

TREASURED and PLEASURED

By

Laran Mithras

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EPILOGUE

Love should never require a choice...

————CHAPTER 1

Last Year

The commotion in the exam room made me jump.

I'm sort of a really nervous person. Unfortunately my blonde hair and high strung personality often came across as air-headed.

I'm not an air head. I flexed my right hand backward in a long stretch. I held one of the doctor's magazines with the other.

Whoever Doctor Beeker was working on was having problems. I hadn't seen the man but I could hear his gravelly, gruff voice. The man was a cusser.

"Aw... for fuck's sake!"

I heard the murmur of the chiropractor.

"Agh!"

After a moment of some unintelligible muttering, Ward Beeker leaned his shoulder on the wall of my area. "Amber, got a client here needing some deep sciatic work, right side."

I am a licensed masseuse. It pays well. It also hurts like hell. Nothing like finding out my career choice was a bad one. From loving to hurting, I was blowing out my wrists and it was getting worse. I dropped the magazine and began working my other hand. "Okay."

He looked weary. Whether it was over the patient or his knowledge that my usage would eventually come to an end, I wasn't sure. He went back into the examining cubicle.

I got up and paced, working the feeling into my legs and feet so I could spend the next half hour or more on them.

A few minutes later, Doctor Beeker escorted a grungy-looking man into my area.

I held out my hand. "Hi, I'm Amber." His hand was rough. I patted the table and said, "Lie face down, here."

He stood there squirming on his left leg in his blue examining robe and growled. His face was lined and a little worn.

I was struck by how handsome he was, despite his scowl. His brunette hair was on the light side and his beard was closely cropped. No hints of gray.

He looked like a spanked little boy at the moment. He climbed onto the table and tried to hide his exposed backside.

I said, "I've seen it all... mister...?"

Doctor Beeker cleared his throat and double-checked his paperwork. "Julian Wheeler." He whirled about and walked towards the front.

Julian grunted sourly in acknowledgement and winced in pain as he settled. He let out a grudging breath.

I could tell he was trying to relax. I said, "Hurts all the way up and down?" I pressed a finger lightly over his sciatic – not enough to cause discomfort, but to let him know I knew where.

"Yeah..."

"This is going to be a deep massage and it will hurt at first—"

"Fuck, it already hurts."

I went to work on him, pressing with my palm to locate the channel of muscle and bone. Then I pressed in with my elbow.

He arched his back up, his head coming almost straight up. "Oh fuck!"

"Try to relax."

"Easy for you to say..."

I slowly started massaging the muscles around the sciatic with my elbow, leaning onto him.

He cried out, grunting and gritting his teeth.

I bore down. The sooner I loosened the muscles squeezing the nerve, the sooner he would find some relief.

He flopped and jerked like a fish on the table. "Son of a bitch... Agh!"

I kept going, ignoring him.

"Ah! Ow!" He panted in exhaustion as I let up and shifted a little.

Back to work.

He growled long and painfully. "Agh... you are one evil bitch! Ah fuck..."

I didn't try to hide my smile. "If we don't get this muscle loosened up—"

"Do you have to use your elbow? You're enjoying this."

"I'm not." My nervous personality forced me to continue. "I have to use my elbows to get deep here. My wrists won't handle it anymore. What you feel in your cheek here is sometimes what I feel in my wrists. It's not fun."

He smirked hoarsely, "Well, I'm glad I'm not the only one in agony."

"That's not nice." I leaned on my elbow.

"Agh!" He panted for a couple of seconds. "Neither is my finger." He waved his middle finger in the air.

"Do you want relief, or not?"

He barked a laugh. "Can't turn down an offer like that from a pretty blonde... Even if she is a cold-hearted witch."

I sniffed in disdain and leaned into him.

"Agh! Did you go to school for this—"

"Yes—"

"—torture?"

"I have to loosen—"

"Who was your teacher? The Marquis de Sade?"

"Who?"

"Famous sadist."

"I am not a—"

"Or maybe a dominatrix taught you. Argh!"

"I was not taught by a—"

"In a dungeon no doubt..."

"It was at—"

He growled, "Do you ever stop talking?"

I huffed in indignation.

He groaned, "Taking a bullet in Afghanistan wasn't as bad as this."

I really gouged his nerve with my elbow.

His howl was loud.

Doctor Beeker came around the corner and lifted his eyebrow at me.

I smiled sweetly.

The handsome man named Julian said, "I think I'd rather reenlist and go get shot again."

I coughed.

"Or step on a landmine. Losing my leg at this point sounds like a great idea..."

I shook my head and said breathily, "And I'm the nervous one."

He jerked his head up and looked at me with wild eyes. "What? You? Nervous?"

"Yes. High strung or whatever—"

"No fucking way. You are like a cold, calculating serial killer—"

I leaned on my elbow.

That shut him up.

I tried to steer the conversation away from his griping to take his mind off the pain. "So what do you do for a living?"

"I used to be a machinist."

"Used to?"

"Yeah, being you're about to kill me and this is my last day on Earth... Fuck..."

"So you're a machinist."

He held up some fingers. "You can't tell?" They were calloused and showed tiny burns.

"I thought you said you were in the service?"

"The Army. Did a four-year stint. Was done with that shit. But now I know..."

"What?"

"It was nothing like this. Now I know what it's like to die under interrogation."

I rolled my eyes.

He limped away from me a half hour later, grumbling, "I feel like I'm gonna

die..."

I sighed and mumbled, "You'll feel better later—" My heart just wasn't in it.

"I feel worse than when I came in..." His voice trailed off as he walked into the examining room to retrieve his clothing.

You're welcome, jerk.

I dropped into the chair and folded my arms petulantly. Then I went to work stretching my wrists.

I was going to have to find a new job – one that didn't require skills.

My future was not looking bright.

————CHAPTER 2

My home was the best I could do for the money. Nestled into very old trees on the edge of the business and industrial parts of town, my rented home was on a strange wedge of land that defied city planning.

Almost an acre under tall trees, it was always cool in the summer, even when the temperatures reached towards a hundred. It was very cold in the winter with a deep bone chill that settled in no matter where on the property I was. The house was a one story thing built when radios were new. The barn leaned, but otherwise seemed to have cemented itself sturdily into its crooked tilt. The trees had the effect of blocking a lot of the sounds from the frontage road and nearby industrial units.

The interior was not well cared for. The old brass knobs had several coats of paint on them. Many didn't even turn anymore. The floor was piled with six layers of old linoleum if the hole in the kitchen floor next to the old refrigerator was any indication.

I loved the feel of the antique refrigerator's chrome handle in the summer. In the winter, it was an icy trap to avoid unless I used an oven mitt.

There was a knock on my front door just as I was deciding what to eat for dinner.

Wesley stood there grinning.

He was my friend in all things. A steady, if forgetful, companion, Wes kept me company in good times and bad. My only other real friend was Verity.

I gave him a knowing look. "What are you doing here?"

Not that he had to have an excuse.

He held up Chinese food boxes. "Remember? Movie night." A movie case was tucked under his arm.

I sighed patiently. "That was last night."

"It was not." He looked confused, though.

I really liked Wes, but he was as absent-minded as they came. He required calendars in his bedroom and bathroom so that he knew what day it was when he woke up and to remind himself when he forgot as he brushed his teeth moments later.

He looked lost with his confusion. "Today is Thursday."

I waved him in. "That's right, but we agreed last week it would be Wednesday." I shut the door and scooted him into the living room.

"It was?" He began unloading his arms.

He was not a very attractive confused person – he looked as if he were constipated when he faced his forgetfulness. When he was happy and relaxed, his face was a comforting reminder that a man could be beautiful. Dark short hair over heavy eyebrows, dark eyes, and an extremely killer smile sometimes had me wondering what would happen if I gave in to him as more than a friend.

Oh, I knew he wanted it. He wore his desire like a medal on a proud soldier. His eyes always softened while looking at me.

He was cute.

But he was my friend.

I really didn't have that kind of interest in him.

He handed me a box after checking its contents twice. "Chicken chow mein, your favorite."

I breathed out silently with resignation. Even if I hadn't planned on watching a movie tonight with him, his demeanor and gentleness won me over. Not to mention, he might forget what day it was or promises he had made, but he always remembered my favorite Chinese food. I smiled with gratitude. "Thank you."

Whenever he looked at me, his eyes sparkled. This was one of those times, but the glow muted as he looked at me. Worry replaced his cheery expression.

He asked as we sat, "Is something wrong, Amber? What's going on?"

I exhaled loudly and shook my head, not looking at him. "It's this job..." I stretched my right hand, then my left.

"Your hands getting worse?"

"Terribly. I don't know how many more days I can take the pain."

"You've tried a... a..." He snapped his fingers in annoyance.

"A menthol rub? Yes. It just hides it until later, then it hurts more."

He nodded with enthusiasm. "Right, menthol." His expression turned serious again. "Not helping, huh? Any ideas for work?"

I was determined to bravely face that issue tomorrow or the next day. Search the local newspapers, ask acquaintances, but the gravity of my situation crept over me until I looked down to avoid him seeing my eyes water with frustration. I wiped as if they itched. "I just don't know what to do..."

He shifted over on the couch and put his arm around me. "Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel bad."

"I know." There was something so comforting at the moment in his arm that I let him hold me. Normally we didn't hug or touch: we were just friends. At this moment, though, my vulnerability welled up out of control and I sobbed. I buried my cheek against his shoulder and tried to figure out how my life had reached a dead end.

Other people had jobs, or a way to support themselves. All I knew was massage and my hands were on the verge of quitting. Four years down the drain. Rent obligations, utilities, and one more year of car payments all hung over me like a piano on a fraying rope.

I squeezed at his sweater as if trying to hold on. "I'm sorry, Wes. I guess I'm not a great movie partner."

Instantly, his other hand came over and cupped my head. "Shh... that's okay. You're going to come out of this fine – I know you." His hand stroked my hair

and ear.

This was not something we had ever done; I was always careful to keep the distance between us and avoid any avenue of intimacy. However, I needed this right at this moment and Wes was being a true friend – and it really did feel comforting to have him sympathizing and telling me everything was going to be all right.

At the end of my rope, I had even been cussed out by a client today, but here was my friend, being there for me when it mattered.

His lips kissed the top of my head and brought little touches of serenity with them.

Thank you, Wes. What would I do without you? I breathed deeper, the tears stopping. A warmth in my chest almost brought a smile to my face. My forgetful friend stepped in and was being my strength. I clung to him as if I would collapse into a puddle without his support.

My good friend Wes.

He was here for me when I needed it.

I looked up at him, into his eyes, wanting to thank him for being here with me. For being sympathetic.

His eyes dropped down and looked at my lips. His own lips moved inward in a slight wetting motion.

It was an instant thought: Is he thinking of kissing me?

His head moved a fraction of an inch closer as if he were unsure, or offering.

My heart thumped in my chest as my breath became labored. I parted my lips to breathe.

He kissed me as smoothly as silken sheets.

And I was kissing him back.

He was not forceful or greedy. He did not squeeze me tighter or move hastily. He was slow, sure, and soft.

My heart beat increased dramatically as I relished the ease with which we had melded mouths. Had he reacted like an eager, hungry teenager, I would've pushed him away. His kiss, however, was just the right kind that told me he cared about my situation. He offered himself in consolation. He sacrificed his cooling food because he really did care.

It was what I needed.

His hand traced over the back of my head during the kiss and sent chills down my back.

When we broke the kiss, he said softly, "I love you, Amber. I always have."

There it was.

However, it wasn't forced or pushy. It wasn't persuasive or pleading.

I looked away.

His lips came to mine again and that small discomfort was swept away.

I embraced his offer of consolation and moved closer into him. My fingers clawed lightly at his chest through the sweater.

His hand slid down to my waist, as twisted as I was on the couch. He did not grope me or cop a feel. It was that and the kiss that moved me over the edge into action.

I began tugging at his clothes, filled with a desire to be closer - more intimate.

I wanted to thank him.

I wanted to experience him.

I wanted to share myself with him.

As slow as thick syrup, I moved out of my friend-cocoon and into the arms of a handsome, caring man.

He followed my lead and we helped each other undress with the same deliberate slowness of the kiss.

Any amount of eager rushing would have frightened me off or made me realize what a fool I was being doing this with a friend.

I watched his reaction as I pulled off my blouse and bra. I have full, wide breasts that don't stick out very far. I think they're strange, but his eyes grazed over them with apparent approval. His hand came up and gently slid over the skin around my nipple.

The little button hardened fast. So did the other one. So did the tingly one between my legs.

He worked off his pants and so did I.

With a bit of a blush, I pulled off my panties and tossed them down as if to hide them from him.

Silly.

His chest was pale, but beautifully sprinkled with dark hair. He didn't just have a beautiful face. His narrow hips framed a very normal-looking dick that was uniform in color.

It lifted on its own and erected with four pulses of his heartbeat.

Seeing my friend's dick was amusing at first and I wanted to giggle, but the warmth inside me forced my hand into action. I wrapped my fingers around it, feeling a twinge shoot through my wrist and up my arm.

I wanted to handle it and feel it, but my wrist wasn't cooperating. I decided to use my mouth, instead.

Why not? Isn't this what men like? I bent over and took him into my mouth. The hot shaft throbbed on my tongue and I felt the power of it as I moved my head.

Wes sighed as if relaxing into a hot spa, but said nothing.

He tasted great – like clean skin. He had no odor down there except soap. I

sucked happily, relieved that he was as clean there as everything else.

Bad experience in the past – not one I like to remember.

His hands pressed on my shoulders until I got the idea he wanted to pull me off.

That's all? What?

I blinked at him in question.

His smile was relaxed and suggestive. He was pushing me over back onto the cushions.

Already?

His head, however, came down on my pussy.

Oh! Okay, sure. I was delighted.

Our silence through it all was the perfect path for my participation. Talking would've ruined it, I think.

His tongue sent a wave of senseless stillness over my body and I held my breath as his warm wet skin moved over my clit. It swirled around and spun me and the room with it. A groan escaped my lips and startled me.

For a split second, I thought it was someone else.

The aroma of Chinese food hung pleasantly in the room and wrapped us in a comforting blanket of familiarity.

I relaxed.

No, I mean I really relaxed.

I drifted to the movements of his tongue and floated carefree on the breezes of peace.

This is a tongue massage... No blown wrists. Could I do this for people for money? Or would my tongue eventually fall off? I almost giggled at my thoughts.

When Wes stopped and moved up my body, I was more than ready. I reached up and pulled on his arms and shoulders – welcoming him onto me.

He looked down and touched the soft helmet of his stiff rod to my pussy. He moved it up and down, not fast, and teased me into readiness.

I was wet. I felt hot. My clit tingled and pulsed. I wanted him... now. "Don't tease me..."

His push was careful.

My pussy spread for his insertion so easily that I closed my eyes and relished the feel of stiffness sliding through my labia.

Much better than a toy.

Surely, his hardness slipped inside and began filling the hollowness that cried out for that human plug which only a man could provide.

It was more than a comfortable fit. It was cozy, cushy, and flawless.

Almost as if...

No, I can't go there.

Almost as if... it had always belonged there.

No... you're my friend, Wes. Nothing else.

His movements were deliberate, tender, and cautious. He... wasn't taking from me, he was giving to me.

With that revelation, my thoughts, doubts, and resistance dwindled away until there was only our union. In and out, he moved within me and slowly twisted that lusty coil into tightness.

I didn't have thoughts of my job or my wrists: those were gone in the past. The present was us together and it... consumed me.

I began to pant with the increase in tension and compression. My pussy clamped on his moving shaft, trying to capture and feel it as it slid in and out. Peacefully,

I was lifted deep inside. I gasped at the loftiness of my body as heat twisted and turned in my pussy. I felt as if my clit were stretching and warming all at once.

The burst of the orgasm was something monumental in its completion. This was not fast or hard. I turned over ever so slowly until the tipping point... Fire blossomed behind my clit and spread in luxurious waves throughout my body.

It was slow, long, and leisurely. Despite its lack of severity, it was complete. The waves were long and tall, if gentle. I panted deeply, letting it all out with hushed exhalations of effort and release. I was warm all over. Tingles tantalized my skin all over me.

I opened my eyes.

