It should go without saying, but I'll say it anyway: what you are about to read contains spoilers for all the *Hot in Chicago* books, so if you haven’t read them, don’t read this! The following takes place *after* the end of *Playing with Fire*, but *before* that book's epilogue. After all, this is Eli and Alexandra we're talking about—did you think it would be easy? 😊

xoxo

*Kate*
Chapter One

I need this. I need you. All the damn time.

Honeyed words from the mouth of the smoothest talking man in Chicago. At least, that’s what they used to call him when he ruled this city. He’d be lying if he said he didn’t miss it, but then lying came as naturally to him as breathing.

Beneath his truth-bending tongue, now lapping gently between her stellar thighs, Alexandra shifted slightly, angling her hips to invite him deeper. He could tell from the fact she wasn’t ordering him around—yet—that she was still caught in that half-twilight between sleep and consciousness. And while he loved her filthy mouth hurling insults at him to do her orgasmic bidding, there was something about a pliant, drowsy Alexandra that got him equally hard.

He licked inside her, relishing her sweet tang.

A sleep-rusty, carnal moan filled the room, followed by a breathy "Eli" and then a gasped "Fuuuck."

His silver-tongued angel had awoken at last.

She was close, her release a couple of licks and one greedy suck of her clit away. Her thighs fell open wider. Her hips developed a sensual swivel as she ground harder against his mouth. With one steady palm, Eli pinned her in place and applied a brief, tonguing flick to her clit—not enough to send her over, but a preview of the pinnacle he would take her to.

Then he stopped.

Lifted his head.
And used his oh-so-wicked mouth to do what he did best after pleasuring his woman:

Cajole.

“We could have your stuff packed up by Friday. Just two days, and you'll be in here and settled before the wedding.”

Meaning her brother's wedding to Darcy, the adorable inked body artist who was far too good for that bruiser, Beck Rivera. But he had a great right hook and an exemplary record in the annual Battle of the Badges. The two lovebirds were getting hitched on Saturday.

“Eli, moving discussion, later,” she said, her voice slurred with pleasure.

“Orgasm, now.”

In full confidence that this raspy encouragement was enough to put him back on all-important tongue-fucking duty, she cupped his head and pushed his mouth where she needed it most. Christ, he loved how in tune she was with her strong, beautiful body.

But he would love it more if she opened her heart as completely as she opened her thighs.

Through lips wet with her, he murmured against her soaking seam, knowing the vibration of his voice would drive her wild. “Shadow wants you here as well. He whines when you go.”

“I think you whine when I go,” she panted.
“We’re very alike.” He fingered the soft folds around her clit, careful to avoid that nerve-packed bundle of pleasure. “I want you to come here straight from your shift at the firehouse. I want to arrive home and find you waiting for me.”

“In an apron? Ready with your martini?”

“Yes to the apron. Naked underneath, of course. And you know I want a Glenlivet.”

“You know what I want? A fucking orgasm, Eli. You wake me up at five thirty in the freakin’ a.m. with that ninja tongue, purely so you can start a negotiation.”

She wasn’t wrong.

But she was wrong in thinking that coasting her fingers down between her legs and finishing the job herself was the next logical step. He could almost hear her annoyed internal admonishment: Never send a man to do a woman’s job, and hell if that didn’t spur him into action because bringing her over that sweet edge was his job. He snagged her wrist, and restraining her arms, pushed up and slipped inside her.

Probably not the best move because she felt so tight, so right, he’d likely explode before he compelled her agreement. So he was a little rusty on the bargaining front, but damned if he’d let her know.

“Negotiation is my forte, Alexandra. How else would I get a woman as difficult as you to love me?”

“Oh, by lying your ass off”—God, he was so deep inside her, fighting the suck of her muscles, thickening with every passing second—“and faking a reason why I should date you”—he slowly withdrew and angled his next, consuming thrust so it
brushed her clit as he entered her—“and being an all-round underhanded, sneaky, unscrupulous dick weasel.”

Those melted shamrock eyes, flamed with desire, held his captive—when they weren’t rolling to the back of her head with the sheer pleasure they were creating together. He couldn’t look away. Would never want to.

“Come live with me.” Grasping her sweet ass, he spread her wider for his invasion. *Mine, mine, all mine.* “Be with me. Always.”

It was the second week of May, ten weeks since the election, and Alexandra refused to move in with him. Sometimes she came over after a night working at Dempsey’s on Damen, the bar her family owned. Sometimes, she dropped in after the end of her shift at Engine 6 around nine in the morning—and as he was no longer mayor and was busy getting his ducks in a row for the law practice he planned to open, those early morning visits worked for both of them. She would barely set foot inside the front door and they’d be fucking like... well, Eli and Alexandra. Against the wall, on the hallway rug, half-way up the stairs.

But he didn’t want to answer the damn doorbell to the woman he loved. He didn’t want to wait for a text to confirm if she was coming over or not.

He wanted her with him, physically and emotionally present. A permanent fixture in his bed, a forever part of the life he was rebuilding.

Bold action was needed. He slipped out of that warm, wet haven, a last ditch effort to haul the power in this negotiation back to his side. “I want you here.”

“I am here,” she murmured, pushing him on his back when it became evident that he was going to suffer an unsatisfied cock rather than give her what she
wanted. In a move so evil a James Bond villainess would be proud she straddled him. Of course, his cock had no choice but to return to home base because the traitor knew exactly who it belonged to.

Pussy-whipped | verb | /ˈpʌs-ə, ˈhwip, ˈwip/  
Defined as: Eli Cooper’s dick imprinted on Alexandra Dempsey’s pussy to the point it no longer recognizes the great wealth of pussy that abounds in the greater Chicagoland area.

She splayed her hands on his chest as she rocked, rolled, and rode him. Her beautiful tits bounced, their sweet rosy tips calling for his hands and mouth, and *fuck*, his balls filled and his cock swelled and the battle was lost. But first... A light thumb of her clit sent her rigid, her body in an arch that thrust her breasts forward. The squeeze of her killer muscles triggered the release he’d tried to delay. Yet again, this woman had given him an orgasm that blew his balls to the wall, but he was no closer to winning the war.

