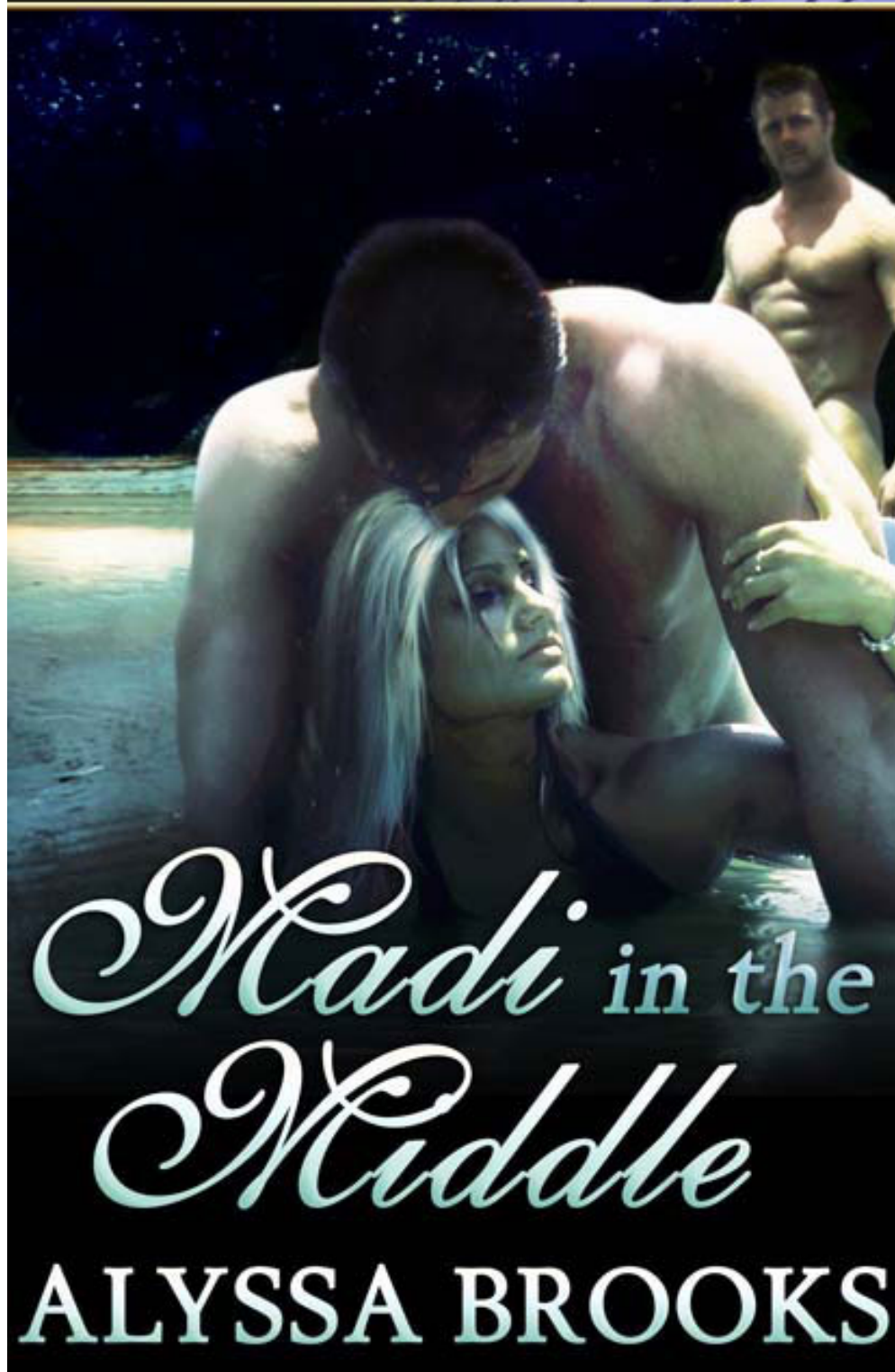


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



## **Madi in the Middle**

Alyssa Brooks

*He loved her enough to let her go...*

Intimidated by the prospect of facing the man who broke her heart years past—the man she cannot stop loving—Madison Porter hatches a plan for her long-time roommate to accompany her home. To help her make her ex jealous.

*Pretend* to want her? Brady Michaels has sported a crush on Madi since day one. Now she wants him to hold her hand, to kiss her in public? For him there's nothing fake about it—and this is the perfect opportunity to seduce her. Starting with a few practice make-out sessions...

Only one glitch... Madi's plan has worked a little too well. Now Will wants her back. Determined not to keep Madi from pursuing her dreams, Will Ryder may have dumped her, but his love for Madi never changed...only hers has. Now Madi must choose. Will it be Will, the man who broke her heart, or Brady, the one who healed it? If only happily ever afters came in package deals...

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Madi in the Middle

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# ***MADI IN THE MIDDLE***

**Alyssa Brooks**

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## Prologue

This was, irrefutably, the best day of Madison Porter's entire existence. No, not the best—the first. Today started a new life. A much, much better one.

"Will! Will!" Grinding the brakes to a halt in the dirt drive, she slammed the gear into park and leapt from her old beat-up car, leaving the dinging door ajar as she bolted for the barn, waving the big envelope in her hand and screaming, "Will, I got in! I got in!"

*Adios, New Jersey! Aloha, Hawaii!*

Will emerged in the shadowy opening of the barn, the hay under his feet gleaming gold in the warm spring sun. There he stood, tanned like a god, what was left of his jeans and white t-shirt clinging to sculpted, hard-earned muscles and covered in dirt and hay, those fathomless dark eyes unreadable. Showing no excitement.

Silently, stoically, he stood there—just *stood* there—and she skidded to a stop in front of him, confused. "Will? What's wrong?"

He ran his hand over short, nearly black hair, those full lips she loved to kiss contorting with something unspoken. "Madi, listen..."

Oh God. Oh God, no!

She couldn't bring herself to ask directly. All their plans, the rest of their lives depended on them both being accepted. "Did you check your mail?"

"Not yet."

"Well, come on then! What, are you nervous, silly?" Surely the same large white envelope was waiting for him! Madi snatched his big hand in hers, giving him a tug. "Let's go see!"

“Madi, stop.” Not budging, he wrenched his hand free. “There isn’t going to be any envelope. Not today, not ever.”

“No envelope?” But...she knew he’d applied. They’d filled out their applications together then gone for shakes to celebrate. Her heart-pounding excitement welled into panic, shivering over her skin. “What do you mean? Of course there is—”

There *had* to be.

“Aw, Madi...” Lifting his hand, he claimed a strand of her pale blonde hair and twirled it between two fingers. “My cornsilk angel.”

His nickname for her. *Cornsilk*. An image of him leaning against his old, beat-up pickup, drumming his fingers as he waited for her to get out of school—she’d been a couple of years behind him when they started dating—played through her mind. *Hey there, Cornsilk*, he’d say. *Sunshine’s got nothin’ on you today*. And Madi had known no other man would ever make her feel as special as this down-to-earth farmer’s son did.

Now he admired her hair as if it were the last time he’d see it, touch it. “It’s for the best.”

What in the hell was he talking about?

“No. Will, *no*.” She smacked his hand away, panic turning into absolute terror. Something was wrong. Horribly wrong. After all their planning... Two long years of saving after high school. “Tell me what happened,” she demanded. “What’s wrong?”

“I should have told you this before now.” He looked to the ground, uncommonly thick black lashes hooding his eyes—as if he were afraid to face her. “I never applied, Madi. Threw the papers out. Just couldn’t mail them.”

He what? “*Why?*” All the while her mind screamed *No! No, no, no!* But she knew Will. Realized the awful truth.

“You know why, Cornsilk. I can’t leave my dad here alone. I just can’t. He’s been slowly killing himself with his drinking ever since the accident and he’s lost one son already...” Will’s voice cracked at the mention of his twin brother—the true farmer of

the family—who'd died at eleven in a combine accident, making his mother's death—she'd hemorrhaged, determined to deliver both boys naturally—seem even more pointless. "How can I leave Pa? If I go the farm'll go under. Or worse. Of all people, you should understand."

Of all people she didn't *want* to understand. Her own father had died of alcohol poisoning when she was four, leaving Mom to raise her alone, breaking her back in factories to make ends meet. Hating her life and ensuring Madi—and everyone else around them—was fully aware. Every second of every day.

Two things Madi *knew*—principles until now she'd believed she and Will had in common—she would *never* drink. And she would *never ever* work a job she hated.

Nothing in this world did she love more than the ocean and all its creatures—dolphins and whales, seahorses and sharks. Ever since *The Little Mermaid*, their underwater lives were absolute magic to her. And those hot summer days when she and Will escaped Quarry and drove the hour ride to the nearest beach to soak up the sun and splash in the sea? A slice of heaven. Ever since she'd started researching colleges, it was all she'd wanted—to attend the renowned Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology on Coconut Island. To acquire her Ph.D. in oceanography and live what she loved.

"So you're just going to stay..." Madi gulped back emotion, because this farm...this farm was *not* what Will loved. He loved the stars. Could name every constellation ever found and a few just of his own. And he was supposed to be at her side, attending the University of Hawaii, majoring in astronomy. "You're sentencing yourself to this life you hate? Will, we talked about this, remember?" Every night for years. They'd lie in the back of his pickup, down by the river, gazing at the night sky, talking and cooking up plans. Big plans, *together*. "What about your dreams?"

Hers? Theirs?

How could she live without him? How could he expect her not to go? Surely her heart was splitting into pieces.



He said nothing. Stood, looking away from her, unmoving.

Tears of confusion slid down her face. A hole burned in her chest, growing larger with every passing second. "Will, please."

"I'm sorry, Madi, but it's over." His voice did not crack but held strong, smooth and sure.

"Over? You're breaking up with me?" Madi couldn't believe what she was hearing. Refused to accept it. "No, no it's not. We love each other. We want to get *married* some day."

She reached for him, feeling as if she were grasping at straws, but he yanked back. "We can fix this," she insisted. "Whatever's wrong—"

"Can't fix what's not there." Finally he lifted his gaze, looking her dead in the eye. His voice was steel. Colder than she'd ever heard. "Look, Madi. What we had was puppy love. We were nothing but a bunch of high school kids and it's time to grow up. You'll get over me. I'm already over you—that's the real reason I didn't apply. So don't go forming any notions of staying. Either way, we're over."

With that he turned his back, grabbed a pitchfork and disappeared into the barn's depths.

## Chapter One

*Seven years later...*

Dumped. Again.

What, did she have a sign on her back or something? *Not a keeper?*

Knowing exactly where she was going—to her car, to drive to the beach—Madi hurried through Manoa Marketplace, past fruit and vegetable stands, where farmers rushed to lift the tarps they'd quickly draped to protect them from the sudden afternoon shower that'd dropped in—there wasn't a day in this valley it didn't rain, either a little or a lot. Lush green vegetation and gorgeous flowers thrived as a result and rainbows popped up frequently—like now, beautiful colors streaking across the pale blue sky. As if predicating beautiful things.

It'd poured while Dan had broken it off with her, in the shelter of a local sandwich shop where they'd gone for lunch. She hadn't touched a bite. He'd scarfed down two tunas on rye. Three months they'd dated.

"It's not you," he'd claimed between bites, "it's me."

Infamous line. To be honest, it *was* her and his following explanation had proved it. "I'm the needy sort," he'd explained. "We're both busy, Madi. Too alike. I need a girlfriend who'll be more available."

And Madi wasn't. In fact, to quote the last guy she'd dated— "You're married to your fish, Madi." And no matter who she went out with, they never moved her enough to give them any sort of priority. Her lack of feelings showed, she realized.

Maybe she should just quit men altogether. Stick with the gilled variety.

Knowing she shouldn't go hungry if she wanted the energy for swimming off her frustration, Madi stopped by a vendor, paying a buck for a banana because she didn't want the bunch or the change and pulled back the skin as she continued her hurried

trek toward her '84 convertible—like all the old cars she'd ever owned, it had a lot of wear and tear, but she enjoyed the wind in her hair and it'd do until she finally earned her Master's next spring, after a total of eight long years. Sooner or later, her Ph.D. would follow—she refused to give up on that dream—but likely just as slowly. Independently supporting herself through school had been a bitch...numerous times she'd had to take off a semester just to catch up financially.

Madi bit off a bite of banana. God, how this breakup figured. She wasn't hurt about being dumped—she'd long since come to the conclusion that after Will, no man could ever hurt her again. Can't break a heart that's already in pieces. But she was upset. Big-time upset. She'd been counting on Dan's company this weekend. Now, in less than two days, she'd have to face the trip home—and *Will*—alone.

The thought formed a knot in her throat, blocking the banana, and she coughed it out before she ended up choking. The rest of the fruit she cast away, having reached her car. Screwing in the key, she yanked open the squeaky door and threw herself into the seat. Two seconds later the engine revved and she sped toward solace, never needing it more.

She couldn't—wouldn't—go back to that town single. Not again, not at practically twenty-eight. It was pathetic...especially after the last time, everyone in Quarry knowing Will was dating some waitress with red hair. Three times she'd run into him at the diner, forced to experience the awful truth. Watching Will flirt was hell. Facing him was just too awkward, even after all this time.

But she hadn't seen her mom since Easter, when Madi shelled out to fly her into Manoa rather than returning to New Jersey herself—as she'd done the Christmas and Thanksgiving before. Now Mom was planning to get hitched to the guy she'd been seeing the past couple months and Madi had promised—crossed her heart and sworn—she'd come home for an extended weekend and attend the courthouse wedding.

At the thought, she was slapped with a vision of the redhead tossing back her hair and laughing at something Will said—

Madi's hand drummed the wheel and she shifted into fourth, breaking the speed limit. This was ridiculous. He was over her, clearly. Why wouldn't he fade from her heart?

Still, the redhead laughed. Laughed and laughed and laughed, mocking her.

And suddenly, it hit Madi with fierce realization just what to do and she slammed on the brakes, hooked a u-turn and headed back to her apartment. She had something better than Dan...the loser! She'd take home her own redhead—in the form of her sexy roommate and good friend Brady. After all, he'd bemoaned her abandoning him all weekend to cook for himself, swearing he'd probably have a blocked artery by the time she arrived home. *Only way I know how to make my food come out edible is with three inches of oil.*

And it was true—when it came to batter and oil, the man was a pro. But his heart health wasn't why he was complaining about Madi leaving. Their third roommate had recently moved out, and if there was one thing Brady loathed, it was being alone.

Now he wouldn't have to be.

Brady. Ah, it was perfect! He was tall and powerfully built, sporting plenty of muscles and a sexy Southern drawl. Tanned dark by the Hawaiian sun, with beautiful auburn hair and laughing hazel eyes. Super smart and working on finishing up his Ph.D. An absolute catch. Actually, she would've happily gone out with him long ago—he had asked a few times—except for one small flaw. Like Will, he loved the stars, was studying astronomy...that was just too weird in her book.

Still, he was exactly what she needed to goad Will's jealousy.

Not that that was her intention. She simply needed a redhead buffer. *If* she could get him to agree.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pretend to want her? *Pretend?*

Was he hallucinating? Still dreaming? After a late night at the observatory, studying a young star he'd recently found on the infrared telescopes, Brady had just woken up a few minutes ago—or had he?

Spoon in one hand, cola in the other, he gawked at the unwittingly sexy woman who'd just burst into the apartment, bounced onto their last-leg old brown couch, batted blonde lashes, and announced she needed a "teeny-weeny...okay, maybe huge favor" in that fascinating, songlike voice of hers then asked him to pose as her boyfriend.

Hold her hand. Flirt. Kiss her in public.

Just for a few days.

"Pleasepleaseplease," she begged, hands folded in prayer, those vivid ultramarine eyes shimmering with need. *For him.*

Heat ran along his cock at the thought and he dropped his spoon into the bowl of frosted flakes on the coffee table and sat back. "Hell yes." *Damn...little too eager, jackass.*

"Really?" she chirped, luckily not noticing his over-enthusiasm. "Because it would mean so much to me, not having to face Will by myself. I mean...but I don't want to cause you to feel weird or anything."

As if he'd tell her "no" this side of ever. As if there was any pretending to be had. Never mind that she was essentially asking him to make the competition jealous.

God, just look at her, kneeling next to him on their couch, silky pale blonde hair dangling over her shoulders, catching glints of light that gleamed through the open window behind them. The bluest eyes he'd ever seen, eyes that could hook a man's soul if he looked too long—Brady knew, because he had. Delicate features, an almost-fragile bone structure to her tall, model-like figure.

A couple years now they'd roomed together—with a revolving door of UH students who took the spare room—and he'd wanted her just as long. She was sunshine to him. A star in her own right. Warm and glowing. But after three attempts to take her out and subsequently three strikes, he'd figured he was down for the count. It was clear

where Madi's heart lay. Broken, at the bottom of Will's feet. Really too bad too, pretty and smart as she was, but Brady had let up, just grateful to have her as a roommate. Not many people could put up with him and he knew it.

"I'll pay for your plane ticket. Hell, I'll pay *you* if you want..." she rambled on. "Or would that make things weirder?" Her finger went up. "I know —"

"Nah, darlin'," he cut her off, "it's cool. I'll do it—no charge. Should be fun actually." Brady forced himself to play it cool, taking a swig of soda. Another added benefit—as if he needed one—at least he wouldn't have to spend four days clawing the walls and harassing his friends for company. Even at his age—on the verge of thirty, after eleven years of what his father labeled as being a "professional student" and what Brady called finding himself, albeit the long way—he still *hated* spending a second alone. An only child, Brady had spent one day too many banished to his room by his excessively strict parents, his only solace the telescope he'd received for his sixth birthday. Late at night, he'd peek out at the stars through a crack in the curtains, yearning for the day he'd be free from the solitude.

As a young adult, that'd translated into a penchant for partying. Now he was finally settled down and concentrating on achievement, but still, the more people—and telescopes—he had around him, the happier he was. He never went home if he could help it and never shut his curtains or doors for privacy—maybe that was why so many of their roommates moved out. Apparently his shit stank—and Sunshine here was the only one who never complained, simply laughed when she caught him squatting on the toilet, reading a textbook.

"Really?" she asked again, her voice ringing with excitement.

"Long as I can count on some of that juicy chicken you've told me your mom barbeques." And the chance to show Madi how "juicy" it could be between them. To kiss her, taste her. Turn her on...

That and stick it to the bastard who'd hurt her.

Brady flexed his fist, denting the can at the thought of making Will sweat—and bleed—just as Madi cried with glee and threw her arms around him, hugging tight. “Oh Brady, you’re the best! The absolute bestest!”

Now *that* he intended to prove.

“So glad I can help.” Dropping the empty can, Brady squeezed her back, relishing the feel of her soft, supple breasts squashed against the hard expanse of his chest. The way she smelled like a sea breeze. How her feminine structure against his muscular one revved something cavemanish in him and all he wanted was to possess her.

“Truly, thank you.” She started to pull back, but he locked her in his embrace.

“Uh-uh, wait,” he murmured in her ear. Every ion of his being itched to taste her, touch her, *have* her. “Maybe we should practice. Get in tune.”

“Practice?” She cocked her head, scanning his face with those bright eyes, clearly uncertain. “You mean...like...”

“Yeah, sure.” *Cool, cool, keep it cool.* Though impossible to do as heat flooded his cock—how he wanted her. Now, not in two days. Not for pretend. “Can’t have our first kiss be in front of *him*, right? You want it to look real. The more we practice, the better we’ll be at it.”

“I don’t know...”

“What’s there to know?” Keeping one arm secure at the small of her back, he brought his free hand to her face, stroking her smooth, tanned cheek. “You can trust me, Madi. We’re friends but we ought to be believable...”

“Right. Friends. This is just so we seem real.” She sucked in a breath, blonde hair bobbing as she jerked her head. “Okay. Do it.”

“Good. Okay.” Inside, he trembled with excitement. His cock tingled and strained in his star-spotted pajama pants—God help him if she looked down. “I’m gonna kiss you, that’s all. So just let it happen.”

Cupping her chin, he brought his mouth to hers and something unnamable shuddered through him. “*Madi.*” Then he crushed his lips to hers, cutting off her gasp of shock. His tongue swooped along her teeth, encouraging her to open for him, and with a throaty whimper, she did. Warm and willing, she melted into his kiss, her teasing tongue flicking to and fro, dancing with his.

He kissed her deeper and deeper, pinning her to the couch, knowing this couldn’t be any more real, this wondrous, carried-away feeling as their mouths tangled and twisted and his hand ventured to her breast, molding the handful of supple flesh and squeezing a frantic cry from her.

Quickly he retreated – fondling was going too far. *For now...*

How he wanted more than this – a kiss on false pretenses. Her body, her passion, her love. Sweet, sweet sunshine Madi, whose heart belonged to Will. Whose kiss was only for practice. With her, he was never alone.

The thought nearly caused him to lose control – made him yearn to flatten her to the worn cushions of their old couch, take her completely before she could change her mind about the whole affair. Compel her body to sing to the heavens, brand her with his touch.

Instead, Brady forced himself to end the kiss, breaking free with a groan of disappointment. For several moments they just sat there, staring at each other and breathing hard. It wasn’t awkward – at least not to him – just...amazing.

Brady was the first to speak. “Sorry about the hand thing. That’s just how I kiss. Got this thing about touching.”

“Oh. Sure.” Her mouth hung open a little and she reached her fingers to her lips, playing unpolished nails over pretty pink skin as a smile tweaked the corners. “So I guess I better get used to that.”

“I’m sure I’ll do it again. That’s what the practicin’ is for, right?” And damn, he couldn’t wait for their next session. But didn’t she see? If they could kiss like that, if he could turn her on, why not date him? Why still worry herself with Will? “*Madi...*”



Without warning, she leapt to her feet. "You know, let's just not say anything more right now, okay?" Spinning around like a whirlwind, she practically leapt to the door and dove into her flip-flops. "I think I'll go for some fresh air. I, um..." One hand went to the knob, the other to her forehead. "I need to think, okay?"

About Will, he'd bet. How no man could compare. Jealousy bombed into his chest, but he struggled against the useless emotion, knowing he could never change the reality that she loved Will. But he *could* change her feelings for him...already had a start on that. *If* he could keep it cool, play his cards right.

"Say," he asked, "what did the boy star say to the girl star?"

Cocking her head, she shrugged her shoulders, looking at him as if he'd lost his mind.

"I really glow for you," he answered for her with a wink. "I'll get to packin', that way we've plenty of time for practicin' when you get back. Now you enjoy your swim."

"Oh Brady." Stifling a grin, she walked out.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun pounded down, searing her unprotected skin. Sand threaded her toes, the crystalline ocean water licking her feet, foaming around her heels, and Madi looked out over the brilliant afternoon horizon, thinking of home and her seaside trips with Will. How she'd loved it there, completely clueless to the beauty and wonder that lay beyond her sheltered existence.

