chill of the night air helping dispel the heat of anger.

“I’ve texted him,” I said, “but I’ve gotta say, he either gets his head out of his arse and gets on board the help Katie train.”

“Or we leave him behind.” Rhett nodded, climbing into the front seat of his car. “We’ll go by the hospital on the way, see if we can talk sense into him.”

Or walk away from him for good.

Chapter 70

Garrett

These kinds of patients were always the worst.

Not the drunk ones. Not the ones caught in the throes of addiction, the disease forcing them to do shitty, deceitful things in an attempt to assuage the pain of withdrawal. Not even the hypochondriacs or demanding ones beat these. No, it was the quiet patients with haunted eyes that killed me every time.

Mrs Curtis said very little when I entered her bay, but the way she jumped, then shrank back against the bed, told me everything I needed to know. If that wasn't enough, the bruises all over her body screamed it at me. Her husband, a big prick that stood too close, staring down at her with hard eyes, his hands forming fists and then relaxing, only to clench again, he made clear what he'd done, even if he was unaware of it.

Do a mandatory report of domestic violence, I thought, creating myself a checklist. Anything rather than see Katie there on bed, her beautiful brown eyes looking at me with the same kind of hurt as Mrs Curtis. Take some observations and—

“Can we get out of here?” Mr Curtis, I presumed, huffed, his big boy act ruined by the furtive way he looked past me and out to the ward. “She’s fine.”

“That’s what the doctors will determine,” I said in my best arsehole whisperer voice. “Now, Mrs Curtis—”

“Talk to me, mate.” Australians used the word mate to refer to their best friends or worst enemies. “You got anything you want to say?” The

challenge was evident in his tone, the way his chin lifted. “You say it to me.”

“Right.” I was tired, too bloody tired, but of course, I still had work to do. That exhaustion, the hopelessness I felt all the way home, threatened to break me right now, but I wouldn’t due to the likes of Mr Curtis. Men that beat up women, abused them? There had to be a special kind of hell for them if there was any justice in the world. “Well, I need to do some observations.” I held up the blood pressure monitor and clipboard. “Take your blood pressure, temperature—”

“You’re wasting these people’s time, you know that, right?” The fact the man dared to use such a scathing tone in front of a complete stranger had my hackles raising. Abusers could escalate and it felt like this man’s control was fraying by the second. “The emergency department is packed with people that really need help and you had to come in here—”

It felt like his hand moved like a glacier, too slow, too ponderously, but with a power that had its own inertia. Too tired to default to my usual professional manner, my hand shot out, stopping him from grabbing her arm by taking control of his. My thumb pressed down into the sensitive muscles just above the ulnar, grinding into the bones until the man was forced to snatch his hand back as if stung.

“What the fuck...?” The curtain around the bay was whisked back and a doctor walked in, taking in the entire scene with a slight frown. “We’re going.” He went to wrench his wife from the bed. “Not staying around here letting some pussy nurse manhandle me.”

“What...?” the doctor frowned, then stepped out and looked down the hallway. “Security!”

“Security? Security?” Mr Curtis shouted. “What the fuck do we need security for? To take this prick away from grabbing me? I want him charged!”

HALF AN HOUR LATER, I was standing in Cora’s office, before her desk, waiting for her to turn up and discipline me like a naughty schoolboy. Sure enough, her door was wrenched open and she marched in, a pinched expression on her face. My union rep was with her, but the look on the woman’s face didn’t fill me with hope.

“Any reason why you would assault a patient?” Looked like we were getting right down to brass tacks. Cora sat down in her chair, but didn’t indicate I was to do the same. Her head came to rest on her hands as she stared me down. “I understand the situation was a difficult one.”

“Curtis has been charged with domestic violence,” the union rep said almost apologetically. “He’d breached an Aggravated Violence Order.”

“But that doesn’t mean my staff need to act like judge, jury and executioner.” Cora scowled at me before looking down at her computer. “You have a clean record with no previous incidents.”

Yes, I fucking did. Every day I did my job, pushed myself to be my best, not that it made a difference.

“But this...” A sharp shake of Cora’s head let me know how this was going to go. “I’ll need to put you on administrative leave while we investigate the situation.”

Why did that feel like a death sentence and a relief all at the same time?

That gave me pause.

