

A  
Different  
Kind  
Of  
Fairy  
Tale

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**Smashwords Edition**

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## Dedication

This book is dedicated to everyone who encouraged me to take a chance; most of all, my stepmother. Without her encouragement and help, I would not have followed through on my dream of writing. For this, I will always be thankful.

## Chapter 1

“If you drop one more pass, I swear I’m going to jump through this TV and rip your balls off!”

Stella Howe screamed and paced in front of her 55 inch flat screen television. Her favorite team, the Green Bay Predators, had a road game this week against the Washington Justice. They were down by six with ten seconds to go, and one of their star wide receivers had just dropped another pass. They had one more down to go for the end zone and the win from the eight yard line.

Stella stalled her pacing as Abel Redder, the Predators hot hot hot quarterback, got set under center. She held her breath as the ball was snapped.

Redder dropped back and scanned the field. As the seconds ticked away, it seemed so did the Predators hope of that first round bye. Suddenly, Redder took off like a shot for the goal line.

“Get your fine ass moving, Go Go Go Go! Woooooo!” Stella cheered as loud as she could. Redder dove into the end zone for a touchdown and the win.

Stella slumped down onto her couch, out of breath and with a smile on her face. There were few things in this life better than watching football on a Sunday afternoon for Stella. She enjoyed everything about it. But most of all, spending all day watching hot men in tight pants bent over, what more could a girl want?

*Knock, Knock, Knock*

Before Stella could pull herself up off the couch, her door swung open. “Is the room safe from flying objects, or should I come back later?”

Alex Gray, Stella’s next door neighbor and best friend for the last three years, came strolling in with a smile on his gorgeous face. “I don’t know what you could possibly mean.” Stella replied with mock offense.

“Since I could no longer hear your loud mouth through these incredibly thin walls, I just assumed the game was over and I would be free of bodily harm.” Alex replied. Knowing exactly what Alex was referring to, Stella cocked her head to the side to study him.

“It was one time; and it’s not like you needed stitches when the pieces of the remote hit you. You barely needed a band aid.” Stella rolled her eyes at Alex.

“One time? I wish it was a one-time thing. You my dear have scared away some of the toughest men I know with your outbursts. Kyle won’t even visit my apartment when a game is on, out of fear you’ll throw something through my wall. How one woman can get so worked up about a silly game is beyond me.” Alex stated.

“Silly game, how dare you! This is serious business. They are in the playoffs; but if they don’t get their heads out of their asses, it’s going to be a short run. I’m simply motivating them; and if small innocent objects get broken in the meantime, so be it. And if Kyle is scared of little old me, his crew at the firehouse should be concerned about him watching their backs.” Stella said pointedly.

Alex looked at Stella for a few seconds before finally giving in, and he burst out laughing. “I can’t believe you just said all that with a serious face. It’s a football

game. And most of the men at Kyle's station have seen you in action. I think they would understand his fear. I swear if I hadn't accidentally walked in on you naked last summer, I'd be convinced you're a man." He had finally stopped laughing long enough to bring in a few deep breaths! Stella felt her face go a deep dark red at the memory of last summer.

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She had just gotten out of the shower and forgot a towel, so Stella left the bathroom and froze with her hand on the linen closet door knob. Alex had waltzed into her apartment, like he always did, asking what she was making him for dinner. Only this time, instead of dinner, he was getting a show.

Their eyes connected for a brief moment, and Stella thought she saw a flash of desire in his eyes. But as quickly as it had come, it was gone. Embarrassed beyond belief Stella bolted for her bedroom.

After slamming the door shut, she leaned back against it. Stella heard Alex's footsteps getting closer. "Stella? Stella, answer me."

"Go away. I would like to die of embarrassment without you here." Stella wanted the floor below to open up and swallow her whole. Men had seen her naked before, but this wasn't just any man. This was her gorgeous, hot, sexy neighbor; a man she could not, and would not, think about in ways other than friendship.

She had long ago conceded that she would never be more than a buddy to Alex. He dated women that looked like they should be on the cover of magazines or walking the runways of Paris. Not someone that couldn't even tell you the difference between eye liner and eye shadow; let alone how to put them on.

Stella's idea of dressing up was jeans and a T-shirt. She loved sports, beer and food. In no way, shape or form did she want to be a model, but one day she would like to be looked at as more than one of the guys.

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Stella glared at Alex for bringing up the second most embarrassing situation of her life, and for insulting her beloved Predators. She threw her hands in the air, let out a growl and went to the kitchen to finish some food she started earlier.

As she went about getting the ingredients out of the refrigerator, and dropping chicken wings into the deep fryer, Alex came in and sat on a bar stool at the island to watch her work.

"What are you making?"

"Why should you care, you're not getting any."

"What, why? Come on Stella, I was just kidding earlier. Predators' football is a big deal and I hope they win it all this year. And seeing you naked was the highlight of my summer last year. Too bad you always remember to lock your door when you take a shower now." Alex said with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

"You're just saying that because you smelled my amazing brownies baking and saw the honey barbeque wings cooking." As soon as Stella said brownies and wings, she knew she had distracted him from anymore shower and naked talk.

"Brownies, Wings? Where are they? Are they done yet? I will pledge my undying love to the Predators for both." Alex was talking a mile a minute and looking around frantically, and it made Stella laugh.

“I’m sure the team will appreciate your support, even if it is over food.” Stella said dryly. “They are almost done, so let me finish getting the sauce ready, and then we can go eat in the living room and watch the post-game show. Here’s some mini quesadillas to hold you over.”

“You’re the best. Although, since living next door to you I have let myself go. How am I going to find a woman looking like this?” Alex rubbed his hand in a dramatic rounding motion over his stomach.

Since the day she moved into the building, Alex had been raiding her cabinets and containers for food. Anytime she made something from scratch, he was there. It’s like he had developed a sixth sense when she was cooking. It never bothered Stella because she loved to cook, and liked even more that someone appreciated it. Even if it was someone totally off limits.

Their easy friendship worked for her. She had enough going on in her life without the complications a man would bring; especially a man like Alex. All cool confidence and striking good looks. Been there, done that, got the broken heart to prove it.

As Stella’s gaze trailed down Alex’s body she started laughing. “Yes, I see your point. Every woman hates a six foot two man with blonde hair, piercing blue eyes, washboard abs and muscles that scream touch me. You just get more unattractive every day; poor baby. I guess I’ll have to cut you off from all of my food so I don’t feel bad for throwing off your game with the ladies.”

Alex’s startled expression was priceless. “You will do no such thing. I’ll just have to turn up the charm so they ignore my love handles.” And with that, Alex grabbed another quesadilla, shoved it in his mouth and smiled like a fool.

Stella shook her head. She couldn’t believe she just said all of that to him. She turned away and finished up the BBQ sauce she was mixing. She pulled the wings from the fryer and tossed them with sauce. As soon as she set the bowl down, Alex pounced.

“Let them cool down.” Stella scolded. “If you want a woman so bad, please never let them see you around chicken wings. No amount of charm can make up for a ring of BBQ sauce around your mouth and the stain on your shirt. Seriously, use a napkin. I don’t have time to clean up after you. I have to head to the office in a little bit.”

“It’s not all chicken wings, just yours. And, it’s Sunday. Why do you have to go in? You’re the boss. Give yourself the day off.” Alex said around a mouth full of chicken.

“I have three weddings this weekend, plus all the clients coming in for the day to day shoots too. I need to make sure everything is ready. Plus I need to do some cleaning at the studio.” Stella could already feel the tension of the week set in from just saying her schedule aloud.

“You work too hard. You need to learn to say ‘no’ Stella. It’s not healthy. You hardly sleep or eat, and let’s not mention your social life because you my dear don’t have one. You’re twenty-seven, not fifty-seven. You need some fun in your life, not just work.” Alex looked at her with concern filled eyes.

Stella knew all of this. It’s nothing she hadn’t heard from Alex before, let alone her sister and assistant Lindsay. But she had worked hard to build her photography studio into what it was today. She was proud of what she had accomplished in just three short years. She refused to fail, and taking time off or cutting back was not an option. Stella would not chance losing even one client.

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When you grow up constantly worrying about whether you will have a place to live, food in your stomach or power on when you get home, it is a pretty big motivator to work hard.

Hard work, the one lesson Stella wished her mom would have learned. Instead, Tina Howe had lived for herself, and would take from whoever she could. The only use her children had in her life was for child support. She in turn spent it on going out boozing with whatever flavor of the week she had at the time; leaving her two daughters at home to survive on their own.

And survived they had. She and her sister had both been towards the top of their classes, worked hard and became two very successful and independent women.

Stella loved her sister. Victoria was outgoing, beautiful and Stella's best friend aside from Alex. She was always popular in school, and had an eye for fashion and hair; an eye that landed her a scholarship to the top art institute in Chicago. Victoria had excelled at the institute and now had her own stylist firm in downtown Chicago. They were best friends and always there for each other no matter what else was going on in their lives.

Stella was the baby of the family and so different from her sister in looks and personality that she sometimes wondered how they were related. Her sister was around five foot one, and Stella was just shy of five foot eight. While her sister was skinny with long blond hair, Stella had thick chestnut brown hair and a curvier athletic build. She knew that was just the way her body was made, no matter what her mother said.

According to Tina, Stella needed to be on a constant diet so that she could be as beautiful and well-shaped as her sister. Her sister knew how to do her hair and make-up and always dressed in the current style. Stella was a tom boy through and through. Throw on a pair of jeans, a T-shirt or hoodie and she was happy. Her hair was pulled up in a ponytail most of the time too. Put Stella in a pair of heels, and you might as well be asking to spend the night in the E.R with her.

Just one more thing her mother threw at her during one of her many fits of rage. How no man would ever want to marry a chubby buddy, when they could have someone like Victoria as arm candy. It had been five years since Stella seen her mother. She had finally given up on her mother ever changing. That still didn't stop Tina from calling to try and weasel money from her though.

Stella's childhood wasn't all bad. Going to her dad John's house, every other weekend, was like a vacation from hell. She knew without a doubt she was loved there. Stella was if nothing else, daddy's little girl. Their weekends were spent playing basketball or softball outside. Stella tried like hell to beat him at a game of horse, but failed miserably.

In the winters, they would play board games or video games. *Madden* being their favorite, so they could trash talk each other's teams. They watched movies; mostly old westerns, war movies or *Star Wars*. He would ask her about school or whatever else was going on in her life at the time.

Stella knew her dad had always wanted a son, but she was as close as he ever got; which was fine with her. Stella could never see herself as a girly girl. Sure she

sometimes wished she could turn heads like Victoria, especially one particular man's head, but she was comfortable with who she was.

A few years after her parents divorced, John had remarried. Penny was a breath of fresh air. She was more of a mom to Stella than her own was. Penny taught Stella everything she knew about cooking. They would spend hours in the kitchen trying new recipes or laughing about any number of things. Life at her dad's house was the break Stella's soul needed to make it through the other parts of her life.

If it hadn't been for her sister and all her friends at school, Stella would have asked to move in with her dad and Penny. Her dad knew very little of the hell his daughters lived in. The constant yelling and hitting was not something her and Victoria liked to talk about.

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Stella needed to stop dwelling on the past and move on. Her business was great. She talked to and saw her family and friends as often as she could, and aside from her mother constantly trying to borrow money from her, Stella's life couldn't be better. Unless she thought about the fact that she hadn't had sex for three years and counting. Not since the day she walked in on her ex, Kevin, in her bed, with her now ex friend Heidi.

She refused to give a man the power to hurt her ever again. If and when she decided to put herself back out there, she was going to look for an average guy; average in every part of his life. Never again would she fall for the charming, good looking, sweet talker type; the ones that as soon as they so much as say hi, your panties are hitting the floor. They say you're all they ever think about, while sleeping with your friend behind your back.

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## Chapter 2

“Earth to Stella” Alex waved an impatient hand in front of her face.

“Sorry, what were you saying?” Stella shook her head as if to clear some unwanted thought from her mind. Alex sat for a moment just staring at her. She had bags under her eyes and had lost quite a bit of weight in the last few months.

“I said you need to eat some food, get some sleep and take better care of yourself. I hate seeing you like this.” Stella rolled her eyes as she always did and brushed his concerns aside with an “I’m fine.”

“Damn it, you’re not fine. When is the last time you ate a decent meal; let alone slept for more than three or four hours a night?” Alex was getting more and more frustrated with Stella. He had watched as she built up her business and let it take over her whole life. She never took time off, and when she wasn’t at the studio, she was in her home office going over details for upcoming shoots.

He wanted to pull her close and hold her until she listened to reason and took a much needed nap in his arms. Mentally smacking himself, he quickly let that thought slide away.

Stella had been Alex’s best friend for three years. She was one of the only people he could talk to who actually listened. His buddy Kyle was great to hang out with and drink beer, but not a great listener unless the subject was sports or hot chicks. Stella on the other hand, was one of the guys; but would also listen if he needed her to. She never judged, gave great advice and was the most loyal person he knew. Not to mention her amazing cooking skills.

Every time he started to let his romantic feelings for Stella come to the surface, he quickly pushed them back down. He thought about everything he would lose if he told her how he felt.

If she didn’t return his feelings, which at this point he was pretty sure was the case; there would be an awkwardness hanging over them every time he saw her. If she did have the same feelings and they tried and failed at a relationship, he would lose his best friend and girlfriend all in one shot. Girlfriends came and went, but a friend like Stella was one in a million. That was not a risk he was willing to take.

“Well, instead of having a repeat conversation like the last two, I’m going to head home.” Alex tried to keep his tone even, but judging by the look on Stella’s face, he had failed.

Alex got up from the bar stool, walked over to give Stella a hug and kiss on the cheek, said a quick good-bye and headed for her door. He knew trying to talk to her was a lost cause. The woman was stubborn as a mule.

“Wait! Don’t you want to take these with you? I’ll never be able to eat them all myself.” Stella came in the living room holding the bowl of wings and smiled. Damn her and her hold over him and his stomach.

Alex snatched the bowl from her; then for good measure, walked back into the kitchen for the pan of brownies that had been cooling on the counter. He thanked her for both and headed back to his apartment. As he closed the door behind him he

heard Stella sigh. He didn't know if it was out of frustration over their conversation, or the fact that he had just stolen all of her brownies.

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Three years ago, Alex was in the middle of another "chat" with his then girlfriend Sarah. It was the same thing constantly. "I don't think we want the same things." "Care more." "You never take me anywhere nice." He knew he needed to end it, but he didn't know how. Most women would have dumped him by now, but Sarah seemed to think she could "fix" him. He wasn't a bad guy. He just didn't see the need in going out every night to eat, or buying presents for anything other than birthdays and holidays. Sadly, all the women he attracted were the high maintenance type that required all of the above.

He heard a woman shriek outside his door, then a string of curse words that would have made a sailor blush. He got up from the couch without a second thought to Sarah and her "issues", and headed for the door.

As he opened the door, he saw a tall, brown haired woman balancing a moving box between her and the wall. He couldn't see her face, but he had a hard time believing this was the woman that had let such colorful vocabulary fly.

She had long legs that led to an incredible ass, a waist that was made for grabbing and holding onto as she was bent over the back of a couch, and long hair pulled back in a ponytail that he had the sudden urge to wrap tightly around his hand. He was broken out of his wandering thoughts when another string of expletives proceeded out of her mouth as she tried to get a better grip on the box.

She was dangerously close to falling down the stairs if she adjusted the wrong way. He quickly reached out to steady her and grab the box.

When he finally got a look at her surprised face, he was held in place by the most amazing eyes he'd ever seen. They were big and round and the oddest color of green mixed with gold around the center. Then there were her lips. Those plump, juicy lips that Alex could easily imagine wrapped around his dick. He stared for what felt like minutes, when he suddenly realized they were still by the stairs. He pulled her and the box back out of harm's way.

"Thank you. I thought I could make the two flights of stairs no problem. Clearly the box was heavier than I thought. I'm Stella, by the way. I'm moving into apartment 2B." Alex stood still for a few seconds longer than he should, and then readjusted the box he had taken from her and shook the rambling woman's out stretched hand.

"I'm Alex. I live in 2A. So I guess I'm your new neighbor. Would you like me to carry this in for you? It is a little heavier than it looks. What did you pack bowling balls?"

With a laugh, Stella opened the door to her apartment and Alex followed her through the door. A few pieces of furniture and some boxes were strewn around the living room.

The apartment was just like his. The floor plan was open, with a wall of floor to ceiling windows in the living room. You could see from the living room through the modern kitchen to the hallway at the back that leads to two nice size bedrooms. A small bathroom was in the hallway along with a laundry room. The master bedroom was large, with a private bath and walk in closet.

“You can set that down on the kitchen island if you want.” Stella’s voice, which had a husky rasp to it, pulled Alex out of his haze. He walked over and set the box down.

For such a small box, it weighed a ton. As if reading his mind she said “That box has all my cookbooks in it. I didn’t think I had that many. Guess I should have labeled the boxes better.”

“So you like to cook? Are you any good or are these books your attempt not to poison people?” Alex smirked and hoped she knew he was kidding. He thought she did too, until the most crushing look came across her face. It looked like she was going to cry and then he heard the first snuffle come from her.

Suddenly feeling like the world’s biggest jackass, he started muttering “I’m so sorry. I was just kidding. Please don’t be upset. I swear it was a joke. Please don’t cry.”

Just as Alex was prepared to get on his knees and beg for forgiveness, Stella did something he didn’t expect. She laughed, and they were not girly little giggles. It was a full on, tears rolling down her face, body shaking laugh. One look at his stunned face only made her laugh harder. After several seconds, she composed herself enough to stand up and talk to him.

“I’m sorry for laughing.” She looked anything but sorry. “You’re just too easy. Men can’t take a woman crying. It always gets me. You didn’t upset me. If I got upset over a guy thinking I can’t cook, I would need medication for the bigger problems in my life.” And as Stella said that last sentence, all traces of humor left her face.

Alex knew enough about women to know not to ask what big problems she may have. Especially when it was clear it wasn’t something she wanted to talk about. Instead he went for a much lighter conversation.

“I can already tell living next to you is going to keep me on my toes.” She relaxed once again. All the sadness leaving her face. “Now back to the cooking thing. Can you really cook; because if you can, you are now my new best friend?” Stella gave the cutest blush.

“I’ve been known to throw together little things here and there. And as you so elegantly put it, nobody’s been poisoned yet.” Stella stepped around him and headed back toward the living room.

“Do you have more boxes to carry up? I could help if you need me to.” Just as he had gotten the last word out, an annoyed sigh came from the open front door.

“Alex, what the hell do you think you’re doing? We were in the middle of a conversation. I don’t appreciate being ignored. Now, come back so we can finish this, and then you can take me to get some dinner.” Sarah stood in the doorway staring at Stella with clear aggression. If how she was looking at Stella wasn’t enough, her comments toward him tripped the wrong trigger inside him. No one gave him orders; especially someone looking to continue a relationship with him.

“I think we are finished with this Sarah. Please don’t call me or contact me ever again. You can take your demands and holier than thou attitude and go to hell.” Alex wasn’t normally such an ass, but this was the last straw. How he had put up with Sarah for the last six months was beyond him. He felt like a hundred and ten pound weight had been lifted off his shoulders and out of his bed. Without a second thought, he turned his back to Sarah.

With a very un-ladylike growl, Sarah turned on her heels and stalked back to his apartment. After he heard the sound of his front door slamming and her high heels click clacking down the stairs, he turned to Stella. "I apologize for her rudeness."

Stella stared at him for all of two seconds before she blurted out "Why are you apologizing? What a bitch!"

Her bluntness made him laugh. "I couldn't have said it better myself. I guess I should have done that in private. I'm not normally such an ass. We were having so much fun before her little interruption. Can we forget it happened? Why don't we finish getting your stuff up here and then I'll order pizza as a sort of 'welcome to the building' thing."

"That sounds like a great idea, as long as you're not a big baby. I like my pizza fully loaded. None of that 'supreme, but take everything off but the pepperoni' stuff." He liked her even more now. "And by the way, I think you had every right to act the way you did. I'm pretty sure the only time I've seen a woman be that nasty was in a movie. How long were you together?"

"You are a woman after my own heart" he placed his hands over his heart and sighed. "The greasier the better; and to answer your question, six long months" Alex replied with a dramatic shudder.

Stella laughed "Well the look your girlfriend just gave you said you have no heart," she said with a mischievous grin "but if that's how she was all the time, you deserve a medal for not throwing her and her high heels out a window long before now."

Stella was unlike any woman he had ever met. She didn't seem to have five layers of make up on. In fact, she wasn't wearing any at all. She spoke her mind and didn't care who was around. And she liked to eat. Where had this woman been all his life?

Alex spent the rest of the night helping Stella unpack. She didn't have a lot so it went fairly quickly. They talked and laughed like they had been friends for years, instead of hours. He had learned that she just got out of a relationship, but didn't say much beyond that, and he didn't push.

He watched her unpack several Green Bay Predators knick knacks and souvenirs and started poking fun at all of them. She turned steely eyes on him and gave him one warning.

"I will tell you this only once. No one insults my beloved Predators, in my home, and gets away unharmed. You have been warned." Alex's only reply was the shocked expression left on his face from her words.

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And so began the best friendship he had ever had. After three years, they still made each other laugh. Sometimes they got on each other's nerves, but that was mostly when he was poking fun at her beloved Predators or she was withholding her excellent food from him for said offense. Nothing was going to change. He wouldn't let it. Now if only he could convince his heart and other body parts to listen to his head.

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## Chapter 3

Stella pulled up to the back of her studio and turned the car off. She looked up and couldn't help but feel an overwhelming sense of pride. Since opening *Picture Perfect Studios* three years ago, her life had been a lesson in long days and sleepless nights.

Making the decision to open her own photography business at one of the lowest points in her life was frightening. Stella second guessed herself every step of the way. Until one day she woke up and realized she had to do this one thing for herself.

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When she passed the building her studio was currently in, everything had clicked into place. She called the realtor, made an offer and signed all the paper work sixty days later.

Since that time, she did everything from baby pictures to weddings and everything in between. After the first year, she had finally broken down and hired an assistant.

Lindsay Pierce had been a life saver. During her interview, Stella had felt an instant connection. Lindsay was quiet and shy. She had long red hair and wore simple clothes that did nothing to show off the figure Stella could tell was hiding under the too big clothes. She seemed jumpy, but Stella figured it was nerves over the interview. After twenty minutes, Stella knew her search for an assistant was over, and had never once regretted her decision.

Two years later, Lindsay was someone Stella had come to count on and listen to when she had an idea. She also considered her a friend. Along with being extremely well organized and great with clients, Lindsay had an artistic eye that rivaled Stella's. Lindsay had gone from quiet and shy, to downright feisty.

She no longer hid herself behind her long hair and frumpy clothes. Lindsay could light up any room she was in. She still didn't talk about her life before starting at *Picture Perfect* much, but Stella chalked it up to her being a private person.

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Now with business booming, they were busier than ever. In the last couple of months, she had started debating on hiring a part time photographer to take care of the day to day photos, while she traveled to ones on location.

Stella walked in the studio, mind wandering and quickly realized she wasn't alone. All the lights were on in the back room and she could hear items being moved around. Stella grabbed in her purse for the pepper spray Alex had insist she buy. Her studio was in a good neighborhood on the out skirts of Chicago, but she was often alone and he said he would feel better if she at least had some protection.

Just as her fingers found the can she heard a familiar voice. "Stella, is that you? I'm in the back." Lindsay!

“Yes it’s me. What are you doing here?” Stella asked as she approached the storage room Lindsay was currently in.

“Alex called me a little while ago and said you were headed down here. I wasn’t doing anything so I figured I’d come help you get everything sorted out for the week.” Lindsay spoke as she rearranged back drops and props for the shoots scheduled for tomorrow.

“He shouldn’t have done that. I would have been fine on my own.” Stella said on an exasperated sigh.

“We all know you can do it on your own, but you don’t have to. He’s worried about you and so am I. You look like you’ve aged ten years in the last few months, and you’ve lost weight from not eating enough. It’s okay to ask for help Stella.” Lindsay had stopped working and looked Stella straight in the eyes. All Stella could do was shake her head and walk to her office, with Lindsay hot on her heels.

“I’m fine. We’ve just been extra busy lately. The holidays are over so everything will slow down. As for the weight, it’s not like I couldn’t stand to lose a little anyway.” As soon as the words left her mouth, she regretted them.

Lindsay’s face went bright red and she looked like she was going to blow a gasket. “How many times do I have to tell you, you look amazing? Stella you are one of the most beautiful women I know inside and out. You didn’t need to lose weight and you still don’t. Whatever bullshit your mother drilled into your head about needing to be a size zero to be happy is wrong. Curves are beautiful and I wish I had yours.”

Stella knew Lindsay was right. She was healthy, stayed active and her body was normal, but every once in a while her mother’s voice was there in her head; warping her view of her stomach and legs into something unattractive. “I’m sorry. I don’t know where that came from. I know I look okay. The doubts just creep in every now and then.”

“You should never let anyone make you feel that way about yourself.” Lindsay now had a sad look in her eyes. One Stella hadn’t seen her have in a long time.

“I know. I promise it was the last time.” She gave Lindsay a smile and she smiled back. Lindsay shook her head and walked back out of the office. Stella sat her purse on her desk and reached for the phone. On the third ring, he picked up.

“Let me guess, you don’t appreciate me calling Lindsay and voicing my concerns about your well-being, and I should mind my own business. How am I doing so far?” Alex sounded pleased with himself for knowing her so well.

“Lindsay deserves a day off Alex. I wasn’t going to be doing so much that I need her here.” Stella said with as much exasperation as she could muster.

“You need a day off too. So why don’t you tell Lindsay to go home and you do the same. I’ll take you out for some dinner and if you’re nice to me, a movie too. But no chick flicks.” Alex finally finished his ramblings.

“I’m not happy with you right now. I don’t know what it’s going to take for you to believe I’m fine. It’s just been a crazy couple months. Christmas is over and all the craziness should be done now; and how is dragging me all over town going to get me the rest you say I need.” Stella pointed out.

Alex sighed, “Fine! But will you at least call it a day. I’ll order take out and we can watch something on Netflix at my place. I’m sure we can find a Bruce Willis movie for you to drool over.”

“I just got here, but if it will get you off my back for a while, I will only work for an hour then leave. Does that make you happy?” Stella could not get any more sarcasm in that last question.

“Extremely, now what would you like for dinner?” Alex asked a little too happily.

“I want sushi from *Chop Sticks*, with a side order of egg rolls and Chow Mein.” Stella could already taste the delicious Chinese food on her tongue and barely stifled a moan. *Chop Sticks* had the best take out in their neighborhood.

“Text me when you’re leaving and I’ll place the order. I’ll see you in a bit. Bye.” And with that, Alex hung up. With one nagging friend taken care of, for now at least, all Stella had to do was get Lindsay out of here.

Stella sat down at her desk and checked her emails. Then she pulled out her planner to go through her schedule for the week when an appointment jumped out at her.

“Lindsay, can you come in here please?” Stella said a little louder and shakier than she would have liked.

“What’s up? Do you need me to get you something?” Lindsay asked sweetly, as if Stella’s world wasn’t currently spinning off its axis.

“Did you write this appointment in my planner? And if so, please tell me it was your attempt at a horrible joke.” Stella could barely stop her hand from shaking as she pointed to the appointment in question.

Lindsay round the desk and looked down at the planner. Stella knew the moment reality set in by the look of sheer horror on Lindsay’s face.

“Stella, I am so sorry. I didn’t put two and two together. I’ll make this right. I’ll call and let them know that this meeting won’t be happening. Why the hell would they have called here in the first place? They have to know you’re the photographer. What sort of sick game are they playing?” Lindsay was already grabbing for the phone when Stella stopped her.

“It’s ok Lindsay. I’ll take care of it. Hopefully it’s all a horrible mistake.” Who was she kidding? Stella knew better. “I think we are done for today. You can head out. I’ll be right behind you.” Stella didn’t want Lindsay around for the meltdown that was sure to happen as soon as she was alone.

Right there in front of her, written in blue ink, were the names Kevin Montgomery and Heidi Shaw. They were looking for a wedding photographer. Stella had not seen or spoken to either of them since the day she caught them in bed together; her bed. The same bed she shared with Kevin for over a year. And now, with a cruel twist of fate, they were getting married and were looking to hire her as their photographer.

“Are you sure? I can take care of it. It’s not a problem. It’s my fault that the appointment was made.” Lindsay finished with a pained look on her face.

“Lindsay, it’s really ok. I’m a big girl. I’ll call them tomorrow and get it all straightened out. Go ahead. Alex bribed me with Chinese food to quit work for today, so I’m headed home too. Enjoy the rest of your Sunday and I’ll see you in the morning.”

With one final apology, Lindsay grabbed her things and left. Stella sat frozen at her desk. For three years, Stella had put her heart and soul into making her business a success. Only now, sitting staring at the two names that had turned her world upside

down, she realized she had worked to avoid dealing with just how much their betrayal had hurt her.

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Stella had asked her manager at the *Crimson Café* to leave early. Kevin didn't have to work late at the law firm for once, and she was hoping to surprise him with a special dinner and an even better dessert.

As Stella drove home, she stopped at her favorite lingerie store for a hot pink and black teddy she had been eyeing for a while. Every woman had their weakness. Some were shoes or purses. Stella's weakness was expensive lingerie. She loved feeling silks and satins against her skin. And if she had to pay extra for that luxury, it was worth it.

After another stop at the grocery store, to get all the ingredients for Kevin's favorite meal, she headed home. As Stella pulled into the driveway of the house she and Kevin rented together, she was surprised to see his car already in the driveway. "So much for surprises" Stella murmured as she made her way up the front steps.

Just as she pushed through the front door she heard voices coming from somewhere in the house. After placing all the bags in the kitchen, Stella went in search of Kevin and whoever he was talking to. When she realized they were coming from the bedroom, her spine started to tingle with an uneasy feeling.

She slowly pushed the door open and was cemented to the floor. The view in front of her was something she couldn't have imagined in her worst nightmare. Kevin lay on the bed running his hands over every part of a leggy blonde. But on a closer look, it wasn't just any leggy blonde. It was Stella's best friend since high school, Heidi Shaw.

Stella must have made a noise because all of a sudden there was a flurry of blankets and clothes, as they both flew from the bed. "What are you doing home? I thought you worked until six?" Kevin gasped out as he tried to shove his boxers back on.

"Please, don't let me interrupt. You both seemed to be enjoying yourselves. I had this crazy idea to come home early and cook you dinner as a thank you for all the hard work you've done lately. But I see you've already had your dessert, so there really is no point." With that said, Stella turned and all but ran from the room.

Just as she reached the front door, soft hands grabbed her. "Stella, wait! Let me explain. It's not what you think." Heidi stopped her from leaving.

"You weren't just riding my boyfriend like a whore on a rollercoaster. I really should get to the eye doctor because that's exactly what I saw. Now, unless you want to lose the use of your right hand, I suggest you remove it from my arm." Heidi let Stella's arm go and stepped back.

