
HIS TASTE OF TEMPTATION

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Just when she thought her morning couldn't get any worse.

Madison Graham let out a sputtering yelp. Unfortunately, with a stuffed-up nose and well on her way to a major case of laryngitis, it came out sounding more like a Pekinese dog's yappy bark rather than the desperate cry of a woman in need of help.

"What the hell," a sleepy voice grumbled from behind her. "Ah, shit. Not again."

With her hand inside the hole in the wall that had yet to be fixed since their last plumbing disaster, Madison cupped her palm over the end of the broken pipe, struggling to stem the water flow before it did any more damage to her bathroom, or worse, leak through to her bakery on the ground floor below. Shooting a frantic glance over her shoulder, she saw Jonah Crosby, her childhood best friend and current roommate, and gave an aggravated shake of her head.

"I really need to find a new place to live." Twisting around, Madison quickly switched hands on the pipe, gasping when another spurt of water shot into her face.

With his hands braced against the door facing, Jonah made a leisurely survey of the scene. “Or you could try taking a shower the way the rest of us do—inside the stall.” Dressed in a pair of low hanging pajama pants that exposed a long, lean torso and those well-defined, V-shaped lats that attracted women in droves, Jonah gave her a crooked grin. His gaze skimmed over Madison’s water-spattered glasses, then drifted downward, lingering on her thin nightshirt. Madison followed the direction of his glance and noticed that her nightshirt had been transformed into a prize-winning wet T-shirt after being hosed down by the broken water pipe.

“Seriously, Jonah, I need to get a better place.”

Jonah cleared his throat. “Ah, you should probably get changed first,” he teased.

“And you’ve got ten seconds to move,” she warned, her teeth chattering as she repositioned her grip, ready to aim the spray Jonah’s way. “Otherwise, you’re next.”

“Right. I’m on it.” He disappeared from the doorway and hurried down the steep steps. A loud clang and few curses later, the gushing water trickled to a drip before coming to a full stop. Madison stepped back, wiped the moisture from her glasses, and attempted to squeeze the droplets from her long, soggy hair.

The old floorboards creaked under Jonah’s weight as he jogged back to the bathroom. He grabbed a big, fluffy towel from the hook on the door and tossed it her way. Keeping his bare feet out of the ever-expanding puddle, he stood in the hall and braced his hands on the overhead door frame.

He assessed the damage and pulled a disgruntled face, one that made him look young and more boyish than his twenty-five years and had her thoughts careening back to their playground days.

One eyebrow arched when he asked, “You want me to call or do you want to?”

Madison pressed the towel to her chest and blotted her cold cheeks with a corner, groaning as she fought off a sneeze. She was battling the summer cold of the century—during Austin’s worst heat wave, nonetheless—and really wasn’t in the mood to get into another shouting match with her landlord. Besides, she already knew how the scenario would play out. Over the phone he’d promise to come by right away, going so far as to ensure her he was practically on her front stoop. Past experiences, however, had taught her that he’d show up on her doorstep at his leisure, leaving her high and dry, or in this case, wet and sodden, for days on end.

“You’d better do it this time.” She grabbed a couple of towels from the sliver of a linen closet and tossed them onto the flooded tile floor before adding, “Not that I think it will do any good.”

Jonah tapped his fingers on the paint-chipped doorframe and nodded in agreement. “Maybe I should just call Brad. He’ll know what to do.”

At the mention of Jonah’s older brother, a shiver moved through Madison, one that had little to do with the water chilling her feverish skin and everything to do with the hot hunk of military man who had been invading her dreams since her teen years.

“What would I know how to do?”

Jonah spun around. “Hey, bro. Just in time.”

“What would I know?” Brad began again, but his words fell off. Madison glanced up, expecting to see him surveying the bathroom, only to find him looking directly at her breasts and the ample curves she spent years hiding. Her nipples tightened in response, unbridled desire moving into her quivering stomach as their gazes collided.

“We...uh...we had another flood,” she managed to croak out, hoping she didn’t sound as breathless as she felt.

“I can see that,” he responded, his voice sounding tighter than normal.

Her blood pulsed hot when his smoldering gaze tracked a path down her body—a slow, lazy caress that instantly pushed back the cold inside her. Heat bombarded her as she became fully aware of her near-naked state—fully aware of what else Brad could *see*.

She snatched another towel from the closet and let it drop down in front of her as his gaze tracked back up her body and met hers. For a moment, she could almost swear there had been a flicker of interest backlighting his baby blues, but he gave a quick shake of his head and tore his gaze from hers. When he frowned and took in the sad state of her century-old bathroom, she knew she had to be mistaken. Guys like Brad didn’t lust after girls like her. No, he was into vivacious, self-assured women. Brazen women who had it all and weren’t afraid to use it to get what they wanted.

What he wasn’t into were girls who spent the better part of their lives being called Fatty Maddy, along with a few other unkind names like S’mores Cracker.

Madison wrapped the towel around her chest and tucked it in, then reached for another to blot the water from her hair. It wasn’t that she was fat, *per se*. She had been an early bloomer and had body image issues. She had worn oversized, bulky layers of clothing to cover her D-cup breasts and curvy hips, but rather than camouflaging her full figure, she had ended up looking like a big, round marshmallow. Sort of like a female version of the Michelin Man. That, of course, coupled with the last name Graham, was how the mean girls—and boys—from high school came up with the S’mores dig. God, teenagers really were the cruelest beings on earth—and, as far as she was concerned, not all that creative, either.

Size twelve boots splashed in the water as Brad stepped into the tight confines of the bathroom. Her pulse jumped in

her throat as he leaned past her to look at the broken pipe. She tried to breathe in his familiar scent of fresh soap and clean skin, but her stuffed-up nose took that moment to run, gushing with the same enthusiasm as her broken pipe. Damn. She quickly reached for her box of tissue, only to find that it had become a casualty of faulty plumbing as well. In a very unattractive, unladylike move she sniffed hard, and, because the fate-Gods liked to kick her when she was down, Brad took that moment straighten to his full height and look directly at her.

Okay, her day had officially gone from bad to worse.

“Grab my toolbox from the truck,” he said to Jonah, and that’s when she realized he sounded as hoarse as she did, and that he was likely battling a cold too.

He folded his arms over his chest, the soft fabric of his T-shirt stretching across his broad shoulders. He took his time to inspect the damage, pulling the same disgruntled face that Jonah had earlier. Only on Brad, the expression was anything but boyish. Oh no, not at all. Here stood a *man*, ready to take charge, to do whatever was necessary to get the job done, and take all the time he needed to do it. A man who wasn’t afraid to roll up his sleeves and get his hands dirty...or wet. It made him look hot and sexy and—good God, she needed to pull herself together!

