

A person is sitting on a wooden bench, seen from behind, looking towards a night sky filled with fireworks. The person is wearing a dark jacket. The sky is dark blue and green, with several bright firework bursts and falling sparks. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

Handle
with
Care

MICHELE L. RIVERA

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Untitled


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“When the rain washes you clean, you’ll know.”
-Stevie Nicks [of Fleetwood Mac], “Dreams”

Theo

Then

I finish cashing out the two women at the bar who are most definitely going home together. How do I know? I pay attention. It's one of the reasons I'm so good at my job. Judging by the amount of alcohol they both consumed and how handsy they were getting with one another, I'd be hard-pressed to assume their night is anywhere close to over. Good for them.

Am I jealous? A little, because my shift doesn't end until one in the morning, and once I get out of here, I'm going back to my apartment to curl up in bed. Alone. Again. Damn. I really miss sex. I hate that I agreed to do a thirty-day cleanse with my best friend in an act of camaraderie following her bad breakup. Who even came up with the idea of abstinence as a form of detoxing the body? It doesn't matter. It's cool. Only two weeks to go and temptation has yet to get the better of me. Considering I bartend at Labrys—the most revered lesbian nightclub in Somerville—I'd say that's a noble achievement.

Once the women finally get up from their respective stools and walk away, I begin wiping down the bar top. When it's clean enough for my liking, I stand up straight and toss the white rag over my shoulder. At the exact same time, a new patron takes a seat in front of me. I do a double-take. It's rare for me to see a face I haven't seen before, and I'm sure I've never seen *her* face before. I'd remember. She's gorgeous...and she's drenched. Maybe this is her signature look or maybe her umbrella blew away in the storm that's

happening outside as we speak. Either way, I'm not complaining. The whole I-just-came-in-from-the-rain vibe is working for her.

Be good.

I swallow hard despite myself. Her army-green tank top is essentially stuck to her body, and water is running down her bare shoulders and arms, creating the illusion that the floral band tattoo on her bicep is weeping. Her dark brown hair is dripping onto the bar, and I can't *not* watch the droplets of rain dribbling down her jawline and chin. The second she glances up at me with her tearful, hickory-colored eyes, I shiver.

Oh, shit! Was I staring? I was. But, like, how am I NOT supposed to stare at THAT? Never mind. Pull it together.

I clear my throat and offer the beautiful stranger a small smile. "Can I get you something? A towel, perhaps?"

Her eyebrows draw together as if she's confused and trying to reorient herself. As a bartender, I know this look all too well.

"Um. Sorry?" she stammers.

I wave away my words. "Nothing. It was a joke. It's just that you're all—" I feel the heat rise to my cheeks. "—wet."

Wow. I really need to get laid.

"Oh, yeah." She glances down at herself and looks back up at me, flushed. "I walked here. In the rain. Sorry. I didn't mean to make a mess of your—"

"No need to apologize," I cut her off, offering her a handful of napkins. "Here. You can use these to dry off."

What? Napkins? Really?

"Thank you." She gives me an appreciative nod and takes the napkins from me. I fight back a smile while she pats her arms dry. When she's done, she balls up the napkins in her fist and peers up at me again. Our eyes lock for a moment and my stomach gets all fluttery.

Welp, that can't be good.

"No worries," I say with a shrug and pray to the Universe that I'm coming off as way more casual than I truly am.

She squints at the large selection of bottles on the shelves behind me and gnaws on her bottom lip—her full, pink bottom lip. I might experience heart failure from how obliviously sexy this woman is.

"What do you recommend?" she asks.

"What do you like?"

“Whatever is the strongest.”

“Bad day?”

The woman snorts. “You could say that. My divorce got finalized today.”

My mouth falters into a frown. *Okay, I didn't see that coming. That's a first for me. What's the appropriate response here? She seems sad about it. I mean, she was walking in the rain and I'm guessing it wasn't in a Mary Poppins kind of way.*

I finally reply, “That sucks. I'm sorry.”

The corners of her kissable mouth turn downward. “Me too.”

I'm not sure why, but a powerful urge to make this woman feel even the slightest bit better overcomes me. Is it because she's absolutely beautiful and I'm absolutely turned on by the fact that she's soaked, and her top is practically see-through? Probably. But it's also because she has the prettiest melancholic expression I've ever seen, and I'm not even sure if that's a thing. Regardless, since I can't hug her or make out with her in a conciliatory way, I can at least make her the best drink of her life. After all, that's my job.

I place both my hands on the bar top in front of her. “Lucky for you, I have a cocktail for that.” I furnish a smug smile.

She almost chuckles. Fine, it was one barely audible noise teetering on a quiet laugh, but *I* made it happen. And there's that flutter, returning with a vengeance.

She raises a curious eyebrow at me, a smile tugging at her lips. “I'm intrigued. Let's do it.”

I grin. “Coming right up. But first I need to see your ID.”

The woman blinks deliberately at me. “Right. Sure.” She sets aside the used napkins, reaches into the back pocket of her jeans, and pulls out the world's most compact wallet. After sifting through it for all of ten seconds, she hands me her license. “Here.”

I take the plastic card from her and examine it. Quinn Gellar. Forty-one years old. Weirdly photogenetic at the DMV. It's sort of charming.

I return the card to her, smiling. “You don't look a day over thirty-five. Whatever you're doing for your skincare routine, it's working for you.”

A deep shade of scarlet sets in along Quinn's high cheekbones. “Thanks.” She takes her license from me and slides it back into her pocket.

“You're welcome. Now, let's get you that drink.” I turn around, grab my favorite rye whiskey, sweet vermouth, and Campari, and get to work. Once the ingredients are mixed, I add a cherry to garnish it. In less than three

minutes, I'm placing the high ball glass in front of my new favorite patron of the night. "Let me know what you think. If you hate it, the next drink is on me."

There it is! A smile. It's not exactly beaming, but it's there and it's dazzling, nonetheless. Quinn lifts the glass to her lips, but her eyes stay on me, and my knees feel a little wobbly at the thought of her eyes on me while she's doing other things, like...

No! Be good.

"What is this cocktail called anyway?" she asks.

I shrug with my mouth. "Taste it and then maybe I'll tell you."

Whoops. Tone down the flirtatiousness. She's divorced and I'm...cleansing. Ugh! Fuck my reality right now!

I should be helping other customers. I'm aware of this. And I'll get to them. I will. I just want a few more minutes with Quinn. You know, to see if she likes her drink or not. So, technically I *am* working. I'm doing a performance evaluation...on myself, but what does it matter?

"Alright, fine," Quinn concedes. "Cheers."

I watch with anticipation as she tips her head back a tiny bit and takes a sip of my carefully crafted cocktail. I study the muscles in her neck when she swallows. *Oh, my God.* I hold my breath.

Quinn makes a face while she puts the glass down. "Whoa."

I wince. "You hate it?"

She shakes her head. "No, it's good. It's...*very* strong."

I laugh. "You asked for strong, so I gave you strong."

To my surprise, she laughs too. It's a great sound. I want to record it so that I can download it to Spotify and play it back on repeat.

"I did ask for strong. Thank you for delivering."

"You bet." I wink, forgetting my no-flirting rule from two minutes ago.

"So, what's it called?"

"It's a Boulevardier."

Quinn's brow furrows. It's very cute. "A what now?"

I chuckle. "It's French. It's pronounced bou-levar-dee-ay," I annunciate slowly, and I swear she's watching my mouth as I speak.

I suddenly grow warm despite the air-conditioning being on full blast in this place.

This earns me another smile from Quinn. "Sounds fancy," she says.

"Not really."

Quinn takes a second sip of her drink and licks her lips afterward. Dizzy, I almost don't hear her when she says, "I would butcher that if I tried to say it."

Don't do it. Don't go there. Don't—

"Nah. You wouldn't. Just practice and you'll get the hang of it. Boulevard-dee-ay," I repeat. "I'm not going to make you another unless you can order it properly." This isn't true, of course. I will make this woman whatever she wants as long as she keeps looking at me with rapt attention.

Get a handle on yourself.

Quinn lets out a short laugh. "Guess I won't be having another. This is good though. I like this." She tilts her glass in my direction. "I'll savor this one."

I internally frown because I want her to stay for another drink.

"Well, I'm glad you're enjoying it," I say.

"I am. This is totally what I needed. Thanks."

I wonder what else she needs or wants. My face burns. *Fabulous.*

"Anytime. That's what I'm here for." I motion to my right with my thumb. "I've gotta check on everyone."

Quinn nods hurriedly. "Yeah. Yeah. Go. Of course."

"I'm Theo. Give me a holler if you need anything." *Literally anything at all.*

One side of her mouth quirks up. "Okay. Will do."

Please, please do.

I force a smile and reluctantly walk away to tend to my other customers. I don't look back, but I do sway my hips just a little in case she's watching. And fuck, do I hope she's watching. I doubt that she is considering she's broken-hearted, and understandably so. But just in case, I want to leave her with a lasting impression.

Quinn

I take another sip of my bou-levar-dee-ay while my gaze follows Theo, observing her perfectly squared shoulders, the way her long, wavy, blonde ponytail bounces with each step that she takes, and the gentle swing of her backside when she moves.

Once it occurs to me that I'm checking out the bartender, a zap of guilt shoots through me.

What am I doing? I can't be appraising some woman I just met, no matter how exceptionally good-looking she is. I'm grieving my marriage. And that's the only thing I should be doing.

I shut my eyes briefly, shake my head at myself, and shift my focus back to the bottles lining the shelves behind the bar. I stare at them until they all look the same, their labels indistinct. Or perhaps that's the alcohol getting to me after only a few sips. I probably should've eaten first. *What was I thinking? I'm not in my twenties anymore. I'm a total lightweight now.* I guess I wasn't thinking. I suppose that's why I came here...to not think. Only I *am* thinking. To be honest, my thoughts are racing.

I quickly pull to mind some of the skills I'm currently learning in my meditation practices. I inhale deeply, hold my breath for a count of five, and release. I do this three times. I try to concentrate, but in the background, I can hear Theo's voice and her laugh. The sound causes a stir in my belly that's both new and familiar.

What is going on?

I know what it is. I've been single far too long and it's finally catching up to me. Not to worry. It's a normal physiological reaction to finding someone

attractive, and it doesn't at all mean that I don't miss Simone, because I do. I promised her I'd always be here and that I would remember everything about...

"How's it going over here?" Theo's voice relieves me of my deliberations.

I narrow my eyes to zero in on her face and unexpectedly find myself unable to breathe, caught off guard by the stunning amber tones in her irises. They seem darker than they did earlier.

I clear my throat. "What?"

Theo smiles at me. "You good? You want another?"

Another what? I glance down at my glass. It's empty. *Oh, shit. When did I finish that?*

I meet Theo's stare again. *Wow. She truly is beautiful. Wait, no. Don't get lost.* "Um. Sure. Thank you."

Her smile becomes mischievous. "You're going to have to order it by name."

I feel the blood rush to my cheeks. "I can't."

Theo pouts. "Yes, you can. C'mon. Try."

I grimace and shake my head. "No, it's okay."

I'm not prepared when Theo rests her elbows on the bar top and leans in. My heart flatlines for a second then starts beating so fast, I almost go deaf by the sound of my pulse between my ears.

There's a glimmer in her eyes that lights up my entire nervous system. I swallow forcibly. "Watch me say it."

As if I could watch anything else.

I nod. "Sure. Okay." I glimpse down at her lips. They're thick and a creamy beige color with just the right amount of shine. I press my legs together tightly. *Everything about this is wrong.*

"Ready? Bou-levar-dee-ay," Theo announces at a painfully slow pace, making it sound like some dirty word lovers would whisper while fucking. "Now, you give it a go."

Breathe.

I lift my gaze to Theo's and that's when it happens. For a single moment, I forget Simone. My chest squeezes.

"I'm sorry," I say quietly.

Theo knits her eyebrows. "What for?"

"I just...can I please get a shot of Jameson instead?"

Theo's expression softens. "Yeah. Definitely. Don't be sorry." She backs away from me, straightens her stance, and places a shot glass in front of me. She reaches out and grabs the infamous green bottle from the shelf.

"I like the cocktail. I just want to get drunk faster, because I need to stop overthinking. I overthink a lot. It's a problem," I blab.

Theo nods and one corner of her mouth lifts. "You don't have to explain yourself to me," she says and begins pouring the alcohol into my shot glass.

"I know that, but..." *Stop right there. Redirect.* "Actually, can you make it a double?"

She gives me a delicate smile. "I sure can," she says and fills the shot glass up to the very top without spilling even a drop.

I return the smile. "Thank you." I pick up the glass and shoot the whiskey. Instantly after swallowing, I cringe. *Son of bitch, that tastes like fire.*

Theo chuckles. "More?"

I nod. "One more."

"You got it. I'll even join you." She sets another glass on the bar, gives me a refill, and then pours herself a shot. She raises her glass and clinks it against mine. "Cheers."

I follow her lead. "Cheers."

Simultaneously, we take our shots and slam the empty glasses down. I make a face, but Theo seems completely unfazed as though she just chugged water.

She gives me a wicked grin, but it's not with her mouth, it's with her eyes. "Again?"

We stare at each other for a minute too long, but neither of us looks away. There's a sporadic thumping in my chest and the room begins to spin. I laugh under my breath and place my hand over my glass.

"No more for me. Your face is getting blurry, which is a shame because it's lovely."

I tense up in my seat. *Did I say that out loud?*

Theo bites down on her heavy bottom lip and does the worst job ever at stifling a smile. "You like my face, huh?"

An explosion of butterflies flit about my belly. *Yes. Yes, I do. I shouldn't, but here I am.*

I shake my head quickly. "I didn't mean to—"

"What? Flirt?" She raises an eyebrow at me.

My mouth goes dry. “Yeah. That. I didn’t mean to.”

Theo purses her lips and nods. “That’s too bad. I was hoping you meant it.”

My palms start to sweat. “Really?”

She collects the empty glasses from the bar top. “Oh, for sure.”

My forehead wrinkles. “Why? I’m a newly divorced person.”

Theo laughs softly. “Better that you’re divorced-hitting on me rather than married-hitting on me, right?”

I feel the color settle into my cheeks. “True. I guess. It’s been a long time...since I’ve flirted with anyone. It feels weird.”

Theo presses her lips together, but amusement dances in her eyes. “Good weird or bad weird?”

I tip my head to the side thoughtfully. “I’m not sure weird.”

She grins. “Well, you should keep practicing on me until you figure that out.”

I run my fingers through my hair and laugh at myself. “Wow. This is crazy. My life is crazy right now. My marriage just legally ended, and I’m devastated about it. I shouldn’t be making a pass at anyone. I mean, for heaven’s sake, I shouldn’t even be noticing other people.”

Theo gives me a side-eye. “Says who?”

I blow up my cheeks and puff out a breath. “I don’t know. Me?”

She looks at me intently. “Hmm. Well, maybe you should cut yourself some slack. Grief takes all forms. And for what it’s worth, I think it’s normal for divorced people to...*notice* other people.”

I look her dead in the eyes. “That’s the thing. I haven’t *noticed* anyone for a year. Then I saw you.”

Theo’s pupils darken, blending into her irises. “See, *that* was a good line. I almost believed you.”

Drop it. There’s no need to say...

“It wasn’t a line.”

What are you doing? Go home. You’re drunk and you’re sad. You’re sad-drunk. This is unwise. Don’t be stupid.

Theo squints at me. “It wasn’t?”

“No, it wasn’t.”

What the fuck? Stop!

Theo’s face turns scarlet. It’s sweet. “I’m flattered.” She uses her rag to wipe down the bar but watches me the whole time. “I still don’t think you

should feel bad about that. Maybe that makes me a bad person or maybe it just makes me human.”

I glance down at her hand and briefly observe the way her fingers are wrapped around the cloth. It gives me a chill. “I don’t think you’re a bad person.”

Theo chuckles. “I appreciate that, but you don’t know me.”

“No, but I have good intuition. I’m confident that if I got to know you, I’d be proven right.”

Crap! I’m talking way too much.

Theo’s hand becomes still. She lifts her gaze to mine and searches my eyes for a moment. I can’t move. “Is that something you want? To get to know me.”

Is it something I want? Yes, it is. Isn’t it?

I draw in a big breath and release it gradually. “That’s a tough question only because I’m in a very messy headspace.”

Theo’s lips pinch together. “Yikes. You *do* think a lot.”

“You have no idea.”

She smiles. “Okay. Let me ask you an easier question then. How drunk are you on a scale of thinking clearly to making regrettable decisions?”

I take a second to visually trace the outline of her visage. Her features are both sharp and soft. Her complexion is rosy and smooth-looking. Her stare is kind yet mysterious. And her mouth is...

I swallow against my quickening heartbeat. “I’m somewhere in the middle.”

There’s a flash in Theo’s eyes. “I can work with that. I’m off in twenty. Do you want to do something?”

Yes. No. Wait, yes. Shit.

“Like what?”

“Anything,” she says.

“Sure.”

Cool. So much for stopping.

Theo

It's no longer raining when Quinn and I step outside of the bar. The June air is thick and sticky. I can't tell if it's hard to breathe because of the humidity or because Quinn is staring at me expectantly, her light brown eyes pinning me in place, making it feel as though my high-top chucks are cemented to the sidewalk.

"Are you hungry?" I ask, tying my rain jacket around my waist to hide my face while I attempt to gather myself.

"Kind of, I guess. But it's one a.m. Nothing is open."

I look up at Quinn and the oxygen leaves my lungs again when I find her gaze waiting for mine. "I might know a secret spot. How do you feel about dumplings?"

"Indifferent. I've never had dumplings."

I gasp. "What? Seriously?"

Quinn smiles shyly. "Seriously."

"That's horrible. We're going to fix that right now. Come with me." Without thinking, I reach for Quinn's hand. Our fingers brush and a jolt of charged energy shoots through my body. I flinch and I'm pretty sure she does too. I promptly retract my hand. "Sorry. I'm sorry."

A flush paints Quinn's cheeks. "No, it's okay." She fixates on the ground and rubs the back of her neck. The movement causes her small bicep to pop, and I am so here for it. After a beat, she brings her eyes back to my face. "It's just...I wasn't ready, and you make me nervous, so my palms are sweaty."

Aww.

I catch my lower lip between my teeth to curb a smile. "Would it be

helpful if you knew my palms are sweaty too?”

Quinn gives me a small nod. “Yes, actually it would.”

We share a brief laugh and I offer her my hand. “You don’t have to take it, but it’s yours if you want to. You know, so I can guide you to the restaurant.”

Quinn’s stare intensifies to such a degree, it sends a shiver down my spine.

“I want to,” she practically whispers, accepting my hand. The skin-on-skin contact makes my head buzz. Her palms are damp and soft. Her fingers are slender and smooth, and they fit seamlessly between mine. I gingerly run the pad of my thumb over the crack in one of her knuckles. She twitches but doesn’t try to escape my grasp. “Guide me,” she says.

“Alright. Let’s go,” I playfully pull Quinn toward me as I begin walking down the street. In seconds, our footsteps fall in with each other’s. “It’s only a block away,” I explain.

Quinn doesn’t say anything, but I can see her nod through the corner of my eye.

I glimpse up at the sky, littered with stars, and inhale deeply. I catch a whiff of something citrus-like wafting off Quinn. She smells delicious, summery. I smile to myself.

“What are you smiling about?” Quinn asks, yanking me away from my fantasy about burying my nose against her flesh to breathe in her scent.

Think fast.

“Huh?” I blurt.

Try again.

Hastily, I continue. “Oh. I was just taking in the night. It’s beautiful.” *And so are you.*

“Yeah. It didn’t turn out to be such a terrible night after all, thanks to you and multiple alcoholic beverages.”

I tip my head to the side a bit to hide my blush. “Glad I could be of assistance.”

“Me too.” There’s a long pause. “How long have you been bartending for?”

“About five years. I started shortly after graduating college.”

Quinn stops short, forcing me to a halt.

“What?” she asks, wide-eyed.

I narrow my gaze. “What?” I echo, confused.

Quinn's forehead wrinkles. "How old are you?"

"How old do you need me to be in order to *not* kill the vibe of this moment?" I smirk.

Her mouth hangs open for a solid ten seconds before she speaks again. "I'm not kidding."

I tighten my hand around hers to keep her from pulling away because I'm desperately afraid she's going to.

"I'm sorry I teased you," I say calmly. "I just don't understand why my age matters so much to you. We're two people going out for dumplings. That's all. No big deal."

"Well, it matters because I..." she stammers. "Because it...matters."

I chew on the inside of my cheek. *God, she's cute when she's flustered.* A hundred different ways to make her even more flustered sprint through my mind. *Be good.*

I raise an eyebrow. "Because...?"

To my disappointment, Quinn releases me and covers her face with her hands. "Aargh! I was flirting with you. That's why it matters. I don't want to be a creep. Ew. You look...I thought you were at least...you know?" She lowers her arms and peers at me. "You know?"

I swallow a laugh. "You're not a creep."

"Then how old are you?"

I purse my lips. "How old do you think I am?"

Quinn shrugs. "Thirty."

I snort. "Wow. I don't know whether to take that as an insult or a compliment."

Her nose crinkles. "So, you're not thirty?"

"No. I'm twenty—"

"Nine!" Quinn shouts, cutting me off. "Please be twenty-nine."

I chortle. "Shh. Relax. Take a breath. Can you do that?"

Quinn exhales slowly. "Okay. I'm good. I'm relaxed. I'm not freaking out."

I aim my index finger at her. "Stay relaxed. Remember, it's only a number."

She grimaces. "Just tell me already."

"I'm twenty-seven."

Quinn recoils. "Oof. Really?"

I smile. "Mm-hmm. Really. I'm twenty-seven and you're forty-one. Now

that that's out of the way, can we eat? I'm starving."

Quinn blinks rapidly. "You're not...bothered by this?"

"This being what exactly?"

"Our age discrepancy."

"No, I'm not bothered at all. I knew you were older than me this whole time. I saw your license. Remember?"

"Yes, I remember." Quinn runs a hand through her layered bob. "Of course, I remember. And you said I looked younger than my age."

"You do look younger than your age," I confirm, squishing my eyebrows together. "So, what's the issue?"

Quinn holds out her arms, showing me her palms. "But I'm not younger than my age. I *am* my age."

A small laugh escapes me, but I immediately cough in an attempt to cover it up. "Yeah, that's how age works."

Quinn grimaces, her limbs going slack at her sides. "I flirted with you though. I'm that divorcee who flirts with twenty-something-year-olds at bars now. Oh, God. This is it. It's happening. I'm having a mid-life crisis."

I clamp my lips together to fend off another smile. "Quinn." I roll her name around in my mouth to try it out, to taste it. It tastes good.

Her head jerks back, then she stares at me with her eyebrows pinched together. "Yeah?"

I hazard a step closer to her. Her posture becomes rigid, but her eyes follow my movements. "There's no need to panic. Alright? We're both adults."

Quinn frowns. "But I'm much older than you are, and I hit on you."

"And I liked it. I even encouraged it. Let's not forget that I came on to you too." I drop my voice and continue. "Did you like it?"

Quinn takes in a sharp breath and my pulse accelerates. Her gaze falls to my lips for a moment. The tiny hairs on the nape of my neck rise. I love this moment. I wish I had unbuttoned my short-sleeved flannel to show off my camisole for this moment. I wish I wasn't abstaining from sex and that Quinn wasn't raw from a divorce in this moment. Because I want her to kiss me so that I can kiss her back.

Her eyes trail across my face before staring deep into mine, leaving me unsteady, covering my skin in goosebumps. *Please kiss me. Just lean in and kiss me—I'll do the rest.*

Quinn's pupils flare and my heart misses its cue to beat again.

“Yes,” she finally responds in a whisper. “I liked it.”

A sharp tingle ripples between my thighs.

Behave.

“Then it’s settled. We’re all good here.”

“I shouldn’t like it though,” Quinn continues. “For one, I’m grieving. What kind of person am I if I’m flirting with someone immediately after my divorce finalizes...and enjoying it? It doesn’t seem right. Then, I’m just like her—moving on so quickly, forgetting so easily. And second, you’re so much younger than me. I don’t want to be a cougar.”

I let out a breath. “For one, I think you’re a person with human emotions. No one is judging you or your grief process. But I think you might be judging yourself. And I don’t think we forget the people we’ve loved. I also don’t believe that they forget us. Life is going to keep happening. We choose to go with it or stay behind in the past. It’s a choice, and different people make different decisions. You do what feels best for you.” I supply her with a small smile. “Secondly, I don’t think you’re a cougar. More like a skittish cat.”

Quinn turns red but chuckles. “Thanks a lot.”

“You’re welcome a lot.” I shift my weight from my left leg to my right. “Listen, if our age difference makes you uncomfortable, we can just stop flirting. Besides, it’s not like it would go anywhere. I can’t have sex with you anyway.”

Quinn’s blush deepens, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t taking pleasure in the sight. “Right. Yeah. I get it. There’s over a decade between us.”

“I don’t care about your age. And I didn’t say I *wouldn’t*. I said I *can’t*.”

“Oh,” Quinn utters, staring down at her combat boots. “But you would?”

“One hundred percent. If the circumstances were anything but what they are, yes. I’d sleep with you. But you’re, well, doing your thing. And I’m practicing abstinence.”

Quinn looks up at me, brow furrowed, mouth downturned. “Until marriage?”

I laugh abruptly. “No. Absolutely not.” I shake my head and clear my throat. “I made a pact with my best friend. Neither of us are engaging in sexual activity for thirty days. It’s a cleanse. Like a restorative type-thing.”

Quinn draws her lower lip between her teeth. “That’s...interesting. How’s that going for you?”

“You think it’s funny?”

“Pfft. What? No. I’m genuinely curious.”

“Well, it sucks. That’s how it’s going.”

“If it’s any consolation, I haven’t had sex in a year.”

I gawp at her. “A year?”

“Yup.”

“Do you miss it?”

Quinn shrugs. “Sex? Um. I honestly haven’t thought about it until...” her voice trails and her cheeks rouge. “You know what? I’m super hungry. Are we close to the dumpling place?”

Noooo! I need to know the end of that sentence. Until when? God, I’m dying here. It’s okay though. I’m fine.

I nod toward the storefront behind Quinn. “We’re here. We’ve been here.”

Quinn’s expression falls. “We’ve been standing outside having a conversation this whole time when we could’ve been cozied up inside, eating?”

“Yeah, because we were in a flow, and I didn’t want to break the flow by telling you we had arrived.” I smile broadly.

“Unbelievable,” she mutters.

Without thinking, I grab Quinn by her forearm. “C’mon. Let’s eat,” I say, dragging her inside The Dumpling Palace.

The restaurant is small and stifling. A large pedestal fan is next to the counter, blowing hot air into the dining area, which smells of oyster sauce and kimchi. It might not be the most atmospheric place, but the food here is life-changing.

I point to one of three vacant tables. “Take a seat,” I tell Quinn. “I’ll place an order.”

I walk over to the counter and lean against it, sticking my ass out just a bit in the event that Quinn decides to look my way. I pretend to review the menu board I’ve long ago memorized for a second before I put in an order for steamed vegetable dumplings, steamed pork dumplings, and two lemonades. In all of about ten minutes, I’m signing the credit card receipt, and the food is being handed to me. That’s why I like coming here—because hardly anyone knows about it, so there’s no waiting. Not to mention it’s nearly two o’clock in the morning, which isn’t exactly dinner time for most.

I summon my waitressing skills and gather the food in my arms, with the drinks balanced on top of the containers, and carefully trek over to the table I left Quinn at. Sure enough, she’s watching me.

“Do you want some help?” she calls out.

“I got it. You sit tight.” I’m perspiring both because it’s a thousand degrees in this place and because I’ll be mortified if I drop so much as a napkin in front of Quinn.

Okay, so I could stand to use some help, but I also want Quinn to keep watching me. If this is all the time I ever get with this woman, I’m going to make it count. I’m going to leave her with as many mental images of myself as I possibly can.

When I reach the table, I release a quiet breath of relief. Quinn gets up from her seat and assists me in putting the food and drinks down.

“I could’ve helped you, you know,” she says.

“I appreciate that, but I like a challenge.” I plop down on the chair closest to me and Quinn sits back down as well.

Quinn stares fixedly at me from across the table and I become immobilized. There’s a flicker in her eyes, bringing out the yellow tones of her irises. A slow smile builds on her lips. Now, I’m really fucking warm.

“Is that why you agreed to be celibate with your friend?” she asks. “Because you like a challenge?”

I curl up my lip. “No. I’m doing *that* because I’m an incredible friend.”

Quinn gives me a dubious raised brow. “Uh-huh. So, what kind of challenges do you like?”

I take a bite out of a pork dumpling and hum contentedly, then I reach over and hold it out to Quinn. “Try this.”

She narrows her eyes. “It’s half-eaten.”

“So? I don’t have cooties.”

Quinn points to the container in front of her. “I can just get my own.”

“Except those ones are veggie. This is pork.”

Quinn shakes her head but smiles. “You’re shady.”

I gape. “I resent that. I’m not trying to be shady. This is my move. Can you at least go with it?”

She chuckles. “What happened to not flirting?”

I shrug. “I offered to stop, and you never gave me a straight answer. Do you want me to stop?”

Quinn stares directly into my eyes. “If I say ‘no’, then—”

“Don’t overthink it,” I say quietly, cutting her off.

She partially nods, parts her lips, and takes the dumpling I’m holding right out of my hands. It happens in slow motion. I can’t take my eyes off

hers, boring into mine. And when she moves her head back, one corner of her mouth tickles my finger. My breath catches in my throat.

Quinn chews, swallows, and gives me a toothy grin. “How’d I do? Was that the desired outcome of your move?”

I remember how to exhale. “Uh. Yeah. Something along those lines.”

She smiles. “It’s good, by the way. I approve,” she says, picking up another dumpling from her own container. “You want me to do you now?”

A full-body blush covers me. “I’m sorry?”

“Do you want to taste mine?”

My stomach dips. *Whoa. Oh, boy.*

“I know that you’re saying words, but I can’t comprehend them, because my brain is turning everything into something sex-related. Can you please rephrase?”

Quinn giggles nervously. It’s so freaking endearing.

“Whoops,” she says. “Let me try again. Do you want a bite of my dumpling?”

Now, I’m the one who’s giggling nervously. I internally shudder and get a hold of myself. “Sure,” I manage.

Quinn stretches out her arm and puts the veggie dumpling right up to my lips, almost whacking me in the face with it. A tinge of crimson stains her cheeks and I snort with laughter.

She winces. “Sorry.”

I shake my head, snickering, then grab the dumpling between my teeth. I pull back, stealing it from Quinn’s grip. She yelps. Three-quarters of the dumpling ends up in my mouth while the rest of it lands on the table in front of me.

“It’s so good,” I moan between large bites.

Quinn doubles over, cracking up. “Oh, my God! Please don’t choke.”

I swallow with success. “I’m fine. I’m fine.”

Quinn’s expression flattens. “You almost bit me,” she accuses, but there’s a teasing lilt in her voice.

I chuckle. “Ah, but I didn’t.”

“And then you almost died,” she proceeds.

“Ah, but I didn’t.”

We share a laugh, and my chest expands. I don’t recall ever wanting to kiss someone so badly. I know it can’t happen though. I have to break the spell.

I cough, mentally switching gears. “Bartending,” I spew. “Bartending is a challenge I like. You had asked, and that’s my answer.”

Quinn’s laughter dies and she squints at me. “Oh, right. Yes. I did ask you that. Um. Why bartending?”

“Having to read people and situations keeps my job interesting,” I explain. “I have to always pay attention to small details and think on my feet. My job is about watching people and learning what different people’s limits look like. Are they getting angry? Are they getting frisky? Are they going to pass out? Have they made themselves too vulnerable? In understanding what to watch out for, I’ve discouraged bar fights, helped people out of unsolicited flirting situations, and have taken away car keys and called more ride shares than I can count to try to prevent drunk driving.”

Quinn lifts her brow. “That’s very cool and also impressive.”

“Thanks. That’s not all though.” I put another piece of a dumpling in my mouth and chew. Then I pick up where I left off. “Beyond all that, there are times when patrons want to share with me the very personal details of their lives. The challenge there is listening without judgment. They don’t want to know what I think, they just want to feel heard and get drunk about it. But man, have I heard some crazy shit. So, it’s a challenge and I love it.”

Quinn’s ears turn red. “Oof. I definitely fall into the latter category. Sorry about that.”

I shake my head. “Don’t be sorry. It’s part of my job. Besides, I wanted to hear what you had to say. That wasn’t an act.”

Quinn averts her gaze and takes a sip of lemonade. “I appreciate you saying that, but still.”

“No ‘but still.’ I meant what I said.” I glimpse at my watch and frown. “We should finish up. They’re closing soon.”

Quinn wipes her hands on a napkin and shifts her eyes back to my face. “There are some picnic tables in the center. Do you want to go? Um, with me? To talk?”

I feel my lips slowly curve into a smile. “Yeah.”

Quinn

As Theo and I make our way across the street to the center of Davis Square, I'm painfully aware of our proximity—arms bumping, hands grazing. It doesn't matter how subtle it is—every time we make contact, my insides vibrate.

I officially have no idea what the fuck I'm doing. Clearly, that's not stopping me from doing it. Note to self: talk about this in therapy.

Before we reach the deserted center, lit up by streetlights and surrounded by trees, I steal a glance at Theo. She's staring up at the sky, where the moon is gigantic and bright. I take a second to admire her profile in secret. Her skin tone is even and unwrinkled—essentially flawless. I bet she's never had a blemish in her life, which has been much shorter than mine. *Sigh*. Her cheekbones are set a little low, making her dimples that much more apparent when she smiles. Her jawline is defined, and her eyes are as black as the night. Her wide, full lips are glossy from her lipstick and greasy food. They're perfectly kissable. And as much as I don't want to admit it, I've thought a *lot* about kissing those lips in the past few hours and I've worked equally hard to push said thoughts away. She's stupid-gorgeous.

Watch yourself.

I refocus just in time to avoid tripping over the curb. *Thank goodness*. God knows the last thing I need right now is to fall.

In comfortable silence, we take a seat across from one another at the first picnic table we find.

I fold my hands together. "Thanks for dinner."

Theo smiles at me. "You're welcome. Thanks for that huge tip you left

for me at the bar.”

“Pfft. It was nothing.”

“Not true, but I’ll drop it.”

I flatten my palms on the table. “So, what else? Aside from your job, what else can you tell me about yourself?”

Theo arches an eyebrow. “What do you want to know?”

Everything.

“Hmm. Tell me about your family?”

She purses her lips and narrows her eyes at me. “Really?”

“Yes, really.”

Theo releases a long exhale. “Okay. I grew up on the South Shore with my parents and my younger sister. I moved out this way for school and fell in love with the energy of the city, so I stayed. My parents recently bought a condo in South Carolina, so that’s where they are nowadays. And my sister’s out in Connecticut. She’s still in college.”

I nod ponderously. “Are you close with them?”

“Kind of. I talk to my sister at least once a month, if not more, and we all get together for Christmas every year.”

“Where did you go to school and what did you study?”

Theo chuckles. “This feels more like an interrogation and less like a casual Q&A.”

I wince. “Sorry.”

“Will I get to ask you questions after this?”

Damnit. I hadn’t considered that. But fair is fair.

“Sure.”

Theo rests her elbows on the table and holds onto the back of her neck. “I studied marketing at Emerson.”

I gasp. “No way! Emerson is a great school. That’s awesome.”

She smiles big. “Thanks. Can I quiz you now?”

“Not yet.” I grin. “One more. Favorite season?”

“This one. Summer is my favorite.”

I stick up my nose. “Seriously? Why? It’s so hot and humid.”

“Exactly, which means women like you wear tank tops like *that*.” She outstretches her hand and gestures to me. “Hence, why it’s my favorite season.”

My face blazes. “That can’t be why.”

Theo relaxes her arm. “No, it’s not, but it’s a bonus.” She waggles her

eyebrows at me. “I like the warmth. I love that everyone seems happier, more vibrant. And I live for the longer days.” I smile at the way her expression lights up when she speaks.

“That’s fair. I enjoy the longer days as well.”

“Right?” She leans forward and gives me a sly leer. “I think that’s enough about me. Your turn.”

Here we go.

“Alright. Alright. Fire away.”

Theo clears her throat and sits up straighter. “What do you do for work?”

“I own a coffee shop.”

Theo’s mouth drops. “Holy crap! That’s amazing! I love coffee!” She grimaces but quickly recovers. “Where is this shop?”

I laugh lightly. “I’m not telling.”

She juts her chin forward, mouth falling open even more. “What? Why not? You know where I work.”

“I know where you work by accident, and I will respectfully refrain from coming into your place of employment from now on if you wish.”

Theo rolls her eyes dramatically and groans. “You’re seriously not going to tell me?”

“No. My work stays separate from the other parts of my life. I need it that way.”

She stares flatly at me for a beat and then continues. “Fine. I mean, that puts us on an uneven playing field, but who’s keeping track.”

I frown. “I’m sorry. It’s nothing against you.”

Theo holds up her hands, palm facing me. “No. Don’t worry about it. It’s all good.”

“Okay,” I say softly.

She lays her arms back on the table. “Okay,” she reiterates. “Next. What’s *your* favorite season?”

“Winter.”

Theo grimaces. “Why though? It’s so...cold.”

I chuckle. “I’m not a fan of it being dark by four o’clock, but I don’t mind the cold. It’s refreshing.”

“Refreshing? That’s one way to put it. I am all set with New England winters. Sub-zero temperatures, dirty, freezing snow, icy streets, seasonal depression. No thanks.”

I point to her. “But also, it’s the holiday season.”

“Definitely not a selling point. Sorry.” Theo tucks her lips behind her teeth and hums. “Tell me about your ex-wife.”

The oxygen slips from my lungs, and I practically choke on my exhale. “What? Why? No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I...and we’re...and I’m...so, that’s why.”

Theo’s eyes widen. “I’m not following. Do you want to try that again in complete sentences?”

My mouth goes dry. “I don’t understand. Why do you want to know about her?”

Theo inches her hands closer to mine on top of the table but doesn’t venture to touch them. I can’t decide if I want her to or not.

“Listen, my grandpa—who is like a second father to me—has dementia. I know what it’s like to grieve someone who’s still alive. And what helps me is to talk about him, about the way he was before he got sick. Maybe it would help you if you told a stranger about your...what’s her name?”

“Simone,” I whisper while my eyes begin to well up. “I’m sorry about your grandpa. That’s hard.”

“I’m sorry about my grandpa too. Thank you.” Theo casually wipes a tear from the corner of her eye. “So, tell me about Simone. Not who she is now, but who she was to you, the person you’re grieving.”

I slump my shoulders forward and fixate on the table. Simone’s face flashes through my mind a million times in a tapestry of memories, from our first kiss up until our last goodbye.

I swallow the lump in my throat. I know in my soul that my best friend would murder me in cold blood if she found out I said anything positive about my now ex-wife. But maybe Theo’s right. Maybe it would be beneficial to tell an outsider about the inside of my heart.

“The Simone I’m grieving is smart. She would sometimes just drop random facts on me that had nothing to do with what we were talking about, but it awed me. She’s funny. Goofy funny, but she always made me laugh. She’s artistic. She’s got a beautiful singing voice, and we would kill it during car karaoke.” Tears that I refuse to release sting my sinuses. I sniffle. “She’s kind. Very pretty. Like nerdy pretty, but also sexy. And she’s got these big, captivating eyes. So expressive. Those eyes haunt me in my dreams. That’s who I think about when I’m grieving.”

I peer up at Theo from behind my wet lashes. Her brow is creased, and

she blinks at me.

I choke back a sob and proceed. “You know, no one ever prepares you for divorce, how painful it is. How complicated it can be. How long it takes. It’s not like a breakup. At least for me, it wasn’t. It’s losing dreams and plans and hopes you shared with someone else. It’s broken promises and empty vows. It’s letting go of this vision I had of spending a lifetime with her.”

Don’t cry. She is NOT worthy of your tears.

Theo places her hand on top of mine. I tremble and my lips begin to quiver. I grit my teeth and softly growl as the hot tears—tears of agony and anger—trickle down my cheeks. *Fuck.*

Theo tightens her hold on me. “It’s okay.”

I squeeze her hand in return while I try to catch my breath. It’s pointless though. I need to say it. I need someone to hear it. I shut my eyes and make my confession.

“She was my world,” I weep. “I loved her, and she let me go. She made it look so...easy. I felt so powerless, so small. And I thought I would never be able to breathe again, because the hurt...the hurt is too much. Then, one day, I didn’t cry. Days became weeks and weeks became months. I was healing. And today, I unraveled, because our story is officially over.”

My voice cracks and I use my free palm to cover my mouth. I inhale violently through my nose and hiccup. When my airway feels less constricted, I lower my hand and start to rub my forearm soothingly.

I can do this. I can finish.

I nod to rally myself and find my vocal cords again. “It’s over. There’s nothing left to it. It’s just so...*final*, the conclusion of something that was never supposed to end. It’s jarring. I’m jarred. I’m sad and I’m jarred.” I unwittingly snivel, but I persist. “It’s like someone took a knife and drove through the scar tissue in my heart. I just want to be recovered from her.”

For several minutes, my sobs fill the space between me and Theo. They ring against the twilight. I gulp for air. It takes me a few tries, but eventually, I exhale somewhat evenly.

I open my eyes and risk looking at Theo. Misty-eyed, she awards me with a clenched, half-smile.

I shake my head. “Whoa. That was a lot. I’m sorry. The whole divorce thing just really...I didn’t see it coming. Maybe I should have, but I didn’t. Shit. I completely unloaded on you. I’m so—”

“Shh. Stop,” Theo interrupts me. “You apologize for *everything*. Don’t. I

asked you to share and you shared. You had to say goodbye to someone you loved when you weren't ready to say goodbye. It *should* be a lot. In fact, I'd be worried if it wasn't. I appreciate you telling me all that you did." She does the thing where she gently smooths the pad of her thumb over my knuckles. My body relaxes. "How did it feel for you, telling me that?"

I sniffle. "Equal parts freeing and mortifying." I sigh heavily. "Clearly, I'm a hot mess. One minute, I'm in mourning. The next minute, I'm flirting with you, caught up in thoughts about kissing you. And then my grief strikes again. I didn't mean to drag you into my mess. Obviously, I have more crap to unpack in therapy."

Theo chews on her bottom lip, undoubtedly suppressing a smile. "You've thought about kissing me?"

I bark out a short laugh. "*That's* your takeaway from everything I said?"

Her eyes grow large, and she giggles. "No! I heard everything you said. That part just stood out to me."

A warmth crawls up my chest, my neck, my cheeks. "Yes, I have. I know that makes me sound even more disorganized. I don't quite understand it myself, but it is what it is."

Theo smirks. "I've thought about kissing you too."

My stomach bounces. "You have?"

"Oh, totally."

Stop. Think. Someone could get hurt.

I let out a prolonged exhale. "That sucks."

Theo gapes. "What? Why?"

I carefully pull my hand away from Theo's. "Because my head isn't straight and because there's a major age-gap between us."

"I agree. You're working through some stuff, but I didn't say I wanted to be your girlfriend. I said I wanted to kiss you," Theo states coolly. "And I'm comfortable with our age disparity or what have you. It's only a number to me."

I furrow my brow. "I'm not sure if age is *only a number* to me though. I need time to think about it." I can more or less *feel* my fine lines and wrinkles as I speak.

Theo sits up tall. "Look, we don't know each other very well, but from our brief time together, I know that I like you, both in the most basic sense and as someone I would fuck if I weren't practicing abstinence right now. That's because of who you are, not how old you are. See where I'm going

with this? Does that make sense?”

I lose my breath to her words. It's not new information, but it's her delivery that ignites an ache between my legs.

“Uh-huh.”

She quirks an eyebrow. “You good?”

Be rational here.

I cough. “Yup. I'm good. And I hear you. Perhaps I'd feel the same way had we met under different circumstances instead of when my emotions are all over the place. But that's not our case.”

Theo tips her head and eyes me closely. “What are you getting it? Are you telling me that if we met at some other point in our lives, you'd consider having se—”

“—*Dating* you. I'd consider dating you. Make no mistake, I'd consider hooking up with you too, but I like your layers. I'd want to peel them back. That takes more than just sex.”

Theo blushes. “Well, shit. Now, I like you more and feel hella guilty for telling you I'd bang you minus the dating.”

