
HIS BEST FRIEND'S GIRL

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“**W**hat I wouldn’t give for a piece of that.”
Skylar Redmond, owner of Sky Bar in downtown Austin, glanced at Kat Stiller, who was licking her lips and looking at Skylar’s best friend like he was a fresh slab of meat and she’d just come off an all-veggie diet.

“You’ve got a thing for Matt?” Sky asked as she refreshed Kat’s strawberry daiquiri and slid it to her from the working side of the bar.

“Yeah. He’s so hot.” She fanned her hand in front of her pretty face, her big green eyes wide as she admired Matt from afar. “Just look at him. All that muscle, those blue eyes, the hair and those hands. God those hands... I bet he really knows how to use them to get his kink on in the bedroom.” Kat sighed and spun on her padded stool to glance around the room, one filled with hot soldiers who frequented Sky Bar on a regular basis. “Too bad he’s more interested in that book he’s reading than he is in getting laid.”

“He’s studying for his MCATs,” Sky explained, stealing another glance at Matt as he focused intently on the pages in

front of him, oblivious to everyone and everything around him as he huddled at the far end of the bar. She looked at the jar of peanut butter beside him. Honest to God, if he didn't start eating properly he was going to get sick. He might be crazy busy seven days a week, switching careers from an army field ambulance technician to a civilian medical doctor, but no man could live off of peanuts alone. She grabbed her iPad and punched in an order that went directly to the kitchen. When Matt wasn't in class, studying, or helping with the training of service dogs, he worked at the bar with her, and every cent he made went toward saving for med school. But as his best friend since childhood, and current boss, she was not going to let him starve.

"You think that's all it is?" Kat asked, crinkling her nose.

Pool balls banged and laughter and ribbing could be heard from a half a dozen or so ex-soldiers standing around the pool table. As Sky listened to the camaraderie among friends, she grabbed a cloth and began wiping down the glassware that Dean had brought from the dish pit out back.

"What do you mean?" Sky asked. "What else would it be?"

"I mean, maybe he's not...you know...into women." She shrugged. "Not that there is anything wrong with that. But it could account for his lack of interest."

Sky nearly burst out laughing. Kat was right, there was nothing wrong with that, but she knew Matt. In their teenage years, he was one the biggest hound dogs she knew. He and their other best friend, Caleb Roth, had to fight the girls off with a stick. Those two bad boys from the wrong side of the tracks had their pick of girls. She would know, since they all hung out in Caleb's basement and she'd accidentally walked in on them with their girlfriends a time or two.

"No, you're wrong. He likes his women. Believe me, back in the day he had his fair share." Then again, Sky hadn't seen him with anyone since he returned home from his tour over-

seas a year ago, and plenty of girls at Sky Bar had tried to get his attention. She could only chalk up his lack of enthusiasm to the important entrance exam he was studying for. Switching careers at this point was no easy task, and everyone knew the MCATs were hard to pass, even when prepared.

Kat took a sip of her drink and toyed with her straw. "Or maybe he's already into someone else."

"Yeah, probably the girl in his anatomy book," Sky said, grinning. "That's the only action he's been getting lately." She placed the polished glass on the rack and reached for another. "Besides, I thought you and Josh Mansfield had a thing."

"Yeah, Josh is great, and we've been having some fun, but...I don't know, maybe I'm looking for something more, you know?"

"More?"

She rounded her shoulder and hugged her belly. "I think my biological clock is ticking. Every time I hold Tallulah's sweet baby girl Lexi, all I can think about is having my own child."

Sky nodded as the kitchen bell sounded behind her. "I know what you mean." She grabbed Matt's sandwich from the serving shelf and slid it down the counter to him.

It hit his textbook with a thud, and his head lifted. He took note of the sandwich, then his glance went to her. He gave her a big smile and Sky just laughed, pointed at his plate and said, "Eat."

She turned back to Kat, who was studying her carefully.

"So if you know what I mean, does that mean you want to be in a serious relationship too?" Kat asked.

"Sure," she said, then closed her mouth, not wanting to admit that she was approaching thirty and the one guy she wanted she couldn't have. But she didn't want to go down that depressing road. Instead she redirected the conversation and asked, "I take it Josh isn't the settling-down kind?"

“No, but Matt sure seems like a forever kind of guy, doesn’t he?”