Her life in Hawaii? It was great. Never better, even without Will. And the intimate moment she's just shared with Brady?

Even after half an hour, her lips still tingled — *that* she hadn't bargained for. Hadn't bargained for his kiss, for his hand flattening her breast, the wash of electric desire that'd hit her body like a tidal wave.

Nor did she count on Brady wanting her — taking her "favor" as a green light, obviously ready to seduce her.

Sure, he'd asked her out a time or two when they'd first met, but they'd become good buds since then. For heaven's sake, he blatantly went to the bathroom in front of her.

Now his intent was written in his words, plain in his kiss, not to mention the tent in his pajama pants. *That way we've plenty of time for practicin' when you get back.*

Kinda made the whole idea of pretending...well, a total sham. And that nicked her conscience.

She liked Brady well enough. Using him to get at Will, to make him jealous—because that was the ugly truth—now seemed wrong. So what did she do? Go with this awkward—yet intriguing—plan of practicing kisses and pretending to love each other? Or cancel bringing him, do what was right?

A gut-wrenching vision of the laughing redhead backhanded the notion, dismay driving her farther into the ocean. Wading up to her knees, she kicked and splashed water, knowing she couldn't face Will again, not alone. She just couldn't.

She thought of Brady. His tingly kiss. Of the way he'd known she was coming here, without her even saying. Thought maybe it wouldn't be pretending after all. Then she thought of Will again. Those seductive kisses in the back of his truck, under the stars.

Brady! He actually wanted her. His friendship made her feel safe, his kisses made her feel desired.

But *Will*. There he was, always a thorn in her heart.

Brady!

Will.

Brady!

Will.

Clothes and all, Madi dove into a cresting wave, relishing the rush of streaming water and bubbles engulfing her. Fizzing around her, seducing her entire body with tingles, reminding her—she had a third lover. And neither Will nor Brady could

compete. Because the ocean would never disappoint her. Betray her. Stop loving her. Its beautiful blue waters held no danger, at least not to her damaged heart.

Madi surfaced, arms pumping with furious emotion. Never would she love anything – anyone – more.

And that made Madi safe. Safe, except for one gnawing, head-pounding reality – she was leaving her ocean behind, headed to Quarry in a quandary.

## Chapter Two

"It's not much, I know. But it's home, I suppose." Nothing to be embarrassed over, right? "Mom won't get off work until after ten. Second shift. She'll stop over to say hi then."

Madi turned her tried-and-true key, swinging open the paw-print-muddied front door into darkness. From the fenced-in yard out back, Zoey howled a welcome.

"Trust me when I say money can't buy happiness. An education, yes, happiness, no." Behind her, Brady effortlessly hauled both their suitcases—he'd insisted—up the rotting porch stairs. "Besides, I'm sure it's lovely."

"It's not, not really. But home's home." As if to prove it, Madi flipped the switch on, illuminating the small living room with a couch to rival their own, stacked high with taped-up cardboard boxes. To Madi's pleasant surprise, the room had been given a fresh coat of cream-colored paint and the dog hair had been recently sucked out of the tattered carpet—likely to complement the *For Rent* sign outside.

"Mom's moving in with Chuck," she explained. All her clothes were already there—her toothbrush too—and after this weekend, anything else that mattered would be as well, including the pets. "Another reason I had to come—to finally empty out what's left in my room before Mom finds a tenant."

"Well, I'm at your service." Despite carrying the luggage, Brady flexed his arms, pumping muscle. "All yours, darlin'."

Men.

But at the thought of Brady seeing her room—not to mention the body-affecting sight of those rock-hard biceps—her face flushed hot.

Well, crap. Until this moment, she'd been so mentally focused on facing Will and physically distracted by Brady's "practice" kisses, she hadn't thought of much else—

certainly not this small, rundown house she'd grown up in. That she was introducing Brady to a side few in Hawaii knew—her old bedroom plastered with dolphin posters and littered with heart-shaped reminders of her love for Will. Mom and her rages against the world. The neighbors who fought so loudly, at times she'd been sure their yelling would shake the house to the ground.

God, she should have booked a hotel. Brady might be avoiding his parents at every turn—mean SOB's he called them and Lord knew she'd dodged enough of their calls for him—but in the end, he came from wealth. Knew the finer things. They definitely came from opposite sides of the track, quite literally—a train ran right out back and shook their house every morning and night at six sharp.

Right on time, her house began to quake and howl, threatening knickknacks on the end tables Mom had long since super-glued down. The walls shuddered and groaned, and like clockwork, Zoey went into a fit of defensive barks and growls. "Sorry! It'll only last a minute or two," she shouted over the noise. "You won't call this homey tomorrow morning!"

"It only adds to the charm!" he called back, strolling in and appearing unfazed as he set down their luggage. "Very homey! Hope the dog doesn't bite."

"Zoey? Only if you have food in your hand. I'll let her in once we're settled in." A familiar sound, several pictures on the wall slipped from their hooks and clapped to the floor—the glass in the frames had long since shattered to bits—and Madi groaned, rushing to scoop them up. "I don't know why she insists on keeping these hung." Just then, the rumbling faded and all returned to normal and she planted the old family photos of her grandparents and father back on their nails. God, just look at her dad—so young, smiling that famous, lopsided smile that could charm a drink from a rock and the pants off a nun, as her mother always said. And that was all she knew about him—that he was a drunk and womanizer, through and through, but Mom had loved him anyhow. A lot. And until Chuck, had never gotten over his death. Her heart clenched at

the thought and she quickly turned back to Brady. "You sure you don't want me to take you to a hotel?"

"Trust me, babe. Sterile floors and empty walls don't appeal. Too much like where I grew up." Madi noticed he didn't call it home—she'd never heard him refer to his parents' place in Georgia as home. "This suits me more than fine."

"If you're sure..."

"Positive. I like that I'm getting to know you, where you came from, better." He nodded toward the picture. "So, that's your dad?"

Madi didn't glance back. "So I'm told. Obviously, I have his hair."

"And his eyes. You don't talk about him much."

"What's there to say? He's a stranger to me, except for what I've been told. None of it good."

"Hmm." Brady pondered the photograph. "Well, at least we know he did one great thing in his life."

"What's that?" Because she certainly hadn't heard about it. She had, on the other hand, heard all about the time he'd been arrested for indecent exposure, sunbathing naked—and drunk—on the roof. Or the time he was found passed out, crushing the neighbors' rose bushes, and Mom brought him home covered in thorns. Or—

"Don't look so doubtful," Brady admonished, his hand going to her shoulder. His gaze drifting lazily over her in appreciation, as if he could look all day and never get enough. "You see, he made you, beautiful, and what a mark on the world that was. I'll have to shake his hand when I get to heaven."

Madi scoffed. "I doubt he's there." Yet she had to admit, his compliment settled deep-welling good feelings through her. Warming her to her toes. Never before had she been given any reason to appreciate her dad. And never before had she felt so treasured than she did in that instant. "But...thank you. A lot."

"Your dad's the one who needs thanked." He winked.

Just then, from around the corner, peeked little Puny – the orange and white runt of the litter – and Brady lowered that huge frame of his to a less formidable level, clicking his tongue and offering his hand. “Here, kitty, kitty.”

So he liked cats – always a positive sign of a gentle-hearted man. As if she hadn’t concluded Brady was the nicest guy on the face of the earth years ago. “She’s not a fan of strangers.”

Still, Puny hesitantly approached, brushed her whiskers to his hand but quickly changed her mind, tucking tail and zipping under the couch. “Ah, I’ll win her over before the end of this visit,” he swore, lifting his gaze to hers as he once again rose tall, those hazel eyes sparking with unspoken promise – Puny wasn’t the only one he was intent on winning over. “I’m hungry. Let’s get these suitcases put up and grab a bite to eat.”

“My bedroom...um, I’ll show you.” Ugh. Here went nothing.

Madi led him down the short hall to her small room on the right. The door opened to reveal a mattress and box springs, minus a frame, lying flat on the floor and draped in a comforter she’d been given one Christmas. An ocean scene spread out across the bottom of the bedding, which faded into blue. Empty fish tanks lined the top of her long dresser and every inch of her walls were indeed covered with proof of all she loved – including Will. Pictures of him. Them. Little hearts she’d doodled with his name on it.

Except that her mom had mentioned washing the sheets for her and the fresh scent of fabric softener wafted through the room, it was exactly the way she’d left it – unfortunately. No wonder she never wanted to come home – her own bedroom was like torture. A total shrine to their past.

Feeling like a jerk, Madi glanced at him, noting the gleam in his eyes as he took it all in. God, he had to be hurt – how unfair she was to him, using him like nothing but a pawn. “I’m sorry, I –”

“Nah, darlin’,” he dismissed in that seductive Southern-smooth voice of his. “I’m here for a reason, I’m aware.” One reddish-brown eyebrow perked as he took in pink

lipstick hearts on the mirror. "It's kinda cute, actually. You're always so down-to-earth. I'd no idea you're so romantic."

"I'm not. God, why, *why* didn't I tear this childish stuff down years ago?" But Madi knew the answer—some desperate part of her had always hoped...

Stupid. Absolutely stupid.

She was nothing but a total packrat and she needed to learn how to throw things out—*especially* from her heart.

"You loved him. A lot. I get that." Day-old auburn stubble covered his jaw from the long flight home and his wide mouth quirked in an ornery, lopsided smile that was all Brady. "Hmm...I think I know how we can handle this."

"You do?"

"I do." Strolling to her dresser, he rummaged the cosmetic kit she'd left behind, choosing an old tube of red lipstick and cranking the flame-colored makeup out.

*Crimson Candy*. She'd bought it on a whim for her eighth grade dance and made a fool out of herself—in cahoots with Leah—looking like a clown. Of course she hadn't thought so then. The double coating of watermelon-hued blush and bottle of hairspray she'd emptied on her head hadn't helped either, and her then boyfriend had taken one look, burst out laughing, and dashed under the bleachers. Just another in a long line of jerks.

Except Brady.

"The famous Crimson Candy?" Brady asked, proving he not only listened to but remembered her stories.

"The one and only."

"Couldn't be more perfect." With that, he attacked—first the picture of Will on the dresser, drawing horns and a pig nose. "Care to join me?"

"Oh Brady." Her burst of laughter rent the air. "Do I ever."



Going to the cosmetic kit, she grabbed the first lipstick she encountered, twisted it free, and assaulted the photo of Will hanging from the wall. Nothing had ever felt better than scribbling on that mustache and fangs, and she laughed again when she saw his finished product. Take that, Will, the devil swine.

Brady moved on to the hearts on the mirror, writing over the pretty pink *Wills* with his brilliant red *Bradys*. Drawing a few new, bigger hearts that read *Brady 'N' Madi 4-ever* that took her breath away. "How's that?" he asked.

"It's um..." Madi didn't know what to say as she cast him a happy smile because, God love him, Brady knew how to lift her spirits. Make her feel so much better. Always had. "Thank you, Brady. For being so cool, so supportive. I don't know what I'd do without you."

Not that she didn't expect he had plenty of motivations of his own, but even with them, she could still count on him to be there for her. No matter what.

"Hey, my pleasure." His gaze darted to the right, past her, and locked on something. "But you know what I'm thinkin'?"

"Do I dare?"

"I'm thinkin' maybe this whole Will thing...maybe you just haven't had proper incentive."

"Incentive? What's that mean?"

"Take Dan the Man for example. What happened with him? Did you ever even sleep with him?"

Dan the Man, Brady's almost-mocking nickname for the date who'd showed up at their apartment all of seven times, and in each instance, Brady had clapped him on his back, jokingly warning the guy to watch his manners. To keep his hands to himself. To have her back by ten. She'd thought Brady was just being brotherly.

Now that it had occurred he was being protective...but in a whole other way.

"Of course not. You know that."

"Because you would've told me. Thing is, Madi, you've never told me you've slept with *anyone* but Will. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you've never even made out with *anyone* but Will."

He paused there, giving her opportunity to correct him. But there was nothing to correct. It'd always been Will – she couldn't be intimate with someone just for the fun of it.

"Like you said...maybe I just haven't had the right incentive."

"Exactly! Not that I would've liked it, but you dated Dan three months, Madi. Three months and *nothing*." Plucking a picture off the wall – one of her and Will at the beach, her riding piggy back – he frowned down at it. Then he put it back, untouched. "What's it gonna take? When are you gonna get over this joker, Madi?"

To be honest? "When the stars stop shinin'." Probably the wrong thing to say to the astronomy-loving man who'd just doodled his name across her mirror, but with Brady, she didn't feel the need to lie.

"Well, we can't have that, can we? Can't have you livin' your life in reverse. You've got to move forward." Again his gaze darted over her and locked in place. "Incentive. Yup, maybe I need to provide you with some. Right now."

"Oh yeah? Incentive, huh?" Why'd she get the feeling this was going to end in yet another practice session? Which, with the way he kissed, the prospect of was inarguably exciting. But then Madi realized precisely *what* he was eyeballing.

The bed.

And what he meant by "incentive".

"Only full-size. Gonna be an awfully tight fit." With a telling wink, he took one looming pace forward. "But I am a fan of snugglin' up close and wrapping my arms around *my* woman."

Her heart pitter-pattered offbeat. "'My woman'? Since when do you get to call me that?"

"Since we drove into the city limits. That's why I came to Quarry with you, isn't it?" Casting her a devil-may-care look, his tongue flicked out, wetting his lower lip as his gaze zipped back to the bed. "Let's just hope the springs don't squeak too loud."

"Squeak? *Squeak!*" Kissing was one thing, but...squeaking the springs with him? At the thought, her stomach dipped and shivers jazzed over her skin, and Madi found herself taking a stride backward, attempting to avoid him as he closed in another foot. What a fine mess she'd gotten herself into with this ridiculous plan. "I wasn't...we weren't..."

It was too much, too soon. Entirely too fast. How could she trust him? Will was the only guy she'd ever given herself to and look how *that* turned out. Bad, bad, bad.

She and Brady...they weren't even technically dating yet. *Yet?* But his eyes said differently. So did the fireflies fluttering around and heating her insides. So did the ache in her chest, making her yearn...

God, how her feelings for him were multiplying in spades since he'd started kissing her. Okay yes, she *did* want him. A lot. But Madi just wasn't sure she could handle it if things went sour. "Let's just take this one step at a time."

"We are." He chuckled, driving her yet another small *step* backward. "You're not thinking of sentencing me to the couch?"

"Actually, I can sleep there myself," she offered, holding her ground. Sputtering like a fool—like some half-scared teenager rather than a woman with desires. "You're too big. I mean, tall. Really, you should have the bed."

"Won't work, Sunshine. Not at all." And he was standing directly in front of her, looming over her with his height, his masculinity. That small and helpless and completely-at-his-mercy way he made her feel every time he swooped in for a practice kiss. "You bring home a serious boyfriend to meet the folks then sleep on the couch? Come on now, who'll believe that?"

Maybe some parents, who always hoped for the best in their children and weren't complete and total cynics of the world. But... "Okay, maybe not my mom," she admitted. "Still, this isn't about her —"

Claiming a strand of hair, Brady twirled it about his long finger. "Not Will either."

Round and round that finger twirled, trapping her hair, trapping her to him, as if asserting some sort of upper hand. Which he *didn't* have.

"It doesn't matter. I told you, my mom moved in with Chuck. And it's not like I'm planning on inviting Will over to spend the night."

That would be an interesting disaster — just imagine, her in bed with Brady and Will knowing it. Hearing it. Ha!

But really...she was fooling herself to even think he cared.

"All the same..." Brady's free hand brushed up her arm, inciting tingles. "I think we better practice." Before she could protest, his mouth captured hers, tongue plunging deep as he shoved her down onto the bed she hadn't even realized he'd backed her against.

The weight of his muscled body pinned her beneath him, his mouth locking hers to his, kissing her deeply in that stubble-scratching, all-consuming way of his as his finger twirled free of her hair and began to wander slowly in contrast to the fury of his tongue.

Along her neck his touch traveled, across the blade of her collarbone, sweeping over her sweater to her breasts and rousing trembles. Rubbing the fuzzy material against nerve-heightened flesh, he kicked her legs apart with his knees, nestling himself between her thighs, and she whimpered as the impressive length of his cock pressed against her pussy, only her clothes as a barrier.

Hot and wet she pulsed, her body screaming with want. She needed more, needed what he offered — "incentive", his long, hard shaft included.

Breathing hard, she ripped her mouth free. "Brady..."

But she didn't know what to say. *No?*

Or yes?

Stop?

Or beg for more?

Instinctively, Madi wriggled against him, inviting what her body craved. Her cunt clenched with empty, feverish yearning. It'd been far too long since she'd experienced pleasure at Will's hands and this man...Brady was special to her already.

But at the simple thought of Will, she was uncertain again. Shaking inside and torn about what she wanted.

Which was exactly why she murmured, "Damn it, more." Because this *was* right. Brady was right. And after all this time, her feelings for Will? Wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong. "I want you, Brady. I do."

She *did*. And she was tired of being caught in limbo, miserably beholden to the past. Tired of being afraid.

"You got it, Sunshine." Fueled by her eagerness, Brady trailed furious kisses over her collarbone, down her neck, shoving his hands up her sweater, under her bra, to take her nipples between his fingers. Massaging deep, pinching, rolling, driving her mad.

*Mad*, because some welling part of her still struggled, still wrestled with memories of Will—*his* mouth, *his* touch, *his* fingers at her breasts—while the rest of her sang at Brady's magnificent seduction.

"Oh God..."

His other hand shot down her length, ripping open the button to her blue jeans and sliding his thick, smooth fingers inside her panties, past her curls and into her moist depths, coaxing her to lift her hips—

"Wait!" She couldn't stop the unintended protest that burst from her. The pure, heart-pounding panic. "I can't do this. I want to and I thought I could but..."

"Madi..." He growled disappointment but refused retreat. "I won't take you, not if you don't want me to." As if to prove she did want him, he took her clit between thumb

and finger, massaging and making her huff with pleasure. "But let me show you how good I can make you feel. Let me finish this."

How could she say no to that? He was squeezing, rolling the nerve-infused bud, and her words were a desperate plea. "Please, I just don't know if I can."

Physically, she was raring to go.

Mentally? Her train had just wrecked.

"I won't take no for an answer," he warned, pinching tight. Spurring her to gasp, "Brady!"

And that was it. The end of her protests because no longer could she think. Feel anything but several of his fingers easing into her wet, long-denied tunnel, stretching her to accommodate them then pulling back and thrusting deep. Driving her to cry out as his thumb rode her clit and his other hand, still stuck up her shirt, plucked her nipple, milking wonderful frissons through her sex-charged body.

"Oh God." Madi arched her back, squeezing her eyes shut as cries of delight escaped her lips. "Brady..."

"That's it," he encouraged, heightening his efforts, doubling the pace and fury in which his hand pulsed inside her. "That's right, Sunshine. Give yourself to me."

It seemed he knew her desires better than she did. How to touch her, where. The right speed. He was playing her like slave to master, almost roughly commanding her to enjoy herself, whether she wanted to or not.

"I want you to come for me, babe," he insisted, and just when she was certain she couldn't climb any higher, those pulsing fingers buried deep, hooking inside her and stroking her most sensitive flesh. Petting her pleasure from the inside out. "Come for me. Nice and hard and loud."

And her body obeyed. All at once she was bursting from the seams. Screaming and spinning out of control, an explosion of radiation as her pussy convulsed around his fingers in a series of ecstasy-controlled contractions.

Never had Will done this to her, with his hand no less.

Will.

Oh God, how could she be thinking of him now? Going limp, Madi sank into the mattress as Brady eased from her body and planted a tender, loving kiss to her forehead that made her want to melt. "Don't you see how good it could be, Madi? If only you'd let me in."

Hadn't she already, in a way?

Brady was right. It could be—it *was*—good and right between them. Then and there, she almost, *almost* invited him to finish what he'd started. To take her, completely and with his cock, to that wondrous place where her memories of Will be damned.

But no sooner than she opened her mouth, the phone sitting on her night table began ringing off the hook.

Fate interrupting?

"Leave it," he muttered, rolling off her and slipping an arm under her neck to pull her close. "I just want to hold you."

In the hall, the answering machine picked up and she listened to the perky voice of her high school best friend rattling on. "Hey, Madi, it's Leah. I tried calling your cell, but you aren't answering. So like, look, I know you just got back in town tonight and you're probably tired from the flight. But some friends stopped by and we're having an impromptu dinner party and you're only here a few short days, so if you're up to it, pleasepleaseplease come on over. You didn't even make it to my wedding, so you owe me. General Tso's, baby, your favorite. You know you love it...and I'm not going to stop bugging you until we get together...pleasepleaseplease—" The answering machine cut Leah off before she could finish.

*Some friends stopped by...* Leah had said, and Madi's heart skipped at what those words meant. Will would be there. He was best buds with Leah's new husband—exactly why she hadn't attended the wedding.

“Um...” Madi sat up, running a hand through the mess her hair had become then letting it drape in front of her face, hiding behind its curtain. *Fate interrupting?* Perhaps.

“You want to go?” Brady asked, lying flat on his back, arms extended, his tone unreadable. “It’s up to you. I’m game for anything.”

Yeah, from the hard lump in his jeans, he was “game” for one thing in particular — her. And two minutes ago she’d been about to give herself to him. Now all she wanted was to run in the direction of the man who’d broken her.

Feeling like a total bitch, Madi chewed her lower lip and cowered behind her hair, no idea what to do...but, God help her, she couldn’t fight the pull. “Well, you *are* hungry.” In more than one way, she reminded herself.

But maybe it was better like this. Meant not to be.

“Let’s go then,” he agreed, still not moving. God, he had to be disappointed. Maybe she should rethink this.

Instead, leaning forward, Madi pecked a thank-you kiss to his cheek. “Just for a little bit. You’re the best.”



## Chapter Three

"I could've flown back to Hawaii and raided our fridge by now."

"Ah, but remember?" she called through the bathroom door. "You wouldn't have anything decent to eat without me. I believe you claimed my leaving was, to quote, 'bad for your heart'."

In ways she had no idea. "Touché."

Long since ready to go—all it'd taken him was a quick rinse, a swipe of deodorant, and some fresh clothes...six minutes tops. Now Brady paced the hall, too antsy to sit. Feeling shut-in. Suffocating. At least in Hawaii he could open the windows. The doors. Get some air. But the weather was too damn cool in New Jersey for such simple freedoms.

He wanted to be back in Hawaii. With her. Life, nice and normal and easy. Safe and sound, no worries over Will.

But then he wouldn't be *with* her.

Waiting was driving him nuts. Thoughts of this party? For the first time in his life, the thought of going out, socializing, made him feel more agitated than staying in.