"Please don't do this. I never meant to hurt you. It just happened." As Heidi finished her pathetic plea, Kevin joined them in the living room. Stella glared at him.

"I will be back here tomorrow to get my stuff. If you so much as show your face while I'm here, I will personally make sure you can't walk for a week. You can keep the bed, even though it's mine. The thought of ever laying any part of my body on it again makes me sick to my stomach." Stella turned around and walked to her car with all the calm she didn't feel. She had backed out of the driveway and made it to the end of the street before the first tear fell.



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With that last thought screaming in her ears, Stella walked around turning off all the lights and locked the doors. Once she reached her car, Stella sat there trying to decide what to do. She could go home and stuff herself with Chinese food and watch Bruce Willis blow shit up and kick ass.

That option however, involved seeing Alex and explaining why she was about to have a stroke; or she could head to the nearest bar and try to drink away all the memories of that one horrible day. With the decision made, she backed out of the parking lot.

Rum trumped Chinese food any day!

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## Chapter 4

Alex was breathing hard, his muscles were on fire and he was covered in sweat. After Stella had called, he decided to get a quick workout in before she was set to be to his place. He walked out of his spare bedroom, which he used as his home gym, and went to get a bottle of water.

Stella had said she would work another hour, but as Alex checked the clock for the hundredth time, it seemed she had lied and was putting in more work. He was just picking up his cell phone to call and nag her, when it went off.

“Hello.”

“Alex its Lindsay, is Stella there? I’m trying to get ahold of her and she’s not answering.” Lindsay had a slight panic to her voice that caught Alex’s attention.

“No, she hasn’t come back yet. I thought you were going into the office to help her out? Did something come up?” Alex took a sip of his water and waited for Lindsay to continue.

“I was at the studio when she got there. I started giving her grief about her working so much, and she went to her office. I left her alone to go finish up what I had been working on when she yelled for me to come to her office. There was an appointment I had written down in her planner that she apparently hadn’t seen yet. God, Alex! I’m such an idiot. The appointment was for a possible wedding client. It was Kevin and Heidi. I didn’t realize at the time that’s who it was.” Every word after that last sentence was lost on Alex.

On the few occasions Stella had actually opened up about her split with Kevin, Alex could see the pain that was still in her eyes from it all. “What happened after she saw it? Did you get it cancelled for her?” Alex had a feeling he was not going to like Lindsay’s answer.

“I told her I would take care of it, but she assured me that she would handle it. Then she said you had bribed her with Chinese food, so I could go ahead and leave because she would be right behind me. I left her alone in her office, thinking she was going to leave then.” Alex had never heard Lindsay sound so pained, but that still didn’t keep the bite out of his next words.

“What do you mean you left her alone? How could you leave her alone after she saw something like that?” Alex was in full blown panic mode. Stella was God knows where, with the knowledge that her ex-boyfriend and the woman he cheated on her with were getting married; not only were they getting married, but wanted to hire Stella as their photographer. If he was ever within two feet of Kevin Montgomery, he was going to tear him limb for limb.

“I’m sorry Alex. I should have called you as soon as I left. I’ve tried her cell a bunch of times, but I keep getting her voicemail. She must have turned it off.” Lindsay sounded just as worked up as Alex did. Any other woman would have come straight home and had a good cry. But Stella Howe was not just any woman. She was stubborn, independent and refused to let anyone see her vulnerable side.

“It’s alright Lindsay. I’ll head to the studio and see if she’s there. If I can’t find her, I’ll call you back.” Alex hoped he sounded calm enough to relieve some of Lindsay’s worry.

“Yes, please do. I’m so worried about her. She never really talked about everything that happened, but I know she was really upset today.” With that last bit of information, she hung up.

Alex quickly headed to his bedroom to throw on some clothes. He had planned on showering before Stella got there, but seeing as this was an emergency, people could deal with him being sweaty and gross. Just as he opened his dresser drawer to grab a T-shirt and jeans, he heard the door to Stella’s apartment open.

“She’s home. Thank God!” Alex made his way to the front door. He pulled it open and stopped. There, sitting in her door way, with one hand still on the knob and her back leaned against the door, was Stella.

“Alex!” Stella shouted.

Great! Alex thought. Not only had she been drinking, but she was absolutely smashed.

“Hi Stella, been doing a little drinking have you?” Alex couldn’t help but smile as she made an adorable scrunched up face while thinking about her answer.

“Nope, been doing a lot of drinking” She ran an appraising eye up and down his bare chest and smiled. “What have you been doing, playing naked roller coaster with some super-hot, skinny model? That’s what all the boys are doing these days.” With that final statement, Stella’s door gave way and she fell backwards into her apartment.

Alex stood there watching as her back and head hit the floor. “Stella, are you alright? Would you like me to help you up?” Her only response was a very small giggle.

“You look yummy from down here.” Alex was standing above Stella, trying to assess if she was hurt. “Maybe I should stop wearing underwear under my clothes too. It would be one less complication in my life.” He stared dumbfounded at the woman lying on the floor until Stella’s words finally registered in Alex’s brain, and had him jumping back several feet.

Alex had always worked out in athletic shorts and nothing else. It was in the privacy of his own home, and there wasn’t a chance of anyone seeing his nether regions, so why constrict himself. Now he was beginning to question that decision.

Since he couldn’t leave Stella laid out in the door way to her apartment while he went to change, he quickly scooped her up off the floor and headed toward her bedroom.

On the way to the bedroom, Stella was all hands. She was twisting and turning and touching everywhere on Alex she could get to.

“I’ve always wondered what your muscles would feel like under my hands. It’s even better than I imagined. Only I always thought you’d be sweaty from some acrobatic sex, not whatever you’ve been up to.” Alex stumbled momentarily at her admission, but he held tight to Stella and got his footing back. Stella’s wandering hands were gliding over his biceps to his chest and then lower still to map each individual abdominal muscle.

“Stella, stop! You’re drunk and don’t know what you’re saying or doing. I’m going to take you to your bed, lay you down, get you a glass of water and an aspirin and let

you pass out in peace.” It took all of Alex’s will power not to notice how perfectly Stella fit against his chest, or how right her hands felt exploring his body like he’d imagined her doing for so long.

Just when he didn’t think he could keep his body under control any longer, he was lying Stella down on her bed.

“Don’t leave. I wasn’t done exploring yet. I haven’t gotten to the best part!” Stella attempted to snag Alex back to her, but he was just out of reach of her greedy little hands.

“Behave. What is wrong with you? I’ve never seen you like this. How much did you have to drink? What did you have to drink actually?” Alex was staring into Stella’s unfocused eyes as she let out a sigh.

“Why is the rum gone?” Stella asked before she broke into another round of giggles. Well that explained what she drank. Now all he needed was for her to talk to him about why instead of coming home and talking to him, she drowned her feelings in a bottle.

But talking to a drunk about anything was a challenge; especially, when that drunk is unbelievably sexy and trying to use your body as a scratching post. It was impossible.

“Sweetheart, I need you to talk to me. How did you get home?” Alex asked hoping Stella had not driven herself.

“I rode in a car.” Stella stated with a serious face.

“What car? Was it yours? Because I swear if you drove home in the state you’re in, I will bend you over my knee and spank your ass this instant.” Alex groaned and looked to the ceiling. Why did he have to say the one thing he knew he shouldn’t? And why did it look like Stella wanted him to do just that.

“Well, now I want to lie and say yes. You don’t make telling the truth easy on a girl.” Stella was sprawled out in what her mind was probably a seductive pose. When in all reality, she looked like a rag doll that had been thrown on the bed.

“Stella, I’m going to get you some water. Please stay on the bed and try not to fall off.” She gave him a salute and Alex left the room; coming back a few minutes later with a tall glass of water and two aspirin he had found in her bathroom cabinet.

Stella was still in the same spot he had left her. Only now, adorable snoring sounds were coming from her unconscious body. Alex shook his head and placed the water and pills on her nightstand. After carefully removing her coat, shoes and socks; which right now were the only articles of clothing his poor nerves could handle being removed from her, Alex gently moved Stella’s head to rest on her pillow. He pulled her comforter up to her chin, kissed her on the cheek, and with one last look back, left the room.

After picking up her purse and keys from the entry way, Alex made sure her lights were off and the door was locked, before leaving her to sleep it off.

Once back in his apartment, Alex threw himself down on the couch. What the hell had that all been about? Since when had Stella become so sensual and provocative? And why was she talking about his body like it was a present she couldn’t wait to unwrap?

Alex had to keep reminding himself of the circumstances. She was drunk and dealing with a very emotional situation right now. It didn’t mean anything. She would

have acted the same way with anyone else. That thought made Alex see red. He needed to get his head together; both of them. After placing a quick call to let Lindsay, to let her know Stella made it home safe, Alex went to take a shower.

As the warm water cascaded over his tense muscles, all Alex could think about was the woman sleeping in the next apartment. How right she had felt against his bare chest. How the spark of desire he had seen in her eyes was now igniting what was turning out to be one of the most painful erections he had ever had. No matter how hard he tried, Alex could not will it away.

After washing his hair and body, Alex took his hard shaft in hand. With a firm grip, he began pumping up and down with quick jerks. With every pass of his hand over the sensitized head, Alex's mind imagined Stella on her knees in front of him; placing her warm wet mouth over the head and with almost painful suction taking him all the way to the root.

This wasn't the first fantasy Stella had starred in where Alex was concerned. After last summer, anytime he needed a release all he had to do was think about her strong athletic body coming out of her bathroom naked, and he was on the edge in seconds.

With that final thought in his head, Alex's seed exploded all over the back wall of his shower. His hand kept sliding up and down his now semi erect shaft until every last spasm had left his body.

As he turned the water off and went to get ready for bed, one thing kept running through Alex's mind. How was he going to keep his feelings bottled up inside now that he knew how good her hands felt on his skin, and that she had apparently thought about him or at least his body a time or two herself.

Alex got in bed and fell into an uneasy sleep. Dreaming of a dark haired woman that meant more to him than any one person should.

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## Chapter 5

*Ring....Ring....Ring*

Stella tried to open her eyes enough to locate her phone and destroy it. Had the stupid thing always been that loud and obnoxious? When she finally got one eye opened, she did a quick scan of the room.

She was definitely in her bed. Wearing yesterday's clothes and feeling like she had been the victim of a mob beating. The question was how she had gotten here? The last thing she remembered was waving down a cab in front of *Bart's Bar* around the corner from her studio.

As Stella slowly made her way to a seated position and propped herself up against her headboard, the memories from last night came flooding back.

Kevin and Heidi getting married, drinking what was probably a whole bottle of rum at *Bart's*, falling on the floor in her doorway, Alex nearly naked, Alex holding her, her feeling up Alex and confessing her desire to touch him, Alex taking care of her and being the gentleman he always was with her. God she was pathetic. Even drunk she couldn't interest a man.

And this is why you don't drink Stella. The very small filter you normally have is virtually none existent when you add alcohol. She mentally scolded herself while trying to remember every detail of what she said and did last night. How had she let this happen? Alex probably thinks she's crazy or psychotic or both. He should have just left her on the floor of the walkway and hoped someone came along and kidnapped her.

The room was dark, but Stella could just make out the faintest hint of pre-dawn light peeking over the horizon. "Death is coming to take me away." Stella murmured as she watched the day approach.

Her phone had stopped ringing, only to be replaced by the pounding in her head. Set to crawl her way to the bathroom for some much needed medicine, Stella paused when she spotted the glass of water and pills sitting on her night stand. Alex! Of course he thought of everything. He wouldn't want her to die without the chance to torture her endlessly about what a fool she had made of herself last night.

Stella picked up the aspirin and gulped down half the glass of water. Her mouth felt like the Sahara Desert. As she started to get out of bed, she heard her front door open. A few minutes passed and she could hear the tell-tale signs of coffee being made and pots and pans clanging and banging around.

She quietly walked down the hall, only to stop a few feet from the kitchen; she stood there staring. Alex was in her kitchen, moving around like he owned the place, making breakfast. He had just added a few stripes of bacon to a pan when he turned around and saw her standing there.

"Sorry if I woke you. I was hoping to get this all done before I had to wake you up for work. I figured your alarm would be too much for the headache you must have. How are you feeling?" Confused, humiliated, embarrassed, and mortified. Stella could think of a million things she was feeling but the most elegant thing she could

come up with was “Like shit.” And with that she moved the last few feet into the kitchen and sat down on a bar stool.

“Coffee just got done. Would you like some, or do you want juice?” Alex was talking and acting like nothing was wrong. Like she hadn’t tried to attack him last night and pretty much beg him to let her have her naughty way with him.

“Coffee would be great, thanks.” Alex smiled at her as he set the steaming cup of happy in front of her. She gave him what she hoped was a smile and took one giant gulp of the coffee in front of her.

“Shit! That’s hot!” Stella was not only a stupid drunk; she was an even bigger moron sober. Why me? It was the same question that had been going through her mind since yesterday in her office. What had she done in a previous life to deserve this hell?

Her only saving grace was that Alex didn’t know about the whole Kevin/Heidi mess. If he asked why she got drunk, she could just say she was taking his advice and getting a social life; although, the thought of socializing with the guys down at *Bart’s* made her cringe. Just when she thought she could salvage the whole situation, Alex’s voice broke through her haze.

“So you want to tell me why you went out and got hammered instead of coming to my place for dinner like you were supposed to last night?” Alex had a knowing look on his face, but Stella went forward with her story like she hadn’t seen it.

“I was attempting to get a life like you told me to.” Stella could see that her poor attempt at a cover up was not working. So she went for distraction. “Why are you up so early? Shouldn’t you be in bed until the wee hours of noon?”

“Yes I should. But you see I have this neighbor. She’s a pain in the ass and last night she came home so drunk I had to pick her up off the floor in her doorway and carry her to bed so the rest of the building wouldn’t see her like that come morning.” He held her in place with a hard stare.

“And then I thought I would be nice and make her breakfast since clearly something had been bothering her last night. Only now I’m regretting that choice because she’s lying to me and leaving out the small detail of finding out her ex-boyfriend and his mistress are getting married; and that those same people want her to be their photographer.”

As Alex ended his long drawn out speech, all the color drained from Stella’s face. “What do you mean……How did you……Who told……?” Stella couldn’t finish a single thought. He knew, but how? Her memory of last night had come back and she never once remembered mentioning any of those details.

“Lindsay called me last night looking for you. She was worried that you were taking the news harder than you were letting on. And when she couldn’t reach you on your cell, she called me. Apparently you told her we were having dinner. She felt awful about what happened and you disappearing didn’t do a damn thing to calm her down.” Stella had never heard Alex like this before. He was pissed mixed with another emotion she couldn’t quite place.

Knowing she was treading into uncharted waters, Stella began slowly. “I went to *Bart’s* last night after I left the studio. I took a cab home from there. I’m sorry if I worried you guys. I just needed a little time to myself to figure a few things out.”

Alex let out a sigh and Stella saw some of the tension leave his body. “You scared the shit out of me. When Lindsay called and told me what happened, I knew you’d be upset. Then when you didn’t show up like you were supposed to I really started to panic. Why didn’t you just come here to begin with? You could have talked to me. I am a pretty good listener most of the time.”

“And said what. ‘Hey Alex, by the way, my ex is marrying the whore he cheated on me with and they want me to take the pictures that will forever show their love for one another.’ That would have been such a fun and uplifting tale. You would have got pissed and wanted to track down Kevin and beat him within an inch of his life. I didn’t need that last night.”

“I would have tried to understand. You wouldn’t have been in a bar, surrounded by people that could have done God only knows what to you. I’m surprised you were able to hail a cab in the shape you were in last night. What were you thinking?”

Stella had had enough. She was twenty-seven years old. Alex was her friend. Not her dad, not her boyfriend, her friend and she’d be damned if she was going to sit here and listen to one more minute of this lecture.

“You know what Alex, I’m a big girl. I’ve done just fine taking care of myself for the last twenty some years and I don’t need you coming in to my house and giving me a lecture about one night of stupidity.” All the shouting wasn’t helping her headache, but she went on.

“You know what, I wasn’t thinking. I wanted to forget everything for just a little while. So I got drunk. I’m grateful for your help last night, but that doesn’t give you the right to pass judgment on me for my choices. They were mine, not yours, and I am paying the price today. Now if you are finished, I’d like to take a shower, wash the memories of last night off of me, and go to work.” Stella turned around and left the room.

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Twenty minutes later, she was showered and dressed for work. Still feeling like a Mach truck had drove straight through her head; she made her way back to the kitchen. Her breakfast was laid out on the counter, but Alex was nowhere to be found.

A sudden pang of guilt hit Stella. She was pretty mean and vicious to him earlier. He was only trying to help and after what she put him through last night, he didn’t deserve her attitude. He deserved a reward for not giving in to the pathetic attempts of a drunk to seduce him. She ate her breakfast at a leisurely pace, as to not upset her already nauseous stomach and went to apologize to Alex.

She reached for the door handle to let herself into his apartment only to be stopped with resistance. It was locked. Alex never locked his door. Since becoming friends, they had both left their doors unlocked when they were home to make it easier to float back and forth. And considering Alex worked from home as a web designer, he couldn’t have left for work.

She retrieved her keys from her purse and separated out Alex’s. Opening the door and letting herself in was the easy part. Not knowing how he would react to it was going to be the test. Stella scanned the apartment and didn’t see Alex. She heard the sound of running water coming from down the hall and made her way in that direction.



She walked through his bedroom and stopped in front of the master bathroom door. “Alex? Can you hear me? Look, I’m really sorry for being such a bitch earlier. You were only trying to help and I shouldn’t have snapped at you like that. Will you please forgive me? Alex?”

Stella tried again but there was still no answer. She turned the door knob on the bathroom door so she could stick her head in just enough for him to hear her. As she pushed the door open the water turned off. And before she knew it, she was face to face with the most beautiful naked man she had ever laid eyes on.

“Holy shit Stella! What the fuck are you doing, trying to give me a heart attack? Why are you in my apartment, let alone my bathroom?” Alex was so caught up in yelling at her that he must have forgotten he was naked because he made no move to cover himself.

“I..I..I wanted to apologize for the way I acted earlier, but you couldn’t hear me through the door, and I didn’t want to leave for work with you being mad at me.” Stella gave herself a mental pat for getting it all out without looking down. But now that she was no longer explaining herself, she couldn’t stop her greedy eyes from wandering down Alex’s body.

The man was built like a Greek God. Broad shoulders gave way to defined muscular arms that were made for keeping a woman safe and secure, hugged close to his chest. A chest Stella was admiring with pure female appreciation. Its sprinkling of chest hair that continued down to a set of abs that at this very moment she would like to run her tongue over, one bump at a time. Finally coming to rest at the large shaft currently sticking straight out towards her. Beckoning her like a moth to a flame.

As Stella openly gawked at Alex’s impressive member, it grew even larger. She was about to take a step forward when whatever daze Alex had been in for the last few moments finally snapped. He lunged for a towel and secured it around his waist.

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have barged in like this. I’ll talk to you later.” Before he could respond, she high-tailed it out of his bedroom and out of the apartment. Calling for a cab once she was outside, Stella went down to the front of the building to wait for it. Well... that went well.

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## Chapter 6

Alex didn't release the breath he had been holding until he heard his front door slam shut. What was happening? Last night he tried to blame Stella's interest on her being drunk and emotional. Now he wasn't so sure.

"Ugh, why didn't she just go to work this morning?" Alex murmured to himself as he finally got his feet moving towards his bedroom.

After Stella had yelled at him and went to take a shower, he had finished making her breakfast and left. He was angry at her, but the need to take care of her, and hope she would eat, still won out. Maybe he should have minded his own business, but after last night he wanted answers.

He had locked his apartment door, hoping she would get the message that he did not want to talk right now. Clearly, he forgot who he was dealing with. If Stella had something to say, no locked door would stop her.

Alex finished getting dressed and headed to his computer to get started on a new website he had been hired to design. Alex loved his work. He was his own boss, chose the clients he wanted and the hours. Life was how he always imagined; minus the one small detail of someone to share it with.

This brought Alex's mind back to Stella. Until yesterday he had placed her in the category of look but don't touch. Now with her confession last night and the scene in his bathroom just moments ago, he was more confused than ever.

There was clearly something drawing them together. Whether it was purely physical or something deeper remained to be seen. Neither one of them had dated anybody in a while. Maybe that's all this was; two people in desperate need of release. Stella had so much going on in her life right now. Alex didn't want to cause any undue stress to her, but this feeling of not knowing was eating him up inside.

Alex's mind was too scrambled to get any work done. After quickly checking his email and calling his client, Alex grabbed his car keys. He knew exactly where to go. To the one person, other than Stella, that knew him and would not hold back on calling Alex an idiot for even thinking about pursuing Stella.

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Mondays were always Kyle's scheduled days off from the fire station. They were also the days he didn't get up before three in the afternoon. He was about to get a rude awakening. Alex had put up with a lot of shit from Kyle over the years. Kyle owed Alex for all the late night phone calls to bail him out, or help him get rid of some bimbo he had picked up at the bar. Now it was Alex's turn to collect.

When he pulled into Kyle's driveway the house was dark. Alex walked around to the back door and found the hidden key under a rock next to the steps. Letting himself in to Kyle's house, he took a look around and laughed. Other than the piles of dishes and pizza boxes being in different spots, it always looked the same. It screamed 'bachelor pad, no women allowed after sunrise.'

Alex decided waking Kyle up wasn't going to be easy. Especially since he had probably just went to bed an hour or two ago. He grabbed a handful of ice from the

freezer and headed in the direction of Kyle's room with an evil grin on his face. Alex gave a soft "rise and shine Kyle" a second before depositing the handful of ice on Kyle's bare stomach.

"Ahhhh!" Kyle screamed as he jumped off the bed smacking the ice in every direction. "What the fuck is the matter with you? Who wakes someone up like that? A simple 'wake up Kyle' would have done just fine."

"My way was a lot more fun." Alex said with undisguised mischief.

"Fun will be me tackling your ass to the ground and making you beg for mercy." Kyle still looked half asleep as he made the threat.

"Quit your bitching. I need your help with something and after all the times I've helped you out, you owe me." The sooner they started talking, the sooner Kyle would tell Alex to quit being a pussy and go get laid. Kyle's answer for any problem involving a woman was to find another less complicated one.

"Can't this wait? I just went to bed like three hours ago." Kyle had started to climb back in bed when Alex grabbed his arm.

"If you don't get up right now, it's going to be a bucket of ice water next." Kyle narrowed his eyes at Alex, but got back up and headed into his living room.

"Do I have time to make coffee before we talk or am I forbidden from that too?" Alex laughed and told Kyle to sit down while Alex got the coffee ready.

Ten minutes later, Kyle was slightly less grumpy after taking a few sips of his coffee. "So are you going to tell me what has your panties in a wad at such an ungodly hour?"

Alex sat down with a long drawn out sigh. "I think I'm in love with Stella." The gulp of coffee Kyle had just taken was now deposited all over the front of Alex's shirt. Alex reached for a napkin to wipe off with while Kyle sat in the chair across from him laughing like a fool.

"That's your problem? Man, I could have told you that two years ago." Kyle exclaimed as if this was old news.

"What the hell do you mean? Stella and I are just friends." Alex said stubbornly.

"Friends that can't keep their eyes off each other maybe; the last time we all went to the bar you practically took a piss on her leg to mark your territory when any guy asked her to dance."

"She could do better than those guys. I was just saving her from wasting her time on losers." Really, it was the least he could do as her friend.

"What about a few months ago when you had a date with Tina or Gina or whatever the hell her name was; Stella just happened to need your help on a simple plumbing problem, which we all know she could have done herself. Actually, every time you have a date she walks in your apartment with some question or problem. Anytime we all hang out together, it's like the two of you are an old married couple. You eat off each other's plates, snuggle on the couch during movies and spend all your free time together."

Alex sat there in stunned silence. How could he have not seen it before now? They had become so comfortable with each other over the years that Alex had missed all the signs. Now thinking back, Stella did seem to go out of her way to annoy his dates with her shenanigans.

"Why didn't you ever say anything?" Alex asked as Kyle just stared at him.

“I figured if you wanted me to know about your relationship you’d tell me. I can’t believe it took this long for the two of you to finally admit you want to be together.”

“It isn’t the two of us. I have no clue how she feels about me. I’ve been trying to keep my feelings to myself for so long because I don’t want to ruin our friendship.”

Kyle gave Alex a ‘you’re dumber than a box of rocks’ look before saying, “The woman can’t keep her eyes off of you. Whenever you leave a room, those green eyes of hers follow you like a heat seeking missile. I think it’s a safe bet she reciprocates your feelings.”

“Reciprocates huh? That’s an awfully big word for you isn’t it? Was one of your dates having fun with a dictionary again?” Alex knew it was meant to rib his friend right now, but he felt like he was drowning with all the new information and needed to lighten the mood.

“Fuck you buddy! I’m not the one sitting here like a pussy, talking about my feelings.” Kyle cocked his head as if daring Alex to counter.

“I’m just giving you shit man. I’m so messed up right now; I don’t know what to do.” Alex laid his forehead on the table in front of him and looked down at the broken linoleum.

“What brought all of this on? I mean you didn’t just wake up this morning and suddenly want to tell Stella you love her. Not after three years of trying to hide it. Something must have happened.” Kyle sat back waiting for Alex to spill the beans.

Alex relayed all the events of yesterday and this morning to Kyle. Everything from Stella finding out about Kevin and Heidi, her getting drunk, the comments about his body and the looks she gave it. After he finished the story Kyle had lost all of his cockiness and became somber.

“Shit. How the hell could that bastard be so cold; especially after what he’s already done to her? Now I at least see why you’re conflicted. If you start something with her now, how do you know it’s not just her trying to prove she’s over Kevin?”

“I really need to talk to Stella, but I don’t know what to say to her. This is all so messed up. I feel like if I tell her now, I’m taking advantage of her vulnerability. And that doesn’t make me any better than Kevin.” Alex could no longer sit still. He got up and started pacing around the small kitchen.

“You are not now, nor will you ever be anywhere close to being like Kevin. Second of all, you two are already best friends. Adding some making out and sex to that can only make it better.” Kyle said with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

Finally a small laugh came from Alex. “Man, only you would make this whole thing about sex. But thanks, you actually have helped a lot.”

“That’s just the kind of sweet guy I am. Now go tell your woman you love her and let me get back to bed. This is too many emotions for so early in the day.” With a final wave goodbye, Alex left Kyle’s.

One thing was for sure, he needed to talk to Stella. By the end of today, he would know one way or another where he stood with her.

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The fifteen minute drive to her studio was pure torture. He talked himself in and out of what he was about to do. The risk was high, but so was the reward. He had wanted Stella for three years and if there was even the smallest chance that she wanted him too, nothing was going to stop him.

As he pulled into the small parking area behind her building, Alex took a deep breath to calm his nerves. “This is Stella. You’ve talked to her a million times. You can do this.” With his small pep talk out of the way, he steeled his shoulders and headed for the door. It was now or never.

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## Chapter 7

“Honey, oh I’m so glad you’re here. I’ve missed you.” Stella threw herself into Alex’s arms and planted kisses all over his face.

“Uh, I missed you too, sweetheart.” Alex said and Stella could hear the confusion and surprise in his voice. She knew it was mean to put him through this, but right now she didn’t care. As discreetly as she could, she leaned in and whispered in his ear.

“Whatever I say or do just play along I am begging you.” And with that Stella gave him one more kiss on the cheek and stepped back.

As Stella turned in Alex’s arms, making sure to keep her back to his front with his arms wrapped around her, she spotted Kevin and Heidi coming out of her office.

“This must be the guy we’ve been hearing so much about; Kevin Montgomery, nice to meet the man that has captured Stella’s heart.” Stella felt Alex tighten up behind her, but to her amazement he didn’t let it show on his face.

“Alex Gray. How do you all know each other? I’ve never heard Stella mention a Kevin before. Are you a new client?” Stella had to fight the laughter that wanted to bubble up from the menacing look on Kevin’s face.

Stella knew exactly what Alex was doing. By making Kevin think Stella never mentioned him or their relationship, he couldn’t know how much he had hurt her. God she loved this man. No, he is your friend. Stop those love thoughts right now.

“Kevin and I used to know each other, before I moved to Spring Towers and met you my love. It feels like a lifetime ago.” Stella smiled sweetly up at Alex and was surprised when he leaned in and gave her a too brief kiss on the lips.

“It feels like just yesterday I saw you almost falling down those stairs honey; just waiting for me to rescue you. Even then I had you falling for me.” Alex wrapped his arms tighter around her waist and kissed the tip of her nose. Oh he was good. Alex was playing the part so well, she almost believed him.

Someone clearing their throat drew Stella out of her daydreaming. “And this is my fiancée Heidi. We came to ask Stella to do the photography for our wedding on Valentine’s Day.” Heidi reached out to shake Alex’s hand, running her beady eyes up and down his body, but he just ignored it and continued to look in to Stella’s eyes.

“Are you going to do it honey? I mean you’ve been so busy lately; we haven’t even had time to discuss our own wedding plans.” Stella tried to disguise the shock his statement caused. What was he doing? She was trying to show them she had moved on. Pretending to have a boyfriend was one thing, but saying she was getting married was a disaster waiting to happen.

When a wedding didn’t happen, she would have to explain why and there would be no way to spin it for her to come out on top. They would see her as a pathetic loser who not only couldn’t keep a man, but couldn’t get him to the alter either.

“You’re engaged? How wonderful for you two. Why didn’t you tell us? Congratulations!” Kevin and Heidi both hugged Stella and her skin crawled.

“It is fairly recent. We had been keeping it kind of quiet until we had a date picked.” Stella glared at Alex. To anyone else, it was the look you gave your partner

or spouse when they told a secret they weren't supposed to. Alex knew what that look meant coming from Stella. Bodily harm was coming to him in the not so distant future.

"Sorry baby. I didn't mean to blurt that out, but when I'm around you I lose my head. I'll make it up to you when we get home.....promise." Alex nuzzled Stella's neck, before placing small kisses wherever his lips touched.

"You better. Now behave yourself so I can finish with my meeting. Kevin, Heidi if you want to go back to my office I'll be there in a minute. I can give you more details on what packages are offered, so you can make your decision." Stella waited for Kevin and Heidi's retreating backs to disappear in to her office again before she turned on Alex.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? Why did you say we were engaged?" Stella was whispering, but there was enough force behind her words to get Alex's attention.

"It seemed like a better way to go with the story. I always have been fond of story time. I already told you I'd make it up to you later." Alex smirked at her. He was happy with himself, while she was about to have a panic attack. Bodily harm was definitely happening later.

"This is not funny. I have to go finish up with them, but when I'm done I'm going to strangle you." Stella was so mad; why had she thought that one lie could be just that?

"Don't be too long sugar. I don't think my poor heart could bare you being away for so long." And with that final comment, Alex grabbed Stella with one hand behind her neck and the other at the small of her back. He dipped her down and gave her a good old-fashioned movie style kiss.

