

VALENTINE:  
AN ON DUBLIN STREET NOVELLA

BY  
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## Jocelyn and Braden

Braden threw back the rest of his coffee. "I need to go."

"You haven't even had breakfast yet." I frowned at the scrambled eggs and toast I'd made him.

"I'm sorry, babe, I'm late for this meeting." He put his mug in the sink, leaned down to brush my lips with his and then rounded our kitchen island to kiss Luke and Beth on their foreheads. "See you all tonight."

"Bye Dad!" they yelled after him as he hurried out of the kitchen. Luke immediately eyed the scrambled eggs Braden had left.

"Are you kidding me?" I snorted. My six year old had just eaten cereal, two slices of buttered toast and a handful of raisins for his breakfast. "Where do you put it?" I scraped most of the scrambled egg onto my plate but gave him the rest.

Luke frowned at the disproportionate portioning. "How come you got more?"

"Because she's got a baby in her belly, silly," Beth said with a superiority she liked to lord over her brother whenever she could. If she weren't also incredibly overprotective of him and willing to play with him despite their three-year age gap, and not to mention charmingly adorable, I'd call my eldest an unbearable smartass.

That's just what happened when two smartasses procreated I guess.

"Don't call your brother silly," I reminded her.

Beth sighed heavily, like she was ninety instead of nine. "Sorry. I'm just cranky because of this Valentine's Day stuff at school."

She also *talked* like she was ninety. That's where the charmingly adorable part came into play. "What Valentine's Day stuff?"

"We have to make a card for someone today and then *give* it to them."

I bit back my laughter. "Well, baby, that's what you do when you make a card for someone. You give it to them."

"I don't have to make a card," Luke said with a mouthful of scrambled egg.

"Remember talking rule number five."

He swallowed and grinned at me. "No talking to people dressed as Santa when it's not December because it's not really him because he's in the Northern Pole and it's a stranger portending to be Santa."

"The North Pole," Beth corrected him. "*Pretending*. And that's rule number seven."

I wrinkled my nose at my daughter. “You are cranky today, Miss Wite-Out.” I turned back to Luke. “Rule number five is no talking with your mouth full.”

He stuck his thumb up as he chewed, letting me know he got it.

“Back to you.” I leaned across the island and tucked Beth’s soft hair behind her little ear. “What’s the problem with the card thing?”

She shrugged. “What if I make a card for Aaron and he doesn’t make his for me?”

Aaron was this adorable kid a full head shorter than my kid who followed her around like a puppy dog and had done for the last year. They were ‘boyfriend’ and ‘girlfriend’.

“I’m one hundred percent positive that Aaron will make his card for you, and it would be sad if he made a card for you and you didn’t for him. He’d be really upset.”

Beth stared at me, processing this like it had world importance, which we all knew at that age it kind of actually did. “Okay. Better feeling silly than hurting his feelings I s’pose.”

And another reason I adored my kid.

“Beth, you know you don’t have to make a Valentine’s Day card for anyone if you don’t want to, right?”

She nodded. “I want to.”

“Okay.” I looked at Luke who’d finished his scrambled egg and was now sitting with his head propped on his hand, his eyes half shut. “Oi, Narcoleptic Cool Hand Luke, let’s get you to school before we lose you to the land of nod.”

His eyes didn’t open all the way.

Beth grinned at me and leaned into her brother. She planted a big smack of a kiss on his cheek.

“Blech!” He jumped awake, rubbing at his cheek.

I almost peed my pants laughing at the comical, exaggerated expression of disgust on his face.

“I’m telling Dad when he gets home!” with that he jumped off his stool to go get his school bag.

As I walked around the island I held my hand out to Beth and she gave me a high five.

“So is it true Will, Bray, Sophia and Jarrod are staying tonight?” she said as we followed Luke out of the kitchen and into the hall.

We set about putting on our boots and coats. “Not for the whole night. But for most of it, yes. You okay with that?”

“I am!” Luke shouted, grinning.

He would be. Ellie’s son Will was only a year younger than him and the two of them were best buds. “Shocker.” I winked at him and he giggled.

“It’s fine.” Beth grumbled as we stepped outside and I locked up. “As long as I don’t get left with the babies.”

“Yeah.” I just stopped myself from rolling my eyes. “Because it would be responsible of me to leave my nine year old to look after a six month old.”

“I could do it,” she said, contrary. “I just don’t want to.”

“You are so my child,” I muttered as we headed to our Range Rover. We bought a car and a parking permit when I was pregnant with Beth. It was just one thing that had changed as Braden and I became parents. We could no longer rely on public transportation to get us around the city. It was too inconvenient when you had kids and most of our friends had discovered the same thing as we all grew into parenthood.

“I’ll help with Jarrod though,” Beth said as I pulled away and started driving down Dublin Street toward their primary school.

“And why Jarrod and not Bray and Sophia?”

“Because they’re toddlers now. They can handle life themselves. Jarrod’s just a wee baby.”

I grinned at her reasoning but decided not to correct her. “Okay, then we have a deal. You’ll help out with Jarrod tonight.”

“Yeah, but only until my bedtime.”

“Gotcha. But you know Jarrod’s bedtime is before yours.”

I glanced out of the corner of my eye and saw her frown. “Does that mean I’m looking after him until his bedtime then?”

“Nappies and all.”

“Ugh.” She stuck out her tongue like a frog. “No thanks. I’ll take Sophia.”

“I thought you might say that. But it’s okay.” I gave her a quick grin. “We’ll just give Nappy Jarrod to your dad.”

They giggled at my conniving and nodded in agreement.

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No matter how many times I stared into the mirror there was no way to change the image reflected back at me.

I grimaced.

It was probably just as well that it was my and Braden’s turn to babysit this Valentine’s Day. It was hard to feel sexy when I was six months pregnant.

“Little Ellie.” I patted my stomach, talking to my unborn daughter, something I did a lot. “You’re killing my mojo and all my best moves. Bad timing little fetus, bad timing.” It was possible I was a little inappropriate with the sharing sometimes, but I was counting on the kid not remembering any of our one-sided conversations during her time in my womb.

“What’s bad timing?” Braden sauntered out of our bathroom, a towel wrapped around his hips. He’d just returned from the gym.

I immediately felt a tingling between my legs. My eyes hungrily followed a drop of water as it trickled down his abs.

And that was another drawback of being six months pregnant. I was freaking horny all the freaking time and yet I wasn't one hundred percent comfortable enough to just jump Braden like I'd normally do.

That didn't mean we didn't have sex.

Because we did.

A lot.

My being pregnant did not turn off my husband. In fact it seemed to flip as much of a horny teenager switch in him as it did me. He got all caveman and possessive. In fact he might as well have worn a T-shirt with the words "Me Man. Me Put Seed In My Woman's Belly. My Woman. Mine!" on it.

"Being pregnant on Valentine's Day." I bit my lip so I didn't sigh in pleasure as he unwrapped the towel to give his naked body one last rub down before dressing.

I swear a little bit of drool dribbled down my chin as I fixated on his ass. He had a gorgeous ass. I loved grabbing it while he pounded into me. I shivered, lust fogged.

His naked ass disappeared inside his suit trousers and I pouted.

"Why is that an issue?" Braden turned around and I quickly lifted my eyes to his face. I was a little too late though and he smirked, having deduced I'd been ogling.

"You're my husband." I refused to be embarrassed for drooling over him. "I can objectify you if I want to."

He snorted as he pulled on his shirt. "Why is being pregnant on Valentine's Day an issue?" he repeated.

"Because I can't wear sexy lingerie and heels and we can't have rough, hard sex against a wall. You know... typical Valentine's Day stuff."

He finished buttoning his shirt and walked leisurely over to me, sliding his hands around my rounded stomach and drawing me as close to him as baby bump Ellie would allow. "You can still wear sexy lingerie and we can have slow, hot sex with you on your knees or faster, hotter sex with you riding me."

"After we babysit."

"All that time we could be having sex, and you made us stick to our babysitting promise."

I glowered at him. "Believe me, the queen of pregnancy hormones agrees, but last year Ellie and Adam looked after Beth and Luke so it's only fair we take a turn."

He nodded reluctantly. "You're right." He kissed my nose and released me to finish getting dressed for a night of babysitting fun. "A quiet night in then."

"Yup." I made a face and rubbed my hands over my stomach. "You better be ten million times funnier than your brother and sister, and that's asking a lot because they're pretty darn

funny.” I opened our bedroom door to go in search of said siblings. “Although we won’t tell them that because they get their ego from their daddy.”

“I heard that,” Braden called out to me as I wandered down the stairs to the second floor.

“You were meant to,” I muttered.

“I heard that too!”

I bugged my eyes out at my stomach as if Little Ellie could see me. “Jeez Louise, he has radar ears.”

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Braden stood with his hands on his hips, surveying our large double sitting room. I knew exactly what he was thinking.

Three down, three to go.

Somehow, against all odds, we got Jarrod, Sophia and Bray sleeping in the nursery next to our bedroom on the top floor of the house. We had the main nursery on the second floor that was all ready for Little Ellie arriving, but Braden was determined to tire our remaining three kids out and didn’t want to wake up the younger kids while we did it.

He had a baby monitor tucked in his back pocket so he’d know if they needed us.

“How about a game of hide and seek?”

“Yes!” Will and Luke nodded excitedly.

Beth eyed us skeptically but it was that kind of ‘I really should act like I’m older and above it but I want to play’ skepticism.

“It’s me and Dad against you lot,” I said to her. “You can be their team leader.”

“No fair!” Luke crossed his arms in a huff.

“She’s older,” Braden said. “When Little Ellie comes along you’ll be older than her and therefore her team leader in games of hide and seek. It’s just how it works.”

Luke screwed up his face as he thought about it and clearly decided it made sense because he nodded. “Okay.”

“Now the wee ones are sleeping,” Braden reminded them, “So no squealing or shouting or waking them up. You’re sticking to the ground floor and the basement. The first and second floors are off limits to you three.”

The kids nodded, their little expressions so serious I couldn’t help but grin.

“Mum and I are hiding. You lot are seeking.”

“We’ll find you in under five minutes,” Beth boasted.

“You wanna bet on that?” I said.

She narrowed her eyes on me. “What’s the bet?”

“If I win I get foot rubs for the next four weeks. If you win I clean your room for you for the next four weeks.”

Beth’s eyes lit up. “We’re so winning this!”

Braden grinned at her confidence. “Right. Your mum and I have sixty seconds to find a place to hide.”

Beth played with her digital watch. “Okay... starting... Now.”

I grabbed Braden’s hand and we dived out into the hall. “Which way?” I whispered.

In answer he dragged me to the very back of the house to what used to be the servant’s staircase. When he started to go up them I tugged on his hand. “That’s totally cheating,” I hissed. “First and second floor are off limits.”

“I said they were off limits to *them*.” He winked.

I grinned. “You sneaky bastard.” I pushed him playfully and tried to swallow my giggles as I hurried quietly up the back staircase after him.

His large hand curled around my wrist and he gently tugged me along the hallway of the first floor, into the dark of our main guestroom and inside the bathroom. He locked the door behind us and lowered himself to the floor, positioning me on the floor between his legs, my back to his chest.

“Are we just going to sit here in the dark?” I whispered.

“Yeah,” his voice rumbled with amusement.

“For how long? We’re supposed to be parenting.”

“And we will. I just wanted a minute alone with you.” He caressed my bump and put his chin on my shoulder. “How’s our wee one doing?”

“She’s quiet today. Only a few kicks. And I think those were to tell me to turn off The Killers. I fear our youngest will have shit taste in music.”

Braden chuckled and kissed my neck. “There are worse things in the world.” He slid a hand up my bump to cup my right breast, his thumb circling my nipple.

My body immediately responded, my breasts particularly sensitive right now, and my nipples tightened against my bra. “Like my husband tormenting me,” I gasped, trying to shimmy away from his touch. “Stop.”

In answer he kissed my neck again and his other hand cupped my left breast. He kneaded them and pleasure pain shot through me. I arched my back into his touch, leaning my head against his shoulder.

“It’s not right,” I breathed as he massaged them. “You’re getting me all hot and bothered when we don’t have time to do anything about it.”

His teeth grazed my ear and I became aware of his erection digging into my lower back. “How hot and bothered?” he asked, his voice gruff.

I turned my head to look up at his shadowed face. I was frustrated. Beyond frustrated. “You’d slide right into me with ease’ hot and bothered.”

Braden groaned at the blatantly sexual imagery I created to make him as frustrated as I felt. “This was a bad idea.”

“You started it.” I grumbled, grabbing his hands to remove them from my breasts. “We better check on the kids.”

“I need a minute.”

I reached behind me and pressed my hand against his hard on. “Hmm, so you do.”

“Jocelyn,” he warned, removing my hand.

“Not so funny is it when the shoe is on the other foot?” I pulled away from him and he immediately jerked me back into him, nuzzling my neck.

“I’ll make it up to you tonight,” he promised.

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“You’re seriously not going to kiss me goodnight?” I frowned at Beth as I sat on her bed.

It was a few hours later, Ellie and Adam and Marco and Hannah had picked up their kids, and Braden and I had put Luke to bed. Beth finally followed an hour later.

It was nine o’ clock at night and as much as I adored the heck out of her, I was ready for my kid to go to sleep.

I did, however, want a kiss first.

But apparently Beth didn’t take too kindly to Braden’s little trick.

“Will you give me a kiss if I tell you that you don’t need to give me foot rubs after all?”

Finally she turned her head on the pillow to look at me. “It would only be fair since you cheated.”

“Technically your dad cheated.”

“Hey,” he said coming into the room. “I didn’t cheat.”

Beth pouted. “It was almost like cheating.”

I tickled her belly. “You’re just mad because you didn’t come up with it first.”

She giggled despite herself and I knew we were forgiven.

I leaned down for a kiss and a hug, holding her for a minute longer than usual as she wrapped her little arms around my neck. “Night, baby,” I whispered.

“Night, Momma,” she said.

I got up and let Braden kiss her goodnight. The two of us stood in her doorway for a second, watching her pull her duvet right up to her ear as she turned onto her side, getting comfy. I switched off her light and we closed the door behind us.

I looked up at Braden and shivered at the heat in his eyes.

“I’ll lock up,” he said, his voice low. “You go upstairs and wait for me.”

My skin flushed with excitement. I grinned in anticipation. “We’re having an early night?”

“A long night,” he corrected, leaning down to kiss me softly. “You’re going to be fucking exhausted by the time I’m done with you.”

“Yay.” I grinned back and he chuckled.

While Braden went downstairs to lock up the house, I went upstairs to get changed into a nightgown that my husband bought me after I told him I was pregnant. It was a silk nightgown in ice blue and it covered my bump but was really low cut and snug around my boobs. My boobs were usually a very decent handful and were now more so and very tender.

I shouldn’t complain too much about my pregnancy figure. I was lucky enough just to have my boobs and belly swell. Every other part of me stayed the same. In fact, Ellie Senior told me rather enviously that from the back you couldn’t even tell I was pregnant.

Ellie *would* be envious of that since she swelled up everywhere—face, fingers, feet and all.

Ellie Jr wasn’t too big of a bump, I thought, smoothing the silk over my stomach. Luke had definitely been bigger.

“Sexy lingerie, check,” Braden said, smiling at me as he stepped into our bedroom and closed the door.

One of the best things about our Georgian townhouse? Being a whole floor away from our kids so we could have adult husband and wife time without them overhearing us.

I pointed to my bare feet. “No heels, though, sorry.”

He whipped off his sweater and threw it across the room as he walked toward me. “We didn’t even need the nightgown, believe me.”

My eyes locked with his as he tugged me toward him. “You have good taste in lingerie though,” I murmured, my breathing quickening.

He slid his hands down my back and I felt my nipples pebble. “I’ve been looking forward to this all day.”

“Yeah?” I ran my hands up his arms. “Then can we move it along? Because I would very much like an orgasm.”