You shouldn’t feel that way about a job, right? To be looking frantically for a way out, like a rat trapped in a maze, all while trying to do your best to navigate its twists and turns as fast as you can.

“Paid leave,” the union rep said firmly. “Curtis obviously bashed his wife.”

“Allegedly.” Cora said that far too primly, setting the pens and paperwork on her desk in perfect right angles to each other. “The matter is for the police to deal with, but Garrett’s actions, they could affect the case, let alone re-traumatise the poor victim.”

The two of them talked about how things would go, haggling like two women at market. I just watched them talk and talk, not really hearing the words. It was a meaningless, discordant tune, one that was joined by a far off orchestra. The sound of voices beyond the door, one blaring over the PA system. The beep of heart rate monitors, the wail of sirens, they washed over me. It was a massive sea of noise and I was drowning in it.

That was when I took a step backwards.

That’s what you did when a tidal wave was rushing forward for you. You got the hell out of its path, didn’t just stand there and let it swallow you whole. Cora broke off and frowned as she watched me move closer to the door.

“Garrett...” The union rep’s voice was gentle. It was the same tone we used when patients were panicking, designed to help their nervous system reset. “It’s OK.”

But it wasn’t. I felt it now, everything I’d been trying so damn hard to keep down. This was wrong. I didn’t need to be polite and professional around dicks like Curtis. I’d worked hard to make sure my body was strong. What was the point of that if it wasn’t to drag fucks like him around the back of the hospital and beat the shit out of him until he never dared raise his hand against a woman again? Of course, that was when my phone buzzed. I pulled it out and then looked blankly at the screen.

We’re going to Katie’s, Rhys had written. Rhett’s quit. I told Drew to buy me out of the gym. We need to talk about what to do with the house.

I blinked, feeling like I’d somehow walked in the middle of a conversation.

Or? I typed out.

Or you can come with us. I watched the bubble appear and something loosened the god awful pressure in my chest, letting me take a full breath. Leave your shit job behind. Each one of us likes to help people. How about we help the most important person in our life?

When? I asked.

Now, came his reply. We’re out front, Gar.

“I need to go.” That came out all croaky, but I didn’t bother to clear my throat, heading to the door.

“You’re on administrative leave, Garrett!” Cora snapped. “Until an investigation is complete.”

She was going to make me jump through hoops, flex her muscles just to make herself feel big by making me small. I shook my head.

“Don’t bother.” Finally, finally I felt like the haze in my head was clearing. “Because I quit.”

Both women called after me as I strode out the door, but they weren’t the ones that mattered. Katie did. I walked past hospital beds, other nurses and doctors, but didn’t respond as they turned to stare. Just keep on walking, I thought, to Katie. Beyond the doors, out into the night, my bag left in my locker, but I couldn’t bring myself to go back to get it. The hospital was like quicksand, ready to suck me back in. Instead, I breathed in the night air with greedy gulps.

“Well, we got him outside.” Rhys appeared, a broad smirk on his face. “That’s promising.”

“We need to make a decision,” Rhett said. “The right one, this time.”

“I apologised,” I snapped, all the frustration I tried to tamp down coming bubbling up. “I fucked up, and I apologised and—”

“Now you need to put your money where your mouth is.” Rhett frowned. “Your body? That saying makes no damn sense.”

“What Mr Roboto is saying is words are cheap, Garrett.” Rhys stepped forward. “Action talks and bullshit walks. We just need to know, are you full of shit or are you a man of your word?”

“We can’t do this without you,” Rhys said. “Who’s going to patch us up after we undoubtably have an industrial accident on the work site?”

“Speak for yourself,” Rhett said, shooting him a dark look. “I use proper PPE and follow safety protocols.”

“Who’s going to annoy the shit out of Katie’s nan, co-opting her kitchen to cook amazing meals made from local ingredients? No more farmers’ markets needed when you live on a damn farm.”

“You need me to be the farm medic?” I asked, finding myself smiling despite everything.

“We need you to show Katie how serious we are about her,” Rhett replied. “We screwed shit up with Natasha. Let’s not make the same mistake twice.”

He was about to come with us. I saw it in the way he took a step forward, the first one in the right direction, but of course that was the moment some officious cow came marching out of the emergency department.