I chuckle. “Don't feel guilty.”

“I'd date you too. Not in the shape you're in. No offense. But all in all, I would.”

I nod. “No offense taken. That's what I mean though—we met at the wrong time.”

“But if we met at some alternate time, our age difference would still exist.”

I purse my lips. “True, but I'd be in a better emotional state, so I'd be able to think about it with more clarity and reason.”

Theo narrows her gaze. “I can't tell if you're joking or not.”

“I'm not joking.”

“But dating and sex often don't go hand-in-hand with reason, so your point is moot. We can't help who we're attracted to. What we *do* have the power to do is decide what we want to do about our mutual feelings of attraction.” Theo shifts in her seat and looks at me anticipatorily. “So, what do you want to do?”

I throw my head back and groan. “I don't know what I want to do.”

“Then tell me what you know.”

I take a breath and stare at her. “Theo, I am attracted to you. It's hard not to be. But I know I'm not ready. I'm not ready to sleep with anyone, and I'm

not ready to date anyone. I need to be with myself more first. Furthermore, I know that I *am* skeptical of our age difference.” I grimace. “Maybe I shouldn’t be. Maybe it shouldn’t matter. But right now, it does. Not a whole lot, but enough to give me pause. And from what I can tell, you don’t deserve pause.” I point at my head and make a circular motion with my finger. “I keep thinking that if I had my shit together, I’d be able to assess this situation between us a whole better.” I drop my arm to my side. “I’m not there though. Not yet.”

Theo turns her eyes downward at her hands and begins picking at one of her fingernails. “So, to recap—you honestly believe that if we met at some other point in our lives, some point in which you have *clarity*, that we’d have a real shot at being together despite our age-gap?”

“Yes, precisely.”

She glances up at me and makes a face. “You’re strange.”

“I’m aware.”

A bitter smile hijacks Theo’s lips. “Do you want to be friends then? I believe that people come into each other’s lives for a reason, so parting ways indefinitely feels wrong. We connected. I can’t turn my back on that.”

A rock forms in the pit of my stomach and I frown. “I can’t be your friend. Given our attraction to each other, I think it would be difficult.” I use my fingers to sponge up my falling tears. “That said, I also believe that people meet for a reason, but I believe in timing too. And our timing is off. I don’t want to ignore our connection either. So, I’m going to make a proposition.”

Theo gives me a strong side-eye. “I already don’t like where this is going.”

I chuckle despondently. “Hear me out, okay?”

Theo’s big, brown eyes open wide. “Okay.”

“What if we agree to meet in the future.”

Theo snorts and waves her hands in the air. “Sorry. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to laugh.” She clears her throat. “Continue.”

I furrow my brow. “Anyway, as I was saying—we meet in the future. Maybe a year from now. Hopefully, by then, I’ll be in a much better headspace, and I will have processed our age difference and figured out how I feel about it. And you’ll be in a different place in your life, too. Like, a less celibate place.” I smile lightly. “If there’s still a connection between us, then we can determine together what to do about it. Do we pursue a friendship or

something more? What do you say?”

Theo covers her mouth with her palm and closes her eyes. Her body shakes a little.

I gape. “Are you laughing?”

Theo nods.

My eyebrows knit together. “Why? I’m being serious. It wasn’t supposed to be funny. I think it’s genius.”

She coughs and exhales audibly. “Quinn, I’m sorry, but that’s ridiculous. How many early 2000s romcoms did you watch? I think you’re slightly brainwashed.”

“Excuse me? I am *not* brainwashed. This is the best idea I’ve had in a while.”

Theo cringes. “That’s not something I’d boast about if I were you.”

I roll my eyes. “Theo, c’mon. What do we have to lose?”

“A lot, actually. We’re just going to put our lives on hold for a whole year, waiting to see if our timing is right on the second go ‘round?”

“No. That’s not what I’m proposing. I would never ask that of you. You don’t wait for me, and I don’t wait for you. We carry on with our respective lives. We let time do its thing.”

Theo makes a face. “I don’t know about this. What if you meet someone and start dating? What if *I* meet someone and start dating? What if one of us moves across the country? A million things can happen in a year. Hell, a million things can happen in a moment.”

I press my lips together. “I hear that, and I don’t disagree. Think of it like...” I glimpse skyward for a second, then set my gaze on Theo again. “Do you believe in fate?”

Theo pushes out another loud breath. “Oy.”

“Well, do you?” I press.

“Yes. I do.”

“So do I!” I exclaim, slamming my hands on the table. Theo jumps back, clutching her chest. I immediately shrink in my seat. “Sorry. I got carried away.”

“I’ll say.”

“This is great though—that we both believe in fate. If, in a year, we still have a connection, then it means we were meant to be part of each other’s lives,” I explain. “But if life happens and it somehow prevents us from meeting up again or if one of us just doesn’t want to show up, then it wasn’t

meant to be. Everything will happen the way it's supposed to." I grin. "Whaddya say?"

Theo makes a face. "I'd say this is complete lunacy." She breaks into a smile. "But, sure. I'll go along with your crazy-ass plan, but ONLY because we do have a connection. Plus, I think you're cute."

I smile so wide, my cheeks hurt. "YES!"

Theo laughs. "Alright, Crazy. What's the plan?"

I tap my finger against my lips for a minute. "Okay, I got it! In exactly one year from today, we meet across the street at the Dumpling House at eight p.m."

Theo glances over my shoulder in the direction of the restaurant. "Inside the Dumpling House or outside?" She looks at me with a raised brow.

"Outside."

She nods slowly. "And you do realize that there will still be an age-gap between us?"

"I do. But as I said before, I think I'll be more emotionally equipped to deal with that in a year."

Theo pinches the bridge of her nose and sighs. "You don't make any sense to me right now." She places her hand back on the table. "I'm just going to trust that you know what you're talking about."

I puff out my chest. "I do. I think. Yes. I do. I know." I hold out my pinky finger. "Promise that you'll let life happen as if we never met."

Theo gives me a once-over. "I don't know if I can pretend that we never met, but I promise to let life happen the way it will." She hooks her pinky around mine.

I lower our linked fingers down. "I should go now."

Theo pouts. "Really? Now?"

A heaviness settles inside my chest. "Yeah. Now." I bring her hand to my mouth and brush my lips against it. I listen to her gasp. It gives me momentary vertigo. "Thank you for tonight."

Her throat moves when she swallows. "Thank *you*."

I try on a smile. "I think you're great."

Theo cracks a watery smile in return. "Ditto."

I unravel my pinky from hers. "Are you going to be safe getting home?"

"I'll be fine. I'm going to catch an Uber."

"Do you want me to wait with you?"

Theo shakes her head and chuckles so softly, I almost don't hear it. "I'll

be okay. How are you getting home?”

“Same way I got here. I’m going to walk. I need the air.”

“Please be careful.”

“I will.” I get up from the bench and take a breath.

“Wait!” Theo rises from her seat. “So, we don’t exchange numbers or addresses or emails or anything?”

“No. We just believe in fate.”

She rolls her eyes again. “Okay. I’ll see you around then. Maybe.”

I smile. “Yeah. Maybe I’ll see you around. Take care, Theo.”

“You take care, too, Quinn.”

I blink, taking a figurative snapshot of Theo to commit her face to memory. I offer her a half-nod goodbye, doing my best to hold back my tears. Then, I turn around and start trekking home.

Theo

364 Days Later

I rummage through my closet until I find my floral A-line dress, my black mini dress, and my gray, deep V-neck T-shirt. I pull them from the rack one-by-one, and spin around to face my best friend, who's sitting on my bed, staring at her phone.

“Lexi? I’m ready.”

Lexi sets her phone down on the mattress and glances up at me, wearing a partial smirk. “Are you sure you’re not nervous about tomorrow? You have this frantic energy about you.”

I scoff. “I’m not nervous. Not even a little. Why would I be nervous? There’s no need for that. She probably won’t even be there. And if she’s not, no big deal. That’s why I’m not nervous,” I say in one breath.

Lexi’s sky-blue eyes open wider. “If you’re not nervous, then why do you care about your outfit and why aren’t you breathing between words?”

“Pfft, I’m breathing. And I care about my outfit in case she *is* there. Because if she’s there, I want to look good. Is that so wrong?”

Lexi shakes her head, chuckling. “No. Not at all. You do you.”

I thrust out one arm, clutching the hanger with the A-line dress. “This one with heels? For a casual flirty and fun vibe?” I shove the mini dress in my best friend’s face. “Or this one with knee-high boots for a sexy, no-holds-barred vibe?” I drop both dresses to the floor and toss my T-shirt onto Lexi’s lap. “Or this one to go with my short denim shorts and Converse sneakers for

a sexy but not-trying-too-hard vibe?”

Lexi picks up the shirt and holds it up to study. Then she drapes it over her legs, looks me up and down, and purses her lips. “Do you still have those super tight, black jeans with the rips in the knees?”

“Duh. Those are my favorite jeans.”

Lexi smiles. “Those jeans, the gray V-neck T-shirt, and your black, knee-length boots.”

I pout. “Really? That’s so anticlimactic.”

Lexi points a finger at me. “No, it’s not. It says, ‘Hey, it’s just another day and I didn’t dress for anybody but myself and I still look sexy AF.’ And *that’s* the vibe you want to give off. Trust me.”

“I get what you’re saying, but it’s eighty degrees out. I can’t wear jeans. I’ll sweat my ass off.”

“Theo, that’s precisely why you want to be in the V-neck. You have amazing cleavage. Believe me, if it’s glistening with perspiration, she doesn’t stand a chance, assuming she’s going to be there. But also, if you end up being indoors where there’s air-conditioning, you *won’t* freeze your ass off, because the jeans will help keep you warm. It’s the best of both worlds.” Lexi rests her palms on my bed, leans back, and eyes me. “Yeah. I definitely think I’m right about the ensemble.”

“You always think you’re right about everything.”

She shrugs. “Well, I usually am.”

I flop down on the bed next to my friend. “Do you think she’ll show up?” I fully recline and gaze up at the ceiling.

Lexi lies on her back beside me, creating a comforting warmth. “Anything’s possible. I just don’t want you to get your hopes up, babe.”

I turn my head to face her. “I won’t.”

Lexi lets out a loud but short-lived laugh and shifts to meet my eyes. “Really? Come on, Theo. You haven’t dated anyone since you met her. Are you going to tell me that’s a coincidence?”

My mouth opens a little while I consider my retort. “Maybe I haven’t felt like dating anyone since I met her. It’s not like I was waiting around. I mean, there was Angela and…” I draw a blank. *Don’t panic. Improvise.* “Pamela, and Sandra, and Rita. Oh yes, and Monica.”

Lexi raises a disbelieving brow. “Aren’t those the names in ‘Mambo No. 5?’

Guilty.

“Huh. Are they?”

Lexi grabs a pillow and whips at me, laughing. “Yes! They are and you know it! You turd!”

I chuckle as I pull the pillow from her and pitch it onto the floor. “Okay. You caught me. But there was definitely an Angela. I just can’t remember the others. There *were* others though.”

“Man, you were such a player this past year, which is totally out of character for your Libra spirit. Again, I think it’s because you’re holding out for what’s-her-face. The cougar.”

I laugh. “Wow. What a call-out. I wasn’t being a player. I was simply doing my due diligence spreading love. And her name is Quinn. Also, she’s not a cougar.”

Lexi shows me her strong side-eye game. “Well, she’s not exactly a spring chicken either.”

I gasp. “You make her sound old. She’s not old. She’s like forty-two now. That’s not even middle-aged.”

Lexi winces. “I think that it is, actually.”

“What? No way. It can’t be. Google that shit.”

My best friend picks up her phone and raises it overhead. She speaks softly along with her typing, “Is forty years old middle-aged?”

Silence.

I chew on my lower lip. “I’m telling you that it’s not.”

“Ah-hah! According to Google, people between the ages of forty to sixty are considered middle-aged.” She drops her phone. “Right again!”

I sigh. “Alright. Who cares? It’s nothing but a number. Besides, I’ve only been with women my age. Maybe dating up has its advantages. Not that we’re going to date. I’m generally speaking.”

Lexi rolls her eyes. “Mm-hmm. Sure you’re generally speaking.” A slow grin shapes her mouth. “I bet she’s good in bed. Years of experience, probably. Years and years and years.”

I break into a laugh and shove my best friend. “Knock it off! She’s *not* old.”

Lexi giggles. “Okay! I’ll stop. It’s just too easy.”

Once our laughter dies, we stare at each other once more.

“Lex, can I tell you something?”

“Of course.”

“Remember in the fall when I wanted to go on a local coffee shop tour,

and I made you come with me?”

“Do I remember? Yes, I do. That was by far one of your most bizarre phases yet. What about it?”

I cringe. “Please don’t hate me.”

Lexi’s expression falls. “Oh, my God. What? What did you do, Theo?”

My stomach twists. “I lied to you about why I wanted to do that.”

She glares at me. “You *weren’t* in search of the best cold brew in Middlesex County?”

I wrinkle my nose and shake my head. “No, I wasn’t,” I admit quietly.

“Then do you want to tell me why we spent months gallivanting around multiple towns, hopped- up on enough caffeine to give us each a heart attack?” Lexi hisses. I really wish she would blink.

With a mouth as dry as cotton, I swallow. “Quinn may have mentioned that she owned a coffee shop. She just never said which one nor did she give a location. I’m really sorry I lied.”

Lexi’s features harden. “You went looking for her? And you lied to me so that I’d accompany you? What the hell?”

I avert my gaze. “I was worried you would talk me out of looking for her if I told you the truth.”

“What were you thinking? I thought you were supposed to let time take care of things or some bull crap like that?”

I groan. “I know, but I wanted to see her even if she didn’t see me. I don’t know why. I can’t explain it. But I wanted to know where she was. I guess I wanted to be sure that I didn’t make her up, that she’s real.”

Lexi makes a noise resembling something between a sigh and a growl. “You had the night with someone and lost all your senses. Theo, I love you, but when it comes to romance, you’re a lost cause.”

I finally turn my eyes to Lexi’s again. “Well, if I had told you the truth, would you have supported me or tried to discourage me? Be honest.”

“Ugh! I don’t know. I want to tell you that I would have supported your shenanigans, but I worry about your heart, so maybe I would have discouraged you. I don’t know.” Lexi shrugs. “I see where you’re coming from, but please don’t ever lie to me again. We’re best friends. You don’t have to tell me everything, but whatever you do tell me, at least be truthful about it. Okay?”

I press my lips together. “Okay.” I reach out and press the tip of my finger to the tip of Lexi’s nose. “I love you too.”

“You fucking better love me,” she says, and we share a brief laugh.

“Do you think this whole thing—me meeting up with a woman I hardly know from a year ago to see if we still share a connection—is insane?”

Lexi stares openly at me. “Um. Yeah. One thousand percent do I think this is insane.”

I chuckle. “I am nervous about it.”

Lexi lifts an eyebrow. “Yes. I know. I gathered as much.” She places her hand on top of mine. “Please set realistic expectations going into this. Do you even know what you want to come out of this reunion?”

I take a breath. “No. I only know that the night I met her was one of the best nights I’ve ever had and that I’ve thought about her every day for the last three hundred and sixty-four days. I wish there were rhyme or reason to it, but there’s not,” I explain. “We’re two humans who connected in what felt like a special way. I need to find out if that magical feeling is still there, and what it means.”

Lexi exhales through pursed, red lips. “I respect that. I think you’re on one, but I want to support your flavor of crazy, but only because I want you to be happy. I don’t want you to get hurt. It seems as though you put your heart on pause for her. And I hate that for you.”

I nod slowly. “She didn’t ask me to, and it wasn’t my intention. I didn’t feel like I was bound to her or anything of that nature. I agreed to live my life and I did. It just so happens that I didn’t develop any other profound connections along the way.”

Lexi gives me a side-long glance. “Will you please come up with a game plan in case she doesn’t show? I don’t care what you say—if she’s not there, I know you’re going to be crushed, because I know you. What are you going to do for self-care if she never comes?”

A wave of nausea rolls inside my stomach. “I don’t need a plan. I’ll be fine.”

I’ll be fine, right? Of course I will be.

Lexi’s brow furrows. “I have a hard time believing that.”

“Oh, cut me some slack. When have I ever not been fine?”

“Do you seriously need me to answer that?”

“Psht. You know what? No. Don’t answer that. I know I’m fine and that I’ll *be* fine regardless of what goes down, and that’s all that counts.”

“I agree,” Lexi says, patting me on the arm. “That is what matters most. But also, come up with a contingency plan. Please.”

“Alright. If she’s a no-show, I will get drunk, hook up with someone, and talk to my therapist about it after the fact. Is that good enough for you?”

Lexi shudders. “Are you messing with me? I can’t tell.”

“No. I’m totes serious.”

“Maybe do that in reverse order?” Her eyes narrow. “Did you ever tell your therapist about this?”

I contort my face. “Welllll, I might have mentioned it in passing, but that’s about it.”

Lexi goes pale. “What? You never told your therapist about this? About her?”

“Oh! I told her about Quinn right away, for sure. But I maybe neglected to tell her about my and Quinn’s arrangement to meet up again in the future. She wouldn’t get it. She’s straight.”

Lexi’s eyes enlarge. “Theo!”

“I know! Please give me this one thing. I never judged you when you and Breanna decided to—”

Lexi slaps a hand over my mouth. “Shush! We agreed to never bring that up again.”

We stare at each other for a moment.

“Okay,” I mumble against her hand.

She removes her hand from my face. “You’re absolutely right. You were chill about it, and I should be chill about your poor life decisions as well.”

I chuckle. “I appreciate that.”

“Sure. That’s what friends are for.”

“Wait!” I whoop. “I got it!”

Lexi jerks back with a gasp. “Christ. You got what? What is it?”

I plaster on a self-satisfied grin. “I remember their names—Angela, Holly, Erin, Rae, and Dani.”

“Aaargh! Don’t scare me like that!” Lexi threatens and pushes me off the bed.

I hit the floor, but the area rug cushions my fall. Ow.

“Ow!”

“Shit! Are you okay?” Lexi calls down to me, laughing.

I start to chuckle. “Aside from the concussion, I’m great. Never better.”

“Time to switch gears and kick Wine Wednesday into full effect?”

“Good idea. Can you help me up?”

Quinn

“You’re really going to go through with this, aren’t you?” Gabby asks me, locking the door to our coffee shop for the evening.

Gabs and I met in 1999 at Endicott College, where we both studied business. We had many of the same classes, most of which had a focus on women in business. Gabby was loud and outspoken and openly queer. I was quiet and shy and openly gay. Once, during a class debate about inclusivity in business, Gabby found herself on the losing side of the argument even though every point she made was valid. Going against every fiber of my being, I spoke up to defend Gabby, citing multiple texts that backed up Gabby’s case. The professor, who had sided with the boys, reconsidered his stance and sided with Gabby instead. The girls in our class looked at her like a hero. After class, Gabby came up to me and asked me if I wanted to grab a coffee with her that night, and the rest is history.

We became fast friends, and both ended up working corporate jobs. Five years ago, we were at a bar, complaining to each other about our respective careers, and Gabby drunkenly suggested we go into business together. I drunkenly agreed. We pooled our resources, did market research, wrote out a business plan, and used crowdfunding in addition to our combined savings to fund the business—a coffee shop open to everyone, but catered to the queer community.

Our café, The Roasted Bean, not only serves beverages and baked goods, but we host a monthly singles night and have readings from queer authors. Additionally, our space is decorated with Pride Flags, Transgender Flags, and Progress Flags. And our speakers are usually playing anything from The

Indigo Girls and K.D Lang to Lady Gaga and Lizzo. It's fabulous.

I turn the dial on the dishwasher to get it started. "Of course I'm going through with it," I inform her. "We made a pact. Plus, I want to see her. I want to know how she's been."

"And see if she's still as hot as you remember?" My friend chuckles, making her way back to the counter, where I'm cleaning up.

My face grows warm. *Maybe.*

"No," I lie. "I mean, sure. I vaguely recall her being gorgeous, but that's not the driving force behind why I want to see her."

Gabby snorts and raises a sculpted eyebrow in my direction. "You talked about how 'drop dead gorgeous' you thought she was for months. *Months.* You want me to believe that you *vaguely* remember?"

I laugh lightly. "Put your air quotes away." I toss Gabby a rag. She catches it mid-air and immediately goes over to the tables and starts wiping them down.

"I stand by my initial thoughts and feelings about this in that I think this is by far the stupidest thing you've ever done, which is why I approve. You never take risks."

I furrow my brow and look up at her. "False. I take risks."

"LOL!"

I roll my eyes. "What? I do."

"Hun, I hate to be the one to break this to you, but having two drinks instead of one on a work night or drinking a caffeinated beverage after eleven in the morning don't count as risks."

"You're hilarious," I mutter.

"Thanks. I know," Gabby says with a dramatic flip of her shoulder-length, black hair.

I huff. "Hey! I adopted Cassandra Valentina Frances. That was a risk."

Gabby blurts out a laugh. "Agreed. Naming that poor cat what you did was definitely a risk."

I gape. "I wasn't talking about her name! She has a most excellent name."

Gabs presses her lips together, but not quick enough to muffle the beginnings of a snicker. "I beg to differ, but please, go on. Why was adopting Franny a risk?"

"The shelter told me that there was a slim chance she could ever be domesticated, and yet we live peacefully together."

My best friend's lips vibrate as her chuckle escapes. She doesn't even try

to hide her amusement this time. “Quinn, that poor thing *hates* you and you’re afraid of her. You live in the same space, but it’s only peaceful because you two avoid each other. In her defense, I would hate you too if you gave me that name, but that’s neither here nor there.”

“Excuse you. I love her.”

“Oh, I know. But you’re terrified of her as well. Basically, she’s like so and so from sophomore year. What was her name? The one you dated for a month but never saw because you were too intimidated to actually hang out with her in person.”

I frown. “Don’t bring my first-ever college girlfriend into this conversation.”

Gabby smiles. “Fine. You’re right. But what was her name? It’s bugging me now.”

“Lindy,” I say under my breath.

“Yes! Lindy.” Gabby nods along with her words. “Anyway, my point is that adopting a cat who hates you hardly counts as a risk. If you tried to pet her, I’d give you that, but you don’t. You’re not a risk-taker, and that’s okay.”

“Well, I’m going to take this risk. You just watch me.”

Gabby stands up tall and turns to me, one half of her mouth turned upward. “Look at you, you closeted badass. You go get you some with that attitude!”

I smile back. “I’m serious. And I hear what you’re saying. I don’t entirely disagree. I prefer to play it safe, yes. *But* I’ve taken risks when it counts.” I put my rag down, place my hands on the countertop, and lean forward.

Gabby folds her arms over her chest. “Alright. Give it to me.”

I harden my stare. “I will.” I clear my throat. “I think we can all agree that coming out is a risk and I did that. I’ve risked my heart several times in life, no matter the fallout. I took a huge risk opening this business with you. I think it’s fair to say we all took fashion risks in the nineties. On top of all that, you’re wrong about me and Cassandra Valentina Frances. I risk my life every time I go home to Franny and I’m late in feeding her. So, yes. I think it was brave of me to adopt a living creature who wants nothing to do with me and love her unconditionally just the same. All in all, I’m pretty fucking fearless. Going to meet up with Theo after a year has passed to see if there’s still a connection between us is simply one more risk to add to my long resume of risk-taking, because I feel that it’s worth taking. There.”

Gabby claps. "That's my girl!"

My mouth falls. "Huh? What just happened?"

Gabby gives me a smug smile. "Quinn, *I* already know you're brave. I needed *you* to remember that you're brave before you run out and do this foolish thing that you're about to do. That way you can't talk yourself out of it when you inevitably begin to feel insecure five seconds prior to go-time." She clicks her tongue against her cheek. "Works like a charm every single time."

"You tricked me!"

Gabby laughs. "Yup, I did. What are you going to do about it? Fire me?" Her laughter gets louder.

I pout. "I'm not *that* bad."

"No, you're not," she says, pushing the chairs closer to the tables. "But you were a little insecure when I met you and I loved watching you build yourself up as you got older. Since the divorce though, your confidence seems touch-and-go, which makes complete sense. I just want you to know that you have nothing to be self-conscious about. So, when you meet up with this person, this woman, don't let the past get inside your head. Be you. You're awesome."

My cheeks warm and I smile. "Thanks."

"Anytime. So, what are you going to wear?"

"Um. I hadn't thought about it," I admit with a shrug.

Gabby's eyes almost fall out of her head. "Yeah, no. That changes right now."

I chuckle. "She might not even show up. If I dress up and she's not there, I'll be mortified."

Gabby finishes putting the tables and chairs back in place and turns to me, hands on her hips. "But if she *is* there and you're *not* dressed to impress, won't you be equally mortified?" She quickly holds up a finger. "Don't answer. Just let it marinate, then get back to me."

Well, dang. I hadn't thought of that.

I purse my lips and squinch up my face. "I didn't think of that."

"That's why you have me." Gabby grins. "And I have you, too. You remind me to pay my excise taxes, and I remind you what date etiquette is."

"Hey! Just because I've been single for two years, doesn't mean I forgot about date etiquette, thank you very much." I turn and pretend to make sure all the brewing baskets are secure in place. "But this isn't even a date."

“Isn’t it?” Gabby challenges.

I swivel around to face her, brow furrowed. “No, it isn’t.”

Gabby arches an eyebrow. “You’re going to a restaurant to meet up with a woman you had an emotional connection with and are sexually attracted to. What do you call that, if not a date?”

Hmm.

“A gathering,” I offer.

Gabby lets out a short laugh and throws her rag at me. “You’re so full of shit and you know it.”

“Fine. It’s a date-esque gathering.”

“Oh, my God. Please quit while you’re ahead.” She saunters over to the counter. “Call it what you will, but it’s a date. So, the question remains—what are you planning on wearing?”

I mentally ransack my wardrobe. “Uh. Well, I don’t want to dress up too much, because I don’t want to come off as presumptuous in case she’s of the mindset that this isn’t a date, which it isn’t. But now that you’ve made me paranoid, I do want to present myself as a woman who put some thought into her appearance.”

“Yes!” Gabby shoots a finger gun at me, and I’m sure she’s the only person on earth who could get away with it. “Now, we’re getting somewhere.”

“I know! I can wear my black slacks, and—”

Gabby holds her hand in front of my face, interrupting me. “Okay, I’m going to stop you right there. Don’t ever say ‘slacks’ again, especially not to someone who is fourteen years your junior. Next, your *slacks* are taking it too far. Save those for weddings and funerals,” she advises, lowering her arm. “What else ya got?”

I throw my head back and groan. “I don’t know.”

“You do know. You’ve done this before. And you have style...in a very limited way. But you have it.”

I rub the back of my neck and retrain my gaze on Gabby. “I have that pair of worn black jeans. The skinny ones. I could wear those.”

My best friend smiles from ear to ear. “Yes! Those jeans shape your ass perfectly. What else?”

I squint, trying to call to mind what tops I own. “Um. Oh! I just ordered a short-sleeve button-up. It’s like this red and black checkered pattern.”

Gabby nods. “Loose or fitted?”

“Slim cut.”

“Nice. I love it. And do that thing you do when you roll up the sleeves.”

I laugh. “Yes, ma’am.”

“What? It’s a good look on you. It’s sharp.”

I flush. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Gabby leans against the counter. “I have a more serious question.”

Good grief.

“What’s that?”

“If this woman doesn’t show up, what are you going to do? How are you going to cope? I’d tell you to call me, but I have a date. I’ll totally cancel if you need me to.”

“No! Absolutely not! You’ve been looking forward to this date for two weeks. You’re not canceling, especially not for me.”

“Quinn, you’re my best friend. You’re the *only* person I’d cancel a date for.”

I bestow a tender smile upon my friend. “I’d do the same for you.”

“I know that. You’re the most important person to me, so I need to know that you’ll be okay if your date is MIA.”

My stomach bunches at the thought of Theo not turning up tomorrow night. I take a long, measured breath.

“I’m not going to pretend that I won’t be bummed if she bails on me,” I divulge. “But if she doesn’t come, it wasn’t meant to be. And I’ll have no choice but to let it go.”

Gabby reaches out and grabs my bicep affectionately. “I’m proud of you. You’ve come a long way since the divorce. Truly. And whether you do or don’t become romantically entangled with a twenty-five-year-old, I’ll still be proud of you, both for your risk-taking and your personal growth.”

I chuckle. “Twenty-eight. She’s twenty-eight, not twenty-five.”

“Pfft. She’s in her twenties. It’s all the same.”

“No, it’s not. You have to meet her, Gabs. She’s...I don’t know. If she’s anything like I remember, she’s fucking great.” My heart does a handspring as I speak.

Gabby shakes her head, laughing quietly. “She better be great if you’re going to be gross about it. But also because you deserve greatness.”

I drop my eyes shyly. “I definitely remember her being great.”

Damn. I hope she shows up.

Theo

365 Days Later

I leave my apartment Thursday night with more than enough time to make it to the Dumpling House by eight o'clock. I wonder if Quinn is as punctual as me or if she runs late. Something about her makes me think she'll arrive exactly on time. That's if she even shows up.

Oh, God. What if she doesn't show up?

My gut churns. Oof. Yeah, that's not good. Just take a breath.

I mentally shake off my worry and continue down the street, glancing inside the restaurants and bars as I pass them by. I catch glimpses of people talking, laughing, eating. Nothing about today suggests that it's anything but ordinary, except it isn't. Today is the day I've forfeited to fate exactly one year ago.

I shake my head a bit and laugh quietly to myself at the ridiculousness of it all. But once the laughter subsides, my insides fill with butterflies at the prospect of seeing Quinn. Again, that's if she even shows up.

"She'll come," I whisper, rallying myself.

I mean, she has to come, right? I'm coming. I'm sure she will too. Why wouldn't she?

Immediately, my mind begins to race, calling forth all the reasons that would keep Quinn from showing up. Maybe she got back with her ex. Maybe she's married again. Maybe she moved to Canada to start a coffee franchise. *Wait, what? Too far. Okay, what else is there?*

But maybe she forgot. Or maybe she made other plans.

“She better not have made other plans,” I mumble, knowing full well that I marked this date off on my calendar with a heart circled around it, because I’m sixteen.

Christ! What am I doing right now?

I stop short, suddenly realizing I’m in the center of Davis Square. I take in my surroundings—the mom and her daughter sharing an ice cream, the man patrolling the area with his dog, the couple holding hands across the table that Quinn and I once sat at, planning out this very moment, or some version of it.

The streetlights suddenly feel like spotlights as I look ahead, across the street at...

Where the fuck is the Dumpling House?

I shut my eyes for a second, but when I open them, the Dumpling House is still gone. In its place is an abandoned restaurant. The glass windows are covered with large sheets of brown paper, the entrance is boarded up, and the sign above the building is gone.

My jaw drops and my shoulders fall forward.

No. It can’t be closed. That’s impossible. I was just here last week.

I check my watch. Five minutes to go.

What do I do? Do I wait? Do I leave? What if this is a sign—literally—to back down? What if all of this is the Universe showing me that none of this was meant to be? Because, what are the chances?

Post-haste, I glance up and down the streets on either side of me. Quinn is nowhere in sight. My stomach tightens. I glimpse at my watch a second time. Three minutes to go.

“Come on, come on, come on,” I chant under my breath.

Without thinking, I clutch my bag and jog across the street, dodging several cars and a rogue cyclist. Like a lost tourist or a pedestrian with a death wish, I stand in the middle of the busy sidewalk right outside of what is now the former Dumpling House. I survey the area, searching for Quinn in a sea of faces, trusting that I’d know hers if I saw it. I come up empty again.

I sink my teeth into my lower lip, and at the risk of missing a passerby or two, I look at my watch. Time’s up.

My vision blurs while my chest caves in. *Fuck.*

Something hard slams into my shoulder. *Ugh!* My head snaps up just in time to hear a muffled, “Sorry” coming from somewhere in the bustling

crowd of strangers.

I readjust the strap of my bag and scour the vicinity once again. No Quinn. Nothing. Unwittingly, my eyes begin to leak. I mutter a string of curse words. Then, I inhale through my nose, lift my chin up, and hotfoot it in the direction of the closest bar, the one I manage. Because fuck this shit.



I push open the door to Labrys and am instantly greeted by the artificial breeze of the air-conditioning. Lexi was right. Again. The jeans will keep me from getting too cold.

I scan the club. It's packed for a Thursday.

Good. More options for me.

I spot a brunette at the bar, taking a swig of beer, and my heart trips over itself. But when she turns to the side to say something to the person on her left, I catch sight of her profile. My insides deflate. It wouldn't make sense for Quinn to be here anyway. She hasn't shown her face here in a year. Why would she start now?

I mosey over to the bar and slide onto a stool next to a woman with long, auburn hair, making sure my arm brushes hers as I get situated in my seat. She briefly glances at me, clearly surprised by our collision. She's cute.

"Oh, sorry," I lie, half-heartedly wincing.

The woman's eyes rove over me and she smiles. "No worries."

I don't have the chance to say anything else before a familiar voice cock blocks me.

"Well, well, well. Who do we have here?" Celeste asks in a sing-song inflection.

This time, I really wince and look straight ahead at my work bestie. Her head is tilted to the side, amber eyes wide with wonder.

I shrug. "She wasn't there."

Celeste's lips part as she coughs out a breath. "Are you shitting me?"

I release a long exhale and shake my head. "Would I be here if I were joking?"

Celeste frowns. "Aw, sweetie. I'm sorry. That blows." She holds on to the edge of the bar top, flashing her colorful fingernails, all relatively long, except for the middle and index fingers on her right hand, which are always

kept trimmed. “Her loss is my gain.”

I press my lips together and twist them into a smile. “Sure. Thanks.”

She taps her hands on the bar. “Welp. The night is young, and this place is overflowing with hot women. So, are we implementing Plan B?”

Lexi isn’t the only one in the know about my Plan B, which is still to get trashed, get laid, and then talk to my therapist about it.

I nod. “Yup. Let’s get it started.”

Celeste stands up tall. “Alright, girl. Pick your poison.”

“Jack and ginger,” I say without a second thought. “And make it a double. Please.”

Celeste furrows her brow. “Do you have no faith in my abilities as a mixologist?”

I chuckle lightly. “I taught you everything you know, so obviously I have faith in you. I just want to keep it simple.”

“Fair enough,” my friend says with a nod and begins making my drink.

The stranger beside me turns her head in my direction. “You’re a bartender? I wasn’t eavesdropping. I just happened to overhear you.”

I rest my folded arms on the bar top and glance at her, eyebrow quirked. “I am. Why? Do you have a thing for bartenders?”

The stranger’s cheeks redden. “No.”

Showtime.

I scrape my bottom lip with my teeth. “That’s too bad.”

She smirks at me. “Is it now?”

“It is.”

“Here you go,” Celeste says, setting a drink down in front of me.

I smile at my friend. “Thank you.”

Celeste’s eyes bounce between me and the stranger. “You good here?” she inquires.

“All good,” I assure her.

Celeste raises a suspicious eyebrow but leaves me to work my game on the hottie next to me, the hottie that sadly isn’t Quinn Gellar.

I take a sip of my drink and glimpse to my side. “So, where were we?” I ask the stranger.

She laughs softly. “I think I was about to tell you that I have a newfound thing for bartenders.”

I turn to face her full-on. “That’s convenient.”

The right corner of her mouth curls up. “It certainly is.”

“Can I buy you a drink...?” I let my voice drop off.

“Carrie,” she discloses.

I blatantly look her over. She’s wearing a very ‘90s baby doll T-shirt that showcases her well-endowed chest and flared jeans, which draw attention to her long legs and thick thighs. We’re talking legs for days here. I can totally get down with this. Quinn who?

I meet Carrie’s gaze. “Can I buy you a drink, *Carrie*?”

There’s a glint in her eyes. “I’m all set, thanks.” She leans in closer and gives me an impish look. “You could tell me *your* name though. I did tell you mine.”

I purse my lips. “You did, didn’t you.”

“I did.”

“In that case, I’m Theo.”

“Theo, the Bartender.”

“Yeah. That’s me alright.”

“So, are you waiting on someone?”

“Mm-hmm.” I have another sip of my drink and take my time swallowing. “I’m waiting for you to ask me to leave here with you. Now would be too soon since I haven’t finished my drink. But if you give me about ten minutes, I can be ready.”

Carrie licks her lips and I can’t help but notice that they’re not Quinn’s perfectly proportioned lips. I resent the sudden pang in my heart.

“I can do that,” she says in a hushed tone. She’s definitely sexy and exactly what I came here for, but she’s not what I want. I suppose I have to let go of what I want now, of who I want, because it’s clearly never going to happen.

Quinn’s voice rings between my ears. *It wasn’t meant to be.*

I internally grumble. *Fucking fate.*

I draw my finger around the rim of my glass and finally respond to Carrie with a simple, quietly spoken, “Good.”

“How long have you been bartending for?”

“Wow. You really *do* have a thing for bartenders.”

Carrie chuckles. “I really don’t. I’m just trying to get to know you.”

I nearly guzzle what’s left of my drink. The alcohol leaves my throat burning, my chest warm, and my head foggy. I put my glass down and stare into her eyes. *Don’t think about Quinn. Don’t think about Quinn.*

I stare into Carrie’s hazel eyes. “Can I ask you for a favor?”

She squints at me. "Sure."

"Don't." Unreservedly, I touch the back of her hand. "Don't try to get to know me. Okay?"

Carrie gives me a small nod. "Okay."

"Thanks." I reach inside my bag, pull two twenty-dollar bills out of my wallet, and place them on the bar top, under my empty glass for Celeste. Then, I turn back to Carrie. "I'm ready. Ask me."

Carrie smiles with one side of her mouth. "Do you want to come home with me?"

Time to make some bad choices.

"Yes. I thought you'd never ask." I hop off the stool. "You don't, by chance, have anything to drink at your place, do you?"

"Oh, I have plenty."

"Great. Let's go."

Quinn

365 Days Later

With my head hung low, I trudge across the street and make my way over to the center of Davis Square, which I've avoided for an entire year for fear of running into Theo prematurely. Now, all I want is to run into her. Funny how that worked out.

I hop atop the first empty table I find and perch on the edge of it. I stare ahead at the vacant building that was once the Dumpling House.

How is this happening?

The lump in my throat grows large enough to strangle me. I swallow so hard, it hurts. My watery eyes sweep the area for the hundredth time, but Theo is nowhere to be found in the swarm of foreign faces. I would know her face if I saw it. I'm certain. I memorized it the night we met, and I've revisited that memory over the last year more times than I can count.

I glance at the phone clenched in my hand. The screen lights up. It's five minutes past eight o' clock.

Where are you, Theo?

At this point, I realize the chances are slim to none that she even showed up. Why would she after all this time?

What was I thinking when I came up with this plan? I admit that this wasn't my best idea ever—for me and Theo to return to the scene of the crime one year later to see if a connection still exists between us. My most romantic idea, sure. But not my best. Not even close.

I inwardly shake my head at myself, then glance around once more. Theo isn't here. I feel it in my body. If she were here, she'd find me, or I'd find her. We'd find each other...that is, if we were meant to.

My eyes well up again just as a raindrop bounces off the tip of my nose. I peer up at the cloudy sky and more drops of water splash against my face.

"Are you fucking serious right now," I mutter. *Because of course it's raining.*

I shut my eyes and wish for an alternate ending to this story. When I open them and Theo isn't standing in front of me, hot tears join the cold rain running down my cheeks. She's not coming.

Not gonna lie—if ever I felt like an imbecile in my life, it's this moment.

What did I think was going to happen?

"Foolish," I mumble, rubbing the sore shoulder I managed to whack into someone with. I wince. That's going to bruise. *I hate this day.*

I sigh, relinquishing whatever hope I've been carrying around with me. I swipe on my phone and text Gabby like I promised I would. ***Hey. She didn't show. I'm okay though.***

My phone buzzes less than a minute after I send the message. ***Are you sure she didn't show?***

I dry the corner of my eye with the back of my finger and respond. ***Of course I'm sure. The restaurant shut down and I don't see her anywhere.***

My phone vibrates against my hand, and I read the incoming text. ***Did you search the premises?***

I grumble and compose another message. ***I'm telling you, she's not here.***

There's a bout of silence, and then my phone goes off again. ***I'm sorry, hun. What do you need? I can cut my date short if you want to process together.***

I have to steady my hands before responding. ***Don't you dare cut your date short. Enjoy yourself. I want to hear all about it tomorrow.***

I stare at the screen of my phone and a new message from Gabby appears. ***ALL about it? Even the dirty details?***

I puff out a short laugh. ***Maybe not the dirty details, but the other stuff.***

I watch the three dots pop up on the screen, then disappear before she actually writes back. ***You sure you're going to be okay?***

I sniffle. *I don't really have a choice in the matter.*

I swiftly move my fingers across the keyboard. ***I'll be okay. Go have fun. G'night.***

Gabby's next text is in all caps. **LOVE YOU TONS!**

I take a calming breath and slide my phone inside the pocket of my worn skinny jeans. Sluggishly, I get down from the table.

Now what?

I cast a quick look in the general direction of Labrys, which I haven't stepped foot in this whole year, not wanting to tempt fate. But, fuck fate. I have nothing to lose.

Wearily, I begin walking. I tell myself it's for a much-needed drink, but just maybe...



I'm not sure when the rain let up, but it did. And before long, I'm standing outside of Labrys in damp clothes, an all-too-familiar position. The irony isn't lost on me.

I step to the side of the entrance and stare at the door, mustering the confidence to go inside. Or, perhaps, mustering the acceptance to let go.

See, somewhere during my short walk, I decided that it would be awkward if Theo was in there, because it would confirm that she was blowing me off and it would look like I was coming to find her, like some pathetic excuse of a person. I don't want to be that guy. I also don't want to bear witness to Theo actively rejecting me. Or worse, forgetting about me altogether.

But if I turn my back on this, what does that make me? A chump? Because I don't want to be that guy either. And I don't want to *not* believe in Theo, in our connection. That would indicate poor judgment on my part. I'd like to think I'm an excellent judge of character. Sure, I chose the wrong woman to marry, but that could happen to anyone—forty to fifty percent of the population, actually.

When is anyone supposed to *really* know when to walk away? I wouldn't have a clue. I waited six months for my ex-wife to come back to me even after she moved on.

I inwardly roll my eyes at myself.

What to do? Okay, clear your mind. Let the answer naturally come to you.

I inhale deeply, but on my exhale, the door of the nightclub swings open,

almost knocking me over. *Jesus*. Thankfully, I regain my balance before I hit the ground, all the while muttering every cuss word in my vocabulary. By the time I look up, I catch only a brief glimpse of a figure with long, sleek, auburn hair turning a corner at the end of the street.

Rude.

I contemplate the entrance again, but I can't bring myself to go through it. I close my eyes, my limbs suddenly fatigued, my ego a little wounded, and a soft, sullen laugh escapes my lips.

This is ridiculous.

I open my eyes and the world around me is now cloudy. I stare at the long stretch of pavement ahead. Then, with heavy steps, I make a start for home, trying desperately not to acknowledge the small lesion on my heart.



It's around eleven o'clock at night by the time I walk through the front door of my house, balancing a half-drunk six-pack of beer stacked on top of a pizza box in one hand while trying to pull the key from the lock in the other. Once I'm successful, I kick the door shut and plod over to the kitchen. I place my cold dinner on the countertop and call out to my cat.

"Franny! I'm home. Are you hungry?"

I pull the bag of kibble from one of the cabinets and spoon a small portion of it into my cat's bowl, and then I set it down on the floor next to the water bowl. In seconds, Cassandra Valentina Frances comes bounding into the kitchen and goes straight for her food.

I smile at the way she snorts as she inhales her supper. "Good girl." I bend over to pet her, but she stops eating to hiss at me. "Sorry," I tell her and stand back up just as my stomach growls angrily.

Yikes.

I grab a slice of pizza from the box along with another can of beer and sit on the floor across from my beloved pet, even though our love is an unrequited one. I chew off a big bite and take a swig of beer.

"Can you believe she didn't show up?" I ask Franny through a mouthful of food. "She just stood me up. I've never been stood up before. Who does she think she is? It's such a discourteous thing to do, right?" I swallow and chug more beer.

My cat stares up at me, one ear flattened.

