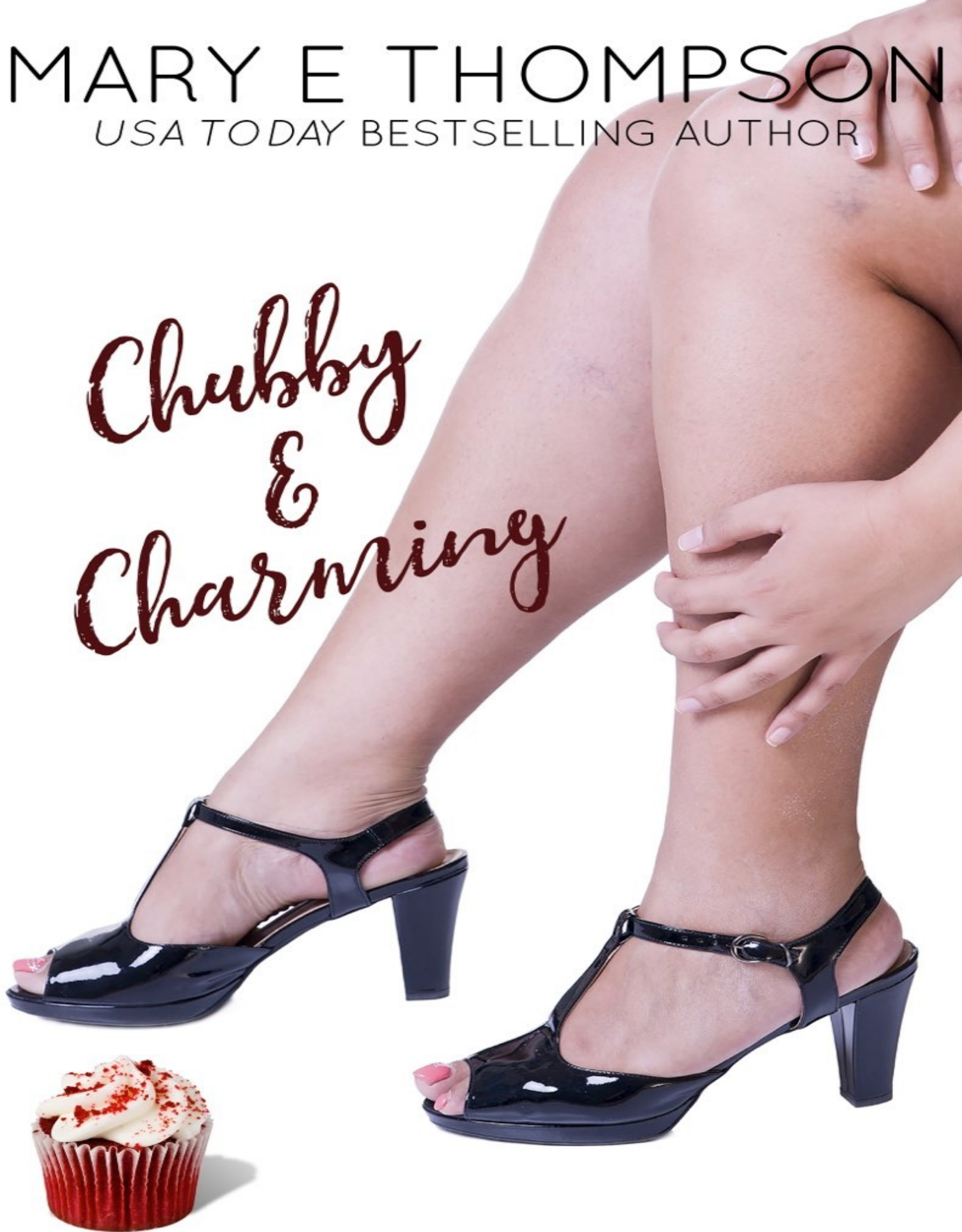


MARY E THOMPSON
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

*Chubby
&
Charming*



CHUBBY & CHARMING
A SMALL TOWN CURVY GIRL ROMANCE

BIG & BEAUTIFUL
BOOK ONE



MARY E THOMPSON



Chubby & Charming

Big & Beautiful, book one

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Ebook ISBN: 978-1-944090-01-2

Print ISBN: 978-1-944090-08-1

Audiobook ISBN: 978-1-953879-99-8

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BIG & BEAUTIFUL

Women (and men) have always come in all shapes and sizes. Being plus size or big-boned or fat is a bad thing for some people. For the women in this series, it's just a fact of life. A fact that brings them together and fuels their friendships. But for the men, the curves on their women only make them proud to be with women who love life, and everything it offers. Because life is better with cupcakes.

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To my hubby, Alex. My book boyfriend in real life.

CHAPTER 1



I used to like my life. I thought I had it all. Or at least all I expected as a fat woman. I had a great set of friends, a job I enjoyed, and my own place. I was on my way to buying a new car and I was happy.

And then I met him.

Xander Carlson.

The man who turned my life upside down.

I know, you think I'm being foolish. Everyone wants a man in their life, right? Women all really just want someone to take care of them? Well, not me. I wanted to do it myself. I was a strong woman who could take care of herself. I never pictured my life with a man.

Maybe because I never thought anyone would want me.

Okay, not maybe. Definitely.

I grew up fat. Pictures from when I was little reminded me of that whenever I visited my parents, and their display of family photos throughout the ages. My brother loved to remind me of it, too. In one particular picture of me at three years old, I was wearing a yellow bathing suit and laying in one of those plastic pools. My brother said I looked like a beached whale.

Yeah, he's an asshole.

He's also right. I hate to admit it, but my weight seemed to be genetic and uncontrollable. It became something I just accepted because if I'd always been fat then I always would be fat. Eh, no big deal.

Like I said, I was happy. It didn't matter to me that I never had men chasing

me. I saw my friends go through problems with men and took comfort in knowing I never had to deal with all that.

Not to say I didn't have boyfriends or date. I did, but it usually was something short lived. One of us realized we weren't right for each other. Eventually I decided dating was more trouble than it was worth. Whenever I went out with someone, I made sure it was a purely physical thing, or just a friends thing.

But I didn't need men as friends. I had three awesome female friends that kept my life fun.

Claire was my closest friend. She and I went to high school together in Winterville, New York. Claire was thin in high school but started gaining weight after her high school boyfriend raped her. Claire never really got over it.

How could you?

I was there for Claire, but watching her go through something so horrible and then hide behind her weight was tough. Especially when I knew how skinny Claire could be. Sometimes I thought she wasted her body because if I could have been skinny I would have. But then I remembered that fat was fun and I ate another cupcake.

Claire and I met Sam and Addi in college. We all went to Erie University, also in Winterville. As cold as the town was, it was home and I could never bring myself to leave.

Sam and Addi are also overweight. The four of us lived near each other in the dorm our freshman year and hit it off. We were among the only ones not running out to frat parties and bars every night. We would sit around the dorm and watch chick flicks and bake brownies.

There's a reason we became close friends.

But this story isn't about them. It's about him. About the man who ruined my life. The man who took away all my happiness.

I worked at Western New York Health, a local branch of one of the big insurance companies. In customer service, where I worked, we handled questions from customers about their claims. If there was a problem, we would talk it through with them and then contact the doctor's office to request a new

form detailing the services rendered.

It sounds boring, I know. Really, I liked it. I've always been good with people and liked to talk. Being on the phone hid my appearance so I wasn't judged by my size. I could be a phone sex operator by night or a model, but no one would ever really know.

The anonymity let me be the real me on the phone. I could joke with the customers who needed a laugh, I could console the ones who were upset, or I could flirt with the ones who sounded hot.

Xander Carlson fit into that last category. Squarely.

It was a Monday when he called me the first time. Spring was just starting to make an appearance in our Western New York town. Outside the window near my cubicle I could see the trees finally starting to thaw. Inside, my cube was part of the standard cube farm with blue-grey walls that were about waist high when you stood up. Everything was dull and drab and felt like a rainy day, even when the sun was out. The boring interior made the outdoors seem that much nicer, especially on days like that one.

It was the first day we'd broke 50 since the previous October. Even though I wasn't foolish enough to pack up my winter clothes (our town wasn't called Winterville for nothing) I was excited to see the first signs of spring.

I was off my game because of the weather.

That's my story.

The phone rang and I was lost in a daydream about warmer weather, maybe even a vacation with my best friends. We'd all been talking about going on a cruise for years together, but we'd never done it. When the phone rang I barely knew what I was doing when I picked it up and said, "Western New York Health, Mandy speaking. How can I help you today?"

The brief pause on the other end of the line set me on edge to start with. When he started talking I was sunk. His voice was rich and deep, smooth. He sounded like a wet dream come to life. He should have been the one working on the phone with a voice like his, but I just knew he had the body to match. A body that would have been put to better use in front of a TV camera where you could see and hear him.

“Hi Mandy. I’m Xander Carlson. I guess I need some help.”

I took a deep breath. They all needed help. Otherwise they wouldn’t be calling. But I understood not really knowing where to start.

Plus, he used my name. Most people called and didn’t address me at all. But he said my name. And I wanted to hear him say it again. And again.

“Okay Mr. Carlson, let’s see if I can help you. First, my direct extension is 8657. If you get disconnected for any reason, call back and enter my extension when it gives you the option. Otherwise you’ll have to go back through everything to get to a person. Second, I need your claim number so I can look it up.”

I heard papers shuffling through the phone as he presumably looked for his claim number.

“You have a beautiful voice,” he said, nearly making me lose my train of thought. “Okay, here it is. My claim number is 273MX85G5739.”

I typed in the code as he read it to me, struggling to focus on my job and not his compliment, and waited while my computer pulled up the claim. It was for a claim that was two months old and for an Alexander Steven Carlson. I quickly scanned the details, wondering what horrifying thing the man with the sexy voice could have gotten taken care of.

It turned out to be a pretty standard claim including a general check up and blood work. There were a few notes that said he had a payment due and was challenging it, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Thank God he wasn’t hiding some horrible disease.

“Can you tell me your full name please?”

“Oh, yeah, sorry. It’s Alexander Steven Carlson. I forget about that sometimes.”

“It’s no problem. Lots of people go by nicknames. Okay, so I see the claim has been paid and you owe the balance. It also looks like you’ve been challenging this one for a week. What can I help you with today?”

He blew out a breath, not sounding irritated, but instead sounding worn out. He’d been through this before and he didn’t feel like explaining it again. That was a familiar noise in my job.

“When I first got the EOB I called my doc. He thought he coded it wrong when he submitted the claim and for some reason it isn’t getting set as an annual exam. The doc was supposed to resubmit the exam details and I would get another EOB in the mail. I got a new one today, with Friday’s date, showing all the same information. Nothing has been updated.”

I keyed in a few things to see if I could find the problem. Usually when something like that happened it was just pushed through without waiting for the doctor’s billing. It sounded like his Explanation of Benefits just got resent, not redone.

While I looked through the details that were in the file about this claim he started talking again. “I’m sorry to be dragging you into this. You’re much nicer than the last woman I spoke to. And I’m thrilled to be talking to an American. Maybe I shouldn’t say that, but it’s so hard to talk to people who don’t speak the same language.”

I laughed to myself at his honesty. “Well, everyone at Western New York Health is American. We’re local, in Winterville about ten minutes southeast of Buffalo.”

“Really? I live in Winterville. Maybe one day I’ll get to see the beautiful face that goes with your beautiful voice.”

I froze. He couldn’t be talking to me. Oh, wait, that’s right, he had no idea what I looked like. He was just flirting.

“Yes, well, I’m sure you’ve got your share of stunning women lining up for a date with you. As for your claim, I apologize for what you’ve been through. Your claim hasn’t been reprocessed yet, but I can take care of that so you don’t have to worry about the payment.”

Xander huffed into the phone, sounding relieved.

“It really isn’t that big of a deal to me. The money isn’t that much, but it’s more the principle of the thing. I only go to the doctor when I need to. No offense but I hate dealing with all this crap. I feel like I only ever talk to people who really don’t give a shit about me.”

I stifled a laugh when I noticed that his previous call was taken by Melody, my nemesis at work. She was definitely one of those people who didn’t give a

shit about the job, or the people. I tried not to be that way. I was smart enough to know one of the biggest reasons for people to lose everything was medical issues. I didn't want to have any of our customers end up bankrupt if there was something I could do to help.

"Hopefully I don't give you that impression, Mr. Carlson. I assure you I will do whatever I can to take care of this for you. I think I can see the problem here though. The dates on the doctor's billing show that you were there on February 23. Your annual exam last year was on February 25 so we won't cover an annual exam until after a year is up. Here's the thing though, I'm looking at a calendar and February 23 was a Saturday. Did you go to the doctor on that day or was it a different day?"

"What? No. My doctor isn't even open on Saturdays. I was there on a Thursday."

I flipped back through the images on my screen and zoomed in to see the billing. The date looked like a 23 but it easily could have been 28.

"Mr. Carlson, it looks like your claim should have been for the 28th instead. I don't have the authority to make that change in our system. If I can put you on hold for a few minutes, I will talk to my supervisor and see if we can get it updated for you."

"Please, call me Xander. Mandy, you're a lifesaver. Thank you so much. And yes, I'll wait."

I hit the hold button and called over Diana, my boss. "It looks like his date of service was entered incorrectly. He is on the phone and said he was there on a Thursday. The date of service puts him there on a Saturday which should have been flagged, especially after his first call. I think we can resubmit the claim with the correct date of service on here and get this taken care of."

Diana looked over the forms on my computer and nodded. "You're right. Good catch, Mandy."

Diana walked away and I sent the files to her for approval. I saw her sit back down at her desk, a few cubicles away. I waited until she gave me the thumbs up to say she'd corrected everything then clicked back onto the phone.

"Mr. Carlson--"

“Xander,” his smooth voice hummed in my ear, “please.”

“Sorry, Xander. It looks like we’ve got it all taken care of. My boss has already approved the change to the dates and your claim will be reprocessed. You should get a new EOB within a few days showing the updated charges. Your doctor will get a new one also. If he’s billing you for this, you can call him and tell him things are being taken care of on our end. Is there anything else I can do for you today?”

Xander chuckled softly, a soft rumble that was like a full body tremor. I felt it all the way through me, lighting me up. “I just can’t believe I got this resolved and I got to talk to a beautiful woman on the phone. I almost wish you couldn’t fix it so I’d have an excuse to call you again.”

I blushed. I actually fucking blushed. A man had never made me blush. I felt beautiful, like he meant it. But of course I knew it was just an illusion. He had no idea what I looked like. If he did, he wouldn’t have given me a second thought. I knew that.

“Well, unfortunately for you Xander, I’m very good at my job and I take customer satisfaction very seriously.”

“I can tell you satisfy everyone you talk to.”

What? Did he really just say that? Holy shit, he was totally hitting on me. I was stunned. And he wasn’t just hitting on me, he was intimating that I’m good in bed. Whoa! I was baffled. Men never hit on me, on the phone or in person. If only I could believe he meant it.

Xander chuckled at my silence, waking up parts long dormant. I shifted in my seat, my panties getting wet as I imagined the ways I’d like to satisfy a man like him.

“I’m sorry, that was out of line. I just wasn’t expecting to find someone like you on the other end of the line.”

“Uh, thank you, Mr. Carl- I mean Xander. It was a pleasure talking to you today. I’m glad I was able to help you with your problem. If you ever need anything else, please don’t hesitate to get back in touch with us.”

“Thank you. I hope I have lots more problems. Goodbye Mandy.”

I said goodbye with a grin. I couldn’t stop smiling. It was silly. He was

attracted to my voice, not to me. He was grateful I helped him, not actually hitting on me. I would be a fool to read more into it than was really there.

But for some reason I couldn't stop thinking about him.

CHAPTER 2



The next night I was still thinking about Xander. I spent my whole day hoping he would call me again, but he never did. I knew it was foolish, but I couldn't stop myself from wishing things were a little different. Wishing I were the confident woman I dreamed of being.

Maybe I would look him up and call him.

No, I wouldn't do that. I could get fired for going through client files. And I didn't need a man. I never had before, I sure wouldn't start now.

Xander Carlson was just a blip on my radar. A momentary setback. I wasn't going to worry about him, especially not when I had girls' night.

Every Tuesday night, Claire, Sam, Addi, and I met up at Cooler Coffee for girls' night. It was our chance to talk and have fun, all four of us. Most weekends I saw at least one of them, but during the week we were all busy with work. Tuesday nights we just relaxed.

For some reason I always seemed to be the last one there. Claire worked at the airport for TSA so her schedule was pretty set. Addi was a chemistry teacher and was always early for coffee dates. Sam was a brilliant photographer with gigs all over town so there was no telling what time she'd arrive. But she was always there before me.

Cooler Coffee felt a little like being at home. The sitting area ran along the front window with tables overlooking the street. It was in a part of town that catered to people walking around. The parking was horrendous, but the food and laid back atmosphere were worth it. Sam, Addi, and Claire were already at a

table in the far corner.

When I went through the door the familiar smell of coffee tickled my nose. I stepped up to the counter, eyeing the treats in the display case as the person in front of me ordered. I'd always loved the smell of coffee and had been addicted to it for years. I never really liked the stuff though and finally gave it up a few years earlier. On girls' night I always ordered a hot chocolate.

And cupcakes. We had to have cupcakes.

I took my hot chocolate and twin cupcakes to the table where the others were waiting for me. I smiled and answered a chorus of hello's and dropped into my seat, the weight of my day sinking over the edge of my chair with my ass.

I already felt better being surrounded by my friends. Claire was on my right with Addi across from me and Sam next to her. I could finally forget about my day, and Xander Carlson.

"Who stole your candy?" Claire asked, her liquid emerald eyes pinning me to my seat. She'd known me long enough to be able to read my moods, something I hated at the moment. I didn't want to talk about it.

"Nothing. I mean, no one. I just had a hard day."

"Is Melody giving you shit again? I wish you could get her in trouble and not have to deal with her again."

I smirked. Claire knew my innermost thoughts. "In fact, she did get in trouble yesterday. I fixed something she should have caught and has been trying to make my life that much worse since. It's good that Diana knows how hard I work though. She won't let anything happen to me."

Claire rolled her eyes. Melody had been trying to make my life a living hell since I started working there five years earlier. Just out of college I didn't have any real skills, but I had a degree and did well in my interview. Melody had been there three years before I started and she hated me from the start.

Diana wasn't our boss at first, we worked for a man named Oscar. Oscar was into Melody. I think something was going on between them and he was helping to hide her mistakes. When Oscar got promoted, Melody was sure he would take her with him, but he didn't. She was stuck at the same job while he moved on. Diana had been one of our customer service teammates before Oscar moved up.

I always got along with Diana, not that we were close, but we didn't have any issues. She knew I worked hard and wanted to do well. Melody was the opposite.

"So what did you fix?" Addi asked. She tossed her poker straight milk chocolate hair behind her back. She had one of those trendy cuts with layers just past her shoulders that I always wished I could wear. My wavy red hair was cut similar but never looked as good as Addi's.

As a teacher, Addi was always curious how people solved problems. She taught high school chemistry, God help her, and had tough students. Most of them were good, according to Addi, but a few didn't like to listen to her. She was forever looking for new tools to use to resolve issues. We often traded stories.

It's amazing how similar high school students were to adults. Both were pains in the ass.

"A guy called up and said his claim wasn't being paid. I looked into it and the date on the claim was wrong. It's something Melody should have noticed. I showed Diana and she approved the change to the claim while I was talking to Xander. It was taken care of in about ten minutes."

They exchanged a look. All three of them. A look that I knew meant they picked up on something. What did I say? I had no idea. But something got their attention.

"Xander? And who is Xander?" Sam chimed in. I saw the smirk in her peaked eyebrow and teasing brown eyes, shadowed behind her red framed glasses.

"Shit," I said. How could I have been so stupid? I said his name. One fucking word and they were latched on to me like cupcakes on my ass.

Heat crept up my neck and onto my cheeks. I wanted to blame a hot flash, but the nice weather of the day before had turned cold again. It was in the 30's outside and there was no way they'd believe I was just overheated.

"Are you blushing? What did he say to you?" Claire asked.

I struggled to figure out how to get out of it. I knew it was stupid, thinking about him after one phone call. Yeah, he flirted with me more than any man ever. In my life. But that didn't mean anything. We didn't know each other and I knew

if we ever met he would run screaming in the other direction.

“It’s nothing. He just said I had a nice voice and wished he could call me again.”

They exchanged another look, this time with raised eyebrows. They were all thinking the same thing...

“Did he call you back?”

The question. The one I didn’t want to answer because it would be admitting that, again, nothing happened. It seemed like forever, since middle school when boys entered my radar, that any time I thought something might be possible, nothing happened. I wasn’t the sort of person that got dates. Guys didn’t ask me out. If they did, they were either also fat or desperate.

I wasn’t shallow, at least I didn’t think I was. But I didn’t always find fat guys attractive. I guess that made me a hypocrite instead of shallow. I got pissed that hot guys didn’t want me but thought it was okay that I didn’t want fat guys.

Okay, so I was shallow and a hypocrite.

I shook my head and took a sip of my hot chocolate. I knew if I said the word ‘no’ they would hear the emotion in my voice and leap all over it. Too bad not speaking was just as much of a trigger.

“You wanted him to, didn’t you?” Claire asked softly.

“Fine, yes. I liked having him flirt with me. It was exciting and empowering. I know it’s stupid, but it felt good for a few minutes to have someone tell me I was beautiful and he wanted to talk to me again. I’d be a fool to think anything would come of it though.”

“You never know,” Addi added. “Crazy things happen all the time. I dream about finding someone who is a decent guy. A hot, sexy guy who comes home to me every night. Passionate sex. Lots of love, too. A few kids. The white picket fence. Maybe even a few cats.”

“Cats are overrated. You should get a dog,” Sam teased. It was an ever-present debate between us. Claire and Sam loved dogs, but Addi and I were cat fans. We argued that dogs are like men, well like men with hot women. They were always happy to see you and hump your leg. Cats were like women, full of attitude and stubborn as hell.

I always wondered if it meant Addi and I tended toward playing for the other team, but I'd never found a woman attractive, and I didn't think Addi had either. We just liked a quiet home and a pet we didn't have to be dedicated to.

Of course that also probably meant we weren't ready for kids.

No, I could answer that one... I was definitely not ready for kids.

You had to have a partner for that. Or at least it was preferred. I wasn't prepared to be a single mom.

I laughed along with my friends as they debated the good and bad points of having dogs vs. cats, chiming in as necessary to back up Addi.

"Sam, have you photographed anyone interesting lately?" I asked when the animal chat subsided.

Sam rolled her eyes. Her whole body shook like she was trying to eliminate a bad memory. "I had a bride from hell this weekend. She was every bit as horrible as I thought she would be, but she's done. I meet with her tomorrow to review all the photographs."

"She didn't go on a honeymoon?" Addi asked.

Sam shook her head, her long chestnut hair falling over her shoulders, and sipped her black coffee. I don't know how she handled that, but she said it was something she'd gotten used to. Coffee was usually a standard at photo shoots and taking time to doctor it up, or having someone else do it for you, was not possible with Sam's schedule. She got used to drinking it black because it was never right any other way.

"Supposedly they're waiting for the summer when the weather is a little better and then headed to California to tour the vineyards in Napa and Sonoma Valleys. I would have just waited until then to get married."

"Me too," Claire said. "I can't imagine not going on a honeymoon. Even if it's just a few days away because money is tight, I would insist we go on a honeymoon. You know, if I ever got married."

"I agree," Addi said. "With school I would have to wait until classes were out of session, but I would wait to get married over summer break. Plus, the summer around here is the prettiest time of year anyway."

"Blah," I added. "I hate summer. Maybe because I sweat so much. I would

want to get married in the fall or spring when it's still nice outside but not so hot that I melt into a pool of goo."

"Ugh, I wish I had that choice," Addi replied. "That's one of the bad things about being a teacher. My time off is limited. I could always get married over spring break or even winter break, but no one wants to be in Winterville in the winter. Hell, the spring is bad enough. Did you guys hear it might snow this weekend?"

We all groaned together, frustrated with the weather. A part of me secretly loved it, but after almost six months of winter, even I was getting a little tired of it. Everyone was.

"So, Mandy, did you look at Xander on Facebook or Twitter? Is he hot?"

I rolled my eyes. The conversation about Xander had passed, but dammit Sam brought him back up. Hell yes, I'd looked him up online. About 3.5 seconds after we hung up the phone. But I sure as hell didn't want to admit that. Even to my best friends.

"No," I tried. I knew they'd see through me, but I had to try.

"Oh, you so did. Is he hot?"

"What's his last name?"

"Carlson," I answered without thinking. Sam had her phone out and was searching before I knew it.

"No!" I called, diving for her phone. She held it out of my reach while Facebook pulled up Xander's profile.

Yesterday I was thrilled that he had a public profile and I could browse through all his pictures and updates. Xander was even hotter than I'd imagined. He looked like a model. Unfortunately there weren't any pictures of him shirtless, but I could tell he was built. His t-shirts stretched across his muscles like a second skin, just enough to tease my eyes but not leaving much to my imagination. His smile was bright and beautiful, and when I zoomed in close, I could almost imagine it was just for me.

Not that I did that.

Much.

But as I watched my friends huddle around Sam's phone doing the same

thing I did yesterday frustrated me. I wanted to keep him to myself, like a secret crush. I couldn't have them looking at him, seeing the truth.

No doubt they would see the same thing I did... a man way out of my league.

"He's totally hot, Mandy. And he was flirting with you?"

The disbelief in Addi's voice both pissed me off and hurt me. I wanted to believe maybe someone like me could actually get a guy like him, but Addi didn't believe it so I had no reason to.

"Yeah, I know, he's out of my league. It's not like I had any hope of anything happening. He has no idea what I look like. I'll likely never hear from him again so it doesn't make a difference."

Claire heard the hurt in my voice and tried to do damage control. Sam and Addi traded looks of shock and uncertainty. "You never know, Mandy. He might not be like all the other hot jerks out there. Some guys are decent."

"He doesn't know me, Claire. I'd love to think a guy could love me, but I'm happy with my life. I don't need a guy."

They all looked at me like I was full of shit. I knew I was too, but I wasn't going to admit it. Xander had stirred something in me, something that made me want to believe I could have more in my life than great friends and a good job. Something more than a lonely life with no one to come home to.

All that with one phone call. I could only imagine what he would do if I ever met him.

And discovered he wasn't an asshole.

CHAPTER 3



By Friday of that week I'd almost forgotten about Xander Carlson. Sure, I'd Facebook stalked him a few more times and considered using genetic software to see what our kids would look like, but really, he was as far from my mind as he could be.

My weekend was looking to be pretty boring but I didn't care. It would be a few days away from Melody and her bitchiness. She'd gotten worse through the week, trying to catch me in everything I did. I'm pretty sure she spent more time reviewing my calls than answering her own.

I really had no idea what her issue was. She was nice to just about everyone else, but never liked me. I tried to shrug it off, but it bugged me. I mean really, what did she have to be jealous about?

Melody was perfect. She had that long flowing blonde hair every woman dreamed of having. She was thin with large, perky breasts. Don't judge me, she put them on display every day. She always was dressed to the nines in business suits and three or more inch heels. Her make-up was impeccable. She drew the attention of every man in the place, and half the women.

But she was a bitch. With a capital B.

I tried to give her the benefit of the doubt. I really did. Maybe she had a rough childhood or she was miserable. Maybe she was still sore that Oscar moved on without her. Or maybe she was just a bitch.

Unfortunately, I was pretty sure it was the last one.

"Mandy, I'd like to speak with you. Could you come to the conference room,

please?” Diana said as I set the phone down mid-afternoon. She didn’t sound upset, but there was no way of knowing what was going on.

“Sure,” I said, locking my computer and following her down the hall.

In the conference room the whole group had assembled. Melody walked in behind me, her heels clicking on the vinyl flooring. “Are you going to stand there and clog up the entire doorway, or are you going to let the rest of us in?” she snarled.

I shook my head and moved out of her way. She wasn’t worth my time, or my energy, so I just ignored her, but man I wanted to slap the shit out of her. She didn’t come out and say it, but I heard the fat comment in the tone of her voice, and it bugged me.

“Please take your seats, everyone,” Diana said from the front of the room.

I moved to the only open seat left, between Melody and Pete, the smelly guy who had a cube near the bathrooms. It couldn’t have been worse. I prayed for a quick meeting.

“I’m not sure how many of you have heard,” Diana began, “but I’ve decided to retire. I’m going to finish out this month and next. Starting in June, you will have a new boss.”

Everyone started murmuring around me. I never thought Diana would leave. She was practically an institution around there. Even though I hadn’t been there long, I knew Diana was the backbone of customer service. Having someone else take over would almost certainly mean changes. I just wondered who would step up and do it.

I’d love to, but I wasn’t sure I was ready for the challenge. I was still new. I had a lot to learn.

“How’s it gonna feel to have me as a boss? Diana loves me. And Oscar is her boss, so I’m a shoe-in for the job. Actually, you know what? You’re not gonna have me as a boss because the first thing I’m going to do is fire your fat ass for insubordination. Oh, I can see it now.”

Melody trailed off, letting me imagine her as my boss. I shuddered. There was no way in hell that was going to happen. If Melody became my boss she would make good on her threats. She’d find a way to fire me. Without Diana

around I wasn't sure I'd make it much longer.

"Many of you are qualified for my position," Diana's voice broke through my stupor. I looked up to find her staring right at me as she spoke. "I truly hope you apply for my job. You'd be a great fit, and the company would be lucky to have you take on a manager role."

I knew she wasn't speaking directly to me, but it felt like it. Or maybe she was, but was trying to make everyone feel like they should apply. Maybe I could step into her job. I was good at my job, why couldn't I be good at Diana's?

I left the meeting a few minutes later with everyone else. Melody was right behind me as I walked out the door. "You know she was talking to me when she said I'd be a great fit. The job is as good as mine. And I can't wait to see you go up in flames. It'll be my greatest pleasure to have you fired."

"Really?" I quirked an eyebrow at her. "Your greatest pleasure? I feel bad for you then. I really thought with your perfect body you'd have found men better at sex than that. But if it really will be your greatest pleasure maybe I shouldn't fight you on it. I really feel badly for you."

I left Melody sputtering in outrage as I walked back to my cube. I could only laugh.

Diana was in her cube when I passed by so I stopped in to congratulate her.

"You must be excited, Diana. Congratulations on your retirement."

She spun around in her chair. Her grey hair was tied back in her standard bun, her green eyes shining like they always were. "I am excited. At first I wasn't so sure, but my husband and I are making plans to tour the country this summer, see some of the places we've always wanted to see. We're going to visit our children and grandchildren. It's going to be a nice change for me."

"I'm happy to hear that," I told her, genuinely happy for Diana. "I only hope our new boss is as wonderful as you."

She tilted her head to the side as if trying to figure something out. "You know I was talking about you, right? When I said you'd be a great fit. I know you've only been here five years, but you have potential. You're kind and smart and wasting your talents hiding behind the phone. I really hope you'll apply for my position. I'd love to leave it in hands as capable as yours."

Stunned, I stood there gaping at her, wondering what to say. “Thank you,” was all that came out. I was shocked and touched. “I will think about it,” I told Diana as I left her cubicle and headed back to mine.

I was still in a daze when my phone rang a little while later. I picked it up, grateful for the distraction to get me through the end of the day.

“Western New York Health, Mandy speaking. How can I help you today?”

“Mandy, it’s good to hear your voice.”

It was him. Fuck! Why was he calling me again? And why were my nipples jumping up to say hi on their own.

“Xander, how are you? Did you get your EOB?” I was breathing heavily, trying not to be too excited that he called me. After all, it was probably another problem with his claim.

“You remember me?”

“Uh,” I stammered. Shit! I should have let him reintroduce himself. Isn’t the first rule of getting a guy to like you to play hard to get? And wouldn’t making him think you forgot him fall under playing hard to get?

Yeah, there was a reason I didn’t date.

“I, um, I do remember you. Your voice is very distinct.”

‘Very distinct?’ What the hell was that supposed to mean?

“Distinct. And here I got my hopes up that maybe you had the slightest interest in me.”

Did he really just say that? To me? I thought I was going to have a heart attack. And I couldn’t even blame the stairs. I worked on the first floor.

“I don’t know anything about you, Xander. I don’t spend too much of my time wondering about men that I have only spoken to once and don’t know.”

‘LIAR!’ my mind screamed. I made it sound like I hadn’t been on Facebook every day to see if he mentioned our conversation, or added new pictures of himself. Nope, I hadn’t gone through his profile with a fine-toothed comb looking for indicators that he had a girlfriend, or wife. And I certainly hadn’t been thinking about him day and night.

Yeah, right.

“Well, I think we need to change that. I was hoping you would meet me

sometime. I'd love the chance to maybe buy you a cup of coffee."

I smiled. No, it wasn't a smile. It was a shit-eating grin. I couldn't stop it from covering my face, making me feel like one of the beautiful people. He was gorgeous, simply stunning. And he was asking me out.

Me!

Mandy Ryan!

We weren't actually supposed to date our customers, but it was more of an unwritten rule than anything. It's not like we would always know what kind of insurance people had, but it was generally frowned upon to start dating someone once you knew they were a customer.

If I wanted the promotion, I definitely didn't need to be toeing the line of acceptable behavior at work.

"I actually don't drink coffee," I said. I had no idea how to respond. I felt like I knew a secret that he didn't know. Of course I did. I knew who I was, and I knew who he was. He thought my voice matched the rest of me. He would be expecting a supermodel and getting a beached whale.

Xander laughed softly, the sound filling me. I could picture his smile, the smile that had been haunting my dreams. I wanted to see that smile in person. I ached to meet him. I couldn't explain it. Something felt different about him. Something that made me want to say yes.

"You don't have to drink coffee. We could go out for a beer or hell, a water, for all I care."

I laughed. He was charming. It warmed me. No, it heated me. Like burning in hell sort of heated me. He wasn't saying anything particularly charming, but I was already aching for him.

"I love the sound of your laugh. God, I want to see the smile on your face when you laugh. I can only dream of how beautiful you are."

I opened my mouth to tell him the truth. To tell him I wasn't the woman he thought I was. He deserved the truth before he tried to take me out.

Right?

"I'm sorry. I guess this is a little creepy, right? What if we got to know each other a little better. I'll tell you anything you want to know about me so you

know I'm not sketchy. I have a younger sister and I would yell at her for days if she went out with a guy like I'm asking you out. I'm 29 years old. I work for Colton Construction as a project manager. I have a BS in electrical engineering from University at Buffalo. My parents have been married for almost 35 years and my sister is 23."

He took a deep breath. I closed my eyes and imagined his breath cascading over my skin. I listened to him breathe, as though he was trying to figure out what to tell me next. He kept going.

"In high school I was a bit of a troublemaker. I was the star pitcher on my high school's baseball team and goalie for our soccer team. I went to Orchard Park High School and my parents and sister still live in OP. I thought I could get away with anything because I was a sports star. I drank and TP'd a house almost every weekend. My friends were just as crazy as me so I thought we were normal."