Still holding him in the velvet cage of her body, she inclined toward him, her soft, full breasts in a teasing brush against his chest, and snagged his lip with her teeth. A conqueror’s kiss.

“Stick to talking, Eli. Sex won’t work as your weapon, not against this bangin’ body.”

She was right. When it came to fucking as the field of battle, she would always come out on top.
“I’m not giving up, you know.”

“I like how it’s going now. I like taking it slow, getting to know you without all the media attention.” She slipped off him and rolled to the edge of the bed. “Now, go make me coffee, Cooper. I’ve got to get ready for work.”

Hell and damn, she was a vision, sitting in profile like a truck’s mudflap cameo. This perfect wave of woman. This perfect wave of woman with a—what?

His mouth dropped open.

“Why the hell do you have a bruise the size of Wisconsin on your back?”

***

Oh, shit.

Eli’s hands planted firmly on her ass as she tackled him like a rodeo queen meant that she’d forgotten about that ugly-ass bruise. The early morning light filtering though the blinds in Eli’s bedroom should have kept her injury in the shadows where it belonged. But the man had the eyes of a predator when it came to her body.

He leaned over to the nightstand light closest to her and switched it on, those ice-pick blues a mix of frost and fire. He really had the most beautiful eyes, framed by lashes no man should be allowed to possess.

Reverently avoiding the bruise, he cupped her hip and angled her body to get a better look. As if it could improve with a closer view.

It could not.
“It’s just a bruise,” she said. “No big deal.”

It might have been the qualifying “just” that pissed him off but it was more likely the casually tossed off addendum that sent him over the edge.

“No. Big. Deal.” The words were laced through with barely-concealed rage.

“Alexandra...”

“I ran into a little trouble on my last shift.” Rather than wait for him to explode at that, she twisted trying to see the mark. The asshole who’d aimed a size 12 boot at her back could have bruised her spine if he’d landed a couple of inches to the left. “This fucker thought he was Jackie Chan with the drop-kick.” She added a laugh of well, isn’t this a trip?

“Someone...” He was having trouble forming the words, and when Eli Cooper, word wrangler extraordinaire exhibited weakness in the verbal domain, it was not good. “Someone kicked you? Explain, Alexandra.”

“It happened two nights ago. Fire in a home-made meth lab. Pretty unusual, you don’t see a lot of those on our runs. This guy didn’t appreciate it when I pulled him off his girlfriend.” He’d been needling this poor defenseless girl, pushing her around, blaming her for the fire—because she had left the stove unattended to check on her kid. Alex had plenty of experience dealing with high-off-their-asses dickheads from her EMT days. Now, that was a dangerous job.

In the two months since she and Eli had become “official”, there’d been the usual road traffic accidents and space heater fires during her shifts. Nothing she and her platoon couldn’t handle, so nothing to report to Eli during the “how was your day, honey?” But as soon as this happened, she’d known:
Eli would freak the fuck out.

“This is why you didn’t come over after your shift the other day.” Every word emerged from his mouth like they were fighting the air that gave them life. “You were hurt and you didn’t want me to see.”

She reached for his superhero jaw. God, he was devastatingly gorgeous, even with that pain flashing in his eyes. “I knew you’d overreact.”

He jerked away. “Is this how it’s going to be, Alexandra? You keeping this shit from me? Is this why you won’t move in because it’s easier to hide if you keep your own place?”

_Easier to hide._ She swallowed, knowing he meant hiding any on-the-job boobooos that would worry her man, but hearing something else in those words. He loved her now; of that she was certain. And her love for him was stronger than ever.

But he wanted her to move in with him, and she held a small part of herself back because once she took that step, he might... she wasn’t sure what. Discover that she was boring, weird, totally whackadoo? Their romance had been a whirlwind. Still was. Fueled by fire that made for the best foreplay in the world. Every fight ended the same way: Eli between her thighs, showing her how mad he was at her. About her. Living together would put paid to the sexy fight-and-fuck dynamic they had going on. Real life with squabbles over messy bathrooms and dirty laundry didn’t lend itself to a passion like theirs.

And that was before the other doubts seeped in, the ones that said she didn’t deserve him. Not after what he had done to win her. His sacrifice of the mayoralty to prove that capturing her heart was the true campaign. Every time he asked her to
move in, she heard a different message entirely: you’re the center of my world,
Alexandra. I gave it all up for you. Now give me a hundred and ten percent.

She could have expressed her concerns. A normal woman would know how
to navigate the maze of loving Eli, but the old gender-based conflicts were an easier
you were getting into, but I think you’d prefer if I wasn’t a firefighter.”

“I’d prefer if you were safe.”

“We’ve been through this—”

“I know. This is your job and I’m supposed to accept that you’re good at what
you do, you know your limits, and you won’t take any unnecessary chances. So tell
me, why the fuck is there a giant bruise on your back?”

She rubbed her thumb against his jaw, soothing, but knowing that it was just
as likely to incite.

“I can’t control every variable. I can follow SOP on our runs, use my instincts
to the best of my abilities, and hope I make it back safely to the firehouse. And until
you can wrap your head around that, what you don’t know won’t hurt you.”

His smile was grim. “Turnabout’s fair play, Alexandra?”

Telling him she would continue to keep secrets so he wouldn’t be hurt wasn’t
some childish revenge—though his underhanded methods in wooing her had
chapped her ass big time.

“Eli, that’s not it at all.”
“Forget it.” He stood, a gleaming, naked god, his cock still half-erect, a mouthwatering anger-boner, and grabbed running gear from the dresser. “I need to take Shadow out. And you’d best get ready for work.”
Chapter Two

“Which one of you assholes ordered pizza?”

Eli turned to the motley crew of firefighters, paramedics, and God knew who else made up the rest of Beck Rivera’s bachelor party invite list. He didn’t mean to sound so cranky but he had gone to just a smidge of trouble organizing a nice spread to watch hockey by. Not to mention the fact they were partaking of this banquet in an executive skybox at the United Center during a Hawks-Bruins game.