Just what was she doing in there? Getting dressed for the ball? *For Will?*

Brady checked his watch. Twenty-three minutes...waiting and wondering what would happen tonight. What was next between them.

So close. They'd been *so damn close*. The way she'd cooed and come, he could've sworn she was his to have. But one phone call and—

Shoot, *what* was she doing in there?

"I'll be waiting on the porch, okay, Sunshine?" Unable to tolerate being stuck inside any longer, Brady jerked on his jacket and fled the house, taking the stairs two at a time

and coming to a stop on the cracked sidewalk, gazing out at the night sky. *Wow. Absolutely gorgeous.*

At the sight, air whooshed from his chest. Weight lifted. Instantly, his stress faded.

Like some amazing miracle, as if the heavens had opened right up to give a sneak peek, every star twinkled, the moon a crescent hanging high.

Weather this clear and perfect was unusual. A true blessing.

As was an angel like Madi. And the more wound up in this farce of hers he became, the more he couldn't stand the thought of ever losing her. How utterly vacant his apartment, his life would feel without her around. Just imagining it made his skin crawl. Emptiness to tear through him.

One way or the other, he had to make certain she'd remain his.

He could do this, he coached himself. Let Madi put on her show, do what she needed to get Will out of her system.

Meanwhile, he'd wiggle his way *into* her system...

"Hey," Madi interrupted his train of thought, the door clicking quietly behind her. "I'm ready."

About time, some dark part of him wanted to mutter. But Brady bit his tongue, knowing it was only his jealousy speaking. So she'd dressed for Will, not him, and likely to the nines, given the time she'd spent. *So what?* He wouldn't let that get to him. Brady had always known where he stood, but he also knew Madi needed *him*, her friend. A lot more than she needed that jerk any day.

She also needed what'd happened between them earlier—and plenty of it. With a little patience and a lot of encouragement—physically *and* emotionally—Will's clutch would loosen. Her love for him would fade. Look at the way she responded to his kisses. To his touch. Madi *did* want him, whether she loved Will or not.

And hopefully soon, *not*.

He wanted that for her and not just because of his feelings for her. After all this time, Madi wholly deserved to get over the bastard, once and for all.

Sure enough, he turned to find her in a knock-his-socks-off dress that clung to her every alluring curve, accented by a complementing shrug sweater. The porch light did her little justice, but once inside, Brady knew those brilliant eyes would reflect off the outfit's color, gleaming, as would her magnificently sleek blonde hair, pinned on one side by a decorative clip.

Wholly beautiful. That was how she looked. Not sexed-out. Not put-on. Just so damn beautiful. Sweet and innocent despite what Will had done to her, only using her, as Brady was sure he had—and for that, the bastard deserved to have the knife he plunged in Madi's back lodged in his heart.

Right then and there Brady decided Will didn't get to hurt her, not anymore. He was turning the tables.

"You want to drive?" she asked, tugging the ill-fit door shut and locking it behind her. "Or should I since I know where it is?"

Rubbing the heel of his palm over stubble—hell, he should've taken more time...shaved, dammit—he asked, "Depends. How far is this place?"

The keys jiggled along with her laughter as she jogged down the steps. "Am I *that* bad of a driver?"

"You did broadside that palm tree while changing the radio. Nearly knocked my head off. Scared a girly scream right out of me. And you backed into my car too, in our own parking lot. Practically plowed my bumper into the trunk." Claiming the keys, Brady folded her small-boned hand in his, threading fingers. "But I assure you, that's not the point. So how far is it?"

"You said you forgave me," she pouted. "And it's only a couple of blocks."

With his free hand, he cupped her smooth cheek, leaning forward until their foreheads rested together. "I did forgive you, Sunshine. Nothing you ever did could force me to hold a grudge. You're too damn pretty for that." And he needed her around

too much. Planting a lingering kiss to her lips, he memorized her taste...that of lipstick—which she never wore—mingled with Madi. And before they reached Leah’s—or maybe *when*—he intended to kiss it all off. “It’s gorgeous out. A little chilly, yes, but I’ll keep you warm. Let’s walk in the moonlight, shall we?”

The longer it took to get there, the less time he had to worry about Will and the more he had her to himself.

Releasing her hand, Brady looped an arm about her back, keeping her snuggled close and, as promised, safe from the chill in the air. Their hips rubbed in unison as she led them down the uneven sidewalk, and for several minutes they walked in silence, just enjoying the autumn breeze that wisped around them. The sight of lights glowing in quaint old houses. Advancing closer and closer to Leah’s.

And so this was it. Her silly little plan, finally in action.

Nervous tension hummed through Madi at the thought of walking through Leah’s door. Setting eyes on him—tanned from the sun, ripped from hard work. So tall and dark and handsome.

The irresistible bane of her existence.

Her heart skipped up a notch, her gait slowed. The ache took over. But Brady’s pace pushed her on.

“So...” he finally posed, letting several more seconds linger before actually asking his question. “I’m assuming Will’s going to be present tonight. That’s why we’re attending?”

“It’s that obvious, huh?” No, Madi wished she could claim, she didn’t care spit about Will. Those fathomless almost-black eyes. Those full lips she’d kissed so many times. Whether he’d be there or not.

But Brady knew better, proven in his next response. “You put on lipstick.”

When what she should've done was stay in bed with Brady, feeling good – no, not good, *fabulous*. So right in his arms. Instead, here she was, a frog lodged in her throat, feeling a lot like she was walking to a haunted house rather than her best friend's.

"Yeah, I guess I did." Gnawing at her lips, she tried to suck off as much as possible. Leaves skidded across the cement and she kicked them out of the way, hating that she had to be so obsessed – and he knew it. "But I am looking forward to seeing my old friends. The truth is, I've been totally avoiding them, Will being around and all. I've missed them."

His arms tightened slightly. "But now you have me."

"Right. Exactly." Realizing they were practically there, Madi stopped in her tracks under a big oak tree and turned to him. "Brady, you've no idea how much I appreciate you coming. And you know what? Wait a sec..." Stealing the predictable handkerchief she knew to be in his left pants pocket, she wiped clean the lipstick she never should've put on. "There." Drawing a deep breath, she looked up at him, wanting one thing and one thing only in that moment. "Kiss me."

His lazy, lopsided grin tweaked his cheeks as he ducked low, murmuring, "And speakin' of comin'. I appreciated *you* comin' earlier."

A chuckle burst from her. "How romantic."

"Just being forthright. Besides, you're smilin', right?" And then his lips were on hers, demolishing any Midnight Mauve that might remain. Devouring her, his tongue swooping along hers. Kissing her hungrily, passionately, and her desire blasted off, flushing through her body as he coaxed and claimed her mouth.

*Turn back, her mind screamed. Go home!*

Brady said it for her, mumbling amidst suckling her lip. "Forget Will..."

Yes.

She should've said the word out loud. Screamed it. Instead, she whimpered helplessly and Brady's fingers chased the tingles shooting along her spine. She kissed

him back with everything in her. Kissed him, wanted *him*. Brady. Not this party, not Will.

Forget about it. Making Will jealous? It was stupid anyway.

But then an engine rumbled by and without so much as a glance, Madi knew who the old, sputtering truck belonged to.

Some part of her melted. Lost the passion, lost the focus. Lost Brady.

Sensing her distraction, Brady broke free. "God, I could gobble you up..." Several seconds, he stared down at her, as if trying to gauge her thoughts, and Madi flushed hot, settling on her feet, ashamed she couldn't let this be. "But all right, let's go."

A truck door slammed loudly in the night and Madi gulped, angling to face what she'd come here for. *Will*. Her heart ceased its rapid drumming, coming to a complete standstill. Her breath locked in her chest.

In simple blue jeans and a black button-down shirt that complemented his bronzed skin and midnight hair, he juggled a twenty-ounce soda carelessly between his hands—like her, he wouldn't drink—and strutted up the illuminated walk, his strides long and lax. Totally at ease.

He was alone, she couldn't help but notice. No redhead. No date at all.

Why did that almost disappoint her?

Even after all this time, seeing him hadn't gotten easier and, God help her, she stared. Totally gawked, relieved at least, that he hadn't noticed her standing here with her fake—or not—boyfriend. Confused at how comforting it was, Brady's hand at her back.

Damn him, her ex looked good. Looked great. Every time she saw him, he seemed to have weathered and grown...and come to think on it, he'd just celebrated his thirtieth birthday two weeks ago. God, how time flew. He looked so much more like a man and less like the boy she'd fallen for. Somehow that only increased his appeal by

twofold, because she was seeing the man she would've been with, spent her future with. If only...

The gaping hole in her soul widened, darkening all reason as the front door opened and some female greeted, "Hi, Will!" as if he were the most fabulous person on earth, and he was invited into the warmth and chatter of lifelong friends.

"You okay?" Brady leaned his head over her shoulder, nuzzling her ear, and nothing had ever felt sweeter. More soothing.

Shaking off the devastation that always came at seeing Will, she sucked in a harsh, much-needed gasp of air. "Fine," she dismissed. As if the searing pain in her chest were totally normal. Totally acceptable. But *no*...and it was fading now, brushed away by Brady's touch. "I'm good. Let's go."

What she needed to do was face Will head-on, she decided. Get closure. For the last time look him in the eyes—Brady at her side—and be done with the past once and for all. To let Will know, loud and clear, *she* was over *him*. No more lingering over what might've been, over a one-sided love. She didn't need Will, need this hurt. She had Brady.

Just as she decided that, another vehicle pulled in the overcrowded drive and Leah leapt out, waving madly. "Madi, oh my God! You came!" Squealing, she rushed around the vehicle and three seconds later Madi was smothered into her friend's embrace, being squashed by arms that'd obviously missed her. Considerably. "It's about damn time! The phone calls aren't enough!"

"I know. I'm sorry." Madi hugged her back, thinking how she'd let Will cost her so much, especially her friends. Well, no more. "But from now on, I'm coming home more. I promise." Stepping back, she gestured to Brady. "You've heard all about him. Even chewed his ear off a time or ten when I wasn't home."

"Oh my God. *Oh my God, oh my God!*" Leah's eyes popped, her mouth gaped. "You brought Brady?" Without an answer, she bypassed his offer of a hand, squealing as she practically knocked him down, bear hugging his chest.

"Whoa there," Brady chuckled, but he hugged her with equal enthusiasm. "You're just like I expected."

"And what did you expect?" Batting none-so-innocent eyelashes, as if to say, "Who me?" Leah pulled back, taking him in. "Well?"

"Total fireball."

"You got me there. But *wow*." Leah threw up her hands as if she just couldn't believe it. "It's so good to meet you in person! I just can't believe Madi brought you."

Sly eyes shifted to Madi as if to question motives. Demand answers.

"Now why wouldn't she bring her boyfriend?" Brady drawled so sexily, so nonchalantly, as if there were nothing to pretend, and his claim sent little tremors down Madi's back.

"Boyfriend?" Leah's chin practically hit the sidewalk at Brady's revelation. "Really? Since when?" Then she clapped her hands together and pointed to Madi. "The takeout! I almost forgot...it's in the car and getting cold. You should help me carry it in, Madi. Get the table ready."

"I can help too," Brady offered, as if Leah would have any of that.

"No, no," she waved off. "You go on in, hang with the guys. Make yourself comfortable. I'll tell Steve to introduce you around and we'll just be a minute."

"But—" Madi started to protest, but a determined Leah looped an arm in hers, towing her away.

"But nothing. He'll be fine," she insisted, walking at warp speed. "Right, Brady?"

"Just dandy," Brady called back. "I want an extra egg roll though."

"See? Brady's a people person. Not at all a shy guy, so don't worry. And I *really* need your help in the kitchen, Madi."

No sooner than they were out of earshot, arms loaded with Chinese food, did Leah demand, "Dish. Now."



\* \* \* \* \*

"Damn, I can't get over what a beautiful evening it is. Just take a look."

Audaciously dimming the lights, the stranger whisked open the French doors as if he were peeling back drapes on a stage, revealing the luminous night as he stepped into the opening. "Incredible for this area—can't imagine y'all see this too often, what with the smog off all the East Coast cities. Every star's shinin' in the sky."

Will hadn't noticed. Will *never* noticed the night sky, not anymore. The moon. The stars. Not once in the seven years since he'd decided to stay had he looked up. Couldn't bring himself to do it, to face his old dreams. Memories of Madi. What losing her had cost him.

And he didn't appreciate the reminder now. Or the cool air rushing into his best friend's amply heated home.

He'd stayed. Dad eventually killed himself anyway.

"Just look at it," the redheaded man repeated with a whistle of awe, gaining partygoers as an audience with the passion playing in his Southern accent. "Not the best night to be away from the observatory. I mean, not a cloud. Not a single one. A million diamonds sparklin', like heaven just opened its doors to give a show."

How poetic.

A welcome distraction, Leah's new husband stepped in front of the window, offering his hand. "The name's Steve. My wife mentioned you were here, but we haven't met officially."

The two men locked hands. "Brady Michaels. Good to be here." Then his eyes drifted outside with a smirk. "Mostly. Man, I'm missin' out though. If I had my telescope... Anyway, hope you don't mind me letting in the cool air a sec."

Brady made a move to shut the doors, but Steve stopped him. "Nah, go for it, man. Honestly, sometimes I think Leah's secretly trying to cook us."

"I noticed." Brady swept a finger along his collar. "Kinda felt like I was suffocating a second there."

"Yeah," Tyler called from his spot on the couch, appropriately attired in only a t-shirt. "We all thank you, man. Just don't let Leah catch you."

Will had to bite his tongue to keep from calling out her name.

Who was this guy with, anyway? Sherri? Jen? But weren't both of them in steady relationships? Yup, Tyler and Tim, two boyfriends, in tow. And Leah—Madi's best friend from high school—was definitely off the market as of three weeks ago. Stephanie? Nope, Will couldn't think of one single girl in their close-knit group of friends who this guy might belong to, except Meg, who was sitting on the couch, beer in hand, not displaying any sort of connection.

Curiosity got the best of Will and he couldn't resist joining in, offering his own hand. "Will, Will Ryder. You're really into astronomy I gather?" *That he fucking can't shut up about it?*

From the scathing glare he received, Will had to wonder if he'd just said that out loud.

"Like my next breath," Brady half muttered, shaking his hand a little too hard then turning away. "I'm documenting the formation of a young star I recently discovered for my thesis. Tonight would've been perfect."

The answer made Will's throat go tight. It was like talking to who he was *supposed* to be. But despite his annoyance—not to mention Brady's obvious aversion toward him—Will was undeniably drawn to the topic of stars. Even after so many years avoiding the subject, he couldn't help himself. Was about to ask for elaboration when Meg interrupted.

"So, like, you know constellations and stuff, Brian?" she asked, ruling out any association. Blonde she may be, inside and out—that hair reminded him far too much of Madi—but if she were with the guy, she'd at least get his name right. He'd hope. "Like the Big Dipper? What about the North Star?"

"It's Brady," the outsider corrected. "And sure. Easy enough. You can see them both clear as day, so to speak, from right here."

"Where?" Popping off the couch, she waltzed in front of the open doors. "You gotta show me because I've always wondered how to find the North Star."

"Right there...no, little to your left." Angling his head, Brady pointed, waving Meg's gaze in the right direction. "See the bowl of the Dipper down low? It points up to the North Star, see?"

"Ohhhh..."

"You see it?"

"I think...but—"

"Leah's finished fussing over dinner. We can eat!" a painfully familiar voice sang out, paralyzing Will. And instantly he knew who Brady belonged to. Madi. His Cornsilk. *His*, always in his heart, which pounded painfully now.

She'd come home for her mom's wedding. With a guy. Which meant it was serious.

And worse, said guy loved the stars. Was taking astronomy at UH, Will surmised. What was up with that?

She'd replaced him, completely and entirely, that's what.

Reality swirled. Will felt sick. And just when he was certain the blow couldn't have hit him harder, he watched Brady abandon the window. "And there's the prettiest star of all," the bastard boomed, dominating the room with his claim on Madi. Taking her into his arms and placing a kiss to her cheek. "Have I told you how gorgeous you are tonight?"

That she was, darkly tanned from the Hawaiian sun, hair never blonder, almost white, every curve and dip of her tall, lithe body displayed in a formfitting blue dress that accented her eyes, eyes cold as ice for him as she cast a backward glance his direction and smiled. "Oh hi, Will. Almost didn't see you there." As if he were nothing.

And he was. He'd made it that way. Had always known one day it would come to this.

His friends began filing into the dining room, leaving him no choice but to follow.

What was she thinking? Feeling?

If Brady had a million bucks, he'd shell out every last cent to get inside her head.

More beautiful than the sun, fairly glowing in his arms, Madi dazzled a wide smile as they strolled through the huge colonial home to the dining room under the guise of a happy couple.

Never appreciating an old house full of heavy doors more – this from him, hater of all things that shut – Brady gave the one that led to the dining room a hearty kick, pretending he didn't realize Will was behind them – too bad Will caught it before it could bounce off his face. "Hey, man! What the hell –"

"What?" Clueless, Madi darted her questioning gaze between them, but Brady barely gave the issue a half a glance.

"Whoops. Sorry 'bout that."

No he wasn't. But hey, he was entitled to some fun, right? Anything to distract him from the cutting reality that Will was a good-looking man – tall, dark and handsome, as the ladies would say. Not that Brady was attracted – hell, no, he didn't swing that way – but hey, he could be candid.

Will was good-looking. Madi wanted him.

And Brady had never hated his ugly red hair and scattered freckles more. Damn his parents for being Irish.

Thank God he could at least claim to have an inch or two on the bastard. Not to mention Madi in his arms.

Because he sure hadn't missed noticing Will's arms were empty. No date...and one thing was for sure, the man lagging behind them practically reeked with jealousy. All

one had to do was look into those coal eyes and see the sharp edge. Will wasn't even *trying* to play it cool, and after all the heartache the son of a bitch had put Madi through, Brady hoped their little act—though he prayed it wasn't pretend so much now—cut deep. Hell, he hoped the waitress had broken his heart to pieces.

Everyone filed around the long, lace-covered table. It was immediately obvious what Madi had meant when she said Leah had been fussing over the take-out food. Quite the homemaker, Leah had doled all the Chinese from the carryout containers into fancy serving bowls. Each place had been set with fine china, as if this were a holiday meal, not an "impromptu dinner party".

"You've outdone yourself again, Martha." Steve plopped onto the head seat, murmurs of laughter echoing his jibe. "We should get you your own show, Mrs. Stewart."

Pulling out a chair, Brady seated Madi with a lingering kiss to her cheek. "How's that? Far enough in?"

"It's perfect. Thank you."

He kissed her again for good measure then sat next to her, angling his chair slightly in her direction and threading his fingers through hers so their hands rested together on the table between their plates.

"See that? Such a gentleman." Leah gave her new husband a fork poke to the biceps. "You never seat me anymore!"

"Ow!"

Squeezing his hand, Madi gazed up at him endearingly, as if he were the only man in the world. Didn't he wish. "Oh, Brady knows how to treat a lady."

"And how to treat a woman, I hope?" her friend winked, as if they were sharing some sort of secret.

"So not a dinner topic." But the glimmer in Madi's eyes as she winked back answered that question hands down—Brady just hoped like hell it wasn't an act, that

she was thinking about earlier. The pleasure he'd indeed brought her. "Let's just say Brady makes me *very* happy."

Now *he* was thinking about earlier. God, how soft and responsive she'd been beneath him, shivering at his touch, tensing and crying out as her wet tunnel clasped around him...

As if they could read his thoughts, one of the other girls gave a "Hubba-hubba!"

Hubba-hubba was right. But Brady tried hard to shake the images before he wound up with a useless erection.

Will, all the while, simply glared at his empty plate.

"Females." Shaking his head, Steve picked up a bowl of glazed chicken and scooped some on his plate then passed it to his wife. "I'd get forked again if I said something so—"

He got forked anyway. "Ow!"

"So, Brady..." Once all the food had circled, Leah's catlike green eyes settled on him as if he were prey. "Just *when* will you be taking this one off the market?"

"Leah!" Madi sputtered, a spoonful of rice midair.

"I mean, it sounds as if you've pretty much already had the honeymoon."

"*Leah!*" This time it was her husband who protested, obviously shocked by his "Martha Stewart" wife's dinner conversation. Impromptu indeed.

But Brady only chuckled and assured her, "Our whole lives together will be a honeymoon. We'll be living in Hawaii after all." It was dead obvious too from the sly smile that tweaked Madi's lips what was going on. Leah *knew*—Madi must have told her the truth—and she was tossing wood on the fire. Enjoying watching Will burn at the stake.

Nice woman. Brady liked her.

“Now about *when*,” he went on, throwing flames as he looked down at Madi as if she were the world. And to him, she was. “I wouldn’t want to give away the big surprise, would I?”

“Ohhh...soon I hope!” Leah swooned. “I want an excuse to fly to Hawaii!”

The rest of the dinner continued just so, with Leah making sure it was all about them, centering the conversation around their fake almost-engagement, razzing their nonexistent uber-great sex life, and fawning over how fabulous he was. Sexy too—at one point, Madi and Leah even had a short conversation about how hot his auburn hair made him. Brady had beamed, thinking back on his initial insecurity, thinking that he had nothing to worry about. That he’d make all this real. Tonight, tomorrow...sometime, somehow he’d seduce Madi past the point of return. Dark hair or not, handsome or not, the one who took her virginity or not, Will would no longer matter to Madi. She’d truly belong to him.

Until then, he’d be whatever she needed him to be.

But that didn’t mean it didn’t sting when eventually Madi turned to her ex, who hadn’t spoken a word or taken a bite, and politely asked, “Will, is something the matter?”

Because for all their laughter and kisses, her concern—if it could be called that—was real. She wanted Will uncomfortable, which could only mean she still wanted *him*.

Without a word, Will stood up, threw down his napkin and stormed out, leaving Brady to reach over, once against smothering her hand in his and squeezing. He was here for her. Will wasn’t.

## Chapter Four

Practice made perfect.

Practice had made Brady's arm around her *real*. The sensation his kisses left behind *real*. Two days ago their relationship had been completely platonic. Now she readily expected his hand at the small of her back, the passionate kisses he whisked her into at any given moment.

Yearned for more of the pleasure he'd given her.

Oh yes, it had felt very real, no show at all, to flirt with him over dinner, to pretend they were in love. It'd felt *good*.

And then she'd gone and looked at Will. Meeting those fathomless raven eyes, the burn in her chest had never been stronger. She'd brought Brady because she thought having him at her side would make facing Will easier. And sure, some part of her wanted him to be jealous.

But Will hadn't been eating. Or talking. Will hurled his balled-up napkin to the table, practically knocking over his seat to quit the room when she asked what was wrong.

What was with that? And why'd it have to hurt so bad?

Laughter and conversation droned around her, but Madi was lost in her own world. No longer in the mood for her own games. She just wanted to get out of here.

