

Secrets that we Keep



Warning: The following excerpt is unedited. Typos and grammatical errors galore.

Double Warning: Since this is rough-draft material, the scene I'm sharing with you may or may not end up in the final book...if the story even makes it to publication.

Triple Warning: Sorry, I don't really have a third warning; I'm just a goofball who wanted to write "triple warning." It's so fun! Anyway, enjoy the excerpt!

Bella

Drinking alone had never been a good mix for me. I tended to make stupid, reckless decisions when I had too much alcohol flowing through the old bloodstream and no one was around to stop me. Like getting online and buying a dozen pair of new shoes. Or ordering thirty-eight packs of chewing gum at once.

True story.

But tonight, I just couldn't help it.

I'd still been rocking the woozy, tipsy vibe from all that drinking I'd done with the girls earlier to help Haven get over a fresh breakup. And after Gracen had dropped me off at home—alone—I'd stumbled my way to my own liquor stash and poured myself another.

Because my poor baby cousin's situation had felt freakily too familiar to me.

Haven had walked in on her boyfriend cheating. And so had I. Kind of. I mean, it had been the next morning and no one had been in the middle of the actual deed as they'd been in Haven's situation. But they'd still been naked and cozied up in bed together, passed out after a night of rowdy unfaithfulness. So it felt just as traumatic, if you wanted my honest opinion.

Yet not one family member had mentioned that today at Haven's place when they'd been trying to cheer her up. No, *hey, Bella totally understands, ask her how she overcame. No, yo, Bella just went through this, so you can make it through too.* No nothing.

Or maybe they all knew that I really hadn't made it through yet. I was still stuck somewhere in the muck of unrelenting pain.

Though honestly, it felt more like they'd all just plain *forgotten* I was also nursing a broken heart. Sure, it'd almost been a year. But it still felt like yesterday to me. Especially after watching Haven's misery today.

We'd tried to talk her into rebounding with another guy. Actually, I had been more on team vibrator and anti-man, but whatevs. I'd eventually sided with the others and encouraged her to give it a try. I mean, it couldn't hurt to taste test her hot, new male roommate. No more than she was already hurting, anyway.

Too bad I didn't have a hot man roommate to help me get over Ethan—er, maybe not Ethan himself, but what I thought I'd had with him. I made a sour face at the dildo in my hand and then chucked it into my still-open nightstand drawer before shoving it closed. Cold plastic just didn't sound appealing right now. It was all that damn Teagan's fault, too. Pregnancy must spike the hormones to unbelievable heights, because she'd made sex-with-a-live-man sound pretty damn enticing. I couldn't get the idea of hot, urgent hands, a wet, seeking mouth, and firm, sculpted abs out of my brain.

Maybe I *should* try what Haven currently was and hop back on that horse. Yeah. I could have myself a rebound hookup, too. So maybe I'd have to find a willing guy, but—

Oh, yeah.

Guys.

Never mind.

I didn't want anything to do with a bearer of penises right now. Except maybe one. But he was my brother, so he didn't count.

Knowing I could always depend on my Gracen, I turned to my nightstand and reached for my phone, accidentally knocking over the glass of bourbon and Coke I had sitting next to it.

“Shit.”

God, how much had I had to drink? My vision was totally fucked up. Trying to blink the foggy world from my eyes, I crawled to the edge of the bed and draped myself over the side, trying to reach for the glass. It hadn't broken, thank God, but a puddle of alcohol was staining my carpet.

Ah, fuck it. My fingers couldn't reach the glass. I'd just deal with clean up tomorrow.

Returning my attention to my phone, I gave the screen a goofy grin to wake it up, only to snort at the text messages app I still had open. Poor Haven had been getting cold feet about seducing her roommate, but we'd encouraged her to try again, anyway.

Mon, Oct 8 2046, 5:03 PM

HAVEN: Then what am I supposed to do?

BENTLEY: Whenever he comes back from grocery shopping, just try again. And if you get so close that he tries to escape...

LUCY: Don't let him.

Don't let him!!

TEAGAN: Girl, don't you dare let him.



iMessage

Send

If all was right in the world, Haven was having a hell of a good time right now.

Which made misery rumble through my stomach. I needed my Gracen. Bad.

Flicking my way out of the text messages, I went into my address book to call him. As soon as I saw the Gs, I pushed on his name. At least, I think it was his name.

Close enough.

“Hello?” he answered a few seconds later.

He sounded funny. Or maybe that was just my drunk ears hearing funny things. Whatever. As soon as he was here, curled up on the couch with me, feeding me hot chocolate and popcorn as we watched reruns of our favorite show together, he could sound as funny as he wanted to.

So I said, “Can you come over? I really need you tonight.”

And I hung up the phone before he could answer.

That was always all I needed to say when talking to my twin. He always showed up, just as I knew he would tonight.

Twenty minutes later, my doorbell rang.

“About damn time,” I mumbled, frowning over the fact that he’d rang the bell. Why in God’s name was he ringing the doorbell? Gracen just walked right on in. Even if I had the door locked, he had a freaking key.

“Why are you ringing the—Oh!” I blinked when I saw who was standing on the other side of the entrance.

Definitely not my twin brother.

My shoulders slumped. I shot the uninvited guest a scowl. “What’re *you* doing here?”

“Uh...” His eyebrows lifted in surprise. “You *called* me.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I didn’t.”

“Yes,” he countered. “You did.” Stepping past me into the front room without waiting for me to even let him in, he glanced around as if looking for more people. There was always other people around whenever he came over. But tonight, there was just me. And Jim Beam.