Everyone from Engine Co. 6 turned to one of the firefighters Eli didn’t know.

“Phelan,” Luke said with a sigh. “Is it possible you could go ten minutes without ordering a fucking pizza?” He gestured at the sideboard of deep-fried, artery-hardening goodness—*thankyouverymuch*—and shook his head sadly. “This is Becky’s bachelorette party and you know how upset he gets when you try to upstage him.”

“He does this at the firehouse as well,” Gage explained to Eli. “The stuff I plate there rivals any five-star chef”—quirked grin in the direction of his boyfriend, Brady; affectionate eye roll right back—“and Derek Phelan has to have Chicago deep dish. Every freakin’ day. You’re an addict, man.”

Phelan shrugged and looked at his phone. “They were supposed to call me when it arrived. I’ll head down to get it.”

Eli held up his hand. “It’s okay,” and to the usher who had informed him, he handed a fifty-dollar bill and instructions to return with the deep dish Phelan couldn’t manage without.
Eli wasn’t quite sure how he’d been roped into this. He’d assumed they’d spend most of the night at a strip club drinking to Beck’s last night of freedom, but apparently that’s exactly what his fiancée Darcy was worried about. A quick call from the girl who was like an annoying little sister to him (*Eli, any chance you could help to keep it, um … classy?*) and he was on the case. The Dempseys were hockey fanatics, Eli had access to the box, and this seemed like a good option. So here he was with twenty of his not-so-closest friends. Not that he minded all that much. Frankly he was down with getting into the better graces of the Dempseys because closer to them pleased Alexandra.

He wished he knew how else to please her.

He walked over to the bar and grabbed a beer, needing a minute or two to corral his thoughts about this woman who had him all tied up in knots. Now that they’d ridden off into the sunset together, it was supposed to get easier, right? He wasn’t supposed to be riddled with doubts about whether the woman he loved more than anything came close to feeling this way about him. Still pissed about her withholding information, he saw now how it was just one more boulder in the path of Alexandra’s commitment to them. As fearless as she was in her work and life, when it came to relationships—when it came to Eli—she wouldn’t allow herself that same freedom to rush in.

A dark shadow loomed at his side. Luke Almeida gestured to the bartender for a Bud.

“Thanks for putting this together,” Luke said. “Let us know how much we owe you.”
“It’s no bother.”

“Let us know all the same.”

Eli nodded. It was to have been his gift but he understood that Beck’s brothers would feel ownership over his send-off.

Luke took a slug of beer, and instead of slinking off as Eli expected, he eyed Eli shrewdly. “Something on your mind, Cooper?”

“What makes you think that?”

“You look like someone stole your cuff links.”

Luke Almeida would not have been Eli’s first choice as confidant—oddly, in the last couple of months, he’d found an unexpected kinship with, of all people, Wyatt Fox, the oldest and broodiest Dempsey—but Luke appeared to be making more of an effort with Eli than he had, well, ever. Eli needed to play this close to his chest.

“What makes you think that?”

Shit, just blurt it out there, why don’t ya?


“About work. Stuff you see on the job. Bad shit that happens to you.”

Luke frowned. “Sometimes I think it’s better she doesn’t know, but if it’s bothering me, I’d rather talk it out and then ...”

“Then, what?”

“Fuck it out.” He grinned, then shut it down immediately because no man needed the image of another man boning his sister grilled on his retinas. “Talking’s all well and good, and I’ve got my crew for the job support, but sometimes you don’t
want anyone telling you how you screwed up or how that run could have gone better. You just want some sympathy and a soft place to lay your head.”

Made sense. “Alexandra talks about this stuff with you, I suppose.” Because they were part of the brotherhood of fire, and Eli was outside that circle.

“Sure, we all talk to each other. Some of us, anyway.” He shot a look at Wyatt, a man of secrets, some of which Eli had lately become privy to. When Alexandra found out about that, shit was going to hit the proverbial.

“My sister giving you trouble?”

“She got hurt at work a couple of days ago and didn’t tell me.”

Luke nodded wisely, not elaborating, though Eli was sure he had more detail than what Alexandra had revealed about this meth head who had assaulted her.

“She won’t share what’s going on. And she’s resisting taking that final step. Moving in.”

Unsurprisingly, Luke didn’t look too cut up about it. “She’s probably just being cautious.”

“Who’s being cautious?” Beck had appeared at Luke’s shoulder, gesturing for a Rolling Rock from the bartender.

“Alex,” Luke said. “Won’t drop her toothbrush in the mayoral mug.”

“Shit, don’t try telling Alex to do anything.” Beck jerked a chin at his brother. “Luke’s been trying for years and he’s gotten nowhere.”

“Bet if I told her not to move in with Cooper, she’d do the exact opposite just to spite me.”
Eli must have looked hopeful because Luke gave a friendly sneer and shook his head. “Considering all the shit you pulled to date her, it’s probably a good thing she’s takin’ it slow. I wholeheartedly endorse that course of action.”

“Who’s taking it slow?” Oh, for fuck’s sake. Now it was Gage’s turn to weigh in. Wyatt and Brady leaned off to the side of the bar, listening and silently judging, so the whole freakin’ complement of the Firefightin’ Dempseys—plus Brady who was practically honorary—were on hand to offer their two cents.

“Alex,” Beck said, picking up the mantle of communicating Eli’s misery. “Mr. ‘Man of the People’ here, the guy who bamboozled an entire city into voting for him can’t persuade our girl to take the next step and go all in.”

“Well, he did lose the re-election so clearly the magic is gone,” Brady deadpanned. That would be the same Brady who might have had his ass saved by Eli in Afghanistan on more than one occasion.

Eli glared at his friend, annoyed because (a) he was supposed to be on his side and (b) was probably correct. Eli’s powers of persuasion had definitely taken a turn for the worse.

“That’s about half-right,” Wyatt offered.