"Hey, Madi... Earth to Madi..." Leah chimed. "Are you in there?"

Madi tried to shake off her thoughts—easier said than done. *Will could flirt with a waitress but she couldn't bring home a guy?* "Yeah, I'm fine." More like she was giving herself a headache to match her heartache.



Leah narrowed her gaze, crooking her neck. "I didn't ask if you're fine. Which tells me you're not."

"You do look pale." Brady clenched the hand he was holding and she squeezed back, never needing his comfort, his fun-seeking nature and the distracting way he made her feel more. He leaned closer, asking in a low voice, "Are you upset?"

"No, no." Madi rubbed two fingers to her forehead. "I'm sorry. I just...I think I'm ready to go home. Go to bed." With Brady? *God*...where'd that come from? She was a mess! "It's just been a really long day."

"Okay, sure. I understand." But the look in Leah's feline eyes said she didn't buy her friend's excuses, not a bit.

They said their goodbyes and five minutes later they were strolling down the sidewalk, chilled by the cool fall air that'd turned blustery in the few passing hours. Wrapping an arm about her shoulder, Brady sheltered her in his warmth. "That was hard for you, huh?" His fingers stroked circles along her shoulder through her sweater. "You want to talk about it?"

Shit, Brady was such a good guy, supporting her through this.

"It wasn't hard, actually. It was fun," she admitted. So was kissing Brady. Coming over his fingers. So why did she torture herself, constantly living in the past? "For a while there I forgot it was all lies. Well, mostly."

"So what's the matter?"

"When I looked at him..." Just thinking about it, her chest tightened painfully. Every muscle in her body went tense. "You know what? I *don't* want to talk about it. I hate myself for loving him still."

"Don't do that." Brady stepped in front of her, blocking her way and taking her face in hand. The light from the streetlamp illuminated the concern in his eyes as they locked with hers. "You're human, Madi. You can't flick a switch and change the way you feel."

So tenderly he held her jaw, spoke to her, yet there was strength in his actions. The way he cared, understood. There was a certain masculine potency that radiated in his every touch. Brady made her feel safe, protected. Loved — *no matter* what.

“But you can change the way I feel,” she realized out loud. “And I do want that.”

“How, Madi?” The ache in his voice relayed how badly he wanted that. “Just tell me how.”

“Kiss me,” she whispered, closing her eyes to the emotional yank the request gave her, as if she were turning her back on her own heart. She would get over Will. In Brady’s arms. “Kiss me then take me home and give me all the incentive you can.”

“God, yes.” Brady’s mouth crushed hers, sweeping her into a furious kiss. Hungrily, his lips twisted over hers, his tongue plunged and she met his almost-crazed need with a fervor of her own. The immediate arousal that ignited was like fireworks blasting off, raining tingles all over her body and, as promised, his wandering hands grasped a breast, squeezing, while the other dove to her butt and clenched the muscle tight, as if to claim *mine*.

His passion was intense, bruising. Not at all nice — and yet entirely so. It was all she needed. All she wanted, to be his. To feel like this and not be so torn in two.

Will had never touched her like this —

Will. *Out of my head!*

“More!” she whimpered, tearing her mouth free to plead with Brady. “Harder. More, I need more.” Needed him to erase Will, images of the slow, seductive love he used to make to her... In the tall grass by the creek on warm summer nights. In the cab of his old pickup, riding his lap on cold winter nights. In the bed of that truck after gazing at the stars.

Over and over and over the sultry memories buzzed like an annoying fly and Madi mentally swatted them away, determined.

"Oh God, Madi," Brady groaned, coming up for air a second before claiming her in another severe kiss that locked their lips. The hand at her bottom pushed fabric and fingers between her crack, flexing possessively, and Madi squeaked in surprise at how deeply that turned her on. How her anus clenched, her clit pulsed. How wet she was, how she loved his other hand roughly plucking her nipple while she was weak in his embrace. Completely at his mercy.

"More," she whimpered. "More."

Deep down, she wanted him to hurt her, to punish away her ridiculous feelings for Will. Spank her. Tie her up and make her scream.

Ridiculous, she knew. What normal person did those things? She'd always figured herself too tame for naughty sex. Never before had she wanted it...or admitted it to herself at least. Not in the light of day.

But face those welling desires she did now, fiercely. Right there on the open street, under the streetlight she moaned for him to take her. If only there was some way of letting him know, of relaying what she needed.

With a growl, Brady wrenched his mouth free. "Tell me we can sneak in without seeing your mother." Abandoning her breast, he grabbed her other ass cheek and hauled her off her feet, seeming to know exactly what she wanted. Roughness. Dirtiness. Anything but sweet, anything but Will.

"Not through the window. Mom nailed it shut when I was sixteen so I couldn't sneak out and have sex." Oh the irony. Now she was trying to sneak *in* to have sex. *Naughty* sex. With a giggle, she wrapped her legs around his waist, trailing her lips over his chin, suckling at his neck. "But she's not off work for a little bit yet, so hurry!"

"Madi, wait! I have to talk to you!" *Will?*

Dammit, *what* was he thinking? Had seeing Madi in love cost him his sanity?

Must have. The knife in his chest was enough to drive any man completely mad.

Still, he knew better than to linger outside after he left the party, arguing with himself whether or not to go back and talk to her before it was too late. No way should he have chased after them. Never should he have stood there, watching the woman he loved make out with another guy—totally manhandling her—and absolutely *no way* should his cock be hard for it.

Talk about being a sucker for punishment.

But he'd never seen Madi like that, so lusty and sexually aggressive. The way she kissed as hard as she was being kissed, the way she begged for more, seeming to love being treated forcefully. It could mean only one thing.

She really did love Brady Michaels. Which meant she'd stopped loving *him*.

"Will?" she demanded, sliding from her lover's embrace and turning on him with wild eyes. Eyes as blue as the Hawaii ocean she so adored. Skin as tanned as a native, flushed red from passion. She glowed, his Cornsilk. "What—"

"Look, Will," Brady ground out, jaw clenched. "Don't you think you've hurt Madi enough for one lifetime? Jesus, man, have a heart. Let her be happy."

Had it really been that bad for her? Over and over he'd told himself once she got to Hawaii, she'd forget all about him. She'd have school and new friends. Boyfriends and the beach. But the tears glimmering in her eyes told a different story, a long sad tale that made him beg, "Madi, please, I have to talk to you." Because those eyes said she loved him still, no matter that her lips were swollen from kissing another man. That he could smell her passion, even several feet from her. "Really, it's important."

"Umm..." For a moment he'd have sworn she was going to tell him to jump off a high bridge, but then a sigh whooshed from her and Madi nodded, making Brady swear under his breath as she agreed, "Okay. But make it quick."

"Alone," Will added. "Just give me a minute alone. Please."

"Fuck!" Brady protested loudly, reaching to her possessively. "Madi, don't do this to yourself."

"It's okay. Really, Brady, thank you but I'm fine." Turning to him, she forced a smile, but in a telling gesture her hand fluttered at her chest, over her heart. "I'm fine. Go ahead home. Will can walk me the rest of the way."

For a moment Will was certain he was about to be punched out. Smashed into the sidewalk. Hurling in front of a passing car.

But after several tense moments and looking as if he had to rip his feet from where they were planted to the sidewalk, Brady finally turned and walked away. Slowly. Backward, watching them every measured step of the way.

Will eyeballed him until he rounded the corner and Madi sighed, briefly closing those tear-pooled eyes. "What is it, Will?"

"Uh..." He'd no plan as to what to say, no idea why he even needed to talk to her. He just needed to be near her. Just couldn't *stand* to see her with someone else. Especially Brady. "So he likes the stars."

Maybe if it weren't for that, Will could stomach this better. But her dating the guy he should've been? That stung. Seared like a dagger in his back.

"That's all? Lots of people like the stars. Trust me, it's a coincidence." She spun away, wafting of desire and headed in Brady's direction, and he *had* to stop her—she was going home to screw the bastard, dammit. She *couldn't*. "You can't!"

"Hmm?" she murmured over her shoulder, still walking away from him.

"I, um...I guess you heard my dad died," he blurted.

"Oh Will." She stopped in her tracks and turned around. "No, I didn't know. Was it the—"

"Yeah, um, drank himself—" His voice cracked, emotion sweeping over him in a shudder. His mother, his brother, now his dad. He had no one left. Nothing but that damn farm, which he didn't even want. Needing her touch, he moved forward and reached for her hand. By some miracle she let him wrap those small fingers in his embrace. Fingers that'd caressed Brady's cock... "Drank himself to sleep one night and

never woke up. Just like that, he was gone. I stopped him from driving drunk, but not from drinking."

"How long ago?" she asked with an ache to her voice, a heartfelt show of her sorrow. Madi hadn't much cared for his dad, but she'd still been like part of the family.

"Couple of months now. End of August."

"My mom never told me. I would've come." To his surprise, she pulled him into a hug, squeezing him tight. "I'm so sorry."

He nuzzled his nose in her hair, bypassing the lingering aroma of arousal and inhaling her natural scent—that of sunshine and the beach and, he imagined, Hawaii. Her home now. How bittersweet it was to hold her, knowing she belonged to another. Will couldn't stand the thought of letting her go. Certainly not back to Brady.

But of course she pulled away, again taking his hand. "We better start walking. Brady's bound to get worried."

*Brady.* Son of a bitch.

Still, how natural it felt, strolling slowly down the street, their hands locked together. Just like old times. Except all he could think about was Madi in Brady's arms, being ravished.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked. "Any plans?"

"I guess I'm going to sell the farm." *Finally follow my dreams.* Meeting Brady had forced him to realize that right off the bat. "My cousin and her new husband want it, so it'll stay in the family. I'm giving them a more-than-fair price."

Leaves skidded around their feet and she shivered at the cold wind. "Good. I hope you find something to make you happy."

"You're cold. Take my coat, it's heavier." He started to shrug it off—a mistake because the action pulled his hand from hers and yet she denied him.

"No, I couldn't."

"Go on," he held it out. "Take it. I'm not cold."

"No, Will." She sighed in that "enough's enough" way of hers and Will knew any tenderness they'd shared was over. "Listen, I'm really sorry about your dad, but Brady's waiting. Was there anything else?"

Hell yeah. *Don't do it*, he wanted to demand. *You're mine*, he ached to scream.

But he was the fool who'd pushed her away all those years ago. For her own sake and it'd been the right thing to do. He couldn't have let her stay, let her entertain any notion of a future between them when he had no idea if he'd ever leave Quarry and she had no intention of staying.

Now everything had changed, including her.

He had no idea why he didn't just tell her all that, except he was afraid she'd be angry. Afraid it was too late anyway. *Brady, damn him.*

Never needing her more, Will reached out, claiming the hand he'd let slip free and held it tight despite her resistance this time. "I mean, we're still friends, right? I know things went bad between us, but I still care about you. A lot."

The way her brows crooked, she found that doubtful. "And?"

"And that guy. Brady." Will didn't mean to spit his name like poison, but damn, he didn't want that guy's hands pawing his woman. His tongue in her mouth. "I don't think he's good for you."

"You *what*?" With a glare that could cut, she jerked her hand free. "How dare you?"

Will found himself grasping, desperate to convince her. "I saw the way he was manhandling you, Madi. That's not right, him treating you like you're some piece of meat. Right out in the open too."

"Did it ever occur I *wanted* him to?"

With those razor-sharp words, she whisked around and walked away, leaving him to desperately chase after her. "Madi, I know how men are. I know his type. He's cocky. No good for you."

"You bastard! So what, you can date other women, but I'm suppose to stay single forever? You didn't want me, remember?"

"I mean...come on, Madi. He likes the stars and that's a coincidence?"

She whirled around, no longer glowing but on fire. He'd never seen such anger flare in those normally cool blue depths. "What's *that* supposed to mean? What do you think? That I picked out a replacement for you? You're just that unforgettable? *Please.*"

Damned if he hadn't lodged a boot in his big mouth. "Look –"

"No! For your information, he treats me a lot better than you ever did!"

A vision those hands gripping her sweet little ass, digging in – *smacking her* – burst through his mind. "I've seen how he treats you! I would never do that to you!"

"Ugh! Exactly! Because what we had was *puppy love*! Brady treats me like a *woman*." Her pace picked up, practically doubling into a run. "No more! Do not follow me. Do not say another word." With that, she stormed away.



## Chapter Five

Unbelievable. That son of a bitch. Where did he get off? Who did he think he was? Her owner?

Will didn't even want her—by his own admission. She'd never forget those cold words that had ended things between them those seven long years ago. *It's just puppy love*, he'd said. *I'm already over you*.

Besides superficial hello-goodbye exchanges, he hadn't spoken to her since the breakup. No, instead he flirted with the redhead. And now he *cared*? Didn't approve of her boyfriend?

That lousy no-good bas—

Madi jerked her head up at the sound of laughter—her mother's laughter—rolling from their tiny house, followed by the deep rumble of Brady asking, "You wanna hear another one?"

There they sat, under the glow of the porch light, side by side on the step, a beer in her mother's hand. A rare smile spread on her life-worn face.

"Another one, what?" Just *how* did this man manage to have her mother in such high spirits, fresh off work? Just went to prove, Brady was amazing.

He leapt to his feet. "Madi!"

"Hi, Mom." She did her best to appear cheerful. "Brady."

Bounding down the stairs, he took her by the arms, searching her eyes. "Hey there. Everything okay?"

God, he was so understanding. Such a shoulder.

"Oh yeah, fine," she lied, sucking in a deep breath, not about to bring anything up around her mother, who'd never liked Will anyway—said he just wanted in her daughter's pants. And she'd been right. "What's going on?"

Hand at her back, Brady guided her up the stairs. "I was just breaking the ice. Telling bad astronomy jokes."

"Ah. Brady's corny jokes. Which one?"

"New restaurant on the moon," her mom supplied.

Madi had heard it a hundred times. "Great food, no atmosphere." With a laugh, she reached out, hugging her mother, who, aside from the beer in her hand, appeared incredible from the woman she remembered growing up. She'd finally dyed her graying hair a healthy deep brown and had dropped some weight. "You look great. It must be the new boyfriend."

Mom beamed. "Oh..." She waved the compliment off. "Chuck's a pain in the ass. Lucky I'm still marrying him, but since he's my foreman..."

"Ah, no wonder you're in a rush to tie the knot. Brown-nosing the boss."

"That's puttin' it politely. More like—"

"Uh-uh. Keep those details to yourself." With a laugh, Madi slid in the spot between them and folded her hands around her knees. "So, all set for the wedding? What's your dress like?"

"A dress? Not me," Mom scathed. "Chuck would tease 'til the cows came home."

Cows. So not the reminder she needed right now. Madi gulped, determined to keep the conversation light and airy and all on her mom, whatever the cost, lest she break down. "So what're you wearing? A skirt? Slacks?"

Mom clapped her empty beer bottle to the porch. "I'm goin' in my good old blue jeans and so is he."

“Blue jeans!” But Madi had to grin. Sounded just like her mom. No frills, no fluff, just one-hundred-percent tough, hardworking woman. “Tell me you’re at least wearing a blouse.”

“Hell no. He and I bought matching Harley shirts. He’s gotta bike, you know, and soon as we’re hitched, we’re riding cross country. Two weeks on the road...free at last...” She created a sweeping motion with her hand. “First time I ever used my vacation days for a vacation and not to cover a layoff. But Chuck assures me he earns enough that I don’t have to worry. Gonna stay workin’ though. Stay independent. And just to appease your notions, I am gettin’ my hair dolled up in a nice braid, not that the helmet won’t mess it up anyway. Having my nails painted too.”

“That’s fabulous, Mom. Really great.” And it was, coming home to see her mom in such high spirits. Truly gave Madi hope after witnessing her lifetime of bitterness and pain. That after what Dad had put her through, she could love again...

They sat there chatting about the wedding, more about the biking trip, catching up for what seemed like forever.

But as much as she was enjoying the conversation, Madi couldn’t stop replaying what Will had said to her. *Brady wasn’t good for her?* He knew Brady’s *type*? Damn him, was it not enough that he ruined her life? Now he had to ruin the best talk she’d ever had with her mother in her life?

Constantly, even when laughing, Madi found herself damming back the tidal wave of emotion that threatened. Fighting for composure. Nerves crawling, emotion twisting. It was the hardest façade she’d ever presented.

*Come on, Madi. He likes the stars and that’s a coincidence?*

Damn him, where did he get off?

As if a reflection of her mood, clouds starting rolling in. The night grew colder, darker and threatening, and when Brady began to worry about a storm, they all said their goodbyes and Mom hopped in her old, beat-up four-door to drive over to Chuck’s where she was sleeping now, swearing one beer couldn’t put her past the legal limit.

No sooner than her mom cruised off with a jerk of the transmission, Madi bolted, barely making her way into the bedroom before she lost it. Crumpling inside.

Flicking on the light in the nick of time, Brady caught her as she collapsed to the floor, bawling.

If not for the soft, sobbing heap of woman in his arms, Brady would've punched a hole through a wall. "That son of a bitch, did he hurt you? What'd he do to you? What'd he say?"

Damn that Will. Brady had a mind to tear out after him and fix it so he never looked in Madi's direction again.

"Nothing, nothing," she choked out, sniffing and slapping at her cheeks. "I'm okay."

"Oh sure. That's why you're nothing but a ball of tears. Can't even stand on your own two feet." Brady fought rage, hating that she was hurting like this as he lifted her to the bed, lying down alongside her and snuggling close. With one finger he slowly stroked away hot tears. "Oh Sunshine, I'm sorry. I never should have left you with him. I knew better."

Madi hiccupped. "I think he was jealous. *Jealous*. Can you believe that?"

"Wasn't that your plan all along?"

"I just... I just... Oh God..." she moaned. "The way he acted. Not eating. Holding my hand. Saying you're bad for me. It was almost like he still has feelings for me."

"He *what*?" Brady's arm beneath her neck went stiff and he jerked her face toward his, staring into eyes that swam with tears. Damn it, when would enough be enough? "Why do you put yourself through this torture?"

Jesus, he was half to blame for coming to Quarry with her, agreeing to this inane farce in lieu of seducing her the right way.

"He said you were manhandling me. That he knew your type."

"That a fact?" he drawled, sliding his hand to her breast, smashing it in his grasp.

"Tell me you didn't like it. Tell me and I won't touch you again."

"I did...oh!" she cried as he flicked her hardened nipple with his thumb. "I do."

"Now listen to me." He spoke slowly, glaring into her eyes and punctuating every word. "*I* know Will's type. He only wants what he can't have. It's all about him. He doesn't care what he's doing to you. He never has, Madi. *Never will*. He's probably off right now, beddin' that redhead you told me about and you know it's true."

"Never will." Never *Will*. Slamming shut moist, pale lashes, she scrunched her face and nodded, her voice aching. "Finish what you started earlier, Brady. Make me forget him."

Him. Always about *him*.

"That's what you really want?" Angrily, Brady threw himself over her, a hand propped at either side of her face. "Look at me, dammit. Tell me you want *me*." He grabbed her by the jaw. "Well, Madi?"

"Yes." Her bright blue eyes, still wet with emotion, snapped open and locked with his. "Manhandle me. I want it."

Not quite the answer he was looking for. "I'm not an *it*, Madi." Brady swept his hand from her face to her breast, pinching her nipple through her dress in an unrelenting hold. "Stop using his words. Use yours. Tell me you want *me*. Tell me how."

"Oh God," she moaned, her back arching from the bed as he pulled the cloth-encompassed pebbled bud upward, stretching the taut flesh. "I want you, Brady. Take me! Rough! Like only you can!"

"Any way I want you?" And to prove how it would be, he twisted his fingers, squeezing. "You mine for the takin'?"

"Yes! All yours!" she gasped, her anxious body taut and lifting off the bed, squirming with desire as she added, "I want it that way. I just want to lose myself with you."

Releasing her nipple, Brady rose to his knees.

She had no idea what she'd just gotten herself into. Because Brady had full intention of wiping Will from her mind once and for all. "Tell me something, Madi. Are you thinking about him?"

With that, he grabbed a shoulder and tugged her onto her belly facedown, making her cry in surprise as she honestly answered, "Just a smidge."

As he'd figured. But after tonight, Madi would never want *any* other man. Just him.

Whether she knew it or not, he wasn't just taking her body, he was taking her heart. And there was only one way how—to tease and tempt and torture her into total submission. Likely would take all night. But from strain in his slacks, he was definitely up for the challenge.

Snagging her zipper, he yanked it down and pulled and worked her dress off, tossing it to the floor. Next went her cream-colored satin panties, exposing her mind-blowing pert ass. How many times had he admired it in a bikini? It was small, tight—he could mold each cheek in his big hands—and now it was his.

Nudging her legs wide, he stroked a finger along her pussy, testing her readiness—she was nice and ripe for him—then he slid a wet pinky up her seam, circling her anus. Stroking the puckering tense bud as she huffed in shock.

"Did he ever take you here?"

Her voice shook as she answered, "No."

"Hmmm...good." Tempted as he was to slide that finger deep, it was too soon for this anal virgin. She needed to be good and worked up first. "Because I will, Sunshine, you can count on that."

Her delicate frame trembled at his words, but she didn't protest. Wanting to see her face as he aroused her, he withdrew his finger and unsnapped her bra then took her by the legs, twisting her back over.

The bra he cast to the wind, laying his body over hers, propped on one elbow, careful not to smash her. She was so thin, so fragile boned compared to his bulky frame. Such an innocent angel, even if another guy had taken her—*that* idiot hadn't known what he was doing. Now it was up to him to slowly introduce her to the real pleasures a man could bring a woman.

"If I do something you don't like, just say so." Otherwise, he was pulling out all the stops.

"Just please, Brady, hurry. I'm on fire."

Hardly. He hadn't even gotten started yet. "No hurryin's happening here. You're mine all night."

"Oh God..."

With a chuckle, his mouth encompassed her small breast, taking more than just her nipple and suckling. Soft at first, flicking his tongue. Then harder, milking and drawing the flesh, more and more, until his teeth closed around her pebbled bud. Nipping and making her mew with delight. Weak with pleasure, he was certain. Weak for him.

Dragging his teeth over her nipple, Brady smeared his lips down her belly, his tongue whipping around the outie he found so adorable. She giggled, folding up, but his forearm quickly flattened her knees back to the bed then dove between her legs, searching out her clit. He flattened the nub beneath the pressure he applied, rubbing it round and round as he slid his mouth farther south, circling the outer edge of her neatly trimmed golden curls, digging in his teeth here and there when she dared to thrash or buck against him, just to remind her who was in charge.

Finally he nestled himself between her legs, bracing them apart and bringing his lips to her succulent pussy. He kissed her tenderly, teasing her with short licks as he searched out her slit, thrusting two fingers inside all at once.