Only this wasn't just any kiss. This kiss was so full of passion and heat that Stella was worried her clothes were going to catch on fire. As quickly as the kiss started, it was over. Alex stood her back up, straightened her clothes, turned her around and whispered in her ear "had to make sure they got a good show." And with those parting words, he gave her butt a pat to move her towards her office.

Amazed that her legs held her up, Stella crossed the few feet back to her office. Kevin and Heidi sat quietly while she sat back in the chair behind her desk.

"Stella I'm very happy for you. He seems like such a sweet guy. And obviously he's smitten with you. You always did go for the good looking charmers." Heidi smiled sweetly at Stella as her words hung in the air.

"Yes, he's very sweet and charming. But I think the thing I love most about him is his loyalty." Stella smiled just as sweetly back at Heidi as she let the jab fly; aimed straight for both Heidi and Kevin. And it hit the mark by the looks on their faces.

"Well we will let you know what we decide soon. I have to be getting back to the office. It was so great to see you again Stella. Hopefully it won't be so long until the next time." Kevin extended his hand and Stella gave it a shake. Then he placed Heidi's hand in the crook of his arm and left.

Once she was sure they were gone, she leaned her head against the back of her chair and closed her eyes. She didn't know how long she lay there like that, just absorbing everything that had happened.

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Stella had arrived at the studio in a fog. She was still all worked up over the incident with Alex and his wonderfully naked body, when the buzzer sounded for the door. She hadn't been expecting anyone for another hour or so and really needed to get things prepared.

When she opened the door and saw Kevin and Heidi, she nearly fainted. "What are you doing here?" Stella was trying to hold it together, but there was only so much her heart could take right now.

"I know we had an appointment for later in the week, but we were hoping you could fit us in today. Kevin just found out about a business trip and leaves tomorrow." Heidi's words were rushed, as if she was trying to get them out before Stella slammed the door in her face.

"So this wasn't a mix up? You two actually want me, me, to take the pictures at your wedding." Stella had to give them one thing. They had balls of steel.

"We know it may be a little unorthodox, but you are one of the best around and I know you will do an amazing job." Kevin must have finally found his voice and was now trying to stroke Stella's ego to get his way.

Stella was about to tell them both to go to hell, when she saw Lindsay's car pull into the lot. "My office is on the other side of this wall. If you want to go have a seat, I will be with you shortly."

As they disappeared in the direction of her office, Lindsay came through the door. "Hey, I didn't think you had any appointments until nine? I would have been here sooner if I would have known."

"Not a client. That was Kevin and Heidi. Apparently they were hoping to catch me before their appointment because Kevin has a business trip later in the week. They just showed up right before you did." As Stella finished explaining the situation, she watched as Lindsay's eyes widened and then closed to small slits.

"I'll take care of this." Lindsay went to push past Stella to go tell Kevin and Heidi where they could go, Stella was sure, when Stella stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"That's very sweet of you, but I will handle this. It's my mess and I will have to deal with them at some point. It might as well be now." Stella could feel the anger pumping through Lindsay as her eyes kept darting past Stella in the direction of her office.

"Are you sure? Because I wore my ass kicking boots today, and you know I will use them." Stella had to laugh. Lindsay was all of five foot two, but she was a fire cracker.

"Yes, I'm sure. It shouldn't take but five minutes and when I'm done we can sit and gossip until our first appointment." With a murmured "If you insist" from Lindsay, Stella headed to her office.

Kevin and Heidi were sitting in the two chairs in front of her desk and turned to look at her. "This is a nice place Stella. It's so cozy." Heidi was looking around Stella's office. Cozy was Heidi's way of saying small. It wasn't big and fancy, but neither was Stella.

It was decorated in light blues and greens, with pictures of her family on various shelves behind her desk. A small bar sat in the corner, stocked with water, juice and snacks for her clients. Her desk sat in the middle of the room with two comfortable



leather chairs sitting directly in front of it. Of course, Stella had some of her Predators memorabilia around the room too.

The pennant she got at her first game hung on the wall behind the door. On her desk sat her Abel Redder bobble head, along with a Green Bay mouse pad. And sitting on a shelf behind her, in a Predators picture frame, was a picture of Stella and Alex. He had gotten her tickets to see the Predators take on the Chicago Boulders last season.

It had been one of the best days Stella had ever had. Even if they had gotten kicked out not long after the picture was taken. Clearly the men that rooted for the Boulders couldn't take a little harmless trash talking. Alex had nicely asked security to let her go, on the promise that he would never bring her to a game again. Men are such babies.

"Still a Predators fan I see. Think they can pull out another Super Bowl win this year, or is Redder going to blow it again?" Opening and closing her fist in her lap, Stella looked at Kevin. He knew which buttons to push, and seemed dead set on pushing every last one of them.

"I have no doubt they will" Stella got out between clenched teeth. "Now, back to the business at hand, I'm not sure when you plan to get married but....." before Stella could finish her sentence, Heidi piped in.

"We've set the date for Valentine's Day. It just seemed so romantic, and it's also a slow time for both of us at work." Again trying to calm herself, she flexed her hands. Why were they so set on interrupting her and making her listen to this bullshit? She was getting ready to finally throw them out when Kevin started starring at the pictures behind her.

"I see work is not the only thing that has kept you busy the last few years. You two look happy." Kevin nodded his head in the direction of her shelves. Stella knew without turning around what picture Kevin was looking at. The one of her and Alex was the only none family picture in her office.

Stella didn't know if it was the fact that Kevin didn't sound happy for her at all, or that she had had enough of this whole situation, but Stella found herself saying "Yes we are. Alex is the absolute best" before she could stop herself.

Stella hated lying, but the reality of telling them she was single and had been since the day she left him, didn't make her feel any better. It wasn't like she would see them again after today, so there was no harm in spinning a story that made it look like Kevin wasn't even a blip on her radar.

"Alex had surprised me with the tickets for my birthday. He's so thoughtful. We went to Navy Pier after the game and rode the Ferris wheel. It was the most romantic night I've ever had." Stella let the lies pour from her mouth.

"That's wonderful Stella. How did you meet him? Was it at that bar you used to like?" Heidi asked with a slight annoyance to her voice. Obviously seeing Kevin's less than pleased response to the picture had pissed Heidi off. Good, serves her right.

"No, we actually met when he saved me from falling down the stairs at our apartment building. I knew as soon as those strong arms wrapped around me I had to have him. I mean the chemistry that sparked between us was..." Stella fanned herself as if someone had turned up the heat before she continued "well let's just say, I'm surprised my clothes didn't have scorch marks after."

Kevin and Heidi sat in stunned silence. Heidi was the first one to recover. "He looks familiar. Where does he work? I swear I've seen him before." Stella knew Heidi would recognize Alex. It was in her nature to know a wealthy man within a two state radius. She had always cared more about money and social climbing than what was on the inside.

"He works from home, but he was featured in the Tribune a couple months back." Stella glanced quickly at Kevin as her words sank in. "He owns *Gravity Designs*."

"*Gravity Designs*, THE *Gravity Designs*? Alex is Alex Gray?" Heidi gasped and then shared a disbelieving look with Kevin. Heidi's acting skills had gotten better, but Stella still knew her surprise was all an act.

Alex was one of the most sought after web designers and bachelors in Chicago. He had grown his small web design business into a very lucrative business over the last five years. Stella still couldn't figure out how he had done it though. Alex was picky about the jobs he took and worked at his own pace. And despite all of that, he was still one of the wealthiest twenty-eight year olds in Chicago; although, anyone who met him wouldn't know that.

He had a normal apartment, drove a Toyota Camry, and never dressed flashy or expensive. The only time Stella caught glimpses of his wealth was seeing all his electronic gadgets. He always had the newest techno devices and gaming systems; boys and their toys.

As Stella sat satisfied to have finally shut them up, a movement from the front door caught her eye.

Walking through the door at that very second was Alex. "Damn it!" Stella muttered under her breath, but Kevin heard her and asked her what was wrong. She had to think quickly and did the first thing that came to her. She excused herself and went to create a very public display of affection.

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Stella rubbed her hands over her eyes. Why did she think she could get away with her lies? If Alex hadn't walked in, she could have gotten rid of Kevin and Heidi without having to put on a show. Luckily, Alex had played his role beautifully; almost too beautifully. Even she had started to believe him.

Peeling herself out of her office chair, she went out to find Lindsay and Alex. As she walked into the backroom, the only person she could see was Lindsay. "Hey, where did Alex go?"

"He said he had work to do, and to tell you he'd see you later." Lindsay had a hint of a smile on her face as she relayed the message.

"What has you so happy?" Stella asked.

"That was quite a show you two put on. Got me all hot and bothered from all the way back here." Stella hadn't realized Lindsay was in the room earlier. Now she was even more mortified.

"Oh My God! You saw that? The humiliation keeps coming. Alright, go ahead. Tell me how pathetic and desperate I am. I deserve it." Stella waited for Lindsay to start her lecture, but it never came. Instead, what Lindsay said surprised her.

"If it had been an act, I would say it was pathetic. However, since you and Alex are perfect for each other and have been skirting around each other since I met you, I don't see the point."

Stella's jaw hit the floor. "What! What do you mean perfect for each other and skirting around each other? Alex and I have been friends."

"Oh please. I've watched the two of you together. He stares, you stare, and you both bring out the claws when the opposite sex comes around. It's kind of funny, in a sad sort of way. And after seeing that kiss he laid on you, I'm pretty positive the sex is going to be fantastic." Lindsay stood there smiling like the cat that caught the canary.

"We were playing a part. That's all it was. I'm not Alex's type, any more than he is mine." As Stella finished, she knew it was a lie. Alex was exactly her type; tall, sexy, charming. In short, everything Stella had avoided for the last three years.

"Sorry to burst your bubble, but no man kisses a woman like that if he's just playing a role. That kiss screamed 'I want to rip your clothes off and make you come ten ways to Sunday.' Furthermore, Alex is every woman's fantasy come to life. And you my dear are not immune to it."

Stella found a small chair and sat down. "I'm so screwed." Stella told Lindsay all about last night and this morning. When she was done, she didn't feel any better about the situation.

"Stella everyone should be lucky enough to find what the two of you have." Again there was that sad look. But as quickly as it came, it was gone. "What possible reason could you have that would make you think he's not head over heels for you?" Lindsay asked.

"Come on Lindsay. You've seen the woman he goes out with; all long legs, big boobs and tiny waists. I can't compete with that." Stella wanted to stop this conversation, but Lindsay had other ideas.

"Compete with whom? When is the last time Alex had a date with someone other than you? Stella, how many times do I have to tell you, you are a knock out? Any man would be lucky to have you in their life, and it just so happens that a very gorgeous sexy man does." Lindsay said the last part with a knowing smile.

"We do not go on dates. We hang out together. And, I don't know. We've been friends for so long. What if we try and fail. Then what will I be left with, other than another broken heart and the pain of losing my best friend?" Stella didn't think she could bear to lose Alex. It would hurt worse than losing Kevin ever had.

"What if you try and succeed? You already have the friendship part down. That's the hard part. Now comes the fun parts." Lindsay gave a little waggle of her eyebrows, and then laughed. "Plus, I need to live vicariously through you. So I expect to get all the juicy details."

All Stella could do was shake her head. Before she could respond, the front door dinged and signaled their client had arrived. "We will finish this conversation later. Let's get to work."

"You got it boss lady." Lindsay winked and went to greet the customer.

"Smart ass" Stella murmured as she went to get her camera.

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## Chapter 8

Four hours later, Stella and Lindsay sat down in the small break room to eat their lunch. “I know I say this all the time, but that was the cutest baby ever.” Lindsay had a soft spot for all kids, but babies especially. She always got such a look of longing on her face during the shoots.

They had just wrapped up a photo shoot with a newborn baby, and Stella had to admit the little bundle of joy was pretty darn cute. “I think baby shoots are my favorite. They are just so sweet, innocent and full of life.” Stella let go of a small sigh.

Lindsay studied Stella for a few minutes. “Are you starting to hear the tick tock of a biological clock Stella?”

Stella jerked her head up from the salad she was eating and started choking. “Biological clock, um no; I just love babies. They are so small and always smell so sweet.” Lindsay made a face and Stella chuckled. “Ok, well maybe not always.” She wrinkled her nose, remembering the present little Brayden had left his parents when the shoot was done.

“I think you’d be a great mom Stella. You are so great with the kids that come in here, and they all seem to instantly warm to you. I can picture it now, little blonde haired, blue eyed boys running around; screaming at the TV screen during Predators football games. It will be perfect.” Stella could only look at Lindsay with disbelief. Stella loved kids and one day wanted a house full of them, but you needed another person to help with that.

“Last time I checked, it takes two people to make a baby, and I am currently hopelessly single. Also, I am a brunette with green eyes. Where is the blonde hair and blue eyes coming from?” Stella had no clue what made her ask that ridiculous question.

“Alex of course; if he didn’t succeed in getting you pregnant with that kiss earlier, I’m sure Alex won’t mind giving it another try or fifty.” Lindsay continued eating her lunch. Although, Stella didn’t know how she could eat with such a big smile on her face.

“You’re a pain, you know that right?”

“I know, but you love me all the same.”

Stella was about to show Lindsay just how much she loved her, by throwing a cherry tomato at her, when “Big Girls Don’t Cry” started playing on her cell phone. Stella clicked open her phone without even looking at the caller ID; only one person had that ringtone in her phone.

“Hello, Victoria.”

“You’re alive, I’m so glad. Now I can call dad and tell him to quit worrying and not to turn your old room into a sauna. Although, having one at my beck and call would be fantastic. So I may put it off a few more days.” Victoria did always have a flare for the dramatic.

“It’s nice to hear from you too. Now, do you want to tell me why you thought I was dead, when I just saw you Saturday night for dinner? At dad’s I might add.” Stella loved her family, but sometimes they were just too much.

“It is now Monday. When is the last time we went two days without so much as a text message?” Victoria was right. Since Stella had gotten out of college, they had talked daily. Even if it was the most pointless conversation, it still meant a lot to both of them.

“Sorry Vicki. I’ve had a rough couple days. Is everything ok? Does dad need something? He’s not feeling sick again is he?” Stella felt the well of panic rise higher as she asked each question.

“No, Dad is fine. He was worried when you didn’t call and give him his Sunday hazing about the Boulder’s losing. Stop getting so worked up about him. The doctor reassured all of us that the blood clot was a fluke and not a sign of anything serious going on. You were there when they said it. You’re going to make yourself sick if you don’t quit stressing about him all the time. He goes to regular check-ups and they have found nothing further.”

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A few months ago, Stella’s dad had started to have trouble breathing at their regular Saturday dinners. After they ate, things had not gotten any better, so they convinced him to head to the ER just to be safe.

The nurses had poked, prodded, and made John’s life a living hell for two and half hours. When the doctor finally came in, he informed John that he had a small blood clot in his left lung.

Stella’s world had stopped spinning. Her dad and sister were everything to her. If anything were to happen to either of them, she didn’t know how she would go on with her life. She clutched onto her step mom Penny’s hand. She felt the tremble and pulled herself together enough to give Penny’s hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Mr. Howe, have you been sitting a lot lately or been on any long trips?” The doctor asked her dad.

“We drove to Florida and back about a couple weeks ago. But other than that I stay pretty active while I’m at home. Why do you ask?” Her dad seemed calm as a cucumber; typical. The only thing John Howe got worked up over was Boulders football and his family.

“Well other than the small blood clot we found, you seem to be in excellent health. Sometimes long trips in a car or long periods of inactivity can be the cause. That’s why I needed to rule it out before checking for further causes. I am going to prescribe a medicine that will dissolve the clot and also take care of any others we might not be able to see. You should be good as new in a week. While on this medicine you must be careful not to do anything that can cause you to bleed. If that happens, you are to come straight in to the ER.”

The doctor finished giving his orders and sent the nurse in with the discharge papers and the paper with his prescription on it. Penny, Victoria and Stella had fussed over John the rest of the night, until he finally had had enough. “I am not an invalid. The doctor said I was fine, so stop hovering over me. Goodnight. I love you all.”

His rant had no true power behind it, but they all left him alone to go to bed. For the whole week that followed, Stella had visited every day and even watched a Boulders game with him that Sunday without ribbing him too bad.

Stella knew they said it was a freak thing to have happened, but it still reminded her that life was precious. She had been so busy since that whole ordeal, that aside from Saturday dinners, she hadn't been by to visit.

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"You're right Vicki. I guess I'm just feeling guilty for not visiting more. How are you? How did your date go after you left Dad's?" Vicki had been so antsy to get out of dinner Saturday night for her date that Stella was surprised she didn't choke as she all but inhaled her food.

"Ugh! It was horrible. First, he was late getting to the bar we were meeting at; then when he finally did show up, his mom called his phone three times. Apparently, he forgot to mention he lives with his mother still and she worries when he's out after ten. And if that wasn't bad enough, he spent the whole night talking about his pet snake and how he had permission to stay out late tonight. He's Thirty-one. Honestly, why does this always happen to me. On paper they seem great, but in person they all fail miserably." Victoria sighed heavily.

"You'll meet someone one of these days, I swear. But you have to stop searching online. Their profile never tells the real story. You need to physically meet someone first to see if there is that spark; the kind that starts at the top of your spine and goes all the way to your toes." Stella could feel Victoria making icky faces through the phone.

"With my work schedule, online is the only way I can do anything. And, I would settle for a flicker right about now, not even a whole spark. I haven't had sex in months and if I don't get to it soon, my virginity is going to grow back."

"I'm almost positive that's impossible, but hopefully you won't need to find out." Stella was probably the poster child for born again virginity after her three year dry spell. "Whatever happened with that guy who's interning at your office? What was his name, William?"

Barking laughter came through the phone. "Stella, William would be good to go shopping with, or even get a Mani/Pedi with, but I don't think his partner Jeremy would appreciate my making a move on him."

"He's gay!?! No way! He is so hot. Every time I'm there it seems like he is checking you out." Stella really did need to get a social life if she couldn't spot an openly gay man anymore.

"The only thing he ever checks out is my wardrobe and shoes, but enough about me. Why have your last couple days been rough? And whose ass do I have to kick?" Victoria was, if nothing else, a loyal sister.

"Don't go putting on your boxing gloves, it's nothing much. Kevin and Heidi made an appointment to ask me to be their wedding photographer the other day. And when I saw the appointment for the first time, I may have went out and gotten slightly intoxicated. Then proceeded to go home and throw myself at Alex." Stella cringed while giving Vicki the play by play.

"WHAT! I'll kill that little bastard, and the bimbo too just for good measure. I hope you told them where they could shove their meeting?"

“I didn’t get a chance to. They came in early this morning before we opened and cornered me. But I haven’t even got to the worst part.” Stella took a deep breath.

“What could be worse than your scum bag ex and the woman he cheated on you with, asking you to take pictures at their wedding?”

“While they were in my office, Kevin saw a picture of Alex and me. He didn’t seem very happy about it, and I may have said he was my boyfriend and we were over the moon happy. And when he just happened to come into the studio a few minutes later, I had a pretty hot and heavy make out session with Alex in front of them.” What had possessed her to tell Vicki all of this?

“So let me get this straight. Your ex assumed an insanely hot guy was your new boyfriend, and wasn’t too thrilled about the idea. And when said hot guy came in, you had some heated kissing with him just to get under Kevin’s skin?”

“That is an accurate description so far.” Stella knew Vicki was far from done.

“Damn Stella. I don’t know whether to bow down to you, or kick your ass. Alex is the only hot guy I know that isn’t a complete tool or gay. You have all the fun.”

“This is not fun. I have tweedle dee and tweedle dumb to deal with still, and I have no clue what to do about Alex. It wasn’t fair for me to put him in the middle of this mess, and now things are going to be awkward between us.” Stella rubbed between her eyes where a headache was beginning to form.

“I’ll tell you exactly what to do with tweedle dee and dumb. It involves a wood chipper and a lot of trash bags.” Stella rolled her eyes. “As for Alex, I’m sure the middle he would like to get in is the middle of your legs.”

“Ew, you are my sister, stop thinking about someone putting anything between my legs; especially Alex.”

“So while you were playing tonsil hockey with Alex in front of Kevin, I’m guessing he fought you every step of the way?” Stella should stop talking now. Giving Vicki anymore information was only going to encourage her.

“No, he actually played along, and even told Kevin and Heidi we’re engaged. Now not only did I lie, but when I don’t get married, it’s going to make me look even more like a loser.”

“Stella, what is the rest of your day like?” Before Stella could adjust to the abrupt change of subject, she was telling Vicki that she had a couple of meetings but no other shoots for the day.

“Good. Tell Lindsay to handle the appointments and meet me at my salon down town in an hour.” Vicki’s tone said she was not to be argued with, but Stella still tried.

“Why do you want me to meet you down there? I can’t leave in the middle of the day. It’s my business, people expect me to be here.” Stella was pretty sure Vicki was losing her mind.

“I am going to make you look like sex on heels, so that you can go home and seduce that sex on a stick neighbor of yours. As for leaving, yes you can. Lindsay is more than capable of running things while you take some personal time.”

“I will do no such thing. Who said I wanted to seduce Alex? And I am not dumping my appointments on Lindsay....” Stella didn’t get to finish the conversation with Vicki. Lindsay took the cell phone from her hand and started talking to Victoria herself.

“Hi Vicki...Yes...Of Course...Ok, Bye.” With that, Lindsay hung up the phone and handed it back to Stella.

“What did you do that for?”

“Because Stella, you need this. For the last three years you have worked your ass off and you have a great business to show for it, but you’ve sacrificed everything else. You are going to Vicki’s salon, getting dolled up, and then you’re going back to Spring Towers and finally telling Alex how you feel.” Lindsay was already up and out of the room before Stella realized what had happened.

“Why does nobody listen to me? I am fine. I don’t need to seduce Alex. I am perfectly happy with my life.” Stella stuck her chin out stubbornly.

“When is the last time you had sex Stella?” Lindsay asked the question as if she already knew the answer. Stella just stood there looking at her. “Exactly, I can almost guarantee you haven’t had sex since Kevin, or if you did, it wasn’t very good and it was still probably a long time ago.”

“You’re one to talk. You haven’t exactly been living it up since I met you.” Lindsay slowed her walking and turned to look at Stella.

“I’m too much for anyone to handle.” The statement held a weight to it that Stella couldn’t figure out. Then Lindsay brightened and continued, “Now stop trying to change the subject.”

“I’ve already made a fool of myself in front of the man three times in the last two days. Do I really need to do it again?”

“You will not be making a fool of yourself. You’ll be giving both of you exactly what you need; orgasms and lots of them if that kiss was anything to go by. Now get your purse and coat and get to your sister’s salon. I don’t want to see you in here until tomorrow at ten.”

“We open at nine Lindsay.” Stella pointed out.

“Yes we do, but your first appointment isn’t until ten, and if anyone walks in before then, I will have them schedule for a later time. Now, if you’re done making excuses, please go, get dolled up and have hot monkey sex with Alex. Then come in tomorrow, walking funny and give me all the dirty details” After she finished giving her demands, Lindsay all but shoved Stella out of the door into the cold afternoon air.

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## Chapter 9

An hour later, Stella pulled up to Victoria's salon, *Color Me Beautiful*.

"It's about damn time you got here. I was beginning to wonder if I was going to have to go find you, and drag you here kicking and screaming." Vicki greeted her with a hug and kiss to the cheek as she walked in the door.

"I didn't have much of a choice after Lindsay all but threw me out of my own studio." Stella was still mad at both Vicki and Lindsay for hatching this ridiculous plan.

"We both love you honey. This is as much for us as it is for you. If you're happy, we're happy. And being with Alex is going to make you very happy." Vicki sounded so sure of herself. A family trait Stella had apparently not received.

"I don't know how to seduce someone Vicki. And I definitely don't know how to seduce my best friend." Stella should just make a break for it now.

"That's where I come in sweetie. Before you leave here today, you will be the sex kitten that I know is hiding inside of you. Now go into the back and change into a robe and we'll get started." Vicki disappeared behind a curtain and Stella resigned herself to her fate.

Five minutes later, Stella came out wearing a long pink robe and nothing under it. She had no idea what all Vicki had in mind, but Stella knew it wasn't going to be pleasant.

"Finally, come on over here. Maya is going to give you a manicure, while Julie gives you a pedicure. Then, we will move on to the waxing room. When you're smooth as a baby's bottom, we will bring you back out here and I will do your hair and make-up." Stella sat down where she was directed and shook her head.

"Waxing? What are you going to wax? I think I like that part of your plan the least."

"Stella, you are beautiful and I wouldn't change a thing about you. But if I have to look at your unplucked eyebrows for one more day, I'm going to attack you with a pair of tweezers." Vicki then lifted the robe off one of Stella's legs and grimaced.

"For the love of God, when is the last time you shaved your legs? You could start a fire with those babies."

"It's winter" Stella said with a shrug, "and they aren't that bad. I shaved last week, but I've been too busy to get to it this week."

"No woman should ever be too busy to shave. I guess I shouldn't even ask about your bikini area then. You're going to hate me by the end of today, but it will be worth it."

"Already do" Stella muttered. Not meaning a word she said. Julie and Maya had already started her manicure and pedicure. As she sat in the massaging chair, she hated to admit how good this actually felt. Maybe she did need to start making time for a little luxury.

"Alright, let the waxing begin." Stella opened her eyes and looked at Vicki smiling down at her.

“You are not waxing my legs or any other parts of me Vicki.”

“Of course I’m not sweetie. William is going too!” If she hadn’t just got a very cute manicure, she would have smacked the smile off Vicki’s face.

“You will pay for this one day. I don’t know when or how right now, but soon.”

“Yeah yeah, get moving. The wax is going to start cooling down and that would make things a lot worse for you. Just think ‘beauty is pain’ and you’ll do fine.”

Stella walked into a room that smelled vaguely of aloe vera and coconut and laid down on the table. The lights were soft and the sounds of rain floated through the room.

“It’s so peaceful in here.”

“I’ll remind you of that when you’re screaming in pain.” Vicki smiled. “William will be with you shortly.” Vicki quickly retreated out the door with a wave.

“Paybacks a bitch, you know?” Stella yelled to a now closed door.

“Actually, Julie is, but don’t tell anyone I said that.” William walked in the room and shut the door again.

“Ah, the master of torture has come for his victim. How much will it cost me for you to forget I’m here?” Stella pleaded with her eyes for William to have mercy on her.

“Sorry sweetheart. I was warned that if I let you get away without removing all unwanted hair, I will no longer have a job or testicles. I’m quite fond of both.”

“Wimp”

William chuckled, then gave her an apologetic look and began to prepare everything he would need.

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“Much better; now was that really so bad?” Vicki was helping Stella into a salon chair to start work on her hair and make-up.

“No, it was worse. I feel so exposed. The least he could have done was left a landing strip or something.” William had assured her this was what men liked. How the hell would he know? The men he knew liked other men, not bare vaginas.

“Honey, you will be fine. If you don’t like it, you just have to wait four to six weeks for it to grow back. Now if you’re done with your tantrum, I’d like to get started on your hair. Do you like the length or do you want to try a shorter look?”

“No, I want to keep it longer. It’s easier to put up when I’m working if it’s longer. Maybe just trim the ends.”

Vicki studied her hair then asked “Would you mind if I just added some layers here and there? That way your hair has more shape and it doesn’t just lay there in long strings.”

“As long as I can still get it in a ponytail, I don’t mind.”

“Don’t worry; your ponytail will be safe to hang again.” With that, Vicki began the process of washing, drying, cutting and styling Stella’s hair.

Stella wasn’t sure how much time had passed, when Vicki stopped and turned her away from the mirror.

“I’m going to do your make-up and then you can get dressed. I don’t want you looking in a mirror until I’m done.”

“Am I that scary? Don’t want me to break any mirrors with my hideousness?” Stella was joking, but the hard look on Vicki’s face told her that Vicki didn’t find it all that funny.

“You are sexy and beautiful Stella. I won’t have you putting yourself down in my presence.”

“It was a joke Victoria.”

“Stella, I was there when we were growing up. I know what mom said to you. If you for one second let that egg donor lower your self-esteem, I’m going to lock you in a room full of mirrors until you see what everyone else does.”

Stella sat there looking everywhere but at Vicki. When she finally found her voice, she could barely speak. “You knew the things mom said to me? Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“How would I bring it up? I was the person mom was comparing you to. I didn’t want you to think I was just doing it because I felt sorry for you or that I believed a horrible word she said.” Vicki looked so sad. Stella would do anything to take that expression off her face.

“I really was joking. I don’t let the things mom said affect me. At least, I try not to. Now, you are supposed to be getting me ready for a seduction and if we don’t get a move on, the lighting is going to be terrible.” Both of them shared a laugh and Vicki got started on Stella’s make-up.

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“What am I going to wear? I didn’t bring any clothes.” Stella was looking around the small dressing area, but didn’t see anything other than a rack of lingerie on the far wall and a woman’s trench coat hanging off a hook.

Vicki stepped through the curtain and stepped up to the rack of lingerie. “Pick your favorite and put it on. I want to see it once it’s on.”

“You want me to model lingerie for you? Is there something you need to tell me?”

“Stop being a smartass and just do it. I personally like the black corset with the red ribbon and bows, but it’s your seduction and your choice.”

Stella ran her fingers over all the silks and satins and was in her own personal heaven. Picking the perfect outfit was very important. She wanted it to scream sex, but not slut. There was a fine line between classy and trashy.

“I love the black corset too. The accents of red are very sexy and with a pair of sheer black stockings it will look unbelievable. And since William did such a great job, I won’t feel so self-conscious wearing the see through black thong with it.” Stella could already feel the silk material skimming along her body and gave a little shiver.

“Save the shivers for Alex. Now, go change so we can make sure everything fits and exposes all the right areas.” Vicki was very bossy when she wanted to be.

It took Stella a couple minutes to snap the corset together and attach the small clips that would hold her stockings up. When she stepped out of the dressing room she didn’t know how she would feel showing her sister this side of herself.

Vicki gasped and threw her hands over her mouth. “Oh My God Stella, you look HOT! If I wasn’t your sister and straight as a board, I’d let you do naughty things with me.”

“That’s a lovely image, Vicki.” Stella said dryly.

“If Alex doesn’t die from swallowing his tongue, you are going to be a very satisfied woman tonight; and for many more to come.”

“That’s if he doesn’t laugh in my face and send me home.”

William walked into the room just then, “If he does honey, he obviously bats for my team because even I can tell you’re sexier than sin right now.”

“Well, we have the under outfit prepared, what am I wearing over it?”

Vicki looked at William, who only smirked. Stella had a very bad feeling about this. Vicki headed towards the hook that held the long coat and brought it over to Stella.

“I figured you can just put this on and pull it tight around you. It will be like opening a late Christmas present for him. You’ll knock his socks off; and his pants too.”

“Have you lost your mind? I can’t walk out of here in nothing more than lingerie and a trench coat. What if I would get pulled over?” Stella was starting to panic.

“One look under the trench coat and you’d never get a ticket” Vicki stated.

“This is such a bad idea; and what about shoes? I don’t think my tennis shoes are going to work with this getup.”