She turned and looked at Matt as he bit into his sandwich. He followed it with a swig of soda, then licked his fingers clean—an action that seemed to have Kat squirming on her stool. Honestly, she’d never thought about Matt in that sense before. He’d just always been Matt to her. Playful, laid-back and easygoing most times, yet serious when he needed to be, like when he was studying.

“Yeah, I guess he could be a forever kind of guy,” she said with a shrug.

“You guess?” Kat arched a perfectly manicured brow. “Shouldn’t you know? You are best friends, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, we are.”

Kat gave her a once-over, a sly smirk spreading across her face. “Unless there is something more going on between you two that I don’t know about. I mean, you are constantly together and he’s always giving you piggyback rides.” She planted her elbow on the table and opened her palm toward the ceiling. “Like I said, he’s a guy who knows how to get his kink on.” She went quiet, thoughtful for a moment, then wagged her index finger back and forth between Sky and Matt. “Is there something I should know? Are you two...you know...getting your kink on?”

Sky nearly laughed again. “Hardly. We’re just friends. We go way back.” Matt, Caleb, her—the three musketeers. “We’re not getting our...” she paused and did air quotes around the words, “...kink on.”

Kat wagged her eyebrows. “But you want to, right?”

“No! And for the record I’m not into kink.”

“Well I am, and I want the whole package. A good, stable guy who knows how to rock my world in the bedroom.”

Sky would settle for the good, stable guy. She’d never had anyone rock her world in the bedroom, and a kind, caring

man was more important to her than that. "And you think Matt is that man?"

"You tell me. You're his best friend."

"To be honest, I've never thought about Matt and marriage in the same sentence before." Nor did she ever think about Matt and kink, but for some strange reason now that Kat had planted that idea in her head, she couldn't quite seem to get it out. "I guess I just never pictured him wearing a tux and standing at the altar."

Kat frowned into her drink. "That's because you didn't see him at the wedding last year."

"What happened at the wedding?" Matt was the best man at Jenny and Ving's wedding last summer, and Sky was still upset she had to miss the ceremony. She'd come down with a serious stomach flu and no way would she fly to Mississippi under those circumstances and risk giving her germs to anyone in the bridal party. Jenny had sent her a copy of the video but she'd yet to find the time to watch it.

"He looked so good. Definitely like he *belonged* at the altar. Women were throwing themselves at him, and he was always so kind, polite and gentlemanly when he declined."

As Sky eyed Kat, and took in the gloom on her face, she guessed the girl was talking from her own personal experiences with Matt. "He's different than most guys." Kat twirled her straw around her mouth and angled her head to see him. "He's not a player, at least not anymore. And he was so fiercely protective of Jenny and Ving, making sure they had everything they needed and stayed stress free during the entire time. I just bet he'd be crazy possessive of his woman too, inside the bedroom and out." She gave a wistful sigh and added, "The stories he told at the dinner party were funny yet so sweet, you know? I really think he is the whole package."

Sky couldn't help but smile, because Kat was right. Matt was funny and sweet and extremely protective of those he cared

about. With no mother to raise him and an abusive father who continuously told him he'd never amount to anything, Matt was anything but a chip off the old block. In fact, he swore he'd never be anything like his old man. He'd spent many nights sleeping in Caleb's basement when his father went on a rampage. Caleb's parents might not have had much to offer, but they opened their hearts to Matt and gave him whatever they could.

"Kat?" she asked, unable to get Kat's assessment of Matt out of her head.

"Yeah."

"What makes you think Matt is into kink?"

A small, knowing smile curled up her lip. "I have a knack for these things, and believe me, he's the kind of guy who knows how to hold a girl down hard and give it to her good."

Oddly enough, a fine shiver moved through Sky, even though she wasn't into that kind of thing. In an effort to disguise her sudden interest, she pointed to the door when it opened. "Tallulah and Garrett are here."

Kat smiled and waved Tallulah over as her husband, Garrett, made his way to the pool table. Like Sky and Matt, Tallulah and Kat also went way back to childhood. Kat had only recently moved to Austin and started working at the hospital as a physical therapist so the two could be closer—and also because, according to her, the guys were way hotter in Texas.

Garrett joined his comrades as Sky went to work on making Tallulah a daiquiri. Tallulah slid onto the stool next to Kat. "What's up?" she asked. "You two looked like you were in a serious conversation."

