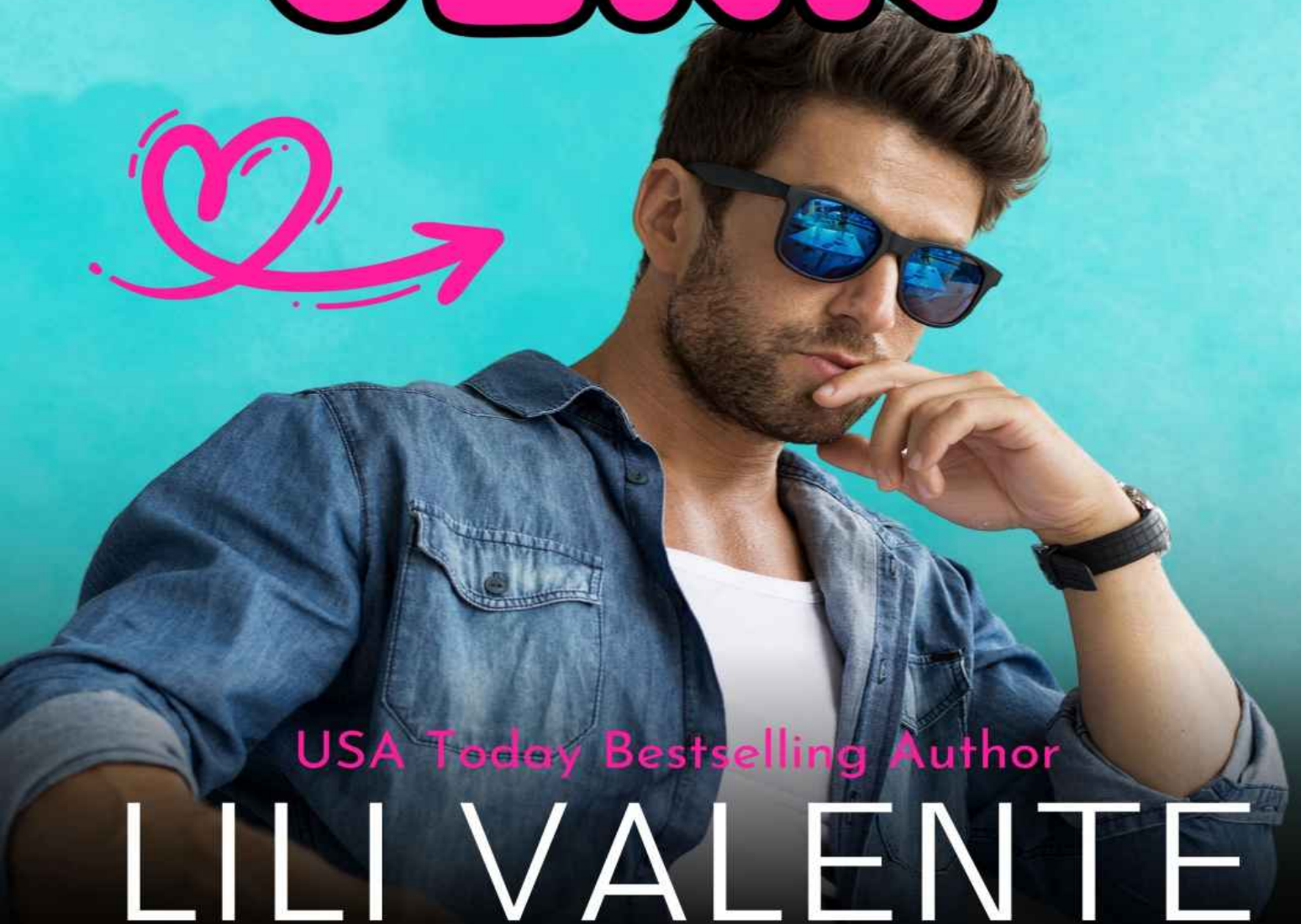


A BAD DOG NOVEL

KIND OF A SEXY JERK

The title is written in large, bold, pink letters with a thick black outline. There are three red lipstick smudges: one above the word 'OF', one to the left of 'A', and one to the left of 'JERK'.

USA Today Bestselling Author

LILIVALENTE

Kind of a Sexy Jerk

A BAD DOG NOVEL

THE MCGUIRE BROTHERS

BOOK FOUR

LILI VALENTE

Kind of a Sexy Jerk

A Bad Dog Novel
The McGuire Brothers Series
By Lili Valente

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About the Book

“As soon as you’re safe, I’m going to spank you.”

Those are the last words Matty McGuire says to me before punching a man, tossing me into an SUV, and peeling out of Bad Dog like a bat out of hell.

And I am outraged about it, I tell you!

Outraged...and desperately turned on.

I don’t want to lust after this man. He’s stubborn, bossy, secretive, and leaving the country in just a few weeks. But he’s also my lifelong crush, loyal, heroic, and always there when I need him.

Whether it’s defending me from horny squirrels or kissing me until the local Haunted House isn’t so scary, Matty does it for me. He always has, ever since we were kids.

But when his secrets turn out to be the kind that could get a girl tossed into the Witness Protection Program, I realize I’m in way over my head.

Can I make love work with a Sexy Jerk who is actually a Sexy *Spy*? (And who’s leaving the country after his final mission?)

Or will this one, red-hot weekend on the run from the mob be our first...and our last?

To 2024. Please be gentle.

Prologue



The calm before the storm...