Above me, Wes moved and showed the most curious of smiles – at once, familiar and caring. I might have expected mockery or critique, if not for the man inside me being someone who wouldn't. Instead, I saw loving wonder.

He descended, put his mouth to mine, and pushed deep – perfectly caressing my pleased and sensitive parts from the inside. His shaft swelled inside me and began pulsing. His masculine offering to me was felt, hot and wet. We kissed as he finished – just as slow and carefully as before.

His tenderness was just what I needed.

He relaxed on me, his muscles going soft and melting onto me.

I relished the warmth and close intimacy of our bodies as I came down from my orgasm and he from his. I felt the thump of his heart against my chest and listened to his slightly ragged breathing.

Our two respirations danced together as if on a ballroom floor as the music slowed.

He hummed a wordless syllable that was ripe with fulfillment.

Something inside me turned over and opened its eyes.

What have I done?

I tensed up, feeling his naked form on mine and his dick filling my hole.

How... did I let this happen? What have I done?

I started to push him up and off.

He moved after only a second of hesitation. He pulled out and got up, a curious look on his face. "Are you okay?"

I looked away and rolled off the couch. "I just need some air." I gathered up my things and ran for my bedroom.

He said nothing, but I could feel his eyes on my back.

I hid in my sanctum for as long as I thought I could. I washed my face. I brushed my hair. I pleaded with the mirror to tell me that it had all been erased – not just the evidence, but the act.

When I came out twenty minutes later, he was dressed, sitting, and finishing his Chinese food. He looked over at me with the same old Wes-look with which I was so accustomed.

He asked, "Want to watch the movie now?"

As if nothing had happened.

That infuriated me. Was I just a piece to him? Used and done? Cheap? Was what had happened so insignificant that he had no comment?

He held out my box as an offering.

I'm only worth Chinese food?

I rubbed my forehead and hid my eyes. "Not tonight, Wes. I think... maybe... I'm just going to go to sleep. You understand, right?"

He was up off the couch with catlike grace. "Amber? Is everything all right?"

No! "I just want to go to sleep..."

He looked back at dinner and the movie. And the couch. When he looked back,

there was an anguished look to his eyes. His mouth hung open wordlessly.

I flailed my hands as if trying to shrug, but they only rose to waist level. "Sorry... I just have a lot to think about." I scratched my forehead again.

Wes dropped his shoulders and said, "Okay... okay. Maybe..." He thumbed towards the door. "Maybe I'll just go."

I nodded.

He began patting his pants and looking around. "Where... did I put my keys?"

I pointed to the lampstand.

He delicately picked them up and moved stiffly to the front door. He stood there with it opened and looked back, the grief even sharper now on his face. "I..." He looked down and away, then walked out.

————CHAPTER 3

My thoughts chewed over what happened and ground the entire experience into defeat. In a moment of weakness, I had given in and let the unthinkable happen. I had sex with a friend who was nothing more than a friend.

How cheap can I be?

My body ached with the realization that I had erred in a big way.

I went to work with my newspapers and fliers under my arm, but ruminated ceaselessly on my failure – on the breakdown of what had been a comfortable friendship.

How could I ever face Wes again? Was he going to expect me to put out now whenever he needed to get off? Was I now a convenient toy and not a person to him? Was it even possible to restore...?

No, I can never go back. The mistake is done. The disaster complete. What a fool I am!

I walked into Beeker Chiropractic and frowned at Lucy.

She took one glance at me and looked down again, wisely keeping her mouth shut.

Unfortunately, Ward Beeker was not as wise for all his learning and doctor's degree. He was a tall man, wearing glasses and very gentle in appearance. He was also dry and sometimes creepy. Maybe it was just his education. Weren't all doctors weird?

"Amber." It was a mumble meant as a greeting, like, "Good morning."

"Hey..."

He stopped sipping his coffee and followed me into the back to my so-called area. It was an open room off to the side that contained a table, but not for

examinations. It was kind of a catch-all room for extra chairs, equipment and a cart. The only decoration was a yellow and orange abstract painting of a sunset that didn't match the cooler lavender colors out front.

Ward asked, "Still looking for a job?"

I sighed in defeat. "My wrists can't handle much more."

"I understand. Found anything?"

"No. I don't even know what I'm looking for."

"Be open..." He made a hand motion as if to churn an idea. "Look for opportunities where you least expect them..."

He was trying to be positive and offer me advice. The problem was, he wasn't good at giving advice and whatever he was trying to say sucked.

I patiently nodded. "Right..." I opened my papers.

He looked uncomfortable and retreated.

I did hand exercises while searching the ads and waiting for the odd call for me to deliver a massage.

Where was the therapy for my wrists?

Everyone knew, though, there was nothing to be done. At this point, the only option was to stop. Completely. Forever.

The end of my day offered nothing except more silly hand movements and no relief from the numbing, persistent pain.

I had to stop.

I walked out of the office with another paycheck for services rendered the previous week. Two more massages today were a mixed blessing. Two more fees to be collected the following week and two more straws on the camel's back that were my wrists. A pair of massages in one day was not the best for income. Four was where I found the money began to exceed my requirements.

Four was where my wrists ached in agony all night.

I was at the end of my rope.

My car was on the far side of the lot towards the street. The closer spaces were for customers.

A man on a motorcycle just sitting there caught my attention.

A woman had to be aware of things in the current climate of violence.

The man was scowling at me.

I tensed up as he got off his ride. I began to hurry, looking around for witnesses.

There were plenty. A couple over there. A woman and her baby just a dozen steps away. An older woman putting two sacks into the back of her minivan. A security guard...

"Amber?" The gravelly voice tore at my nerves.

I spun around, purse clutched tightly under my arm and hands firmly on the straps. Then I recognized him.

He walked towards me in a way that was cautious and threatening. It had something of a sideways angle that suggested he was making himself less of a target. He slid his feet forward as if walking a plank and testing its solidity. His eyes were squinted and studying. Little sparkles of light glinted on his pupils and told me he was looking back and forth on my face – between my eyes.

I swallowed. "Yes?"

He stuffed his hands into his jeans. "Julian Wheeler. Remember me? Sciatic?"

Of course I remembered him; it was only yesterday. Cautiously, I said, "Right?"

He looked down and kicked out a foot. "Just wanted to say I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" I turned to face him and let him talk.

"For being an ass. You and the doctor were right; the pain got worse but it feels a

lot better now." He waved his right foot around in the air. "I can move a lot easier today."

"Oh... that's... good."

"I really want to thank you. It was murder just trying to ride my bike." He indicated the motorcycle with a lift of his chin.

I relaxed a little. These kinds of compliments were part of the reason why I had taken up studying to be a massage therapist. "That's great."

He looked down again, then peeked at me with one eye from under a boyish eyebrow. "Can I offer you a dinner in thanks? I feel really bad about—"

I was shaking my head. "No, that's really not necessary."

"You could've kicked me out. I would've kicked my ass out—"

I laughed a little. "You weren't that bad."

He sounded vexed. "I was bad? See? Let me make it up to you. Dinner at a place of your choice."

There was something bare and raw about the man that told me he was genuine. And maybe he would divert my attention from what had happened with Wes. "Well..."

"Don't say no..." There was something muted there that hinted at a hope at the end of its rope – in a good-natured way. It struck a chord inside me that rang in sympathetic vibration with what was going on in my own little world.

I searched his eyes and he searched mine. I let my senses decide whether I should be warned or warmed, and found myself warmed. "Okay, then..."

His smile spread rapidly, first from one side of his mouth to the other. It looked good on his face, but also looked out of place - as if he rarely smiled. "Tonight?"

"I usually eat early..."

He shrugged as if nothing else mattered. "Right now?"

I laughed. "Um..." I glanced at his motorcycle. "I don't think I could ride with you—"

He was shaking his head right away. "Oh, no, you can't. There's no seat and I don't have an extra helmet. But I can follow you to wherever."

I liked the sound of it all. Dinner in a public place, no sharing rides, and a diversion from my troubles. I nodded with more enthusiasm. "Mexican food?"

His eyes widened and his head tilted slowly away in aversion. "You've got to be fucking kidding me. Mexican? The only food I can't handle?"

I laughed and covered my mouth. "I'm sorry. No, it doesn't have to be Mexican —"

"No, shit, I can eat... something. If that's what you like?"

"No, no, no, really. Chinese is my favorite, but I had it last night."

"We can go to Pablo's or Juan's or whatever—"

I laughed harder. "No, really."

"Any other choices? Anything other than Mexican?"

"Sure. Just follow me."

His smile came back. It was a little faster this time. His single chin dip for a nod was efficient and encouraging. "All right."

I led him to the Blue Lake Café.

I waited for him near the front door as he got off his motorcycle and removed his helmet. He glanced over the building and the cars in the parking lot and smoothed down his leather jacket.

His slight limp looked a lot smoother than the previous day. He said to me, "Am I dressed okay for this?"

I waved a hand. "Oh, sure. Easily."

His eyebrows moved in suspicion, but he accepted my assertion.

Daisy, the bright eyed hostess, seated us at a small table by the window. I loved the café for its cozy atmosphere and dark wooden tables and chairs. The dark blue tile on the floor was worn from many happy customers. Conversation from the other patrons was loud enough that anything we said to each other would be just between us.

He said, "Nice place." Short, to the point.

After we ordered, he said, "Thanks for letting me take you out."

"Is this a date?"

His dry tone was cracked and raspy. "Would it bother you if I bragged to all my friends that it was?"

"I don't know; how many friends do you have?"

A flat answer, "None."

I blinked. "Oh come on—"

"I left some behind in the service..."

I didn't know if he meant dead or not. "You didn't like the Army?"

"I liked it fine, but all the bullshit..." He shook his head and looked away.

"What do you mean?"

"Petty bullshit. Stupid orders by officers. Politics and rivalry. Can't function in that kind of environment."

"Is that what got you shot?"

He looked annoyed. "No. I kicked in a door and got shot." He pulled up his left sleeve and showed me a scar midway up his forearm. "Minor wound. Nothing serious."

"Getting shot is nothing serious?"

"It didn't hurt until later." He flexed the fingers on his left hand. "Just a little off. Not bad at all."

"Did you get a medical discharge?"

His instant smile told me whatever I had said was wrong. "No, I served out my term."

Not understanding the military, I remained silent. Neither did I want to clarify and sound even more like a fool.

He told me about the incident, the buildings and people involved until he stopped and squinted at me. "What's wrong with your hands?"

I realized I had been stretching alternating hands without even thinking about it. I stretched each one and frowned. "Sorry, just flexing..."

"Is that a warm up? Are you going to torture my sciatic again?" There was a hint of jocular to his voice.

"No, they hurt."

"What's wrong with them?" More serious now.

"The median nerve is compressed in each, causing—"

"What the fuck? Plain English."

I coughed. "Uh, carpal tunnel."

"Too much time on the keyboard?" He sounded interested.

"Nope. In this case, it's my job. The stress is burning out my wrists."

His look of surprise was tinged with horror. He grabbed both of my wrists and held them in his rough fingers, though gently. "And you worked on me yesterday..."

"Yeah..." I looked away.

"Then I am truly grateful. Is there anything to be done? Are those stretches you

were doing helping?"

I sighed in defeat. "No."

His gaze sharpened in question.

I said, "It's basically the end of my career."

He whispered, "Ain't that the shit?"

I shrugged helplessly; he was still grasping my wrists.

He said, "Then I am even more sorry—"

"It's not your fault."

"No, you don't understand. I was an ass and you were just doing your job. And pretty soon you won't be able to?"

"That's right."

He let go, leaned back, and shook his head. "What a dipshit I was..."

"It's really okay."

He locked eyes with me. "No, it's really not." He shook his head. "Look, I..." He searched the other patrons and the café furniture. "I often look at civilians as me versus them. They don't understand. They don't get what we go through as a service to our country and ultimately to them. But here I am treating you like they treat us. It makes me ashamed."

I was overcome with sympathy. I reached out and gripped his forearm causing him to wince. "Hey, it's okay. It's part of the job. It's my service to you and—"

He pulled his arm away and surreptitiously rubbed it.

I realized it was his wounded arm. I clapped a hand over my mouth. "Oh! I'm sorry."

He chuckled. "Nah, it didn't hurt, it's just... sensitive sometimes. Sort of numb and tickly at the same time."

I calmed myself, trusting his words. "I guess we both got caught up in who we were..."

He grunted. "Still, I feel as if I owe you a lot more dinners."

His gruff offer tickled my funny bone. I began to laugh and grabbed up my napkin to cover my mouth.

He looked horrified. "Bad idea?"

"No... um..."

The semi-grizzled veteran looked hopelessly lost. "What?"

"That was..." Cute. Instead, I said, "Nice."

"Oh shit, don't tell me you're taken. I didn't see a ring—"

"No," I said, a little too forcefully. I pushed my mistake with Wes out of my head. "No, I'm not."

"So... that's a yes to more dates?"

Our plates arrived.

I said, "Julian?"

His eyes opened wider in expectation.

I picked up my fork and stretched my wrist. "Yes."

————CHAPTER 4

I walked with Verity as she walked her dog. She was my best friend, aside from Wes. But now that my relationship with him was on the rocks, she was the one to whom I turned. I had met her before moving out of my apartment and into the old house a few years before.

She was a short, tatted girl with black hair and wrinkled eyes. She smoked like a chimney. But it wasn't her cigarette smoke that horrified me: the tattoos made me cringe. A thorny rose vine traveled over one shoulder to her neck. A teardrop was on her right cheek beneath one dark eye. On her other shoulder was a detailed gothic cross. On her fingers were playing card symbols, a skull, a heart, and a bow.

Her eyes checked mine whenever I stared too long.

Her dog was shaggy and black, named Pepper.

She took a long drag on her cigarette and said in a cracked voice, "So you crossed the line with Wes, huh?"

"Bad."

"Was it bad?"

"No, but..."

"And you met a guy."

"Right."

"So you feel guilty?"

"Right."

Verity shook her head and blew out the smoke in a long exhalation of satisfaction. She rolled her eyes at the same time. "Amber..."

"What?"

"Who fucking cares?"

"I do."

"In a hundred years, will it matter?"

We waited while Pepper pooped.

Verity bent down with her gloved hand and scooped up the turd. She placed it in the bag she had been carrying under her arm.

I gulped. "Gross. I don't know how you can do that."

"It's common courtesy. Also the law."

I shook my head.

She said, "You never walk your dog."

I didn't. Winter was an older German Shepherd that ran to her delight all over the acre I rented. No need to walk her. We played Frisbee right out the back door.

Verity stripped off the glove and put it in the bag.

I looked away.

She said, "So you caved to his advances?"

"It sort of just happened."

"With a friend. You know that's yuck, right? Total ew."

Something rose up inside of me in annoyance. "It wasn't 'ew' and he didn't force it on me."

She flashed her tobacco-stained smile. "Gotcha."

"What?"

"No one cares, Amber."

Pepper pranced ahead, pulling on the leash. Verity looked at me over her shoulder as she let him pull her along. A plume of smoke streamed out of her mouth.

I coughed and walked faster to get out of the trailing cloud. "I'm more worried about my job." As if on cue, my wrist twinged. I stretched and wriggled it, but it was futile.

"Oh yeah, the wrist thing, huh? Still getting worse?"

"Yep." I worked the other hand.

"No prospects?"

"For a massage therapist? Are you kidding?"

"Just asking." She scanned the street and apartments as we passed in silence for a few minutes. "Ever thought of dog grooming?"

"Grooming?"

"Well, not at first. But a lot of places are looking for people who will bathe dogs. Big pet stores. You could start by washing, work your way up."

"Work up? How hard can it be to brush a dog?"

"It's a lot more than that. Grooming includes cutting hair—"

I shrugged. "Big deal—"

"It is, actually. Shears cost up to thirty dollars and a good groomer uses up to a dozen of them—"

"What?"

"Not all at once." She dragged on the cigarette and finished it off. She dropped it, ground it with the heel of her shoe, and picked it up for deposit with the poop in the bag. "Different dogs require different shears. Extras in case you have some out for sharpening. Brushes—"

"Okay, okay, I get it."

"All of your gear could cost you several thousand dollars. You accumulate it over time, mostly. Especially if you want to go mobile later. Then there's the cost of the van..."

I groaned.

"But you can still get a job washing. It pays well."

I took out my phone and began tapping a search.