He chuckled, remembering his foolish youthful days. I was a bit jealous. I didn't have those memories. In high school Claire and I were best friends, but she was dating BJ. When things went bad between them, she and I spent most of our weekends at either my house or hers. She didn't want to go out because BJ had told everyone all sorts of lies about her. Claire just wanted to get through high school without having to deal with anyone. Honestly, that's all I'd ever wanted, too.

"I cleaned up my act in college. My first two years I was just as crazy, but eventually I figured out that I wasn't doing myself any favors. I ended up with a roommate my junior year that was focused on his work. We were in class together and he was kicking ass and I was close to being thrown out. I knew if I didn't get my shit together I wouldn't graduate."

The phone muffled and I wondered if he was talking to someone else. After a second I heard him sneeze and then he came back on the phone.

"Sorry about that," he said, sounding embarrassed.

"Bless you," I told him with a smile. For some reason it made him seem more human to hear him sneeze. Almost like I forgot that hot guys sneeze, too.

"Thank you. Anyway, my roommate tutored me for the first semester of our

junior year and pulled my grades out of the dump. After that it became a game between me and Drew to see who got the better grade. Most of the time he beat me, but I gave him a run for his money. We're still good friends today."

I listened quietly. As he talked I clicked through his Facebook profile, again, and looking at him while he talked. I was surprised someone as gorgeous as he was could care about things like grades. Usually that was reserved for people who didn't have their looks to fall back on. People like me.

"So now, I own my own house, I own my own Jeep, and I work hard. I love my job. I work with Drew, my roommate from college, and we dream of being able to open our own home restoration company one day. We're working with the construction company because it's pretty steady work, but we'd love to be able to go in and bring something old back to life instead of starting from scratch. I guess it doesn't sound that interesting, but Drew and I work well together and would love to do our own thing."

"I totally get that. I mean, it's not me. I actually really like my job, but I can understand wanting to put your own stamp on what you do."

"That's it. Exactly. I know I'm doing good work where I am, but I could do so much more if I weren't having to give a cut of my pay to the company. Plus, I like working with the customer a little more. As it is we go in to a house as it's under construction and wire it up but never have anything to do with the homeowner. I know we have to follow code, and we do, but it would be cool to sit down and plan things out with the homeowner or go in and help someone when they have a problem. I feel like I'm not using my education at all and that bugs me. I worked hard for it and I like solving problems."

I found myself smiling. He sounded wonderful. Every time he said something else I wanted to meet him and talk to him in person. I wanted to tell him everything about myself, and learn everything else there was to know about him.

When he asked, "Now that you know more about me do you think you'll go out with me?" I had no choice but to say, "Yes."

"Really? Excellent," he said. I could hear his smile and it brought one to my lips. I'd just agreed to a date with a really cute guy and he was excited about it.

“How about this weekend?”

Panic! There was no way I could meet him over the weekend. The weekend was starting in about twenty minutes. I wouldn't be prepared to meet a hot guy in less than 24 hours. If ever.

“This weekend isn't good for me,” I lied. “Are you available Tuesday evening?”

He paused and I worried I'd blown it. Maybe I should go out with him over the weekend. But then I wouldn't have any back-up. All my friends were busy, either working or had something else going on. I needed to have at least one of them available to go with me, or talk me through it when it fell apart.

“Tuesday works for me. I usually get off work around four. I'm guessing you work until five so how about we meet at six? Where do you want to go? Since you don't like coffee,” he teased.

I smiled again. This was starting off better than I expected. He was making me smile so much my cheeks were sore. “How about Cooler Coffee?”

“Wait a minute?” he laughed. “You said you don't like coffee and now you want to go to a coffee place? What's up with that?”

I laughed again. Picking on me was a good sign. He was already comfortable enough with me to joke around. Yep, I could do it. I could have fun with a man.

A hot man.

That had no idea what I looked like.

Before I lost my courage I said, “I like hot chocolate. If you want to go somewhere else we can...”

He laughed at me, the vibration tickling my ear like his breath was actually fanning me. “Cooler Coffee sounds great. I'll see you Tuesday at six.”

“Yep, Tuesday at six. Bye Xander.”

“Bye Mandy.”

I hung up the phone smiling. I couldn't stop. He not only eased my concerns about being out with a perfect stranger, but he made me laugh. I was really looking forward to meeting him.

Until I turned around.

Melody was right behind me, examining her nails and staring at my

computer.

That still had Xander's profile pulled up on Facebook.

"Is that the guy you were just talking to. The one you're going out with Tuesday?"

I scrambled to close the tab before she could see anything else. Like his name.

"Does he know what you look like? Does he know what he's getting himself into?"

"What business is it of yours?" I snapped at her.

A wicked smile crossed her lips. She looked like an evil Barbie. "So you haven't told him you're fat. Do you really think a guy who looks like *him* is going to want to be with someone like you? I mean, really?"

"Leave me alone, Melody," I said sharply. I turned away from her, focusing back on my computer and finalizing the last bits of paperwork I had to do before I could go home. After a few moments I heard the clacking sound of her heels as she walked back to her cubicle. Each step felt like a shot through my heart.

Too fat.

Too fat.

Too fat.

What was I thinking? Of course Melody was right. Not that I wanted to hear it from her. Even Addi thought he was out of my league when she saw his picture. She didn't come out and say it, but it was pretty obvious by the tone of her voice.

I could try to convince myself Xander Carlson was different, but really I had no idea. The odds were he was a jerk. A big one. I wanted to cancel the date.

Shit, I wondered, why did I agree to it?

I told myself all week that I didn't need him, but as soon as I heard his voice I was ready to do anything he said. I was weak. It had been a while since a man showed me any bit of attention, and it drew me in. God, I was stupid.

But without his number I had no way to canceling on him. If I didn't show up at all, I would be the jerk. If I showed up, I knew I'd get hurt. But it was too late.

My first date with Xander Carlson was set.

CHAPTER 4



All weekend I was paranoid. What if he didn't like me? What if he walked out when he saw me? What if Melody was right? By Tuesday I'd gotten myself so psyched out about our date that nothing could put me in a good mood.

I'd secretly hoped Xander would call Monday or Tuesday to tell me he had to cancel our date, but he never did. As Tuesday afternoon approached, I started freaking out. Seriously. I was losing it.

As soon as five o'clock hit, I was out the door. Usually I'd make sure things were in order for the next day, but I wasn't going to take the time. I had to get to Cooler Coffee early to talk to my girls. I knew I wouldn't get through my date if I didn't have their support.

I burst through the door a few minutes later. Addi was already seated at a table alone, looking at her smartphone. I ordered my hot chocolate and cupcakes then joined her.

"You're here early," Addi said with a smile. "Usually I'm by myself for a few minutes. You look really nice today."

The massiveness of my date washed over me and I almost started crying. I still couldn't believe I was going to go out with him. Or meet him. It all seemed like a dream, a bad one I was sure. Even my clothes indicated something was going on.

I hadn't talked to anyone all weekend. Addi coached tennis and lacrosse for the school and was an instructor on the side. One of the clubs she taught at

opened over the weekend and she was working from sun up to sun down to get new students signed up.

Sam and Claire also worked all weekend. It felt strange to have such a huge event, for me at least, and none of my friends had a clue.

“I’m meeting Xander. He called me on Friday and asked me out. We’re meeting here tonight.”

Shock didn’t begin to describe the look on Addi’s face. She was completely blown away, as though the idea of me going out with a hot guy was not only unbelievable, but also a huge mistake.

Her face was the picture of my insides over the last four days. It was so bad I’d lost three pounds because I was so anxious about the whole thing.

I waved my hand in front of Addi’s face, trying to get her attention again. She blinked rapidly then focused on me. “Wow. Sorry, I just imagined what it would be like to have a date with someone that looked like him. Are you nervous? I’d be a wreck.”

I nodded. Nervous, terrified, about to throw up. They all applied.

“Nervous about what?” Sam asked as she sat down next to Addi. I hadn’t noticed her walk in. Sam’s rich brown hair bounced as she dropped into her seat. I watched, mesmerized, as her hair settled into place.

“Mandy’s meeting Xander here. Tonight,” Addi declared, emphasizing ‘tonight.’

Sam turned on me, a smile playing at her lips and her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Really?” she dragged out. “Isn’t that interesting. Why is he meeting you here?”

I huffed out my frustration. “You know why, Sam. He wanted to go out over the weekend but I couldn’t do it knowing I didn’t have any of you to call when things went south. I asked to meet here so I could bash him for being a shallow asshole when he decides I’m too fat to be with someone as hot as he is.”

“I don’t think you’re giving him enough credit, Mandy,” Sam retorted. “Did he ever ask you what you look like? Did he give you any indication that he wouldn’t go out with you if you weren’t thin and hot? If he did you certainly didn’t tell us.”

I shook my head and started to argue, “He kept telling me how beautiful my voice was and how he couldn’t wait to see me in person to match my face to my voice.”

“Who’s matching your face to your voice?” Claire asked as she took the seat next to me. “And why are you here before me?” she teased.

“Mandy’s got a date with the hottie she told us about last week, but she thinks he’s going to be an asshole so she is meeting him here tonight so she’s not alone when he tells her she’s too fat for him. Is that about right?” Addi told Claire.

I stuck my tongue out at her. She’d perfectly articulated my feelings, but she didn’t have to be so negative about it. “Addi, you’re the one who made it seem like he was way out of my league. I agree with you. He is out of my league. I was stunned when he called Friday. He started telling me all this stuff about himself, like his past and his dreams for the future. He has a sister and said he’d be pissed if she agreed to date someone who’d asked her out the way he asked me. He started telling me all this stuff so I wouldn’t be afraid to meet him.”

My friends exchanged worried glances. “You like him, don’t you?” Sam asked.

I looked down at my hands and picked at the pink nail polish I’d carefully applied over the weekend, and then destroyed with my nerves. “He seems like a nice guy,” I told them noncommittally.

They watched me, like they were waiting for something. They could tell I was lying my ass off and were waiting for me to sink myself, but I wasn’t taking the bait. I was going to let them sit there.

And just in case, I stuffed a huge bite of my cupcake in my mouth.

“You look nice,” Claire said. “I’ve always loved you in that dress.”

I smiled. She was baiting me, but it was working. Claire knew I was wearing my favorite dress. The soft red color matched the darker shades of my hair and highlighted my light skin. It had a cinched neckline that scooped low enough to be sexy but not so low it was slutty. The capped sleeves allowed me to wear a bra, something very important to the well-endowed. I’d paired it with black knee high boots that just barely kissed the hem of the dress.

I looked hot.

Well, as hot as I could look.

My hair was cooperating too, my soft curls bouncing just right around my shoulders. I had simple jewelry on and light make-up, but it was all different. It wasn't how I usually dressed. And they knew it.

I looked like I was trying too hard.

"He's a fool if he doesn't like you," Addi said suddenly. "You're gorgeous and you're a great person. He already likes your personality, or what he knows of you. If he blows you off we'll all go on his Facebook page and tell everyone what a jerk he is."

Tears welled up in my eyes at the thought of my friends putting themselves out there for me. It seemed so small, but it was huge to me. To know they believed in me enough and thought I deserved someone like him.

I wanted to believe it, too.

"Let's talk about something else," I suggested, hoping they would all get the hint that I didn't want to think about Xander for a little while. I glanced at my phone and saw he would be there in only twenty minutes. I needed to relax before he showed up, otherwise I just might sweat through my dress.

Thankfully they picked up on my mood and started talking about the nicer weather. "Addi, are you going to have class outside this week? It's supposed to be beautiful. I always loved it when my teachers let us go outside for class."

Addi laughed softly at Sam's idea. "I love it too, but it's hard for my class. If I taught English or even history it would work because you could go out for class and read or listen to a story or even lecture. I use the board so much, not to mention the experiments, that I don't know how I could teach outside. I need to be able to show my students what I'm working on. If they can't see it they'll never get it."

"Is it strange teaching without books?"

Addi had commented at the beginning of the year that her school had gone electronic and were no longer issuing books to students. It saved some taxpayer money because they weren't buying books, but Addi worried it would be harder on the students.

She shrugged. "I thought it would be really weird but I guess I've gotten used to it. The parents hate it though because they have to look everything up online to figure out how to help the kids. A few of my kids never have their homework done because they don't have internet at home and can't look things up online."

"Seriously?" asked Sam. "I can't imagine not having internet all the time. Hell, we have internet in our hands and these kids don't have it at home. Are their parents against it or they can't afford it?"

"Can't afford it. Some states offer cheap or free internet for students that get reduced price lunch. I think New York is considering it. They need to if we're not going to issue books. I think it's great for the kids, but the school should have had some sort of online resource in place if they were going to take the books away. I end up piecing together lectures from a variety of sites and try to send home the web addresses every day, but it gets tiring."

I listened to them talk about schools and then Sam filled us in on her meeting with her bride from hell. Claire had a few new stories to share about the crazy things people try to carry onboard an airplane. The whole time they talked, I watched the door. I knew I would recognize Xander when he walked in. I'd certainly stared at his Facebook pictures enough.

I was listening to one of Claire's stories when he arrived. At first I didn't glance at him because the man walking in was so gorgeous it almost hurt to look at him. Then I realized it was Xander.

He quickly scanned the place, his eyes bouncing right past our table. My heart sunk as I realized he never gave me a look. He saw a bunch of fat girls and looked over us to find someone better.

I watched as he walked up to the counter. He leaned against it, his jeans threatening to drift from his narrow hips. His face lit into an immediate smile when the barista addressed him.

He was a flirt.

Great.

His dark hair was cut short, shorter than in his pictures, but it suited him. His angled jaw was lined with a faint beard, like he couldn't decide if he wanted to

grow it or not. He wore a long sleeved t-shirt with his jeans, a faded green color that made his hazel eyes look green. I stuffed the rest of my second cupcake in my mouth to stop me from drooling. He was turned from me so I saw his profile, the dimple in his left cheek, the bump of his chest muscles straining against his shirt, the soft ridges of his stomach, and the bulk of his arms.

Fuck, he could make a girl come just standing there.

I didn't want to think he was hot. Certainly not that hot. I hoped the pictures were old and he had softened a little, maybe gotten slightly less gorgeous. Not even close.

He asked the barista if anyone had come in looking for him. She shook her head sadly, as if she had her sights set on him. How could she not? He thanked her for his coffee and walked to the table in the front corner, right next to the door. His jeans stretched over his perfect ass as he walked and my fingers twitched, wanting to feel those muscles in my hands.

When he sat, he glanced around again, then pulled out his phone, probably texting his friend Drew.

Crap, I hated that I knew what a perfect guy he was.

With Xander seated at his table I finally realized my table was silent. My friends had stopped talking and were staring at me instead. "What?" I snapped.

"Are you going to go talk to him?" Addi asked with a smirk.

"You go talk to him," I snapped again. "You're the skinny one."

She snorted a laugh and quirked an eyebrow at me. "Skinny is a relative term in this circle. Come on, Mandy, you agreed to this date. Go over there and meet the hottie. If he was my date I'd already be in his lap."

I looked at her like I knew she was full of shit. "He couldn't hold me."

"As much as you were staring I know you saw those muscles. He could probably hold all of us. Lucky for you, I neither share my men nor steal them from my friends. Besides, he's here to meet you."

"No, he's not," I said with disappointment. "He's here to meet the hot version of me. The version who's about half my size."

"Mandy, he's here to meet you. Now, go give the hot man a chance to prove he's not the asshole you think he is," Sam chastised me.

I huffed out my irritation and stood up, making my way toward him.
Somehow, I knew my life would never be the same again.

CHAPTER 5



Xander didn't see me coming toward him. He never looked up from his phone. I was at his table, trying to figure out what to say, and he still didn't know I was there.

Stupidly, I'd left my hot chocolate, now cold, at my table. Along with my purse and my sanity.

I finally cleared my throat and said, "Xander?"

He looked up slowly, appraising me as his eyes drifted to meet mine. It was like a slow, lazy caress. One that made my entire body light up. His eyes smiled at me and his lips quirked, as if he was trying to decide what to do with them. "Yes? Are you Mandy?"

He straightened in his seat when I nodded. He gestured toward the chair opposite him and I sat down, running my hands along my dress, trying to squash my nerves. He watched me, following my every move and making me even more anxious.

"It's nice to put a face to that beautiful voice. Thank you for meeting me."

The formality of his tone threw me. Already, after just a few seconds he was dismissing me.

"Forgive me, can I get you a hot chocolate?" He was halfway standing before I shook my head. What did it say that he remembered I liked hot chocolate but not coffee? Was that a good sign?

"I already had one. Thank you."

He lowered himself back to his seat, his jeans tightening on his thighs and

drawing my eyes. My gaze drifted between his legs to the small bulge at the apex of his jeans. Not hard, just huge.

I looked back up to his face when he sat and found him staring at me. “I didn’t see you come in. I was trying to watch for you.”

He sounded kind, but there was something in his voice that threw me. It wasn’t irritation or anger, it was disappointment. Of course.

“Actually, I was here earlier. My friends and I meet here every Tuesday so I was already here when you arrived.”

God, I sounded so formal. Not like myself. I hated that he was making me so nervous. I wanted to not care, to dismiss him as I knew he was dismissing me, but inside I was kicking myself for being there in the first place.

I should have known better.

His eyes drifted behind me to where Addi, Claire, and Sam sat, surely gawking at us. He nodded briefly, once, in their direction and I heard the soft peal of their giggles. They were suckers for a hot guy.

Then he turned his eyes on me.

Yep, I was a sucker for a hot guy, too.

I was sunk.

“You still didn’t trust me, did you? You worried I was some psycho?” he teased. His lips turned up at the edges as he lifted his cup to them. I watched his lips curl around the edge of the cup and wished I could be that cup.

I struggled to come up with a reasonable excuse for being there with my friends, something that made sense. Something better than the truth. I couldn’t admit to him that I expected him to be shallow and not interested in me because of my appearance. The only thing more humiliating than him not wanting me because I was fat would be having him admit it to my face.

“I’m just cautious. If you ended up a jerk, I wanted my friends here so I wouldn’t have to deal with it alone.”

He cocked his head to the side, a questioning look in his eyes. “Really? Why did you think I was a jerk? Was it something I said? I’m sorry if I came on too strong.”

“No, it wasn’t that, it’s just... I just don’t have that good of luck with men

most of the time. I tend to be careful meeting someone completely new. If I knew anything about you I wouldn't have thought twice about meeting you alone."

He nodded, agreeing with me, but something in his eyes held me back from believing he understood.

"I get that, but that's why I shared my background with you. So you would trust me. I thought you wanted to be here, but it sounds as though you feel like I forced you."

I couldn't believe he was doing it. He was turning around everything I said to make it seem like I was the one who wasn't into the date. Like I was the one turning him down. It cleared his conscious so he could walk away believing I did it.

"I agreed on my own. I do appreciate the background, but you have to admit, it still doesn't tell me much about who you really are. I know where you work, that you have a sister, and where you grew up, but I don't really know you."

His gaze felt like ice running over my skin. It brought goosebumps over my exposed skin and made my nipples stand on end. He looked predatory, like he was getting ready to stake his claim on me. Like he was pissed off and possessive all at once.

I'd never had a man look at me like that.

And I liked it.

"What do you want to know? I'll tell you anything."

I regarded him cautiously. What people say and what they do can be very different things. I still didn't know him and had no idea if he would actually answer any questions, but I figured I'd give it a shot.

"How long was your last relationship?"

"Six months," he said without missing a beat. If he was surprised that's what I started with, he didn't indicate it.

"When did it end?"

"Four months ago. And before you ask, I ended things because I realized she wasn't right for me. She didn't make me laugh anymore."

"What's the most important thing in a relationship?"

“Compatibility,” he answered, looking me straight in the eyes. I tried to see something in there, to see if he thought we were even remotely compatible but I had no clue.

“What constitutes compatibility to you?”

“Well, she has to be someone I can have a conversation with. Someone I can talk to and get along with. I like a woman who is sure of herself and knows who she is, not always looking for a man, or a job or her friends, to define her. I want someone who enjoys some of the same things I do, but is open to new activities.”

“What about sex?”

He paused, his coffee cup an inch from the table. He set it down carefully and met my eyes, muddy green drawing me in and making me forget both where we were and that we’d only just met. “What about sex, Mandy?”

My name on his lips was like heaven. I wanted to hear it again, a soft and perfect word that could have been a passionate sound or a dismissive one, but all I heard was passion.

Was he toying with me?

“Is sex important in determining compatibility?”

He took a sip of his coffee, watching me while he considered his next words. I’m sure he thought I was propositioning him, telling him I was ready and willing. Of course he would assume that. The fat girl was desperate so why wouldn’t she be begging for it.

“Sex is very important in determining compatibility. But I also think it’s one of the last things to figure out if it works. The first thing I notice in a woman is her smile. It’s why I wanted to meet you. Your laugh led me to believe you would have a gorgeous smile.”

He was carefully avoiding exactly what I wanted him to tell me. I wanted him to get it out there. Just tell me I was a fat, ugly cow and he’d never want me. That’s all I wanted from him, but he wouldn’t say it.

I guess I had to give him credit for being diplomatic.

“After a smile, what do you notice in a woman. Physically.”

“Physically?” he clarified with a quirk of his eyebrow. “Is this some sort of

research project or something? I feel like I'm taking a test."

No one should look as good as he did with one eyebrow raised. Most people looked silly, but on Xander nothing was silly. It was just downright sexy. He was teasing me, tormenting me into coming right out and asking him the direct question I was trying to avoid.

"Do you like fat girls? Like me? Let's just get it out there."

Xander sat back in his seat. All of a sudden the teasing and humor was gone from his face and a quiet seriousness took over his features. He looked menacing, strong. And pissed.

"I wouldn't say you're fat, Mandy, but honestly, I've never given much thought to the size of the women I date. I look for a woman whose company I enjoy and go from there."

"Really, so you've dated fat women before," I snarled at him. His answer avoided what I wanted to know and he knew it. He was trying to let me down easy and it was pissing me off. Just tell me the damn truth.

His gaze skirted over me, as if trying to figure out just how big I was. I sat firmly, my jaw set in a hard line to show him I wasn't going to be some little pushover he could bang and forget. He wasn't getting one over on me.

"Most of the women I've dated have been thin, yes. I would say you're the biggest one I've gone out with."

I nodded, willing the tears I felt stinging my eyes to stay inside until I walked away. "That's what I thought. Well, thank you for reminding me of my place in the world."

I stood up and walked back to my table where my friends sat gawking at me. I grabbed my purse and headed straight for the bathroom, ignoring Xander calling my name and the stares of my friends.

In the bathroom I let a few of the tears fall. It felt good to let them out, to clear the pain I felt. Even though I knew Xander wouldn't like me, it hurt to hear he'd never date a fat woman. I don't know why I bothered to go out with him in the first place. It really was just foolish on my part.

After a few minutes, I pulled myself together, splashing cold water on my eyes and reapplying my mascara. I walked out of the bathroom with my head

held high and headed straight for my table. It was no big shock to find Xander's table empty.

What was a surprise was the way my friends reacted.

"Why were you so mean to him?" Claire demanded. "He was nice to you."

"You obviously didn't hear him say he only dated skinny girls. If that wasn't brushing me off I don't know what was."

Claire draped her arm around my shoulder and gave me a squeeze. "I'm sorry. I wanted to believe he could be different. Of all people, I should know better."

I wrapped my arm around her back and hugged her. "He wasn't like that, Claire. I hope one day you can trust men again."

Claire waved a hand dismissively. "This isn't about me and my craziness. This is about you and yours."

I laughed, feeling better already. "I thought maybe he would be different. Melody told me the other day that I was tricking him by not telling him what I looked like. I started to believe you were right, Addi, about him not caring what I looked like because he never asked. Unfortunately it looks like the smug bitch was right."

My friends all looked ashamed, uncertain. They'd all been in the same position as me, thinking there might be a chance with a man and having it thrown back at them that we are too fat to be loved.

It still hurt.

Every.

Single.

Time.

We talked for a few more minutes, all agreeing that Xander was cute but not worth the trouble. My friends told me to move on and just live my life.

And for a second or two I thought I could go back. I thought it would be perfectly fine to go home and be okay.

When I got home that night, my cat, Zada, was waiting for me. I smiled at her meow and let her lead me to the kitchen.

I loved my condo. I'd bought it two years earlier and it was home, through

and through. The only thing I wished it had was a garage, but other than that it was perfect for me.

In the corner of my kitchen I opened the pantry door and pulled out the bag of cat food. Zada wound herself through my legs as I scooped out her food and set the bowl in front of her. I turned back to the rest of my kitchen, trying to decide if I wanted to eat something.

The embarrassed side of me wanted to avoid dinner. Skipping a few meals would probably help me to drop a few pounds. Maybe if I skipped enough meals I could lose weight to be where someone thought I was beautiful.

The practical side of me said I was being crazy. I'd always been fat and it had become who I was. I didn't want to admit just how depressing it was. I felt like something inside me snapped. Like I'd put all my hopes for my future into a guy who liked my voice. A guy who said nothing more than the sound of my voice attracted him. That made me believe my voice was enough. That I was enough.

Annoyed with my weakness I crossed the grey tile floor of my kitchen to my sleek stainless steel refrigerator. I opened the freezer and pulled out a container of cookie dough ice cream. I opened the drawer next to the fridge and grabbed a spoon. From the fridge I pulled out a bottle of pinot noir. Armed with my supplies, I went to the living room and settled into my oversized, extra deep, midnight blue couch.

I picked up my remote and turned on the TV. It was still on The Food Network and Cupcake Wars was on. I set the remote back down and drowned my sorrows in wine, ice cream, and virtual cupcakes.

My mind drifted back over my past, especially the relationship that still haunted me when I stopped fighting the memories.

The last time I lost myself was when I met Dave. It was my freshman year of college. Claire and I had just met Addi and Sam and we were settled into our weekends at the dorm. Dave was in class with Sam and joined us one night. He wasn't a big partier and was happy to have something to do on his weekend.

At first we just talked. He would flirt with me a little, but for the most part we had a casual relationship. He started coming to our movie nights more

regularly, usually finding a seat near me.

When he asked me out I felt special. It felt like he cared. I mean, we'd all been spending time together but he singled me out as the one he liked.

Our relationship started off slowly, but it picked up in no time. Within a few months we were sleeping together and spending the night at each other's dorm rooms.

As our new semester started, we began to drift apart. Dave started getting busy and would blame it on studying. He always said he had a test or a project due.

One night I decided to surprise him. You can probably guess the rest of the story. I went to his room. I'd dressed sexy for him, buying something special. Lingerie. We'd never done anything like that before, but I felt grown up buying and wearing something sexy for my boyfriend.

I knew he would be home because he told me he'd be studying all night. I wanted to surprise him, so I knocked on the door and opened my jacket just slightly, enough that he would be able to see what I was hiding underneath but no one in the hall could see.

He opened the door wide, starting to yell at his roommate, who he thought was at the door. Instead he saw me and a slow smile crossed his face. He looked down over what I was wearing and sneered at me.

"Getting a little desperate, huh?"

I shook my head, confused. I wasn't desperate, just in love. I wanted to share something new with him.

"Oh, Mandy, did you really think I was going to stay with you? When there were so many other women out there. We're only 18. And I'm here to have fun, not get sucked into a relationship with the first girl I see. Especially not one who looks like you."

At that point I looked past him to the svelte blonde in his bed. I was shocked, but she was sneering at me. I stumbled backward into the hallway, pulling my coat tight around myself. I ran back to my dorm room and cried myself to sleep.

Xander wasn't Dave. I told myself that over and over again. He wasn't nearly as cruel as Dave had been, nowhere near the evil bastard, but he still

didn't want me. I had to accept that all over again. And I wasn't sure how to start over again with hope.

CHAPTER 6



I spent the next few days wallowing in misery. I avoided talking to everyone at work and even kept my calls with my friends short. Claire tried to get me to go over to her house one night, but I just didn't have it in me.

The worst part was I didn't even really know why I was so upset. I mean, it's not like we were dating or even involved in any way. I knew I was overreacting to the whole situation. There was just something about it that made me feel like I'd missed out on something amazing with Xander.

At work I felt Melody hovering most of the time. She knew I was supposed to meet Xander Tuesday and kept trying to corner me. I made sure I was on the phone at all times. If I wasn't on the phone I ducked into the bathroom. I ate my lunch in my car instead of at my desk.

I was hiding.

From a woman half my size.

I just didn't want to hear it. I knew she could tell things hadn't gone well, and I wasn't in the mood for her to taunt me with it.

The only good thing that happened that week was I decided I was definitely going to apply for Diana's job. I couldn't sit back and let my life pass me by any longer. And if I wasn't going to have a man in my life, I could at least make sure I didn't lose my job when Melody got promoted over me, and then promptly fired me.

After lunch Friday I was walking back to my desk when I heard Melody call my name. I walked faster, hoping to get on a call before she caught up with me.

The click of her heels was dull on the short carpet in the work area, but I could still hear it clearly behind me. Getting closer.

“Excuse me, Mandy, I need your help with something,” she said loudly. I knew it was only for the benefit of others around us so I would be forced to stop. Diana poked her head out of her cubicle and I took a deep breath as I stopped.

I turned around and planted a smile on my face. “What can I do for you, Melody?”

“Oh, I was just wondering if you’ve heard from Mr. Carlson again. I heard you handled his claim last week, after I talked to him the week before. Diana told me you pointed out something you thought I should have picked up on. We’re lucky you took care of it. Has he been back in touch with you?”

I took a deep breath. I didn’t know how she’d put it all together but she figured out who Xander was. And now was using work to get information about our date.

“No, Melody. I haven’t spoken to him since last week.”

“Oh, really? I thought you were going to see him Tuesday,” she whispered.

My spine stiffened in response and I met her eyes. I saw the challenge in hers, daring me to say anything inappropriate. As far as anyone else could tell she was asking me about a customer, not about my personal life. Melody knew the rules just as well as I did, and she knew I’d pushed the line by going out with a customer.

“Yes, I saw him Tuesday,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Hmm, and you haven’t heard from him again? Not a big shock.” She looked me up and down, making her point clear. “If I’d known he was so cute, I might have gone above and beyond to make sure he was so grateful to me. Of course, if he’d taken me out I’m sure he would have called me back.”

Bile rose in my throat as I imagined Melody going after Xander. She was exactly the sort of woman someone like him would probably be interested in. He wouldn’t have overlooked Melody, dismissing her like she didn’t exist.

“Is there anything else, Melody?” I asked sweetly, swallowing the tears that threatened.

“No, I think that about covers it,” she said and turned to her desk. I watched

her sashay away and wondered if I would get fired for throwing a stapler at her.

Guessing I shouldn't push it, I resumed my walk to my own desk. I sat down and breathed a sigh of relief. As much as I didn't want to talk about Xander with Melody, having it done meant I could breathe a little easier.

Even if it sent images of the two of them together into my brain.

I sent Claire a quick text and asked her if we could get together over the weekend. Melody might have made me face my disappointment over Xander again, but she also helped me remember that I needed to move on.

My phone buzzed with a reply from Claire saying she'd call Sam and Addi and we'd all try to get together for wine and chocolate, our weekend stand-by when we could crash at someone's house. Usually everyone came to my house because I had the space to accommodate us all. I could use the company.

Smiling from my impending weekend plans, I dialed in to the phone service and reactivated my phone so calls would get routed to me. Within a few minutes my phone rang.

"Western New York Health, this is Mandy. How can I help you?" I said as I answered the phone.

"Hi Mandy. How are you today?" the voice said softly in my ear. Xander. What the hell was he doing calling me?

And what the hell were my nipples doing standing up to hear what he had to say?

"I'm fine," I ground out. "How are you doing today?"

"Well, see, that's why I'm calling, Mandy. I have a little bit of a problem. I called last week and talked to a woman, strangely enough she was also named Mandy. She was sweet and sexy sounding. I really enjoyed talking to her."

"Uh huh," I said, wondering where in the hell he was going with the whole thing.

"Well, see, I asked her out for hot chocolate, she doesn't like coffee, and a woman showed up, but it wasn't the same one."

"Oh, really?" I quipped. I was starting to get pissed. He actually believed I wasn't the same woman. That a fat woman had pretended to be me and gone in my place. He was a fucking crazy person.

“Yeah, well, let me explain. See she sounded the same, had the same seductive voice. The problem was this woman had an attitude I wasn’t expecting. The woman on the phone is confident and sure of herself. She’s sexy because she knows who she is. She made me want to get to know her, which is why I asked her out. The woman who met me came in with a chip on her shoulder and never really gave me a chance. She basically blew me off without really talking to me and then walked away from me. I was crushed. It’s taken me days to get up the courage to call you for help.”

He couldn’t be serious. He was calling me to bitch about me. To challenge my attitude. Okay, so maybe I didn’t give him much of a chance, but why would I? He said he didn’t date fat girls.

“You were crushed? I find that hard to believe. You could have snapped your fingers and had a handful of women half my size and twice as hot drooling over you,” I stated blandly.

He laughed softly. “So this is because I’m good looking? Do you think pretty people don’t get hurt when someone implies things about them? Do you think I wouldn’t be interested in you because you don’t look like you need a few dozen cheeseburgers to get healthy? Just because I’m attractive I’m automatically shallow? Is that it?”

I stammered over my words. I didn’t know what to say to him. Suddenly I felt like a first class asshole.

“I’m sorry I implied that.”

“No, you’re not. You meant it. And I understand. The thing is, Mandy, I wish the woman from the phone had shown up. The sexy, sassy one. The one I was interested in. The woman who was there, she was bitter and took it out on me. I don’t know what happened in her past to make her feel like she couldn’t trust me, but I’d love to know what it was. In fact, I’d love to know pretty much everything about her.”

“Why?” I breathed. He had to be teasing me, drawing it out so I would fall for him and he could crush me.

“Because the woman on the phone was sweet and sexy sounding and I liked her. She was nice to me and showed me that she’s really someone who cares

about others. She made me believe that maybe there is good in the world. Even if she isn't my personal happily ever after, I'd like the chance to get to know her and find out if she could be."

Tears trickled down my cheeks. He was good. He was really good.

"A guy that looks like you would never go for a woman that looks like me. It just doesn't happen."

"If that's the case, then you'll have to explain to me why I haven't been able to stop thinking about you. When I close my eyes I put your phone personality with your look and I dream about you. Mandy, I want to see you, the real you. I want to watch you as you laugh, to see that beautiful smile on your face and know I put it there."

"Are you for real? I mean, really? Because I can't take it if you're playing with me," I told him honestly. If he was playing with me, the reality was he wouldn't likely admit it. But maybe my confession would make him think twice about deceiving me.

"Mandy, I'm completely serious. I know what you look like, I know who you are. All I'm asking is for a chance to get to know you, for us to get to know each other."

I took a deep breath and wiped the tears from my cheeks. He sounded sincere, like he meant it. Could I trust him? Was he being honest?

I knew I had a choice to make. I could either choose to trust his intentions were true and leap, or I could believe he was the same as my ex and blow him off.

Silently, I contemplated the options, knowing I only had a few moments. I wanted to believe him. I wanted to think he was different. He was the one guy out there who thought I was beautiful. But old habits died hard.

"Mandy, I know you have no reason to trust me, but you also have no reason not to. It's hard to meet someone new, trust me, I understand that. But think about it this way, I asked you out before I knew what you looked like. I wasn't attracted to your body, I was attracted to your personality. I hope that means something."