Braden’s eyes narrowed at my unromantic demand and he started walking, moving me backward toward the bed. “I was going to make love to you but if you just want to get straight to the point that’s your call.”

“Really?” I said, my heart pounding with excitement. “I promise you can make love to me after.”

My husband closed his eyes, a smile kicking up the corner of his mouth as he shook his head. “Almost twelve years of marriage and she’s still unlike any woman I’ve ever known.”

“*She’s* still in the room.” I got up on the bed and when he opened his eyes I grinned at him. “I’m ready.”

He smirked. “You look like a kid at Christmas.”

My gaze dropped to his straining zipper. “And I know which present I want to open first.”

Braden burst out laughing and reached out to wrap his hand around my ankle. Gently he pulled me down the bed toward him. I leaned back on my hands and tilted my head back, as his mouth descended toward mine.

My lips tingled at the brush of his mouth against mine.

One brush.

Two.

Teasing

A whisper.

“Braden,” I pleaded softly.

“Do you love me, Jocelyn?” he murmured in my ear, and goosebumps awakened at the back of my ear and all the way down my neck and spine.

A long time ago that question would have sent me scurrying from the room. I remembered that fear, those feelings, but they felt somehow separate from me... like I remembered them as though they were felt by a very good friend of mine—as though it all happened to a very good friend of mine—rather than to me.

I turned my cheek, caressing my face against his, feeling the slight prickle of stubble on his cheeks. “No one could love you more, baby.”

At that he groaned and gripped the nape of my neck in his hand, holding me to him as he kissed me hungrily, desperately. I clung to his waist, straining for more, always more.

I pulled back and reached up to cup his face in my hands.

Staring into his eyes, eyes that were now as familiar as my own, I felt a huge rush of emotion overwhelm me. I knew it was my hormones. I swear I was at my mushiest when I was pregnant. I think that was another reason Braden liked me knocked up.

“Do you still feel the way you felt about me when we first got together?”

He stared at me, his eyes searching mine. “No,” he said quietly, as though it was obvious, and my breath caught. “I feel more.” He took my hand in his, sliding his fingers through mine. “You’re a part of me now in a way you weren’t when we first fell in love. It was just a connection then. A hot, exciting, sexy as fuck connection.” He grinned at me, the memories dancing in his eyes. “Now it’s a full blown fusion. A hot, deep, sexy as fuck fusion. If something had happened back then... if it hadn’t worked out... it would have floored me but I would have eventually gotten back up and started living again. Life would have been emptier but I would have gotten on with it.

“Now.” He pressed his forehead to mine and closed his eyes. “Losing you would be like losing myself.” His eyes opened, burning bright, so close to mine. “It doesn’t bear thinking about.”

Tears welled up in my eyes (pregnancy hormones and sweet husband did not a dry-eyed Jocelyn make) and I kissed him softly. “I want you inside me now, however way you want to give it to me,” I said, my husky voice even huskier with emotion. “Making love or slam bam thank you ma’am.”

His laughter tickled my lips and he kissed me harder as he slowly slid my nightdress up my body. He broke away from me so he could lift it over my head and throw it aside as he had done with his sweater. His eyes darkened and his chest was rising and falling in quick breaths. “On your knees, babe,” he said softly as he caressed my cheek with the pad of thumb.

I shivered in anticipation and turned around, steadying myself on my hands and knees. I felt incredibly exposed, but not in a vulnerable way. Never with my husband.

The sound of his zipper filled the room and I felt my arms shake as need rolled through my body. The rustling of clothing told me he was divesting himself of his jeans and underwear.

I glanced over my shoulder, my thighs quivering at the sight of my gorgeous husband and his beautiful cock. My fingers curled into the duvet underneath me and heat rushed through me as he got up onto the bed on his knees too and grasped my hips in his hands.

One of his hands disappeared between my spread legs and I sank into him with a moan as he pushed two fingers inside of me.

Braden’s groan reverberated around the room. “Wet doesn’t even cover it.”

“I told you,” I panted, my head falling forward as he toyed with me. “I’m horny as hell.”

He chuckled and his fingers disappeared. “My wife. Ever the romantic.”

The heat of his cock nudged between my legs and I whimpered. “Yes.”

Without further ado Braden pushed inside of me and the wonderful feeling of being filled took my overly aroused body straight to the clifftop.

“I’m close,” I panted in disbelief.

Braden’s grip tightened on my hips as he rocked into me. “Just let it happen. I’ll take you there as many times as you want.”

“Oh God.” I pulled at the fabric I’d curled into my hands as I pushed back into Braden’s gentle thrusts. “God, Braden... Braden... Oh God... yes... yes!” My back bowed as I came, my inner muscles rippling and tugging around Braden’s cock.

“Fuck,” he grunted as it continued. “Fuck!” When he said the word ‘fuck’ he thrust a little deeper, faster into me.

I steadied my body against its desire to go languid and loose in the aftermath of my orgasm and as Braden pumped into me I felt the tension start to build again.

His fingers bit into my hips. “One more time.” He slid his hands up my spine and around my chest, cupping my breasts in his hands. Gently, he applied pressure, and I eased up off my hands until my back was pressed to his chest.

I gasped at how deep he slid inside me, and reached out behind me for him, resting my hands on his hips for balance.

He pinched my nipples and I cried out, my head falling back on his shoulder. And then he started to move again and I caught his rhythm, pushing up off his cock and sliding back down it again.

My pace quickened but it was jerky with need and Braden bit out an aroused, impatient curse. He eased me back onto my hands again, clearly needing to control our pace.

I cried out as he thrust into me. “Yes!”

He grunted, satisfied, in response to my euphoria. Sex lately was nowhere near as desperate and hard as we’d had it in the past—Braden was always gentler with me while I was pregnant—but it was one hundred percent absolutely amazing.

Pushing me toward the cliff top again, my body tensed when I reached the precipice. Braden slid inside me once more and just like that I fell over, another deep, long climax washing over me.

I felt Braden pump into me a few more times and then his grip tightened on my hips, his own stilled against mine and he let out a guttural cry of my name.

After a few seconds he pulled out of me, allowing me to turn around and flop onto my back.

Braden lay down beside me, sliding an arm over our bump and cuddling into me.

We lay there for a moment just listening to each other try to catch our breaths.

Finally I turned my head and looked into his eyes.

“I love you,” he said, the words so easy, so natural.

“I love you too.”

He pressed a kiss to my shoulder. “Happy Valentine’s Day, Jocelyn.”

I frowned. “Is it over?”

Braden grinned. “No. We’re just taking a break.”

Relief moved through me. “Good. I’m not done being all lustful and needy.”

“That’s good to know, but I’m not a god, babe. I need time to recharge these days.”

I shook with laughter. “I can’t believe you just admitted you’re not a god.”

“Don’t tell anyone.” He buried closer to me, closing his eyes for a moment.

He’d had a long day.

“We can just go to sleep if you want?” I would be disappointed but I’d live with it.

His eyes popped open. “I said I’m not a god, not that I’m ancient. I’m spending the rest of the night having sex with you, alright.”

I bit my lip, trying to stifle my laughter and failing. “No need to get uppity.” I slid my hand down his stomach and over his semi-erection. “Or do.”

His lips twitched at my innuendo. “Keep doing that and this show will be back on the road very soon.”

“That’s the plan.” I wrapped my hand around him and began stroking him.

The color started to rise in his cheeks. “Babe,” he groaned.

I brushed my lips over his. “Happy Valentine’s Day number twelve, Braden.”

He kissed me back and whispered, “Here’s to the next sixty.”

## **Ellie and Adam**

“I almost feel bad for Joss and Braden,” I said as the hostess seated Adam and me at a lovely romantic corner table at the back of the restaurant. Our favorite restaurant in Old Town had gone the classy way for Valentine’s Day. There were no garish pink and red hearts anywhere. Just candlelight and red roses.

“I don’t,” Adam said. “We did the babysitting last year.”

“Exactly. We know what they’re going to have to put up with.” I gave him a mischievous smile. “Six kids. And Joss is pregnant.”

“You know Braden will probably do all the heavy lifting.” Adam stopped talking as the waiter approached and introduced himself. Once we had our menus in hand and our drinks ordered, the waiter walked away and Adam started talking as though we’d never been interrupted. “He’s acting extra protective of her since this is their last kid. You’d think she’s the only woman ever to be pregnant.”

I wrinkled my nose at his dry tone. “I think it’s romantic.”

“Els, you think everything and everyone is romantic.”

“Not true.” I looked at my menu. “Sometimes my husband is completely unromantic.”

“Are you ready to order?” the waiter appeared before Adam could respond with what I knew would be some sarcastic comment or other.

“Yes, please.” I gave him my order and Adam took a couple of minutes but eventually decided on what he wanted.

I sipped at my water, looking around the restaurant at all the other couples. They varied from being completely into one another, to looking bored. My guess was that the bored couples were the ones who had been together the longest.

As a romantic, I loved Valentine’s Day. I thought it was wonderful that we had a day dedicated to the people we loved. Adam, however, hated Valentine’s Day. In his words it was ‘a bunch of commercial bullshit’ and ‘completely unromantic to force people to show that they care’ when it was ‘far more romantic to be spontaneous’.

Despite my love of Valentine’s Day I tried to understand where he was coming from and almost kind of did. Although my husband had a practical nature, he was easy with his ‘I love yous’ and spontaneous little gifts. If you were married to someone like Adam you didn’t need Valentine’s Day. But not everyone had an Adam. Some people needed the reminder to show their partner that they loved them.

“Sweetheart.”

I turned to look at Adam. “Yeah?”

“Where did you go?” His brow was knitted together in concern.

I leaned across the table as I lowered my voice. “Look how bored half of these couples seem. Is that what marriage does to you?”

Adam looked around the room and then back at me. “We’ve been together for over a decade and we’re not bored. Right?”

I shook my head. “Of course not. Still... I wouldn’t want us to go that way.”

“We won’t,” he said, so certain.

I shrugged. “I just think perhaps—” I cut off as the waiter arrived with our starter.

“You just think?” Adam said once the waiter was gone.

“Perhaps we shouldn’t get lazy. You know... we should try to keep things spiced up in the bedroom.”

“For a couple who have two kids and full time jobs I think we’re doing pretty fucking good in the bedroom,” he said, seeming annoyed I’d say otherwise. “Or am I interpreting your orgasms incorrectly?”

I snorted. “No. You are not.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

I swallowed my food and took a sip of wine, giving myself a little courage to say what I wanted to say next. Finally I looked him in the eye. “We haven’t had sex in a public place. Perhaps we should do that.”

Adam gave me a slow, incredulous grin. “Sweetheart, are you joking?”

I frowned at his reaction. “No.”

“Come on, Els. It took you six months to stop blushing every time I called it ‘fucking’.”

A pang of hurt radiated in my chest and I looked down at my plate. I know he didn’t mean to be hurtful but still...

I sometimes thought everyone, including him, thought I was a sweet goody-two-shoes who didn’t know how to be wild and impulsive. A few years back I had a night in with the girls and we all got a little drunk and started oversharing. Jo had told us about a time when her and Cam were first dating and he had seduced her in a changing room in a shop, he was so desperate to have her. And then there was Nate and Liv who had sex on the hood of a car out by a beach one night.

That sounded so thrilling and passionate.

I’d been envious of them both.

Adam and I had a wonderful sex life. We did. But a little adventure would be amazing. Especially now we were parents and got so little time to ourselves, so little time to feel as young as we once did.

But apparently Adam didn’t think I was capable of being sexy, danger girl.

“Christ, Ellie,” he said, his voice soft. “Are you mad at me?”

I looked up into his concerned eyes. “You had sex with that waitress in public on my eighteenth birthday. I found you both going at it behind the hotel.”

Adam frowned at the mention of her. “She was a quick fuck. Not my wife, whom I love and respect.”

Dear God, could he make me sound any more boring?

I grimaced and Adam sat back, wary. “I said the wrong thing didn’t I?”

“Let’s just say I feel as sexy as a ninety year old grandmother with no teeth right now.”

He winced. “I didn’t mean—”

Lifting my hand I cut him off. “Let’s just eat and forget about it.”

The rest of our dinner was tense and silent.

In fact I was pretty desperate to get out of the restaurant and to the Valentine’s party we’d been invited to by one of my colleagues at the university. There I could mingle with other people and avoid my husband until I wasn’t quite so hurt and annoyed by him.

“We better grab a taxi,” I said as we stepped outside of the restaurant. “I’ll—Oh!” I yelped out in surprise as I found myself jerked backward down the alley between the restaurant and the bar next to it. “What are you doing?” I whispered frantically as Adam dragged me further into the dark.

Suddenly he pushed me up against the brickwork of the restaurant and started kissing me.

I got over my surprise quickly, kissing him back as he pressed his full length against mine. I sighed into his mouth in pleasure, remembering that I did indeed have a wonderful husband who loved to make me happy.

His lips trailed down my neck and I arched into his kisses, loving the heat of his mouth, the touch of his hands on my breasts, the smell of...

I wrinkled my nose, almost gagging.

“Fuck.” Adam broke away and looked at me. “That smell.”

I turned my head. “We’re right next to the bin.”

He followed my gaze to the huge rubbish bin we were standing next to. “That smell is horrific.”

“Not sexy,” I said softly, disappointment moving through me.

Adam looked back at me. At the sight of my disappointment he lifted his hand to brush my cheek with the back of his knuckles. “I love what we have. I don’t need sex down an alley. I just need you.”

I warmed at his words, trying to ignore the still swirling disappointment in my gut. “Yeah. Let’s just go the party.”

He took my hand and led me away, but I couldn’t help glancing back into the dark a little forlornly.

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“Are we okay?” Adam said, giving my waist a squeeze.

We’d been at the party for five minutes, chatting to acquaintances and being introduced to people we didn’t know. I gave him a little smile. “We’re fine.”

His brows drew together but before he could say anything my colleague, and the host of said party Anthea, appeared.

“Ellie, I want you to come meet my friend Lacey. She’s this fabulous American who loves art history so much her knowledge will blow you away. Come, come.” She took my hand and began leading me away. I glanced over my shoulder at Adam. “Two minutes,” I mouthed and he nodded patiently.

But it wasn’t two minutes.

I was introduced to Lacey and her date for the night, Jack. Lacey could talk! I barely got a word in edgeways, and it was with some relief when Anthea arrived to drag Lacey off to meet someone else.

“Drink,” Jack said, offering me a glass of wine.

I smiled and took it. “Thank you.”

“She’s uh... she’s a bit much.” He nodded in the direction Lacey had taken off in.

I eyed him carefully. “First date?”

He grimaced. “And I’m afraid the last.”

“Oh dear.” I sighed.

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “If you don’t try though right?”

I smiled at his optimism. “Exactly.”

“So, you’re actually a college lecturer for art history? Did Lacey get any of what she was saying right?”

Laughing, I nodded. “Lacey may talk a lot, but at least she’s talking with the knowledge to back it up.”

“Well that’s something,” he said dryly.

“What is it you do?”

“I’m an optician.”

“Really?” I grinned. “I’ve never met an optician before. I mean of course I’ve met an optician because I go to one every two years but not outside of the actual opticians...” I wrinkled my nose at my rambling but it only made Jack laugh.

“I got what you meant. I can assure you, it’s not the most interesting job, although I do enjoy watching people’s reactions when I lean in close to inspect their eyes. You’ve got the ones who tense up, completely uncomfortable because I’ve stepped over the personal space

line. Then you've got the heavy mouth breathers... I don't even want to go there. And my personal favorite... the people who are struggling not to get the giggles over it."

I laughed. "I'm the last."

Jack chuckled. "I thought you might be."

I fell easily into conversation with him, laughing and chatting about everyday nonsense as we finished off a glass of wine and started another.

We'd found a corner where we could hear each other over the noise of the party and I thought nothing of our amiable chitchat until I lifted my left hand to smooth my hair back from my face.