Verity remained silent while I did so. She took out her phone and one-thumbed through her messages.

Indeed, there were several dog washing openings in town. "Thirteen an hour?"

Verity croaked, "That's pretty good. Some only pay minimum wage. Not the big boys, though."

"That's... horrible..."

"Thirteen is better than sitting at home without an income."

I grimaced at her. "I guess so..."

"They train you and you can go to school at their expense later on for grooming. That's where you'll make a lot more money."

"Or I could be a waitress and get tips."

"Bad hours, honey. And surly people. There are a lot of hungry waitresses out there and it can be cutthroat."

I put my phone away and the weight of my situation made me bend my head over in dejection.

Verity cackled. "Cheer up, girl. You have options. At least you're not homeless."

"Would bathing dogs help my wrists?"

"Yes and no... I think. There's scrubbing involved and struggling with heavy dogs to get them into the tubs."

I took out my phone again. "Maybe I can get on with a construction company."

She looked at me as if I were insane. "What?"

"You know, one of those people that hold traffic signs and hold up cars?"

"I think you have to be certified for that."

"So? I can get certified."

"You fancy wearing a hardhat all day?"

"I can stick my hair in a ponytail." I tapped on my phone for a bit. "Flaggers. Anyway, I've seen women flaggers."

"Sounds boring to me."

"Not to my wrists."

She nodded in assent. "A girl does what a girl's gotta do. I think you'd enjoy dog bathing better. Well, maybe except for the poop."

"Huh?"

"Dogs poop everywhere, hun."

I exhaled long and hard. "Thank you for helping me choose to be a flagger."

She laughed.

I began tapping to find where to get certified.

————CHAPTER 5

Julian didn't call or text for days.

What was his problem?

I spent a hundred and ten on a certification course and was scheduled to be trained the following week.

In the meantime, I had given Doctor Beeker my notice.

He understood.

My last day was Friday and the course for flagging next week. After that, I would apply for a job. Several openings existed both locally and distant. I pinned my hopes on the local opportunities. I didn't want to drive everyday over half the state just to make seventeen an hour.

I came out of my last day of work at Beeker Chiropractic to find Julian leaning against his motorcycle waiting for me.

Couldn't he call?

Flush with freedom from further destroying my wrists, I welcomed the flood of warmth that washed over me at seeing him. "Hi."

His smile was crooked and suggested he knew something about me he shouldn't. "Hey."

"Giving your motorcycle a rest in front of my job? Or did you come back for more sciatic work?"

He flexed his right leg out. "Pain is gone. Just a hint of tenderness, maybe."

"I can't work on you anyway; I quit."

"Because of me?" His tone was dry and abrasive. Except that it also felt genuine.

"No, my wrists." I stretched both.

"Right..." He made a dismissive gesture with his head. "I wasn't here for that."

I stepped towards him, teasing him. "And why exactly are you here?"

"Sheeit, you know why. I'm here to ask you out."

If he was going to be difficult, so was I. I played with him. "You could've called."

"I hate the phone. People spend too much time with their noses buried in it."

I jumped, feigned being startled, and said, "Was that my phone? Sorry, I gotta take this." I pretended to rummage in my purse.

He laughed low, long, and raspy. "I think I like you, Amber."

"Me? Really?" I played it coy.

"No, the Amber behind you." His sarcastic tone brought a smile to my face. He asked, "Do you want to go out or not?"

Why are you so difficult? "Okay, okay, fine."

"I'm sure you want Mexican food?"

I frowned for a second in exasperation that he thought I could so easily forget, then began laughing. I picked up on his sour sarcasm at the last second. "Are you always a jerk?"

"Only on days that end in a Y."

I giggled. "Any ideas?"

"Yeah, there's this Thai take-out you might like. We can go back to my place and eat—"

"Thai is fine, if you're talking about Thai Take?"

"Yeah."

I didn't want to go to his place. I didn't feel that safe with him... yet. "But my place." Where Winter can keep an eye on you.

He shrugged. "I cleaned for nothing?"

"I guess so."

"Deal." He was already twisting around to straddle his bike. He looked totally at ease with his leather jacket and motorcycle.

I said, "So... are you a biker?"

He froze and considered me for a moment. "Do you see any motorcycle patches on my jacket?"

"No..."

"I ride my Indian. Haven't thought much about riding with a club."

I nodded, sensing it might be a touchy subject with him. "I'll follow you."

He grunted.

Suave and debonair, you are not. Yet, I liked being around him. He made me feel... feminine.

He was quiet, but also confident – as if he didn't care what I thought. Or, at least that was the front he put up. He also didn't stare and talk to my breasts, though I saw him give me the once-over a few times. There was neither disapproval nor approval in his reaction to what he saw.

That caused an endless ambivalence inside me. Why couldn't he pretend to like what he saw? Though I was glad he didn't because my figure shouldn't be the only litmus of who I was.

I was confused.

And intrigued.

With Wes, I knew where I stood with him and over the years had kept him safely in the friend zone. Sure, I knew he had a thing for me, but he had behaved.

I had failed.

I carried the Thai food to my car after the purchase. My shoulders sagged as I got into the driver's seat. Here I was with a handsome man and a potential dating partner, and I was obsessing over Wes.

Wes is just a friend. It was a mistake that I will not let happen again. I had ignored his texts and calls for a week. Sometime soon I would allow contact and re-establish our friend zone.

I valued Wes as a friend. His compassion and sympathy were qualities I wasn't going to give up. I just needed to reinforce our space.

I pulled into my lot and breathed a sigh of relief. Winter came trotting up and her ears perked at the sound and sight of the motorcycle following.

I'm being silly; Julian isn't a threat. I got out and called for Winter. She came to me, tongue lolling and panting happily in welcome. She didn't move as fast as when she was younger, but I still had some years with her left. I scratched her ears and said, "He's okay."

Her mouth closed and she licked her nose in response. Her ears moved back just a tad to indicate she understood. The slow tail wag confirmed it.

Julian walked up, open and slow. "She friendly?"

"How'd you know she's a she?"

"A name like Winter? And she's narrower than a male. She also doesn't have any obvious hanging... appendages."

"You have a good eye for dogs."

"Worked with some K9 units in Afghanistan."

"Ah."

He said, "Come here, dog."

"Winter," I corrected.

He gave me a dry look.

Winter padded over to him warily, tail not moving. She sniffed his hand. I could feel her warning from where I stood.

Julian shifted his hand after a moment to scratch near her ear. Her ears went down and her tail moved slowly. Her nose came up in a thrust. He nodded to her wordlessly, then looked at me with the food.

I led him inside.

He looked around with interest, then sat right down on the couch where Wes and I had...

Winter sat, looking at him.

He chuckled and waved her to come. He began scratching her ears and neck.

I shifted towards the table. "You don't want to eat at the dinner table?"

He scowled and waved a hand. "Not unless you really want to... or you don't eat on the couch." He looked down around him at the cushions where I had been pressed under Wes. "Pretty comfy."

I sighed in defeat and said, "No, I often... eat here." I set down the food and left for utensils.

I was pleased he hadn't asked to see the place and it truly looked like he didn't care. There didn't appear to be any anxiety in him being in my place.

And sitting on the couch where...

I gritted my teeth, carrying napkins and forks back to the living room.

I sat in the rocker.

We ate with enough small talk that I finally began to relax. A long final week was gone. My job was gone. I told him all about it.

He seemed amused. "Flagger bitch, huh?"

I admonished him, "I don't think it's called that..."

His silent laughter underneath twinkling eyes told me he was making fun of me.

I understood him then: he was a hard man and didn't care what people thought of him. If it was on his mind, he said it. However, it was refreshing to know he didn't play games or put up a front. I was relieved that I didn't have to try to figure out his angle: he didn't have one. I either accepted him or not. The only trouble I had was picking up on his sarcasm.

In my mind's eye, I could see myself telling Julian I didn't like his attitude and him shrugging. Then I could see him getting up and sauntering out without a word. He could take or leave someone just so easily.

He asked, "You own this place?"

"Rent."

He grunted. "I bought a trailer, but it's a dump." He looked around and then bit his tongue.

I felt the need to explain. "I like the room for Winter, and it's very cool under all the trees in the summer."

A single nod.

I filled the silence. "It's old, but I guess I like things simple."

"You keep it clean."

"Is that important?"

"Yes."

"Is this a job interview?" I felt a little peeved.

He chuckled harshly. "Does it sound like it?"

"Sort of."

His eyes glittered at me in scrutiny. His voice came lower, with more caution.

"I'm just learning about you. I want to know..."

My irritation was vanquished in an instant. His demeanor was more of that acid honesty that hid nothing and I felt... honored... that he would desire to learn about me. I asked breathlessly, "What do you want to know?"

He didn't answer right away.

Winter had jumped up on the couch after we had eaten and lay beside him. Over the course of the conversation, she had rested her head on his thigh. He had moved his hand up and was scratching and rubbing her neck and ears.

He didn't even look at her, just petted as if it were automatic and required no thought.

I saw a good man.

He tilted his head at me in consideration. "Who are you, Amber? Who is behind the pretty face? Where are you from? What do you want in life?"

I couldn't resist. "To crush my enemies, see them driven before me—"

His bright smile and chuckle-jerk of his head was instantaneous. "And to hear the lamentation of the women." He laughed, eyes sparkling. "A woman who has watched Conan? Who would've thought?"

"One of my favorites."

"Because of Arnold? Or the Conan character?"

"Actually, Valeria. I identify with her."

He frowned. "Why so?"

"She was her own woman, doing her own thing. She had goals and a mission. Men came and went, but there through it all was a yearning to be a part of something greater."

"Is that how you see yourself?"

I nodded. I wanted something... more.

————CHAPTER 6

Julian's eyes shifted away, to the table. He leaned forward and got up. "Let me help you clean up."

I was more interested in talking. I waved a hand. "You don't have to."

His response was clipped and efficient. "I helped you make the mess." He was already gathering the containers and napkins.

I reluctantly moved to help him. "I..."

"Shut up and show me the kitchen."

I stifled astonished laughter. He could go from hot to cold in an instant and it made me dizzy. I blinked, opened my eyes wider, and held up my fingers in exasperation. "Fine, fine."

"Does Winter like Thai?" He looked over the miniscule remains.

I shook my head. "A little too spicy, though she'll eat what I give her."

"Gotcha." He looked at my dog. "I'll bring you a Milk Bone next time, okay?"

His inclusion of her made my heart flutter. What a nice man.

We cleaned the dinner and dumped what was necessary in the kitchen. I wet a rag and picked up a towel to wipe the coffee table if there were any smudges.

He stared at the hole in the floor by the old refrigerator.

I saw it and said, "I used to catch my foot in it, but I eventually learned to avoid it."

He smirked.

I felt a little defensive over my place and scowled.

What he did next sent my thoughts spinning like a top. He encircled me with his arms and lifted his chin in challenge. "I enjoyed tonight."

I blinked rapidly in confusion. That's all? "You're leaving?"

A shift of his shoulders in indifference was his only expression. "I don't think you want me crashing on your couch."

I was dumbfounded. I dropped my mouth open in shock that the so-called date was so... innocent. Had he really just wanted to eat and get to know me? Was it really over so fast? I...

His eyes dropped to my mouth.

A memory of Wes doing the same thing wormed through my stunned and speechless state. I began to close my mouth.

However, Julian moved without hesitation and his mouth came down hard on mine. The move was aggressive and appeared to be lacking any forethought.

He saw an opening and took it.

Those were my last thoughts as I entered into brainless battle with his tongue and my surprise.

His strong arms encircled me and held me in a vise grip of comfort and need. He wasn't going to let go.

I didn't want to escape, anyway.

I felt his chest moving faster and his manhood pressed against me hardening in his jeans.

He pulled his head away after a furious exploration of my mouth. His eyes were intense and scrutinizing. He searched my expression.

I wordlessly gasped at the ferocity of the kiss.

He bent in a flash and lifted me.

My nipples went from tingly to hard in an instant. Heat flooded my pussy.

He carried me into the living room and looked at the couch.

Winter was down, but I didn't want what I knew he was thinking.

Not on the couch. I said, "Through that hall there. My bedroom."

His steps were steady and he breezed me into my bedroom. He set me down easily and began removing my clothing.

I flushed with heat and excitement. Having a man remove my clothing was a sign of control and desire that I could only breathlessly welcome.

When he exposed my breasts, I automatically brought my hands up to cover them, but then stopped just before doing so. I slowly lowered them and left my exposure open to his eyes.

A rough hand tentatively reached out and cupped my left breast. His thumb brushed over the nipple with one pass that induced a vicious shiver in my limbs.

Then his hand was gone. He began removing his clothing.

My slacks were still on, so I began undoing them.

He removed his jacket and shirt. His chest was defined and covered with less hair than Wes. He said to me, "Leave your panties on."

Why? It was an order and I obeyed.

His jeans came off. He was commando underneath.

My eyes latched onto his dangling manhood. "You don't wear underwear?"

"Fuck that. My rides back and forth to work aren't long enough to chafe and I hate the compression." He gripped my arms and lowered me to my bed.

Winter walked in.

I pointed at the door. "Winter, go."

Her ears twisted back a little, but she obediently turned and left the room.

His eyes watched, but he said nothing. Then he gripped my panties and peeled them down my legs. A smile spread on his face as he did. He murmured, "Nothing better than unwrapping a present."

I was frozen, wondering what he thought of me. I didn't have a jogger's body. I was on the soft side and a little too hippy.

Whatever I thought of myself, the light in his eyes said he approved.

What he did next caught me by total surprise and I cried out with alarm. He drove his face into my pussy and smashed his tongue against my clit.

It was an assault. It was a battle plan immediately implemented with force and savagery. With a soldier's efficiency, he destroyed whatever resistance I might have had and demolished my clit. Rough fingers invaded my hole and wriggled in the wetness.

His tongue and fingers ravished me, taking what he needed while delivering to me a breathless experience of euphoria and sexual frolic.

I didn't ask for it, but I accepted it as if being presented with an opportunity to enjoy the surprise without hooks or angles.

He didn't twist my arm with persuasion, he just took it and I found myself enjoying the suddenness of his move immensely. I was able to ride the sudden rollercoaster of his aggression without apprehension or anxiety.

I exulted in the efforts of his tongue and gasped happily on my bed.

He promptly ceased when I thought I was going to finish and he moved up my body like a wrestler crawling over another. It was fast and purposeful. I knew what was coming and he was making no coy moves or hiding his intent. He was going to fuck me.

I was frozen helpless with the knowledge, mouth agape, and willing.

He moved up my prone body and brought his hips down. The touch of his cock to my pussy could not prepare me for the savagery with which he stuffed my pussy full with one brutal lunge. His eyes radiated heat and... anger?

No, not anger.

Extreme lust.

Need and desire, packed so hotly that Julian's face showed the precarious hold on his restraint. He pumped strenuously, the muscles cording out on his shoulders and arms. He panted with effort of pushing his cock in and out of my pussy.

The invasion had been a surprise, even if I had known it was coming. I clamped on him in response and my pussy began convulsing involuntarily as his thick pole pounded and stuffed me over and over. The brisk rubbing of my labia by his soaked shaft pushed stimulating waves of rhapsody inside me.

I began making noises that embarrassed me: little sounds like chirps and warbles. I could not control them. I could not change them. They were plucked from me with every plunge of his pole.

To be so thoroughly taken and possessed for his pleasure was electrifying. I didn't just willingly allow him to use my body, I gave him myself by pulling on his butt. I wanted to feel his cock inside me. I wanted it deep. I wanted to break his masculine control and feel him cum inside me.

I wanted to be a part of it.

The orgasm was beaten out of my clit by the base of his cock. The heat from our union down there was intense, but nothing like the lava that grew in my pussy. Abruptly, the coil inside me untwisted with a violence I hadn't felt in any of my memories. The waves were sharp and bordering on painful. Each burst was a struggle of effort not to scream.

My extremities grew hot at the pounding waves. I gasped hysterically for air as my body shook and jerked through my climax. My scalp grew damp and my neck sprouted sweat.

Julian snarled deep in his throat and his eyes almost flared with feral ferocity. He pounded my pussy with deep penetrating stabs, sliding me back on the bed several inches at a time.

He cried out in sexual rage just as my head began to hang over the other edge of

the bed. His thrust went deep and full. His cock swelled. My head flopped uselessly as scalding squirts spurted against my cervix.