Eli waited for him to say more, and when he didn’t, he motioned with his hand for Wyatt to expound. Getting the man to speak was like trying to squeeze a straight answer from a Chicago alderman.

“What you did the night before the election,” Wyatt explained, “is bound to knock any woman off her axis. Real Prince Charming shit. Like Edward and Mrs. Simpson.”
Gage looked blank. “Who?”

“The King of England who gave up his throne to marry an American divorcee in 1936.”

Everyone stared, slack-jawed, at Wyatt.

“Read a fuckin’ history book, assholes. What I’m saying is that Alex might be feeling a bit overwhelmed. Inadequate.”

Eli would lay good odds that Alexandra Dempsey had never felt inadequate in her entire life.

“Not just Alex.” Luke crossed his arms and redirected the conversation back to Eli. “Your behavior has made things difficult for the rest of us, Cooper.”

“It has?”

“It’s hard enough trying to keep our ladies happy, but then you pull that stunt and put the rest of us to shame. How the hell are we supposed to compete with Mr. Fuckin’ Romance? And as for my sister—”

“She’s waiting for the other shoe to drop,” Beck said thoughtfully. “Just feeling you out, making sure you’re on the up and up.”

Eli wasn’t so sure. Usually so determined to jump in, screw the consequences, Alexandra should have been attacking their relationship with the same passion and gusto she did everything else.

“I wish she’d move in with you,” Gage said after a draft of beer. “Then maybe this one would finally move in with me.” He threw an arm around Brady and planted a kiss on his mouth.
“Whatever happens, you’d better be solid, Cooper,” Luke said. “Hurt her and it won’t be pretty.”

Christ, this family. And Alexandra thought he was the Neanderthal. What the hell did he have to do to prove he was in this for the long haul?

How did he prove it to her?

“You won’t be happy until I take a bullet for her.”

Luke looked at him hard, then broke into a wide grin. “Yeah, that’d work.”

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Alex knocked back a shot of Jäger and slammed it on the table at Dempsey’s, the family’s bar, and the terminal site of a six-bar crawl through Wicker Park. Darcy’s veil was askew and she’d stained her “Mrs. Rivera in Training” T-shirt with vodka sauce from their stop at Piece for pizza earlier.

“It just feels like a double standard,” Alex said.

Kinsey rolled her eyes. “That he’s worried about you? How is that a double standard? When Luke comes home, I check every single inch of his body to make sure he’s okay. And if I see a bruise, he’d better be telling me how he got it.”

Darcy grinned. “I’m more likely to inflict the bruises. Apparently I sleep punch. But Eli has every right to know if you’re hurt, Alex. You can’t be hiding things from him.”

Alex knew that. Just as she knew she was creating one barrier to mask the real problem. Being self-aware sucked.
“If I had that hot ex-mayor in my bed, you can bet I wouldn’t be hiding a thing from him.” Darcy’s friend, Mel offered a dirty grin. “Look what he did for you. Men like that do not come around every day. You need to lock that sexalicious ass down.”

**Voila!** The problem in a nutshell. It wouldn’t have been the first time she heard it. Just about every man, woman, and online infotainment outlet insisted on telling Alex how lucky she was that Eli fell on his sword to win her. She knew how blessed she was to have a man with the world in the palm of his hand let it slip through his fingers because he loved her that much.

She also knew that living up to it was tough.

Alex turned to Madison who had so far held back from weighing in. It should have been weird that Eli’s ex-wife was hanging with them for Darcy’s party, but then Alex’s whole life was just a series of weird.

“What do you think, Mads? Did you tell Eli everything when you were hitched to him?”

Madison looked thoughtful. “We weren’t married long enough and we never lived together. In fact, we probably confided more in each other as friends.” She arched a perfectly-plucked eyebrow. “Eli’s very emotional and he needs to see you giving back in the same way.”

“Is this why you won’t move in with him or is there something else?” Kinsey asked, sharp as ever.

“It’ll be different, won’t it? The thrill is gone and all that.”

“Nope, just gets better,” Darcy said with an annoyingly beatific smile.

“Waking up beside Beck every day, knowing he’s there when I get home. Nothing
can top it. And now that we have a little one on the way, it's perfect.” Darcy rubbed her not-yet-visible bump.

It wasn’t completely perfect, though. Darcy was still on the outs with her dad, Sam Cochrane, and his part in blackmailing Eli had only increased the distance between them. She’d wanted him to walk her down the aisle the day after tomorrow, but the big bad billionaire still held his mysterious, out-of-proportion grudge against the Dempseys.

“All right, I’m getting another round in. Shooters?” She arced her gaze over the group until she alighted on Darcy. “Ginger ale for you and the demon spawn.”

Alex headed behind the bar, glad to get away from her girls for a few moments. Sure, she’d asked for their advice but the problem with that course of action was that it blew donkey balls when it wasn’t what you wanted to hear. Of course, they would be happy with their normal, grounded men—they weren’t being wined, dined, and 69ed by romance paragon, Eli fucking Cooper!

*He gave it all up for you! You owe him big time!*

She was sure, but she needed him to be even more so.

It wasn’t too busy tonight, and with all the Dempseys otherwise occupied, they’d hired a couple of bar backs from one of the local watering holes. She grabbed the mandarin vodka to get started on Vodka Passion shooters. When she turned back, she found the man of her dreams leaning on the bar.

It had been 38 hours, 27 minutes since she’d seen him.

It had also been hell.
“Hi,” she said, sounding shy even to her own ears. What if she’d scared him off? *Only a matter of time*, a niggling voice said. But not yet. She wanted more. Needed it.

He didn’t respond, just watched her like that wolf he was, ready to spring. The tension between them stretched taut, pulling on her last nerve.

Finally, she asked, “How was the game?”

“Our boyfriend played well. One goal, five assists.”

Her boyfriend, Bastian Durand, that is. The Hawks right-forward called her every now and then to ask when she was giving up that shark in Armani. Of course she told Eli about every call to get him riled. Supposedly all in good fun, but she felt rather guilty about that now.