Jack's eyes caught on my hand and he grew still. To my surprise, disappointment entered his expression. "You're married?"

I tensed, realizing he'd only just now spotted my wedding rings.

Oh crap.

Did he... ?

"Yes, I'm married."

He dragged his gaze over me and I suddenly felt very uncomfortable standing there in my cocktail dress and heels. "Of course you're married," he said hollowly. "Why wouldn't you be?"

"I thought you saw them." I looked down at my wedding rings. "Did you think I was flirting?"

"Yes, I definitely did." He stared at me intensely. "Are you sure you weren't?"

"Of course I wasn't," I said indignantly. And I bloody well wasn't!

He nodded. "No, I suppose you weren't."

We had just been talking. Friendly chatter. Nothing more!

He sighed and shook his head. "Sorry."

"It's alright." I wanted to escape but I didn't know how to do it without being rude.

Jack shot me a look, the spark of hope in it making me freeze. "Are you sure you're happily married?"

"Yes, she fucking is." Adam snarled at him, appearing at my side.

I looked up at him wide-eyed, as he wrapped his arm around my wrist and pulled me away.

"It's not what you think," I said to his back as he hauled me through the crowds. "Adam!"

But he wasn't listening.

I could feel the anger vibrating off him as he dragged me out of the sitting room and down the crowded hall. He pounded on a door and when he got no response he threw it open and pulled me inside behind him.

We were in the bathroom.

Adam locked it behind us.

“I wasn’t flirting with him,” I said immediately.

His response was to jerk me toward him and then shove me against the door.

I was shocked by his roughness. “Adam,” I whispered.

He glowered at me as he pressed his body into mine and I gasped at the feel of his erection. “How would you have felt?” he said hoarsely as he pinned my hands up beside my head and ground his dick against me. “If it had been you who found me with some woman, flirting with me, looking at me like she wanted to fuck me right there and then, and then asking me if I was happily married?”

I swallowed hard. “Is that how it looked?”

“Jesus, Ellie, are you fucking oblivious?”

“Apparently,” I winced.

He stared at me, his anger not dissipating any and then he groaned in frustration, the sound filling my mouth as he kissed me. His kiss was hard, punishing and more than a little thrilling.

His kiss felt out of control.

Suddenly my hands were free as his slid roughly down my body. I wrapped my arms around him, drawing him ever closer.

I shivered at the feel of his fingers on my inner thigh, and I sighed into his mouth as those fingers moved upward and slipped beneath my underwear. My own fingers curled into the hair at the nape of his neck as he dragged his thumb over my clit.

I pushed my hips into his touch as he slid two fingers inside of me.

I gasped at the sensation, breaking the kiss as my head fell back against the door.

“You’re already wet,” he said, voice thick with arousal and surprise.

I opened my eyes to look at him and his own gaze darkened with heat at what he saw in mine. Yes, I was already wet, because I was utterly turned on by the fact that my husband was so desperate for me.

And that desperation only increased at my expression.

“Fuck,” he panted, his chest heaving as his breathing quickened. His hands went to his jeans and my belly rippled low with need as he unzipped. He pushed his jeans down low enough to release his dick and my thighs began to quiver.

Eyes locked to mine, Adam pushed the hem of my dress up and then tore my underwear down.

My grip on him tightened as the pulse between my legs throbbed.

“Adam.” His name was a plea.

He hooked my left thigh around his hip and thrust up.

My head slammed back against the door and I cried out at the pleasure of being filled completely by him.

“Ellie,” he grunted, his eyes low-lidded with his desire. “My Ellie.”

My husband continued to pump into me, his thrusts hard and fast as he pounded me against the bathroom door. I wrapped both legs around his waist and he moved deeper inside of me.

I called out his name along with God’s.

“Everyone can hear us,” he whispered against my lips. “Everyone can hear how much I want you.”

My inner muscles clenched around him at the thought and his eyes widened slightly at the evidence of how aroused I was by this.

“Fuck, Ellie.” He thrust harder.

“Oh God!” I dug my fingers into his shoulders, the tension inside of me reaching breaking point. “Adam!” I came around him hard and he cried out my name as my climax squeezed around his driving cock, wrenching his own orgasm from him.

He slumped against me, his hands still clutching my thighs, holding me up. He panted against my neck, his lips trailing along the skin under my ear. Finally, as our breathing grew more controlled he pulled back to look me in the eyes.

“You can still surprise me,” he said, tenderness and love mixed with the satisfaction in his gaze.

I smiled slowly. “You can still surprise me, too. I thought you were over the whole possessive thing.”

The muscle in his jaw clenched. “I trust you and I’m secure in our relationship. It doesn’t mean I can sit back and watch some good-looking guy five years my junior hitting on my wife.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Was he good-looking?”

Adam stared at me a moment and then a slow smile curled his beautiful lips. “You didn’t notice he was good-looking?”

I shook my head, sliding my hands into his hair. “I’m not attracted to anyone but you.”

“Jesus, what did I do to deserve you, Els?” he sagged against me, sliding his arms around my back to hug me to him.

“You’re pretty good with the whole orgasm thing,” I teased.

He laughed, the movement causing a pleasurable friction inside of me and I gasped at the tingle of arousal it reignited.

Adam’s clasp on me tightened. “I need to get you home.”

“We have to pick up the boys,” I reminded him.

Slowly he lowered me to my feet and slipped out of me. We looked into each other’s eyes as we each fixed our clothing. When our clothing was back in place he cupped my cheek.

“We’ll get the boys, put them to bed, and then you and I are finishing what we started.”

I grinned. "I like the sound of that."

He took my hand, unlocked the bathroom door and led me out. He immediately halted and I frowned, about to ask him what was wrong. But then I looked over his shoulder.

What was wrong was that Lacey was standing in the hallway, along with Anthea and Jack, as well as a few other guests.

Anthea smirked at me and shook her head. "Are you done in there?"

I blushed, reaching up with my free hand to smooth my hair, which was now much wilder than it had been before Adam dragged me into the bathroom.

My husband looked down at me and grinned at my blush. "Public enough for you."

I blushed harder which made him laugh harder.

"We were just leaving," I said apologetically to Anthea, not even able to meet anyone else's eyes.

My friend raised an eyebrow. "Oh I'll bet."

Adam said his goodbyes and started to lead me away.

"I'm sorry," I whispered to her as we were passing.

"Don't be." She grinned. "You lucky cow."

I laughed and let Adam guide me out of the flat.

He was chuckling as we walked down the stairs.

"What?"

He looked back at me still grinning. "Happy Valentine's Day, sweetheart."

I squeezed his hand, grateful for this man who would do anything to make me happy. "It's one for the ages."

## Johanna and Cameron

I had butterflies in my belly.

Life continued to surprise me. Eleven years Cam and I had been together. We had a three-almost-four year old daughter and we were best friends. And yet, somehow, these past few months I'd lost touch with my best friend. And it was hard to explain how scary that was.

Cam had started a new job with a large international marketing company. On top of that he did freelance work with artists and independent businesses. It felt like all he did was work lately, and since I worked full time and we had Belle, there really had been no 'us' time.

We hadn't had sex in six weeks.

That may not have been much to other couples but that was unheard of for us, and I was more than a little worried. I was more than a little hurt.

My decision to surprise him with a special Valentine's evening out was a last minute thing suggested by my friend Joss. I was on a housing development site, painting another room a boring bright white, when I decided to call Joss on my break. The distance between my husband and me was eating at me. I felt incredibly lonely. I finally let myself acknowledge that and called Joss for help, hoping I wasn't interrupting her writing.

"Nah," she'd said. "I decided not to start a word count today because it's only going to be interrupted in a couple of hours when all the kids get here."

"Oh yeah, it's your turn to babysit this year."

"Yes it is." She'd sighed heavily. "I could really do with some alone time with Braden tonight."

"I know what you mean." I'd gone on to tell her everything that had *not* been happening between Cam and me.

"Why have you been keeping this to yourself? Are you okay?"

Her concern made tears prick my eyes and I was glad I'd found an empty room in the house we were working on. I did not want to be overheard by my colleague Deacon. "It's just six weeks."

"That's a lot for you two. And it's not just the sex. When was the last time you had an actual conversation?"

"I can't remember. It's just been a lot of hellos and goodbyes. I knew things would be hard while he tries to make a name for himself at the company but I don't like this, Joss. I don't like feeling like I don't know what's going on with my own husband. And the fact that he doesn't even seem to be bothered is more than a little terrifying."

“He’s probably just preoccupied. But you have to talk to him, Jo. Otherwise this will just build up into a huge ball of fiery resentment and that will not end well. I promise.” She sighed. “You know what you should do? Surprise him. Look, Braden and I had reservations for *La Cour* tonight because he forgot about the whole babysitting thing. I’ll see if we can transfer the reservation to your name. Ask Mick or Cam’s parents to look after Belle tonight and then go and surprise Cam at work, take him out for the night and then take him home and break this dry spell.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I’ll text you to let you know if we can get the table for you.”

“Great. Thanks, Joss.”

And she did text me and we did get the table. After arranging to have my uncle Mick and his wife Dee take Belle I finished up early at work, got home, showered, put on a slinky sequined T-shirt dress and heels and grabbed a cab that took me across New Town to Cam’s office.

Standing outside it was when I was hit with the butterflies. *Butterflies*. All because I was going on a date with my husband.

Yeah. He and I really needed to sort this out between us. As much as I was still filled with anticipation anytime he and I went on dates (not that I could remember the last time that happened), butterflies were a thing of the past. And I was happy they were. Their absence spoke of my security with Cam, something that I never thought I’d have with any man since I was unbelievably riddled with insecurities when Cam first met me.

The return of the butterflies was a bad sign.

An omen, one might say.

I went to buzz into the building but the door opened and two guys in suits came out, smiled at me and held the door open for me. I smiled back, feeling a flush of pleasure as one of them held my gaze a little too long.

I loved my husband and I didn’t want anyone else but I had to admit, as someone who used to rely solely on my looks because I didn’t think I had anything else going for me, it was flattering when men still looked at me. Especially at the moment when I felt almost invisible at home. I was almost thirty three, I’d had a baby, and while my husband just got better looking with age, I’d started to notice wrinkles around my eyes, that my breasts weren’t as perky as they had been pre-Belle, and I’d even plucked out a few gray hairs in amongst my long strawberry blonde locks.

I knew Cam loved me, but I also still wanted him to want me. And I definitely wanted him to notice me.

Bolstered by the handsome guy in the suit and his appreciation, I smoothed my hands down my dress that twinkled beneath my coat, ready for Cam to see it and get that look in his eyes that I loved.

Taking the lift to his floor, I tried to stem the butterflies, kind of aggravated by them now.

“Excuse me.” I stopped a woman who was leaving the now almost empty office. “I’m looking for Cameron MacCabe.”

She smiled at me. “Through the door on the left. You can’t miss his desk.”

I nodded my thanks and followed her instructions.

I almost wished I hadn’t, my aggravation increasing a million fold when I stepped into the open plan office to find my husband sprawled casually back in his chair, gazing up at the brunette sitting on his desk.

My eyes travelled over the young woman, my blood heating as I took in every detail of her. She was younger than me, in her early twenties, and she was sitting on my husband’s desk with her slim legs crossed, her grey skirt riding up her thighs. Her pretty face was framed by poker straight shiny light brown hair, and she was focused completely on Cameron.

I knew that look.

Back in the day, before Cam arrived and saved me from an empty life, I used to wear that look when I’d targeted a man I was determined to make mine.

It was a predator’s flirty, sexy, seductive look.

My stomach dropped.

I took two slow steps toward them, my feet feeling heavy as I watched Cam’s reaction to her. He kept his distance physically, and his smile was only just friendlier than polite. He seemed interested in what she had to say... but most importantly he was here with her instead of at home with me.

The last three months of little affection, of distance, of late nights... the last six weeks of no sex at all... it all pooled together into my mind as I walked toward them and the awful suspicions planted themselves there as much as I hated myself for thinking it of him.

He would never... he would never betray me.

But was he thinking about it?

Did he want to?

I swallowed past the sudden lump in my throat as I neared and Cameron caught sight of me out of the corner of his eyes. He jerked his head toward me, surprise slackening his features.

“Jo.” He stood up with ease and the brunette turned to look at me, her eyes narrowing as they swept over me. “Sweetheart, what are you doing here?”

I stared at him, still struggling to speak past the emotion choking me, and then I stared at her.

“Jo, this is Ally, one of the creatives.” Cam gestured to her and she slid gracefully off his desk. She didn’t hold her hand out to me but gave me a nod, her eyes dimming with disappointment as she took me in. “Ally, this is my wife Johanna.”

Since she didn’t offer any of the normal pleasantries such as ‘nice to meet you’ I didn’t either.

I turned back to Cam. “I wanted to surprise you for Valentine’s Day. I got us reservations for dinner.”

“Shit.” He winced, eyes filled with remorse. “Sweetheart, Valentine’s Day.”

Yes, I was very aware that he’d forgotten. “Valentine’s Day,” I murmured.

“Let me just shut everything down.”

“Well, I’ll see you tomorrow, Cam,” Ally said, smiling at him. She gave me a little nod as she strode by, swinging her hips in exaggeration.

My husband didn’t watch her leave and that was probably a good thing. I might have killed him if he did.

Once he’d grabbed his coat we walked out of the office together. He placed his hand on my lower back to lead me out and I tensed.

He sighed once we were in the lift alone. “I can’t even believe you’re thinking what you’re thinking right now.”

I stared straight ahead, trying to keep a hold on my emotions. “I’m thinking I’ve barely spoken two words to my husband in months because he’s always working late. Tonight would have been another night you were late home and I’m suddenly realizing it’s not because of work. It’s because you’re having flirty conversations with a girl ten years younger than your wife.”

“That’s not even... that’s ridiculous,” he huffed, sounding exhausted.

“Tonight it was the truth.” I turned to look at him as the doors to lift opened. “Tonight would have been more time away from me and Belle, and for what? To talk with Ally?”

He stared at me, a spark of guilt there. “I never thought of it that way. I’m sorry. But we were talking about work. I promise. It’s nothing more than that, Jo.”

Chest aching as I realized how badly the growing distance between us had impacted on me I suddenly wanted to bury my head in the sand. “Let’s just go eat.” I strode out of the lift and Cam followed me outside. We were quiet as we waited for a cab to come along with its light on. Once we found one we got inside and I gave the driver our destination.

“*La Cour*?” Cam said, surprised. *La Cour* was a restaurant that Braden once owned years ago. He’d sold it to a chef friend of his and it had gone from popular to Michelin star popular. It was incredibly difficult to get a reservation.

“Joss and Braden got us it.”

“This was really nice of you, sweetheart.” I felt his warm hand slide into mine and I let him hold my hand, but I didn’t hold his.

He squeezed me, attempting to thaw me. “Who did you get to look after Belle?”

“Uncle Mick.”

“I’m looking forward to being alone with you.”

I didn’t say a word and he laced his fingers through mine, his grip tightening. “It’ll be nice,” I managed to wheeze out.

The silent tense atmosphere between us was almost hard to breathe in and it lasted all the way to the restaurant, until we were seated inside *La Cour* and were eating our starters.

Cam’s phone beeped on the table beside his plate as we ate. I watched him beneath my lashes as he picked it up and frowned at whatever he read.

“What is it?”

He flicked me a wary look. “Nothing.”

My pulse started to race faster than the already rapid speed it was going at. “If it’s nothing you’ll let me see it.” I held out my hand to him.

Cam glowered at me as he passed it over. “I’ve got nothing to hide from you, sweetheart. Stop treating me like a criminal.”

I took the phone off him and stared at his screen.

It was a text from Ally: Your wife seemed mad at us. Are you okay?

My temper started to rise and I flicked through his past conversations with her. I was only somewhat mollified by the fact that they were all work related and not flirtatious.