Kat twisted on her stool and gestured with a nod toward the end of the bar. "Oh, I was just questioning Matt's sexual preferences."

"His sexual preferences?" Tallulah's dark lashes blinked

rapidly as she rolled her eyes. "Is this because he never paid you a lick of attention at the wedding last year and keeps himself holed up in that corner studying?"

"Can we not talk about Matt and licking in the same sentence?" Kat groaned. "And if you want to know the truth, then yes, it is because of that. No matter how hard I tried, I could not get that man's attention." She frowned. "I'm starting to think I'm losing it."

Sky looked at the flamboyant, gorgeous woman with the long, thick, chestnut hair that never went frizzy in Austin's humid weathers. "Losing it? Hardly. You're gorgeous, Kat. I wish I had..."

Her words fell off as the heavy oak door opened once again and Caleb Roth sauntered in. Sky's body warmed all over when he shot her a panty-dropping smile that traveled all the way to her toes, stopping in a few erogenous areas along the way. Unable to help herself, she let her gaze slide downward to take in his easy gait and the familiar way he kicked out his long legs with the same lazy ease Sky remembered from their youth. When Caleb had joined the army years ago, he left their hometown of Austin a boy, but he came back a man. A hot, sexy man who would never think of her as anything more than the pigtailed tomboy who used to climb trees with him and Matt.

"Ah, Sky..."

"What?" she asked, turning back to her friends as they both looked at her with wide-eyed curiosity. She resumed wiping down the glasses, busying her hands and pretending Caleb's mere presence hadn't thrown her off her game.

Tallulah tapped a manicured finger on the oak bar top. "Don't *what* us."

Sky reached for another glass, avoiding Tallulah's raised eyebrows. "Meaning?"

“Meaning, what the hell was that all about?” Tallulah asked.

“I’ll tell you what that’s all about,” Kat piped in. “Sky here has the hots for Caleb.”

Tallulah’s brown eyes widened. “Oh my God, it’s true, isn’t it? When did this happen? Tell me everything.”

“What’s true?” Amber, Sky’s head waitress and good friend, asked as she came back to the counter with her tray in hand.

Sky’s mind raced as three sets of eyes stared at her. She could lie, but what was the point? They’d all see through it anyway. “Okay, fine, it’s true. I have the hots for Caleb. It started when he returned home from overseas last year. There, I said it. Are you happy?”

“Like hell I’m happy,” Amber said, planting one hand on her hip in usual Amber fashion. For a minute Sky thought Amber was upset because *she* wanted Caleb but then her friend’s lips quirked and she pointed a finger directly at Mr. Hottie himself as he walked over to talk to Matt. “I’ll be happy when you go over there and do something about it.”

“No way.” Sky grabbed Amber’s wrist and lowered her hand as she shot Kat a glance. “You’re not the one losing it, Kat. I am.” She gave a disgruntled shake of her head. “Honest to God, I swear the only way I can get a guy to look at me is to tie a pork chop around my neck.”

Her friends laughed and she couldn’t help but laugh along with them, even though it was the sad truth. She hadn’t been with a guy in ages, and if things didn’t pick up soon, she was going to give up hope and start hoarding cats.

Then again, it wasn’t like she’d been putting herself out there. After finishing four years of college, switching from an English degree to a business degree so she could successfully take over her father’s bar when he suddenly passed away from a heart attack a few years back, all she did was work. Her

mom died during childbirth and it had been just her and her father growing up. They were very close and keeping the bar a success was important to her. Not only because it was his pride and joy and he'd named it after her, but because he'd entrusted her with it. That meant everything to her. Someday down the road she could get her English degree and write the book she always wanted to, but right now she needed to put all her energy into the bar and making it a success.

Her heart ached as she thought more about her late father, who she missed dearly. He was one of a kind: smart, successful...a man who started out working in the dish pit, saving every penny he had until he could buy the bar and make it his own. He was kind, giving and cared a great deal about others, even offering his friends odd jobs when they were down on their luck. Her whole life she knew she wanted to marry a man who was as compassionate as her father.

She stole a quick glance at Caleb as he walked to the pool table and picked up a stick. She suspected he was that man. He'd come from very little and had worked hard to get where he was. Now he was an army doctor working up in the San Antonio clinic, giving back to the community and caring for the sick. He usually traveled to Austin on the weekends to hang out with her and Matt. When the weather was good and everyone could get the time off, they all often took off to his cottage at the lake.