“Good night?” He glanced over at the rest of them. Beck had immediately claimed Darcy by placing her on his lap, Luke and Kinsey were nuzzling at one end of the bar, while Brady and Gage were eyeing each other up in a way that said the Harley would soon be rocking. Wyatt stood apart, checking his phone, frowning hard enough to attract a group of women watching him avidly. She worried about him.

“Yeah, it was fun. I drank all of the shots meant for Darcy. I think she’s a bit down because Daddy Cochrane won’t emerge from his evil underground lair and attend the wedding.”

“He’s a grudge holder. And he doesn’t like it when he can’t pull the strings.”

Didn’t she know it. The way Eli had stood up to him by throwing his threats back in his face was just one of the million reasons why she adored this man.
She loved him so much, so why the hell was she making this so difficult? She stepped out from behind the bar. He met her half-way. There was some sort of symbolism there.

“About yesterday morning,” she started. “I just don’t want to worry you.”

“I know. But I can’t help it, and not knowing is worse. Infinitely worse. I want to protect you even though you don’t need it. I know you’re so damn strong and maybe I don’t have anything to offer someone as independent and self-sufficient as you, but ...” He moved in closer, smothering her with his scent and sheer Eli-ness. Still not touching, though, every inch away from her torture. “I talked to your brothers and I get that they understand what you go through on the job better than I ever could. As long as you have someone to talk to, it doesn’t have to be me.”

That sounded awful. Of course it was great to have so many people in her family who understood the pressures of being a firefighter, but they could never replace Eli as her comfort. Her everything.

He circled her waist and pulled her close, and she could feel his care in trying to avoid her bruise. She could also feel his uncertainty and it killed her that she’d made him doubt.

“I can’t make you confide in me with words, but when you share your body with me, I feel we’re getting... closer. In a previous lifetime, I spent a good deal of my day compromising, so I understand that I can’t always have it my way. I suppose that’ll have to be enough for now.”
His control was something she held in the palm of her hand—a gentle squeeze was all it took to make him lose it. But for him to back down from his usual intensity marked a change she wasn’t sure was good.

“Eli, that’s not what I want. I mean, yes, I want the body-sharing, but I don’t want to stop there. I should have told you about what happened on that run. I guess I’ve been holding back because—”

“What, honey?”

She was shaking in his arms, terrified. How did he do this to her? Or perhaps she was doing it to herself. She didn’t know anymore.

“With you, I always feel at such a disadvantage. Like I’m falling into this huge pit.”

He frowned, and when she didn’t elaborate, he raised an eyebrow and asked, “A huge pit of… puppies?”

She giggled, the release smoothing her frayed nerves somewhat. “Sometimes, but more often it’s a place where I don’t feel as strong as I want to. The more time we spend together, the sooner you’ll realize what a bad bargain you made. What a fraud I am.”

He drew back, shock enlivening his handsome features. “Fraud? Alexandra, you haven’t a fraudulent bone in your body. Tell me what horrors I’m going to find out if you live with me.”

“I’m a slob. I’m always forgetting to close the shower curtain. Gage gripes about it constantly. Calls me the mold-whisperer.”

“Glass shower doors, a modern design miracle. And I pay someone to clean.”
“You won’t like me before I’ve had coffee.”

His hand drifted to her ass and squeezed it. “I’ve liked you plenty of times before your morning caffeine turns you into Ms. Sunshine.”

Hmm, he did enjoy his morning exercise between her thighs.

He smiled against her mouth. “Don’t you realize I’d give you the world, Alexandra?”

“That’s the problem. You already have.”

He looked taken aback. “Explain.”

“What you did for me... how can I live up to that standard?”

He nodded in understanding because this was Eli and he was sharp like that.

“You don’t have to live up to anything. What you give me now is perfect.”

Obviously not, if he felt this was a compromise. If he had to go to her brothers for advice. That must have killed him. How was he still even talking to her?

A shadow crossed his face, realization dawning. “Alexandra, I know I’ve pushed you. God knows I’m a greedy bastard, doubly so where you’re concerned. I can’t help myself, but perhaps I’ve expected more of you than you’re willing to give.”

“Eli—”

“Hear me out, honey. I confessed my sins the night before the election, as much for myself as for you. If I hadn’t won you, I would have been crushed but at least I would have felt clean after so many years in the dirt. If you feel some obligation to me because of the events in February, then I’ll release you. I’ve already tricked you into dating me, I’m not going to guilt you into loving me.”
He stepped away, leaving her cold. Uncharacteristically speechless. Then he left the bar, leaving her destroyed.
Chapter Three

Eli hadn’t slept a wink, wondering if perhaps he had been too harsh on Alexandra last night. Thing is, he’d spent years parsing the truth and edging around his feelings, all in the name of playing the game of politics. While it would be difficult, he could compromise when it came to talking about her job, but if she felt some obligation to him because he’d tanked his campaign, then they had a bigger problem than he’d suspected. One that couldn’t be glossed over.

He needed her full-fledged commitment. All or nothing.

Taking a deep breath, he knocked on the door to the ante-room at Firehouse Chicago, a renovated station on Rosemont Avenue in Edgewater, just steps from where the Dempseys had been raised and still lived. Up until ten years ago, it was a working station; now it served as an event space, and none was more suited to the marriage of the bruise boxer and his Bohemian bride.

“Come in,” Darcy called out.

He entered, and as always, his eyes sought out the woman who filled his mind and heart and hurtled through his blood in a torrent. She wore a stunning sheath dress, its emerald green a match for her eyes. It plunged dramatically, making him torn between wishing her beautiful breasts would pop free (and into his waiting mouth) and wanting to protect her from the inevitable stares of every wolf waiting in the congregation.
Perhaps he needed to back down. A little compromise might be necessary to get a smidge of relief for the cock that was hardening with every second he couldn’t remove his gaze.

“Well, Eli,” Darcy said, a smile in her voice. “I can’t say that’s very flattering to the bride.”