I handed him his phone back. “You don’t think that text is inappropriate? Since when are you and she an ‘us’?”

He put his phone away. “I do think it’s inappropriate, that’s why I’m not replying.”

“She’s flirting with you.”

“I won’t encourage it.”

“I guess that’s not the point anymore.” I shook my head in disgust, angry that he was oblivious to how shipwrecked our relationship was at the moment.

Something like alarm entered his expression at my tone. “Jo,” he leaned over the table, trying to reach for my hand but I pulled back, “You’re getting worked up over nothing.”

Nothing? Did he honestly not see what was going on here?

I threw my napkin on the table and stood up, my chair scraping loudly along the hardwood floors. “I’m not in the mood for Valentine’s Day after all. I’ll see you back home.”

“Jo.” He stood up, reaching for my arm and missing as I fled the restaurant.

I felt sick.

Absolutely sick.

I got in a taxi, trembling the whole way to London Road. Once inside the flat I looked around at the familiar space, the place we'd lived in together for over a decade.

My gaze locked on Belle's doll. It was draped across the armchair. Her cartoon DVDs were scattered across the floor in front of the television.

I wanted my daughter in my arms so much it hurt.

I wanted to breathe her in and take comfort from her.

Because my home didn't feel familiar right now. It felt cold and lonely and missing its familiar beauty.

The front door slammed and I heard Cam's heavy, fast strides as he walked down the hallway. He appeared in the doorway to the sitting room, his tall frame taking up an intimidating amount of space. His expression was as black as midnight.

"What the fuck was that?" he snapped.

"Do you not want to be with me anymore?" I said, warm, salty tears slipping quietly down my cheeks at the utterance of my fear.

My husband looked at me incredulously as he took a step toward me. I waved a hand at him, warding him off and he frowned, halting. "Where is this coming from?"

"Did you know Dee had a breast cancer scare a month ago?"

He blinked rapidly at the dramatic turn in conversation. "No."

"No." I shook my head, curling my lip in disdain. "Of course you wouldn't because every time I try to have a conversation with you, you blow me off to take a phone call from either the office or a client. Any tiny miniscule of free time you have you spend with Belle and that's fine because she's more important... but it's like you don't even care that we haven't had a real conversation in months or that you haven't touched me in six weeks. Nothing but a perfunctory kiss on the lips before you leave for work in the morning. Almost like a habit rather than a desire."

"You think I haven't noticed?" he said, exasperated. "Of course I've noticed we haven't seen much of each other, but we knew this transition would be hard at first."

"There's difficult and then there's this!" I cried. "Maybe other women accept this but I won't put up with it. I didn't marry you so the other side of my bed would be warm at night. I married you because you're supposed to be my best friend."

"I am your best friend. We're having a rough time, that's all."

"And Ally?"

"Is nothing." He glared at me. "And the fact that you would think otherwise has me really fucking worried."

I nodded slowly. "You should be, Cam. You should be worried."

He paled. "What are you saying?"

I narrowed my eyes on him. “I’m saying I’ve been lonely for months and you haven’t reached for me, you haven’t noticed.” The tears were running too fast down my cheeks for me to keep up with wiping them so I just left them. “I’ve tried to pretend that it’s okay. It’s just a rough patch. But it’s not okay. I’m not the girl who thought she wasn’t worthy of real love anymore. I’m not her. *She* would have let you take her for granted. I won’t.” I shook my head. “The way I feel right now... it’s not okay. I’m not a bloody doll you can put aside while you’re too busy to play with me. I’m your wife and marriage doesn’t just magically work out. You have to work *at it*. And if you don’t want to do that anymore because you’re too busy with other pursuits then fine... but I’m not sticking around for it. Belle and I will find somewhere else to live. Do you understand me?”

The words had barely left my mouth and Cam was across the room, gripping my arms tight, pulling me into his body. I let out a little gasp of surprise as I tilted my head back to look up into his strained face.

“Never,” his lips trembled with emotion, “Never say that to me again. I can’t live without you.” he rested his forehead against mine, and I felt him trembling. “I’m sorry,” he whispered hoarsely. “I’m so fucking sorry I made you feel that way.”

We stood together for a moment as I let the sincerity and fear in his voice calm me somewhat.

Our breathing found pace, our inhaled and exhaled slowing down.

“I don’t mean to be needy,” I whispered, my cheeks burning over what I’d said to him, what I’d threatened. “It’s just not like you to not... want me.”

“I’ll always want you,” he said, his voice gruff. “I’ve just been so fucking exhausted trying to keep up with everything.”

I pulled back to look at him. “I know. I know... I just...” I shrugged, feeling guilty for even suggesting leaving him.

He nodded, his soulful eyes searing into mine. “But you’re right. I was taking you for granted. I just expected you to put up with my absence while things were tough.”

“I want to support you,” I said. “I do. But I’ve felt invisible lately.”

He sucked in a breath at those words and cupped my face. “What do I do, Jo? How do I make this better?”

I shook my head and stepped out of his embrace. I felt cold of a sudden. Wrapping my arms around my waist, I shrugged. “We work at it. Relationships take work. I guess... I guess we both took how easy it has been for granted. Things are different now. We have Belle and our jobs... we have to work a little harder at the you and me part.”

He nodded, as subdued as me. “What now?”

“I’m tired,” I said softly. “I’m going to bed.”

Fifteen minutes later we lay on our bed in the dark of our room.

We didn't touch.

"I love you, you know that right?" Cam's voice was thick, gruff with emotion.

I took a moment, fighting fresh tears.

"Jo?"

I nodded even though he couldn't see me. "I love you too," I choked out.

The bed creaked and I felt his warmth hit me as he rolled into me. He slid his arm around my waist and pulled me against him. My hands fluttered for a moment and then settled on his chest.

"I can't believe I even made you doubt it," he whispered, sounding agonized. "That I hurt you so much you thought about leaving me."

"Maybe my expectations are too high."

"No." He stroked my hip. "Baby, no. I fucked up."

"We'll get back on track." And I meant it. I was already feeling relief pour through me just being in his arms.

"But you fucked up too."

I stiffened.

"I know I should have noticed," he said. "But I'm also not a mind reader. It should never have gotten to this point, Jo. You should have told me that you were worried I didn't want to be with you." He tugged gently on my hair, tipping my head back.

I could just make out his features but I didn't need to see them clearly to know there was anger in his eyes.

"We're stronger than this. What happened?"

Just like that the panic was back. "It... it was a combination of things I think. I've been feeling a bit ... a bit off about getting older," I admitted. "With Belle turning four this year and Cole getting married soon ... and us not having sex in a while ... it's all just built up. Joss was right. I kept it to myself too long. Explosion was inevitable." I sighed, miserable with myself.

"Jo," he said, and I could hear the incredulity in that one word, "You are still the most beautiful woman I have ever known. I will never want anyone the way I want you."

"You have to promise," I curled my fist in his T-shirt, "Not to disappear on me again, and I will promise to let you know what's going on in my head."

"I promise," he said immediately.

I tucked my head against his chest and closed my eyes. Things weren't magically mended between us, but we'd get there. When we were younger and just starting out we'd had the argument to end all arguments and still we made it through it.

"I'm sorry about Ally," he said. "You're right. I should be taking whatever chance I get to be with you and Belle. If it had been you in that office, chatting away to some guy, and I

walked in on that scene with the kinds of thoughts in my head that were in yours tonight, I would have killed the guy.”

“I know Ally was just a catalyst for our bigger problems... but I didn’t like the look in her eyes when she’s looking at you, Cam, and that’s not paranoia.”

“I will make it clear I am one hundred percent not interested. I promise you that.”

I gave him the words I knew he needed to hear. “I trust you.”

“Thank you, baby.” He hugged me harder. “I love you. I will never take you for granted again.”

He held me close until eventually the tension melted out of my body and sleep reached out to take me.

\*\*\*

“Baby.”

I buried deeper against my pillow, shutting out the voice that was trying to wake me. Hadn’t I just fallen asleep?

“Baby, wake up.”

I slowly opened my eyes, blinking against the glow of light in our bedroom. My bedside lamp was on and the clock radio said it was eleven thirty.

We’d gone to bed at nine o’ clock. Less than three hours ago.

What the hell?

I glanced at Cam who was sitting beside me, fully clothed. “What are you doing?” I mumbled, rubbing at my eyes. They felt swollen from crying earlier.

He took my hand. “We only have thirty more minutes left of Valentine’s Day.”

Sleepy but intrigued, I let him tug me out of bed and I followed him through the cool, dark flat in my pajamas.

When we stepped into our living room I gasped.

Candles covered the mantle over the fireplace, our coffee table and any surface that would hold one. On the floor in front of the fire Cam had set up a picnic of snacks and wine. In the middle of it all was a huge heart-shaped box of chocolates.

I stared at him in questioning awe.

“I nipped out to the twenty four hour supermarket.” He smiled coaxingly at me.

Tears pricked my eyes and I grabbed his hand. “Thank you.”

He reached for me, tugging me toward him and pressing my body against his so there wasn’t even a speck of air between our torso. “I will never fuck up like this again. I promise you that.”

I nodded. “Me neither.”

He brushed his lips over mine, a seductive whisper of promises still to come. I shivered in anticipation. I'd missed him in more ways than one.

"Come on." He led me down onto the rug and I laughed at the mini sausage rolls and quiches he'd heated up.

"It's all they had. It's not quite *La Cour*."

I grinned, shaking my head. "It's perfect."

We started eating and I just then realized how hungry I was.

"So tell me about Dee," Cam said, sipping on his glass of wine. "Is she okay?"

I frowned, remembering how scared she'd been as we waited for the results of her screening. She'd found a lump four weeks ago but thankfully it had turned out to be a cyst. "She's fine. We got a fright but she's fine."

"Next time shit like that is going down you grab me by the hair, the balls, whatever the fuck you can grab, I don't care, and you yell at me you need to talk. Okay?"

I stared into his eyes. "I will. I'm sorry I didn't."

He lowered his gaze and his wine, and I waited, recognizing the troubled look on his face. "Would you really try to leave me?"

I closed my eyes, wishing I'd never said that. It was the heat of the moment, it was my own pain talking.

But I'd hurt him.

"It would have to take a hell of a lot to make me leave you, Cameron MacCabe."

He looked up at me now and I shivered at the heat, the longing... the determination in his eyes. "I would follow you, you know. I would follow you to the ends of the earth to convince you to come back to me. I will never stop fighting for you."

And that right there.... That was one of the many reasons I loved him. "I just needed the reminder. Not everyone has a love like ours, Cam. I was terrified we were becoming just... ordinary."

His answer to that was to push the food out of the way and crawl toward me.

My breath hitched as he nudged my legs apart and pressed his body against mine until I had no recourse but to lie back on the floor beneath him. He braced himself over me, one hand caressing my thigh.

"It's been too long. I need to be inside you, baby."

I nodded, speechless as arousal flushed hot and tingling between my legs and in the swell of my breasts. "I need you too."

Cam slowly stripped me of my pajamas and his own clothes until I was lying naked in the glow of the candlelight and he was braced on his knees over me. I drank in the sight of him, of the warm light highlighting the hard, muscular body that was maintained by the gym and

his martial arts training. I had to admit part of me had resented his immovable commitment to his fitness these last few months—more time given to something else other than me.

But lying there, desire prickling my every nerve ending as I took in his masculine beauty, I had to admit I loved the outcome of his commitment. My gaze moved up to his face and my breath caught in my throat at the expression in his eyes.

“I was right you know... all those years ago.”

My brows drew together at his cryptic comment.

“When I said no man could possibly deserve you.”

Tears stung my eyes at the memory. “*You’re stunning. No man could possibly deserve you.*” Cam had said that to me the first night we were together. It wasn’t something a woman easily forgot.

But it was an insanely beautiful realization that Cam hadn’t forgotten one thing about that night either. A tear slid down my cheek and he came slowly down over me, one hand on my hip, the other cupping my face so he could wipe my tear with his thumb. “I will make this up to you,” he repeated hoarsely, his own eyes bright with emotion.

And I knew him well enough to know that he’d be kicking his own arse for weeks to come about this.

I sought to soothe him, as he had soothed me. “You already are.”

On that he kissed me softly, sweetly as he slid his hand between my legs and caught his thumb on my clit. I sighed in pleasure, arching into his touch as he circled my clit, need swirling low in my belly.

Just as the tension was about to break in me he broke our kiss and removed his thumb.

My eyes flashed in unfilled desire.

A small, playful smirk curled the corners of his delicious mouth and I cried out his name as he slipped two thick fingers inside of me.

“Look at me, Jo,” he demanded and I did as he asked.

Our eyes held and locked as he wound me up with his fingers, his own eyes darkening with a deepening arousal as he watched my eyes dilate, as he listened to me pant his name over and over.

I came on a cry of relief and he grasped my wrists, held my hands above my head and began to thrust into me.

Light flared in his eyes as he looked down at me. Not once, as he pumped his hips against mine, as the sweat began to bead across his skin, as the muscles in his jaw clenched with his effort to hold his release in check, did my husband once break eye contact with me.

I wanted to touch him but every time I tried to move my hands he pressed them down harder to the floor.

“Do you see?” he groaned, his thrusts coming faster and harder. “Do you see what you do to me? Only you. Only you...”

On those words I cried out his name again, my inner muscles rippling around him as I came.

“Johanna,” he called out as his hips stilled and then jerked against mine as his own hard climax rocked him.

He rested his forehead against my chest as he tried to catch his breath.

“I think we both needed that,” I whispered, amused and sated.

Cam looked at me and released my wrists to rest his hands on my waist. I circled his shoulders with my arms and wrapped my legs around him, holding him inside me, tight to me.

“You and Belle,” he whispered, his words somber. “You mean everything to me.”

Tonight had left us both raw, but whereas I was much calmer now, much more at ease, made so by his reassurances, Cam was unsure. I could see the panic buried deep in the back of his eyes. He didn’t know if I believed him. And I had a feeling he was going to spend the next few months trying to prove his love to me. As much as that would be lovely, I didn’t want Cam feeling the way I had felt for the last few months.

“I believe you,” I whispered. “I promise that I believe you.”

He coasted his hands up and down the sides of my waist in a soothing, comforting caress. “It’s Saturday tomorrow.”

“It is.”

“You, me and Belle. This whole weekend. Just us.”

“No work?” I said, hopeful.

“I’m switching my phone off.”

I grinned. “That sounds fun.”

“Mmm.” He brushed his mouth over mine. “I think it’ll start with a sleep-in.”

“Oh?”

“You’re going to be very, very tired, Mrs. MacCabe.” He grinned cockily. “But very, very satisfied.”

I laughed and he grinned harder at the sound. “Do your worst, Mr. MacCabe. We’ve got all night.”

“Correction,” He said gruffly. “We’ve got forever.”

I bit my lip on a smile. “You’re the quite the romantic this evening.”

“Well.” He shrugged nonchalantly. “It is Valentine’s Day. I don’t mind putting in the effort.”

I playfully pushed at him and he shook with laughter, peppering me with teasing kisses and tickling fingers that I tried to avoid. My failure at both caused my squealing laughter to

fill the flat, Cam's deeper amusement joining it and making my home feel familiar and beautiful again.



## Olivia and Nate

“Liv, have you seen my fisheye lens?” Nate yelled from his office at the back of the house.

I gently brushed January’s soft hair into pigtails. “Why do you need your fisheye lens?”

“Mummy, can I have some gummy bears?” Lily asked from the kitchen.

“Because I’m doing that magazine shoot this morning! We’ll be experimenting with shots and the fisheye lens might come in handy!” Nate shouted, sounding exasperated.

He was late.

He hated being late.

“Well the lens should be with your equipment.” I kissed the top of January’s head and she hopped off the arm of the sofa and hurried off into the kitchen to be with her big sister.

“Mummy? Gummy bears?”