And now him, too.

Turning back to me, he added, “You asked me to come over, saying you *really* needed me.”

“No.” My brow knit with confusion. I kept shaking my head. “I called *Gracen*. I said that to Gracen.”

Catching my face between his hands to get me to stop with the whole back-and-forth head action, he looked me straight in the eye and answered, “You called me.”

Narrowing my eyes, I slapped his hand away and whined, “But I don’t *want* you.”

“Wow.” He tipped his chin just enough to eye me under the shaded bill of his hat. It was a look he gave people whenever he thought they’d said something incredibly stupid. “Thank God I have a healthy self-esteem. That might’ve actually stung.”

“I thought I was talking to Gracen,” I ground out. “You’re just one name off from his in my phone. It was a stupid misdial.”

“Well, you got me anyway, baby doll.” Rubbing his hands together, he started for the kitchen. “Please tell me there’s some decent food around here. I’m starving.”

“What do you think you’re doing?” I called after him. “You can’t stay. You weren’t invited.”

To which he called back from the kitchen, “Was too.”

“Ugh.” Throwing my head back, I glared up at the ceiling a moment, then slumped my shoulders and trailed my pain-in-the-neck guest to my kitchen.

Wrapping the robe I was wearing tighter around my stained T-shirt and sweatpants, I plopped heavily into a chair and irritably watched the cloth of his jeans pull snug across his butt as he bent over, browsing through my fridge.

I was going to grumble about him just making himself at home, but I got a little distracted by the nice scenery, so I ended up simply blinking as I wondered when he'd gotten such a nice ass.

Obviously not finding anything of interest, he shut the door and straightened to open the freezer. Damn. He looked better when he was bending over.

"You know, those frozen peach pop things you buy are seriously the best," he was saying from the depths of chilly air.

"You think? Hmm. Well, I'm out," I was evilly pleased to report. Served him right for barging in without an invitation.

"But *are* you?" Grinning broadly, he backed out of the freezer so he could turn and triumphantly hold up the push pop in his hand.

My mouth fell open. "Where the hell did you find that?"

"Under a bag of frozen waffles." He winked. "Right where I stashed it the last time I was here."

"Last time..." Scowling, I shook my head. "It's probably been a year since you were last here."

"I know." Unwrapping his treat, he wiggled his eyebrows mischievously. "Shows how much I know you don't like Eggos, huh?"

I mean-mugged him and mumbled, "It's probably freezer burned by now." At least, I hoped it was. That was what he deserved for hiding one of my favorite treats from me so he could hog it to himself.

But as soon as he stuck one end in his mouth, he closed his eyes and moaned in delight. "Mmm. Perfect," he announced.

When the moan hit my ears, though, it vibrated through me, tickling me in the most sensitive places. I jumped, not expecting that kind of reaction, especially since it was caused by *him* of all people.

Oblivious to my response, he smirked and continued to suck on *my* push pop as he grabbed another chair with his free

hand, spun it around, and sat on it backwards so he could rest his forearms on the backrest as he ate.

Setting startling blue eyes on me, he sighed. “So what was the distress call about?”

I lifted my chin loftily. “I have no idea what you’re referring to.”

He rolled his eyes. “Oh, come on.” Lifting his voice to a ridiculous falsetto, which in no way resembled me, he mimicked, “Can you come over? I really need you tonight.”

“That wasn’t meant for you,” I ground out.

“Yeah. I didn’t figure, but...” He shrugged. “Here I am. So, you might as well talk.”

He licked his tongue up one side of the push pop and down the other. My gaze followed the slow, languid path of his tongue, unable to look away until he popped the whole thing back into his mouth and broke the spell he’d had me under.

Dear Lord, what was wrong with me tonight?

Mentally slapping myself away from lusty thoughts, I blinked my expression into a scowl. “If you *knew* I’d called the wrong person, then why the hell did you come over?”

He shrugged again. “Don’t know. Bored, I guess. And anyway...” His blue eyes probed mine. “Why can’t I help you just as well as anyone else? We’re family; that’s what we do.”

I snorted. “You and I are in no way related.”

“You know what I mean.” His voice was dry and unimpressed. “We’re part of the *group*. The inner circle. Our parents are closer than blood. We. Are. Family.”

He was right, so I just rolled my eyes and remained stubbornly mute.

Finishing the push pop with a satisfied sigh, he chucked the empty-stick remains across the room toward my open trashcan. When he made the shot perfectly, he turned back to me grinning proudly.

Until my glare cause him to falter.

“Come on, Bells,” he encouraged. “You can talk to me.”

“I bloating and have horrible cramps,” I growled, hoping that would scare him off. “And don’t call me that. You know I hate that nickname.”

The bastard only winked. “Nice try. But I have a sister, remember? Lady problems don’t rattle me. And you gotta admit; Bells is a hell of a lot better than what I *used* to call you.”

I lifted my eyebrows, unable to remember what he used to call me, so he rolled his hand. “Isabella,” he sang softly. “Has a bad smell-a. Got diarrhea and pooped Nutella.”

“Oh my God!” I gasped. “*You’re* the evil cretin who came up with the awful song?”

When I grabbed an orange that was sitting in a basket on the table and chucked it at him, he laughed and dodged it, deflecting it off his muscled forearm.

“What?” he asked with fake innocence. “You were a mature twelve to my ten. I had to level the playing field somehow.”

“I was thirteen when you were ten,” I argued.

“Twelve and a half,” he allowed.