"If you like him, then do something about it," Kat said, like it was just so simple. If only it were. "Wouldn't it be worse if you never tried?"

Sky lowered her voice, not wanting anyone to overhear them, even though no one else was sitting near them at the bar and Matt was at the other end, out of earshot. The last thing she wanted was for Matt to know how much she wanted their other best friend and make him feel like the third wheel, uncomfortable and out of place.

“He doesn’t see me as anything more than a friend,” Sky said. “And he never will. He still calls me Skywalker. As in Luke Skywalker. You know, like I’m one of the guys.”

Tallulah leaned to her side and nudged Kat with her shoulder. “Then make him see you as a girl.” She shared a smirk with Kat, like the two had a dirty little secret. “Believe me, if anyone can school you on seduction and teach you how to get a guy to notice you as something more, it’s our Kat here.”

Kat grinned. “You’re not opposed to bending over a lot, are you?”

Sky sucked in a quick breath as her mind envisioned her doing just that. God, how naughty, wicked and...*kinky* that sounded. “You’re joking, right?” Sky asked. Both girls knew her well enough to know she wasn’t bold, like Kat, and had never come right out and seduced a guy before. But dammit, she was tired of going unnoticed.

“No. You have a great ass and it’s time he knew it.” Kat slid a napkin across the bar top. “Go over to the pool table and drop this in front of him. When you bend to pick it up, be sure to arch your back and let that little skirt you’re wearing ride up.” Kat winked. “Then you’ll have him right where you want him. And believe me, girlfriend—” she snapped her fingers, “—he’ll be hard as that stick he’s holding.”

Sky laughed along with her friends. While that sounded devious, and getting him hard would be nice, she truly wanted him to like her for more than her “great ass”. She wanted what Kat wanted and Tallulah had—a forever kind of guy—because settling down with a family someday sounded just about right. While sex was nice, it wasn’t her main priority. Finding the right man to settle down with was.

“Well, are you going to go for it?” Tallulah asked.

Sky let loose a long, slow breath and planted her hands on

the bar top. "So let me get this straight. You want me to go over to the pool table, drop this napkin, and bend over to show off my ass because you think that's what it's going to take to get Caleb to finally notice me as something more than his tomboy friend."

All three girls inched back a bit, a strange look coming over their faces. Kat and Tallulah turned their attention to their drinks and Amber scurried off to attend a table.

"What?" Sky asked, wondering if she'd said something offensive. Then again, that whole scandalous setup was *their* idea, not hers, so she had no clue as to why they were all of a sudden acting aloof.

"Thanks for the sandwich," Matt said from behind her, his mouth near her ear, his warm breath fanning over her skin.

She spun around and when she came face-to-face with her childhood best friend, she knew in an instant he'd overheard their private conversation.

With an almost tortured look on his face, Matt looked down and said, "I...ah...I think you dropped something."

She followed his gaze to the floor to find the napkin lying across her shoes like it was some clandestine clue in a secret, devious plot—which of course it was.

And now Matt knew about it!

Matt adjusted his backpack over his shoulder and swallowed down the lump pushing into his throat as he took note of the pink flush staining Sky's cheeks. With embarrassment written all over her face, she opened her mouth and closed it again, her expressive eyes portraying her mortification.

Coming to her rescue, he worked to keep things light and hurried out with, "Caleb wants to hit up a movie so I'm going to take off for a bit."

"You finished studying?" she said breezily, but he could tell she was struggling to follow his lead and keep the conversation casual.

"For now. Doctor's orders." He gestured toward Caleb as he put his cue stick away and started toward them. "But I'll be back before closing to help you lock up."

In a swift move she kicked the napkin away, like she was trying to dispose of evidence. Her friends kept one eye on their drinks and the other on them as they pretended not to eavesdrop.