Clearing her throat, Madison turned her thoughts to the two men in her life. Even though there was only two years between them, at twenty-seven, Brad was all man. One hundred percent grade-A male. The kind she wanted to serve up on a shiny platter and dive into with vigor. Hunger moved through her and she worked to find her voice as she finger combed her hair in some feeble attempt to make herself look presentable.

He shot a quick glance her way and a strange look came over his face, one she couldn’t quite identify. “You...uh...you

might want to get out of those wet clothes before you catch your death of cold." His turn of phrase reminded her of his late folks, his dad in particular.

"I've already got a cold," she mumbled, stepping onto one of the soaked towels. She pulled open the vanity drawer, grabbed her trusty lip balm, and applied it to her chapped lip. As the scent of cherry filled the air, she caught Brad wetting his own mouth, like he too was in need of relief.

"Want some?" She held the tube out to him. "It's cherry flavor, but it works."

His gaze dropped to her mouth, and then quickly darted away. "No," he bit out, his harsh tone surprising her.

She recapped the tube and tossed it back into her vanity. "What, you don't like cherry?"

The muscles along his jaw rippled. "I never said that."

Jonah came back with Brad's toolbox and she let the matter drop. Jonah stepped up beside his brother, and Madison smacked her lips to spread the balm. She couldn't help but compare the two men as they stood side by side. Where Brad was taller, with harder muscles and sharper features, Jonah was lean with a pretty-boy face. With his angelic attributes, Jonah would look at home on any Calvin Klein poster, although Madison couldn't help but wonder what his older brother would look like in those sexy designer underwear.

Along with his boyish good looks, Jonah was also easygoing, the life of the party and game for just about anything. Brad, on the other hand, was far more responsible. When his dad had died of lung disease after a long hard battle, and his mother shortly after, ovarian cancer taking her out quickly, Brad had stepped into a parental role, despite the fact that he was only a teen himself. He always looked out for his reckless kid brother, and was a real hands-on kind of guy, in the field as an explosive expert and around the house as a handyman.

Speaking of hands on...

Her gaze moved to his hands as he searched through his toolbox. He picked up a wrench, looked it over, then carefully put it back and chose another. As she thought about how meticulous he was in everything he did, her brain took a brief, luxurious moment to think about what those rough palms of his would feel like on her flesh. She imagined he was a considerate lover, and that his touches would be slow, thorough and needy, his kisses hot and demanding as he trailed a path downward, his tongue moving closer and closer to the warm juncture between her legs, to the greedy little spot that needed him the most.

“...Madison.”

The sound of Brad’s voice brought her thoughts crashing back to reality. She took in his watchful eyes and wondered what he’d just said to her. “Ummm,” she murmured, blinking rapidly. “What was that again?”

Before Brad could answer, Jonah stepped up to her. “Are you okay?” His brows pulled into a thoughtful frown as he reached out and pressed the backs of his fingers to her forehead. “Jesus, you’re burning up.”

Oh God, he had no idea.

“I’m fine,” she assured him and squared her shoulders. “It’s just really hot in here.”

She seriously needed to get it together before she threw herself at Brad and begged him to take her—right there on the wet bathroom floor. Not that Brad thought of her in a sexual way, or that she’d actually have the nerve to bare herself to him. No, that was never going to happen. Even if by some miracle Madison had the opportunity to get between the sheets with him, it was a pretty sure bet she’d run the other way, because she had a feeling Brad was the kind of guy who’d want to make love with the lights on, and take his good old time exploring his woman’s body. Her skin tightened, and

a strange, strangled noise caught in her throat as she imagined his attention focused on her body—his hands and eyes moving over her, touching her, seeing her. All of her.

Okay, okay, so there was no denying that she still had body image issues, and was just as insecure today as she was all those years ago. She cupped the towel against her chest tighter and darted a quick glance Brad's way.

His nostrils flared as he massaged his temples with his thumb and forefinger. "Go get changed. Now."

"Oh, right."

Adjusting the towel so it dipped in the back, making sure her backside was covered, Madison stepped past Brad and splashed her way down the hall. She could hear him digging around in his toolbox as she made a beeline to her bedroom. Once inside she shut the door and sagged against it, her libidinous body still feeling the effects of Brad's close proximity and rugged good looks. A breeze drifted in from her open window, the morning air cooling her damp body and helping to focus her thoughts.

With the gust of air giving her a burst of energy after a sleepless night, she peeled off her wet T-shirt and glanced at her clock, wondering what Brad was doing at her place so early in the morning. She tugged on her work scrubs and grabbed a clean apron from the laundry basket, then stopped dead in her tracks. Without water, she wouldn't be able to open her bakery, and if she couldn't open her doors, she'd never make enough money to find a decent place to live. Damn, damn, damn.

With so much to do today she could only hope that Brad could get the plumbing fixed right away. She took a breath to collect her thoughts, then made a mental list of everything she had to do. As soon as her assistant, and other childhood best friend, Sophie Edwards, arrived Sophie could go to work on serving the breakfast crowd—providing they had water—

while Madison darted to the country club to showcase cake samples to a bridal party. Once she got that out of the way she could get a start on making the truckload of cupcakes she'd promised to donate to the city's upcoming Fourth of July festival. The school band was counting on her donations to help raise funds for their fall trip and she didn't want to let them down.

The sound of a car pulling into the back parking lot behind the shop signaled Sophie's arrival for her shift, but if Madison couldn't open for the day, she'd have to turn her around and send her right back home. Not that she thought Sophie would mind. Working at the café and taking summer classes at night was no easy feat, and with her exams coming up, she could likely use the extra hours to study.

Smoothing her hair down and wishing the pipe had broken *after* she had showered, Madison adjusted her glasses, knotted her apron around her waist and made her way back to the brothers.

"Any luck?" she asked hopefully.

Jonah shook his head and wrung out another wet towel over the tub. "Brad doesn't have the right parts."

Her glance shot to Brad, who was down on his knees, and she swallowed hard, because from where she stood, it was abundantly clear that Brad had *all* the right parts. Then he turned his head and coughed into the crook of his arm and guilt ate at Madison.

The man was sick and the last thing he needed was to be ankle deep in icy water. This was her rental house, her mess, and she should be the one fixing it, not him.

Madison frowned. She knew what she had to do, even though she couldn't afford it. "It's okay, Brad. I'm going to call a plumber."

Brad stood and blue eyes that mirrored his brother's latched on to hers. "I can fix this for you, Madison. It's just a

matter of getting the right supplies. I can do that after I drop Jonah off.”