I shook my head. “You were such a little jerk.”

He nodded in satisfaction as if proud of the label. “I totally was.”

“And you haven’t improved all that much,” I had to add, grumbling, “hiding my damn push pops from me like you did.”

He batted his lashes playfully. “I’ll buy you a whole new box if you tell me what’s wrong.”

“Yeah, well *that’s* that problem.” I picked up another orange so I could toss it between my hands. “Nothing’s actually wrong. I was just feeling grumpy and lonely and depressed, reliving bad memories.” I glanced across the table at him. “Gracen would’ve understood.”

“Okay,” he said, slapping his hands together and rubbing them in preparation. “What would *Gracen* have done, then? We’ll see how I compare.”

I wrinkled my brow. “You really want to help me? Like he would?”

Lifting one shoulder, he said, “Sure. Why not? Like I said, I was bored and antsy myself. Needed something to distract me.”

Noticing that he did indeed seem a bit off, I sat up straighter. He was always scruffy, but his clothes seemed more wrinkled, facial hair thicker, and the lines under his eyes were deeper than I’d ever seen them before. He hadn’t been sleeping well.

Suddenly worried, I demanded, “What’s going on with you?”

He mumbled out a dismissive sound and slid his gaze to the ceiling as if trying to downplay his problems. “Nothing really. Angie just keeps texting is all. Asking me to come over.”

“Angie?” I made a face. “I thought you two broke up months ago.”

“We did.” He sighed and scrubbed his face. “She’s mean and unstable and, honestly, I can’t stand her. But then she’ll call sometimes, sounding all grumpy and lonely and depressed—” He raised his eyebrows my way as he repeated my own words. “And—I don’t know—*okay*?”

When his phone began to ring from his pocket, I scowled. “That her?”

He shrugged, looking miserable. “Probably.”

I lifted my hand “Give it here.”

He sent me an untrusting glance. So I shook my fingers insistently.

With a sigh, he handed his phone over. “Just don’t be too mean.”

“Oh, I’m not talking to the bitch,” I reassured him. I’d never been able to stand Angie, and hearing that she was still messing with his head made me even less of a fan. There was no way I would be able to say anything productive to her right now.

So I turned the phone off. Now, neither of us would have to listen to the ringing.

His shoulders immediately deflated in relief.

Setting the phone on the table, I watched him with pity. “You really must’ve been desperate if *I* was the lesser of two evils.”

“Hey, you’re not so bad,” he mumbled, picking at a knot of wood on the back of the chair he sat on. “I’d pick partnering with you at beer pong, over Gracen, any day of the week.”

Except there was no beer pong to play tonight, so I shrugged. “I guess.” Then I sent him a forced smile. “At least I can keep you from going to your ex’s and doing something you’ll regret.”

He made a face at the knot. “I wasn’t going to go.”

“Mm hmm.” I lifted my eyebrows. “That why you look so tempted?”

He shot me a glare. “*I wasn’t.*”

I lifted my hands. “Okay, fine.” Blowing out a breath, I glanced around the kitchen and then turned back to my reluctant guest. “Gracen would’ve made me popcorn and hot chocolate.”

“Really?” Immediately popping to his feet, he announced. “I can do that.”

“And then he would’ve cuddled on the couch with me so we could watch *Gilmore Girls* for the rest of the night.”

That caused him to pause. “*Gilmore Girls?*” he asked slowly. When I nodded, he groaned. “You gotta be fucking kidding me. No. There’s no way. I refuse.”

I batted my lashes at him. “Gracen wouldn’t have refused.”

He snorted. “Gray can’t possibly like *Gilmore Girls.*”

“He crushes on Rory,” I argued. “Big time.”

“God. I should’ve known.” Another groan later, he rolled his head on his shoulder as if trying to force himself into *Gilmore Girl* mode. But it must not have taken because he suddenly asked, “What about *Supernatural*? Or, hey, I know

you like *Stranger Things*. Huh?” He lifted his eyebrows suggestively to make the alternatives sound more appealing than *Gilmore Girls*.

Except I was in a solid GG mood.

“Never mind,” I muttered, tossing down the orange and jerking to my feet. “I’ll just take care of myself. You probably suck at cuddling, anyway.”

And I slumped from the kitchen.

“Hey, now.” Darting after me, he tripped his way into the hallway to catch me, and nearly tackled me to the floor in his haste to wrap his arms around me from behind. “I’ve been told I have superb cuddling skills. See.”

“By who?” I asked, my voice muffled against his rock-hard chest when he spun me around to make it a true hug. “Your crazy, psycho ex? Jesus.” I shoved at his arm. “I can’t breathe. Worst hug ever.”

The jerk didn’t let me go, though. He merely repositioned us until I could turn my head enough to the side to drink in huge gulps of air. “Just relax, will you. You’re like hugging a cactus.”

I poked him in the ribs with my finger. “Not helping.”

He chuckled, and the sound reverberated through me, causing things to shudder and stir to life inside me. I went completely still, wondering why I kept having this intense reaction. To *him*.

“Just give me a chance here, Bella. I’ll keep you company and help distract you from your bad night if you help distract me and keep me from doing something epically stupid in return.”

The man had a point. We could help distract each other.

And maybe bounce back from our exes together.

Just like Haven was doing right now with her hot new boy roommate.

Oh, shit. Hey...

Suddenly, my mind was coming up with all kinds of creative ways I could distract myself right now. Relaxing against him, I sank my cheek more heavily against his heartbeat, appreciating the steady thump against my jaw. Breathing in his sturdy presence in, I set a hand along his side.