“Look, you have an acts of service kink,” Rhys said.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“It used to be enough for you making sure we ate, had showers and cleaned up after ourselves, but really you wanted more.” Rhys peered into my eyes. “Someone you can pour all that love into and get just as much back. Working here is gonna kill you. You know it and I know it. It’s just a matter of when. Don’t you want to put the burden down?” I glanced back at the hospital for just a moment. “Don’t you want to choose Katie?”

“And what if she doesn’t want me?” I barely whispered that. “I fucked up—”

“So make it up to her,” Rhett replied. “Walking away from this shithole, that’d be a helluva good first step. Each one of us wants someone to love and something meaningful to do. Maybe...Maybe we can find a way to do that together.”

I couldn’t answer them straight away. All the habitual bullshit that kept me in this place was weighing me down. It was like concrete blocks tied to my feet, dragging me back under the waves. But I couldn’t let it. Not for myself. Rhys was right, there was something about that perfect and total surrender of my ego to a greater cause that was endlessly seductive, but for Katie... I wrenched off my scrub top and let it fall from my fingers.

“Let’s go and get our girl.”

IT WAS MIDMORNING when we rolled up the driveway to the farm. Bronson came bounding out, barking to alert everyone inside that we were here. Katie came stumbling out, still dressed in her PJ’s, her eyes slightly red and swollen. They blinked right now, as if unable to believe what she was seeing and that had me striding across the driveway to pull her close.

“You want to build a shelter here? We’re here to help.” I pressed a kiss to the top of her head, closing my eyes for just a second to breathe in her perfume. “We’ll always be here for you.” I pulled back for just a second. “If you want us to.”

“Told you it’d all work out.”

Her nanna stood there with a smug smile on her face, right as her husband emerged.

“So we’ve got another couple of visitors?” He looked us up and down. “You lot look like strong types. What do you know about feeding cattle?”

“Nothing,” I replied, “but we’ll learn. Whatever it takes to make this work, we’ll learn.”

Chapter 71

Katie

Days later

“You’re making some progress.”

I looked up to see Nan had come up with a basket of food and then glanced at the sky. Sun was overhead, so must be lunchtime.

“We’d want to be.”

Rhys walked over, wiping his face on his shirt and that was a mistake. We’d been hauling stone bricks out of the undergrowth and cutting down weeds, which was hard, backbreaking work. Bronson was in his element, barking and then coming barrelling over when he saw we had company. He stopped at Nan’s truck though, dropping into a sit and barking at the passenger side door.

I soon realised why.

Mandie sat there, silent for once, until she opened the door.

“Brought you something to eat and...” Nan looked over her shoulder.

“Another helper. Figured you could use another set of hands.”

Could I? It wasn’t my sister’s hands I was worried about, but her mouth. My hands went to my hips and she noted that as she walked over. For once she was acting almost chastened.

“Fellas.” She nodded to the guys and got a simple nod from them as they helped themselves to the thermos of tea. “So, this is going to become a shelter, huh?”

“That’s not why you drove down here.”

I'd gotten texts and missed call notifications from her, but by the time I got to look at my phone, I was usually too tired to reply. Well, that was my story, and I was sticking to it.

"Nope, it's not." Mandie looked the shed over, squinting slightly in the face of the bright sun. "This could be amazing. The stone is a great—"

"Why are you here, Mandie?" I said, raising an eyebrow.

"To say sorry. You know me. Open my mouth and the truth bombs just drop out." She tried to smile her way through that, but my steady stare had it faltering. "I was a dick. Not entirely off base—"

"You know you're ruining a perfectly good apology right now," I said.

"Yeah?" She dared to smile. "I kinda thought I sucked at it."

"That's probably a more accurate way of putting it." I grabbed a cloth and wiped my face. "Well, if we're all about the unvarnished truth, let me hit you with some." Her silence was about the best I could expect from my sister. "You treat me like I'm some kind of gimp because I don't do things the way you do. Newsflash, most people don't and it's not because they're too stupid to recognise your genius, but due the fact everyone does things in their own way." She sucked in a breath to reply, but I cut her off. "That doesn't make them wrong."

"OK."

Apparently, I had permission to continue.

"If you really want to help people, try listening first and passing judgement later, if ever. See if people actually want you acting as judge, jury and executioner."

"Heard."

Her tight voice made clear how much effort it took to keep quiet.