“No, Lily.” I followed Jan into the kitchen to find Lily clutching a mini bag of chewy fruity bears. “Sweetheart, those are for recess. Eat your banana and yoghurt.”

“It’s called playtime not recess and I’ve already eaten my banana and yoghurt.” Lily pouted.

“Liv!”

I gritted my teeth at Nate’s yelling as I plucked a banana from the fruit bowl and handed it to Lily. “Have another and watch your sister while I help your dad.”

Hurrying toward his office I thrust open the door to find him rummaging manically through a drawer. “Why isn’t it with the rest of your stuff?”

“How the fuck should I know?” He snapped. “Every time you put something down in this house it takes a walk.”

“Okay, calm down and think. When was the last time you used the fisheye?”

He ran a hand through his dark hair, hair that was starting to show sprinklings of grey in the edges. That and the wrinkles around his eyes that had appeared from his (usually) excessive smiling did nothing to detract from his masculine beauty.

Often, when taking time to admire how gorgeous my husband was, I got tingles between my legs and a sudden switch to an amorous attitude. Not today, however. Today was Valentine’s Day and as much as Nate and I enjoyed mocking the commercialism and general hokeyness of the day, he always acknowledged it by giving me flowers in the morning.

Not today.

Nada today.

Except he was uncharacteristically grumpy.

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “It’s been a while.”

“Was it for that article you did for the paper... I remember it being distorted... you know the picture of Portobello Beach. The history pic—”

“You’re a genius!” He pointed at me. “I gave the bloody lens to Mikael that day and he didn’t give me the fucker back.”

“Nate the girls are just down the hall,” I reminded him.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “I’ve got to go. I’ll call Mikael and get him to bring the lens.”

I had no idea who Mikael was but I nodded since it was getting my husband out of the house. The girls were due at school and I was due at work and I just needed him and his bad mood gone.

He grabbed his equipment and gave me a peck on the lips as he passed. “See you later.”

Following him out into the hall I watched as he dumped his equipment and hurried into the kitchen. Standing in the doorway I looked on as he lifted January up into the air making her giggle and squeal before he peppered her face with kisses that made her laugh harder. Once she was safely on her feet he turned to Lily and enfolded her in his arms, chasing her cheeks with kisses as she squirmed and laughed at him to get off of her.

The sight made my chest ache with its beauty.

“Bye girls. See you later.” He flashed me a quick smile as he passed me and I tried to ignore the way the ache in my chest suddenly turned into a painful knot.

The door slammed shut behind him and I clapped my hands and grinned at the girls, covering my dour mood. “Time for school. First one to the door with their shoes, coat and schoolbag gets an extra bag of gummy bears.”

The girls giggled and started hurrying to get ready.

\*\*\*

I stormed through the security gate at the main campus library of the University of Edinburgh where I worked as head librarian for the User Services department. I was promoted to Librarian three years ago when my boss Angus took early retirement and high-tailed it to Greece with his civil partner.

“Olivia, there you are,” Ronan, my longest serving colleague hurried toward me as I dashed behind the help desks toward the staff room. “The reserve section self-service check in check out system crashed this morning but we just got it up and running five minutes ago. I’ve left a few frantic messages for you.”

“Sorry.” I shrugged out of my coat and threw it over my chair. “Bad start to the day. It’s running you say?”

“Yeah, it’s fixed.”

“Good. So why are you still looking at me like the roof of the building is on fire?”

He frowned at me. "Because I didn't know what to expect. Irritations such as system failures tend to make you very depressed lately."

"I'm not depressed." I grabbed a hold of the weekly schedule to remind myself what I was doing this morning. I was on reshelving. Great. Alone time. "I'm fine." Ronan snorted at my back but I ignored him and made my way to the carts that were loaded with the books for reshelving. "If I'm needed, page me."

As I rode the elevator up to the second floor, I mused over Ronan's comment. I *hadn't* been myself lately. I hadn't been myself lately because Nate hadn't been himself lately.

It wasn't the sex, I thought as I started working. Sex with us was always easy and great so it wasn't the sex. It was just... lately I felt like we were drifting a little. We both had work and the girls so the only time we really had alone was at night in bed and well... we had sex instead of talking.

And Nate and I did great banter.

I missed the banter.

Don't get me wrong I loved our girls and I loved the four of us hanging out because we had great fun. I was probably being a spoiled child even thinking of complaining about what we had.

But this morning... well that was new and I didn't like it. Nate didn't wake me up with a kiss and a cuddle like he usually did. And there were no flowers and there were always flowers on Valentine's Day. In fact he hadn't even mentioned the day, even not to make a crack at it.

This morning he just rolled out of bed and hurried into the shower. He barely said two words to me as I walked into the bathroom as he was coming out. He just said something about needing to be fast because he had an early start and that he would make his own coffee.

The most he'd said to me was when he was yelling about that fisheye lens.

And then the peck on the lips.

The peck!

We did not *peck*.

Unsettled I shoved a book onto a shelf and lost myself in thought. Had we hit that point? That inevitable point in marriage? That inevitable point that I never actually believed was inevitable for us?

That point where we just... start taking one another for granted.

I blinked back the burn of tears at the thought, finding myself overwhelmingly upset by the idea.

After almost eight years of marriage and with no sign of falling into that trap I thought we were sure to escape it. Of course like all couples we'd reached a comfortable familiarity and

sometimes we bickered, but we'd never lost that need for one another, emotionally or physically.

Oh God.

Was the peck the beginning of the end?

\*\*\*

"So when did he start with the lip pecking?" Ellie asked as we shared a coffee over lunch at a café just around the corner from the university.

Ellie was a professor and tutor in the art history department and whenever we could we met up for lunch.

I frowned. "Just this morning. But he completely forgot Valentine's Day."

"I thought Nate believes Valentine's Day is just one giant commercial puppet trick."

[Those were](#) his exact words actually. "True, but—"

"Liv, it's one day. You're really getting this upset over one peck and one missed Valentine's Day?"

I grimaced. "You'd be pissed if Adam forgot Valentine's Day."

"Of course I would. I'm a romantic. You are a semi-romantic. And Valentine's Day has never been a big deal to you."

"We're just... we don't get to hang out alone anymore and I understand that that is a part of being parents," I sighed heavily. "I would probably be more okay with it if I knew he missed our alone time as much as I do." I groaned. "I sound like an awful mother. I'm not. I love my kids and I don't know what I'd do without the girls but Nate and I haven't had a real conversation in—"

Ellie held her hand up cutting me off. "Liv, no one thinks you're a bad mother okay. Calm down. It's hard. We all know it is. You have to work at it. Make time. Why does the ball have to be in Nate's court?"

I sat back and processed that. Ellie was right. As a modern woman it was kind of shocking of me to place all of the romantic responsibility on Nate. "You're right. It's unfair to put the expectation on him. Perhaps I can get Nathan and Sylvie to look after the girls next weekend." They were Nate's parents and they'd helped us out before in the past.

"Doesn't hurt to ask."

"Olivia?"

At the deep, somewhat familiar, male voice I looked up from my lunch to see a tall, good-looking guy standing over our table. I stared at him until his gorgeous light green eyes caused recognition to hit me.

"Ben?" I pushed back my chair and stood up. "Benjamin Livingston?"

“She remembers me.” He grinned at me before pulling me in for a hug that I returned happily.

This guy, this handsome tall Scotsman was the reason Nate and I were together. I’d had a crush on Ben when he was a post-grad student at the university and I’d ask Nate to help me become more confident and seductive to win Ben over. Of course in doing so I ended up falling for Nate and vice versa, but during the ‘down’ moments of our ‘courtship’ I’d spent time with Ben and he was a great guy.

He pulled back, still smiling. “You must still work at the library?”

“I do. I’m head librarian now.”

“Hot.” He grinned and Ellie laughed drawing his attention. “Hi, nice to meet you.”

“Oh we met once before.”

He studied her and then nodded. “Ellie, right?”

“Right. Good memory!”

Still stunned to see him after all this time I found myself asking, “Do you have time to sit with us?”

Ben nodded. “If you’re sure?”

“Of course.”

“Let me just grab something to eat.”

Once he was out of earshot Ellie leaned across the table and said in a low voice, “How funny. And he hasn’t changed a bit.”

It was funny to see him of all people on a day when I was feeling so nostalgic for the early days in my relationship with Nate. To clarify I was nostalgic for the post-Benjamin days. Nothing in the world could make me want to relive the angst of being with Nate but not really being with Nate, breaking up with Nate and thinking I’d lost him forever.

“So, how are things?” Ben said without preamble as he sat at the table with us.

“Really good.” I lifted my diamond-adorned left hand. “Married. With two girls.”

“To whom?”

I blushed, remembering how he stepped back from pursuing a relationship with me because of Nate. “Nate Sawyer.”

“Like I didn’t already know that.” He said and then held up his left hand where a platinum wide band encircled his ring finger. “Three years. Her name is Jules and she’s pregnant with our first kid.”

“I’m happy for you,” I said with genuine feeling.

“I’m happy for you too.” He smiled and then turned politely to Ellie.

She answered before he even asked. “Married to my brother’s best friend even though it was like pulling teeth to get him to even attempt a relationship with me. We have two little boys, Will and Braden, and they are quite possibly the cutest kids known to man.”

Ben laughed at her oversharing. “That’s great. And any plans for Valentine’s Day, ladies?”

“Dinner and a party a colleague is hosting. You?” Ellie said.

“Well I actually live in Aberdeen now but we came back home for my mum and dad’s fortieth wedding anniversary. The celebrations are lasting a whole week.” He shook his head, laughing I assumed at his family. “Jules is being dragged around while my mother picks out baby clothes, and I tried to tag along but my mother is adamant when she wants something and she wants alone time with Jules, so I decided to grab some lunch and do some work.” He patted the laptop bag at his feet.

I eyed the bag. “What do you do now that you’re no longer a student?”

“I’m an academic.” He shrugged. “There’s nothing much else out there for a guy with a PhD in history but to continue on. I’m a professor at the University of Aberdeen.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“Thanks. You still happy at the library?”

“Very. It keeps me busy. So do the girls.”

“No plans for Valentine’s Day tonight then? Are you like me and Jules... at the mercy of our family?”

I shook my head, feeling that annoying little knot I knew shouldn’t feel. It was just Valentine’s Day for goodness sake! “Nope. No plans.”

\*\*\*

“Liv, your phone is ringing in your bag.” Angie, one of my library assistants rushed out to the help desk. “It keeps ringing. Someone clearly wants to get a hold of you.”

Worried, I let her take over with the student I was helping and hurried into the staff room to rummage through my bag for my phone. I shot apologetic looks at the staff that were trying to work as I looked at the screen.

It was Nate.

I called him back, locking myself in one of the staffroom toilets.

“Hey, babe. I tried you a few times,” he said.

“I know, is it urgent? Why didn’t you call the office?”

“Because it’s not urgent.”

“Then why try me three times?”

“Because I want to talk to you.”

Hearing the rumble of affection in his voice I slumped down on the closed toilet seat and smiled, that little knot in my chest loosening a little. “Yeah? About?”

“Your day. I had to rush out of the house this morning so fast I didn’t even kiss you properly. I felt bad.”

Relief whooshed over me. “Yeah, I noticed.”

“Aye, I know you would have noticed that, that’s why I’m calling to make sure you know I noticed it too.”

“Well I appreciate that.” I laughed softly. “Is that all you were calling about?”

“I’m on a break so I just thought I’d call. If you have to get back to work though it’s fine.”

“Nope.” I shook my head, enjoying hearing his voice too much to let him go just yet.

“How did the shoot go?”

“Great. Mikael turned up with the bloody lens, which was good because we needed it after all. How’s your day been so far?”

I thought about the strange meeting. “You’ll never guess who Ellie and I bumped into and ended up having lunch with.”

“Who?”

“Do you remember Ben?”

There was silence on the end of the line.

“The postgrad guy?” I offered.

“Yeah I know who it is, Liv,” he said, sounding a little impatient. “Why did you have lunch with him?”

Hearing the edge of jealousy in his voice I rolled my eyes. “He’s married. Her name is Jules and she’s pregnant.”

“And if I hadn’t been in the picture her name would probably have been Olivia.”

“Oh come on.” I sighed. “It was just two old friends having lunch with another friend. I thought you’d find it funny. It was weird to see him after all this time. And on today of all days.”

“What does that mean?”

Yup, he’d totally forgotten Valentine’s Day.

“Nothing. I guess.” I stood up, a little annoyed with his reaction. “Well I better get back to work.”

“I’m finishing early today. I thought I’d pick up the girls so they don’t have to go to the after school program.”

“Okay, great. Make sure to let the school know they won’t be there.”

“Got it. I’ll see you at home.” He hung up and I glowered at the phone. Nate had no right to be pissy at me because of a stupid lunch.

Ugh.

What an unbelievably crappy Valentine’s Day.

\*\*\*

Walking up to the house in the dark of the early evening I stared at it in confusion. Usually the house was lit up when I came home from work. Whereas I did breakfast and the morning school run, Nate always arranged his schedule so that he could pick the kids up from the after school program and he more often than not had dinner on the table too.

There was only a faint glow of light peeking out of the blinds that covered our front window.

Opening the front door I was immediately hit by the comforting heat and the delicious smell of Chinese food.

My favorite.

Maybe Nate felt bad for being all grumpy and jealous on the phone earlier. "I'm home!" I called out as I closed the door.

I was usually barraged with something along the lines of 'Mum! Jan stole my Barbie!' while said thief came running at me from wherever she was in the house.

Nothing.

"Nate?"

"In here, beautiful."

Smiling at the compliment I shrugged out of my coat and shoes and followed the smells of divine food to the dining room.

My eyes widened at the sight before me.

The room was lit with candlelight and there was a huge bunch of stunning red roses in a vase on the middle of the table. A table that was set up for dinner.

Nate stood by the table in his favorite jeans and a long-sleeved black top that did nothing to hide his still muscular and trim physique. He was barefoot and relaxed and staring at me with a familiar heat in his eyes.

"Happy Valentine's Day, babe."

I grinned, my stomach letting out a rumble at the sight of the Chinese food. "Did someone remind you?"

He shook his head, mischief in his eyes. "I called my dad last week and asked him if he'd take the girls tonight. My parents picked up Lily and Jan this afternoon."

"But... you made it sound like you'd forgotten?"

He shrugged and laughed. "I was just messing with you." He strode toward me and grabbed a handful of my shirt to tug me to him. His kiss was hot and deep and I instantly wrapped myself around him.

When we broke apart, he stared into my eyes and whispered, "I've missed you, Liv. I thought we could use some time alone."

And just like that the knot in my chest loosened completely. "I've missed you, too."

A few hours later I laid on our sofa, my legs stretched out across Nate's lap, while I sipped at the ice cold beer he'd just handed me before settling in. The living room was lit by the flames in our fireplace. It was cozy and intimate and romantic.

It was also weirdly quiet.

"You feel it too?" Nate drew circles on my ankle with the tips of his fingers.

"The girls?" I said softly.

He nodded. "It's quiet without them."

"Yeah. You get used to having them around." I chuckled. "Lily said something so funny this morning."

Nate smiled. "Yeah?"

"Yeah, I just can't remember what it was." I rested my head on the back of the sofa hearing Nate laugh. "It's been a weird day. I can barely remember any of it."

"Except for the part where you had lunch with an ex?"

I shot a look at him. He was drinking his beer and still tracing my skin casually but the lines of his shoulders were tense. "Ben wasn't an ex."

"Close to."

My brows drew together. "You honestly had a problem with me seeing him today?"

He turned his head and our gazes locked. "Yes. I had a problem with some guy getting to have a quiet lunch and a nice conversation with my wife because until right now I couldn't remember the last time I got to have a quiet lunch and nice conversation with my wife."

"Nate."

"I know I'm being an arse." He rubbed a hand over his face and groaned.