He forced his eyes away from Alexandra and the inscrutable expression on her heart-shaped face. Darcy looked radiant, her vibrantly-inked arms a dramatic contrast to the purity of her white dress. Moving forward, he caught her hands and pulled her into a hug.

“You are a vision, monkey.”

“Too late, jerk,” she said, but she was laughing as she accepted his kiss to her forehead. “Thanks so much for being here for me today. It means the world that you’re giving me away.”

In the haze of seeing Alexandra, he’d almost forgotten his current mission.

“About that, Darcy…” He drew back. “Your father is outside.”

Her mouth wobbled. “Here?”

“He’d like to talk to you. And if you’re amenable, he’d like to walk you down the aisle.”

Tears sprang into her eyes, but Kinsey was immediately there with a tissue. “For fuck’s sake, Eli, could you not have dropped this on her before she was made up?”

Darcy dabbed at her eyes. “I wanted him here... I mean, I hoped he’d come but at the last minute like this? God, why do men have to be so dramatic?” She
offered beseeching glances at the women around her, all of them ready to come to her aid no matter her decision. “I should talk to Beck.”

“You can’t let him see you,” her maid of honor said. Melanie, Eli thought she was called. “A million years bad luck or something.”

“I’ll call him.” She headed into the bathroom.

Eli finally met Alexandra’s eyes. She gestured with a nod of her chin for him to move to the other side of the room.

“Did you do this?”

“What?”

Skeptical eyebrow lift. “Talk Sam Cochrane into coming here?”

He blew out a breath and fisted his hands at his side. The urge to touch her was near unbearable.

“Just call me her fairy godfather. It’s time Sam put his grudge aside and started looking toward the future.” It hadn’t been easy. In another lifetime, Sam would have tried to leverage something out of Eli for his cooperation, only this time Eli was in a position of power. The badly-behaved billionaire was starting to realize that he would likely die alone if he didn’t make amends with his daughter. If he wanted to see his grandchild, peace with the Dempseys was a must.

“Eli, after everything he put you through, after he held that sword about your father’s past over your head, you had no reason to ever speak to him again and yet you went out of your way...” She reached for his lapel, tentatively, as if she might doubt her right to touch him.

Did she not realize that this body belonged to her, utterly, completely?
Of course, he hadn’t done it just for Darcy. Making her happy would make Beck happy and that domino effect would knock on to all the Dempseys. If it was in his power to give, he would gift-wrap the sun for the woman before him.

“I spent too long lingering on the past, letting it consume me and dictate my decisions. I know what it’s like to be a prisoner of that, to be afraid.”

Her eyes softened and she snagged her lip with her teeth. Woman, have mercy. “Eli, we should talk.”

“Okay!” Darcy emerged in a cloud of white and determination. “Beck said he’ll try his best not to punch my father.” She sought out Eli, a smile of gratitude brightening her face. “Thank you, Eli. I know this had to be tough for you.”

“I’ve been in tougher spots, monkey.” None more so than the one he was in now. Alexandra wanted to talk. Was that good? He had no clue. His instincts of late were no better than a beaten-down dog’s. “I’ll go put the old coot out of his misery, shall I?”

He turned to Alexandra, leaning in to inhale that unique scent of warm woman and sensual comfort. “Later.” And because she was impossible to resist, he nipped gently at her earlobe. Made his claim on her. “You look so fucking beautiful, honey.”

Then he left before he made an absolute fool of himself.

***

“Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. and Mrs. Beck Rivera!”
Raucous applause and loud hoots broke out as Darcy and Beck made their way into the white peaked marquee tent in the grounds of the firehouse. Alexandra couldn’t help her smile. Their happiness and love for each other was just beautiful. She watched as they mingled, accepting boundless love from their family and friends, but really she had an eye out for her own tenuous future.

Eli wasn’t here. Neither had he sat with her during the ceremony. He’d said they’d talk later, so why wasn’t he within reaching distance of her greedy grasp radius, ready to chat about, you know, them?

In ever-increasing circles, she wandered through the crowd, all busy chowing down on Brady’s hors d’oeuvres of crab cakes and avocado whatsis, until she reached the outer limits of the tent. Sam Cochrane stood at the special table of photos they’d set up to ensure that the loved ones no longer with them didn’t miss out on the party. Logan was framed in silver, grinning like the heartbreaker he was, alongside a photo of Sean and Mary.

The last time Alex had been this close to Darcy’s dad was two months ago when she’d barged her way into his high-rise office and made her grudging apology about slicing-and-dicing his Lamborghini. That’s when he informed her what Eli was up to, one of the (many) lies he’d told to make Alex his. Of course, it didn’t matter. She was already so far gone that Eli could have been unveiled as Jack the Ripper and she’d be asking if he needed help sharpening his knives before he went out into fog-shrouded streets.

She stopped at his side, noting that he stiffened but didn’t turn. “It means the world to Darcy that you’re here, Mr. Cochrane.”
He nodded, his gaze lingering on the photo of Sean and Mary for an extra-long beat before he turned to face her. “Well, Eli can be very persuasive.” Such a waste, she heard in his tone.

“Don’t I know it?” She kept her gaze focused on Sean, her adopted father. The photo wasn’t the usual one of him in his dress blues, but a memory from their home life. In it, he was turning to their mom, Mary, his face a picture of utter devotion, still palpable across the years.

“Once, you told me that he stole something from you. Was it Dempsey’s Pub? Did he cheat you out of it?”

A grim smile touched his lips. “Your mother was a very beautiful woman. I know you’re adopted but I see a lot of her in you. That stubborn streak, that spirit, that fire. But unlike you, she liked a working class man, a salt of the earth type.”

Realization shocked every nerve-ending in her body. She understood now. Mary was the sticking point, the reason behind this ancient feud. Sam Cochrane had once been in love with her mother. Her heart melted for him a little right then, this man who’d pulled the strings of so many people, and was still living in misery.