"And be a bit more open to the fact people have their own goals and their own ways of getting there." I looked over my shoulder to see the guys moving closer. They had my back, I'd learned that pretty quickly, and they always would. "It'd be a whole lot cooler if you accepted you were a fellow traveller on the road, not the only person who can see a way forward."

That was the moment when her shoulders drooped, her face falling. I hated seeing it, but also needed it to happen as well. Mandie would bounce back and be twice as bossy, but right now I was creating a check point, one I could bring her back to when she got too crazy.

"So can we jump to the part when we hug this out?" she asked in a small voice. "After I've said sorry, that I just wanted things to get better for

you.” There was a mischievous glint in her eye as she met my gaze. “I mean look at how this all turned out.”

“You did not just say I told you so...” I growled, taking a step forward and she threw her hands up in surrender. “Pretty sure that means you’re on brick heaving duty.” I punched her in the arm. “You’re always rabbiting on about functional exercise in your videos.”

“Nothing more functional than tossing stone bricks into a pile,” Rhys said with a grin, nodding the mound we’d created.

“Fine...” Mandie rolled up her sleeves, then tossed me her phone. “Get this on film.”

“So I can play it back and gloat each time I watch it?” I asked with a grin.

“Because this is good content.” She looked up at the walls and the decaying roof. “And you’re gonna need me to help out with the shelter. I’ll have a GoFundMe campaign up before the end of the day, a marketing plan by the morning. I know a bunch of influencers who’d love to get behind a community project like this. We can get a working bee going—”

“Let’s start with the work first,” Rhett said, shooting her a dark look. “Everything else can be sorted after the day is done.”

“Well, that was long overdue.” Nan wrapped an arm around my shoulders and gave me a squeeze, despite my filthy state. “You always let your sister ride roughshod over you. A bit of push back is healthy for both of you. Now, I made you your favourite sandwiches...”

I ate them sitting down on an outcropping, Bronson panting at my feet. Mandie had ideas, so many ideas about how to make the process go faster. The guys listened patiently, then directed her to move her arse and get it done the way I told her. I smiled and then took another bite.

Chapter 72

Several months later, the day of the shelter opening

Katie

I woke the day of the shelter opening with a start, glancing around me to see I was the only one in our bed.

“Shit...” I hissed, throwing the covers to one side. “Shit!”

Had I slept in? Was everybody here already as I was snoring my head off, oblivious. The room in the shearer’s cottage we had commandeered was completely empty. Not even Bronson had stuck around. It was then I heard the sound of the shower going, so I yanked an old t-shirt on and went to investigate.

“Morning.” Rhett stepped out of the shower, and whoa. All that damp, naked flesh shoved my fears to one side and had me refocussing on him. “I was just about to wake you up.”

“What time is it?” I asked, slapping my body as if that would summon my phone, so he looked down at his watch.

“Just gone eight.”

“Eight!” I yelped and then stripped off, jumping in the shower he’d just vacated. “I was supposed to be up at six!”

“And you went to bed at two am.” He grabbed me around the waist and held me close. “All your hard work has paid off. Everything is done.”

“The food—” I said, trying to wriggle free.

“Garrett is down at the main house chopping up onions with your grandmother. Your mum and dad are bringing down the sausages.” His nose wrinkled. “Including those weird vegan ones Mandie insisted on.” His arms

went around me and their damp weight was comforting. “Rhys is up at the shelter with Bronson, feeding the puppies.” We’d gotten our first lot of rescue dogs. A litter of puppies were dumped at another nearby shelter and they offered them to us when it was clear they wouldn’t have the space to home them. “And I need to get in uniform.”

I looked up at Rhett then and smiled.

“First time in months. Are you excited? What kind of appliances is the Country Fire Service going to bring? Are they the cool ones?” I asked.

“They’re all cool,” he replied, stroking his fingers down my cheek, “and yeah, I’m excited. The transfer took a little longer than expected, but...” His lips pressed against mine. “I had this really cool chick to spend it with.”

“You could spend some more time with me.” I looked down, noting the way his body was responding. “Scrub my back?”

His lips twitched as he shook his head slowly.

“I want to. Like really, really want to, but I need to impress the boss and be there on time to show him where to set up. The volunteers need to be organised, and we need to review what we’re going to do for the kids...”