“I have a whole selection for you to choose from in the next room. It’s all going to be ok Stella. Trust me. I would never steer you wrong.” Stella did trust Vicki. She just didn’t know if she trusted herself to pull this off.

“Let’s do this. Although, if I break my ankle in the shoes you have for me, bad things are going to happen.”

“It will all be ok. I made sure the heels weren’t too high.” Vicki said reassuringly.

“Not too high to you is five inches.” Stella said sarcastically as they went into the next room.

“Here, these are the ones that go with the outfit you chose.” Sitting in front of Stella were a sexy pair of red stilettos with a little black bow just above the opening at the toe.

“Try them on and make sure you can walk in them.” Vicki helped her slip first one foot and then the other into the shoes. Standing there in the impossibly high heels, Stella felt like a giant.

“I’m going to make him feel like a dwarf in these. I’ll tower over him like the Jolly Green Giant.”

“You will not. Even in the heels, you will be a good two inches shorter than him. And who says your shoes will be on for very long anyways.”

“Well hold my hand while I try to get used to these. How do you walk in these torture devices every day?” Stella never wore heels and this only reminded her why.

“Stand up straight, put your shoulders back and walk heel to toe.” As Stella let Vicki’s instructions sink in, walking became easier.

“I think I can do it now. Let me make one more lap around the room on my own and I think I will be ready.” Stella couldn’t believe what she was saying. She was about to leave *Color Me Beautiful*, and head to seduce her best friend. This could go so very bad, but it was too late to turn back now.

Stella let the panic rise and fall, and then went to grab the trench coat. “Well, once I put this on, the transformation is complete. Am I allowed to look in the mirror yet?”

With a slight nod from Vicki, Stella walked over to the closest full length mirror. The woman staring back at her was stunning. Long, brown, shiny hair hung in beautiful waves down her back. Her eyes had never looked bigger or greener, with impossibly long eyelashes. Her make-up was gorgeous, but not overly done. And the corset and stockings fit her body like a glove. Her breasts were pushed up and together and the stilettos made her legs look a mile long.

“Wow!” The one word said it all.

“Stella, you are stunning. You were before this and you will be after, but right now I couldn’t be more proud of you for being so brave. Now, put this coat on and go get your man.” Vicki’s statement was genuine and made Stella tear up.

“Don’t you dare cry and ruin all my hard work.” Vicki mock scolded Stella. “I love you. Be safe and call me tomorrow.”

Stella pulled the trench coat tight around her waist. With a quick thank you to Maya, Julie and William, and hug and kiss for Vicki, she left.

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Instead of trying to climb the stairs in the high heels, Stella decided carrying them up the stairs was a much safer way to go. She reached the landing of the stairs, put the shoes back on, and made sure the coat was pulled tight around her.

The wind had really picked up and was colder than when she had left the salon. She hoped Alex was home because she was not going to wait out here for long.

With one final deep breath, Stella moved the few feet to Alex’s door. She checked her coat, hair, shoes and the small gift she had stopped off and bought on the way to the salon.

“Let’s do this.” Stella lifted her trembling hand and knocked.

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## Chapter 10

Alex had driven back to Spring Towers with a smile on his face. Not only had he gotten to feel Stella in his arms, but he had kissed her senseless in front of her asshole ex and Barbie doll fiancée. It may have all been make believe for her, but he had meant every word and kiss.

Feeling better than when he had left earlier, Alex strolled into his apartment ready to get some work done. He knew Stella was going to kick his ass later, but he was looking forward to it. If he had his way, they would be involved in some naked wrestling by the end of the night.

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At six o'clock that night, there was a knock on Alex's door. Thinking it was probably Kyle coming over to get all the dirty details, he opened the door. As the door opened and he was hit with a blast of cold wind, he froze.

Stella was standing in front of him with a smile on her face and a small trophy in her hand. She was wrapped up tight in a long coat, and there was something very different about her.

Her hair was down and slightly curly hanging down her back. She was closer to his height and when he looked down he caught a glimpse of what he thought were some sexy heels. Then, as if the heels hadn't been shocking enough, he noticed Stella was wearing makeup. It was lightly applied, making it look almost natural against her skin. "Can I come in? It's really cold out here."

Stepping aside so she could come in, Alex watched her cautiously as she went into his living room, only wobbling a few times as she went. Instead of sitting down, she stood at the floor to ceiling window and looked out at the Chicago skyline. "Why did you knock? You never knock."

Stella continued to look out the window when she answered him. "You locked me out this morning. I figured you might still be mad; especially, after this morning at the studio."

"Stella I'm not mad at you. Confused, bewildered, curious, but not mad." Alex took a few steps towards her. "Why don't I take your coat for you?"

"Not just yet, I have some things to give you." Stella finally turned around and extended her hand holding the trophy out towards him.

"What's this?" As Alex took a closer look at the small trophy, he noticed the writing at the bottom and looked up with a smirk. "Best Actor huh, but what will Bruce Willis think about losing his title?" Alex didn't know how to feel about this silly gift. He hadn't been acting with her earlier today, but didn't know how to start the conversation he knew they needed to have.

"I'm sure Bruce will understand. Although, I can always give him the title back... if you weren't acting." Stella held Alex in place with a pointed look. A look that said she was giving him the opening he needed.

“What are you asking, Stella?” Alex knew what she was waiting for him to say, but he needed her to give him a clue as to what she was thinking before he poured his heart out.

“I think you know what I’m asking Alex. So please tell me.” Stella never moved from her position beside the windows, and Alex couldn’t stand the distance anymore. He walked over to her and took both her hands in his.

“Stella I don’t know how to do this.” Alex took a deep breath before he continued, “So I will just start with your question. No I was not acting today. Other than the engagement thing, but that we can talk more about later.” At her startled expression, Alex couldn’t help himself; he leaned in and gave her a quick kiss on the lips.

“Um....” Stella had started to say something but Alex gently placed his hand over her mouth to stop the ramblings that would probably come out. Stella had a terrible habit of saying anything and everything when she was nervous.

Removing his hand from her oh so soft lips Alex continued, “Please let me get this out before I lose my nerve. I love you Stella! And it’s not in an ‘I love you as a friend way’ either. For the last three years I have thought of little else but you. I have tried my hardest to lock down my feelings and desires for you out of respect for our friendship, but today I realized I don’t want to anymore.”

“But I’m not....” Again Stella tried to interrupt and he stopped her with a kiss this time.

“You’re not what Stella? Beautiful, sexy, irresistible, kind, sweet, funny, because if you were going to say you weren’t any of those things, you would be a liar. And aside from that little stunt earlier in your studio, you are one of the most honest people I know.” Alex held Stella loosely around the waist now as he finished.

Stella began to sway and Alex had to tighten his hold on her. “Can we sit down? I need to sit down.” Alex walked her over to the couch and let go of her long enough to take his seat right next to her. Then without thinking twice, he picked up her hand and intertwined their fingers.

“Is that better? Do you want me to get you a glass of water?” Stella shook her head, but still hadn’t said anything about all he had told her. After what felt like hours, he couldn’t take the silence anymore. “Stella, I’ve kind of poured my heart out here. And the most you’ve given me is that you want to sit down. Have I completely freaked you out?”

Stella stared at him for a few more minutes. She opened and closed her mouth several times as if to say something, but no words came out. Finally, she blurted out “I like you Alex.” Okay, not exactly an ‘I love you’, but it was a start. “Sorry, that came out wrong. What I meant to say was I really like you. I’ve been thinking about you too, and I haven’t wanted to say anything that could ruin our friendship.” Stella was worrying her bottom lip, while she looked anywhere but at him.

“Stella, your friendship is very important to me. And no matter what happens, nothing will ever change that. I promise.” Alex was rubbing his thumb over her knuckles, trying to calm the nerves he could still see in her eyes.

“I’m nothing like the girls you’re normally with, I wouldn’t even know where to begin.”

“If you hadn’t noticed, there haven’t been any women in my life for a while now. And, I’m glad you’re nothing like them. Sure they were fun to hang out with a few times, but they always left me with an empty feeling. I want someone who challenges me, makes me laugh, and sees me for more than a meal ticket and a good time. I want you, Stella.” Holding Stella’s hand was no longer enough. He let go of her hand and pulled her into his side. She came willingly.

“I’m more than a challenge, Alex. I can be the most stubborn, pain in the ass around, and you know this. I’m not good at relationships. Look at how well the last one turned out.” Alex could feel the stress begin to take over Stella’s body, and he had to laugh.

“Stella you are stubborn, and you are a pain in the ass most of the time,” At her hurt expression he quickly went on, “but those are two things I love the most about you. You will tell me like it is, and not let me get away with stupid shit. You will call me out on my mistakes and I will do the same to you. It’s going to be a hard at times, but I will never intentionally hurt you. However, I am a guy and we have been known to act without thinking. And if that happens, you have my full permission to kick my ass and knock some sense into me.”

Stella sat there absorbing everything he had just laid on her. Then with a wicked grin she said, “I don’t make mistakes.”

“Ha Ha, smartass” All Alex could do was shake his head and laugh. Just then, a comment she made minutes ago came to the forefront of his mind and he lost all humor. “Stella, your last relationship was not your fault. Kevin was an asshole, who never deserved you. If he couldn’t see what a great woman he had in his life, then he’s a moron; although I should probably thank him.” Stella snapped her head up to look at him.

“If he hadn’t been such an idiot, you wouldn’t have moved here, and I wouldn’t have you in my life.” A small tear rolled down Stella’s cheek and Alex wiped it away with his thumb.

“I’m a mess. I’m not normally such a crier. Please don’t think it will be water works all the time. It’s rare that it happens.”

“Stella, you’re not a robot. You are allowed to have emotions.” Alex hugged her tight.

“I know, I just swore I wouldn’t cry again after ‘him,’ and now look at me, I’ve done it twice in one day.”

“When else did you cry today? That asshole didn’t make you cry after I left did he? Because I will hunt him down and make him pay.” Alex felt the anger rise within him.

“No, it wasn’t Kevin. Victoria was being very sweet and it touched me. She isn’t always the hard ass everyone thinks she is.”

“When did you see Vicki? Although, that would explain the hair and make-up right now; she is always trying to change you.” Alex felt a sharp pain in his rib from where Stella’s elbow had just connected.

“Be nice. I love my sister. And yes, she had a hand in this. But she wasn’t trying to change me.”

“I’m sorry. I like Vicki; she’s just very pushy sometimes.” Alex rubbed his free hand over his now sore ribs.



“Yes she can, but I can handle her.”

Wanting to get back on steady ground, Alex asked “So...you gave me the trophy, but when you handed it to me you said you had some things, as in plural. What else have you got up your sleeves?”

Alex felt Stella go still in his arms. “Oh um” she bite her bottom lip so hard, he was surprised she didn’t draw blood.

“It’s ok Stella. Whatever it is, I’m sure I will love it.”

“Well now you’re really making me nervous.” Stella pushed out of Alex’s arms and slowly stood up. She walked in front of his TV and stopped with her back to him. He saw her take a deep breath then turn around.

The look in her eyes when she turned around was like nothing he had ever seen; a mix between desire, nerves and apprehension. “What is it, Stella?”

She didn’t answer him. The only response he got was her reaching for the belt on her coat. She very gently untied the knot, and then went to work on the buttons. When she was done, Stella held the two pieces of the coat so tight her knuckles turned white.

Alex made a move to get up and go to her, but she held up her hand to stop him. “No, if you come over here right now, I’ll lose what’s left of my nerve.” Alex sat back down and waited.

Stella loosened her grip on the coat and finally opened it and let it fall to the floor. “Surprise” was the only thing Stella said.

Alex’s lungs ceased to take in enough air. Standing in front of him was the most erotic vision he’d ever seen. Stella wore a tight fitting black corset with tiny hooks that ran down the middle. Suddenly all Alex could do was flexing his fingers to keep from reaching out and undoing every last one of them. The tiny red bows were strategically placed in all the places his eyes were already wandering.

Stella’s breasts were dangerously close to spilling out of the top of the corset and Alex prayed for divine intervention to help them do just that. When Alex’s eyes finally started moving again, they nearly popped out of his head. The smallest scrape of see through black silk was covering Stella’s bare mound. A small groan escaped past Alex’s lips before he could stop it.

Forcing himself to continue the tour of her body, he moved on to her legs. Legs that Alex had wanted to have wrapped around his waist for what felt like an eternity. They looked a mile long and were covered in black stockings. Stockings held up by small clips with more of those red bows.

Alex’s eyes finally came to a stop at the shoes he had gotten a glimpse of earlier in the doorway. Red high heels with another tiny black bow. Her toe nails had been painted a sexy red color, and were playing peek-a-boo out of the front of the shoes. And just like that, Alex went from hard to near bursting.

“Stella, you look amazing.”

“You like?” She looked nervous again.

“Like... No my dear, love is more like it. You did all this for me?” Stella nodded her head but said nothing.

No longer able to stay on the couch, Alex rushed over to Stella. His lips were on her in a hard, passionate kiss before she could react. It was not the sweet romantic kiss he had envisioned giving her, but damn if he could control the desire burning

inside of him. They broke apart, both breathing hard and fast. “I take it you don’t want to send me home and forget this ever happened?”

Alex looked at Stella like she had grown horns. “Why the hell would I do that? A ridiculously sexy woman has come to me, dressed in an outfit that should have a health warning, and you think I’m going to send you home?” Alex took her mouth in another heart stopping kiss.

As they pulled apart again, Stella stuttered, “W-Well, I hope not, but I didn’t know how you would react.” Without a second thought to what he was doing, Alex swept Stella into his arms and all but sprinted down the long hallway to his bedroom.

Just as he had gotten inside the door to his bedroom, Alex pressed Stella up against the wall and took another sip from her delicious lips. “Oh Stella, the things you do to me.” Alex laid his forehead on hers, trying to breathe.

“Touch me Alex. I need you to touch me.” Stella’s plea was Alex’s undoing.

He pulled her away from the wall, crossed the last few feet to his king sized bed, laid her down and quickly covered her body with his. He captured her lips, only this time it was a much gentler kiss. After several minutes, Alex pushed himself up and with one slow grind of his hard shaft between their still clothed groins; he sat back on his heels.

“Stella, if you can’t feel how much I want you, then maybe I’ll just have to convince you somehow. But right now you are wearing entirely too many clothes. And since I love opening presents so much, I’m going to savor every single second of unwrapping you. After all, I did say I would make up for earlier.” And with that said, Alex began the slow process of removing the last of Stella’s defenses.

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## Chapter 11

Stella could hardly believe she was here; lying on this bed, with this man undressing her. The room was dark, but the light from the hallway was streaming through, outlining Alex like a halo. Only, he was no angel. The feelings and need he had coursing through Stella's body right now were down right devilish.

Alex was taking his time undoing each little hook holding her corset together. Tempting and teasing her skin with feather light kisses after undoing each one. Stella was sure she would spontaneously combust at any moment if he didn't give her more.

"Alex, please." She didn't know what she was begging for, only that the throbbing between her thighs was about to drive her insane with want.

"All in good time, baby."

"I need you now!"

Alex stopped undoing the hooks and looked up at her with a wicked grin.

"Patience is a virtue, sweetheart."

"Patience is over rated." Each word was panted out breathlessly.

He slide up the bed and placed his hands on either side of her head, and kissed what was left of her breath away. The connection wasn't nearly enough for Stella though. She threw her arms around his neck and pulled him down so there wasn't one part of her body not connecting them. He opened on a gasp and her tongue was inside his warm wet mouth instantly. Stella sucked and nipped at his tongue until Alex was moaning his delight.

"Stella, you are going to unman me. Let me take care of you, baby. If you keep kissing me like that, this will be over far too soon." With one last slow sensual swipe of her tongue over his, Stella reluctantly let Alex pull away. He didn't break all contact though, as he slid one of his legs between her thighs. Without even thinking, she found herself thrusting her hips against his hard, muscled thigh.

"Mm mm...." The pressure was like a lightning bolt of sensation and Stella knew it would only take one look, one touch and she would be a goner.

"Stella." Her name was a groan on his lips. She could see a fine sheen of sweat breaking out over Alex's forehead and loved that she could do this to him. Testing his control and tempting him to lose it. Seconds later, he did just that. Her corset was ripped the rest of the way from her body.

Alex moved down the bed. After removing her heels, he grabbed her left ankle, bringing her leg up just enough to slip her stocking off. After placing a kiss to the bottom of each toe on her left foot, Alex gave a tiny bite to her pinky toe.

"Arggg..." Stella felt the bite all the way to her throbbing clit.

"I see you like a little pain with your pleasure. Let me see what other secrets your body holds, sweetheart."

Alex moved to her right leg. Once again removing her stocking and kissing each toe, ending with a small love bite. Never in her life had she felt so on edge. So full of need that if he didn't give her a release soon, she may very well hurt him.

Alex had placed her legs back on the bed, leaving her lying naked in front of him except a thin scrap of silk covering her bare mound. He reached down and ran his finger along her silk covered folds. "I can feel how ready you are already. You're so fucking wet Stella, and I've barely touched you."

"Then please touch me. Touch me anywhere. Touch me everywhere. Just don't stop touching me." She didn't normally sound so desperate in bed, but it had been three long years. And he seemed hell bent on prolonging the wonderful torture he was putting her body through.

"You are killing me, Stella. You're so damn beautiful. I don't want to leave one spot untouched." Alex had started running his hands up her sides and was now absently running his thumbs along the under sides of her breasts. "You don't know how many nights I've wondered what these beauties would feel like. Cupped in my hands, your nipples beaded into hard points, waiting to be taken into my mouth and sucked until you scream out in pleasure."

His words were like a shot of desire aimed straight at her clit. It pulsed, and Stella gave her hips another roll against his thigh that he had once again returned to between her legs. "Please..."

Alex shifted and was now hovering near her ear. Warm, wet breath was tickling her over sensitized skin, as he sucked her earlobe in between his teeth and gave it a light tug.

He rained kisses along her jaw line, before running his tongue down to the crook of her neck. Nipping at her pulse points, and then soothing them with flicks of his tongue. When he reached the spot where Stella's neck and shoulders met, he pulled the tendon between his teeth and gave it the hardest bite yet.

"I want my mark on you. Reminding you where I've been. Giving you pleasure when I'm not there. Making you think about how much you want to come right now." Stella let out a moan that was barely human. No way would she be forgetting him in this lifetime. The man not only had her begging, but seemed to know her body better than she did.

"Yes." The one word seemed to satisfy him because he began his torturous trek down her body once again. His tongue dipping into the hollow of her collarbone, and Stella could feel the action as if he was dipping in between her slick and swollen lips.

Alex slid further down her body and began to run his tongue over the tops of her breasts, with his hands not far behind. Her breasts rose and fell with her harsh breathing; pushing her breasts further into his waiting hands. He was so close to her painfully hard nipples, but didn't touch them. "Alex, please..."

"Tell me what you want Stella. I want to hear you say it." Stella threw her arms over her eyes and shook her head from side to side.

Stella had never been shy about what she wanted in bed, but lying there, almost completely naked with Alex, brought out all of her insecurities. Her eyes were not the only part of her body she wished she could hide right now.

As if he could sense her pulling away from him, Alex stopped caressing her breasts and gently laid his hands on her arms. With a slight pull, he removed her arms from covering her eyes. "Stella, look at me." She slowly opened her eyes, but refused to look at him.

“Look at me.” This time he said it with a little more force. Stella turned her head just enough to see him staring down at her with so much understanding that Stella could feel the tears building.

“Never hide from me, Stella. You are so incredibly sexy and responsive, I feel like a teenager again. Afraid I’m going to come in my jeans from just kissing and touching you. There is nothing you could say or ask for that is going to turn me off. I want you to be completely satisfied. So please, tell me what you want.”

Taking a deep breath, she finally caved. “My breasts are very sensitive. You were so close to my nipples, yet not touching them. I need some sort of relief before I burst into flames.”

“See, that wasn’t so hard.” Easy for him to say; she still wasn’t thrilled he was seeing all of her. “Thank you for telling me what you want” Alex kissed her quickly, and then repositioned himself above her breasts, “now look at me.”

Stella wasn’t used to a dominant man in the bedroom. Her previous partners, all two of them, always let her lead. Only now did Stella realize this is what she wanted and needed; someone to take control. Stella did as he asked and just as her eyes connected with his, he sucked her nipple into his mouth and gave it a hard flick with his tongue.

Stella couldn’t keep her eyes open. She squeezed them tightly shut as the pleasure took over. Fireworks were going off behind her eyes. Over and over he sucked and flicked the hard bud in his mouth. When Stella thought the pleasure couldn’t get any better, he bite down and tugged the bud between his teeth. She felt tingling shocks of pleasure all the way to her toes.

With one final suck, he let the nipple fall from his mouth with a *pop* before moving his focus to the other rose colored bud. After effectively loving that one with the same amount of attention; he started to work down the rest of her body with achingly slow movements.

Alex kissed and nipped her stomach, stopping only to dip his tongue into her navel. He kissed her from hip to hip. When he finally reached the top of her panties, Stella was sure his breath alone was going to make her come.

“Your scent is intoxicating, Stella. I need to know if you taste as sweet as you smell.” He hooked his fingers in the sides of her panties and yanked them down, stopping at mid-thigh. “I can’t wait any longer.” That was the only warning Stella received before Alex leaned in and ran his tongue along her wet folds.”

Pure pleasure shot through Stella. “You taste so damn good, Stella. I’m never going to get enough of you.” He sucked her clit into his mouth and she melted. His tongue ran a line from her clit, down to her opening, before finally darting in and exploring the inner walls of her pussy.

Over and over, he worshipped her with his mouth; bringing her to the edge, only to back off just before he took her all the way over. His tongue slide back up her swollen lips and once again found her bundle of nerves. “Yes, right there. Oh.” He sucked her clit into his mouth again just as he slipped a finger into her pussy.

“Jesus, Stella. You are so tight. You’re squeezing my finger with the best kind of pressure.” He made one more drawn out thrusting motion with his finger, before completely removing it. Stella started to protest the absence, when he slid two fingers back into her.

“Yes, fuck me with your fingers, just like that.” And when Alex’s mouth came down over her once again, she was lost to the sensations. Stella came so hard, she wasn’t sure if she would ever move again. She thrashed back and forth while Alex kept up his assault on her senses, until the final contraction left her body.

“I could listen to you come all day, Stella.” She could only lay there, breathless and reveling in her sensual high. The bed dipped; Stella opened her eyes to see Alex frantically pulling his T-shirt over his head. His jeans and boxers came off in one smooth motion.

All Stella could do was stare at the gorgeous man standing so gloriously naked in front of her. Seeing him in his bathroom this morning had nothing on the vision he made now. His broad shoulders, muscular chest and lean waist all called to the very female part of her that wanted him buried deep inside her. His cock was turned up towards his stomach and Stella’s mouth watered to taste him against her tongue.

“Come here.” Finally finding her voice, she kicked off her panties the rest of the way. He gave her a knowing smile and walked back toward the bed. He was half way back when Stella scrambled off the bed. Kneeling in front of him as gracefully as her body would allow. She was still shaky from the first orgasm she had had in years.

Catching him by surprise gave Stella an advantage. She placed her hands on his hips to steady her, then wrapped her mouth around his thick cock and sucked it all the way down to the root. “Ahh... easy, Stella. Oh...that’s so...ahh” hearing his babbling made Stella double her efforts. “I want to be inside you when I come. Please... that’s going to make me come.” She pulled back with enough suction to draw his balls up tight against his body.

“Next time I will taste you as you come down my throat, but for now, this will have to hold me over.” She gripped his shaft around the base with one hand, stroking up and down while her other hand moved to fondle his sack. She swirled her tongue around the head of his cock, tasting the drop of pre cum glistening on the tip, in a dance meant to drive him crazy.

“Ohhh...you’re good at this.” The approval in Alex’s voice spurred her on and she sucked him all the way in and down her throat. She bobbed up and down, memorizing every vein on her way.

“Enough.”

Alex pulled from her mouth and had both of them back on the bed, kissing her with renewed passion seconds later. She could feel his cock pulsing against her inner thigh and no amount of moving was getting him closer to where she needed him.

“Alex, I need you inside me.”

“I’m right there with you, baby.” And with that, he leaned up, grabbed his cock in hand and positioned the head at her opening. There was no finesse in his next move. Alex pushed into her with one deep thrust; all the way to the hilt.

Stella let out a whimper of pain, before the pleasure of being so filled by this man took over. “So tight... sorry, not gonna last!” With his grunted declaration, Alex started moving. He thrust into her hard and fast, and Stella was already there with him.

“Yes, just like that. Harder, fuck me harder, Alex.” As if her words were all the permission he needed, Alex began thrusting harder and deeper than before. He did a little swivel with his hips and hit her sweet spot.

“That’s going to make me come.” He did it again and again. Taking her to a place she didn’t know that she could handle. Stella threw her arms around him, clutching his back. He would probably have scratches on his back tomorrow, but right now, she didn’t care.

Alex’s movements became frantic and when he stilled, Stella felt him pulsing inside her. Alex’s orgasm set off her own. He gave a few more pumps of his hips, making sure he got every last ounce of pleasure from her body.

They both lay there, trying to catch their breaths. As if it pained him to break their connection, Alex withdrew from Stella’s tender body and rolled her to her side. He pulled her tight against his chest, while absently rubbing his hand up and down her back.

“Stella? Are you ok? I didn’t hurt you did I?”

The concern in his voice touched her, and she wanted to reassure him that she was fine, but the only thing that came out was a small moan.

“Is that a no?”

Again there was another moan.

“Are you tired?”

“Mmmm” was her only response.

He kissed her cheek, pulled the covers over both of them, and once again pulled her close to him. “Sleep now baby.”

She was asleep in seconds, with a smile on her face.

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## Chapter 12

Alex opened his eyes and blinked, then blinked again. Lying next to him, snoring softly against his chest was Stella. He still couldn't believe it was real. After three years, he finally had Stella in his arms, and the panic he expected to come never did. Whether their relationship would go past this one time— which it damn well better after last night—remained to be seen. But he would have no regrets.

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Last night had been amazing; more than amazing; more than he could have ever asked for. Sometime after Alex had fallen asleep, Stella had woken him up with her mouth once again wrapped tightly around his cock.

“Stella?” He had been in such a haze that he couldn't tell if it was real or the best dream of his life. She only hummed, which sent the most wonderful vibrations straight to his balls.

“If this is a dream, I never want to wake up.” Stella pulled off of him with a *pop* and laughed.

“Do you often dream of me waking you up with a blow job?” The husky rasp in her voice was more prominent in her sleepy state.

“More than you'd think. Only this time, I'm hoping the ending is in your mouth and not my hand.” Alex watched as Stella's eyes went from laughing to pure lust in the blink of an eye.

That had been the last words spoken between them, other than a “Fuck!” from Alex as he came. True to her word, he came deep in her throat and she licked and sucked him dry. Stella had then moved back into the circle of his arms and fell back to sleep.

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Now with the hazy morning light pouring through the window of his bedroom, all Alex could do was wonder what he had done to deserve this woman.

He glanced at the clock and saw that it was seven thirty. Not wanting to wake her just yet, he gently removed her head from his chest. She made the cutest protest, then fell back to sleep. He headed out of the bedroom and used the hall bathroom so as not to disturb her. After taking a quick shower, he would make her breakfast and they could finish the conversation they were having last night.

The bathroom door opened and soft hands were rubbing up and down his back seconds later. “Good morning.”

Alex turned so that he was now facing Stella. He bent down to capture her lips in a quick kiss, but the kiss took on a life of its own. Both of them were all hands and lips and teeth. Finally pulling apart, they stood there trying to catch their breaths. “That's one hell of a good morning kiss.”

Stella laughed, “It would have been better if I could have brushed my teeth first.”



“No amount of morning breath could make me want to stop kissing you.” Alex had Stella wrapped in his arms and it just felt right; his very hard erection rubbing against her stomach.

“Why didn’t you wake me up?” Stella asked.

“You looked so cute lying there snoring, that I didn’t have the heart to wake you. I was going to cook breakfast then come wake you up.” Alex couldn’t stop nuzzling her neck and giving it small kisses as he was talking to her.

Stella gave him a playful smack on the arm. “I do not snore. As for breakfast, I’ll just grab a granola bar before I leave for work. You don’t need to go to all that trouble.”

Alex put his index finger under her chin and tilted her head up so she could look at him. “It is not a problem for me to cook you breakfast. Nothing could make me happier. You’ll just have to get used to me taking care of you.” And just to prove his point, he let his hands glide down over her slick skin, until he reached his destination.

Stella let out a surprised gasp as Alex moved his finger in lazy circles over her already sensitive nub. “Breakfast would be fantastic and I’ll try to be more grateful next time, just don’t stop doing that.” Stella’s words made him smile.

“Good girl. And, I couldn’t stop if I wanted to.” Alex picked up the speed and pressure of his finger. Moments later, Stella shattered in his arms. He didn’t stop moving his finger until he felt the last of her orgasm subside. Once she was able to stand on her own again, he moved her body under the spray of water and helped her clean up.

“I think it’s your turn.” Stella was reaching for Alex, but he stopped her.

“I promised you breakfast and if you touch me, we won’t leave the bathroom for hours.” Stella frowned. He kissed her to take away some of the hurt his words had obviously caused. “There are sweats in my bottom drawer and T-shirts in the second. I’ll start breakfast while you get dressed.” With that, Alex turned off the shower and wrapped Stella in a towel. After giving her one more all-consuming kiss, he smacked her butt to get her moving in the direction of his bedroom.

Several minutes later, while he was chopping onions, Stella came into the kitchen wearing his favorite T-shirt and a pair of sweats that were dangerously close to falling off. “I’ll think of you every time I wear those now.”

“Who said you’re getting them back? They’re very comfy.” Stella propped herself up on the counter and watched him finish cutting up all the vegetables.

“I’ll get them back; even if I have to strip you myself.” He gave her a playful smile and went back to getting the omelets started.

“You’d have to catch me first.” Stella hopped off the counter and was now on the opposite side of the island from him.

“Oh Stella, do you really think this is going to end well for you? I mean, I would hate for you to have to walk to your apartment naked.”

“I’m sure a few of our neighbors wouldn’t mind.” Stella taunted him.

“No one is to see you naked but me.” Alex felt like a cave man, but she was his damn it.

“You are mighty possessive this morning. Like a little kid with a new toy.” Stella grinned at him while pretending to stretch.

“What are you doing?”

“I wouldn’t want to pull a muscle while you try to catch me. I could be running awhile. You might want to try it too.”

Alex turned the stove off then turned back to her. And just like that, he lunged to grab her. With a very girlish squeal, Stella took off towards the living room. Alex caught up to her and tackled her onto the couch, landing so that he was on bottom to cushion her fall. “No fair. These clothes are too big on me.”

“Quit making excuses and let me have my prize.” Alex was tugging on the draw string of the sweat pants, when Stella shoved at his hands and turned around to straddle him.

“Now who has who at a disadvantage?” Stella taunted him while he tried to buck her off. Stella’s hands landed above his head to steady her when she fell forward.