He was right. Addi said the same thing and I didn't want to listen to her, but

it was the truth. I only had one question.

“Did you picture what I would look like before we met?”

I had to know. His silence gave me the answer I was afraid of, but then he spoke. “I tried to. I wondered who could embody such an amazing spirit and voice. But every time I tried to picture you it muddled. At the most I could see eyes, soft green eyes, but that was the only thing that was ever clear. I felt like I wasn’t given a picture of you because I wasn’t supposed to have an idea of who you were. The truth is, I couldn’t have dreamed up a more beautiful woman than you.”

Tears sprang freely from my eyes. I covered my mouth with my hand and cradled the phone to my ear. “I don’t feel that way, I’ll be honest with you.”

“But you are. We never see ourselves the way others see us. You say I’m attractive but I only see me. I don’t see what women see, I just see me. And I see you. I want to see more of you. What do you think?”

Oh damn, he was already talking about sex. I was not ready for that.

“Shit, I didn’t mean it that way. I just meant I want to get to know you. The real you. What I’m actually wondering is if you will give me your phone number, your personal number, not at work. Then we can talk, get to know each other, and go from there. If we hit it off the way I think we will, we’ll go on another date. And hopefully you won’t worry about me being a jerk if you’ve gotten to know me a bit better.”

I nodded. What he said made sense. If I was worried about him being too hot for me, taking our appearance out of the equation could allow me to think he was just some invisible guy, instead of the hottest man I’d ever met.

He was pretty damn smart.

“Okay.”

“Okay? Did you say okay?” he asked. I heard the excitement in his voice. It wasn’t something he could fake. It was real, genuine. He really wanted to get to know me.

“Yes, I’ll give you my number. We can get to know each other and go from there.”

“I’m going to give you my number too so you know who you’re getting a

call from. I never answer calls from people I don't know and I'm guessing you're the same."

I smiled into the phone, thinking how similar we were despite our obvious differences. "You're right. Thank you."

We exchanged numbers and hung up the phone. I knew there was still a chance he wouldn't call me, but it felt good to know I hadn't given him my number and would be sitting around waiting for him. If he didn't call, I could call him.

Or just go on with my life.

Before I put my phone away it buzzed. Ready for another text setting up plans from Claire, I was surprised to see Xander's name come up.

It was good to talk to you, the real Mandy. I look forward to getting to know you better. I'll talk to you tonight.

I smiled at my phone. Not only was he not ignoring me, but he already texted me. I sent him a quick text back that I was looking forward to hearing from him and tucked my phone away, anxious to hear from him later that night.

CHAPTER 7



Xander called me every day for the next week. He texted me multiple times, too. He was the doting boyfriend, even though he wasn't really my boyfriend.

We didn't talk about having a relationship. It was there, thick and hovering over every conversation, but Xander didn't bring up going out again. I wasn't sure if it was because he didn't want to date me or if he was trying not to scare me off again.

I wanted to believe it was the second one, but most guys weren't that patient. Rarely had I met a man who would even be willing to talk and get to know each other, over the phone especially, instead of jumping into something physical. I knew it wasn't possible that he was as scared as I was, but he was holding back.

The following Friday night, a week after he convinced me to give him my number, he scheduled our call for late. I worried he was seeing someone else and put me off until after his date. By the time he called I was not only hurt, but I was fuming. I almost didn't answer.

"Hello," I snarled as I picked up the phone.

There was a pause on his end of the line. I knew he was wondering if he'd called the wrong person. "Mandy? What's wrong? Why do you sound upset?"

"I'm not upset, why would I be?"

I laid it on thick, knowing he'd pick up on the sarcasm in my voice. He did.

"Oh really? Then how come the woman from the coffee shop is on the phone. What happened? Did Melody give you shit today? I told you not to worry

about her.”

Is it bad that I was touched that the first thing he thought about was Melody? I’d complained about her all week, telling him how horrible she was in her attitude and how perfect in her appearance. He confessed women like her were exactly why he wanted to go out with me in the first place. A good body doesn’t mean a good personality. My words, not his.

I was also happy he didn’t automatically assume I was getting my period. Most men, especially my dad, thought the only time women got bitchy was when it was that time of the month. He used to lock himself in his office when my mom and I got our periods together. It was hilarious because whenever we wanted a night to ourselves, we would give him a little attitude and he’d disappear.

Thankfully he’d take my brother with him.

“I’m not upset over Melody. She didn’t even speak to me today. What were you up to earlier?”

“What do you mean? I was working today.”

I wasn’t sure if he was being purposely obtuse or if he was teasing me, but either way I didn’t like it.

“I mean why are you calling me so late?”

“Ahhhh,” he said directly into the phone. He finally caught on to my line of questioning, and my mood. “You think I was out with someone else, is that it? Really, Mandy? You’re the only one I’ve been able to think about for two weeks. You occupy my thoughts, only you. Why would I be out with someone else?”

Instantly I felt embarrassed and guilty. I’d accused him of cheating on me when there wasn’t really an us. You can’t cheat if you aren’t together.

But he did say he was only thinking about me. That’s good right?

Then again, he didn’t tell me what he was doing. That’s bad, right?

As if reading my mind he picked back up, “I was with my sister. I told you about her. We try to go to dinner about once a month together. We’re both always so busy that we don’t get to see each other much, but we’re still close. When she asked if we could go out Friday I agreed, but I didn’t want to miss our call.”

Wow, I was a jerk. I couldn't comprehend being that close to my brother. We grew up fighting constantly and never liked each other. As adults, we only see each other at family gatherings, and even there we barely speak. It's like we're complete strangers.

"I'm sorry I was suspicious of you."

"Honey, listen, I want you to be able to tell me what you're thinking. We need to be honest with each other, even if the truth hurts sometimes. I want to be with you, and only you, and I'm not going to do anything to screw that up."

He always knew what to say to make me feel better. I don't know how he did it, but it was like he already knew me. Knew my heart. In a way, I guess he did.

"Thank you for not freaking out on me. I've never told anyone the things I tell you."

He laughed softly. "Me too. It's strange how connected I feel to you. Especially since I've only seen you once."

"And I was a bitch," I added.

He laughed again, harder this time. I heard rustling in the background and looked at my clock. It was almost ten and I wondered if he was going to bed. There was something about talking to a man in bed that was very sexy.

"You weren't sure about me. I know next time we see each other things will be different."

"Are you in bed?"

He paused, briefly, before answering, "Yeah. It's been a long week. I was going to lie down while I talked to you. Is that okay?"

"Yeah. It just feels... I don't know, really personal. Like we're sharing secrets."

He chuckled, "We are sharing secrets. I'm just sharing them while I'm in bed."

My heart rate picked up at the thought of Xander in bed. I knew how gorgeous he was and I found myself wondering what he was wearing. I opened my mouth to ask him but he spoke first.

"Why don't you tell me something new, something you haven't told me yet. How about you tell me five new things and I'll tell you five new things."

Suddenly feeling tired, I climbed the stairs to my room. “Okay,” I said on the way up. I walked into my room and turned on the lamp next to my bed. For some reason, the low light made me feel better about talking to Xander while I was in bed. I went into my closet and changed from the work clothes I was still in to my pajamas. I pulled on a pair of cotton shorts and a tank top then climbed into bed.

“Are you in bed, too?” he asked, his voice deep and sensuous.

“Yeah. I was getting tired and I figured if you were in bed I might as well be, too.”

“God, I wish I was there with you, by your side.”

I smiled, a breath pushing from me in a half-laugh, half-nervous sound. “Me too.”

“Hmmm,” he moaned softly. “Okay, before I get too distracted, tell me your five new things.”

I snuggled under the covers a little deeper, trying to think of anything new I could tell him. After talking all week, I wasn’t sure what there was about me that he didn’t already know.

“I had my first kiss when I was fourteen, my first love was George Strait because my mom listened to country music, I read about three books each week, the only foreign country I’ve visited is Canada, and... I really want to see you again.”

Xander laughed at my first admissions and got really quiet for the last one. I started to wonder if he’d hung up, or we’d gotten disconnected, because he was silent for so long. “I really want to see you, too. Who was your first kiss? What was his name?” His voice had gotten deeper, softer. He was tired, I could hear it in the slow way he was talking, but he was also sexier with his sleepy voice.

“His name was Joey Maynard. We had social studies together and he asked me out after class one day. He kissed me in the woods behind the school. We dated for about a month before he moved on to someone else.”

“His loss,” Xander said huskily. “I never thought I’d be jealous of George Strait, but you’ve officially made me hate him. Joey Maynard, too.”

I laughed. He was a charmer, I could tell. Then again, I’d figured that out

before that night.

“What kind of books do you like to read?”

“You’ll laugh at me,” I protested.

“I wouldn’t dare. I enjoy reading, too, but usually don’t read that much. Maybe we like the same things.”

“Ha! I doubt it. I read romance novels.”

“Really,” he said, sounding surprised and interested. “Like love and sex stuff.”

I huffed a laugh, “Yeah, something like that. I’ve always liked them. My life has never really had much romance in it and those books are an escape for me, a way for me to imagine my life different. The guy comes to rescue the girl from herself and they live happily ever after. And yeah, I like the ones with some sex in them, too.”

“Well, now that is something I didn’t see coming. Phew,” he breathed out. “I’m having a little trouble focusing after that one. Okay, so Canada. Where did you go and why?”

I laughed softly at the distress in his voice, but continued, “I went with my family when I was in middle school. My dad and brother wanted to go see the Yankees play Toronto so we all went. My mom and I wandered the stadium while the guys watched the game. We went shopping afterward while my dad and brother went back to the hotel and crashed. It was a fun weekend with my mom, but I could have done without the game. I don’t watch much baseball.”

“Is there a sport you do like?”

“Eh, not really. I’ve never been that into sports. My brother was an athlete and I think it pushed me in opposite directions. I wanted to be as far from him as possible most days.”

“I can understand that. It’s hard for me to picture my life without my sister in it. Jessica and I have been through a lot together. It’s hard sometimes because we’re six years apart, but I would do anything for her and know she’s the same. I wish you had that with your brother.”

I shrugged, dismissing the thought. There were times I wished my brother wasn’t such an ass to me, but most of the time I didn’t really care. We were

related by blood, not choice. We both knew if there was a choice, we wouldn't have anything to do with each other.

"I'm just used to it from him. But I had Claire growing up. She was like a sister to me. We obviously didn't live together, but we were close forever and I knew I could count on her like you count on Jessica. And Drew."

"I guess so. Drew is sort of like a brother to me now, even though we've only known each other about nine years. It feels like I've known him forever."

"That's how Claire and I are. We really have known each other forever. We've been through all the hard things in life together. It's nice to have a friend like that, you know. Someone who will pick up the pieces when you fall apart."

Xander was quiet for a few minutes, a companionable silence that left us both thinking about our family and friends, our past and future. I hoped one day Xander would be like that for me, someone I could count on no matter what, but I wasn't sure.

"Okay, tell me your five things. Quit stalling."

He barked a quick laugh. "I wasn't stalling. I was trying to understand you more. Very different things."

"Yeah, whatever," I teased.

He chuckled softly, the sound teasing my ear, almost like he was there, his lips pressed against my ear instead of a phone.

"I had a crush on my kindergarten teacher, I lost my virginity when I was 18, I've always wanted to go to England and see Buckingham Palace, I practically had to handcuff myself to the bed on Tuesday so I wouldn't go see you, and I've taken a cold shower every night since I met you."

I didn't know how to respond to him. What do you say to that? He wanted to see me, and he's turned on talking to me. How is any of that possible?

As I contemplated what Xander said, I was silent. He asked, "Mandy, are you still there?" Concern and fear was in his voice.

"I'm here. I'm just surprised is all. I wasn't expecting that."

"Well, my kindergarten teacher was the first woman I knew outside my family, and she was young and cute so I guess it was fate that I would like her," he teased.

I laughed in spite of my nerves. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

“I know,” he said softly. “But I meant all of it.”

“Why 18? It seems like a really long time to wait, especially for someone like you.”

“Someone like me? What do you mean?”

I laughed, “I mean, baseball and soccer star who had the world at his fingertips. You can’t tell me there weren’t girls in high school.”

“I was immature in high school. I knew I wasn’t ready and I didn’t have any steady girlfriends. I couldn’t sleep with someone that I knew I wouldn’t go out with again, especially for my first time. I know that’s not the typical guy thing, but I knew I’d remember it for the rest of my life and I wanted it to be more than a one night stand. My girlfriend freshman year of college was in class with me. It was her first time, too. We dated for most of our freshman year but decided we wanted different things and split up. She’s still someone I talk to at times, but we’re not that close.”

“You are quite the catch, Xander Carlson.”

“So are you Mandy Ryan. I just hope I’ve caught you.”

I smiled to myself, hoping he’d caught me too. “Why England? What’s the deal with that?”

“I don’t know. I saw pictures of it when I was in history class and was fascinated by the design and structure of it. I guess it’s the engineer in me that wants to explore it. Stonehenge is another one. It fascinates me.”

“Well, hopefully you’ll get to see them both one day.”

“Yeah, I hope so,” he murmured.

I was quiet for a few minutes. I wanted to ask about the last two things he told me, but I didn’t know how to bring it up. I mean how do you ask a guy about his cold showers or about wanting to come see you. It sounded so conceited. But it felt so good.

“You don’t want to ask, do you?” he offered softly.

“I don’t have a clue how to ask. I am curious though.”

He laughed again, always finding me funny. He was good for my ego in many ways. “After talking to you every night I really wanted to see you. Since I

don't know where you live and would feel like a stalker if I went to your work, I've been just hoping I'll get to see you again. On Tuesday when you asked if we could talk later because of your girls' night I almost went to Cooler Coffee. I knew you would be there again and I was aching to see you. I just... I wanted to see you. Obviously I didn't go, but it was the hardest thing I've had to do in a long time."

"I don't think I would have been as much of a bitch to you this time," I said softly, my voice dipping low and sexy. I almost didn't recognize it.

"It wasn't that. I can tell how important your friends are to you and I didn't want to intrude on your time together. I knew I would be able to talk to you after your hot chocolate date so I locked myself in the cold shower."

"Okay, so about that. Why don't you just... I don't know, take care of yourself?" I asked boldly. I couldn't believe I was asking him about his masturbation habits, but I couldn't stop myself.

His sharp laugh startled me. "I love that you say what's on your mind. As for taking care of myself, I did, but sometimes it's not enough. This week it hasn't been nearly enough."

"Why not?" I wondered aloud.

"Because your voice is in my head. When we talk I can't help but wonder what your skin feels like, what you taste like, the sounds you make when you're excited or when you come. I know the sound of your laugh and your voice is as familiar as my own, but I have to imagine the rest. And when I do, I just stay hard. All the time."

"Wow, I... um, wow. I don't know what to say to that."

"Have you thought about me this week? Imagined my hands on you?" his voice softened and thickened. It brought a shiver to my body and my panties dampened.

"Of course," I admitted.

"Did you touch yourself? Do you do that?"

"Sometimes," I confessed. I'd never told anyone that I'd tried it before, but I felt like I could tell him anything.

"What about right now? Are you imagining me touching you right now?"

Because I'm imagining you in my bed. Your fingers gliding over me, your lips against my ear every time you speak."

Heat and excitement coursed through me. I didn't know how to talk dirty to a man. I could imagine, but I'd never done it. Hearing his voice was definitely getting me in the mood though.

"Mandy, will you touch yourself for me? Will you let me hear you? Please?" he whispered softly, the deep sound of his voice tickling my ear and sending tremors through my entire body.

Fire licked at my core, heating me from between my legs all over. I heard myself whisper, "Yes."

"Thank you, honey. I've been dreaming about this. Will you do what I say? Let me guide your hands?"

"Yes," I whispered again, my eyes drifting closed so I could focus on his words.

"What are you wearing? I want to be able to picture you."

"Cotton shorts and a tank top."

"What color?"

"My top is pink and my shorts are black."

"Are you wearing panties?"

"Yes. They're garnet. And a thong."

"Oh, God, you sound so good. Take your hand and brush your hair from your face. I want to be able to see you, in my mind. Lie on your back and let your hand drift from your face down over your jaw, across your throat, and down between your beautiful breasts."

I did as he asked, forgetting that my hand wasn't his. I felt him there beside me, his hand touching me.

"Will you squeeze one of your nipples for me? Twist and pull on it just a little bit. Now I want you to lift your shirt and do the same to the other one, but under your shirt."

I moaned softly at the contact, pain and pleasure mixing inside me.

"Oh, God, I wish I was there with you. Will you slide your hand into your shorts? Tell me how wet you are, Mandy. I need to know."

I slid my hand beneath the waistband of my shorts, over my belly to where I ached. I slid my fingers through my folds, feeling my wetness seeping out of my body. "I'm so wet, Xander. My body is slick, ready for you."

"Argh," he groaned. "Slide your fingers inside, cover them with your come so they're smooth."

I did as he said, drawing the wet from inside me back up. "I need to come, Xander. Will you help me?"

"God yes, honey. Press your fingers into yourself, make circles, teasing yourself. Let me hear you, honey. I need to hear you," he coaxed.

I moaned aloud, feeling free. I knew I was going to come soon. "I'm almost there, Xander," I ground out.

"Good, honey. Now, go fast, as fast as you can, and hard, right over top. I want to hear you. I want you to come for me, honey. I want you to come hard. Right now, Mandy. Come now."

My body obeyed his command and released at his word. I screamed his name, thrashing alone in my bed with my own hand in my shorts. I heard him on his end of the phone, breathing frantically and grunting, his own release only seconds after mine.

I slowly pulled my hand from between my legs, aftershocks still racking my body. "Holy shit, Mandy, that was amazing. Thank you for sharing that with me. For letting me listen to you. I've never heard anything so sexy in my entire life."

"I find that hard to believe, but thank you. That was the first time I've done that."

"I thought you said you've touched yourself before?" he asked.

"Yeah, but not on the phone. I've never had phone sex."

His silence worried me. Maybe I shouldn't be admitting so many things to him.

"Neither have I. I just couldn't stop myself. I'm sorry if I upset you."

I laughed a low, husky laugh. "Not even close. I haven't felt this good in forever."

He laughed softly. "Me neither. I just want you to know that after that I can't wait much longer to see you. I'm not saying something like that has to happen,

but I need to be able to see you. I want to feel your skin under my fingers. I can't keep myself from you any longer."

"I feel the same," I admitted.

"How's tomorrow? Are you busy? Can I take you to dinner, then maybe dancing and dessert?"

I quickly flashed to my weekend. Claire and I talked about doing something, but we didn't have definite plans. I was free to say, "Yes."

"Excellent. I can't wait. Now you go get some sleep. You just wore yourself out."

"So did you. Good night, Xander."

"Good night, Mandy. I'll see you tomorrow."

CHAPTER 8



By the next afternoon I'd worked myself into a panic. I was going on my first date with Xander and was nervous as hell. After what we'd shared the night before I didn't know what to expect. I also didn't know what I wanted.

The only thing I was sure of was that I was excited to be going out with him.

I called in reinforcements to help me figure out what to wear for our date. By the time they arrived I'd emptied most of my closet onto my bed.

Claire got there first, letting herself in the front door after a quick knock. Addi and Sam were right behind her, pushing through the door shortly after Claire shut it. They all found me upstairs in my room, surrounded by my crazy, in my underwear.

"Are you wearing that?" Addi asked with her nose turned up.

I glanced down at my underwear. I had on a pink cotton bra and white cotton panties. I didn't see what was wrong.

"You can't wear that. You've been talking to him for a week and you're finally going out on a date. I'm not saying you have to have sex with him, but I'm saying you should keep the possibility open. And that says 'Closed' if I ever saw it."

I blew out a frustrated breath. This date was beginning to make me crazy. Actually, no, I'd passed crazy a while ago. I was just confused.

"What do you want to happen? If you keep on the granny panties you won't let anything happen. If you are thinking about it you should change into

something better.”

I took a deep breath and admitted the truth. “I need to change. I don’t want something that says ‘Up For Anything’ but I also don’t want to shut him down before he even gets started.”

Sam dug through my underwear drawer, something that should have bothered me, but hey, it was Sam. She pulled out a simple black bra with a little lace edging and push-up cups. It was sensual instead of slutty. She kept digging and found panties that matched and handed them both to me.

“Black underwear means you need dark clothes so the black doesn’t show through. You go put those on while we dig through the mess you’ve made,” Addi commanded. You could tell she was a teacher, always taking charge. I needed it at that moment.

I ducked into the bathroom and changed into my new underwear. I had to admit I felt a little better with just that change. A little sexier. Like I could be worthy of Xander.

I walked out of the bathroom and leaned against the doorframe, posing for my friends. I bit my nail and arched my back, giving them my sexy pose.

Claire whistled, Addi cheered, and Sam pretended to take pictures. It was a great reaction. “Thank you, thank you. I always knew I looked best in my underwear. Not!”

“You look amazing, Mandy. It’s the perfect start.”

“I do feel better. Thanks guys. I couldn’t have done this without you.”

Claire and Sam waffled but Addi called everyone to order. “This is not the time to get mushy. We still have to figure out something to cover that sexiness with.”

I watched as Addi expertly directed Sam and Claire. Sam held up outfits and Claire hung up the clothes they discarded. I sat back and let them work, wondering what the hell they were going to end up with.

“Mandy, why don’t you do your make-up while we finish with the clothes. When we have a few outfits for you to try on, you can model them for us,” Addi commanded.

I went back to the bathroom, leaving the door open so I could hear the

conversation. I leaned in close to the mirror and brushed on a light layer of foundation before going to work on my eyes. I applied a neutral base to my eyelids then blended in a deeper brown along my crease and heavier into the outside corners. I covered my lids with a sparkling gold then lined my eyes and swiped on mascara.

I wiped a copper blush on my cheeks and added a lighter copper lipstick. I leaned back from the mirror and was astonished myself.

My green eyes popped out at me, sparkling with the make-up I'd applied. I'd left my brushed copper curls loose over my neck. I coated them with a light spray to keep them from falling and left the bathroom.

"Holy shit," Claire said when she looked at me. "You look amazing. Maybe you should just go like that."

I rolled my eyes at her but was thrilled with the compliment. Addi had four outfits on the bed for me to try. Claire was still hanging up clothes and Sam was digging through my jewelry.

I picked up the first outfit, a short grey skirt and soft pink sweater. The skirt worked, but the sweater didn't go with my hair. It rarely did. Pink was my favorite color, but I couldn't ever wear it. It was frustrating.

Next was a green wrap around dress. I pulled it across my body, buttoning the first side then tying the second side to cover me. It fit well and looked good, but didn't hide my imperfections. Still, it was better than the first outfit.

Third I tried on a black dress that was just too boring. This was a date, not a business meeting.

Last Addi had picked out cobalt blue top that fit snug over my breasts but hung loose around my waist. She'd paired it with a light brown skirt that had wisps of the same blue and pink threads through it, creating flowers.

As soon as I slid the skirt on my friends all stopped what they were doing to look. I felt like I was trying on a wedding dress for how emotional they got. "What? Is it okay?" I asked.

"It's perfect," Claire said, emerging from my closet with a pair of brown heels with a pink bow across the toe. I'd bought them the previous summer but never knew what to wear them with. Obviously Claire knew.

Sam stepped up next, carrying jewelry. She draped a sparkling gold chain around my neck with a tiny gold daisy pendant. She handed me earrings that looked like miniature golden sand dollars hanging from my lobes.

I finally turned to look in my floor length mirror, to get the full effect. “Damn, I look good,” I said confidently. My friends laughed with me and followed me downstairs.

“Where are you going?” Sam asked.

“He wanted to meet me at Thai This. I told him I’d only ever been to Canada so he wants to work our way around the world in food. He figured we can go to American places any time, but it would be special to go someplace different together.”

“Wow, he sounds like a dream come true,” Addi said.

“Sometimes I think he is. Okay, I’m going to go. Thanks for your help. There’s wine in the fridge and more in the cabinet. Help yourselves to whatever. Love you guys,” I called on my way to the front door.

“Have fun,” chorused behind me and I rushed out the door to my car.

The snow had finally melted in Winterville, but the town still had a soft glow to it. I loved my town, especially as the sun was setting. We weren’t situated right on the water of Lake Erie, but we were close enough to get amazing sunsets. Unfortunately we were also close enough to get all the snow Lake Erie usually dumped on the area.

I turned off my street and smiled, like I always did, at the silly snow and winter related names most of the town had. I lived on Frozen Drive and grew up on Jack Frost Lane. I drove down Snowy Road toward the center of town. Our main street was Winter Way, a road that ran through the center of town and had most other roads branching off from it. I passed Cooler Coffee then turned off Winter Way onto Icy Lane toward Thai This.

I found parking in the lot next to the restaurant. I had no idea what Xander drove so I headed into the restaurant, a few minutes early for once, figuring I’d just wait for him inside. I popped a piece of chocolate in my mouth for luck and headed in.

The hostess smiled warmly at me and asked how many in my party. “I’m

meeting someone here. I'm not sure if he's here yet though."

"Are you Mandy?" she asked kindly.

"Yes, I am."

"Your date is already here. I can show you to your table if you're ready."

I nodded and followed her through the restaurant. The front room was packed and cozy with the murmur of guests chatting through their dinner. I glanced around nervously, looking for Xander.

We passed through an opening into a smaller dining room with only a handful of booths, all circular so an entire party could sit next to each other. Each booth was high and secluded from the others so there was an air of privacy even though the room was open. It was very romantic.

The hostess stopped at the booth in the back corner and smiled at me. I stepped close and saw a foot coming out of the booth. Then, before me, stood Xander Carlson.

"Are you leaving?" I asked, panicking that he'd changed his mind and was trying to get away before I arrived.

"No," he said with a smile. He offered me his hand and I slipped mine in his, a spark of awareness shooting up my arm and settling low in my gut. "I'm trying to be a gentleman and let you sit first."

He smiled at me and gently squeezed my hand. I slid into the booth first, still holding his hand, and Xander followed me. The hostess said, "Enjoy your meal," then left us alone.

"Hi," he said, turning to me when she was gone.

"Hi," I whispered back, a smile overtaking my face.

"You look amazing. I almost don't want to do this," he said.

"Do what?" I started to ask but was cut off by his lips on mine.

He held my hand tightly, his other hand drifting softly over my cheek. His lips were pressed loosely against mine, small kisses traded between us. I sighed, loving the feel of his lips on mine, and his tongue reached out to stroke my lips. They parted automatically, as if under his command, and his tongue slid into my mouth.

His hand drifted from my cheek into the hair at the nape of my neck as he

pulled me closer to him. His tongue gently explored my mouth, gliding alongside mine and taking us both on the ride of our lives.

Lost for a moment in our kiss, Xander tilted my head and deepened our kiss, hunger and need making us both nearly frantic. I explored his mouth, licking the roof of his mouth and dipping my tongue into the hollow of his cheeks. He did the same, learning me, returning to spots when I made a noise or clenched his fingers tighter.

After too many moments to count, Xander released me. He pressed his forehead into mine, our heaving breaths mixing together between our mouths. "I'm sorry. I ruined your make-up. I just couldn't wait another minute to kiss you."

"Mmm hmm," I murmured, still drowsy from being kissed so thoroughly. If the man could kiss me into oblivion I could only imagine what he could do when he put his whole body into the job.

"You taste like chocolate," he whispered like we were sharing a secret.

My eyes popped open and my cheeks heated. "I ate a piece before I came in. For courage or something. It made me feel better."

"I liked it. I'll never eat chocolate again without thinking about you and that kiss."

I smiled. God, he was perfect.

I straightened in my seat and went to pick up my menu when the waiter approached our table. "Good evening," he said. He flinched briefly as he passed a look between us then regained his composure. I was sure he was just shocked that someone like me would be out with a god like Xander.

"Can I get you started with something to drink? We have Coke products and our wine list is at the back of the menu. We also have some specialty cocktails on this menu here." I took the cocktail menu from him and looked it over quickly while Xander ordered a beer and water.

"I'll have a Raspberry Lemonade cocktail and a water," I told him. He nodded then left us alone again.

Xander still had my hand clamped in his. "Look at me," he said. "Your lipstick is smeared. He gave us a pretty strange look."

I pulled my hand from Xander's to dig out my mirror from my purse. I flipped it open and laughed at the mess on my face. I looked like a toddler trying on her mom's lipstick. Xander rested his hand on my leg and leaned in to kiss my shoulder.

"I thought he wondered what you were doing with me," I confessed.

Xander squeezed my thigh. "He knew exactly what I was doing with you. How do I look in brown lipstick?"

I turned to face him and snorted at the copper ring around his lips. "Come here," I beckoned, napkin in hand. I gently wiped my lipstick from his face, leaving no traces of our passionate make-out session at the restaurant.

He pulled the napkin from my hands and cupped my chin to turn to him. He wiped softly, working his way around my mouth cleaning up the lipstick. The gentle touch of his hands on my face kicked up my heartbeat and I was nearly panting by the time he was done. His pulse skittered in his neck and his breathing skipped along with it.

He put the napkin down and eyed the tube of lipstick I had in my hand. "Don't put anymore on. I'll just kiss it off you," he said, leaning closer with each word so when he spoke the last his lips were a breath away from my ear. My nipples were standing on end and my panties were getting a good rinse.

Xander inhaled deeply. "You smell so good," he whispered in my ear, the softness of his words and the tickle of his breath sending a shiver down my spine. His tongue darted out and licked behind my ear. "You taste good, too."

I clamped my mouth shut to stop a moan from escaping my lips. Xander kissed his way down my neck to my throat then back up to my mouth. He kept one hand tangled with mine and the other in his lap. When he kissed me again it was softer, more pleading than begging. His kiss made promises, told stories, but was every bit as passionate as the last one and still made my toes curl.

"I can already sense a long cold shower in my future," he murmured in my ear. I glanced down and saw his jeans were tented in the front to give room to the sizable erection he was hiding under the table.

Just then the waiter returned with our drinks and took our order, quickly retreating when he saw we didn't need anything else.

I sipped my drink, trying to calm the hormones coursing through me. I wasn't accustomed to feeling so desired and it was making me a little crazy. I wanted to crawl under the table and relieve the pressure Xander was experiencing. Or drag him under with me and help us both out.

As if sensing my thoughts, Xander brought his hand up my back to the back of my neck. He held me loosely, but enough that there was no mistaking he was there. "I can't stop touching you, or kissing you, or breathing you in. This is the craziest thing I've ever done, feeling like this, and I can't control it. I'm not scaring you, am I?"

I shook my head and looked at him over my shoulder, flashing a flirty look. "You're turning me on like you wouldn't believe. I've never felt so beautiful in my life."

He leaned forward and rested his chin on my shoulder. "You are beautiful. So fucking gorgeous. Thank you for giving me a chance."

I smiled, "Thank you for giving me a few chances."

He laughed, surprised at my statement. His breath blew over my face, tickling my nose. I leaned into him and softly pressed our lips together. He responded instantly, tightening his grip on my neck and turning me toward him. I turned into him, letting our bodies melt together, my soft curves fitting around his hard planes.

Pressed up against him I could feel just how exceptionally built he was. I ran my hands over his chest and down to his stomach, letting my fingers bump over the ridges of his body. My hands slid back up to his shoulders and I held onto the muscles there, tensing and jumping with every movement of my hands. I drifted over his arms, running a delicate finger over each bump of muscle and feeling it flex under my touch.

Xander's hands explored, too. He released my neck and ran one hand down my back to rest at the top of my ass. He split my shirt from my skirt and let his fingers roam the lower part of my back, sending sparks through my body. His other hand rested possessively on my thigh, just under the hem of my skirt. He caressed my thigh, bare under my skirt, and made me ache for him to go higher.

"I apologize," a voice said from somewhere outside my consciousness.

Xander pulled back from me guiltily, but he kept his hand on my thigh. I looked up and saw our waiter standing over us with plates of food. He deposited everything onto the table and asked if we needed anything else then vanished again.

Xander leaned into me and kissed my neck. “Whoops,” he joked against my skin. I laughed with him, feeling empowered by the way he was making me feel.

We both dug into our food hungrily. Or maybe we were just anxious to get out of there. Either way, we ate quickly, sharing food from each other’s plates and feeding each other from the same fork. Xander touched me or kissed me every few seconds, as though he couldn’t get enough of me. It was a new but amazing feeling. I couldn’t get enough of him either.

When we finished our dinner we sat back and held hands, stealing quick kisses while we talked. “I was thinking about going to Sweet & Sassy for dessert. They have live music, local artists, on Saturday nights. Of course their desserts are amazing.”

“That sounds good. We can walk from here, right?”

“Yeah,” Xander nodded. “It’s on the corner of Winter Way.”

Xander slid out of the booth after he paid for dinner and held out his hand for me. I slipped my hand into his and smiled when he held onto it tightly as we left the restaurant.

CHAPTER 9



Sweet & Sassy was crowded but we still managed to snag a table. A waitress in all black with a pink apron around her waist greeted us warmly and gave us menus. I was a little disappointed that we were sitting across the table from each other, but Xander remedied it quickly when he scooted his chair next to mine.

And rested his hand back on my thigh.

“What sounds good?” he asked me quietly, pressing his lips to my ear.

My body trembled, shocks of pleasure sparking through me. I glanced at the menu and saw chocolate, chocolate, and more chocolate. “You pick. It all looks good to me.”

“You look good to me,” he whispered, nipping my ear gently. I jumped, surprised at the intimate touch in such a public setting. A smile toyed with my lips as my body heated up. “How about something chocolate?” he teased.

The waitress returned and Xander ordered a variety tray of truffles, two mini chocolate mousse cupcakes, and two glasses of wine. As she walked away Xander asked me to dance. There was a live band playing music but no one was dancing. A dance floor was wide open in front of the band, but I wasn’t sure about being on display for the crowd. “I don’t know. No one else is dancing.”

“So,” he said with a shrug. “Maybe we’ll spark them to join us.”

I smiled at his hopeful look and let him lead me to the front of the restaurant. The band started playing a slow, sweet song as we stepped onto the dance floor. Xander pulled me in close, his one hand gripping mine while the other rested

possessively low on my back.

Wrapped in his arms, I felt smaller than my size 18. Xander was tall, easily over six feet tall. The bulk of his body dwarfed mine, allowing me to feel small compared to him. He held me tight, our bodies pressed together, allowing me to enjoy the firmness of his body.

Muscles held me in place against him and his burgeoning erection pressed into me. We danced slowly, our feet shuffling slightly to keep us moving but really just using the music as an excuse to hold each other close. I realized as he held me that I'd never felt more cared for or loved than I did at that moment.

It scared the shit out of me.

I didn't want to be falling for Xander so quickly but I was. He knew me better than anyone else ever had, including Claire. I'd shared my deepest secrets and my fears with him. I'd told him about my past and my hopes for the future. And he'd shared all of the same with me.

I knew I would never be the same after him.

When the song ended Xander noticed our dessert was waiting for us at the table. He wrapped his arms around my waist as he followed me, keeping his bulging pants hidden, back to our table.