Jonah ran his hands through his short, cropped hair and looked at his watch. “Shit, I’m running late. I’ll grab my gear.” He cast his brother a glance. “Mind if I take a quick shower at your place before we go?”

Brad nodded and Madison stepped to the side to let her roommate push past her. With all the commotion and the brain fog from her cold, she’d forgotten that it was the first of the month and Jonah was leaving on a job this morning.

After finishing their tour in Afghanistan, both Jonah and Brad had decided to expound on their military experience and returned home to do contract bomb hunting here on American soil, defusing munitions that had been left over from former training camps during the wars. Today was Jonah’s day to leave on a convoy, heading north for the next month to search for and defuse old bombs. Which, of course, accounted for why his brother had shown up at her place so early. He was here to drive Jonah to the departure site some twenty miles outside of town.

Contracting out as explosive experts was their main line of work, but when they weren’t away they could be found at the old abandoned base training service dogs with their fellow comrades. With Brad’s love of restoring things, he could also be found helping out in their friend’s motorcycle shop, or working on the old Victorian house left to him by his ailing grandfather.

Brad tossed his gear back into his toolbox, then stood, his body crowding hers in the confined space.

When he coughed again, she said, “Brad you don’t have to do this. You’re not feeling well.”

“Neither are you, which is why I need to get this done right away. You won’t get a plumber in here for hours, and I don’t want you without water for that long.”

Her heart tightened at his thoughtfulness but before she could respond, she heard Sophie's voice at the foot of the stairs. "Hey, Madison, what's going on?"

"Come on up and see for yourself," Madison called out. She stepped into the hall to meet her friend, and when Sophie took one look at her hair, she crinkled her nose.

"Did you get in a fight with the egg beater?"

Great, just what she needed, her friend drawing attention to her frazzled hair. As if a red, stuffed-up nose and watery eyes weren't bad enough. Madison pulled an elastic band off her wrist and tied back her long, wet curls. "Broken pipe."

"Again?" Sophie groaned when she reached the landing.

"Yeah, because it was never fixed right in the first place," Brad's deep voice rumbled from within the bathroom.

Sophie stepped past Madison, and her eyes lit up when she spotted Brad. "Hey, Brad," she said in the same flirtatious tone she always used around the Crosby brothers. Her gaze rolled over him and Madison worked to smother a spark of jealousy she knew better than to feel. "I didn't realize you were back."

"Been back for a while now."

Surprised to hear that, Madison's head came back with a start. She hadn't seen Brad around for weeks and just assumed he was hanging out in Tallulah, Louisiana, after his friend's wedding. No doubt he'd found himself a nice, hot bridesmaid to occupy himself with.

Come to think of it, Brad had been coming around her place less and less and it made her wonder if the brothers had had a fight, although Jonah hadn't mentioned anything about it.

"So, how was the wedding?" Sophie asked.

His grin was wry, highly sardonic. "Let's just say it's good to be home." The look on his face combined with his dark tone let them both know how he felt about love and

marriage. Unlike his brother, who loved to play the field and had no desire to change his lifestyle, Brad hadn't always hated the idea of settling down. In fact, he'd been engaged once himself. But it had turned out badly when he'd come back from his tour early to find his girl in bed with another guy—or at least that's what Madison had heard. He'd changed after that, dating casually, avoiding commitment, and rarely staying in one place for very long.

“Why don't you grab your stuff—” Brad gestured past Madison's shoulder, nodding toward her bedroom, “—and you can shower at my place while I drop Jonah off and make a quick trip to the hardware store.”

The thought of climbing into his shower, using the same soap he'd lathered his body with earlier that morning had her nipples aching and her sex moistening. Hoping to hide her body's reaction, she coughed into her sleeve and said, “That's okay, I can just grab a shower at Sophie's.”

“Only if you're really, really quiet.” Sophie frowned and smoothed her blonde hair behind her ears. “Karley was up with the baby all night and the two are sleeping it off.”

Madison drove her hands into her apron pockets. She'd forgotten that their friend Karley and her newborn Brooklyn were staying with Sophie until her husband returned from overseas.

“Besides,” Brad said, “you don't want to spread your cold germs around.”

It was true. She didn't want to risk giving her germs to an infant.

“Yeah,” Sophie agreed, her expression deadpan as she nudged Madison with her elbow. “You should probably go to Brad's. That way you can make as much noise as you want. Heck, you could even scream and no one would hear you.”

Fully aware of her friend's innuendo, Madison sniffed and glared at her. Oh, she was so going to kill her when she got

her alone. "But then I'll be spreading my germs around his place, won't I?"

As if on cue Brad sneezed. "I've got a cold too, so it won't matter." Madison exhaled slowly, grateful that he hadn't picked up on Sophie's sexual innuendo. Giving her no time to protest, Brad slipped past them. "I'll meet you at the truck."

When he disappeared down the steps, Jonah came out from his room looking rugged and handsome dressed in his army fatigues. "Hey, Sophie," he greeted before turning to Madison. "Dibs on the first shower," he said, in typical Jonah fashion, then rushed down the steps after his brother.

A wide grin split Sophie's face as she watched him go, her gaze latched on his backside until he disappeared outside. "So," she said, "you live with one of the hottest guys I know and are about to shower at his gorgeous brother's place." Sophie tapped a painted nail on her pursed lips and Madison could almost hear the wheels turning when a sound of delight rumbled in her friend's throat. "Forget S'mores Cracker, girlfriend. I think it's high time you made yourself a *Graham Sandwich*, don't you?"

Jesus Christ, Madison was going to be the death of him.

He'd been hoping to avoid her when he showed up to collect his brother, and the last thing he expected was to find her in a goddamn wet T-shirt, looking so fucking hot he almost shot off a load then and there.

Brad drummed his fingers on his steering wheel and shifted in his seat, uncomfortable as his cock pressed insistently against his unforgiving jeans. Christ, seeing her in that T-shirt, blinking up at him with those dark bedroom eyes of hers as the lush swell of her body beckoned his touch—his cock—had damn near done him in.

Fuck.

He'd be lying if he said he didn't want her in his bed. Every time he looked at her all he could think about was caging her beneath him and fucking her long and hard, driving balls deep until she screamed out his name. Oh yeah, he'd make her scream, and when he did—contrary to what Sophie thought—*everyone* would hear it.

Maybe then he'd be able to stop thinking about her when he was alone at night. Hell, who was he kidding? He thought about her even when he wasn't alone.

He'd always liked his kid brother's best friend, but six months ago, after returning home from a long overseas tour, he suddenly began to see the sweet girl next door in different ways.

Sinful ways...

But he wasn't going to act on his urges, not when she had something going on with Jonah. Shit...