“Exactly. I’m baffled too. See, you get it.” I stuff my mouth with more pizza. “It makes no difference anyway. I should’ve seen this coming. And you know what else I should’ve seen coming? My divorce. But, nooo. You know, that’s my problem. I put too much faith in people and I’m an optimist. Ugh, how I *loathe* that part of myself. Because do you know where optimism gets you? Nowhere. I’m telling you, Fran, women are trouble.” I study my cat as she jumps on top of the counter to inspect the partially open pizza box.

“Hey! Get away from that! Are you even listening to me?”

Franny innocently sits down beside the box of food.

“You can’t fool me. I got your number,” I say to my cat.

Franny’s bright green eyes widen while she watches me finish my slice of pizza. “What are your thoughts on this? Like, honestly. Would you have waited there longer?”

My cat tips her big, fluffy head to the side.

“For real. *You’re* going to judge me? Well, what was I supposed to do? Pitch a tent in the center of town and hope for the best? The restaurant was *closed*—as in, shut down, no longer in existence. Talk about an omen.” I polish off my beer and shake my head. “It sucks though. This whole thing played out so differently in my mind.” I lean back against the cabinet door and sigh. “Next time, remind me to be more cynical. Because cynicism is where it’s at. That’s what I think. Don’t you agree?” I glance over at my cat.

Franny meows in annoyance, leaps down to the floor, and scurries away.

“Pfft. Fine. I see how it is.”

Tiredly, I get off the floor and go over to the counter. I pick up the pizza box and put it in the fridge with the remaining two cans of beer. Then, I shuffle over the couch and plop down on it. I close my eyes and place my palm to my forehead, quietly begging my brain to slow down. It’s no use though. Images of Theo continue to permeate all corners of my mind. Every memory is in high resolution and surround sound—her long blonde hair, her dark brown eyes, her warm smile, her soft and almost smoky voice, her laugh.

Aargh!

My eyes snap open and I gaze up at the light fixture on the ceiling, trying to calm my breath before I end up doing something else foolhardy like unzip my jeans.

I run my hand over my face. *I should sleep. I need sleep. I have to work*

in the morning, and I've had it with this day. Tomorrow will be better, a fresh start.

I startle when the sudden extra weight lands on my chest. I glance down to see Franny looking back at me. She's purring.

I do not understand this cat.

"Hey, girl. What's up?" I ask her. "You never want to snuggle."

Franny begins to knead my sternum with her paws. *Maybe she knows I could use some comforting. Maybe she likes me more than I give her credit for.*

I refrain from petting Franny as she basically cuts off my airflow with the pads of her feet, though I appreciate her affectionate gesture.

Eventually, she blinks at me, and I blink back because multiple Google search results told me to. Then, she stretches, placing her paw on my chin. I brace myself, waiting for her to accidentally scratch my skin off, but she doesn't. Instead, she turns around and repositions herself so that her tail is in my face.

"Thanks," I wheeze while chuckling lightly. "This is progress for us."

Could it be that Theo stood me up because I was supposed to be here, bonding with my cat for the first time ever? I wrinkle my brow. Alright. Grasping at straws here. Jesus, I'm losing my fucking mind.

Franny must pick up on my energy because she sinks further into me. I'm grateful for the diversion.

Once my cat is seemingly comfortable, she yawns, and I do too. I focus on the way her tiny, furry body rises and falls along with my breaths. My muscles relax and my thoughts finally dull. I listen to the faint trills coming from my cat, and that's the last thing I remember before falling into a drunken slumber.

Theo

Now

I slink out of my one night stand's apartment before six in the morning. A massive headache woke me up, and why would I stick around for the inevitable awkward post-hookup small talk when I can go home to ride out my hangover in private, am I right?

I push open the door to the apartment complex and am immediately blinded by the sun. I squinch up my eyes and mechanically begin fishing through my bag for my sunglasses. It doesn't take me long to find them and virtually shove them on my face.

"That's better," I say quietly, glancing down the street to gather my bearings. "Ah, hell. Where the fuck am I?"

I fetch my phone from my bag and swipe on the screen with the intention of pulling up Google Maps. Unfortunately for me, the camera app opens and of course, it's on selfie mode. *Jesus!* I cringe at the sight. My hair is wild, lipstick smudged, bra strap showing. I quickly slip my phone inside the back pocket of my jeans and use the elastic around my wrist to tie my long, tousled locks up into a messy bun. Then I use my palm as a napkin and attempt to wipe the red smudge off the corner of my mouth. When my lips are raw from rubbing, I let up and retrieve my phone. I check myself in the camera again. It's an improvement, albeit a slight one.

I shake my head at myself and finally open Google Maps. The start of a migraine makes itself known as I read the tiny letters spelling out street

names on the app.

“Huh,” I mutter, realizing I’m not that far from my place. A little over a mile. I can walk there, no problem. I just need water and caffeine first.

I type “coffee” in the search bar and five options instantly pop up on the screen. I click on the closest one, which happens to have the most five-star reviews, and I’m taken to another map, offering me directions on how to get there.

I look up again, taking an inventory of my whereabouts. Then, I press “start” and begin ambling down the street per the instructions of my phone.

I’m winded and dehydrated within five minutes of my journey. Thankfully, I’m nearing the coffee shop’s loud, pink awning with The Roasted Bean scribbled across it in cursive, black letters. Never heard of it, which is mind-boggling considering my coffee shop obsession from another life.

The café’s windows are plastered with equality stickers of various designs and a Progress Flag is blowing in the wind right outside the door.

Damn. This place is G-A-Y.

I reach for the handle of the door and pull, getting a strong whiff of freshly ground coffee beans as I do.

Inside, it looks like Pride threw up, but in a tasteful way. It’s so close to being over-the-top, but not quite there. Instead, it has an upbeat yet warm energy to it. The bulletin board is full of flyers, the walls are covered in art, and Brandi Carlile is singing softly in the background. I feel like I belong right away. There’s a sweet smell of baked goods coming from somewhere behind the counter, where the line is. It’s not a terribly long line, but it’s not short either. This place clearly has some regulars, ordering without so much as glimpsing at the hand-written menu above the bar.

I, on the other hand, need to look. Every item is tinted, thanks to my sunglasses, which I am absolutely not removing for fear of what lies beneath. It can’t be good if my smeared lipstick from earlier is any indicator.

Once I decide on a cold brew with an extra shot of espresso, I wander over to the end of the line. The woman in front of me gives me a once-over and half-smiles at me knowingly. I flush and nod at her, horrified that my walk of shame is showing despite my sunglasses and...

Shit.

Hastily, I go to pull the fabric of my T-shirt closer to my neckline to cover up my bra strap, only to find that the strap itself is midway down my

arm.

Fantastic.

I adjust my bra and shirt as casually as possible while the line slowly moves. Eventually, the customer before me picks up a tray of coffees and walks away, and the person working the register finally comes into full view.

The dark hair causes my heart to pause for a fraction of a second, but it's not who I thought it was.

The woman taking orders opens her eyes wide. "Well, hello. What can I get you this morning?" She presses her lips tightly together as though she's quelling a smile.

Christ! Can everyone here tell I spent the night having sex with a stranger?

I clear my throat. "Hi. Um. Yeah. G'morning. Can I please get a large cold brew with an extra shot of espresso?"

"You sure can. Will that be all?"

I squint at the woman's nametag. *Gabby.*

"Yes. That's all. Thank you."

Gabby grabs an empty, plastic cup, tosses it in the air with a flip, and expertly catches it. She's definitely got flair. I like her. Then, she fills the cup with ice, a shot of espresso, and chilled coffee. She places it on the counter with a cocksure expression on her face. I don't judge her, because I know that face. *I make that face when I'm working at the bar.*

"For you," she says. "That'll be six dollars and forty-three cents."

I grab my wallet from my bag and pull out a fifty because it's all I have. I hand her the bill. "Here."

Gabby takes my money. "Thanks. One sec." She cranes her neck and hollers over her shoulder, "Quinn! We need change!"

"I'm coming!" a voice shouts back, resounding between my ears.

Quinn.

There's a hostile swirl in my belly. I can't tell if it's because I'm elated or about to be sick or a little of both.

She can't see me like this.

From the corner of my eye, a Quinn-shaped figure materializes off in the distance. I could never forget that body. Suddenly, I feel pinned in place. *I know she's looking at me.*

Aaand I've been spotted. So much for her not seeing me. This is happening. Fuck my life.

Whether or not Quinn recognizes me is a different story, but her stare is definitely aimed at me, and it can't be. Not now. Not like this.

God, it's me, Theo. I know I don't believe in you, but please help a girl out and make me disappear. Nope. Nothing. Still here.

I feel woozy.

My new pal, Gabs, must sense something is off, because her gaze oscillates between Quinn and me, and then her mouth drops all slow-motion-like.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I scoop my coffee off the counter and, without waiting for my change, I bolt out of the café. I don't stop when I'm outside though. I walk briskly, and my walk turns into a jog. As soon as I pick up speed, my boot-clad ankles, queasy stomach, and throbbing head plead with me to stop. But I don't. I can't. I have to get the hell away from here.



“You're on speaker,” I tell Lexi as I set my phone on my bed and continue getting dressed for work.

After a restful nap, a long, hot shower, food, Excedrin, and copious amounts of water, I feel human again, and ready to catch my best friend up to speed. Lexi lives for this sort of drama, whereas I could take it or leave it.

“How can you be sure it was Quinn if you didn't get a full look at her?” Lexi asks.

I zip up my high-rise, wide-leg jeans. “I heard her voice and I saw the outline of her figure. It was her. I'm positive.”

“Huh. That sounds mildly stalkerish, but I'll let it slide. How did we not notice this coffee shop before? Didn't we go to like all of them?”

I make a shrugging motion as I grab a T-shirt from my dresser drawer. “I thought so too, but it appears that I thought wrong.”

“That's nuts. I can't believe you ran,” Lexi says, clearly still digesting the details of my adventure this morning. “Why didn't you go up to her and give her a piece of your mind for standing you up?”

My acerbic laugh is muffled by the shirt I'm pulling over my head. “Um. Because that's a godawful idea. That's why. I wasn't going to confront her, all hungover and looking like I...”

I pause, racking my brain for the words, but Lexi chimes in, beating me to it.

“Had a tryst with a stranger?”

I roll my eyes as I tie up my hair into a ponytail. “I wouldn’t call it a *tryst*. Nor was she a stranger. Her name is Carrie.”

“Oh. So, you know this Carrie person? Tell me about her then. What’s she like?”

“Fine,” I huff. “I don’t *know* her, know her, but we talked before we did anything. Safe sex and all that stuff. Er. Oh! I told her I’m a bartender and I learned that she has a dog. A small one. With fluffy ears that look like butterflies.”

I can *hear* Lexi raise her eyebrows. “Babe, you’re reaching. Spare us both and quit while you’re ahead.”

I groan. “What do you expect? It was a one-time thing. I didn’t want to get to know *her*, I just wanted to get naked *with her*. And I’m sure that’s all she wanted too. Just a romp in the—”

“—No,” Lexi interjects. “I’m begging you not to finish that sentence. And please do humanity a favor by erasing the word *romp* from your vernacular. ASAP.”

I chuckle. “Fair. The point I was trying to make is that I was hardly in a position to approach Quinn. Also, what would I have said?”

“I don’t know, maybe something along the lines of *thanks a ton for ghosting me, ya jackass*.”

I laugh, trying to keep my hand steady so that I can finish perfectly applying my eyeliner. “Oh, right. Sounds like the beginnings of a productive conversation.”

Lexi sighs. “It doesn’t have to be a conversation. Just tell her off. Get it off your chest. Then, you can let it go.”

“Pfft. I let it go already,” I lie. “It’s gone.”

“Wow. You think I’m going to buy that?” my friend asks. “Don’t play me for a fool, Theo. I know you.”

I shake my head and blot my newly painted lips. “Lex, I love you, but drop it. What’s done is done. I’m not angry at Quinn. It wasn’t meant to be, is all. And now that it’s over, I’m not going to double back—not to confront her and certainly not to try and rekindle some kind of connection that obviously was never really real. Why put myself through that? No thanks. I am positively *not* going to dwell on what could have been. Ain’t nobody got time

for that fanciful bullshit. Instead, I'm going to move forward. Upward and onward."

Lexi's chuckle rings throughout my room. "How healthy and grounded of you."

"Right? I haven't even had therapy yet this week."

"Listen, girly, you handle this in whatever way feels best for you. You'll always have my support."

I take a breath. "Why do I sense a *but* coming?"

"*But* you know where to find her now. Maybe you should talk to her. You can get closure."

I let out a short laugh. "I don't need closure. It was a stupid thing that got dragged out for way too long, and now it's over and done."

"Mm-hmm. So, you don't feel like there's anything that's been left unsaid? If she was standing directly in front of you now, there's nothing you'd want to say to her? Nothing at all?"

Why didn't you come for me?

"No. And as much as I've enjoyed this heart-to-heart, I've gotta get to work."

"Alright. We'll talk later."

"For sure. Just not about this, okay? Love you. Bye."

Quinn

I try to keep pace with Gabby's footsteps as we make our way through Porter Square and into Davis Square, but she's walking unusually fast.

"It's wild that she showed up like that at *our* coffee shop as if you manifested it or something," Gabby says, shaking her head.

I exhale loudly. "Yeah. You keep saying that."

My friend grabs my bicep tightly. "I know I do, because it's a big deal. Why are you being blasé about this? This is what you wanted, isn't it? To see her again?"

I shrug with my mouth. "No. I mean, yes. But not like that."

"Well, sure, she had that post-sex look going on, but it was obvious that she had no idea she was going to run into you."

I wrinkle my brow. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

Gabby purses her lips. "I don't know, actually. You were right about how hot she is though. I understand now why you waited for her."

I scowl. "I didn't wait for her."

"Oh, sorry, sure you didn't." My friend rolls her eyes playfully.

I give Gabby a light shove, careful not to throw her off balance. "I didn't. Evidently, she didn't wait for me either."

I mentally try to shake the image of Theo standing in the coffee shop with her clothes wrinkled and her hair wild from my brain. My efforts are fruitless, the visual is seared into my memory. My gut clenches.

"According to you, y'all agreed to carry on living your lives. That's all she was doing. You can't fault her for that," Gabby says.

My jaw twitches. "I'm not faulting her for anything. It just sucks for me

that she carried on and forgot about meeting up with me *or* chose not to meet up with me. Either way, it's shitty. But that's not even the worst part. What's eating me up is that when she saw me, she made a mad dash for the door. What am I to make of that?"

Gabby links her arm through mine and hurries me across the street. "Maybe don't think anything of it," she says when we safely land on the sidewalk. "Get out of your head."

I grit my teeth. "I want to. Trust me. It's so hard though. I keep playing that whole scene over and over in my mind."

"It's crazy to me that you two even recognized each other. Between barely looking at each other and her larger-than-life sunglasses, it's a little impressive. Not that you asked, but *I* think that if you meant nothing to her, she wouldn't have been so spooked. And she definitely didn't forget you. That much I'm sure of based on her reaction to your cameo shot behind the counter."

"I disagree. Perhaps she saw me and that's when she remembered that we were supposed to meet the day before. Then, guilt set in, and she fled."

Gabby blows out a breath. "I'm so glad I was able to persuade you to come to this party tonight, because you are *really* overthinking this. You're going to drive yourself insane."

"*Persuade* is putting it gently."

Gabby chuckles. "You can thank me after you have a blast."

I roll my eyes. "I don't even get why Carrie invited us to her birthday celebration anyway. We're her bosses."

"Yes, but we're her super fun, super cool bosses."

"Uh-huh. I think it was a pity invite. At least mine was."

Gabby gasps. "Why would you say that?"

"Because she only gave *you* the details. I have no idea where the fuck you're taking me right now."

My friend falls quiet for a second. I glance over at her, and she's suddenly fixated on the shops to her right.

"Ugh. What is it? Gabs, what aren't you telling me?"

Gabby makes a face. "Do you trust me?"

"I *did* until you asked me that question."

My friend pulls me closer to her. "You're family to me. Trust that I have your best interest at heart. I want all the things for you, hun."

I glare at her. "What are you up to, because I sure as shit am not in the

mood for a sur—”

I follow Gabby’s gaze and glance up at the familiar sign above the familiar nightclub. My voice falls away and my throat dries.

“—Surprise?” Gabby winces.

“No,” I wrangle my arm free from Gabby’s. “Nope. Uh-uh.”

“Come on, Quinn. I didn’t pick the place. I just kept it from you, because I knew you wouldn’t go for it if you knew it was at Labrys. And I think you need to be here. I really do. It’ll be good for you, even just to step foot inside. You haven’t been in this place for over a year, and you used to love it. It’s time for you to reclaim it. It’s also kind of a sign—wouldn’t you say—that the party is *here* of all places?”

My mouth hangs down and I narrow my eyes at Gabby. “What? No, I wouldn’t say that. Aargh! I’m so mad at you right now! What if she’s in there?”

Gabby outstretches her arms, hands balled up. “Yes! Exactly! What if she’s in there? What are you going to do? You’ll have two options—stay or leave. You get to choose. It’s not rocket science. She also might *not* be in there.”

I grit my teeth. “But if she *is* in there...fuck! How could you put me in this position?”

Gabby shakes her fists at me. “You’re infuriating! You literally told me this morning that you wished she would have stayed and talked to you. But that’s not how that went. That doesn’t mean that *you* can’t go and talk to *her* if you want to hash things out so badly, get your answers, find closure. Whatever the fuck it is that you need to move on from this, here’s your chance. Take it.”

I move several inches backward. “I can’t.”

Gabby drops her arms and frowns. “Why not?”

The backs of my eyes begin to sting. “Because it wasn’t supposed to be this way.”

“You don’t know that. Maybe *this* is how it’s supposed to happen—completely unplanned. Don’t you want to find out?”

I sigh and glance up at the darkening sky for a second. When I’m sure I can speak in a steady voice, I look at Gabby. “I’m scared. I went on and on the other day about how fearless I thought I was, and now I’m here and I’m afraid. Alright?”

My friend’s eyes soften. “Alright.” She peers over at the entrance of

Labrys and then studies me for a moment. “Quinn, let’s just get something straight—you *are* brave. But being brave doesn’t mean you can’t feel fear. You’re a human person.”

I take a breath. “I know that, it’s just...” I place my hand over my heart and decide not to finish my thought out loud.

“You don’t want it to break again. That makes sense. I don’t blame you.”

I swallow. “I think in this situation, not knowing is best. In the larger scheme of things, she’s still just a stranger. I shouldn’t be feeling this many feelings about it.”

Gabby raises an eyebrow at me. “You made a connection, and then you made a plan to see where the connection might lead. The plan fell through. No offense, but you don’t deal all that well when plans fall through. I think it’s valid that you are feeling some feelings.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “What would you do if you were me?”

“Honey, I’m not you.” Gabby smiles weakly at me. “The real question is what would you do if you weren’t scared?”

I furrow my brow. “But I *am* scared, so that doesn’t help me.”

Gabby rolls her eyes theatrically. “If I were you, I’d go in there and enjoy the party. You don’t have to consider what to do about Theo at this point in time. You don’t even know if she’s in there.”

I shove my hands inside my pockets and glimpse at the ground. “What if she’s in there though? What should I do?”

Gabby chuckles. “If Theo’s in there, do whatever comes naturally.” She clears her throat. “*But, if I were you and I saw her, I’d jump at that chance to get some clarity.*”

I give my friend a small smile. “Noted.”

Gabby gestures to the club with her thumb. “I’m heading inside now. Will I see you in there?”

I crinkle up my nose. “I don’t know yet.”

My friend nods slowly. Thoughtfully. “That’s cool. Take your time.”

“Thanks.”

Gabby winks at me and begins walking toward the club. My skin starts to itch, and my pulse starts to race.

This is so fucking dumb, but it’s going to gnaw at me if I don’t...

“Gabs! Hold up! I’m coming with you.”

Gabby grins, snatches me by my hand, and ushers me inside the club.

I instantly shiver upon entering Labrys. It’s freaking freezing in here. Not

that anyone else seems to mind, including Gabby, who's already dancing her way in the direction of a table full of women, tugging me along.

Of the women sitting at the round table in the corner of the club, drinking and laughing, I only recognize Carrie, our most recent part-time hire. Technically, we stole her from Starbucks after oohing and aahing over her latte art for two weeks straight until finally deciding we wanted her to work for us. One day, we waited for her shift to end—all cloak and dagger-like—introduced ourselves, and outright offered her a sizable pay raise and better benefits. She accepted our offer on the spot.

The three of us—me, Gabby, and Carrie—work well together and it's nice to have an extra set of hands when an event is taking place at the café and the line is out the door. Also, did I mention terrific latte artwork? Heart-shaped foam during Pride Month was a huge hit.

“Hey, guys! We made it,” Gabby announces to Carrie and her circle of friends.

Carrie looks at Gabby and me and her face lights up. “Hi! I'm glad y'all could make it. Please, sit.” She motions to the empty seats around the table. Then she addresses all the women at the party. “Everyone, these are my bosses, Gabby and Quinn. Gabby and Quinn, this is everyone.”

Huh. Worst introduction ever.

All the women stare at Gabby and me and offer us polite smiles. I smile back and Gabby holds up her hand in a mock-wave.

“You know, we're actually going to grab some drinks first.” Gabby pulls at my arm. “We'll be right back.”

Before I get the chance to tell Gabby that I don't want a drink yet, she's marshaling me toward the bar, her hand still clutching mine.

The closer we get to the bar, the more my stomach curls and tightens incessantly, warning me that the contents inside are at risk of leaving my body at any given moment.

“Gabs,” I hiss-whisper. “What if she's there? I'm not ready. I need time to prepare for...” the words die on my tongue when I catch a glimpse of that long, wavy blonde ponytail made notable by the light brown streaks throughout it.

I dig the heels of my combat boots into the floor, bringing myself and Gabby to an abrupt stop.

“Jesus.” Gabby shoots me a confused look. “Rip my arm from the socket, why don't you?”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to...Gabs, she’s there. I can’t do it.”

“No way. Is she?” Gabby glances over at the bar, eyes squinched. I give her a second, waiting for it.

“Oh, fuck,” she mumbles.

There it is.

Gabby turns back to me, eyebrows raised so high that they meet her hairline. “Quinn, it’s a sign. You have to talk to her.”

I shake my head. “No, I don’t. I don’t even know what I’d say.”

Gabby lets go of my hand and with a flick of her wrist, discards my concern. “Worry about that later. Just go up there and order a drink.”

“I don’t want a drink.”

“Sure you do.”

I narrow my eyes. “No, I really don’t.”

Gabby glares at me. “Honey, just go order a fucking drink. You don’t have to consume it. The drink is your in.”

I don’t need an in. I need an out.

“What about your drink?” I inquire.

Gabby gapes. “Are you serious right now? Forget my drink. I’ll get it myself. This is about you. Go shoot your shot.”

My heart’s beating louder than the music. “I’m not ready.”

Gabby takes hold of me by my shoulders. “All the more reason why you should go up there—because you *haven’t* planned it. We’re not supposed to be ready for every single thing that life throws at us. You know that. You lived it. And you *survived*. You’ll survive this too no matter how it goes. I promise. Come on, Quinn. This is happening. Roll with it.”

I’m totally going to hurl.

“This could be so bad,” I tell my friend.

“That’s your anxiety talking. Tell her to shut the fuck up. You can do this. It’s a simple interaction. Go say, ‘Hi,’ order a drink, and the rest will fall into place. Okay?”

I frown. “I’m going to vomit.”

“No, you’re not. Suck it back in.”

My forehead wrinkles. “What about Carrie’s birthday party?”

“What about it? You’re just getting a drink, and then you’ll come back to the party. You’re blowing it up in your head. Don’t do that. R-E-L-A-X.”

“Relax,” I parrot. “Right.”

“There you go!” She steps to the side and places her hand on my back.

With gentle force, she nudges me in the direction of the bar. “Get it.”

Against my better judgment, I begin making my way to the bar. Maybe it won’t be as bad as I think it will be. At least if I do this, I won’t have regrets. Well, hopefully not.

I swallow back the bile making its way up my throat as I near the bar. I come to a standstill a few feet from where the stools are and steel myself.

Theo’s back is facing me. I watch her shake a cocktail and carefully distribute the liquid from the shaker into two separate glasses. Then, she garnishes each drink with a lemon wedge and carries them off to a couple sitting at the far left of the bar.

My mouth is chalky, and my tongue feels three sizes too big. I take a breath and nod to myself before I take a step closer. Closer. Closer. And, I’m here.

Oh, God. I’m here. Okay, no. Don’t panic. Play it cool. You can be cool.

I slide onto the stool nearest me just as Theo heads back to the area where I’m seated. My pulse is rocketing through my veins at a terrifying speed, but Theo still doesn’t look my way. She’s too focused. I study the way she moves while she works, so precisely.

She lines up four shot glasses, swipes a bottle of whiskey from the shelf that’s level with her, and effortlessly pours out the brown liquid into the glasses without causing so much as a splatter. She passes the drinks off to another bartender with vibrant-colored fingernails.

Colorful Fingernail Lady takes the drinks from Theo, holding all four glasses in both of her hands, balancing them perfectly. She looks at Theo, then nods her head in my direction. My mind immediately becomes disorganized.

“I got it,” Theo calls out to her co-worker while she places the bottle back where it belongs and quickly wipes down the surface of her workspace.

I’m doing this.

With my nerves misfiring everywhere, I pull in a long breath and let it go. I clear my throat. “Excuse me, miss. When you get a chance, could I please have a Boulevardier?”

Theo

I freeze. My heart plunges into my belly while the rest of my body tenses up.

Did I just imagine that? Or did I hear...? No. It couldn't have been, could it?

I don't turn around, not yet. What if Quinn is really here? What if she's not? I didn't come to work tonight prepared for any of this. Although, I have fantasized about this scenario once or ten times, but that was before everything became such a clusterfuck between us.

Wait! Work. Shit. I'm at work. I can't just stand here. I have to do my job. Alright. I can handle whatever is about to go down. Right? Sure, I can. I'm a professional. Quinn's voice was probably a hallucination anyway. There's no way she'd come here. Not after what happened in the past twenty-four hours.

I spin around slowly, brow prematurely creased. Sure enough, Quinn's there, eyes already trained on me. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end and my flesh prickles. For a millisecond, I forget how to breathe.

The corner of her closed mouth ticks up into a sheepish smile.

God, I missed her face. You know, when I'm not running away from it.

"Hi, Theo," she says, and her voice nearly breaks me in two. One part of me wanting to run into her arms, another part wanting to lay into her about ghosting me.

Say something.

I part my lips and a rush of air enters my lungs, fills up my chest, and wraps around my heart with a stronghold.

"Quinn. Hi. Um. What are you...?" I blink and shake my head. "Sorry. Let me try that again." I cough softly. "I didn't expect to see you. It's been a

minute. How are things?”

You look hotter than ever. How did you pull that off? Also, why the hell are you here? And where were you last night?

Quinn fiddles with the hoop earring dangling from her right lobe. I inadvertently notice the single stud in her left ear. Those are new. Can't say I hate that look for her.

“Things are good,” she finally says. “How about you? How've you been?”

“Great.” I will a smile to my lips. “No complaints.”

Quinn's eyes briefly drop to the bar top and then she nods. “That's awesome. I'm happy for you.”

This is so fucking awkward.

“Thanks. Uh. Let me get that drink for you.”

I swivel on the balls of my feet, grab a bottle of rye whiskey off the top shelf along with a few other key ingredients, and begin fixing up Quinn's cocktail for her. I need this to be the best freaking Boulevardier I've ever made, better than the first one I made her, one that she'll remember.

Meticulously, I mix the whiskey, sweet vermouth, Campari, and some personal flare over a cube of ice in a highball glass. Afterward, I garnish it with a fresh slice of orange peel. It looks prettier that way, but the citrus zest does give the drink a pleasant zip that it otherwise wouldn't have. When I'm done, I mentally pat myself on the back for my expertly crafted Boulevardier. Now, all I have to do is give it to Quinn. Easy enough. I just can't drop it.

I can feel Quinn's stare burning a hole in the back of my head. My hands begin to shake.

Seriously?

I take a deep breath and pick up the drink, handling it with the utmost care as I bring it to her, as if I were bringing her a piece of myself, because this has to go right.

Please don't let me drop it.

I set the cocktail down without looking at her. *Whew!*

“Enjoy.”

“Thanks. I like the orange peel. It's a nice touch.”

Aargh! Why does she have to be so nice?

“Yeah. Let me know what you think of the drink and give me a shout if you need anything else.” I shift, getting ready to walk away.

“Theo! Hold on a minute. Can we...? I don't know. Can we talk?”

Can we? What is there to say? I'll accuse you of standing me up and you'll give me some sorry-ass excuse and then we'll both end up with hurt feelings. Pass. I don't want to know why you didn't come for me. Or do I? Ah, fuck!

I brace myself, wary of letting my expression give me away. I bring my eyes to Quinn's and immediately wish I hadn't. Even in the dimly lit club, I can make out the flecks of yellow in her light brown irises, and I'm immediately transported to one year earlier, once again spellbound and left slightly off-kilter.

"Look, if it's about this morning, I—"

"So, you admit to seeing me this morning?" Quinn asks with a raised eyebrow.

My face warms over. "I mean, I didn't see you, *see you*. But I heard your voice, and I felt your presence."

Her forehead wrinkles. "Is that why you left in such a hurry? Are you afraid of me now? I'm not mad at you for standing me up if that's what you're worried about."

My chest cavity collapses in on itself as if someone just drop-kicked me. I gasp. "I'm sorry? Did you say *I stood you up*? If so, you must be referring to a different night, because *last night*, I was definitely on the receiving end of the standing, not you."

Quinn gapes. "Uh-uh. No. You don't know what you're talking about. I would never do that to you, or anyone. I was there. I went to the Dumpling House, except—"

"It was gone," I finish Quinn's sentence for her.

Quinn peers at me. "Yeah. It was gone. How did you—?"

I tip my head to the side, eyes wide. "I know, because *I was there*."

She opens her mouth to speak, then closes it and scrutinizes me. "That's impossible. *I was there*. I looked for you. I waited. I would have seen you if you were there, but you never came."

Relief washes over me as everything slowly clicks into place. Quinn showed up. She didn't forget.

I roll my eyes and ward off a smile. "This conversation is getting ridiculous. Listen, if you say you were there, I believe you. But you have to believe me too. Quinn, I thought about you every day for a year. There was no way in hell I was going to miss last night." My voice quavers on the last sentence.

Quinn's facial muscles relax and she blinks. "I thought about you too." She narrows her watery gaze at me. "How did we not see each other?"

I shrug. "I have no idea."

A slow smile builds on her lips. "We came for each other then, just like we planned."

I snort. "Well, not exactly like we planned, but yeah. It seems that way." I glance around. More people have taken up space at the bar. I look at Quinn and place my hand on hers. I feel her stiffen. "I have to do my job or I'm going to get fired. Can you hang around for a while? I'd love to catch up."

Quinn's eyes shine brightly. "I'll be here."

"Great. Drink your drink. I'll check back in when I get a minute."

Quinn nods. "Yeah. Yeah. Sure. Go. Don't get fired."

I smile and squeeze her hand. "It's good to see you. Finally."

She blushes and returns the smile. "It's good to finally see you too."

"Okay. I'll be back." I let go of her and walk off to help Celeste at the other end of the bar. As soon as she spies me, she waggles her eyebrows.

"Who's the cougar?" she inquires.

I laugh and give her a playful push out of my way so that I can help her serve the latest influx of customers. "She's not a cougar."

"Pff. The fuck she isn't." Celeste hip-checks me as she begins making a Mint Julep. "Don't get me wrong, the woman is hot stuff, but what? Ten years older than you?"

I internally wince. "Fourteen," I say blithely, filling up three beer glasses with a summer ale we have on tap from a craft brewery. "She's fourteen years older than me."

In my peripheral vision, I watch Celeste's mouth drop. "Is that the woman you got sad drunk over last night? The one who was supposed to meet you at Dumpling Palace?"

I can't help it—my lips spread into a grin. "Shh. Yes, that's her."

Celeste gasps loudly. "No fucking way."

"Totally fucking way."

"Damn, girl. No wonder why you waited a year."

I laugh. "I didn't wait, I—"

"Save your breath, sweetheart. You waited." Celeste gives me a smug smile. "And I don't blame you. Get back over there and talk to her."

"I'm working."

"I'll cover this section. Go."

“No,” I say firmly and enforce it with a glare. “We operate as a team.”

“Aargh! You’re insufferable.” Celeste shakes her, chuckling, her gaze drifting past me, past the patrons sitting at the bar. Her smile suddenly fades. “Shit.”

“What?”

“Don’t turn around,” Celeste commands.

My throat tightens. *Something’s wrong. I know that tone.*

“I can’t turn around. I’m making a drink,” I explain. “What is going on?”

“Um. The woman you left here with last night...she’s here.”

Noooo! No. No. No. No. No. Christ on a bicycle.

My vision becomes spotty. “Are you sure it’s her?”

“I’m sure. She’s looking over here, at you,” Celeste informs me. “Wait. Now, she’s looking at your cougar. Interesting.”

“She’s not a cougar and she’s not *mine*.” I do a quick headshake. “Hold up. She’s looking at Quinn. Why?”

“Who’s Quinn?”

“The cougar.” I cringe. “Scratch that. Quinn is the woman I was supposed to meet at Dumpling House.”

Celeste gawks at me. “How is your life like a very poorly written soap opera right now?”

I sigh. “Hell if I know. Do you think I want this?”

“The attention of two beautiful women? Oh, no. Who would want that?” Celeste says dryly.

“Okay. I’m not going to stress about it. We’re probably making something out of nothing. I have customers to take care of.” I pick up the beers and cocktail and carry them over to the young women who don’t look a day over twenty-one. That explains the Sex on the Beach. But having to ask for and examine four IDs is a welcome distraction from wondering why my one-night stand is ogling my one-night crush.

After I’ve confirmed that my party of four are of legal drinking age, I glance over at Celeste, but she’s busy helping patrons. I scan the club before I start working on my next order, but I can’t find Carrie. My eyes eventually land on Quinn, who’s drinking her Boulevardier contemplatively. It’s adorable.

Unconsciously, I take a step toward her, completely enthralled by her gravity. But the second a beautiful woman approaches her—a woman I swear I’ve seen before—I stop, heart falling to my feet.

Quinn

Out of nowhere, Gabby sidles up beside me at the bar. “Hey. So, I’m going to tell you something, and I need you to not be alarmed. Nod if you understand,” she whispers.

I become rigid in my stool. It’s a universal fact that when someone tells you to not be alarmed, it’s cause for alarm. I swallow and nod.

“Alright. The women at the party started talking about the cute bartenders here, which is like every bartender here. But then, Carrie specifically mentioned Theo. She gave us the impression that she knew Theo, but not in a way that would suggest they’re friends, if you pick up what I’m laying down.”

There’s an unpleasant quiver in my belly. “And?”

“And maybe Carrie is on her way over here right this second to hit on Theo.”

“Please tell me you’re joking.”

“I’m deadly serious. I’m sorry. How’s it going over here anyway?” Gabby asks.

“It *was* going well. Apparently, we both showed up last night. We just missed each other.”

Gabby’s smile reaches her ears. “That’s brilliant! Yay. She likes you. Don’t fret about this Carrie thing. She can’t hold a candle to you.”

I huff. “False. She’s a hottie, *and* she’s younger.”

I give my best friend a side-eye. “When did you get so on board with age-gap romances?”

Gabby rolls her eyes. “I’m not necessarily for them or against them, but

I'm pro-you being happy."

"Hey, you two!" Carrie says as she takes the stool next to me on the opposite side of Gabby, sandwiching me in. "Whatcha doing over here?"

At the exact moment that I say, "drinking," Gabby says, "talking," which gains us a raised eyebrow from Carrie.

"Um. Okay. Cool," Carrie says. "Well, I hope you join us back at the table soon."

"Totally," Gabby says.

"What are *you* doing over here?" I ask. "It's your birthday. You shouldn't be getting your own drinks."

"Oh, me? I'm here for the bartender." She grins slyly.

My palms begin to sweat. *Awesome.*

"Really? Which one?" Gabby probes. "There are several."

I grimace on the inside.

Carrie tips her head in Theo's direction. "*That* one. We sorta have a history."

I clench my teeth.

Gabby audibly draws in a breath. "Ahh. I see. That's so funny, because Quinn here also has a history—"

"Of being served," I blurt out, cutting Gabby off. "Drinks. I have a history of being served drinks by that particular bartender."

Carrie narrows her gaze at me. "You know Theo?"

My mouth runs dry. *Yes, kind of? But no, not really? How should I answer this?*

Without notice, Theo emerges from the other side of the bar and wastes no time inserting herself into the conversation that's taking place. "What about Theo?" she asks Carrie.

I exhale softly, relieved.

Carrie greets Theo with a relaxed smile. "Hey, gorgeous."

Gag me.

Theo doesn't react to the flirtation. "Carrie. Hi. I didn't expect to see you here tonight."

"We were just talking about you," Carrie advertises. "I was telling my friends how we go back."

Theo pales and her forehead puckers. "Y'all know each other?"

"You could say that," I mumble.

"Huh." Theo's mouth sets into a hard line and she looks at Carrie. "You

should tell the truth then. We don't go *that* far back."

"Sure, we do." Carrie flashes me a smile. "Anyway, it's my birthday, and since we had such a good night last night, I thought maybe you might want to celebrate with me later on."

Theo's jaw becomes taut. Gabby coughs.

Last night? An acrid taste coats the back of my throat and my stomach lurches at the mere thought of Carrie and Theo being intimate.

The corners of Theo's eyes crinkle. "I can't. I have a date...with one of your friends."

Carrie's haughty expression flattens. I glance at Theo, and she winks at me. My heart stumbles and my lips shape into a smile of their accord.

But wait. I'm Carrie's boss. Mother fucking hell.

Gabby pokes my arm with her elbow. "This is getting good," she mutters under her breath. "What did I tell you? Can't hold a candle."

Carrie lifts an eyebrow, and then looks between Theo and me. "You're referring to Quinn?" she asks Theo. "You have a date with my boss?"

Theo jerks her head back, mouth dropping open. "What?" She turns to me. "You two work together? Oh my God."

"Actually, the three of us work together," I clarify, pointing to myself, Carrie, and Gabby. "Theo, this is Gabby, my best friend. She owns the café with me. I think you two shared a moment this morning."

An aggressive blush covers Theo's face, neck, and ears. "Gabby. Right. I thought you looked familiar. You know, for a split second and from a distance, I thought you were—"

"Quinn's fetching other half," Gabby says, grinning.

Theo's small laugh has an edge to it. "Yeah. Something like that."

Something like that? What is that supposed to mean?

Gabby chuckles. "Aww. You were jealous of me," she lilts. "How sweet. But no, Quinn and I aren't an item. We do get that a lot though. You can have her. She's all yours."

I flush and Theo's cheeks turn an even deeper shade of crimson.

She was jealous? Of me with another woman? Well, alright. I can live with that.

Carrie shakes her head and stands from her barstool. She flicks her wrist against my bicep. "Sorry. I didn't know. No hard feelings, okay?"

I give her a tight smile. "Yeah. Okay."

Carrie glimpses at Theo. "Maybe we can hang out some other time? Like,

as friends or something.”

Theo presses her lips together and gives Carrie a nod. “Friends. Sure. Maybe. I’ll think about it. Uh. Take it easy. Oh, and happy birthday.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Carrie waves at us and strolls off.

Oof. That was awful. Welp. I’m definitely not looking forward to my next shift with Carrie, and I’m passing her upcoming performance evaluation off to Gabby.

“Eek. That was a catastrophe, amiright?” Gabby reaches across the bar and offers Theo her hand. “Nice to meet you. Again.”

“Hi. Nice to meet you too.” Theo smiles at Gabby and they briefly shake hands.

“I believe I owe you some change from this morning,” Gabby says.

Theo’s complexion pinkens. “Please keep it.”

“I couldn’t,” Gabby says to Theo.

“Please,” Theo prods.

“Come back for another visit, and I’ll give you your money. Believe me, you don’t want to fight me on this.” Gabby smiles at Theo and lightly touches my back. “Well, you two, I’m going to go mingle with a bunch of twenty-somethings, finish my beer, and go home.” She eyes me closely.

I nod. “I’m going to stick around, if that’s okay?”

Gabby smirks at me. “Obviously,” she says, getting out of her seat. “Enjoy your night.”

“You too.”

Gabby mimes holding a phone up to her face and mouths, “Call me” before turning around and walking away.

I flush and bring my attention back to Theo. We stare at each other for a moment.

“Wow,” Theo says, chuckling a little. “That was a lot.”

I laugh along with her. “That was a lot.”

Theo’s smile slips. “I’m sorry for...um. I made some rash decisions last night. I...ugh. Look, I understand if you don’t want to hang out later.”

I shake my head. “No. I want to with you later.”

What?

Theo giggles quietly. “Cool. I want to with you too. I just have to check in with a few customers and then cash out.”

“Yeah. Of course. Do your thing.”

“If you need anything while I’m busy, ask my friend, Celeste,” Theo

explains. “She’s the pretty bartender with the amazing fingernails who’s staring at you. I might have mentioned you to her at some point.”

I glance down at my drink and smile, hoping to mask my blush. “Got it.”

“Don’t go anywhere.”

“I won’t.”

Theo watches me for a minute, one half of her mouth curved into a small smile. “Good,” she says and takes off to finish her shift. I keep my eyes glued to her the entire time, eagerly awaiting her return.



Right as I’m taking the last sip of my Boulevardier, there’s a light touch on my shoulder. I shiver.

“How’s it taste?” Theo asks softly, taking the seat next to mine.

My cheeks scald and I have to catch my breath. “It’s really good. Thank you.” I tilt my head to the side to get a look at Theo and my heart seizes.

Her dark chocolate eyes are magnified by eyeliner, and they have a beautiful shimmer to them, causing her partial smile to appear more coy than sweet. My head thrums.

“You’re welcome,” Theo says. “I’m glad you like it.”

“It’s even better than I remembered.”

Theo slowly swivels back and forth in her seat. “Yeah? So, you’ve thought about it? The cocktail, that is.”

“Mm-hmm.” I swallow. “I did. I’ve thought about the cocktail.”

A grin eclipses Theo’s lips, and I wonder what would happen if I leaned over and kissed her just like I’ve done before a thousand times in my dreams.

“I thought about the cocktail too.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Are you still talking about the drink?”

Theo chuckles. “Nope. You?”

“No.”

Her expression sobers and she gives me a once-over. “You wanna get out of here?”

My throat closes and I can feel my pulse in my temple. *How did she get sexier?*

I lift the almost empty cocktail glass to my lips and take a drink of watered-down whiskey and melted ice to moisten my mouth. After a beat, I

nod. “Sure. Let me pay the tab first.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’re all set. I took care of it,” Theo says.

I pout. “You didn’t have to do that. Let me pay you back.”

Theo shakes her head and hops off her stool. “You’re not paying me back. And I *did* have to do that. I acted like a jealous bitch in front of your best friend, because I thought she was hitting on you, and I slept with your employee, because I was in a bad way last night when I thought you stood me up.” She grimaces. “I’m really sorry.”

I wheel around in my stool so that I’m completely facing Theo. “You don’t have to apologize. You thought I didn’t show up last night, so you went on living your life. I get it. Is it my favorite thing in the world that out of everyone you could have hooked up with, it was Carrie? No. But that’s for me to deal with,” I explain. “To be fair, I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for Carrie’s party and the fact that Gabby forced me to come with her. She neglected to tell me the party was here, or else I…” I exhale and my brow creases. “I probably wouldn’t have come.”

The edges of Theo’s mouth slope downward. “Oh.”

I’m not sure what I’m thinking—or if I’m thinking at all—when I reach out and brush my hand against Theo’s. She trembles, and there’s an intense whoosh in my stomach. Without hesitation, she wraps her fingers around mine. Her skin is soft and cool, relieving the heat of mine.

I swallow the dry lump in my throat. “I’ve been afraid to come in here for the past year. Afraid that if I did, you wouldn’t be here.”

An inkling of a smile graces Theo’s lips. “I’m glad you got coerced to come here tonight then.”

I smile back. “Me too.”

“I did the opposite.”

I narrow my eyes. “What do you mean?”

She flushes. “I went to as many independent coffee shops as I could, looking for you.”

I laugh softly. “That wasn’t part of our deal.”