His voice trailed away at my grin.

“Rain check then.” I bounced up to give him another kiss. “Go and impress your new boss, and I’ll come and find you later. Maybe I can get in the front seat of the fire truck and toot your horn or something?”

That earned me a slap on my arse, forcing me to yelp as I scrambled back into the shower. Rhett didn’t leave immediately, standing in the doorway and watching me scrub myself clean.

“What?” I asked as I bent down to grab the shampoo.

“It’s all coming together, babe. Your dream, your vision. Take a moment to catch your breath and enjoy it.”

I blinked, considering his words long after the point that he left the bathroom.

The kitchen was insane.

“Not that thick!” Nan said to Garrett.

The two of them had a massive pile of chopped onions before them, the air making my eyes water.

“They need to be reasonably thick, otherwise they’ll burn on the barbeque,” Garrett countered.

He’d been initially a bit intimidated by Nan, and she was wary of letting him into her precious kitchen, but the two had developed a strange kind of

camaraderie.

“If you keen them thin, they caramelise and it develops all the sweetness in the onions.” Nan held up the peeled onion she was about to cut. “These are lovely. I grew them myself.”

“Caramelisation happens at low temperatures.”

Knives were stabbed into chopping boards and they both went to square off on what would no doubt be yet another battle about food. I cleared my throat and entered the room.

“Look who decided to get up!” Nan came over and pressed a kiss to my cheek. “Morning, darling. Are you excited? I could barely sleep a wink last night. I’ve been up since before the sun rose, baking fresh bread.”

“We had that bakery order,” I replied.

“Cancelled that.” She waved her hand. “The bakery is never going to be able to beat my bread.” As if to make a point, she sliced off a couple of pieces and handed it over, laden with bacon and eggs she had been frying on the stove. “Now get that into you. If today is like the local show, you won’t get a chance to take another bite all day.”

“Hey.” Garrett shot me a sidelong look as I walked over to his side of the kitchen island. Those dimples popped as he smiled. A soft, lingering kiss was pressed to my temple, then he pulled me in close. “Tell me how to deal with your grandmother, because the woman is a menace.”

“Heard that!” Nanna shouted as she went back to slicing onions.

Before I could answer, the door opened and in came my parents.

“Hello, love!” Mum said, bustling over as she carried bags and bags of supplies. “Morning Grace, Garrett. Got all the sausages you ordered.”

“Fancy ones from the butcher at the central markets.” Dad dropped his burden onto the kitchen bench. “Vegan ones from the vego place.”

The three of them started talking about grilling and proper temperatures as Mum rushed to my side.

“How’re we feeling?” Her hands went to my shoulders as she looked me up and down. “Nervous? Don’t be. Mandie’s GoFundMe thingo is going great guns. She’s already raised a couple of hundred thousand dollars.”

You can say a lot about my sister, but bad at marketing wasn’t one of them.

“Nervous?” I took a moment, my awareness turning inwards. Was that what this jittery feeling was? It didn’t feel anxious, though. We’d set ourself goal after goal the entire time we rebuilt the shed, and we’d smashed each

one of them. This was just the finishing line. Get people in the door, involve the community, and see if we could raise a bit more money. “No, I’m...” Garrett stopped arguing with my family, somehow knowing this was the moment when he needed to focus on me. With a gentle smile, he nodded. “I’m happy, Mum.”

Oh no.

Her eyelashes fluttered frantically, her cheeks turning bright pink.

“Oh, Katie...”

“Mum.” I held out a hand. “Mum!”

Nope, too late, she had her arms wrapped around me and was holding me tight.

“That’s all I ever wanted, sweetheart. It’s all any parent wants for their children. I told you that not becoming a vet was just a setback.” She pulled back, holding me at arm’s length. “Because look at you now.”

Yeah, look at us now. A giggle bubbled up inside me as I watched Dad argue for slower cooking times on lower heat and Nan dismissed both him and Garrett as idiots. Arguing about a sausage sizzle seemed stupid, but that wasn’t what I was focussed on. We were all together, bound by bonds of love, and right now my heart ached with the intensity of it. Of course, I couldn’t say that.

“Um... I need to get up to feed the puppies. Did you want to come?”