"You don't have to do that." Sky smoothed her hand

through her shoulder length blonde hair. She pushed the strands off her face, only for them to recoil back in place when she let them go. With obstinate resolve written all over her, she jutted her chin out. "I'm quite capable of locking up myself."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," he said. He also knew *independent* was her middle name—so was *stubborn*. She'd been that way her whole life. Little tomboy Sky might have been a tough kid growing up—compliments of having no mother, something they both shared—but she was also kind, and the only girl in the neighborhood he and Caleb allowed into the half-assed tree house they'd built in Caleb's yard. Regardless, tenacious or not, there had been a rash of break-ins around the neighborhood lately, and the bar wasn't in the best part of town, which meant he didn't want her walking to their apartment building alone, no matter how capable she was. Plus, that asshole Simon Harris was here drinking with his construction crew tonight, and he didn't trust the guy or like the way he looked at Sky. "But I have to check on Gran's house anyway." He liked to do a perimeter check every night and make sure she'd set the security alarm before going to sleep. "And it's on the way to our place." Well, technically it wasn't their place. They lived in the same apartment complex, not the same apartment.

As she stood there staring up at him like she was waiting for him to say more, the full impact of her admission suddenly hit like a sucker punch. Christ, how could he possibly be expected to keep the conversation going—not to mention his shit together—after hearing what she planned to do to with that damn napkin. With Caleb. But now that she'd said it, put her feelings for their other best friend right out there in the open, there was one thing he did know. He could no longer ignore it.

No, he could no longer overlook the way she acted when

Caleb was around. The way she all of a sudden started staring at him differently and touching him more frequently, letting her fingers linger on his arm, his leg, his face more than she used to.

Fuck.

Sky knew he'd overheard them, which meant they'd have to eventually talk about it. Hell, they talked about everything else under the sun, everything except how she really felt about their best friend. But he didn't need to hear her voice the word to know what was going on with her, or how perfect his two best childhood friends would be together.

Caleb was a good guy and had a lot to offer, and, honestly, he wanted only what was best for Sky. That's all he'd ever wanted. Even though he'd been in love with her since the first time she skinned her knee on the playground, then threw a little dirt on it instead of crying, he understood he, Matt James—a guy who barely finished high school and took a front-line, expendable position in the army—was not the guy for her. No, she deserved someone better. Someone like Caleb.

What the hell did he have to offer a girl like her, anyway? Not a goddamn thing. At least not until he completed his medical degree, and he wasn't even sure he could pass the entrance test. He scoffed. Maybe on some deeper level he'd changed paths because he figured if he ever amounted to more he might actually be worthy of her. But none of that mattered now, because her feelings for Caleb were clear and he wouldn't do a damn thing to stand in their way.

"Matt..." she began, then stopped talking when Caleb leaned over the counter and tugged her hair.

"Hey, Skywalker," he said, a warm, familiar lilt to his voice as he called her by her childhood nickname.

"Caleb," she responded as he flashed a charming smile her way. Matt shook his head. He loved Caleb like a brother,

would take a bullet for him, but damned if the man couldn't charm the bite off a snake.

Sky turned from Caleb to Matt, her eyes pleading. His heart hitched. Jesus, she was so perfect, and so beautiful. She had an innocent sensuality about her that she had no idea she possessed. But she was soon going to be his best friend's girl, he quickly reminded himself. So it was hands off from here on out.

"Matt," she murmured in a breathless whisper.

Wanting her to know her secret was safe with him, Matt put his mouth near her ear and whispered, "We'll talk later." Unable to help himself, he breathed in her sweet smell, and when her hair brushed over his face, he stifled a groan. His mind instantly envisioned her splayed out on his bed, pinned beneath his body, screaming out *his* name as he pounded into her with long, hard strokes that would make her forget her own. He coughed to hide the things he was feeling, then straightened to look at Caleb. "Ready?" he asked.

"Wait, aren't you coming?" Caleb asked Sky.

"No, I can't."

Matt frowned. He really wished she'd kick back and find time for herself more often, but she'd given her assistant manager the night off, which meant the responsibility of locking up rested with her.

"Why not?" Caleb asked.

Sky waved her hand around the bar. "I have to work."

Caleb fished his keys from his pocket. "Aw, come on. You know what they say about all work and no play."

"That's right," Matt said.

She punched Matt in the arm. "You're one to talk."

Slipping into play mode, Matt grabbed her arms and pinned them behind her back. "Are you saying I'm dull?"

She wiggled and her body pressed against his. Their groins collided and when his cock thickened he realized what he was

doing. It was time to stop playing with Sky...time to stop touching her and thinking about her as anything other than a friend.

Caleb twirled his key chain around his finger. "At least tell me you're free next weekend." Next weekend Caleb would be leaving his twenties behind. Two weeks after that, Matt would be saying farewell to his.