I smiled. "You're not an ass. On retrospect, considering how little time we've had for each other lately, I would have been mad if you had lunch with some other woman who had some affiliation with your romantic history."

Nate squeezed my ankle. "Doesn't matter now. We're here."

"Yes we are."

We lapsed into comfortable silence, the only sound the crackling of the flames in the grate of the fire.

And then I couldn't help myself.

"Would you rather take part in The Hunger Games or the Tri Wizard Tournament?"

Nate contemplated the question. "Depends. Am I competing in the 74<sup>th</sup> annual Hunger Games or the 75<sup>th</sup>?"

"Why?"

"Well the 75<sup>th</sup> was the one where all the previous winners were pitted against each other."

"You've seen those movies too many times."

"You've seen Harry Potter too many times."

Well I couldn't argue with that. "True." I frowned. "Does it matter if you're in the 75<sup>th</sup> annual hunger games?"

"I take it I am then?"

"Yes, for the sake of expedience you are in the 75<sup>th</sup> annual Hunger Games. So The Hunger Games or the Tri Wizard Tournament?"

"It's kind of an easy decision. I'll probably die in The Hunger Games. I'll live in the Tri Wizard thing."

"Uh no!" I shook my head. "You will inevitably face Voldemort at the end of the Tri Wizard Tournament."

"Still not as difficult as The Hunger Games, Babe."

"Hello, it's Voldemort. He's the second most powerful wizard in the world."

"Third if you count Harry Potter."

"But not at the Tri Wizard Tournament point in the books and movies."

"That Voldemort guy has no nose. How scary can a man without a nose be?"

"He has nostrils."

"But no nose."

"I feel like you're underestimating him."

"I feel like you're underestimating the games. There are people with weapons and mutated dogs and acidic fog in the games. It's Battle Royale on steroids."

I huffed. "Please, Battle Royale was way bloodier than the Hunger Games."

"Because of a rating issue. In reality the games are extremely violent and futuristically sadistic."

"I feel like you care about these movies way too much. Is it the Jennifer Lawrence thing?"

Nate laughed. "No. You asked me a 'would you rather' and I gave my answer."

"Well..." I sighed heavily. "I hope you're happy because you've separated us. You're in the Tri Wizard Tournament facing he who shall not be named and I'm in The Hunger Games trying to avoid killing freaking Katniss because she's awesome."

We stared each other a moment as we processed our conversation.

"We never really grew up did we?" Nate mused.

"No, we really didn't."

"Our kids are going to out mature us."

"Probably. Definitely January. She's already more mature than you."

Nate tickled my feet in payback and I laughed as I tried to pull away. He grabbed onto me and tugged on my leg so I slid down the couch.

"Hey!" I giggled, holding my beer out so it wouldn't spoil.

Nate's answer was to take the beer off me and put it on our coffee table next to his. He then braced himself over me, nudging my legs apart and I wrapped them around his hips as he stared down into my eyes. His dimple flashed as he smiled at me.

"You're beautiful, you know that."

I grinned. "You're drunk."

"I've had half a beer." He shook his head. "I just... sometimes I forget how beautiful you are and then I look over at you and you're smiling at the kids and your beauty punches me in the chest. How did I get so lucky, Liv?"

I slid my arms under his shirt and around his back, stroking his warm, smooth skin. "I asked you to teach me to be good at sex and you very kindly obliged. The rest is history."

"Oh. Right." he grinned, still smiling as he pressed a kiss to my lips. Very suddenly he frowned, however, and pulled back.

"What?"

"We are never telling our kids the story of house we fell in love."

Horrified at the realization, I agreed. "Never."

"We need a story to tell the kids in case they ask."

"Well..." My grip on him tightened. "You kind of started getting me all hot and bothered here. Can you finish doing that and then we'll think of something?"

His answer was start kissing me hungrily.

"Mmm." I pushed at his chest and he pulled back, frowning down at me. "You know where we should do it?"

"I thought we were doing it right here?"

"No, let's do it in the shower. Oh we haven't had shower sex in so long."

He eyed me suspiciously. "This wouldn't be a way to kill two birds with one stone would it?"

"No, because I will need a shower again after we do what we're going to do when we get out of the shower which is more sex because we can have sex loudly tonight." I slid out from under him. "And I hate that saying. Why the hell would you kill a bird with a stone, let alone two?"

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It was safe to say I was in a *good* mood the next day. Nate and I had a long and very wonderful shower together, and afterwards he got me so dirty I needed a shower all over again.

It was awesome.

By morning I woke up sated and satisfied but missing the girls, so we talked to Lily and January during our breakfast before their grandparents drove into the city to drop them off at school. I couldn't wait to hug my little angels that night.

Ronan commented on my obviously improved mood but not even his teasing could penetrate my anti-negativity force field. The world was good and no one was going to tell me any different.

Okay so the student who wouldn't quit screaming at me over her reserve section fine maybe put a dent in my force field.

I was in the staffroom buried in paperwork, rubbing the tension the ranting student had put in my forehead out when a strong hand coasted down my side and I heard a deep familiar voice say in my ear, "Free for lunch?"

I jerked back in my seat, my head just missing Nate's nose. I stared up at him in shock. "What are you doing here?"

He held out a hand. "Taking you to lunch."

"I thought you had a shoot?"

"Finished early."

A slow smile prodded my lips. "So you came here? To take me to lunch?"

He grinned. "I was thinking you could take a long lunch."

"She can take a long lunch," Ronan butted in and I dipped my head so I could see past Nate. Ronan stood behind him grinning mischievously at me.

"Are you sure you can handle things while I'm gone?"

"If you come back in an even better mood than you were in this morning then I can definitely cover a long lunch for you."

"I'm not that bad," I huffed.

He rolled his eyes and walked away.

Nate raised an eyebrow at me. "Olivia Sawyer, have you been a moody boss?"

"Never." I stood up and mimicked his eyebrow raise. "I'm a lady, and ladies are never moody. We're mercurial."

My husband laughed. "Slap a fancy name on it but it doesn't change facts. You've been moody."

I shot him a grin before I gathered my things and accepted his proffered hand. "It's your fault I've been moody. I don't do well without my Nate time."

He squeezed my hand. "Back at you, babe."

We talked about everything and nothing, and it surprised and elated me at how giddy I felt to be walking down the street hand in hand at lunchtime with him. It was just so outside of our regularly scheduled programming, and I loved that he'd sprung this on me.

When we stopped outside a hotel I stared up at it, confused. “Do they have a nice restaurant here?”

Instead of answering right away, Nate tugged my hand and led me inside the gorgeous entrance way of the boutique hotel. “I don’t know,” he finally said, as we approached reception. “But they do room service.”

My lips parted in more surprise as Nate said to the pretty receptionist, “Early check in for Mr. and Mrs. Sawyer.”

She went through check in with us and then handed us our room key.

Once we were in the elevator I turned to look at my husband. “Lunch time check in. They probably think we checked in under false names. That we’re having an affair.”

He smirked and shot me a look out of the corner of his eye. “Probably.”

“Nate.”

“What? I could give a shit what they think.” The doors binged open and Nate pulled me out of the elevator with more urgency now. “If I don’t get you in our room,” his eyes flicked from door number to door number, “In the next ten seconds I’m going to fuck you in the hallway.”

Arousal flushed my skin. “What’s gotten into you?”

“Here we are.” He stopped and pushed me up against a door, crushing my lips beneath his as he squeezed my waist with one hand. I realized he was opening the door with the other as it clicked open behind me and I stumbled back on my heels, breaking the kiss. My heart was pounding in my chest as I was dragged inside, the door slamming shut behind us.

“Na—” his name was cut off when he kissed me again.

“Do you,” he kissed me, “realize,” more kisses, followed by him pushing my coat off my shoulders, “last night,” he kissed my jaw, my neck, as my coat fell to the floor, “was the first,” my lips were captured in his again, “time in ages,” he plucked at the buttons on my blouse, “we took time,” the zipper on my skirt sounded through the room, “to savor sex.”

“It was?” I said, but the words were mumbled against his hot lips.

Nate pulled back to slowly slide my skirt down my legs. I stepped out of it, watching as his eyes travelled up them leisurely. When he looked at me they were black with heat. “Sex is always great, babe, but last night was like old times.”

I nodded, shivering just at the memories.

“I don’t want it to end,” he whispered hoarsely. “I don’t want you to ever stop needing this because I know never will.”

I bent down so I could cup his gorgeous face in my hands. “I’ve never stopped needing this. Never, Nate.”

“Tell me what you want?”

I bit my lip and brushed my thumb over his mouth. “My dirty Nate,” I whispered affectionately.

He bit at my thumb playfully. “I already knew you wanted me.”

“Oh?” I grinned. “Is my hard on showing?”

He laughed, his eyes gleaming with mirth and so much more. “If I slide my hands between your legs, I’ll find you wet and wanting. I’ll tell you something else,” he coasted his hand up the inside of my leg, “I’ll fuck the cockiness right out of you.”

I sighed in pleasure as his fingers slipped under my panties. “I blame you.” I groaned, he pushed inside of me. “You’ve inflated my ego.”

He pressed a sweet kiss to my stomach and looked up at me. “It’s not ego when it’s all true.”

I giggled and brushed my fingers through his hair. “Is that what you tell yourself, babe?”

He winked at me and it was *hot*. “You know it.”

“Enough chit chat,” I teased, “If we’re having an illicit affair we better get going.” My laughter turned into squeals as Nate slipped his fingers out of me, stood up and unceremoniously lifted me into his arms and threw me onto the bed.

Grinning at his playfulness I spread-eagled on the bed. “Take me!” I cried out breathily and melodramatically. “Before the clock strikes midnight and I turn into a poor serving girl.”

Nate, who had already yanked off his shirt, paused mid unbuttoning of his trousers. “You can’t dirty up Cinderella.”

I snickered. “Why not?”

“Because our kids watch it.”

I burst out into hysterical giggles at the horror on his face.

“What?” He crossed his arms, frowning at me.

“You!” I tried to catch my breath. “You’re such an adorable daddy.”

His face fell. “Don’t use that word in the bedroom.”

Struggling not to smile I said, “What? Daddy?”

“Stop it.”

“Come on, daddy.”

“I’m warning you I will lose my erection!”

I commenced laughing so hard my stomach was aching.

“That’s it!” he growled and I let out a huff of surprise as Nate wrapped his arm around my ankle and pulled me down the bed toward him. He crawled over me, grabbing my wrists and pinning them beside my head.

My laughter died but I was still grinning as he stared down at me, his lips twitching. “I’m sorry,” I whispered, amusement still thick in my voice.

“Are you done?” he whispered back.

I nodded.

“Good. Now I’m going to lick you and finger fuck you before I take turns sucking and licking your nipples.”

A delicious wave moved through my lower belly and I felt the wet heat between my legs at his words. “And then?”

“Then I’m going to slide my cock slowly inside you, inch by inch, tormenting you. I’ll keep it slow, easy, just out of reach... until you’re begging me to fuck you.” His hands squeezed tight around my wrists and I felt the heat of his hard cock between my legs.

“Do that other stuff later,” I spread my legs and tilted my hips to press him harder against me. “Give me your cock. Now.”

“My dirty Liv,” he said gruffly and then pressed my hands deeper into the mattress as he positioned himself.

I felt the heat of him, pressing slowly inside, and pleasure started rippling over me at the stunning feeling of fullness.

“Nate,” I pleaded.

He thrust inside and I cried out at the pleasure pain, the slight burn easing completely as he started to pump in and out of me. My legs fell open and there was nothing but my husband and what he was doing to my body. The delicious pressure low inside of me started to build, and my breathing grew louder, my cries falling involuntarily from my lips.

“Liv,” Nate groaned, his hips slamming against me as he took me with more stamina and power than probably most men half his age. “Baby, fuck, baby.”

“Yes.” I jerked my hips back against his, undulating into his thrusts that had increased with so much enthusiasm the headboard was rattling against the hotel wall. “YES!” I cried out as my orgasm tore through me.

Three orgasms later I held onto Nate’s shoulders as I tried to steady my jelly-like legs long enough to get back into my shoes.

My long lunch was over.

It had been the best lunch break of my entire life.

As soon as my feet were in the shoes, Nate wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me up against him. “We should do this every week.”

“What? Hotel sex?”

He shook his head. “Lunch.”

“Well...” I grinned and wrapped my arms around his shoulders. “We technically didn’t have lunch.”

“You know what I mean.” He rubbed his nose against mine and sighed. “We should take time to have lunch together once a week.”

Feeling all warm and mushy I nodded. "I'd love that."

"Good." He pulled away but just to reach for my coat. "I better get you back."

He helped me into the coat and then pulled me against him again, my back to his chest. His lips brushed my ears and then he whispered, "Happy Valentine's Day, Liv."

I smiled, curious at his sudden positivity toward the concept. "Valentine's Day was yesterday."

Nate turned me in his arms and grinned. "Every day is Valentine's Day with you."

I grinned back. "Nate Sawyer, you charmer you."

"It was a good line, wasn't it?"

"It was a freaking awesome line." I grabbed his hand and led him toward the door. "Why didn't I think of it?"

"You can make it up to me tonight."

"More sex?" I said incredulously as we walked out into the hallway. "Can our bodies take it?"

"We just need to refuel first."

"Then sex it is."

We walked hand in hand back to the elevator, brimming with satisfaction and contentment. I was practically humming to myself as we got into the elevator. Even the crappy elevator music couldn't spoil my mood.

"So..." I said, "Would you rather have sex in a haunted bed or on a beach with the kind of sand that's more like grain and pebbles and dirt than actual sand?"

"It depends... who is haunting the bed?" Nate turned to catch my eye.

Seeing the word 'threesome' gleam with mirth in his eyes I said, "Jimmy Stewart."

He grimaced like a little boy. "Spoil sport."

The elevator doors pinged open and the woman who'd been sharing it with us shot us both a horrified look before hurrying out of it ahead of us.

Nate and I turned slowly to look at each other and we drew stares from the other hotel patrons as we strolled arm and arm out of there, laughing the whole damn way.

## Hannah and Marco

The sound of two of my colleagues talking in the hallway met my ears as I packed up for the day and it made me smile.

I thought about what it was like for me when I first started teaching English to high schoolers. The long hours parents didn't see. How I'd finally look up from my marking and planning to see the clock on my wall said seven o' clock in the evening, how the school around me was eerily quiet because most of my colleagues had left ages ago.

That all changed when Marco came back into my life.

I had a husband and children who needed me to be home at a decent hour.

I wanted to be.

The kids had left at the last bell an hour ago and it was time for me to get in my car and drive home to my husband who was waiting for me to celebrate Valentine's Day. We hadn't planned much, other than to ask Joss and Braden to babysit this year (it was their turn, Marco's and my turn next year), so that Marco and I could just have some quiet time with one another.

I smiled smugly. Or not so quiet time. Wink, wink, nudge, nudge.

Laughing at myself, I wandered out into the hall.

Nish and Barbara, my friends and colleagues, were the chatterboxes out there. They turned to smile at me. "Off home so soon?" Nish said, grinning mischievously.

I shrugged. "It is Valentine's Day."

"As if we could forget," Barbara said dryly, referring to the drama we'd had in school today.

"I still can't believe Rochelle Muir ripped actual hair out of Stacy Abernathy's head." Nish winced.

"And over Michael Steel." I shook my head in disgust. "I've caught that boy kissing too many girls to count."

"Fourth years," Nish and Barbara said in unison, making me laugh.

"Well I'm not a fourth year. I'm off for a quiet night in with the hubby. I suggest you do the same." I winked at them and they laughed as I strolled down the hall.

"I would if my husband looked like yours!" Barbara yelled at my back.

I grinned and shot over my shoulder. "There's more to him than just good looks. He's very adept with his hands."

"I hate you!" She yelled back.

Laughing I sauntered out of the hallway.

Outside it was a crisp, fresh afternoon that was just starting to grow dull. Sun would set in about an hour. I glanced up at the sky and willed the spring on. I was sick of the short days of winter.