“He’ll make her happy, you know,” she said, her gaze alighting on Beck and Darcy. “He never stopped loving her during all those years she was away.” She hoped Sam would stow his disappointment and hatred for the sake of this new love being celebrated. This new life about to be born. “Congrats on your imminent grandfatherhood, by the way.”

Sam blinked at her, then held her gaze with those green eyes he shared with his daughter. Maybe the baby would share them, too.
“I’m more than ready to embrace my cuddly grandpappy persona.” He smiled, and for once she didn’t shiver. “Perhaps this old dog can learn some new tricks after all, Ms. Dempsey.”

With one last look at the photo—at the woman he’d once loved so much it led him to hate her family—he excused himself to join his daughter and her new husband.

Alex looked around, but still no sign of Eli. Was she a stick-in-the-mud reluctant to learn something new, or could she open her heart to this new sensation of depending on another person for her happiness and well-being?

***

She walked out onto a relatively quiet Rosemont Avenue. This firehouse was unusual, looking more like a townhouse in the middle of a residential street in Edgewater. The May air was a little cooler than she expected, and just as that thought formed, she felt the soothing brush of lined fabric over her shoulders.

He’d found her. He would always find her.

Eli caped her as he had done in the hospital the night she saved his life—and he saved hers right back. He wrapped her in his jacket just like the night of the Weston Cooper Justice Award gala when he told her how much he wanted her and later made love to her with both ferocity and reverence.

“Cold?” he whispered against her neck.
“Not anymore.” She turned, her breath trapping in her lungs at his raw magnetism. His top shirt button was undone, his bow tie unfurled, his sleeves rolled up. Ready to work—or to fight. “I thought I’d lost you.”

“I was never far. One of my clients called. Needed to be talked down.”

Eli hadn’t officially opened his law practice yet, but he was already taking on clients, veterans who were on the cusp of disaster. As a former Marine, who had weathered torture and deprivation in the desert, he knew what these men had endured. How they still suffered.

She stroked his strong jaw. There were a million things to say, a million ways to say them.

She had no idea where to start.

But apparently she didn’t need to—not yet—because Eli’s mouth crashed down on hers, hungry, yearning, filled with a love she wasn’t sure she deserved.

He broke the unforgiving kiss, his breath in a ragged pant, his hand on her hip urging her toward the side of the firehouse. It was quiet here with everyone in the tent, and Eli led her to pleasure, taking charge in that way she loved. Except there was none of the usual verbal seduction, just Eli Cooper’s sheer force of will.

She opened her mouth to say she was sorry, but his lips covered hers again, and she understood. He was done with her excuses. Talking got them nowhere but this... oh, this had never been a problem.

Her hands moved to his belt buckle, then below that to his erection. He groaned when she touched his hard length, so she continued to stroke and caress,
watching how his expression changed from a beautiful gravity to agony-ecstasy. She needed to hear her name on his lips but he seemed determined not to give her that.

Fine, she’d take this punishment. It was the least she owed him.

He turned her way from him so she faced the wall. In heels, she was almost as tall as him and his groin aligned perfectly with her generous ass—as he so kindly demonstrated with a lascivious rub against her. He loved this position, taking her from behind in those early morning hours when they were cocooned in his bed.

Their bed.

It was in his house but when she was in it, it became theirs. This one place where they had no problem connecting.

Cool air across her ass reminded her that they were most definitely not in a bed and that he had just shoved her bridesmaid’s dress up over her hips. His groan was loud in the quiet May night at the sight he revealed—this dress was so tight that only the barest thong would do and now his hands gripped her butt cheeks, kneaded and spread them.

Hands flat on the wall, she pushed for leverage and arched her back to present to him. Yours, baby, all yours. Take it. Take what belongs to you.

With searching fingers, he pushed the thong aside and stroked through her wetness. Another sound emerged—a growl, and she wasn’t sure if it was him or her but then it was them: joined as one as he drilled inside her. The sensation of fullness was indescribably exquisite, and as he withdrew, the ache between her thighs screamed to be soothed the only way that would do. More Eli. More of them.

Together, they could do anything.
This knowledge gripped her hard, and then Eli’s hands gripped her harder, lifting her at the hips to make the angle of entry more receptive to his deep, penetrating thrusts. Her hands might be using the wall as an anchor, but even if they weren’t, Eli would have been strong enough to hold her in place for this sensual assault.

He was the strongest person she knew.

A rush of heightening pleasure spiraled up, up, up, and soon she was gone because this man’s demands always brought her over so quickly she should be embarrassed—or would have been if he didn’t follow with an almost equally thigh-clenching climax.

Still inside her, he held tight, yet there was something so gentle in his masculine grip. She possessed something he needed, something he couldn’t get from anyone else. She wasn’t sure before, but she knew it now.

Too soon, he’d left her body. There would be no leaving her heart.

Taking care of her, he unfurled her ruched dress down her thighs. The imprint left by him between her legs kept her warm, stoked, ready for more. She turned to face him, snatched at the air.

“I don’t know how to do this. Tell me how to do this.”

He covered her body with the hard protection of his own. “For a woman who doesn’t mind telling people what she thinks about pretty much everything, you’re shockingly tight-lipped on the subject of how you truly feel. Just be honest, Alexandra.”

Just be honest.
“I’m scared, Eli.” There, she’d said it. She’d told him she loved him, but she’d never admitted the terror that came with loving a man like Eli Cooper.

And now she couldn’t shut up about it. “I’m scared that our love is fueled by fighting and drama and the best sex of my life. That this crazy hate-lust-love thing we’ve got going on will eventually pass. What happens after the fire, Eli? After it burns out?”

“Honey, the crazy-hate-lust-love thing is exciting but I’m not sure my heart could take this every day. If you give us a chance, if you accept that no one does it for me like you do, it’ll change into something real and solid and golden.” He leaned his forehead against hers. “With you, I feel raw, open, like I’ll die if I can’t have you. Why the hell do you think I want you in my home all the time? This not seeing you for over 24 hours while you’re on shift is a real fucking problem. I miss you constantly. You’re right here in front of me and I miss you. Come back to me, Alexandra. Trust that I love you enough.”