Matt let her hands go and stepped back, working to get his shit together when she grinned at Caleb, a gleam in her eyes. "I wouldn't miss your thirtieth birthday for the world, Caleb."

Caleb eyed her. "Ah, should I be scared? You look like you have something on your mind."

"I just thought a little payback was in order."

"Payback?" Caleb's curious glance went from Sky, to Matt back to Sky again. "What the hell you talking about?"

"You don't remember putting me over your knee and spanking me twenty-nine times on my birthday last year?"

Caleb's grin returned. "Ah, I think you had one too many celebratory drinks, Skywalker. It was Matt who held you down and spanked you, not me."

"Oh," she said, her eyes going wide as she looked at Matt. When their gazes met and locked, something strange moved over her face, something he couldn't quite identify, and that was saying a lot, considering she was such an easy read to him.

"And just for the record—" Caleb pointed a finger at Matt, "—he was also the one who put the icing on your nose, not me. So don't get any ideas."

Matt shrugged and walked around the bar. "Gran's old tradition."

Kat cleared her throat and when all eyes turned to her, Kat zeroed in on Sky. Her lips curled up at the corners, like she and Sky knew a secret. "Spankings and icing." She took a

long pull from her straw, then said, "Imagine that." She turned to Tallulah. "Can't wait for my birthday."

Caleb turned his attention to the two women grinning at each other. "You two are coming, right?"

"I'll be there," Kat said.

Tallulah nodded. "Babysitter is already booked."

Matt checked his watch and started toward the door. "Come on, movie is starting soon."

"Okay, see you later, Skywalker," Caleb said, turning to follow Matt outdoors.

Matt looked at his friend, his comrade, his brother in crime, and couldn't help but want to know how he felt about Sky. He couldn't come right out and ask because he didn't want to betray her trust. He'd promised her that her secret was safe with him, and he'd never, ever go back on a promise. Still a little subtle investigation couldn't hurt, right?

A car door slammed and sexy Daisy, who hung out at the bar, hiked her purse over her shoulder and started toward them. Dressed in her usual frayed short shorts and cowgirl boots that climbed up her long legs, she cut through the parking lot.

Caleb made a noise. "I wouldn't mind unwrapping that sweet thing for my thirtieth."

"Hi, boys," Daisy said, doing a sexy little finger wave as she sauntered by, giving an extra shake to her hips when she saw the way Caleb was looking at her.

Matt jumped into the passenger seat of Caleb's SUV and tossed his backpack onto the seat beside him. He looked through the passenger side window and watched Daisy until she disappeared inside the bar. "Yeah, she's hot. But you're getting old, man." He put his hand on Caleb's head and gave a little shove. "Time to start thinking with your head, and as sweet as Daisy is, she's not the marrying type."

"What the hell?" Caleb shot him a quick glance then

turned the engine over in his vehicle. “Marrying type? Christ, Matt, you need to stop hanging around Gran so much. You sound like a seventy-year-old woman. And besides, I’m only turning thirty. That doesn’t mean life stops and I have to get hitched. And you know we’re the same age. You’re only two weeks behind.”

Caleb pulled out into traffic and drove toward the theater. “So do you ever think about finding the right girl and settling down?” Matt asked.

“You’re channeling Gran again.” Caleb laughed and eyed him. “What’s gotten into you, anyway?” Caleb reached across the cab to touch Matt’s forehead. “You getting your period?”

“Fuck off,” Matt said, pushing his hand away. Okay, maybe he needed to cool it on all the “girl” talk before Caleb demanded he turn in his man card. “I think I’ve just had my head in a book too long.”

“I think you need to get laid, pal.”

“Maybe you’re right.” As they parked and bought their tickets to the movie, Matt gave more consideration to the long dry spell he was in. The truth was, it was hard to climb between the sheets and have casual sex when all he could think about was Sky. She’d given him a job when he returned home from overseas last year, and being around her every day was really playing havoc with his head—both of them. But fuck, now that he knew the truth, he needed to move on and forget about her. Maybe after the flick he’d go find Daisy. She’d come on to him a time or two before and he’d politely declined, but maybe next time he wouldn’t say no. Yeah, maybe next time he’d take her home and show her that he was anything but a gentleman behind closed doors.