“Oh, I’ll stay here, love.” Mum glanced back at the chaos. “Dogs are more your thing than mine, and I think someone’s going to need to arbitrate here.”

I shook my head and then went over to Garrett.

“Tell your grandmother that we are not running an American low-and-slow barbeque joint today,” he said with a huff.

“Yeah, right.” I pointed at the three of them. “I like eating food. You guys go nuts about it. Anyway, speaking of food, I’m off to feed the pups.”

“So I’ll see you later?” His tone dropped as he turned his back on the conversation, sheltering me. “I might have a sausage for you to put in your mouth.”

“Oh my god...” I looked around him to make sure none of my damn family caught that before skipping free of him. “I’ll come and find you later.”

The sound of puppies yipping filled the air as I slid off the ATV. They were so cute, but also so damn noisy. Why became evident pretty quickly.

“Hey!” Rhys was just closing the door of the fridge we kept the dog food in before turning and sweeping me up into his arms. “We didn’t wake you? You looked so cute when we snuck out this morning. Figured I’d get a jump on the feedings, and you know Bronson loves coming up to hang out with the puppies.”

Almost more than he did with us. He was the reason the puppies were so excitable right now. Bouncing around their enclosure, he had them following hard on his heels before whirling around to chase them.

Because it was now he had the opportunity to be a puppy himself.

You could almost see him grinning as he charged at the pups, sending them scattering, only for them to rally seconds later and launch themselves at him.

“Look how happy he is,” I said, my hand going to my chest.

“Look how happy we are.” When his arms went around me, I looked up, catching his warm smile. “This is a helluva lot more fun than bollocking out ‘roid heads for not putting their damn weights away.”

“So you like being out here?” I asked in a small voice.

They’d sold their house, Rhys had sold his half of the business and reinvested it in the shelter. I’d wanted someone to choose me, but in the end, they went far beyond that. Sometimes I felt like I was waiting for the other shoe to drop and then they’d realise what a mistake this all was.

“Never happier.” He snuggled in closer. “Not even pulling off a complete 2160 spin off a vert ramp could top this.”

“Even if Tony Hawk was watching?”

“Even if the entire 1980s era Bones Brigade was standing on the sidelines,” he replied.

I had no idea what that meant, but it was enough to have me turning back to the dogs. Part of me wanted to sit here for hours and just watch them go crazy, but—

“There you are.” We looked up to see Pa had pulled up on the tractor. “Time to start setting up.” He nodded to the trailer attached to the tractor. We’d cleaned it up so kids could jump in and go for rides. “Young Rhys could drive us back down to the house, show me he won’t drive over your grandmother’s roses.”

“One time...” Rhys shook his head. “I did that one time.”

“C’mon, Bronson.”

When I called out to the dog, his head jerked up, and he went running over to the gate. I let him out, forced to keep the puppies from following us.

“Not this time, guys.” I was met with a chorus of yips of complaint, but I knew they’d be OK. We’d given them a purpose-built puppy pen that was safe and secure, out of the weather, had plenty of water and toys and dry food for them to eat. They were safe, and when they got a bit older, we’d trial them going on walks around the farm. “Alright, Bronson...”

I didn’t need to tell the dog twice. He was up and in the tray, paws planted on the railing as Pa dismounted. Rhys took over and revved the engine a little, just to make us stumble in the tray.

“Ready?”

When we got back down to the paddock, we’d collect all the food and supplies to bring up here. The CFS would need to be directed on where to come, as would the local band that volunteered to play. The opening day would begin in earnest and that had my breath catching in my chest. I nodded despite that.

“I’m ready.”

“Hey, I’m Mandie and I’m here at the Paws Dog Rescue up in the beautiful hills...”

My sister walked past me, talking into her phone, because apparently she was doing a live broadcast of the opening. She said it would help bring more people to the event, but I’m not sure we’d need it. Hours later there were cars, families, everywhere. Rhett and the CFS had created a mass of bubbles for the kids to play with, and still more were walking with their parents, meeting the puppies. Rhys had a clipboard in hand and was handing out applications for adoption.

None of the dogs were going anywhere until they were a little older and had their first shots, but it was good to have options. It was the savoury scent of a sausage sizzle that drew me closer. Nan was right. I’d barely stopped all day, and it was well past lunchtime. I went to join the line up in front of the food stall, but Garrett waved me forward.