Maybe he wasn't such a bad hugger after all. He was really warm. And solid.

And so freaking male.

It's been too long since I'd felt this feminine and comfortable in the arms of a nice, capable man. Closing my eyes, I snuggled even deeper into his intoxicating masculinity and sighed.

"There you go," he murmured appreciatively in my ear as he stroked my hair. His low voice caused the muscles deep in my belly to clench. "That's not so bad now, is it?"

No. No, it wasn't. "You smell good," I told him, rubbing my cheek against his shirt like a cat in heat.

With another chuckle, he kissed my temple. "Yeah, I showered today. I do that sometimes."

Oh, so we were putting our lips on each other now, were we? Following his lead, I lifted my face to his throat. "You should shower every day."

Humming in delight, I pressed my mouth to the pulse beat on the side of his neck before letting my tongue flick across his flesh.

Mmm. Tasted good, too.

"Whoa!" Jerking back, he gaped at me a moment, just staring. "Uh..." he started but nothing else came out until he furrowed his brow and said, "Bella?"

"Yes?" I murmured, eyeing his thick, muscled chest before lifting my hand and running my fingers over his shirt where it molded perfectly to his defined pecs. Damn, he was definitely built nice.

He grasped my wrist as if to stop me, only to halt himself and pull away again. "Um..." he said instead, looking extremely uncertain. "Watcha doing?" he finally asked.

I lifted my gaze to his. His blue eyes were wide with shock and maybe a little fear. “What?” I asked playfully, smiling big as I dug my teeth into my bottom lip. “You said we could distract each other.”

“But I didn’t mean—that is—” He frowned in confusion. “What did *you* think I meant?”

Since he seemed to be having problems reading my intentions, I reached down and gripped him between the legs.

“Holy shit!” he shrieked.

“I meant...” Stepping close until my face was inches from his, I began to massage him, learning the feel of him through his jeans. “You’re not leaving here tonight until we each have the orgasms we both obviously need.”

“Fuck, Bells,” he breathed.

His lashes fluttered shut as the bulge under my fingers began to grow and harden. His lips parted and his head fell back slightly as if all he could do for a moment was simply enjoy my touch and let the sensations draw him under.

“You...” he started, sounded drugged, but then he opened his eyes and focused on my face. “Dammit.” Jerking back, he accused, “You’ve been drinking.”

I gave him a shrug and glassy smile. “Maybe a little.”

“Or a *lot*,” he argued, turning to the side away from me and reaching down to readjust himself in his pants. “Christ, I can’t believe I—hey!”

When I reached forward to slip my hand over his taut ass, he leapt farther away, then faced me head on, legs slightly braced as if encountering a threat.

“No.” Holding up a finger, he shook it menacingly. “We are not—you’re *drunk*.”

“Not that drunk,” I argued.

“Bella,” he warned, backing away again when I stepped forward. “I’m serious.”

“Ooh,” I murmured with a shiver and grinned broadly as I moved even closer, causing him to back into the wall of

the hall. “You’re serious. That sounds intense. And so damn hot.”

He lifted his hands and gulped. Sweat misted his brow. “I said no, Bells. You and I are *not* having sex.”

Well.

Wow.

That was pretty definite.

I slowed to a halt and swallowed, trying to taste something other than acute rejection.

With a scowl, he dropped his hands and eased forward. “Hey, no,” he warned. “Don’t look at me like I’m rejecting you.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Except that’s exactly what you’re doing.”

“No,” he started, coming closer as he shook his head emphatically.

I plopped my hands on my hips and leveled him with a glare. “So, this is your way of *accepting* my invitation?”

“No. *Jesus*.” Grinding his teeth, he pulled on his hat, tugging it lower. “I just—you and I—we—Fucking hell, Bells. Don’t do this to me right now. You’re going to make me wish I’d just answered Angie’s call to begin with.”

My mouth dropped open. Lifting my eyebrows, I hissed, “*Excuse me?*”

“What?” He met my gaze as if confused by my offended tone. But as soon as he saw the hurt in my expression, he rolled his eyes. “Come on. *She’s* a mistake I could handle making. *You* are not.”

That really didn’t help.

“Wow.” Tears watered my eyes. I took a step back and glanced up at the ceiling. “So I’m an even bigger mistake than Angie. Always lovely to hear.”

“Whoa. No.” His fingers caught my elbow. “That is *not* what I meant.”

I sniffed and met his eyes, only to discover he sincerely looked concerned about me. Wiping at my face, I asked, “What did you mean, then?”

“I mean, you’re a fuck of a lot more important to me than she *ever* was. And you’re super drunk right now. So I know exactly how this would play out. You’d regret it in the morning and start avoiding me until we never talked to each other again. Which would kill me. So, no. This isn’t happening. I’m not losing you like that. Angie, I could lose. Not you.”

“Well, too late,” I announced, giving him a tear-stained smile. “I’ve already messed *that* up. Because if we *don’t* do this, I’ll be too embarrassed about the way I shamelessly threw myself at you and you *rejected* me that I’ll never be able to look you in the eye again, anyway.”

His mouth fell open as this shattered expression crossed his face. “Are you serious?” he asked quietly. “I’m fucked either way?”

“Sorry,” I said without a hint of apology in my voice. “But yeah, I believe so.”

“Well, shit.” He ripped off his hat and ran a hand over his head. “Don’t tell me that. I don’t want to be fucked. And I *can’t* lose you.”

“Let me ask you this...” When he focused on me, I said, “Would you still be turning me down right now if I didn’t have any alcohol in me?”