“Well if this is how a disadvantage feels, I like it a lot.” Alex was leaning forward to play with her nipple through the T-shirt, when he realized she was no longer laughing. He pulled back and looked up. Stella sat up and looked like she had seen a ghost.

“Stella? What’s wrong? Did I hurt you when you fell forward?” It was only then that Alex noticed something in her hand. Stella was holding a pair of women’s underwear in her left hand.

“Oh shit! Stella, I’m sorry. I don’t know where those came from.” Stella was just staring at a spot on the wall, not saying anything. Alex slowly sat up, making sure not to hurt her legs as he moved them both to sit on the couch.

“Stella, whose ever those are, I don’t have anything to do with them now. They were before us. I’m sorry you found those, but I wasn’t exactly a virgin before we slept together last night.” Alex was waiting for her to give him a clue as to how she was feeling because he felt like he was drowning. Finally she broke the silence.

“Here,” she thrust the panties at him and stood up, “I need to go home and get ready for work.” And with that, she turned around and headed for the door.

Alex sat frozen, and then realized what she had said and he yelled after her. “Stella, wait. Let’s talk about this.” But his words were wasted on the door, which was now closed behind her.

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## Chapter 13

“Damn you, Kevin.” Stella had made it back inside her apartment and locked the door. Then because she knew Alex would use his key, she threw the chain on.

When Stella had woken up this morning in Alex’s bed alone, she started to worry. Then she had heard the shower and all was right in her world again. Her muscles were sore in the most delicious way, and all the fear she had the last few days just fell away.

They had played in the shower, he cooked breakfast, and they laughed and joked like they always did. Stella thought nothing could break the spell they were under, until she found those underwear. All at once, every insecurity came flooding back. She was back in that house three years ago, staring at such betrayal.

She knew it wasn’t fair to Alex, but the longer she sat there, the more it hurt. If she hadn’t left his apartment that second, she might have said something she could never take back.

Just then, Alex started banging on her door. “Stella? Come on, open the door. It’s freezing out here.” Stella heard his key slide into the door, but when he tried to push it open the chain caught.

“Go away, Alex. I want to be alone.”

“We need to talk about this, and if I have to stand here talking through this two inch space I will. So stop being stubborn and just open the door.” Alex had slipped his hand in, but couldn’t get the chain undone.

“Talk all you want, I’m going to get ready for work.” Stella walked to her bedroom, Alex yelling at her the whole time. When she finally heard him call out “I’ll be back” Stella sat on the edge of her bed and let the tears fall. Before she knew it, it had turned into a full body sob.

She didn’t know how long she sat there crying, but when warm arms wrapped around her and pulled her down on to the bed, she cried harder.

“It’s ok, baby. Let it go. I’ve got you.” Alex’s sweet words set off a whole new set of water works. He was being so nice to her, even after how awful she had been to him this morning.

Finally getting herself under control enough to talk she asked “How did you get in here?”

“I had some bolt cutters in my apartment from when Kyle’s crazy ex chained herself to his front porch. You’re going to need a new chain.” That got her to smile.

“I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for. I understand.” Alex was rubbing up and down her back in a soothing motion.

Stella sat up, wanting him to listen. “Don’t do that. It’s not ok. I shouldn’t have reacted that way. I know you’ve been with other people and seeing those panties should have been no big deal.” She took a cleansing breath. “Until I saw those, I thought I was over everything Kevin did. But seeing those brought it all flooding back and made me panic. If something like that happened again, I wouldn’t survive it.”

Alex sat up and was once again holding her. "I'm not Kevin. I would never betray you like he did. If I could erase those memories for you I would. I would do anything for you, Stella."

"I know you're not him. I just can't help but feel like one day you'll wake up and realize I'm not a girly girl or a model or anything like you are used to." Alex let her go and stood up. She instantly missed his warmth.

"Damn it, Stella. I want you. I want YOU! I don't know how many ways I can say that to you before it pierces that incredibly thick skull of yours." Alex sounded sincere, but her emotions were still too fresh.

"You know what; some of us come with baggage. Not all of us grew up in the perfect family and had the perfect life. And if you can't handle that some of mine may pop up every now and then, then this," She gestured between them, "doesn't need to happen."

Stella started to head to her bathroom, but strong arms grabbed her before she could make her escape. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have yelled. And I shouldn't have said what I did." Alex placed a kiss to the back of her neck.

"You are going to have to be patient with me, Alex. I'm trying here, but I can't change overnight."

"I know. And if you would refer to what I said last night, I will screw up. You just have to put me in my place." He turned her in his arms and looked her in the eyes. "But Stella, you can't run every time something comes up or we disagree. That solves nothing, and I can't fix things if you're not here."

Stella let the tension go and melted into Alex. "Old habits..." She left the sentence unfinished.

"Let's make a deal. I won't push you any faster than you're willing to go; and in return, you have to talk to me if something's bothering you or you feel uncomfortable."

"Deal" Stella pushed up on her tip toes and gave him a gentle kiss.

"Now that that's settled, I'm going to go back and finish breakfast. Come back after you get dressed and I'll feed you and kiss you before you have to leave me for the whole day." Alex had the cutest sad puppy dog look on his face.

"Ok. Lindsay told me I can't show my face at the studio before ten. I can think of a couple things to do to pass the time." Stella gave a flirtatious lick of her lips.

"You are insatiable woman."

"You have no idea." Alex left her room chuckling and shaking his head.

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While getting ready, Stella thought about everything Alex had said. She knew Alex would never intentionally hurt her, but she couldn't guarantee another freak out wouldn't happen.

As she grabbed all her stuff to leave, her cell phone rang. When she finally found it, the name on the screen surprised her. "Lindsay? Is everything ok?"

"That depends. Are you walking funny?" Lindsay's bluntness sometimes shocked Stella.

"No I'm not, but I have a whole lot of pep in my step."

"Good. Stella..." Lindsay paused as if weighing what she wanted to say.

"What is it, Lindsay? You sound funny."

“I...I wasn’t going to tell you, but then if you found out later that I didn’t tell you, I was afraid you’d be mad, so I figured I should call and tell you.” Stella was having a hard time keeping up with the fast pace babbling.

“Lindsay, just tell me. I’m not going to be mad at you.”

“When I got in this morning, there were a couple messages on the machine. One of them was from Heidi. I deleted it so you wouldn’t have to deal with them again.” Lindsay sounded so torn.

“I understand you want to protect me Lindsay, and I’m not mad you did it. I would probably do the same thing for you. But I can’t keep running from this. I’m going to talk to Alex about what he thinks I should do, then me and you will discuss it when I get there.”

“So, you’re not mad at me?” How could Stella be mad at her?

“No, Lindsay. I’m not mad at you. I’ll be there a little before ten, and I’ll give you some of the dirty details of last night over lunch.”

“I want all of them. Remember, I’m living through you.” Finally a laugh came from Lindsay.

“A lady never kisses and tells.” Stella couldn’t stop grinning at what she knew was coming.

“That’s why I asked you.” And there it was.

“I’ve got to go. Alex made me breakfast.”

“Him on a plate, because that is the breakfast of champions” After another laugh, they said their goodbyes.

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“What took you so long? Your omelet is getting cold.” Alex gave her a peck on the cheek as she came into his kitchen.

“Lindsay called as I was heading out the door. She was having a dilemma.”

“What’s going on; something wrong at the studio?” Alex’s concern touched her.

“Apparently, when she was checking the messages this morning, I had one from Heidi. She deleted it, then felt bad and called to tell me about it. ” Stella started eating her omelet, hoping they could discuss this calmly.

“Why is Heidi calling? I figured you told them to go to hell after I left yesterday.” Alex didn’t sound happy.

“I gave them a packet that shows everything I offer. I didn’t think they would actually pick me to do this. Apparently, I was wrong. What do you think I should do?” Stella hated to turn away a client. Even if those clients were the scum of the Earth. Business was business, and if one of Kevin’s clients liked her pictures, it could lead to more.

Alex sighed, “It’s your business, Stella. I just want you to be happy. If you think you can do this then I say take their money, and smile while doing it.”

Stella couldn’t help it, she had to kiss him. “Thank you. I won’t do this if you will be uncomfortable though. I don’t want my past to come between us anymore than it already has.”

Alex pulled her back against his chest. “Thank you for thinking of me. As long as you don’t let them walk all over you, I will be fine.”

They sat there and finished having breakfast and even made plans to have their first date Friday. She and Alex had made it through one disaster after another these last few days. Hopefully, it would be smooth sailing from here on out.

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At 9:45, Stella walked into *Picture Perfect*. She had never felt this happy, or smiled this much in her life.

“Now that is a happy face. Where can I get one like that?” Lindsay came around the small desk by the front door.

“If I was a sharing person, I’d say Alex’s apartment. But I’m not, so you’ll have to find your own hunky sex slave.” Stella gave a blissful sigh and headed to her office.

“Sex slave, like you tied him up; kinky.”

“No you perv. I did not tie him up. It was an expression. Anyways, I don’t want to talk about that right now. If I do, I’ll be leaving and going to finish what we started in the shower this morning.” Stella mentally smacked herself. Apparently, amazing sex makes her brain to mouth filter a little faulty.

“I will get you to spill the beans, just as soon as we break for lunch.” Lindsay winked at Stella and headed back out front. After sorting through the mail on her desk, Stella sat down to make the phone call she was dreading most.

Luckily, nobody answered at Kevin and Heidi’s and she just left a message. “Hi, it’s Stella calling you back. If you’d like to go over details on times and locations just give me a call back before five. Talk to you soon. Bye.” Well, that was easy.

Stella’s intercom buzzed. “Stella, your ten o’clock is here.”

Getting up from her desk, Stella grabbed her camera and headed out to the main area. “Mr. and Mrs. Rodgers how are you?”

“We are great dear. Fred here isn’t too thrilled to be taking these pictures, but you only have one Fiftieth Anniversary and I want to remember it forever.” Edna Rodgers was looking at her husband with so much love; you’d think they were still newlyweds.

“Well I will try to make this as painless as possible Mr. Rodgers.” He gave her a small nod, and as Stella led them to the portrait area she couldn’t help but think this could be her and Alex one day.

It has been one day, Stella. Slow down; just because the man said he loves you, doesn’t mean forever. Kevin said the same thing, remember that. Stella tried to stop the horrible thoughts, but they kept creeping in.

After finishing up with the Rodgers, Stella had taken one year pictures of a little girl, and then six month pictures of another baby. All in all, it had been a great morning.

“Can we eat lunch now? I’m ready for juicy details, and I’m guessing so is your sister.” Lindsay had a wicked grin on her face.

“What do you mean my sister is too?”

“She means I had her call me when you’d be taking lunch and I headed over here to see if all my hard work had paid off.” Stella whipped her head around to see Victoria standing in the doorway.

“You two are wrong in so many ways; especially you, Vicki.” Stella walked past them towards the break room.

“Well, out of the three of us, you are the only one having sex. So start spilling.” Vicki and Lindsay took the seats opposite Stella, and had their chins resting on their hands. They looked like kids looking out the window.

“I went to Alex’s apartment dressed in lingerie and a trench coat.” That was said for Lindsay’s benefit. “I went in, we talked, we had amazing mind-blowing sex and we are together now. That is all I am going to say.” Stella sat back sipping her drink and smiling at their shocked faces.

“Oh no you don’t, I want down and dirty details; like size, shape and orgasm count.” Vicki was practically drooling.

“Not gonna happen.” Stella loved both of them, but she would not betray Alex by giving them all the details of their amazing night together.

“Ugh. You are so mean.” Lindsay looked like a toddler that had been told she couldn’t have a cookie.

“Go rent a dirty movie or better yet, go find your own men to hump.”

“Men suck.” Lindsay muttered under her breath.

“Ditto” Vicki piped in.

When both women realized they weren’t going to get any sex talk from Stella, they moved onto the relationship aspect. “So how is this going to work? I mean you both already hang out together all the time. Is it just going to now include sex?” Stella sat and thought about it, and didn’t really know what to say.

“I guess. I mean this morning we showered together,” Stella winced at that admission when both women leaned forward waiting for her to explain further, but she moved on, “then he made me breakfast and we chased each other around the apartment. Until I freaked out and went back to my apartment.” Damn it. Why did she keep spilling everything to them?

“What do you mean you freaked out? He didn’t hurt you did he?” Lindsay asked the question with a weird look in her eyes.

“No nothing like that. When we were playing around I found a pair of panties stuffed in the couch, and had a flash back to Kevin. But Alex reassured me he would never do that and he got me calmed down.”

“Sweetie, not all men are assholes. I think Alex is one of the good ones.” Vicki wasn’t normally so lovey dovey about men; it kind of floored Stella.

“I agree. I’ve never seen him be anything but genuine.” Lindsay gave Stella a small smile.

“We’ll see.” They sat there, eating lunch and gossiping when Stella’s phone rang. “Excuse me ladies, I need to take this in my office.”

“Come on...” Both of them gave her their most pleading look.

Stella just kept walking to her office and answered the phone. “Hello.”

“Have I told you lately how incredibly sexy I think your voice is, because I just got hard from you saying hello.” Alex sounded so seductive and Stella started choking as she tried to swallow.

“Give a girl some warning next time. You almost made me swallow my tongue.”

“What fun would that be?” He was pleased with himself. Punk!

“Other than making my libido spike, was there a reason for this call?” Stella loved that they were still able to have their banter back and forth.

“I like your libido spiked, but I actually do have a reason for calling. My mom just called. Her and my dad wanted me to come to dinner Friday night at *Sal's*.”

“That’s fine. We can make our date for another night.” Stella wouldn’t come between him and his family. Her family dinners were important to her, so she refused to interfere in his.

“I want you to come with me.”

“That’s your family time Alex. I wouldn’t want to interfere.” In the three years they had known each other, she had never met his parents. She knew they had to be great because of the way he spoke of them with such love and affection, but they had just gotten together. It may be a little too soon for the meet the parents thing.

“Stella, you are my girlfriend. You wouldn’t be interfering; you’d be meeting my parents. I want you there and so do they. After hearing me talk about you for three years, they were thrilled when I told them we are finally together.” He sounded so happy; she didn’t have the heart to refuse him.

“Ok. I’ll go. But I may need to go shopping. *Sal's* is not really a jeans and T-shirt kind of place.” Stella could already feel what a bad idea this was.

“Stella, wear whatever you want. You look great in anything. I’m just happy you’re going.” Stella couldn’t stop the smile splitting her face in half.

“I’m happy too. I’ve got to get back to lunch with the girls, but I’ll see you when I get home around six, ok?”

“Ok, I’ll see you then. Bye baby!”

“Bye.” Stella hung up and just stared at her phone. Alex calling her baby was going to take some getting used to, but she loved it all the same. She was just getting up to head back to the break room, when her office phone rang.

“*Picture Perfect Studios* Stella speaking”

“Hey Stella, its Kevin” Stella almost lost her lunch at just the sound of his voice.

“Hi Kevin, how can I help you?”

“I just wanted to give you the dates and times you’ll need; along with the package we think we want.” She could do this.

“Ok, go ahead.” After Kevin had told her all the information, she wanted nothing more than to hang up, but he had other ideas.

“So, have you and Alex set a date yet?” Ok, left field question, but she was not discussing anything but business.

“That’s not really something I want to talk about with you, Kevin. I am more than happy to talk about your wedding, but nothing further.” Stella hoped that would set everything straight.

“Of course, I’m sorry. I just wanted you to know I am happy for you.” Yeah, right.

“Thank you. I have a client that just walked in, so I should really get to work. I will call you to schedule your first appointment later this week.”

“That would be great. Thanks again, Stella.”

“You’re welcome. Goodbye.”

Stella hung up the phone and made her way back to Vicki and Lindsay. “Were you having phone sex? You were gone forever.”

“No, I got another call after I talked to Alex.”

“What did lover boy want? Can’t stand being away from you already?” Vicki was batting her eyelashes.



“He asked me to go to dinner with his parents Friday.”

“Meeting the parents already? And what did you say?” Lindsay looked at her curiously.

“I told him I’d go, but it is going to be at *Sal’s*. I don’t have anything to wear. I’m nervous enough meeting his parents. Now I have to worry about my wardrobe too.”

“I’ll take care of your clothes, don’t worry.” Stella was so thankful for her sister.

“Thank you. Well, our next client will be here in a few minutes. I’m glad you stopped by, Vicki; even if you are a pain.” Stella gave her a wink, and Vicki stuck her tongue out at Stella.

“I’ll call you when I’m going to bring an outfit over.” Vicki hugged Stella.

“Lindsay, call me about Friday night and we’ll go out.”

“You’ve got it.”

Stella went back to work and thought about how lucky she was to have all of these wonderful people in her life.

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## Chapter 14

“I changed my mind. Let me out here and I can walk back home. You go and have fun.” Alex ignored Stella’s attempt to get out of having dinner with his parents. Instead of letting her out, he reached over and grabbed her hand, placing a kiss to the back of it.

“It’s going to be fine, Stella. My parents are going to love you, so stop worrying.” Alex kept her hand in his, but placed it back on her lap.

“Easy for you to say; this is going to be a disaster. I’m not sophisticated enough for *Sal’s*. I don’t know what silverware does what.” He could feel her pulse racing, but that didn’t stop him from laughing.

“Stella, *Sal’s* isn’t that kind of place. Yes it’s a little fancier than some, but that’s not why my family goes there. We go because my dad is friends with the owner, and they are practically family.” He gave her hand another kiss.

“I feel sick.”

“There’s a bathroom there you can throw up in as soon as we get there.” Stella narrowed her eyes at him, and she gave a cute little growl.

“You will pay for this later.” Stella’s threat made him laugh again.

“I look forward to it.” Alex pulled up in front of *Sal’s* and went to get out of the car. However, Stella had a death grip on his hand.

“Please. I will do anything. I will never wear clothes again at the apartment if we leave right now.” Stella’s offer made Alex pause for only a couple of seconds, before he pried his hand out of hers.

“That’s very tempting, but we are still going in.” Alex finally made it to her side of the car, only to find the door locked. Too bad for her he had anticipated her juvenile move and clicked the button to unlock the door.

As Alex handed his keys to the valet, he was all but dragging Stella at his side. “Stella really, it’s not that bad; its food and conversation. It’s not like they’re going to ask for your medical and financial background.

As they went through the front doors, Stella had finally given up and was walking next to him. “Gray, party of four” Alex said to the maître d.

“Of course Mr. Gray; the rest of your party is already seated. Please follow me.” With only a small tug to get Stella moving again, they headed into the main dining area.

“Here we are, Mr. Gray.”

“Thank you, Thomas.” The maître d gave a tip of his head and walked away.

As they were approaching the table his parents had started to stand. “Mom, Dad this is Stella Howe. Stella this is my mom, Dawn and my dad, Bill.” He could feel her shaking, but she stuck her hand out to greet them.

“It’s nice to meet you Mr. and Mrs. Gray.” Instead of shaking her hand, his dad rounded the table and pulled her into a big bear hug. Stella’s shocked expression was priceless.

“Oh honey, Mr. and Mrs. Gray were my parents. Please call us Dawn and Bill. I’m so glad we are finally meeting you. Although, I feel like I already know you from the way my son talks about you all the time.

Alex just rolled his eyes at his dad, “Bill, let the poor girl breathe.” Alex’s mom was now standing next to them. “Sorry dear, he’s harmless. He just never has been able to help himself around beautiful women.” His mom gave her a hug and kiss on the cheek. “I’m very glad to meet you.”

“Thank you.” Stella had two pink spots on her cheeks, but seemed to have relaxed a bit. He pulled out her chair and she sat down.

Alex made his way around the table to hug and kiss his mom, then give his dad a hug. “Have you been waiting long?”

“No. We had only been here ten minutes or so when you arrived.”

“Sorry we are late. It was my fault.” Stella was looking down at her hands. Alex took his seat and rested his hand on her leg to calm her.

“You aren’t late. We women need our time getting ready. And I imagine you were nervous about coming here tonight.” Stella jerked her head up to look at his mom.

“I’m not a mind reader, dear. I just know that the first time I went to meet Bill’s parents, I tried to jump out of the car at a light.” Alex loved his mom. She always knew what to say.

Alex saw Stella let the rest of the tension leave her body as she laughed. “So then you won’t be offended that I tried to lock myself in the car when we got here?”

His parents both laughed and shook their heads. “No, I’m still shocked you are here at all. Alex has never brought a woman to meet us, but I’m very glad he brought you.”

Stella turned to stare at him. “Never”

Her one word held so many questions, so he gave her hand a reassuring squeeze and said, “I’ve never found the right person to bring with me, until now.” He could no longer hold back, he leaned in and gave her a brief kiss.

“Good evening folks. My name is Trent and I’ll be your waiter this evening. Can I get you all a drink to start with?” As the waiter walked away to get their drinks, Alex leaned over to tell Stella what was good to eat. The waiter was back a short time later to take their orders. Once he left, it was time for the “get to know you” portion of the evening.

“So Stella,” His dad said, “Alex had told us you have your own photography studio. I’ve actually seen some of your work. You did the pictures for my friends’ grandson and he was of course showing them off at work.”

“Thank you. Yes, *Picture Perfect* keeps me busy, but I love it. Baby shoots are my favorite. Seeing the babies progress and grow between each session makes me smile.” Stella had a look on her face, one Alex had never seen before; almost like a longing for a baby of her own.

“Yes, babies always do seem to bring out the best in people.” Alex’s mom had hopefulness in her voice and he narrowed his eyes at her. She only laughed.

“Alex, don’t get grumpy. I’m not asking for grandbabies right now.” Dawn gave Stella a wink when she started chocking on her drink. “I’m just saying babies are great, and you are my only child; so therefore, my only hope to bounce babies on my knee again. And we all know I’m not getting any younger.”

“You are still as beautiful as the day I met you, sweetheart.” Alex’s dad gave his mom a kiss across her knuckles. “Now, stop teasing Alex and Stella. We don’t need to scare off the first girl he introduces us to.”

Alex sat back and watched the love his parents had for one another. He could only hope to be as happy as they were after thirty years together.

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Alex knew of horror stories about how some kids grew up. He had been fortunate enough to be born to two of the most loving parents in the world.

As an only child, he had never felt alone. His parents were always there for him; whether it was to help with homework, take him to sporting events or practices, or just to talk to.

Anyone looking at his family would have thought it looked like a cheesy Fifties TV show. Alex was ok with that because he never went a single day without feeling loved.

His dad had worked hard and ran his own landscaping business. He still always had time for Alex though. He coached Little League and made all of Alex’s football games.

Dawn Gray was the quintessential housewife. There were always fresh baked cookies and laundry hanging on the lines outside. She was a small woman, but she was a spit fire if you made her mad. She could cut a grown man down to size with a smile on her face.

Where his dad was quieter, his mom was the opinionated one. His parents had shown him how a marriage should be, and Alex could only hope he could pass that on to his children one day; children with striking green eyes and a heart of gold.

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“I see he still has an attention problem.” All of them laughed as Bill poked fun at his son. Alex snapped himself back to the present.

“Sorry. My mind was wandering. What were you saying?”

“We were asking Stella about some photo shoots coming up. I’m guessing Valentine’s Day is a busy day for you?” Alex could see Stella start to tense up again.

“Yes it is. I’m actually taking pictures of a wedding that day.”

“Oh how wonderful.” And it was then that his mom noticed Stella didn’t seem at all happy about it, “or maybe not so wonderful?”

Alex didn’t want Stella to have to explain all the dirty details, so he answered for her. “The wedding is between Stella’s ex-boyfriend and her ex-friend.”

Alex pleaded with his eyes for his mom to drop the subject, and she thankfully took the hint. “Well I think it’s great you are the bigger person. Obviously, they know you have talent and want your lovely photographs to capture the day.” Alex’s dad was always good at putting people at ease.

“Thank you, Bill. That’s very sweet.”

“Sweet, my dear, is those cookies you sent with Alex to our house for Christmas. It seems you have many talents. Most important of which is making my son happy.”

Again color stained Stella’s cheeks. “Thank you. He makes me pretty happy too.” Stella smiled at him and his heart stopped. “And I will make sure to send some more cookies your way soon.”

“You can personally bring them when you come to the house for dinner. I would love to get to know you better, Stella.” Alex sat back and grinned. His parents were just as in love with Stella as he was.

The rest of the evening consisted of embarrassing stories of Alex as a kid, and other small talk. They all went outside to get in their cars and say their goodnights. “It was such a pleasure to meet you, Stella. I will look forward to seeing you again.” His mom hugged Stella tight and kissed her on the cheek.

“Yes, Alex will let you know when we get together for dinner, and I will be looking forward to those cookies.” His dad gave her another bear hug and wink.

“I had a great time meeting you. I will see you soon.” After a quick goodbye to his parents, Alex helped Stella into his car.

“I think my dad is smitten with you. If I didn’t know how in love my parents are, I’d be afraid he was going to steal you away.” Stella waved her hand around in the air.

“They were just being polite. Although, your dad is very charming, and your mom is something else.”

“Honey, my parents are polite, but if they didn’t like you, they wouldn’t have invited you to their house for dinner. And yes, they are both characters.” Alex pulled away from the restaurant and headed home.

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The drive back to Spring Towers was a quiet one. Alex had never brought a girl to meet his parents and he didn’t really know how Stella felt about the whole night.

“Is everything ok? You’ve been really quiet.” Alex took Stella’s coat from her. They had just walked into his apartment out of the cold and he wanted to warm her up.

“Tonight was better than I could have imagined. Your parents are amazing. Your dad is charming and very sweet, and your mom is so full of life and mischief. I love it.” Stella paused then looked him straight in the eyes. “I love you, Alex.”

Alex stood frozen. He had wanted to hear her say those words for so long, and now that she had there was only one thing he wanted to do. “I love you too, Stella.” He brushed his lips across hers softly, “I want to make love to you.”

“Yes,” was the only word she got out; Alex didn’t waste time heading to the bedroom. He pulled Stella down onto the couch.

“This outfit has been doing bad things to my body all night; especially, right here.” Alex kissed along the barest amount of cleavage that was showing from her sexy red sweater. “It’s like your shirt wanted to let your breasts out to play, but they wanted to hide.”

“You can thank Vicki. She picked it out.”

“I’ll be sure to do her next website upgrade for free then.” Alex kept kissing along the vee of her shirt. Then when that was no longer enough, he pulled her shirt over her head. “I need to see you.”

Just as Alex was going to lay Stella back down, she maneuvered them so that she was on top. “You got to explore my body last time. I think it’s only fair I get to do some exploring of my own.” Stella was running her hands up and down his chest and stomach, igniting a line of fire straight to his hardening cock that she was sitting on.

Alex placed his hands behind his head and grinned at Stella. “Do your worst.”

Alex watched as Stella sat up enough to lift the bottom of his shirt to his chest. She leaned down and placed a kiss and a lick to first one nipple then the other. Alex inhaled sharply and tried to stop himself from grabbing her.

“I see I’m not the only one with sensitive nipples. Good to know.” Stella seemed so proud of herself for finding one of his weaknesses. He would let her have her fun for now.

“I’ll get you back for that.”

“I look forward to it.” Stella threw his words back at him from earlier, and then she got back to her sensual mapping of his chest. After she had placed a few more kisses to his chest, she started moving lower. “You don’t know how long I’ve wanted to run my tongue along your abs. It may actually be an obsession at this point.”

“You can run your tongue along anything you’d like, baby.” Alex didn’t know how he was going to survive Stella doing it. But if it would make her happy, he would just have to get control over his body.

With the first swipe of her tongue along the top of his abs, Alex almost came in his dress pants. “Mmmmm...” Stella continued down, until she had mapped and licked every peak and valley of his stomach.

When she got to the edge of his pants, she looked up at him with so much desire, he was paralyzed. “Lift up.” As if his body was being controlled by her voice alone, he lifted his hips. Stella undid the button, and then pulled down his pants and boxers all in one move.

Finally getting his body under control enough to sit up, he removed his shirt and threw it on the pile of clothes. Alex lay back down on the couch. Stella was sitting back staring at his body with such open admiration. “Damn, you are hot.”

Her open and honest statement warmed Alex. “You’re not so bad yourself, sweetheart.”

Like she always did when given a compliment, Stella blushed. “Thank you, but I’ll never compare to your Greek God body.” Alex could see the doubts still in her eyes. He pulled her down on to his chest and gave her a kiss that she would not soon forget. When he was sure she wouldn’t be able to do anything but listen, he sat her back up on his lap.

“You are perfect Stella. I love your body, and I am two seconds away from throwing you down on the floor and burying myself deep inside you. So please, never doubt my feelings for you or your body.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll shut up now.” Stella was already moving further down his body again.

“Apology accepted. And please don’t shut up. I’m going to want to hear you screaming my name later. Ow.” Stella had bitten his hip after his last comment.

“We’ll see who’s the one screaming.” And as if to make her point, she ran the tip of her tongue from the root to the tip of his rock hard cock.

“Ohhhh...” The one word was all Alex could get out before Stella wrapped her kiss swollen lips around him and sucked. Going no further than the head, she bobbed up and down, making little swipes on the sensitive skin under the head.

“You taste so good, but I think I need to taste more.” Alex was still processing her words as she swallowed the rest of his cock into her mouth. All he could do was lay there and receive the single greatest blow job of his life. If Stella had a gag reflex,

she hid it well because she never let up. Alex was so close, but he didn't want to come in Stella's mouth. Not this time.

With as much will power as he could, Alex pulled out of Stella's mouth. "I don't want to come in your mouth. Not now. I want to make love to you, Stella." She was looking between his face and his cock as if trying to decide what to do. Then she brought her eyes back to his.

"Make love to me, Alex."

Alex didn't say anything. He grabbed Stella by the back of the neck and brought her down on his chest again. This kiss was a gentler one, but still had all the love and lust they both felt. Turning so that Stella was on bottom, Alex pulled off of her lips enough to rest his forehead on hers. "I've never wanted someone this much in my life. I love you, Stella."

"I love you too." He kissed the tip of her nose and each eye lid. Then, without thinking twice, he moved down her body. After undoing the front clasp of her bra, he took one hard peak in his mouth and sucked. "Alex!"

"I told you you'd be screaming my name. Ow!" Stella had smacked him on the back of the head. "Be nice or I may just stop right now." His words would have probably had more effect if he wasn't smiling up at her.

"You stop and you'll pay."

Alex's response to her threat was to suck her other nipple into his mouth. He could feel Stella's body tensing beneath his hands and knew she was close just from the stimulation to her nipples. He was so close himself. His hands popped the button on her pants and pushed them off, along with her underwear. He had his mouth on her wet folds seconds later. As soon as the flat of his tongue put pressure on her clit, Stella detonated.

Alex didn't let up until the last spasm left her body. Even then he continued to lick and suck up all her juices. "You taste so good, Stella. Now I want to feel your tight pussy squeezing me."

Alex moved up her body, running his hands over the sexy curve of her hips, and then slowly sheathed himself in her tight channel. "You feel fucking fantastic." Alex couldn't stay still any longer. He pulled back until just the head was in Stella, and then slammed home again. Over and over he tortured them both until he felt Stella tightening around him.