Xander dropped into the seat next to me and brought our clasped hands to his lips, brushing a soft kiss over my knuckles. Xander reached out to pull the plate of goodies closer to us and selected one. He sniffed it, as if he could tell what flavor it was underneath the thick coat of chocolate.

He offered it to me and whispered, "Take a bite."

I opened my mouth and closed my lips around the chocolate, his fingers barely brushing the inside of my lips. I bit into the truffle and tasted the sweet chocolate and the savory peanut butter hit my taste buds. I moaned softly and closed my eyes. When I opened them Xander was watching me. He slid the rest of the truffle into his own mouth and licked his fingers clean.

"That was really good," I said.

Xander selected another truffle, again sharing it between us. We shared each truffle the flavors blending between our mouths. When Xander slanted his lips over mine I could taste the chocolate in his mouth, sweet mixing with his

commanding tongue and making my body hum in anticipation.

We drank our wine then Xander fed me one of the cupcakes. It was soft and sweet and melted in my mouth. I picked up the second one and held it out for him. He held my eyes as he closed his lips over my fingers, taking the cupcake away with his tongue. His hand on my wrist held my fingers in his mouth and he licked and sucked them until they were clean and I was panting. Wet panties and tight nipples led the way for my aching body to throb for him. I wanted him. Bad.

When he leaned over and whispered in my ear, “Do you want to come back to my place?” I nodded eagerly and followed him out the door.

In the cool fresh air a sense of clarity found me. Was I really going to go home with someone I barely knew? After all, Xander and I had talked, but we really only met once. Was I the sort of woman who slept with a guy on the first date?

As if he could feel my mood shift, Xander stopped me on the sidewalk. Light from the open stores next to us faded to deep shadows where we were standing. He pulled me to him and held me close. “Are you okay?”

I tried to nod but wasn’t entirely sure how I was feeling. Wrapped tightly in his arms I felt safe and protected, but going home with him I worried I was getting in over my head.

Xander leaned down and ran his tongue lightly over my ear. His lips stayed close to me as he took a deep breath. Then he said, “You don’t have to come home with me if you don’t want to. I know this is all strange and the connection between us is... I don’t know. It’s fucking powerful. I’m not asking you back to my place for sex. I just want to be alone with you. Without every other man in the place giving you his bedroom eyes.”

I laughed into his firm chest, holding on to his waist like a life preserver. “No one was looking at me like that.”

He pulled back from me to look in my eyes. “Yes, they were. How did you not notice?”

“Uh, because it wasn’t happening,” I teased.

“Yes, honey, it was. You don’t even realize how stunning you are.”

I waved my hand dismissively, not able to voice how much it meant to hear him say those words. I'd dreamt my whole life of someone finding me attractive, and the hottest guy I've ever met was telling me I was stunning. It was almost too much for me.

Xander leaned against the brick of the building behind us and pulled me up against him. "Mandy, listen. I'm here with you because I love your personality. We talk easily and I enjoy knowing everything about you. Tonight, the way I couldn't keep my hands off you, that had nothing to do with our conversations. That's all you, baby. You're beautiful, and you're turning me on. I know you can feel it, you can tell. I want you, not some skinny version of you. You're beautiful as you are. I wish you could see what I see."

"I don't know if I'll ever see myself that way. I've accepted who I am and am basically happy, but I don't think of myself as sexy. It baffles me that you want me. At all."

Xander anchored his hands to my hips, his fingers digging into my fleshy sides, and pulled me against him. Our bodies met and he nudged me softly, his firm erection digging into my soft belly. "You know I do. You can feel that. There's no one out here but us and that's all because of you. And yes, I'd love to take you home and make love to you until dawn, but I will be more than happy to just spend more time with you. This is about both of us. I want to make you happy."

"I've never had this. I've never had someone who cares if I'm happy. Who thinks of me first instead of thinking of himself. It's... it's just strange. None of my friends have men in their lives like you. It's like we've always been cast aside because we're chubby and you standing here telling me you want me... It's all a little surreal to me."

Xander pulled me in tight, holding me to him. His hands stroked my back and he pressed his lips to my hair. Where he was sexy and sensual at dinner and dessert, he was sweet and sensitive as we stood on the sidewalk. His touch was a reassurance, not meant to turn me on, or get him going, but just to convince me he was there for the same reasons I was. He wanted to be.

"If it makes you feel better, this is a little surreal to me, too. I know you think

I've had such an easy life because I'm good looking--

"Hot, Xander. Not just good looking. You're fucking gorgeous. Not to mention charming."

He laughed softly into my hair. "Regardless, it's not like everything comes easily to me. I told you about college and how poorly I'd done. I also have trouble with girls, all the time. You wouldn't believe how many women out there just want me for arm candy."

"Who said I didn't?" I teased.

He threw his head back and laughed wholeheartedly. The sound rumbled from his chest into me, pressed against him. "See, that's what I love about you. You can joke with me. No woman who was really after me for devious reasons would joke around about it. We just connected. It's strange and it's scary, but it's amazing. You're amazing."

"Are you sure you're not just trying to get me into bed?"

He pulled back from me, his hands still gripping my hips. He looked into my eyes as he drifted toward me, his gaze drifting to my lips seconds before his mouth caught mine. His kiss was slow, soft. He kissed my lips, working his way from one corner of my mouth to the other. He pulled my bottom lip into his mouth, sucking hard on it. He released it only to reclaim my lip between his teeth, nipping and pulling.

My heart pounded in my chest, threatening to break loose. Xander's lips covered mine again, his tongue sweeping past my lips as I sighed in pleasure. His tongue glided gently over mine. His kiss was still soft, but there was an urgency behind it, as though he was afraid someone would stop us.

I clung to him, leaning his back against the brick and letting my hands run over his body. His shirt was long sleeved, but it was thin and allowed me to feel the planes of his body, the strength he hid beneath his clothes. My hands drifted to his waist and I hesitated. I wanted to reach between us and hold him, feel him throbbing in my hand, but I couldn't do it in public. Instead I slid my hand under his shirt, feeling the soft skin and silky hair on his stomach. His muscles twitched under my fingers and he groaned as he thrust into me.

His hands travelled south from my hips to cup my ass. He squeezed and

kneaded my flesh, holding me to him. I moaned softly into him and pulled back.

“Let’s go to your place,” I said. My voice was unrecognizable with the thick emotion clouding it.

Xander looked at me and held my face in his hands. “That’s not why I kissed you. I was going to kiss you and let you go home. I don’t want you doing anything you don’t want to do. I need you to trust me.”

“I know. I do trust you. And I want to go back to your place. Now.”

Xander watched me a few more seconds then grabbed my hands and practically dragged me back to the parking lot outside Thai This where we’d left our cars. He pointed out his to me and led me to my car, kissing me hard before I got in. He jogged across the parking lot to his Jeep and within seconds I was following him to his place.

CHAPTER 10



The drive to Xander's house took us back toward my own place. When we pulled into the driveway of an older style ranch home, I was impressed. Xander mentioned he owned his home, but I expected a chic bachelor pad, not a home in a neighborhood close to mine.

Xander pulled into the garage and I parked right behind him in the driveway. He climbed from his Jeep and walked back toward me. I met him at the entrance to the garage and he grasped my hand, pulling me inside behind him.

We walked straight into the kitchen. It had an old, rustic sort of feel. The cabinets were clearly original to the house but in excellent shape. The stone counters looked as though they'd been replaced recently. To the right sat a solid wood table in a deep, rich espresso stain with four mismatched chairs that somehow looked perfect.

"This is beautiful," I breathed, impressed with his home.

"Thanks. You should have seen the place when I bought it. It has good bones, but it needed some love."

"You did all the work here?" He nodded. "Wow, I'm even more impressed now. Will you tell me about what you did?"

He raised a skeptical eyebrow at me. "You really want to hear about all this?"

I smiled. "Yeah. It gives me a better idea of who you are. Plus, I love my townhouse, but it doesn't have the charm of this place. I love old homes like this. Where you feel like they have a story to tell and you have to figure out what it is.

I think you found this home's story."

He blushed and glanced away, looking around the kitchen of his home. Pride and embarrassment warred on his face but when he turned back to me the pride shined through.

"The house was owned by a woman who grew up here. Her parents built the house. She was going into a retirement home and didn't have any family so she was selling the house and planning to use the money for her stay at the home."

He stood beside me as he talked. When our eyes met, I could see how important the house was to him.

"She had it listed way below market price, but no one wanted it because of all the work that needed to be done. I went to visit her, she'd already moved to the retirement home, and talked to her about the house. She told me about growing up here and how much love had filled the house. She had two siblings but both moved away years ago and had no interest in the house. She'd never married so she had no kids to claim it either. She just wanted it to go to someone who would love the house."

I squeezed his hand, encouraging him to continue. I could tell he'd gotten attached to the woman.

"Anyway, she worried about money because the asking price would only pay for about five years in the retirement home. She said she knew it needed a lot of work, but she needed to get enough out of it to be sure she could live without worrying. Being on her own, she didn't have family she could call on if she ran out of money. I agreed to pay a little above her asking price and I signed a contract with the nursing home that if she runs out of money they will come to me to help her out."

"What's her name?"

"Louise. She's become like a grandmother to me. I go visit her every week and we play cards. I bring her pictures of the house and she tells me stories. This house has a lot of stories and you're right, I've tried hard to find them. Louise has helped."

"She sounds wonderful. It makes this even more special of a place because you have a connection to the background of it."

Xander nodded. "That's why I love it so much. I know it's just a house, but it's home for me. It's the first place I've ever felt proud to have."

I smiled and reached up to kiss him. He met me halfway and his tongue swept quickly through my mouth. I pulled back before we got too involved in our kiss and asked, "So what have you done in here?"

He looked around the kitchen taking in the room. "Just about everything actually. The cabinets aren't original but I custom made ones that matched the old design. The counters are new and I replaced the tile floor when I first got here. Of course all the appliances are new. The table is one I found at a garage sale a few years ago and just thought it worked. I collected the chairs over the years, looking for similar scale and color but I wanted something a bit different."

"You've done amazing. I really thought those were the original cabinets. They're beautiful." I ran my hand over the cabinet doors and felt the smooth wood, cool beneath my fingertips.

"Do you want to see the rest?" Xander asked shyly.

I turned to him, a grin splitting my face. "Absolutely."

He led me through the dining room where he'd replaced the hardwood floors and installed a built-in to hold serving dishes and other rarely used kitchen items. The living room had the same hardwood floors and a new ceiling fan. The furniture was big and leather, very inviting. Xander had a huge TV across from the couch and a few small tables scattered around the room. The whole place had a very comfortable, homey feel.

Beyond the living room was a narrow hallway that led to the bedrooms. We passed two small rooms that Xander used as his office and home gym and a hall bathroom before approaching his bedroom.

"I'm not trying to lure you in here. I just want you to see it."

"Is that a euphemism?"

He barked a laugh and pulled me in for a sharp kiss then flipped on the light in his bedroom.

I was glad he'd saved it for last because I knew I wouldn't have gotten through the rest of the house.

Front and center was a king sized bed with a huge wooden headboard that

covered half the wall. Crisp white sheets and a comforter lined the bed with pillows haphazardly thrown over the top. A large dresser stood to one side and a TV sat atop a stand in the corner. Two doors framed the bed next to the nightstands leading to the bathroom and closet.

Walking in to the oversized closet I wondered why Xander didn't have more clothes. The closet only appeared half full. "Where's the rest of your stuff?"

He looked down at his feet and ran a hand over his short dark hair. "I don't have that much stuff. The closet is great because things rarely get lost, but it's way too big for me. If someone ever moves in here with me it'll be good that she has space though so I don't try to fill it up."

He said the last sentence with his eyes locked onto mine, as though he were considering the possibility of me moving in with him. I mouthed, "Oh" and went back into the bedroom. I walked around his bed to the other door.

Xander flipped on the light in his bathroom and I nearly fell over. "Holy shit," I said before I could stop myself. The room was stunning.

A two or more person shower ran along one wall with a jetted bathtub next to it, a window right above. The vanity and toilet were off to the other side with a door to keep the toilet private. Double sinks graced the sleek concrete counters, anchored by a sturdy wooden vanity. Slate tile floors sparkled in the lights and the amber color was picked out of the floor and painted on the walls.

I wanted to live in that bathroom.

"Did you do all this, too?" I asked.

He nodded shyly. "I figured if I was redoing it all I would go crazy with it. It's a bit much but I love it."

"It's amazing. I would kill for a bathroom like this."

"You look good in here. It suits you." He reached for me and I fell easily into his arms. Holding me, leaning against the counter, I listened to his heart beating. His hands slowly glided over my back. I did the same, listening as his steady heart beat faster the longer we held each other.

When he tipped my face up to his he kissed me, slipping his hand into my hair and holding me in place. My hands ran over his chest, drifting toward his waist. I lifted the edge of his shirt and let my fingers trace over his muscles,

reveling in the flinch they made when I touched each muscle.

Xander's tongue swept through my mouth, claiming me as his. The force and speed of his tongue increased with each touch of my hands on his stomach until he broke our kiss, breathless.

"I'm sorry, honey, I can't do this. I can't kiss you like this. Not here so close to my bed. We can go in the other room and talk."

"Or..." I glanced toward his room where the king sized bed sat just out of sight.

"Or what?" he ground out, fighting the hormones I knew were racing through him.

I decided to be the bold, confident woman I was on the phone. The one who'd made Xander come with only my words and sounds just the night before. The one who'd had him hard all evening.

"Or we could see where this leads us, maybe on your bed."

He reached around me so fast I didn't know what he was doing until he had me hoisted in his arms. "You're going to hurt yourself. Put me down," I protested.

Xander carried me to the bed, kissing my neck as he walked and murmuring against my skin. My legs were wrapped around him and I held on tightly, hoping he wouldn't give himself a hernia.

At the edge of the bed Xander slowly lowered me, our bodies rubbing together all the way down. He groaned as my feet hit the floor and he sealed our mouths together, frantically kissing me.

"On the bed. Now," he commanded. A little thrill raced through me at the change in him all of a sudden. I'd never had a man order me around in bed before but I was thinking I was going to enjoy it.

My panties got wetter as I took in the look of pure desire on his face. He wanted me. Bad.

He crawled onto the bed and up my body, stopping at my waist. He nudged my shirt up with his nose and ran his tongue over the soft skin of my belly. I cringed and tried to move away, wishing he wouldn't have his face so close to the fattest part of me.

“Don’t move,” he said harshly. “I’ve been touching this spot all night and I need to know what it tastes like.”

I laid stock still as he slid my shirt up further and kissed and sucked the flabby skin of my belly. He dipped his tongue into my belly button and hummed against my body. My heart was racing and fire licked at every inch of my skin, aching and burning for him to keep touching me.

“Take off your shirt,” he told me. I pulled my shoulders from the bed and tugged my shirt over my head then dropped it off the side of the bed.

His hazel eyes, a deep muddy lust-filled green, raked over the top half of me, resting on my mouth for a brief second before meeting my eyes. “You’re beautiful,” he said seriously when our eyes locked together. Mine sparked with tears and he immediately moved up to kiss me.

He held himself up with one hand and forced the other into my hair, pulling me up to meet his kiss. His tongue pushed through my teeth and plunged roughly into my mouth. I held on to him, trying to remember everything about what I was feeling in case it was a dream and I woke up.

When he pulled back from me, he looked into my eyes, our foreheads pressed together. “You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever had in my bed. The most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. And I’m going to make sure you know just how much I want you by the time I’m done with you.”

I gulped, suddenly terrified of what he was going to do. No, I knew he wasn’t going to hurt me, but I knew it would be very emotional for me if he tried to get me to see myself differently.

“I kiss your lips and I don’t see a fat face like you think you have. I taste the sweetness of you, a hint of chocolate which reminds me of you, and I know I can’t stop there.”

He moved toward my ear and whispered, “When I kiss your cheek I don’t think about your hidden cheekbones or your chubby cheeks. I think about how good your skin smells and how much you like it when I dip my tongue behind your ear and how fast your pulse is when I’m near.”

His tongue caressed my pulse and it skipped faster, encouraging him.

“I work my way down your neck to your breasts and I’m not thinking that

they're too big or heavy, I'm thinking they fit perfectly in my hands and," he paused as he rasped a thumb over one nipple. I arched into him, pressing my breasts into his hand more securely. "I'm thinking about how you respond to my touch. About how I listened to you last night when you were touching your nipples and how hard I got."

He reached behind me and unclasped my bra, sliding it down my arms and throwing it behind him. His mouth covered one nipple as his fingers twisted the other. I moaned and clawed at him. I was on the edge of an orgasm just from his words and a little nipple play, something that had never happened before. I knew I'd rupture if he touched me where I ached for him.

His hands slid down to my hips and he trailed kisses as he went. On my belly he said, "When I kiss here I don't think about the weight you think you need to lose. I think about how soft your skin is and how this is one place where I know smells like you. A place that isn't tainted by deodorant or perfume or anything else, but just holds you."

My hands gripped his head, his short hair brushing against the tips of my fingers and tickling my palms. As he kissed me he slid my skirt and panties from my hips. He looked up at me, a question in his eyes. I smiled at him, giving him the permission he sought.

He tossed my skirt and panties to the floor with my other clothes and I squeezed my eyes shut, not wanting to see the look in his eyes when he took in my full naked body.

"Look at me, Mandy," he said softly. I forced my eyes opened and met his, finding need and aching desire there instead of the disgust I expected. "You're fucking beautiful. I don't know how I got so lucky, but thank you for being here."

A tear slipped from my eye and Xander moved to lie next to me. "Talk to me, honey. What are you thinking right now?"

I hesitated. He said he liked the confident woman from the phone and I was feeling like anything but at that moment. I wanted to pull the covers around myself and hide from him. I wanted to run screaming from his house and never look back. I wanted to wake up from the dream that I was sure was about to

bring me heartache.

“I’m scared out of my mind. I don’t understand why you find me attractive because I don’t.”

“Stop. Right there, stop. Attraction isn’t something we can control. I liked you the moment you answered the phone and that hasn’t changed because of how you look. If anything, it’s gotten more intense. I know you don’t get it, but you are beautiful in my eyes. Nothing has to happen. I can put your clothes back on and we can go sit on the couch. You’re in charge here.”

“Really,” I teased. “Because I sort of liked being ordered around.”

“Yeah?”

“It was kind of hot.”

“I’ll have to keep that in mind. For right now I think we need to take this slow. Are you okay with that?”

I glanced down at our bodies pressed side by side, mine completely naked and his fully clothed. “I think I’d be better with everything if you were naked too.”

He smiled and kissed my nose before rolling off the bed. His clothes disappeared quickly and he returned to my side, propping himself up on his elbow. I turned toward him, feeling him pressing low and hard into my bare stomach. I looked down and reached for him, unable to stop myself.

I wrapped my fingers around his length, marveling at the silky skin covering his hard shaft. A few drops of come glistened on the tip and I wiped them with my thumb, circling his tip. Xander gritted his teeth and thrust into my hand. “Fuck, honey, you can’t keep doing that or I’ll come.”

“I want you to come. I want to watch you. I want to taste you.”

“Can I taste you first? Please,” he moaned as I stroked him gently. He pushed me to my back lightly and leaned over me, kissing my neck and traveling down my body. He stopped at my nipples to lick and nip then ran his tongue over my belly before setting up camp between my legs.

I still hadn’t answered him so he looked at me expectantly as he pressed his nose against my body. His fingers ran down my inner thighs, tickling and teasing me to open wide for him. I moaned softly and let my knees drop to the bed,

giving Xander the access he needed.

He didn't waste any time, running his tongue all over me in one swift movement. I moaned loudly and arched into him. "Fuck, you taste good," he murmured against my skin. His hands held my legs to the sides as he dove his tongue inside me, thrusting gently into me before he returned to my nub.

He circled me, sucking softly on me. His fingers drifted closer to me until he slid one inside, probing deeply into me. He pulled his slick finger from me and thrust it back in with another one as he pulled me into his mouth. I screamed and fought him, trying to hold back instead of letting the release fill me.

"Come for me honey. I need to taste you. Now."

Xander added a third finger and thrust deep and strong into me, his tongue furiously licking me as my body clenched tight around him and I felt my release on the tip of his tongue. He reached up with his free hand and twisted my nipple as he dove his fingers inside me the next time, the pleasure and pain of his movement shocking the orgasm out of me.

I screamed his name, coming in a powerful thrashing explosion. He held onto me, sucking and probing as wave after wave of orgasm rushed over me. As the rush slowed I felt Xander's fingers slide from deep inside me and he kissed my thigh with wet lips. He crawled up over me, lying down next to me on the bed, his erection bridging the gap between us.

"That was the most amazing thing ever. I'll never be able to stop thinking about the way you sound and the way you taste."

I reached between us and held him in my hand, hesitating. He stroked my hair softly, kissing my temple and holding me. "Will you make love to me?" I finally asked.

He froze. Like he changed his mind. When I gathered the courage to look at him he had the biggest grin on his face. "Are you sure? I don't want you to feel like you have to."

"If you don't want to--"

"Fuck no," he interrupted me. "You know I want to. I just want to be sure you're ready."

"I want to feel you inside me. I... I need you inside me."

Xander leaned over me and opened the drawer on his nightstand and pulled out a condom. I took it from his fingers and tore it open. He laid on his back, his erection pointing to the ceiling. I held the condom over him and looked at him briefly before I started rolling it down over him.

His fingers found my naked vagina and he slid two inside while I worked on him. My body moved with his fingers, bouncing over his hand, seeking another release as he toyed with me.

When the condom was in place Xander gripped my hips and started guiding me to crawl over top of him. "What are you doing?" I asked, frantic. I couldn't sit on him, I would crush him.

"I want you on top, at least to start. I want to watch you ride me."

"I'm afraid I'll hurt you."

"Not a chance. Please. I just want to watch you for a few minutes."

I buckled under the pleading look in his eyes and crawled over top of him. He guided himself into me, holding my hips when he was lined up. Letting him control my body, I enjoyed the feel of him throbbing at my entrance. My body was wet and ready for him, already aching from his touch.

Xander slid me down over him inch by inch, letting my body stretch to accommodate his thick cock. I spread my knees further to welcome him in and dropped down onto him, impaling myself on his erection.

The pain and pleasure of having him inside me attacked my body and let me know I was ready to go again. Xander felt my body clench around him and moaned softly. "Ride me, honey. Take your pleasure from my body. Like you took last night from my words. Ride me hard."

I rested my hands on his chest to help with my leverage and slowly lifted from him. I dropped back down, spreading my knees far to take Xander in as deep as he would go. His cock hit me deep and hard but I needed it faster. His hands held my hips, not controlling, just feeling me. I lifted and dropped harder and faster, feeling my body coiling tight around him as my orgasm crept closer to the surface.

Frustrated that I couldn't move faster I threw my head back and sat up. Xander sensed my need and slid his hand between us. He rubbed furiously

against me with his fingers, making me lean back further to give him better access. I moaned loudly, closer and closer to the edge I desperately needed to fall over. Xander flipped us abruptly, keeping himself sheathed inside my body and slammed into me.

His fingers worked their magic on me as he pounded our bodies together. The slap of skin was a faint noise in the background compared to the heavy breathing and moaning we were doing. Xander moaned into my ear, “Come for me, Mandy. Honey, I need you to come now. I can’t hold on much longer, baby. Let me have it.”

I came under his command, screaming his name and clinging to him as my body rocked with the power of my orgasm. He thrust hard and deep, my name on his lips as he came right after me.

He kissed my eyes, my cheeks, my fingers, everywhere he could reach as we both shuddered with aftershocks. Making love to him was the most powerful and tender experience of my life. Even as I started to ache between my legs and knew I’d be sore for days, I knew more than anything else that he’d ruined me for other men. No one would ever compare to Xander Carlson.

CHAPTER 11



Afterward, Xander pulled me into his arms and held me. He whispered in my ear and told me how beautiful I was. In the post-coital glow, I let myself believe he could actually feel that way.

Deliciously sated and throbbing from our mutual pleasure, I stayed in Xander's arms, in his bed. I knew I should leave, go home instead of dealing with an awkward morning after, or a walk of shame. Xander held me close as we cuddled in his bed, talking in between soft kisses. I told him I should go but he kept talking and kissing me and I never left.

Somewhere past midnight we fell asleep, tangled in each other's arm with the crisp white sheets pulled around us. I was vaguely aware that I'd never spent that much time naked with a man. As I drifted to sleep I also realized I'd never spent the night with a man either.

A few hours later I woke up and felt uncomfortable being there. After everything we'd shared, our phone calls, the touches, the love making, I still worried that the morning would be strange.

I disentangled myself from his embrace and eased off the bed. I quietly gathered my clothes and got dressed. I glanced back at the bed, Xander lying face down and sprawled across his side of the bed. My heart ached, telling me to curl up next to him again, but I knew I should leave.

Instead of ducking out without a word, I decided to tell him I was going. Walking to the side of the bed, I rested my hand on his bare shoulder, the heat from his skin warming me. "Xander," I called softly as I nudged him.

“Hmm?”

“I’m going to head home.”

He rolled over and looked up at me, his eyes sleepy and confused. “Mandy. Honey, come back to bed.”

“No, I’m going to go home. You go back to sleep.”

He grabbed my hand and pulled me down to him for a sleepy kiss. “You don’t have to leave. I want you to stay.”

I smiled, wondering if maybe I should stay, but I knew the morning would be odd. “I need to get home. I think my friends are still there.”

“Oh babe, I didn’t know I was keeping you from friends. I’m sorry.”

I smiled, “No, it’s okay. They came over to help me figure out what to wear on our date.”

He ran his hand over my ass then up under my skirt to touch my bare skin. “Tell them thank you for me then. You looked amazing. Still do.”

“I’ll tell them. Call me tomorrow?”

“Definitely. Be careful, honey.”

I kissed him softly and let myself out the front door. The streets were quiet as I drove home and I found my townhouse dark. Inside I saw Sam on the couch and smiled. I dragged myself upstairs and went into my room, stripping off my clothes for the second time. I pulled on a tank top and shorts and climbed into bed next to a passed out Claire.

The next morning Claire rolled over and smacked me, waking me up. She screamed and jumped up before she saw it was only me. In my bed. “When did you get home?” she asked, climbing back into bed.

“Around three. Xander wanted me to stay but I worried the morning after would be weird.”

“Ooh, the morning after. It sounds like you had a good night.”

“Yep, a really good night. He’s amazing. And he wore me out. I’m starving. Let’s go wake up Sam and Addi and I’ll tell you guys all about my night.”

In the kitchen I pulled out pancake mix. Sam grabbed the mixing bowls and Addi pulled milk, eggs, and bacon out of the fridge. Claire started the coffee.

I turned on the stove, heating up the pan for the pancakes as Addi laid strips

of bacon on a plate to cook in the microwave.

“Okay, spill. How was last night?” Addi asked as I poured the first pancakes into the pan.

“It was amazing. We went to dinner and he couldn’t keep his hands off me. The first thing he did was kiss me, like mad passionate, make-out kissing. My lipstick was smeared all over my face and his and the waiter looked at us like we were crazy. He said he couldn’t stop himself from finding out what I tasted like.”

“Damn, that’s hot,” Sam said.

“Yeah, it was. He couldn’t keep his hands off me all night. He was either holding my hand or rubbing my leg or had his arms around me pretty much all night. It was... shit, I can’t even describe it.”

“Do you still think he isn’t serious?” Addi asked.

“I think that’ll always be in the back of my mind, wondering if he’s just with me until someone skinnier comes along. I’ve spent 27 years believing I was too fat for anyone to love and it’s weird to start thinking maybe it could happen. I mean I’m not thinking he’s in love with me now, but the way he responds to me, how turned on he was all night, not just me, was just... it was different than anyone I’ve ever been with.”

“He sounds perfect, almost too good to be true. I’m just glad you’re happy,” Sam added.

“Thanks. It’s funny to start believing but I do. And I know if it can happen for me it can happen for you guys, too.”

They groaned in unison and I laughed, flipping pancakes onto a plate and crunching down on a piece of dark, crispy bacon.

“So did you sleep with him?” Addi asked me.

I blushed, wondering what they would think of me that I slept with him on our first date. I didn’t count the first time we’d met because I felt like it was a different situation. This was our first date.

“I did. Does that make me a whore?”

“Hell, no,” Sam yelled. “That’s awesome. How was it?”

I glanced at Addi and Claire and found them smiling encouragingly. They didn’t seem to think I was a slut either and were anxious for details. It was odd

being the one with a story to tell.

“It was amazing, like best sex of my life amazing. I don’t think I will ever have sex again without comparing it to him and I doubt anyone will ever compare. It was sweet and sexy but also passionate and wild. He took care of me first, a few times, and then again during. But he was just... I could easily get addicted to him.”

“Man, I want one. Does he have a hot brother who’s also into fat women?” Addi teased.

I laughed and shook my head. “Nope, just a sister. And I’m pretty sure she’s into men.”

“I couldn’t play for the other team anyway. There’s something about imagining touching a woman that makes me shiver. And not in a good way.”

“I know,” Claire chimed in. “I feel like life might be easier if I was into chicks, but I just can’t do it.”

“Yep, sausage fan here, too. Women are too damn moody. Plus, I like cock way too much. Well, what I remember of it,” Sam teased.

Addi laughed, “Yeah, I’m with you. It’s been so long I’m not sure I’d know what to do with one. We’ll have to live vicariously through Mandy though. Maybe we can pick up a few tips along the way.”

I laughed along with them, flipping pancakes and eating a hot one every once in a while. Claire made me a hot chocolate while the rest of them enjoyed coffee. After breakfast we piled on my couch and flipped channels before deciding to watch Bridesmaids.

My phone beeped with a new message shortly after the movie started. I picked it up halfheartedly, not expecting more than an alert about coupons ready to expire or something like that.

Xander’s name was on my screen and I opened the message. Claire paused the movie, “What’s going on?”

“Nothing, just a text from Xander. Oh, he’s so sweet,” I said, handing my phone over. He’d taken a picture of himself with an empty pillow next to him and said, ‘Your pillow and I are lonely without you.’

The phone beeped again when it reached Addi on the other end of the couch

and she squealed and dropped my phone. “What happened?”

“I didn’t need to read that!” she called. “Oh shit, I can’t unread it.”

“What did it say?” Sam asked laughing. She picked up my phone and read the text, laughing. She passed the phone to Claire who responded similarly to Addi and tossed the phone to me.

My cock misses you, too. I’m ready for round two when you are.

I blushed and sent him a quick text back for us to get together the next day. He responded instantly that he wanted to see my place. I sent him my address and agreed he’d come over for dinner after work the next day.

I tucked my phone away and settled back into the movie, feeling good about the not so awkward morning after.

CHAPTER 12



The next few weeks flew by. Xander and I spent a lot of time together, learning each other's habits and moods, and bodies. I knew I was starting to fall for him and it both scared me and excited me. Before long we were spending the night together almost every night.

Melody caught wind of my new relationship and threatened to turn me in to Diana for violating company policy. We both knew she couldn't really get me in trouble, but it didn't help my chances of getting promoted. Of course that was exactly what Melody was after. If I was out of the way, she was guaranteed to get the promotion. Diana told me Melody and I were the two leading candidates. With me pushing the rules, Melody could easily sell me out and secure her position.

For some reason, she hadn't done it yet.

"Mandy, have you heard from Mr. Carlson lately?" she asked one Friday afternoon as I walked past her cubicle.

Melody's voice carried through the office, halting me and making me wonder what the hell she was up to.

"Yes, I've heard from him. Why?" I responded, knowing she knew full well I'd been seeing Xander.

"I was just making sure he didn't have any other issues. If he's calling you then I'd assume there's a problem with his account. Did his previous claim get paid?"

I gritted my teeth, knowing she was implying he would only want to talk to

me if he had a problem. Of course, I couldn't exactly announce that our conversations had nothing to do with work and everything to do with... other things. "His claim was paid. As far as I know he's not had any other issues with claims not being paid correctly."

"Maybe I should call him and follow up. Make sure he's happy with the service he's received from you. See if there's anything *I* can do for him..."

My blood boiled and my fists balled. I'd never wanted to hit someone as badly as I did at that moment. She was baiting me, and fuck if it wasn't working.

"Of course, Melody. If Mr. Carlson finds my services... lacking... I'm sure you'll be able to help him."

With that I spun on my heel and raced back to my cubicle, hoping I could get in touch with Xander before Melody did.

I sent him a text first, but he didn't answer right away. I called him, but it went to voicemail after a minute, which meant he was busy, but would call me back when he had a minute.

Unease churned in my gut as I waited to hear from him. The morning seemed to drag on, and by the time lunch arrived I was so anxious I couldn't even eat. Every time my phone rang, I jumped.

It was almost time to go before I heard from Xander.

Busy day. Everything ok?

Melody wants to talk to you. Trying to piss me off.

Is that what that was about? Already talked to her.

My heart sank.

Before I could answer, the unmistakable click of Melody's heels echoed around me, indicating she was coming closer. I tucked my phone back into my desk and clicked over to my email, hoping she wouldn't bother me.

"Mandy, I just spoke with Mr. Carlson. I thought you should know since you were so *interested* in his case."

I nodded, but didn't speak, hoping it would all be over soon.

"Do you want to know what he said?"

“Of course, Melody. I care about our customers just as much as you do.”

Melody grinned like she had a secret. “Mr. Carlson said he was happy to hear from me. He promised that he would let me know if there was anything at all that I could do for him.”

“I’m sure he did,” I ground out, a mix of anger and pain filling me. Why would Xander say that?

“He was very grateful that I called him. I think I’ll put him on my list of customers to call regularly, just to make sure he’s doing well. After all,” she said quietly so no one else could hear, “he’s got a sexy voice. One that shouldn’t be wasted on someone who looks like you.”

With that, she turned and walked away, leaving me feeling like I’d been sucker-punched.

In a way I had.

I spent the last hour of my day ignoring my phone buzzing in my desk, knowing it was just Xander. I wasn’t ready to talk to him after hearing how happy he was to talk to Melody.

My friends had been bugging me to meet Xander. I knew they wanted to evaluate him for themselves. That night everyone was coming over for a movie night at my place. I knew I couldn’t avoid him forever, but I needed a little time to breathe, without Melody on my back.

Leading up to the day, I was nervous. The four people closest to me were all going to be at my place for the evening and I worried they wouldn’t get along. I thought maybe Xander wouldn’t like my friends or maybe they’d think he was a jerk. I wanted everything to be perfect.

With Melody’s conversation with Xander hanging over my head, I was no longer nervous. I was just hurt, frustrated, and confused.

After a trip to the liquor store to get a new bottle of vodka and a few bottles of wine, I stopped by the grocery store. I found the beer Xander liked, even though I was mad at him, and loaded up on raw cookie dough, ice cream, and cupcakes. We tended to eat a lot of snacks and drink a lot on movie nights.

The doorbell rang around five and I heard the door push open. I rounded the corner of the kitchen and walked into the living room in time to see Claire close

the door behind her. “Hey,” she said. “Can I do anything?”

Claire knew me too well. I hadn’t come out and said how nervous I was about the night but that obviously didn’t matter when it came to best friends.

“I’m just trying to relax a little right now. Melody called Xander from work today and said he told her he was happy to hear from her, and that he’d call her if there was anything he needed.”