Theo levels me with a stare. “No offense, but I only went along with that deal because it meant something to you. I wasn’t a fan at all. I hated watching you walk away. I wanted to find you, even if it was to see you only for a second, to know where you were.”

My eyes drop to her pink, pouty lips for a moment, and then I meet her gaze. I take another breath to keep steady. “Well, I’m here now and so are

you.”

“Thank fucking God.” Theo shakes her head, laughing lightly. “Did you sort out your shit?”

I widen my eyes in mock offense. “Yes, I did.”

“Good. So, can we finally go on our date?”

I purse my lips. “Should we call it a date? We still don’t know each other all that well. Are you sure you don’t want to call it something else?”

Theo growls, but her eyes smile. “Woman, you are going to drive me mad.” She grips my hand tighter and pulls me off my seat. Now, we’re standing face to face. I can smell her sweet, floral perfume. I can just about count the freckles sprinkled across her nose and cheeks. And I can hear her soft, fitful breaths, an echo of my own. Her nearness makes me light-headed.

We hold each other’s gaze for a long minute. The air around us is teeming with tension. My entire body is hyper-aware of it, of her.

Theo wets her lips with her tongue and a current of unadulterated desire careens through me. “I’m going to ask you again. Do you wanna get out of here?” she prompts. “With me?”

It hurts when I swallow. “Yeah, I do.”

She runs her thumb over the top of my hand. “C’mon. Let’s go.”

Theo

The air outside the club is humid and damp from the midday thundershowers. This summer's been rainy, probably trying to make up for the string of sixty-degree days we experienced in February and a desert-dry spring, because New England weather.

I'm a bit disconcerted by how empty the city streets are, considering it's a Friday in late June. Not that I care where everyone is, because I'm exactly where I want to be.

With Quinn's hand in mine, I gently steer her away from the club and down the street. She doesn't protest, she just walks alongside me.

"Where are we going?" she queries.

"You'll see."

Quinn huffs, but it's followed by a light chuckle. "You're not going to tell me? And you think *I'm* going to drive *you* mad?"

I laugh. "That's legit. I'm sure we're both capable of driving each other mad." I mentally shake off my jitters and go for it. "But I mean that in the best possible way," I add and hold my breath.

Quinn gives my hand a squeeze and I exhale. "I know," she says. "For the record, you *do* drive me crazy. Just a tad, but still."

"*Just a tad?* I'll have to find a way to amend that."

"Um. That's really not necessary."

"Oh, but it is," I say as we reach the end of the block, arriving at our destination. I come to a full stop and pull at Quinn, signaling for her to stay in place with me. "We're here."

Quinn furrows her brow at me. "What are we...?" her voice drops off as

she begins scanning the area. When it registers—the abandoned building with its boarded-up windows—she inhales loud enough for me to hear.

I smile to myself.

Quinn whips around to face me again. “What? Why? I don’t...”

I press my index finger to Quinn’s lips, and she shuts up real fast. We lock eyes. I feel her swallow. Something deep inside me aches. “Trust me,” I murmur, lowering my hand.

“Okay.”

Okay. It’s just one word, but when she says it, her breath grazes my cheeks, producing an almost palpable heat that envelops every inch of me.

“It’s kinda wild that we ended up meeting again even though it didn’t happen the way we thought it would, don’t you think?”

Quinn smiles with one half of her mouth. I try not to fixate on her perfectly proportioned lips. “Yeah. It’s a little surreal.”

“This is where I stood last night, waiting for you.”

Quinn looks from side to side before returning her eyes to mine. “Right here? This exact spot?”

I blow out a small laugh. “Yes, as a matter of fact, it was this very spot. So, there.”

Quinn chuckles. “I was here too. I’m sure of it.” She shakes her head. “I can’t believe we missed each other.”

“Did we though? Did we miss each other? We’re both here now, just a touch later than we planned, but still here. According to fate, this must be the place in which we were supposed to come together again. But what do I know about fate? You’re the expert.” I smirk.

Quinn rolls her eyes. “Oh, so it was written in the stars that you were meant to hook up with my employee?”

The warmth of a blush creeps up my neck then spreads to my cheeks. “Maybe? I don’t make the rules.”

Quinn snickers. “Thank God.”

“Hey now! I said I was sorry about that.”

“I’m teasing. You left yourself wide open there. I had to.”

I squint at her. “I don’t recall you being this fresh.”

“Pssht. I’m not fresh. It must be the Boulevardier talking.”

I purse my lips. “That’s a shame.”

“Why’s that?”

“Maybe I wanted to find out *how* fresh you could be.”

Quinn's jaw becomes taut. "Are you flirting with me?"

I search her eyes for a full minute. "Are you really asking me that?"

"Yes."

I grudgingly let go of Quinn's hand, reach up, and ghost the backs of my fingers across her jawline. "I'm always flirting with you."

She visibly swallows and a hunger stirs inside me. "Why?"

I smile. "Because I like you. Remember?"

Quinn matches my smile. "I remember. I was just checking to make sure I had the most up-to-date information."

I gape and lightly push her shoulder. "Yeah, you're definitely fresh."

She simpers but doesn't deny my accusation.

I hold up my finger. "Tsk tsk. You better watch yourself."

Quinn's eyes brighten. "Oh? Or what?"

Or what? I'll tie you down and fuck you from here to next Sunday. I'll ship the shit out of you. I'll show you how I lo—

Whoa! No. Watch yourself. Keep it cool.

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Um. Yeah. I would, actually."

I shrug innocently. "How unlucky for you."

Quinn laughs. "Really? Uh. You are *not* allowed to call *me* fresh anymore."

I touch my heart, play-acting to be offended. "How dare you. I resent that implication. Now, you have to make it up to me."

Quinn's laughter dwindles. "What?"

"You heard me," I say with a puckish smile.

She blinks deliberately. "I don't think that I did."

"No? Huh. How strange," I jest. "Let me rephrase. You owe me one, so will you do something for me?"

Quinn raises a skeptical brow. "Is it appropriate for the public eye?"

I chuckle. "Do you want it to be?"

Quinn's cheeks crimson.

"Don't answer that," I tell her. "Just wait here."

She gives me an incredulous look. "Why? Where are you going?"

I point to her feet but keep my eyes on her face. "Stay."

"Aargh! Okay. I'm staying."

I nod, turn around, and begin walking down the street. There are only a few passersby, so this should work. *Please work.* To be frank, I'm not exactly

sure why I'm about to do what I'm about to do, I just know that I want to do it for her. I've only done this in my head, and it goes off without a hitch every single time, but in real life, I might not fare so well. I guess I'll find out soon enough.

Once I'm several storefronts away from where the Dumpling Palace used to be, I spin on my heels in the direction from which I came. Quinn's right where I left her, staring at me with a perplexed expression that's more than befitting.

I take a deep breath. *I got this. Dear Universe, please don't let me fall.*

"Quinn!" I shout.

Even from a distance, I can make out the concerned wrinkles on Quinn's forehead.

"Theo! What's happening?"

"Wait for it!" I shake my head at myself and sprint toward Quinn.

When I reach her, I jump up with a squeal. And just like in my daydreams, she catches me. There's clapping and whistling in the background. Quinn breaks into a joyful laugh and I laugh too, my face buried in her neck. I get a headrush from the scent of amber and cedar wafting off her skin. My heart begins to race, but not from adrenaline. It's from the feeling of having our chests pressed together and her hands on the backs of my thighs. *Well, fuck.* I didn't think this part through. I struggle to regulate my breathing and draw my head back the slightest amount. Our eyes immediately find one another's. I choke down the urge to kiss her.

"Hi," I exhale.

Quinn gulps. "Hi."

"So, in my fantasies, this is how we reunite," I explain. "Was it as good for you as it was for me?"

Quinn chuckles breathily. "I definitely didn't see that coming, but I liked it. I'm a sucker for an elaborate display of affection. And I'm eternally grateful that *Dirty Dancing* taught me to hold out my arms when a woman is running at me at full speed."

I laugh through a savage blush. "In hindsight, I can see that it was a little extra."

"No, it was amazing," she says, tightening her grip on me. "You, um, you fantasized about us reuniting?"

"I sure did."

Quinn's pupils dilate. "In your fantasy, what happens next?"

“I ask you a question.”

“What question?”

I intentionally scrape my bottom lip with my teeth, and Quinn’s gaze falls to my mouth, right where I want it. “Depends on which version of the fantasy I’m working with.”

“Can I get a for instance?”

“In one version, I ask you if you still want to sleep with me and you say...?”

Quinn inhales sharply and brings her eyes back to mine. “Yes,” she whispers.

I shiver and instinctively bring my mouth closer to Quinn’s. “And in another version, I ask you if you still want to peel back my layers, and you say...?”

“Yes.” She speaks lowly.

My heart swells so forcefully, it causes a mild pain in my chest.

“Are you going to be weird about our age difference?” I half-smile.

“Yes, but only to a small degree. I’ve thought about this a lot.” She winces. “Did I kill the mood?”

I can’t stop my lips from curving into a smile. “Surprisingly, no.”

“Now, what happens?” she asks.

“Do you want me to tell you or would like a demonstration?”

There’s a twinkle in Quinn’s eyes, made impossibly bright beneath the streetlights and stars. “A demonstration. Obviously.”

I keep my arms wrapped around Quinn’s neck, wriggle out of her grasp, and slide down her body. She’s got about two inches on me, so when my feet land on the ground, I tilt my head up to look at her. Instantly, our gazes fall in with each other’s. It sends a chill over me even in this blistering heat.

I regard her for a second—the way the angles of her espresso-brown bob frame her face. The way her side-swept bangs add definition to the hollows of her cheeks. The way the golden tint of her amber eyes catches in the light of the moon. And the slight dip in her upper lip.

I take an uneven breath and slowly lure her face to mine. But I flinch when something cold and wet pelts me between my eyes. Quinn’s brows pull together. At once, we look up right as the sky opens and it begins to downpour.

We both screech with laughter. I watch as Quinn frantically looks around for somewhere we can duck and cover. I’m only concerned with one thing

though.

Impulsively, I place my palm on Quinn's damp cheek and turn her face back to mine. Her laugh breaks off when our eyes meet. The droplets of rain falling off her lashes when she blinks are by far one of the most beautiful sights I've seen. I can feel my heartbeat in my throat, I can feel the blood rush through my veins, I can feel how badly I crave her.

I splay my fingers along the side of Quinn's face and coax her mouth closer to my mouth as I lean in, lips parted, desperate to close the distance between us.

Quinn

My heart stutters as Theo draws me closer. My eyes flit from her darkened gaze to her wet, full lips, and then back to her eyes. All my senses misfire at once.

I haven't kissed anyone in years. And I haven't had a first kiss in forever. Simone was supposed to be my last first kiss, and I'm now here. I want this to be perfect, I need it to be. But I have no idea what the fuck I'm doing. I'm terrified and shaking and...

Theo's warm breath caresses my cool skin. My mind empties and I close my eyes. Her trembling lips delicately sweep across mine, sending sparks throughout my body. My head feels a little swimmy. Before she can back away, I slip my arms around her waist, pull her hopelessly close to me, and kiss her back. Theo nibbles on my bottom lip, inviting me to deepen our connection. I'm more than willing to indulge her. I drink the rain from her upper lip, and she sighs into my mouth, generating a ferocious heat within me. I shut my eyes tighter and skim my tongue over hers, relishing how sweet she tastes. Theo gasps and presses her fingers harder against my face before sliding her hand to the back of my neck. Her lips crash into mine with urgency. Our tongues circle one another's in a dangerous dance that's both eager and unhurried. Automatically, my hands begin to wander from Theo's waist to her hips. I pull at the soaked fabric of her T-shirt. Her breath hitches. Desire surges through me, heavy in my belly, thick in the back of my throat, pulsing between my legs.

"Quinn," Theo rasps, breaking our kiss. Her lips tickle mine when she speaks my name.

I swallow severely. “Yeah?”

“I don’t want to come across as too forward, but—”

“Please be forward,” I request.

Theo laughs softly. “Can we go somewhere? Like your place or mine? Just somewhere dry.”

I smile at her. “Of course. If we walk fast, we can be at my place in seven minutes. Where are you?”

“I’m like ten to twelve minutes away,” she says. “Let’s go to your place.”

A crack of thunder rumbles through the sky.

“Okay.” I grab Theo’s hand. “You ready?”

“To be somewhere private with you? Yes, I’m ready. I’ve been ready.”

“Let’s go!” I make a start for it and pull Theo along. She yelps but manages to keep up with my pace.

A bolt of lightning fires up the night.

“Hurry! Hurry!” Theo orders, giggling.

Puddles splash beneath our feet as our quick steps break into a run. The raindrops almost blind me, but I manage to direct Theo up two streets, across another, and soon after, we’re racing up the stairs to my house. I shove my free hand inside the pocket of my jeans, which are basically stuck to my body. I pull out the keys and unlock the door. I lead Theo inside. We simultaneously shiver from the breeze of the air conditioner.

“Shit. It’s cold in here,” Theo says, hugging herself.

I shut the door behind us and rush over to the living room window to turn off the freezing air blowing inside the house.

“Sorry about that,” I mumble, turning back around to face Theo.

She’s still in the front hall, dripping. Her arms are crossed over her chest and she’s shaking. I frown.

“Let me get you a towel.” I quickly make my way to the linen closet, grab two towels, and hasten back to Theo. I offer her one.

“Thanks,” she says with a smile and takes a towel from me. She slings it over her shoulder and then uses both of her hands to free her hair from her ponytail. I watch as her long, curly tresses fall past her mid-back, all the way to her waistline.

Good God. I bite down on my bottom lip.

Theo gathers the ends of her hair and squeezes them out. When the water splatters against the hardwood floor, she grimaces. “Crap. I’m sorry. I’ll clean that up.”

I chuckle. “Don’t worry about it.” I toss the towel I’m holding onto the floor. “See? Problem solved.”

Theo pouts while briefly towel-drying her hair. “Well, that’s no good. Now, you don’t have a towel.”

I laugh. “I have a zillion towels. It’s not a big deal.”

“I refuse to be the reason you have extra laundry this week. Here.” She tosses me her towel and I catch it. It’s already covered in her smell, and it makes me heady.

I need an excuse not to use it, not to lose her scent. Something clever, believable. “I’m all set.”

Alright. Not the best excuse ever.

Theo rolls her eyes. “Really? You can’t tell me you’re not freezing. Look at you? You’re drenched, same as me.”

She’s not wrong. My socks and sneakers are squishy from the rain and my clothes are glued to my skin. That’s when I notice how tightly her clothes are clinging to her body as well. I clear my throat and barely pat my arms with the towel. Theo raises an eyebrow at me.

“I’m not sure if your way of drying off is effective,” Theo says.

I’m about to object when a small meow comes from my bedroom accompanied by an appearance from my Franny.

Theo’s eyes widen and she smiles big. “You have a cat?”

Franny does a big stretch and then slowly stalks toward Theo and me.

“I do,” I say. “Theo, this is Cassandra Valentina Frances, also known as Franny.”

Theo bursts out laughing and waves one hand in the air.

“What’s so humorous?” I ask.

Theo’s laughter grows.

I tip my head to the side. “What? Do you not like her name?”

Theo lowers her arm, wipes the tears from under her eyes, and coughs. “Nothing. It’s a great name. It’s very...Victorian era-esque meets Greek Goddess.”

“She’s a very fancy cat, so I thought it was fitting.”

Theo gives me an amused look. “It is fitting.” She then crouches down and rubs her fingers together. “C’mere, sweetie,” she coos at Franny.

“Don’t take offense if she ignores you. She does it to me all the time. She might need to warm up to you first—” My jaw drops as Franny moves closer to Theo and rubs her cheek against Theo’s fingers.

“Aw. Good girl,” Theo croons. “Who’s a good girl? You’re a good girl. Yes, you are, and you’re so pretty.”

I smile down at her while she pets Franny, who’s eating up all the attention.

I shake my head. “How did you get her to do that? She hardly ever comes to me.”

Franny butts her head against Theo’s hand, then prances off to her cat bed. Theo stands back up and shrugs. “I don’t know. I grew up with cats, so maybe she senses that.”

I furrow my brow. “Maybe.”

“How long have you had her?”

“Two years. I got her after my ex left,” I confess. “I wanted the company.”

“That makes sense.” She gives me an easy smile. “You have a nice home. Thanks for letting me come over.”

I return the smile. “I haven’t even shown you around yet.”

“Then maybe you should do that. I’d love a tour. I’m especially interested in seeing your bedroom,” she says with a sparkle in her eyes.

My stomach see-saws. *Remember to breathe.*

“Right. Um. So, here is the living room,” I make a gesture straight ahead. “That’s my television, my speaker system, my record collection, and those are my books.” I point to each item as I list them out. “Off to the left is the kitchen, where the, uh, refrigerator and stove are.” *Note to self: don’t ever become a realtor.* “And over there, down the hall...” I nod to the right. “Is my room, where I keep my...you know, my bed and my dresser.” Oy.

One corner of Theo’s mouth turns up. “Are you nervous?”

My face burns. “No. Pssht. Not at all. I mean, somewhat, maybe...” *Stop talking.*

Theo’s eyes fill with concern. “Why?”

My skin itches. I glance at the floor. “I haven’t...it’s been a minute since I...” I scrunch up my face and then look at Theo. “I haven’t had sex since the breakup.”

Theo blinks rapidly. “You haven’t?”

“No.”

“Really?”

I give in to a small smile. “Really.”

“Oh. Wow. Yeah. Okay. That’s cool. I wasn’t suggesting that we...well, I

guess sort of, I was, but also not exactly. I don't know. I can't have sex with you anyway. Not tonight. It's not that I don't want to, because I do. I so want to have sex with you. You have no idea. I just can't," Theo rattles off in one breath.

I touch my fingers to my temple and squish my eyebrows together. "I'm confused. So, you want to have sex with me, but you can't?"

Theo crinkles her nose. "Yes."

My arms drop to my side. "Is it something I said or did? Did I objectify you? Because I want to catch up with you. I want to talk about life and have all the conversations. I don't want you to feel like this is only about sex."

Theo shakes her head. "I know this isn't just about sex for you. It's not like that for me either. And it has nothing to do with anything you said or did. It has everything to do with me though, and my choices."

I squint at her. "I don't follow. Are you abstaining again?"

Theo chuckles. "God, no. Never again."

There's a sinking sensation in my belly. "What's wrong then?"

"Nothing's wrong." Theo flushes. "I, uh. I like to get tested between partners."

My insides unpleasantly twist at the thought of Theo and Carrie together. "Ohhh."

"Yeah, *that*. It's awkward, I know. I wish I could make it better."

I tip my head to the side a little. "It's okay. It's life. Life happens."

Theo puffs out her cheeks and then blows out a breath. "I just can't believe I twat-swatted myself. Who does that?"

I chuckle and so does she.

"You're right," I concur. "No one does that."

"Right?" After a few seconds, we compose ourselves. "I'll go to the clinic first thing tomorrow. For peace of mind."

I give her a smile. "That's extremely responsible of you. I appreciate it."

"What can I say? When I take a lover, I play it safe."

"I see," I tell her, laughing quietly.

"Not that I'm going to take you," Theo corrects herself. "Unless, of course, you want to be taken."

I chew on my lower lip. "I think we've established that I'm alright with you taking me."

Theo flushes. "Good."

"Good," I mimic.

Theo smiles timidly and steps up to me. “When we sleep together, I want it to be special, because I like you.”

I choke up. “I like you too.”

“And you haven’t had sex in a long time, so I want to make sure it’s— how should I put this? *Memorable.*”

I avert my eyes, as if it will somehow mask my blush. “You don’t have to —”

“Shh. I wasn’t asking you. I was telling you,” Theo whispers. “In the meantime...” She reaches up and drags her short fingernails along my jawline. I bring my eyes back to her face, but I can’t see straight. “We can do other stuff. No pressure.”

My heart’s about to beat out of my chest. “What do you have in mind?”

Theo purses her lips and places her hand on my breastbone. I hold my breath and let her give me a light push against the doorframe separating the hallway from the living room. A hint of a grin plays on the edges of her mouth. “What *don’t* I have in mind?”

Holy fuck. I barely shake my head.

Theo laughs quietly. “I need you to breathe.”

My cheeks heat up and I exhale. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.” Theo’s hand laggardly leaves my chest. She stares directly into my eyes as she grabs the hem of her soaked T-shirt, pulls it up, over her head, and discards it on the floor.

My heart ricochets from my chest to my belly and back up to my throat. My lungs momentarily close. My gaze reflexively drops to Theo’s pale purple, lace-trim bra and then travels downward to her bare stomach, the dips in her waist, the black and white vine tattoo that starts on her right hip and disappears beneath the waistband of her Levi’s.

Jesus.

I swallow hard in opposition to the sharp ache between my legs. I feel feverish. I force my eyes to return to Theo’s. She’s watching me carefully with a steady stare.

“Is this okay?” Theo asks quietly.

My lips part and I exhale shakily. “Yes.”

Without breaking eye contact with me, Theo brings her hands to the front of her jeans. In one swift motion, she unfastens the button and unzips the fly.

I’m definitely about to pass out. My breathing picks up at an alarming pace.

Theo hooks her fingers in the waistband of her drenched jeans and begins peeling them off, wriggling her ass a little as she does. Once they're pooled around her ankles, she kicks off her sneakers, steps out of her jeans, and shoves them aside with her foot.

Blanketed in a full body blush, I suck in audible breath.

Theo's standing inches away from me in nothing but her bra and a pair of gray, low-rise boy shorts, the end of her vine tattoo peeking out from the leg of her panties.

"Still okay?" she inquires.

"Yes."

"You can touch it if you want."

There's a swish between my ears as my stomach flies away. "What?"

One side of Theo's mouth twitches into a small grin. "My tattoo. You can touch it. You keep looking at it."

"Sorry." I shut my eyes for a second. "I'm not trying to leer."

Theo laughs softly, and the sound reverberates inside my bones. "Stop apologizing," she orders. "I'm trying to seduce you. I want you to leer."

An unsparing heat flares below my belly button. I squeeze my thighs together and say nothing.

Theo chews on her fleshy bottom lip, bidding me to look at her mouth, and so I do. An untamed longing ripples through me. My fingertips cramp.

"Will you do something for me?" she asks.

There's that question again.

"And before you ask," Theo continues. "The answer is no—it's not at all appropriate."

"What is it?"

"Take off your clothes."

My temperature climbs to an almost unbearable height. I'm completely captivated by her. I want her. I want this, to be naked with her. I really really do. But I haven't been naked in front of anyone in quite some time, with the exception of my doctor, and that doesn't count, because ew. What if I don't meet her expectations? My body isn't nearly as...*tight* as hers. Fourteen years ago, it was. Now, it sags in certain places and there are stretch marks in other places. What if it's a turn-off for her? What if—?

I freeze when the heat of Theo's body lights mine on fire like a furnace, leaving hardly any space between us. She tugs at the hem of my T-shirt. "Do you want help with this?"

I shake my head with a bashful smile. “I, um. I should tell you that my body isn’t—”

Theo pulls assertively at my shirt and shoots me a look. “No. Don’t do that. I’m not going to let you finish that sentence. Quinn, I already know everything I need to know about your body, which is that it belongs to you, and I think you’re goddamned gorgeous. So, are we good here?”

I nod.

“Get out of your head,” she tells me.

I take a breath. “I know. It’s just hard.”

“Will you let me help you?”

I choke down a mouthful of air. “Alright.”

Theo leans in and plants the softest kiss on the corner of my mouth. My heartbeat stammers. “Lift up your arms.”

I raise my arms over my head and Theo tears off my sopping wet T-shirt. She casts it aside and steps back, dark eyes holding me in consideration.

Theo

A distinct gasp leaves my mouth at the sight of Quinn in her black, soft-looking, lightly lined bra. A long chain is dangling from her neck, making it impossible not to notice her cleavage and the swell of her breasts. There's a birthmark right above her left rib that's shaped like something I want to taste forever. When she tenses up beneath my gaze, the floral band that's inked around her defined bicep twitches, and I feel that twitch deep inside my body.

A flush of wet heat spreads from my chest to my belly and drips between my legs.

Fuck.

My pulse throbs behind my eyes. I can't see anything but her and I don't even want to blink. Like, ever. I feel out of my depth, swept up in a storm that's awe-inspired.

I take a precarious breath and bring my focus back to Quinn's face. The glossy light brown and yellow hues of her irises throw me off center. The chambers of my heart constrict.

"Yeah. Like I said, goddamned gorgeous." My voice is a full octave lower than usual.

I flatten my palm against her clavicle and inch closer. So close that our warm, sticky stomachs touch. Our stares are fixed on one another. Quinn opens her mouth slightly as if she's about to speak. I place my fingers over her lips and shake my head slowly while I lift my face to hers, determined to erase the small gap between us. With fervor, I cover Quinn's mouth with mine. Immediately, one of her hands is on the small of my back and the other on my hip, traveling the length of my tattoo. I bite down on her lower lip,

quaking with need. I shut my eyes tighter and kiss her harder, slipping just the tip of my tongue inside her mouth, beckoning her. She begins massaging my tongue with hers, the tiniest noise escaping her throat. I inhale her faint moan, zaps of excitement piercing me to the core.

The pads of Quinn's fingers tickle as they roam back up my outer thigh and around to my ass. My insides turn to jelly.

"Is this okay?" she murmurs between a kiss.

"Mm-hmm." I run my tongue over her lips and feel her tremble. I let my hands fall to the fly of Quinn's jeans. "Can I take these off?" I mumble against her mouth.

"Yes."

I swallow with force and resume kissing her, my fingers working deftly to unfasten her jeans, tackling the button first and then the zipper. My hands latch onto the denim waistband, and I yank downward. Quinn shimmies as I continue to pull and together, we wrestle her jeans all the way to her kneecaps.

"I got it from here," she assures me through a ragged breath and then somehow wrangles out of her boots and jeans in no less than a minute using only her feet. Afterward, she leans in to kiss me again.

"Wait." I lower my gaze to peek. Quinn's wearing black, high-waisted boxer briefs and I couldn't be more hot for her if I wanted to.

Quinn's cheeks redden. "What?"

"Nothing. C'mere." I capture her face in my hands and sweep my lips over hers.

Quinn tightens her grip on my backside and holds me close. I sink into our kiss, immerse myself in the feeling of my chest rubbing against hers, the soft flesh of her abdomen pressed against mine, the movement of her jaw beneath my fingers, her smell, the heat of our breaths becoming one.

Completely uncoordinated, Quinn takes a step forward, prompting me to take a step back. We engage in this pseudo-waltz until my calves bump into something solid. I lift one eyelid and realize that Quinn just assisted me from the hallway to the living room to the couch.

Gradually, Quinn severs our kiss, but her mouth remains a breath away from mine. "Do you want to lay down?"

God, yes.

My heart gallops in my chest. "Yes."

Quinn nods at a leisurely pace while bringing her lips to the space below

my left ear. I lose my breath. I grow increasingly unsteady as she leaves a trail of kisses along my neck. I tilt my head to the side to give her better access and I'm not sorry about it, because she takes my cue and runs her tongue along my clavicle. When her teeth scrape my throat, I soak through my boy shorts, panting a few choice words. I rake my fingers through her hair and begin to lower myself onto the sofa, pulling her down with me.

The moment my ass hits the cushion, Quinn's hands are on my hips and her right knee is between my legs. I hear white noise and bite my tongue to keep myself from begging her to fuck me. Or to let me fuck her, because equality.

I recline fully, resting my head on a pillow. Quinn's body floats above mine while she leaves a mark on my neck. I squirm with pleasure, and she drives her knee further into me.

"Shit," I gasp.

"Should I stop?" Quinn's breath is cool on my damp neck.

"No," I respire. "Don't stop." I duck my chin and she instantly takes my lips prisoner, locking me in a kiss so frenzied, the room spins. My fingers drift from her hair to the waistband of her boxers, aching to rip them off.

Holding herself up with one arm, Quinn uses her idle hand to map out a path from my waist to the lace lining of my bra. She outlines my C-cups with her thumb, and my nipples perk up, waiting for her touch. I start sweating.

Intuitively, I rock against her knee. I listen to the sharp inhale she takes through her nose. My hands glide up Quinn's smooth back and settle on the clasp of her cotton bra.

I break our kiss. "How attached are you to this?"

Quinn stares down at me and I forget what I was about to say, because her irises are three shades darker than before. Her lips are pink and swollen. And there's a droplet of perspiration trickling down the side of her face. She's so turned on that it physically hurts to look at her.

"What? My bra?" she queries.

"Uh-huh. Yeah. That."

"I'm not attached to it at all." Her speech is practically slurred. I try not to smile and effortlessly unhook her bra.

"K. Good," I whisper, removing it.

I watch the muscles in Quinn's neck work when she swallows. *So. Fucking. Hot.*

I glance down at Quinn's completely topless body and a thrill charges

through me.

“Don’t move,” I tell Quinn and slither a few inches downward under her weight. I press my right palm into her shoulder blade to keep her still while I prop myself up using my left elbow. Then, I lift my head a little and take one of her breasts into my mouth. I suck hungrily. She pushes out a breath and her body buckles.

I grin giddily to myself and let up—barely—when I feel Quinn shake. I decide to test her strength and start teasing her nipple with my tongue.

“Fuck,” she groans.

And that single syllable feels like a tidal wave breaking over me, pulling me underwater, leaving me breathless and helpless.

Jesus.

My hand strays from Quinn’s shoulder to her hard nipple, and I replace my tongue with my index and forefinger. She gasps. I strain my neck and take a few heavy breaths against her face. She kiss me greedily, and I welcome it. I want it.

Quinn carefully takes my hand off her chest, wraps her fingers around my wrist, and lifts my arm above my head, pinning me down. My body goes limp, and I lie flush against the sofa cushions. Then, she arrests me by the other wrist and raises that arm up over my head. Before I can even form a thought, Quinn’s got me restrained. I mean, not really. I could easily free myself, but there’s no way on God’s green Earth that I’m going to.

We keep kissing, our lips and tongues easing into familiar patterns and accidentally finding new ones. I begin writing beneath her, a soft whimper slipping from my mouth into hers.

Quinn breaks our kiss, and the sound of our fitful breaths fill the living room.

“Is this okay for you?” she asks. “Me, holding you down?”

“I’m good,” I assure her. “So good.”

Quinn’s pupils grow large. “You’re sure?”

I lick my lips and smile. “So sure.”

At an agonizingly slow rate, Quinn lowers her face back to mine and starts kissing me again. This kiss is different. It’s more controlled yet somehow deeper. This kiss gives me butterflies in places I didn’t know I could get butterflies in. I’m so drunk off Quinn’s lips that I barely notice her bringing my wrists together, one on top of the other, and securing them in place using only one of her hands. It’s only when her fingers soothe over the

front of my lace trim bra that I jerk with pleasure, once again becoming fully aware of the rest of my body. My heart beats loudly in my throat as her hand slinks to the clasp of my bra.

“Can I—?” Quinn murmurs between kisses.

“Yes,” I cut her off and then nip at her lower lip, bidding her to keep kissing me. Much to my delight, she complies, the feeling of her mouth on mine sending sparks along my skin.

Quinn skillfully unsnaps my bra and slides the fabric aside before she begins kneading my breasts. I whimper. Our kiss becomes elevated, our tongues almost wildly stroking each other’s, both of us gasping while keeping up with the movement of the other’s mouth.

My pulse is rampant and I’m sweltering. Acting on instinct, I start undulating my hips beneath Quinn. She pinches my nipple and I try to swallow. I bear down and fight the impulse to part my legs even more. Abruptly, Quinn’s lips leave mine and dips her head. Her hot breath clips my nipple.

Oh. My. God. I’m going to die.

In haste, I twist my wrists within Quinn’s grasp and unfetter myself. I cup her cheeks in my hands and lift her face, impelling her to look at me. Her expression is full of worry. I frown.

“Are you okay?” she speaks quietly.

I draw my lips into a smile. “Yes. I’m more than okay. I promise.”

Quinn’s brow wrinkles. “You don’t want me to—”

“Oh, no. That’s not it. That’s not it at all.” I laugh a little. “I want you to. Believe you me, I want you to.” I sit up and place a kiss on her top lip. “But see, I’m on the edge here, barely hanging on, weakening under your spell. A girl can only take so much. If we continue doing what we’re doing, surely, I won’t make it out of this alive.”

Quinn chuckles, a blush coloring her skin from her ears all the way down to her bare chest. “I don’t have a spell.”

I raise an eyebrow. “The fuck you don’t.”

Quinn shakes her head, still laughing lightly. “I’m glad you feel that way, because I haven’t done anything like this in...gosh, I don’t even know how long. I wasn’t sure if I’d be any good at it.”

“I can assure you that you’re beyond good at it.” I brush my nose against hers. “And I definitely want to finish what I started,” I whisper. “I want to do things to you. So. Many. Indecent. Things. Just not now.”

Quinn presses her sweaty forehead to mine. “I know.”

We sit in silence for a moment. Every time I breathe in, I inhale her, and I savor it. She smells amazing—summer rain, shampoo, and cedar.

Suddenly, Quinn clears her throat. “Should we go on a date? Like, with clothes on? And we can talk, catch up?”

I smile. “Absolutely we should.”

Quinn backs her head away from me and winces. “I feel awful, but I don’t even know your last name.”

“Harrington,” I say, snickering.

“Harrington,” Quinn repeats quietly, as if she’s talking to herself. Then she offers me her hand. “Theo Harrington, I’m Quinn—”

“Gellar,” I supply, shaking her hand. “Quinn Gellar. I saw it on your license when I carded you a year ago. I remembered.”

A dark shade of pink paints her cheekbones. “That’s sweet that you remember.”

I shrug, separating our joined hands. “It was hard not to.”

Quinn runs her fingers up and down the side of my face. “This is going to sound absurd, but do you want to stay over? I can give you something dry to sleep in, and you can take the bed.”

I lean into her touch and smile. “That actually sounds really nice and not at all absurd, except for the bed part.” I purse my lips. “Are you afraid to sleep next to me?”

Quinn glances at the ceiling thoughtfully. “No. Well, yes. I don’t know.” She retracts her eyes on me. “It’s new, to be in bed with someone else. It’s not something I ever thought would happen after the...well, you know? But now, you’re here and I’m here, and we’re...so, yeah. I don’t know.”

I place my hand over Quinn’s, and she flattens her palm against my cheek. “It’s okay,” I tell her. “Say no more. But I want you to take the bed. I’ll stay here on the sofa.”

“No,” Quinn blurts out and stares at me for a minute. “I want you to sleep in the bed...with me.”

“Quinn, there’s no rush. I want you to feel ready.”

She offers me a crooked smile. “I am. I’m ready. I’m ready for this, for you. I didn’t say it earlier, but I am.”

My chest swells. “Kiss me.”

“I was planning on it.”

Quinn

Waking up beside Theo and the warmth of her body next to mine feels dreamed up. I had somehow gotten used to the left side of the bed being empty and cold.

In the beginning, after my ex-wife moved out, I couldn't sleep in the bed. It was too painful. I couldn't do it. So, I slept night after night on the couch. My neck and my back hated me for it, but it was the only way I could even attempt to sleep. Six months into the grieving process, I decided to buy a new mattress and donate the used one. I cut up all the old sheets into rags and replaced them with different ones. I purposefully chose colors and designs that my ex would never have approved of. But I didn't stop there. I purchased a new set of pillows, a comforter, and a bedspread. I don't even use the bedspread—I'm not sure anyone has since the 1950s. I keep it folded at the foot of the bed and it now belongs to Franny. But I needed all the change I could get. I needed to reinvent the bedroom over and over until it in no way resembled the bedroom I once shared with Simone.

No matter how many changes I made, I couldn't adjust to the unoccupied side of the bed. Then it happened. I was lying here one night on my side of the bed, and Franny jumped up on the other side. She curled up against the spare pillow and started purring me to sleep. When I woke up the next morning, Franny was still there. After that, I got accustomed to the bed being just mine—well, Franny's too. The left side of the bed simply became space, and the cold stopped bothering me.

They say that's how change happens—slowly and sort of unnoticed in the moment. Now, I can't even remember what it was like to share a bed with

Simone. I only know it was something I did in some past life.

That life isn't mine anymore though. This one is.

I prop my elbow up on my pillow and rest my head in my hand. I watch closely at the way Theo's chest rises and falls in time with her sleepy breathing. She's a side sleeper, so one half of her face is smooshed into the soft, down pillow. Her mouth is slightly open, but there's no drool. She's not snoring, but her breath gets heavier every few beats. Her long, blonde hair is fanned out across her back. And damn, does she look hot in my oversized Nirvana T-shirt and checkered boxer shorts.

I smile at her, throat thickening. I reach out and brush a strand of hair off her cheek. She stirs for a second but quickly falls back into a deep slumber.

I really don't want to wake her, but I have to get up and to work. It's my turn to open the café this morning. I sigh and peer over at the clock on my dresser. It's 3:30 in the morning. If I don't start getting ready, I'll be late.

I turn my gaze back to a peaceful Theo and decide to let her sleep. I lean closer to her and whisper, "Good morning." She mumbles something incoherent. I laugh softly, and with all the hesitation in the world, drag myself out of bed.

Once I'm dressed, I clean out Franny's litterbox while she stands close by to supervise. Afterward, I give her head a quick scratch and feed her. While Franny's chomping away on her kibble, I put on a pot of coffee for Theo and place a mug on the counter. Then, I fish through the junk drawer and grab a piece of scrap paper and a pen. I scribble down my phone number along with a note for Theo. ***Good morning. I had to leave for work and didn't want to wake you. Help yourself to anything in the fridge or cabinets. Whenever you decide to head out, just lock the door behind you. I don't want Franny to get taken. Call me so we can plan our date. P. S. You look cute when you're sleeping. Have a good day!***



Thankfully, I step foot inside The Roasted Bean with plenty of time to prepare for the morning rush. I flick the lights on and make my way to the back of the café, where Gabby's and my office is. I set my belongings down, but keep my phone in my pocket, which I usually don't do, but I'm also not usually hoping for a beautiful woman whom I spent the night with to call or

text me. I smile to myself and get a move on. There's work to be done.

Admittedly, there's a bounce in my step as I fill all the coffee machine filters with ground beans and check to make sure the water levels in each reservoir are exactly where they should be. As soon as the aroma of freshly brewing coffee fills the café, I begin preparing the teas. Somewhere between putting the trays of money in the cash registers, turning on the stereo, and organizing the small bakery case, I start humming to myself. The second I realize what I'm doing, I stop.

Whoa. Slow your roll, tiger. It was just a make-out session. The hottest make-out session EVER with a woman you've been crushing on for a year, but still just a make-out session. Don't put all your eggs in one basket.

I tip my head and purse my lips. "What a strange saying. Who even puts eggs in a basket?"

"Good morning!" Gabby belts out, sashaying through the entrance and flipping the sign on the door around to the "open" side.

I smile at my best friend and wait for her ode-to-Grey's Anatomy-saying. It's a tradition at this point.

"It's a beautiful day to make coffee!" Gabby declares.

There it is.

I snicker. "It sure is." I pour her a cup of dark roast and slide it across the counter. She takes it and gives me a quizzical look.

"What did you just say?"

I shake my head. "What?"

Gabby's eyes widen. "I said, 'It's a beautiful day to make coffee' to which you responded, 'It sure is' and you never respond when I say that. Never. Ever. So, what gives?" She grins at me. "Did you have sex last night?"

I gasp. "No!"

Her gaze gets squinty. "But you're blushing."

"Pfft. I'm *not* blushing. I'm having a hot flash, what with being perimenopausal and all. Should we put on the AC? I think we should." I nod in agreement with myself and take a sip of my own coffee to conceal as much of my face as I can.

Gabby's jaw falls to the floor. "Don't give me that perimenopausal bullshit. Your cheeks are neon pink. We're talking *Barbie* Corvette on steroids pink. *That*, my friend, is a blush. So, what's going on? Why are you flustered?"

The door to the café swings open and I silently give thanks to Stevie Nicks, who is the closest being to a higher power that I believe in.

“Can we talk about this later?” I hiss. “We have customers.”

Gabby smirks. “Oh, we are definitely going to talk about this later.”

Gabby and I quickly take our positions behind the counter and immediately begin fulfilling orders, many of which we’ve memorized due to having such a loyal customer base.

There’s the woman in the power suit, who always gets a medium iced espresso and flirts with Gabby. Then, there’s the bear, who orders a large green tea latte with soy milk. Then, we have the high femme with her long-haired-butch wife and their two toddlers—that’s a big order, consisting of a small mocha cappuccino with extra foam, a medium flat white, two blueberry scones, and two chocolate milks. Sometimes there’s a raisin cookie involved, other times not. We also have the non-binary college student, who hangs around after they get their large, iced coffee with extra cream and extra sugar, looking like they might approach Carrie, but they never do. My personal favorite is the polyam couple, made up of two stunning women and a man prettier than my childhood crush, George Michael. They typically come in two at a time. Every so often, the three of them will be together. On more than one occasion, both Gabby and I have been invited to one of their dinner parties. We’ve both politely declined. Once, I caught George Michael checking out the non-binary college student, but they were too busy being infatuated with Carrie to notice. Carrie actually has several admirers that frequent our café. This isn’t surprising to me or Gabby, since Carrie is a bona fide piece of eye candy. She’s not gorgeous the way that Theo is or universally pretty like Gabby—she’s just got this vampish thing going on that really works for her, like she just stepped off the set of a Calvin Klein commercial. Or maybe a porno.

My stomach instantly turns sour as intrusive thoughts of Carrie’s hotness getting intimate with Theo’s hotness run through my mind.

Don’t go there. It’s over and done with.

Before I know it, there’s a lull in the café. A handful of tables are occupied, and Gabby is passing a tray of coffees to the last person who was in line.

I take a breath and do a visual inventory of the café, making sure we have plenty of brewed coffee and tea, as well as bakery items. I’m almost done triple-checking when my phone buzzes inside my pocket. My heart leaps. I

retrieve the phone from my jeans, swipe on the screen and grin like a schoolgirl when I see the text from Theo.

Good morning, you. Thanks for the coffee. You're too sweet. It was SO good...how'd you do that? I raided your fridge and had leftover pizza, because breakfast of champions. I appreciate the meal. Let me know how I can repay you. I'll do anything. A-N-Y-T-H-I-N-G. I hope you're having a good day. I have to work tonight, but we should plan something for sometime soon. Now, you have my number. Tag! You're it. P.S. I can't stop thinking about your lips.

“Alright, first the blushing and now, the foolish grin,” Gabby says, approaching me. “What’s gotten into you?”

I return my phone to my pocket and look up at Gabby. “Nothing.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Liar. Was that a text? Was it Theo?”

I bite back another smile. “Does it matter?”

“Does it matter? Does it matter? How can you ask me that? I have waited for over two years to see you grin like a buffoon again and it’s happening, so yes, it matters.”

I let out a deep breath. “I want to tell you. I do. But I also don’t want to make a big deal out of it, because it might not be a big deal. And if it’s not a big deal and I make it out to be a big deal, then it will...I don’t know. It will...”

“Hurt?” Gabby supplies, her expression softening.

My heart descends into my stomach. “Yeah. Exactly.”

Gabby nods. “That’s a rational fear, but what if it *is* a big deal and you’re treating it as if it’s insignificant, when really, you should be celebrating it? Huh? Did you ever think of that?”

I lift an eyebrow at my friend. “But does that logic actually apply here?”

Gabby rolls her eyes hard. “Of course it does. And if something or *someone* is making you all giddy and shit, I think it’s a big deal and cause for celebration. So, fess up.”

“Can we please do this *after* work?”

Gabby does a rapid scan of the café and then stares at me. “We’re the only two people here. Let’s have it.”

Dear Stevie Nicks, please send forth more customers.

I glance at the door. Nothing. *Damn!*

“Fine. Yes, it has to do with Theo. I—”

“A-ha!” Gabby points her finger at me. “I knew it!”

I glare at her.

Gabby crosses her arms over her chest. “All I’m saying is that I called it. It was a straightforward call. You had a secret crush on her for a year and I don’t blame you. She’s quite the showstopper with the personality to back it up. Then you run into her last night and boom! Sparks are flying! It was plain to see.” She half smiles and I continue to stare daggers at her.

Gabby clears her throat and gives me a small nod. “Anyway. Please carry on.”