"Alex...yes...just like...mmmmm" Alex kissed her hard as he picked up his pace. Stella was right there with him, meeting him thrust for thrust, until it was too much for both of them.

"Stella." Alex said her name like a curse as he came so hard he saw spots behind his eyelids. Stella shouted his name seconds later and fell to the couch, with Alex right on top of her.

Alex rolled both of them to the floor to give them more room. As soon as he caught his breath, a thought made Alex sit up with a start. "What's wrong?"

Alex had to fight for control over his breathing. "It's a little late to be asking this and thinking about it, but..." Alex rubbed a hand down his face. "Stella we didn't use protection, this time or last. Are you protected? I mean I've been tested; and I've always used protection, but I..." Stella cut him off with a hand over his mouth.

When she removed her hand, the look on her face told him all he needed to know. “No, Alex I’m not.” Stella let out a sigh. “I haven’t been with anybody since Kevin. I didn’t even think about it. I guess neither one of us did.” She was worrying her bottom lip and not making eye contact.

Alex felt like an ass. He made her think he was going to be mad and expecting her to take all the precautions, when he was to blame as well. “Stella, look at me.”

Luckily, she did as he asked. “I’m not mad, Stella. This was just as much my fault as it was yours. If for some reason you were to get pregnant, I’m not gonna go running for the hills. I hope you know me better than that?”

Stella looked down again. “I guess we’ve never really talked about kids before when we were hanging out. Then again, why would we? We were just friends. I mean, do you even want kids? I know I do, but some men don’t, and I don’t know where you stand on the subject, and...” Stella was rambling like she always did when she got nervous. Alex kissed her to shut her up.

“Stella, take a breath. No, we never talked about it. Yes, I do want children someday, and I’m glad you do too. But since we just started seeing each other officially, I’ll stop by the store tomorrow and get condoms.” Stella gave him an evil little grin.

“So I guess we aren’t going to have round two tonight?” Alex had never put his pants on faster. After getting all his clothes back on, he bent to give Stella a kiss and drove as fast as he could to the store on the corner.

On his way back, he ran through their conversation about children. He waited for the panic to set in; the panic that he could have gotten Stella pregnant already. When it didn’t come, he relaxed. Life with Stella would never be boring and he could handle a few little girls just like her running around.

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## Chapter 15

Three weeks had passed, and Stella was still happier than ever. If she and Alex weren't working, they were together; normally naked and sweaty. It wasn't all about sex though. He was kind, sweet and even brought her flowers one day last week. He had gone to Saturday dinner at her father's house and survived her father's interrogation. He didn't even flinch under her father's stare.

The best word to describe her life right now was perfect. She had slowed down at work; only taking on what she could handle and had even hired a part time photographer.

Stella was sitting at her desk, loving her life, when her cell phone rang. "Hello."

"So there is this rumor going around that we have forgotten all about our friends." Alex's sexy voice sent shivers through her body.

"Is that their way of saying they miss us?"

"I guess. So I told Kyle we would go out to *Maxwell's* tonight. Are you fine with that?"

"That's fine with me. I'll call Victoria, and I'll ask Lindsay too. It should be fun." Stella did feel bad for not spending more time with their friends lately. "We can even invite everyone over for the Conference Championship game Sunday."

"Stella, you do realize you scare the shit out of everyone when you watch a game, right? And with The Predators being one step away from the Super Bowl, I have a feeling your violence will be turned up a notch." Stella pondered that thought.

"I promise I will behave. I'll use the new pillow you bought me if I get angry." During the last game, Alex had given Stella a pillow in the shape of a Boulders player. He told her anytime she got mad to punch it; instead of breaking anymore random objects.

"If the others want to risk their personal safety, then I say go for it. I'll head out tomorrow and get food and drinks." She and Alex had fallen into a comfortable routine. They mostly slept at his apartment because he had the bigger bed, but they ate at her house because she had all the cooking gadgets.

"Well, I need to call Victoria about tonight and then ask Lindsay too. I'll text you when I know a head count. Do you want me to meet you there or come home and we can ride together?"

"Come home first, that way if you want to drink, you can." Alex was the best. Anytime they went out, he limited himself to one beer so she could have fun.

"Ok. Then I'll see you around seven. I have a late appointment tonight so I have to be here an extra hour. Love you."

"I love you too. Bye babe." Happiness felt good.

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Lindsay and Victoria had both agreed to go out, so now all five of them were gathered around a pool table in the back of *Maxwell's*.

"So how's married life, you two?" Kyle was being his normal obnoxious self.

"When we get married, we'll let you know." Alex bent over to take his shot.

“Oh, so now there’s a wedding? Did I miss the part where you get engaged and tell all your friends?”

“We did tell our friends, that’s why you didn’t find out.” Stella loved giving Kyle shit.

“Hardy har har. Seriously, I’ve seen you twice in a month. Isn’t the newness supposed to wear off by now?” Kyle was admiring a tall blonde standing near their table, while he continued complaining.

Alex missed his next shot and came to stand by Stella so Vicki could take her turn. She leaned into him and placed a kiss to his jaw. “Honey, I think your boyfriend is saying he wants some quality man time with you.”

“Thanks Stella. As if his whining didn’t do it, your comment just made us sound like lovers.” Alex cringed and everyone laughed.

“Sorry. Why don’t you two go do something after the game Sunday? I can get some work done and you two can bond.” Stella knew Kyle was happy for them, but she didn’t want Alex to think he had to spend all of his free time with her.

“You sure?”

“Yes. We don’t have to do everything together.” Stella looked at Kyle, who was looking around for the blonde, and smirked. “He’s all yours.”

“Thanks.” Kyle muttered the word and went to join Lindsay and Vicki at the pool table. Stella was watching all of them play pool, when Vicki suddenly narrowed her eyes at something behind where she was standing.

Stella knew the moment she turned around what had her sister so pissed off. Heidi was headed their way, wearing a tiara and sash that said ‘bachelorette.’

“Stella, it’s so good to see you.” The fakest smile Stella had ever seen was plastered onto Heidi’s face.

“Heidi.” Was all Stella could say; she didn’t think calling her Satan would make their working together easy.

“Alex, it’s so great to see you again.” Heidi practically purred as she looked Alex up and down. Not even trying to hide her interest.

“What the fuck do you want, Heidi? Can’t you see we are trying to have a good time, and you are most definitely not invited” Stella was surprised Vicki had stayed quiet that long.

“It’s nice to see you too, Victoria; still crude as ever, I see.” Heidi and Vicki had never gotten along; and if it hadn’t been for Stella restraining her sister three years ago, Heidi would probably have a crooked nose right now.

“And you still seem to be as slutty as ever; glad to see things never change.” Stella put her hand up to cover her grin and pretended to cough.

“I just wanted to say hi. We are out for my Bachelorette party and stopped in for a drink.” Heidi was once again looking at Alex. She even had the nerve to wink. “Are we still on for Monday, Stella? I want to look at the proofs of the dress shots before the actual wedding next weekend.”

“Yes, Lindsay booked it for ten in the morning. Is that fine?”

“That sounds great. Well, see you then.” With a flutter of her fingers, Heidi walked away.

“That was weird as hell.” Kyle did have a knack for stating the obvious. Then Kyle let out a “Damn.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“That blonde I had been eyeing is with Heidi’s group. Man, why did she have to be with the Ice Princess.” Kyle sounded so defeated.

“The Ice Princess, that’s hilarious. The second best word to describe her.” They all had a good laugh.

“You should have let me deck her three years ago, Stella.” Vicki chimed in. Stella wasn’t worried about Heidi’s weird interruption, but she wasn’t thrilled about the way she was looking at Alex.

“If I thought for one second you would have stopped after one punch, I would have.” Vicki was very protective of Stella, and her anger that day was more than she had ever seen.

Vicki harrumphed, and then went back to the pool table.

Lindsay pulled Stella aside. “Are you ok? You don’t look very happy. I can get Frank to go over the proofs with them Monday. It’s his morning to be there.” Frank was their new part time photographer. He was great with a camera, smart, funny and gay. Alex liked the last part the most when she told him she hired a man.

“No, I can handle them.”

“Ok, but if you change your mind, let me know Sunday so I can tell him Monday morning.” Lindsay’s concern and friendship touched Stella.

“I will. Thanks” As everyone got back to playing pool and drinking, Alex came over and hugged her close.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m fine.” Stella all but grumbled the word. Alex grabbed her chin between his thumb and forefinger and tilted her head up to look at him.

“I can tell when something’s bothering you, so please tell me? Was it Heidi?” Stella figured if she wanted to get on with her night, she might as well tell him.

“I didn’t care for the way she was looking at you.” Stella hated to say the words out loud, but Alex had told her to tell him when something was on her mind.

“She can look all she wants; I only have eyes for you.” And as if to prove his statement, he kissed her long, slow and deep.

“Get a room.” Their three friends all said in unison. Alex picked up a peanut and threw it in their direction as he still kissed Stella.

“I love you, Stella. There is no one else.”

“I love you too. I’m glad your mine.”

“Damn straight.”

Stella relaxed again, and enjoyed the rest of the night with their friends.

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“You stupid son of a bitch; get some fucking glasses, you old bastard.” Stella was screaming at the top of her lungs. The Predators were losing and it was all the refs’ fault.

“Stella, calm down.” Alex had placed his hands on her hips to try and make her sit back down on the couch. Yeah, like that would keep her still.

She let Alex pull her back down. “The other team is clearly paying off the refs. That was a bullshit call. Throw a pass interference flag you jackasses.”

“I thought you said she was going to behave.” Kyle had his eye on the door as if he was waiting to make his escape before she started throwing things.

Stella took a deep breath and mumbled out an “I’m sorry.”

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During a commercial break, Stella got up to go refill her drink and noticed Lindsay was hanging around in the kitchen. “Sorry if I scared you. I didn’t mean to. I just sort of lose it when I watch football.”

“It’s fine. I was just coming to check the food for you.” Lindsay had been quiet all day and had spent most of her time in the kitchen.

“You seem weird today? Is everything ok? You’ve been hiding in here like you’re in the Witness Protection or something.” Lindsay dropped the plate she was holding, and it came crashing to the ground.

“Shit! I’m sorry, Stella. I’ll clean it up. Where’s the mop? I’ll make sure it’s all taken care of.” Lindsay was moving around the kitchen frantically.

“Lindsay, it was an accident. Calm down.”

Kyle walked in to see what was going on. When he saw the mess, he went to Lindsay’s side and put his arm around her. Lindsay stiffened and jumped back. “Lindsay? What’s wrong?” Kyle looked as confused as Stella felt. Lindsay was not acting like herself. She was acting like she did when Stella first met her.

“I’m fine. I just need to get this mess cleaned up. I didn’t mean to drop it. I’m really sorry.” Lindsay had grabbed a rag and was wiping up the food.

“Nobody thinks you did it on purpose. Here, let me get it. You go sit down. It obviously shook you up.” Stella had never seen Kyle be so genuine and caring with a woman, or anyone really.

“I can do it, thank you though.” Lindsay finished cleaning up the floor, and then had tried to do some of the dishes.

“Lindsay, you are a guest. Get your ass away from my dirty dishes. That’s why I have a dishwasher.” Stella was still trying to figure out Lindsay’s odd behavior, when she dried off her hands and grabbed her coat.

“Thanks for having me over, Stella. I’m going to head home.” Lindsay was already headed for the door, before Stella and Kyle both trailed after her.

“You don’t have to go. Stay and have some food. I promise I will be good for the rest of the game.” Stella didn’t want Lindsay to be alone right now. Not with the way she was acting.

“I’ve got some laundry to catch up on before tomorrow. I’ll see you at work in the morning.” With a quick hug and yell goodbye to Alex, Lindsay headed for the door again.

“I’ll walk you out to your car, Lindsay.” Kyle’s declaration startled both of them.

“That’s not necessary, but thanks.” Lindsay didn’t even give Kyle a chance to respond. She was out the door like a shot.

“What the hell was that all about?” Kyle was looking at Stella like she knew.

“Hell if I know. I went in to get a drink and asked her why she was hiding in the kitchen and she freaked out.” The whole thing was strange.

“She seemed pale when I came in. Is she sick?” Kyle’s concern made Stella study him for a minute. Why was he so worried about Lindsay?

“Not that I know of, but I’ll call her later to check on her. Maybe it’s nothing.” Stella hoped there was nothing serious going on with Lindsay.

“Maybe” Kyle muttered the word as he continued to stare at the door Lindsay had all but ran out of.

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Stella and Kyle had joined Alex back in the living room, and finished watching the game. The Predators pulled out a win and were now headed to the Super Bowl in two weeks. Stella’s life just kept getting better.

“Well, we are going to head out and grab a few beers. Are you sure you don’t mind?” Stella kissed Alex on the cheek. He was so good to her, but he needed time with his friends and she could use some alone time too.

“Go have fun. I’m just going to catch up on some work here. I’ll see you when you get back.” Alex pinned her back against the wall for a kiss that made he instantly wet and wanting, then just as quickly he pulled back grinning.

“Love you.” Alex yanked Kyle towards the door, and Kyle gave her a wink; evil bastard.

“Uhhh” was Stella’s only response. The man should have a warning. It didn’t matter how many times they had kissed, she still felt it in every cell of her body the moment their lips touched. Once her legs worked again, Stella headed to her home office to get some work done.

Stella was flipping through proof sheets and going over some estimates for a few updates she wanted to do at the studio. She hadn’t been doing a lot of work at home since her and Alex got together. They could barely keep their hands off each other to eat, let alone get any work done. As her mind started to drift to the way his hands caressed her body, her home phone rang. “Hello.”

“Stella, I’m so glad I caught you.” Heidi. How the hell did she get this number?

“Heidi. How did you get this number?”

“It’s listed.” Stella smacked herself. Oh, yeah.

“I really hate to ask you this, but we need a huge favor. Kevin is getting sent out of town again tomorrow, and won’t be back until the day before the wedding. Is there any way we can do it today? I know it is Sunday, but I really want his opinion on the pictures.” Stella should just say no and hang up.

Over the last few weeks, Stella had started to regret taking them on as clients. Heidi was constantly in need of late appointments and her questions about Alex were crossing so many lines. But Stella was getting her biggest commission ever from this wedding, and the business that could come from it made her keep her cool. But once these proofs were looked at she wouldn’t have to see either of them until the day of the wedding.

“Well, Alex went out for a while, so I guess I can. The proofs are at the studio. I can meet you down there in an hour.” Alex and Kyle were going to be out for a while, so it wouldn’t be a big deal and it would give her one less headache for the week.

“You are a life saver. See you in an hour.” With that, Heidi hung up.

Stella finished up what she was working on, put away the leftover food, grabbed her coat and headed for the door. She thought about leaving Alex a note, but she wasn’t going to be gone long and would probably beat him back. She just wanted to get this over with.

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Forty-five minutes after they had left the apartment, Alex and Kyle came back.

“Dude, you are pathetic.” Kyle flopped down on Alex’s couch and grabbed the remote like he owned the place.

“Shut up. You were just as miserable as I was at that bar. I don’t feel comfortable having women slip me their numbers. That’s not fair to Stella.” They had been at the bar all of five minutes when the first group of scantily clad women had approached the table. Telling them he had a girlfriend only seemed to encourage them, and Alex had had enough.

“So because you’re taken now we can’t go out?” Kyle asked in astonishment.

“We can go out, but I’m not gonna let women rub all over me. When you finally fall head over heels for someone, you’ll understand.” Alex knew one day a woman would get under Kyle’s skin, and when that day came, Alex would rub it in.

“Not gonna happen. If becoming a hermit is what being in a relationship is like, I’ll stick to my one night stands.” Kyle said the words, but Alex caught a look of sadness in his eyes.

“Whatever. Grab some beer from the fridge while I go get Stella. I’ll probably have to convince her to stop working, by any means necessary.” Alex paused to wiggle his eyebrows, “So don’t worry if it takes me awhile.”

“I better not hear you having sex.” Kyle narrowed his eyes at Alex.

Alex was still laughing as he went to get Stella. He grabbed the door handle and it didn’t move. “Why the hell did she lock the door?” Alex was murmuring to himself as he reached for his keys.

He unlocked the door and walked in. “You afraid someone’s gonna kidnap you when I’m not here?” Alex called out, but there was no answer.

Her apartment was dark and he didn’t hear any sounds coming from the back of the apartment. Alex did a quick check, and confirmed she wasn’t home; weird. She said she would be working. There was no note, so he went back to his apartment to call her.

“Damn man. Talk about a quickie.” Kyle had a beer in his hand and was flipping through the channels at a dizzying speed.

“She wasn’t home. I’m going to call her cell. Do you want to order some take out after I call her?” Kyle gave a grunt of agreement. Alex would order *Chop Sticks* for Stella and have it waiting for her when she got home, from wherever she went. He found her number in his phone and hit send. Five rings later her voicemail picked up. After leaving her a quick message, he called to order their food.

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Alex and Kyle were picking a movie to watch, when there was a knock on his door. “That was quick. It’s only been like ten minutes.” Alex shrugged and got up to grab his wallet.

Alex opened the door and had to do a double take. Instead of a teenage delivery boy standing in front of him holding delicious Chinese food, it was Heidi Shaw. She looked like she may have been crying, but Alex couldn’t really tell through all her make up.

“What are you doing here?” This woman had caused so much pain in Stella’s life; he didn’t want to be anywhere near her, but for the sake of Stella he wasn’t going to start anything with her.

Heidi took in a shaky breath. “I wanted to come tell Stella congratulations. She said she would get revenge and she finally did.” Alex should just shut the door in her face. Nothing good could come of asking his next question. “Revenge for what, for you sleeping with Kevin? Pretty sure she got over that a long time ago.”

After another sniffle and dramatic sigh, Heidi continued. “I shouldn’t be the one to break the bad news to you, but Kevin told me everything this morning.” She paused for what Alex could only assume was dramatic effect. “Apparently after we saw Stella at the studio the first day, they started talking again.” Heidi wiped at a tear Alex couldn’t see. “I found all the phone calls in his phone and confronted him. Kevin told me that he and Stella were getting back together and the wedding is off.”

Booming laughter came from behind Alex. “You crazy bitch, I don’t know what game you are playing at, but Stella isn’t like that. So why don’t you turn around and leave now, before you embarrass yourself further.” Kyle had apparently over heard, and decided to join in this joke of a conversation.

Alex knew Heidi was playing him. He just couldn’t figure out why. “Heidi, it really is pathetic. Stella and I are together when she’s not at work. I don’t know what you expect to get from this, but you won’t get it from me. You hurt Stella once; I won’t let you do it again. Goodbye.”

Heidi’s small manicured hand flew out to stop the door from closing. “Oh really, then how do I know you two were never engaged? Stella told Kevin that she had just pretended to be engaged to hurt him. Kevin confessed everything to me. Talking on the phone, late meetings at her office, and that tonight he was going to finally ask her to leave you. They apparently were supposed to meet at her office to discuss their plans.”

Alex couldn’t breathe. How could Heidi know about the engagement, or about Stella working late? The only people that knew about that lie were their friends, who had all gotten a big laugh about the whole story.

“From the look on your face, you know I’m telling you the truth.” Heidi sounded so smug, while his world was crashing down around him.

“I don’t know how you know any of this, but Stella could never be a heartless bitch like you. Now leave before I remove you myself.” Alex had never heard Kyle sound so livid, but Alex was still frozen in place.

“Look, whenever you finally come to your senses, give me a call. We can comfort each other.” Heidi ran a finger down his forearm and he quickly yanked it back. Kyle slammed the door in her face a moment later.

“Man, are you ok? You don’t look so good.” Alex didn’t feel good, and could no longer stand. He slide down the wall and sat on the floor.

“Alex? Please tell me you aren’t going to listen to Heidi? That woman is a parasite and lives to hurt Stella, apparently.”

Alex didn’t know what to believe. “How would she know everything she did? Stella has been working late, and she said she was going to be here tonight and she’s not. She’s not even answering her phone.”

“I don’t know how, but I know Stella would never hurt you. She loves you. And after everything she went through with Kevin, do you really think she would give that fucker the time of day.” Alex knew Kyle was right. What he and Stella had was real. He couldn’t believe he listened to Heidi.

“You’re right, man. I don’t know what I was thinking. I’m gonna head to her office and see if she’s there. That way at least I can warn her about the shit Heidi’s trying to start.” Alex peeled himself off the floor and went to grab his coat and keys.

“I’ll stay here to get the food. Plus, if Stella gets back before you do, I can call and let you know.” Alex nodded at Kyle and headed out to find Stella.

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On the short drive to Stella’s studio, Alex felt like an idiot. Why had he let Heidi’s words sink in for even one second? This was Stella; his Stella. She wouldn’t hurt a fly, unless it interrupted one of her football games.

Alex was stilling shaking his head at that thought as he pulled into the parking lot behind her studio. Sitting in its normal spot was Stella’s Malibu. But right next to it was a shiny black Mercedes that Alex didn’t recognize.

Alex just shrugged and went to open the back door. Alex made it five feet inside the door before he was stopped in his tracks by the scene in front of him. Stella was standing in her office, her face buried in Kevin’s chest and he was holding her tight.

An earthquake could have happened, and Alex’s world wouldn’t be as shaken as it was at this moment. A million emotions ran through him as he continued to stare. He wanted to go over and rip Kevin’s arms from his body and beat him with them. But instead, Alex turned back around and quietly left the building undetected; never feeling as empty as he did at that moment.

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By the time Alex got back to the apartment, his anger had risen to a dangerous level. Each mile he drove only added fuel to the fire. Never in his life had he felt so betrayed. He opened his front door with such force, that Kyle jumped from the couch as if someone had tried to shoot him.

“Dude, what the hell was that about? Why do you look like you could murder someone right now? Did you find Stella?” Alex didn’t want to have this conversation with Kyle. He wanted to hit something or someone as the case may be, and he didn’t want that person to be Kyle. But with the way he felt right now, he couldn’t guarantee his safety.

“I found her.” Those were the only words he spoke as he stomped to his room. Grabbing a bag, he started shoving clothes in it.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on?” Kyle had unwisely followed him.

“You want to know what’s going on; Stella’s a lying, conniving bitch, who’s no better than Heidi.” And if his words weren’t enough, he dumped a box out that had been sitting in his closet, and started throwing all of Stella’s stuff she had left at his house in it.

Over the last month, she had moved a few toiletries and articles of clothing over to his place to make it easier in the mornings. Now they were just a reminder of her betrayal.

“Stop, tell me what happened.” Kyle had moved further into the room, but still stayed back from Alex. Alex was in a tail spin; he felt out of control and just wanted to leave. But he would tell Kyle what he wanted to know.

“I had convinced myself on the way to Stella’s studio that Heidi was just trying to start trouble. Imagine my surprise when I get to Stella’s studio and there are two cars. So I walk in and find Stella wrapped in Kevin’s arms, with her face buried in his



chest. Apparently Heidi wasn't lying." Renewed anger coursed through Alex as he told Kyle about the moment his world turned upside down.

"Did you say anything? Ask her what was going on? There could be a million reasons for what you saw. Why don't you wait until she gets home before you decide anything?"

"Fuck that. I know what I saw. She said she was going to be here, and as soon as we left she went running to him. They deserve each other and I'm not going to hang around for her 'let's be friends' speech."

Alex had finished packing his bag, so he turned to finally look at Kyle. "I'll be back in a week or so. Will you get my mail while I'm gone?" Alex didn't know where he was going, but he wasn't staying here.

"Alex, I really think you should talk to Stella." Kyle was trying to reason with him, but it was too late for that.

"Will you or not? If you can't, I'll ask my mom." Alex didn't want to involve his parents in this whole mess if he didn't have to.

"I'll do it." Alex took his key off the ring and handed it to Kyle, with a promise to call in a few days. He grabbed his bag and the box of Stella's stuff. After placing the box on her island, along with the key to her apartment, he left.

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## Chapter 16

Stella had arrived at the studio fifteen minutes before Heidi and Kevin were supposed to be there. After unlocking the doors and turning off the security system, she headed to her office to pull up the proofs. She was clicking through them to mark her favorites and get rid of ones they wouldn't be able to use.

Stella was just about done when her cell phone started playing "Big Girls Don't Cry." Vicki's ringtone always put a smile on Stella's face. "Hey Vicki, where were you today? I thought you were coming over to watch the game with us?"

Stella could hear Vicki take a deep breath and an uneasy feeling made its way through her body. "Stella, are you at home?"

"No, I'm at my office. Why? What's going on Victoria? You sound upset. Is it dad?" The thought alone made Stella feel sick.

After a few seconds of silence, Vicki finally told her. "It's mom." Stella could hear Vicki swallow hard. "She was killed in a car accident this morning." If Stella hadn't been sitting down already, she would have fallen over.

Stella didn't know how to react. She hadn't seen her mom in five years, and the only time she heard from her was when she needed money. Hearing that she was dead should have made her feel something, but she just felt numb.

"Stella? Are you still there?"

"Yes. Sorry, I'm just trying to process all of this. What happened?" Stella didn't know why, but she needed to know what had happened to her mom for it to seem real.

"It happened around five a.m. She was drunk and going the wrong on the interstate. She hit head on with a semi and the car flipped a couple of times. They said she died on impact." As Victoria relayed the horrific details, the numbness settled in more.

"Have you told dad yet? I'm not sure how he's going to take the news." Their mom and dad had never gotten along, and Stella knew it was because Tina had cheated on their dad. That's why they got divorced.

"I called him first. I got the call around eight this morning. I talked to dad and he asked me not to call you until after the game. He wanted you to be able to enjoy it before you got the news. Are you ok?" Stella didn't know what she felt.

"I'll be fine." And she would be. "How are you? She was your mom too." Vicki wasn't any closer to their mother than Stella was, but hearing about the tragic accident had to affect her in some way.

"I've had all morning to think about it. She made the decision to drink and drive, and she paid for it with her life. Other than that, I'm pretty indifferent over the whole situation. We have to go down and make arrangements tomorrow morning. Can you make it? I can do it myself if you're busy." Vicki had always tried to be a rock for Stella.

"Do you really think I'd let you go through this alone? Just let me know when and where and I'll be there. Frank works tomorrow, so I'll have coverage here." Stella

would never expect Vicki to deal with this mess on her own just because she's the oldest. Stella heard a beep in her ear and saw Alex was trying to call her. She could call him back when she was done with Vicki.

"I love you, Stella. If you need to talk later, give me a call. I don't care how late it is."

"I love you too, Victoria. I'm not sure what I feel right now, but if I need to talk I'll call you. And you do the same. You hear me?" Stella knew Vicki tried to be tough as nails, but she felt things deeply.

"I will."

After they said their goodbyes, Stella sat staring at the space in her open office door; the phone call from Alex all but forgotten. She tried to take in what she had just heard. Not only was her mom dead, but it had been her own fault.

After all these years, Tina Howe had still been irresponsible and reckless. Stella sat there and let it sink in. No more phone calls for money, no more wondering where she was, or if she was finally going to clean up her act. She didn't know if it was for her mother, or for the fact that no one else had been killed in her mother's path of destruction, but the tears started to fall and showed no signs of stopping.

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"Stella? Stella are you here?" Kevin's voice sounded like it was at the end of a long tunnel. Stella didn't know how long she had cried, but she needed to get it together for just a little while. She didn't want Kevin and Heidi to see her this way.

Wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand, she took an unsteady gulp of air and stood. "In my office"

"There you are. I knocked, but you must not have heard me." Stella was looking around Kevin for Heidi, but she wasn't with him.

"Where's Heidi?" She was not going to be responsible for her actions if Heidi didn't show up.

"She just called and said she was going to be a little late, but for us to go ahead and get started." Kevin was studying her face and she was trying not to look at him directly. "Have you been crying?"

The one question busted the damn wide open again. He rounded the desk and hugged her tight to him. She wanted to protest and push away, but all her emotions seemed to pick this one moment to make their escape and all she could do was cry harder.

"What's wrong? Is it Alex? Did you have a fight?" There was something in his question that Stella didn't want to dwell on. So she shook her head and tried to talk between sobs.

"It's my mom. She was... she was..."

"She was what? Stella you have to talk to me." Stella finally calmed enough to get the words out.

"She was killed. Victoria just called me."

Kevin hugged her tighter and she couldn't talk anymore. Stella didn't know how long they stood there, but the tears finally stopped. When her brain started working again, she realized who was holding her and her skin crawled. Just as she lifted her head to step back from him, Kevin placed his hands on both sides of her face and leaned in to kiss her.

His lips had just begun to make contact when Stella went into action. She gave a hard shove to his chest, and while he was stunned by the move she slapped him in the face as hard as she could. His hand went to his face. "Damn, Stella."

The emotion she now felt was anger; anger from three years ago, anger that they had asked her to be their photographer, anger over her mom, and the anger that it would take her a week to get the feel of his slimy lips off of hers.

Without a second thought to what she was doing, Stella gave in to the one action she had wanted to do for three years. She brought her leg back and kicked Kevin as hard as she could in the balls.

He dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes and writhed in pain; screaming expletives as he rolled around. Stella stood over him and pointed her finger in his tear soaked face.

"That's for the year and a half I wasted on you, and for cheating on me, and for having the nerve to ask me to be your photographer, and for ever thinking I would want you to put your nasty lips on me. If you ever come near me again, I will not hesitate to do much worse to you next time." Kevin's only response was a few "Fucks" between sobs.

"You can find a new photographer for your wedding. I hope you and the Ice Princess are very happy together. Now get your sorry ass up and out of my studio." Stella felt like the anger she had carried for three years melted away in that instant.

There would be no more insecurities or freak outs. Stella had found something real and lasting with Alex. This incident with Kevin had proven that to her. As soon as Alex was home, she was going to show him how much he meant to her. After she brushed her teeth fifty times to try and wash Kevin's taste off of her.

Kevin had finally made it to his feet, although he was still hunched over. He opened his mouth to say something, but the look on her face must have changed his mind because he began the slow process of walking back to the door.

She heard the door close and she fell into one of the chairs in front of her desk. "Damn that felt good." Stella didn't care that she was talking to herself. She was just happy this whole stupid mess was over with.

Stella grabbed her coat and put it on. After grabbing her purse and phone, she remembered Alex had tried to call earlier. She hit redial and it went straight to his voicemail. Damn. Well she would be home shortly and talk to him then.

She turned out her light and set the security system. Alex would be thrilled about her no longer shooting Kevin and Heidi's wedding. At least some good came out of this whole situation. She had Alex and was never letting him go.

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Stella felt like she broke every speed limit on the way back to Spring Towers. She hoped Alex was back already because she wanted him to hold her and tell her everything would be alright.

After parking her car in its usual spot, she glanced over to Alex's and noticed his car was still gone. Oh well, she would at least have time to get herself together before he came back.

Stella opened her front door and dropped her purse and keys on the small table right inside the doorway. As she started towards the bedroom, she noticed a box on the island. She walked over and peeked inside.