“I...” He blew out a long breath and shook his head before admitting. “Honestly, I don’t know. Probably not.”

I breathed out a relieved breath. “Really?”

He shrugged. “Well, yeah. Just because we’ve never explored that path before doesn’t mean I haven’t wondered what it’d be like with you. Because I have. More than once. But—”

I set a finger against his lips, having heard enough. “Then you shouldn’t turn me down now.”

“Bells,” he rasped, sounding defeated. His eyes searched mine desperately. “If we do this, it changes everything. Every-fucking-thing. You get me?” Shaking his head, he added, “You’re not capable of making that kind of decision right now. Hell.” He gripped the bill of his hat with both hands and searched my eyes. “*I’m* not in a stable enough position to make that kind of decision. We can’t...” He dropped his arms heavily at his sides and stepped back, putting space between us. Space that hurt. “We just *can’t*. Okay?”

Realizing he was right—we couldn’t treat anything between us casually or hastily—I nodded and hugged myself, feeling suddenly gross for even bringing it up. “Okay,” I whispered. Against my will, my chin wobbled and a sob tore up my throat. “I’m sorry.”

“What? No.” Stepping toward me he took me in his arms and hugged me. “Dammit, don’t. Bells. Don’t be sorry. *I’m* sorry. Please don’t cry. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s...” I hiccupped and grabbed the material of his shirt tight as I hid my face in his chest. “It’s not your fault. You’re being all awesome and honorable and trying to do the right thing. And I’m...” Sniffling as more tears fell, I bowed my face in shame and squeezed my eyes tight. “I’m the one who’s sorry. I messed everything up between us, didn’t I?”

“Hell, no, you didn’t.” Pulling back so he could see my face, he set a finger under my chin and urged me to look up at him. When I refused to open my eyes, he kissed my forehead. “Listen to me. Tonight will in no way affect the way I feel about you. Jesus, if anything, I probably like you even more now.”

Startled to hear that, I opened my eyes. “Really?”

People usually left when they got too close and learned too much about me.

But he looked as serious as a heart attack. I hadn’t scared him away at all.

Hope sparked in my chest. Maybe I wasn’t a lost cause, after all. Maybe people could love me just as I was.

I met his gaze, and he sucked in a harsh breath. “Damn,” he whispered. “You’re so fucking beautiful.”

I smiled through my tears and set my palm against his warm cheek. “Thank you.” When he closed his eyes and shuddered under my touch, I murmured his name and pressed my forehead to his.

He blew out a breath. Then grabbing my hand, he led me to the living room. But before he could motion for me to sit on the sofa, he paused and studied my eyes for a moment before his gaze dropped to my mouth.

Temptation swirled in his expression even as he said, “Maybe just one kiss.”

I nodded stupidly and strained toward him. He puffed out a single breath and set his lips to mine.

It was so soft, merely a dusting of warmth against warmth. Then a groan reverberated through his throat, and he moved his mouth experimentally as if testing to see how I would respond.

I mimicked his actions, opening slowly when he did. The moment his tongue touched mine, lightning shot through my veins. I jerked in surprise, and he captured my face in his hands as if to steady me.

I gripped his wrists and slanted my head to the side, gaining more access, more heat. He stepped closer. I stepped closer. Our fronts brushed accidentally, and then on purpose, until we were pressing together as tightly as we could. His hands wandered down my face as his mouth continued to move against mine. His hat fell off his head, or maybe I knocked it off so I could bury my fingers in his soft, dark hair.

When his hips ground close, I felt his erection, thick and ready against my stomach. I wanted to experience it inside me. I didn’t mean to, but I reached down to grip him, imagining his hard length pulsing and hot and deep.

“Jesus.” He jerked, pulling back and gasping as he shook his head.

Like a splash of cold water to the face, I realized what I'd just done. "Sorry," I said, my face flushed and breathing ragged. I'd taken it too far. Again. "Sorry. I..." Shaking my head, I closed my eyes. "Sorry."

Fox didn't answer. A moment later, I opened my eyes to check on him. He was gripping his head, face thrown back and eyes closed. As if sensing my stare, he opened his lashes. We shared a long look before he dropped his hands, licked his tongue over his bottom lip and shook his head. "It's fine," he assured me, then bent down to retrieve his fallen hat.

I nodded.

He winced, worrying the bill between his fingers.

Then, noticing my Jim Beam I'd left out on the coffee table, he snagged it, tore off the cap and gulped straight from the bottle. With curse, he winced again and ran the back of his hand across his mouth.

When his gaze returned to me, his eyes looked tormented.

"Okay, here's what's going to happen," he said, tossing his hat on the coffee table. "I'm going to catch up with you until we're both drunk enough to make really stupid decisions *together*. And then..." Still holding onto the bottle, he pointed toward the floor between us. "Then I'm going to fuck your brains out. Because I'm not leaving here tonight until we each have the orgasms we both obviously need." Meeting my gaze, he asked, "You good with that?"

I stepped toward him. "Yes," I answered. "I'm good with that."

He let out a relieved breath. "Thank God." And he caught my waist with one hand before pulling me into him.

Gracen

I arrived early to get the best spot in the theater: second to last row, aisle seat so I could sit as close to the center of the room as I could get. Hell yeah. And the place wasn't filling up that fast either, which meant I'd probably have the whole row to myself with plenty of room to spread out, put my drink in the holder on one side, and my popcorn in the holder on the other. If the night went well and no one sat in front of me either, maybe I could even kick my feet up and really relax.