My pussy was filled with his pulsing thickness and his hot discharge. I was exhausted.

He gently pulled my head up by the back of my neck and kissed me, though the kiss was not delicate. He ravished my mouth with his tongue, using my mouth almost as he had used my pussy.

I could barely breathe.

Everything on me tingled with electricity and physical fireworks.

Wow.

————CHAPTER 7

I think I was still feeling the aftereffects in my pussy even on Sunday.

Winter was being skittish, so I sat out on the back porch and threw a Frisbee for her. It was cloudy, but thankfully not raining – though she might have enjoyed that more.

I didn't want to have to give her more than her one weekly bath – especially since I had just given her one the day before.

Not as spry as when she was a puppy, she still showed an eager playfulness to fetch the toy when I threw it. While she was running after it, I ate sunflower seeds and pitched the shells into the dirt.

The sound of a familiar engine reverberated through the trees around the house and barn. Winter's ears swiveled and she sniffed the air.

I wondered when he was going to show up.

I got up and walked around the side of the house along the dirt drive, Winter at my side.

The Jeep Wrangler was parked in front and I continued around to the front porch. Wes stood there, flowers in hand. He heard my approach and turned, a hopeful look on his face.

I asked, "Going to a funeral?" He wasn't dressed for it, but the flowers...

He looked at me, all Wes. That curious tilt to his head as if trying to figure me out or trying to remember where he had put his car keys. He faltered his way through a smile, then came down the two porch steps. He held out the flowers. "I brought these for you."

They were beautiful, of course. After all, they're flowers.

I accepted them, bristling inside at the implications, but flattered enough to hold

my tongue.

He stepped into the silence. "Can we go inside?"

I looked at Winter for support and then back to him. "We're throwing a Frisbee out back."

He looked confused for a moment, then his shoulders dropped. "Can we talk while you do that?"

I turned away and started back around the house. "I suppose..."

He followed behind me with Winter at his side.

I didn't want this talk that I knew was coming. I think... I was afraid of it. What would it mean to our friendship? I very much valued what I had with Wes. He was my closest friend, other than Verity. His opinions mattered to me. His sympathy was always a comfort...

I sat back down on the back porch steps. "Winter, get the Frisbee."

She looked at me, then at him, licked her muzzle, then walked off. After a few steps, she broke into a trot.

Wes didn't sit.

I didn't expect him to. He was high strung at the moment and as someone who intimately knew what it was like to live it, I didn't offer him a seat.

In a flash of curiosity, I realized I was the one being solid and sedate in this encounter. How had that happened?

He slouched a little – adorably - in his black pullover sweater, worn blue jeans, and his red ball cap. His hands were stuffed in his pockets and his shoulders hunched forward. He appeared to be trying to remember...

His speech.

My heart melted inside.

He was really trying and he wasn't being pushy.

He looked nervously this way and that, mouth hanging open and brows drawn down.

I said, "Just say it."

He surprised me with an opening I had not initially expected. "I love you, Amber. I always have." His throat sounded constricted and his lips looked stiff. He dropped his gaze to the ground after directing a penetrating look to my eyes.

I sighed with resignation. I knew this already. Wes had loved me probably since the day we met, but we were friends. Love has no place—

He interrupted my thoughts. "I can't live without you. I don't want to live without you. I want to be with you—"

"Wes, please..." I rubbed my forehead. I was extremely flattered. I was also irritated that he was trying to ruin what we had.

"You mean everything to me, Amber. You always will. I wake up at night wondering where you are..."

A crushing weight pressed in on my chest and I felt helpless under his assault. I covered my eyes and ignored Winter as she nudged my leg with the toy. Tears were forming in my eyes. You lay awake thinking about me? Why me? Why not some other woman? "Don't do this."

He crouched abruptly, lowering to his haunches so he could see my face. "I want you to be happy. I want to make you happy. I can't imagine being with any other woman. Ever."

I looked at him sharply and let loose something I probably shouldn't have, "I'm seeing someone, Wes."

He blinked.

He swallowed.

His face drained of color.

His eyes began to water. He stammered, "Wh-what?"

"I met a man... at work." I felt like a total slug – a mud slug – for what I had just done to my best male friend. My mouth wouldn't work anymore and I fought back tears. I looked at the flowers, wondering how I could be so ugly in the presence of such beautiful creations.

Winter whined – a small noise of worry at what she sensed.

Wes put a fist down into the dirt to steady himself. "You're... You're..." His lips trembled and twisted, then the tears dripped from his eyes. The look of sadness and bereft dreams that crossed his features made me look away in guilt.

I said, "You should go." Because I can't bear doing this to you... my friend. I scrubbed at my eyes and wiped my cheeks with my sleeve. I wasn't surprised to find them wet.

His cheeks and eyes glistened, but he didn't make a sound. There was nothing weak or effeminate about the situation, and I felt the strong desire to apologize. Wes was not an emotional person.

Not usually.

He jerked and rose unsteadily.

I heard him walk away.

I heard the Jeep door shut quietly and the engine start.

I heard him drive away.

His engine noise receded at a sedate pace, slowly dwindling until I was left alone with Winter.

I flung the Frisbee as hard as I could and buried my face in my arms.

————CHAPTER 8

Torture doesn't begin to describe my life after Wes.

I was trained to be a flagger, certified, and applied for a job with the closest companies. One was particularly eager to hire me and I was phoned and told I had the job pending a standard background check and drug test.

It was a very hollow victory.

Wes did not text or call.

His flowers sat on my coffee table giving the room – no, the entire house – the only beauty I could see. It bore witness right in front of the couch where...

I thought about that often. Multiple times a day. I thought about it when I was filling out my applications.

Wes had smoothed something over inside me with that one sexual mistake. His positive vibes had reached inside me and taken away some of my agitation.

I constantly compared it to the pulse-pounding, primal sex I had experienced with Julian. The rougher man had driven some agitation out of me by virtue of his efforts.

Was it Wes that had calmed me down? Was it Julian? My bet was on the rougher man, but something wriggled at the back of my mind that kept returning me to my longtime friend.

Had I just needed sex? I was no virgin, for certain. I would never be able to run for political office, not that I would want to. I didn't think it was abstinence that caused my anxiety – that was a stale companion that had existed long before I had lost my virginity.

I was always a nervous person.

And yet, now, of all times, I felt a hint of serenity that transcended years of

experience. Was it fleeting? Temporary? Circumstantial? Maybe quitting my job had been what I needed.

My mind wouldn't let me believe that, no matter how hard I tried to force myself to accept it.

Wes had made love to me and I knew it. It wasn't just sex. Something deep there had been triggered. He had bypassed all my usual sexual-defensive traps and shared with me his innermost intimacy. It was a revelation I could not overcome with a mere dismissive fret over some other frivolous issue.

No, I couldn't rely on my anxiety to stave off facing the truth.

I sat on my couch Friday afternoon, staring at his flowers. A major portion of me was sad at seeing the beginnings of wilt in the supporting leaves and fronds. The petals were fully open and starting to droop.

I wanted...

I wanted those flowers to last forever.

It would be a just and fitting way to remind me how badly I had treated Wes.

The anxiety I had been so blissfully free from returned with a force that left me squirming and crying.

I couldn't take it anymore.

Saturday morning, I rose from the couch where I had just sat down a half hour before. I had been planning on resuming my internal struggle to make sense out of everything, but I... couldn't.

I had wronged Wes and I couldn't just let it go.

I drove to the apartment complex on C Street. I parked in the visitor parking just across from the rust-brown Jeep.

I knocked on his door.

The peephole darkened for a second, then Wes pulled open the door. He was dry-

eyed, but looked wan. Lines marked his normally ebullient face. He was wearing his tan sweater and his hair looked as if he had run his fingers through it several times. "Amber..."

I moved inside, suggesting a push with a light touch to his chest. I let my fingers remain on the fabric of his sweater. I could feel his chest begin to vibrate harder.

He moved aside and shut the door. "Why are..."

I held a finger up to my lips. I stepped into him and carefully wrapped my arms around him in a hug.

His arms came up with some hesitation, and encircled me.

I breathed deeply, feeling a peace settle over me at my gesture. Finally, I was putting my horrid week behind me. Definitely, I was righting the wrong that I had done. Assuredly... I would make things right.

I had to be doing the right thing because it felt so right.

I lifted my chin and kissed him. "I'm so sorry, Wes, for what I did." I didn't allow him to speak after me and I used my mouth to do it.

Waves of cold relief washed down my back and I shivered at the feeling that I had averted some major calamity in my life.

Had I been that close to the cliff? It was that far of a drop? The vertigo only touched me now and I trembled in fright at such a narrowly averted disaster that I still couldn't see.

I was blind to the dark disaster – whatever it was. I could see that fact.

In his arms, I softened and began to relax. He had been there for me when it mattered, now I needed to be there for him.

It was more than a simple trade; it was a sharing.

I smoothed his razor stubble and whispered, "I want you... right now. Even if we never do it again, I need you..."

I didn't want to hold out false hope to him – that would be cruel. I wanted him to know that he meant more to me than just a friend that could be disposed of like a used, plastic fork. I needed to show him he meant more to me than that.

He broke the embrace, took my trembling hand in his, and led me to his bedroom.

He removed his clothing and said, "I have thought of nothing else since we..." He looked away. "I mean..."

"Shh." I put a finger to his lips.

He gripped my hand and pulled it away. "What I mean to say is, what we did was the most wonderful experience of my life."

I almost giggled. "You weren't a virgin, were you?"

He looked befuddled for a second. "No, I've had plenty of girlfriends."

I wasn't wanting to hear that and frowned.

He rushed, "None of them were like you. None of them meant so much... You're... everything to me."

Damn you, why do you have to be so thoughtful? So wonderful? I hugged him, pressing my naked body to his.

His hands glided over my skin and sent goose bumps all up and down my arms. My nipples hardened as they compressed against his hairy chest. My pussy warmed and moistened at the touch of his hardening shaft. In a wave of sentiment, I squeezed him tighter to me and clawed at his back with my fingertips. Only the slight flare of pain in my wrists reminded me of how I had taken up massage to help work out my anxiety.

He pulled me and sat on the bed.

I went with it and climbed onto his lap, straddling him. I whispered hoarsely, "Do it, Wes. Be with me."

He angled his erection down as I lifted.

As he held it in place, I maneuvered myself over his cock. When I felt it aligned right, I let myself settle down, my pussy sliding down over his cock. His shaft filled me as I slid down until I could go no farther.

His hot, pulsing hardness inside was an instant relief. He held me as I rested there.

I held him, hugging him to me with a longing I hadn't thought would be there. My friend. My Wes. I began to move my hips, feeling his erection rubbing against the sides of my canal.

His impaling rod felt perfect.

I rode him slowly, mimicking my memory of how he had taken me on the couch.

A look of wonder and joy colored his eyes as he gazed at my face. He kissed me after a moment and thawed my heart with his mouth and cock.

Everything I was feeling from him vindicated my decision to come here today. There was no animosity, no desperation, no struggle. His posture, his looks, his aura – all gave me that positive energy for which I had always appreciated him.

Wes might be absent-minded, but he was as solid as a rock in my life - a sure foundation stone that provided the kind of support I desperately required.

In his arms... I was calm.

I pushed him backwards and we crab-crawled our way together onto the center of the bed. I placed my hands on his chest and rode him, moving with the delectation demanded by what I was feeling and sensing.

His hands moved teasingly over my breasts. "You're so beautiful, Amber."

I couldn't help but smile. Nothing sounded better right at that moment than those words. A bit of my anxiety poked out peevishly. "Is that all I am? A pretty face?"

I didn't think I was all that pretty. My blonde hair wasn't all that blonde and my eyes were a dull brown.

He shook his head. "Inside and out, you're a beautiful person. The most beautiful

I've ever known." His hands came up and brushed my hair from my cheeks.

I closed my eyes to stifle the formation of tears. Wes was truly my friend – more than a friend.

How could I be so stupid as to turn him away? I moved with more force and desperation – trying to chase away those thoughts and the dark disaster I had narrowly avoided. No, I won't lose you.

He gasped beneath me, moving his hips and driving that stiffness up into me.

I rotated my hips, back and forth, around in circles. I was determined to feel every inch of his perfect, normal cock inside me. I wanted to remember it for all time in case we never did this again.

I... wanted to do this again, though. The second time was a positive reinforcement of the first and even better.

I gasped also, breathing heavier as his solid erection sparked sensational throbbing deep in my pussy. These throbs formed waves that radiated out and wound me up inside to heights that were making me breathless.

I rode him faster, my hips jerking with the escalating sexual tension twisting inside me. I circled my hips, moving my pussy around with the twist, driving the swirling passions inside me tighter and tighter.

His hands squeezed my hips and he groaned with the imminence of his release.

My thoughts clarified in me. Wes, cumming in me, with me, and it feels so right. I cried out in alarm as the sudden rush of orgasm swept me up and over. My fingernails clawed into his chest. I vibrated violently on his cock and cried out with release. The waves obliterated my anxiety and I rode them like a cowgirl on a bucking bronco.

His hot spurts and moans of pleasure drove me higher until I was dizzy with giddy relief. I fell over and off of him, collapsing onto the bed beside him. He hadn't been finished and I felt a single squirt hit my thigh.

I didn't care about it; I draped my arm over him with my hand on the other side of his chest. I flattened my palm and felt the thundering vibrations of his heart as

he came down from his climax.

Here, I was safe. Here, I was serene. The second time had confirmed it; Wes filled something lost inside of me that was the cause of my high-strung personality.

Was it gone forever now?

Could I be whole?

————CHAPTER 9

I went home without making him any promises, except that I didn't want us to be separated over what had happened.

Something in his look told me it was a slender lifeline to his hope.

Fine, then, let it be.

I told him to come by with a movie Monday and find out how my first day of work went.

In the meantime, I needed to digest what I was discovering inside my head and heart.

Still tingling from the encounter that morning, I heard the familiar rumble of Julian's motorcycle outside my house as Saturday afternoon turned to dusk.

Alarmed and excited, tempered by curiosity, I went to the door before he knocked. I stood there in the doorway, leaning on the frame as he got off his motorcycle and secured his helmet. We shared wordless looks while he did so.

Winter trotted out and sniffed him happily. Julian spared a few seconds for some head pets and ear scratches that caused no end of her tail-wagging.

I scolded her in my mind. How dare you accept him before I give the okay? Rotten dog you are... No, I love you, Winter – my puppy. I sighed as he approached, but looked forward to this unplanned visit.

As he put his boot on the first step of the porch, my mind flashed to the previous week when Wes had made an unplanned visit.

I had not looked forward to that, so why this? Was I really seeing this man as I had told Wes? Was I reserving myself for Julian?

Poor Wes.

Julian's head was tilted down like a shy boy, but his eyes glinted with mischief. "Hey."

Nervous over my scattered thoughts, I simply repeated his greeting.

Winter was sniffing at his pocket.

He chuckled and said, "I guess I can't hide this, huh?" He pulled out a huge Milk Bone and offered it to her.

My dog gleefully accepted it and ran past me into the house, head and tail high.

I suppressed another sigh; my nerves were jumping despite what I had done with Wes earlier. I had been at peace the whole day until hearing Julian's motorcycle. I said, "You want some coffee?"

His face twisted into a grimace. "This late?"

I let him in. "Sorry, I guess it works well for me."

"Maybe that's why you're high strung." He walked into the living room and turned to me.

I moved past him without looking at him and resumed my spot on the couch – where Wes and I had discovered something three weeks before. I glanced glumly at the flowers.

Julian saw, but nothing registered on his face. He sat slowly into the rocker, though, as if uncertain of its support. His eyes were on me. "You been sick?"

"No, why?"

"The flowers..."

"They're from a friend."

His neutral expression hardened slightly – a subtle shift of features that suggested guardedness. "Do I... have competition?"

His question was filled with wariness and I felt it tickling my ears. I said, "No, of course not. I have a guy-friend and we watch movies together once in a while.

Strictly friend-zone." Or, at least it was...

"Flowers, huh?" He rubbed at his upper lip. "He gay?"

"What? Uh, no, I don't think so. I've never asked him but I don't think he's gay." Feeling my nerves spiking, I asked, "You're not seeing anyone?"