Truthfully, Brad wasn't sure what kind of relationship the two had, considering he'd seen them both date other people over the years. But from the comfort level between them, to the way they took care of each other, even going so far as to sharing a place when Jonah had finished his last tour, he knew there had to be deeper feelings involved, and he wasn't about to take her to his bed, no matter how much he wanted her naked and beneath him. Or naked and on top.

Or just plain naked.

Jonah tossed his rucksack into the truck bed and slid into the cab, pulling Brad's thoughts back from fantasyland. "Hey, bro, what's up?"

Brad put his key into the ignition and turned the engine over. "Nothing." He clenched his jaw hard as he watched Madison and Sophie exit from the downstairs bakery. A frown marred Madison's pretty face as she spoke to her friend, the

Sweetie's Bakery *Closed* sign on the door behind her rattling against the glass pane as she locked up. Brad gripped the steering wheel harder. He hated seeing her living and working in such a shitty place, and he knew today's loss of income was going to have a serious effect on her bank account.

"You have that look on your face again."

Brad angled his head toward his brother. "What look is that?"

Jonah grinned. "The one you get just before you kick the shit out of me."

Brad glared at his brother and scoffed. "Evidently, I should have beaten you more often." Okay, so he might have roughed up his punk-ass brother a time or two over the years, but it was only because Jonah had needed it. The boy was a damn fool sometimes, getting into messes that Brad had to clean up behind him.

"Yeah, well, that's a matter of opinion," Jonah said.

He held his brother's gaze. "You got something to say?"

Jonah held his hands up and laughed. "Nope."

Madison tapped on the window and Jonah jumped onto the sidewalk to let her climb into the middle. Without conscious thought Brad's eyes roamed the sexy curves she always kept hidden behind those baggy clothes and icing-stained apron. Damned if he didn't want to peel those loose-fitting work clothes from her body so he could touch and kiss her lush contours until she writhed beneath him and cried out his name.

As Madison slid in beside him, her duffle bag clutched to her chest, want pumped through his veins, the sudden, urgent need to help himself to a taste of her sweetness pulling at him hard. Fuck. He looked away, staring at some random woman walking her dog while he did his damndest to ignore his raging hard-on.

“Here, give me that.” Jonah took the bag from her and tossed it into the truck bed with his.

Once he jumped back into the cab, Brad put the vehicle into gear, turned his attention to the road ahead and slipped into traffic. Jonah punched up the volume on the radio and hooked his left arm over the back of the seat, pulling Madison toward him.

Brad tried to focus on his driving, he really did, but with Madison’s leg rubbing up against his it took effort to stay on the road.

He drove through the downtown core, and when they passed a vacant building, a *For Sale* sign on the window, Jonah turned to Madison. “Maybe when I get back we can look for a new place to live.”

She looked at the building, and there was a hint of gloom in her voice when she said, “I can’t afford to rent an apartment *and* a business front, and it won’t be easy to find a place where I can live upstairs and turn the main level into Sweetie’s.”

Jonah curved his arm around her and pulled her in closer. As she rested her head on his shoulder, he brushed a light kiss over her hair. “Don’t worry. I’ll be making some good coin out on the road. It’ll go a long way in finding something nicer than we have now.”

Feeling like a third wheel, an eavesdropper listening in on a private, intimate conversation, Brad cast a glance their way. His gut clenched when he saw Madison smile up at Jonah. Hell, the two of them even talked like an old married couple. There was no missing how much his brother cared for her, which only solidified Brad’s vow to keep his distance where Madison was concerned.

Of course, she wasn’t the first girl Brad had walked away from because of his brother. Jonah was fun, wild and had a reputation with the ladies. As teens, a few of Brad’s girl-

friends had gravitated toward his charismatic younger brother. Even though Brad wanted to beat the shit out of Jonah for taking his girl instead of doing the honorable thing and backing off, Brad always walked away. Blood was blood and no way would he allow a girl to come between him and his brother. How much could any of those girls have cared anyway, if they had no trouble leaving one brother for the other? Besides, he'd promised his dad that he'd take care of Jonah, and as a man of his word, he chose his family battles carefully. As long as Jonah treated the women properly, there'd be no trouble between brothers.

His thoughts careened back to a couple years ago, to the night he found his fiancée Jocelyn in bed with another man—doing the one thing he wouldn't dream of asking her to do for him, considering she'd blatantly told him oral sex was disgusting and there wasn't a girl in the world who enjoyed giving it. Although she enjoyed the hell out of it when he'd gone down on her, which he did frequently. Fuck, he wasn't sure what hurt more, seeing her mouth wrapped around some douchebag's cock, or realizing how stupid she thought he was when she starting spilling lies, telling him it wasn't what he thought. Sure, whatever. Wouldn't be the first time a woman had fallen and landed with a hard-on in her mouth and a pair of balls in her hand. Oh yeah, shit like that happened all the time.

He could have stayed and fought for her, but any girl who would sleep with another man and lie about it while her fiancé was overseas fighting for their country wasn't worth the battle. And after seeing the same thing happen to a few of his comrades, he'd come to learn that long-distance relationships never worked. Since Brad's work continued to take him out of state, he decided never to get himself in that kind of situation again. No, now he was into casual sex, no commitments.

"Besides," Jonah said, "Brad can help us turn any space into a bakery. Right, bro?"

"Yeah, sure." Brad looked at Madison, and when she turned her bright-eyed smile his way, his heart nearly stopped.

She ran paint-chipped nails along the deep hollow of her throat, and as he watched the movement his mouth watered, his tongue wanting to follow the path of her hands. Heat throbbed through him, and his cock thickened once again, aching to pound into her, hard hot strokes that would leave them both sated and breathless and would finally, *finally*, get her out of his head.

"And if something else goes wrong with the place while I'm away, Brad's your man," Jonah said.

As Brad pictured himself stepping in for his brother, his mind ran wild with one delicious idea after the other, and he forced himself to cough, hoping it would rattle some sense back into his lust-drunk brain.

"Isn't that right, Brad?"

"Yeah." He nodded. "I can help you out with anything you need."

Something flitted across her face when she asked, "Anything?"

"Yeah, anything," he assured her, but when she drew her bottom lip between her teeth, and her eyes glazed over like she had other things on her mind, he wondered if they were still talking about her run-down rental...or something else entirely.

Madison stepped into Brad's apartment, dropped her bag onto his scratched and pitted hardwood floor, and spread her arms wide, enjoying the coolness of the place.

"Air conditioning," she said as her eyes slipped shut. "It's heavenly."

Brad's boots scraped the floor and her lids flicked open in time to see him pick her bag up and place it on the end table next to his tattered sofa.