As I turned my head back toward my car, I caught a glimpse of something, or should I say someone, out of the corner of my eye. I looked back at the school gate and my breath stuttered in my throat.

Standing with hands in pocket, leaning against the gate was my husband Marco.

Wonder moved through me and I slowly made my way toward him, my heart quickening in my chest at the sight of him.

*Will this feeling ever leave me?* That feeling of anticipation and joy I felt every time I saw him.

God I hoped not.

Marco took a step toward me, and my gaze travelled up his tall body. He was wearing his good black boots, dark jeans, a stylish double-breasted wool jacket and a plaid scarf I'd bought him for Christmas. There were blues and greens in the scarf, colors that set off the blue green of his eyes. I was caught in those stunning eyes. They were the first thing, after his immense height and build, that you noticed about Marco. They were such a striking contrast to the beautiful caramel of his skin, and so darkly lashed I was almost envious of them.

Seeing him standing at the gate, I had a sudden flashback to when we were younger and he would wait for me at the school gate to make sure I didn't miss the bus. And if I did miss the bus he'd always walk me home.

"I wanted to make sure you got home safely," he said, a small teasing smile curling his lips.

I grinned at his sudden nostalgia. "That was thoughtful of you."

He held out his hands. "Car keys?"

Chuckling, I handed them over. Marco took them and then took my hand and started to lead me to my car. Once inside he had to adjust my seat so he could fit his long legs in. I was a tall woman, at five ten. Marco was about eight inches taller than me.

He started the car but instead of pulling out of the space he looked at me.

I smiled curiously at his serious expression. "What?"

"Back in school... I used to stand at that gate and pray you'd miss the bus so I could walk you home."

Leaning across the gear stick I ran the back of my knuckles across his cheek and pressed a soft kiss to his mouth. When I pulled back I whispered, "Sometimes I deliberately missed the bus."

Marco chuckled and I sat back in my seat to watch him handle my little car with ease. For such a big man he had a lot of grace.

We were quiet as he drove, a familiar silence falling between us. Although Marco had changed a lot from the scared, taciturn, brooding young boy he'd been when we first met, he still wasn't the biggest talker. It was one of the things I loved about him. I could just sit with him in silence, and be perfectly comfortable and at peace.

I frowned as I realized he'd driven us off course from our destination of Morningside, a quieter area south of the city center, where we'd bought a house we could just barely afford. We'd bought the house because we loved it but also to be closer to Dylan. Dylan was my stepson. Marco had him with his ex-girlfriend Leah a little over seven years ago. She and her husband Graham lived in Morningside and it was easier on Dylan for us to be so close to them.

"Sophia and Jarrod are with Joss and Braden," Marco suddenly said. "I dropped them off earlier."

I felt a little pang in my chest. Our son Jarrod was only six months old and our daughter Sophia was only two and a half. I found it difficult to be separated from them and reminded myself that it was only for a few hours.

"So where are we going?"

He shot me a quick, mischievous grin that made me smile in return. "You'll see."

I waited patiently, but filled with anticipation as he drove us to Stockbridge and parked near Dean Village. "It'll cost a fortune to stay parked here," I said as he unbuckled his seatbelt.

"It's worth it." He flashed me that grin again and I shook my head laughing as I got out of the car.

As soon as my door was closed behind me, Marco grabbed my hand in his and started leading me down the street. A sense of familiarity quickly descended over me and when we stopped at the entrance to Douglas Gardens, a small public garden we'd visited once before, I looked up at my husband in question.

"Do over," he said.

He couldn't possibly mean what I thought he meant.

Tugging me gently inside we found the gardens empty. Near the back of the gardens, next to a bench I'd sat on with Marco one very memorable night when we were kids, was Marco's aunt Gabby. I watched wide-eyed as she turned from placing a napkin on the picnic she'd set up on the ground. Fairy lights were wrapped around the bench and around potted piece of topiary that looked out of place and thus suggested had been brought to the spot specifically for this.

"I'll just be leaving then," Gabby grinned and Marco pressed a kiss to her cheek before she hurried out of the gardens.

I shook my head in amazement, gesturing to the beautiful picnic. "Why?"

He led me down onto the blanket, moving the picnic hamper with food in it out of our way. “That night,” he said, his voice thick with sincerity, “When you came to me here... it’s the night I knew I loved you.”

My, my... I had quite possibly the most romantic husband on the planet. “You amaze me,” I whispered, looking around at what he’d set up. “I was expecting a quiet night in with you but this...” I reached for him and he automatically pulled me onto his lap and I got comfortable, shifting position so I was straddling him. It meant pushing my tight skirt up my legs but I didn’t care, there was no one around to see me but him. “Thank you for never letting a day go by without my knowing how much you love me.”

His arms tightened around me in reflex.

“I hope I give you the same.” I stroked his cheek, searching his eyes for the answer.

His love for me was there for all to see along with a growing heat. “You do, baby.”

I brushed my mouth over his and his hand slid up my back to my nape so he could hold me to him for a deeper kiss. That kiss turned hot in seconds and it wasn’t long before I felt Marco’s erection between my legs.

My nipples tightened against my bra and I felt a rush of tingling arousal shoot straight through my core. I pulled back from the kiss, my cheeks flushed. “We can’t here,” I whispered.

Marco’s hands slid down my waist, deliberately slowly, deliberately seductive, until they came to a rest on my thighs. His fingers slid under the material of my already bunched up hemline and he pushed it up to my waist, cool air rushing in around me and making me shiver. “No one’s here,” he said softly against my lips.

My belly flipped at the thought. “If we got caught...”

“No one’s here.”

“It’s an offence,” I whispered frantically as his fingers slipped past my underwear. I found myself rising a little to give him better access. “Marco,” I panted as he pushed two fingers inside of me while his thumb sought out my clit.

“No one’s here,” he repeated, his voice hoarse now with arousal.

“The food?” I breathed, trying to concentrate over the pleasure that was zapping me of my senses.

“Will still be here after I make you come.”

I whimpered as the tension inside of me escalated and I rested my forehead against his as I flexed my hips against the thrusts of his fingers. “Marco,” I breathed as I neared climax. My hands fumbled between us for the zipper on his jeans. “Inside me.”

He didn’t need to be asked twice.

He quickly freed himself and I lifted myself up onto my knees, inelegantly hurrying to slip my underwear off. As soon as it was out of my way I guided him inside me and slowly lowered back down.

“Marco,” I panted, feeling that beautiful fullness take over me.

I clutched his shoulders, watching the way his eyes darkened as his cock slid inside me. His fingers bit into my hips as I lowered as far as I could and lifted myself back up. I wrapped my arms around his neck, bringing us flush so I could kiss him.

Our breathing was out of control as our kiss turned erotic, mimicking the rhythm of our bodies.

Then tension inside me reached breaking point and I stiffened and moaned into his mouth as the orgasm rolled over me. My inner muscles rippled around him and I felt his answering grunt vibrate through me at the same time I felt him swell even thicker inside me before his hot release filled me.

I pulsed around him, pulling back to look into his eyes as I struggled to get my breath back.

“Well,” I grinned, feeling languid and satisfied, “That was unexpected. The fact that we could get caught made it surprisingly hot.”

He laughed softly, his gaze tender as he brushed his thumb over my lower lip. “It’s always hot with you.”

I smiled, pleased, before I gently rose up. I pouted comically as he slipped out of me and he chuckled. We sorted our clothing with all the comfortableness of a married couple, like we hadn’t just had sex in a public place where anyone might have seen us. It was reckless, it was probably foolish, but fuck it, it was Valentine’s Day and it was hot and sweet and I enjoyed the hell out of it.

Feeling more than a little smug, I settled beside Marco on the picnic blanket with all the demureness I could muster. He stared at me as he handed me the pastries his uncle Gio, who owned an Italian restaurant, must have made us.

“What?” I said, curious at his sudden intensity.

He shook his head as he got comfortable, lying down, half on his side, his right elbow holding up his upper body so he could talk and eat. “I just like it that I know more about you than anyone else does that’s all.”

“What? The lady in the street but a freak in the bed part?”

Marco raised an eyebrow. “Did you just quote Usher at me?”

I struggled not to laugh. “Maybe.”

“I wouldn’t have put it like that.” He shrugged. “But I have pieces of you no one else has... I like that. Just like you have pieces of me that no one else can or will ever have.”

“I like it too.”

He nodded, happy with that before he took a bite into the delicious food Gio had given us. As we ate in companionable silence, I gazed around me before my eyes locked on the bench we'd sat on all those years ago.

We'd sat there and he'd told me about his uncle who back then had been abusive. He'd mellowed in his old age, but it had taken me a long time to be cordial to the man, knowing how he used to behave around Marco. That night Marco had told me why he'd left the States, about how lonely life had been for him. I'd ached so much for him. We sat there for hours talking about everything and nothing, and one of the things we talked about was our idea of the perfect date. Marco had just said he didn't date. But he wanted to know what my idea of a perfect date was anyway.

I smiled remembering.

When we first got back together he set that perfect date up for me.

I looked over at him to find him watching me. "You remember everything about that night, don't you?"

He nodded. "Every word."

I finished off my pastry, brushing the crumbs off my fingers. "I think we did the right thing starting off as friends."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we were best friends first right. That means when we're older we'll still always have that. Our friendship. I think it's what keeps couples together more than anything else."

Marco frowned. "What does that mean?"

Sensing he was irritated by the comment I hurried to explain. "Well people get older, passion..." I searched for the right word, "*Dilutes*."

He made a face. "I hate to tell you this, baby, but when we're old and gray my horny ass will still want yours."

I laughed at the image I now had in my hand. "I take it that means you don't intend to give me any peace in that department?"

He grunted and gave me a pointed look. "I think it'll be mutual."

Chuckling I nodded as I reached for the sparkling water in the hamper. It was true. I woke him up for sex during the night probably more times than he did me. He always fell asleep before me because I liked to read before going to sleep. "I read a lot of sexy books." I shrugged.

"And I thank God for that every day."

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Sophia and Jarrod were both sleeping when we picked them up from Joss and Braden's later that night. Although Sophia stirred and whimpered and cried a little as we took them out to the car, Jarrod slept right through. Thankfully, Sophia fell asleep with the movement of the car, and Marco carried her into the house while I carried the soft, warm, pliant bundle of baby joy that was my son.

Once we had them down for the night, we made our way to our own room and got ready for bed. Crawling in beside my husband, I curled up next to him and lay my head down on his chest.

I sighed, content, when his arm came around me, his hand resting on my hip.

"Thank you for the best Valentine's Day ever."

He was silent.

I lifted my head to find him frowning. "What?"

"Best ever?" he grimaced.

"Um... yes," I answered, confused by his response.

"Well how the fuck am I supposed to top that?"

I threw my head back in laughter and found myself rolled onto my back as he braced over me, grinning. I slid my hands around the warm, hard muscles of back. "You don't need to worry about that for another two years. Next year is my turn."

"Oh." He nudged my legs apart as he began peeling the strap of my nighty down. "What do you have in mind?"

"It's a surprise." My breath caught as cool air whispered over my breasts as he tugged my nighty down to my waist. My nipples peaked and Marco took it as an invitation. His warm, hot mouth wrapped around my left nipple and I automatically wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him closer.

He lifted his head and gave me a slow wicked grin. "Next year. You and me. Alone. In this bed. You naked. Best fucking present you could give me."

I shook with laughter. "Men are so easy."

"You know it."

My laughter was quickly swallowed up in his kiss and we were just getting to the good stuff when Jarrod's cry lit up our baby monitor.

We froze for a second, our heated, aroused bodies needing a minute to come out of the lust stupor. Marco untangled himself from me and got out of bed, shucking on a pair of pajama bottoms. "Don't move," he said to me. "Not one inch."

"I'm lying like a wanton," I grumbled.

"I don't know what that is but it's sexy as fuck so stay there, exactly as you are."

"Or what?"

“Just do it.” He disappeared quickly out of the room and a couple of seconds later I heard his deep crooning through the baby monitor as he saw to our son.

My belly melted as I heard him whisper soothingly to Jarrod and I decided I *would* stay as I was just because he was such a good dad.

A little while later he wandered back into the room and stopped in the doorway. His eyes flared at the sight of me sprawled across our bed, half-naked. “Fuck,” he bit out and I had to bite my lip to stop from grinning.

He saw it anyway and it made him move.

Before I knew it he was naked and in the bed and I was wrapped around him again and he was inside of me, thrusting into me with urgency and need that took me toward climax.

Twice.

Afterward, I curled into him, my body and mind so filled with contentment, sleep came for me easily.

I was almost out when another cry lit the air, this time louder and more feminine.

I moved to slip out from Marco’s arms and he tightened his hold. “I’ll go,” he said.

“My turn,” I whispered, pressing a kiss to his shoulder before I left.

I pulled on my discarded nighty and tugged a robe on around it and padded down the carpeted hallway to my daughter’s room at the other side of the house.

She was sitting up in her bed, clutching at her duvet, the nightlight in the room showing tears in her eyes.

An ache moved through me at the sight and I hurried over to her, pulling her into my arms. “Baby, what’s wrong?”

“Mummy,” she hiccupped and clutched me tight.

I could only assume it was the disruption to her sleep tonight that set her off, so I lay back against the headboard and murmured the story of Cinderella to her until I finally felt her warm little body go limp against me. Carefully as possible, I settled her comfortably and tip toed back out.

Not wanting to wake Marco, I slid back into bed and curled up on my side.

Not two seconds later the mattress dipped and I felt his heat along the length of me as he put his arm around me and pulled me into him.

“Angel okay?” he said sleepily.

“She’s okay.”

“Good.” He kissed my neck. “Love you.” His soft snores followed quickly on the heels of those two words.

I smiled, my eyelids drooping with exhaustion. “Love you, too.”

## Shannon and Cole

My eyes were boring holes into the wall.

The buzz of a needle had not sounded for the last few minutes and still Cole hadn't appeared out of his room with the stunning brunette whose eyes had lit up at the sight of him like a kid's on a present-surrounded Christmas tree.

I grumbled under my breath and propped my elbow on the reception desk and my chin in the cup of my palm. I continued to glare at the wall, the glare turning into a full on glower at the sound of a feminine giggle.

I huffed and pushed back on my chair restlessly, flailing my arms out to balance myself when the chair threatened to topple backwards with the power of my aggressive restlessness.

Everyone else had left INKarnate, the tattoo studio in Leith that we worked in. I was the full time receptionist and would continue to be the full time receptionist until I started art college after the summer. Then I'd drop to part time. Cole, my fiancé, was the manager and head tattooist. Stu owned the place but his visits were rare now. Rae, my best friend and ex flatmate, was the tattooist and tattoo removal specialist, and Simon, gorgeous, alpha-man gay Simon, was our other tattooist and piercings guy.

Both of them had gone home to their respective lovers an hour ago.

Why?

Because it was Valentine's Day.

Actually it was Cole's and my first Valentine's Day together... and he was tattooing some flirty, giggling stunner while I waited impatiently for him to finish up.

I crossed my arms over my chest and glowered out at the street that was artificially lit up by street lights and the headlamps of passing vehicles. Now, I knew for a fact that Cole was not flirting back with the brunette. Somehow, after everything I'd been through, I managed to find the one guy in the world who looked like something out of a really sexy Greek myth (yes, he was *that* gorgeous), had the principles of a Disney hero, the style and attitude of a biker, the soul of an artist, and the honor and skills of an honest to goodness warrior.

I may have thought about how to describe Cole perfectly a lot. Really *a lot*.

Now of course he wasn't *perfect*. If he was perfect we'd be on our first Valentine's Day date by now, but he was definitely one of the good ones, which was why I trusted him implicitly.

Even when he had sexy women on his tattoo chair.

"Shortcake."

I whipped around to see Cole standing in the doorway of the back hall where the tattoo rooms were. “Yeah?”