“Oh!” Madi’s pussy jumped against his face and he plunged again, taking her clit and suckling. “Oh God, Will!”

Well hell, Brady couldn’t believe his ears.

“What?”

Pleasure blurred the edges of reality. All Madi knew was what she felt—on the brink of the most intense orgasm she’d ever experience. With a whimper, she pushed against him, wanting more. Brady’s hand driving into her. His cock.

“*What?*” he demanded a second time, his fingers gone still inside her, his mouth *not* where it belonged – suckling on her clit. “Damn it, Madi.”

“Don’t stop,” she begged. Her pussy clenched around him, on fire. “Please, Will...” Oh shit. She hadn’t just said that. “Oh God, *Brady*, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean... I didn’t realize.”

Madi’s insides trembled at the horrible mistake she’d just made. What was wrong with her? She finally decided to put Will from her heart once and for all then cried the bastard’s name when the man who truly mattered was about to make her come?

Why had she even been thinking about Will? Why, dammit? “Brady, I am *so* sorry.”

He made a guttural sound, something like a grunt. Or a growl. “Too late for apologies now.”

No!

He rose from the bed, walking away, but instead of staying gone, abandoning her as she so deserved, he unzipped his luggage, searched out a big box of condoms and returned, throwing them on the bed then snatching her by the upper arm and thigh, roughly tossing her to her belly. “One way or another, Madi, I’m going to get through to you.”



"What are you doing?" she gasped as he grabbed her at the knees and forced her onto them, his hand smacking down hard, burning her left butt cheek with the answer he then supplied.

"Punishing you."

*Thwack, thwack, thwack!* His palm showed no mercy, branding her with the horrible mistake she'd made.

Startled, she lunged away and he caught her, dragging her back into place. "Teaching you a lesson. And don't you dare move or I'll make it worse!"

"Don't move?" Make it worse? Who did he think he was? Her owner? "Like hell!"

"Not the answer I'm looking for." *Thwack, thwack, thwack!*

Her butt muscles clenched tight, on fire. Her arms trembled to hold her up.

But there she remained, knees quaking as she struggled and wrestled with the thought of not scrambling away, of staying in this position, totally exposed to him as she'd never been to any man before.

Of letting him... Oh God, he was *spanking* her. And to think she'd fantasized about it earlier—but not like this. Not as her being punished like some misbehaved girl. Every ion of her feminist side raged and revolted.

She told herself she didn't run only because he'd catch her anyway. Because she didn't want to anger him further. Because after calling him Will, she owed him this. But the truth was something else, something deep inside. Oh, how she ached...

"You said you wanted it rough, right, Madi?" *Thwack, thwack, thwack!* "I have to force you to forget him, right?" *Thwack, thwack, thwack!*

"Please!" Pain spiraled down her legs, heat welled on her ass—and between her legs—proof of her desire trickled down her inner thighs. How, *how* could she still want Brady so much?

"Are you thinking about him now?" *Thwack, thwack, thwack!* "Are you, dammit?"

"No! Not at all, I swear!" And she really wasn't. Until Brady's mention, Will had completely abandoned her mind. Even now she felt nothing at the mention of him – all her focus was on Brady and his spanking. As it should be.

"I'm sorry!"

"Then behave like it." *Thwack!* "If you still want my cock, you'll thrust that ass up and ask for more."

Do what? She couldn't...she wouldn't...

She *did*. Because it was right. It was what she deserved.

What, in some weird way, she wanted.

"Please, Brady, I *am* sorry!" She arched her bottom in the air as requested. "Punish me more. Harder. I've earned it."

"Damn straight."

Her pussy clenched at empty air, hot and needy, and to her surprise, as he delivered three more blows to her right cheek, her arousal didn't lessen, didn't fade in the least, but only heightened.

Did it really take this, him being so harsh, to get through to her?

"I'm sorry!" she pleaded again. "Spank me like I deserve." *Thwack, thwack, thwack!* And he did.

She whimpered. She cried. And for some God-unknown reason, she yearned for more.

More, which he delivered, in harsh form. *Thwack, thwack!*

Then, when she never wanted it to end, this thought-blurring, reality-dimming experience, he stopped, fingers pressing into the right cheek of her burning ass as he reached for a condom and rolled it on.

His cock nudged her pussy, aligning with her entrance, and he pushed his way inside her, filling her with his length and width. Settling deep. "Feel *me*, Madi. I'm the man who loves you."

He didn't need to ask twice. "You're the man I want. Truly, Brady, I do love you."

She just loved Will too. No matter what, he was a black hole in her heart. And in that tender moment of completion between them, Madi just wanted him gone, whatever it took.

Bucking against Brady, she begged, "Take me hard, Brady. Make me yours. All of me."

Madi knew what that meant—what he'd promised earlier, about entering her anally. And while that prospect scared her somewhat, she found the thought arousing. And if that's what it took... "Do it," she encouraged, too shy to voice exactly what aloud.

But as always, Brady knew what she needed. Drawing back and slamming into her, he placed his thumb to her anus, riding the unaccustomed ring as he began thrusting his hips furiously. Almost as if he was warming her up, testing her there. Of its own accord, her anus clenched and puckered as if saying *yes*.

And so she cried, "God yes, do it!"

With his other hand, he plucked a bottle from the box of condoms and squirted something warm and gooey between her cheeks, rubbing the thick liquid in. Instantly the area heated.

"Yes! Please, please," she found herself begging and arching her bottom in the air, as he'd commanded her to do early. "Please, Brady."

She wanted more. Wanted him fucking her, wanted his thumb deeper, wanted him spanking her again.

"I know, baby, I know." Harder, faster he rammed his cock into her, taking her to the hilt as his thumb gradually slid deeper, twisting within and applying pressure, opening her up. "Just relax and I'll give you what you need," he promised. "Everything you need."

With that, he smacked her left cheek and she gasped with delight.

A knot settled in the pit of her stomach, followed by a strange sort of rush as he withdrew and reentered her with his finger then added a second digit. The two stroked deep, sparks tingling over her skin. Her clit pulsed, feeling swollen, and she reared backward, needing even more.

But how? She was filled to the max, unable to comprehend her ass accommodating any more until he added a third finger to the mix, barely squeezing the tip in, followed by a nip of pain as he slapped her ass and her world blew to pieces. Violently she came as he spanked her like he'd spanked her earlier, with the blistering *thwack, thwack, thwacks* she so craved. The walls of her pussy went into wild convulsions, grasping at the cock that never slowed as she came and came.

Only when her muscles drooped from exhaustion did he pause, withdrawing from her pussy, but not her ass. Those fingers still retreated then plunged, working inside her.

"Lie flat," he commanded. "Relax a minute. We're going to ensure we do this right."

He hardly needed to ask—Madi melted to her belly, hugging the mattress. She was so spent, her mind a total blur and breathing ragged. But as she lay there prone, her ass filled with his twitching fingers, Brady removed the third, unfitting finger, slowly exploring and expanding her to her innermost depths—so lovingly—she experienced an awakening like none other. She couldn't be any more intimate or exposed than she was with this man right at this moment. What was between them was basic, primal. *Real.*

Her body burned anew and she whimpered as he hooked those two fingers deep inside her, almost pulling her apart, gently widening the tight channel—her *ass*, for God's sake. There wasn't getting any more nitty-gritty than this—yet look how he wanted her. Look how he relished her—every single last damn inch of her body was a turn-on.

"Get ready, Sunshine," he warned tenderly, "here comes the third again."

Madi could only muffle her compliance into the mattress.

Squirting more goo, he prodded with the third finger, demanding entry, demanding she open so wide for those thick digits, pain mixing with the pleasure that pulsed from her clit.

“Open up for me. Relax,” he encouraged, stilling those three fingers partially inside her. With his other hand, he slipped between her pussy folds, finding her clit and pinching and rolling it. “You have to take my fingers first if you want my cock. Come on, babe, I need you nice and ready. I *want* you,” he all but growled.

In sensory overload, Madi ground her teeth, intentionally catching the sheet in her mouth and mincing the cotton fabric.

“Don’t you want me too?”

Eyes pressed, she nodded a furious yes.

“Then relax. You’re so tight. A total virgin. But you have to open up more.” He tweaked the nerve-infused bud, advancing his painstaking-slow entry into her ass. One slow millimeter at a time he gained ground and it seemed to Madi his cock would never fit, that she’d never be able to take him this way. It was all so much. The red-hot pleasure burning through her body. The stretching pain that blended with it, giving her senses a sharp edge.

More? Impossible! Relax? How?

Brady coached her body, patiently training her to accept his fingers. Only when she was at total ease with their width, nearly humping his hand, he had her so aroused, did he pull free and refill her anus with his cock. Easily, his head pushed past the tight ring and he claimed her anal virginity. No need to hesitate—he’d made damn sure she was ready for this—he glided into the embracing depths, relishing her snug, hot channel.

Threading fingers through her pubic hair, Brady manipulated that magic button and stroked the recesses of her tight glove with a steady rhythm. “Ah, Madi, mine. All

mine.” He’d claimed her body so hard and thoroughly, no way could she fantasize of anyone else. Now or in the morning.

Her muscles tensed at his claim, squeezing his rod as if to agree.

Contracting more and more with each of his deep glides, her body became a taut string beneath him as she mewled with delight, and he knew she was about to climax yet again. His Madi. His Sunshine, exploding for him.

God, just the thought had cum pulsing through his cock.

Knowing he could easily let go at any moment—and he likely wouldn’t be able to prevent it—he rolled her clit rapidly, egging her on. “That’s it. Come, baby. Come nice and good for me.”

Her obedience as a lover was mind-blowing. She released into a series of cries and little muscles contractions that threw Brady over the edge. Her ass milked his cock tight as cum shot up its length, bursting into his condom, and his world went unsteady. Stars twinkled, his vision darkened. He was blinded by ecstasy so sheer, it was as if he’d blasted off to another world.

Folding over her body, still buried deep inside her, he nudged aside silken hair and whispered in her ear, “Didn’t think of him a minute, did you?”

“Mmm...” she moaned, tucking her face and muttering into the mattress. “And I don’t want to think of him now.”

“That’s because you’re mine now, Madi.” Brady tossed aside blonde strands, claiming the delectable flesh of her neck in mouth. “Madi, *mine*.”

“Mmm, yessss...”

## Chapter Six

He'd made a huge mistake. Huge...and stupid.

Seeing Madi storm off into the night, headed into the arms of another man—the man he should be—Will had known his error with searing, painful certainty.

He hadn't been able to go home, to face that old, empty farmhouse he had the misfortune of calling his own. The slanted floors and creaky stairs meant nothing—nothing but a constant thorn in his side—and everything that did mean something... Gone.

Instead, he found himself wandering aimlessly through the cold, dead night and the next thing he knew, he was down by the creek that wove between his fields where he and Madi use to park in his truck and lie in the bed, gazing into the night, plotting forever.

There in the tall grasses, he sunk to the freezing, damp ground, wind bustling around him as he glared at the night sky, cursing the clouds that'd moved in, shadowing his first viewing in over seven years.

Just fine and well. He decided to look up, clouds. But earlier, every star in the sky had twinkled for Brady.

The man had everything. And Will bet the guy didn't even know it. *Shit.*

And so he lay there, wet and cold yet somehow not shivering. Too lost in his feelings to care, somehow comforted to be in the spot that was theirs.

Twice in his life he'd lost his other half—first his brother then Madi—and now Will wore loneliness like a second skin. When Wayne died, Will had been left with an ache, a black hole, and for a while being with Madi had filled it. Eased his pain. Now, with each passing year, the emptiness inside him burned wider and deeper than ever. For her sake, he'd dealt for a while, but seeing her with this guy was consuming him.

Madi holding his hand, Madi kissing him tenderly on the cheek...

Never should he have thrown her or his dreams away. Never. All too late he realized how very much they meant. Needed them back with ferocity. They were *his*.

Who was Brady to up and steal them?

A vision of the man kissing her, practically taking her right there on the street tortured him. Brady's palm molding the gentle curve of her breast, plucking at her nipple through her dress. His hand smacking her butt, digging possessively into that fine ass of hers...

Dear God, what was wrong with him?

Fists clenched at his side, Will fought the heat crawling along his cock. *His*, he punched into the cold ground. His Cornsilk, not Brady's! That sultry, sexy woman he'd witnessed begging for more was *his*!

How swollen her lips had been when they talked. Kissed thoroughly. How she'd radiated arousal...he'd been able to smell her.

And she'd touched him. Held his hand. Hugged him.

No! Breathing through his nose, Will shoved aside the images. God, *where* were the stars?

As if in answer, one sole star peeked out from the corner of a black cloud and, breathing hard, Will focused on it and its beauty. Madi's beauty, ravishing his mind constantly. Her smile so wide. Those sapphire eyes shimmering with life. The songlike way she laughed, twittering with happiness. The more he stared up, star after star appearing, the more there she was. Lights in his life, lights that would never go out.

The knife inside his chest twisted fiercely. Exactly why he'd spent seven years glaring at his feet.

God, the fool he'd been. Unselfish, right? He'd stayed for his father. For the farm. And Madi? He'd dismissed her—coldly, granted—but for her own sake. So she



wouldn't be beholden, but free...to follow her dreams, spread her wings, even to fall in love again. All in the name of doing what was right. For everyone but him.

His clothes were wet with dew, his skin likely a frosty shade of blue, and right about now – for the first time in his life – Will was sick to death of doing what was best for others. He cracked his fingers in frustration, popping each knuckle without mercy. Didn't he get to be selfish, just a little bit? He only wanted his life back. What was rightfully his, Madi included.

He thought about college. About Hawaii. About the stars. About Madi and the way she'd hugged him, her soft hand enfolded in his rough one. The way she'd smelled.

It wasn't too late, he decided. He wouldn't let it be.

By the time the black night faded paler and paler, the sun streaming light into darkness, Will had made up his mind what to do.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Mmm, yes..." Sand scratched at her bare butt, grazing already-heightened nerves as Will's tongue tangled with hers, kissing her deeply, fiercely, both hands roughly grasping at her breasts, smearing sand over her nipples, grazing the tender flesh as he pinched roughly, spurring her to cry out. Manhandling her...just like Brady.

Brady, who was kissing down her neck, easing his finger between her ass cheeks, pressing into the somehow already-lubed and ready bud as Will's own hand dipped south between her folds. And then both men had a handful of breast, sharing the rough plucks they applied as they plundered her nether regions, driving her mad.

Madi wriggled and pleaded, so close...but it just wasn't enough.

How she wanted them both, their cocks buried deep. Fulfilling her, completely. An ache that seared nerves, boggled the mind. On and on it went...

Them touching and teasing and torturing.

Higher and higher she flew, tighter and tighter she wound. But they wouldn't give her what she wanted. Both of them, their cocks thrusting in unison, pleasing her, loving her...

As she did them.

"Please!" she begged. "Please, I can't stand it!"

"Please, please..." Madi's head thrust back and forth, her body writhing as if in hell. "*Please!*"

At the same time, the whole house began to shake, rattle and roll, accompanied by a *bang, bang, bang!*

The six a.m. train roared by as heavy thuds pounded throughout the house—something being jostled and banged about maybe?—and Brady grabbed the thrashing woman in his arms by the shoulders, shaking her awake. "Madi! Madi, you're having a dream. It's just the train! Wake up!"

"Please..." she sputtered once last time, her eyes flashing open and staring up at him as if she'd seen a ghost as their bed vibrated violently. No wonder the damn thing wasn't on a frame. "Oh God, Brady?" As if she expected to find someone else, she glanced around frantically. "What—?"

To his despair, a tear flitted down her cheek as she settled beneath him and whispered, "No."

In all their time rooming together, he'd never noticed her having any inclination toward nightmares. Of course they slept in separate rooms, but even so, they were both in the habit of occasionally crashing on the couch after a late-night movie.

"What could be so terrible?" He kissed away the moisture, relieved as the train finally rolled by, fading in the distance. "What were you dreaming about, darlin'?"

But there it was again. *Bang, bang, bang!*

Not the train. Knocking. Brady winced at the untimely interruption, tempted to shout "Go away!" Except it wasn't his house.

Madi swept fingers under her eyes then pinched the bridge of her finely shaped nose. "Mom's at Chuck's. I better see who that is." Quickly slipping out of his hold, she hurried to her feet and stuffed herself into a pink terrycloth robe that hung on the back of the door. "Coming!"

"You sure you're all right?"

But it didn't take a mind reader to see through her fake smile.

"Yeah, sure," she answered, teeth showing, eyes lying. "I'm fine." Quickly turning, she rushed from the room. "Coming I said!"

Well damn. *Fine?* He had no idea what she'd been dreaming about but *that* was a bald-faced lie. Which could mean only one thing — she was hiding something from him. And Brady had a powerfully disappointing suspicion he knew precisely what. Or who, rather.

She'd been dreaming of Will, dammit. He just couldn't fucking win when it came to the bastard, could he? Speak of the devil...

"Will?" Madi's shock echoed throughout the house. "What are you doing here?"

"I have to talk to you. Now," the son of a bitch declared, as if he had some right barging in. "Is there somewhere we can be alone?"

"Like hell," Brady ground out, whipping from the bed and practically jumping in his boxers. Storming down the hall, he shouted again. "Like hell I'm leaving you alone with her a second time!" Always the peacemaker, Brady had no idea the animal that'd taken him over, making his nostrils flare. His fists ball up. Will would not cause her to cry again. Not on his watch. "Get out!"

"*Brady.*" Madi spun in place, putting up her hands to halt his warpath. "Stop, please. Calm down."

"Come on, man," Will scoffed, as if *he* were the one being put out here. His dark gaze glared with challenge. "Mind your own business."

"Madi is *my* business. So get lost!" His business, currently dressed in nothing but a robe. If not for her standing in the way, blocking him, Brady would've snatched the asshole up by the collar and thrown him out on his scruffy blue-jeaned ass by now. "Madi, move. It's high time he received a dose of his own medicine. *Pain.*"

Male pride hissed between Will's teeth. "Let him past," he dared. "Obviously this cock you're with needs taught some manners. Why don't you go put some clothes on? The lady said *stop*. She wants to talk to me. Alone."

"Oh you don't! Not either of you!" She dodged off Brady's advances, not letting him past. "Brady, seriously. Please stop. I can handle this."

As she'd handled it last night, collapsing to the floor? Ragged breaths charged from him. "Not this time."

"Yes this time." Putting up her hands, she again gestured for him to stop and implored him with her shimmering gaze. "I need to handle this myself. You can stay, just calm down."

"You know where this is going to go, Madi." Brady's heart drummed at an unsteady beat and he fought to tamp the anger boiling inside. The fear. Not something he'd ever admit out loud, but that nightmare had him scared—for her, for them. What if last night, no matter how mind-blowing, hadn't been enough? What if nothing would be? What if...he wasn't?

"I know where I'm going to allow it to go. Trust me."

God, already she looked so sad, tears held at bay. How could he just let this bastard back in to drive the knife deeper? How could she?

But again she insisted, "I mean it. I'm a big girl and I can make my own decisions. So either simmer down or just *go*." Go? From the tone of her voice, she wasn't changing her mind. No other choice, Brady was forced to draw a deep breath and will himself to cool it.

She was right. As much as he wanted to take care of Will once and for all, it had to be up to her.

"Don't you put your hands on her," he warned, crossing his arms to stand guard. Eyeballing Will, taking him in. The guy looked rough, as if he'd slept in a barn. Dirty, dampened jeans, day-old beard. Uncombed hair.

"Thank you," she sighed, turning her back to him and facing Will. To Brady's momentary relief, she immediately informed him, "Look. At this point, I can't see how we really have much to say to each other. I think I'd like you to go." Madi motioned to the open door. "It's cold, you're letting out the heat."

Will didn't budge, except to kick the door shut behind him. "Let me say what I came to for."

"Which is?"

"I, um—" Will started to reach out to her, but must've thought twice when he caught the glare Brady was emanating. *My Madi*, he mentally screamed. *Hands off!* "I came to apologize."

Real great. As if that made up for anything.

Brady itched with despair as Madi acknowledged his words with a bob of blonde hair, hugging herself. "Yeah, you were a real jerk yesterday."

"I was." Lowering his voice, Will stepped forward. "And I have been, all along. I hurt you, Madi, and I'm sorry. Sorrier than you can imagine. It was the stupidest mistake I ever made and I've regretted it since then."

As if too afraid to ask it out loud, Madi whispered, "Why are you saying this now?"

*Why was he?* Brady felt his world slowly slipping from under his feet, spinning out of control, and all he wanted was to put a stop to it before it was too late. Before Madi was hurt again. Or he lost her.

But he couldn't do a damn thing but stand here and listen to it. Not without pissing Madi off.

"I wanted to talk to you alone."

Again Will reached for her, but Brady leaned forward, making it obvious that wasn't going to happen.

"So, um..." Will cleared his throat, instead running that hand through short, messy black hair. "I'm going out on a limb here...but, Madi, I want you back. I want you bad."

"What?" Brady barked, fear exploding within. "Hell no!"

"What?" Madi echoed, casting him a glare that shouted, *Be quiet. Stay out!* "So you see me with another guy and suddenly you want me again?"

"I never stopped wanting you, Madi. You've got to believe that. Never. And I can't let some other guy marry you."

Ah, man, this was *not* happening. "She's been coming back here for seven years. Seven years, man—you had your chance. Go back to your redheaded waitress."

"Redheaded waitress? You mean Trish? My cousin?"

"Dude, that's sick."

Will looked at him as if he were nuts. "What's sick? That I talk to my cousin? Madi, you know Trish. Met her when we were fourteen at the family reunion in Pennsylvania, remember? Short as shit and covered in freckles? She moved to Quarry about a year ago to hide out, after an ugly breakup. Her and her new husband are buying the farm."

"I...I forgot about her," she stuttered, clearly shocked. "Leah said Steve said you'd found someone. And I saw you talking to her...laughing with her..."

Damn, the guy hadn't even been seeing anyone seriously? Madi's whole basis for needing him to come along, to practice kiss and put on their farce...now null and void?

"No, Madi. *No.*" Will's hands clenched and unclenched empty air, as if he wanted to grab her, pull her to him and never let go. With every word he spoke, his motions empathized that need, acutely. "Listen to me. Steve and Leah just wanted you to move on. But there was no one. *No one* but you. Yeah, I tried seeing a few girls, mainly blind

dates set up by friends. But the entire time I just kept thinking about you. Everything I did, everywhere I went a memory of you waited to torture me.”

“What are you talking about?” Madi whispered, as if she couldn’t believe it.