"I am."

My support structure inside me collapsed and my shoulders drooped on the outside. I looked down and away. "Oh..."

"I'm seeing you."

After having just crashed, my insides went numb. My face didn't seem to want to work. "Me? Why me? I'm just a former massage therapist turned flagger bitch."

He frowned. "I didn't mean anything by it when I said that..."

"I know, I was just repeating your joke. It's just a job."

"Have you started it yet?"

"Monday. I just got certified and my first day is Monday, though it'll just be some paperwork and drug test—"

His sharp interruption was pointed. "Anything to worry about?"

"No, not at all. Nothing in my background and I don't do drugs. Of any kind."

"Not even pot?"

"Nope."

His eyebrow lifted. "Good for you."

"What about you? Old soldier, seen combat, need relief? Pot your thing?" I was talking so fast that I wasn't taking the time to consider the gravity of my insinuations. My nerves were in high gear.

He was studying my face and didn't answer right away. "Tried it when I was

younger. Friends. Fuck them. Anyway, no, I didn't like it and don't do it now. I saw all my so-called friends dive deep into paranoia. It just wasn't for me."

I nodded restlessly. "That's good to hear."

His eyes narrowed. "Are you sure you don't do drugs? A little something on the side?"

"No, not at all. Why do you say that?"

"You're jumpy and hyper—"

"Sorry, that's just my personality. Sometimes I get this way."

Curiosity colored his features. "Is it a medical condition?"

"The doctors might like to think so just so they can get me on prescription drugs, but basically I'm just occasionally very high strung." I was working my fingers spastically together in knots and stopped. I heaved a frustrated sigh.

"Was I interrupting anything?"

I wiped my forehead. "No, really, you weren't. I was just sitting here in my thoughts. Sometimes my brain decides to shift into high gear and spit out endless worries. What did I do wrong? What better choices could I have made? What should I have said differently? Why can't I go back and change things? Would I have—"

He was up off the rocker and moving to the couch.

He sat uncomfortably close.

He sat comfortably close.

I wanted to scream at my anxiety.

He gripped my shoulders from the side and began to knead them. "I ain't no fucking expert at this, but it seems to me like you need some help relaxing."

Hard, difficult Julian. I closed my eyes and rubbed my forehead. Stop with the thoughts, Amber! I mentally screamed at myself. I took several deep breaths and

stretched out one shoulder, then the other, as his fingers compressed and squeezed the tension there.

His strong hands were raw and unpracticed, but his mauling of my taut muscles was working mystical magic and I began to relax.

So did my raging thoughts.

My hands started to quiver and tears formed in my eyes.

This was going to be a bad one. Why was I building up to an anxiety attack? Was it Wes? Was it Julian? Why do I feel so powerless? This was a good day...

Julian's gruff voice was low and measured. "Are you okay, Amber?"

I took a very deep breath, held it, and then let it out – long and complete. "I guess this whole career thing..."

"You'll do fine."

There was something in his certainty that was infectious. I looked at his face and focused on his eyes. There was a strong confidence there despite his hard exterior. His character had a durable nature that drew me in and comforted me.

Julian was a solid man, not just physically, but emotionally as well. He was an anchor in a raging ocean of life that promised a steady, permanent peace.

I leaned into him and laid my head on his shoulder. It was as if his strength flowed into me, absorbed through my cheek and my arm around his waist. He smelled of sun-bleached leather and soap. The hint of scent near his neck suggested cooked pasta noodles, without the acrid bite of male odor.

He had rested one hand down on his knee after I leaned onto him. I studied it. His fingernails were raw and clean. For a machinist, he had to have scrubbed them every day after work. Neither did he smell like machine oil.

Strong, simple, and meticulously hygienic: qualities that very much appealed to me. Except for his abrasive personality. Who doesn't like Mexican food?

I started to ask him why, but I trailed off into a mumble.

His other hand stroked my hair – much like Wes had weeks before. How do men know what I like? I closed my eyes, at peace.

I purred inside as he petted my hair and made no other moves. He was there for me, right now, not for him. When he had taken me, it was almost brutal. This evening, however, he was as sympathetic and gentle as Wes. His needs were set aside so he could concentrate on mine.

I turned my face into him and squeezed, kissing the skin of his neck in appreciation. Julian might have been rough and hard, but there was a deep well of compassion underneath that made me want to swim in it.

He did not react immediately to my kiss. Or the next few after that. He waited patiently, still stroking my head and making sure the monsters were gone.

I raised my head more and kissed his beard. Even there, he was trimmed and combed. The golden sparkles in his brown beard beckoned me higher. I shifted upwards and twisted into him. My mouth melted to his lips and I initiated a kiss.

I wanted to share my appreciation with him. I wanted it to be intimate. I wanted him to know I was thankful for his presence. I wanted us... to be together. I moved my hand up and gripped the back of his neck. I whispered onto his parted lips, "Julian..."

The warmth of our breaths mingled, and then so did our tongues.

As if turning on a light switch, he flipped from passive to aggressive. Muscles corded and bunched. He gripped me fiercely and kissed me back.

Really, he took over.

And that was fine with me. I surrendered to his command and confidence. I let him sweep me up emotionally and take me for a ride along the paths of passion.

I grabbed onto the anchor of his personality.

I was his.

————CHAPTER 10

He stripped us both, right there on the couch.

I wasn't sure my nerves were going to stay hidden, but nothing flared as he pressed my naked body down onto the very same cushions where Wes and I had made our mistake.

Except that it hadn't been a mistake.

It had been right. At the time.

Even now, though, as Julian moved to enter me, I still felt that what I had done with Wes was right.

Julian's cock touched my labia and he wriggled it into place.

I had ridden Wes earlier that morning and very much enjoyed his different kind of strength and compassion. My pussy still felt some of the aftereffects of that tryst.

Julian thrust with force and power. For the second time today, a hard cock penetrated and entered my pussy. This time, I was underneath and at the former soldier's mercy. He drove deep and hard, pressing and straining forward to be as completely inside as possible.

I squeezed on him, flexing and feeling the stiffness filling my hunger. It was a good feeling to clamp on a masculine erection: my softness to his hardness. It was as if he was the perfect puzzle piece fit for my pussy.

Interestingly, I felt that, too, about Wes.

It was these fractured thoughts that bounced in my head as Julian set up a punishing assault on my pussy. With one foot braced on the floor, he heaved above me, driving his cock deep, over and over. His pubic bone smashed into mine, repeatedly, exciting my clit with the force of our fucking.

The couch skidded a little with each thrust and I relished the mutual sounds of my gasps and his grunts. There was a perfect synchronicity in our coupling that was so much the same as what I had done with Wes earlier in the day. Our bodies worked together flawlessly, mine and Julian's, yet it was he who was in control. With Wes, I had been in control and we had worked together in a superb meeting of minds and bodies.

Even when Wes had been in control weeks before, he had worked so easily with me that it was seamless. No hesitation, no fumbling.

These two men fit me in somewhat different ways – but more than any other man had ever come close to achieving.

Bounced around by Julian's brutal thrusts, I had a ditzzy moment trying to decide which was more perfect for me, sexually. That thought was consumed by the rising tide of my approaching orgasm.

Yes, they were both perfect, and I was going to have to choose.

My cares and concerns over that issue drowned underneath the breaking flood of my release. Fire and heat spread out through my body in a vicious surge of ecstasy. Each pounding thrust of Julian's hips down onto my pussy sent shockwaves of pleasure bursting through me.

I saw stars dancing in little circles in my vision. I squeezed my eyes shut and still saw them. Gratification tingled throughout my body and I groaned with appreciation.

Julian grunted louder and harder. His hand mauled my breasts and pinched my aching nipples. His fingers moved roughly up to my neck and pulled hard on the crux between my soft neck and shoulder.

His cock flexed deep inside, held still while it expanded. Wetness seared the walls of my pussy as his muscles bunched and tensed with effort.

I relished his masculine offering and the effort from him my body required in delivering it.

With a final, savage jerk deeper, his cock ejected its last spurt of cum inside me. He panted heavily and lowered himself onto me.

I welcomed his wet kiss. I very much welcomed it.

————CHAPTER 11

Once again, my anxiety disappeared, but now I understood why and what had caused the near anxiety attack after feeling so peaceful from Wes.

I had two men to comfort me and knew I had to make a choice.

I did, didn't I?

Which one was really responsible for being the cure to my nerves? Was I in love? I wasn't dancing around and singing, birds weren't chirping melodies to me through the window, and butterflies didn't alight on my nose in benediction of my amorous condition.

In fact, the butterflies were rioting in my stomach over this dilemma. Wes was a great friend. He was easy-going, sympathetic, and a fun guy to have around for watching movies or walking the mall. I liked spending time with him.

Except he was forgetful. The only reason he ever remembered my birthday was because it was on every calendar in his house.

What a loser. No, that's not fair. He's absent-minded and I'm nervous. It's just a thing.

Julian, on the other hand, excited my interest in adventure. He was like a wild roller-coaster ride, twisting and turning in unexpected ways. He was like a wild stallion romping through nature – always on the exciting edge of things.

Except that he was a difficult man. He didn't care what other people thought and he forged his own future no matter who got trampled in the process. Hard, he was. Not someone who could learn to behave.

Just like an uncontrollable brat. No, that's not fair. He's focused on what he wants and so am I, for that matter. It's just a thing.

Both men appealed to me for different reasons. Which one was the right one? Which one was the key to my heart? Was either of them the right one? Maybe I

was just wishing on something that was premature.

Maybe there was another man out there – the right one.

No, I don't want another man. I want... Wes. No, I want Julian. Oh brother...

I fully expected my anxiety to flare.

It did not.

Sunday morning I pattered around the house cleaning and drinking coffee. I drank two full pots and felt the caffeine vibrating through exhausted limbs. Sexually fulfilled, I wrapped myself in the warmth of house clothes and a thick terrycloth bathrobe. I cleaned, though I didn't really need to. Habit.

I had a work-week ahead of me and this might be the only day I would have to work through my relationship issues.

Did I have issues? Did I need to choose?

Somehow, I couldn't firmly decide that marriage to either one of them was something I truly desired.

Marriage? Me? Who am I kidding? Neither of them probably wants to marry me. No, wait, Wes maybe with his profession of love and all that... Damn.

The idea of marrying Wes created a void of loss inside me for Julian. I wiped down the doors with a damp rag to remove any finger smudges.

If I married Wes, I would lose Julian, of course.

I flexed my wrists after feeling a stab of pain; I was wiping too hard.

If I married Julian, I would lose Wes, but I've only known Julian a few weeks. Marriage isn't even on the table here...

Sunday afternoon I sat on the couch showered and dressed in my weekend jeans and turtleneck. I idly stroked Winter's ears as I considered the unresolved question of where I should be putting my focus.

Wes was a solid friend. Julian was a potential love interest. With Wes professing

love, he came between what might develop with Julian, whereas Julian wasn't making any moves along forming a lasting relationship.

Was the gruff man just taking advantage of me? Would he dump me after a few good fucks? Move on to the next conquest? I hardly knew him.

Maybe the faeries heard my inner thoughts. Just after two, I heard the rumble of Julian's motorcycle.

So soon? The very next day? Unusual for you, Julian. But I was smiling as I got off the couch and went to the door. I leaned in the doorframe and folded my arms as he removed his helmet. Nothing beat a good display of feminine superiority.

He looked my way and gave a crooked smile.

Before he climbed off his bike, I said, "Just show up without a call? How'd you know I wouldn't be at church?"

A little sparkle lit his eyes. "You believe in God?"

"Yes, do you?" Might as well begin finding that this man was either good for me or not.

"Jesus is my friend." He said it in a tone that was similar to claiming he had insurance. He got off his motorcycle and came up onto the porch. "So, why aren't you at church, then?"

"I believe, I just don't go."

He tilted his head to the side. "Neither do I."

Something tickled my inner uh-oh. A rumble growled in the distance and my face clouded over before I realized what it was: Wes in his Jeep.

Maybe Julian saw the look of alarm on my face. He turned to look out beyond the trees. "Something the matter?" His body, previously relaxed, suddenly tensed into a slight crouch.

"No..." Oh no, it really is Wes.

The rust-brown Jeep came to a stop and Wes jumped out carrying two movie cases. He took in me standing in the doorway and Julian on the porch. His look didn't change; I was just talking to some guy at the door. He approached and held up the movies. "I got two to choose from."

My voice came out thin and anxious, though I didn't feel an onrush of an attack. "That was tomorrow, Wes."

Julian said, "So this is Wes..." He relaxed a bit.

At that point, Wes faltered in his step and frowned at Julian. "Who are you?" He stopped on the top of the porch and faced him.

"Julian."

Wes handed me the movies and put his hands on his hips. "Oh? Amber hasn't mentioned you."

Julian snorted. "No? I'm just the guy banging her—" He didn't get any farther.

Wes wound up and launched a fast punch directly into Julian's face.

The veteran stumbled back, hands coming up too late, and crashed into the porch post behind him. Blood ran from a nostril.

I exclaimed, "Wes!"

My friend, anger on his face, advanced for another punch. He cocked his arm back.

Julian... burst... into action. He ducked just slightly to the side. The punch missed by a fraction of an inch.

Faster than I could follow, Julian swept in under the punch and bodily lifted Wes from around his abdomen. Julian slammed him down onto his back and straddled his chest. His fist came up ready to launch down into my friend's face.

I was screaming, "Stop! Stop!"

Julian got up immediately and unclenched his fist. "He hit me once. I wasn't

going to let it happen again." He explored his nose gingerly.

I dropped down to my friend's side. "Wes, are you okay?" My hands trembled, afraid to touch his face.

His eyes were wide open and staring. He was still.

Then he blinked and let out a breath. "Uh... yeah, I'm just... stunned..." He twisted over to get up.

I stood and turned on Julian, lifting my hand to try helping stop his blood flow. "Are you hurt? Do you need a doctor?"

He waved my hand away. "It's not broken."

Wes stood, but leaned over, panting as if having lost his breath. He said to me, "You and him? What about two mornings ago when you came over and we made love?"

My mouth was open in shock that whatever secrets I had were out. I blinked and tried to cover over the situation by diverting attention. "That was yesterday, Wes. Today is Sunday."

He looked confused.

Julian dropped his hand. "I thought you said this guy was a friend and not your boyfriend?"

Wes straightened, hurt on his face. "You weren't kidding when you said you were seeing someone else...?"

Julian growled, "I'm not getting into this shit." He walked back to his motorcycle and got on.

I called out, "Wait..."

Wes backed away. "I thought we... I can't..." He stumbled down the porch steps and returned to his Jeep.

Julian shook his head and pulled away.

Wes revved his Jeep and plowed dust after him.

I stood there, open-mouthed as the combined rumbles died away.

————CHAPTER 12

Disaster follows victory.

Defeat follows fortune.

I went to work Monday to do the paperwork and drug test. It should have been a day of new possibilities. Rainbows should have been everywhere and the sun sparkling with promise.

Instead, it was an overcast day, dull and dreary with doom. I had gained an income, but lost the two men in my life that seemed to matter to me the most.

Karma?

Perhaps Wes had been right in his insinuation that I was two-timing. I wasn't committed to either one, though. It's not like it was illegal to date two men at once. And was I really dating them?

Wes was a friend who came over once or twice a week. We spent a lot of time together, but were we dating? Julian had taken me to a couple of lunches and had come over at night twice, but were we really dating? We hadn't had a single proper date: dinner and movie, followed by a kiss goodnight.

Well, maybe that one night we had brought Thai Take home and talked about Conan. But... no...

No, I wasn't really dating either man. I had made no commitments. Now they were acting like two spanked children and it was me who was suffering.

My work success was overmatched by the setback in my personal life and it made me glum.

Thankfully, not nervous.

I got quiet. Depressed. Introverted.

My normal mouthy blab was all absent.

It was Wednesday before I received a text from Wes.

Wesley: Can I come over Friday?

Wesley: Just to talk

I wasn't able to answer until my break from training.

Amber: Sure I get off at 4

Wes: See you at 5 Friday

I fully expected him to forget and show up a different day. Sweet Wes.

Training was grueling, even if it looked simple. I had to pay a lot of attention, but the old guy training me thought I was doing fine. Zachary was in his final year with the company and talked endlessly about boating while his eyes were locked on traffic flows and vehicles.