He was saying all the right things, but not in that smooth, practiced way that made him a force to be reckoned with on the stump, in the courtroom, and in their bed. He was speaking from somewhere deep and vulnerable.

“I don’t want to disappoint you, Eli.”

He muttered a curse. “You’re funny, gorgeous, a big mouth who says what she thinks. You’re hot in the sack and your family is obnoxious. Are these true facts?”

She laughed. God, how she loved listening to him shape an argument. “Yes.”

“Are they likely to change in the next sixty years?”
Sixty years. Growing old with this beautiful man. Could they make it without killing each other? “My family will likely become even more obnoxious the longer you know them.”

“Given how insufferable they are right now, I’m not sure that’s possible, but I’ll take your word for it. So the reasons I love you and the issues I have with your family are not likely to change, yet I’m willing to risk it.” He gave that wolfish grin she adored. “Do you still insist I’ve made a bad bargain?”

“I can’t win an argument with you. You’re too tricksy. Too damn smart.”

He pulled her flush to his body, his need and desire clear. The man was insatiable. “Too fucking right I am. Trust that I’m smart enough to know my own mind. I’ve wanted you from the first moment I met you in Smith & Jones. You blindsided me with your hair and confidence and smart-tart mouth. These are facts. They will not change. Since then, I’ve gotten to know the real Alexandra. The woman who cares so much for her family and friends that no vehicle or billionaire is safe. The woman who seeks me out in a crowded room because she knows I need to feel her eyes on me, eating me alive. The woman who does that amazing thing with her talented mouth on my cock. This woman of mine turns me inside out but she also puts me back together again with a smile crafted just for me.”

He moved a wayward strand of hair behind her ear. “You’re scared because you’ve never felt this way before. You love this feeling but you doubt this kind of intensity can be maintained. In five or ten or twenty years, we’ll probably be a little calmer but the love will still be here. This want and need and desire will still be here. I’ll still be here. Loving you madly.”
Her heart hopped, skipped, and jumped over the moon. “Even when I’m making you crazy?”

“I’m a firm believer in the adage that we get what we deserve, and crazy begets crazy. I make you crazy. You give it right back and then some. I fought like hell to win you, to convince you that you’re the one person I would lay down everything for, and dammit I deserve my prize. You are a woman without equal and if I have to tell you that every day for the rest of our lives together, I will.”

Dead. The man slayed her dead. “No need for every day.” She sniffed. “Maybe every other day.”

“Alexandra, if there’s any doubt that this is what you want, I need to hear it. If you feel you owe me a relationship because of what happened at the election, then I need to hear it. I won’t move forward with that kind of imbalance. That’s not what we’re about. It’s never been what we’re about. I demand an equal, not a fawning minion.”

“Say that again when I’m fawning all over your cock.”

“Seriously, honey. Tell me all the things.”

She drew a shallow breath, doubting it would be enough but knowing that she had to soothe the bear she’d poked. “Of course I can’t help feeling in awe of what you did, but I would never let that dictate the most important relationship of my life. I’ve been searching for someone to play with, to talk with, to accept me for who I am. I never expected to find it in a smug, double-talking, hot-as-fuck lawyer-politico. I never expected to feel this joy and need and desire that locks up my lungs every
time I see you. How much do I love you, Eli? More than my body can hold in and it fucking terrifies me.”

“Don’t hold it in, Alexandra. Love me as hard as you can. Love us with every beat of your beautiful heart.”

That’s all she could do. That’s what she would do. Embrace this adventure. Love this man as much as he loved her, though she wondered if that were possible because it seemed Eli Cooper was ass-over-tits crazy about her.

That lucky bastard.

***

He opened his eyes. Something was wrong.

No Alexandra.

The clock said 6:28 a.m. Neither of them had slept much, their bodies communing through the night until they collapsed in a sweaty tangle of limbs. She could have been in the bathroom or downstairs making coffee, but he’d lived in this house long enough to know when it was just him, Shadow, and the ghosts of the past.

He checked his phone on the nightstand. Just one message from Donny Killion, the army vet who had picked a fight with his ex’s new boyfriend a week after returning stateside. Eli was working on getting him into a counseling program to manage his PTSD and the accompanying anger and depression. Donny’s text said:
One word, enough to put Eli’s mind at ease about the direction his new client was no longer going in.

He pulled on sweats because his girl wasn’t here, so what’s the point, may as well give up and become one with his sofa, and headed downstairs. Shadow waited expectantly, eyes aglow, tail wagging.

Eli hunkered to rub behind his ears. “Just you and me again, puppy.”

Standing, he stretched his calves and grabbed a leash. Now where were his—

The front door opened, and in walked the sexiest woman alive, dragging a giant suitcase. She threw his keys down on the entryway table with a casualness he enjoyed immensely. Making herself right at home where she belonged.

She canted her head, all slyness. “You thought I ran out on you.”

“Not for a second.”

“Liar.” Throwing her arms around his waist, she snuggled in close.

No, this was where she belonged.

“You gave me a scare. Deliberately, you witch.”

“Now you know how I feel every second I’m with you.”

He smiled against her hair. “Is this how it’s going to be? You keeping me on my toes?”

“Would you want it easy, Eli?”

“Never.” Easy and this woman were oil and water. Hard was their speed. A constantly hard cock, a life filled with hard challenges, a love hard-fought for and won.

And nothing turned Eli on more than winning.
“So, get this,” she said against his chin. “Gage bundled my luggage into the trunk with one hand and with the other was already dialing Brady to get his ass in gear and move into the Dempsey compound. My own brother glad to see the back of me. Would they rob my grave so quickly?”

Eli didn’t say a word. Couldn’t. Happiness had crushed his power of speech. She looked up, mischief shining in those green goddess eyes he could willingly drown in.

“You scared, baby?” she asked him.

“Terrified.”

She leaned up to kiss him, a soft tug of his lips that turned into something long and deep and so, so sweet. When she finally broke away, her grin was both vixen and victorious.

“Perfect.”

***
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