And Will answered—a little too well—putting aside any doubt. “How when you sang Christmas carols, it sounded like an angel was singing, not a parrot shrieking. How during the summer, you lived to go running down the dock and plunge cannonball into the pond, not just sit and dangle your feet in, afraid of a few little fish. And how in the spring you’d come over and help with planting. You weren’t ever afraid of a little hard work. And that Halloween one time, when we got in that pumpkin guts fight. Or how you’d pet any animal you came across, not shrivel back in disgust like they were dirty. Or how you cut your steaks into tiny bits, so you don’t have to chew a lot. That you’re the only girl on the face of the earth who doesn’t like strawberries just like me and doesn’t drink either, ‘cause you know how important staying dry is to me. You better believe it, Madi, it didn’t matter who I went with, what season it was, how lonely I was, no one compared. No one was as fun. As pretty. As perfect as *you*.”

Madi choked on a little sob in the back of her throat. “Will...”

“I’m not done yet. Not even close—”

“I say you are.” Because, damn, this just kept getting worse. Feeling his ground slipping even more, Brady inched forward, ready to hurl the guy out the door—anything to shut this endearing little speech up—but Madi’s cry stopped him short.

“Stay out of this, I said!” Pent-up tears now shimmered down her cheeks and she rushed forward, giving Will a shove. “It’s just puppy love, you said! I’m already over you, you said! You *hurt* me, so bad!”

Will stumbled as Madi yanked back to slap him, catching her wrists and pulling her to him. “Listen to me. I had to, for your own sake. I thought...I thought it was best.”

“You thought ripping my heart into shreds was *for the best*?” Madi wrenched her hands free, stepping away. “You think this is for the best? I was getting over you, Will!

Finally moving on with my life and falling in love with someone else! What now? *What!?* Am I supposed to just leap into your arms, forget Brady? You could've told me this years ago!"

Will's mouth hung open, despair cracking in his voice. "No, I...I just thought—"

Brady's and Will's gazes locked and, God help him, Brady had to know. "How could breaking her heart be for the best?"

"Because I knew I was never leaving Quarry. My dad was real sick and I had to stay, take care of him, and I didn't want Madi getting any notions of skipping out on college or her dreams for me. I thought...I thought we'd both move on and...and..." Will's gaze darted to Madi's, the truth inarguably gleaming in those dark depths. "Madi, I just wanted you to be happy. Meet someone and move on."

Well, shit.

Damn it, Brady could almost respect him for making the hard choice he had. For Madi's sake. It seemed Will wasn't such a bad guy after all. And in every word Will had spoken, Brady knew the man loved her with all his heart.

So what now? Where did this leave *him*?

"She *did* move on," he pointed out. But that wasn't quite true—a reality Brady knew straight to the core of his being. Madi may have met someone but she'd never gotten over Will. Even after all they'd shared, all the practice kisses and passion, not to mention last night, and he was likely going to lose her now? Some part of him had always sensed he'd come up second place in her heart, no matter how hard he tried for first.

"Yeah." Jaw locked, Will's eyes never wandered from hers, even as he admitted, "That she did. Look, man, I know you love her and all..."

"Yeah, I do."

"I don't know what to say," Madi choked out, swallowing hard, her hand fluttering at her forehead in that telltale way of hers when she was stressed or uncertain. "Um..."



"I know I messed up," Will went on desperately, taking Madi by the upper arms—and, God help him, Brady allowed him, because he no longer knew if Madi was his to protect. Or Will's. "I know I hurt you and I'm sorry, but you're about to marry this guy and I feel like I have this one chance. I'm free now, Cornsilk. Dad's gone, the farm's sold. If you have any love left for me at all, be with me. I'll come to Hawaii, I'll..." Will trailed off, face contorting in pain. "*Madison.*"

Squeezing her eyes, Madi stepped back, shaking her head, and taking that as a cue, Brady stepped forward, claiming her from behind and wrapping his arms at her waist, hugging her tight to him.

Could it be? She was really choosing him over Will? After all, Madi had just left Will's arms—even after his profession of love—to come into his embrace.

He had to know for sure, to hear her say it out loud. "Madi?"

When she finally spoke, her voice was rough with the emotion that exuded around them. "I don't know."

Shit. As much as Brady loved her, much as he wanted her, he knew he couldn't keep her, not if her heart wasn't in the right place. As Will had all those years ago, he'd have to let her go. Do what was best for her.

There was just one thing he needed to hear—and then he'd know for sure. "Madi, what was your nightmare about?" She didn't answer right away, sucking in a breath and going stiff in his arms. "Tell me, Madi," he insisted. "You were dreaming about him, weren't you?"

"No. I mean yes." There went that hand again, skimming her forehead. "I mean in a way, but you...um..."

Her response was so chaotic Brady spun her around and cupped the fragile line of her chin, forcing her to look at him. "Just say it."

"I, uh..." Her voice was so tiny, Brady could barely hear her as she whispered, "I was dreaming about both of you."

"Both of us, *what?*" Will asked from behind her.

Eyes cast downward, Madi didn't answer, only went blood-red with the truth that smacked Brady hard. Sex. Sex.

*Please, please...* she'd begged. She'd been dreaming about a threesome between all of them.

That took the cake. Now Brady didn't know what to think, to conclude of the situation or her feelings. Every time he pegged her, Madi clobbered him straight in the heart.

"Well, have out with it. Me or Will?" he demanded. "Which of us do you want?"

"Which do I want?" Her head lolled in confusion and she sniffled, silent tears streaming faster, heavier, down bloodshot cheeks. "I want both of you."

God, how he hated to see her like this. Hurting. Stuck between a rock and a hard place. But he needed answers—real ones. "Then which of us do you *love?*"

"Both of you. Equally but differently."

Oh great. Freaking fabulous. Why didn't they just make her every last erotic fantasy come true then?

Oh sure, the notion was hot. No doubt it made for a damn arousing dream—heat crawled along his cock just at the thought of having a woman kinky enough to dream—much less try—that sort of thing.

But didn't she get it? She *had* to pick one of them! Having both of them wasn't possible. Not in the light of day!

"Okay, look..." Coming directly behind her, Will took her by the shoulders, rubbing away tension, and a sigh dragged from Madi as he suggested, "I came prepared to fight for you. But maybe I should just go. Give you time to think."

"No, Will. Don't."

Brady stiffened, sure what that meant. "In other words, I should go?"

"No! No, don't—" she cried. The quandary she was in etched visibly across her face. "I—"

Dammit. He wished she'd just dismiss one of them and be done with it.

Didn't she see? Understand? Hers wasn't the only heart breaking!

"God, Madi!" Brady tossed up his hands in frustration, clenching at air, and instantaneously he knew what to do.

Once again claiming her by the chin, he lowered his face to hers, so that his mouth was a hairsbreadth from her, close enough to kiss, to taste her breath.

"Choose once and for all," he ground out, determined one way or another to corner her into the decision she had to make—him or Will, not both. When she didn't, Brady threatened, "Maybe you should have us then. Like in your dream."

It was an intimidation. A way of scaring her out. After all, a dream was a dream, but Madi wouldn't, not *really*.

She'd choose. He knew she would.

What he *didn't* expect was the heat that fired along his cock, making him instantly hard at the thought of instigating such a thing.

"Have *us*?" The same heat leapt in Will's gaze, gleaming as his fingers clenched Madi's shoulders and he swallowed. "Man, is this a dare or something? What're you talking about?"

"Please stop," Madi begged. "Can't you see? You're tearing me in two. I *can't* choose."

"A double dare." Brady knocked aside the other man's hands, seized her by the shoulders and spun the squealing woman around. "Go ahead, Will. Kiss her. Make her want you."

Brady knew desire when he saw it. Will's tongue darted out over his lower lip as he leaned lower, searching Madi's gaze. "Just choose already," he implored her.

Helplessly, Madi cast her gaze down.

"Oh, she's not going to. She *won't*." With his palms, Brady molded her sides, high on her back, sweeping his hands down the length of her torso then around the front to the tie in her robe. "Kiss her, Will, and I'm gonna do the same. Let's see who the winner is."

With that, he yanked free her belt, pulling her robe wide open and exposing her naked body to his rival, planting his mouth to her nape. "You can't feel the same way about us, Madi. Choose."

"I can't." She shuddered, whimpering as he licked her goose-bumped flesh and found a spot to suckle, taking her skin deeply, surely leaving a hickey.

Meanwhile, Will leaned in closer, snagging her chin under his finger. "*Choose.*"

And when she didn't, he swept her into a fierce kiss.

"We're not going to stop. Not until you do," Brady warned one last time. But already it was too late. Brady's cock was steel, his desire blazing, and from the way Will was kissing her and she was responding...

Situation out of control.

## Chapter Seven

Oh God, how long it'd been...

How different.

No more sweet kisses, sweeter sex. Will kissed her hard, fiercely, his mouth bruising hers and his tongue plunging, striking dominantly as his hands ripped her robe from her shoulders and Brady assisted, nipping and suckling the back of her neck as he yanked the garment to the floor, leaving her completely exposed between them.

Fingers—so many fingers—appraisingly swept her tingling skin, Will's calloused tips skating over her breasts, her belly, creating shivers of delight at the combination of rough and soft. Brady's smooth, possessive hands exploring her back, grasping her butt and sliding between, teasing and spurring her to clench with awareness. A tidal wave of hot, wet arousal.

If they did this, she'd be taken there again, entered anally while she rode the other's cock...

"Hell yes," she moaned into Will's mouth. *Both of them*. Nothing had ever sounded more intriguing. Will forced her to swallow her words, bending her head back with his severe kiss.

*Smack!* Brady's hand slapped the bare bottom his lengthy, boxer-clad cock now rested against, commanding, "That's your choice then? That we both take you?"

"Yes," she ventured another moan into Will's mouth.

In that moment, that was what she wanted more than anything. More than Will. More than Brady. She wanted them, her heart filled completely. No more empty holes. Her dream had proved one harsh truth—last night Brady's rough ways may have made her temporarily forget Will, but nothing, *nothing* could fill the void permanently. But

just as she fantasized about Will when making love to Brady, she knew it would be the same vice versa. Brady had worked his way into her soul and was there to stay.

To that thought, he delivered another smart slap with a groan and nipped her shoulder like a baby animal toyed with another, as if to say “Let’s go”.

And so it was that all three of them, Will still frantically kissing her and pawing her as he stumbled backward through the hall while Brady scooped her around her torso with both arms and smothered her pussy in one hand, literally hiking her off her feet, her butt smashed to his cock as he carried her like some sort of cavemen for Will.

It continued that way straight to her room, Brady plowing them forward until Will’s calves hit the mattress and he crashed to the bed, Madi thrown on top him. They landed with an *umph*, her naked body lying over his clothed one and his hands went to her face, cupping her cheeks and smoothing sandpaper to silk. “This is truly what you want?”

“Yes.” Looking away from the confusion she saw in his dark gaze, Madi nodded frantically. “This is the way it has to be.”

“And you like...” Will swallowed, trailing his hands down her to her ass. “You like him smacking you like that?”

A knot lodged in her throat, making her unable to respond.

Brady had faded from the scene only a moment, kicking the door shut and snagging the box of condoms and lube from the nightstand as he answered for her, “She loves it. Give it a try. Go on, Madi, get up on your knees.”

Will’s fingers drummed her behind hesitantly, silently asking for permission, waiting to see if she obeyed Brady.

A scorching blush of embarrassment rushed Madi’s face—fine time for shyness, pinned between two men—and she buried her face in Will’s chest, scooting to her knees and lifting her butt in the air.

"Will..." That was it—his name. But in that one-word sigh, Madi conveyed it all. Her desire. Her need. It was a plea, one that begged he not force her to voice out loud to this man whom she'd always shared such tender passion with what she wanted so badly. Both these men spanking her.

Thankfully, it seemed she had Brady to do the talking for her—God love him for getting them in this situation.

"Hell—" Brady kicked off his boxers, situating himself behind her. His bare cock danced along the folds of her dripping pussy, whisking and bobbing with the promise of pleasure to come. "I'd say she deserves it, wouldn't you, Will?"

His hand came to rest on right flank while Will's owned the left.

"Heck yeah," Will agreed, and he arched beneath her, angling her so could better reach her butt, squeezing the globe in hand. "Not choosing." Then to her satisfaction...

*Thwack! Thwack, thwack, thwack!*

Madi gasped as Brady's palm resounded off her butt, joined by Will's, his smacks slightly hesitant at first but quickly increasing in degree, creating a firestorm of red-hot pleasure-pain.

"Making us share her." *Thwack, thwack!* She received from Brady. *Thwack, thwack!* Will agreed. Each man's hand coming down in quick, branding succession. Hard, harshly. Her arousal spiraled.

"Liking it so damn much." *Thwack, thwack! Thwack, thwack!*

That she did! "More!" Madi found herself crying. "Please!"

*Thwack, thwack! Thwack, thwack!*

"Oh yeah, this one put up quite a front," Brady agreed.

"All sweet and sunshiny." *Thwack, thwack! Thwack, thwack!* "But underneath she's nothing but a little wanton."

*Thwack, thwack! Thwack, thwack!*

Whimpering, her clit pulsing with feverish want, her pussy clenching hungrily at air, she couldn't help but wonder what wonderful thing she'd ever done to deserve this...both of her men, punishing her, working together to do it. It was bliss—searing, glorious bliss—and Madi's ass twitched in the air, inviting more.

"You know," Brady posed, skimming her butt with blunt nails and inciting electric tingles, "just last night she cried your name while I was eating out her cunt." *Thwack, thwack!* "I had to spank her good."

Beneath her, Will groaned. "Thinking of me while you're with him?" *Thwack, thwack! Thwack, thwack!* "You know, I caught her checking me out at the party."

"Oh you were, were you?" That earned a harsh triple *thwack-thwack-thwack!* from Brady, and Madi mewed a protest.

"No I wasn't!" Had she been? As always, when it came to Will, she couldn't help herself. And now it was the same with Brady...

How pathetic was it, to be totally weak for two men?

Will's nails dug into her bottom in warning. "Like hell you weren't! Those big blue eyes running along my body length, unable to look away. Admit it."

And Brady added a *thwack, thwack!*

"Okay, yes!"

Her reward was four ass-biting *thwack, thwack, thwack, thwacks!*

Then Brady's head dipped down, between her legs, taking her clit between his teeth and suckling, lapping up the desire that seeped generously from her ready cunt. Several fingers plunged into her, rousing a gasp, and she bucked against him.

Will, meanwhile, clamped her under the arm, tugging, and commanding, "Up on your hands. Now. I want to suck your nipples."

Weakly, Madi rose, the movement causing her to arch into Brady's face and fingers as Will gobbled her breast in his mouth, dancing circles with his tongue then drawing sharply.



Both men applied deep suction, their teeth grazing, driving her mad as Brady's fingers fucked her steady. It was all Madi could do not to collapse and forfeit. So good, so much, the pleasure her two lovers were bringing her. Without one or the other, it could never be like this. No, she needed them both.

Her body skyrocketed, tensing on the peak of a climax and, as if he sensed it, wanted to stop it, Brady wrenched his mouth and fingers free. "Mmm...take a taste."

The men twisted her around so that her pussy sat in Will's face and Brady's cock hung in hers. "Suck it," he commanded, and Madi wasn't sure if he was talking to Will or to her.

But they both obeyed.

Will's lips locked over her cunt as she kissed the hard shaft, welcoming it into her mouth with roaming flicks of her tongue, and Will's drove into her slit, plunging.

Thrusting in and out, sweeping up and down, round and round.

Instinctively, she and Will fell into a rhythm, giving pleasure, delighting themselves.

Again, Madi soared to the brink, the muscles of her pussy clenching, so close, so ready...

Absolute heaven. Nothing had ever tasted more heavenly, more fulfilling than dipping his tongue into Madi's pussy and drinking. Plundering her depths, suckling her salty flesh.

Right now, in this moment, jealousy completely eluded him. It didn't matter that another man also had his hands all over her. That said man's cock was lodged in her throat, sliding to and fro, his hands knotted in her glorious blonde hair.

His Cornsilk, being shared.

Will was no fool—he had to count his blessings. Madi might’ve chosen Brady. He might’ve lost her forever. All too well, he knew what giving up Madi felt like—hell, sheer hell.

But this...this was heaven and in some crazy way—God, this was *crazy*—Will was almost glad for Brady’s presence. Without him, Will might’ve never known this side of Madi. So naughty. So wild.

Even watching her, those lips clamping around the other man’s cock, drawing and working his length like a pro—it was like watching a porno from the inside out. But *way* better. Images flicked through Will’s mind in rhythm with his tongue. Madi aroused, her back bowed, skin glistening with sweat. Madi, those vivid, full-of-life eyes hungry for pleasure. Madi, the way she cried and whimpered for more when he spanked her. She was so beautiful, so incredible.

He sensed her tensing, the inner walls of her pussy clenching with the onslaught of an orgasm, and he increased the tempo of his tongue, encouraging her. Shuddering, Madi pushed herself against him, grinding, bucking and crying out as her climax took over and he drank the onslaught of pussy cream that gushed from her depths.

Drank and drank and drank, loving it as Madi went weak, sinking against his face, and Will pulled his tongue free, open-mouth kissing the round arch of her bottom, cock pulsing at what was to come.

Brady’s hands knotted in her hair, holding up her head, his grasp tugging smartly at her scalp as he guided her mouth to a slow stop, grunting, “Not yet,” and swearing under his breath as he withdrew without coming.

Those fingers unthreaded as he barked, “Up now!”

Nothing but a tingly ball of mush, the salty taste of his cock still watering in her mouth, her muscles weak from the powerful orgasm Will had brought her, she had no idea if she could move, if her body had enough strength. Instead, she just moaned and complained, “Bossy man.”

"Up, he said!" Will smacked her butt in accord with Brady's command. "I do believe you still have *two* bossy men to please." *Smack, smack, smack!* to the left cheek, and she bucked, butt muscles claspings, no longer mush but tight, every muscle clamped in expectation. "Damn, don't you have us hard, little vixen." *Pop, pop, pop!* to the right cheek, and her cry rent the air. Her pussy creamed.

"Oh God," she whimpered. How weak she was for these men.

Heat branded her ass, desire spiraled anew, and then Will pulled out the big guns, reaching between her legs to pinch her clit. Rolling, pulling at the bud as she mewled delight, and he coaxed, "Come on, Cornsilk, back to life. Come on or next time we won't let you come first, you know that?"

Next time?

"Let's go. I want you *now*." Brady, who'd already rolled on a condom, clearly wasn't about to wait for an invitation. Instead, he scooped her under her arms and dragged her from the bed, planting her on shaky feet. "*We* want you *now*. Undress him," he commanded. "And hurry it up." But Will was already shrugging out of his shirt, throwing it aside and fumbling with the zipper of his jeans, eagerly shoving them and his plaid boxers down.

Madi barely reached for his jeans and they were off, exposing his long, hard cock, the base swathed in dark curls. Her breath caught at the sight, remembering. How slow he'd gone that first time, how careful. But despite his efforts, the pain. Pain that he slowly stroked away until she was whimpering with passion.

Ah yes, all those years ago Will had claimed her virginity—and last night Brady had too, in his own way, such a different way. But both with pain, with pleasure. Staking themselves into her heart. And now they were about to take her together and this too was new. A total awakening. One Madi had no idea what it would do to her, to her soul.

With a shaky breath, she asked, "Condom?"

And Brady ducked his head along her neck, folding one in her hand. "Next time, you'll do as I say and undress him." *Smack!*

Her cry of surprise – which she should hardly be at this point – pierced through the room.

Just loved being Mr. Dominant, didn't he? But there it was again – *next time*. Words that had her chest expanding, filling with such undeniable hope.

Could there be? Was that so unreasonable?

Crawling onto the bed, she tore open the wrapper, her hand hesitating as her fingers brushed the length of his shaft – he was bigger than she remembered – and she trembled with amazement that Will was here, with her, with *them*, as she positioned the condom atop his mushroom head and smoothed it out.

Her fingers skimmed along the soft skin of his balls, and out of nowhere, Madi fought tears. "I didn't think I'd ever touch you like this again."

"Oh Cornsilk. Come 'ere, baby." Will pulled her into his arms atop the rock-hard expanse of his chest, her breasts mashing into the hard muscles as he kissed the top of her head and promised, "You were always in my heart. You are my heart."

Not to be one-upped, Brady floated fingers along her spine. "That makes two of us." His touch was like air, blowing straight to her butt, and peaking fire through her body. "We love you, Madi."

This had to be a dream. A fabulous, incredible nightmare.

But the next thing she knew, Brady took her by the legs, scooting her onto her knees so that Will's cock aligned with her pussy, and the sensations that assaulted her were anything but imagined.

Thick fingers stroked alongside the other man's shaft, sweeping the length of her pussy. "Oh yeah, she's still nice and wet. Mmm, juicy," Brady assured, his voice husky. "Take her. But don't let her come, not until I'm buried nice and deep in her tight little ass."

At those words, a powerful shudder shook through her and her butt clenched. Oh God, this was really happening...

"My pleasure," Will readily agreed. With a nibbling kiss to her ear and one sure stroke, he plunged deep with a groan of delight, burying his big cock and filling her completely, so wonderfully...

"Just one moment," Brady instructed.

And Will held her there, just like that, his cock hot and hard inside her while Brady's palm flattened her ass cheek, spreading her open with a lifting motion and squirting lube along her crack.

"That's a girl..." One finger slid into the hole, provoking Madi to cry out, already on top of the world, all manner of weakness forgotten. "Nice and easy."

Electric energy shimmered over her body and she was overcome with a yearning like no other, and Madi's hips began searching atop Will, bucking against Brady. God yes, this was what she wanted. God yes!

Will met her needy strokes with vigorous thrusts as Brady finger-fucked her ass, swirling the digit against clenching muscles, encouraging her to relax and stretching the taut channel. Madi soared to the stars as Brady slipped another finger into the mix, widening her farther, twisting inside her, testing. "Mmm...you're ready and wanting this, aren't you?"

"God yes!" she called out, arching her spine, throwing back her head and grinding herself against the ecstasy they provided. "Please!"

With a smack to her butt, he slipped free and Madi gasped at the ache they left behind as Will halted his hip plunges, holding her still for Brady, who crawled onto the bed and settled himself behind her.

Spreading her ass cheeks wide, he aligned himself with her anus and pushed. Madi eagerly opened for him, welcoming the thick invasion as he slowly sank in her ass, settling several inches inside her before pulling back and shoving himself even deeper.

The next time Brady retreated, Will matched Brady's thrust and their cocks descended together, filling Madi completely. "Oh yes! Yes!" The pressure, accompanied by pricks of pain—though a lot less than last night—combined with Will's cock, caressing absolute bliss through her, was incredible. All-consuming as they settled into a rhythm, jointly owning her body. Her heart, her soul. Steadily stroking in and out, driving her higher and higher and higher still, above the clouds, her body a rocket of tingles and tension, until finally she flew too high and burst into a billion bits, raining down. Down, down, down...spiraling and twirling out of control. Feeling the men do the same, jerking and burying in her body.