Jonah darted off to the shower as she exhaled slowly, her nose clearing when she breathed back in. "I think I'll stay right here for the rest of the summer."

Brad grinned. "It's fine by me, but you should know that it's only a one bedroom."

"I don't care. I'll sleep on the floor."

He drove his hands into his pockets, pulling his jeans lower on his hips, and his tone was sexy, teasing when he said, "Now what kind of guy would I be to let you sleep on the floor when I have a perfectly good bed you could use?"

Madison swallowed hard, heat curling a lazy path to her

sex as thought back to when she was a hormonal teen with a vivid imagination. She spent many nights in Brad's bed back then—without him in it. Their parents had been good friends back in the day and when her mom accompanied her dad on one of his many business trips, Brad's mom always opened her house to Madison. She'd spent many weekends there, and because Brad was usually hanging at his best friend Garrett Andersen's house, his mother used to put Madison up in his room. God, how many nights had she fantasized about him coming home unaware she was there, crawling in next to her, kissing her, touching her, making love to her all night long?

A loud noise from the street below jolted her out of her daydream. As her skin flushed hotly, she looked for a distraction. Needing a moment to compose herself, she padded across the small room to look out. Realizing Brad's place wasn't in the best of neighborhoods, she asked, "How long have you lived here?"

Brad stepped up behind her. The heat of his body engulfed her as he leaned in to look over her shoulder to see what had her attention. "Not long." His warm breath tickled the fine hairs along her neck as his raspy voice sent a barrage of erotic sensations through her body. "Just since I got back a couple months ago."

She bit back a breathy moan, her body tantalized by his closeness. She touched a crack in his window, carefully tracing the jagged pattern with her fingertip. "And you accuse me of living in a run-down place," she managed to get out as his primal essence overwhelmed her.

He gestured toward the air conditioner propped up in the open kitchen window. "Hey, at least I have air conditioning."

As she continued to trace the crack running the length of glass, he reached around and took hold of her hand. "Careful, I don't want you to cut yourself."

The work-roughened pads of his fingers scraped over her

skin, reducing her once more to that hormone-driven teen of years ago. It would be so easy to lean back, just for a minute, to see if he felt as good in real life as he did in her dreams. Instead, she stared at the crack in the glass and asked, “Do you plan to stay here long?”

His hand lingered on her wrist. “I’m not home much, so it doesn’t matter where I crash. This place is as good as any when I’m not on the road.” When she heard the melancholy in his voice, she turned to face him. His jaw flexed, and when she caught the intense way he was looking at her, desire singed her blood. He dipped his head, his gaze settling on her mouth, and for the briefest of moments she thought he was going to kiss her.

He inched closer, close enough for their breaths to mingle, and she wet her lips, the sweet taste of cherries dancing on her tongue. God, what would it be like to kiss him, to taste the sweetness of his mouth?

Struggling to form a coherent sentence, and looking for a distraction because she was sure she had to be misreading him—every instinct she had told her she was—she asked, “When do you go back on the road again?”

“At the end of the month.”

“After Jonah returns?” she asked.

At the mention of his brother, his nostrils flared and he jerked back like a grenade had just gone off. “Yeah,” he said, his tone harder. “When Jonah returns.” There was a moment of tense silence as he hovered close, then he spun around and walked away from her. “I...uh...I have to get some supplies from storage.”

As she watched him stalk to his door and slam it behind him, she once again wondered if the brothers had had a fight. She stepped away from the window and walked around his sparse apartment, thinking how desolate the place looked. It occurred to her that Jonah traveled just as much as Brad, but

he at least added some personal touches to the bedroom he rented from her. Brad didn't just live like a bachelor, he lived like a nomad. With no commitments or attachments, he was ready to pick up and leave at a moment's notice.

Madison gave a sad shake of her head, understanding his ex-fiancée had done one hell of a number on him. Too bad really, because Brad was a great guy who deserved a house full of kids and happily ever after, considering there was a time when he wanted that. And she couldn't forget he had that big old Victorian house just waiting for him, yet he preferred to live in a one-bedroom rental. Madison's heart grew heavy. What would it take for him to get over his ex's betrayal and move on? Of course, for all she knew, he could be pining for Jocelyn, hoping she'd come back to him.

Brad returned, clutching what looked like a welding torch, just as Jonah stepped from the steamy bathroom.

Jonah raked his hand through his wet hair, tossed his bag over his shoulder and gave Madison one last look before he made his way to the door. "Are you sure you're feeling okay? You still look flushed."

She stifled a yawn, exhaustion from the cold once again pulling at her. "I just need a shower," she assured him.

He pointed toward the bedroom. "And maybe a nap."

At the mention of Brad's bed and his offer to share it with her, need gathered in the pit of her stomach and her sex clenched with want.

Once again a strange noise crawled out of her throat and Jonah eyed her with uncertainty before he slapped his brother on the back. "Promise me you'll take care of her while I'm gone?"

Brad turned, averting his brother's gaze. "Yeah, sure. I promise." Then he looked at Madison just as a sneeze wracked her body. Something in his face softened when he said, "I'll

lock up on my way out. There are clean towels in the closet. Go get a shower. You know where the bedroom is if you want to lie down. I'll be back after I get your plumbing fixed."

She glanced at the clock. "I have an eleven o'clock appointment at the country club. I have cake samples made back at the bakery and need to bring them to the bridal party."

Brad gave an understanding nod. "Okay, then. I'll come back and get you before I head to your place."

Madison watched them go and after she heard the lock click into place, she walked into the steamy bathroom. She stripped off her clothes and folded them neatly, then wiped the mirror, hardly able to believe one of her fantasies was about to come true. Of course, in her fantasies, when she climbed into Brad's shower, he was always in there with her.

She turned on the hot spray and stepped into the stall. After locating a bar of soap on the ledge, she picked it up and ran it over her body. Her eyes drifted shut, imagining it was Brad's hands on her, slicking over her breasts and toying with her hard nipples. She ran the soap lower, until it was between her quivering legs. She brushed it over her engorged clit and shivered, her skin tingling all over as she indulged in her erotic fantasy for an extra moment.

When the water started to turn cold, she yelped, quickly rinsed off and climbed out. She searched her bag for deodorant. "Shoot," she mumbled, then glanced at Brad's medicine cabinet.

She did a quick shoulder check, even though she knew she was alone in the bathroom, but couldn't help feeling like she was invading his privacy as she inched open the mirror. She peeked inside, and her knees weakened when she found a box of condoms. Madison gulped and picked up the box. It gave her an odd sense of satisfaction to find it unopened. It was

silly really. Of course Brad had sex. Hell, so did she! Well, not recently, but still...