Inside the box was all her stuff from Alex's. A tooth brush, hair brush, shampoo, and all the clothes she had taken over there. Stella's stomach rolled and it took everything in her not to throw up. Then she noticed her key and the dread sank in more.

"What the fuck?" Stella sat down on a bar stool and tried to figure out what was going on. When Alex left earlier everything was fine. I mean, the kiss he gave her alone was a good sign, right? What the hell could have changed between then and now?

Stella looked all around the box for a note, but there was nothing other than her stuff. She was not going to take this lying down. Stella grabbed her keys and headed to his apartment. She tried the door handle and it was locked, so she used her key and let herself in.

The apartment was dark and there was no sound other than the hum of the refrigerator. She looked in each room, no Alex. When Stella got to his bedroom, she noticed a gap in his clothes in the closet and a pile of stuff lying on the floor. Then realized she didn't see his laptop anywhere either. He was gone.

Stella ran back to her apartment in a panic and tried his cell again. Again, it went straight to voicemail. Stella noticed a message waiting and listened to it.

*"Hey babe, Kyle and I came back early. I was just seeing where you went and was going to tell you I'm ordering Chop Sticks for dinner. See you soon hopefully. Love you."*

According to that message, she and Alex were great. She had never been more confused in her whole life. Between then and now, he had decided he was done with her, and that she didn't deserve an explanation.

Stella had cried so much earlier that she didn't have the tears left for the hurt she felt. She always thought nothing could top the pain she felt when she saw Kevin and Heidi together. Only now she realized, she never loved Kevin. She only thought she did. And it wasn't pain she had felt; it was embarrassment that she had wasted time on the wrong man.

Now she knew what it felt like to lose the love of your life. It was like someone was taking a hot blade and slicing straight through her soul. Everywhere she looked in her apartment she saw Alex. She had to get out of there.

Picking up her phone, she called the one person she needed right now. He picked up after the first ring. "Stella? Honey, I'm so glad you called. I've been so worried about you."

"Daddy" It was the only word she got out before the tears she thought were gone came pouring out.

"Oh honey, where are you?" Stella couldn't talk through the tears. She sobbed into the phone and her father's words became more frantic.

"Baby, wherever you are? Please take a cab and come over."

Stella finally got an "okay" out and hung up. Packing the few things she would need, Stella had stopped crying enough to call a cab and give them the address to her dad's house. She sat back in the cab and stared out the window. She felt as dark as the night sky.

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Before the cab came to a stop, her dad was already coming down the front steps. Stella opened the door and flew into her dad's arms. "Daddy!"

"It's going to be ok, honey." He never let her go, even as he paid the driver and grabbed her bag. He led her into the house where Penny was waiting. Her dad let go of her so Penny could envelope her in a warm embrace.

"Baby girl, you just let go of all those tears." Penny was rocking her from side to side. Stella clung onto Penny for dear life. When she pulled away from Penny, her dad took her over to the couch and sat her down. He took the seat next to her and put his arm around her.

"Do you want to talk about your mom? Or do you want me to call Victoria and have her come over? What do you need Stella?" Her father had never sounded so helpless.

Stella gave herself a mental shake and forced the tears to slow down. As she sniffled through the last of the emotions, she turned to look at her dad and Penny. "I know I should feel unbelievable sorrow over mom dying, but... I can't. What kind of person does that make me?"

"It makes you human, Stella. You had a hard life with your mother and there is no rule that says people have to mourn in one certain way. You can only feel what you feel." Stella's dad always had the answers she needed.

"She's not actually the reason I was so upset. I mean the emotions from that probably added to it, but it's not what caused the meltdown." At her dad's confused look, she continued.

"I was at work when Victoria called me. I felt numb after I hung up with her and started to cry, why I don't know. Then my ex, Kevin, came in. I was supposed to go over proofs with him and Heidi for their wedding." Stella's dad interrupted her.

"You mean Kevin that cheated on you; that Kevin and Heidi?" Stella nodded her head, and the anger on his face took her aback.

"Stella, why were you doing photos for their wedding? I know you don't like to turn down clients, but what would possess you to say yes to them?" Stella took a deep breath.

"I thought if I did it I could, I don't know, show them that they never broke me and I survived everything. Be the bigger person. Turns out, I was an idiot."

"They never did break you. You are a stronger person for what they did. What happened tonight?" Her dad looked to be holding himself back from shaking the answers out of her.

"Well I was really upset when Kevin got there. Heidi hadn't arrived yet, and when he asked if I had been crying, I lost it again. He hugged me and I was so upset I didn't push him away." She sighed.

"I had finally calmed down and began to pull away when Kevin leaned in and kissed me. It wasn't long, but I was so repulsed that I did the only thing I could think of. I pushed him, slapped him and kicked him in the balls." Her dad cringed when she said the last part, and then laughed.

"I knew I raised you right." Her dad sounded so proud. "So is that why you were upset?"

Stella lost all humor again. "No. After I threw Kevin out, I went home. When I got there, all my stuff from Alex's house was boxed up and sitting on my island." Stella

could feel the emotions building again, but pushed them down. “We were fine when he left to go out with his friend, and he even left me a voicemail saying he loved me. I don’t know what happened.”

“Well, I’m glad you called me and came over. I’m sure it’s all a horrible mistake. Have you tried to call him?” Her dad’s hand was rubbing up and down her arm to try and soothe her.

“Yes, but it goes to voicemail. I went to his place and some of his clothes are missing, along with his laptop.” Stella felt so lost and confused.

Penny, who had been sitting quietly in the recliner listening, finally spoke. “Stella, I already made up your old room. Why don’t you go soak in a long bubble bath and I will make you some warm milk. Everything will work itself out. You’ll see. You just need to try and get a goodnight sleep.”

Penny had never felt like more of a mother to Stella than right now. “Thank you. I think I will. And I’m sorry I interrupted your night.”

“Don’t you dare apologize; you know you are welcome here anytime you need a place to stay or someone to talk to.” Her dad hugged her, and then Penny squeezed her tight.

Stella made her way upstairs. After putting her bag in her old room, Stella headed for the bathroom and the big claw foot tub. As Stella sank into the warm water, she closed her eyes and hoped that come morning this would all be a bad dream.

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## Chapter 17

The smell of bacon woke Stella from her uneasy sleep. She had woken up several times during the night, her arm out stretched like it was searching for the warmth of Alex. Only there was no Alex, and she was all alone in her old bed at her dad's house.

Stella made her way down the stairs and could hear voices talking quietly. The closer she got to the kitchen; she realized one of the voices was Victoria. As she entered the room, her dad was the first to spot her.

"Good morning, sweetheart. How did you sleep?" He came over to place a kiss on her cheek and pull out a chair at the table.

"I think I woke up more than I slept, but it was enough. Coffee would be good." Penny filled a cup and placed it in front of her. Then like always, she hugged her tight.

"Stella, I heard about what happened. Do you want me to try and call Alex? You know I can be very 'persuasive' when I want to be. I'll get answers." Stella loved Victoria. If Alex was subjected to Vicki's verbal assault, he would never come back; which right now she didn't know if she wanted him to.

"No, I tried calling him again around four this morning when I woke up, but his phone is still turned off. The more I think about it, the more the pain turns to anger. If he doesn't even have the decency to tell me why he is breaking up with me, Alex isn't the man I thought he was." Stella put on a brave face, but she was dying a little more inside.

"Well, if you change your mind..." Vicki left the sentence unfinished.

"I know you'll be there for me. Thank you. Right now, I just want to shower and head to work. I need to keep myself busy." And busy she would be. The whole studio would shine like a new penny when she was done. If she was cleaning she wouldn't have time to think how her life went from perfect to shit, in the blink of an eye.

"Why don't you take a day or two off? Give yourself some time. You've been hit with a lot in the last day or so." Stella's dad watched her with concern etched on his face.

"Dad, I can't hide forever. Plus, I need to try and make up for the money I'm no longer getting from Kevin and Heidi's wedding" Victoria, who had been in a conversation with Penny, spun around to look at Stella.

"What do you mean? Did they fire you? How many times do they need to hurt you before it's enough for them?" Apparently her father had left off that portion of the story when he told Vicki what was going on.

John Howe knew his daughters well. He knew if he told Vicki about what Kevin did, nothing would stop her from finding him and hurting him.

"Victoria, calm down. I let them go as clients, not the other way around. Kevin made a move on me last night and I made him pay for it." The menacing look Vicki had before was replaced by a face splitting smile.



“You did? Oh I’m so proud of you. It’s about damn time. Those two wastes of sperm don’t deserve your amazing work anyway.” Vicki lowered her head and gave a quiet apology for the language she used in front of their dad and Penny.

“No need to apologize, Victoria. I completely agree.” The tension lifted somewhat and they all shared a laugh. The conversation turned to small talk while they ate French toast, bacon and eggs.

After they all finished eating, Stella remembered she didn’t have her car. “Vicki, can you give me a ride to my apartment before I go to the studio? I was in no shape to drive last night and I took a cab.”

“I can do that. Although, I still say you should call in. Frank and Lindsay can take care of everything.” It was a tempting offer, but Stella wanted to work. Instead of arguing the point, Stella went on with another topic.

“What time do we need to meet to make arrangements for mom? I’ll just work until we have to go do that.” Stella wasn’t fond of the idea, but it was the last thing she would ever do for her mother. She would lay her to rest and the past along with her.

“I still say you should let me take care of it.” Vicki grumbled. “But since you are stubborn, I made an appointment for four o’clock at Lancaster Funeral Home.”

“I will meet you there then.” Stella placed her plate in the dishwasher and went upstairs to grab her things. Stella could hide at daddy’s house for a few days, but from the look of his closet, Alex wouldn’t be home and she wouldn’t have to deal with him.

Once down stairs, she hugged first Penny, then her dad. Thanking them for all they had done and promised to call later in the day. “Are you ready to go, Victoria?”

“Sure. Bye Dad. Bye Penny.”

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They drove in relative silence on the way to Spring Towers. Stella’s mind was in a fog and Victoria didn’t seem much like talking either. As they pulled into the parking lot of her building, Stella noticed Kyle’s truck parked in one of the visitor spots.

“Is that Kyle’s truck?” Victoria had obviously seen it at the same time Stella did.

“I think so. Guess that explains where Alex is hiding. Oh well, I’m going to take this bag to my apartment and head to *Picture Perfect*. Thank you for bringing me back.” Vicki grabbed Stella’s arm before she could make her escape.

“I’m coming with you. If you see Kyle for some reason, I don’t want him to say anything to upset you.” Kyle was Alex’s friend, but if he wanted to stick up for Alex, Stella could handle herself.

“If you want to come up fine, but I can handle myself, you know.” Vicki gave her a knowing nod, and they headed to the apartment. There was no sign of Kyle, and Stella let out the breath she wasn’t aware she was holding.

Once inside her apartment, Stella put her things away and collected a few files she needed for the office. She had just grabbed her keys, when there was a knock on the door. Knowing who it was Stella hesitated to open it. “Stella its Kyle; please open the door. I need to talk to you.”

Kyle didn’t sound mad or even upset. With a look at Vicki, who only shrugged, Stella opened the door. “What can I do for you, Kyle?”

“Can I come in?” Stella stepped aside and walked to the living room. Vicki was staring at Kyle like a lioness guarding her cub.

“If you have some message from Alex, I don’t care to hear it. He made his feelings pretty clear from the box of stuff sitting on my island.” Stella would not cry, but this shit hurt.

“Are you cheating on Alex?” Kyle’s outrageous and ridiculous statement caught Stella so off guard she stumbled backwards like he had slapped her.

“Are you fucking serious? Why the hell would I cheat on him?” As Stella tried to reign in her temper, Vicki took a step forward. Stella held up her hand to stop her. “More importantly, when would I have the time? When I’m not at work, I’m here, with him.”

Kyle seemed to sag in relief. “Stella, I never thought you did. I just had to ask. Alex should be the one here talking to you, but since he wouldn’t listen to me yesterday, I’m the best chance you’ve got at getting him back.”

“He thinks I cheated on him? That’s why he packed all my shit and ran away like a coward? Who did I supposedly cheat on him with? And who says I want him back? Fuck him.” Stella felt the rage inside her and wished she could deck Alex right now for even thinking she could do something so horrible.

“I think we should sit, and I’ll tell you what I know.” Kyle gestured to the couch and Stella reluctantly followed. She was so mad right now, but a part of her wanted to hear Kyle out and know what was going on. Vicki took the seat next to her, while Kyle pulled over a chair from the dining room.

“Alright, I’m sitting. Now, tell me what’s going on.” Then go back and tell Alex to fuck himself. But she kept that last part to herself.

“Let me ask you something that I think I already know the answer to, at least partially. Why was Kevin at your studio yesterday?” Kyle had an even tone to his voice and Stella’s face lost all color.

“How did you know he was?” Stella was starting to get a bad feeling, but needed to answer so he could get on with it. “Never mind; he was there because yesterday after you and Alex left, Heidi called and asked if I could meet them to go over some proofs. I didn’t have anything to do, so I agreed. I just wanted to get it over with for the week, and I didn’t think you guys would be back for a while.”

“I think Heidi set you up, Stella. I don’t know how or why, but that’s the best I can come up with.” Kyle gave Stella a pained look before he continued. “Yesterday, Alex and I came home early. He tried to find you, but you didn’t answer your phone. We ordered take out and was just putting a movie on when there was a knock at the door.

“Alex got up thinking it was our food, only it was Heidi. She said Kevin confessed that the two of you were sneaking around at late meetings and talking all the time on his phone. That you had told Kevin the engagement wasn’t real; and you were meeting him last night to make plans on running away together.”

Stella was too stunned to form a coherent thought. “I never...we never... why would she...” Vicki wrapped her arms around Stella’s midsection and tried to calm her down.

“The only people that knew about the engagement farce were the five of us. How did she find out?” Vicki asked the question Stella was trying to answer herself, and then a thought occurred to her.

“The blonde” The two words seemed to turn on the same light bulb for Kyle and Victoria. “She was standing there when you were joking about Alex and I being married and about the newness. Even when I said you guys should go out Sunday. She must have said something to Heidi and Heidi figured it out. That’s the only way I can imagine she found out and knew when to call.”

Kyle held up his hand to try and stop her from spiraling out of control. “That’s very possible. We will find out, I will make sure of that, but Stella that’s not all.”

“Oh great”

“Before I slammed the door in her face, she ran her hand down Alex’s arm and offered to comfort him.” Stella saw red and shot off the couch.

“That fucking whore, I will beat the shit out of her if she lays one hand on him.” Stella would have already been out the door, if it weren’t for Kyle and Vicki trying to hold her back.

“Stella, let me finish, please.” She reluctantly sat back down. Kyle sat down and finished. “Alex didn’t take the bait and yanked his arm away. Once we were back inside, Alex was shaken up and wanted to find you. To let you know what Heidi was trying to do. He headed out to your studio, and when he came back...Stella I’ve never seen him so mad.”

“Oh my God...I think I know what’s coming next.” There was only one thing Alex could have seen to make him leave her like he did.

“He said you were in an embrace with Kevin. I asked him if you said why, but I’m guessing you didn’t even know he was there.” Stella shook her head, “He started packing some clothes and your stuff, and then asked me to get his mail for a week or so.” Kyle looked as bad as Stella felt. “I tried to get him to stay and talk to you, but he was so mad he wouldn’t listen.”

“So let me get this straight. He saw my sister being hugged and automatically assumed that she was sleeping with the man. What a logical guy he is?” Vicki’s sarcasm wasn’t helping right now.

Kyle went on as if Vicki hadn’t spoken. “I know it’s none of my business, but why would you hug a man that has made your life hell.”

“I wasn’t hugging him. I was crying and he was comforting me. I didn’t want him to, but I was such a mess I didn’t have the strength to push him away.” Stella did not want to relive all of this.

“Crying? Was something wrong?”

“Vicki had just called to tell me our mother had been killed in a car accident, so yeah, you could say something was wrong.” Stella’s anger had risen again. “So what Alex saw was me having a meltdown and Kevin just happened to be the one there when it happened.”

“Your mom died? Stella I’m so sorry. How are you doing?” Kyle’s concern was touching, but she was too mad to stop now.

“Just freaking peachy” Stella bit out. “If Alex would have bothered to stick around for a minute or two more, he probably would have seen Kevin try to kiss me, and get a slap in the face and kick in the nuts for his trouble.”

Kyle let out a small chuckle. "I'm sure that felt good."

It had, but Stella was not in a joking mood right now. "I guess I shouldn't have bothered since Alex clearly has no faith or trust in me. If he can take the word of someone like Heidi over me, I don't need him in my life. So whenever he decides to come back home, he won't have to worry about me bothering him."

"Stella, you can't mean that. He loves you; he just got caught up in Heidi's bullshit." Kyle was pleading with her, but she was done.

"He doesn't love me if he thinks I could be so heartless. While trying to deal with one of the worst days of my life, I also had to deal with my boyfriend leaving me with no explanation. I've cried more in the last fourteen hours than I have in the last three years. And almost all the tears were caused by him. That's not love."

Kyle nodded. "Stella, I understand. Just so you know, I may be Alex's friend, but I am here if you need me. I don't agree with how Alex went about this, and when I hear from him, believe me I will let him have it."

"Thanks, Kyle. I just want to go to work and get the funeral arrangements made, then come home and sleep for a year." Stella thought knowing what was going on would help, but the reality of knowing sucked just as bad as not.

"I'll let you get to work; I just wanted to make sure you knew the whole story. I hope things get better and know that I will be getting to the bottom of what happened at the bar the other night." Kyle pulled her into a hug and kissed her cheek. "Call if you need anything."

Kyle left and Stella sank back into the couch. "Well, now you know what's going on. How are you feeling?"

"Pissed off, hurt, livid, murderous. Pick one. I'm not sure what I ever did to Heidi, but she has fucked up my life for the last time." Stella didn't know how, but Heidi would pay for all of this.

"What are you going to do about Alex?"

"I don't want to do anything. He made his choice. I'm going to go to work and move on with my life." Stella had never felt so hollow inside.

"You know I support any decision you make." They both got up and headed to their cars.

"I'll see you at four. Love you." Vicki hugged her and left.

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Frank and Lindsay were deep in conversation as Stella came in the door. She walked past them and headed toward her office; hoping to be alone for just a minute to collect her thoughts. No such luck.

"Hey beautiful, how are you?"

"Today is the wrong day to ask that, Frank." He looked like she had slapped him and Stella felt even worse. "I'm sorry. I'm having a bad day. I shouldn't take it out on you. How are you?"

"I'm fine. Do you need me to get you anything?"

"No, but if you could do a full day today I'd appreciate it. I have to leave at 3:30." That was one appointment Stella was not looking forward to.

"Not a problem. Let me know if there's anything else." Frank left her office and Lindsay came in.

“Stella, I wanted to talk to you about yesterday. I’m really sorry about the way I acted. I don’t know what came over me. I guess I’ll just plead temporary insanity and ask for your forgiveness.”

“As long as you’re alright, that’s all I care about. Are you sure nothing is bothering you?” Stella was having a hard time believing it was nothing.

“I’m fine. Just need more sleep or something.” If Stella didn’t have so much going on already she would press further, but she didn’t have it in her today.

“Ok. I was just telling Frank I need him to stay all day. Can you make sure clients know he will be working with them today instead of me?”

“Sure, do you mind me asking why?” Stella closed her office door and told Lindsay the whole story. By the time she was done, they were both teary eyed and in need of a Kleenex.

“Oh Stella,” Lindsay hugged her, “I’m so sorry you have to go through all of this. Is there anything I can do?”

“Just you asking helped. I’ll get through it all and be better for it.” Lindsay nodded her agreement.

“Well, I’m in no shape to see clients today, so I’m going to clean and file and do whatever I can to keep busy until 3:30. Hold all my calls unless it’s family.”

“You’ve got it.” With another hug, Lindsay left the room. Stella turned up her radio and got to work. Hoping the music would drown out her thoughts.

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## Chapter 18

*Five days later, Valentine's Day!*

Alex made his way through the early morning traffic around Chicago. He had spent the last five days in his parents' cabin in Southern Illinois. It was secluded and no one knew he was there since he had his own set of keys.

Alex had relived what he saw in Stella's studio hundreds of times and it still made him nauseous. How could he ever trust another woman again? But he couldn't hide out in the cabin forever and decided to come home and face reality.

He called Kyle once, but only got his voicemail. Now before he could go back to his place, he needed to get his key back. As he pulled onto Kyle's street, he saw Kyle's truck was in the driveway.

Alex parked his car and was coming around the side of the house, when Kyle came bursting out of his back door. He threw Alex's key at him and yelled. "Get the fuck back in your car and forget that you ever knew me." Then turned around and went back inside.

"What the fuck?" Alex wasn't going anywhere until Kyle explained what that little episode was about. Alex opened Kyle's back door and went inside.

"For a smart guy, you aren't very bright. Get out!" Alex didn't scare easily, but Kyle looked and sounded so menacing, he almost did leave.

"I'm not leaving until you explain what the fuck you are so mad about. I just got back in town. What could I have done to piss you off?" Kyle was standing in his kitchen pacing.

"Remember the time I told you that you were nothing like Kevin; that you could never come close?" Alex nodded. "Well I lied. You're worse than that son of a bitch. I can't even stand to look at you right now."

That got Alex's attention. "Let me get this straight. In the five days I've been gone, I've went from your best friend to lower than Kevin Montgomery?"

"Yup...now get out." Kyle walked to his living room, but Alex followed.

"Do you care to explain this to me? Or am just supposed to accept the fact I'm losing my best friend, of twelve years, with no questions asked." Alex had already lost Stella, he couldn't lose Kyle too.

"Have you seen Stella yet?" Wow, change of subject much.

"No, I came straight here to get my key. I don't care if I see her or not." Before Alex knew what was happening, Kyle had him pinned against the wall.

"Listen and listen good. Stella is one of the greatest people you've ever had in your life. And because you are such a self-righteous son of a bitch, you have probably lost her forever." Alex tried to push Kyle off of him, but Kyle had an inch in height and about twenty pounds of muscle on him. Damn firefighter.

"Get off of me, Kyle. You don't know what I saw, what she was doing." Kyle let go of him so suddenly he almost fell on his ass. Kyle pointed to the couch and told him to sit down.

Alex did as he was told. He didn't have a death wish after all. "What you saw was Stella crying into Kevin's chest because Victoria had just called to tell her that her mother was killed in a car accident."

Any air that was in Alex's lungs evaporated. He struggled to breathe, but was able to get his questions out. "What do you mean? Tina's dead? When? What happened? Is Stella ok?"

Kyle plopped himself down in the recliner and seemed to lose all the fight he had seconds ago. "Sunday morning. She was drunk and drove the wrong way down the interstate. She hit head on with a semi. It killed her instantly. They buried her yesterday."

"Oh God, how is she?" Alex sat in shock; poor Stella. He hadn't been here for her. Then he remembered what he saw. "But why was she there with Kevin in the first place."

"She's Stella... stubborn and not talking about it. And to answer your other question, it's because Heidi set the whole thing up." Alex just stared at Kyle in confusion. "That night we were at the bar, Heidi's friend overheard our conversation about you and Stella's relationship. Heidi had told them you were engaged and when she learned the truth, she figured you would fall for her and leave Stella. Just like Kevin did."

"Why would she do that? I don't even know her."

"It's called money, Alex. The woman is a gold digger and knew you had more money than Kevin. Especially after that article in the *Tribune* awhile back. So she figured she could come over and tell you these lies about Stella and you'd fall for them."

Alex groaned, "And I did." He felt lower than pond scum.

"Yes, you did. Heidi called Stella to meet her at her studio, under the pretense of going through proofs because Kevin would be leaving on a trip. When Stella got there, she got the call from Vicki, and then Kevin showed up because Heidi had told him to meet her there. She was crying and told him what was going on. He was hugging her to calm her down."

Alex didn't think he could listen to anymore. "I need some air."

Alex made it to the railing of the porch before he lost his breakfast. Kyle was by his side a minute later. "Here" Kyle thrust a bottle of water at him and he downed it. They stood quietly for a while, and then the cold was too much and they went back in.

Alex couldn't believe how badly he had messed up. How he ruined the best thing that had ever made him feel alive. Alex was the first one to break the silence. "What about the late night meetings? The phone calls? Were they all lies too?"

"Heidi was at all of those late meetings, ask Lindsay because she was there too. As for the phone calls, Heidi told Stella to call Kevin's phone anytime she needed something. Apparently, this was her plan all along after she found out you were with Stella. Her finding out about the fake engagement just happened to be a bonus."

Alex couldn't move. He had hurt the most important person in his life over... nothing. What was wrong with him? "So nothing happened with Kevin?"

Kyle cleared his throat and it looked like he was trying to suppress a smile or a laugh. Alex couldn't decide which. "Not exactly" Alex gave him a hard look and Kyle did laugh. "Calm down, it's not what you think."

"I'm thinking a lot of things right now, so spill it." Alex was barely holding onto his sanity.

"If you would have stuck around another few minutes that night, you would have seen Kevin try to kiss Stella." Alex was fighting to contain his anger, but Kyle went on. "And then you would have seen him get slapped and kicked in the balls."

Alex smiled for the first time in almost a week. "She should have done that three years ago. I guess I know what I have to look forward to now. I never should have left."

Kyle lost all of his humor. "No, you shouldn't have. Alex, you hurt Stella more than anyone else ever has. She gave you her heart and soul and you crushed it. You didn't trust her. I want things to work out with the two of you, but you have to prepare yourself for the possibility that it's not going to happen."

Stella had once told him that not everyone had the perfect life like he did. That statement had never felt more real to him. Things had always come so easy to him, and now he didn't have the first clue how he was going to fix the mess he made.

"How did you find out? Heidi couldn't have admitted it."

"Oh, well we were trying to figure out how Heidi found out about the engagement, when Stella remembered the blonde. Her name is Claire, by the way." Alex moved his hand to tell Kyle to get on with it.

"Anyways, I can be very charming when I want to be. I found Claire the other day and after a few drinks she told me everything." Kyle sat back grinning. "The funniest part is the wedding is still on. When you didn't come running, Heidi figured she might as well marry Kevin."

"So she tried to move onto me, he tried to kiss Stella, and neither of them know what the other did?" Alex didn't think people could be that dumb.

"I guess not." They sat there for a little while longer, when Alex thought of a plan that could go a long way in getting Stella to forgive him.

"Why do you look like an evil genius right now? And why do I have a feeling I'm going to be involved?" All Alex could do was smirk at Kyle.

"Do you have any clothes suitable for a church? I have a sudden desire to go to Kevin and Heidi's wedding." Alex could see the wheels turning in Kyle's head. When all the gears clicked into place, Kyle turned to him.

"You really want to do this?" Alex only nodded.

"Then I say let's get dressed for a wedding. It is Valentine's Day after all."

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Alex and Kyle pulled up to the church and parked out front. They had arrived well after all the other guests, but didn't plan on staying long and would need to get to the car quickly. "Last chance, you sure you want to go through with this?" Kyle asked.

"These two people have caused more heartache and pain than anyone deserves. I only wish I could do more." Alex was ready to give both of them exactly what was coming to them.

"Give me the keys. I want to be able to leave as soon as we're done, just in case there are angry brothers or something." Alex hadn't thought about that.



“Good idea.” After on last deep inhale, he said. “Let’s do this.” They exited the car and headed up the steps. Once inside, there was a small lobby area and two large doors in front of them. With a final look between them, Alex opened the doors.

“Stop the wedding!”

Every head in the church turned to look at Alex; including Heidi and Kevin. Alex walked a few feet down the long aisle and stopped. Kyle had stayed back in the shadows of the lobby, waiting.

“Alex? What do you think you are doing?” Kevin looked a mix between confused and angry.

“I can’t let this wedding happen. Heidi belongs with me. I’ve known it since the day I met her. I have to fight for her.” There were a few gasps and murmurs, but other than that everyone waited for Heidi’s answer, especially Alex. He had kept a straight face this long, but didn’t know how much longer it would last.

Not surprisingly, Heidi turned to Kevin immediately. “I’m sorry. I can’t marry you. I want to be with Alex.” After picking up the bottom of her dress, she practically ran down the aisle to Alex. He grabbed her hand and ran outside as fast as her dress allowed. Kevin left in stunned disbelief.

Once they were outside, Alex saw Kyle head to the car and dropped Heidi’s hand like it was a poisonous snake. “I’m so glad you finally came to your senses.” Heidi was practically beaming.

“I did. I came to realize what a horrible, manipulative, backstabbing bitch you are; someone that should be wiped of the face of this Earth. But since I’m not that fond of jail I had to settle for the next best thing; ruining your wedding and the cushy lifestyle that came with it.” Heidi went from beaming to vicious in the blink of an eye.

“You son of a bitch” Her hand swung to slap him, but he had anticipated that move and stepped back. The doors opened again and Kevin was standing on the top step. Heidi looked at him and her face changed again. Now it was a pleading, take-me-back look.

“Kevin. I don’t know what I was thinking. It all happened so fast. I will marry you. I love you.” Heidi started moving toward him, but he raised it in a stopping motion, and turned to Alex.

“Did Stella put you up to this?”

“Nope, because of the two of you, I’ve probably lost Stella forever. You see, Heidi here orchestrated this big elaborate scheme to get me away from Stella. The late night meetings, the phone calls, and last Sunday she sent you to Stella’s studio while she came to my apartment. She told me how you and Stella were cheating on us and we should comfort each other.” Kevin was now staring at a very pale Heidi.

It looked like Heidi was trying to talk, but Alex went on.

“But I didn’t take her up on the offer. I did, however, go to Stella’s office and see you holding her. And being the idiot I am, actually thought she was cheating on me. Now she doesn’t want anything to do with me” Saying it aloud made Alex feel like a bigger jackass than before.

“So if Heidi was the one to do all of this, why are you blaming me too?” Kevin really was dumb.

“Because you asshole, you tried to kiss Stella. You took advantage of her vulnerability over her mom and tried to make a move on my girlfriend. And there is the small matter of you cheating on her three years ago.” It took all of Alex’s will power to not punch the bastard.

Alex could see more people coming out and wanted to get out of there fast. “Now that I’ve accomplished my goal, I can leave. I hope the two of you are very miserable for the rest of your lives. Ta Ta!”

Heidi lunged toward him one more time as he took off down the rest of the stairs, into the waiting car. “Go!”

Kyle peeled out and sped away from the church. “I can’t believe you actually did it. That may be the greatest thing I’ve ever witnessed.”

Alex thought he would feel a little bit bad after, but he didn’t. Now that he had taken care of that little problem, he had a much bigger one. Alex still didn’t know what to do about Stella.

“Where do you want to go to now?”

“Your house; I have to drop you off, and hope Stella is home so I can start my begging and pleading.”

“Begging and pleading? You do realize you are talking about Stella, right; the most stubborn woman in the world. No amount of begging is going to work on her. You need something big, bigger than big, to even have a fighting chance.” Kyle kept driving as Alex contemplated what Kyle had just said.

As they drove in silence a little while, Keith Urban was singing about stupid boys on the radio. Even the radio knew Alex was an idiot. And as he listened to the words of the song, it was as though it was meant for him.