With his thoughts too preoccupied with other things, Matt could barely concentrate on the movie, but forced a laugh during the appropriate times, otherwise Caleb would pick up on his unease and grill the shit out of him.

When the lights came on, Caleb stretched and looked at his watch.

"You crashing at my place?" Matt asked, climbing to his feet.

"Nah, I think I'll head back to San Antonio tonight."

"Yeah?" They followed the crowd out the doors and the warm night air fell over them as they walked back to the SUV. "I thought you didn't work tomorrow."

Caleb grinned. "I don't. But there is a cute new nurse in the clinic. She messaged me earlier and mentioned something about an anatomy lesson." He laughed. "You know me, I like to help out where I can."

Matt laughed along with his friend, even though he was cringing inside. He hopped into the truck and rested his hand on his backpack.

"You want me to drop you off at Gran's?" Caleb asked, pulling in to traffic.

"No, Sky Bar."

He glanced at the dashboard clock as he drove the short distance to the bar. "Isn't it closed?"

"I told Sky I'd help her lock up." Matt stared straight ahead but could feel Caleb's eyes on him. They turned down the street and he could see Sky Bar in the distance. "What?" Matt finally asked.

"I don't know. What's going on with you? You seem fucked up about something. You want to talk about it?"

"Now who's got their period?" Matt said. He pointed to the bar's back parking lot. "Pull in there." When the truck stopped, Matt opened his door, and before Caleb could continue with his interrogation and possibly squeeze the truth from him, he said, "I'll catch up with you next weekend at the cottage."

"You taking your bike down, or are you catching a ride with Sky?"

He opened his mouth to tell him he'd ride to the cottage with Sky, but then quickly changed his mind. The less time he spent in enclosed spaces with her the better, and he always enjoyed the long ride on his motorcycle.

"I'll take the bike."

"I don't work Friday so why don't we head down early?" Caleb asked.

"Okay, see you then."

"Tell Sky if she wants to come with me in the truck to save gas, there's plenty of room."

"Will do."

Matt closed the door, adjusted his backpack over his shoulder, and looked around the empty parking lot as he made his way to the back door. He fished his key from his pocket and let himself in. Music from Sky's father's prized jukebox reached his ears as he entered. The tunes drowned out his footsteps as he pushed the chairs into the tables and made his way down the long hall to her office.

When he spotted her, tapping away on her computer, a faraway look on her face, his throat tightened. He could only guess she was dabbling with one of her stories. Sky longed to be a writer, but had put that dream on hold to run her father's business. Matt just wished she'd sell half of the business to her assistant manager, Marco, like Marco had been asking her to do for years. At least that would cut back on the hours she had to spend here, freeing her up to fulfill her dreams and take some of the burden off her shoulders.

She never talked about her writing anymore, but Matt knew the dream still lived within her. As he watched, he wondered if she was visualizing Caleb as her hero. Caleb, who was currently off playing doctor with some nurse while Sky sat here trying to figure out a way to get his attention. Not that Matt could blame Caleb for doing what came natural to any hot-blooded male. Caleb was single, had no one to answer

to and had no idea how Sky felt about him. It sure as hell wasn't Matt's place to tell him.

She blinked thick lashes over tired brown eyes, and her hair fell forward, wild and untamed. His fingers itched to grab a fistful and tug as he planted his mouth on hers. What he'd do to give her a hot, hard kiss that told her in no uncertain terms to forget about Caleb and start noticing him. But he wouldn't do that, because he had nothing to offer but a good time between the sheets.

Exhaling slowly to pull himself together, he dug his phone from his pocket. Not wanting to startle her, he swiped the screen and sent her a message.

"I'm here."

Her phone pinged and vibrated on the desk. She picked it up, ran her fingers over the screen and texted back. "I'm in the office."

"I know."

Her head inched up and when her eyes met his, a huge smile split her lips. "Hey, you. How was the movie?" She looked past his shoulders like she was searching for Caleb and he tried not to show a reaction.

"Good," he said. "You all set?"

She closed her laptop. "Yeah."

Matt gestured with a nod to her computer as she packed it away in her case. "What were you doing?"

"Just paying bills."