She put the box back and nosed around in his cabinet a bit more. She gave a small spray of his cologne, then grabbed his stick of deodorant. She uncapped it and drew in the scent. *Brad...* She applied it to her underarms, recapped it and put it back in his cabinet. Making sure she had everything back in its place, Madison closed the mirror and dressed for her eleven o'clock meeting. Turning her attention to her tangled hair, she took out her blow dryer and flat iron. Once she fought her wayward curls into submission, she slipped in her contacts, presenting Made-Up Madison to the world, instead of "Fatty Maddy".

Even though she was more comfortable dressed in her loose-fitting clothes and glasses, with her hair tied back in a ponytail, she reserved that look for home, or for when she was elbow deep in pastry dough at the back of the bakery. When she was out on deliveries or showcasing her product to potential clients, she presented a different side of herself, even though she wasn't all that comfortable in form-fitting clothes. But she was a businesswoman and had to present herself as one, which meant sweats were out.

Feeling more like her old self after showering and dressing, she padded around Brad's small apartment. She stepped over his laundry basket of clean, neatly folded clothes, honing in on a pair of boxer briefs lying on top of the pile. She resisted the urge to pick them up. With the way her day was going, Brad would likely catch her in the act, or worse, think she was some kind of underwear perv. Instead she gifted herself with a moment to visualize him in them and nothing else, and as a warm whisper curled around her thighs, she plopped down on the sofa, where she grabbed her phone from her purse in search of a distraction. As she scrolled through emails, she heard the key in the lock.

Nervous anticipation welled up inside her and she worked to tamp it down. Good God, she'd known Brad her entire life, and it was damn well time she stopped acting like a love-struck schoolgirl around him. She took a centering breath and squared her shoulders.

"Hey," he said. Despite the fact that she'd just lectured herself on keeping her cool around him, the second she set eyes on him her knees went weak.

She climbed from the sofa, walked around his laundry basket and tried for normal. "Were you able to get the parts?"

"Yeah," he answered, then he angled his head, his eyes clouding with something that resembled desire as his gaze trailed the length of her body. His throat worked as he swallowed and, if she wasn't mistaken, she thought she spotted hunger in his baby blues as he looked at her form-fitting dress clothes. But she had to be mistaken. Brad had never looked at her as anything more than his kid brother's friend. Then again, she'd only started wearing professional outfits after opening her bakery last year, which meant that until today, until this very moment, he'd never seen her dressed in anything but unflattering sweats that hid her body before. Had never seen her dress like one of the put-together, brazen women he'd normally go for. And from the way he was currently staring at her, interesting flickering in the back of his eyes, it seemed like he was actually noticing her.

Still, she had to be mistaken, right?

Laid out on his side on Madison's wet, tiled bathroom floor, Brad finished cutting the wall away to give him better access to the pipes, but how he was supposed to concentrate with Madison prancing around in those high heels of hers was beyond him.

She stopped by the bathroom door for the umpteenth time. "You sure you don't need anything before I go?"

Oh, he needed something all right.

"I'm good."

She pointed to her medicine cabinet and he watched the way her blouse tightened on her breasts. "I just have to brush my teeth, then I'll be out of your way."

"Yeah, okay," he managed around a tongue gone thick. She went up on her toes, and he shifted restlessly at the sight of her curvy ass in that tight pencil skirt, her high heels giving her lush cheeks a sexy lift.

"Fuck," he murmured under his breath as he assessed the pipes.

"What?"

"Nothing. There's just some water still leaking so I have to drain the system."

"Oh, did you want me to do that for you?"

"Not dressed like that I don't."

An almost uncomfortable look came over her face as she gave herself a once over. "My meeting—" she started to explain, but he climbed to his feet and cut her off.

"I've got it," he said, his cock needing a reprieve from the sexy yet professional clothes draping her body before he did permanent damage to himself. Honestly, it didn't matter what she wore. Even dressed in sweats she rubbed him the wrong way, or the right way...or...fuck...if only she'd rub him.

He took the stairs two at a time until he reached the basement. He found the water tank and went to work on draining the system. Once complete he hurried back upstairs. He stepped back into the bathroom, and his feet splashed on the water still pooling on the tile. The hurried sound of Madison's high heels clicking on the stairs behind him had him spinning around.

Her voice sounded rushed when she rounded the corner and said, "Oh, I forgot to tell you... Whoa!"

She hurried into the bathroom so fast, her body crashed with his. His feet slipped on the floor, and he tried to grab on to something to right himself, but the impact had him faltering backward.

"Shit," he yelled, knowing he was going down for the count and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.

His boots went out from underneath him and he fell backward with an undignified oomph, Madison crashing to the floor right along with him.

His head connected with something unforgiving on the way down, but he couldn't concentrate on the pain shooting down his arm, not when Madison's floral hair fell over his face in a tumbled mess, and her soft body landed on top of his in the most erotic ways.

"Sorry," she squeaked out. "I didn't expect you to be standing there."

His hands slipped around her waist and settled on the small of her back. He sucked in a breath. "What...uh...what was it you forgot to tell me?" he asked.

She pushed her hair off her face, her mouth only inches from his. "Oh, I just wanted to let you know I made you a sandwich in case you got hungry. It's in the pastry fridge."

Her lush warm body felt so good on top of his...so fucking good...his cock grew an inch. She squirmed, like she was about to slide off, but he held her tight.

He pinned her to him and groaned. "Stop squirming."

"Why?" she asked, her voice sounding breathless.

"Because you don't want to get wet."

Her eyes widened and her lips inched open. "Wet?" she asked, her breathing becoming a little harsher, more erratic. "Why...why would I get wet?" Everything in the way she said

wet sounded so sinful, and he couldn't help but wonder how wet he could make her, if given the chance.

He jerked his head to the side. "The floor. It's still wet. If you slide off, you'll get your clothes wet. You won't be able to go to your meeting if your clothes are all wet."

Christ, how many times could he say wet in one sentence?

"Right. Right. I knew that was what you meant." She frowned. "How am I supposed to get up?"

"Hold on to me."

With her body molded to his, he wrapped one arm around her waist while he pushed himself up off the floor with the other. She snaked her arms around his shoulders and held tight as he climbed to his feet.

Once upright, his head began spinning. Feeling dizzy, the room tumbling out of control around him, he stumbled, slamming her against the wall as he tried to regain his balance. Shit, maybe he'd hit his head harder than he first thought.

Madison gasped, and when her sweet, minty breath wafted before his nostrils all coherent thought fled. Her lush body fit so perfectly next to his, and her soft breasts were so hot against his chest that all he could think about was kissing her, having his way with her right here against the wall. Christ, what could one little taste hurt? One tiny fucking nibble...