I exhale. “We left the bar together last night and got caught in the rain, so we went to my place to...dry off and she ended up sleeping over. In my bed. With me. It was nice.”

Gabby quickly draws her head back, gaping. “Um. I’m sorry. Can you repeat that? I thought I heard you say that Theo spent the night with you.”

I press my lips together and shoot my best friend a knowing look. “You know what I said.”

“Do I though? Because you said it was ‘*nice*,’ and I’m thinking that if you spent the night with your crush, there’s a better word than *nice* to describe it.”

My cheeks sting with heat. “You’re right. It was...it was a lot of things.”

Gabby holds out her hands, palms facing the ceiling. “Tell me the things then! Start from the beginning and spare no detail!”

I sigh with relief when a new customer walks through the door, followed by three others.

“Would you look at that. We have a line to take care of.”

Gabby squinches up her face. “I’m not done with you yet.”

Ignoring Gabby, I stand taller and walk past her to help our patrons. She mutters something under her breath but gets to work at my side right away. It doesn’t long for us to fill the orders, but only moments after we do, the lunch crowd starts to mosey in.

“Hey, ladies!” Carrie calls out with a wave as she struts through the door.

I internally cringe, forgetting that I had put her on the schedule for today.

Gabby and I greet Carrie in a collective wave back. Then, I glance at Gabby in a panic and mouth, “Don’t say anything.” Unflappably, she replies by mouthing, “Relax.” *Because that’s easy.*

It doesn’t take long before Carrie is behind the counter with me and Gabby. I appreciate that she wastes no time in getting down to business—consolidating the items in the bakery case, making sure fresh grounds are in each basket, ready to brew when necessary, and checking the dates on the

open dairy containers in the mini-fridge. I continue watching her from the corner of my eye while I fill each order that Gabby takes. It stays fast-paced for close to an hour, but eventually lets up again. This is when Carrie normally gets chatty. And normally, I don't mind, but on this particular day, I'm dreading it.

"So, Quinn," Carrie begins talking like clockwork. "About last night—me, you, Theo. That was *awkward*, huh? But we're good here, right?"

I pick up a rag and start wiping down the espresso machine. "Yeah. All good."

"It was weird, wasn't it?" she continues. "Who would've thought that we had the same taste in women?"

I inwardly shudder. "Well, I wouldn't go as far as to say—"

"I'm just surprised," Carrie interrupts me. "You know? That Theo's taking an interest in you."

Ouch.

"Why's that?" Gabby asks, joining in on the conversation.

"I mean, I don't want to sound like douche, but she's in her twenties, and you're...what? Forty-five?" Carrie inquires.

I wince and Gabby sucks in a breath.

"Forty-two," I correct her.

"Same difference," Carrie says. "You get where I'm going, don't you?"

I rally myself and turn to face Carrie. "I don't believe that I do."

"Me either," Gabby chimes in.

"I'm only saying that the age-gap between you two isn't exactly small." Carrie shrugs. "What could you possibly have in common with each other? Theo wasn't even alive in the 80s, so pop culture references would be a bust. Personally, I would hate that. Then—with all due respect to Theo—there's the fact that you're probably way more mature than she is, like emotionally. You have more life experience than she does. I can't speak for you, but being on the same emotional maturity level with someone is something I need. And from what you've told me, you've been through it. That shit ages people. It's nothing personal against you. I'm just calling a spade a spade. But I think it's great that you're getting back out there, as you should. Like I said, I'm only trying to wrap my head around how you two would be a good match for each other." Her eyes dart between me and Gabby. "Make sense?"

There's a ringing in my ears. I latch onto the counter to keep from staggering backward. It's as though Carrie went inside the graveyard of my

brain with a shovel, dug up my preconceived doubts about age-gap relationships from a year before, and threw the dirt in my face.

“Um. I don’t think it’s that simple,” Gabby says, placing a hand on my shoulder. “Maybe from now on, we keep our personal lives out of the café. Okay?”

“Oh. Yeah. My bad,” Carrie says. “Sorry.”

“Why don’t you go out back and count how many cases of coconut milk we have left,” Gabby tells Carrie.

“Sure.” Carrie nods. “No problem. I’ll do that now.”

As soon as Carrie’s out of range, Gabby stands in front of me and grabs me by my biceps.

“Do *not* let her get to you. You hear me? She’s only trying to get inside your head because her ego is hurt. She was out of line, and I’ll take care of it. I’ll make sure it sure it doesn’t happen again. But you have to block it out, everything she said. Pay no mind to her. That was all nonsense.”

I gnaw on my bottom lip and furrow my brow. “Was it though?”

Gabby’s gaze hardens. “Yes. It was complete and utter nonsense.”

My mouth is so dry. “I feel like she had a point.”

Gabby presses her lips into a thin, firm line. “Nope. She did not.”

“I don’t agree with what Carrie insinuated about Theo, but she’s right in terms of me being old. Theo should be off dating women her own age. Women who can relate to her. Women who were born in the same decade as her. Women who don’t wear anti-aging cream at night.”

“No. Stop.” Gabby shakes her head adamantly. “You’re not old, because if you’re old then *I’m* old and I’m not old. *We’re* not old. We’re in our prime. Forty is the new thirty.”

I frown. “What does that make twenty-eight? The new eighteen?”

Gabby’s forehead puckers. “Uh. No. That rule only applies to people over thirty.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Says who?”

“Says me. Duh.”

I roll my eyes. “Rule or no rule, maybe I should re-think this whole thing, or talk to Theo about it and make sure she knows what she’s potentially getting herself into.”

Gabby looks me up and down. “You like her, right?”

Here’s that blush again. “I do.”

Gabby gives me a smile and a resolute nod of her head. “Then, yes. Talk

to Theo before you do anything rash. There's no need to *re-think* anything. You did that for *months*. I love you, but I don't know if I can go more rounds. Mm-kay?"

I deliver a smile of my own. "Okay. But what if—?"

Gabby waves her hands in front of my face. "Nah-ah-ah! Shush! This conversation is over. Capeesh?"

I sigh laboriously. "Ugh. Capeesh."

Theo

Lexi grins after I finish recounting last night's events to her. "That's hot." She takes a sip of the gin martini I just made for her and then raises her glass, tipping it in my direction. "Very, very hot."

Heat spreads across my cheeks and I'm appreciative of how dark it is in the club. I clink my San Pellegrino with lemon against Lexi's martini glass. "The hottest," I agree, breaking into a small sweat beneath the bar lights.

Labrys is slower on Saturday nights during the summer compared to the rest of the year. When the weather is nicer, people are less likely to hit up a club and more apt to either hop on the highway and head north to spend time in New Hampshire or Maine or brave Boston traffic to vacation on Cape Cod. Summer in Massachusetts is for grilling and late-night drinks around a campfire or illegally on a beach somewhere. It's when people visit amusement parks and light fireworks long before and long after the Fourth of July. It's drinks on the porch or by the pool. Or, it's staying home to lie next to an air conditioner because it's so damn humid out. If, however, there is an event we're hosting or the forecast predicts rain, we'll have a bigger turnout here. Tonight is not one of those nights though. Tonight, we have our regulars and the folks who probably don't enjoy the heat and are patiently waiting for Halloween to arrive.

Every few Saturdays after her shift at the hospital, Lexi will stop in for a drink or two. Sometimes she meets her girlfriend, Breanna, here, but mostly she comes alone. Apparently, Breanna had to work late tonight, so I get Lexi to myself.

I called Lexi this afternoon on her lunch break to give her the play-by-

play of my time with Quinn, but she insisted on hearing about it in person. Being that it's her half-birthday today and me being the incredible best friend that I am, I agreed to entertain her wishes. Also, she went all out on my half-birthday last month, made me a cake and everything. I suck at baking. So, giving her the nitty gritty of my romantic adventures is the least I can do.

"I bet the sex is going to be earth-shattering," Lexi muses before eating the olive that's garnishing her martini. "You know, when you finally have it."

I shrug as if I hadn't had that same thought five thousand and ninety-nine times already today. "I'm trying not to get ahead of myself," I lie and take a swig of my mineral water.

"Psht. That's a load of crap if ever I heard one." Lexi swallows another sip of her drink. "You're talking to me like I don't know you. And I *know* you." She lifts a dark, sculpted eyebrow at me and smirks. "I know where you live, Theo Harrington."

Lexi pulls a smile from me. It's true—she *does* know me. There are even moments when I think she knows me better than anyone else in my life.

Lexi and I met in cheer camp the summer before our junior year of high school. We bonded over our mutual crush on the captain of the quad, Amelia Capshaw. Damn, she was cute. Amelia was also a flyer on the team. I was a backspot and Lexi was a base. Because of our positions, Lexi and I could sometimes see up Amelia's skirt. Good times were had that summer. The following year in school, the bond between us grew into a friendship. The longest we've ever been apart was during college when Lexi took an internship abroad, but we FaceTimed as often as we could. We were even roommates for a stint before Lexi met Breanna. We've seen each other through relationships, horrible breakups, family crises, job promotions, a pandemic, and multiple hangovers, just to name a few things. She's my family and I'm hers.

"You're tipsy," I tell her.

"Maybe so, but I'm still right." Lexi winks at me. "What did the clinic say? How long until your results come back?" she asks a little too loudly.

My face feels like it's on fire. I glare at Lexi. "Shh. Use your library voice." I glance around, but no one seems to have heard that.

Thank God.

Lexi chuckles. "Why? We just talked about your hot and heavy make-out sesh."

"That's different."

“Is not.”

“Is so!”

“Oh, lighten up,” Lexi advises. “We’re all adults here. Plus, we’re in a club. Library voices don’t exist here.”

“Not the point,” I growl under my breath, redirecting my attention at Lexi.

“Fine,” Lexi says with a flick of her wrist. “When are you expecting a response from your health care provider regarding the findings?” She giggles and finishes her cocktail. “Okay, *now* I’m tipsy.”

I snort. “I see that.”

Lexi slides her empty glass toward me. “Could you please make me another?”

I hand over my mineral water. “Hydrate first, and then I’ll make you another.”

Lexi turns her nose up at me. “So much for the big tip I was going to leave you.” She takes the glass of water from me and chugs it.

“And to answer your question, the office said it will take up to three business days before I receive any information.”

Lexi’s blue eyes widen. “Yeesh. Three days? You would think that with today’s technology, it’d be a lot faster.”

“Right? It’s okay though. There’s no rush. We’re going to go on a date and get to know each other more and see what the other has been up to over the past year. That sort of thing.”

Lexi purses her lips. “You’re into her and she’s into you and the chemistry is there. What more do you need to know? Are you going exchange birth charts or something?”

I roll my eyes. “No. I’m just trying to have a more serious approach to this thing I have with her, because it’s about more than sex to me.”

Lexi smiles. “That’s adorable. I love that for you.”

“Don’t make fun of me.” I begin making my friend another martini.

“What? I’m not making fun of you. I’m genuinely excited for you.”

“Can I share something with you?” I ask, stirring up her cocktail.

Suddenly humorless, Lexi stares at me. “Yes. Of course. What is it?”

I place Lexi’s martini in front of her. “I’m nervous,” I whisper.

Lexi’s brow furrows and she whispers back, “About...?”

I blow out a breath. “Well, she’s older.”

“Uh-huh. I know. By a *lot*.”

I frown. "Not helping."

"Sorry. Sorry," Lexi says with a wince. "I'm shutting up. Please finish your thought."

I tip my head to the side and deliberately blink. "Can I talk now?"

"Absolutely. You have the floor."

"As I just said, Quinn's older and most likely more...experienced than me. Not only with..." I make a flailing gesture with my hand. "But with life."

Lexi raises her hand.

"What?" I ask.

"I have a question." She lowers her arm and takes a sip of her drink.

"What's the question?"

"What exactly do you mean when you do this?" Lexi imitates the motion I made with my hand moments ago.

"You know...sex."

Lexi presses her lips together, barely making an effort to conceal her amusement. "Mm. Obviously," she says, dryly.

I pout. "Lex, are you listening to me?"

"Always."

"Then what did I say?"

"You're concerned that Quinn's age has given her a slight edge on being prowess in the bedroom and the overall human experience."

My mouth drops a little. "Amazing."

Lexi flips her hair. "I know."

I scan the bar, making sure the few customers scattered about are all set. No one seems to need me, so I turn back to Lexi, arms folded over my chest.

"Well? Do you care to weigh in on this?"

Lexi swallows a mouthful of gin martini. "Oh! You want feedback?"

"Only if it's constructive."

"Babe, I got you." She puts down her drink. "First, I need to understand why any of that makes you nervous, because if I were you, I'd definitely file those factoids in the pros category, and not the cons."

I let out a long exhale and start cleaning the beverage guns. "What if I'm not enough? What if my lack of experience is a turn-off for her? Bedroom stuff, I can learn. But all those extra years of life experience that I *don't* have? There's nothing I can do about that. What if it prevents me from relating to her or her to me?"

Lexi gasps. "I *know* you didn't just question your self-worth, because you

would never do that. Right?”

I meet Lexi’s stern stare and sigh. “I know that I’m enough, but that doesn’t mean I’m enough for *her*.”

My friend places her hands flat on the bar top. “I don’t think it’s about whether or not people are enough for each other so much as it’s about compatibility. If people are compatible and want to be together, they work through their differences. But sometimes, two people just aren’t a good match for one another—their relationship values don’t match or their willingness to figure stuff out doesn’t match or, and that’s the end of the story. That’s my opinion though. I’m sure plenty of people would disagree with me. They’d be wrong, but we’re all entitled to have our differing viewpoints.”

I draw my eyebrows together and study Lexi for a second. “Do you think two people can match even if they’re at different life stages?”

Lexi takes her time pulling the olive off the toothpick with her teeth. She chews thoughtfully. After she swallows, she nods. “Yes, because I believe in balance. So, what? Quinn’s circled the sun more times than you have. Does that mean she’s more skilled between the sheets? Probs. Which by the by is a perk for you. Does that mean she knows more about life than you do? It’s likely. But none of that negates what you can bring to the hypothetical table—*your* sexual competence, the life experiences *you’ve* had and how they’ve shaped you. Ultimately, if the shape of who she is now *matches* the shape of who you are, there’s nothing to worry about or be nervous about. But the only way you’re really going to find out if you two work or not is to be in it with each other. Understand? Also, why are you getting so intense about this woman, who you’ve known for like ten minutes? Did you or did you not just express that you *didn’t* want to get ahead of yourself? Because you’re very much getting ahead of yourself.”

Another blush bites my cheeks. “I know I am. Aargh. I don’t know what’s happening with me when it comes to her. I get in my feels about everything. There’s this thing about her that’s...I can’t explain it, but it makes sense to me. I’m definitely infatuated with her. I have been since day one. You know the feeling?”

Lexi chuckles. “That’s very lesbian of you.”

I laugh quietly. “She’s just unlike any other woman I know.”

A wide smile spreads across Lexi’s mouth. “I want to meet her.”

My mouth dries up. “What?”

“Why do you look like that? What’s wrong with your face?”

I swallow. “I think maybe it’s too soon. Quinn and I aren’t even dating. Like, we haven’t even been on *a* date.”

Lexi’s eyebrows rise to her hairline. “Um. That didn’t stop you from going to third base now, did it?”

My face blisters. “That’s not the same.”

Lexi holds up her drink, but I can see her smirk through the glass. “If you say so.”

“Once Quinn and I have an actual date, we can revisit this topic.”

Lexi polishes off her martini. “Oh, shoot. I forgot to tell you.”

I take her empty glass and wipe down the bar top. “Tell me what?”

“Breanna and I are having a small get-together at our place this coming Wednesday,” she chirps. “It would mean *everything* to us if you came. You can bring a friend if you’d like.”

I scowl at her. “Oh? Why am I just learning about this ‘get-together’ now?”

“Because it completely skipped my mind until now.” There’s a gleam of mischief in her eyes. “There will be food and wine and a charcuterie board—I know how much you love those.”

I *do* love those. But who *doesn’t* love a platter of assorted meats and cheeses?

“Are you bribing me with an appetizer?”

Lexi places her hand over her heart and gives me a stunned expression. “That’s a harsh accusation. I would *never* bribe you with an appetizer. I may, however, bribe you with butterscotch brownies.”

I gape. “No. Your famous butterscotch brownies? The ones you only make for Thanksgiving?”

Lexi smiles. “Yup. Those would be the ones.”

I shake my head. “You’re evil.”

“No. I’m cunning. There’s a difference.”

I lift my hand, about to flip off my best friend, when a party of three walks up to the bar and takes their seats next to Lexi. I point my index finger at her instead.

“Me and you are going to have words later.”

Lexi laughs. “You don’t scare me, Harrington. Seven on Wednesday. Be there.”

I sneer at her. “I’ll think about it.”

“You do that.”



It's 2 a.m. by the time I get home. I quietly close my front door, careful not to wake the elderly couple in the apartment across the hall from mine. I drop my bag on the kitchen counter and shuffle over to the refrigerator to see what I have for food. I open it and immediately frown. I'm long overdue for a trip to the grocery store. I have condiments, an expired carton of eggs, and a container of mixed greens that looks a bit iffy. Usually, I do my food shopping on Thursdays because I have nothing else going on, but this past Thursday, I was too anxious about my potential reunion with Quinn that didn't happen and then on Friday, I needed to recover from the events of Thursday night before my shift at Labrys. And today, I worked a double because Celeste asked me to cover for her.

I sigh, close the refrigerator door, and mosey over to the cabinets. I grab the half-empty box of Cheerios and shove my hand in the bag. While I munch on the stale cereal, I continue to look at my other food options—crackers, a bag of almonds, chicken stock, pasta, Oreo cookies, and peanut butter. I don't have any sauce, so crackers and peanut butter it is.

I toss the cereal in the trash and take the jar of creamy peanut butter and the box of Wheat Thins from the top shelf of the cabinet. I pull a butter knife from one of the drawers and head over the sofa with my makeshift dinner.

I park my ass on the couch, pick up the remote, and turn on this godawful reality television show about lesbians falling in love with each other before they even meet in person that I can't stop watching. It's *that* bad.

I put my feet up on the coffee table and sink into the cushions. I twist the top off the jar of peanut butter and set it aside. Then, I stick the knife inside the jar and use it to scoop out a generous glob of salty goodness. I forego the extra step of spreading it on a cracker and just lick the peanut butter off the knife. *Then*, I eat a handful of Wheat Thins.

Once I begin to feel full, I set the food down on the coffee table by my feet. I watch one lesbian on the show get drunk off a cheap bottle of vodka and have a total meltdown about her ex. I cringe at her choice in alcohol. I roll my eyes and tip my head back on the soft cushion while an ad for another reality show plays.

My phone vibrates on the table. My heart skips a beat and I lurch forward to pick up my cell. It's a text from Quinn. ***Sorry to message you so late. Or, I guess I should say so early. I'm having trouble sleeping. I was swamped***

with work today, or else I would have called. Thanks for the sweet text earlier. I'm wondering if you're free at all tomorrow morning for coffee. There's some stuff I'd like to talk to you about. Nothing bad. Just stuff. Text me back when you can. Goodnight. I mean, good morning.

My stomach plummets to my feet. I re-read the text from Quinn three more times, trying to decipher her tone, but I can't. Fuck. What "stuff" does she want to talk about? She claims it's not bad, but it doesn't sound good either.

What if she changed her mind about going on a date? What if she regrets last night?

My pulse kicks into overdrive, and an ache forms in the center of my head. There's a very real chance I might be sick.

I shut my eyes and take a deep breath.

Don't overreact. I can handle this.

I open my eyes and stare at the screen of my phone. *Think.*

My thumbs hover over the keyboard while I mentally draft a message. And then another.

Aargh! Text her already!

I exhale and begin typing. *Hey you! I can be free tomorrow morning for coffee and conversation. Just tell me where and what time and I'll be there. Sorry you're struggling to sleep.*

I hit send before I can second-guess myself. Moments later, my phone goes off again. I catch my breath and read the incoming message. *Why are you still up at this hour?*

I smile at her text and reply. *I'm unwinding after a long shift.*

Quinn doesn't take long to respond. *How do you like to unwind?*

I fleetingly think of my vibrator and smirk but decide to keep that bit of information to myself. *It depends on the night. Right now, I'm going with reality T.V. How do you unwind?*

I move my legs off the table and onto the couch to sit crisscross as I wait for Quinn's answer, eager to learn as much as I can about her. After the two minutes that feel like forever, she texts back. *I read or watch reruns of Law & Order with Franny. That series might be before your time. I just started to practice meditation too, but I'm not very good at it yet. What's your reality show about?*

I chuckle at her message and write back. *It's about bad choices. I DO know what Law & Order is, silly. I'm not THAT young! Are you*

overanalyzing our age difference again?

Please don't be.

My phone goes off again with Quinn's response. ***Sort of. It's what I wanted to talk to you about tomorrow.***

A frown yanks at the corners of my mouth. I puff out my cheeks and release a lengthy exhale before composing my next text. I want to tread lightly. ***If you want to call, we can talk about it now. No pressure. Is this something I should be worried about? Do you want to stop what we're doing?***

Quinn replies instantly. ***Don't be worried. And no, I don't want to stop unless you want to stop. I'd rather talk about it in person though, because you should try to rest. I probably should too. Okay?***

My muscles relax, but only a little. I shoot Quinn another text. ***I don't want to stop. We'll talk tomorrow. Still worried though. I hope you can fall back to sleep.***

The phone on my screen lights up when Quinn replies. ***There's no need to worry. I promise. I have to open tomorrow and take care of a few things. Can you meet me at the café at 9 a.m.?***

My heart pauses at the thought of spending time with Quinn in just a few hours. It's nerve-wracking, because I don't know what she's going to say, but exciting, because it's her. I send one last text. ***Sounds good. I'll see you then. Goodnight.***

I place my phone against my chest and let my head fall back. ***I am not going to catastrophize. I am not going to catastrophize.***

My cell buzzes, almost tickling my heart. I hold the phone overhead and read the message. It's only a word but it's everything. ***Goodnight.***

Quinn

I close the cash register after the final sale in what was a long line of early-bird customers. It makes a satisfying click, marking the end of my shift. I glimpse at my watch and immediately feel out of breath. Theo will be here soon.

“Are you good here?” I ask Gabby.

My friend rolls her eyes. “Yes. How many times are you going to ask me that? We both know how to run this place solo, or did you forget that?”

I sigh. “I didn’t forget.”

“Okay. Then, go get ready for your hot date.”

A blush sears my cheeks. “It’s not a date. Well, not exactly.”

“Pfft. What are you calling it then?”

I shrug. “A pre-date?”

Gabby arches an eyebrow. “Are you asking me or telling me?”

“Telling you.” My voice is laced with uncertainty.

“Get out of my face before I start flicking coffee beans at your head.”

“Alright. I’m leaving,” I announce, holding up my hands in surrender.

“I mean it,” Gabby takes a fistful of blonde roast beans from the bag on the counter.

“I’m going! I’m going!” I turn around, chuckling, and hustle toward the office to grab my change of clothes.

In under ten minutes, I swap my work jeans for a pair of clean ones, I shrug on a fitted, short-sleeve flannel shirt, and play with my shortish, layered bob until it looks somewhat presentable. For a final touch, I spritz on a bit of fragrance, but it doesn’t do much since the smell of coffee has

entirely seeped into my skin.

I give myself a once-over in the full-length mirror that Gabby insisted we hang on the back of the office door. Then, I brush my clammy palms on the legs of my jeans and make my way through the front of the café, grabbing two black coffees to take with me to the outside seating area.

The temperature has climbed about twenty degrees since sunrise. The humidity isn't as oppressive as it was yesterday, but it's muggy and it explains why all our customers are sitting inside. I place the coffees on one of the three small tables located in the front of the café. The umbrella is already open, successfully blocking the sun from setting the table and chairs on fire. I make a mental note to thank Gabby for talking me into purchasing the largest, most expensive umbrellas that were available at Home Depot. I take a seat and frame my cardboard mug with my hands, keeping my attention on the sidewalk. My stomach is jittery with nervous excitement. I can't wait to see Theo again. Just the thought of her smile gives me goosebumps.

I jump and almost knock my steaming hot beverage over when two hands cover my eyes from behind. Soft hair brushes my cheek and neck. I inhale the sweet scent of strawberries and white violets. My heart's thumping wildly in my throat.

"Waiting for someone?" Theo whispers in my ear and I'm suddenly sweltering, but not from the heat of the sun.

I croak out a clipped laugh. "Hi. You scared me."

Theo removes her hands from my eyes. "Sorry," she breathes against the side of my face and lays a delicate kiss below my left earlobe. I shiver.

I listen to the sound of rubber scuffing the pavement as she rounds the table and sits across from me. The set of her satisfied grin gives me another chill.

"Hi," she says, eyes all aglow, her deep brown irises magnified by winged, black eyeliner and subtle black mascara.

I finally swallow and gently push the extra cup of coffee toward Theo. "Here. I can get you something different if you want."

Theo accepts the drink from me. "No. This is perfect. Exactly what I want. Thank you." She lifts the coffee to her lips and takes a careful sip. "What dark sorcery do you and Gabby work to get this to taste so good? Was this what I was drinking at your house yesterday morning?"

I chuckle. "It is," I confirm. "There's no magic involved. We get the beans locally and we're very specific about our brewing methods."

Theo sets the cup down. “Well, it tastes magical.”

I watch Theo’s mouth when she speaks and bite my tongue, because I know of at least two truly magical things I want to taste, and neither of them is coffee.

“Thank you,” I manage. “I’ll pass along the compliment to Gabby. She’ll be thrilled.”

“Good.” Theo leans back in her seat, which gives me a better view of her outfit—frayed denim, high-waisted shorts that stop mid-thigh and a black, *Purple Rain* T-shirt that I’m certain wasn’t cropped off the store rack. “So, what is it that you wanted to talk about?”

I peel my eyes away from Theo’s exposed midriff to meet her gaze, and she gives me a knowing smile.

“I like your shirt.”

Her lips curl up into a controlled half-grin. “Thanks.”

I clear my throat. “Do you like Prince?”

Theo furrows her brow. “Who’s Prince?”

Oof!

My jaw hangs open.

Theo giggles. “I’m kidding. I know who Prince is.”

I exhale. “Okay, good. But that’s kinda why I wanted to talk to you.”

The V between Theo’s natural eyebrows deepens. “You wanted to talk to me about Prince?”

I chuckle. “No. More like pop culture, for one.”

Theo purses her lips and shakes her head. “You lost me.”

I take a sip of coffee to wet my mouth, but it dries it right out instead. “Um. It was brought to my attention that—because we’re from different decades—we might not get each other’s pop culture references...or just references in general,” I explain. “Is that something you think will bother you?”

Theo sits up and folds her hands on the table. “Does this have something to do with why you asked me about *Law & Order* last night?”

I wince. “Maybe.”

Theo nods slowly. “So, this talk we’re having isn’t ‘sort of’ about our age difference, it *is* about our age difference. Yes?”

I frown when she puts air quotes around ‘sort of.’ I drop my head a little but raise my eyes enough to see her. “I’m sorry. Every time I think I’m over it, something new comes up and then, I get...panicky.” I take a breath and sit

taller. “I like you, Theo. I do. And the more I’m with you, the more I like you.”

Theo smiles weakly. “And that’s a problem, because...?”

I hold onto my cup of coffee as though it’s going to anchor me. “It’s not a problem. That’s not what I’m saying. What I’m trying to say is that the more I like you, the more I care about you and the more I care about you, the more I want what’s best for you. And maybe I’m not what’s best for you. Maybe what’s best for you is someone who played with the same toys as you did as a kid. Or someone who was in high school when you were in high school and listened to the same music as you and had crushes on the same celebrities as you. Does that make sense?”

Theo inhales sharply through her nose. “What happened? What came up to make you...not over our age difference?”

I feel new wrinkles developing on my forehead. “I told you what happened—it was brought to my attention about some of the ways in which we might not be able to relate to each other. That’s all. So, it got me thinking. Again. I just want what’s—”

“Best for me,” Theo supplies. “I heard you.”

I press my lips together. “Okay. That’s what I wanted to share. What are your thoughts?”

Theo sucks in a big breath and coughs when she releases it. “My thoughts. Hmm. *I* think that I’m old enough to decide what’s best for me. That’s not your job. And we haven’t done the whole getting-to-know bit yet, so you don’t know what common interests we share or don’t share. You have to give me a chance if this is going to work.” She cringes and the color leaves her face.

A tiny gasp slips past my lips. “If what’s going to work?”

Theo places her elbows on the table and rubs her temples with her fingers, eyes shut. After a beat, her eyelids flutter open, and she stares at me. “*Us*.” She lowers her arms and begins twirling her thumb ring around. “I like you too. But this thing between us isn’t going to work if you don’t give it a chance. In order to do that, you have to give *me* a chance. You can’t make decisions for me, or assume you know about my life, because of what year I was born in. You have to quit doing that. Learn about me and let me learn about you, and we’ll go from there.” She outstretches her hands on the table. “Does *that* make sense?”

My throat thickens. I reach out and touch my fingertips to hers. “Yeah.

That makes sense. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. But if you're going to keep letting other people make you doubt yourself, I can't be a part of that. Because *I* know that I want to see where this goes between us. I don't care if my friends think you're a cougar. Their opinions won't keep me from you. I guess I want to know that you won't let other people's opinions keep you from me either."

I flush. "I'm definitely feeling you're the elder here right now."

Theo puffs out her chest proudly. "See? What did I tell you? You have to give me a chance. I might surprise you."

I smile back. "You *do* surprise me."

She bites down on her lower lip and hooks her pinky finger around mine. "Well, I'm just getting started."

"Listen, I can form my own opinions, even though it may not seem that way. But I doubt myself sometimes, because..." I blink away the brewing tears. "I didn't use to doubt myself this much. But I wonder if I had—if I had gone over everything a million and a half times, if I had covered all bases and then some—I would've caught it sooner." I go to pull my hand back, but Theo's too quick in grabbing it and holding it tighter. A tear falls loose and I inwardly grimace. "I would have seen with brilliant clarity that me and Simone weren't compatible, not for something like marriage. I could have saved myself from a world of pain. But I missed it." A quiet cheerless laugh stumbles from my lips. "I *did* move past our age difference. Or, so, I thought. Then, I wavered, and I don't want to waver for you. Ugh. My therapist is going to have a field day with this."

Theo offers me a kind smile. "Thanks for sharing that."

"I swear that I'm not a human dumpster fire."

She chuckles. "I don't think you're a human dumpster fire. I think you're a person who got hurt, and who's trying to find a way not to get hurt again."

I frown. "I know that's not real life though."

"No, it's not."

I try to smile back at Theo. "I don't want to hurt you either."

"Yeah. I don't want that either, but I'm willing to take that risk. The question is, are you?"

It happens fast—catching feels. The feelings don't exist and then they smack you clear across the face when you least expect it, but at that point, it's too late. Because, once it happens—once you realize that you feel for someone, that you care about them, that you can't stop thinking about them,

and that you want to be close to them all the fucking time, you're in it. The only thing left to do is decide—do you let yourself embrace it or do you turn away from it? Either way, you jeopardize getting your heart broken, whether it's by a person or regret. That's the cruel irony about it all—you're never really safe.

I watch for a moment how the sun reflects off Theo's amber eyes, highlighting the yellow hues in her irises. It's too late for me. I'd say it's time to decide, but the truth is, I've already decided.

I offer her a sideways smile. This smile is real. "Yes. I'm willing to take that risk."

Theo's chest falls as if she had been waiting to exhale and she gives me this half-smirk that's utterly endearing.

"Are you hungry?" she asks.

I squint at her. "Um. A little, I guess."

"Excellent. Let me take you to brunch. On a date."

"You want to have our date now? I smell like coffee."

"So? I love coffee." She gets up from her seat, still holding my hand, and gives me a tug. "Come on. I know a place."

I laugh. "Alright. I'm coming. I'm coming."



Henry's Diner is a small, quaint restaurant located in a small neighborhood by Tufts University. It's tucked between a tall residential brick building and a bodega. It reminds me of one of those hidden gem places listed in Trip Advisor.

On the inside, the walls are bare, except for a few framed newspaper clippings, raving about the restaurant. Despite a lack of decorative flare, the place has a lot of character. There's an old-school soda shop-like bar with spinning stools in the center, a jukebox in the back, and a wall covered in what appears to be the largest selection of random coffee mugs known to womankind. None of the mugs match. They come in all shapes, styles, and sizes. They range from plain white to multi-colored, graphic mugs. It looks like Etsy threw up, but it works. I can appreciate its peculiar charm.

It reeks of bacon grease and coffee. I don't mind; it's just not a smell I'm accustomed to. I rarely go out for breakfast food anymore.

There's no one at the entrance to greet Theo and me. I glance around, trying to determine if we're supposed to seat ourselves. But Theo casually grabs two menus from the hostess stand and begins walking further into the diner. I follow close behind as though I'm going to get lost or in trouble or both.

The entire bar and most of the tables are occupied, which isn't a shocker since it's a Sunday before noon. So, I'm slightly impressed with how easily Theo finds us a place to sit at a small table to the far right of the bar. We take our seats across from each other and she hands me a sticky menu. I'm immediately grateful for the hand sanitizer in my bag.

Theo skims the menu and places it back on the table. I raise an eyebrow at her.

"Do you already know what you're getting?"

"I sure do."

I have to smile at her enthusiasm. "Do you have the menu memorized or something?"

She grins. "Or something."

I glance down at the options and pick my breakfast staple. I lay my menu on top of Theo's. "Okay. I'm ready to order."

"What are you getting?"

"A bowl of granola with Greek yogurt and fresh fruit. You?"

Theo presses her lips together, eyes smiling with amusement. "Really? That's what you want?"

"Yes. I like granola and yogurt. Why?"

Theo shrugs. "It's just kinda...boring."

I screw up my face in mock agony. "I beg your pardon. It's not boring. It's a classic breakfast item. What are you going to have that's so superior to granola and yogurt."

"Challah French toast with fresh strawberries and whipped cream."

Okay, fair. That sounds much more scrumptious than granola.

"I can't remember the last time I had French toast," I admit.

"Then, it's your lucky day, because I love sharing food."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." Theo leans in closer. "Whatever you do, don't get the coffee. You'll be disappointed," she whispers.

I gasp. "Are you implying that I'm a coffee snob?"

"It wasn't an implication. You *are* a coffee snob. But it's cool. It's a

professional hazard.”

I nod and shoot her a quizzical look. “Are you particular when you go to a bar?”

“No,” she says, point-blank.

I frown. “Oh.”

Our waitress, a young woman who’s most likely a student at one of the surrounding universities, tiredly greets us, takes our order, and vanishes to the kitchen. While Theo and I wait for our food, we people-watch together, making up stories about the other patrons, guessing about their lives. Then, we each pick our top five favorite mugs from the wall. Four of our choices are the same and it makes my stomach do a free fall.

After twenty minutes or so, our waitress returns. She sets our food on the table along with a cup of coffee for Theo and an iced tea for me. She makes sure that she got everything right and then leaves us to our meal.

While I use my spoon to mix my yogurt, granola, and fruit together, I secretly watch Theo. She bobs her head up and down to the beat of the Motown song playing in the diner as she pours maple syrup *all* over her French toast, excluding the dollop of whipped cream that’s on top. She blows on her piping hot beverage, takes a sip, and admires her meal once again before she puts the mug down, picks up a fork, and digs in. She makes certain that there’s French toast, a slice of strawberry, and whipped cream in her first bite, and she hums as she chews. My chest aches from the spectacle. That’s when I know somewhere deep inside my core that there’s a definite chance I could fall in love with her.

I swallow a spoonful of my breakfast and I must say that the homemade granola is quite good.

“How did you find this place?” I ask before sipping on my iced tea.

Theo dabs her mouth with a napkin. “Oh. I, um. I used to hang out with someone who went to Tufts, and I was in the neighborhood one day and sort of stumbled upon it. I’ve been coming here ever since.”

I arch an eyebrow at Theo. “So, you dated someone from Tufts?”

“I wouldn’t call it *dating*.”

“Uh-huh. I see.” I spoon more granola into my mouth.

“Jealous?”

“Of...?”

Theo shrugs. “I don’t know. Most women I’m with get weirded out if I happen to allude to my sexual history.”

I purse my lips to curb a smile. “I expect you to have a history. Besides, I’m not most women.”

Theo shakes her head. “No, you’re not most women.”

I smile back. “Is this where you take all the women you’re ‘with’ to woo them?”

Theo snorts. “It’s not like that. And the only other person I’ve brought here is Lexi.”

My granola immediately takes on a metallic taste. *Wow. Okay. Fail at not getting jealous.*

“She must have been special to you,” I say in my most composed tone.

Theo chuckles. “Lexi’s not an ex. She’s my best friend.”

I exhale into my napkin while I pantomime wiping my mouth. Afterward, I clear my throat and place the napkin down. “Got it. Is she one of the friends who called me a cougar?”

Theo flushes. “Er. It’s possible.”

I laugh. “It’s alright.”

“Please don’t get in your head about it.”

“I won’t.”

“Do you want me to distract you?”

“As tempting as that sounds, I’m good. I don’t need distracting.”

“Whatever you say.” Theo stabs her French toast with her fork and swirls a piece of it around in the puddle of maple syrup on her plate. Then, she dips it in whipped cream and holds the bite of food up to my mouth. “You have to try this.”

I smile. “Are you attempting to distract me?”

“Who? Me? Why would you think that?” She moves the fork even closer. “Just one bite.”

I sigh and part my lips a little. Theo eases the fork inside my mouth, and I take the bite of food off the utensil. She gently pulls the fork back and stares at me while I chew, a wide grin on her face.

This is hands down the best French toast I’ve had in my life.

I swallow and give Theo a smile. “That’s fucking good.”

Theo slams one hand on the table. “Right?”

I chuckle. “Yeah. Damn.”

The corners of Theo’s mouth turn up in delight. “You have some syrup on your…” She swipes her lower lip with her thumb, giving me a demonstration of what to do.

“Oh.” I pick up my napkin and wipe my mouth.

Theo giggles. “No. Still there. More to the left.”

“Ugh.” I pass the napkin over my mouth again.

She snickers. “Your other left.”

My face bursts into flames.

“Here.” Theo gets up from her seat and leans forward. I stop breathing. She places her hand on my hot cheek. “This is the part where I try to distract you,” she murmurs and kisses the edge of my mouth. My stomach flip flops, and I accidentally gasp.

Theo sits back down and licks her lips. “It’s gone now.” She winks at me. *Goddamn.*

Feeling slightly intoxicated, I smile at her. “I’m so distracted that I can’t even remember what you were initially trying to distract me from.”

Theo grins. “Good.” She takes another bite of her food and points to my bowl with her fork. “Are you enjoying your granola?”

“I am. Do you want some?”

“No thank you.”

“If I drown it in maple syrup, would you want some?”

Theo chuckles. “Maybe.”

I drink more of my iced tea. “Thank you for bringing me here on a date.”

Under the table, Theo bumps her foot against mine. “Thank you for coming.” She pushes her plate aside. “What are you up to for the rest of the day?”

I glance at the ceiling. “Not much. I could go for a shower though. What about you?”

“I desperately need to go grocery shopping, but that’s about all I’ve got going on,” Theo tells me. “But I’m not ready for our date to end.” Theo pouts and my eyes automatically fall to her lips.

“Who says it has to end?” I flash her a smile. “I love food shopping.”

Theo’s eyes widen in horror. “You want to grocery shop as part of our date?”

“Why not?”

Theo shakes her head, laughing. “You’re a little strange, but I’m into it. Okay, let’s go.”

“Nice!” I playfully toss my napkin at Theo. “Just think of it as chapter two of our date. It’ll be fun.”

Theo

Quinn insists on steering the cart up and down the grocery store aisles and she drives it as though she's on a mission—standing tall, shoulders back, tight grip on the handlebar. I work *very* hard to not tease her for it, because I don't want her to change a damn thing about her ways. She pushes it slowly, staying at my side. When I stop to grab something off a shelf, she stops too. And when I forget bread and have to backtrack through the store, she doesn't get annoyed. In between our conversations, she whisper-sings the lyrics to the songs playing in the store. She seems to know them all word for word. I don't tell her that the only ones that sound familiar to me are the ones the guest DJ spins once a month on Throwback Thursday. However, when Taylor Swift comes on, we both sing along and neither of us misses a beat.

I glimpse at the list on my phone and point to the shelves lined with crackers. "I need more Wheat Thins," I say and reach over the carriage, fully knowing that my crop top's riding up. She clears her throat, which tells me that she noticed. I smile to myself as I place the box of crackers in the cart next to the jar of peanut butter, cereal, marinara sauce, chicken, and fresh produce.

"Are those your favorite crackers?"

I shrug with my mouth. "Not necessarily. I like all kinds of crackers. I've just been on a kick lately. Why? Do you have a favorite cracker?"

"Triscuits."

"Good to know." I snatch a box of Triscuits off the shelf and toss them in the cart. Quinn blushes.

"Do you eat your crackers plain or with something?" Quinn asks as we

start trekking down the aisle again.

I glance at her from the corner of my eye and smile. “Depends. Sometimes I eat them plain. Sometimes with peanut butter, sometimes with cheese, sometimes with hummus. You?”

“Peanut butter. Always.”

“You never get tired of the same thing?”

Quinn continues driving the cart. “Not really. I’m a creature of habit.”

What I wouldn’t give to be one of her habits.

“There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Some people might think it’s boring,” she says.

We round the corner and start down the next aisle. “Well, I don’t. I think you’re interesting.”

Quinn laughs. “You say that because you’re biased.”

I stop short and latch onto the carriage, forcing Quinn to a complete halt. She knits her eyebrows.

“I *do* say that because I’m biased,” I confess. “I’ve kinda got a thing for you. Is that a problem?”

“Nope.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” I smirk at her and let go of the cart.

Quinn coughs lightly as we proceed down the aisle. “Do, um...do *you* get tired of things easily?”

I give her a side-long glance. “I can commit if that’s what you’re asking.” I look straight ahead but smile. “Once I decide that something is worthy of committing to, I’m all in.”

“Same.”

“Three,” I say.

“I’m sorry? Three what?”

“I’ve been in three committed relationships,” I tell her. “That’s what you were going to ask me next, wasn’t it?”

“Er. Possibly.”

I take a bag of rice from the shelf and dump it in the cart. “My senior year of high school, I met my first love. Boy, was she a heartbreaker. Left me for some sorority chic. Then, I was with someone from my sophomore year of college through graduation. She moved to Seattle for grad school, and I would have gone, but she didn’t want me to. I thought I was going to cry forever over her. But I didn’t. You know how it is. Lastly, there was someone I met right after I turned twenty-five. A year into our relationship, she

proposed, and I said yes. But a few months later, she told me that she ran into an old flame and needed to explore it, so we broke up. None of these relationships were super lengthy per se, but they were deeply meaningful to me.”

Quinn’s silent for a minute. I take a quick peek over just as she begins to speak. “For someone who’s been hurt that much, you seem so unafraid to get close to people.”

“That’s only because I *decided* that I wasn’t going to let a few *unhappy* endings keep me from my potential happily ever after. The decision didn’t happen overnight though. I needed time and therapy first.” I chuckle.

“I get that.”

“I bet you do.” I place my hand over Quinn’s as she steers the cart.

“Thanks for telling me all that.”

“Thanks for listening.”

“So, you believe in happily ever after?” Quinn probes.

“I figure why not? What’s the harm in believing?”

Quinn shrugs. “It could leave you feeling disappointed.”

“It *could*, but that doesn’t mean it *will*.”

Quinn laughs. “Damn. You got me there.”

Oh, but I want you everywhere. Oy vey. Okay, focus. You’re in Market Basket for goodness sake.

I clear my throat. “I have everything I need here, so I’m going to head to the checkout. Do you want my keys so you can wait in the car?”

“No thanks. I’ll wait with you. I’m an excellent bagger,” Quinn says with a smile.

I chuckle. “How can I refuse that?”

“You can’t.”

“Then, I won’t.” I peer over at her. “How do you feel about helping me unpack groceries after this?”

Please come home with me.

Quinn purses her lips, but they cave into another smile that makes my pulse react. “I feel good about it.”

Hell fucking yes!



“Where do you want this?” Quinn holds up the box of cereal I just bought.

I *could* tell Quinn that it goes in the cabinet that’s to the left of her head, but instead I go up to her, press the front of my body against her backside, and wrap my arms around her from behind. I listen to her quick inhale. She slowly lowers the box of cereal she was holding mid-air and dismisses it on the counter.