“Milady.” He produced a sausage cooked to my exact specifications (not burned but not undercooked. Onions mounded on the top with sauce and mustard to follow). “How’s it going?” He looked out over the busy field outside the shelter. “I think by anyone’s standards, this has been a success.”

“Thank Mandie,” I said.

“Thank you.”

He looked suddenly serious as he put the tongs down and pulled me closer, but right as he went to kiss me, someone called out his name. An older woman approached with an apologetic smile on her face.

“I know you said you’re not interested, but I figured it wouldn’t hurt to give you my business card.”

“Business card?” I asked him when she turned to rejoin her family. “What’s that about?”

“Nothing.”

He was going to scrunch it up, but I pulled it from between his fingers. That smile was gone, his eyes wary as I scanned the details.

“She works at the local hospital in HR.”

“That’s why it’s nothing.” He plucked it from my grip, but I grabbed his wrist.

“No, it’s not.”

“Katie—”

“What does...” I looked over at the card. “Anne want to talk to you about?”

“We got chatting.” He picked up the tongs again and turned the sausages over. “She asked what brought me down here.” His gaze softened as he looked at me. “I told her you. She asked what I did for a living—”

“And you told her you’re a nurse.”

“Was a nurse.” He worked to turn a bunch of sausages over, then stir the mass of cooked onions before dumping them into another pan, ready to be served. “That’s what I told her.”

“Am a nurse.” I hated the way he looked at me, as if waiting for me to slap him down. That was never the way this was supposed to be. He was caught up in a toxic vibe at his old hospital, but I never once thought he would give up nursing for good. My hand went to his arm. “You love nursing.”

“I love you.”

We both went still at that. We’d said it a bunch of times now, but it still created a frisson of shock each time I heard it.

“I love you too, and the two things aren’t mutually exclusive,” I insisted. He just shook his head, turning back to the sausages. “I mean not having to work for Nora would be a massive bonus.” That had him snorting.

“Would you have to work in the emergency department and do all those crazy hours still?”

“No.” He smiled at the customer who paid for a sausage, putting their order together and handing it over. “Anne said they’re mainly looking for ward nurses. Regular hours, predictable shifts. Most of the emergencies go to bigger hospitals.” I watched him shrug. “I explained that I had pretty bad burnout from the last job, and she seemed to think that they could work with me on that.”

“So...?”

I wouldn’t let up even though there were a million things that needed doing. Sometimes there are moments, special ones, and you need to step up to meet them or lose the opportunity forever.

“I’ve learned my lesson,” Garrett insisted. “That giving everything you have means there isn’t enough left to survive. It’s seductive.” He set more sausages on the grill. “There’s this exhilaration that comes from total surrender of ego to the pursuit of healing. It’s this beautifully noble thing, but also really stupid. If I kept going as I was, I’d be left with serious mental health issues and the medical system would move on, finding new, idealistic nurses to take my place within a day.”

“So don’t do that,” I said. He frowned as he looked over at me. “Don’t give everything you’ve got.” Suddenly, I was a whole lot more confident, because this was familiar ground. “Work out what your boundaries are and stick to them no matter what. Don’t take responsibility for all the world’s problems, not when you need to focus on your own.”

“Just like that, huh?” He stepped away from the grill and towards me. Arms went around me, holding me tight. “And you think that’ll be easy? What about the shelter?”

“What about the shelter?” I replied. “That’s my dream, but I think nursing is yours.” I pulled back to look up at him. “You helped me make mine come true. Now it’s your turn.”

His hand went to the back of my head, tilting it to just the right angle to kiss me.

“I will love you forever, you know that, right?” he said. “It’ll be you and me and Rhys and Rhett, squabbling over how to cook the toast in our old age, just like your grandparents do.”

“Promise?”

This might not have been smart, but right now, I was so damn happy my dreams had come true, I needed everyone to share that joy. His lips curved in a grin.

“Promise.”

“So you’ll ring Anne on Monday?”

“I’ll ring Anne on Monday.” He pulled away to grab a bread roll and split it open, sliding three sausages into the space between. “Now, can I interest you in some more sausages? I’ve been told they feel really good when you put them in your mouth.”

“I’ve got just about all the sausage I can handle right now,” I said with a giggle, right before taking a bite.

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