Claire’s eyes narrowed. “Why are you so upset about that?” She pulled out a corkscrew and filled two wine glasses, handing me one.

“It just felt like he was telling her he’d rather deal with her.”

“And you’ve ignored his calls since, haven’t you?” she said, picking up my phone and unlocking it. “Seventeen missed calls from him? Mandy, I’m screwed up when it comes to guys, but even I can tell Xander is trying here. Melody twists everything, you know that. He knows all your calls are recorded. He probably didn’t want to say anything that would indicate he had something going on with you, or be overly nasty to her without cause. He’s going to be here soon. You don’t need to be fighting with him when he’s here to meet us.”

I sighed heavily, knowing Claire was right. It was just like Melody to mess with me. For all I knew she didn’t even talk to him. No, he said she did, but that doesn’t mean he said anything she said.

“I’m acting like a crazy bitch again, aren’t I?”

Claire shrugged and sipped her wine. “You said it, not me.”

I laughed as I heard a knock on the front door, then froze. I knew it was Xander because Sam and Addi would have let themselves in. I took a deep breath and mumbled, “Better get it over with.”

As soon as the door opened he grinned tentatively at me. Feeling slightly better, I tried to let the tension I was feeling slip from my body. Xander stepped inside and cupped my chin in his strong hand. He turned my face up and asked, “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

I stepped into his arms and smiled when they automatically came around me. I nuzzled into his strong chest and listened to his steady heart beat for a few seconds. His muscles tensed beneath me, picking up on my tension, and he held me close, pressing his lips into my hair. “What happened honey? Talk to me.

Why didn't you answer my calls or texts?"

"Melody made it sound like you wanted to deal with her from now on, like you liked her, and it just really threw me."

"Oh, babe, I'm sorry. I knew she was up to something when I heard it was her calling me and not you. She asked if all my issues with my previous claim had been handled and if I was happy with the service I was getting from WNY Health. Then she said to call if I needed anything else. I said okay. That was it."

I wanted to laugh. I'd been so worked up and it was over nothing. It seemed silly hearing about it from Xander. God, I was such a fool.

"What else is going on? Are you worried about tonight? You were tense when you got up this morning."

"How do you know me so well?" He shrugged and pulled me closer. "Yes, I am a little nervous about you meeting my friends."

He pulled back to look at me, keeping his arms circled around my waist. "Is it bad to admit I'm nervous, too? I want them to like me."

I stepped up onto my toes and pressed my lips to his, sighing when he pulled me in closer and swept his tongue quickly through my mouth. My arms wrapped around his neck and I let myself melt into him. It'd only been a few hours since I'd been in his arms, but I'd missed him.

"Oh, sorry," I heard Claire say behind us. I backed up from Xander and he winked at me as he let go of me and stepped over to Claire.

"Hi, I'm Xander. You're Claire, right?"

"Yes," she stammered. "How did you know that?"

"Oh, well, Mandy's shown me pictures of the four of you and she's told me so much about all of you. I'm sorry if I'm being too forward, but I feel like I already know you. Mandy adores you."

"Uh, thanks. It seems she's pretty smitten with you, too," Claire countered, making me blush.

"Well, she's not the only one smitten around here. She's pretty amazing, but you already knew that."

Claire smiled and nodded. "We already started drinking. Would you like some wine?"

“No, thanks,” Xander answered. “It gives me a headache. I’ll grab some water or something.”

“I bought your beer, babe,” I offered as Xander headed toward the kitchen.

“Thanks honey,” he called back.

Claire grabbed my hand and said, “Is everything okay? Did he explain?”

“Yeah. I was being crazy as usual. He said it was really nothing, just Melody asking if everything had been resolved and telling him to call if there were more issues.”

Claire nodded as Xander came back in the room with a beer in one hand and my wineglass in the other. “Is this yours honey?”

I thanked him and took the glass from his hand, the familiar spark of awareness rushing through me as our fingers brushed. His eyes met mine and I saw he felt the same. He winked at me and I knew he was thinking about our morning. Where he held my hands as I rode him.

Addi and Sam arrived a few minutes later, rushing through the door and introducing themselves to Xander and hugging me and Claire. When everyone had a drink, we ordered pizza and started looking for movies.

“What movies do you like to watch Xander?” Addi asked him.

He smiled at me before he said, “Lately whatever Mandy wants to watch, but usually I’ll watch action flicks. I like having something to figure out or a task to accomplish. I’m not into lots of blood or horror movies, but hand-to-hand fighting or something with fast cars is pretty cool.”

“I like fast cars,” Claire admitted. “I’ve loved the Fast and Furious movies. I liked the action movies that have a little comedy element to them, like 21 Jump Street with Channing Tatum. Of course anything with him is good, even with the sound off.”

Xander laughed and Claire waggled her eyebrows at me. We’d talked many times about the finer points of Channing Tatum. And there were many finer points. He’s the only man we’ve ever said we’d be willing to have a threesome with, if he wasn’t willing to have us separately.

“I could go for a Channing Tatum movie if you guys want. What about you Xander?” Sam asked.

“Anything is fine. He’s a good actor, although I would like to keep the sound on,” he teased Claire.

She laughed at him and said, “If you insist. I’ll dream about him while you watch the movie.”

I scrolled through and found a list of Channing Tatum movies. “How about one of the GI Joe movies?” Addi suggested. “It’s got action for sure, but I think there’s a storyline.”

“You guys don’t have to change your normal movie routine because I’m here, you know. I’d be fine watching She’s the Man or Dear John if you want one of those. Hell even Step Up is fine.”

I smiled and kissed him lightly. His hand tightened on my thigh and I could feel the restraint he was using not to ravage me in front of my friends. I appreciated it, but it made me ache between my thighs. It was going to be a long night.

We finally settled on Step Up to start with because we all loved watching Channing Tatum dance. Xander said he was okay with it and settled in to watch the movie.

Xander sat on the floor at my feet, letting the four of us take up the couch. I wondered if he was bothered by it but he offered. There was a recliner in the corner that I offered him, but he said he wanted to be close to me. I caught a look pass between Addi, Sam, and Claire out of the corner of my eyes, but Claire just squeezed my arm. It seemed they were warming up to him.

CHAPTER 13



Halfway through the movie the pizza arrived. Xander paid for all of it, waving off offers to give him money. “If you’re trying to buy our approval with pizza, it just might work,” Addi teased him.

He laughed and said, “I was hoping to gain your approval with my charm and wit but as long as I have your approval I guess it doesn’t really matter how I got it.”

Everyone laughed as we filled our plates with pizza and headed back to the living room. Xander snagged my arm before we left the kitchen and pulled me into a rough kiss, his tongue forcing into my mouth. He probed me, gripping my ass and grinding his hips to mine while I stood there, pizza and wine in my hands.

He pulled back from me as quickly as he’d grabbed me and said, “I’ve been dying to kiss you. It’s hard to keep my hands to myself when you’re this close. Just a whiff of your scent is intoxicating.”

Stunned and turned on beyond belief I stood there staring at him, “You can’t just kiss me like that and walk off. Shit, I didn’t even get a chance to touch you.”

He picked up his pizza and bottle of beer and winked at me as he left the kitchen to finish watching the movie with my friends. I stared after him, willing the throbbing between my thighs to stop, but I knew only one thing could make that happen. And it seemed I was out of luck there.

When Step Up ended Xander collected plates from the pizza and carried them to the kitchen. “He’s really sweet,” Addi said when he was out of sight. “I

like him. And he's totally into you."

"Yeah," I said, glancing toward the kitchen, "I still can't believe it most of the time. Women gawk at him whenever we go out but he doesn't even notice. It's weird."

"He likes you a lot, Mandy. Don't question it, just enjoy it," Sam said. "I wish I could capture the way he looks at you when you aren't watching him. The look in his eyes... It's the same look most grooms have when their bride steps into view the first time. It's just powerful and amazing."

"Well, we're nowhere near ready to get married yet, but I know he cares. He hasn't said he loves me and neither have I."

"Do you? Love him?" Claire asked, sounding surprised.

I shrugged, unsure how to explain the sudden and powerful connection we shared. I knew I was well on my way to falling in love with Xander, but I also knew, for me, love had been elusive my whole life. I wasn't entirely sure what love would feel like and I didn't want to confuse love with enjoying great sex.

"I don't think so, not yet. But I do feel something very strong toward him. I'm just not ready to say it's love yet."

Before I had a chance to tell them that the idea of falling in love with Xander scared the shit out of me he came back into the room. He had a tray loaded with the cupcakes I bought, a tub of cookie dough, and a large bowl of fresh popcorn.

"I hope you ladies don't mind. I like popcorn when I watch a movie and always like something sweet with it. Besides this one," he said with a wink in my direction.

He settled back onto the floor at my feet and kissed the inside of my knee. He opened his mouth slightly to suck the skin of my thigh and I nearly moaned at the sensation. Movie nights usually lasted all night with a sleepover at the end, but having him around was making me crazy. I kept wondering if I could ask him to help me with something upstairs without my friends knowing it was code for 'Come fuck me while they watch the movie.' I was pretty sure they would see through anything I came up with.

We picked Fast Five for our next movie, agreeing Vin Diesel and Paul Walker were on par with Channing Tatum. Xander rested his head on my knee

and ran his fingers up and down my calves during the movie. When he got up for another beer he kissed me softly and whispered in my ear, “The sound you make when something startles you is the same one you make when I shove my cock inside you. You’re making me fucking crazy.”

I smiled at him as he walked away, watching his jeans pull tight against his ass. His shirt stretched against his broad back when he turned to catch me staring at him and he flashed a million dollar smile at me before he disappeared around the corner into the kitchen.

When I heard him coming back I tipped my head back against the back of the couch and waited for him to lean down and kiss me. His hand, cold from the beer bottle, rested on my throat as his tongue slipped into my mouth. I jumped from the cold and nearly bit him. He laughed and sat down in front of me again, holding his cold beer bottle against my leg. I startled from the contact and felt his hand tighten around my ankle at hearing the noise that came from me. I brushed my hand over his short hair and he leaned into it, like he couldn’t get enough of me touching him.

We polished off the popcorn and cupcakes during the movie and decided to make the last movie a drinking game. With the rules set, I turned on Never Been Kissed. Within seconds we were all drinking and laughing. It was fun and silly and I knew we’d all likely regret it in the morning, but at the time, we were enjoying ourselves.

When the movie ended we were all happily drunk. Sam stretched out on the couch and kicked us all off so she could go to sleep. The rest of us headed upstairs and Claire and Addi headed for my guest room while Xander followed me to my room.

“Your friends are awesome. I’m really glad they liked me.”

“Me, too,” I said as I crawled onto my bed.

“Fuck me, honey. You can’t do that.”

“Do what?” I asked dopily.

“You can’t be on your hands and knees. I might have to have you like that. Jesus, I’ve been hard as a rock pretty much all night and I can’t take you teasing me.”

“Who said I was teasing? For one thing, I didn’t know it would get you going. For another thing, I’ve been just as turned on as you,” I breathed.

I was lying on my back on the bed, watching him when I saw the change in his eyes. They flashed from aroused to possessed in a second. He crawled up the bed, his eyes locked on mine as he got closer and closer to me. He kept his weight on his forearms and I felt his body brush over mine as he moved over me.

I throbbed with need, aching to have him touch me, kiss me, anything. Still fully clothed, Xander circled the faint outline of my nipple and it stood up for more attention. He lowered his lips over it, nipping me through my shirt, and I cried out.

I quickly clamped my hand over my mouth, forgetting we weren’t alone. “I want to see how worked up I can get you before you can’t hold back your screams. I’m going to make you beg me to let you come.”

His words send a jolt straight through my body to the heat pooled between my thighs. I knew it wouldn’t take much when he thrust his cock against me and I moaned softly.

“Did you like that, honey?”

“Yes,” I moaned, arching into him when he did it a second time.

Xander closed the distance between our mouths with his third thrust, swallowing the moan that escaped my lips. He plunged his tongue into my mouth with the same rhythm he used on his hips and I felt myself slowly falling apart.

“Xander, I need to come,” I begged.

Cold washed over me as he disappeared. Before disappointment could settle in I felt him tearing my clothes from my body. My shorts and panties were gone in one economical movement and my tank top was ripped off in the next moment. I still panted, aching to let go of the tension coiled tight around my body.

Xander shoved my legs wide and held them over his shoulders as he dove into me, licking from one end to the other. “Fuck, I’m going to come.”

His fingers plunged deep into me, thrusting hard and making my body swirl. He licked, sucked, and nibbled while he pounded his fingers into me. Just as I

was about to come he slowed everything down until the need backed off and I was a whimpering mess.

He started up again, increasing his speed and power and making my body coil tight around him. Just before I fell over the edge he backed off again, frustration gripping me. I grabbed at his head and pulled him tight to me, holding his face against my body. "Make me come, now. You do it or I will," I demanded.

He didn't miss the opportunity as he thrust hard into me with his fingers, his face not backing off from me as my body began to thrash around. I bit into my pillow and muffled my scream as best I could as the powerful need to come washed over me seconds before I fell over the edge of the best orgasm of my life.

As I came back to earth, I felt Xander between my knees. I pulled the pillow from my face and looked down on him, lips wet from me and a pleased grin on his face. He was naked and sheathed and I urged him to me with a nudge of my heels. He got the message and leaned down to kiss me, the taste of my own orgasm still in his mouth.

When his tongue thrust deep into my mouth he plunged his erection inside me. I moaned loudly, feeling the delicious fullness I'd gotten addicted to over the last few weeks.

Xander held still inside me, letting me enjoy the feeling of our bodies connected so intimately. When he slid out slowly I nearly wept with the desire I felt for him. He quickly thrust back in, my hips raising to meet him and take him in deeper. I felt the tightening in my gut that I knew meant I'd be coming again with him.

His breathing changed to frantic as he thrust into me, his muscles held tight above me. I wrapped my legs around his lean waist and could almost hook my feet together. I felt the strain in his muscles, running my hands over his arms to his chest. My nails grazed his nipples and he went harder and faster, bringing me closer and closer to the edge.

I panted for air, desperate to come as he continued his torture of my body. I felt the ache between my legs that would remind me he'd been there and the rush

of orgasm drowned me. I was vaguely aware of Xander thrusting deep twice more before he shuddered above me, groaning my name into my hair as he came.

He collapsed on top of me without enough energy to move to the side. I let my hands drift over his back, gently caressing the strong muscles there. "God you feel so good. I'm sorry I'm crushing you."

He made a move to get off me but I held on tighter to him. "I love feeling your body pressed against mine. If I was on you I'd be crushing you, but you're not as big as I am."

"Baby," he cooed as he lifted his head, "you're perfect. If you were a skinny bitch I wouldn't want you. I like a woman who likes chocolate and cheeseburgers. You know how gorgeous I think you are. That's why I want you to meet my family and friends. Next weekend. My parents are having dinner Sunday night and invited us and some of my buddies are having a cookout on Monday for Memorial Day. Drew will be there and I want you to meet all of them."

I pushed on his shoulder to get him to roll off me. He laid next to me, his erection shrinking in the condom he used, asking me to meet the people who were the most important to him.

"I don't know," I said softly. "What if they don't like me?"

"How could they not like you? Plus, who gives a shit. I like you enough for all of them. Mandy, I want you there with me. Please at least say you'll think about it."

I looked at him, so perfect, in my bed. I knew it was important to him. Meeting his family and friends was as important to him as having him meet my friends was to me. We'd only been seeing each other about a month, but if things were going to continue, we would have to do these things.

What was I worried about anyway? It wouldn't matter if his friends didn't love me, right? As long as they were decent people, it wasn't a big deal.

"I'll think about it."

"Thank you. It means a lot to me. I'm glad you asked me to meet your friends."

“Me too. They really liked you,” I told him.

“They probably won’t like me that much after I finish round two with you.”

I eyed him suspiciously and saw he’d already gotten hard again. He pulled on a clean condom and prowled over me, his fingers between our bodies and closing on me, already making me moan.

It was going to be a long night.

CHAPTER 14



The following Tuesday I was running late, again, for girls' night. I'd had a late interview with Diana where she told me, officially, they'd narrowed down the candidates to me and Melody. I was excited, but anxious, waiting to see what Melody would do with that information.

I burst through the door to Cooler Coffee and ordered my hot chocolate and cupcakes. I waited impatiently for my goodies, thanking the cashier when she handed them over, and rushed to our table.

I dropped into my seat with a huff. Addi was talking about her week, regaling everyone with a story about one of her students who has gone from wallflower to class clown in a few weeks.

"It's so hard not to laugh when he tells a joke or plays a trick on someone. It's like he took comedy classes. He's hilarious, but as a teacher I have to discipline him to avoid letting it escalate. All I really want to do is sit back and laugh!"

Sam and Claire clutched their sides, tears streaming down their faces from laughing so hard. "What did I miss?"

"Oh, just this kid. It's hard teaching when he's cracking jokes, but honestly he makes it more entertaining. His joke to start class today was 'Did you hear about the constipated mathematician?'"

She paused and looked at me expectantly. I shook my head.

"He used a pencil to work it out."

I burst out laughing. "Holy shit, that's hilarious! No pun intended. You need

to get him to start every class with a joke.”

“He basically does anyway. Even if I try to get started first, he breaks in and tells a joke. It’s helping him socially so I try not to mess with him too much. The jokes are always funny and appropriate, not dirty jokes, so I let it go.”

“I don’t know how you manage so many different personalities. I would go nuts having to deal with kids all day, let alone kids at that age. High school is either an awesome experience or a shitty one.”

Addi agreed. “Yeah, it seems to be that way. I hated high school for the most part. I was a geek who loved to learn so I was the one all the popular kids wanted to copy off of. It only took them a few months to figure out I wouldn’t let them and they moved on to someone else who was more desperate to be in with them.”

“I kept to myself in high school. I had sort of a middle of the road experience. It certainly isn’t a time I look back on overly fondly, but I wouldn’t say I hated it. I joined a few clubs and had my friends, but I didn’t let the populars get to me. I knew back then that I wanted to go into photography so I took every class I could about it or anything remotely similar. I knew getting a jump on my career would help me more than being popular,” Sam added.

“It’s amazing how some people think high school is the only thing that matters,” Addi said. “I watch some of the students, all ranks, who think high school is the best time of their lives. Some think high school will define who they are forever, others think making the right friends in high school will help them in the rest of their lives. Most of the people I know only have one or two friends from high school, if that, and are completely different than they were back then. I want to tell my students sometimes that high school is only four years of your life and you have a lot more living to do.”

Claire was silent during our conversation. I wish I could go back to high school and take away her pain, but I knew it was something that she would always live with. I have no idea the fear she’s dealt with since then, but I knew the conversation we were having wasn’t helping her.

Addi and Sam continued talking about high school and Addi’s students and I whispered to Claire, “Are you okay?”

She offered me a tight smile that said she wasn't and I rubbed her back. "Any crazy people at the airport today?"

She rolled her eyes but a smile played at her lips. "Always. It's like people don't think the rules apply to them. The businessmen think they should be given a pass because they fly so much, the families think they should be given a pass because they have kids, and the rest of the travelers think they should be given a pass because everyone else is. It astonishes me."

"What's the strangest thing anyone has tried to bring onboard?" Sam asked, picking up on our subject change.

Claire thought about it while she sipped her coffee. "We get breast milk almost every day. We also get people smuggling alcohol in their 3 ounce containers. We get strange things a lot, but I still think the weirdest one was when we got someone with frozen sperm."

Sam choked on her coffee and I inhaled a piece of my cupcake. We choked while Addi cackled loudly. When Sam and I finally got ourselves under control I asked, "Why would someone have frozen sperm?"

"They always come with a note from their doctor. It's women, sometimes couples, that are using artificial insemination to try to get pregnant. They go to one place to get the sperm but for some reason or another have to use it at their home doctor's office. It's only happened a few times, but it always throws us when it does."

"Wow, I can't even imagine having to handle that. Do you have to check it? What do you do? Taste it?"

"Eww!" we echoed as Sam laughed.

"You're gross, Sam," Claire said, shaking with disgust. "Once we have the note from the doctor we pretty much let them through. We have to x-ray the cooler, but there's never been a problem."

"You must be pretty desperate to get pregnant when you can't even do it in your own town. It seems extreme, but I guess people are desperate to have kids so it makes sense."

We all agreed with Addi. "It's got to be a hard choice, to go that far to have kids. At the same time, I know one day I want kids. I guess if I have the option,

I'd do what I needed to do to have kids, too."

"Already talking about having kids? Things with Xander are more serious than we thought," Sam said.

I shrugged. "I really like him, but it's not like we're permanent or anything. Ever since he came over for movie night he's been asking me to meet his friends."

"He really likes you then. Guys don't introduce their girlfriends to their friends unless it's serious," Addi said.

"I guess. I'm nervous. Sunday he wants me to go to dinner with him at his parents' house. I'll meet his parents and his sister, who he's really close to. Monday is a barbecue with his friends."

"That's a good thing, right? If he wants you to meet the people he's closest to it's a good thing. You shouldn't be nervous, you should be excited."

"I want to be, you know, but I just worry about them not liking me."

I wanted to tell them I worried his family and friends would think he should be with someone better looking, someone thinner. If anyone would understand feeling inadequate because of my weight, it was my best friends. In a way I was surprised they didn't pick up on it right away.

Ever since my first date with Xander, the one I didn't count, he did everything possible to reassure me about my weight. I never felt like I needed a man's attention to feel good about myself. I knew I wasn't physically perfect, or even close, but I was comfortable with who I was. I felt like my happiness had started depending on Xander and the people around him. Like if his friends or family didn't like me it was because I wasn't good enough, and it would be about my weight and nothing else.

When I was with Xander I was happy. I liked feeling sexy and beautiful. He told me constantly that I was and a part of me was starting to believe it. To have a man who looked like Xander say he thought I was beautiful, to get so turned on by me, was a confidence boost I hadn't ever felt.

I started to wonder what it said about me that his opinion had come to mean so much to me.

"Why wouldn't they like you?" Claire asked.

I rolled my eyes, feeling the prick of tears beginning. “You know why.” I shrugged as though it didn’t mean that much but my friends saw the look on my face.

“Xander wants to show you off. He’s bringing you around to meet his friends and family because he wants you to meet them, but it works both ways. He’s also letting them meet you. That’s huge,” Sam told me.

“If he thought there would be a problem he wouldn’t have invited you. I think you’re overreacting for no reason,” Addi said.

I knew she was right. They both were. Xander wouldn’t put me in a situation that would hurt me. He cared. Perhaps more than either of us wanted to admit. We were starting to fall for each other. It was clear in the tenderness he showed me, the way he made love to me, even in his kisses.

He was anxious to meet my friends, even though he obviously had nothing to worry about. They loved him and I had no reason to think his friends wouldn’t love me.

And if they didn’t like me, Xander and I would figure out together if it mattered.

“Will it matter to you if they don’t like you? You’re not going to get along with everyone, look at Melody. Do you think it will cause problems with you and Xander?” Claire asked. I knew she wasn’t being a bitch, she was being curious.

But she was right.

“I guess it depends. Like anything else. If we just don’t get along I don’t think it’ll bother me. If his friends are jerks and treat me like shit because I’m fat then I’ll be pissed. And hurt. I don’t know if I could let that go.”

“Would you break up with him because of his friends?” Addi asked. “I’ve seen some of my students, and I know this doesn’t compare, but bear with me... They’ll start dating someone and their friends don’t like him, or her, and they’ll basically ditch their friends. Sometimes it means they keep the relationship a secret so their friends don’t find out. Other times I’ve seen relationships that I thought would work out well go down the drain because of stupid shit friends say or do. I just don’t want you to get hurt.”

I nodded in agreement with her and saw Claire and Sam doing the same. “That’s what I’m worried about. If his friends suck and tell him he shouldn’t be dating someone like me, how long will it be before he starts to believe them. And besides that, if they’re good friends, it’ll make me wonder if he thinks the same thing.”

“You said he told you he doesn’t care what size you are,” Sam stated.

“He did. It’s the whole mob-mentality thing though. We act differently alone than we would in a group. Alone he’d never call me fat or say anything to hurt me. In a group with a bunch of friends that maybe used to make fun of fat people, I don’t know. Maybe I just shouldn’t go.”

“This isn’t high school, no offense Addi,” Sam said. “If they’re assholes then call them on it. I’d like to think people mature when they get out of high school and quit picking on people just because they can. If Xander’s friends are like that then maybe you’re right, maybe he’s not worth it. I don’t think it’s going to be a problem.”

“Have you talked to him about this? You seem to tell him pretty much everything,” Addi asked.

“No, I haven’t. I’ve been worried how he would react. When I say something about how we look together he always says not to worry about what other people think. He’s right, but when those other people are close friends of his it’s a little harder not to care.”

I hated that I didn’t trust Xander to have decent people for friends. I wanted to not think twice about meeting them, just go and enjoy myself. But I had a bad feeling about it. Meeting his family I didn’t think would be an issue. Parents usually just want to see their kids happy.

Friends are different. Friends want to see you with the right person, but someone that they themselves would want. Friends want you to have a relationship with someone they dream about stealing from you. A person that might look across the room at your friend one day and realize they’re in love with your friend.

I highly doubted Xander would have any friends dreaming about stealing me from him.

“You need to talk to him. Tell him what you’re worried about. You guys talk all the time anyway. Take a break from phone sex and have a serious conversation,” Claire teased.

Sam and Addi’s shocked faces made me blush. “Not everyone knew about that,” I hissed toward Claire. The three of them burst out laughing as my face burned bright red.

“I wish I had a guy who wanted to have phone sex, or any kind of sex,” Sam said. “It’s been so long I think I’ve forgotten how.”

“Yeah, I feel like I’m buying new batteries constantly. Having someone else around to help out has got to make things much better,” Addi added.

Soon I was laughing with my friends, grateful I had such great ones. I was still anxious about meeting Xander’s friends, but at least the tension backed off a little.

CHAPTER 15



The rest of the week Melody was even more of a bitch than usual. Diana must have told her that we were the last two candidates up for the job so she took her harassment to a whole new level.

Wednesday she told the office I had lice when she saw me scratch my head. I almost laughed when someone asked me if it was true, then I went over and gave Melody a big hug and rubbed my head up against hers so she would be marked as well.

She fessed up.

Thursday she told Diana about Xander. I had to go into Diana's office late in the day for a meeting. She had listened to our initial calls and told me it was inappropriate to talk to a customer about a date.

"Mandy, I'm disappointed. I didn't expect this sort of thing from you. Honestly, I would have believed it more from Melody than you, but I heard it. I heard your calls. I think any calls from Mr. Carlson should be handled by another representative. Please tell him so when you talk to him next."

I agreed I would. It was frustrating, but at least I didn't lose my job, or my chance at the promotion.

Friday was different though. Melody got desperate. The problem was I didn't know it was coming. Which meant I didn't have time to prepare for it. Or do any damage control before the weekend. Melody was smart. She waited until I logged out of my computer and was getting ready to leave for the weekend. As I was walking out, she was walking into Diana's office. I should have stuck

around, but I never imagined the level she would stoop to.



I FINALLY AGREED to go to dinner with Xander's family and the cookout with his friends. Since it was going to be back to back days, he invited me to stay over at his place. We'd spent the night together often, but it was the first time we'd arranged it ahead of time. For some reason it felt different.

Inside Xander pulled me into a kiss then held my hand up for me to spin for him. "You look great honey. I haven't seen this dress before. Is it new?"

It thrilled me that he noticed the effort I went to for dinner with his family. The dress wasn't new but it was one of those dresses I saved for nicer occasions. With the weather getting warmer, finally, I was able to wear it. The dress was a brilliant emerald green with shimmering pearl buttons all the way down the front. There was a collar, like a dress shirt, and short sleeves that gave it a little bit of a professional look, especially when paired with my pearlized peep toe pumps. Like all my dresses, it was fitted over my chest then flared out to give my belly space. Of course I had to make sure it didn't make me look pregnant when I was going to meet Xander's family.

"It's not new, but thank you. I just wanted to look nice to meet your family."

"You always look nice, honey. Are you ready to go?"

I nodded and followed him into the garage to his Jeep. He waited for me to get in then closed my door. I watched as he walked to his side and slid in next to me. He turned the key then immediately rested his hand on my thigh, brushing his fingers under the hem of my dress to touch my bare skin. I rested my hand over his and twined our fingers together.

"Who's going to be there for dinner?" I asked as I checked him out. His shorts reached his knees but pulled tight over his thickly muscled thighs when he sat. My gaze hovered over the bulge between his legs, my body heating as I thought about the things he did the night before.

His soft blue baseball t-shirt fit tight across his chest and strained over his biceps. I knew the blue color would make his eyes, shaded behind sunglasses,

look bluer instead of the usual green. As my eyes drifted up to his face I saw the curve of his lips telling me he knew I was checking him out. He squeezed my fingers and smiled at me.

“Dinner should be pretty quiet, just my parents and Jessica. She’s been dating a guy for a little while but I don’t think she’s bringing him to dinner. Mom usually invites the neighbors over for dinner, but I think it’s just going to be the five of us tonight. She wants to get to know you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Great, so I’ll get the third degree about if I’m good enough for her son. Maybe I shouldn’t go to this.”

Xander laughed. “You wouldn’t dare. She’s going to love you. So is my dad. And Jessica too. You’re getting worked up over nothing, I promise.”

I squeezed his hand and turned to stare out the window while he drove the twenty minutes to Orchard Park. I worried about his parents changing their normal plans. If they weren’t going to grill me about dating him then why would they not have their neighbors over? I tried to tell myself I was overreacting, but I couldn’t convince myself it was going to be okay.

Xander pulled up to a sprawling ranch home on one of the busier streets at the edge of Orchard Park. The home was gorgeous with honey stained wood and natural stone on the front. A three car garage anchored the home on the side and a pebbled sidewalk led to two front doors. A well maintained yard stretched out behind the home and a basketball hoop stood at the edge of the driveway. I smiled at the massive rock near the road and took in the whole place as I stepped out of the Jeep. The house was huge, but looked like it would have been a fun place to grow up, at least judging by the open spaces outside.

Xander led me through the open garage into the house. We entered in a hallway, to the right a half bathroom, basement, and one of the front doors. To the left I heard and smelled the kitchen. We passed a laundry room before the hallway opened into a gigantic kitchen. The ceiling peaked with the roof and two skylights let in sunlight along with the bank of windows overlooking the backyard. An island stretched out through the center of the room, surrounded by cabinets along one wall and a table for six in front of the windows to the back.

“Hi Mom,” Xander called as we stepped in. She turned from the double oven

and smiled brightly at him. He dropped my hand and walked around the island to his mom. She was a medium weight woman with a ready smile for her son. Her short grey hair hung straight in a stylish angled bob. She had on sandals, no doubt to protect her feet from the hard tile floors, and khaki capris with a red short sleeved shirt. An American flag apron hung over her neck and was tied around her squishy waist.

They held each other in a tight embrace and she said, "I missed you. It's nice to have you home."

"Thanks, and I'm sorry, Mom." He stepped back from her and held his hand out for me. "This is Mandy Ryan, my girlfriend. Mandy, my mom, Peggy."

I stepped forward and stretched my hand out to her. She grasped it warmly, wrapping her other hand around mine so it was tucked between both of her hands. "It's so nice to meet you, Mandy. I've heard a lot about you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Carlson. I've heard a lot about you, too. Xander adores you. And your home is gorgeous."

"Thank you, and please call me Peggy. My husband had it built when the kids were little. He struggled with arthritis and his doctors told him to swim so he built a house with a pool. It seemed huge at first, but now it's just home. Even with both kids gone we have a hard time imagining selling it."

"No one said you have to sell it, Mom. Jessica and I love it, too," Xander told her.

"Did I hear my name?" a blonde said as she breezed into the room. She was beautiful with flowing blonde hair, Xander's hazel eyes, and a pink sundress. She looked like someone everyone would want to be friends with with her easy smile and her easygoing attitude.

But the best part about her was that she was normal weight, not a waif like I'd pictured. It shouldn't have mattered, but knowing Xander was raised by a woman who wasn't a single digit size and had a sister not much smaller than their mom made me believe his attraction to me that much more.

"Hey sis!" Xander called as he rushed to her. He swept her into his arms and spun her around. She giggled and hugged him tight.

"I've missed you, big bro. It's good to see you."

“Yeah, Mom was telling me the same thing. Jess, this is Mandy. Mandy, my sister, Jessica.”

Jessica squealed and jumped over to me, wrapping me in an aggressive hug when she reached me. I hugged her back, her infectiousness making me smile as we hugged. When she pulled back she said, “I’m so excited to meet you. Xander’s only talked about you for weeks now and it’s awesome to finally meet you. You have to tell me all about yourself. Xander’s already told me how you met, and how he had to convince you to go out with him, but I want to hear about you.”

She wrapped her arm in mine and pulled me to the living room. A stone fireplace stretched to the vaulted ceiling and more skylights flooded the room with sunshine. Floor to ceiling windows overlooked a huge wooden deck and the backyard. We sat side by side on a tan flowered couch and Jessica said, “Spill. I want to know everything about you.”

I glanced back to Xander who was still in the kitchen with his mom. He winked at me and I winked back then turned my focus to Jessica. I had to remind myself that she was four years younger than me at 23 and only a year out of college. She was sweet and bouncy, full of confidence.

I admired the hell out of her.

“Okay, well I grew up in Winterville. My parents are still there and my brother lives in Buffalo. I work at Western New York Health in customer service, but I’m up for a promotion. It sounds worse than it is. I actually like my job. I have three best friends that are awesome and a solid grey mutt cat named Zada.”

“Aw, I always begged Mom and Dad to get me a cat but they never would. I need to come over sometime and meet your cat. Do you have a roommate?”

I shook my head, “Nope. I live alone. My friends and I do movie nights once a month and they stay overnight, but it’s just me. I have a three bedroom townhouse.”

“”That’s awesome. I have two roommates to be able to afford my apartment. I just started working at the Orchard Park Gazette in the advertising department. It’s the local newspaper in town. I’m like you, I love my job even though it doesn’t sound that exciting.”

A tall man walked through the room, barely glancing at us. When he did he stopped and turned to face us. “Jessica, I didn’t know you were having a friend over tonight for dinner. Who’s this?”

“This is Mandy, Xander’s girlfriend. We’re just getting to know each other while Xander helps Mom in the kitchen.”

He extended his hand to me and smiled warmly. “Ah, Mandy, I apologize. I’m Todd. I didn’t realize you two were here already. It’s nice to meet you. Can I get you ladies something to drink?”

“I’m okay, Dad,” Jessica told him.

“Me too, thanks, Mr. Carlson.”

“Please, Mandy, feel free to call me Todd. I’ll go check on dinner. I imagine it’s almost ready.”

Todd headed into the kitchen and Jessica and I kept talking. I asked her about her new boyfriend. “Peter and I have only gone out a few times. He’s really sweet though and I like him a lot. We’re not to the point where we’re meeting each other’s families though.”

“How did you meet him?” I asked, always interested in other people’s love stories.

“One of my roommates knew him. They were friends in college and he came over for a party we had a few weeks ago. He’s got a marketing degree and works for a company in Buffalo, but I can never remember what it’s called. It’s got one of those long names like law firms have.”