I rest my chin between her shoulder blades. She smells like coffee and fresh laundry. “I’m sorry, did you ask me a question?”

Quinn’s body shakes ever so slightly when she chuckles. “I can’t help you put away your groceries if I don’t know where anything goes.”

“You don’t have to help me with the groceries. That was a ploy. I needed an excuse to get you to come over.”

Quinn gradually turns around within my loose grip. She looks into my eyes, reaches up, and tucks a long curl behind my ear. I get weak in the knees.

“You don’t need excuses to spend time with me,” she says quietly.

“I know, but...I don’t know. I wasn’t ready to say goodbye. I also don’t want to monopolize your day either.”

Quinn presents me with one of her lopsided, heart-stopping smiles. “Do you hear me complaining?”

I bat my lashes. “Well, no.”

“No,” she reasserts in a low voice.

“Okay. I’ll remember that.” I lick my lips. “I’ve been trying really hard all day to *not* be distracted by memories of you with a lot less clothes on.” I touch my palm to her cheek. “Pretending that I don’t know how dizzying your kisses are or how warm your skin gets when you’re turned on.”

Quinn’s jaw flexes and her gaze flits to my mouth. *So hot.*

“How’s that working out for you?” she whispers.

I trace the outline of her face with my fingertips and shake my head but don’t say anything.

“I can relate,” Quinn chokes out.

“Can you?”

“Yes.”

“What should we do about that?”

Quinn’s cheeks heat up beneath my hand. Her eyes search my face for a moment. “Everything.”

My stomach tumbles and I smile at her. “We can do that. Well, not

everything. Not right this second, because we're waiting, but we can do everything else."

"Like before?"

"Yeah. Like before." I brush Quinn's dark, side-swept bangs to the side and slide my hand to the back of her neck. She slips her arms around my waist and holds me close. We stare at each other in some kind of blissed-out state, and I lose time, admiring her subtle smile lines. But the second her thumbs graze the skin between the fringe of my shirt and the waistband of my shorts, I'm pulled back to the moment, awake to her touch. "That tickles."

"In a good way or a bad way?"

I tangle my fingers in her hair and coax her closer, my heart beating something untamed. I keep my eyes open to watch hers grow darker. My insides quiver. I glance the tip of my nose off the tip of Quinn's and ghost my lips over hers. "In the best way," I murmur and kiss her within an inch of her life. I swallow her soft gasp and need bubbles up in my belly.

Quinn kisses me back, her satiny lips artfully manipulating mine, making my body feel all kinds of unstable. She seeks out my tongue with hers, but only for a taste, leaving me wanting. I sigh and press my mouth hard against hers. I lick and bite her swollen lips in a chaotic cadence that she surrenders to with a moan. It makes my head spin. After some serious taunting on my part, Quinn's lips chase mine for another kiss and I let her catch me, forgetting how to breathe when her tongue caresses mine in a series of measured circles and teasing samples. I instinctively match her movements. I pull at her hair for more—more of her mouth, her lips, her tongue, her closeness. Quinn deepens our kiss and I lose my footing, but she presses the heel of her palm to the small of my back, stabilizing me. I secure my arms around her neck and crush my lips even further into hers, a silent plea for her to trust that my desire rivals hers. She works my mouth with more avidity, and I return the favor. Her breath becomes mine. I'm on fire, basking in the heat between us. I won't ever recover from this kiss.

Through short, serrated inhaleds and exhaleds, Quinn whispers, "I want you." And her words burn my lungs like breathing on a cold, winter's morning—jolting my body awake.

Just as I'm about to respond, something wet rolls down my cheek. I gingerly uncouple my lips from hers, draw my face back an inch, and stare into Quinn's misty eyes. My stomach turns rock hard.

"What is it?" I gulp.

She blinks, releasing more tears. “What’s what?”

I furrow my brow. “You’re crying.”

Quinn narrows her gaze. “I am?”

“Yes.” I smile and use my thumbs to dry beneath her eyes. “Is everything alright?”

Quinn blushes. “Everything’s great. I, uh. I’m just feeling a lot right now.”

“Do you want to stop?”

Quinn rests her hands on my hips. “I don’t want to stop. I want to feel.”

My heart takes a header into my belly and my flesh itches for her touch. “I can make you feel more if you’ll let me.”

The light pink in Quinn’s cheeks turns to scarlet. “What do you mean?”

“I mean the water pressure in this building is fantastic.” My voice is thick with lust. “Why stop at chapter two when there’s a perfectly good opportunity for a chapter three right here, waiting to happen?” I motion with my head to the bathroom door on our left.

Quinn audibly swallows. “Are you suggesting that we—?”

“Uh-huh. You *did* say you wanted to shower.”

“I did say that.”

I lower my arms and take Quinn’s hands in mine. I step back, turn around, and lead her to the bathroom in silence.

The sunlight is still streaming through the small window above the tub, casting a warm glow against the pale blue tiles from nineteen eighty-nine.

I release Quinn from my grip and turn on the shower. I wiggle my fingers under the stream of water until it’s hot, but not overly so. In little to no time, the mirror begins to fog up from the steam.

I kick off my sneakers and do a slow spin on my heels to face Quinn. She’s already staring at me—incandescent eyes, a taut jaw, and slightly parted lips. My stomach quakes.

I’m ready to make my move, but I give Quinn a minute in case she wants to—

Quinn nabs me by the hem of my shirt and my breath catches. *God, yes.* I lift my arms and she tears my top off. Her gaze drops to my lacy balconette bra and lingers for a moment too long, so I reach behind myself and unhook it. It falls to the floor. She gasps.

“Your turn,” I say.

Quinn raises her eyes to mine. “You have no business being this sexy.”

I partially grin. “Less talking, more stripping.”

Quinn shakes her head, lips curled into a demure smile. Leisurely, she begins to unbutton her short-sleeved flannel shirt, her eye contact game strong as she undresses herself. My belly swoops this way and that way. When her wireless plunge bra is in full view, my knee-jerk reaction is to lunge forward and rip off *all* her clothes, but I fight to keep myself rooted in place. She tosses her flannel aside and arches an eyebrow at me.

I purse my lips. “I think you can do better.”

Quinn nods and slips out of her boots. She unzips her jeans, and my brain runs circles around itself. She wriggles out them, leg by leg, and throws them on the floor next to her shirt. I bite down on my lip, admiring the way her snug boxer briefs shape her thighs and ass.

“Better?” Quinn asks, closing in on me.

No.

The tile is cold and damp on my back. I can’t tell anymore if I’m sweating because of the steamed-up bathroom or from the fierce longing boiling within me.

Quinn’s eyes lock on mine as she places her arms on either side of me, trapping me against the wall. Her mouth is a breath away from mine. I swallow and answer her question. “No.”

She briefly kisses me on the lips and all the air in the room gets caged in my lungs. “Do you think it’s the best idea for us to be naked together when sex is off the table?”

“I’m not really thinking, and I’m kind of offended that you are. You know I’m topless, right?”

Quinn flushes. “I’m aware.”

“How aware?” I challenge.

Quinn takes one of her hands off the wall and uses the backs of her fingers to outline my breasts. I tremble. “Very aware,” she says quietly.

I cradle one side of Quinn’s face with my hand and urge her closer. “It’s fucked up, the way you make me feel.”

“Same,” she murmurs and kisses me full on the mouth, stealing my breath, leaving me delirious. This kiss is dripping with need. I can taste it, sweet on my tongue. My lips hurt and my jaw aches, and I never want it to end.

My hands find their way to the closure of Quinn’s bra. I unfasten it and slide the straps down her shoulders. Her breathing grows heavier, faster. I

brush my thumbs over her nipples, and she groans, breaking our kiss. I lull my head back against the wall, panting. I'm so aroused, it's like my body is crying for her.

All of a sudden, Quinn's mouth is on my neck and she's cupping my breasts, squeezing them. I moan and tip my head to the side. She licks my pulse point. I grunt and turn my face back to hers. I lock her in a kiss and blindly pull at the waistband of her boxers. She helps me take them off. *Jesus, I want to touch her. Maybe I can just...*

I rest my hands on her hips and slide them downward to torment her but also because I'm a sadist. Immediately, Quinn laces her fingers through mine and pins my hands to the wall. My heart drums loudly between my ears. I smile into the kiss.

"Trust me," I mumble against her lips.

Quinn runs her short fingernails along my sides. I jerk from the sensation but go still when she hooks her fingers in the band of my cheeky underwear and starts to drag them down. Once they reach my knees, I use my feet to remove them completely. Now, we're both fully naked and I ache a little bit everywhere. It's a sweet form of torture when Quinn presses her body flush against mine. I shut my eyes tight and see flashes of white. Frantically, I grab her hand and place it on my outer thigh. She digs her fingernails into my skin and lightly scratches me in an up-and-down motion. I catch her bottom lip between my teeth and pull gently.

"Fuck," I growl and seize Quinn by the wrist.

I can feel her grin. "Trust me," she murmurs, mimicking me.

I breathe out a laugh and place my palms on her bare chest. "I would just like to state for the record that I would give my left kidney for you to sit on my face right now."

Quinn's cheeks burn brightly. "Oh. Um. I've never..." her voice tapers.

I open my eyes wide. "Never?"

Quinn shakes her head. "No."

I exhale through puckered lips. "Well, if you ever want to change that, you let me know."

"I might want to change that."

I smirk. "Okay." I touch my lips to hers. "I can make that happen someday. But right now, we're going to shower together."

I cautiously step inside the tub, quickly tie my hair up into a messy bun, and offer Quinn my hand. She gives me a once-over, grabs onto me, and joins

me in the shower.

“You’re gorgeous,” she tells me, and my chest inflates.

“That’s generous.” I squeeze some shower gel onto my loofah and begin lathering up Quinn’s body with the foaming soap.

She laughs. “You’re going to wash me?”

“Yeah, I’m going to wash you. Do you really think I’d pass up the chance to touch your sudsy body?” I grin.

Quinn plucks the loofah from my hand, and I yelp in protest. She wipes it across my chest, giggling. I stare down at the zigzag trail of white foam on my front side then look up at her.

“If you’re going to wash me, you could at least do it the right way,” I say.

Quinn raises an eyebrow. “What way is that?”

I wind my arms around her waist and pull her closer. Her slippery, soapy breasts rub against mine. She inhales loud enough to cut through the sound of the shower. I drape my arms over her shoulders and grind my body into hers.

“Something along these lines, I think.” I smile at her.

Quinn takes another breathy exhale. “That works for me.”

“Does it?”

She nods. “It does,” she murmurs and kisses me.

And that one kiss turns into a thousand kisses and then a thousand more until we’re making out in the shower, water splashing against our faces, our wet bodies colliding and slapping together, and we don’t stop, not even when our skin begins to prune.

Quinn

Staring at me, Theo props her elbow up on a pillow and rests her head in her hand, causing the sheet to pull down, uncovering her body from her neck to her waist. Her hair is still tied up, but curly wisps of it have long since fallen out of her bun since our shower together. If she could glow any brighter, I'd go blind. She smiles.

“Okay, so we've covered kindergarten, elementary school, high school, college, and your dating history,” Theo recaps. “What else?”

I flip over on my side and mirror the way she's lying on the mattress to see her better. “What else do you want to know?”

Theo reaches out and strokes my face. “You still haven't told me about your family.”

I take an exaggerated breath. “I'll tell you, but it's not super interesting,” I warn.

“But it's about you, so it's interesting to *me*,” she retorts.

I balloon out my cheeks and exhale. “Okay. You asked for it. Well, I was adopted. I'm an only child. I don't know any of my biological relatives by choice. I met my birth mother once when I was eighteen. She came looking for me. She wanted to explain why she gave me up. I think she wanted me to forgive her, which I did, even though I didn't. It wasn't my favorite conversation ever. She was nice, I'll give her that. Nothing like I had imagined. We have the same eyes, I remember that. Anyway, we don't stay in touch.

I'm very close with my parents—my adoptive parents, that is, and the extended family I was adopted into. Mom is a bit woo-woo, and Dad's a

retired high school teacher. It's weird, how opposite they are, but they're happy. They're really great. Over-protective and neurotic, but great. They've always been supportive of me. The divorce was tough on them. They hate when they can't fix something that's broken in my life. I'm sure that my anxiety was a gift they passed down to me. But I love them just the same. And there you have it."

Theo whistles lowly. "How do *not* think that's interesting? Did it give you any closure to know why your birth mother surrendered you? Is it alright that I ask that?"

I shrug. "Yeah, you can ask. I didn't get closure, not really. According to her, she wasn't ready to be a parent. It's fine though. If she hadn't left me, I wouldn't have ended up with my parents."

Theo frowns. "It's not really 'fine,' but it does sound like you have wonderful parents. I'm glad you have them."

"Me too."

Theo shakes her head. "There was so much to that story. Are you okay after telling me?"

I smile. "I'm okay."

"Now that I know that, it's all coming together."

I furrow my brow. "What is?"

"You and your big feelings about everything."

I snort. "I know. I'm a therapist's wet dream."

Theo blurts out a laugh. "That's not what I meant. There's a lot there, that's all. It's part of your story, and I appreciate you sharing it with me." She gently tugs on my earlobe. "I like learning about you."

I bite the inside of my cheek. "It wasn't too much?"

Theo leans in and kisses the tip of my nose. "No. It was the perfect amount of you."

My throat narrows and I struggle to swallow. I smile, because it's all I can do.

Theo plays with the long chain hanging from my neck and says in a hushed tone, "You're sexy when you're being vulnerable."

My cheeks grow warm. "I'm always vulnerable."

"Mm-hmm. I know. That's my point." One corner of her mouth quirks up.

My heart cramps. I just look at her, spellbound. "I don't know what to say,"

“You don’t have to say anything,” Theo tells me and begins tracing the lines around my mouth with her fingertip. “I’m obsessed with your face.”

My blush reaches new heights. “You have a nice face too. Definitely one of the better faces I’ve seen in all my forty-two years on this earth.”

Theo brushes a piece of my hair back. “I’m sure you say that to all the girls.”

I purse my lips. “Nope. Just you.”

Theo flushes. “I’m flattered.”

“You should be. It’s a huge compliment. I don’t just go around, lying naked in bed with every pretty face I see.” I smirk.

“I should hope not, because neither do I.” Theo smiles softly and runs her fingertips over the dip in my waist, my hip, my ass. My stomach does a cartwheel. “To be completely honest, I’ve never done anything like what we’re doing before.”

“Me either.” I study the freckles sprinkled across her nose and cheeks and then meet her eyes. “What *are* we doing?”

Theo’s hand pauses on my hip. “What do you want us to be doing?”

I reach down, take her hand in mine, and bring it to my lips. I place a small kiss on her knuckles. “Dirty, dirty things to each other.”

Theo visibly swallows and her cheeks rouge. “I want that too. You don’t even know.”

I smile. “Oh, I think I know.”

“It’ll happen someday,” she muses.

My heart starts beating like mad, nearly splintering the walls of my chest. *This is the moment. Just tell her.*

“Quinn?” Theo frees her hand from mine and rubs my bare shoulder. “Hey. Where did you go?”

I shut my eyes and shake my head. “Sorry. I’m here.” I look right at Theo. “Um. There’s something else I want to be doing. Like, with you.”

Theo’s eyes glisten. She wraps one of her legs around one of mine and inches closer. “Keep talking,” she urges in a sultry voice.

I exhale shakily. “During these last few years alone, I’ve done a lot of growing, a lot of healing. There’s more work for me to do. There’s always more work. My therapist says divorce is a trauma, and I’m still learning what that means and how to deal with it and I will in time. And I’m not asking you to go on that journey with me. That would be a major ask, and I wouldn’t do that to you. I would just ask that you trust my process, that you trust that I

know where I'm at, because I'm at a place where it feels good to be near you. Almost unbearably good. It's a new place for both of us, I realize that. And it's a place that I want to explore with you. See, I have a thing for you too, so I guess what I'm trying to say here is that I was wondering if you would date me. Not just go on dates with me, but actually *date me*, date me. Going on dates is all fine and good and we can keep doing that, but you're the only person I want to be going on dates with. If you're not there, I understand. Let me know and I'll drop it. So, yeah. In conclusion, that's what I want us to be doing—I want us to be dating.”

Oh, fuck. What did I just do? Stevie, it's me, Quinn. If you can hear me, help.

Theo stares at me, wide-eyed, her mouth slightly agape. “Did you rehearse that?”

I balloon out my cheeks and breathe out slowly. “Parts of it, yes. But not all of it.”

Her eyebrows lift and she partially smiles. “That was...wow.”

I chew on the inside of my cheek. “Too wow?”

Theo sidles up to me even more. She uses her index finger to draw a line from my temple to my chin. “No. It was the perfect amount of wow.” She drags her forefingers along the length of my neck. “You're making it very hard for me to *not* get ahead of myself when it comes to you.”

Her light touch creates sparks all over my flesh. I gulp. “Does that mean you'll date me?”

Theo sighs. “I want to.”

My stomach sinks. “But?”

Theo's dark brown gaze searches mine. “But I need to know you won't waffle again because of our age difference. I can't do waffling. You either want to date me or you don't. Because if we date, people are going to have opinions and some of them might be shitty. I don't want to be worrying about some narrow-minded asshats getting to you.”

I reach up and twirl one of her loose strands of hair around my finger. “No more waffling.”

Theo briefly closes her eyes to my touch. “No more,” she repeats quietly and blinks up at me. She angles her face so that her mouth is level with mine. “I think we could be good together if you can just let it happen,” she says, mapping out my mouth with her thumb, gently prying my lips apart. “Can you do that?”

The heat of her words graze my face. My blood starts pumping faster. “Yes.”

“Good.” Theo sweeps her velvety lips across mine and kisses me hungrily.

My senses immediately get wrapped up in her. She’s all that I can smell and feel and taste. I forget about yesterday and tomorrow. I forget about where I’ve been and where I’m going. I forget about the scars on my heart and the knife I just handed her.

I once read an article on *Psych Central*. It was about a study that set out to determine how quickly people can fall in love. The findings were simple: “There is no absolute rule.”

If there were an absolute rule, I’m sure I’d forget it to the fervency of Theo’s kiss.



It’s late by the time I get home from Theo’s to feed Franny and make myself dinner. Theo offered to cook for me immediately after discovering that I don’t really know my way around a kitchen and rely heavily on frozen dinners, instant rice, cans of soup, and takeout. I turned down the offer—accepting a raincheck for another night—only because the more time I spend with her, the harder it is to leave. And I need to know not so much that I can leave, but that I’ll be alright if *she* leaves. My therapist would call this a trauma response. I call it self-preservation.

There’s no longer a *chance* of me falling in love with Theo. I *am* falling in love with her. It’s actively happening. I can feel it on a cellular level, in the hollow of my bones, and in the recesses of my mind.

In the course of a day, my feelings for Theo somehow grew exponentially. I recognized something over coffee and then again at brunch, but what the fuck? How did I get *here*? Did this really happen in just in the span of twelve hours, or did it start a year ago on a specific summer night inside of a bar? A dumpling restaurant? On a bench in the center of the square? Or days ago, kissing in a thunderstorm? Cuddling on the sofa?

Regardless, how is this possible? It’s so soon...but also, there is no absolute rule.

Oh, right. I know how it’s possible—because I’m me and Theo’s, well,

Theo. And how could I *not* fall in love with her? Between watching her have an orgasm over French toast and becoming so familiar with the patterns of her breathing, the design of her body, and the layers of color in her irises, I didn't stand a chance.

I just want to embrace it and be cautious at the same time. Is that a thing...cautiously falling in love?

No. It's not a thing.

Realistically, I know that falling in love requires throwing caution to the wind. It's about letting go and allowing everything to happen. *I can do that. I can let it happen.*

Can't I?

For the possibility of there being a me and Theo? Yes, I can.

If only there were a way to fall but control the speed of the descent. Or to fall but have jurisdiction over where you land. That's not how falling in love works though. It sort of sneaks up on you and rips the rug from under your feet, causing you to plummet into the unknown without a parachute.

The last time I fell in love was supposed to be just that—the *last* time I fell in love. I never thought I'd be back here again. Most of all, not after a divorce. Which begs the question—once a relationship doesn't make it and your heart has been broken into fifty million pieces and scattered across the Greater Boston area, is there a right time to fall in love with someone new? You know, once you're finally whole?

The concept of time doesn't seem to give a rat's ass about the answer to this question. I suppose if it did, that would be an absolute rule. *Ugh!*

Being older and wiser, one would think that I could rationalize this by now—the dopamine, the oxytocin, the adrenaline, the norepinephrine—and put a stop to it. I have the understanding to know it's chemical. But having the facts doesn't make the feeling less real or less visceral. And when I'm with Theo, when I hear her laugh or see her smile, I don't want to stop anything.

Christ, I'm in so much trouble.

But what nobody tells you is that falling in love is like riding a rollercoaster with your hands in the air, hoping the safety bar won't give out. It's exhilarating. However, it only takes one extremely bumpy ride on a poorly constructed rollercoaster to scare you off to the carousel for the rest of your life.

That said, have you ever met someone who's never ridden a rollercoaster

because they're afraid? Part of you sympathizes because you feel like they're missing out, and yet, part of you gets it. Who would willingly suspect themselves to such a risky experience?

Well, who *wouldn't*, especially if it feels good when it's happening? Especially if it has a kind spirit, plush lips, soft skin, and a touch that sets your world on fire—a fire impossible to contain?

So. Much. Trouble.

But I'm forty-fucking-two-years old now. I've learned about fire prevention and how to use a fire extinguisher, because I know fires are dangerous. So, what am I doing?

I'm falling in love, that's what I'm doing. I'm putting my carefully pieced-together heart on the line, knowing full well that there is a chance it could end up horribly damaged, even though it comes with explicit instructions to handle with care. Instructions I wrote out and revised thousands of times since the day Simone left.

But caution and wind and rollercoasters.

It doesn't make sense, love. The only way I can almost make sense of it is this—how many times in a lifetime do you look into someone else's eyes and think, “this is where I want to be.”? Because that's what I'm thinking when I stare into Theo's beautiful, brown irises.

I could build a fortress around my heart, but it wouldn't do me any good, it wouldn't make a difference. My heart would still ache for Theo. It's either going to ache for her or because of her. That's the gamble.

What it all comes down to is this—if you survive the fall, if your safety bar doesn't come loose, the reward is always going to be greater than the risk.

Because the biggest lesson I've learned—the lesson Simone taught me, the lesson I'll carry around until my last breath—is that no heart can be irreparably broken. It only feels that way for however long it needs to feel that way. Then, someday, you notice that you didn't wake up that morning crying, or that you listened to a song from start to finish without feeling as though your insides were being carved out. Healing is its own ride, like falling in love. It's happening all along, under the radar until BOOM. You arrive.

You're at home in your pajamas, making macaroni and cheese out of a box, smiling to yourself about a girl, while your cat eats her kibble on the floor by your feet, and all is right in the corner of your universe.



I lean back in my office chair and kick my feet up on the desk while I read our latest business report. At the desk diagonal from mine, Gabby takes off her glasses, sets them down on a stack of papers, and rubs her forehead.

I peek over the papers in my hand. “What’s wrong? This is good. Sales have risen since we hosted that speed dating event a few weeks ago.”

“Nothing’s wrong. I’m stressed is all.” Gabby gives me a helpless look.

I put my feet down and sit up straighter. “About what? Is it about Luke? I know this is his first time acting as shift supervisor, but he’ll be fine, and we’re right here if he needs anything. He only gets flustered when George Michael comes in.”

Gabby chuckles. “I think we all get a little bit flustered when George Michael comes in.”

I smile. “True.”

“No, it’s not about Luke though. He’s great,” she says. “It’s about Taryn.”

I furrow my brow. “Who’s Taryn?”

Gabby sighs. “I may or may not be seeing someone.”

I grin and put the papers down on the desk. “You’re seeing someone? Why am I just finding out about this now?”

Gabby winces. “Because she hasn’t been in my life that long. We met on an app. It was supposed to be a casual hookup, but the sex was really good. So, we met up again. Then, we went out for a drink, and it spiraled. We’ve been on approximately two legit dates with date number three right around the corner. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t think it would get to this point—you know, when you’re talking on the phone about how your day was and following each other on social media? So, this morning, she texted me to tell me that she’s told her closest friends about me.”

I purse my lips and look at Gabby expectantly. “And this is a stressor because...?”

Gabby lifts her head and meets my gaze. “Because then, I went poking around on her Instagram account this morning to try to get the vibe of her friends. Do they look like the kind of people I want to know about me? Or should I Google restraining orders? Stupid shit. And in one of her pictures, she’s standing next to none other than Simone.”

My stomach does a nasty twist and my mouth goes dry. “What?”

Gabby squinches up her face. “There’s more.”

My heartbeat becomes sluggish. “There’s more?”

Gabby frowns with a nod. “There’s more.” She gets up from her chair and takes a seat on the edge of my desk. “But if you don’t want to know, I’m not going to tell you the details.”

My limbs shake. “Why are you telling me this much?”

Gabby clears her throat. “Because I like Taryn, but I won’t associate with anyone who associates with your ex without running it by you first. Not knowingly. You’re my family. My loyalty is with you.”

I go to swallow but end up coughing. “I want to know.”

Gabby reaches out and places her hand on top of mine. “In the caption, it mentioned something about how Simone is going to be Taryn’s sister-in-law...”

My friend’s lips continue to move, but an electrical cracking noise is the only thing I can hear. When Gabby furrows her brow at me, I shake my head and blink. “I’m sorry. I missed the second part of what you were saying.”

Gabby squeezes her grip on me. “Are you sure you want me to repeat it?”

No.

“I’m sure.”

Gabby inhales and proceeds. “I immediately texted Taryn to ask her about it and I told her who you were and that there might be a conflict of interest. She explained to me that her sister and Simone are...well, they’re...aargh... they’re engaged, honey. I’m sorry.”

I gag, pull my hand away from Gabby’s, and place it over my chest. Gabby grimaces.

“Can I see the picture?”

“No. Nope. Uh-uh. We both know no good will come of that.”

“Right. You’re right.” I drive my palm further into my chest and rub harder. “Fuck,” I mutter.

“Are you okay?” Gabby asks.

I shudder from the tangy flavor in my mouth. “I’m not okay, but I will be. Give me a sec.”

“Do you want some water?”

“Do we have anything stronger than water around?”

“No, we don’t.”

“Damn.” I blow out a breath. “We should keep something around from now on.”

“Definitely. I’ll put it on the list.” Gabby leans over and touches my shoulder. “I don’t know if it helps, but you’re way hotter than the fiancé.”

I snort. “That helps, thank you.”

Gabby offers me an affectionate smile. “I was torn. I didn’t know what to do with that information. It didn’t feel right to keep it from you, but I didn’t want to hurt you.”

I quickly catch a falling tear from beneath my eye. “I knew she had moved on, but I didn’t think it was this serious. Finding this out shouldn’t hurt me. Not after all the healing I’ve done.”

“Scar tissue isn’t that different from the rest of our skin. It can still be cut open, it can still bleed,” Gabby says. “You made a promise to each other that was meant to last a lifetime, but she left. That shit stays with you. It’s going to come up sometimes, but each time, it’ll sting a little less than the time before. So, go easy on yourself.”

I stare up at the ceiling. The fluorescent lights shine into my watery eyes, making everything blurry. When I’m sure that I won’t cry, I refocus on Gabby.

“I’m falling in love with Theo,” I blurt.

Gabby’s mouth falls open. “No fucking way. Really? I guess I should’ve seen that coming, because I know you and I’ve *seen* her.” My friends snickers. “That’s great, Quinn. I’m happy for you for allowing yourself to go there again.”

I scrunch up my face. “But it’s all the more reason why Simone’s engagement shouldn’t affect me, and yet it does.”

Gabby scoffs. “Were you even listening to my monologue? It makes total sense that it has an impact on you. You’re not a robot. You’re a human being with feelings. And let’s face it—ya got a lot of feelings. Just because you’re not in love with Simone anymore doesn’t mean that her engagement isn’t going to rattle you.” She tips her head. “You’re *not* in love with her anymore, right?”

“No,” I say reflexively. “Absolutely not. It’s been a long time since I’ve felt that way about her.”

“Okay. So, just feel your feelings and move through it.”

I nod laggardly. “Right. And what about you?”

“What about me?”

“You like this woman, this Taryn person. I don’t want you to not pursue anything with her because of me.”

Gabby crinkles her nose. “I don’t know. If things got serious, I might end up being invited to Simone’s future wedding, and I can’t. I won’t.”

My lips turn downward. “I don’t want you to *not* date someone because of *my* past. We’re lesbians—relationship overlapping is part of the deal.”

Gabby chuckles. “Well, it’s a raw deal,” she says. “I appreciate you giving me your blessing, but I don’t feel super comfortable with just how woven these tangled webs are.”

A knock on the office door causes Gabby and me to look away from each other. Luke is standing in the doorway, his shaggy brown hair covering half of his face.

“What’s up?” Gabby asks him.

“Um. Sorry to interrupt, but there’s someone here to see you, Quinn,” Luke informs me. “Should I tell her that you’re in the middle of something?”

My heart springs into my throat. “To see *me*?”

Luke furrows his brow and scratches the side of his head. “Uh. Yeah.”

“Long blonde hair? Big brown eyes? About ye high?” Gabby asks, holding her hand several inches above her head, smiling.

“How did you know?” Luke asks.

“Lucky guess.” Gabby winks at him. “Tell her Quinn will be right there.”

“Okay,” he says and scurries off.

I stare at Gabby. “We’re not done going over the reports.”

“Take five. Go say ‘hi’ to your girl. The reports will still be here.”

I rise to my feet. “Are you going to take a break too?”

Gabby groans under her breath. “I suppose I’ll use this time to text Taryn and tell her that I’m not interested in dating her.”

I pout. “But you are.”

“No. I was before I found out that she’s about to be related to your ex-wife,” Gabby explains. “I can’t do it.”

“But, Gabs—”

My best friend flicks her wrist, waving off my words before I even say them.

“You can’t change my mind,” she tells me. “Now, go. Theo’s waiting. Have you no manners?” Gabby smiles at me.

“I’m going.”

Theo

Quinn emerges from somewhere in the back of the café. She greets me with a smile, slightly blushing, but the rims of her eyes are red.

“Hey. Hi. What are you doing here?” she asks quietly.

“I have a staff meeting before my shift starts and thought I’d stop in for some caffeine first.” I pause and give her a coquettish grin. “And maybe I wanted to see you, because I can’t seem to get enough of you.”

To put it mildly.

The rosy color highlighting Quinn’s cheekbones grows a shade darker. “The feeling is mutual.”

Swoon. “I’m glad. So, how’s your day going?”

I shrug. “Gabby and I are buried in paperwork.”

“Is that why you were crying?”

Quinn flinches. “What? No. What do you mean?”

“Your baby browns are puffy.”

Quinn snorts with laughter. “Please don’t with the baby browns.”

I offer her a soft smile. “Fine. But for real.” I kick the toe of my sneaker against the toe of her boot. “Why do you look upset?”

“It’s nothing.” Quinn gestures to the coffee in my hand. “Next time you’re here, let me know. I’ll take care of your order. And we still have to give you your change.”

I arch an eyebrow. “I appreciate the coffee offer and I’m not worried about the change. Stop deflecting. If something made you cry, then it’s not nothing. So, what’s going on? You can talk to me.”

Quinn shakes her head. “I got some unexpected news, had a moment, and

got over it. There's not much else to say about it really."

I press my lips into a hard, thin line and give her a skeptical look. "Okay. Well, if you ever want to share details, I'm here."

"I know. Thank you." Quinn glances skyward and releases a long exhale. I wait. Eventually, she meets my gaze again. "It's Simone."

My eye twitches. "Oh."

Oh? Really? Surely, I can do better than that.

I continue. "Uh. Is she alright?"

Quinn shifts her weight to the left. "I don't know. I guess. It seems like she is. She's getting married. Again. Gabby saw it on Instagram."

"Ugh. Social media is the worst." I inwardly cringe. "Sorry. Word vomit. It's just that I deleted almost all my socials a couple of years ago because they were causing me unnecessary stress. Too much drama. But that's me. Not that any of that matters," I ramble. *Christ, help me.* "You know what? I'm going to shut up now."

Quinn smiles weakly. "No, you're fine."

No, really, I'm not though. I'm a goddamn mess. You have crying face and it's got something to do with your ex-wife. So, yeah, no. I'm not fine.

I take a composing breath.

"Is that what you were crying about?" I ready myself for her answer.

"It wasn't exactly crying. I shed a few tears. That's all."

My chest tightens. "But you were upset about it."

Quinn purses her lips thoughtfully. "Yes and no. I was mostly surprised by it."

"If you still...you know...have feelings for her, you can tell me." I hold my breath, steeling myself again.

Quinn squints at me. "No. God, no. I don't still have feelings for her. I wouldn't be with...I mean, we wouldn't be dating if that were the case. And that's not the case." She grabs my free hand. Her palms are warm. "I promise that that's not the case."

I become very interested in the floor. "You're allowed to still—"

Quinn places her fingers beneath my chin, raises my face to hers, and brushes her lips across mine. My breath catches in my throat. She pulls back slowly and smiles.

"But I'm not still," she whispers. "Okay?"

Fuck, have I got it bad for her.

My cheeks blister. I blink rapidly and clear my throat. "Okay."

“Good.” Quinn uses her thumb to point behind herself. “I should get back to work.”

“Yeah. I need to get going too. I don’t want to be late for this meeting.”

“When can I see you again?”

I bite my lower lip to keep from grinning. “Are you free tomorrow night?”

Quinn smiles so big, it reaches her eyes. “I can make myself free.”

“How about you take me up on that raincheck for dinner at my place?”

“Done.”

I tug at her shirt. “Alright. It’s a date.”

“What time should I be there?”

“Hmm. Six?”

“Six is good,” Quinn says. “What should I bring?”

“Just yourself.”

“I can do that. What should I wear?”

“Nothing.”

Quinn flushes. “I walked right into that, didn’t I?”

“You did.” I laugh quietly. “Wear whatever you want.”

Her mouth quirks into a meek smile. “One more question.”

“Shoot.”

“Do I get to kiss you goodbye, or would that be weird?”

Butterflies fly wildly inside my belly. “You get to kiss me always.”



“Well, Ms. Manager, another successful meeting on making sure we don’t violate health codes or sexually harass each other,” Celeste says with a light chuckle.

I laugh. “I know no one breaks the rules around here, but we have to go over them periodically.” I open the dishwasher and begin to unload it.

“Yeah. Yeah. I get it. But I don’t understand why you have to show us that outdated DVD from 2003. That overhead speaker dude sounds congested as fuck. And those actors? Nobody dresses like that in a club anymore. There has to be a better way to do that presentation. Something less snooze-festy and more current. You know?”

“That’s a great idea!”

Celeste flips her hair. “What can I say? I’m brilliant.”

I grin. “Really, you are. I’m sure next time, it’ll be far more riveting when you do the presentation.”

Celeste pales and she gapes. “What? Me? You want me to give the presentation? Why? That’s not what I was suggesting.”

My grin widens. “Wasn’t it? I mean, who better to give an updated presentation than the person who knows exactly what changes need to be made?”

Celeste shakes her head. “Uh-uh. Hell no. I was talking out of my ass. You know me. I do that sometimes, but I don’t actually mean it. Obviously, the presentation is perfect as is. You’re the boss and only you know what’s best for everyone here,” she says. “Also, the guy’s voice? Hot.”

I giggle. “Help me get ready to open, will ya?” I toss a clean rag at Celeste. It hits her in the face and drops to the floor. She stares at me, expressionless. I double over, laughing.

“Oh, you’re a riot,” she says, picking up the rag. “And guess what? Thanks to you and your games, this rag has been rendered unsanitary and therefore useless now that it’s been on the floor. Code two-five-one, section A. So, suck. On. That.”

I continue laughing as I straighten up. I use the backs of my index fingers to wipe away my tears, mindful of my eyeliner. Celeste watches me, smiling.

“What?” I ask her. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

Celeste shrugs. “You’re just extra...shiny. Kind of like a post-sex—” she sucks in an exaggerated breath. “Omigod. Did you sleep with the cougar?”

I gasp and glance around to make sure none of our co-workers are within earshot. “No,” I hiss.

Celeste huffs. “Why the fuck not? She’s smokin’.”

I flush with embarrassment. “I can’t argue with you there, but the time hasn’t come yet.”

Celeste’s eyes grow large. “Then make the time come.”

I blow up my cheeks and let them deflate slowly with an exhale. “It’s not that simple. I’m waiting on something.”

“What? Your wedding night?” She chuckles.

“No. Test results from the clinic.”

Celeste frowns. “Boo.”

“I know, but safety first. I should hear back tomorrow.”

Celeste grins devilishly. “Mm. And then what?”

I shrug, bashfully. “I don’t know.”

My friend scoffs. “Oh, yes, you do.”

Yes, I do.

I smile. “I don’t have anything planned out. I’m making her dinner tomorrow night, and that’s as far as I got.”

“Ha!” Celeste rolls her eyes. “Suuure. I believe you. Wink. Wink. Nudge. Nudge.”

“Aargh! Fine! I want to seduce her until the only thing she’s thinking about is having sex with me.”

Celeste holds her hands up and slow claps. “Yes! That’s it! Let it out! Let it all out!”

I chuckle, pick up a fresh lime, and start slicing it. “I’m a little nervous though.”

“Why?” Celeste opens a new bottle of simple syrup and snaps the speed pourer on it.

“Because I really, really want this to go right,” I say. “She’s older and probably has way more experience than I do. What if I pale in comparison to her other lovers? I want to blow her mind. I want it to be memorable.”

“My turn.” Celeste whips a rag at me, but I duck. “Firstly, age and sexual experience aren’t synonymous.” She points at me. “You should be taking notes.”

I sigh theatrically. “I am. Mentally. What’s secondly?”

“Secondly, it’s clear that she likes you. The whole time she was here the other night, she was looking at you like you hung the moon. When it happens, it will be memorable. Trust me. When people look at each other the way you two do, the sex is usually great. And, I highly doubt she’s going around, ranking her sexual experiences on Excel to compare them. That’d be fucking weird. Where did you even get the idea that people do that?”

I give her a sidelong glance. “You.”

Celeste winces. “Ohhh. Right. Shit. That was one time. I just wanted to find out if there was a difference between an October Scorpio and a November Scorpio. Fun fact—there isn’t.”

I roll my eyes, chuckling. “Thanks for trying to make me feel better about all this. It was almost helpful up until the last part.”

Celeste laughs. “Sorry about that. But, believe me, you have nothing to worry about. You never worry about this kind of shit. You must *really* like her.”

“I more than *like* her. I think I’m in love with her.” The words slip from my lips and fill up the surrounding space.

Did I say that out loud?

I hazard a look at Celeste, who’s gawping at me.

Okay. So, I definitely said that out loud.

“You what now?” Celeste asks.

I pick up another lime, set it down, and immediately get to slicing. “I’m falling in love with her. Don’t make it a thing, and please stop staring at me like that. I can see you from the corner of my eye.”

“Well, Christ,” Celeste mutters. “Have you told her?”

I scoff. “No!”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because I don’t want to scare her away.”

“Why would that scare her?” Celeste picks up the beverage gun and aims at me. “Tell me why?”

I turn around to face her and glare at the gun. “You wouldn’t.”

Celeste smirks. “I would and you know it. So, tell me why you think that would scare her or I’ll use this thing on you.”

I hold out my hands. “Alright. Calm yourself. I think it will scare her because we just started dating. It’s way too soon to be throwing around the L word.”

Celeste narrows her gaze at me. “Says who? You’re a lesbian. She’s a lesbian. You had at least one in-person date. Y’all are officially entitled to rent a U-Haul, go to a Brandi Carlile concert together, adopt a dozen cats, and declare the L word as much as you want, whenever you want.’Tis written in the lesbian handbook.”

I laugh. “You make it sound easy.”

“It *is* easy. The best time to say, ‘I love you’ is when you feel it. Time can’t dictate when that is, only you can.”

“Wow. Really? What’s next? You’re going to tell me that you believe in love at first sight?”

“Wise ass.” Celeste squirts me with the gun and I squeal. She doubles over in laughter as I stare down at my drenched shirt.

“I can’t believe you did that! I’m your boss!” I growl half-heartedly and then begin cracking up.

“You are my boss, but you’re also my friend, and I care about you, which is why I don’t want you waiting around for some perfect time that doesn’t

exist to say something important to someone who's important to you." Celeste puts the beverage gun back in its rightful place. "Is it too soon? Fuck if I know. But, if you're in love with her, I'm not going to call that into question. I'm not saying I believe in love at first sight or that I don't. I believe in connections, though. I believe in their suddenness, their fortune, and their power. You two have a connection, and that shit's only as real as it feels to you."

I stare silently at her for about a full minute. I don't quite know what to say to that.

Celeste simpers. "So, tell her."



I take a breath, centering myself. It's followed by a swallow that goes down hard. "I think I'm falling in love with you."

My confession is met with a furrowed brow. It feels as though someone wrapped an anchor around my heart and tossed it into a bottomless ocean.

"No," my sister says, shaking her head. "Take it from the top."

I groan. "What's wrong with it this time?"

Margot fidgets with one of her earbuds. "You can't tell her that you *think* you're falling in love with her."

I pull my eyebrows together. "Why not?"

My sister rolls her brown eyes, which are nearly identical to mine. "Because you *are* falling in love with her. You have to sound as sure as you feel."

"Pfft. That's not true. People say, 'I think I'm falling in love with you' all the time."

Margot shifts in her bed and pulls the blanket further up over her head, shielding her college roommate from the light of her laptop. "Well, people are wrong."

I gasp. "Excuse you. How do you know that? You're twenty-two years old."

"But I'm a wise twenty-two years old." My sister grins. "And this woman is what? Like fifty? She's probs going to want you to sound sure of yourself."

My mouth drops. "She's *forty-two*. Not that there's anything wrong with being fifty, but she's not there yet."

Margot throws me a raised eyebrow. “It’s basically the same. Mom says after forty, all the years bleed together.”

“Well, Mom’s wrong. It’s not basically the same.”

“Look, you asked me if you could rehearse, but if you’re not going to take my feedback seriously, then this is pointless,” she whispers.

I curl my upper lip at her. “Fine. Let me go again. Ready?”

Margot makes a motion with her hand, telling me to proceed. It’s uncanny how much alike we can be. I clear my throat.

“What is it, darling?” Margot asks in a baritone voice, cutting me off.

My brow wrinkles. “What the fuck was that?”

“I’m playing the role of your girlfriend.”

“What? Why? Why would you do that? Also, she sounds nothing like that. Don’t stereotype. We talked about this. Just because she doesn’t wear skirts, doesn’t mean she sounds like a man, and honestly, I don’t even know of any men who sound that ridiculous. Mom and Dad would murder you if they found out that that was your impersonation of a cis male after all the money that they put into your theater lessons. Oh! And she’s *not* my girlfriend. Not yet.”

Margot stares at me, wide-eyed. “Take it easy. I only interrupted you because you *cleared your throat* before you said anything. *Loudly*. You can’t do that. Don’t make it sound like you’re about to give the State of the Union Address. Just say it.” She shakes her head again, lips pursed. “As far as all the other stuff is concerned, I’m sorry I stereotyped. That was wrong. But I *can* act. I killed it in the high school’s production of *Mean Girls*. Remember? Do you know how hard I had to work to get the role of Gretchen Wieners, how many girls I had to best?”

I can’t help but smile at my sister, because I do remember watching her on stage, and she was awesome.

“Okay. You’re right. You can act,” I admit. “Now, will you let me try this again without you cutting me off?”

“Sure. Let’s see what you got.”

I close my eyes and inhale. When I open them, Margot’s grimacing.

“Whaaaat?” I wince.

“I repeat—it’s not a speech. When it’s happening, don’t brace yourself. You gotta let it just roll off your tongue.”

I shake out my arms. “Roll off my tongue. Roll off my tongue. Okay. I got it.” I adjust the screen of my laptop and sit up straight. I glance down at

the keyboard.

“Eye contact,” my sister whispers.

I lift my gaze to Margot’s and open my mouth. “Aargh! You know what? I can’t do this.”

My sister throws her head back and grumbles. “Yes, you can. I won’t do any impersonations but pretend I’m Katie.”

“Quinn.”