I hoped his confidence in me wasn't just due to his anticipation of retirement. "Ship it; who cares."

I got home on that midweek hump day and wondered where my life would be when I was his age. I was already wondering if being a dog bather would not have been a better choice.

Thursday at work came and went while I wondered what Wes would talk about. Play the blame game? Accuse me of...? Despite my wonders and worries, I was relaxed on the job. My wrist only protested infrequently and that was when I was gripping the traffic sign too hard and twisted it around. It was hard to maintain a light grip on it when I found it a useful support for leaning.

Thursday after work, I was coming out of the shower when I heard the doorbell. I wrapped my head in a towel and answered it.

Wes stood there, looking as nervous as I had ever been.

I sighed. "This is Thursday, Wes."

He held up his phone. "I know. I have the message here on my phone as a reminder. I... just couldn't wait." There was a finality to his voice and a haunted look in his eyes.

I let him in and shut the door.

He sat on the rocker and leaned forward. I sat on the couch and kept my robe closed.

Winter came over to Wes and nudged his knee. He petted her, but didn't take his eyes off me. "I wanted to say that you have always been my friend and I've treasured that."

A rumble outside made me almost crawl out of my skin. You can't be serious? Again? I got off the couch, angry. This is as bad as Downton Abbey. Can't get a private, complete conversation in even with a sledgehammer.

I stomped to the door and yanked it open.

Julian was getting off his motorcycle. He eyed the Jeep.

I waved him up. "Come on, it's not like you ever call or text ahead anyway."

He gave me a considering look and said, "It's just as well he's here. Better, in fact."

I huffed, "That's... just... great."

"Sorry, I guess I'll talk more to him anyway." He brushed past me with indifference.

That hurt somewhere inside and I didn't know what to make of it.

Wes had stood.

Julian faced him after giving my dog a few quick scratches.

Winter laid her ears back and lowered her head. Her tail drooped in depression.

Julian said, "I'll make this quick; I came to say goodbye to Amber and wish her a happy future."

I sighed. Great...

He continued, "You two have known each other a long time and I'm just some guy she met at her work. I won't get in the way."

Wes laughed at him. "No, that's what I came to do. Just because she and I were friends shouldn't make me assume I had rights to her. She's all yours, guy."

"Julian," he corrected.

"Whatever, Julian. I... love her. Enough to let her go. If she really wants something I can't provide, I won't get in her way."

Oh God, please make this end, I prayed.

Wes bristled. "I'm the one that needs to do this, not you."

Julian smirked. "Going to try to punch me again?"

"I just might."

"Go ahead, boy. I haven't broken someone's arm in a long time." He cracked his knuckles.

Wes held up a finger and Julian tensed.

Tears ran down my face. I was a useless ornament to their conversation.

My friend backed down. "I might enjoy you trying, but there's no need to fight."

"You punch hard, but whenever you're ready..."

Wes grunted. "You can have Amber. With my blessings."

Julian scoffed harshly, "You think I need your fucking blessings? I do what the fuck I want and it's me who's walking away and leaving her to you. Besides you love her; you said so yourself."

"Oh, so you were just using her then?" The threat in his voice was evident.

"No, I came over Sunday to tell her I had feelings for her, but fuck all that. I step

into this mess? She's all yours."

I felt like an unwanted, out of fashion piece of luggage. I covered my eyes.

Wes shook his head. "I'm not some beggar that needs your cast-offs."

I sobbed and ran to my room.

They let themselves out after a few more minutes of loud arguing over who was bowing out before who.

————CHAPTER 13

I was feeling very moody; that cursed, womanly time was approaching. Sunday didn't require much cleaning because I had little else to do the rest of the week to occupy my time.

No Wes.

No Julian.

I missed them both.

I found Julian's address through the online White Pages. Not far from me at all and close enough that it swayed me to go to him for a talk. I really needed to talk.

I wasn't nervous, though I was beginning to feel occasional pangs.

He was right; he lived in a dumpy trailer. Older things just begin to deteriorate over time and become shabby. The siding on his trailer was warping away at the edges exposing the insulation underneath. The front door no longer fit correctly in the frame. The porch was sagging and the supports no longer vertically straight – they leaned at different angles. The steps leading up to the door had been astro-turfed at one time, but were worn through in the center to the gray wood beneath through countless feet over the years. The stained lattice wood skirting the underside of the trailer was broken through in several places.

There was a brand new shed so out of place next to the mobile home that I immediately felt Julian must sleep in there, rather than the ugly thing that should have been scrapped.

I considered the shed, but it was padlocked and had no windows. I walked up the creaking steps to the door.

Someone nearby in the park began yelling in their trailer. A female voice answered it, screaming back.

I rapped on the door.

Muted crashing and banging was added to the mix of shouting.

No answer.

I knocked again and the hairs prickled on the back of my neck. I tried to look into the window nearest the door, but the old, corroded screen effectively blocked anything I might have seen inside.

That was when I realized someone had driven close. I turned to see Julian on his motorcycle. He was frowning ferociously at me as he glided into his trailer's lot.

I waited for him to get off.

He didn't seem rushed. He got off and left the motorcycle running. He unlocked the shed and slid open the doors.

I could see a few tools and yard implements perfectly hung and spaced on the walls.

He rode his motorcycle in and shut it off. He secured his helmet on a hook and then shut the doors. With a snap of the padlock, he turned to me. "What are you doing here?"

Duh. "I felt like talking."

"Talk to your friend." Hard and difficult.

"I wanted to talk to you," I pleaded.

He said nothing, just brushed past me and opened the door to his home. "Wipe your feet."

That sounded like the most ridiculous thing I had ever heard of, but then I saw why. The interior of the dumpy mobile home had been renovated. New carpet, cabinets, and ceiling tiles were crisp and clean.

The place was spotless.

Springing into my mind was the orderliness of a barracks hall. Very little

furniture, but perfectly squared and arranged as efficiently as possible. No clutter, no mess, no dust.

I wiped vigorously until he nodded. He removed his boots and I followed his example by removing my sneakers.

He opened a drawer in the kitchenette and dropped his keys inside. Removing his leather jacket, he hung it in a small closet on a heavy wooden hanger. He carefully closed the door. Settling into a new leather chair, he placed his hands on the arms like a king and looked at me. "So?"

I perched on the edge of his matching leather sofa. There was no TV and only a coffee table devoid of anything on top and a lamp table holding only a lamp.

Sparse. Spartan. Functional only.

There wasn't even a magazine that I could see. What did he do in his living room? I said in exasperation, "Do you even read?"

He looked at me with a pained expression. "You came here to talk about books? Or my education?"

I shook my head. The question had slipped out without much thought on my part. "I just... I don't see any magazines or..." I spread my hands around at the coffee table and lamp stand.

"I read in bed."

I whispered, "Oh..."

"You didn't come here to talk about reading, did you?"

I looked down and fussed needlessly with my sleeve cuff. "No. I... wanted to talk about us."

"There is no us."

"I miss you."

"You have your friend—"

"Wes. Yes, but I—"

"Go to him. I'm not getting in his way. Or yours."

My hands wanted to claw. I stretched my wrists out of habit. "I want you, though..."

"You know, I came over last week to tell you I had developed feelings for you."

My heart did a few thumps of shock. "You did? Why didn't you say something?"

"I tried, then your friend arrived."

"Oh..." I tried to look him in the face, but I couldn't. "I... feel things for you, too. That's why I'm here."

"Did you dump him?"

"No, I—"

He leaned forward. "There's nothing more I'd like to do right now than fuck you until you can't walk. But I won't because I'm not going to play your stupid games."

Please do ravish me... My moodiness didn't help, and I snapped back, "Maybe you should find yourself a hooker. Seems more suited to what you need."

He sat back leisurely. "Get the fuck out." There was a note of finality and command to it.

There was nothing left to say. Defeated, I left.

————CHAPTER 14

Disconsolate and depressed, I drove to Wes's apartment. I needed to find some traction on what I had lost. I had to get something back.

Wes was home and answered the door not even a second after the peephole darkened. He looked at me with curiosity. "Did I forget something?"

"You forgot that you loved me." It came fast and easy. It was cheap, and I knew it.

He shook his head. "No, never that." He backed up and allowed me inside.

I sat on his recliner and tugged at my cuff.

He sighed audibly and sat on the couch. "What's wrong, Amber?"

And there he was: loving, caring Wes. How could I have been so stupid for so many years? Yet, the longing for Julian smashed around inside my neat little ideas of propriety. If I couldn't have both, then I should definitely choose one, right? I said, "I don't want to lose you."

"I love you, Amber, but I sensed that what you have for the other guy—"

"Julian"

"Whatever. You know I'll forget his name two seconds from now. I sensed what you had with him was stronger than what we had."

"That's not true."

"I want to love you. I want to cherish you. I want there to be us, but I saw it in your eyes. You love him."

"But I love you, too."

"You can't have both of us."

I scrambled down to his feet and placed my hands on his knee. "Please, Wes..."

He leaned forward and lifted me until we were standing. He hugged me tenderly and kissed my lips. "I've always wanted you, but I'm not going to ruin what you want with him. You'll hate me for it."

I shook my head. "I could never hate you."

"Is it broken off with him?"

"I think so, he told me to get the fuck out of his trailer."

Wes stiffened. "When?"

"About a half hour ago..." I sniffed.

He stiffened more, then let go with a sudden collapse of tension. The hug was broken. "See? You went to him first. He's more important than I could ever be."

"That's not true!" Why did neither of them understand?

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Amber. I'm really sorry I couldn't be the man you needed."

I gripped his shirt. "Wes, please—"

"You should go."

"But..." I cradled his head in my hands. Tears ran freely and I was trembling. "But, I... love you, too." I had never said it to him and saying it now made me realize it was true. I hugged him fiercely. "I can't lose you, Wes. I don't ever want to be apart from you." I lifted my chin.

He allowed the kiss with some hesitation, but melted within seconds. His kiss turned passionate and meaningful. His hand stroked my hair. "I would do anything for you, Amber. Anything. I would crawl a thousand miles over broken glass just to be with you. Just to hug your leg and kiss your knee."

I whispered, "Be with me..."

He led me to his room and the sex that followed was the sweetest, deepest love-

making I had ever experienced.

I reluctantly left him knowing I was at a crossroads – a major intersection with my future leading off in directions without reconciliation.

I loved him; I realized that now. I needed him without any doubts in my mind. He was a part of me I couldn't let go.

At the same time, yearning for Julian confused me to the point that I had to flee Wes's apartment without making a commitment. I loved Julian, too, if in a different way.

Wes calmed me, but so did Julian. My longtime friend was a source of stability that I couldn't dismiss. The hard biker was a dominating demand that drove my wandering personality into line. He brought order to my thoughts and desires.

If I could've meshed the two of them into one man, I would have the perfect answer. But no one is perfect.

We all have our faults.

And I had a major one that was too fractured to make a satisfying choice over two different men.

Even with the love-making between Wes and me, I knew I would miss Julian's method of removing my anxieties. It wasn't that Wes was weak and Julian strong, they were both strong in their own ways.

Neither way was enough.

And there was no way I could hide seeing them both; they already knew about each other.

That I would even consider such a deception was unfair to both of them and indicative of my frailty. They were strong; I was the one who was weak.

I hated myself for it.

————CHAPTER 15

I stood in the sun as the cars passed by me. I gazed out over the meadows on the edge of town.

Weeks had passed. Lonely, longing, and forlorn. Some of the crew flirted with me, but they were married. I was resigned to growing old alone because I was too weak to make up my mind.

A familiar rumble snagged my attention and I looked at the oncoming cars passing slowly. We had a single lane passing the reconstruction of a partial washout of the shoulder. Dump trucks whined with hydraulics and the incessant beeping of reversing trucks was a constant companion.

There, behind several of the oncoming cars was a familiar figure riding a motorcycle. I watched his approach impassively, saddened that this was my station in life: reduced to watching a man I loved ride by.

He slowed as he neared me, then slowed more.

The car behind him honked.

On a whim and before time, I spun the traffic sign to STOP as he got close. I radioed ahead the color of the last car in the passing line.

Julian revved his Indian slightly and regarded me.

I said, "Hey." It was a brilliant and simple opening. It was the only one I could think of. "What are you doing here?"

Deadpan, he replied, "Riding my motorcycle."

I smiled, amused at the silliness of the situation. He had slowed for me before I had spun the sign. Surely he had signaled he was willing to talk and I had opened with my brilliant stupidity.

He asked offhand as if it didn't matter, "Life treating you good?"

"No."

He was silent for a long time, looking at my face. His leather gloves creaked on the handlebars. I couldn't see his eyes through the mirror sunglasses, but I knew he was looking at me.

To fill the silence, I asked, "How about you?"

I saw his Adam's apple move up, then down in a hard swallow. "No."

I wanted to melt onto the pavement in sympathy. "I'm... sorry to hear that."

A metallic radio voice from Stan tickled from my shoulder, "Blue SUV."

I saw it coming.

He said, "I'm sorry to hear about you, too."

The SUV passed. I reluctantly spun the sign.

I said, "Yeah..."

He didn't go – he just stared at me, lips pursed.

The car behind him honked.

His jaw tightened and he revved the motorcycle. He pulled away with a roar.

Don't speed, Julian, they'll get you. Bye...

My vision began to blur with tears.

————CHAPTER 16

This Year

I stared at the box of Christmas decorations. I didn't have many, but the box had sat by the rocker for two months. I just... hadn't felt like celebrating Christmas. The house went undecorated and the only presents came from my friend Verity and also my parents.

The holiday was gone and New Year's, too. Valentine's Day was fast approaching and my life was as bereft as before.

Months had gone by since I had last had a friend – a male friend. I didn't want a new one – not with how the last couple of them had turned out.

Even if I wasn't looking for new ones, I certainly had not forgotten the old ones. Both Julian and Wes were on my mind most of the time. I was trying to get over them, but the pangs of regret and longing were powerful.

I loved them both.

I wanted them both.

I worked and deflected the advances of the married workers. If I couldn't get a grasp on which single man I wanted, then I was in no condition to start goofing around with a married man.

I picked up the box of decorations at the end of January. Even today was no longer a special day.

I hated it.

Hours after I put the box away, I received a text.

Wesley: Happy birthday

Nothing else.

I threw the phone down.

What does he care? He notes my date on his calendar. I felt violated that he could so easily reject me but then dare to send a text as if to remind me that I was a rotten bitch.

I got up from the couch, gave Winter a listless ear-scratch, and left the house. If I was going to get on with my life, then I was going to do it. I was going to forget both of them.

I went to Thai Take, deciding to treat myself to some good food and finally put the past behind me. The restaurant was a former Denny's that had been originally built in the sixties. At some point before I was born it had been a Sambo's Restaurant.

It wasn't too crowded and I could see a small line for the counter and several people sitting at the small tables.

My steps slowed as I reached the door. Next to the handicapped parking were the compact spots. An Indian motorcycle sat there.

I stepped inside on rubbery legs.

Hitting me like a bomb blast were the backs of two men at the end of the line, waiting – and talking.

I ducked into the hall leading to the bathrooms and out of sight. I fiddled with my phone as cover and listened.

Julian, responding to something I had missed, said, "Nah."

"It's her birthday, today." Wes was very quiet.

"You here to get a dinner for her?"

"Nah." Very much like Julian had responded.

"I didn't know it was her birthday."

Wes let a little edge sharpen his voice. "Did you ever ask her?"

"No. So... you two aren't a thing?"

"Nope."

There was silence for a few seconds that allowed the normal conversation of the restaurant to take over. I strained as if I might miss them whispering.

It almost seemed loud when Wes asked, "She's seeing you, isn't she?"

"Nope."

"Funny."

Julian's rough voice was confrontational. "Why's that?"

"Oh, nothing. Just seeing you here and the fact she wouldn't commit to me..."

The biker chuckled, changing his tone instantly. "Yeah, well, she wouldn't commit to me, either."

"I told her I would do anything for her."

Julian didn't answer right away. When he did, he was quieter than normal. "That's very respectable, Wes. I... I'd do the same."

"But I love her. Hell, I've loved her since... Since..."

My eyes watered. Oh Wes, you always forget.

Julian said, "You're not the only one."

Wes asked, "You, too?"

"I saw her some months back on the highway being a flagger bitch. She looked tanned and happy."