He nodded his head toward his room. “My customer is feeling faint. Do you have any chocolate?”

Hmm. The very suspicious part of me wondered how a girl could go from giggling to feeling faint all of a sudden. I swept my gaze over my fiancé, taking in his very tall, very athletic build. The tattoos, the scruff, and that face. And those eyes. Those green eyes that could make my underwear melt right off of me.

Yeah, I wasn't buying that his customer felt faint.

I smiled sweetly. “I'll bring some in.”

He smiled back at me. “Thanks, sweetheart. We'll get out of here shortly.”

I nodded and he disappeared back to his room. Grabbing the chocolate from the mini-fridge in the cupboard behind my desk, I then hurried over to one of the mirrors we had set up in the studio so people could look at piercings or tattoos or whatever. When the brunette had first gone into Cole's room for her appointment I'd changed into my dress for our date. I'd then covered it up with my coat so Cole wouldn't see it until we were ready to go.

It was time to disband with that idea. I shrugged off the coat and dumped it on the couch. Staring at my reflection I gave myself a careful nod. I was wearing an LBD. My favorite one actually. Cole liked me in black. This one he'd seen me in but he didn't get to appreciate it fully because we weren't together. I wore it to his birthday party last year when there was animosity, misunderstanding and incredible sexual tension between us.

I thought I'd give him the chance to get me out of it this time.

Along with the dress, I was wearing black suede ankle boots that made my short, slender legs look longer.

“Shortcake?” he called from his room.

Oops. I was taking too long.

Clutching the chocolate I sauntered into the back hall, my heels clicking against the tiled flooring. I stopped in the doorway of Cole's room to see him sitting on a stool and the brunette relaxed on his chair.

There was no sign of paleness to be found.

Cole raised an eyebrow at the sight of me as I walked slowly in so he wouldn't miss one bit of the dress.

“Chocolate.” I handed it to him, suppressing a smile.

He took it and handed it to his customer without even looking at her. “When did the quick change act happen?”

“While you were in here.” I shrugged and smoothed my hands down the dress. “I wanted to be ready.”

“Good call,” he said, still eating me up.

“Do you have a date for Valentine’s Day?” the brunette asked, her eyes on me as she nibbled on the chocolate.

Feeling faint my butt. What a waste of my ‘for the fainties’ chocolate. There were people who really needed that chocolate!

“I do. But he’s late.”

Cole shot me a look, his lips curling up at the corners. “What an asshole.”

I gave a ‘well, whatcha gonna do?’ shrug. “Do you think he’ll like the dress?”

“I think he will love the dress.”

“Aye, you look good,” the brunette added before turning to Cole with flirt in her eyes. “What about you? Do you have a date tonight?”

I just stopped myself from rolling my eyes.

Cole wasn’t stupid. He got flirted with all the time. He knew she was flirting with him, and he knew that’s why I hadn’t left the room after delivering the chocolate. “With my fiancé.”

She almost choked. “You’re engaged.” She looked entirely put out, like she had a right to be or something. “Well she’s a lucky girl.”

“She knows.” I wiggled my left hand at her where the beautiful diamond Cole had put on it months ago, sparkled.

And everything finally came together for her. Cole ducked away, hiding his grin as he pretended to clean up.

“Oh, you two.” She gestured between us. “Right. I missed that.” She gave me a sheepish smile. “I guess I’m holding you guys up. I’ll just go.”

“Only if you’re feeling better,” I said with as much genuine feeling as I could inject into it. I did a pretty good job pretending because she now looked guilty.

“I’m much better thanks.” She got up off the chair. “I’ll just pay and get out of here.”

“I’ll take care of that.” I stared at my fiancé’s back. “I take it you gave her the after care talk?”

He glanced over his shoulder. “I did.”

“Thanks again, Cole.” She gave him a little wave.

“You’re welcome.” He gave her a chin nod before turning back to pretending to be busy.

As soon as she was out of the door I rolled my eyes at his back and then followed her out.

The brunette’s cheeks were flushed with embarrassment as she paid and I actually started to feel bad for her. Once she’d left I wandered back into Cole’s room and leaned against the doorway.

He turned around, giving me a thorough once over that made me instantly overheated.

“You really need to make it clear to them that you’re not single.”

Cole grimaced. "Shannon, I wasn't flirting back with her."

"I know that. But you should have seen her face when she was paying." I winced. "I actually felt sorry for her. She was mortified."

"What can I do?" he shrugged. "If a woman didn't flirt back with me I would take it to mean she wasn't interested. You'd think any sane person would get the hint."

"Oh really." I stepped into the room, my arms crossed over my chest. "Because I distinctly remember not flirting back with you and you still coming on to me."

Cole raised an eyebrow. "Shortcake, you didn't need to flirt back with your words. You were practically panting."

"Ugh. You are so arrogant. I was not panting."

"You were panting." He nodded, still grinning that ridiculous but sexy as sin grin.

I narrowed my eyes on him, ignoring the tingles of arousal between my legs and in the swell of my breasts.

This made him grin harder and then he raised both eyebrows suggestively. "I'm making you hot right now, aren't I?"

"Yes, but that's beside the point." I turned on my heels and walked out.

"Where are you going?"

"To get your Valentine's Day gift. Perhaps it will distract you from your ego."

I heard his laughter as he followed me out into the main studio.

Unlocking the cabinet drawer behind the desk I pulled out his present and handed it to him.

Cole took it with a curious smile on his face. "What is it?"

"Open it and see."

My stomach fluttered with excited nervousness as he carefully tore the wrapping off. He raised his eyebrows as he stared down at the gift in his hands and I had to stop myself from crying out, 'Well?'

He looked up from the photograph I'd had framed. "How?"

Cole had these really cool black and white photographs in his flat. The one above his bed was my favorite. It was taken from the backseat of a classic American convertible. The driver was turned in profile. He wore dark aviators and smoke billowed from his lips as he seemed to stare out at the world in boredom, and beyond the car was a deep canyon, giving the impression that the car was mere inches from the edge.

As cool as Cole's photographs were, none of them were personal.

The one in Cole's hands was.

It was a candid shot of the two of us at a beach in Longniddry, a coastal village just outside of the city. We'd visited there last autumn with Cole's sister Jo, her husband Cam, their daughter Belle, and their best friend Nate and his wife Olivia and their kids. Cam and

Nate grew up there and their parents still lived there. It was a gorgeous place.

Anyhow, Nate was a photo journalist and a bit of a camera nut. He'd taken lots of pictures that weekend and when I was scrolling through them I found one of Cole and me that was so cool I asked him to save it for me. He'd gone one further and printed it out and had it professionally framed.

I'd kept it for a special occasion to give to Cole.

"How?" he said again, his eyes filled with tenderness.

"Nate."

"Of course," he murmured and looked back at the photograph, stroking the image of me with his fingers.

I shivered. "You like it then?"

"I love it," he said, his voice hoarse with emotion.

The image wasn't your typical cheesy, lovey-dovey shot of us cuddling or kissing or anything like that. Instead I was sitting on a stone-built wall that ran along part of the beach, my legs dangling, my hands gripping lightly at the stone at either side of my hips. My coat was open and billowing slightly in the wind and my hair was billowing more than slightly behind me, wild and free like always. I was staring up at Cole, my expression soft, curious.

Cole was standing on the sand, just a little in front of me, his hands burrowed in the pockets of his jeans as the light jacket he wore didn't have any. He wore a beanie cap that Nate had given him to borrow and he was staring contentedly off past the camera at what I knew was the water.

We looked young and cool and interesting and if I may so myself... kind of hot.

"I thought you could hang it in the flat."

"Definitely." Cole looked up at me and grinned. "This is fucking cool."

I giggled and nodded as he pulled me into him with his free arm. "I thought so. I thought it would be nice to have it so when we're old and gray we can look back and remember how we were."

He kissed me softly and pulled back to say something just as the studio door opened.

I frowned, turning around to tell the intruder we were closed when I stopped short at the sight of our boss, Stu.

"Right on time," Cole said.

On time for what? "Stu?" I looked from him to Cole and then back to him. "What are you doing here?"

"Wee fairy." Stu grinned. "How are you doing, lass?"

"I'm fine. Confused but fine. You?"

"Glad my wife hates Valentine's Day as much as me." He chuckled to himself and looked past me to Cole. "Ready?"

“For what?” I pulled out of Cole’s arms, hoping my Valentine’s Day wasn’t about to be ruined.

“Your present.” Cole carefully placed the photograph on the reception desk. “Stu is tattooing your name on my chest.”

At that grand announcement he and Stu started striding toward the back rooms.

My name? Across his chest?

“Are you crazy?” I hurried after him, trying not to slip on the smooth tiles in my heels. “Cole!” I caught up with them just as they were getting organized in Cole’s room. “Can we please talk? Just for a minute. In private.”

“Shannon—”

“Please.” I pleaded.

He sighed. “Stu, I’ll be a minute.”

Stu grinned at us knowingly. “That’s right. You talk some sense into him, wee fairy.”

Ignoring that I grabbed Cole’s hand and dragged him back out into the main studio. “You’re not doing this.”

Cole immediately glowered at me. “I was hoping for a better reaction than this. Something along the lines of ‘that’s so romantic, Cole, I can’t believe you love me enough to get me etched permanently across your chest’.

“It’s so romantic.” I squeezed his hand in reassurance. “I love that you love me that much, but... let’s be serious here. Anything could happen. We have no idea what will happen. And yes, I hope to God that in fifty years time we still have the photograph,” I gestured to it on the reception desk, “and we’re looking back at it together. But we don’t know with one hundred percent surety that we will. A tattoo, Cole. It’s forever.”

“But we’re forever. We’re getting married”

I melted. “I know. You know I love you. But a tattoo seems like a bad idea. Almost like you’re jinxing us.”

“Jinxing us?”

“Mmmhmm.”

He huffed out an exasperated sigh. “I’m not jinxing us, Shannon. You and I are forever. I’m not going anywhere. Are you?”

“No, of course not!” I moved into him, slipping my arms around his back and tilting my head back so I could meet his gaze. “I don’t want you to do something you’ll regret.”

In answer Cole wrapped his arms around me so tightly every inch of me was pressed against every inch of him. “I’ll never regret anything about you.”

As I found myself melting into him again, giving in, a sudden thought occurred to me and I blurted out, “Make it an ‘S’!”

Cole’s head jerked back in surprise at my outburst. “What?”

“The tattoo.” I patted his chest where his heart was. “Just make it an ‘S’. We’ll know it stands for me but if anything ever happened you could easily change it into another word.”

“Nothing is going to happen, but—” He covered my mouth with his hand knowing I was opening it to argue again, “If it will make you feel better about the whole thing, I will just get a stylized ‘S’.”

I grinned against his skin and he moved his hand, returning the smile.

“I just thought of something,” I said, trailing my fingertips over his chest. “This is a two-fold present.”

“And how’s that?”

Heat moved through me at my dirty thoughts. “You need to watch your new tattoo tonight... which means I get to be on top.”

Cole shook with quiet laughter. “It was all in my plans.”

“I’m sure it was.” I stood up on tiptoe to kiss him. “Hurry and then let’s skip dinner tonight.”

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“Lie down on your back.” I stood at the foot of the bed in my skimpy black dress and heels with my hands on my hips.

Cole’s lips twitched with aroused amusement as he sat on the bed before me, wearing nothing. I’d just gotten done ordering him out of his clothes, which he did with a sensual amount of teasing that had me more than hot and bothered.

He stared up at me with those gorgeous green eyes of his, and I think he knew I was itching to touch every inch of him. Every inch but the square on his chest that was covered with cling film, protecting his new tattoo. A beautiful stylized ‘S’ right across his heart.

I forced myself to stop smiling at the tattoo and reiterated my demand.

“Are you getting undressed first?” he said.

“Not until you’re lying across that bed ready and willing.”

He chuckled and did as I asked, his hard-on straining to full attention.

I licked my lips, feeling the wet slickness between my legs. “My turn,” I whispered, feeling my nipples pebble against the fabric of my bra as I unzipped my dress.

Cole braced his head on his hands and watched me with hot eyes.

First I slipped the dress off and stepped out of it, wearing just my bra and underwear and the black heels. My hair tumbled around my shoulders and I let Cole look his fill for a moment before I reached down to unzip my boots.

I kicked those off and then unclasped my bra.

My breasts swelled under his darkening gaze and my nipples tightened into hard points.

“Fuck,” he said softly, his body tensing and his arousal throbbing and straining more toward his stomach.

I pushed my underwear down my legs and then crawled up onto the bed, moving over him on my hands and knees, my fingertips trailing across his skin as I worked my way upwards until I stopped at his erection.

“Shortcake,” he groaned as my head dipped.

Taking him in my mouth I felt his thighs tense under my fingertips. My tongue trailed along a vein on the underside of his cock and Cole dragged in a breath on a hiss of excitement as I began to suck, bobbing my head so my mouth slid slowly up and down his length.

“Shannon,” he groaned through gritted teeth, pumping his hips.

I released him, my gaze promising him that I’d finished what I’d started after we both enjoyed the main event. Trying not to hurry to the main event and fighting my body against that, I kissed a path up along his roped torso as I crawled up his body. Knees on either side of his hips, I shivered as I felt his cock brush high on my inner thigh. I pressed my lips over his right nipple, avoiding his left side. I flicked my tongue over him, my moan muffled against his body as he cupped my breasts, my own taut nipples eager for his touch. When his thumbs brushed them, I shuddered, a sigh escaping from between my lips.

“Shortcake,” Cole growled, squeezing my nipples between his fingers and thumbs. I barely had time to recover from the streaks of heat that shot toward my sex, when his right hand coasted down my stomach, heading between my legs.

As two fingers slid into my slick passage, my back arched, giving his left hand better access to my breast, and my hips surged against his right.

“I need you.” I whimpered, shaking my head as I dislodged him. “All of you.”

He gripped my hips as I positioned myself over him and we both cried out as I slammed down on him, Cole’s hips jerking up off the bed in reaction.

We found a delicious, pressure-building rhythm quickly and with my hands braced on the bed beside his thighs, I leaned back slightly so his cock thrust into me at the most satisfying angle. I moved slowly, building myself toward orgasm.

Our eyes held as I rode him, feeling sexy and powerful at his gleaming expression, watching the way his green eyes darkened on my breasts, on my hair swinging across my back. His grip on me tightened, urging me on. The heat between us built and built, our bodies slick with sweat.

The coiling pleasure low in my belly began to build in pressure, my excitement increasing at the intimacy that matched our passion—our eyes holding, filled with love, the sound of my uncontrolled breaths and mews of pleasure, the intoxicating smell of sex... and Cole groaning at me to come.

“Cole!” I cried out, my body moving faster up and down his length, rushing me toward climax. My muscles clenched around Cole as I came, wave after wave of pleasure pulsing around his cock.

As my limbs melted with satisfaction, Cole started pumping his hips beneath me, lifting me against his hard thrusts until I felt him stiffen seconds before he came inside me.

His grip loosened and he relaxed under me, his chest rising and falling with his rapid breaths.

I leaned over him, careful still not to touch his tattoo and I kissed him—a long, deep, sweet kiss that made my inner muscles squeeze around him. I broke apart just far enough so I could talk, shivering as he coasted his fingers lightly over my naked spine. “Our first Valentine’s Day was a success,” I whispered against his mouth.

He nodded and squeezed me closer. “Every single one is going to be.”

“All fifty of them?” I teased.

“You fucking bet your arse, Shortcake. This here,” he encircled my waist with his large hands, “every inch of you is mine. Forever.” He glanced down at his chest and then back into my eyes, “‘S’ or ‘Shannon’... it will always mean one thing. That I love you.”

“I love the tattoo,” I promised him as I gently circled the area around it with my forefinger. “It will always mean that to me too.”

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Shortcake.” He kissed me softly.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Cole.”

THE END