“Right. Whatever. Pretend I’m Quinn and just say the damn sentence. I’m tired. I have class in four hours.”

“Alright.” I nod and bounce in my seat to hype myself up. A few seconds pass before I sit still. I stare directly into my laptop’s camera. I imagine Quinn on the other side of the screen with her intense amber eyes and her lopsided smile. I run my teeth over my bottom lip. “So, I’m falling in love with you.”

“Yes! Finally!” Margot shouts with a clap of her hands. She instantly winces. “Shit,” she hisses and pulls at the blanket she’s hiding under again. “That was the one,” she says quietly to me.

I puff out my chest. “I did it.”

My sister snorts. “Barely, but yeah. You did it.”

“Okay, I’ll let you sleep. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. And you better tell me how it goes. I want every last gory detail.”

I roll my eyes. “Sure.” I’m about to turn my camera off but stop. “Oh! Wait! Margot! Don’t tell Mom and Dad.”

Margot gives me a stink eye. “I know. I won’t. But she’s special to you. You’ve been talking about her for over a year. Eventually, you’re going to have to tell them. Especially now that you’re *in love*.” She makes a kissy noise.

I cringe. “No special effects, please.”

My sister giggles. “Goodnight, pain in my ass. I love you.”

I smile. “Goodnight, pain in my ass. I love you too.”

Quinn

Tuesday flies by. I spend the day at work training the two new employees Gabby and I decided to hire. One is a recent graduate from Tufts and the other will soon be a senior at Somerville High School. They both seem pumped to have a job that offers free caffeinated beverages but had little interest in the other benefits The Roasted Bean provides, such as medical and dental insurance for part-time employees. Go figure.

Throughout my ten-hour shift, I sneak away to read Theo's texts and reply to them. Yesterday was similar. She messaged me whenever she could between serving customers and even sent me a few pictures of different hand-crafted cocktails. The woman has a gift. Later in the evening, she sent me a risqué bathroom selfie with a provocative caption, and *that* had me distracted for the remainder of the night. I'm still thinking about it. To be honest, it's been quite difficult to concentrate on work when that picture is only one tap away on my phone, teasing me. And I'm sure that's what Theo wanted.

This morning, Theo texted me to wish me a good day and confirm our dinner plans for tonight. I let her know that I'd be there come hell or high water and sent her a picture of Franny napping in her cat tree. Sure, it's no sexy bathroom selfie, but it's something. Based on Theo's response—multiple heart emojis—she loved it. We spent the next several hours asking each other about our favorite movies, albums, and books. Though decades apart, our tastes aren't that dissimilar. With some perfectly timed witty banter thrown into the mix on both our parts, our back-and-forth left me falling faster—something I didn't think was possible.

Finally, I'm home. I have a missed call from my mom, so I call her back.

She asks if I've gone to any of the singles events she emailed me about, and I tell her no, because I'm dating someone. Of course, she wants all the details, but I don't have the time or the energy to get into it. I promise to tell her more when I'm ready. She knows that Theo exists. I told her all about the night I met her but left it at that. Mom would have been ripshit if I had informed her of my plan to meet up with Theo one year later rather than start dating her right then and there. Mom's always worried that I'm going to die a single cat lady—not that anything is wrong with that—so I know she'll be happy to find out that my mystery date is “that girl from that night,” which is who Mom refers to Theo as. Mom says that she's happy that I'm moving on and good riddance to Simone, and also that she can't wait to relay all of this to my dad over supper.

I hang up the phone, quietly laughing, because I'm happy I'm moving on too.

I check the time and calculate how long it will take me to get ready so that I can be at Theo's by six o'clock, and realize I better get a move on.

I clean the litter box, feed Franny, shower, and agonize over what to wear. After talking about it aloud to my cat, I decide on a pair of black skinny jeans and a bright white, short-sleeve, button-down. I fix the chain around my neck and put my earrings in. Then, I tackle my hair. I let my layered bob air dry and brush my bangs to the side. Then, I use a small amount of product to keep them in place and tousle the ends of my hair to give me that flipped-out look from the early 2000s that should have never gone out of style, but I'm pretty sure it's making a comeback.

I go into the cabinet and choose a bottle of Malbec to bring with me to Theo's. I set it by my keys and pace around the kitchen for fifteen minutes, going over everything that could go wrong on this date if I tell Theo I'm falling for her.

My phone buzzes. My heartbeat slams to a stop and I scramble to pick it up from the countertop. *Please don't cancel.*

The text is from Theo. I hold my breath while I read it. ***Hey. So, my oven doesn't seem to want to work. This might be weird, but would it be okay if I came over and cooked dinner for you at your place? I can be there at six.***

In a panic, I glance around, making sure my house is tidy enough for company. The pillows on the sofa could use a fluffing, but that's about all. I text her back. ***I'm sorry to hear that about your oven, but that's fine. You can come over.***

Now, I'm sweating. Cool.

My phone vibrates along with Theo's reply. ***See you soon!***

I eye the bottle of wine on the counter.

Glasses. I should get glasses. And candles? Or is that too extra? Maybe I should change.

I jolt when my phone goes off again, yanking me from my thoughts. I'll just ask Theo about the candles. Only the text isn't from Theo. Suddenly, everything around me slows down. I take a step back and stare at the words until they come into focus.

Hi. It's Simone. I'm not sure if my name is still saved in your contacts or not. How are you? I think our social circles are beginning to overlap. Not that I'm surprised, because lesbians. I was wondering if you wanted to catch up sometime. I'd love to hear about what you've been up to. It's been a while. Hope all is well.

I read the last sentence over and over. *Hope all is well.*

I clench my teeth. Why does she care if all is well with me? She certainly didn't care when she left me or when she handed the divorce papers to me or when she sat across from me in court.

I put the phone down, walk over to the living room, and open a window. It's eighty-eight degrees outside, so there's no breeze, but I need fresh air. I need to ground myself. I take a breath. I can hear the children across the street playing in their yard. I can smell the food that my neighbors are grilling. I can see the sun shining in the clear, blue sky. *I'm okay.*

A knock at the door startles me. At once, I realize it might be Theo and a knot of nervousness and excitement tightens inside my belly. I shut the window, make sure the air conditioner is set to a comfortable temperature, wipe my palms on my jeans, and stroll over to the entrance.

I'm okay.

I turn the handle slowly so as not to appear too eager and pull the door open. There's a sweeping sensation in my chest when I lay my eyes on Theo standing there in her tight, high-waisted, dark blue jeans with a gray, deep V-neck T-shirt that both flatters her bust and accentuates her cleavage. Her long, curly blonde hair is down and brushed over her left shoulder. Two, big hoop earrings dangle from her ears and a dainty, layered, white gold pendant hangs from her neck. As always, her incredibly brown eyes are highlighted by black eyeliner and faultlessly applied mascara. But it's her lips, painted in a distinct shade of creamy, shiny beige that I can't seem to look away from.

“Hi,” she greets me with a sly smile.

I swallow. “Hi. You look...” *Oh, my God, find a word.*

Theo laughs softly. “Why, thank you. And you look...”

My cheeks go up in flames. “Er. Thanks.”

“Aren’t you going to invite me?” Theo asks in a husky voice that makes me knees weak.

“Uh. Yeah. Sorry. Please, come in.” I step aside to give her room.

She brushes past me at a leisurely pace, giving me a moment to inhale her perfume. Her ankle boots make light clacks against the hardwood floor when she moves. It sounds like a noise that I could get used to.

“Do you want me to take that?” I point to the canvas bag full of groceries that she’s carrying.

“Oh, no. I’m fine,” she assures me. “Is it okay if I take over your kitchen?”

“Of course.” I motion to our left. “Help yourself.”

“Great. Thanks. I’m sorry about this again,” she says. “I have no idea what’s going on with my oven, but it won’t turn on and the burners won’t light. I left a message with my landlord about it. Fingers crossed it gets fixed soon.”

“You don’t need to apologize. You’re the one cooking me dinner. You can do anything you want.”

Theo stops mid-way to the kitchen and throws me a look over her shoulder. “*Anything?*”

Jesus, it’s a million degrees in here!

“Mm-hmm. So, um. Would you like some wine?”

Theo smiles. “I’d love some.” She sets the bag on the counter and starts unpacking it. “I hope you’re not allergic to fish.”

I chuckle as I fill up our glasses with Malbec. “No, I’m not.”

“Excellent.”

I hand Theo a glass of wine. “Why? What’s on the menu?”

“I’m going to make you seared salmon with pesto fettuccine and mixed greens.”

My mouth begins to water. “That sounds amazing.” I frown at the bottle of wine. “Should I have chosen a white wine? I have chardonnay.”

“Nah. This is perfect.” She takes a sip from her glass and sets it down.

I swallow a mouthful of wine. “What about music?”

“Yeah. Let’s do music. What have you got?”

“You name it, I’ve got it. I have a playlist for everything.”

Theo lifts an eyebrow at me, a playful smile on her lips. “Okay. I’ll bite. Do you have a playlist for cleaning?”

I scoff. “Everybody has a cleaning playlist. Come on. You can do better.”

Theo laughs. “Oh, can I? Alright. What about a shower playlist?”

“I have that.”

“A playlist for crying?”

“I have two of those,” I say with a chuckle.

Theo pouts. “Quinn...”

“It’s fine. Keep going.”

“Hold up. I need a cutting board, a frying pan, and a medium saucepan.”

“Done. Done. And done.” I work fast behind Theo, grabbing her requested items from different cabinets in the kitchen. I place them all on the counter. “Here you go.”

She cranes her neck to look at me. “Thank you.”

I’m close enough to smell her shampoo. “Sure.”

Theo scrapes her teeth over her bottom lip. “What about a sex playlist?”

My stomach falls. “Yeah. I have one of those.”

She smirks. “Can we listen to it?”

“We can, but sexy is subjective, right? The songs that I think are sexy, you might not find sexy. And the songs that—”

“Quinn?”

“Yes?”

“Put the music on.”

“But—”

“No.” Theo laughs. “Stop it with the doubt. If these songs are sexy to you, then I’ll think they’re sexy. So, show me what you’re working with.”

I let out a long exhale, turn on the speaker sitting at the far end of the countertop, pick up my phone, and start the music.

Theo grins and begins bobbing her head to the beat of the song filling the air. “Ah, Sade? Very nice.”

Another wave of heat washes over my face. “You know who Sade is?”

“Give me some credit!”

I hold up my hands, laughing. “Okay! I’m sorry.”

“From now on, every time I know a reference—song or otherwise—that you don’t think I know, you have to take off one article of clothing,” Theo warns.

I smile. “Alright. But what if you don’t actually know the reference?”

Theo shrugs. “Then, *I* have to strip.”

My mouth pulls into a wide grin. “This might be my new favorite game.”

“Think you’re gonna win? Not so fast. There’s one more rule.”

“What’s that?”

“If *you* don’t know one of *my* references, you have to take something off.”

If one thing is for sure, it’s that I’m all caught up on current pop culture, all thanks to the high school and college students that work at the café, along with Gabby’s newfound obsession with TikTok.

“Like I said—my new favorite game.” I sip and drink more wine.



Theo and I are sitting across from each other at my kitchen table. There are two burning candles and a bottle of wine acting as centerpieces. Throughout our meal, we’ve been quizzing one another. Turns out, Theo is well-versed in music trivia, and I’d much rather be her teammate than her opponent. When she talks about music, she becomes more animated, dancing in her seat, waving her hands around. It’s cute as fuck. She knows the tunes to songs from my era better than the lyrics, so she makes up a lot of words, which is hilarious, because it’s all just so wrong and it’s already cost her a pair of ankle boots. I can hold my own with songs from her era but got stumped in the category of K-pop, and that’s why I’m missing a Doc Marten.

After catching our breaths from laughing about how both of us have had a crush on Britney Spears at some point in our lives, I take a sip of wine and Theo uses her fork to move around what little food is left on her plate.

“I have a question,” Theo says, staring at her fettuccine.

“I have an answer.”

She smiles and meets my gaze. “Lexi and her girlfriend, Breanna, are having a small get-together at their house tomorrow night and I was wondering if you’d come with me. They really want to meet you.”

I smile back at her. “They want to meet me? Already?”

“Yup.” Theo nods slowly and takes a drink of wine. “They know you’re special to me.”

A heat gathers in my chest and rises to my face. “I am?”

Theo sets her glass down and throws her napkin at me. “Yes! Isn’t that obvious?”

I chuckle and put the napkin on the table. “I don’t know. I mean, I know you like me, because you’ve told me.”

Theo quirks an eyebrow at me. “Yeah, I like you alright.”

And I’m falling in love with you.

I pinch my lips together. “I think you’re special too.”

“Then, you’ll come with me? There’s going to be a charcuterie board.”

“I love those things!” I exclaim with a chuckle. “Count me in.”

Theo beams. “Great. I’ll text you the details in the morning. But for now, I think we should go one more round and raise the stakes.”

I laugh. “I’m listening.”

“For every wrong answer, not only do you have to take something off, you have to drink.” Theo pops the cork on the new bottle of Malbec in the center of the table and fills up both of our glasses. She puts the bottle down and smirks at me.

I narrow my eyes. “Okay. You’re on.”

Theo squares her shoulders. “Ahem. Here we go. Name one Bad Bunny song?”

I furrow my brow. “Damn. I’m drawing a blank.”

She grins. “No answer is a wrong answer. Strip and sip!”

I bury my face in my hands, laughing. “Why did I agree to this?”

“Let’s go, Gellar!”

I bend over in my seat, unlace my remaining boot, and remove it. Afterward, I sit back up and take a generous sip of wine. “Happy?”

“Getting there.”

I shake my head. “Ready? Jordan Knight is the member of which Boston-based boy band?”

Theo glares at me. “Seriously?”

“I’m so very serious.”

Theo puffs out her cheeks and exhales. “I don’t know this one.” She unfastens her belt buckle and leisurely pulls it through the loops of her jeans. I take in a shaky breath, watching her. Once it’s off, she drops it on the floor, winks at me, and drinks more wine. “Looks like you’re up. Which female artist starred in Hannah Montana?”

I chuckle. “You realize that isn’t exactly a brainteaser, right?”

Theo folds her hands on the table. “Then, you should have no problem

giving me the answer.”

I pull a face at Theo. “The correct answer is Miley Cyrus.”

Theo slow claps. “Well done.”

I laugh, lean back in my seat, and fold my arms across my chest. “Guess I’m winning.”

“I should have given you a trick question, because I really wanted you to do away with your pants.” She pulls off a sock and sips on her wine. “What a disappointment.”

I sit upright and lift my glass to my lips, hoping to conceal my blush. I take a long drink. “Do you want to keep going?”

Theo smiles. “No. You can take the championship title. I’ll win it back next time.” Under the table, she runs her foot along the inside of my leg, causing me to squirm in my seat. “What do you want for a prize?”

I set my half-empty glass down. “This dinner was the prize. Best meal I’ve had in a long time. Thank you.”

Theo chuckles. “You’re welcome. I’m glad you liked it. But dinner is dinner. You still get a prize.”

Christ, it’s warm in here.

“A prize isn’t necessary,” I say. “Tonight’s been great. There’s nothing more I could ask for.”

“There’s plenty more you can ask for. I’ll even let you get creative.” Her eyes gleam and my belly swooshes.

I lower my gaze. “I’m not a very creative person.”

Theo plants both her feet on the floor and reaches across the table for one of my hands. I let her take it.

“That’s okay,” she says quietly. “You don’t have to be. Just be you.”

“Is *creative* what you’re into?”

Theo twiddles with my fingers. “I’m into you the way you are.”

I glance up at her and she gives me the sweetest smile. “I’m into you too.”

“Good.”

“I’m actually so into you that I, uh. I don’t want to keep anything from you.”

Theo quirks her head to the side. “Okay.”

“Okay. Um. So, earlier today, Simone texted me.”

Theo pales. “Oh.”

“It’s not a big deal,” I add quickly. “She wanted to know if we could

catch up. I don't want that. I haven't texted her back yet, but I will. I'll tell her that I'm not interested in reconnecting, because I'm not."

Theo's grip loosens around my hand, but she doesn't let go. "Are you sure you don't want to reconnect with her? Because if you do, I won't be upset. I understand that there's a history there."

I offer Theo a kind smile. "I appreciate that, but I'm sure about this. I want to leave the past in the past. I want to focus on the now...with you."

Theo raises an eyebrow. "With me, huh?"

"Yes. With you. I'm sorry I put a damper on our date. It was bugging me, like I had a secret. I needed to get it out there. If I held it inside, I...I just don't want anything keeping me from getting close to you."

Theo half smiles. "So, you want to get close to me?"

A blush sings my cheeks. "I want to get *very* close to you."

"Well, I'm right here."

The thumping in my chest grows louder. I open my mouth to speak but stop when Theo brings my hand to her lips. Words elude me and I become statue-still. She continues, "Is there anything else you'd like to share, or can we keep talking about how close we want to get to each other?"

My eyes flit to Theo's lips. "We should definitely talk about getting closer."

"I agree." Theo's lips slowly shape into a killer smile. "You know, I don't think I told you how beautiful you look tonight, which is basically a criminal offense on my part. I'm sorry." She takes one of my fingers into her mouth and rolls her tongue around it. I swallow hard. "Forgive me?"

My vision becomes spotty. "There's nothing to forgive. I didn't say anything either about the way you—" I lose my breath when she licks my finger again and then gradually pulls it out of her mouth.

"The way I what?" she asks with a flash in her eyes.

I inhale sharply. "The way you, um...the way you look. You look amazing tonight. But you always look amazing. It's just like your face. Your face is amazing."

Sweet Jesus, help me shut up.

Theo pinches her lips together and I can't quite tell if she's stifling a smile or holding back a thought...or both.

"How about that prize? Since you won't pick one, I'll give you a prize of my choosing," Theo says, getting up from the chair. She rounds the table, tightens her grip on my hand, and tugs. "Come on."

My brow wrinkles. “What are we doing?” I rise from my seat, warily.

“We’re dancing. I lead, you follow.”

I laugh softly. “That’s what you want to give me for my prize? A dance?”

“Yeah. Why? What did you think I wanted to give you?” Theo grins, wrapping her arms around my waist. “It’d be a shame if we didn’t dance to your sexy playlist, don’t you agree?”

I drape my arms over Theo’s shoulders. “I agree.”

We begin swaying together to the music filling my apartment.

“Isn’t this nice?” Theo’s breath tickles my ear.

I gulp. “Yeah. It is.”

“You have good rhythm. It’s kind of a turn-on.”

I lean the side of my head against hers and smile. “You’re the one with the moves. I’m just going along for the ride.”

“Speaking of rides...” Theo nibbles my earlobe and my heart dips into my stomach.

“What about them?” I speak so quietly, I’m not sure I even spoke at all.

Theo pulls back and looks into my eyes. “At the risk of sounding immodest, I was thinking that since you’re such a big fan of my face, if you wanted to ride it, I can make that happen for you now.”

A feeble breath leaves my body and I come to a standstill. I blink. “What?”

She smiles. “You heard me.”

I’m suddenly flooded with warmth. “But you...and we’re waiting, because of...right?”

Theo’s hands leave my hips and land on the collar of my shirt. “I got my results this morning. We don’t have to wait anymore unless you want to, which I’m totally fine with doing, by the way. Just tell me what you want.”

“What do *you* want?”

Theo purses her lips. “I asked you first.”

“I asked you second.”

Theo exhales the softest chuckle. “I...” She undoes the top button on my shirt. “Want...” She frees another button. “To...” She loosens one more button. “Explore your body with my fingers and my mouth and make you come until you see stars.”

Whoa, boy. I felt that everywhere.

“Uh-huh.”

Theo smirks. “Uh-huh.” She unbuttons the rest of my shirt and pulls it

open. Then, she untucks the tank top I have on underneath it. “What do *you* want?”

My hands stray from her shoulders to the edge of her T-shirt. “Up,” I whisper.

Theo’s eyes grow dark, and she raises her arms. I take off her shirt and toss it aside. She shakes her long, blonde hair out, but keeps her gaze locked on mine. I gently trace the lacy trim of her plunge bra with my index finger. She shivers and I feel it between my legs. “I want to touch you all over and never stop.”

Theo swallows with such force, I can see the muscles in her neck move. “I’m down for that,” she says as she slides my shirt off my shoulders and dismisses it on the floor.

I press my palms against the small of her back. “Was this the prize all along? Was your oven really broken? Did you set me up?”

One corner of Theo’s mouth turns upward. “Yes. No. Guilty. And I’m not even sorry about it,” she confesses. “I wanted plenty of time to seduce you without you worrying about getting home to Franny. I know how much you love that cat.”

I half-smile. “How thoughtful.”

“Right?”

“Right. So, about that seduction.” I pull Theo closer, so close her chest presses into mine. I can feel her rapid heartbeat or maybe it’s my heartbeat. Or maybe it’s ours. She holds on to my upper arms for balance, brings her face toward mine, and tilts her head slightly.

“I have big feelings for you, Quinn Gellar,” she murmurs, her lips inches from mine. “And I’m going to show you.”

A dull ache spreads throughout my body. I lean in and close the distance between us with a kiss so fierce, and a mouth so hungry, I swear I feel the earth shift under my feet.

Theo

Quinn's lips are the softest kind of soft, urging mine apart. I part my lips for her. She sighs and I swallow her breath. It makes me wet. When the tip of her tongue teases mine, a chill covers my flesh. I open my mouth a little more and she kisses me harder. Behind my closed eyes, a kaleidoscope of colors flicker. Her mouth is eager but deliberate. Each time her tongue skims mine or she catches my lip between her teeth, I get weaker and hotter all at once. I let her set the pace and I comply until I can hear her breathing harder. Only then do I kiss her back. Like, fully kiss her back. I crash my mouth into hers with an insistent sweep of my lips. She trips, but I catch her by the arms. Once she's steady, I taste her tongue in tantalizing licks and lazy circles. A tiny moan leaves the depths of her throat, which only serves to make me moan. In seconds, our lips and mouths and tongues have negotiated on long, deep kisses—the kind of kisses that overstimulate your senses in the best possible way.

Never in my life have I felt this hot for someone. It's making me a little crazy.

I let go of Quinn's biceps and sneak my hands up her tank top. I reach behind her, unhook her bra, and peel it off. I retract my hands and tease her erect nipples with my thumbs over her shirt. She loses her breath for a second and so do I.

“Do you want to go somewhere more comfortable?” she heaves.

“Yes.”

Quinn takes my hands and begins taking backward steps, pulling me along. I go, ready for the left turn into the living room, but she continues

down the hall. I motion to the couch with my head.

“Sofa?”

Quinn smiles with a blush. “Bed.”

My heart misses a beat. “Are you sure?”

“I am,” she says, towing me into her bedroom, over to the queen-sized mattress. She sits on the edge of the bed, places her hands on my ass, and stares up at me. “Is this okay with you?”

I smile back at her. “No more silly questions. Now, lie down.”

One corner of Quinn’s mouth curves upward. Without hurrying, she scooches further up the bed and reclines at an angle. Once settled in the middle of the bed, she digs her elbows into the mattress and uses them for support to hold herself up. She watches me.

My skin prickles under her sweltering gaze.

I unzip my Levi’s and wrestle out of them, leaving them in a puddle on the bedroom floor. Quinn licks her lips. *Gawd Dayum*. I bend at the waist, lean forward, and reach for the waistband of her jeans.

“Can these come off?”

Quinn’s jaw flexes. “They can.”

I undo the fly of her jeans and pull. She doesn’t try to stop me. I glimpse down at her in nothing but a ribbed tank top and a pair of boxer briefs and smirk.

“You’re a fucking knockout,” I tell Quinn as I kneel on the foot of the mattress. Her eyes rove over me before she fixes her stare on my face again. Her pupils are dilated, and her mouth is slightly ajar, setting free the faintest gasp. My heart topples into my belly.

“You’re something else yourself,” she says in a hushed tone.

I blush and scratch my lower lip with my teeth. “You’re too kind.”

Quinn’s cheeks redden and she shakes her head a little. “Not really.”

“Yes, really.” I smile at her. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Ask away.”

“Is this not romantic? Because I want it to be special.”

“This *is* special,” Quinn says, twinkling at me. “This is everything, just the way it is.”

“Good. I feel the same.” I grab her ankles and push gently, encouraging her to bend her knees, feet flat on the bed. I slide my hands up her outer thighs, over her hips, and crook my fingers in the waistband of her boxers. “I would very much like to take these off. Would that be okay?”

Quinn barely nods. “Okay.”

“Okay.” I tug on her briefs and ease them down her legs. I banish them somewhere behind me. My eyes soak up the sight of the small patch of curls between her thighs and her glistening pussy. I begin to salivate. I swallow and look up Quinn’s face. Her expression is dark with longing. It takes my breath away.

I could tell Quinn now that I’m falling in love with her. I can practically taste the words on my tongue. But I don’t want to jeopardize the perfectness of this moment. So, I hold it in. I let it coat my throat and fill up my chest—something inside me that belongs only to her.

“Tell me what you want, and it’s yours,” I manage through a ragged exhale.

“You.” Quinn’s voice cracks when she speaks.

I grin. “You have me.”

“Not as much as you have me.”

There’s a sharp pang deep in my core. “Oh, yeah?” I offer her a kittenish smile and hold onto the backs of Quinn’s calves. “Well, that’s definitely about to work in my favor,” I whisper and dip my head between her smooth thighs. She trembles. My pulse vibrates in my ears, the need to taste her coursing through my veins. I run my tongue along her pussy, savoring her. We both moan. She tastes amazing. Delectable, really. And I’m insatiable. I begin stroking her sex with the flat of my tongue in a precise up-and-down motion.

Quinn curses and clutches the sheets. I let go of her calves and place my hands on top of hers. I thread our fingers together, smiling between licks. Her inhaled and exhaled become erratic, and it makes me wet. I unconsciously hum. She whimpers and digs her fingers into me.

I glance up and Quinn’s eyes catch mine. We stare at each other, enraptured. It’s hot. With her gaze trained on my face, I continue lapping at her cunt. Her breathing quickens and she sinks her teeth into her lower lip but doesn’t look away, so neither do I. She squeezes my hands and I replace the long strokes of my tongue over her center with small, attentive circles around her clit. Quinn gasps but keeps her heavy-lidded eyes on me. I smile up at her before I apply more pressure. Her body tenses up and she forces out a punctuating breath. I begin alternating between licking and sucking. Her muscles start to spasm. I surround her clit with my lips and suck gently. Within seconds, Quinn throws her head back, groans, and comes against my

tongue. She collapses on the bed, panting. Giddy, I grin and leave a kiss on her clit. She jerks in response.

“Shit,” she exhales.

I use the back of my hand to wipe my mouth. Then, I plant my palms on the mattress on either side of Quinn’s limp body and crawl on top of her until my face is aligned with hers.

“You’re so, so beautiful.” I kiss the tip of her nose.

Quinn opens her eyes and stares up at me with a watery gaze. My heart slumps into my stomach.

“Quinn? Are you okay? What’s wrong? Did I hurt you?”

Quinn smiles, reaches up, and brushes the hair off my sweaty face. She tucks it behind my ear. “You didn’t hurt me. Not even close. I feel fantastic. You’re like, incredible. That was...holy fuck.”

I sigh with relief. “That was a pretty religious experience for me too.”

Quinn chuckles. Her blush blended with her sex flush is almost too sexy to withstand. “I’m kind of at a loss for words.”

“Then don’t speak.” I brush her tears away with my thumbs. “Oh, and that was only a preview. I’m going to take such good care of you. Just you wait.”

Quinn lifts her head, bringing her mouth to mine. “No more waiting.” Her voice is throaty and vibrates inside my core. She captures me in a passionate kiss. Immediately, a dull ache begins to build below my belly button. Unconsciously, I start to grind against Quinn, desperate for more friction. I’m so lost in her lips that I don’t notice right away that she’s unhooked my bra until she’s rolling me over on my back, tearing it off.

Unrestrainedly, I grab at Quinn’s tank top, balling the fabric up in my fists. I want to feel her skin on my skin so badly, I could weep. In between kisses, she assists me in removing her top. Her breasts are warm and soft pressed against mine. I run my fingers through her hair, nip her bottom lip with my teeth, and smooth my tongue over the newly sensitive flesh. Quinn gradually separates her mouth from mine and begins leaving a path of kisses along the column of my neck. Every time I think I’m about to catch my breath, Quinn’s mouth discovers another part of my body—the base of my throat, my collarbone, my shoulders, my nipples, my stomach. But when she drags her mouth from my hip to my pelvic bone while sliding my panties off, I’m certain I’ll never breathe again. She splays her fingers on the outside of my left thigh and places an open-mouth kiss on the tail end of my vine tattoo.

I grit my teeth and grunt. Then, she carefully lifts my leg and hooks it over her right shoulder. I don't question it, but I steal a curious glance at her. She's already looking at me. It creates a merciless throbbing between my legs. I gulp. Quinn kisses the inside of my thigh, winks at me, and then lowers her face. I gasp and arch my back when Quinn's breath glances off my swollen center. She takes her time exploring me with her tongue, driving me wild. She devours me with purposeful, perpendicular licks, each one edging me more than the last, but when her tongue starts moving back and forth, well, I nearly die. I can hear myself panting, but what's getting me more worked up is the sound of Quinn's heavy breathing. My muscles tense up. *Oh, fuck.* I shut my eyes and place my hand on Quinn's head.

"Please don't stop," I choke out.

As if to prove to me that she heard my plea, Quinn soothes her tongue over my clit. My hips buckle. She begins drawing halos around my sex with the tip of her tongue. I start to shake. Suddenly, she moans between my thighs and that's all it takes for me to dissolve. Dripping with arousal, I cry out as ecstasy consumes me and I finish inside her mouth.

My muscles twitch as I ride out my mind-fuck of an orgasm. Eventually, my breathing stabilizes, and I relax.

"Oh, my God." I laugh and play with Quinn's damp hair as she lifts her face up from between my legs, grinning.

I go to take my leg off Quinn's shoulder, but she quickly places a hand on my knee, holding it in place.

"Not yet." Quinn smiles.

Quinn

Theo smiles back at me, a blush painting her cheeks. “I don’t know if my body can handle much more.”

I place a kiss on the small strip of silky hair below her pelvis and she jolts. “Do you want to rest?” I ask.

Theo chuckles. “Not what I said.”

I laugh quietly and look up at her. The mischief in her brown eyes sucks the oxygen from my lungs. I swallow and take a mental photograph of her perfect face, her sexed-up blonde mane, her swollen lips.

I sweep my tongue over Theo’s wet center, and she falls back on the bed with a low growl, her leg sliding off my shoulder. I lick her arousal from my lips and hold myself up on all fours. I move slowly up Theo’s body. When my arms are framing her head and my face is suspended above hers, Theo stares up at me, her pupils hugging her irises. I lower my lips to hers and cover her mouth with my mouth in a carnal kiss. With a sigh, Theo arches her back and wraps one of her legs around my waist and begins to rock her hips. My heart rattles furiously against my ribcage.

Still straddling Theo, I place all my weight on my right palm and use my left hand to fondle her breasts. In a hoarse voice, she cusses and then kisses me harder. My chest hurts with longing, my fingers aching to touch her everywhere. I slide my fingertips down her side and she squirms, gasping a giggle against my lips. I run my tongue over hers and deepen our kiss. She outlines my shoulder blades with the backs of her fingernails. It tickles. I inhale the scents of sex-laced perfume and sweet wine on ragged breaths while Theo’s lips move with mine, and I begin to feel wasted off the

deliciousness of it all.

The last song on my sexy playlist ends and then begins again on a loop, starting with the first track. Sade's voice floods the bedroom, but it's only background noise. Theo's small whimpers and laborious intakes and outtakes of air swim between my ears like a goddamn symphony. My heart's about to burst.

I skim over Theo's slick center with my forefingers and slip inside her. She breaks our kiss and groans as I begin to fuck her slowly.

"Jesus, you feel good," she whispers hoarsely.

"What do you like?" I murmur.

Theo's jaw tightens and she grabs onto my shoulders. "Everything. All of it. Just keep touching me."

I smile. "I can do that."

I push deeper into Theo, crook my fingers, and start pulsating her G-spot. She moans and begins writhing beneath me, moving in time with my rhythmic thrusts.

In a matter of moments, Theo's body clenches around my hand. I kiss her upper lip, steadily slow my tempo, and draw my fingers back and up. I begin massaging her clit, eliciting a guttural moan from her throat. She cranes her neck and looks at me, eyes dark as the midnight sky, mouth partially open. There's a twinge in my heart.

I am completely gone for this woman.

"Quinn," Theo calls out my name. "I'm so close."

"What do you need?" I ask breathlessly, my lips floating over hers.

"Your kiss," she pants.

I smile to myself, lower my mouth to Theo's, and engage her in a zealous kiss. She sighs against my lips and undulates her hips against my fingers. Suddenly, she severs our kiss and gasps. She pulls at my hair and a sequence of broken breaths escape her lips. I keep touching her to the beat of her body. Her muscles start to contract. I increase momentum just a bit. Theo immediately bends her head back, unleashes a long, low moan, and comes hard against my fingers.

Theo's limbs slacken and she falls flat on the bed. "Holy shit," she whispers and covers her face with her hands.

I grin and gently ease my fingers off her swollen sex. "Look at me."

Theo's arms drop to her sides, and she stares up at me, eyes glossy with tears. I stiffen and my gut twists.

“Why are you crying?” I ask with a frown.

Theo places her palms on my cheeks. Her lips twitch into a smile that alleviates the tension in my body.

“Because I’m happy and because you’re lovely,” she says. “I don’t know what you’re doing to me, but the way I feel...I’ve never felt anything like it before.” Theo shakes her head and chuckles quietly. “Never.”

This is it. Tell her.

I lower my weight onto Theo and our sticky skin fuses together. I use my thumbs to dry beneath her eyes and swallow. “Theo...” I pause.

She caresses my face with her fingertips, studying it with her touch. “What is it, baby?”

Instantly, Theo winces and I press my lips together, biting back a smile.

“I said that aloud, didn’t I?” she asks. “I vocally referred to you as ‘baby’.”

I smile. “You did.”

Theo crinkles her nose. “How did it land?”

I laugh softly. “Safe landing. Zero turbulence.”

Theo lifts her face to mine and plants a light kiss on my lips. “Good.”

When her head drops back on the pillow, I seek out her lips and kiss her again. She hums and we both smile into the kiss.

“We cry a lot together, don’t we?” Theo asks in a low voice, chuckling under her breath.

I join her in laughter. “We do.”

“God, we’re so gay.”

“The gayest,” I agree, marveling at her face—the freckles splashed across her nose and cheeks, her wide lips, her rich brown eyes.

Alright. I’m going to do it. Here I go.

“What is it?” Theo runs her hands through my hair. “You were going to say something earlier.”

I clear my throat. “Yeah, I was.”

“Is everything okay? Because your heart’s beating *really* fast right now.”

I feel the color rise to my face. “Yes. Uh-huh. Everything is...yes.”

Theo purses her lips. “What aren’t you saying?”

I take a breath. “I’m getting there.”

Theo tickles my sides with a featherlight touch, and I shriek. She laughs and snatches me by my wrists. I giggle while she wrestles me onto my back. She pins my hands above my head and leans forward. Her nipples graze mine

and a thrill permeates my body. She must feel it too—that charge—because she goes very still.

“Out with it,” Theo demands, her voice thick but playful.

I search her face for a long minute and smile. “I’m falling in love with you.”

Theo gasps, eyes growing large. She releases my wrists. “You’re what?”

“You heard me.”

Theo sits up partway, her ass resting on my upper thighs. Her long, loose, blonde curls shaping her face and almost eclipse her rouged cheeks. Almost.

I take in a breath. *What a fucking vision.*

Theo chews on her bottom lip and gazes up at the ceiling with a slow shake of her head. “Unbelievable,” she says quietly and then looks at me. “That was *my* line. You stole my line.” She laughs this incredibly sexy laugh and sinks back down until her stomach is flush with mine. She places her hands on either side of my head, lifting herself slightly, hovering over me.

There’s a swoop in my belly and a tight lightness in my chest. “You’re falling in love with me?”

Theo smiles. “Yes, I’m falling in love with you. I tried to tell you a thousand times already—with every kiss, every touch.”

I outline her jawline with the back of my finger. “I could feel it.”

Theo turns her face and kisses the inside of my wrist. “How did it feel?” she murmurs before returning her gaze to mine.

I inhale something severe. “Exhilarating.”

“Exhilarating, huh?” She touches her index finger to my chin, a shadow of a smirk on her lips.

I swallow the desire coating my throat. “Yeah.”

Theo’s finger drifts from my face to my neck and begins to chart the contours of my body, migrating south. I wriggle beneath her.

“I feel pretty exhilarated myself,” she tells me. “Do you want to know how else I feel?”

My next exhale is replaced by a muted groan. “Yes.”

Theo casually glides her fingertips up and down my thigh. I clench my teeth and stir. She grins. Her mouth is suspended above mine, only inches away. “I feel seriously hot for you,” she whispers and brushes her lips across mine, giving me a taste as she slides two fingers inside me. “Fuck,” she whispers at the exact same moment that I gasp.

Theo begins moving her fingers in and out of me in a purposeful,

cadenced motion that makes me warm and achy all over. Her breath is hot and heavy against my face, chilling my sweaty skin. My inhalations and exhalations become shallow.

“Relax,” Theo says and kisses me slow and deep. I shut my eyes and match the movement of her mouth. My head swirls as I drown in the softness of her lips. Instinctually, I draw my knees up and spread my legs more.

While Theo’s mouth continues to occupy mine, she eases out of me, and starts languidly circling my clit with her already-lubricated fingers. I tear my lips away from hers, bend my head, and let out a moan.

Oh. My. G...

“There,” I croak.

Theo offers me a faint, roguish smile, presses further into me, and starts stroking my sex *counterclockwise*. Every part of my body responds in a blur. I grab Theo’s hips as my muscles tighten and she keeps going, touching me with smooth, even circles. I hold my breath as the pressure builds within me. Theo reminds me to breathe in a voice so charged with lust that it pushes me over the edge. I groan on my exhale, quaking, and completely come undone. I climax so hard, my toes curl and I see spots.

Theo smiles and sweeps her lips over mine. “I could do this all night.”

I laugh, still reeling from my orgasm. “I mean, if that’s what you want, I’m certainly not going to object.”

“I want.” Theo carefully moves her hand out from between my legs and brings it to her mouth. My breathing stalls as I watch her lick her finger. She grins and kisses me. I can taste myself on her tongue. It’s wonderfully intimate. But the kiss itself—the way Theo soothes her tongue over and around mine—is titillating.

Theo’s hands begin to roam over my body. She grabs my ass and shifts onto her side, taking me with her as she repositions herself on her back and I end up on top of her. By degrees, she brings our kiss to cessation. We’re both panting. She gazes at me, eyes dark and dazed, and licks her lips.

“Ride me,” she murmurs.

I suck in a quick breath. “I...I don’t know how. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Theo smiles. “You’re not going to hurt me. I’ll show you what to do. Trust me. Okay?”

A blush burns my face. “Okay.”

Theo’s eyes sparkle. “Sit up and scoot forward. Keep your knees above my shoulders.”

My stomach jumps with anticipation as I follow Theo's instructions. It takes me a second to get situated. Almost instantly, I can feel her breath on my pussy. My nerves go wild. I glance down at Theo.

"Like this?"

Theo's grin widens. "Mm-hmm. Just like that." She places her hands on my waist. "Now, put your arms behind you to hold yourself up and lean back a tiny bit."

I do what Theo tells me to. She quickly rewards me by gliding her tongue along my center. I grip the sheets, close my eyes, and surrender myself to her.

Theo

I wake to the sound of Quinn's slow, soft breaths. Our legs are wrapped around each other's, and we're only partially covered by the cotton sheets. Her backside is pressed against my front side and my arm is draped around her waist, moving up and down with the rhythm of her breathing. The room smells like sex and my muscles are delightfully sore in all the right places. I smile to myself and bury my nose in Quinn's hair. She stirs and quietly murmurs something incoherent but doesn't wake. It's fucking adorable. I rest my palm on her hip and slide my hand down her body with a delicate touch. She stirs again for a moment before settling back into sleep. I kiss her the nape of her neck and she rouses with a hum. I kiss her shoulder and she shivers.

"Good morning," I whisper into her ear. I listen to her breath catch.

Quinn carefully turns over and smiles at me. "Good morning."

Now, it's my breath that catches. Even sleepy-eyed, Quinn's irises are vibrant with shades of brown and yellow.

I swallow, my throat thick with emotion. "Don't move."

Quinn furrows her brow. "Okay. Why?"

"I just want to look at you for a second before I try to persuade you into having morning sex with me."

Quinn blushes, reaches up and tangles her fingers in my curls. "I don't need persuading."

"Oh, really?"

"Really." Her eyes shine at me. "I do need to pee though, and hydrate, and feed my cat."

I chuckle. “Hot.”

She laughs, slightly wincing. “Did I ruin the moment?”

I purse my lips. “Do you promise to come back to bed after?”

A grin grows across Quinn’s lips. “I promise.”

“Then, no. The moment is still alive and well.”

Quinn sits up, her hand still in my hair. She studies my face for a second, and then inches closer while coaxing me toward her with a gentle tug. She kisses me longingly. It takes away my breath, makes the blood in my veins run hot, and creates a roar in my chest so loud that it reverberates between my ears.

This feels different than a fall, more absolute.

With my soul on fire, I return the kiss, wishing with my whole being that she can taste on my lips the words I cannot say.

I love you.



I spend the afternoon in a daydreamy state. I can still taste Quinn’s lips on mine and feel her hands everywhere on my body. We spent the entire morning having sex, but it’s not enough. It’s like an unquenchable thirst is lingering in the back of my throat and Quinn is water. I watch the hours pass with a nervous energy in the base of my belly, eager to see her again, to be near her.

At work, I try to stay busy. I draft the schedule for the following week, update the liquor inventory spreadsheet, and make sure the bar is fully stocked for tonight’s shift. Celeste insists on asking me a million and one questions about Quinn. I don’t say anything specific to Celeste, but I know I tell her everything with my silence and an onslaught of blushes, because she points her finger at me a lot with a corrupt smirk on her face, waggles her eyebrows several times, and when I turn away at one point to hide my stupid grin, she whistles and whoops, “ooh la la.”

Once I’m home, I shower and get ready for the evening. Unsure of where the night will take Quinn and me, I put on a lacy little number under my black, flutter-sleeve mini dress. I pull my wavy hair into a half ponytail, leaving two long strands loose on either side of my face. Then, I expertly apply my makeup—winged eyeliner but nothing too dramatic, mascara but

nothing heavy, and nude lipstick, extra glossy for Quinn's benefit. A fluttery sensation overcomes me at the thought of her looking at my lips. I take a calming breath and text Lexi for the third time to remind her not to interrogate Quinn tonight. Lexi responds by sending me a winky face emoji, which doesn't settle my anxiety *at all*.

At a quarter past six, I'm standing in front of my door, staring at it, ready to pounce the second there's a knock. Only, when the knock happens, I get jittery all over and it takes me a minute before I can move.

I smooth my palms over my dress and open the door and there goes my breath.

Quinn is standing about two feet away from me, smiling her charming smile, her high cheekbones looking as sharp as cut glass. And those lips...don't get me started. She's in tight black jeans, a white, sleeveless button-down shirt, and suspenders.

I inhale acutely and a bit too loud but offer her a grin. "Who do you think you are, showing up here in all your hotness when we have somewhere to be?"

Quinn smirks. "And if we *didn't* have somewhere to be?"

"I'd be strapping you to my bed right now with those suspenders." A warmth spreads throughout me, filling up my cheeks. "You're so damn beautiful, I'm not going to be able to take my eyes off of you."

Quinn holds out her hands, gesturing to me. "What about you? How am I not supposed to *not* check you out all night? I mean, that dress is..." she shakes her head. "It's basically tailored for your body."

I step up to Quinn and smile at her. "The dress is nothing. Wait until you see what's underneath it."

Quinn blushes and she bites her bottom lip. "Are you sure your friends need us to be present for this get-together?"

I chuckle. "I'm sure."

"Fiiiine," Quinn groans, and I giggle like I've just been blessed by Lady Gaga. Then, she leans in and sweeps her lips across mine. "You're gorgeous."