Reality faded and Madi blinked her eyes, finding herself sandwiched between them, Will breathing hard beneath her, Brady collapsed above her, and all she could think was *next time...*

How could there be a next time?

## Chapter Eight

The minutes ticked on slowly, all three of them lying there, squashed in the tiny bed and shocked out of their minds. Madi in the middle, her glorious blonde hair spread over Will's chest, a hand curled against Brady's hip. So soft and sedated and smelling of sex. Each inhale Brady took only made him want to do it again.

Well, shit. What the hell had he gotten himself into?

Knowing someone would have to say something soon—for God's sake, they were in her *mother's* house...what if she showed up?—Brady was the first to speak, stating the most obvious dumb-ass observation. "You didn't choose."

So much for his plan to corner her into deciding. Call her bluff. Ha! The only bluff he'd called was his own and the only thing he'd cornered was a big, huge mess. If it'd been hard for her to choose before...

Brady knew how she felt about Will, had all along. Heck, on some deeper level, Brady had known since the start that no matter who else she fell in love with—himself included—her feelings for Will would always remain. *Always*. Madi could kick Will out this minute, but she'd never be his completely. As far as her heart went, he was stuck sharing.

Just as he'd shared her body.

"*Shit*." Madi sat up, cradling her forehead in her hand. "Oh Brady... Will... I'm sorry."

"Ah, darlin'..." Heart going out to her, he reached up, pulling her arm down and entwining her fingers in his. She was hurting. Brady *hated* to see her hurting. "Don't be sorry, Sunshine. I'm not."

Poor Madi hadn't asked for this mess. She just wanted to be happy. And he wanted that for her too.

Which left one question—now what? Who would make her *most* happy?

“Me either.” Will sat up beside her, gathering her free hand into his, and Brady marveled how strangely that didn’t bother him. How right and normal it felt, knowing their history. “Definitely not sorry. What happened happened—hey, it was an experience, right?”

“You can say that.” Dragging fingers through his hair, Brady pulled himself up as well and there they all were, huddled side by side in bed, together. It ought to make him mad. Jealous as sin. But after all that’d happened...

It was what it was.

He stared at all her dolphin posters, the pictures of Will that they’d lipsticked in devil-pig faces. The hearts on the mirror, his name scribbled in bright red over her professions of love for Will in pink.

Jesus, what a mess.

He hoped like hell she chose to be with him. Hoped like he hoped for his next breath that she’d come home to Hawaii and be with him, not leave him empty and alone and miserable in that apartment.

At the thought, the littered walls of her bedroom—all that evidence of how much she loved Will, and Brady loved her—and it felt as if the room were pushing in. Growing smaller by the second, attacking him. And he just wanted out.

Insides itching, he eyeballed the closed door, the shut window, wanting freedom. Wanting air.

If she left, he wouldn’t be able to stand it. He’d lose his mind. Would never find anyone to replace her.

“Yeah,” Madi whispered, staring down at the bedding as if afraid to pose the question out loud. “But what happens now?”

“I don’t know, Cornsilk. Wish I did. Wish I could call that decision for you.” Will brought the back of her hand to his lips, planting a tender kiss that made even Brady



tremble inside—not from attraction, but emotion, and he had to look away. He could feel how Will felt, the tenderness in that action. The sheer love. Need. *Hope*. “But there’s something I need to tell you.”

Brady stared straight ahead and Madi glanced at him then quickly back down. Unable to rub those fingers currently held hostage along her forehead as typical, she nibbled nervously at her lower lip. “I think maybe right now I just need some spa—”

“You need to know this. I told you I was selling the farm. Well, that’s not all. I’m applying to UH.”

Brady’s head snapped in their direction so fast, he likely gave himself whiplash. “What?”

“I’m applying to UH. Moving to Hawaii.”

Wait a sec...he *what*? And *why*—when Brady’s only advantage had just been leveled—was the first thought to pop into his head that of their third bedroom, currently empty?

So he hated an empty home. That was just weird.

“Oh Will...you can’t do that just because of me.” Then, as if wanting to gauge his reaction, Madi turned and touched him with glistening eyes. “Brady?”

“Shit,” was all he had to say.

*What happens now?* had just vaulted to a whole new level. If—by any miracle—Madi did decide to choose him, they could never work with Will around campus, haunting her.

The only way that could work was exactly like this. All together.

But *all together* was impossible. Ridiculous. Right?

Nervous tension thrummed through Brady’s muscles. His temples pounded. And what did he have to say? “Shit, man.”

"I'm doing it no matter the decision you make. Seeing Brady here..." Will's dark eyes, filled with appreciation, locked on him and he gave a nod. "It's caused me to realize it's high time I followed my heart instead of my head. Made my dreams reality."

"Oh good." Madi's shoulders heaved. Up, down with a heavy gulp of air. Then again. "Oh good," she sputtered a second time, breathing each word hard. "You're deciding...to follow your...dreams. Now. Finally."

Suddenly, she was hyperventilating. "Madi!" They lunged in to comfort her but she yanked her hands free, waving them back.

"Space," she gasped, pushing at the air with her palms. "Need space. Go."

Anything, just so she'd stop panting as if she were going to die. Brady looked to the other man and jerked his head toward the door. "Will, man—go!" And when he didn't leap from the bed. "Don't make me show you out."

"Look, she—" Will started to protest, obviously not to be thwarted, but Madi cut the two of them off at the knees.

"Go, *both* of you," she cried. "*Now!*"

"Me too?" Him too? But how could that be? He was staying here. Was supposed to be her shoulder to cry on.

Even so, she confirmed passionately, "Yes! Go!" Like a slap to the face.

With that, she scrambled from the bed, dragging the sheet with her and whipping it around her gloriously long and lean naked body as she rushed from the room, leaving Brady to gawk at the reality that he'd just been stripped of his friend-at-her side status. Just lost yet another advantage.

How could he *ever* win her now? Despair mounted, the walls closed in, his skin crawled at the thought of losing her. Of being alone.

*No. This couldn't be. Couldn't. Madi mine.*

She'd agreed to that. Wanted it.

In his mind, he replayed her kisses, the way she writhed and responded to his every touch. Submitted completely to him and afterward curled against him, whispering, “Mmm, yessss...”

How could she, the darling, heart-on-her-sleeve woman he’d known so many years say that and not mean it? The Madi he knew couldn’t. Wouldn’t. With those words, she’d committed her heart.

Yet here he was, thinking about this while sitting naked on the bed with the love of her life, and he’d bet his next orgasm Will was thinking the same exact type of things. Enumerating his strong points, knowing with all his heart Madi loved him. Above all, one question looming—how could Madi ever pick between them?

The heel of his palm scraped the whiskers covering his jaw in frustration, but there was nothing to do but what she’d asked. Some fresh air would do him good anyway, because if he had to stay in this room another minute he’d bust out the nailed-shut window.

Swinging his legs from the bed, Brady scooped up his boxers with his toes. “The lady says go, we best go.” He stood, yanking up his shorts then tossing Will his. “But look, man, no matter which of us she chooses, this is going to hurt her. Cost her greatly.”

Will threw back Brady’s renegade t-shirt from last night.

“I know it.” The rough words seemed to drag from Will’s throat, as if he hated the truth. Wrestling on his jeans, he flung himself onto two feet. “I wish we could make this easier on her.”

Him too. But Brady didn’t see how. “I just hope you’re sure this time around and not acting out of jealousy.”

Brady tossed him his flannel shirt and Will caught it midair, not looking away. Not backing down. “Hell no. I was doing what I thought was right for Madi back then. I just wish I knew what was right for her now.”

And from the dark, determined look in his eyes Brady knew it was true.

“Look,” Will went on, “I’m sorry if I...you know...got in between you two. It sounds like you had something good going on before me. Didn’t mean things to happen like this.”

“All right. I appreciate that.” This was chalking up to be the weirdest damn day of his life, so why not? Brady offered his hand in peace and their palms clapped together. “Then may the best man for her win.”

“One other thing...” Pulling free his hand, Will hitched his thumb in the direction of the devil goat. “Did she do that? Or you?”

“Joint effort.”

“Lot of that going on lately,” he laughed.

## Chapter Nine

Next time. Nexttimenexttimenexttime...

As if they could look forward to some sort of future together.

How?

*How* what? All three of them? It was impossible! Madi wrapped balled-up fists around her waist, hugging herself tight and feeling as if she were the rope in a vicious game of tug-of-war. Frustration beyond reason roiled through her. And there was nowhere to go, no ocean to turn to. No escape or comfort to be had, certainly not in the arms of Brady. Or Will.

Only the hot shower, washing away evidence of what they'd done. Washing away her tears. She slid the soap between her butt cheeks, over the loosened bud that puckered in reminder of Brady...

Brady, playing with her there, squirting lube and readying her, working his thick cock inside. Claiming her forever.

"God," she wailed with a stomp of her foot and the soap plopped to the tub's basin. There was no *how*, only reason! She'd have to *choose*. The prospect almost gagged her and she swallowed back emotion, refusing to even consider it for now. Refusing to let thoughts of them—touching her, teasing her, taking her—in.

For the first time in her life, she craved a good, hard drink. *Like hell*. Madi cranked the shower from hot to cold, shuddering at the ice water that rained down on her.

Her fingers clenched and unclenched and she squeezed herself tighter, her mind going crazy with ridiculous thoughts of "next time", tears streaming hot against cold. She forced herself to stay under the freezing stream of water until she was numb, unable to think about anything but the shivers that racked her body. Until she could stand it no longer.

Body quaking, Madi cranked off the water and stood there, arms crossed and listening for any sounds that indicated they hadn't left. Silence echoed back. Puny mewed from where she hid behind the bathroom curtain.

Praying the coast was clear, Madi vigorously dried her hair then slung the towel around herself. She couldn't face the bedroom, so she ventured on tiptoe into the living room where her robe had fallen. Dropping the towel, she pulled it on, tied the belt securely – maybe a little *too* securely – and went to the phone. At least she had Leah.

With trembling fingers, she dialed her friend's number, praying she'd have some worthy advice. Leah picked up on two rings, already knowing it was her thanks to caller ID. "So did your little plan work, or did it *work*?" she chimed. "Will was white with jealousy! And – *Oh!* – Brady is a real catch, by the way, if you ever change your feelings about Will. Quite charming. So sexy too –"

Madi cut her off, knowing Leah could go on forever, completely clueless. "You've *no* idea. Oh Leah..." Madi's voice shook in accord with her body as she poured out the whole story, start to end, and finished with a sob. "I don't know what to do. I love them both so much."

"Huh." Leah was quiet a tense moment and Madi expected any number of things from Mrs. Homemaker, major romantic at heart. Getting yelled at. Lectured about the sanctity of a relationship. Being told to choose Brady because he'd never hurt her, unlike Will. To choose Will because he had her heart first. To create a chart and weigh her options.

All of which brought more tears to her eyes and honestly, Madi probably would've gone along with any advice Leah gave her, just to share the weight.

Instead, what did Leah say? "Yeah, I've read about people who live like that. Just recently, actually."

Huh? "Live like *what*?"

"All together, more than a couple. Like, uh...kinda like the Mormons."

"You mean *polygamists*?" Madi's heart struck thunder in her throat. Live with Will and Brady, all together? *I can't do that*. But at the same time as the thought seared through her mind, she mentally saw an image of their third – and empty – bedroom.

Blue carpeting. Blue was Will's favorite color.

"Sure, polygamy," Leah flipped off as if it were the easiest solution in the world. "Though that word makes it sound gross and weird, doesn't it?"

"You don't think it is?" *Hello...* Sex was sex was one thing. But what about when it came to Thanksgiving dinner or marriage or kids or any number of normal situations?

How could that ever work?

"I don't know. But you're doing the opposite – double the men. Not nearly as weird as two wives, IMO. More like every woman's fantasy – well in bed, at least. They might get annoying out of it, true. *Men*. Can't live with 'em, can't live without them," her friend rambled on, sending Madi's mind spinning. "I read an article online just the other day. About how these group lovers share the housing costs, which makes living nicely so much easier, and they split the chores and rotate who sleeps with who. It's kinda fascinating, like one big family. I'll send the link to your cell right now."

One big family. She couldn't imagine Will or Brady needing anything more than that. With their love of the stars, they could be like brothers.

But still...the thought was insane. Absolutely over the top *insane*.

"You actually think I should consider this?"

"You know the romantic I am." Leah was quiet a minute, and when she spoke again, her voice was sincere. "I hate to see you hurting, Madi. If you truly love them both."

"I do." Oh but she did. And if only this could be the answer. "But it's more complicated –"

"Well then!" Leah flicked right back to her loud and in-your-face nature. "You're not marrying them both, right? Just live with them until one or the other pisses you off enough. That'll make choosing a cinch."

Choosing a cinch? Never. The thought brought on an ache. A burning inside. A whole new storm of emotion threatened, and after a few more well-meaning doozies from Leah, Madi couldn't take any more.

"And think about it, Madi," she went on with a giggle, "you could utilize this to your benefit. Give them the toilet cleaning and the dishes. Let 'em spoil you if they want you. But oh! God, make sure you're on good birth control. Wouldn't want *that* kind of confusion. Though their difference in coloring would likely make a baby a dead ringer for one or the other... Hey, can either of them cook?"

This was so not helping. Right about now, talking to Leah was like banging her head into a wall repeatedly.

"Hey, I have to go," she rushed off, interrupting Leah midsentence—something about playing her cards right and this being win-win. Ha! "I'll call you later or whatever..."

"But—"

"Really got to go!"

"Oh no you don't! You—"

"Bye!" Not waiting to hear what else Leah might say—she'd gone on quite enough already—Madi hung up.

Live with both men? Love them both? That was her friend's advice? Outrageous!

"Win-win!" Madi shouted to no one in particular. "She's lost her mind!"

God, she wished she were home in Hawaii where she could bury her toes in the sand. Seeking solace in the waves.

The phone started ringing again, undoubtedly Leah calling back, and Madi glared at it, gnawing her lower lip. *Shit*. Should she answer?



No. Uh-uh. That phone call just proved it—she needed to sort through this on her own. Her decision, right? Madi just stared at the phone until it cut off and started back again. Stared and reeled and stared.

*Go away.* Madi glared at the phone, willing it to shut up. Let her think. But Leah wasn't giving up, and from the front porch she heard footsteps. The key scratching in the knob. Great, Mom was home.

She walked in, took one look at her, and asked, "Madi? What's going on? Answer that!" Rushing forward, her mom leapt for the rattling phone.

"Mom, don't—"

She picked up anyway. With a frantic hello, she shot Madi a reprimanding look and turned away. "Oh hi there. What's wrong?"

Ah, crap. Cringing at the thought of her mother finding out what was going on, Madi held her breath. Not good. So not good. That had to be Leah, and after the last call...who could predict *what* her friend would say?

"Oh no," her mother groaned. "Damn it, you're kidding me! But that's not possible...it is? But why? Well shit..."

*Had* to be Leah. Turning redder by the second, Madi bolted for the hall, escape her only option, but Mom's last sentence stopped her short. "I'll be right there. Love you too." *Not Leah.* Oh, thank God. "Madi, wait a sec. I have bad news."

"Bad news?" she practically squeaked, slowly turning around and self-consciously folding her arms over her chest. *What now?* This day should've been marked with a warning label on the calendar or something. Stay asleep.

Oh sure, she should've kept right on dreaming *that* dream...

"That was Chuck. There's a problem with a shipment out at the factory. The plant's closed on Sundays, so if he doesn't get it out today, he'll have to go in Monday."

"But you're getting married Monday."

Mashing her lips together, Mom nodded. "Which is why I have to go in, put in some overtime and help him out. So I guess we'll miss spending the day together like we planned."

"Oh Mom." Consciously mediating her next breath, so it didn't rush out in a sigh of relief, Madi waved her off. "Don't worry about it. I'll work on my room and we still have tomorrow."

"I know you came all this way. If there was another option—"

"No, really. Do what you need to." Closing the distance between them, Madi gave her a quick hug goodbye. Five minutes later, she'd read the article Leah had emailed and was nearly hyperventilating again. Dressing quickly, she grabbed her keys and rushed out the door, only one place in the world she wanted to be.

\* \* \* \* \*

May the best man for her win, his ass.

The stench of manure overpowered stale hay and Will clomped through the muck, diving through a split-wood fence into the barn. All around him, dairy cows bellowed and Will worked his way through the crowd, his mind everywhere but on the chores at hand.

Oh no... If these ladies knew what was going on up top they'd likely imprint their hooves on his head.

Madi, arching her butt and moaning eagerly for him to spank her. Brady too.

Madi, her pussy in his face, quivering with an orgasm as she eagerly sucked Brady's cock, stroking his balls...

The last thought—the same one that kept replaying and replaying in his mind—had Will blanching. Heat swelling in his shaft. No matter how many hours passed, he still couldn't believe what'd happened. Or stop thinking about it.

Madi riding atop him, Brady taking her from behind.

Well, shit. He needed some sense kicked into him.

Just going through the motions, he went about feeding the poor clueless beasts surrounding him. One thing was for sure—he had plenty to keep his shaking hands busy. Just no hope for his mind. Or his cock. Not after this morning.

“Hey there, Jessie,” he greeted his best-producing, award-winning—not to mention favorite—lady as he emptied grain into the feeder, never more relieved to be on his last chore. “You keepin’ up the hard work?”

He sure was keeping up the hard cock.

“It’s only ‘cause I love her so much,” he explained to the nose-in-the-feeder chomping cow—Jessie had a quiet way of understanding. “Besides, it was just once. She’ll choose, right? And this’ll all be behind us.”

Jessie huffed through her nostrils as if to say, “Yeah right.”

“Ah shit. This is ridiculous.” Will kicked the ground, scattering hay. What sort of man was he, standing here talking to a cow because he couldn’t stop fantasizing about making love to his woman with another man?

He had to see her. To know once and for all where he stood. Where Brady stood.  
*With Madi in the middle?*

All damn afternoon he’d waited and hoped Madi would come to him. Fling her arms around him and say she wanted him, that *he* was the best man for her. But that old dusty lane hadn’t kicked up a cloud the entire day. Well, now that he was finished with the chores, it was high time he went to her and demanded some answers. A day was enough space—especially one passing as slowly as this had.

A man on a mission, he marched to the house, kicked off his boots at the back door and headed in to shower—because he never knew what might happen. *Like another threesome.*

Shit. He’d read one too many *Hustler* columns in his lonely lifetime.

Seven minutes later, he was revving up his truck and rumbling down the lane, intent on a normal outcome to this anything-but-normal situation.

Instead, as he pulled up alongside the curb at Madi's house, he noted her rental car was gone and there sat Brady on the front step, Puny purring atop his knees as he tenderly scratched at her ears.

The skittish kitten-sized cat bolted when Will cut off the old rattling engine, leaving his keys hanging in the starter as he hopped out of the cab. "Where's Madi?" he called over the hood.

Nothing weirder than asking his girl's lover where to find her. So why did he feel totally at ease doing so?

"Ah..." Brady combed a hand through his short auburn hair, grimacing as he rose to his feet. "Man, I wish you knew. 'Cause I sure don't."

Will didn't like the sound of that at all. Not after the way they'd separated that morning. "She's gone?"

"All damn day. And not answering her cell." Brady loped down the stairs two at a time. "Left out this morning. I went for a walk to give her some space, came back, and she and the car were nowhere to be found. Went exploring all through town, looking for her. But nada." A heavy sigh drug from him as he stopped on the other side of the hood, palms flat on the truck. "Will, man...I don't know. I think we scared her off, pushing her to choose."

"Because she can't." Will had no idea where the words—the deeper understanding—came from. He just knew, sensed the same thing Brady clearly did.

"Exactly. We have to stop. Just let it be." Madi was too torn between them. She could never choose and still be happy—but where did that leave them? How did they just "let it be"?

Instead of questioning Brady on that, Will asked, "Did you call Leah?"

"Nah." Brady's fingers drummed metal nervously. "Don't have the number. Stopped by there though and no one answered."

No, she wouldn't have. But Madi could still be with her. "Leah's a realtor. Always on the move. I'll call her." Will dug his cell from his pocket, dialing her number—and then, because somehow it didn't feel like the call was his alone to make—he punched on the speaker and held the phone out across the hood so they could both hear. Leah answered right away, chipper as always. "Hey, Will. What's up? Everything with Madi okay?"

"Not exactly," Will told her. And Brady added in, "She's missing. We can't find her, haven't heard a word from her all day."

"Oh. Oh my."

Damn straight. With the way she'd been hyperventilating, he was worried. Could see Brady was too. "Have you spoken to her any?"

"Yeah, early this morning. She called really upset and we talked for a bit, but I guess she got frustrated with me and my big-mouth suggestions because she said she had to go and hung up. I tried calling back, but she wouldn't answer. I just figured she needed a little space."

Brows burrowed, fingers pounding, Brady demanded, "What'd she get frustrated about?" *Thud, thud, thud*, he drummed impatiently, adding a certain tension to the question.

"Umm..." Leah trailed off, quiet a moment before she disappointed them with, "I don't know. You should talk to her."

And how were they supposed to do that? Telepathically? "Come on, Leah. Don't be like that."

"If you said something that made her take off somewhere," Brady put in, "we need to know. She's been missing *all day*." *Thud, thud, thud*.

"Umm..." The hesitant word dragged from Leah, making Will even more worried. Just what had the woman said to Madi to cause her to run off?

"This is weird," Leah started. "So weird. Okay, like...I maybe told her about this article I read. About these couples...well, they're not couples. More like triples. Or quadruples. Or even more in some cases. Ah, I know. We can call it a blended relationship, you know, like a blended family but —"

Huh? "Leah, get to the point."

*Thud, thud, thud.*

"I guess I told her if she loves you both and you boys are cool, she should just be with you both. Like...you guys have a thing all together."

Brady's fingers came to an abrupt halt. His face fell. "What?"

"Leah, um..." Will cleared his throat. "I don't think either of us swing that way."

"Men. I'm just being objective here. I didn't mean have a thing like that. I meant...well, you *know*."

Obviously *she* did. Madi must've dished every last detail.

Still. Leah was proposing they just continue to share her? Just like that? Ah, but she was just being objective, right? Helluva way to put it. Obviously he didn't know his best friend's wife as well as he thought. If Steve could hear her now—shoot, he'd probably move a woman in directly.

Shaking off his shock, Will reminded himself this wasn't about them. This was about finding Madi. Then they'd worry about what the hell to do. "So you suggested that and she rushed off the phone?"

"No. I mean, we talked about it awhile. Well, I talked. She sputtered. But I think she was just overwhelmed. Like you two are right now."

Damn straight on that account. "Okay, well, if you hear from her, give us a call."

They said a quick goodbye and Will hung up.