“I’ve never had to apologize to a woman before. I’m walking blind into this, man.” Kyle looked like he was giving it real thought.

“Stella isn’t like other woman. You can’t buy her pretty jewelry and flowers and everything is ok. Stella hates all that shit, so your wallet can’t save you.” Alex knew all of this, but that didn’t help him much right now.

They took the exit ramp near Kyle’s house, and when they passed a sports bar it gave Alex a brilliant idea. “I think you’re wrong. My wallet may be the key to this whole thing; or at least part of it. I’m still going to have to risk bodily harm to set it all up.”

“What are you talking about? Are you going to try and talk to Stella? Because after she told me what she did to Kevin, you might want to consider doing that over the phone.” Alex just shook his head.

“I will try to talk to Stella when I get home. But that’s not who I’m scared of.”

“Then who are you scared of?” Kyle asked with clear confusion.

“Victoria.” She was so protective of Stella. It was going to be like walking into the lion’s den.

“Why are you going to talk to Victoria? She will kill you.” Alex didn’t doubt that for a second.

“She’s going to be the only chance I have at making my plan work.” It had to work because if it didn’t he didn’t have a plan B.

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Alex had never been in *Color Me Beautiful*, but he had seen plenty of photos from when he designed the website. It was bright, cheerful and the pictures didn't do it justice. There were a few customers getting their hair and nails done that he could see.

"You must have balls of steel or be incredibly stupid for showing your face in here." Ah, Victoria. Just the person he wanted to see.

"Hi Vicki, it's nice to see you too. And to answer your question, it's the second one." She glared at him. Don't poke the bear, Alex. He scolded himself.

"At least we agree on something. Now leave." Vicki was in mama bear mode.

"I need to talk to you. Can we go to your office? Please, it's important." If she wouldn't even talk to him, he was screwed. All his planning would be for nothing. He watched her war with herself, and then pointed toward the back.

"You have two minutes to convince me not to cut your balls off and shove them down your throat." He tried not to laugh as her customers gasped. They probably thought Victoria was kidding. He knew better. She'd do it in a heartbeat.

Victoria started walking and he very promptly followed. Once her office door was closed, she turned around and kicked him in the shin. "Ow. Damn it, Vicki." Alex grabbed his throbbing shin and tried to rub the pain away.

"Be glad I didn't aim higher." He was.

"I guess I deserve that." And when she looked like she was going to kick him again, he quickly added, "Ok, I did deserve that."

"You deserve much worse for what you've put Stella through this week. I thought you were different Alex, but you are no better than Kevin or Heidi." Vicki had thankfully taken the seat behind her desk. His body was safe for now. Alex took the chair in front of her desk and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and stared at the floor.

"I know. Kyle told me what really happened." Alex lifted his head to look directly in Victoria's eyes. "But I will spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to Stella if that's what it takes. I can't lose her Vicki. I love her and I want to fight for her."

"What makes you think you deserve to have her back? You deserted my sister on a day she could have used you most. We buried our mother yesterday, and Stella was alone. Family is one thing, but you were this bright light in her life, and then you just disappeared. And for what; all because you assumed some lies a dumb bitch told you were true?"

Victoria wasn't holding back and Alex wanted to hear all of it. "You didn't trust Stella or the love she felt for you enough to give her the benefit of the doubt. You just packed her shit and yours and left. What kind of man does that make you?"

"Not a very good one. And believe me; once my mother finds out about my stupidity, I will never hear the end of it. And she'll probably try and tan my ass." That wasn't a conversation he was looking forward to. "But I will deal with whatever I have to. Now, you said the love Stella felt; as in past tense? She doesn't love me anymore?"

Alex couldn't bear to hear Vicki say yes. "Of course Stella still loves you. She can't just turn something like that on and off. But that doesn't mean she's going to take you back, and if she doesn't want to, you will not push her. You will put your tail between your legs and walk away. Do you hear me?"

“I can’t promise that, Vicki. I love her. And if there is even the smallest chance I can have her back in my life, I will fight for it.” And he would every second, of every day, until she gave in and gave him another chance. Hopefully, it wouldn’t take that long though.

“So why are you here talking to me? What do I have to do with any of this?” Ah, the plan.

“I have this plan, but if you don’t give Stella these,” he pulled out two envelopes and placed them on her desk, “and say they are from you, it won’t work because if you don’t go with her she would get suspicious; and I know she won’t take them from me.”

Victoria leaned forward and opened first one envelope, then the other. Her eyes widened beyond the point Alex thought possible. “You are one crazy, over the top bastard. I’ll give you that. But how is this going to work if I’m there instead of you?”

“I’ll be there too. Mines right next to those.” Vicki stared at him and then stared some more. He was starting to sweat, waiting for her answer. Finally she did.

“You have your pick of women, why my sister?” Not at all what he expected her to say, but it was a fair question.

“I’ve loved your sister since the day I met her, Vicki. I’ve thought of little else since she moved into Spring Towers three years ago. For the longest time, I convinced myself that our friendship was more important than my feelings for her. But after the last month, I’ve seen my future and she’s it. She is smart, funny, motivated, warm, caring and way too good for me.”

Vicki had tears in her eyes as she answered him. “You’re right. She is too good for you. But I’ve never seen my sister happier than she was this last month. She took time for herself and her confidence has never been higher. If you promise to never, and I mean never, pull some shit like this again, I will help you.”

Alex relaxed into the chair; one Howe sister on his side, now he just needed to convince the other one. So he and Vicki went over his plan; he just hoped it worked.

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## Chapter 19

“Valentine’s Day sucks.” Stella was huddle under a blanket on her couch eating ice cream and watching TV. When she had got home earlier, she immediately put on her sweats, t-shirt and piled her hair on top of her head. If you are going to be miserable, might as well be comfortable.

The whole week had gone by in a blur. When she wasn’t working, Stella was at home drowning her sorrows in junk food and wine. She hadn’t slept a full night since Alex left and she hated that she had let a man affect her like that again. Lindsay and Victoria had tried to cheer her up. They even offered to have a Bruce Willis movie marathon, and they hated action movies, but she had refused.

At work, she let Frank do the photo shoots. With the bags under her eyes, she was liable to scare the children that came in. But Stella hadn’t been able to hide out the whole week. Yesterday had been her mom’s funeral and a more difficult day then Stella imagined.

Stella and Vicki had a small funeral and finally laid their mom to rest. There really wasn’t anyone there, but for Stella it was something she needed. To let go of the years of pain and sadness this woman had caused her.

Stella hadn’t tried to call Alex anymore after Monday morning. There was no point. She wouldn’t be taking him back, and obviously he didn’t care one way or the other. He hadn’t tried to get in contact with her once. Men, who needs them?

She had survived horrible things in her life before, and this time would be no different. She did not need a man to complete her. She would recover from her broken heart and move on. Maybe she would put herself out there again eventually, but not for a very long time.

Something else she would have to do again was move because of a man. No matter how strong she was, living next to Alex was not going to work for her. When he started dating again, she wouldn’t be able to see or hear him with another woman without sharp stabs of pain. Once the weather warmed up in a few months she would start her search.

She was just flipping through the channels again, when someone knocked on her door. She wasn’t expecting anyone, and she looked like hell. She would just ignore it and hope they went away. It was probably just the wrong apartment or something.

She thought whoever it was had went away, but another knock came. Damn. Stella untangled herself from her blanket and sat the ice cream on the table. Making her way to the door, Stella flipped the lock and opened it. And just as quickly as she had opened the door, she closed it. Alex was standing at her door.

What the hell. She hadn’t even heard him come home. Well, he could just go back to his apartment and leave her alone. Did he really expect her to welcome him back with open arms? He could think again.

“I guess that answers my first question.” Alex said through the door. She would not ask him. She would not ask him. Just go back to the couch and ignore him.

“What question?” Damn. A part of her obviously wanted to know why he was here.

“If we can talk; although I can do it through the door if you want. I think I might be safer that way. I hear you’ve got a vicious right kick.” Stella started to crack a smile, but stopped herself. She would not allow him to joke his way out of this.

“Well at least your hearing works because your eye sight sucks.” She still couldn’t believe he thought he saw her embracing Kevin. Ew!

“Stella, I really want to talk to you, but I don’t want the rest of our neighbors to hear. Can I please come in?” Stella warred with herself and finally decided she would let him say his piece and send him home.

Opening the door again, she gestured him in to her apartment. The place was a mess and so was she, but if he didn’t like it the door was right there. She walked back to the couch and cuddled into her blanket again. Stella was no longer in the mood for ice cream, so she left it melting in the container.

Alex was standing by the arm of the couch at the opposite end. He looked as bad as she did. He had a couple days growth on his normally bare face, dark circles shadowed his blue eyes and it looked like he had been running his hands through his hair repeatedly.

He hadn’t said anything since coming in, so Stella sat watching TV. If he wanted to talk, he could start it. She hadn’t done anything wrong and refused to cave. When he finally spoke, she jumped.

“I’m sorry.” That was it? That was the best he had after the worst six days of her life.

“Do you feel better now? Then you can leave.” Well that should let him know how she feels. She would not yell or scream. She felt hollow for that. She had lost her heart and no amount of arguing would bring it back. And an “I’m sorry” didn’t begin to make up for it.

“No, I feel terrible.” That made two of them. “There are no words I can say to take away the pain I’ve caused you, Stella. And if I could, I would go back to Sunday and do everything different, but I can’t. All I can say is how sorry I am. I’ve recently been shown the error of my ways and set straight about what happened.”

Stella didn’t want to hear any of this. Alex being sorry wasn’t the issue. He believed she could betray him like that and didn’t trust her enough to wait for an explanation. It had taken her three years to trust a man again. And when she finally let down her defenses, it was thrown in her face.

“I’m not getting back together with you.”

“I understand that, but for three years you have been a huge part of my life and I wanted the chance to try and salvage even a small part of our friendship.” Stella stopped staring at the TV and turned her attention to Alex.

“You told me when all of this started that my friendship was important to you, that we would always be friends. And now look what happened. The first sign of trouble and you run. The one thing you asked me not to do. I changed a very big part of myself for you, and you destroyed it all over again.”

“Stella you never gave me one reason to doubt you. I let jealousy, which I didn’t even know I possessed, blind me and reacted to what I had seen in front of me. I saw my girlfriend in another man’s arms. And all logic escaped me.” Alex had been jealous of Kevin? Please.

“So jealousy made you act like an asshole? It had nothing to do with Heidi filling your head with a lot of bullshit first. Bullshit that you chose to believe the second you saw Kevin and me together.”

Alex was shifting his weight from foot to foot. “Believe me, I feel lower than dirt for how I acted. What I should have seen was my best friend and the woman I love in trouble, but all of her words fit in that one moment. I should have said something, but I didn’t want to hear the ‘let’s be friends’ speech. I was a coward and what I did was unforgivable. I can only hope that one day you’ll forgive me enough to let me back in your life.”

A single tear slid down Stella’s cheek. She wanted him to take her in his arms and kiss away the pain. Erase the nightmares of this past week. But if she gave into him, it would be like exposing herself to all that hurt again. She was barely surviving now; if he did it again, she wouldn’t.

“Maybe one day I will understand what you were thinking, but today isn’t that day. I wanted what we had more than anything, and you ripped that away from me. I thought you were my happily ever after, but I don’t think I believe in those anymore.”

Alex moved to the coffee table in front of her and sat down. When he reached for her hands, she moved them under the blanket. If he touched her she would be to overcome with emotion to keep her few defenses up. Stella saw the pain in Alex’s eyes at her move, but he masked it quickly.

“One day your fairy tale will come true, Stella. I know it. You just have a very different story line in yours.” His words bewildered Stella. Then from out of nowhere, it seemed, Alex had a single white daisy in his hand. He placed it in her lap and gave her a small smile.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Stella. I love you. I will leave for now, but know I’m not done trying to prove to you that you can trust me and that I trust you. I just had a momentary lapse of stupidity; one that I fully plan to rectify.”

Alex got up and before she knew what was happening, he placed a kiss to the top of her head. His warmth and scent surrounded her. She wanted him to kiss her again and again, but he walked to the door and left.

She stared at the flower for a long time after he left; a simple flower that Stella appreciated more than a whole bouquet of roses. She stretched out on the couch and thought about everything he said. He wasn’t going to give up, but she didn’t change her mind easily. He had his work cut out for him.

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Sunday morning, Stella’s cell phone woke her up. She flung her arm out and smacked around on the night stand until she found it. She answered it on a yawn.

“Hello?”

“You’re still in bed? What is wrong with you? It is almost noon.” Vicki was annoyingly chipper today.

“I was sleeping well for the first time in almost a week. Go away.” She was about to hang up when Vicki’s loud mouth screamed through the phone.

“Don’t you dare hang up on me; I need to come see you. I have a surprise for you.” With Victoria, surprises should be entered into with caution. You never knew with her.

“What is it? And how long do I have to sleep before you get here?” Hopefully it was a few more hours.

“I will be here, right now.” Stella heard the pounding on the door seconds later. Of course Vicki would give her no warning. She felt like hell and probably looked worse. Brat!

“Thanks for the heads up. I’ll be there in a minute.” Stella hung up and threw her phone on the bed beside her. After putting on her robe, she went to let Vicki in.

“About time, it’s February out here, you know.” Stella rolled her eyes and let Vicki walk through. “By the way, this was on your door mat.” In Vicki’s hand was a single yellow daisy. It went perfectly with the white one from yesterday. Stella took it into the kitchen and put it in a small vase with the other one.

“What’s with the random flower, or two from the looks of it?”

“Alex gave me the white one last night when he came over to apologize. My guess is that ones from him too; all part of his ‘not giving up’ plan.” Stella had thought about it last night, and didn’t think she could handle just being friends with him. After all they had been through; she wanted more than friendship if she did forgive him.

“You let him in? That surprises me. Maybe you’re not as done with him as you said. Maybe deep inside you miss him and want him back.” Vicki had a knowing look in her eyes and Stella didn’t like it.

“I don’t want to talk about it. He apologized, gave me the flower, and said something weird about me having a different kind of fairy tale, and then he left. Two flowers do not make up for all that pain.”

“Of course not, it was silly of me to bring it up.” Vicki thrust two envelopes in her direction. “Here.”

“What are you up to?” Stella opened the first envelope and it was two plane tickets to Miami, Florida for next Saturday. Why was Vicki taking her to Miami?

“What are these for?”

“Open the next envelope and you’ll see.” Stella lifted the flap on the next one and almost fell over. She let out the loudest scream of her life and threw herself on her sister, knocking them both to the ground.

“You did this for me? How did you? Oh my God. These are real? I’m really going to the Super Bowl? Ahhhhhh!” Stella couldn’t stop hugging her sister or randomly screaming with joy.

“I take it you are happy?” Vicki had an amused look on her face.

“I’m ecstatic. But Vicki, this is too much. This whole trip had to cost you a fortune.” Stella had no intention of giving the tickets back, but she at least had to say something to make herself feel better about accepting such an over the top present.

“You deserve it, and those tickets were bought with all the love in the world for you. It’s going to be life changing.” Vicki winked at her.

“So we leave Saturday? What are we going to do until the game on Sunday?” Stella had never been to Miami and was looking forward to seeing the beach to get some great pictures and all the other sights.

“We have all inclusive passes to enjoy all the pre-game parties and activities they have going on. We will be busy until game time.” This kept getting better and better.



Someone needed to pinch her. Stella's smile was going to be permanently on her face after this next weekend.

Stella was still jumping around, when she had the urge to go tell Alex all about it. But she stopped herself from heading to the door and Victoria could see it. "You know you want to, Stella. Go tell him."

"No." She would not give in that easily. They weren't anything to each other right now, and she needed to remember that.

"Don't do it out of friendship. Do it because he's a guy and going to the Super Bowl is every man's fantasy." She had a point. Fine, she would go rub it in, and then come back and celebrate some more.

Stella grabbed the tickets and went to her door, not even feeling the cold as she stepped outside. Taking a deep breath, she knocked on his door. He answered the door wearing only his athletic shorts.

Stella stood like a statue. She was mesmerized by all the muscles she knew so well. Even now she wanted to touch him and the throbbing between her legs almost overwhelmed her.

"Stella? Can I help you with something?" His cocky smile made her narrow her eyes at him. He knew the effect he was having on her; bastard.

"I wanted to show you what Vicki just gave me." She thrust the tickets in his face. He took them from her and pulled them away so he could read them.

"You're going to see the Predators in the Super Bowl? That's amazing, Stella. I'm very happy for you. It's like a dream come true." His words from last night echoed in her head. He seemed pleased about something, she just didn't know what. Shaking it away, she took the tickets back.

"Yes, it is. Sorry if I interrupted you. And thank you for the flower this morning." Stella had to get back home, before she started rubbing her hands up and down his sculpted chest.

"You are very welcome. And you can interrupt me anytime, you know that." He grinned and winked at her, and then went back into his apartment and shut the door.

Stella went back to her apartment and leaned against the door. "What did he say?"

"That he was happy for me." The sexual fog had taken over Stella's brain. He really should have been wearing a shirt. Who opens the door in a pair of shorts and nothing else? It's not very polite. Anybody could have been at the door.

"I'm sure he is. Are you ok? You look funny." Probably because my sexy neighbor slash ex-boyfriend looked good enough to eat and I wanted to take a bite. But instead of saying all of that out loud, she went with "I'm fine."

"If you say so; well, let's sit down and make a plan for next weekend. I can't wait to go to Miami." Stella couldn't either. So for the next two hours, they browsed the internet and figured out all the things they were going to do. This would be the best weekend of her life.

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Stella never knew a week could go so slow. It seemed like someone had pressed the slow motion button on her life. "You leave tomorrow. I think you'll survive another day, Stella." Lindsay laughed as they ate their lunch.

“I feel like I’ve known about this for a year. The suspense is killing me.” Stella couldn’t sleep, she couldn’t eat. All she had thought about was seeing The Predators play in the Super Bowl. It was going to be awesome.

“What time does your plane take off in the morning?”

“7:00, we have to get to the airport around 5 a.m.” It wasn’t early enough for Stella. She wished they were leaving today. Stella and Vicki had gone through all the activities that went with their all-inclusive passes. She would get to meet former players from both teams, get autographs and play games.

“Well, I’m happy for you. You deserve this, Stella. And hopefully you get to see The Predators win. Just don’t get kicked out of the game, like the last time.” Stella blushed and promised not to.

“You should head out early today. Frank and I can cover things here. You probably need to pack still, knowing you.” Lindsay knew her so well.

“It’s only for two days, but you’re right. I haven’t even started. I can’t decide what to take.” They finished up their lunch, and Stella went to her office to get a few things taken care of before she left for the weekend.

“Get out of here! You are no longer welcome in this studio, so leave.” Lindsay was practically screaming at someone who had just come through the door. Stella went to see what all the fuss was about.

“Lindsay, what is going on out...?” The words stalled on Stella’s tongue. Kevin was standing in front of the reception desk, with Frank now grabbing onto his arm.

“Let me go, I’m not here to cause Stella anymore drama.” Kevin was trying to pry his arm out of Frank’s grasp.

“It’s alright, Frank. Let him go. He knows I can take care of myself.” At the reminder, Kevin’s hand instinctively went in front of his balls in a protective shield. “What do you want Kevin? I told you not to come near me again.”

“I wanted to come apologize to you. Not just for last Sunday, but for all the things Heidi and I put you through.” Out of all the things Kevin had ever done, this shocked her the most. Stella studied him for a long moment. Kevin was normally so cool and confident, but now he looked like he might get sick at any moment.

“It’s ok guys. I’ll hear him out.” She looked at Lindsay and Frank, and then turned to Kevin. “But don’t think I won’t hesitate to follow through on my threat if you cross the tiniest line.” Kevin hesitated, but started walking toward her office.

Stella closed the door enough to have some privacy, but not all the way. “So, you’ve apologized. Is that all? Shouldn’t you be on your honeymoon right now?”

“We didn’t get married.” Interesting, “I figured someone would have told you by now.”

“This may come as a shock to you, but you and Heidi aren’t a high priority in my life. Everyone respects that.” How she ever believed she loved this idiot was beyond her.

“So Alex didn’t tell you what he did?” Kevin seemed shocked.

“What does Alex have to do with anything? Thanks to you, we are no longer together, and have only spoken once since the night you were here.” They hadn’t been talking, but every morning he left a white or yellow daisy on her door mat. Stella was trying to stay mad, but he was really making it difficult.

“Heidi and I were standing at the alter saying our vows when Alex came busting through the doors. He said he wanted to be with Heidi and she didn’t hesitate. I was left standing there, watching her run out the door with him.” Stella’s legs felt like jelly and she had to sit down.

“I was so stunned; it took me a minute to go after them. When I got outside she was swinging to hit him. Apparently, his plan was to ruin our wedding to teach us a lesson for hurting you.” Kevin was now pacing around her office. He slowed and looked at her with an intensity she had never seen from him.

“Stella, what I did three years ago was wrong on so many levels, and then when I tried to kiss you last week. You didn’t deserve any of this and I will never forgive myself. But I had nothing to do with Heidi’s plan to break you and Alex up. I swear.” She had waited three years for this apology and now that she had it, she couldn’t speak.

“I don’t expect your forgiveness, but I do want you to be happy. Alex did this for you, and I don’t know a lot of people that would put themselves in that situation unless they were truly in love.”

Finally, Stella stood and made her way towards Kevin. When he flinched she smiled. “I’m not going to hit or kick you.” She stuck out her hand and he shook it. “Thank you for telling me and for the apology. Maybe someday I will give you my forgiveness, but for now this is all I have.”

“That’s all I can ask for. Goodbye, Stella.”

“Goodbye, Kevin.” He left her office and she felt something shift inside her. Kevin had done some awful things to her, and she had heard him out, twice. Alex had reacted to a situation set up by a terrible person and she was giving him the cold shoulder.

Stella decided that once she was back from Miami, they would sit down and talk about everything. Including the fact that he ruined Heidi and Kevin’s wedding and didn’t tell her.

“Are you ok?” Lindsay was now standing in the door way of her office.

“Better than ever” And she was. “I’m going to head home and pack. I won’t be back in the office until Tuesday, but I’ll let you know when I arrive. Call if there are any problems.”

“Have fun, but not so much that you get arrested. We will be fine here.” Lindsay hugged her.

“I will. Bye” And with that, Stella headed home to pack for what was going to be an amazing weekend; feeling better than she had in weeks.

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“I can’t believe we’re here. These seats are awesome. I can see everything.” Stella and Vicki were in their seats waiting for the Super Bowl, the Super Bowl, to start and she couldn’t sit still or stop looking at all the things going on.

“Yes, so you’ve said a million times since we sat down ten minutes ago.” Vicki was rolling her eyes, but smiling at Stella with love.

“Sorry, it’s just so exciting. The game is going to start in half an hour and I can hear the seconds ticking away.” They had spent the last day and a half living what felt like a dream.

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They had arrived in Miami around 10:00 and went to drop their things off at the hotel; which happened to be in the heart of the Super Bowl madness. After making their way to the stadium parking lot, Vicki pointed to the tent for pass members.

When they got inside, Stella lost her mind. She was in her own personal heaven. Past players were mingling with everyday people and Predators fans were everywhere. Seeing Mustang fans made her cringe though. Vicki pulled her along and made sure she got autographs and pictures with each player and goodies from all the booths too.

Saturday night, they partied with people from all over the country. Stella and Vicki danced and drank until well after midnight. A few times, Stella was convinced she saw Alex, but laughed it off. Why would he be here? Deciding she didn't want a hangover for the game tomorrow, Stella called it a night and finally went to bed.

Vicki had woken her up around eleven to go watch a celebrity flag football game in the field next to the stadium. It had all been so perfect. Stella never wanted to come down from the high she was on.

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Now she was sitting, waiting for the game to start and her dream to end. She had her Abel Redder jersey on, jean shorts with white and yellow tube socks pulled up to her knees and white and yellow hair spray streaked down her pig tails.

"The stadium is packed. It's crazy; I can't believe the seat next to me is still empty. I think it's the only seat left in the place."

Vicki just laughed. "I'm sure he'll be here."

"How do you know it's a guy?" Stella looked curiously at Vicki.

"I don't, but it's the Super Bowl. It's a pretty logical assumption." Vicki shrugged then looked back to the field, where the pre-game show was going on. Stella watched her for a little bit longer, and then turned her attention back to the show as well.

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"Let's go. Play some defense." Stella hadn't sat down since the opening kickoff. She had cheered and hollered for the Predators the whole time. There was a minute left before halftime and the score was all tied up.

Vicki had stopped trying to get Stella to sit down after the first quarter and had sunk into her seat as far as she could. Stella knew she seemed like a lunatic, but this was the Super Bowl and the Predators had to win. A little embarrassment was worth it.

The final seconds ticked down and the teams started to leave the field for halftime. Stella couldn't help herself; she had to yell one more time. "I love you Abel."

"Well I guess I shouldn't be here since I've been replaced." Stella would know that voice anywhere. Alex! She whipped her head around so fast that her long pig tails hit the guy sitting behind her. After an apology, she was once again looking into the most piercing blue eyes she had ever seen.

"What? What are you doing here? How did you...?" It was then she noticed the seat next to her was still empty. Trying to wrap her brain around all that was happening she fell into her seat and it all made sense.

"You did this?" Alex only nodded.

"Why? I mean, you've missed out on everything so far."

“I haven’t missed anything. I’ve been in Miami since Friday. I watched you yesterday and I’ve never seen you look so happy. That’s what I wanted. If I had been the one to offer this trip to you, you would have turned it down.” Stella was in shock. Alex never used his money in such an extravagant way.

“So it was you I saw last night at the party.” Again Alex nodded. Stella turned to Vicki who had been sitting quietly. “You lied to me?”

“No. I told you that the tickets were bought with all the love in the world for you, Stella. I just didn’t say it was Alex’s love. I may have omitted, but I didn’t lie.” She looked so smug.

“Stella...” Alex had started talking again and she turned her attention back to him, “I love you. Never in a million years would I want to hurt you. I know I did and all of this could never make up for that, but I miss you. My life is clouded in darkness without you.” Stella realized their section had gone silent during Alex’s speech and they were all looking at her and Alex.

“You know how to captivate an audience.” Alex shrugged.

“The only thing I want is for you to be mine for forever, Stella.” Alex came off the steps and was now kneeling on the sticky floor in front of her.

“What are you doing?” Stella was shaking her head no, but Alex went on. He pulled a small box from his pocket.

“Stella, you are the only person I want to go to bed with every night and wake up to every morning. I want to buy a house with you and fill it with as many children as you want. I never want to spend one more day without you by my side. Will you marry me?”

Alex opened the box and sparkling back at her was a solitaire diamond on a silver band. It wasn’t flashy, but simple and exactly what she would chose. She looked from the ring to him and back again. All the pain and sadness of the last weeks disappeared, and kneeling in front of her was the one person that knew her better than anyone; her best friend.

“Yes!” Stella could no longer stay in her seat. She flew into Alex’s arms and luckily he caught her without falling down the stairs behind him.

The sound of hundreds of people letting go a collective sigh came right before the cheering and congratulations started. Stella found Alex’s lips a moment later and kissed him with all the love she felt. He was right there with her. His tongue fighting for entrance into her mouth and she gladly let him in.

They were still mauling each other when someone clearing their throat caught Stella’s attention. She looked up to see a very amused security guard. “Folks, please take your seats.” Stella buried her face in the crook of Alex’s neck and blushed.

“Sorry sir.” Alex got them both back in their seats and let her go enough to slide the ring on her finger. “I love you, Stella.” And he placed a kiss to the back of the ring.

“I love you too, Alex. This has been the best weekend of my life. I’ll never be able to thank you enough.”

“You just did, Stella. You said yes.” Stella beamed at him, and then realized Vicki was still there.

She turned to see Vicki with tears streaming down her face. “I’m so happy for you, Stella.” They hugged for what felt like hours; both of them letting it all go.

When they broke apart, Vicki wiped her eyes and excused herself to go get a drink. Alex pulled Stella into his side and she leaned in staring down at her ring.

“It’s perfect. You did well.”

“I’m glad you like it.” Alex tipped her chin up to look at him. “I love you.” Then he gave her a very sweet kiss. She had never been this happy and if it was a dream, she never wanted to wake up.

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As the game came to an end, The Predators were Super Bowl Champions. But Stella felt like the biggest winner of all. She had everything she ever wanted and more.

“I love you, Alex.”

“I love you too. Welcome to your Happily Ever After, Stella. I told you it was a different kind of Fairy Tale!”

She couldn’t agree more.

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## Epilogue

Lindsay Pierce watched as everyone surrounded the happy couple. Stella and Alex had come back from Miami a month ago and announced they were engaged, and tonight was the engagement party.

Lindsay didn't have anything against people falling in love, and was happy when things worked out...but she knew better than anyone that not everyone got their happily ever after.

Lindsay sat at her table, drinking her water, when she spotted Kyle Brady making his way towards her. Before she could get away from him, he sat down next to her.

"You look beautiful tonight, Lindsay." Kyle was charming, sexy, and gorgeous, and he knew it. He was also a fire fighter. All strikes against him in Lindsay's book.

"Where's your date for the evening? Trying to figure out which bathroom to go into?" Kyle had a thing for air heads that Lindsay was surprised could walk without assistance.

"I'm flying solo tonight; although, I could be persuaded to have a co-pilot." He gave her an appraising look and Lindsay blushed. Kyle was either drunk or on something because she was not his type.

"I'm sure you won't have a problem finding one." Lindsay turned away from him so he couldn't see the reaction he caused in her. Lindsay looked around, and decided she needed to get out of there. Big crowds still made her jumpy, and Kyle Brady did other things to her that she would not allow.

"Why do I make you so nervous, Red?" She snapped her head to look at him. How did he know he made her nervous? And since when did he call her Red.

"I don't know what you mean. You don't have any effect on me at all." Liar "I'm going to say a quick good bye to Stella and Alex. I'll see you around."

Lindsay made a quick getaway before Kyle could say anything more. When she found Stella and Alex, they were both bummed she was leaving. "Are you sure you have to leave? The party just started."

"I've got a headache. I just need to get some rest. I'll see you at work Monday."

"Well, I wanted to talk to you about my apartment. I talked to the rental office and they said you moving in would be no problem." Stella had moved in with Alex a few weeks ago and knew Lindsay was looking for a new place.

"Are you serious? That would be amazing." Lindsay loved Stella's apartment and really needed to get into a safer area and building.

"They are expecting your call." After a hug and thank you, Lindsay left. Life felt so normal right now. Lindsay just hoped it stayed that way.

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## **About the author:**

When Morgan was a senior in high school, she discovered her love of romance novels. The more she read, the more her desire to write ate at her. After graduation, life happened. Working hard and finding herself led to starting a family and being a stay at home mom. It was only after receiving an iPad that she discovered that same love for reading. A year later she gave writing a shot, and “A Different Kind of Fairy Tale” was the result. She holds out hope to one day write full time.

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