It hurts my chest and makes my heart feel buoyant all at once—not the compliment, but the way Quinn delivers it in a whisper with scintillating eyes—as if she's telling me that the deepest secret in her heart is me.

I smile at her and take her hands in mine. "Come on, you. We have somewhere to be."



Lexi greets Quinn and me with a big-ass grin on her face and leads us through the living room of the condo she shares with Breanna to the dining area. There's a charcuterie board and a plate of butterscotch brownies in the center of the table as promised as well as a large bowl of chicken Caesar salad, and several bottles of red wine.

Once we're in the dining room, Lexi motions to the chairs around the table. "Take a seat, guys. Help yourselves. Breanna will be out in a second. She's trying to find the corkscrew."

Quinn pulls a chair out for me and Lexi coughs lightly. I thank Quinn and shoot my best friend a dirty look as I sit down. Quinn takes a seat beside me. Our legs brush and I immediately find myself unable to focus.

"Everything looks great," Quinn says to Lexi. "Thank you for having me in your home."

Lexi smiles at Quinn and then at me. "You're welcome. Glad you could make it." She sits down across from us.

Breanna appears from the kitchen, holding up the corkscrew triumphantly. "Found it!" she announces.

"Thank you, Bri," Lexi says to her girlfriend.

"No problem." Breanna begins to open a bottle of wine. After she pops the cork, she starts filling the glasses on the table, but glances up at Quinn and me between pours. "Thanks for coming, you two."

"Thanks for having us," I say with a smile.

Breanna passes a glass of wine to each of us, sets the bottle down, and takes a seat. She nods in Quinn's direction. "You must be Quinn."

Quinn clears her throat. "I am, yes."

I place my hand on Quinn's leg and we both stiffen. *I was going to say something. What was it? Oh, right.*

I smile adoringly at Quinn and then turn my gaze to Breanna. "Breanna, this is Quinn, my date. Quinn, this is Breanna, Lexi's partner."

"Nice to meet you," Quinn says to Breanna. After, she looks at Lexi. "It's nice to meet both of you."

"You as well." Lexi raises her glass. "Cheers, everyone. To good food and good company."

We all clink our glasses against Lexi's with a collective "cheers" and simultaneously take a sip of wine.

“So, Quinn. Tell us about yourself.” Lexi puts her elbows on the table and stares intently at Quinn.

I tip my head toward Quinn. “You don’t have to tell them anything,” I mumble.

Lexi makes a face at me and Breanna snorts.

Quinn chuckles. “No, it’s okay. They’re your friends.” She takes a long drink of wine and looks at Lexi. “What would you like to know?”

“Yes, *Theo*. We’re your friends.” Lexi swirls the wine around in her glass. “You two can relax. I’m not going to ask Quinn what her intentions are with you, although I’m deeply curious.”

I roll my eyes and mutter an apology to Quinn. She smiles at me, unfazed.

Lexi redirects her gaze and studies Quinn again. “*Theo* speaks highly of you, so you must deserve to be spoken highly of,” she says. “She’s my best friend, so treat her right and you and me will get along just fine.”

“Lexi,” I hiss. “Intense much?”

Lexi widens her eyes. “What?”

I squeeze Quinn’s knee. “I’m sorry. Don’t listen to her.”

Lexi glimpses at me. “Excuse you? I care about you.”

I sigh dramatically. “I know, but you’re not the Godfather.” I shoot Breanna an exasperated look. “Can you tell your girlfriend to chill out?”

Breanna laughs. “Did you really think she wasn’t going to tap into her inner mamma bear? You gave me the same speech way back when.”

Quinn puts down her wine glass, takes my hand, and nods at Lexi. “I understand. I watch out for my best friend too.”

Lexi smiles. “I knew you’d get it.” She takes a sip of wine. “See, *Theo*? Quinn gets it. We’re good here.” She brings her hands together with one loud clap. “Everyone, eat.”

I gasp and set my eyes on Lexi. “A word, please?”

Breanna gently pushes the charcuterie board toward Quinn. “Congratulations,” she says quietly. “You made it through initiation.”

“Thanks.” Quinn takes a cracker and loads it up with cheese and pepperoni.

I glare at my best friend. “Lexi. Kitchen. Now.”

Lexi stands up. “Alright. Alright.”

I rise to my feet, round the table, grab Lexi’s arm, and drag her out of the dining area and into the kitchen. I pull her to the furthest end of the room, release my grip on her, and swivel around to face her, hands on my hips.

“What is the matter with you?” I sneer at Lexi.

My best friend wrinkles her brow. “Nothing is the matter with me,” she says with a shrug. “Okay, so maybe I went down a rabbit hole on the internet about power dynamics within age-gap relationships, and it got me nervous for you.” Lexi sighs. “Quinn needs to know that we love you and that we’re keeping a close eye on her and that if she tries to pull any of that shit, she won’t get away with it.”

I press my lips together and glance skyward, rapping my fingernails against the countertop. I take a few breaths and return my eyes to Lexi’s.

“That’s what this is about? Your Google search results?” I huff. “You couldn’t have run this by me first before cross-examining my girl—uh, date?”

Lexi arches an eyebrow. “Your what now?”

I quickly fold my arms over my chest. “My date,” I blurt without missing a beat.

“Mm-hmm.” My best friend grins.

“Don’t give me that look.”

“What look?”

I shut my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose. “I love her,” I whisper to Lexi. “I’m falling in love with her, *and* I love her, like who she is. She’s gentle and kind and funny and she’s awkward, but in a cool way. Being with her is effortless.” I open my eyes to look at my friend. “We talk about music and philosophy and family dynamics and childhood memories, and I’m bonding with her cat. Her cat, Lex. The vibe between us is just...fucking amazing. I want to ask her to be my girlfriend, because there’s no one else I want to be with. But, I worry that it’s too soon. We’ve only been dating for five seconds, and her last serious relationship was a *marriage*.”

Lexi leans against the counter and smiles. “I love this for you. It’s about time you got with someone who’s on your level.” Her smile shapes into an impish grin. “I take it you two had sex. How was it?”

I get a chill thinking about my face between Quinn’s thighs. “It was...” I shake my head and whistle lowly.

Lexi giggles. “Excellent. I *knew* it would be.” She shifts her weight away from the counter. “If you want to lock it down with Quinn, then lock it down.”

I shrug. “Ugh. I don’t want to come across as the young girl who’s completely smitten and foolish for the older woman.”

Lexi furrows her brow. “But you *are* the young girl who’s completely smitten and foolish for the older woman, so maybe just accept that.”

I cringe. “Am I pathetic?”

Lexi reaches out and gives my shoulder a light rub. “Yes, but so is everyone else who’s in love.”

I snort but compose myself quickly. “What if Quinn doesn’t want to be locked down?”

Lexi guffaws, and I immediately slap my hand over her mouth.

“Shh,” I plead and slowly remove my hand.

Lexi coughs out the rest of her laugh under her breath. “Theo, she came here to meet your friends. She wants to be locked down. It might not be this very second, but she wants it, and she wants it with you. Read the signs, babe.”

I exhale. “Okay.” I give her a tight smile. “What do you think of her, really?”

Lexi purses her lips and stares at me with a thoughtful expression. “I like her. She showed up, she doesn’t cave under pressure, and she seems to be adding to your life.”

I half smirk at my friend. “Then, can you go easy on her for the rest of the night?”

Lexi rolls her eyes exaggeratedly. “I’ll try.”

“Try hard, or I’ll tell the story about the time you and Breanna experimented with rope play without safety scissors.”

Lexi flushes. “I told you to never bring that up.”

I grin. “Then don’t make me have to.”

After Lexi and I return to the dining room to find Quinn and Breanna engrossed in a conversation about Stevie Nicks’s solo career, we open a new bottle of wine and the four of us start talking about women in music while we dine on the charcuterie board offerings and brownies.

We spend the next two hours discussing the disappearance of the Dumpling House, Lexi and Breanna’s frustration with healthcare policies, the art of crafting a mean dirty gin martini, and how The Roasted Bean was recently given a Best of Boston award, at which point I placed my hand on the back of Quinn’s head and began playing with her hair, smiling proudly.

Now, our wine glasses are nearly empty and we’re all pleasantly tipsy, laughing at the way Lexi’s Boston accent gets thicker the more she drinks. My belly aches and I wipe a tear of joy from my eye. That’s when Quinn

lightly touches my leg and traces the inside of my thigh with her fingers. I choke on my chuckle and startle in my seat. Lexi raises an inquisitive brow at me, and I can *feel* Quinn smirking.

“You good, Theo?” Breanna asks. “Want some water?”

“No, I’m fine. Thank you.” I finish my wine and slip my free hand beneath the table. My heart beats rapidly as I find Quinn’s roaming fingers and wrap my own around them. She goes very still in her chair as I ease her hand further up my thigh, under my skirt. When her fingertips meet the lacy trim of my panties, she gasps.

Lexi turns to face Quinn. “Everything alright?”

“Yeah. Everything’s great.” Quinn forces a smile and I let go of her.

I pick up the empty wine bottle off the table. “Breanna, where did you get this Pinot? It’s wicked good. I’d love to order some from the bar.”

Breanna throws Lexi a look. “I told you it was good,” she says, and Lexi rolls her eyes. Then, Breanna looks at me. “That boutique-y wine shop right by Harvard Station.”

“Awesome. I’ll have to check it out.” I turn the bottle to read the label and I’m not ready at all when Quinn brushes her fingers over the center strip of fabric on my thong. I jump, dropping the bottle on the table. Thankfully, it doesn’t break. Quinn picks it up and sets it upright while she continues to tease me.

Lexi gives Quinn and me a sideways glance and I ignore it. Instead, I turn my attention to Quinn, but struggle to look her in the eyes.

“It’s getting late,” I say to her. “Don’t you have to get home to feed Franny?”

Quinn faces me, completely poker-faced as she pinches the fabric of my panties. “She’s all set for the night.”

I inhale shakily. “She is?”

Quinn smiles. “She is.”

Lexi snickers and I scowl at her. Then, I make another attempt.

“Quinn. Uh, don’t you have to get up early tomorrow for...that thing?” I ask.

Whew, that was bad.

Quinn knits her eyebrows at me. Promptly, I put my hand on her lap and smooth it over her thigh. Recognition dawns on her face and her cheeks redden.

“Oh, right. The thing I have,” she says. “I almost forgot. We should

probably get going.”

In my peripheral vision, I spot Lexi elbowing Breanna. Breanna chuckles.

I nod at Quinn. “Good idea.” I glance at Lexi and Breanna. “Looks like we’re going to call it a night,” I inform them. “This was so much fun. We’ll have to do it again.”

“Yeah, thank you much for your hospitality,” Quinn chimes in.

“Anytime. Good luck with your thing,” Lexi says to Quinn and then grins at me and mouths, “Have fun.”



Quinn and I struggle to behave in the backseat of the Uber, but it’s futile. We’re quite handsy with each other for the entire ride, but we keep it PG-13 for the sake of the driver.

The second we enter my apartment, Quinn turns around and pushes my back up against the door, shutting it. I draw in a quick breath right before she catches me in a heated kiss. Our hands bump into one another’s as we recklessly tear off each other’s clothes. I pull down her suspenders and blindly unbutton her shirt, open it, and run my fingers over her warm skin. Then, in one fluid motion, I unfasten her jeans. Quinn lowers the zipper to my dress, but it gets snagged. I laugh quietly into our kiss. She laughs with me and utters an apology.

“Don’t apologize.” No longer laughing, I hike up my dress, take one of Quinn’s hands, and slide it up between my thighs. She groans softly when she feels how wet I am. “I’ve been thinking about you,” I mumble against her lips.

Quinn swallows so forcefully that her body shakes. She slips her fingers inside me. I sigh and so does she.

“I want you,” I whisper while tugging her pants and boxers down over her hips. I touch her where she aches. She moans and I can taste the wine on her breath. My temperature spikes.

Quinn covers my mouth with her mouth with immediacy and wraps one arm around me, holding me close while we fuck.

What must be hours later, Quinn and I are spent, lying on my living room floor, sweating and panting, a pile of rumpled clothes by our feet.

Quinn rests her head on my chest, and I immediately begin raking my

fingers through her hair.

“You know, if we keep dating, it’s probably not always going to be like this,” she says.

“Like what?”

“All the lust and wild sex.”

I chuckle. “I wouldn’t necessarily refer to what we do as ‘wild’.”

Quinn tickles my ribcage with the pads of her fingers, and I shiver. “You know what I mean. One day, you might find that your attraction to me has faded. Or maybe when things aren’t so new, you’ll feel bored.”

I wrap a strand of Quinn’s dark brown hair around my finger. “Sometimes, I wish I could shut your brain off.”

Quinn laughs softly. “Me too.”

“Here’s what I think—I think that if two people are invested in being together, they find a way to keep things from getting stale. Not just sexy stuff, but everything. If you commit to someone, you either put in the work to keep life interesting, or you don’t. It’s a fairly simple concept.”

Quinn starts drawing an invisible circle around my belly. “Simple in theory, but maybe not in practice.”

I outline her shoulder blade with my fingernails. “Have you practiced?”

Quinn places her hand on top of my left breast and rests her chin on it. She stares at me for a moment. “I’d like to think so.”

I smile at her. “Maybe you need a new practice partner.”

I hold my breath.

She smiles back at me. “Maybe.”

Swoon.

Quinn

Gabby hands me a cookie from the bakery case. “I thought that line was never going to end. *Finally*, we can gossip. I feel behind in your life. We took opposite shifts two days in a row. Catch me up. I want to know everything. Did you have sex with her? What was it like? Did you tell her you’re falling for her? How was it meeting her friends? When are you seeing her again?”

It’s after closing on Thursday evening. Luke and Carrie have gone home, leaving me and Gabby to clean up and cash out. The Roasted Bean’s inaugural open mic night was a hit, which is great, but we had no idea that it would draw in such a large crowd. We were barely able to keep up with all the free refills. And why are people drinking *multiple* caffeinated beverages after 7 p.m. anyway? It’s basically bedtime. Well, it is for me. Or at least it used to be. I should probably talk to Theo about sleep hygiene, because neither of us has been sleeping much recently.

My mind begins racing with thoughts of a very naked Theo in my bed, on my couch, on her living room floor, in her shower, on her kitchen counter...

Gabby clears her throat and I snap out of it. I take the cookie from her hand.

“Thanks,” I say and bite into it.

Gabby’s eyes grow big and wide. “Well? Tell me!”

I put down my cookie and wipe my hands on my pants. I purse my lips, reflecting on Gabby’s questions. “Um. It was cool meeting her friends. They’re very protective of her, but they’re nice. I *did* tell her that I’m falling in love with her, and she feels the same way.” There’s a swoosh in my belly at the memory.

Gabby gasps. “Oh my God! Yes! Get it, girl!” She holds out her fist for me to bump and I do with a chuckle. “I knew this would happen for you! I knew it! I’m so happy! Are you happy? You must be thrilled.”

My cheeks fill with warmth. “I’m happy.”

Gabby grins. “How’s the sex?”

I smile and shake my head. “Unbelievable.”

“YASSS!” She laughs. “Is that why you look exhausted? You two been going at it nonstop?”

“No comment.”

“Bow chicka wow wow,” Gabby sings, swaying her hips.

I blurt out a chuckle. “Will you stop? I have to ask you something and I need you to be serious.”

Gabby quickly sobers. “Alright. I’m done. What’s up?”

“Would it be okay if I borrowed the café after hours on Sunday?”

My question is met with a smirk. “Why?”

I pick up a cloth and start wiping down the counter. “I want to do something special for Theo,” I explain. “I thought it might be—I don’t know—romantic, if we had an evening for two here and I picked up some dinner. I could set it up all fancy, like with twinkle lights and flowers for a centerpiece.” I crinkle my nose. “What do you think?”

Gabby lifts an eyebrow at me. “What’s the occasion?”

I smile. “Theo.”

My best friend laughs. “Look at you, so in love.”

I glance over at Gabby. “So? Can I?”

“I don’t know why you’re asking me. You’re part owner.”

“Out of respect.”

“I appreciate that,” she says. “I think you should go for it. Just please don’t have sex in here. It wouldn’t be sanitary.”

My jaw slackens. “What? I would never!”

“Pfft!” Gabby grabs a rag and sportively whacks me on the arm with it. “You say that, and yet I don’t believe you.” She grins. “Besides, the steel countertops can feel especially cold on some parts of the body, almost uncomfortably so. Trust me.”

I gawk at her. “Gabby!”

My best friend shrugs and then erupts in laughter. “Just sayin’.”



The rest of the week goes by in a blur, and I spend all of it waiting for Sunday, for when I see Theo again.

I work during the days while Theo has all night shifts. We text whenever we can and even manage to sneak in a few brief phone calls. We talk about Theo's management position, the slam poetry event Gabby and I are planning to have at the café in the fall, our upcoming date, the most influential people in our lives, and our celebrity crushes. The sound of Theo's voice alone has the power to flood my body with a warmth that's both new and familiar. And the sound of her laugh? Forget it. I can't even.

During my time off, I send Theo pictures of Franny napping in various spots around the house, and she replies with cat memes that are all too relatable. Except for the one evening that I sent her a picture of Franny sleeping on my lap and Theo responded with a very indiscreet selfie along with some caption about how she's jealous of Franny and wishes she were on my lap instead. The message left me so preoccupied that I burned my dinner. Twice.

In what feels like no time at all, Sunday evening arrives.

Once the café is closed, Gabby hangs around to help me clean up. Afterward, she insists on assisting me with decorating the place. We hang the lights and strategically arrange the candles. Then, Gabby gives me a tutorial on how to cut the stems of flowers prior to putting them in a vase, which we agree is something I should know how to do at this point in my life.

When the café is set up, I rush home to shower and change. Then, I hurry back with only twenty minutes to spare before Theo's arrival.

As I'm hooking my phone up to the café's Bluetooth speakers, a loud rapping on the storefront window gives me a start. I know it's not Theo because I told her to text me when she gets here. I roll my eyes and prepare myself to explain to some rando that we're closed and Dunkin' Donuts is right down the street.

I open the door and everything becomes stock-still, and my head fills with some kind of static noise. I furrow my brow.

"What are you doing here?"

Simone greets me with a saccharine sweet smile. "Hi. I was in the neighborhood and saw some lights on, so I thought I'd stop by, figuring you'd be here. Guess I figured right," my ex-wife says. "You never responded to my text about catching up. Can I come in?"

I snap my head back. "Uh. Actually, I was about to—"

Simone squeaks by me and steps inside the café.

I gape. *Okay, never mind.*

“Wow. This place has really come along,” she says. “What’s with the atmosphere? Gotta hot date or something?”

I clear my throat. “Simone, I didn’t text you back because I was trying to decide how to tell you that I don’t want to catch up. There’s no room for you in my life anymore.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “You *do* have a hot date, don’t you?”

A gasp leaves my mouth. “That’s none of your…” I shake my head. “Look, now is not a good time for me. Could you please go? There’s nothing left for us to talk about.”

Simone studies me for a second. “You look good, Quinn.”

I clench my jaw. “Simone, for real, I need you to—”

My ex-wife holds up her hands, surrendering. “I know. You want me to leave. I got that part. But I have something I’d like to share with you.” She pulls out a chair, sits down, and gestures to the seat across from her. “Give me five minutes. Please. That’s all I need.”

Un-fucking-believable.

I march over to the empty chair and take a seat. “Five minutes. Go.”

Simone folds her hands on the table. “I know the lesbian community can be a bit incestuous, so I’m sure you heard from Gabby that I’m engaged. I’m sorry that you found out that way. I should’ve told you before going public with it.”

I take in a calculated breath. “I appreciate the afterthought, but it’s fine. I don’t care what you do with your life.”

Simone nods slowly. “So, it doesn’t bother you at all that I’m getting married again?”

I elevate my chin. “No, it doesn’t. Is that all? Because I’m expecting—”

“A hot date?” She grins. “I’m glad you found happiness. She must be something. You certainly never went out of your way like this for me.”

My eye twitches. “Maybe I thought I had the rest of my life to do stuff like this for you. Did you ever think of that?”

Simone cocks her head to the side. “Quinn, we weren’t a good match. Someday, you’ll thank me for ending our marriage.”

I blink and see red. “I think that day already happened. Because if you hadn’t left, I wouldn’t be here, and I like it here. I’m happy here.” I attempt to swallow. “She *is* something, my date. She’s something amazing. And she’ll

be here soon, so if you'll excuse me, I—”

“It’s the bartender, isn’t it? The young one from Labrys?”

My shoulders curl forward. “What? Who told you that?”

Simone gives me a tight smile. “Like I said—the lesbian community is incestuous. I have a work friend who was at your employee’s birthday party not long ago. Carrie, I think her name is. Rumor has it that you and the bartender were the talk of the night.”

My tongue feels stuck to the roof of my mouth. “Since when did you start believing rumors?”

Simone shrugs with her mouth. “Since when did you start dating women half your age?”

My eyes bulge and I heave out a breath. “She’s not ‘half my age.’ And it’s none of your business. My life isn’t your business anymore.”

Simone glances down at her left hand and twirls her engagement ring around for a minute. “Quinn, even though we’re no longer married, I have your best interest at heart.” She looks up at me. “The bartender, she’s a child. What happens when you get older? Will she leave you for someone younger? More limber, perhaps? And if she stays with you, then what? When age gets the better of you, will she end up putting her life on hold to take care of you? That doesn’t seem fair. Have you taken her future into consideration, or are you just focusing on your own needs? You do have a tendency to—”

“Stop!” I practically spit. “You don’t know her and you don’t know me. I don’t think you ever did. I get it—your experience of me wasn’t a favorable one, but that doesn’t make me the bad guy. Don’t put our divorce on me so that you can feel better about yourself, about what you did, about how you left, about how you hurt me. Just because I wasn’t what *you* wanted, doesn’t mean I’m someone who’s unlovable.”

Simone glances past my shoulder. A slight smirk appears on her lips. She leans in closer. “You always were sexy when you got fired up about something.”

That instant, the door to the café swings open with a burst of hot air. I turn around in my seat. My heart catapults into my stomach.

Theo’s staring at me, her brows drawn together, the color drained from her face. Her eyes bounce between me and Simone until they finally fix on me.

“I...uh. The door was unlocked,” Theo mutters. “I’m s—sorry. I’m going to—” she uses her thumb to point to the door behind her. “Yeah. I’m going to

go.”

Theo whirls around and bolts out the door so quickly, I don't have the chance to protest. I jump to my feet, but Simone grabs my hand. I glance back at her with a questioning look.

“Let her go,” Simone says.

I yank myself free from her grip, shaking. “You saw her coming, didn't you? You saw her coming and you leaned in. You *knew* she'd get the wrong idea,” I say, seething.

Simone's forehead creases. “Quinn, it's not my fault if she's young and insecure and feels threatened by me. Think of this as me helping you. I'm simply showing you who she is so that you don't have to find out the hard way. I told you that I care about you. Maybe someday you'll recognize that, and you'll want me in your life again.”

I grind my teeth together.

Breathe.

“Why do you want to be in my life? You left me. *You left me* and there was nothing I could do except watch you go.” Tears prick my eyes. “I moved on. I never thought I could, but I did. So now, I'm asking you to let me let you go.” I snifle. “Leave. Leave, and don't come back. Okay? I'm glad you found what you're looking, so go. Enjoy your new life but stay away from mine.”



The minute Simone exits the café, I blow out the candles, shut off the lights, and run out the door. I lock up and turn to face the street, only to realize that I have no clue where Theo could be. I pull out my phone and text her. ***Hi. Can we talk about what just happened? Please.*** After I hit send, I call her. It rings five times before I go to voicemail.

“Theo. Hi. I need to talk to you. Can you call me back or text me or something?” I hang up in a hurry, hop in my car, and drive.

My first stop is Theo's apartment and she's not there. Either that, or she's pretending not to be and doing a very good job at it. She's not hanging out in the center of Davis Square. Her favorite breakfast diner is closed. And the longer it takes me to find her, the more it occurs to me that I don't know Theo's spots, her safe havens. *Where is she?* I rack my brain for other places

Theo could be. There's a chance she's with her best friend, but there's no way for me to reach Lexi and I can't remember how to get to her house. So, I swing by Labrys instead. Maybe Theo dropped in for a drink.

I could sure use a drink.

It's a miracle that there was one parking space available around the corner from the club, and I take it as a positive sign.

When I step inside Labrys, I'm surprised at how busy it is for a Sunday night. My eyes sweep the perimeter, but Theo's nowhere in sight. My shoulders slump forward as my heart sinks. Fresh out of ideas on where to go next, I drag my feet to the bar. I take a seat on a stool and stare at the seemingly endless rows of liquor bottles on the shelves.

Fuck my life.

"Boss?" a familiar voice says from a not-so-far distance.

I turn my head to the left to meet Carrie's quizzical gaze. *Great. Because this is exactly what I need right now.*

I press my lips into a smile. "Hey."

Carrie gets up from her seat and walks over to me. She perches herself on the stool next to mine and takes a sip of her beer.

"What are you doing here?" she asks. "I thought you and Gabby renovated the café for your date tonight with Theo."

I lift an eyebrow at her. "How did you know about that?"

Carrie winces. "I overheard you and Gabby talking before I left."

I huff. "Of course you did."

"So, what's the what? Did Theo cancel?"

I narrow my eyes. "Are you asking because you care or because you're wondering if you have a chance with her?"

"Oh, I know I don't have a chance with her. I can't compete with how she looks at you, all googly-eyed and shit," she says. "I'm asking because I care."

I know she means it as a compliment, but it feels like someone just stabbed my chest with a hot poker.

"Simone showed up." I frown.

Carrie's eyes bulge. "No shit. In the middle of your date?"

"No, before the date could even start," I clarify. "I think Theo misread a situation because she fled the scene before I could explain. Now, I can't find her. I haven't the slightest idea where she is. It's as if she vanished or something."

Carrie nods and takes another sip of her drink. After she swallows, she

asks me, “Have you tried looking for her at Fresh Pond in Cambridge?”

I draw my head back and peer at Carrie. “Why would I look there?”

Carrie shrugs with her mouth. “The night Theo and I, er, hung out, she mentioned how she got stood up and if it were any other day, she’d go to Fresh Pond to be alone, but she wanted company instead that evening. That’s how we ended up...um, *chilling* together.”

I gulp down the bitter taste in my mouth. “She told you that?”

“She did. I don’t know if there’s any truth to it, because she had a few drinks prior to telling me that, but Theo doesn’t strike me as the lying type.”

I leap off my stool and grab Carrie’s shoulder. “Thank you. I have to go.”

The drive to Fresh Pond takes longer than I anticipated and when I finally arrive, there’s no available parking to be had, so I circle the place. On my third loop around the parkway, I find a spot. It takes me a twenty-point turn to squeeze my Subaru into it, but I get it done. I spring out of the car and scour the area. It’s dark and beginning to drizzle. The temperature has noticeably dropped within the last hour. I shiver and stare out at the acres upon acres of grass surrounding the water. I don’t see Theo anywhere.

With nothing to lose, I begin trekking through the park. Several people are out jogging, a few teenagers are lounging about, there’s no shortage of dog walkers, and a group of cyclists nearly run me down. But none of the faces I pass by are Theo’s. Eventually, I reach the pond, and everything becomes quieter. The only sound I can make out is the slight rippling in the water caused by raindrops.

I come to a stop and take it all in—the peacefulness. I understand why Theo comes here to get away. I shut my eyes and breathe. When I open them, I take another long look around. Then and there, I make out Theo’s blonde, curly ponytail blowing in the cool, summer breeze from afar. I become paralyzed and just stare at her.

Theo’s sitting on a bench that’s situated in what appears to be the most remote area of the park, looking out at the water.

I wait for my brain to catch up to my body. Only then, do I wander over to her. My footsteps are soft in the grass, so she doesn’t hear me coming. I clear my throat as I approach the bench. She sits up quickly, turns to her right, and glances up at me.

“Hi,” I say with a small half-wave.

Theo’s eyebrows pinch together. “Why did you come here?”

I shove my hands in the pockets of my jeans and puff out a low breath.

“Because I thought you might be here. Well, Carrie thought you might be here, so then, I thought you might be here and here you are.”

Theo’s forehead wrinkles. “You didn’t have to come looking for me.”

I glimpse up and meet Theo’s eyes. “Yeah, I did. I want to explain things.”

Theo shakes her head and shifts her attention back to the water. “You don’t have to explain, Quinn. I saw what I saw. That was her, wasn’t it? That was your ex-wife?”

My heartbeat becomes a dull thud. “It was. How did you know?”

“Women’s intuition and also her name is tagged in some of the café’s social media pictures,” Theo says. “You two looked like you were about to get pretty intimate.”

My heart clenches. “We weren’t though. You saw what Simone wanted you to see. There’s so much more to it than that. Please let me explain.”

Theo’s expression tightens. “I thought you didn’t want her in your life?”

I rub the back of my neck. “I don’t.”

Theo cocks her head to the side and starts at me. “Did you change your mind?” She places her hand over her stomach. “Are you two getting back together, or...?” She looks up at the sky, the moon reflecting the unshed tears in her eyes.

My insides feel like lead. I crouch down in front of Theo. “No, we are not getting back together. Absolutely not.” I place my hand on Theo’s knee, but she flinches. I frown. “Theo, look at me. Please.”

Theo’s jaw flexes and she brings her eyes back to mine. “Okay. Explain it to me. Tell me what I walked in on.”

I lick the dryness from my lips. “I had the café set up for our date. I was going to surprise you. Simone showed up, unannounced, to ask me why I never responded to her last text—the one I told you about. Remember?”

“I remember.”

I nod. “I asked her to leave, but she wouldn’t until she said her piece, so I listened. She wanted to tell me to my face that she’s engaged. Then, she went on to let me know that she found out about you and me, not that I care. She tried to get in my head about it, tried to get me to doubt you, but I wouldn’t let her. I think she saw you coming into the café, and she leaned in to give you the wrong idea. She was messing with you. I assume it was to get *you* to doubt *me*. Simone was never going to kiss me. And for what it’s worth, if she *had* kissed me, I wouldn’t have kissed her back. There’s only one person I

want to always be kissing and that's you.”

Theo regards me in silence for a moment. Then, she utters a curse and thanks God under her breath, lips fashioning a smile. She pats the space next to her on the bench.

“Sit.”

“Wait.” Lightheaded and unable to breathe, I reach for Theo's hand, and she lets me take it. “There's something I have to say.”

Theo

There's something I have to say.

One sentence. Six words. An endless amount of anxiety. All in a single breath.

Whatever comes next is going to be substantial for better or for worse. I'm thinking for better, because I believe in what Quinn and I have together, but I'm also human. And love does something strange to humans. It makes us strong and brave, but at the same time, it makes us vulnerable and scared. Both things are true. My mom told me once that when we are afraid, it means something is worth it.

What I know for sure deep in the burrows of my heart is that Quinn Gellar is worth it.

I hold Quinn's gaze and swallow the lump in my throat. "Let's hear it."

Quinn brushes her thumb across my knuckles and smiles at me. "I had a speech, but I'm going to spare you and get right to the point." She wobbles a little and I grab her arm so that she doesn't tip over. Her cheeks rouge.

I suppress a chuckle. "Don't fall."

"We both know it's too late for that." Quinn gives me a lopsided smile.

I've no choice but to smile back. I mean, who can resist that face?

"I love you," she utters to me under the moonlight, just like a dream.

A warmth like no other infuses my body. I blink and Quinn's blurry. This is definitely for the better. I smile and squeeze her hand.

"You stole my line," I say, my voice awash with emotion.

Quinn beams at me. "I did?"

"You sure did." I bite my lower lip. "Of course I love you. Why do you

think I panicked when I thought I lost you?”

Quinn maneuvers herself onto the bench, never letting go of my hand. She caresses the side of my face with the pads of her fingers. I briefly close my eyes to her touch.

“I panicked when I thought I lost you too,” she confides. “You ran and I didn’t think you were going to come back.”

“I needed a minute. I was going to come back. I’m never going to just disappear on you or leave you guessing, even if I’m upset. Okay?”

The corners of Quinn’s mouth turn upward. “Okay.” She exhales audibly. “Did you doubt me today when you saw me with Simone?”

I purse my lips. “No. I think I doubted myself. You two have a history, and me and you, we’re—”

“We’re history in the making.” Quinn drags her fingers along my jawline, luring me closer. I lose my breath when her lips brush against mine.

I grab Quinn by her shirt collar, pull her nearer to me, and kiss her back, desperately wishing that all the love I feel for her spills from my lips onto hers.

A clap of thunder shakes the sky above us and lightning strikes and we just keep kissing.



A week after what Quinn and I will forever refer to as The Mishap That Never Was, I find myself burning the candle at both ends—working every night while conspiring with Celeste during the day. I’m planning something of a surprise for Quinn. A mulligan, if you will.

Although my schedule is hectic, I make it a point to stop by the café each morning to grab a coffee and to steal a kiss from Quinn. I never intend to linger, but I always do. Quinn’s kisses leave me feeling a little drunk for hours after they happen. It’s trippy, and that’s not a complaint.

Quinn is under the impression that we are going to meet up with Lexi, Breanna, and Gabby for brunch at the new bar and grill that opened in the Omni Hotel this Friday, but that’s actually not until next week. I hate lying to her, but I don’t think she’ll be upset about the truth once she finds out what it is. And she’s about to.

I hold onto Quinn’s hand tightly as I guide her through the entrance of

Labrys on Friday morning right before eleven o'clock.

"Don't open your eyes yet," I tell her.

She chuckles. "I won't."

I usher Quinn to a chair at the table I set for us and help her sit down.

"What is this?" she inquires.

"You'll see." I put the stereo on and the first track—a Sade song—begins to play. Quinn makes a sound that's not quite a giggle but not quite a laugh. It's cute as fuck.

I sit across from Quinn at the table and take a breath. "Okay. You can look."

Quinn slowly lifts the lids of her eyes and gasps. "What the...?" her voice trails as she glances around the club, absorbing her surroundings—the twinkle lights Gabby suggested, the unscented flickering candles hand-selected by Celeste, and the rose petals on the floor. A smile tugs at her mouth and she turns back to me, but easily gets distracted by what's on the table.

I press my lips together to refrain from grinning and lift our respective plate covers to reveal our meal of homemade Challah French toast, scrambled eggs, and fresh fruit. Next to both of our plates are mimosas.

"Ta-da!"

Quinn inhales acutely and gazes up at me. "This is...what is this?"

"This is yours. I tried to recreate the date we never got to have. I had to coordinate with my staff to make sure we could have some privacy. We have approximately two hours. Celeste and Gabby pitched in too. But, the playlist was all me," I boast.

Quinn flushes. "Theo, you really didn't have to do..." Her eyes widen. "Are you *not* wearing a bra under a Fleetwood Mac T-shirt?"

"Mm-hmm." I simper. "Why else would I have worn a sweater to walk here in eighty-degree weather? I wasn't about to flash the neighborhood. I figured it wasn't going to take us two full hours to eat brunch. And there's a strong possibility that I turned the security cameras off."

Quinn's blush spreads to her neck. "Are you suggesting—?"

"I *am* suggesting. Uh-huh." I wink at her.

Quinn smiles at me. "God, I love you."

I smile back at her. "I love you, too, baby."

Quinn shakes her head, laughing softly while she picks up her fork and digs into a piece of French toast. I watch her while she chews, eyes rolling

slightly to the back of her head. “So good,” she mumbles through a mouthful of food.

I chuckle. “I’m glad you like it.” I take a bite of my own meal.

“Did you make this?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Theo, this is seriously delicious!”

I finish chewing. “Thank you.” I take a sip of my mimosa. “So, did you do it?”

Quinn nods while eating a mouthful of eggs. Not sure how she makes that look attractive, but she does.

“I did it.” Quinn grins. “Did you?”

My heart beats riotously in my chest. “Uh-huh.” I bite down on a piece of strawberry and talk with my mouth full. “And? What did they say?”

Quinn takes a sip of her drink. “My mom was slightly concerned about our age difference at first. Dad didn’t seem to care. But when I told them how happy I was with you, nothing else mattered. They can’t wait to meet you.” Quinn smiles big at me. “What did your parents say about us?”

I sigh. “Dad wasn’t loving the age-gap romance thing either, but eventually chilled out after Mom and I talked him down. By the end of the video call—once I told them about how you make me feel—they wanted me to invite you to South Carolina for Thanksgiving.”

Quinn breaks into a laugh. “I’ll take it.” She gazes at me for a second, lips partially curled into a smile. “I guess things are getting serious between us then. We’re throwing around the L word and telling our parents about each other.”

I aim my fork at Quinn. “Mm. And don’t forget about the all the sex.”

Quinn chuckles. “Yes! The sex! How could I forget?”

I snort with laughter but recover quickly. “Are you okay with getting serious?”

My girlfriend’s eyes soften. “Of course, I am. I wouldn’t be here if I felt differently.”

“Same.”

Quinn taps on my plate with her knife. “Eat. It’s delicious!”

I smile. “I *am* eating, and you keep saying that.”

“Yeah, because it’s delish.”

“I appreciate that, but I can think of a few things that are even more delicious.” I grin devilishly at Quinn and her cheeks turn a furious shade of

red.

“Are you going to let me eat this meal or are you going to keep teasing me?”

I smirk at Quinn. “Both.”

“What am I going to do with you?”

“You can literally do anything you want with me.” I get up from my seat and round the table. I can feel Quinn’s eyes following me. It gives me chills.

When I reach her, I grab the sides of her chair and swivel it around with her on it. Quinn giggles and my heart flutters.

“Now what’s happening?” she asks, a lilt of amusement in her voice.

I carefully settle myself into Quinn’s lap. She catches her breath, and her hands immediately find my waist. She looks up at me, her brown irises illuminated by the candlelight. My stomach does a pirouette.

I cup Quinn’s face in my palms. “What’s happening is that I’m going to ask you if you’ll be my girlfriend. I know we’re dating, but damn, do I want to lock you down. I want to make it official.”

I feel Quinn swallow against my touch and she smiles at me. “You stole my line.”

I sigh through a smile. “Is that a yes?”

“Yes. Consider me officially yours.”

I lean down and bring my face to Quinn’s. With one long, slow graze of my lips, my mouth takes her mouth captive. Quinn’s lips move across mine with an eager grace that I’ve memorized the flavor of. Right away, we fall into our rhythm, as though we’ve always been kissing, breathing each other’s air, lighting up each other’s souls.

Quinn

365 Days Later

I slow to a stop on the bustling streets of Davis Square and loosen my grip on Theo's hand.

"Here we are! Returning to the scene of the crime," I announce, gesturing to the storefront sign. "May I introduce you to The Taco Hut formerly known as The Dumpling House."

Theo giggles. "Are we going to do this every year as anniversary thing?"

I smile. "Yup! Because even though we technically became official at the bar, this is where you first kissed me, on this very sidewalk. And, I knew after that kiss that there was no going back." My throat squeezes and I swallow. "In that moment, everything—the trajectory of my life—became impossibly clear and it all came together in a way I would've never imagined."

My girlfriend ducks her head and blushes. "Must have been some kiss."

I press my lips together to suppress a chuckle. "It was. You should have been there."

Theo laughs her deep laugh and then quietly coughs. "I was, but it was different for me. Like a dream state, because I dreamed about that kiss a year before it happened. And here we are."

I grin. "Here we are. Now, how do you feel about a dinner date?"

Theo nods. "I feel good about it. Let's do it."

I open the door to the restaurant and make a sweeping gesture with my

arm for Theo to go first. She curtsies playfully and passes by me. We take a seat at the first empty table we find. Theo automatically picks up the drink menu and begins studying it the way she does at every establishment. It never fails to make me smile.

“Should we try their margaritas?” she asks me.

“We should.” I look up from the food menu. “What if I get the chicken enchiladas and you get the fish tacos and we share?”

“Genius.” Theo begins placing our order on her phone.

“Are you going to tell me, or are you going to leave me in suspense?”

Theo submits our order and puts her phone away. She flashes me a smile. “Do you really want to know?”

I slap the edge of the table, eyes wide. “Um. Yes!”

“I got it!” she squeals.

“Yeah you did!” I reach across the table and take her hand. “Congratulations! This is huge! We should celebrate after dinner. So. Much. To. Celebrate—us, your new job, everything.” I smile. “Do you want to get a drink somewhere after dinner or dessert? You choose.”

Theo cringes. “Well, I did have this whole celebration thing planned already. It included me and you and copious amounts of champagne in a bed. And there’s this epic nudity scene. But you know, tacos are important too.”

My cheeks warm over. “I mean, we don’t *need* to eat.”

Theo laughs. “Stop it. Yes, we do. Besides, we’ll need the energy for later when we celebrate my way.”

I shake my head, smiling. “Fair point.” I lace my fingers through Theo’s. “How does it feel to be the new daytime bar manager at the Omni Hotel?”

Theo sighs. “Amazing. I’m going to be able to spend so much more time with you and Franny and Lexi. Night shifts were starting to take a toll on me. I need this change.”

“I’m happy that you’re happy.”

Theo smiles. “Enough about me. How was breakfast with your folks?”

“Ha! I didn’t even feel like I was there. They couldn’t stop talking about how much they love *you*. They’ve been obsessed with you since their Halloween party.”

“That’s because I nailed that Cyndi Lauper costume,” Theo says with a flip of her hair.

I laugh. “You really did.”

Theo chuckles along with me. “If it makes you feel better, my family

ambushed me during a Zoom call after last Thanksgiving to gush about you. I'm fairly certain they want to adopt you, especially Margot."

I lower my gaze in a useless attempt to hide my blush. "I'm flattered."

Just then, the waiter appears with our dinner and drinks. "Excuse me," he says and sets our food on the table. "Here you are. If you need anything else, let me know."

Theo and I thank the young server before he walks away.

Theo kicks my foot under the table. "I don't know why you seem surprised that my family adores you." She smiles. "It's effortless to adore you. I would know."

"I love you," I blurt, overcome by the swell in my chest.

Theo tips her head to the side and smiles. "I love you too." She points to my plate with her knife. "Now, will you eat, so that I can ravish you later without having to worry about your blood sugar dropping."

I laugh and take a bite of rice. "Better?"

"Much."

I swallow and sample my margarita. "So, Gabby would like to know if we'll go on a double date with her and April next weekend."

Theo lights up. "April from the speed dating event last month?"

I smile. "That would be the one."

"Good for Gabby!"

"Yeah. She deserves a win in the dating department."

"It's sweet how you rigged that event for her."

"Shh. She can never know."

Theo laughs. "Mum's the word." She licks the salt from the margarita off her lips and I momentarily lose my train of thought until her voice carries me back. "I love how much you care about her."

I shrug. "She's family. She cares about me too."

A tiny smirk appears on Theo's lips. "I know she does. That's why she agreed to cover your shift tomorrow morning when I asked."

I raise an eyebrow at Theo. "Why would she agree to that?"

"I told you that I had a plan. A plan that might make for a sleepless night."

I push my plate to the side and lean forward conspiratorially. "You know, I'm suddenly kind of full."

One side of Theo's mouth quirks up. "Is that your way of telling me that you're ready to go back to your place?"

“Not exactly.” I slide my napkin across the table to Theo.

Theo furrows her brow. “What’s this?” She lifts the napkin, and her beautiful brown eyes grow large. She gasps and picks up the shiny, brass key I hid under it when she was placing our order. “Quinn, what—?”

“I smile. “What I was trying tell you exactly is that I’m ready to go back to *our* place.”

“Our place,” Theo echoes.

“Unless it’s too soon, then, we can—”

Theo holds up her hand to silence me. “Not too soon. Now is perfect.”

I let out a long exhale. “Alright! We’re doing this. This is going to be great.”

“The greatest.” Theo smiles at me. “*This* is something we really need to celebrate, like right away.” She locks her eyes on mine and touches her fingers to my fingers. “Because, I cannot wait for you to experience how hard I’m about to celebrate *us*. Over and over and over again.”

There’s a sweeping sensation in my belly. “How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Make me feel all the feelings.”

“I could ask you the same.” Theo moves forward and angles her face with mine. Her gaze penetrates me and my insides tremble in the most magnificent way.

My breath all but disappears and I smile at her. “Maybe it’s magic.”

Theo closes the space between us, kissing me tenderly on the lips. I’m still spinning from the contact of her mouth on mine when she whispers, “Our love is pretty fucking magical, so that must be it.”

“Have enough courage to trust love one more time and always one more
time.”

-Maya Angelou