This was the life, man, I'm telling you.

Now if only I had a bit of company to enjoy it all with.

Draping the boxes of candy I'd just purchased across my chest, I dug my phone up and clicked off a grinning selfie before sending it to Bella.

GRACEN: You sure you don't want to join me? I got the works. Popcorn, cherry slushy, AirHeads, Reeses, Red Hots, AND Junior Mints.

If the appeal of spending time with her favorite twin didn't win her over, then maybe my Junior Mints might.

But the aggravating woman wasn't swayed.

BELLA: Not tonight, bubs. Just wanna stay in.

Stay in? On a Friday night after the stressful week at work I knew she'd survived, meeting a big deadline? Who the hell was I talking to?

She had to be lying.

I hadn't spent the last twenty-seven years as her other half, shared a womb with her, *and* been her first-choice in confidantes not to immediately spot her lies when she spewed them, even via a text. And she'd been hiding something from me a lot lately.

I couldn't figure out what her secret was yet. But I wasn't too worried either. She'd open up eventually. She always did. We never kept anything from each other long.

Tonight, however, I really needed her company. I hated going to the movies alone. It always made me feel pathetic, like I couldn't find anyone else to go with me, which usually *was* the case.

Not of a lot of people in the family had the same cinematic taste I did. I mean, it was their loss; I had an awesome palate for movies. But just because they all had boring, bland appetites didn't make me feel any less alone when the beginning credits rolled.

Bella empathized, though, so she typically sucked it up and went along with me, which was exactly why I started to feed her a massive guilt trip now, trying to get her to change her mind.

GRACEN: But I'm all alone. You're not seriously going to make me...

I never finished typing.

Someone passed by me in the center aisle right next to where I was sitting. Her perfume wafted over me, and the smell was nice. So, of course, I glanced up.

Whoever she was, she was alone, and she looked good from the back. Hair pulled up into a sloppy bun with curling tendrils falling fashionably down her neck, she walked with a hypnotic sway that caused me to focus on her ass in those tight jeans.

Grade A ass.

One of my eyebrows lifted with interest.

She wasn't carrying a drink or any treats, just a purse slung over one shoulder, which made me think she couldn't be alone—her companion was probably already seated or trailing behind to get their snacks because who could watch a movie without sustenance? But she wasn't glancing around as if looking for anyone or plotting a good space for multiple people to sit; she walked with purpose, knowing exactly where she wanted to go.

Like me, she had her favorite seat in the house.

Made me wonder if she was also like me and hadn't been able to find anyone else to go to the movies with her, or if she was just the confident type who felt comfortable going alone. I decided to peg her as the confident type because I liked that scenario better.

When she reached her row of choice—way too far down and close to the screen for my taste—she turned and shuffled in to reach her desired place.

Something familiar about her side profile caused my brows to furrow. I think I knew her—maybe—but I wasn't sure, until someone from the other side of the aisle and further up whistled, calling, "Hey, baby. You don't have to sit all alone down there. Why don't you come plant that fine ass next to me?"

I winced, because seriously, *plant that fine ass*? What kind of douche actually said shit like that aloud? It was one thing to check the ass out silently and appreciate it in your own mind. It was quite another to share such thoughts with the actual masterpiece you were appreciating.

Fine-Ass glanced up at her caller, and that's when I got the full view of her face.

Ah, shit. What the hell!

I'd just checked out *Yellow Nicksen's* ass? Not cool.

So not cool.

Bella would skin me alive if she knew what I'd just done.

And speaking of Bella...

Worried she might change her mind and hurry down here to watch the movie with me after all, I glanced at the screen of my phone and quickly deleted my message, before retyping a new one.

GRACEN: No worries. Take care. Call you in the morning.

Nothing would ruin her night more than finding herself stuck in the same room as the vile female who'd slept with her last boyfriend, causing them to break up.

I glanced toward Yellow again, narrowing my eyes and searching for something to dislike this time so I could jostle myself back into the appropriate frame of mind when looking upon my sister's nemesis.

When I couldn't find any immediate visual flaws because—damn—Yellow Nicksen had some definite aesthetic appeal, I went shallow and mentally flayed her name.

Could you really blame me, though? I mean, *Yellow*? What a stupid nickname. I wonder how she'd come up with it. Maybe she'd wet her bed a lot when she was little. Or she still did. Yeah. I liked that idea.

And how could *Yellow* be better than whatever her real name was? Why didn't she just go by her real first name?

It was too bad she had such a pretty face; that was probably how she'd lured Ethan into straying away from Bella in the first place. Even the way she was uneasily wincing at the guy who'd just invited her to sit by him was adorable. She had a cute, button nose, full, luscious lips, dark, exotic eyes, and—

Not that her appearance meant a damn thing. Loyalty demanded I hate her. She'd hurt my twin. Only someone who was straight-up malicious could do such an unspeakably awful thing.

Sniffing bitterly, I watched her answer the guy. "No thanks," she called, "I, uh, I'm waiting on someone."

As she sank into her seat, I sighed and shook my head. Damn, she lied about as poorly as Bella did. Yellow wasn't waiting on *anyone*. And her new admirer knew it.

Pushing up from his chair, he smirked and strutted her way. Oh, Jesus. You had to be kidding me right now. I wasn't here to watch this shit; I just wanted to see my movie and go home, dammit.

But it was happening whether I liked it or not.

Maybe I should warn him not to bother. He was just going to get himself mixed up with a cheating homewrecker if he went anywhere near her. But something about his cocky swagger turned me off, so I figured I'd just let him learn the hard way what a mistake he was making.