As the bathroom faded in and out of existence, her voice sounded as if it were thousand miles away. He pushed against her, caging her with his body. Knowing he wasn't thinking straight, he dipped his head, and even though she was speaking, saying something to him, he couldn't hear her, not when his entire focus was on that sweet mouth of hers.

Before he could get his shit together, he closed his mouth over hers, and when he heard a heated groan, he wasn't sure whether it was his or hers. He sank into her mouth, reveling in the delicious taste of her. With little finesse, he pushed his

tongue inside to play with hers. *So fucking sweet.* Greed urged him on and his tongue slashed against her mouth, his cock aching to sink inside her wet heat and stay there for the rest of the day. Jesus, her mouth tasted like mint, cherry and sugar all rolled into one—the best thing he'd ever tasted.

Some part of his brain registered that her hands were on his body, touching, tugging at his shirt, pulling on his shoulders. Jesus, did this mean she wanted him as much as he wanted her? But when she raked her fingers through his hair and pain zinged through him, reality crashed over him like the cold water from her broken pipe.

He inched back and stared at her. When he saw the way he'd smudged her lipstick and mussed her hair, and noted the almost frightened look in her eyes, his heart raced. Okay, so apparently her hands were all over him because she was trying to push him away, not because she was eager to touch him. What the fuck was he thinking?

"Jesus, Madison. I didn't mean—"

"Brad." She carefully smoothed her hand over the back of his head. "I think you have a concussion."

His hand went to this head, and when her fingers moved aside he found an egg-sized lump and winced. "Shit."

"You must have hit your head when you fell."

"Yeah, I...uh." His glance went to her mouth again. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. You're just not in your right frame of mind right now. I don't think you even knew what you were doing."

Oh, he knew all right.

"You need to sit," she said, her beautiful breasts rising and falling as she stared at him, wide-eyed.

"I'm fine," he murmured, inching back.

"You're not fine. Come with me." She grabbed his hand and took him to her bedroom. She sat and patted the

mattress beside her. "I think I'd better cancel my eleven o'clock."

In a bid to appease her, Brad dropped down next to her on the bed. "You're not canceling anything."

"You shouldn't be alone."

"Madison, I'm fine." She frowned and he suspected there was only one way to get her to leave. He pushed his index finger into her sheets. "If I promise to stay here until you get back, will you go?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, Brad. I was just born yesterday."

He grinned. "You know me too well."

"What I know is how stubborn you are." She tugged at his T-shirt. "At least get out of these wet clothes."

There was that word *wet* again. He shouldn't tease her, but he couldn't seem to stop himself from responding with, "So what you're saying is you want me naked and in your bed."

Her dark eyes widened and she opened her mouth and closed it again. "I just don't want... You have a cold..."

"Fine. If I grab something of Jonah's to wear and promise to take it easy, will you go?"

She glanced at her clock and climbed from the bed. "Okay, but I'm getting you ice first and if you need me, call my cell."

Twenty minutes later, Brad listened to the sound of her car leaving the driveway. He dropped the ice-filled cloth into her bathroom sink and checked the copper pipes to see if they were dry enough to solder.

Satisfied that they were, he grabbed his gear from his toolbox and lost track of time as he went to work on fixing her faulty plumbing. Before he knew it the afternoon was upon them and Madison was back from her appointment. Her heels clicked on the stairs as she came to check on him.

“Brad,” she called out as she cautiously turned the corner, walking slowly like she was trying to avoid another run-in with him. And who could blame her, considering how he’d ravished her, damn near taking what wasn’t his to take.

Sitting on the edge of her tub, Brad turned off his soldering gun, and said, “I’m here.”

She stepped into the bathroom and looked at the gaping hole in her wall. She crinkled her nose when her glance went back to him. “You didn’t change your clothes.”

He shrugged. “They were only going to get wet anyway.”

For a moment she looked like she was going to give him a lecture, but then she looked beyond his shoulders and asked, “How’s it going?”

“Almost done. You’ll have running water in no time at all. Then I’ll see about fixing this wall.”

She shook her head. “You’ve done enough already. And don’t think I forgot about that bang to the head.”

He ignored her protest. “How did you make out at the country club?”

She smiled. “I got the contract. Which means I really need to get to work.”

“Almost there,” he assured her. “I’ll give you a shout when I’m done.”

“I’ll leave you to it then.” She clicked her way down the hall, his focus locked on her curvy ass the whole way. When she reached her bedroom, he shifted his position for a better view and damn near swallowed his tongue when she kicked off her heels and tore off her blouse, clearly forgetting that he had direct line of sight from the bathroom. She probably never expected him to be sneaking a peak. After all, they’d been friends for years and she was dating his brother.

A gorgeous lace bra covered her ample breasts, and his gaze latched on to the creamiest cleavage he’d ever had the pleasure of viewing. His cock tightened and his nostrils

flared, heat careening through his blood at dangerous speeds. He wet his mouth as the need to taste her set his body on fire. He was so goddamn hot, burning from the inside out, he was sure he could smell smoke. He inhaled then jerked back with a start.

Wait! He *could* smell smoke.

He jumped from the tub. "Fuck."

"Brad," Madison called out, rushing down the hall. She tied the waistband on her sweats. "I smell smoke."

"Me too." He pushed past her and rushed down the stairs to the basement, Madison tight on his heels. He reached her furnace room and cursed under his breath when he saw her water tank smoking. His glance went to her circuit board, and he raked his hands through his hair, kicking his ass for forgetting. But goddammit, he wasn't in his right mind when he was around Madison.

"Shit."

"What happened?" Madison asked.

"I drained the tank but forgot to switch the breaker. I burnt out the heating element." He walked to the circuit board and flicked off the breaker. "I'll have to run out and get a new one. Water might be coming a little later than I had hoped." He drove his hands into his pockets and shook his head. Jesus, he'd told her not to call a plumber because he could fix it for her, and what a fine mess he was making of that. "I'm sorry, Madison."

She touched his shoulder. "Hey, don't be sorry. I just appreciate what you're doing for me."

With the heat of her hand seeping into his wet flesh, he could feel his body reacting, hardening. Need careened through him and his glance dropped to her mouth. For the briefest of moments he thought about kissing her again, but doubted he could get away with blaming it on his concussion a second time. She was too smart for that, and if she knew

how much he wanted her it would make things awkward between the three of them when Jonah returned.

“I have some paperwork to take care of anyway, so going without water for a little longer won’t hurt me.”

He took note of the tank’s model number. “I’ll be back as fast as I can.”

Brad climbed into his truck and spent the next few hours driving around town. Her tank was old and getting the right part proved harder than he expected. When he finally arrived back at her place, night was upon them and his stomach was growling, not to mention the throbbing at the base of his neck. Shit, maybe he really should have taken it easy.