I laughed, knowing exactly what she meant.

Xander came in and sat down on the couch next to me, wrapping his arm around my shoulders and kissing my temple. “You’re not telling stories about me are you?” he asked Jessica.

“No, I’m just getting to know Mandy. I’ll save the embarrassing stories for next time.”

I clapped my hands together and rubbed them like an evil scientist. Jessica laughed and Xander gave me a dirty look before he burst out laughing also. “You know all my secrets. I have nothing to hide from you.”

“I know, but sometimes others have a different perspective on a story that

makes it more interesting.”

“Yeah, well, as long as you don’t hold me accountable for my stupid youth it’ll be okay,” Xander said. I smiled up at him and he brought his lips down to mine. His hand brushed over my throat but he kept his lips together in front of his sister.

“Dinner’s ready,” Peggy called from the kitchen.

Jessica jumped up and Xander and I followed her. He stopped me before we got into the kitchen and said, “My mom said you’re beautiful. I told her I know. She likes you.”

I smiled. “I like them, too. Your sister is full of energy but really nice.”

He laughed, “Yeah, Mom always says Jessica was born bouncing.”

I laughed and nodded. He pulled me into his arms, his hand fisting in my hair as he pressed his lips to mine. His tongue butted against my lips and I opened them to allow him to sweep his tongue through my mouth. He pulled back just as I was heating up. He smiled down at me. “I can’t go very long without tasting you.”

I offered a wry smile and let him lead me into the kitchen to sit with his family.

Todd said the blessing then everyone passed dishes around. I filled my plate with roasted chicken, garlic mashed potatoes, carrots, and broccoli. A bottle of white wine was passed around along with a water pitcher. The whole thing had a very casual family feel to it. It amazed me how comfortable I felt there.

“Mandy, why don’t you tell us how you and Xander met,” Peggy said.

I glanced at Xander, wondering what he’d told his parents about us. Jessica said she knew how we met, but I wasn’t sure how much of the story they knew. He smirked at me then ducked his eyes to his plate, leaving me on my own.

“He sort of stalked me actually. He called my work and I happened to answer the phone. I gave him my extension because it’s policy but he called back a few days later and asked me out. I actually refused him at first, but he wore me down.”

“Yeah, and you hated me when we actually met.”

Todd snorted his laughter and Peggy smiled kindly. “What did you do that

made her hate you?”

“He didn’t do anything,” I jumped back in. “I had it in my head that because he’s attractive that he wouldn’t like me and was a jerk to him. He called me a few days after we met and asked me for my phone number so we could get to know each other better before we went out again.”

“Smart man,” Todd said.

Xander winked at his dad. “She was herself on the phone. I knew the only way she’d go out with me again was if she got to know me a little bit.”

“It worked. When we went out again it was amazing. I was totally smitten that fast. I felt like I’d known him forever already. Like he was an old lover that I was meeting back up with.”

Peggy and Todd traded a knowing look and smiled at us. Jessica jumped in, “That’s amazing. I hope I have a story like that one day.”

Peggy patted Jessica’s hand and smiled at her. They reminded me of my mom and I. We were always close when I was younger. It had been a while since I’d seen my parents for dinner. I talked to my mom every couple of days, but they hadn’t met Xander yet. I knew I needed to remedy that soon.

As we ate, everyone talked about work and family. I told Peggy about my parents and brother and Todd asked about my job. I listened as they talked about Todd’s impending retirement, in just a few months if everything went as planned.

When we finished our delicious dinner Xander asked if I wanted to see the rest of the house. He led me through a room at the front of the house, on the other side of the fireplace from the living room. It was a huge great room with a formal dining table near the kitchen and a smaller family room at the opposite end. Built-in shelves made it feel like a great place for a library.

A large tile foyer connect the great room and living room with the main front door and the pool. Yep, a pool inside the house.

Inside the pool room was warm, Xander said it was because the room had to be a higher temperature than the water. The pool wasn’t huge, but it was still *inside* the house. A small hot tub sat within the walls of the pool. Large windows and a series of skylights let in plenty of natural light.

“My favorite thing in here was being able to swim when it’s snowing. It’s pretty cool to be warm in the pool and see snow falling on the skylights. Swimming at night was always cool, too. Sometimes my friends and I got crazy and would run out in the snow then jump in the pool. It was so stupid, but so much fun at the time.”

I laughed, imagining a younger Xander playing around so much.

“Do you want to go for a swim?” he asked, his hands poised behind me.

“No!” I yelled. The last thing I needed was for him to throw me in the pool.

We left the pool room with Xander’s laughter echoing behind us. Just off the pool room was Todd’s office and behind that was Jessica’s bedroom. A bathroom was wedged between her room and Xander’s room, back at the front of the house. He called it the cave and I could finally see why. A short hallway led back to the room, dark with woods outside the window and brown walls. A baseball theme made me smile as I walked through Xander’s childhood bedroom.

He leaned against the doorframe while I wandered. I grinned at him and said, “If these walls could talk, I probably don’t want to know the stories they would tell me.”

“These walls wouldn’t tell you anything I haven’t already told you. You know all my secrets honey, I keep telling you that.”

“I know,” I said, meeting him at the door.

“Are you ready to go?”

“Already? It’s up to you.”

“Well,” he whispered huskily in my ear, “seeing you in my old bedroom makes me want to see you in my current bedroom. Preferably without your clothes.”

“I think that could be arranged. Especially if it’s without your clothes, too.”

I reached up around his neck and waited as he lowered his lips to mine. One hand tangled in my curly hair and the other slid down my back to my ass. He cupped my ass and kneaded as he thrust his tongue into my mouth. I moaned as our tongues met, tasting the coolness of him. I held on tightly to him as he leaned me against the wall, his erection digging into my stomach. “God, I want you,” he whispered as he kissed his way to my ear. He nipped at my earlobe then

kissed my racing pulse.

He pulled back from me, resting his forehead against mine. “Fuck, you’re like a drug. I can’t get enough of you. Watching you laughing with my family all evening has me so turned on. I love your laugh and I just... I love when it’s all for me.”

“Everything today is for you babe. Your family is great.”

He took a deep breath, closing his eyes tightly. “Okay, talking about my family is helping, but I can still smell you. I’m going to duck in the bathroom, you go back to say goodbye to my family.”

With a quick kiss I walked back down the hallway and found Peggy, Todd, and Jessica in the kitchen finishing up the dishes. “I’m so sorry, we should have offered to help.”

“Oh, no, you’re our guest. We’re just glad you joined us tonight. Are you guys going to head out? Xander said you’re going to the barbecue tomorrow.”

“Yeah, we are. He’s excited to see his friends. I just hope they’re half as friendly and welcoming as you have been.”

“No one is as welcoming as Peggy,” Todd told me, “but I hope you’re right about Xander’s friends. You guys have fun.”

Xander came in the room and said, “We’re going to head out. How about dinner next Sunday?”

“Of course. Mandy, I hope you’ll join us,” Peggy said.

“I’d love that. Thank you.”

We all hugged then Xander and I headed for the garage door again. He practically dragged me to the Jeep. Then raced through the streets toward home.

CHAPTER 16



As soon as we got to Xander's house we were tearing each other's clothes off. The drive was only twenty minutes, but he leaned over and kissed me at every stoplight. His fingers drifted north and by the time we reached his house he had his hand inside my panties and could tell just how excited and ready I was.

Xander kicked the garage door closed behind us and captured me against it. His hard erection pressed into my soft skin and I moaned in anticipation. He anchored himself to the door, pinning me between his thick arms. He leaned into me, kissing my lips, my neck, my collarbone. His lips were everywhere and I couldn't focus on any one area because he moved.

I clutched at him, trying to hold onto him. I was panting and aching for him, so beyond ready that I could barely breathe. Xander growled into my throat, "I've been wanting to rip this dress off you all day. These buttons, and wondering what's underneath, has been making me crazy."

I arched into him, my head hitting the door, and he reached for the first of my buttons. "I need to see you. I can't wait any longer."

The restraint in his hands twisted his face into a pained expression. I knew he wanted to just rip the buttons apart but he was trying to be good and not ruin my dress. The slow process of undoing all the buttons on my dress was making me hot and had Xander on edge. With every inch of skin he exposed he pressed his lips against me, nipping my flesh, leaving teeth marks all the way down my body.

Once he got to my stomach, he slipped his hands inside my dress and pulled my breasts free. He groaned when he saw my red lace push-up bra. His fingers fumbled at my buttons but I didn't care. His lips closed over my nipple and I moaned, leaning back against the door. "Fuck, you're beautiful," he murmured against the skin spilling over the edge of the lace.

Xander moved from one nipple to the other, drawing each into his mouth with the delicate lace. He sucked on the peaks, circling his tongue around my nipples until I moaned in pleasure. He pulled gently with his teeth, pain and pleasure shooting through me and making me even wetter.

While he teased my nipples his fingers worked deftly on the rest of the buttons until my dress hung open down the front. He stepped back and looked at me and my red lace panties that matched my bra. His eyes turned predatory and goosebumps skittered over my body. My nipples stood tall, wondering what was next.

Xander moved toward me quickly and hooked his thumb around the sides of my panties. He pulled hard and I heard the fabric rip in his hands. The next second his fingers thrust inside me and I moaned, my knees buckling. He forced me against the door with his large frame and held me up. "Lock your knees baby. I'm going to make you come right here. I can't wait any longer."

The desire and commandment in his voice had me jumping to do as he said. No man had ever spoken to me like Xander, made me feel like they couldn't control themselves when they were with me. It turned me on more than I ever wanted to admit. It felt so fucking good.

With my knees locked Xander moved away from me, his fingers still probing between my thighs, making me moan and writhe under his manipulation. He knelt in front of me and forced my legs further apart. I thought he just wanted to watch until I felt his breath on me, hot and heavy against my thighs. Before I could say anything he licked me from one end to the other.

My knees softened again, unable to stop against the extreme pleasure shooting through me. Xander growled and wrapped his arms around my ass, lifting me as he stood. He turned and set me down on the island, keeping my ass at the edge. I sat up but he pushed me back with one hand on my breast as the

other dove inside me again. His lips found my center and I moaned as I stretched out over his island.

He licked and teased me, his fingers helping excite me. He thrust his hand into me, my hips drawing up to meet his fingers. All I could feel was the rhythmic pleasure of him as he toyed with my body, making me want to come.

No, I needed to come.

My breathing became shallow and my moans and screams became louder. I arched into him, and ran my fingers along his hair. I needed to come, I needed the release. "Now, baby, now," Xander commanded me and my body fell apart. My screams echoed through his quiet kitchen and I wrapped my fingers through his, holding on tight as my body uncoiled from the tightness he created.

When the darkness of my orgasm receded, Xander was hovering over me, kissing my stomach. He tugged me off the island, the feverish look still in his eyes. I tore at his shirt, dragging it over his head so I could kiss his chest. I ran my tongue over his nipples, teasing them with a nip that made Xander groan and wrap his hands tight in my hair. He tugged at his shorts and boxers, letting them drop to the floor at his feet.

He reached for my dress and yanked it off my shoulders, his mouth closing on my skin. He bit me then let his tongue soothe the ache he caused. "I'm sorry, baby. I'm just so fucking hot for you."

He turned me around and pulled my dress the rest of the way off. His cock pressed hard into my lower back and his chest brushed against my back. Xander dipped to my neck and sucked hard, sure to leave a mark. He followed the tendon of my neck down to my shoulder and kissed me again.

He stepped forward, forcing me with him. My belly hit the edge of the island and Xander pressed me down over it. "Hold on to the edge, baby. Hold on tight."

Excitement raced through me. I'd never been taken from behind. I heard the tear of the condom then felt Xander's fingers circling me. I moaned and leaned back into him, already ready for another round.

His cock teased my entrance, circling me under the control of his hand. He slowly guided himself inside. The torturous movement had me moaning into him. He leaned over me and growled, "Are you ready for me, baby? Are you

ready for me to take you like this?”

“Yes,” I moaned back, gripping tighter on the edge of the counter.

Xander slid out slowly, rasping over me and making me ache with the loss of him. He slammed hard back into me and I cried out, fire lapping over me as my body recognized the intrusion and craved more. “Again,” I said, a smile crossing my lips.

“My baby likes it hard, huh?” he teased.

“Oh, God, yes,” I moaned as he slid out again slowly.

“Climb up on the counter, baby. let your body rest on top. I want your feet off the ground so I can control you. I need to be able to take you hard. Just like you want it.”

He helped me climb higher onto the counter, my entire belly on the surface while my legs hung straight down behind me. His height gave him an advantage and he stayed inside me as I moved, hitting all the right spots as I positioned myself.

Xander’s hands gripped my hips and he pulled out slowly again then pulled me to him as he thrust inside. My body opened for him, taking him deeper than he’d ever been. I loved the overfull feeling I had with him deep inside. I wiggled my hips to get him deeper, harder. And he lost control.

Xander held my hips, no longer able to draw out slowly. He pumped furiously, slamming me into the counter as his cock drove deeper and deeper into me. I cried out as my orgasm built again, so close to the edge as I held on.

His one hand ran up my sweaty back and into my hair. He pulled on it, tugging my head backward. “I can’t hold on baby. I need you to come. Fucking come now.”

He tugged my hair again and my body split in two, a powerful orgasm drawing me into darkness surrounded by a fuzzy version of reality. Xander kept pumping into me and I heard his voice yell my name. His hand finally let go of my hair and I emerged from the darkness.

Xander leaned over me, his face inches from mine. “I’m so sorry baby. I just couldn’t wait until we got to the bedroom. I almost took you in my bedroom at my parents’ house. Did I hurt you?”

I laid on the counter, sweaty and sore. I smiled up at him. “I hurt like hell, but it feels so fucking good. I’ve never done that before.”

“I’m so sorry I hurt you.”

“Don’t be. It felt good. I could probably come a few more times judging by how good I feel.”

“Oh, really?” he teased. His fingers drifted down my bare back toward my ass. He brushed over my skin and let his fingers slide over me. “I think that could be arranged. How about a bath?”

“Really?” I asked excitedly.

“Yeah, honey. Hopefully it will help you feel better. I’ll go get it started. We can talk about the rest of those orgasms when you’re done with your bath.”

I agreed and let Xander help me down from the island. “I’m never going to be able to cook again without getting hard. Having you splayed out over that counter for me was one of the hottest things ever.”

I smiled up at him and brushed my hand over his cheek. “We might have to try that again. Maybe the couch and the bed, too. Don’t you have a desk?”

“Fuck, woman, you’re going to kill me. You might have to take a bath after I have you again.”

He pressed his firm cock against me and I grinned up at him, batting my eyelashes. “Well, I did say I could go again...”

I turned to walk away but Xander caught my arm. I laughed as he wrapped his arms around me. The laughter turned to moans as his fingers trailed over my belly to play between my thighs. “Couch first. We’ll work our way back to the bedroom and then you can have a bath.”

I reached down and grabbed his cock and stroked it. “I’m game if you are.”



WE FINALLY MADE it to the bedroom around midnight. Xander ran me a bath as promised. When I sunk into the hot water I knew I’d be sore the next day. I’d had more orgasms than I could count and we’d had sex four times. My shoulder ached where he’d bit me and when I looked in the mirror I saw the faint outline

of the hickey he'd given me.

The water was hot and soothing. Xander let me bathe alone. He was watching TV when I walked back into his bedroom and he wrapped me in his arms. "Are you okay?" he asked.

I snickered. "Your friends are going to know what's been going on." I showed him the hickey on my neck.

"I'm sorry baby. I got carried away."

"It's fine. I sort of like knowing you can't stop yourself. It's a huge turn-on that you're so excited by me."

He nuzzled against me. "You know I am. But I'm sorry I hurt you. How was your bath?"

"Amazing. That tub is almost as orgasmic as you are."

Xander laughed loudly. The rumble from his body made the bed shake and I trembled and laughed with him. "Well, no more orgasms tonight. I'm afraid I'll have to pack you in ice after the way I've abused you today. Do you want to watch a movie?"

I nodded and cuddled against him. He drew the covers up over us and clicked on a movie. Within seconds I was sound asleep.

I woke up the next morning still wrapped in Xander's arms. His steady breathing told me he was still asleep and I enjoyed feeling his warm strong arm around me. His cock was awake, but I knew we needed to get going early.

Besides, I was way too sore to think about sex.

No, I was never too sore to *think* about it.

I stretched and felt my shoulder ache with the movement. The ache between my legs promised to make it hard to walk, but I made sure to bring comfortable shoes for the cookout.

"Hey," Xander said sleepily. "You're awake already."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you up. I guess I fell asleep on you last night."

"Yeah, but it's okay. How are you feeling?"

"Sore as fuck. Literally."

He tugged me tighter against him and pressed his lips into my hair. "I'm so sorry baby. I promise, hands off today." I looked up at him skeptically and he

laughed. “Okay, maybe not hands, but definitely my cock. How about you take a shower and I’ll start breakfast?”

“Sounds good,” I said, climbing from his warm bed. The cool air flashed over my skin and brought goosebumps. I headed into the bathroom and heard Xander going toward the kitchen. His shower was warm and felt amazing on my aching flesh. I washed my hair and body, taking special care around my shoulder and between my thighs. I was still very sore, but at least I was clean.

I wrapped another fluffy towel around me and headed into the bedroom. I grabbed my bag and pulled out the black shorts and Army green top I wanted to wear. I’d packed capris too, but it was hot out and I knew I would sweat in them.

I packed the rest of my clothes and bathroom products in my bag and went back to the bathroom to fix my hair and make-up. I combed through my hair and turned my head over to fluff up the curls. With my hair dryer I got my hair light and fluffy and flipped my head back over. I brushed on some mascara and decided to forego any other make-up. Earrings went in my ears and a necklace draped around my neck.

I felt good.

I grabbed my bag and headed out to the kitchen. Xander was naked in front of the stove, cooking eggs. He looked so good my body ached for him.

His sculpted muscles were on full display for me. My mouth watered as I took in the long lean muscles of his legs. His cock hung loose between his legs, still long even when he wasn’t turned on. His narrow waist dipped above his cock and a trail of hair pointed from his cock to his belly button. The dips in his abs made me wonder if I could do body shots off him. His chest stood out, defined muscle that moved as he stirred the eggs on the stovetop. I trailed my eyes over his thickly muscled arms and felt warm at the memory of them around me just minutes earlier.

I dropped my bag in the kitchen near the door. Since we both had to work the next day I was planning to go home after the cookout. Xander turned and pulled me into his arms. “I hope this is okay. I was hungry after last night.”

I smiled and nodded. I kissed his chest and ran my fingers over him gently, watching as his cock twitched. “You can’t do that, baby. I am not going to have

you today. I can tell by the way you're walking that you're sore."

I let go of him and walked across the kitchen to reach down two glasses for juice and a mug for Xander's coffee. "You shouldn't be walking around here looking so sexy. Especially naked."

"I'll go take a shower in a few minutes. I just wanted to make sure we had breakfast."

He scooped eggs onto plates then pulled bacon out of the microwave as toast popped up. Xander sat down at the table, all his naked glory spread out for me to see. I sat next to him and tried to focus on eating breakfast instead of eating him. He dug into his breakfast and I realized I was starving, too.

When Xander finished, he kissed me then went to get in the shower. I cleaned up the kitchen while he was gone and put away all the dishes, already familiar with his home. Xander emerged a little while later in khaki cargo shorts and a Coke t-shirt. He slid his feet into his flip flops and reached for me. "Thanks for cleaning up. You didn't have to."

"Well, I figured your counter could use a good cleaning after last night so I went ahead and wiped it down, too."

He grinned like he'd won a prize and kissed me hard on the lips. He picked up my bag and led the way outside. We tossed my bag in my car then got into his Jeep.

"Tell me a little about your friends," I said, trying to focus on something that would calm my nerves.

"They're fun. Usually we laugh and drink when we're together. The guys will have their girlfriends there and a few of our friends are women. It'll be a nice mix of people. Of course you know I'm closest to Drew. He'll be there today, but he's single. He's a good guy. I think he's about the only one of them I have a real relationship with. The rest, we just get together to drink. But it's fun."

"So am I going to be carrying you out of there?"

"No," he said adamantly. "I won't be drinking that much. Maybe a beer or two, but I'm not going to drink a lot."

"Whose house are we going to?"

“Ricky and Billy. They were friends of mine in high school and college. They’re roommates. The house is nice but the backyard is why we always go there. It’s huge and pretty private.”

“What are Ricky and Billy like?”

“They’re assholes,” Xander laughed. “No, I shouldn’t say that. They can be jerks, but they’re funny. They’re going to love you though because you can hold your own with them. They’ll think you’re funny.”

“Are you sure about that?” I asked. If these guys were good friends of Xander’s and the first thing he said is they were assholes it didn’t give me much hope for them liking me.

“Yeah, baby, it’ll be fine. The women are the ones you need to worry about. Kayleigh and Braylon are friends of ours but they’re complete bitches. I avoid them because they’re always trying to get me into bed, but they’re skanky bitches and I have never wanted anything to do with them.”

Fear ripped through me. I knew men would overlook my appearance if they got along with me. If they weren’t trying to sleep with me they didn’t care what I looked like. The women though... that was a whole different story. Women would be horrible bitches if they were jealous of me. Under any other conditions, no woman would be jealous of me. But showing up at a party with Xander would open me up to an attack.

I felt like I was going to throw up.

“Just stay with me. I won’t let them get to you. And if they do, we’ll leave. I promise.” I nodded as Xander stopped the Jeep. I looked at the house we were parked in front of and took a deep breath. “Come on, honey. Let me show you off to my friends.” He brushed his finger over the hickey he left on my neck and leaned in to kiss it. “I love being able to see my mark on you. Telling the world you’re mine. It turns me on so much.”

I leaned back and let the arousal course through my body. Xander turned my face toward him and dove his tongue into my mouth. His kiss was rough and possessive. He threaded his fingers into my hair and tipped my head so he could kiss me deeper. I moaned against his lips, feeling my panties getting wet.

Xander finally pulled back, kissing my cheeks. “I’d take you right now if I

knew it wouldn't hurt you. You make me so happy."

"I'm happy too, baby. Let's go meet your friends before I lose my nerve."

Xander laughed and pulled back from me. He got out and I took a deep breath. When he got to my side he opened my door and offered me his hand. I took it and walked by his side to meet his friends.

CHAPTER 17



Xander pushed through the front door of the two story house like he lived there. We walked right into the living room where I saw old furniture and a big TV. Shoes were kicked into an overflowing closet behind the front door. The room was big and well-lived in. I heard voices coming from somewhere deeper in the house, presumably where Xander was leading me.

It looked like I imagined a frat house would.

It sort of smelled like it, too.

The kitchen was at the back of the small house and overlooked the large backyard. People spilled from inside to outside, laughing and talking.

Xander said hi to the people in the kitchen and introduced me though he went so fast I couldn't remember any of their names. We said hi and he pulled me outside to the yard.

"Xander!" was yelled out from the yard. I had no idea which way it came from but it brought a huge smile to his face. He squeezed my hand and dragged me behind him to the far end of the yard. When we reached a group of five guys he dropped my hand to trade punches and hugs with the other guys.

He wrapped his arm around me again and said, "Guys, this is Mandy. Mandy, this is Ricky, Billy, Doug, Trevor, and Brian."

"It's nice to meet you guys," I said, trying to keep my cool. So far every single person at the party was gorgeous. I felt like I'd stumbled into the filming of a beer commercial or something. It was terrifying.

I didn't want to judge Xander's friends by their looks, just like I didn't want

them to judge me by mine, but I found it hard not to. Xander had already told me Ricky and Billy were assholes and Kayleigh and Braylon were bitches. I wasn't sure how much of it I was going to be able to take.

The guys looked me over, not shy about their appraisal of me. Xander punched one of them in the shoulder, Billy I think, and said, "Jeez dude, she's taken. Back off."

Billy held his hands up in surrender but looked me over one more time. It gave me chills up my spine, but I suppressed them, gripping on to Xander. "Come on babe, let's get a drink," he said.

I nodded to his friends and turned with Xander to find a drink. Maybe having some alcohol in me would help take the edge off.

Xander found three coolers on the patio and fished out beer for each of us. He twisted the top off mine and handed it to me. I sucked half of it down before his even got to his lips.

"Fuck baby, you can't do that. I can't watch you suck on a bottle like that without wanting you to suck me like that."

"Sorry honey," I said wiping my lips. "I just need a little something to take the edge off. Your friend really creeped me out with the way he was looking at me."

Xander glanced across the yard to where the guys were talking. "I know, but he's harmless. He's just trying to get me wound up."

"I just don't want to be around him. He gives me the creeps."

"Stick with me. I won't let him get to you. Come on, I want you to meet Drew."

Xander held my hand as he approached another group. A guy stood in the center, commanding the attention of the entire group. He had dark hair, longer than Xander's but still short. His brown eyes were looking around the group making eye contact with everyone as he told his story.

He was good looking, as hot as the rest of the people there. His left arm was covered in tattoos and he had an elaborate cross tattooed on his right calf. I couldn't stop watching him, wanting to hear what he had to say.

"I took the next turn and knew it wasn't going to end well. My bike started

going down and the only thing I could do was go down with it. There were two cars coming toward me and they were both swerving. All I could do was pray it would work out.”

I held my breath with the rest of the crowd, anxious to hear how the man standing in front of us survived the fall. I gripped Xander’s hand and stared at the tattooed god.

“I let the bike fall and went down with it. I slowed down as much as I could and ended up rolling into the grass off the side of the curve. Thankfully my bike wasn’t too badly damaged and once I brushed myself off I could get back on it. I had a few scrapes down my leg and banged up my arm pretty good, but I was okay.”

“What happened with the girl you were going to meet?” one of the other guys in the group asked.

“Ah, you know, she was cute but shallow. We hung out for the weekend, touring the wineries around the Finger Lakes, but I didn’t see her after that. I need someone with a little intelligence, not just a flighty woman that’ll put out.”

His eyes searched the crowd and landed on mine. I felt warmed under his appraisal. He smiled at me and took a step forward. The rest of the crowd started to dissipate, sensing the story was over.

He reached his hand out toward me and said, “You must be Mandy. It’s great to finally meet you.”

I shook his hand and smiled up at him. He was tall, much taller than I was. At 5’8” I wasn’t that short, but he easily stretched well above 6’, maybe up to 6’6”. Xander hovered at my side.

“I’m sorry, I don’t have any idea who you are,” I told the mystery man.

“Oh, sorry. I’m Drew. I work with Xander,” he told me.

“Oh, wow. It’s so great to meet you. Xander’s told me so much about you. You’re not at all what I pictured.”

He ran a hand through his hair and gave me a breathtaking smile. “Yeah, the tattoos throw a lot of people off. I started getting them when I was in college and it became an addiction. But since I never did drugs and rarely drink I figure it’s a pretty safe addiction.”

I laughed and nodded with him. He reminded me so much of Xander that I was drawn to him. Looking between them they almost could have been brothers. He had a charm that made everyone want to be friends with him. I did too.

Xander hugged me tighter to him and nuzzled my neck, "Can we talk for a minute?"

"Sure babe. It was great to meet you Drew. I want to hear all about Xander in college. We'll be right back."

Drew smiled as we walked off. Xander held on to me and guided me toward the back of the yard. "Why are you flirting with him?" he asked.

"Seriously?" I countered, laughing.

"Yeah, I'm serious. I'm not going to stand by while you flirt with my best friend. What's going on?"

I turned on him. "Xander, you need to knock this off right now. Drew is not what I expected but he's very charismatic. Being interested in what someone has to say does not mean I want to jump him. Honestly I was thinking how much he looks like you and how similar you guys are. I can see why you're good friends. But I'm not into him."

"Are you sure?"

"Hey, where's my hot, confident boyfriend? Where's the guy I've gotten to know? The man who had me panting and screaming *his* name last night. The guy that marked me just last night. The one that kisses me so hard and holds me so tenderly that I forget every other man exists."

"I just don't think I can take it if I lose you, especially to my best friend. I couldn't handle it."

"I'm not going anywhere. But I do want to get to know your best friend better. I don't want you getting jealous, but I am going to go talk to him. He's nice. He made me comfortable, not creeped out."

"You're mine, baby," he said. He leaned down and slanted his mouth over mine, forcing his way in. I eagerly wrapped my arms around his neck and moaned into him. His fingers dug into my fleshy hips and his cock was firm against my stomach. Jealous and possessive Xander was hot, but there wasn't any reason for him to be that way.

“Only yours,” I moaned as he trailed kisses to my ear. He nibbled my earlobe then dipped his tongue behind my ear. His teeth brushed over my collarbone and my head fell back to give him access.

“When we get back to my place I’m going to mark you again, in other ways. I want you unable to walk tomorrow.”

“Let’s get back to the party. Otherwise I’m going to drag you upstairs to one of those sketchy bedrooms. Then you’ll have to carry me to the Jeep.”

“Fuck,” he whispered in my ear. “I need to go calm down. Will you be okay for a few minutes? If I don’t get away from you I won’t make it upstairs. I’ll bend you over right here and now.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll go find Drew and flirt with him a little more.”

He smacked my ass, “You will not. You’re mine.”

I laughed. “I’m not going to flirt with him, but I am going to talk to him. If you’re leaving I need to find someone who won’t make me feel uncomfortable.”

“I will throw you over my shoulder and drag you out of here if I find you flirting with him.”

“That might be enough of a reason to do it,” I teased. Xander glared at me and I just laughed as I walked off to find Drew.

Halfway across the yard I heard two women talking. “What is he thinking? He’s too hot for her.”

My brain said keep walking, but for some reason my feet didn’t listen. I paused, pretending I was looking at something as I eavesdropped on them.

“I know, right?” the second one said. “And why would he bring her here? It’s not like she’s someone he needs to be showing off. She looks like a cow.”

“A cow in Army gear,” the first one said. They both cackled and the hair on the back of my neck stood up straight. They were talking about me.

“The good news is after her he’ll realize he can’t find love bargain shopping. He needs to find a real woman. One as hot as he is that’ll be his equal instead of his puppy dog. Literally.”

I knew it had to be Kayleigh and Braylon. They were both stunning, and about half my size. All it would take was for me to sit on them and they’d be dust.

Xander walked out of the house and searched the yard for me. When he saw me near them he got a serious look on his face. He headed straight for me and they snagged him as he tried to pass.

“Xander,” the blonde purred, “where have you been?”

“I’ve been with my girlfriend. Have you ladies met Mandy?”

He reached out to me and pulled me against him. He nuzzled into my ear and licked it, sending shivers down my spine.

“Why bother? It’s not like she’ll be around long. Not when we’re here, ready and willing,” the blonde cooed, leaning into the other one, making it clear they were up for a threesome.

I stood there shocked, unsure what to say. My fists clenched into balls and tension filled me. I wanted to slug the bitch, but I knew it wouldn’t do any good.

“I’ll be back, honey. I need to go inside for a minute,” I said sweetly. I walked away before I could say or do anything I couldn’t take back.

Inside I found a bathroom off the kitchen. I locked the door behind me and gripped the sides of the sink. I stared myself down in the mirror and willed myself not to cry. I wanted to, I’ll admit it. Those skinny bitches made me feel like a worthless piece of shit. I wanted to punch them, to bitch slap them, to knock their asses out. All of the above. I knew it wouldn’t do any good but God I wanted to. I wanted to hurt them as much as they hurt me. Except physical pain goes away. Emotional pain lingers.

I pulled out my phone and sent a text to Sam. I knew Claire was working and Addi was spending the day with her family. Sam had a photo shoot that morning but was going to be on her own for the afternoon. We’d all talked about getting together for dinner but nothing was set.

Two skinny bitches made me feel like shit.

Want me to come kick their asses?

I laughed.

No. Just pissed me off.

What did Xander say?

I scoffed. I understood he didn't want to cause problems with his friends, but I was disappointed that he didn't respond to their shittiness.

Nothing. I left before he had a chance.

Not good. Want me to come kick his ass?

I laughed, grateful for having someone on my side.

Not right now. Will let you know if that changes.

Home all afternoon.

I smiled and stuck my phone back into my purse. I checked my make-up one more time then went back outside.

Xander was in the group at the back of the yard. I could hear Billy talking before I got over there. Everyone was laughing at something he said and I went closer so I could enjoy the joke.

"What's the definition of irony?" Billy asked the group.

I took another step closer as everyone glanced at each other, everyone shrugging. "A fat girl who doesn't swallow!" Billy boomed.

I froze. He was telling fat girl jokes? And Xander was over there laughing with him. I looked at Xander and saw his broad smile as he laughed with everyone else. The blonde bitch saw me and nudged her friend. The friend said, "Is your life ironic, Xander? Does your fat girl swallow?"

"Back off, Braylon," he said.

"How do you fuck a fat woman?" Billy asked, drawing the attention back to him.

Everyone looked around again. "Xander says you smack her ass and ride the wave."

I turned as tears burned my eyes. I didn't wait to hear what he had to say, I just needed to get the hell out of there. The roar of blood rushing in my ears drowned out everything else, but I knew Xander was laughing with the rest of

them, not caring that those words hurt me. It didn't matter what he did while I was standing there. If he'd laugh behind my back I didn't want him.

I burst through the kitchen and pulled out my phone. I sent Sam a text asking her to pick me up with the address and letting her know I was going to start walking.

I shoved through the front door and nearly ran over Drew who was sitting on the front porch.

"Whoa," he yelled, jumping out of the way. "Are you okay Mandy?"

I waved my hand at him and started to walk down the steps toward the street.

He grabbed my arm. "Mandy, what happened?"

The tears I fought broke free and ran down my cheeks. I tried to shake him off, but he held me tight.

"Mandy, talk to me. Where's Xander?"

"Xander's an asshole. He's in the yard with his friends. And I'm getting the fuck out of here."

"Mandy, sit down and talk to me. I'll give you a ride if you need one, just tell me what happened."

The kindness in his eyes made me want to trust him. He wasn't out there with the rest of them. Maybe he wasn't that bad. "Billy was telling fat jokes and Xander was laughing at them. He knows how sensitive I am about my weight and he was fucking laughing about fat girls. He's a fucking asshole."

"What did he say?" Drew asked.

"Nothing. He didn't say a fucking thing. He just let them stand there and make fun of me."

"They were talking about you? They all knew you were there?"

I shook my head. "Kayleigh and Braylon knew I was there. They said something to him and he just told them to back off. Billy told another joke and said Xander told him the answer. I'm sorry, Drew. You seem like a nice guy, but your friends are fuckers."

"Actually the only one here I'm friends with is Xander. I come to these things because he asks me to. I can't stand Billy and Ricky. They're pricks. And Kayleigh and Braylon are miserable bitches who think they're God's gift to men.

That's why I'm out here. I just needed a break from the shallow pettiness."

I took a deep breath. "I guess I need a break, too. Except my break is going to be permanent. I'm done with assholes like Xander."

"I'm sorry. He really likes you. You're all he's talked about since he met you. I really wish things weren't working out this way. I always told him he turned into an asshole around those guys. Maybe he'll finally realize it after this, but I'm sorry you got hurt because of it."

I saw Sam's car coming slowly down the street and I stood up. "Thanks Drew. You're a really nice guy. Thanks for listening to me. Tell Xander to lose my number."