"Happy?"

Happy? What? Me?

A short woman passed by me, nose buried in her phone. She didn't even look at me. I fit right in.

Julian grunted a chuckle. "Well, she looked beautiful, at least, but said things weren't going well."

"With her job?"

"No, I got the feeling she meant her personal life."

"Oh," said Wes.

"I thought she meant she missed you."

"The last I saw, she said she loved both of us. Me and you. I couldn't accept that."

There was silence for a long time and I peeked out. Three people had piled behind them, and they were both standing, looking down at their feet. I ducked back and waited, palms getting sweaty at the thought of being caught.

Julian said, "I don't think a day goes by that I don't think of her."

Wes sounded curious. "So you haven't talked to her?"

"Not in months, no."

"Huh."

"You?"

"I sent her a birthday text today. I figured she would just delete it."

No, Wes, I would never do that... I firmed my lips to keep them from trembling. I wanted nothing more than to rush out and wrap both men in hugs.

Julian said, muted and difficult to hear, "That's more than I've done."

"Why do I get the feeling that this isn't a case of Amber being too stupid to make

up her mind?"

"You know her better than me."

"Right, and it bugs me that this is so unlike her. She kept me at arm's length for years—" His tone changed abruptly and after a moment he delivered his order at the counter.

I peeked around. You're all done talking?

They were at the counter and there was nothing to be done.

I tried to look through things on my phone, but it felt like I had a mile-wide thumb at this point and nothing I pressed worked – I kept getting other pages and apps.

I sighed in exasperation and carefully tapped the camera. I leaned out a bit and snaked a picture of their backs. What a spy I am. CIA here I come.

What seemed like forever passed and both men passed side by side out the door. I shrank against the wall like a scared kid. All it took was a glance to the side to see me.

They didn't.

I poked my head around the other corner and looked out the front. Both men were standing, talking, holding their separate white bags.

I couldn't hear a word with the door shut.

At one point, Wes looked inside and I pulled back as fast as I could – my heart pounding with the fright of discovery.

This is silly.

Someone came in and passed me to the line.

By the time I poked my head back around, they were gone. I went out the front door and heard voices. Stepping slowly forward, I looked out of the recessed entry towards where I had seen Julian's Indian.

They were both there, talking next to the motorcycle. Both of them kept looking down and shaking their heads.

In a surprise move that ended their conversation, they traded phones.

I blinked in surprise. Wes had punched Julian and been slammed to the ground by the soldier. Now they were trading phone numbers?

My stomach was agitated and jumpy. I fumbled and dropped my phone. My nerves and anxiety had come back long ago.

I ordered my food inside and went home to let it sit in the refrigerator.

I just didn't have an appetite.

————CHAPTER 17

Spring brought no hope and neither did the summer. It was the aging of autumn that brought me a surprise in the form of a text.

Wes: Movie night?

Wes: Thursday?

It was Monday evening.

I stared at the text for a long time.

Surely you've gotten over me by now.

Did he just want to be friends again? Could I handle that? Because I surely hadn't gotten over him. Or Julian.

Maybe I didn't think of them every day anymore, but the hurt was deep inside, if numbed by the passage of time. Nothing could make me more melancholy than recalling the disaster of trying to love two men and being unable to decide.

To this day, I could still not make up my mind which man I had loved more. Wes? So sympathetic and calm? Julian, so hard and exciting? Wes gave me comfort and security more than Julian. Julian gave me thrill and adventure more than Wes. They both had all those qualities, but with a different shift in focus that accentuated the other.

Even almost a year later, I couldn't decide which man was better.

I didn't answer Wes.

I couldn't.

My anxiety was through the roof and even throwing a Frisbee for Winter wasn't helping.

But I finally did answer him, later that night.

Amber: Ok

I knew I was making a mistake. I also knew he would be over Wednesday because he would forget. Possibly Friday, but he had usually been a day early, not late.

I readied myself Wednesday after work.

I was not ready.

No way was I ready for what I saw.

Verity pulled up in her neon green Volkswagen bug. Wes was behind her in his Jeep. And the familiar rumble of doom followed right after: Julian.

I was looking out the window, agape and aghast with shock.

What am I going to do? Are they going to fight? Is this going to be bad? Maybe I shouldn't answer the door.

Even my teeth were tense. I ground my jaws together until they hurt, but I still answered the door.

Wes stood there with a look on his face one might find on a magician that had performed an amusing trick. "Hey." He had his backpack over one shoulder and movies in the other hand.

I tried not to look at Verity and Julian behind him – they're heads were together talking. I answered Wes, "Uh, hey. You said tomorrow, not today."

So far, so good. My verbal skills are up to the task.

He held up the two movies. "You knew I'd forget. So, Star Wars or Star Trek?"

"You know I like both."

His smile brightened. "I remembered, wow."

I couldn't control a short, nervous laugh. I looked at the other two. "Why are...?"

"They want to watch the movies, too." His face turned serious. "That isn't a problem, is it?"

By the way Julian was standing so close to Verity, I thought it would be. "Uh, no, not at all." My jaw hurt, really bad. I let them in.

Wes surprised me with a quick, friendly hug – the kind you give a sibling or an aunt.

So did Verity.

So did Julian, though his was stiff and awkward. He didn't look me in the eye. He stood next to Verity, hands stuffed in his jeans.

How am I going to get through this? Are they seeing each other now? How can I endure this torture seeing him with her?

I sat in the rocker. No way could I sit close to anyone. I even patted for Winter and hugged her into my lap for some fragment of comfort and security.

I was a wreck.

She licked my face in an unusual display of affection. The problem was, her tongue was all up my nose and over my face.

Wes eyeballed me quietly as my dog made a fool of me.

I tried to turn my face away and wipe it, but she kept licking.

Julian sat next to Verity, close. He talked about his tour in Afghanistan while she looked at him with the most adoring eyes.

I was going to throw up.

How can this happen to me? Winter, please stop.

As if reading my mind, she did.

Wes was still watching me.

I wiped my face with my sleeve and blushed at how stupid I must look.

He said, "I missed movie nights..." It was a tentative offering.

Still thinking I had dog slobber on my cheek, I kept wiping. "Uh, I did, too." I scrubbed furiously on my left cheek and then gave up.

Winter betrayed me by sending that long German Shepherd tongue right up onto my left cheek in a single swipe.

I gasped in exasperation. "Winter, stop. Get down."

Her ears flicked back, but she was a good dog and got down. She padded over to Verity and Julian, nudging his knee with her nose.

Julian dropped his hand onto her head and began petting her.

I sighed quietly. Traitor!

Wes worked the remote and said to Julian and Verity, "Are we going to watch, or you two chat the whole movie?"

Verity giggled.

Julian said, "Let's watch. Sorry." His eyes flicked to me, then away, fast.

He was mashing on my friend Verity and couldn't even look me in the eye. I seethed with agitation.

Wes started the movie, then pulled a huge bag of popcorn out of his backpack.

I used that as an excuse to get up. "I'll get a couple bowls."

Wes said, "No need..."

I was already heading to the kitchen and I wasn't going to stop. I heard murmurs from them while I lingered, but couldn't make anything out.

Was this some kind of cruel joke? Was Wes displaying Julian's fascination with Verity as some way to help me decide between the two of them? If it was, this wasn't fair. This was more like rubbing my face into it and thinking it's funny.

I came out with the bowls. All three watched me, though Julian immediately

looked away and said something to Verity.

What did he see in the tattooed and pierced woman? Rough likes rough? Had they had sex already? Was Verity a banshee to match his brutish skills? I felt ill and wanted the night to be over right now.

Unfortunately, I had to suffer through Star Wars. Even the antics of the supporting cast couldn't bring a laugh out; I just didn't feel it.

And my jaw was really hurting.

I think Wes knew it; he kept looking at me and studying my face.

After the movie, I made my excuse before anyone could say anything. "Please, I'm super wiped-out. I need to go to sleep and be up early tomorrow." I rose and made a motion towards the front door.

Reluctantly and with much hesitation, all three got up.

I got them out of the house without having to suffer hugs.

Wes turned on the porch and said, "It was good to see you again..."

I slammed the door.

————CHAPTER 18

I should've known.

I was crampy and moody on Thursday.

It didn't make work any harder but it did make it seemingly more exhausting. The men liked making me drive the work truck for some reason.

I don't know, a girl with construction equipment made a lot of hard-working men smile. Girl with a hard tool? I saw the old Snap-On calendars hanging in the shop.

I took an extra-long shower Thursday night. When I came out, my front door was getting pounded.

A voice called out. "Hey!" More pounding.

Winter sat looking at the front door, silent, and ears erect.

I cinched the bathrobe tight and opened the door.

Julian stood there, looking perturbed.

I scowled. "What do you want?"

He saw the robe. "I came over to talk. You were in the shower?"

"Yes."

"Oh, sorry. Thought you were ignoring me."

"I could start right now if you'd like."

His eyebrows drew down. "What's eating you?"

"Did you come over to tell me you and Verity are a thing now? Because I don't care."

"What the fuck is wrong with you? No, I'm not seeing Verity."

"You were all over her last night."

He tensed and his voice took on a decided edge. "The fuck I was."

Despite the animosity in our current encounter, I felt a flash of satisfaction. "Then why did you come over with her yesterday?"

"We all drove separately."

"And?"

He looked down and stuffed his hands into his jeans. He looked left, right, and down at my feet. Then he shrugged. "Wes thought it would be a good idea."

"So? Was it?" I folded my arms and leaned on the doorframe.

He breathed audibly and said, "I don't know."

"Yeah, from the looks of it, you had a great time with my friend and not with me."

His eyes flashed up, hot. "I'm not interested in her. I haven't met anyone and I don't want to. I've had no one since you – except for my hand."

Supreme satisfaction sizzled in my chest and I couldn't hide a smile.

He saw it. "I'm sure you've met someone else."

I told a half truth. "I have a lot of men after me." Married men, but you don't need to know that. I was having too good of a time rubbing this all in his face.

He looked down again and nodded. "I love you, Amber. Took me a while to realize it, but it's not going away like some seasonal flu bug. It's getting stronger."

I was speechless and stunned. Not shocked - just at a total loss how to answer his honesty.

He filled the silence. "I came over yesterday because Wes and I have been

talking..."

"You two are a thing now? Is that what you wanted to talk about?"

His head snapped up. His voice was steel. "I'm not gay." He shook his head. "Fuck, this was stupid! Why did I even come?" He turned and stomped off the porch.

I realized I had allowed my moodiness to run too far. I reached for his back, even though several feet separated us.

He reached his motorcycle and snatched his helmet in anger.

I called out with as much strength as I could, but panic strangled my voice, "I love you, Julian..."

I don't know if he heard.

He started his motorcycle and sped away.

————CHAPTER 19

Wes came over unannounced in the middle of December. It was cold and frosty out, though I felt no cheer or warmth.

I hadn't even taken out my box of Christmas decorations; I had no joy to celebrate other than what some man did for me two thousand years before. He got my thanks every morning. Tinsel and bells weren't going to make a difference.

I answered the door to the extremely cold breeze and the deep gloom of afternoon as it turned to evening.

He stood, looking hopeful. "Hey."

Something inside me shifted, changed, melted, and leapt forward with hope. "Wes."

His small smile widened.

I let him in and shut the door. It felt good and right. I hugged him and felt him tense with surprise, but only for a second. Then he was hugging me back just as fiercely and tenderly as I had remembered.

I breathed in his clean scent and hint of soap. Immediately, Julian's similar scent came to mind, but I dismissed that in an instant.

We let go of each other and I blushed. "Sorry... I guess I missed you."

His hand came up and he stroked my cheek. "That's all I've done for over a year, Amber."

Embarrassed, I made a furtive gesture towards the living room.

He sat, perched and leaning forward on the rocker. Without looking, he scratched Winter's ears.

My German Shepherd had been my only companion this last year and seeing his consideration for her made my heart swell.

He said, "I... can't... live without you. I've tried, but..."

I swallowed hard. Some of my hope twisted in anguish. Could I now make a choice? Could I choose Wes over Julian? Even after confessing my love to the veteran last month?

He said, "I want us to be together."

Like a coffin lid slamming shut, I considered the dark despair of indecision in my heart. I wanted Wes, I did. But Julian? I asked, "Is this a proposal?"

Wes looked down hurriedly and away. He wiped at his upper lip and pressed his lips together. It was an unusual sign from him that something was on his mind that he didn't want to reveal. Or didn't know how.

I waited patiently, worry making me tilt my head to look at him. My fingers wrestled together with the turmoil I felt inside from my anxiety and this strange visit.

He looked back at me and swallowed visibly. "Kinda."

"What?"

"I... have something... of a proposal."

"You don't want to marry me?" A sliver of strange relief slithered through me, but also major disappointment.

"No, I do, but... I know that Julian would come between us."

I knew it. He knew it. He knew that I knew it. There was no decent answer I could give.

He said, "I think we've come up with a different option."

"Oh?"

"We both see you."

"How is that going to work? You guys fought over me—"

"Actually, we've become pretty good friends." He laughed low and looked away.
"Coincidentally, it all started—"

"On my birthday."

His eyes narrowed. "He told you?"

"No, I saw you."

"At Thai—"

"Yes."

"I didn't see you there."

"I came in behind you two and you were already talking."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"I don't know... I guess it was all still so raw."

Wes nodded thoughtfully. "He loves you, you know, and so do I."

I shrugged helplessly.

He said, "I think we both appreciate each other now; we have something in common."

I felt like I was swirling in a whirlpool about to get sucked under. Everything was working out great for them, but not for me. "I don't know, he was pretty mad when he came over last month."

"He was, but he also said he heard you at the end. He's been ashamed—"

"Julian?"

"Yeah. Don't tell him I told you that. Anyway, I told him you had probably been moody."

I coughed a half laugh. "Uh, I was..."

"I know you, Amber..."

I blushed somewhat in embarrassment and anger. Can't a girl have some privacy with our issues?

Wes said, "Anyway, I'm here to put you on the spot."

"What?"

"It took Julian a while to agree to this, but... You know how hard he is to deal with."

"What are you going on about? Spit it out." My curiosity was crushing me.

"We want to try again with you."

"Uh..." That's not going to work.

Then he finished his proposal, "Together."

"Together?"

"Yeah, we all love each other..." He shrugged as if it should be obvious.

My eyes went dry and I blinked to wet them. If he was suggesting a triangle... I knew those things were not socially acceptable. "I, uh..."

"You love us both, right?"

I nodded, afraid of wanting to grasp at his offer.

"We both love you. He and I... have reached an understanding. It took him long enough, but..."

I dropped my mouth open. "Wait, wait, wait." I held up a trembling hand.

"Wait... you're willing to... share me?"

He nodded.

It sounded simple.

I said, "And Julian agreed to this?"

He nodded again.

"I can't believe it."

Wes smirked. "Yeah, but he loves you as much as I do, and I know how much it hurts."

"Julian?"

Wes broke out in nervous laughter. Even he wasn't so sure about all this. "Yeah, jealous Julian. I thought he'd never come around. Stubborn son of a bitch." His eyes widened. "Pardon my language – guess I've been around him too much."

I laughed incredulously. My Wes getting along with Julian? Am I dreaming? Crazy? I pinched myself.

Winter wagged her tail.

————CHAPTER 20

Christmas Eve made me more nervous than I could ever recall. By the time it was getting dark, I was a wreck. I had several bathroom visits as everything in me turned to water. I showered when my nerves had nothing left to expel.

I heard them arrive and I wanted to faint.

Was this the start of another disaster? More yelling and fighting? Bodies flying around and hitting walls and floors?

Wes had claimed they were friends.

Julian had barely looked at me when he had visited with Verity and Wes.

Was Julian's acceptance of this mad proposal just wishful thinking from Wes?

I answered the door.

Wet with drizzle from winter weather stood my two men, both smiling and holding gifts. Both dressed in silly Santa outfits.

Julian's smile slid a little. He grumped, "This was his idea." His eyes shifted to a beaming Wes.

I greeted them both with amazing skill and grace. "Hey."

Julian scowled. "Invite us in, it's fucking cold in these costumes."

Wes nudged him. "Language."

"Kiss my ass..." But there was a playful tilt to his lips on one side.

I let them in, bubbling inside at seeing the two of them together and getting along.