Matt nodded but didn't push the matter as she stacked paper on her desk and started to clean up. From the wistful look on her face, he guessed she wasn't paying bills at all, and the girl couldn't tell a fib if her damn life depended on it. He grinned, thinking back to their teen years when they all drank too much and crashed in Caleb's basement. She'd been so sick that night. He and Caleb had spent the better part of the night taking turns holding her hair as she hovered over the

toilet. She'd told her father she stayed at some girlfriend's house and was too sick to call because she had the flu. He saw right through that lie, and accused her of being out with a boy. But she hadn't been out with just one boy. She'd been out with two. Her father wasn't half as angry when he found out Sky had been with him and Caleb. He shook his head as he thought about that. He and Caleb had a reputation a mile long. Why her father had ever trusted her with the likes of them, he'd never know.

Matt played with his key inside his pocket and leaned against the doorjamb as he waited. Sky grabbed her purse from the drawer and met up with him. Everything in the way she moved was so sexy, so sensuous, he had no idea how Caleb couldn't see that she was all grown up.

An easy silence fell over them as they stepped outside and Matt wondered if she was going to bring up what he'd overheard. He locked up and they walked toward Gran's house. Gran was his mom's mother. He lost his mom to cancer when he was just a toddler, so he didn't know Gran very well growing up, and had been working hard to make up time ever since. She'd moved here to take over his father's house a few years back when his dad had died. Matt didn't want anything to do with the house. It held nothing but bad memories and he preferred to live in his little one-bedroom apartment across the hall from Sky. It wasn't much of an apartment, but it was a place to lay his head nonetheless.

"How's Gran?" Sky asked and Matt knew she was hedging.

Matt kicked a rock and slowed his pace so she could keep up. "Good. She'd probably like to see you soon. It's been a while."

"I know. I've just been so busy at work." Silence, and then, "Matt?"

"Hmmm."

"About what you overheard," Sky began, crinkling her nose as she lifted her chin to meet his eyes.

"Yeah. I thought you might want to talk about it."

"I didn't mean for you to hear any of it."

They moved down the sidewalk and a car sped by, the passengers in the backseat hollering out to Sky. This, of course, was why he liked to walk her home. Sure, they didn't live far and she could take care of herself, but there were assholes everywhere and he'd been protecting her from them for as long as he could remember.

"I know," he said, wishing he hadn't heard it too. But he had and now he couldn't ignore it.

She tucked her hair behind her ears. "I...just..."

"So you like Caleb," he stated and rolled his shoulder casually, like there wasn't a shit storm going on inside him. "It's no big deal."

"Really?" she asked, her eyes wide. "It doesn't make you uncomfortable?"

"Why would it? Caleb's a great guy, and I think you two would be great together."

"You do?"

"Sure."

She toyed with the zipper on her purse. "Are you serious, Matt?"

"Yeah, I'm serious. You should go for it."

She looked at the ground as they walked, going quiet for a moment. "He still thinks I'm one of the guys."

"Which was why you were going to try that whole napkin thing?"

She cringed and cupped her cheeks. "Oh God, that is so embarrassing. I wasn't really going to do it, you know."

"No."

"I don't think so. Then again, maybe I was. I don't know. I'm...I'm just...not really all that noticeable."

Matt stopped and turned to her, the streetlamp overhead spilling over them. When she blinked up at him with those big brown eyes, he gripped her shoulders. How could she not see how beautiful and special she really was? “Look, Sky. You don’t need tricks. You’re beautiful, smart and independent. A guy would be crazy not to see that.”

“Oh.” She stared at him for a long moment, her eyes moving over his face like she could see right through him. He let go of her shoulders and stepped back, putting a measure of distance between them.

“Caleb’s birthday is this weekend,” he said quickly to distract her. “We’re all heading to the cottage so maybe it’s a good time to show him that you’re all grown up and get him to see you as the beautiful woman you are.”

What the fuck am I doing?

Her gaze fell to his chest and she looked like she was a million miles away. Then she blinked and looked back up at him. “So you really think I should go for it? You really think we’d be good together?”

“Yeah. I do,” he said and started walking again. Only his footsteps echoed in the quiet night, and he could feel her gaze drilling into his back as she stood still behind him. “Coming?” he finally asked.

“You’re the best friend any girl could ever have, Matt.”

Before he realized what was happening, Sky jumped on his back for a piggyback ride. Her legs wrapped around his waist and as he grabbed her thighs to hoist her up, he knew he’d rather be tortured for hours by the enemy than think about her in bed with his best friend.