Mr. Not-So-Suave moseyed right up to Yellow's row and leaned in over her, setting his hands on the backs of the seats both behind and in front of her so he could trap her in.

"What's wrong, baby? I don't bite. Come on over and sit by me."

I rolled my eyes. Lamest pick up line ever. I'd lose all respect for her if she actually fell for that. Except, wait, I already had no respect for her, didn't I? So yep, she was probably going to pop right up and follow him like any unfaithful leech would.

She surprised me, though. Leaning away from him, she said, "N-no, thank you." She wasn't at all snarky and bitchy about it, either. Bella would've told the guy to get lost in a much more creative and violent way than that. She wouldn't have sounded so afraid and intimidated either.

So why wasn't Yellow just laughing in the dude's face and telling him to get lost, already? She obviously wasn't into his advances. So why wasn't she threatening to kick him in the balls? Why wasn't she defending herself?

Shit. He was actually *spooking* her into some kind of petrified statue, wasn't he? I could practically feel her quivering in fear from all the way back here.

Unease stirred in my gut. Scaring a woman wasn't cool, no matter how wicked she was.

"Come on," Her harasser repeated, reaching for her shoulder. "You know you want to."

With a gasp, she jerked away and stumbled to her feet so she could reverse deeper into her row away from him. "No, really. I'm fine here."

"What? You don't like me or something?" he challenged, following her until she was even more trapped than she'd been before.

When her back hit the wall, she yelped out her surprise and winced up at the guy, her face full of wary fear. "Excuse me," she tried. "I'd like to get by now."

He laughed. "Not until you tell me why you won't sit with me."

"Please," she tried, turning her face to the side away from him, when he leaned too close. "I just want to watch the movie in peace."

"So do I," he countered. "Next to you."

"I...I..." Jesus, was she going to *cry*?

I think she was gonna fucking cry.

"Dammit," I muttered on a disgusted sigh as I gathered all my shit and rose, then stormed down the aisle toward them, beyond pissed I was being forced into this situation.

I mean, seriously. What was the world coming to? Bella would kill me if she knew I was about to save Yellow Nicksen's ass.

What an ass, though.

Wait. Shit. No, I wasn't thinking about her ass, anymore.

"Sorry I'm late," I said, as I reached her row, making my voice sound breathless as if I'd been rushing. "Damn boss wouldn't let me leave any earlier. I got us the works, though."

When both Yellow and her admirer glanced up, I lifted my attention from the heaping pile of goodies in my arms to them and jumped as if surprised to see she had company.

“Um...hi?” I told the guy, sounding confused, before I cocked my head curiously to the side. “What’s going on?”

He lifted his hands as if to prove he hadn’t been touching her, which honestly only made him look guiltier. “Nothing,” he answered in a defiant kind of tone, even as he backed off. “You here with her?”

I lifted my eyebrows and glanced at the snacks in my arms before returning his gaze. “What’s it look like to you?” Then I hitched my chin toward Yellow but kept my eyes on him. “There a problem here?”

“Nope.” He shook his head and turned sideways to step out of the row and into the aisle without brushing against me. “No problem at all.”

“Good,” I said, staring him down and turning with him as he stepped around me so we could keep eye contact. “Because it looked like you were backing her into that wall against her will.”

“Well, I wasn’t,” he snapped, narrowing his eyes before he started away to return to his own seat. “Get some glasses, man. And don’t leave your girl all alone in a theater like that next time.”

“Yeah, thanks for the advice,” I snarled after him, glaring until he found his old spot. Then I slumped heavily into the seat next to where Yellow had been sitting and muttered, “Asshole.”

Beside me, she slowly sank back into her chair. I huffed out a disgusted breath, because now I had to talk to Yellow Fucking Nicksen.

When I glanced over, I met wide, surprised, brown eyes. “You’re welcome,” I muttered.

“You...” She shook her head and blinked. “But aren’t you—”

“Gracen Lowe?” I finished for her. “Yeah. We met when I was literally pulling my sister, Isabella, off you to keep her from scratching your eyes out for sleeping with her boyfriend,

which makes this—what?—*twice* now that I’ve saved your ass. Let’s not make a habit of it, shall we?”

She stared at me with that same stunned expression for another moment before swallowing uneasily. “Yeah,” she answered slowly. “Good idea.” Then she glanced past me, her gaze weary. “So, your sister. Is she, uh, is she coming to see the movie with you?”

Narrowing my eyes, I stared her down until she swung her gaze back to me. But her expression was full of so much fear, my hateful resolve melted like a marshmallow in hot chocolate.

So I found myself shaking my head and answering, “Nah. It’s just you and me tonight, kid.”

Relief eased her shoulders as she shifted her gaze around the theater with a wild kind of reprieve. “Oh, thank God.”

“Yeah,” I muttered dryly. “It’s just fan-freaking-tastic, isn’t it?”

Her gaze swung back to me. She blinked once before wincing. “Look, you don’t have to…” Her eyes drifted over me, and she seemed to forget what she was going to say until she focused on my face again. Then she cleared her throat uneasily. “You don’t have to stay here. With me.”

I snorted. “As if I’d *want* to.”

Her spine straightened in surprise.

I sighed and ran a hand over my face. “Okay, look.” Dropping my fingers, I leaned in a whispered, “Do you *want* lover boy to come back, or not? Because we both know if I go anywhere from here on out, the douche will be right back in your grill like ketchup on a hot dog. But if you’re good with that…” Lifting my hands to show her I was cleaning them free from the situation, I pulled back, adding, “Then I’m gone.”