I didn't get hugs until they set down their presents.

Wes went first. After Julian released me, he said, "Sorry I haven't been in contact; I've been fixing up my trailer."

Wes coughed.

Julian pouted and shifted his eyes towards him. "And... I was sort of embarrassed over how I've acted around you..."

"I thought you were getting over me."

He barked abruptly with laughter. "Uh, no. But I definitely had trouble being around you after hearing his proposal."

I looked at Wes. "How long ago...?"

Wes said seriously, "Over the summer."

Julian let me go and stuffed his hands in the red Santa pockets. "I didn't like it at first..."

Wes laughed loud and long. "That's an understatement."

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah..."

I said gently, "But here you are."

His eyes sharpened on mine. "Here I am." Without changing his tone of gravity, he said, "Here we are."

"You're okay with all this?"

He looked away in weariness. "Fuck if I know... All I know is my life is shit without you."

I swallowed the lump in my throat and tried to look serenely composed like a statuesque goddess far above the emotions of mere men.

Wes gripped my shoulder. "Aw, don't cry, Amber. We're both here for you."

Great. I can't even pretend to be unaffected.

His grin was infectious.

Good old Wes.

He said, "Let's open presents."

I got two new Frisbees for Winter from Wes and a beautiful gold heart pendant.

He pointed at the heart. "Open it."

I looked at it in surprise. "Oh, it opens?"

"I don't remember how but—"

I got it open. Inside was a tiny picture of... both men. It was a duo headshot outside with greenery in the background. Both were smiling – Wes beaming and Julian smirking.

My hands trembled and I couldn't hold it up any longer. I dropped my hand into my lap and hid my face. "It's beautiful."

Julian grunted, "If you get all weepy, Winter will ruin your make-up."

"I'm not wearing any."

"Wow, you're that perfect."

Ire itched its way against my loss of composure. "I'm not perfect!"

But when I looked at him, I saw humor in his eyes and a relaxed posture as we sat on the floor around the coffee table. He hadn't been insulting me, he had complimented me.

I pouted. "Jerk."

He said, "You've always been beautiful." A second later, he added, "Even when you were torturing my sciatic with your elbow."

"You were a big baby."

He laughed.

Wes stroked my hair. "You like the pendant? We can get it in silver if you don't like gold. I thought it would go with your hair."

"No, I love it. Thank you."

Julian pushed his presents to me. The hard exterior at this very moment was gone with the exuberance of offering his gifts. It was a seminal exposure of him that clicked into place much like Wes had clicked to me long before.

Hard exterior. Soft, sympathetic interior. What had he seen in Afghanistan? What had he felt when he was shot?

I opened the two gifts and found a big box of Milk Bones for Winter and a helmet for me.

Wes said, "He actually went out and let someone touch his Indian to install a passenger seat."

Julian grumped, "Yeah, well... I gave it a good wiping after."

I said, "I'm going to get to ride with you?"

A slight toss of his head preceded his answer. "If you want."

I swallowed hard. "I'm sorry again, for not having any gifts for you."

Wes was getting to his feet. "Shut up, Amber." He wriggled his fingers, beckoning me up.

I had expected something like that from Julian, not Wes. I got up, studying his face for clues to his mood.

He scooped me up like a little girl.

I squawked at the sudden lifting, and clung to his neck to keep from falling.

Julian looked uncertain. "I don't know, Wes..."

"You can do it."

Wes carried me to my bedroom.

My heart began to hammer and my breath came in short, panicked bursts. Are they really going to do this?

————CHAPTER 21

Wes set me down and began plucking at my buttons. Julian stood looking uncertain until Wes motioned with his head.

Two men began undressing me. My heart thundered louder. I was certain they could hear it.

Wes said, "You can do it, Julian."

There was a grunt from behind me, then a flurry of clothing sounds. Heat pressed in behind me onto my naked backside. Flesh to flesh. Wes hugged me from the front, sandwiching me warmly between two male bodies.

My nipples hardened instantly. My pussy moistened so fast I thought it would run down my legs. And slowly, the thundering in my chest subsided into happy, eager beats.

A dangling male appendage lightly pressed against me from behind and another from the front. Wes was hardening faster and he kissed me as I was wrapped in their embrace.

My knees wobbled and I felt so very sluggish and unable to move. Yet my senses were heightened and humming in tune with what they were offering.

Could this work?

I wanted it to. More than anything.

But would it last? Could Julian go through with it? Would it dissolve into jealousy?

These were minor thoughts in my mind, though important. The rest of me was caught up in the slow swirl of discovery and emotional attachment to these two men.

I loved them both. I wanted both. I was getting that, but I was... scared that it

couldn't work.

That anxiety inside me grew.

Would I have to suffer losing this?

Having the two men I loved with me together at this second was the most sensuous and satisfying feeling I had ever felt. It pulsed hotly deep in my heart, sending waves of contentment throughout my body.

However, that anxiety battered at me.

Once having experienced this, and if this all degenerated, would the parting be even more difficult than last time?

That, more than anything, made my knees tremble and my shoulders ache.

Was this really a new beginning? Or was it just another end – and a harder one?

Wes stopped kissing me and spun me around. I met Julian's hungry eyes, tense and focused with wary need. His kiss was tentative and tender.

I had expected his savage seizure and instead gotten a Wes-style graze of lips and tongue.

I opened my eyes. This is Julian, right? It was.

Wes pulled me away after we broke the kiss. He pushed me back down onto the bed.

I saw both men were mostly hard. It was an invigorating sight. Two beautiful cocks in the same room. Yum.

Wes moved in on me and parted my labia with his tongue. The soft insertion sent shivers up my back and down my arms and legs. My nipples became so hard they ached.

Julian was standing with some uncertainty, sort of stroking himself while puzzling over what was happening.

I looked at him longingly and gasped to what Wes was doing to me.

Julian climbed onto the bed and started to bend over my breasts, then changed his direction and gave me another kiss.

I moaned with relief and probed his mouth with my tongue. I could feel his breathing quicken dramatically as he kissed back.

When he stopped, he pulled back. His hand was on his cock, stroking. It was fully hard. Next, he settled down to kissing my breasts and nibbling at my aching nipples.

Wes was working magic on my clit and the waves of sensation from two tongues were monumental. Never had I experienced such an intensity of direct sexual and emotional stimulation.

The room and bed moved and turned as if I were floating on clouds of contentment.

Then it all stopped.

I looked up, pouting. I made a disappointed noise.

Wes was looking at Julian. "Want to flip for who goes first?"

Flip? What? I blinked at the incongruity of the interruption. Hey, I was enjoying...

Julian grunted, "You got a coin?"

I exclaimed incredulously, "Hey, what am I? A wager or a woman? Hello, I'm right here."

Wes looked down at me critically. "Do you want to decide who goes first?"

I blinked. "Uh... uh..."

"Yeah, thought so." He looked at Julian. "Tell you what, you go first."

"You sure, dude?"

"Absolutely. Go ahead." He was scooting away.

I felt like a lab animal on display and started to close my legs and cover my breasts.

Habit, I guess.

Julian was moving and they traded places.

I started to relax; I didn't want to give him the impression I didn't want him.

He moved down, gave my clit one hard lick like an ice cream cone and moved smoothly up. His cock touched my very excited pussy and pushed inside.

I felt my lips part for his push and the walls of my pussy stretch open to accommodate his entry. Stiffness slid into me and I tensed, waiting for the brutal shove.

It didn't come.

It definitely did feel wonderful, though, to have a long, hard cock inside me after having gone so long without one. I clamped on him and looked over at Wes.

He was stroking his cock rapidly, watching me underneath Julian. His eyes were lit with excitement and anticipation.

I smiled at him, surprised at finding myself enjoying his display of arousal. I whispered, "Save some of that for me."

"Oh, I will," he panted.

Julian didn't pound me like I was used to from him. His pushes were slow and adventurous. He concentrated on feeling me deep. His cock flexed and moved, in and out, slow and certain. There was still force to his movements, but more restrained and considerate. It was as if he were savoring the flavor of something long forgotten.

His gentle, deep thrusts pushed a wave of satisfaction inside me that started slow and began to build faster in intensity.

I held onto his butt, pulling with the need to be filled with his rigid desire. I welcomed him inside, wanting it all. I felt his muscles bunch and move as he

made love to me in a perfect horizontal dance of passion.

Filled and emptied, I took everything he gave, until the realization that he was making love to me and not fucking me made me cum. It was a sudden twist of the coil inside that let loose several luxurious waves of relief. It wasn't a strong orgasm, but it was a long, satisfying ride of pleasure that left me moaning happily and my body relaxed and tingling.

Coming down from my orgasm, I realized Julian had finished. He was panting heavily and I was extremely wet in there.

He gasped, "Wow. Better than I remembered." He dipped down and kissed me fervently – some of that old savagery returning. "I love you, Amber."

Not certain if I should say it in front of Wes, I stammered, "I l-love you, too."

Julian leisurely pulled back, a warm smile on his lips. His cock was still hard when it came out and it was shining slick with juices. He gave it a few strokes, then licked his fingers.

The coil twisted again inside me, eliciting a groan of lust. It looked so hot.

Wes blocked my vision of him as he climbed over me. His eyes were hot with need. "Oh, Amber, not having you has been torture..." He stabbed his erection into me, hard and pressed harder when it was all the way in. The base of his cock mashed hard against my pubic bone.

I clamped on him, squeezing his stiffness inside of me. I sighed happily.

He said, "Unbelievable."

"Huh?"

"It's like a lake in there. But it feels..."

"Feels what?"

"It's like my dick is all tingly from the wetness."

I wasn't sure what to say. "Is that good?"

He laughed, "Oh yeah. Feels great, man." He began heaving his hips, driving his cock into me with some seriously energetic thrusts. The few times I had taken Wes, he had been very slow and deliberate. This was more an explosive demonstration of sexual joy.

I writhed under his pounding, moving my hips to meet his. I began panting at the twisting of that coil again, knowing that an orgasm so soon would either be painful, or a doozy.

Wes moved faster, breathing as if he couldn't believe how good it felt. He began groaning breathily as his cock hammered down into my pussy. "Oh... oh yeah..."

Julian crouched next to me on the bed and smiled. One eyebrow was lifted in amusement. "I guess I can handle this. Who would have thought?" His hand was on his cock again, toying with it.

Wes growled loudly, "I love this!" His erection flexed inside me and sent hot spurts into the mix. "Oh, Amber!" He thrust harshly and emptied himself inside me.

It was his final, grinding pushes that smashed my clit over the edge. I squeezed my eyes shut as a harsh wave wracked my body. It wasn't painful, but it was fast and exhausting. My head and legs came off the bed as I squeezed out five, powerful convulsions.

I flopped on the bed after them and felt my clit pulsing hotly like a bruised wound. Sleep overtook me.

————EPILOGUE

I awoke in the early morning.

The clock's digital read told me it was before four. I snuggled warmly in between two male bodies in my own bed.

I had been surprised by their decision to work together – to accept me that I loved them both. Different in so many ways, they had come together and understood that they needed to cooperate, or neither would have me.

Worse to me was that I would have neither of them.

I listened to their breathing and the creaking of the cold house around us. In our cocoon of safety, security, and sensuality, I knew I never wanted to let either of them go. Too long I had awoken alone.

No more.

Like an old familiar friend, anxiety crept up on me and I cursed my inner thoughts.

Without thinking, I reached my hands to the sides and fumbled for their cocks. I found them and gripped, looking for reassurance.

Both stirred: Wes slowly; Julian with a jerk.

I said, "Don't leave me."

Julian grumped, "I was asleep."

Wes murmured, "No one's going anywhere."

"I mean, after we wake up. In the morning. Tomorrow..."

Julian shushed me. "Shh." His hand stroked my forehead and hair.

I felt tears straining and I scrunched my eyes shut. "I don't want to be alone again." The fear mounted in me not unlike an orgasm. It threatened to ruin me.

Wes said, "Hey, calm down. We're here for you."

Julian grunted, "Tell her."

"Tell me what?"

Wes twisted up and supported himself on his elbow. His face was a darker patch of gloom above me. "We contacted the owner of your property."

"Burt?"

"Well, Steve. Burt is in a rest home now."

I was shocked. "Oh, I didn't know."

"Anyway, his son is handling things and expressed interest when we offered to buy the property outright."

Julian chuckled. "He said he wants to start a band with the money."

"You want to buy this place?"

"Yeah, if you want. You don't even use the second floor."

It was true. The rooms up there were totally empty, and filled with dust, old paint and several layers of wallpapers from over the decades.

I raised my head. "This place?"

Julian repeated, "If you want. I've fixed up my trailer. It's ready to sell. Wes is in an apartment wasting his rent money..."

I got it. "Wait, you'd both move in here?" I was astonished that it might be so.

Wes said, "Yes, if you think we can make it work. All three of us could go in on the title. Make it fair."

I had paid off my car at the beginning of the year. With little motivation to shop

in my depression, I had almost five thousand saved so far. I was speechless.

Julian flexed his dick in my hand. "I like waking up like this."

I burst out with a giggle and squeezed him.

Wes carefully said, "What do you think?"

I had what I wanted. I would be insane to give it up. "I want it."

"Are you sure?"

Julian groaned. "Don't give her the opportunity to be confused, you dick."

Wes and I laughed.

I said, "I'm not confused. I just want to be sure you two can handle... all of this."

Julian smirked, "I can handle anything as long as you're handling my cock."

I laughed again. "Oh gosh, you perv." I leaned over and found his nose with my lips. I moved lower and kissed him.

Wes said, "Hey, what's going on there? What about me?"

I pulled his face down to mine. His lips met my chin. We adjusted and kissed.

Fingers found my achy pussy. I didn't know whose.

Julian twisted and turned on the light.

It was a hundred-watt bulb and we all blinked in the sudden blinding brightness.

Wes complained, "Agh, why'd you do that?"

"Because I want to see our present." He flipped back the sheets to expose our nakedness.

The cool air rushed in and made me shiver. "It's cold!"

Julian's sneer was sexy. "We can fix that."

And they did. Mouths and fingers explored me to the point I thought I was going to sweat.

However, I wasn't content to just lay there doing nothing. I got up and turned. "Get closer. I want to play." I got both their erections in my hands and stroked their displays of desire.

I definitely would have to be insane to give this up.

Both men rested, heads on their arms, and watched me. Both had smiles that ignited wickedly delicious fires inside me.

I said, "I want both of you. I don't know who to ride first."

Wes brightened. "Oh? Together? We could try that."

"Wait, what?"

"You know, double..."

"Huh?"

Julian said, "Ride both of us? You're kinkier than I thought, Wes."

I got the bright flash of inspiration. It sounded very... dirty – and perfect at the same time. "I don't know if..." But I wanted to try. It sounded too perfect to cap off such a wonderful Christmas morning. I said, "Get them together. Close." I pulled on both of them.

Wes and Julian worked out how. One was up on the bed like normal, the other's head at the foot of the bed. They wriggled and scissored until their erections were right up against each other.

Julian grated, "No one better take pictures of this. My ballsack has never touched another guy's nuts."

Wes laughed.

"I'm not kidding."

"It's not gay, okay?"

I was climbing over them, maneuvering and gripping their dicks together.
"Would you two shut up?"

Both grinned at my bitchy dominance and went quiet.

I got both of their heads together at my entrance. They both weren't going to go in at the same time, so I chose Julian's cock to go in first. I popped it in and then wiggled Wes's erection against his at my opening. I shifted and squirmed until I felt the stretching that indicated I had it right.

I pushed down, trying to relax. I began to stretch. Everything ached from the night before, but the stretching actually felt good. I squirmed my hips, gyrating them to make sure both were inside.

I felt their heat. I felt their cocks flexing against each other and inside me. It was wonderful. I sat down and pressed more.

Slowly, my pussy stretched open and took them deeper. I called out breathily in alarm as I sank down on their combined cocks.

My world swirled around me and my pussy opened wide for the two men that I treasured.

Louder and louder I called out as I gave them what they wanted and took from them what I needed.

My voice echoed powerfully in the old house as we three engaged together in the perfect display of love and passion.

Thank you for reading Treasured and Pleasured! I hope you found the story fun and enjoyable. All reviews are greatly appreciated.

If you would like to read similar holiday stories, check out these titles from Laran Mithras:

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