"Sorry, Mandy. It was nice meeting you."

"You, too," I said.

Then I walked away.

CHAPTER 18



In Sam's car I let loose the tears. Drew got them started and I couldn't keep them in any longer with Sam looking at me like she knew what happened. She drove silently and let me cry.

After a few minutes Sam said, "I called Claire and Addi. We're going to have a girls' night at Claire's."

I nodded. "I need to get my car. It's parked at Xander's. I'll follow you from there."

"You don't want to get it later?"

I shook my head. "No, I want to get it now. I can't see him. I just want to forget he ever existed."

Sam nodded once, then focused on the road. When we got to Xander's I looked up at his house and said goodbye, letting go of everything. I got in my car and followed Sam to Claire's apartment.

Inside Claire and Addi were waiting for us. Claire handed me a glass of wine without another word and we all piled on the couch. Addi turned on Ferris Bueller's Day Off and we sat and watched the movie.

As the movie played I went back through my entire relationship with Xander. I knew I should have known better. I told him that the first time we met. There was no way someone who looked like him and someone who looked like me would ever end up together. It couldn't happen. We were too different.

When he met my friends they accepted him. He wasn't treated poorly because he's gorgeous. He was treated like any other person. But his friends...

they were the jerks Xander said they were. If he knew it, I couldn't understand why he was still friends with them. Drew said he'd told Xander he was an ass when he was with them so it made me question even more why he stayed friends with them. And why he brought me to meet them.

Then again, I knew the answer. It was because he was an asshole, too.

When my wineglass was empty, Sam jumped up to fill it again. Claire brought me tissues and cookie dough. Addi let me lean on her shoulder and cry.

After the first movie ended Claire asked if I wanted to talk about it.

I didn't want to admit to them what happened. I didn't want them to be hurt the way I was by people being cruel. I knew they would all be pissed on my behalf, but I also knew how much it would hurt to hear those jokes.

But they were my best friends. They deserved to hear what happened.

"It was horrible. Well, not at first. The friends that were having the party were jerks, but his best friend, Drew, was really nice. We talked to him for a while and Xander got jealous of me talking to him. He said I was his, and only his."

"Uh, that's creepy," Addi said.

"That's hot," Sam said.

Claire just stared at me.

"Anyway, after that he went to the bathroom and left me alone. I went to find Drew because I thought he was interesting. Well, before I got to Drew I overheard these two bitchy girls talking about how Xander deserved better than me and how they would help him get over me when he realized he should be with someone hotter."

"What the fuck? That's who you were texting me about?" Sam asked.

"Yeah, that's the same ones."

"And Xander said nothing to that?"

"Well, no. He wasn't there when they were saying that. He came out later and they asked him why he was with me when the two of them were willing."

"And he didn't respond?" Sam asked, surprised and offended on my behalf.

"I walked away first. I don't know what he would have said, if anything, but I just left. He told me before we got there that he didn't like them, but maybe

two were better than one. I went to the bathroom and calmed down. When I came back out the asshole who lives in the house was telling fat jokes and Xander was laughing.”

“What an asshole,” Addi said.

“Yeah, he was. The bitchy girls saw me and egged Xander on because he didn’t know I was there. He just told them to back off. His friend told another joke but for the punchline he said, ‘Xander told me...’ I was horrified so I left.”

“What did he do?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I just left. I didn’t hear anything after I walked away, the blood was pounding in my head so hard I thought it was going to explode. I just got the hell out of there as fast as I could.”

“Who were you talking to on the front porch?” Sam asked.

“That’s Drew, Xander’s best friend. He’s the only one at the party that was nice to me. He said he doesn’t know why Xander hangs out with those people, but I think it’s because he’s just as big of an asshole.”

“Are you sure Mandy? I mean why would he say you’re his or sleep with you or give any of us the time of day if he was just toying with you?” Addi asked.

I looked at her, stunned. Maybe he was just an asshole who wanted to torture me? Maybe he was good at tricking women into believing he was someone other than who he was. Maybe Addi was right, but I didn’t want to hear it. I wanted sympathy instead of someone fixing the problem. I also just wanted to feel better for breaking up with the asshole.

“He’s a jerk, Addi. We’ve all been worried when it would come out. We all thought at some point his true colors would show through. I hate that it happened, but it did. I wanted him to be a good guy, I really did. If he was really a good guy then this wouldn’t have happened,” Claire said.

“Yeah, well, he was perfect until today. How is it possible he fooled all of us? She was happy. She was falling in love with him. We all saw it. He treated her well and after the noises they made the night we were all there for movie night it was clear the sex was amazing. I just hate that all of a sudden it went to shit. I wonder if maybe we’re jumping to conclusions. Find out his side of the

story. Has he called you?”

I shrugged. I left my phone in my purse and in the kitchen so I wouldn't be tempted to check my messages or answer if he called. “I don't know. My phone's in the other room.”

Addi got up to get my purse and pulled out my phone. “Already six text messages and three missed calls from him. If he was trying to be an ass and blow you off do you think he'd be trying to get in touch with you?”

I started crying again, my shoulders shaking softly as I cried. I couldn't think about Xander's phone calls or text messages. I couldn't think about the way he'd treated me. I was falling in love with him, actually I'd fallen. I had started letting myself imagine my life with him. We'd only been together about six weeks, but I couldn't remember the time before him. I couldn't imagine my life without him.

Hearing Addi tell me maybe I was wrong was letting hope seep back in. I almost thought maybe everything was okay and he was calling to apologize and explain what happened. But all I had to do was close my eyes and think about the way he was laughing at the jokes and know I couldn't do it. I couldn't just accept everything was okay.

It wasn't okay and it never would be.

“Addi, let it go. She doesn't need to think about it right now. As of now, Xander is a jerk. If she talks to him and decides to give him another chance we'll support her, but right now she doesn't need you telling her she's overreacting. I would lose it if someone did that to me,” Claire said.

They talked about me as though I wasn't there. As though they were talking about someone else. I wanted to tell them what to do, to offer an opinion. I wanted to tell them that no matter what he did I still loved him. I wanted to tell them I didn't want them to hate him because no matter what I didn't.

And I hated myself for it.

I wanted to be able to hate him. I wanted my heart to know what a jerk he was. But my heart wouldn't buy it. My heart wanted him, and the idea of my friends hating him bothered me. I couldn't stand listening to them tear him down. Not now, not ever.

“Let's just watch another movie, you guys,” I said. “I need to forget about all

this and just chill out.”

Everyone nodded and silently watched me. I got up from the couch and went into the kitchen. I needed a few minutes from their prying eyes. I heard them whispering once I left the room, but I didn’t try to hear what they were saying. They were probably arguing over what I needed.

Unfortunately the only thing I needed was the one thing I couldn’t have. I needed Xander’s arms wrapped tight around me, telling me it was all going to be okay. I needed to have him hold me and let me feel loved. I needed to know everything I thought was real was real.

I wouldn’t get that though. Xander would never again hold me or kiss me. I wouldn’t see him again because he’s not mine. He was never really mine.

I shoved my phone back into my purse and leaned against the counter.

How could I have been so stupid? I loved my life before him. I was happy. I had it all. Now I had it all but with a broken heart and a misguided belief on my happiness. I couldn’t go back to happy again, not like I was before. I’d learned what I was missing. What life could be like if I had love in it. I wanted that. I wanted love in my life.

I wanted Xander.

I filled my wineglass again and drained it before leaving the kitchen. I poured myself another glass and carried it to the living room. I resumed my seat on the couch and forced myself not to cry as we watched Clueless.

By the time the movie was over I was good and drunk. I couldn’t remember how many glasses of wine I’d had, or if I’d eaten anything besides cookie dough, but I was ready for bed.

I followed Claire down the hallway to her bedroom and got ready for bed. Sam and Addi camped out on the pull-out couch and we all headed to bed.

Curled up next to Claire she said, “I’m really sorry, Mandy. I thought he was different. I wanted him to be different.”

“I did too, Claire. I really thought he was a good guy. Even though I fought going out with him because I knew he’d be a jerk, I fell for him. I’m in love with him. I hate admitting that. I hate feeling that way.”

I snuggled under the covers. Sleep was pulling at me, but I needed to talk to

my best friend.

“You can’t help who you love, you know that.”

“Yeah, but it sucks. I should be able to stop loving him when I find out he’s an ass. Listening to Sam and Addi arguing about him was hard. I didn’t want to think about the phone calls or texts and I didn’t want to make you guys hate him. No matter what they said it broke my heart.”

“I’m sorry, Mandy. We all should have just listened. You know they were trying to help.”

“I know. It was hard to hear Sam get so down on him and it was hard to hear Addi build him up. Every word made me want to scream.” I clenched my fists, fighting back the urge to scream right then, just to let it all out.

“Yeah, I know. When you were in the kitchen we were arguing over what to say to you. We all finally agreed that we just needed to shut the hell up and listen to you if you wanted to talk.”

“I think I just need to process it all. You know try to get over it. Talking about him is only going to make me miss him,” I started crying. Again.

“Okay, then let’s not talk anymore. Get some sleep and maybe you’ll feel better in the morning. I wish I could take this away for you.” Claire rubbed my hair softly, consoling me and helping me feel ever so slightly better.

“Thanks, Claire. I’ll be okay. Eventually,” I murmured sleepily.

At least I hoped I would be.

CHAPTER 19



I woke up the next morning and showered and dressed quickly, thankful I'd packed an extra outfit for the cookout from hell. I ate a bowl of cereal in Claire's kitchen with everyone. The tension in the room could be cut with a knife, or maybe a sword. It was clear they didn't know what to say to me.

"Thanks for trying to help last night guys. It means a lot to have such great friends."

"We're always here for you. You know that," Claire said.

"Yep, no matter what," Sam added.

"I'm sorry if I upset you. I wish things had worked out for you. You're such an amazing woman and you deserve to be happy. We all do," Addi said.

"You're right. For now, we can be happy together. If one of us finds someone we'll all do our work to make sure whoever it is has a good guy."

I smiled and shoveled my cereal in. I needed to get out of there before they started trying to tell me what to do about Xander again. They were doing it again, making me want to scream. Until I could get my heart and my brain on the same page I couldn't think about Xander.

When I finished my cereal, I rinsed the bowl then stuck it in the dishwasher. I offered to help clean up the dishes from the night before but Claire waved me off. "I'll take care of it later. I don't have to work today so I'm going back to bed when you guys are gone. I'll clean up tonight. Are we still on for girls' night?"

Everyone looked at me. I nodded.

“Okay, I better go. Thanks so much for your help. I love you guys.”

I threw my bag in the back of my car then headed into work.

In the relative safety of my cubicle I knew I would be able to sink myself into work. I wouldn't have to hear from Xander and I certainly wouldn't have to see him. Eventually he would give up and accept that I was done being made fun of by him.

My phone showed thirty-two missed calls overnight and fifty-one missed texts. I scanned through the first ones at my desk, figuring I wouldn't cry if I was at work. The first texts were asking where I was and why I left. Then he shifted to being worried about me and saying he wanted me to call him. A handful more and he must have talked to Drew because the messages changed to him apologizing and asking if we could talk.

I deleted them all. Even the ones I didn't have the strength to read.

Melody walked by and saw my expression. “Did the boyfriend finally figure out that you're not worth it?”

“Shut up Melody. I don't want to talk to you,” I growled at her.

She laughed at me then stalked away on her heels, her cackling echoing in my head. Good thing, too, or I would have thrown my stapler at her.

“Mandy, I need to speak with you,” Diana said, drawing the attention of everyone in the room.

Her voice sounded ominous and I immediately flashed back to Friday afternoon when Melody went into her office. What now? I wondered.

Diana led me into the conference room, the only space nearby with a door so others couldn't hear our conversation. I was grateful for the barrier and terrified by what it meant that we needed one.

“Mandy, it's been brought to my attention that you've been threatening another employee here.”

“What?” I asked as I attempted to keep my head from exploding. What the hell was she talking about? If anything, I've been the one who's been threatened.

“I am not going into details, but the employee in question came to me late Friday in tears telling me everything that's been going on between you. She had proof in the form of emails she's received from you, signed documents from

other employees who've witnessed your behavior, and a detailed journal of all your interactions. All this is under review, but I have to say I'm very disappointed in you. I really thought you would be a good replacement for me, but in light of all this, I'm not even sure you'll have a job long enough for me to retire at the end of the week."

She couldn't be serious. After the beating I'd felt like I'd taken from Xander and his friends the day before I was numb, but hearing that 'another employee' had accused me of threatening her... It made my head spin. Not to mention I was about to lose my job. What the hell was I going to do?

I stumbled out of Diana's office with a killer headache. I didn't know if it was the wine or the tears, but I figured it was probably both. I wanted to claim I was sick and go home, but I knew that wouldn't help. I had to figure out how to prove Melody's accusations were lies.

While I was trying to figure out what to do, I answered calls as quickly as I could, solving problems for the customers and forgetting about my issues in the face of the troubles these people were dealing with. After lunch I signed back into my account and waited for the phone to ring. I didn't have to wait long. "Western New York Health, this is Mandy. How can I help you today?"

"Oh, baby, thank God. I've been so worried about you. Where were you last night?" Xander breathed in my ear. My traitorous heart lurched at the sound of his voice. I didn't want to talk to him. I didn't want him calling me. And fuck if I didn't forget he knew how to get in touch with me at work.

"What can I do for you today, sir?" I asked, trying to keep the panic and desire out of my voice.

"Mandy, please, you have to talk to me. You have to let me explain." He sounded desperate and it made me want to hear him out. I was curious what explanation he could possibly have.

But I was still pissed off.

"Explain what sir? I apologize but this is a business phone. If you don't have a problem that I can help you with I'll have to ask you to hang up."

"I do have something you can help me with and you know it baby. Mandy, you need to listen to me. Drew told me what you said. I'm not going to forget

you. I can't, baby. You're everything to me. He told me what you heard, but you need to listen to me. If you won't talk to me now I'll wait until you're ready." His voice went from pleading to desperate. I ached inside, and wanted to forgive him, but I was too confused, and too angry.

"I don't have time for this," I hissed. "I'm working and I can't lose my job because you're an asshole who preys on fat women to get them to sleep with you."

"God dammit Mandy, you know that's not what happened. You're mine, baby. I can't lose you. You're everything to me." He was practically begging me to listen. His voice was harsh as he told me I was his. He wanted to own me, control me, not be my partner.

"You're nothing to me, Xander," I snapped, my resolve breaking. "I thought you could be, but you proved that wasn't going to happen. You proved that you were exactly who I thought you were. You're the jerk I was afraid to get involved with."

"I'm not, Mandy, and you know it," he said softly. I heard the sorrow in his voice, like he was giving up. Or like he knew he couldn't convince me to let him back into my bed. All that work and he was going to have to start over.

Poor ass.

"No, actually I don't. You fooled me. You let me believe you weren't a jerk. You hid who you really were. God, I fell- It doesn't matter."

He breathed out a frustrated breath. "It does matter, Mandy. It matters to me. What were you going to say? Tell me now or tell me tonight. I'll come to Cooler Coffee tonight and we can talk after your girls' night."

"No, leave me alone. It's over, Xander. We're done. Don't call here again because I will not be able to do anything for you. It was nice knowing you, Mr. Carlson. Goodbye."

I hung up the phone. It took all my guts to turn him down. I didn't think I could do it again, especially when he was being sweet. But I had to. I wasn't going to let him trick me twice.

I felt the pain rising in my gut, overwhelming me and choking me. Tears pricked at my eyes and I knew I had to get to the bathroom before I broke down

in front of everyone. Melody would never let me live that down.

“Mandy Ryan, I need you to follow me, please,” I heard from behind me. I whirled around and was blown away by the harsh look on Diana’s face.

I stood and followed her through the path to the conference room again. She stood near the far wall and glared at me as I sat down.

“Ms. Ryan, I presume you were talking to a client on the phone since personal calls on company time are not allowed.”

“I, uh...” I fumbled. I didn’t know what to say. Depending on how much she heard it would be clear the phone call was personal. I did not want to get into a discussion about my break-up and I certainly did not want to admit I was handling personal issues on work time.

“It was a customer, yes.”

Diana breathed out a deep irritated breath. “I was really hoping you weren’t going to say that. Ms. Ryan, from what I heard of that phone call you were very rude to whoever was on the phone. We don’t talk to clients that way, no matter what they say. What did the client say to you?”

I took a deep breath. I glanced around, looking for inspiration, and found Melody grinning at me. It reminded me of Melody’s lies. I had no doubt she thought Diana was berating me for threatening Melody. Hell, maybe she heard my phone call with Xander and was just happy she was right. At that moment, I didn’t care.

“He’s a customer I’ve spoken to in the past and he was not being polite to me. I told him his situation had been handled and that he had no reason to call back but he did.”

“Is he harassing you? We can get the transcripts of the calls and we can alert the authorities. If he’s harassing you, we will make sure you don’t get his calls anymore.”

Diana looked so serious. I knew she was serious. Even though it would solve a few problems for me I knew I had to take care of Xander myself. I had to talk to him and tell him it was over and to leave me alone. I had to get him to leave me alone. Avoiding his calls would only go so far.

“No, Diana, he’s not harassing me. He just called about something today that

I wasn't able to help him with. I'm sorry for responding the way I did."

She stared at me for a few seconds. I couldn't read her expression though I knew it wasn't good. Fear crept over me. Was I going to get fired? Over Xander? First I lost my boyfriend and now I was going to lose my job? This had to be the worst week ever.

As I sat there and waited for Diana to deliver the bad news I tried to think of what I was going to do. I would have to move in with Claire, if she would let me. I'd have to sell my townhouse and all my stuff so I had enough money to pay for food and everything for a little while. I'd start looking for another job right away, but customer service jobs weren't always easy to come by.

Fuck, how could one guy have ruined so much of my life?

"In light of the information I received Friday afternoon, I'm afraid I'm going to have to put you on leave. We'll be investigating the issues between you and Melody and this new issue with the customer. I'll need his name and I'll review the transcripts of all your calls with him to make sure this was an isolated incident. In six weeks you've gone from one of my best employees to someone I might have to fire, Mandy. I don't know what's happened with you, but I am very disappointed."

"You know what," I said, letting the anger and frustration fill me. "I'm disappointed, too. You let that poisonous viper come in here Friday, after I'd left for the day, and feed you a bunch of lies, and you just believe her. You don't even ask me what happened before accusing me of being guilty? Melody is the most vicious person I've ever worked with. Ever since you announced your retirement she's spread more rumors and lies about me than I ever heard in high school. Just last week she told the entire office I had lice, then she told you about my relationship hoping you'd fire me for it, and now this. It doesn't matter what I say. It's clear you're going to listen to her and ignore me."

"Did you say she said you had lice?"

"Yes," I sighed, wondering why that was the only thing she cared about.

Diana shuffled through some papers on the table. When she found what she was looking for she pulled it from the stack. "Melody said you spread that lie about her last week."

I shook my head. “She’s not even creative enough to come up with a new lie. It doesn’t surprise me. Diana, I don’t know who signed these papers for her, or what emails she produced, but I have enough issues of my own. I don’t need to create issues with Melody.”

Diana shook her head. “I was quite surprised, but the evidence wasn’t something I could ignore. Melody can be very convincing.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, thinking back to the day she called Xander. Tears sprung to my eyes. She’d have no reason stay away from him now. He was available again.

“Are you okay?”

I shook my head. “Not really. I broke up with my boyfriend earlier. That was the phone call you heard.”

“You said it was a customer,” Diana said with hands on her hips.

“Well, Melody told you last week that he is. I broke up with him yesterday and he called today because I won’t answer his calls on my phone.”

“Men are a pain in the ass. I’m sorry, Mandy. Listen, I’ll look the other way about the phone call, but I still need to investigate Melody’s claims, even though I’m certain there’s nothing to them. Why don’t you log out of the system and review some of the files we have on backlog. If I find Melody lied about all this, she will be the one out of a job by the end of the week, and you will be getting the promotion. You might want to read up on how to do my job.”

I smiled. Something was finally going my way. I stood up for myself and Diana believed me. If only it was that easy with Xander.

Diana nodded, dismissing me, and I left the conference room. I went back to my desk and signed out of the system so I wouldn’t get any calls. I knew it meant my day would drag on, but it was already mostly over.

I pulled out my phone and quickly sent a text to Claire, Sam, and Addi. If Xander was going to be at Cooler Coffee, I was going to make sure I wasn’t.

Xander wants to talk. Is going to be at Cooler Coffee. I can’t face him. I’m not going to make it to girls’ night.

ADDI

I heard about this new bakery Bite Me! Another teacher brought in cupcakes from there. So good.

Are you guys sure?

SAM

Definitely. Let's do it.

CLAIRE

I'm in.

With one issue solved I went to the bathroom to try to bring down my heart rate. I was still reeling from Xander's call and my confrontation with Diana. I checked the stalls and was happy to find them all empty. I dropped onto one of the toilets and rested my head in my hands.

The tears came easily. I let them fall, not even trying to hold them back. I didn't cry out, just in case someone was walking by the door, but I let my tears go. I cried for the relationship I thought I had, for the man I was tricked into thinking Xander was, for my own foolishness, and for my heartbreak. I replayed his words when I met his family and again when I met his friends. I replayed our phone conversations and all the things I told him.

I'd never felt so exposed before.

He'd let me believe I could trust him, like he was a good person. I told him so many things, things I never imagined trusting anyone with. He made me feel loved, cared for. He made me feel like everything was going to be okay, like life could be perfect. Perfect with a man.

Perfect with Xander.

I dried my tears and pushed myself off the toilet. I had to get back to work before someone noticed I was gone so long.

The mirror showed me how poorly I wore sadness. My eyes were red and puffy. I splashed cold water on my face, but it didn't hide much. I pulled my make-up bag out and added mascara and a little shadow to my eyes. When I decided it was as good as it would get I went back out to start my training.

At least I wouldn't have to worry about Xander calling me again.

CHAPTER 20



I plugged in the address for Bite Me! on my phone. Addi said it was near the center of town, but I had no idea where, even after looking at the address. I did like the name though, and kept thinking that's what I want to say to Xander - Bite Me!

The directions led me through Winterville toward Addi's school, Winterville High School. It was still strange to have a friend that taught at my old high school and was friends with people who had been my teachers. I was just glad she didn't have parties with us all there. I wasn't sure I could handle that.

I turned onto Lake Effect Lane and started looking for the address. A few blocks up I saw a small shopping center with a few restaurants and some little shops and realized it was sandwiched in the middle. Feeling like a fool I parked near the entrance and dragged myself toward the door.

The door was marked with a chocolate cupcake smothered in pink icing. The cupcake had a smile on its face and a bubble over it where it said, "Bite Me!" I intended to do just that as soon as I got inside.

The smells that hit me when I walked in the door made me want to set up a cot in the back and never leave. Holy shit the place smelled good. It was like the sugar had permeated the walls. I was tempted to lick the walls to see if they tasted as good as the whole place smelled.

When I looked over I saw the creamy white walls looked like buttercream frosting. Rich chocolate swirls were painted along the walls with swipes of pink running alongside. I never knew walls could look delicious.

As I tore my eyes from the walls I saw the large display case with all the cupcakes. I felt like a new mom looking through a nursery window at my precious bundle of joy. The cupcakes were a rainbow of colors all arranged in an artful display designed to tempt me into trying one of each.

And after the day I'd had, I was tempted more than I wanted to admit.

The woman behind the counter smiled at me. She had chocolate brown hair cut into short choppy layers with peanut butter highlights, and I shit you not she had cupcakes that matched. Her bright blue eyes sparkled as she watched my reaction to the place. She had the prettiest smile I'd ever seen, it just lit up the room. I could tell she liked her job, and not just from the size of her body, but from that brilliant smile.

Of course, seeing a heavy woman behind the counter of Bite Me! made me like the place even more. I hated when I went into a cupcake shop, or anyplace that specialized in sweets, and saw a waif behind the counter. It made me wonder how good their stuff really was if even the employees could resist. I knew Bite Me! had to be good judging by the size of the employee.

"What can I get you today?" she asked me.

I knew it wasn't going to be an easy answer. I wanted to order at least four of them, maybe more. Looking at her I knew she wouldn't judge me. It was definitely a cupcakes for dinner kind of day.

"I think I'll try a red velvet, one chocolate peanut butter, one strawberry, a chocolate mousse, a vanilla bean, and one surprise of the day. Oh, and can I get a hot chocolate?"

She lifted each cupcake as I spoke and gently placed them into a box fitted with cardboard that gripped the base of the cupcakes so they wouldn't fall over. I had to admit there was nothing worse than seeing a delicious cupcake fall over and know you'd never get it back just right no matter how hard you tried.

She handed me the cupcakes then went to get my hot chocolate. I paid her and she said, "Here's one of our flyers. We're having a Grand Opening in a few weeks."

"Oh, you've only just opened. You must love working here. I don't know how you smell this all day and don't eat them all."

She laughed, a tinkling sound that made me feel better that I didn't offend her. "I opened about three weeks ago but wanted to wait until I knew if things would go well before doing the party. And yeah, it's hard resisting all this stuff. You should see when I'm testing out new recipes though. That's the worst because I have to make a whole batch to find out if they're good."

"Oh, wow, you're the owner?" I asked, pleasantly surprised.

"Yeah, I'm Charlotte Black, Charlie."

"It's nice to meet you Charlie. I'm Mandy and my friends are over in the corner. If you ever need taste testers, I'm pretty sure we'd all be very willing to help out with that."

Charlie laughed again, the sound making my day just a little better. "I'll have to keep that in mind. I hope you enjoy those ones."

"If they taste half as good as they smell they probably won't make it out of here in the box. I was ready to lick the walls when I came in."

She threw her head back and laughed earnestly. I realized in that second she was someone I wanted to be friends with. "That was exactly my reaction when my painters finished in here. Thankfully I haven't had anyone go for the paint instead of the cupcakes."

I laughed with her and thanked her again for the treats. I had to make sure I gave her my card on the way out the door. And I was pretty sure I'd suggest we change our weekly girls' night to Bite Me!

Claire, Sam, and Addi stopped talking when I got to the table. If that wasn't a sign that they had just been talking about me I didn't know what was.

"Hi guys, what's up?" I asked cheerfully, trying not to be pissed that they were talking about me. Or that they thought I was so fragile.

Oh, wait, I was fragile.

"How was your day?" Sam asked cautiously.

I'd intentionally left out the details of Xander's call when I texted everyone earlier. In fact, I'd left out the fact that he'd called at all. I didn't want to get into it at work. I was already in enough trouble because of him. I couldn't handle getting a second reprimand in one day.

"My day sucked, how about you?" I said sarcastically. They were going to

handle me with kid gloves all night and I couldn't deal with it. If they wanted to know how I was doing, they needed to be prepared for my honest answers.

And I honestly had a shitty day.

"Why did you have a bad day?" Addi asked. Her voice was a little too high pitched and she looked like she had something in her eye the way she was blinking rapidly. It was like watching the Stepford Wives with her perfect outer appearance and fake emotions.

"Well, let's see, I woke up knowing my ex-boyfriend that I thought I was in love with sees me as a fat cow. I found out Melody made up a bunch of lies about me and I might lose my job. Xander called me at work and told me he's not going to leave me alone and he's going to find me so I'll talk to him. Then I got in trouble and taken off calls because I was rude to him on the phone and my boss said I'm not allowed to talk to customers like that. Now I'm here and I'm getting treated like I'm mentally unstable by the three people who've always supported me. Is that bad enough for you?"

The three of them exchanged looks. 'Busted' was written all over their faces. I called them on their idiocy and even though they didn't like it, they knew it was the truth.

"We're sorry. It's just after what you told me last night, I told Sam and Addi to lay off on the advice or whatever about Xander. We just don't know what to say," Claire told me.

"How about 'Wow, your day sucked. Sorry you had to deal with all that. Is there anything we can do to make it better?' That might help instead of everyone trying to figure out on your own what I need."

I opened my box of cupcakes and inhaled deeply. For just a few seconds I needed to feel like everything was okay. I needed to forget how upset I was about Xander and how my friends were treating me like I was incapable of dealing with my life on my own. I had to have some control over something in my life, and staring at the six beautiful cupcakes I'd just purchased, I was happy I was in control of which one I ate first.

I examined them all, as though I could see which one would be the best. They all looked delicious. If I had six hands I knew I'd hold them all and take

bites out of each one until they were all gone. Instead, I picked out two, setting them on a napkin in front of me to pull the paper from the soft cake at the bottom.

The red velvet went first. The bright red paper pulling away to reveal the blood red cake underneath. The icing was like it should be, almost as thick as the cupcake itself. I inhaled deeply and smelled the telltale cream cheese frosting that should always go with red velvet.

My first bite was practically orgasmic. I smiled thinking at least I found something to replace that part of my relationship with Xander. The soft cake fell apart in my mouth, not crumbling but melting with the icing into a delicious pool of creamy softness. I closed my eyes and let the flavors meld on my tongue, the rich chocolate with the sweet cream cheese. A slight crunch gave away a secret hiding in the cupcake but I couldn't put my finger, or my tongue, on exactly what it was.

I took another bite, ignoring my friends and their blatant stares as I devoured my cupcake wholeheartedly. They might not know how to handle me or my mood, but at least they knew enough to leave me alone with my cupcake.

Before I knew it, and before I figured out the secret ingredient, my red velvet cupcake was gone. With the delicious tingle of sugar racing through my system I peeled the paper off my second one, the strawberry cupcake.

When I lifted it to my lips I saw my friends staring at me. I set the cupcake down and looked at them. "What's wrong with you guys?"

"We thought maybe you'd want to get dinner. There's the Mexican place on the corner or the Japanese place?" Addi said.

"I'm eating cupcakes for dinner. I bought six so I would have enough food in me. I'm depressed and I'm drowning my sorrows in sugary sweetness. If I can't have a manmade orgasm, I'm going to have six woman-made sugar induced ones."

"I thought I was going to come just watching you eat that first one. I'm going to get some cupcakes, too," Sam said as she stood up. Addi followed her.

Claire stayed put. "Are you okay?"

I glared at her. She knew better than to ask me that question with those

puppy dog eyes. “You know I’m not. It hurts like fucking hell. It ripped my heart out to hear his voice today. He sounded so relieved to finally get me on the phone and I was a complete bitch. I wouldn’t let him explain because I didn’t want to hear ‘they weren’t talking about you’ or ‘it was just a joke.’ They may not have said my name, but it certainly came across that way to me. So no, Claire, I’m not okay. I’m fucking hurting. And I want to eat goddamn cupcakes for dinner.”

Claire watched me as I squeezed my eyes tight against the tears. I didn’t want to cry in public but she’d brought it out of me. I told them to ask what I needed, not give me the sympathetic crap. I couldn’t fucking handle the emotion. My heart was still in that backyard, where it was torn from my chest and left on the ground for Xander and his friends to stomp on.

All except Drew.

At least he had one decent friend. One person in his circle that wasn’t a complete douche canoe.

Too bad I wasn’t attracted to Drew in the slightest. Aside from realizing he was cute and charismatic, he just wasn’t Xander.

And I hated that.

Sam and Addi scurried back to their seats with boxes smaller than mine and both opened them the same way I did mine. We all inhaled our cupcakes and they pulled the paper off theirs with the same reverence I’d used. The three of us lifted our cupcakes to our mouths together and bit into the soft gooeyness.

The strawberry was every bit as delicious as the red velvet. Little bits of strawberries were sprinkled through the cake and adorned the chocolate buttercream frosting. A rich creamy strawberry filling surprised me when I bit into it, filling my mouth with a little extra surprise.

I wanted to kiss Charlie for creating such beautiful masterpieces.

Claire sat down with her box as I peeled the paper from my third cupcake. I heard my phone vibrating in my purse and dove in the cupcake with renewed vigor, knowing the call was coming from Xander.

I wanted to block his number, to avoid his calls and texts altogether. But every time my finger hovered over the button I couldn’t bring myself to do it. As

though there was some reasonable explanation for why he was a jackass and I might be willing to listen to it.

I couldn't though. I'd already convinced myself that I had to keep away from him until my head and heart were on the same page. And it was clear they weren't if I couldn't even decide if I should block his number or let him talk.

I was screwed up. Big time.

After my fourth cupcake orgasm I realized everyone was staring at me again. "What?" I asked, clearly frustrated.

"Why did Xander call you?" Sam asked. I knew she'd be the only one with the guts to bring it up. She was the one who would always say the things no one wanted to hear. The one who would tell it like it is. The one who would push your buttons to piss you off because she knew until you got pissed you couldn't get over what was bothering you.

Unfortunately she was good at that shit.

"He wanted me to talk to him," I finally answered her. "He wanted to tell me what happened yesterday."

"How does he know why you're pissed? Did the fucker see you and still laugh like it was nothing?"

I shook my head with a smile, happy to hear her defend me so adamantly. "His friend, the one I was sitting on the porch talking to? He told him."

The fight went out of Sam as quickly as it appeared and she narrowed her eyes at me. "What did he say?"

"I wouldn't let him say anything. I wanted to talk to him, but I knew I would just forgive him and accept whatever lame excuse he had because I'll never get a guy hotter than him."

"Yes you will," Addi said loudly. "Don't make it seem like you're a horrible catch because you're not a stick. Every one of us deserves to be loved, no matter what our size is. Hot guys dig fat chicks."

"On what planet? I don't know where you've been but I don't get hit on by hot guys. The thing is, I don't care how hot a guy is if he's an asshole. Xander treated her like shit so it doesn't matter what he looks like. He doesn't deserve her."

“Yeah, but-“

“Guys, stop. This is what you did last night and it only made things worse. She’s hurt and upset. Just let her figure out how to handle all this and then we’ll make decisions about Xander’s character. Maybe there’s an explanation, maybe there isn’t. But it’s not up to us to decide that. It’s up to Mandy,” Claire defended me.

“Thanks Claire. The truth, guys, is I don’t know what to think. I don’t know how to feel. Have you ever been so blindsided by something that you weren’t sure which way was up? That’s how I feel. I was so sure Xander was a jerk at first but he worked hard at proving me wrong. Then yesterday I feel like he showed me I was right and it’s just thrown me off. I trusted him. I thought he was the man he was trying to convince me he was. I wanted him to be the sweet, caring, passionate man that I was falling in love with. It feels like I’m underwater, like I’m in the middle of a dream or something. I don’t know where to go to find answers, but until I figure out what I want from this I can’t see him. I just need to come up for air and see if I can find my way. Then I’ll think about talking to him.”

“I’ve been there,” Claire whispered. Sam and Addi looked at us, obviously unfamiliar with what I was describing. My heart ached for Claire that she’d been through this before, but much worse. I was jealous of Addi and Sam and their blissful naïveté. I wanted to go back to that. Back to before I met Xander and realized what life could mean with love in it.

Cupcake orgasms were great, but orgasms triggered by love would always be better.

Suddenly tired and ready for my own bed, I stood. “I’m going to head home. I need to rest and start to rebuild my world without Xander Carlson. Thanks for listening guys. Sorry I wasn’t very good company tonight. Oh, and let’s come here from now on.”

Everyone agreed and said goodbye. I walked out the door with my last two cupcakes knowing my friends would stay for a while and talk about me.