He parked in the small parking lot and fished out the key Jonah had given him from his pocket. But when he found Madison standing at the bakery door, waving him over, he secured the new heating element under his arm and walked toward her.

Her eyes narrowed as they moved over his face in concern. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, it just took longer than I thought.”

“Come on.”

She led him inside the dimly lit bakery that always smelled like sweet icing sugar, like Madison herself. Then another scent caught him. Pizza.

“Have a seat and eat with me.” Madison pointed to one of the many tables scattered throughout the small space.

He held up the heating element. “Let me get this done first.”

His stomach took that moment to grumble, and Madison took the part from him. “You’ve done enough for today. Time to eat.”

Hunger pangs gnawed at him. “Yeah, that does sound like a good idea.” He grabbed a chair and Madison divvied up the pizza before handing him a cola.

"It might be a little bit cold. I was waiting for you."

He felt a strange hitch in his chest. "You waited for me?"

She nodded, then looked at the dim lights. "I have to keep them low, otherwise customers might think I'm open."

He grinned. "The *Closed* sign hanging on the door doesn't do the trick."

She laughed. "Apparently not. Customers still come up to the door and peek into the window. But I guess I'm grateful that customers like my goods enough they they'll stop by at all hours."

Her customers weren't the only ones, he thought, as his glance moved over *her* goods. Oh yeah, he liked them enough that he'd stop by at all hours too.

She continued to talk about her business, and how she'd like to hire more staff to keep later hours. He listened to her ideas and scarfed down his first piece in record time, following each bite with a swig of his cola.

"Have some more." Madison nudged the box toward him.

He helped himself to more and as he chewed he noticed sauce on Madison's face. He grabbed a napkin, and without giving it another thought, swiped at it, but when his fingers connected with her soft flesh, something that looked an awful lot like heat moved across her face.

"You...uh...you have sauce on your face," he explained and jerked his hand back. As the air charged and his blood ran south, he quickly changed the subject. "I guess it's going to be hard for you with Jonah away for a month."

He watched her throat work as she swallowed and realized it felt a little odd sitting in the dark bakery with her like this, a little intimate. "I kind of got used to the company, and because I don't have an alarm system, I sleep better when he's here."

"He takes good care of you?"

“Yeah, Jonah might be a lot of things,” she said, a knowing grin on her face, “but he’s good to me.”

“That’s good.” Brad stuffed his face before he said something he might regret, like how she should ditch his punk-ass brother and give him a chance. But he’d never do that to Jonah, no matter how much he wanted Madison for himself.

Madison finished eating and said, “Wait here, I’ll be right back.”

Brad pushed back in his chair and looked around her bakery as she disappeared into the kitchen area. He was impressed that she’d built the business from the ground up and was garnering quite the loyal following in town and in the wedding circuits. Too bad she had to start out in such a crappy building, and if he ever came face to face with her landlord, he was going to give him a good shit kicking.

Madison stepped up behind him, ice clinking in a bag.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

He was about to turn but her hand on his shoulder stopped him. “Shh, just let me check your head, okay?”

Her body crowded his as she carefully placed the ice on his lump. How long had it been since someone had taken care of him? Not since before his mother had passed. That Madison was the one caring for him now caused a tightening in his gut.

“It’s still very swollen,” she said quietly.

Oh, she seriously had no idea.

“Did you ice it earlier when I told you to?”

He shifted, ready to grab the bag and place it on a different body part.

“Yeah,” he mumbled. “Sort of.”

She huffed. “You really need to take better care of yourself.”

He made a move to get up, this nurturing side of her making him feel all peculiar inside, making him remember his

own upbringing and the way his mother showered her boys with love before cancer took her shortly after his father's heart attack. Their love was so strong that Brad couldn't help but think her death came on the heels of his father's quickly because it was nature's way of putting husband and wife back together again.

His heart tightened with memories of his folks and his happy childhood. Brad had always wanted a family of his own, and just when he thought it was within reach, his ex had betrayed him, and ever since his world had been tilted off balance.

He cleared his throat, unease moving through him. "Let me get at the tank, okay?"

With the bag still on his head, she shifted, and perched on the table beside him. She yawned, and said quietly, "Let's leave it for tonight."

"No. I'm not leaving you here without water."

"I'll be fine."

He gave her a crooked grin. "Now look who's being stubborn."

"You've done enough." Warm brown eyes full of genuine concern moved over his face. "Besides you're fighting a cold and I think you have a concussion."

He exhaled slowly, exhaustion moving through his body now that he stopped working. "Okay, how about this. I'll call it a night if you agree to stay at my place."

Her body tightened and she opened her mouth to say something when he cut her off. "I'm not leaving you without water. So either I fix this tonight, or you stay at my place."

"I don't think—"

"Besides, I have a concussion," he said, wincing with a little too much enthusiasm as he took the bag of ice from her. "And I don't think I'm supposed to be alone."

She chuckled quietly and shook her head. "You always did know how to get what you wanted didn't you?"

Not always...

He arched a brow. "So...?"

"Fine." She pushed off the table.

He grabbed her arm and softened his voice when he added, "It's what Jonah would have wanted me to do."

Her eyes dimmed as she looked at some distant spot past his shoulder, letting him know how much she adored his brother. His gut clenched wishing she'd look at him like that.

"Okay, I'll sleep on the sofa," she said quietly.

He nodded, even though he had no intention of letting her crash on his couch, but now was not the time to be arguing about such things.

"Just let me grab my stuff."

As soon as she left he pulled his cell from his pocket and made a call. He spoke quietly as Madison made her way upstairs, and just as he was about to hang up, he heard Madison behind him.

"Brad, do you want—" Her voice fell off when she saw the phone in his hand. "Oh, I'm sorry. If I'm keeping you from someone..."

He shut down his phone, shoved it in his pocket, and shook his head. "That was Granddad. I normally visit him on Wednesdays and bring one of the therapy dogs by but I don't want to go around the nursing home with a cold."

The alarm fell from her face and a smile touched her mouth as she looked at him. "Oh, I thought." She shook her head. "Never mind."

"What were you asking me?"

She held out a blister pack. "Cold medication. It's supposed shorten the duration of a cold, but it also knocks you right out." She yawned, then laughed. "I took one upstairs and bed is already calling me."

He took her duffle bag from her and put the cold medication in his pocket. “Well, then let me get you to bed.” He suddenly wondered if he was some kind of masochist. Christ, he should have just fixed her tank, because he had no idea how he was going to make it through the night with her in his bed and his hands tied.

Hands tied...

Ah, fuck.