“Oh my God, no! Don’t go.” Panic filled her face as she glanced over my shoulder in her harasser’s direction. Then she licked her lips uneasily and returned her attention to me

before relaxing her shoulders. “I mean, I guess you’re right. You can stay.”

Really? She made it sound like some kind of a fucking privilege when it *felt* more like a life sentence.

“Can I?” I snarled. “Wow, thanks. I’m honored.”

She huffed out an irritated sound and jerked her attention to the screen before learning toward me and hissing. “Not that I’m ungrateful, but you didn’t *have* to help me, you know. You still don’t. I’m not some damsel in distress.”

Oh, she was such a piece of work. Tossing some popcorn into my mouth, I shrugged. “Well, you could’ve fooled me.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw her zip her attention to me. I didn’t have to see the glare that followed to know it was incredulous and annoyed. Unconcerned by it, I lifted the butter-stained tub between and asked, “Popcorn?”

When I finally glanced over, her mouth had fallen open. “I could’ve taken care of myself,” she seethed.

I wasn’t going to argue the point, especially since it no longer mattered. I *had* stepped in and now here we were, stuck sitting next to each other for the rest of the goddamn movie.

Someone kill me now.

“No one else is coming to sit with you, are they?” I asked.

Indecision crossed her features before she reluctantly admitted, “No.”

“That’s what I thought.” Shaking the popcorn just enough to get her to focus on it, I said, “Then eat. Make it look like we’re honestly here together.”

Her gaze fell to the flavored kernels, but she didn’t take any.

“What?” I demanded. “Do you not *like* popcorn?”

Wouldn’t that just figure?

Her eyes flew up to mine. “Oh, I love popcorn,” she blurted, only to wince as if she felt she shouldn’t have shared that fact.

I lifted my eyebrows. “Well, then...?” What the hell was her problem? I was swallowing my acute dislike of her in order to help her out, here. The least she could do in return was play along with this stupid fake relationship I’d created in order to save her ass.

“Don’t worry,” I assured her bitterly. “Sharing popcorn doesn’t mean I’m interested. You wouldn’t want me anyway; I don’t have a girlfriend you could steal me from.”

With an offended gasp, she gaped at me as if I’d said the unthinkable. But, oh, there was plenty more where that had come from, sweetheart.

“Get your popcorn out of my face,” she hissed.

“Fine.” I shrugged and swung it back to my own lap. “More for me then.”

From the corner of my eye, I watched her cross her arm tightly over her chest and face the screen to watch the commercials playing.

I grinned, realizing I kind of got a rush from all the heated responses I was dragging from her.

Huh. Pissing her off was kind of fun.

So I leaned toward her as I filled my mouth with a handful of buttery goodness. “Mmm,” I moaned in delight. “So good.”

The irate glance she shot me seemed to say, *Are you kidding me right now?*

Glad her attention was back on me, I swallowed and said, “Your taste in rows seriously sucks, by the way. I had the best seat in the house before you had to start your little drama show and force me to come down here and step in.”

“Excuse me?” she growled. “I didn’t start *anything*.”

“And why the hell *are* you here all by yourself?” I added, ignoring her rejoinder. “Couldn’t you get any of your friends to come with you? Or did you sleep with all their boyfriends, too?”

Her mouth fell open, and she sputtered a moment before snarling, “You know what? Fuck you. Slut shaming looks attractive on *no one*, buddy.”

The label caused me to pull back in surprise. Then I instantly shook my head to deny such a claim. “I’m not slut shaming,” I insisted. “I’m—I’m *homewrecker* shaming. Big difference.”

When she glanced at me in disbelief, I lifted my hands in surrender. “Honest. I don’t give a shit who you sleep with. It’s the ruining my sister’s life part I’m sour about.” I pressed a hand into my own chest and added, “Because *I’m* the one who had to patch her back together after *you* royally fucked her world up with what you did.”

A multitude of expressions crossed her face. Shock, horror, guilt, despair, indignation, and then rage. “That’s it,” she said, flashing clenched teeth at me. “I’m not talking to you anymore.” And she went back to facing the front of the cinema, staring determinedly at the ads flashing across the screen.

Smugly, I shot back, “Well, good. The world just got infinitely better.”

She snorted but refused to answer.

I faced the front too, ready to ignore her right back.

Around us, the lights dimmed and the commercials faded so previews could begin. The view I had of Yellow in my peripheral vision went shadowed but I could still feel her there next to me, more brilliantly than I’d been aware of anything in a long time.

Against my will, I turned to look at her. The lights from the screen reflected onto her face, showing me how well she knew I was staring. She tipped her chin up defiantly and tightened her lips to keep from saying anything to me.

Just to see what she’d do, I lifted the popcorn tub again, offering her more. She huffed out a disgusted breath before lifting her hand and taking a handful without even looking at me.

I shook my head and fought a chuckle. For whatever reason that other asshole had made her lock up and shut down, she certainly wasn't that way with *me*. It was kind of cool to know I could draw forth the spitfire in her and coax it into coming out to play where others could not. Made me feel sort of triumphant.

And though I'd really been looking forward to this movie, I had a harder time concentrating on it as it began than I did wondering about the woman sitting next to me. Seriously though, if I wasn't so duty-bound to dislike her, I might actually want to get to know Yellow Nicksen better.

But Bella would cut off my balls for even entertaining the thought. So yeah, never mind. I was totally not interested.