And knowing I didn’t care because I had two more cupcake orgasms coming my way.

CHAPTER 21



I drove back across to my side of town wondering how in the world I would get over what had happened. It hurt. To hear him laugh at the jokes he laughed at. It wasn't just that he'd laughed. It was that he didn't care that those words would hurt me. That I wasn't the first thing on his mind.

My life was never going to be the same. After almost two months of sharing my life with someone, I felt like I didn't know how to go back. How to be alone again. My friends were great, but there was only so much I could share with my friends. There were only so many things we could talk about. Xander was the man who allowed me to be myself. And he was the one who took that away.

When I pulled up in front of my house I sat there, listening to the rest of the song on the radio, not ready to face my empty townhouse alone. I hadn't been home since before meeting Xander's family two days earlier and I knew it would feel different, as though my home would know how much my life had changed.

I smiled to myself as I realized that was one of the reasons I had a cat. I could leave her for two days and she'd be fine on her own.

I got out of the car and saw movement near my front door. I glanced up and gasped. Xander was standing on my porch, just getting up from where he was obviously waiting for me to get home.

My body leapt at the sight of him and my broken heart ached. In my mind I was angry that he'd had the guts to show up at my home, but a secret part of me was thrilled that he was trying to get my attention.

I gathered my things slowly and headed for the door. Xander stayed on the

porch, blocking my way inside with his body that looked way too damned good for me to be mad at him. Why couldn't he have had cupcakes for dinner and gotten fat in a few hours? Why did he still have to look so fucking good?

It wasn't fair.

Slowly I crossed the distance between us, every step feeling like I was walking straight toward the edge of a cliff. Like once I got there I would have to choose to step back or fall over the edge.

"Where have you been? I've been so worried about you," Xander said as I got closer.

Irrepressible fury ripped through me. Yesterday he didn't care about my feelings and today he had a right to ask where I've been.

I don't think so.

"It's really none of your business where I've been."

His eyes sparked at me. He was angry, maybe a little hurt also. I tried to tell myself it didn't matter, but dammit it did. It mattered that I'd hurt him.

He softened before I got to say anything, the sharpness in his eyes drifting away and the tension in his body melting to the ground. "I'm sorry. It isn't my business. I have no right to anything in your life if you don't want me to have it. I want to. I've been going crazy trying to find you. But I can see you aren't ready to talk to me."

His kindness threw me. The man I'd been convincing myself to hate over the last 24 hours wasn't the man before me. The man before me was a shell of Xander. He looked the same, but he wasn't. He had the same soft green eyes and short brown hair, but he was a different man. A man that made me feel bad. A man that I wanted to wrap in my arms and convince everything would be okay.

A man I wanted to love again.

My heart won the battle and I admitted, "We went somewhere new for girls' night because I didn't want to see you."

"Are you afraid of me?"

That was a loaded question if I'd ever heard one. Afraid of Xander, the man? Not even a little bit. Afraid of the way I feel around him? Every second of the day.

“No.”

“Why are you avoiding me?”

“Because I’m hurt. Because I wanted you to be different. Because I found out you’re not who I thought you were.”

I felt the tears as they built. The lump choking my throat didn’t help either. My control was slipping away, drifting right through my fingers like dry sand. Xander seemed remorseful, ashamed of what had happened. It didn’t matter. For one thing, he still hadn’t said he was sorry. For another, sorry wouldn’t erase the pain I’d felt.

“I’m exactly who you thought I was. I understand you’re hurt, but you weren’t the only one. I was, too,” he said softly. He slowly turned. Somehow I hadn’t realized he was standing in the shadows, part of his face shielded from me. When he turned I understood why.

His left eye was swollen and red, a purple and blue bruise forming half a circle on the outside and underneath. He had cuts down the side of his face and his knuckles were raw.

“Oh, Xander,” I whispered. “What happened?” I moved toward him without thinking, without the need to keep the distance between us. I reached up to his face and he sucked in a breath when my fingers brushed against his cheek. His eyes closed and his jaw clenched as he fought the pain brought on by a light touch from me.

“I want to explain it all to you. I want to tell you everything. I need to come in though. I want to explain everything. Please.”

I stepped back. I knew what he was asking me. What he was saying without the words. He wanted my forgiveness. He wanted me to let him in, not to my house, but into my heart. He wanted me to give him another chance. And letting him in so we could ‘talk’ would only make it that much harder.

How could I do it? How could I sit there and consider taking him back?

Then again, he’d clearly gotten into a fight. And it was most likely over me.

Right?

Shit. I had no idea what to do.

“I don’t know Xander. I feel like I opened myself up too much to you. I don’t

know if I'm ready to do that again. If I can sit by and let you rip my heart out again."

He nodded once, letting me know he got it. It made sense to him. But I could tell he didn't really. He wanted to force his way inside, to make me listen to whatever he had to say. But I knew Xander would never hurt me.

"You're not the only one who had their heart ripped out. I'm not giving up on us, Mandy. You're hurt right now. And confused. You want to know why I didn't defend you or do something about it. I have the answers to all the questions that you've been asking yourself. And you can answer my questions. But we need to be at a point where we trust each other. We have to be able to talk. I'm going to wait until you're ready. I slept on your porch last night, waiting for you to come home. I'll do it every night until you let me inside to talk. I'm not going anywhere until you know everything. Then, and only then, will I accept it if you still want this to be over. Only then will I even consider letting you go."

His voice turned sad then possessive as he spoke. He was mad and hurt but he still wanted to be with me. He could answer my questions. The questions you always asked when a relationship ended. The questions you spent the rest of your life asking yourself. The questions that would keep me up at night.

I could get answers.

But all I could say was, "Let me think about it."

Xander stepped to the side as I passed him. A hint of his scent wafted around me, making my knees weak with desire. I wanted to press myself against him, to wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him like nothing had happened. I wanted to erase my memory of the day before and drag him to my bed and have my way with him.

But I didn't do any of those things. I simply walked past him, unlocked my front door, and went inside.

On the other side of the door I sunk back against it then dropped to the floor. I wanted to bang my head against the front door but I knew Xander would hear it and try to break down the door to find out what was going on.

Instead I pushed myself from the floor and went to the kitchen at the back of my townhouse. Then called Claire.

“Hey Mandy, what’s up?” she asked. Caution and worry laced her words and her tone. She knew if I was calling her back this quickly after leaving that something had happened.

“Xander’s here,” I stated, trying to remove any emotion from my voice.

“He’s where? At your place?” she asked, shock registering with her words.

“Yep. He’s on the porch. He said he slept on my porch last night waiting for me to come home and will sleep there as long as it takes for me to talk to him.”

The last thing I expected to hear through the phone was a soft bubble of laughter that grew to full blown hysterics. Claire laughed loudly, and her infectious laughter had me joining her.

“Why are we laughing?” I finally asked between tears and gasps.

“I’m sorry. I just got this mental picture of him on your porch, curled up against the door and falling inside when you opened the door.”

“Oh, God, I’m going to have to be careful in the morning.”

Claire stopped laughing immediately. “So you’re not going to talk to him?”

I took a deep breath. I thought if anyone would understand how confused I was it would be Claire. She’d been there. She’d been hurt by someone she thought cared about her. She was humiliated and crushed when it happened and I thought she would understand my need to block Xander from my life.

“I know how scary this is, Mandy, you know I do. He’s not who you thought he was. It sucks. I guess I feel like if I could go back and talk to BJ, ask him why, I might. I’m not comparing Xander to BJ because I don’t think they’re anything alike. I’m just saying that getting the opportunity to ask those questions is pretty powerful.”

I sighed. She was right, of course. Before BJ tried to rape Claire they’d had a good relationship. Over the last 10 years I knew she’d always wondered why. Why all of a sudden he seemed to change on her. What happened that he turned into the monster he was that night.

“What if I don’t like what he has to say? What if he’s mean or says something even more hurtful?”

I could hear Claire’s smile in her voice when she said, “He wouldn’t be there. If you were a game to him, a joke, he wouldn’t be there. He wouldn’t have

called you today or told you he was going to sleep on your porch until you listened to him. I know you don't want to hear our opinions or have what we think mess you up even worse, but I think he's a good guy. I didn't think he was for a while, and I questioned it yesterday when you came over. But the truth is he wouldn't be chasing you down now if he was a jerk. If he was with you just to make you feel like a fool in front of his friends he would have left it at that. He would have let you walk away feeling humiliated and been done with you."

I nodded, even though she couldn't see me. I was nodding as much for myself as I was for any other reason. "He got in a fight," I said quietly, almost like it was a secret.

"What?!? With who?" Claire exclaimed.

"I don't know. He said he'll tell me when I want to hear everything. I'm guessing it has to do with the party."

"Does he look even hotter?" Claire asked mischievously. "I always thought a guy who was willing to get into a fight for me was seriously hot. I guess after being attacked and having to fight for myself it made me want to have someone else who would do it for me. Then again, I can take care of myself."

"You can, and you always have. But yeah, he looks hot. And a little gross. His whole eye looks like it blew up. He's got a nasty bruise and some scratches and his knuckles are all scratched up."

"Hmmm, sounds sexy. If you don't want to talk to him, give him my address and I'll take care of him."

Rage and pain roared through me. I nearly dropped the phone, or crushed it in my hand. I wanted to scream at my best friend for thinking it was okay to go after Xander. No matter what happened between us, it would never be okay for her to go after him.

God, I hated her at that moment.

Why was I friends with such a deceitful bitch, and how had I never noticed it before?

"Hey, Mandy. Are you pissed that I said that?"

I grunted, unable to form words. I wanted to scream that she's a horrible bitch and I never want to hear from her again.

“All that shit you’re feeling... How pissed you are at me right now? Tells you how much you still want him. I’m just joking. I have no interest in Xander, fight face or not. What I am interested in is you admitting how much you still want him. If you’re that upset over a comment like that, go open your door and listen to the man you love.”

“You’re a bitch, you know that,” I growled at her.

She laughed loudly in my ear, clearly enjoying tormenting me. “It got you to admit how you feel. Now go let the man in and take care of his face. Call me later.”

I hung up and smiled at my phone. She was right. If I was that pissed, I needed to give him a chance to explain.

With a deep breath for courage I opened to the front door to let him in.

And found the porch empty.

CHAPTER 22



My first thought was ‘That lying bastard.’ He said he’d stay there on my porch, waiting until I was ready to talk to him. And in less than ten minutes he disappeared.

My heart sunk to my toes as I realized just when I’d given in and realized how much I still wanted him, he let me down again. He didn’t really want me. He just wanted to be right. Or wanted to embarrass me again. Or God knew what.

I let out a frustrated breath and shook my head at my stupidity. When I turned to go back inside I heard my name.

I looked around but didn’t see anyone. He called again. I scanned the cars in front of the townhouses but the evening sun was glinting off the windshields and I couldn’t see anything.

Then I saw a hand waving at me.

Xander’s SUV.

I stood there and waited, wondering what the hell was going on. He emerged from the vehicle a few seconds later and jogged across the grass toward me.

“Were you masterbating in your car?” I asked, slightly horrified.

“No,” he said, a blush creeping up his cheeks. “I had to pee, really bad. I didn’t want to knock on your door and have you think it was an excuse to get inside your place.”

“Why didn’t you go home?” I asked as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Just in case you changed your mind about me,” he said softly, hope weaving through his words as he looked up at me from the sidewalk leading to my porch. I stood two steps above him, watching his every movement and wondering if I would be able to resist anything he said.

“Do you still want to talk?” I asked calmly.

His eyes snapped to mine, the green in his hazel brightening as he realized I was inviting him inside. That I was going to give him another chance.

“Yes, I do. Very much.”

I nodded and turned back to the front door. I felt him behind me, the heat from him working its way through my defenses to my heart. We went inside to the living room, both sitting on the couch. I curled up at one end and expected Xander to sit on the other end but he didn’t. He sat right next to me, close enough for me to smell him and feel his heat.

There was so much I wanted to know. All the questions I wanted to ask him. But sitting there, feeling him against me, all thoughts went out of my head. The only thing I could remember was the way his hands felt on my skin, the way he looked at me when he plunged into me, the possessiveness in his voice when he told me I belonged to him.

I wanted to forget about the issues we were having and just crawl on top of him. I wanted to get him out of my system. Except I knew I never would. I could love him every day for the rest of my life and never have him out of my system. I would always crave his touch, his love.

Xander cleared his throat and looked at me. He raised an eyebrow as though asking if I was ready to hear what he had to say and I nodded.

“I’m sorry I took you to that party yesterday. If I’d known what was going to happen I wouldn’t have asked you to come.”

“You would have gone without me. Just gotten rid of me from the start,” I suggested. My anger was resurfacing. Holding onto it was the only way I could survive the conversation with him, having him there in my home where we’d made love more times than I could remember.

“Fuck no. Is that what you think of me? That I’m like that?”

Xander jumped up and paced the room. He was angry, but I didn’t care. I

wasn't about to make it easy on him. I had to know if he was being honest or not. And I knew getting him mad would help with that.

"You brought me to a party of people you said were your closest friends. Why would you be friends with people who were the polar opposite of you? I know you're like them. And that's exactly what every one of them would have done. Ditched the fat chick before their friends saw her."

He ran a hand over his hair as a muscle twitched in his jaw. He was trying to figure out how to respond, but the truth was out there. He could try to deny it, but I knew it was true.

"Can I just tell you what happened? Please? Let me talk without trying to make me out to be someone I'm not?"

His eyes pleaded with me and I shrugged, silently giving him the permission he asked for.

"Billy and Ricky went to high school with me. We were friends because we played sports together. We stayed friends since because we were just always friends. I told you before we went that they were assholes and that I don't see them much, but they always had good parties so I kept going."

He took a deep breath, glancing at me to make sure I wasn't going to interrupt him. I nodded for him to continue.

"When Billy was checking you out I thought it was a good thing. He's always an ass to women but I figured if he was checking you out then it meant he would take you home if given the chance, which never would have happened, so I thought he wouldn't be an asshole."

"Whoops," I whispered, unable to stop myself. Xander glared at me so I held my hands up in surrender.

"Kayleigh and Braylon are always horrible and hitting on me, I told you that. They've never been that mean. When you left I was horrified at what they said and told them to leave you alone. I didn't think they actually would but it isn't like I could beat the shit out of two women."

I snorted, thinking I wish that's exactly what he'd done.

"I gathered, from talking to Drew, that you came back outside when Billy was telling jokes, and being an asshole."

I nodded.

“At first I wasn’t paying attention to him. Another guy we’d gone to high school with, Kevin, was there. We were talking when Billy was telling his jokes. The first few were stupid, dirty jokes and they were funny. Kevin and I were talking and I was laughing at something he said when Braylon...um, when she...”

“It’s okay, I heard the bitch. She asked if your life was ironic, if I swallow.”

He had the decency to look ashamed. He dropped back to the couch next to me. “I didn’t know what she was talking about but I’d heard the joke before so I guessed that was the one Billy had just told. When Billy told the next joke and used you as the punchline... well, I used him as a punching bag.”

“What?” I screamed.

All the breath in my lungs rushed out as I processed what he said. He couldn’t be serious, could he? Why would he punch one of his oldest friends? Over me? There’s no way.

“Everyone was laughing and thought it was funny. I swear I saw red, I was so pissed off. I wanted to rip his fucking head off for saying anything about you, for letting anyone think you are something other than perfect. I told him to shut the fuck up and not to ever talk about you again. He just kept laughing, and I...”

He stopped and took a deep breath. His fists were clenched in his lap. His eyes were twitching behind his eyelids, as though he was watching the whole scene play out again.

With his eyes still closed he said, “My first swing connected squarely with his jaw. Billy stumbled backward, sprawling across the grass before he’d ever stopped laughing. Everyone stared at me, silent, scared. Ricky helped Billy back to his feet and he charged at me. He caught me around my chest and threw me to the ground. He got me good with the first punch.” Xander gently touched his eye where Billy had obviously hit him. “Since I’m bigger than he is I was able to throw him off and crawl to my feet. When he came at me the second time I landed another punch, knocking him off balance. His cheek split wide open and blood poured out. Ricky helped him to his feet and they both stared at me and just told me to get out.”

He took a deep breath and finally opened his eyes. He looked at me and my heart ached. I knew whatever he was going to say next was the hardest part.

“I couldn’t find you. I looked in the bathroom but it was empty. I even went upstairs. I knew you weren’t outside because I would have seen you, but I didn’t know where you were. I was coming down the stairs when Drew walked inside. He asked what happened and I ignored him, asking if he knew where you were.”

I sucked in a breath through my teeth. Xander had been crazy jealous about me talking to Drew and with that much rage I could only imagine what he did to his best friend.

“Drew told me you’d left, that one of your friends had come to pick you up. I was pissed and hurt. I didn’t know why you’d left, why you would do that to me when things were going so great. I... fuck, I needed you. I asked Drew how he knew and he admitted you two were sitting out front talking while I was getting the shit beat out of me. I was pissed. I told Drew he was a shitty friend for not stopping you. I told him he was an asshole for letting you leave. I tried to hit him, but he deflected me and pinned me against the wall. The fucker’s stronger than he looks. He told me to go home and cool off and we would talk later.”

I let out the breath I’d been holding, afraid of Xander ruining his friendship with the one person who’d treated me well that day. I knew he was hurt and angry. I knew he wasn’t mine. But I wanted him to be happy. And I knew how much best friends meant.

“I left and went straight to my place but your car was already gone. I didn’t know where any of your friends lived so I couldn’t go there. I tried your place but when you weren’t home I ended up driving around for a while to try and find you. When the sun started to set I just went back to your place thinking you’d show up eventually.”

He looked exhausted, like he’d worn himself out just telling the story all over again. “When you didn’t come home I started freaking out. I couldn’t get you to answer your calls or texts. I thought something had happened to you. I called Drew and asked him who you were with and what I should do. The woman he described sounded like Sam so I assumed you were at her place. Drew suggested I wait for you at home for a while then get some sleep. Thankfully he wasn’t

mad at me.”

“He’s a good friend,” I said quietly, remembering the kindness he’d shown me when I needed it. He was a good friend to me even though it went against his best friend. Drew was definitely someone who would make a woman very happy one day.

“Yeah, he is. I wouldn’t have gotten through the last 24 hours without him. I know I won’t get through the rest of this week without him if you can’t forgive me.”

I blew out a breath. He was giving me an opening. It would be so easy to forgive him and fall into his arms. To go back to the way things were the day before.

I wanted to. I really did. I could feel myself weakening as he told his side of the story. It wouldn’t be long before I would give in. Until I would just say it’s fine and he wasn’t to blame.

The truth was, it wasn’t enough for me. It wasn’t enough to say he was sorry. Getting into a fight with one of his oldest friends because of me was... nice, I guess. But I knew enough to know it would happen again and again. I would doubt him. I would think the worst of him. I would expect him to end up as that man I feared he was when we first met.

And I couldn’t put him through that.

It wasn’t fair to lead him on, to love him when he needed to be free to find someone more like him, someone who would never question who he was or how much he cared simply because they worked.

Pretty people were meant to be with pretty people. And Xander was definitely one of the pretty people.

I was not.

I looked at him, tears trembling in the corners of my eyes as I fought them back. I had to be strong and tell him he deserved more than a fat girlfriend. But he opened his mouth and said, “Mandy, I love you. I love you so much it fucking hurts. The last 24 hours have been the worst of my life because I knew how much you were hurting and it was because of me. I’m sitting here dying inside because all I want to do is pull you into my arms and kiss away the pain I

caused, but I can see you aren't ready for me to do that. Maybe you never will be, but I want you to know I've never loved anyone the way I love you. And I never will."

Oh, fuck.

CHAPTER 23



*H*ow the hell was I supposed to respond to that? Everything I was telling myself, everything I worried about, was erased with just a few words from his beautiful lips. He told me the words I never thought I'd hear from him. The words I ached for but never let myself believe he would say.

And still in the back of my mind I doubted those words. I still wondered if he would leave me as soon as someone better looking came along. Would he check out hot women in bikinis at the beach and wish he'd waited for one of them instead of for me.

Would he stop loving me if I got bigger?

As if he could read my thoughts, he knelt in front of me and took my hands. "Mandy, you're it for me. Honey, I know you've worried about me, but I've had skinny girls and I've had you. Every single time I want you. I want your luscious curves and your easy laugh, your chocolate flavored mouth and your beautiful heart. I want you by my side. I want to kiss you and hold you and love you for as long as you'll allow me. And one day, I'm going to ask you to marry me and pray you say yes. And if you do, I'll live all my days working to prove to you how much I love you. And only you."

The tears I fought were falling steadily from my eyes, running down my cheeks, and dropping onto our joined hands. I watched as a small pool formed between our fingers, clasped tightly together. Xander wasn't letting go of me and I wasn't letting go of him, the tears simply collected between us.

I didn't know what to say. My lips wouldn't form any words. Neither could

my brain. I'd gone from missing him like mad and wanting to hate him to hearing him declare his love for me and tell me he was going to marry me one day.

"Before I met you," I began, "I enjoyed my life. I had great friends, a job I liked, my own place. I was happy. I didn't need anything and I always took care of myself." His eyes flashed to mine briefly and I caught on to the mischievousness glinting in his hazel eyes. I rolled my eyes at him and continued, "You know what I mean. Get your mind out of the gutter."

He chuckled softly and pressed his lips to the pool of tears on our hands.

"I thought I had everything I would ever need. I wasn't looking for a boyfriend. And I certainly wasn't looking for someone like you. You turned my world upside down. The last 24 hours have been the worst of my life, too. I've never been so hurt before. I've never felt so worthless before. I've never thought so little of myself because of what others said."

He slid his hands from mine, sensing where I was going.

"And the worst part of all of it was how much I missed you. I wanted so badly to hate you. I wanted to believe you were the asshole I'd feared from our first meeting. The truth is I didn't want to admit to myself how scary it was to love you as much as I do. I didn't know how to handle loving you, and letting myself love you, without losing myself. When I saw you laughing, I assumed the worst of you because it was easier than to think you could love me enough to cut your friends off. I don't want you to lose the people who matter to you, but I don't want to lose you either."

His eyes snapped to mine again. The hazel green was filled with hope and longing and it shot right through to my gut. My whole body warmed at the look he was giving me, like he wasn't sure if he should kiss me or wait for me to finish what I was saying. I let the moment hang between us, barely breathing as we both waited for what was going to come next. For where things were going to end up.

"You said you would wait until I was ready to listen to you. And after that you would let me make the choice. You would let me decide where things were going to go with us. The truth is I want all the same things you want. I was

miserable without you. I wanted to cry for all the moments we wouldn't share. My heart ached for you. I don't know if I'll ever completely let go of my fears that you'll fall in love with someone else who's skinnier than me, but I'm going to try. Because with all my heart, and all that I am, I love you Xander Carlson."

The words had barely passed my lips when Xander's mouth was on mine. He kissed me like his life depended on it, like he'd been starved for me. I kissed him back, feeling like it'd been longer than just a day since his lips had been against mine.

His frantic kiss had his lips kissing mine, all over each lip until he'd covered them both in soft kisses. Then he pressed his full lips against mine and his tongue darted out to run over my lips. I sighed softly, reveling in the feel of him, and he slid his tongue into my mouth.

He kissed me fully, deeply, learning me all over again but always returning to the places he knew were my favorites. As he kissed me his hands drifted over my thighs, caressing my skin through the fabric of my capris. He held on to me, not letting me move from the place he had me pinned.

Xander leaned over me, still on his knees in front of me, pressing me back against the back of the couch. His large strong body covered mine, making me feel small cradled within his arms. His fingers laced into my hair as he manipulated my head to plunge his tongue deeper into my mouth, claiming me all over again as his.

"Let's go upstairs," he whispered as he drew back from me. His eyes were hot with desire for me. My body was on fire, aching for him, so ready to get back to where things were before. In the back of my mind I wondered if I'd forgiven him too quickly, but I pushed the thoughts away. Like Claire said, he wouldn't have gone to so much trouble to talk to me if it was all a joke.

He loved me.

In my room he turned on all the lights. I reached to turn them off, not liking to have him see me in full light. Naked. Vulnerable.

"I want to see you. I want to see all of you."

I took a deep breath and knew this would be it. This would be the last thing to let go of so I could fully trust him. I'd already trusted him with my secrets, my

heart, my love, even my body. But letting him see me in the harsh lights of my bedroom, letting him watch my body jiggle and shake as we made love, it meant trusting him with my soul.

Xander stood next to me, holding my hand. He kissed my neck, slowly brushing my shirt aside to kiss my shoulder. “You’re beautiful, Mandy. So soft.”

His fingers toyed with the edge of my shirt, lifting it so he could graze his knuckles across the sensitive skin on my stomach. I felt the roughness of his knuckles, the wounds left from his fight with one of his oldest friends. Over me.

I reached down and grabbed his fingers, taking his hands into mine. He looked down at me, wondering what I was doing. I brought his hands to my mouth and kissed each scratch, each bruise. “Thank you for defending me,” I breathed against his skin. “Thank you for thinking I’m beautiful enough to be upset for me.”

“You are beautiful Mandy. You are worth defending every day for the rest of my life, if I have to.”

I smiled up at him and let him return his hands to my waist. He lifted my shirt from me and gazed down over the top half of my body. “So beautiful,” he whispered as he leaned down to kiss my collarbone. His hands went to my breasts, lifting them in his large palms, holding the weight of them for me. He trailed kisses between the heavy globes and back up, running along the lacy edge of my bra.

He gently lowered my breasts back to my body and slid his hands around my back to unclasp my bra. I shimmied out of it and felt his hands return to my bare skin, cupping my breasts and drawing his thumbs over my peaked nipples. I gasped and arched into him, pressing more of my heavy breasts into his hands. “I know these hurt your back, but I love your breasts. They fit perfectly into my hands and respond so easily to my mouth. And the skin around your nipples... it’s almost as sweet as the skin on your stomach.”

He dipped his head to capture one nipple then the other, nipping them gently then laving his tongue over the ache. His hands went to my hips and slowly lowered my panties and capris together. He dropped to his knees in front of me, holding each leg as he helped me step out of the last of my clothes. Then he

kissed my stomach.

“This is my favorite part of you. Your skin here smells like only you and I can catch hints of your arousal when I inhale you deeply. Your stomach is so soft and perfect here. One day I will watch as this soft round belly of yours grows with the product of our love, with our children. It makes me so happy to imagine the rest of my life with you.”

I stood before him, my body bare for his eyes, his hands, his body. I stood there and listened to his sweet words and knew, without a doubt, I’d never be happier.

“You have too many clothes on,” I told him, a wicked glint in my eye.

He stood before me and stripped his clothes quickly, leaving them on the floor at our feet. He guided me quickly to the bed and directed me to lie down. He took the space next to me and let his hands and eyes drift over me, naked and waiting for him.

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, Mandy. And I’ll beat the shit out of any man who thinks less than that of you.”

I gently brushed my fingers over the bruise covering his eye. He flinched slightly at my touch before nuzzling his face into my hand. “I want to believe you. I just don’t see what you see. I don’t see beautiful.”

“Then I’m not doing my job. But I will. Every day, for the rest of my life, I will do everything I can to show you how I see you. To let you see the beauty of your body and your heart. You are beautiful. Always.”

I cuddled tighter against him and my legs fell apart as he reached between them to find me slick and ready for him. He quickly brought me to an orgasm then settled between my legs. As he thrust hard and deep into me I could feel the love he felt. The love flowing between us.

Xander punctuated his motions with his words, repeating ‘You’re beautiful’ and ‘I love you’ with each movement of our bodies together. I felt another orgasm building as much from his words as from his body. As my body gripped him, held him inside me, he lost his control, thrusting harder and deeper into me. He gritted out, “Honey, I need you now. I need you with me. I need you to love me with everything you have. Now, baby. Now.”

“I love you,” I whispered against his lips as I tumbled over the edge he’d brought me to. I held his eyes as he moaned my name and repeated my words. I felt his love as his body released into mine. Love that brought me to tears.

Love that I’d never dreamed of. But was mine forever.

EPILOGUE



CLAIRE

“*A* toast to the newest Customer Service Manager! Congratulations Mandy!” Xander said, raising his glass.

We were all crowded around the island in his house, celebrating Mandy’s promotion, and them getting back together. After I talked to Mandy Tuesday night I was worried about her, especially when she didn’t call me back. I knew all too well how someone could turn on a person. I paced nearly the whole night, worrying something had happened to Mandy. I sent her a couple of text messages that went unanswered then called her. She finally answered around midnight and told me Xander was still there and everything was fine. Once I heard her voice I could breathe again.

I can’t imagine any of my friends going through what I went through. Watching Mandy and Xander, I struggled to believe he could ever hurt her, especially on purpose. Just looking at the two of them I knew something had changed between them. They always touched and shared looks, but there was a sweetness to it whereas before it had seemed more sexual, like they wanted each other and couldn’t keep their hands to themselves.

Now, I saw love.

Love wasn’t in the cards for me. Something about getting raped by the first, and only, boy you ever let close damaged something deep inside. I was okay with that. I had friends. I was happy enough. Yeah, I’d love to feel the way my best friend felt. I’d love to share my day, my life, with someone, but it wasn’t going to happen.

“What ever happened with Melody?” Sam asked, bringing me back to the present.

Mandy wrinkled her nose and shook her head. “She finally admitted she’d lied to Diana and she fired her. I felt bad, but it makes my life easier. I won’t have to deal with her, or fire her myself. She was trying to get me fired so she could get the promotion and get rid of me all at once. When nothing worked she just took it to a whole new level.”

“I still can’t believe you talked to your boss like you did,” Addi said, shaking her head.

Mandy looked sheepish. “Yeah, I was pretty forceful. I probably shouldn’t have said all the things I said, but I was upset and just couldn’t hold back any longer.”

Xander nuzzled into her neck. He stood behind her, his body pressed against Mandy’s back. I watched silently as he kissed the back of her neck and whispered something in her ear. Mandy turned her head to the side and kissed him softly.

I heard him whisper ‘I love you’ when they pulled apart and my heart clenched. No one had said those words to me, except my family and friends, since high school. I didn’t know if I’d ever believe someone saying those three little words to me. I was fairly certain I was incapable of letting anyone in close enough to find out.

“So what now? Do you have changes you want to make or are you leaving things as they are?” Addi asked.

“For now I’m going to leave things as they are. Diana agreed to stick around for a couple of weeks to train me, but the job is officially mine on Monday. Diana will only be working half days. I have a lot to figure out, but I think it’ll be okay.”

“You’re smart, honey. You’ll figure it out and be taking over the whole place in no time,” Xander agreed.

“I don’t know about that, but thank you. It’s nice to know I have you guys in my corner.”

The doorbell rang and Xander rushed over to pay for our pizzas. Sam and

Addi wandered into the dining room, leaving Mandy and I alone.

“You’ve been quiet tonight. Is everything okay?”

I’d hoped no one would pick up on my mood, but I should have known better. Mandy and I had known each other far too long to think she’d miss anything.

“I’m okay. I’m glad you’re happy. It’s good to know he was the guy we all thought he was.”

Mandy glanced toward the front of the house where Xander was. “He is. He told me he loves me. And that he’s going to marry me some day.”

Tears pricked my eyes, although I had no idea why. “That’s great, hun. I’m so happy for you.”

“Then why are you crying?” Mandy asked with narrowed eyes.

I shook my head. “I don’t really know. I’ve been really emotional this week.”

Mandy wrapped her arm around me. “Do you think you’re losing me or do you wish you had a guy of your own?”

She was dead on, not that I wanted to admit it to myself, let alone her, but I knew I couldn’t hide from Mandy. “Maybe a little of both. I’m not trying to make you feel bad though. I like Xander, and I’m really glad you’re happy. I just feel like I’m on my own now. Sam and Addi have each other and now you have Xander. I guess a part of me wishes I wasn’t so screwed up and I could have someone to share my life with. It wasn’t too long ago we talked about moving in together.”

Mandy looked down and I could tell I’d made her feel bad, even though I didn’t want to. “I’m sorry, Claire. I’m not replacing you, I hope you know that. I never could. You’ll always be my best friend.”

“I know,” I said through my tears. “It’s just different now.”

Mandy nodded, acknowledging what we both knew to be the truth. Xander came back into the kitchen with three boxes of pizza. The smell was overwhelming, but not nearly as much as the emotions swirling through me. I excused myself quickly and ducked into the bathroom.

The mirror betrayed my attempted calm. I looked tired. I hated when people told me that because it was always a thinly veiled insult, but right then it was

true. I hadn't been sleeping well, trying to figure out my life. I'd been thinking more and more about BJ, wondering why, and wishing no one else ever had to go through what I went through. I didn't want to go there, but with my best friend finding love, it brought back a lot of memories of BJ, before that one night.

I splashed cold water on my face and went back out to join the others. Everyone was laughing and eating pizza, drinking to celebrate Mandy's promotion. I felt like an outsider for the first time. I was the fifth wheel.

Xander approached me. "I want you to know you're welcome here any time you want to come. No matter what, you'll always be welcome here."

Confused, I cocked my head and narrowed my eyes at him. Where was that coming from?

"I know you and Mandy are close, best of friends. She talks about you all the time and I know you spend a lot of time together. If she's here, now or in the future when hopefully she marries me, I want you to feel comfortable here. I don't want to come between the two of you. You're like her sister, and I'd never forgive myself if I was the reason you weren't as close. If you ever need anything, we're both here for you."

Tears filled my eyes again. Mandy was a lucky woman. Xander was not only sweet and kind to her, but to me also. And that meant a lot in my book.

I thanked him, wiping my tears, and knew my best friend would always be well taken care of. At least if I was losing her, I was losing her to someone who would love her and always be there for her. I envied that, more than a little, and found myself wishing for the same thing.

Even though I knew it'd never come.



THANK you so much for reading Mandy and Xander's story! This series is truly a work of my heart, and I thank you for giving my wonderful ladies a shot!

The series continues with Claire's story. She buried her feelings behind her weight and told herself she couldn't get hurt if no one bothered to look at her.

The last man she expected to pay her any attention was her sexy coworker, Aidan. They were friends, so she let him in, but he's not happy with just being friends and won't stop until they're much, much more. Pick up your copy of [Lush & Lovely](#) now!

CAN'T HAVE JUST ONE? Get the next four books in the Big & Beautiful series in one boxed set. Read Claire's, Lexi's, Addi's, and Sam's stories now. Get [Big & Beautiful Boxed Set #1](#) today.

WANT EVEN MORE curvy girl romance? Blake can't get Ian out of her mind. Especially after she walked in on him right after his shower. Wet, hard muscles...and other things. But he'd never go for her. He wasn't the kind of guy who did relationships, or curvy girls. But she doesn't know what he wants as well as she thinks. Read [His Curvy Friend](#) today!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA TODAY Bestselling Author Mary E Thompson spent most of her childhood wishing she had a few less curves. She hid in the pages of books because her favorite characters never cared what size her clothes were. Now, neither does Mary, and she writes stories that celebrate women like her. Real women who have curves, chase dreams, and find love, because we should all be happy, no matter our dress size.

Mary spends her non-writing time with her husband and two kids, watching too much TV, cheering for her hometown football team (Go Bills!), and hiding chocolate from her family.

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