With a groan of frustration, Brady slapped his hands against the hood. "Damn it! If we were home, I'd know exactly where to look for her. The beach."

The beach! That was it!

Pointing a finger at him, Will told him, "Get in the truck. I know where she is."

Before Will could twist the keys in the ignition, his cell phone went off. "Maybe that's Madi." Pulling it from his pocket, he glanced at the screen, opened his mouth then shut it.

"Is it her?" Brady's heart pounced with hope. "Answer, man!"

"Uh..." Will cleared his throat, messing with his hair. "Nah. It's Leah. She sent that link."

"Link?"

"To that article."

"Oh." *Oh...*

Will hit a few buttons then he was quiet. Reading. Several minutes later, he passed over the phone. Eyebrows furrowed, Brady scanned over it.

There it was—exactly what Leah had said. Couples who were way more than a couple, happily living together, sharing the chores and bills and shit like one big loving family.

*A family.* Not something Brady had ever truly had. Just two parental figures, making sure he followed all their damn rules. No brothers. No sisters. No hugs. God forbid *fun*—

Wait a sec. What the *hell* was he going on about?

Refocusing, Brady quickly finished reading the rest. It ended with two words—love and family. *Family.* There was the wonderful word again...and obviously, to the author, that was the bottom line. Families didn't have to be traditional.

"Huh. Interesting."

There was a whole hell of a lot more rambling through his mind, but Will was quiet, so Brady didn't dare say another word as he handed back the phone. Together,

they just sat there and stared forward, silently contemplating, absorbing what they'd read, until finally, Will started the engine and they rattled off in his beast of a truck.

The hour ride and conversation that followed were inarguably the most remarkable in Brady's life. Deciding the topic of Madi and who she would choose—or weirder yet, the prospect the article had put forward—wasn't the best matter to discuss without her, he'd rolled down his window, letting the cool evening air whip around him as he struck up a chat about what he chatted about best. The stars, particularly his young one. And his foe had chatted back.

No tension, no bickering. No digs about who would win Madi. Easy as pie, they cruised down the side roads then onto the highway, passing the time bantering back and forth about all things astronomical.

At some point, Brady kind of forgot all about Madi and the mess they were in, and by the time they pulled into the dark, almost deserted parking lot of the state park, the moon was a brilliant white sliver in the night sky and the man he'd once despised he sorta liked.

Who'd have thunk it?

"This is it." Will slammed the truck into park, dipping his head in the direction of Madi's car. The only one in the lot. "There she is."

"There she is," Brady repeated. Somewhere beyond the dune, Madi waited with her heart breaking. For a minute both of them just sat there, not speaking. *What now?* echoed around them. *What now, what now, what now?*

The silence seemed to scream the question and finally Brady had to ask it. "What now?"

Will cleared his throat, twisting the keys free. He juggled them in his hand nervously. "I guess we need a plan. Like what to say to her."

As if Brady had a clue. Too bad no one had written a Love Triangles for Dummies guide book. "I think... I guess she should know that we're cool."



"No asking her to choose," Will translated.

And Brady agreed. "She doesn't have to choose."

\* \* \* \* \*

She'd been found.

Madi knew it as soon as she heard the distinctive roar of Will's truck puttering into the parking lot. The slam of doors...*two* doors.

And her heart took off pounding against her ribs like a freight train. So they'd come for her. She could hear their voices—Brady's and Will's—moving closer and idly conversing about sand in their shoes and taking them off.

What she didn't understand—*why* were they together?

Sitting at the water's edge, just close enough to relish the breeze off the waves but not so near she'd get wet—it was far too cool for swimming—Madi dug her toes into the cold sand and hugged the quilt she'd brought from home tighter around her shoulders, listening to the foreboding swoosh of their feet as they trekked across the beach.

"Hey there, Sunshine." Brady plopped down on her right, Will to her left.

"Brrr..." Will gave a shudder and looped an arm around her shoulder. "You've got to be cold, Cornsilk."

He tried to snuggle her closer—to pull her to his side—Madi refused to budge. She could not play the pick-me game with them again. It could only lead to one place—exactly where it'd gone the first time.

Tempting...but trouble.

"I'm fine, thanks." Madi stared straight ahead, not letting herself look at either one of them. Ten minutes ago she'd finished convincing herself the only thing to do—the *right* thing to do—was to separate herself from both of them. Concentrate on work.

Now, as Brady settled his hand on her lower back and Will stroked her upper arm, did she realize she never could break it off. With either of them. Literally, at their touch, her muscles felt weak. She trembled—inside and out.

Damn it, why couldn't she just love one the most and be done with it? What was wrong with her? Madi *hated* herself for these impossible feelings.

But *not impossible*, the imp in the back of her mind—with the voice of Leah—plagued her yet again. *Just be with them both.*

Ridiculous, even more so when Will went and gave her a squeeze, telling her, "Brady and I want you to know we're cool."

Cool. Freaking fabulous. Now her lovers were friends?

"And you don't have to choose," Brady contributed to the ever-growing confusion. "We just want you to be happy, however that has to be. No pressure."

No pressure? Easily put, maybe. But her head felt as if it were going to explode just weighing the options!

When she didn't respond, Brady drawled in that smooth, Southern inflection of his, "Why didn't the dog star laugh at jokes?"

Trying to ease her tension, she knew. One of the many reasons she loved him.

"Because it was too Sirius," Will answered. Leaving Brady to remark, "You heard that one, huh?"

"Used to spend hours on the internet devouring anything stars, didn't I, Madi?"

Then it was quiet again, the tide slapping the shore over and over. Both men huddling closer, embracing her in their warmth.

Finally, Brady asked in a low murmur, "So what now, Madi?"

"Oh God..." Feeling sarcastic, Madi gave a swing at her own joke. "What we did before was pretty fun."

But her flip comment sure didn't sound so funny voiced out loud. They did chuckle devilishly – but definitely *not* because they took it as a joke. The next thing she knew, Will was sweeping her into a kiss and Brady was tugging the quilt from her shoulders.

The blanket whipped sand in the wind as Brady whisked it from her shoulders and draped it over them, burying their bodies beneath its shielding safety, leaving only their toes to peek out.

Sandwiched between them, Madi was helpless to stop what she so intensely craved. Weak as Will kissed her senseless, tasting, teasing... Utterly bewitching her as his mouth tangled with hers, suctioning her tongue, fingers firmly grasping her chin and preventing escape. Not that any part of Madi could hope for that in this moment, not with the body-melting way Brady was dragging kisses along the back of her neck, exploring the length of her spine under her sweater with gritty, seductive hands.

In the background, the ocean roared. Stretched out as they were, the freezing tide swept the tips of their bare, exposed feet, as if wanting to join in on the act, her third lover – no longer first place.

Will kissed her, Brady seduced. Every ion of her being yearned. *Yes*, her desire screamed, the ache in her demanding completion. To have both of them making love to her. Filling her, completing her.

Right or wrong, this was what she wanted. What she so desperately needed.

Despite the cold air outside the blanket, fire ignited along her flesh, the goose bumps lining her skin sending off electric sparks at every brush of Brady's fingers, dipping under her sand-coated sweater. At every stroke of Will's tongue, every twist of his mouth. Sheer fireworks.

"Damn, what'd you get us into?" Brady murmured, nipping flesh. Punishing with tiny little bites. "You're trouble. Absolute trouble, you know that, Sunshine?"

As if it were her fault! And was that praise in his voice?

She would've responded, told him he was crazy, but Will had her tongue. Was sucking hard and chuckling in her mouth all at once, as if there were something funny about this situation.

Funny? Hardly. What they were doing—*again*—ach! This was a mess...a total disaster.

*Ah*, but she was forced to admit to herself as Brady applied pressure and her toes curled in the frigid washing tide, *but it's sensational nonetheless*.

Tremors racked her body and her pussy clenched, hot and wet, moisture pooling between her legs and creating its own ocean, sliding over her anus as Brady tilted her toward him. Still sucking on her neck, he yanked free the buttons of her jeans, shoving and tugging them down her hips. The heavy fabric dragged sand over nerve-heightened skin, granting even the simple act of her clothes coming off a seductive, arousing edge that had her squirming.

"Patience, hellion." Sitting up, Brady hurled his side of the blanket over her and hauled her pants the rest of the way, followed by her panties then his clothes. Cast to the wind, literally.

Still, Will kissed her. Sucked her tongue, her lower lip. Made slow, sensual love to her mouth, and it occurred to Madi that for the first time in her life she was kissing with her eyes wide open, only so she could see both of them. The loves of her life, loving her. Regardless of it all.

"Damn..." Brady suddenly swore. "Just realized...bad news, Will, Madi. Can't carry lube around in my pocket, if you catch what I mean." He hovered over her like a dark shadow, picking up his pants and fishing in the pocket, removing his wallet and retrieving shiny silver squares. Tearing one of the packets open, he rolled on a condom then tossed one to his partner in crime. "I guess taking her together is out. Need a plan B."

At that announcement, Will ripped his lips free. "Damn. That's a pure shame." Will's hand dove between her legs, fingers thrusting along her clit. Circling. "But she's nice and wet. Can't we just spread her pussy cream around?"

"Nah, man. Got to treat the lady right."

Madi opened her mouth to tell him no thanks, go right ahead and treat her bad. Hurt her, spank her, whatever it took. She wanted them both, like last night. Needed Will's cock in her cunt. Ached for Brady to bury himself in her ass.

But then Will went and plunged those fingers deep. "Then I guess we'll just have to share this hot pussy one at time. Got any dice to roll?" he chuckled, and Madi cried out, gasping at the more-than-welcome invasion while his thumb applied pressure to the sensitive bud that pulsed between her folds. His fingers slid inside her, massaging deep. "Because I sure as hell want it to be right when I take her that way." Madi gave another gasp as his fingers swirled, his voice heady with intent. "That's right. Next time, your ass is mine. I've never taken you like that before and now that I know I can...that you'll like...oh yeah. Next time, sweetheart. You're mine."

There it was again – *next time*.

But this time, Madi believed it. With all her soul hoped for it. If only...

"It's like sinking into heaven. She's so nice and tight there. Clenches your cock like a glove." As if to emphasize that point, Brady smacked her butt directly over her crack, causing her body to go rigid and her butt muscles to clasp. "If you like, Will, I'll coach you so you'll do it right. Bring her pleasure."

Madi's heart slammed in her chest at the thought of these men not only okay with each other, but working *together*. Almost lovers themselves. All in the name of bringing her pleasure.

Again Will's fingers plunged to the hilt, swirled then retreated, gliding over the trimmed hair covering her mons before abandoning her all together. Leaving her to lie there, burning from the inside out. "Will please..."

Of all things, he shushed her, rising to his knees. "You'll coach me, huh?" Will's velvety voice was thick with coveting. "Sounds damn fine to me. Make that a promise."

And wouldn't she know it, Will offered his hand and Brady clapped it in his.

"It's a promise, man." Still holding tight to Will, Brady brought their hands down her chest. "Madi? What do you say?"

As if they had to ask?

No hesitation, she slapped her hand atop theirs, completing the pact—she could search for the sense of it in the morning, when she wasn't lying naked between them, exposed, at their mercy, and hornier than hell. "It's a promise."

She'd just made a deal with the devil. Two devils...seemingly in cahoots at this point.

Their hands fell apart and jumped to task, Brady making quick work of pulling her sweater over head and Will fumbling with her front-closure bra, jerking free her final garment, kissing the tip of each nipple, gnawing gently, hungrily, before groaning primally and ripping himself away and attacking clothes, seconds later rolling on his condom as Brady took over his position, claiming her mouth in a bruising embrace.

Madi whimpered at the sensual assault Brady's teeth created as they brushed swollen flesh, thrusting his tongue in her mouth, taking hers in his and seemingly holding her hostage. Everything about him raged with hunger, pure need, no matter that he was sharing her with another man. Until today, his rival.

Brady wanted her still. Wanted her, wanted this, downright aggressively. So did Will, apparently. Dragging her back under the blanket, all of them naked in the damp sand, their bodies smashing hers between them, and just like in her dream—only opposite—both men claimed her breasts, squeezing and pinching roughly. Grit braised her soft skin, creating breathtaking prickles as their other hands traced grainy, nerve-heightening treks south to the juncture of her legs. Brady took over her clit, working the nub like magic. Rolling it, tweaking it, sending her soaring as he instructed Will to, "Use her pussy juice. Get her nice and wet back there then take it real slow. She's still

tight, still adjusting to the anal play. One finger is enough, maybe two. She'll go crazy horny."

"She'll go crazy?" As if he could hardly tamper himself at the thought of playing with her there, Will ground out, "Damn, I can't wait until next time."

"Me either," Brady agreed, flicking and spanking her clit.

"Me three," she whimpered as Will slid in from behind, dipping two thick, calloused fingers into her pussy. Gathering cream, he dragged the silky moisture from front to back.

Brady, meanwhile, laid his big thumb to her clit, sliding several fingers inside her at once, slowly finger-fucking her. Pressure nudged her backdoor, slowly expanding, and Will's pinky pushed its way inside her.

"Oh God!" Her cry burst into Brady's mouth. Crazy horny indeed, Madi nearly lost it, her body stretching taut between them. Toes expanded, head thrown back, she cried with delight, loudly welcoming their joint exploration.

Brady broke free from their kiss, chuckling, "See? What did I tell ya?" Together, they began thrusting faster, harder, driving her higher and higher. Driving her mad, to the rapid edge of an orgasm, and Madi gasped as it almost came on, only to have it ripped away.

"Enough!" Brady barked, fingers retreating. "She's gonna come too soon."

"Can't have that," Will agreed. Then to her he warned, "You come when we say."

Bastards.

Both men's hands moved back to her breasts, squeezing, coaxing her arousal to their design. Swirling her nipples, drawing the tight buds upward, laughing when she sobbed, "Please," like some poor helpless fool because her body was so tense, so on fire. "Please, please," she begged, starving for release. "Take me. I can't stand it. No more."

As if to punish her, Will fingers tightened and pulled. Then, in complete contrast, he went and suggested, “I don’t know. Maybe we should accommodate the lady? She sounds pretty desperate.”

“Hmm...” Brady’s fingers pondered over her breasts, little *thud thuds* that sent sparks through her. “No dice on hand. Tell you what—why don’t you go back to practicing on that tight ass of hers and I’ll get her started? It’s that or we can play rock, paper, scissors to decide.”

*What?* If they stopped pleasuring her to do *that*, she’d scream.

Thankfully, with a burst of laughter, Will’s hand dove between her butt cheeks. “Not necessary, but maybe some other time. Playing with this finger-clenching little bud for now sounds like fun to me. You go for it.”

Seeking out more moisture—and there was plenty to be had—Will slid his fingers to her cunt and back while Brady slanted her body so that she was partially on her side, half facing him, leaving Will just enough angle to continue his exploration. His fingers twittered over her anus, teasing and spreading her cream, forcing her to clench as one centered in the midst of the tight ring, prepared to enter. Pushing slightly, wedging himself inside only a fraction. Pausing there, as if waiting.

“Please.” Her anus twittered and clasped, her pussy screamed for relief. “Will... Brady...”

“Shh...we got ya.” Spreading her legs and holding them there, Brady brought his cock to her slit, aligning the head of that, thick long shaft before glancing over her. “Together, man. Ready?”

“One, two...” Will counted—ridiculously slowly, if she were asked. “Three...”

Simultaneously they thrust, Brady’s cock burying to the hilt, Will’s finger filling her ass.

“Oh God! Yes!”



Madi arched, every muscle wound like a spring. Again they rammed into her, slamming into her body with glorious force.

She mewed at the sheer ecstasy of it, lost to oblivion. They began rocking in tandem, jointly owning her body, finger and cock easily slipping in and out, harder, faster, driving her wild. In the background, the tide crashed, covering her whimpers of pleasure. Higher she flew, soaring, pitching herself into their plunges. Clenching her pussy and ass muscles, as if to hold on forever. Never to let this – *them* – go. Loving these two very different yet somehow similar men was so intense, so overwhelming.

Soon Madi was shuddering with an orgasm, gasping as her entire body rippled with pleasure, fluid rushing from her and leaving her spent. Weak yet still wanting more, craving her other lover in an almost instinctual way as Brady sank deep, his cock twitching as he came. She felt his red-hot heat pumping into the condom, relished the fulfillment of knowing he'd come brought.

"Will," she whimpered, still needing him. Needing to finish. Her climax with Brady hadn't been enough...

It happened in a blur, Will's finger slipping free, Brady withdrawing, her legs being handed off. The next thing she knew, Will was settled between her thighs, wasting no time diving into her with his broad cock. Brady crawled beside her, enveloping her breast in his mouth. Suckling, almost nursing her orgasm back to life while Will set a strong, steady rhythm that reunited her fire as though his cock were electricity striking into her.

Ecstasy crashed like thunder as Brady moved his mouth to her other breast, nipping at her nipple, drawing the bud upward with his teeth. Madi bucked against Will, her body lifting off the scratchy sand. Another climax shuddered through her. The walls of her pussy clenched and grasped, quaking with pleasure. Her skin burned cold-hot. Her cries rent the air. She spiraled, control lost, and Will submerged himself deep, jerking with his own orgasm. "*Madi.*"

Brady's mouth relaxed, kissing sweetly, praising her climax. "I love you so much, you know that? God, you're incredible. It's like your body was made for us."

Us, he said. Not him. "Oh Brady," she practically sobbed. "I love you too."

"And I love you as well, Cornsilk." Will eased himself from her body, bringing the blanket with him as he nestled up to her side and nothing had ever felt more right than lying pinned between the hard expanses of two male chests, draped in their arms. "With all my heart. Never stopped, never Will."

Never Will.

Brady had definitely been wrong about that. And so here they were again. Madi in the middle. No real solution at hand. Except...

"So, Sunshine, what are we going to do about this?" Madi trembled inside as Brady stroked a finger along her side tenderly, his condom-clad cock resting against her hip, still hard. Will's lay against her backside, tempting her with hope for a next time.

Next time. The thought had her sighing in defeat. If only this could be all about sex...nothing more.

But it was more. *A lot* more.

"I don't know what to say. It's too confusing, I can't—" Madi gulped, an answer tempting her tongue, common sense holding her back. Leah was crazy. *Crazy*. That or a total genius. "I—"

"Stop." Brady's hand darted to her chin, taking hold. "Way I see it, maybe the decision shouldn't be yours."

"It shouldn't?"

Her stomach dipped at the thought of what he might mean as Will leaned over her, gazing down at her face, moonlight glowing behind his dark features. Those dreamy eyes locked on her as if he'd never let her go, not again. "Brady and I are part of this too, remember. And you won't choose."

Not wouldn't. *Couldn't*.

Before she could protest—because obviously they would both choose themselves and a lot of help that would be—Brady kissed her firmly on the forehead. “I say there isn’t much to decide that isn’t a done deal already. It is what it is. Besides, we could use a third roomie.”

Will planted his lips to her cheek, as if sealing the deal. “And I could use a room.” The words breathed from him, soft and seductive. He was asking, they were both. They wanted to share her and all she had to do was agree.

Just like that? They decide to all live together...*be* together? How could it ever work?

“I...I don’t know.” But the denial she knew she ought to voice wouldn’t make its way to her throat.

No part of it made logical sense, but Madi had to admit, deep down it was all she wanted. To be with both of them, no more strings yanking at her heart. No more having to choose. No more feeling as if she had a black hole in her chest, eating her alive.

And if they wanted it too, well...

Well, why not? She could think of several smart reasons, none of which her heart gave a damn about at the moment.

“So we just...” Her voice broke, she so couldn’t believe she was agreeing to this. “Leave things like this? You men really think you can share me?”

“Sure, already am. I’m game,” Brady flipped off, as if this were cut and dry, all too easy. “You know I’ve always got room for one more in the apartment. Not that they ever stay long.”

“You don’t close the bathroom door,” she muttered. “You’ll probably scare Will off as well.”

“But not you,” Brady murmured hopefully. “Never you, right?”

“Wait a sec. What?” Will barked with laughter. “You *shit* in front of her?”

“Well, I don’t ask for an audience!”

"Brady has a complex about doors. Being alone," she explained. "I guess you could call him claustrophobic. He was locked in his room a lot as a kid."

"That's sad, man."

But it was so true and the more she thought of how he hated being by himself, craved people being around him, she could almost imagine the comfort Will would be, having him as a friend and roommate.

All too easy. Maybe for Brady, it would be.

And Will as well, she realized. After losing his dad, he had to feel so alone in the world. They'd be like a little family—just like the article said—their togetherness filling the dark empty spots they all carried. *If* Will could tolerate Brady's weird habits.

"We call it even then," Will offered, catching her off guard. "He doesn't have to shut the bathroom door then neither do I. I'm kind of used to living alone these days...stopped shutting doors myself awhile back. No sense in breaking any habits."

Uh...what?

And Leah thought this would be win-win. To her advantage! Ha! "You're joking, right?"

"Joking? Now why would I do that?" Will leaned in, popping another kiss. "Because it's funny? Because I'm a farm boy and I don't care spit if Brady wants to advertise his bathroom visits? Because if it means we can be together, I'll even feed the guy my famous chili?"

"Chili. Mmm." *Men.* Madi could just imagine Brady drooling as he asked, "So you're in?"

"I'm in."

All they needed was her agreement.

"But what about the future?" she wondered out loud. Marriage, kids?

"The kinks will work themselves straight," Brady assured her. "Life's like that."

"I guess the bigger question is if I want to *put up* with two men."

“Ah, come on, you know you love us. Follow your heart, Cornsilk...”

Follow her heart. And that she would, the details be damned, for at the thought, no longer was she ripping apart, yanked down two paths, but one—straight into their arms, their love, right where she belonged. Cuddled between them, truly feeling whole and right again for the first time in seven years.

“Hey, look there.” With his free hand, Brady pointed to the sky. “See it?”

In the dark night above, yellow gleamed a path. “Wow,” Will whistled, “I’ll be. A shooting star.”

“Talk about perfect timing,” Brady awed. “Go on, Madi. Wish for us.”

Wish she did. That maybe sometimes happily ever afters came in package deals.

## About the Author

Slip between the sheets with Alyssa Brooks, erotic romance author.

Author of fun, flirty and contemporary erotic romance and erotica, Alyssa Brooks currently writes for several publishers including Ellora's Cave. She resides in Amish country, Pennsylvania, where every day is a little crazier and the house gets a little messier. Taming her bad-boy husband is a never-ending task, but Alyssa's become a pro at giving him plenty of incentive. Proud mom to a young daughter, two stepsons, and a puppy that has a particular taste for shoes and unrolling toilet paper, Alyssa loves her hectic existence and is ever grateful for her awesome job as an author, where with a little research she can become anyone, doing anything, and fall in love over and over and over again. The imaginary sex is great too!

Alyssa welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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