All morning and into the early afternoon on Thanksgiving Day, as I prepare an ice-cream feast fit for a queen and her loyal lady in waiting, I remind myself that I don't do jerks.

They say nice guys always finish last, but not with this girl.

Nora Boudreaux loves a nice guy.

I have, in fact, dated *exclusively* nice guys, and have never had my heart broken. Not even once. Sure, I've been sad when things didn't work out, but my boyfriends were so kind during the "breaking it off" process that I never lost my faith in love, men, or my eventual happily ever after.

And thanks to Gram, I have a loving home where I can retreat to lick my wounds when looking for Mr. Right starts to feel like too much.

I'm basically the luckiest woman in the world.

So...why do I feel like absolute human garbage?

And why can't I stop thinking about Matty McGuire, no matter how hard I try?

"Are you going to eat that scoop of passion fruit sorbet?" Gram asks, eyeing my last egg cup full of ice cream across our fancifully decorated dining room table. I went with a "Feast in

a Fairy Forest” theme this year, decorating the chairs with gauzy wings, hanging birds and fairies from the ceiling, and weaving tiny sparkly lights through the flower vases. I’m a fashion designer by trade, but I love spiffing up a space and any excuse for a party. Even a party for just Gram and me.

I sit back in my chair with a huff, laying a hand on my stomach. “No, I’m stuffed. It’s all yours.”

“This is why you’re my favorite granddaughter,” she says, snatching the cup and diving in with one of the little espresso spoons we use for the ice-cream feast to make the feasting last longer.

“I’m your only granddaughter,” I remind her with a smile.

Her blue eyes, nearly the exact color of mine, dance above her spoon. “True. But you’d still be my favorite, even if I had a dozen. Still going on your date with Sam this afternoon? He’s a cute one.”

“Yeah, I am.” I glance at the clock above the doorway leading into the kitchen. “I should probably go change, actually. I don’t want to walk the muddy path around the lake in white jeans.”

“Yes, you should change. For sure,” Gram says, scooping a bite of sorbet between her lips before adding, “and pack an overnight bag while you’re at it.”

I frown. “What? Why?”

“So you can get some, honey,” she says, shocking me to my core.

Gram and I talk about a lot of things, but we never talk about *that*.

I may be nearly thirty years old, but in her eyes, I’m still that little girl who came to live with her when I was in second grade and so traumatized by life with my flighty mother that I slept on a mountain of emotional support stuffed animals.

“You’re too young and pretty to be on the shelf,” she continues.

“I’m not on the shelf,” I say, indignant. “I go on dates all the time.”

“But you haven’t gotten laid in years.”

My jaw drops far enough for one of the fake birds hanging from the ceiling to fit inside.

Who is this woman and what has she done with my sweet, mannerly little grandmother, the one who wouldn’t say “poop” if she had a mouthful of it?

“I may be old, but I’m not blind,” she says. “Or senile. I know what goes on around this town.” She arches a loaded brow my way. “And what *doesn’t*. And while I’m all for waiting to settle down until you find the right guy, there’s no sense in torturing yourself, sweetheart. Intimacy is a basic human need. It’s fun and relaxing and good for you.” Her brow furrows with concern. “You do enjoy sex, don’t you? If not, there’s therapy for that. And no shame in asking for help.”

“I…” I trail off. Open my mouth. Close my mouth. Blink and wait to wake up in my bed, mortified that my subconscious served up such an awkward dream.

When that doesn’t happen, I wheeze, “What are you getting at, Gram?”

“I’m trying to figure out if you have some sort of sexual dysfunction or if you’re just a big old chicken.”

My jaw drops again, and Gram reaches over, tapping me beneath the chin.

“Close your mouth, sweetheart,” she says kindly. “Don’t want a fly to get in. I saw one zooming around the kitchen earlier. Don’t know how flies are still pestering us in November, but it’s been a warm winter so far. Supposed to be even warmer tomorrow. You should pack that cute little sweater dress with the pink and blue swirls for your overnight and take your guy to breakfast tomorrow. I can hold down the fort alone for a night.”

“You cannot,” I say, ignoring the rest of the madness for now. “What if your arthritis acts up and you can’t get into bed by yourself?”

She shrugs. “Then I’ll sleep on the couch. One night on the couch won’t kill me. And I don’t have to be anywhere but here at home tomorrow, so I won’t need you to drive me around.” She pushes her chair back and stands, beginning to gather the empty egg cups on the silver platter I used to deliver them to the table. “If you don’t like Sam in that way, that’s fine, of course, but don’t use me as an excuse. I may be fussy and particular and have a bossy streak a mile wide, but I’m no cockblocker.”

“I have expired,” I murmur in a stunned daze. “I’m dead, aren’t I? And this is some weird version of hell where I have to listen to my grandmother say obscene, out-of-character things for all eternity?”

Gram frowns. “Isn’t that the way you say it? Cockblocker? Debbie told me it was. I asked if maybe it should be ‘vagina blocker’ in this case, since we’re both women, but she said that isn’t the way the slang works.”

The last of the blood drains from my face. “You talked to Debbie about my sex life?”

“Your lack of sex life, you mean?” Gram counters. “And yes, I did. Debbie’s my best friend.”

“Debbie’s the biggest gossip at the senior center!”

“She won’t gossip about you,” Gram says, adding beneath her breath, “There’s nothing to gossip about. That’s the whole point of the conversation.”

I surge to my feet. “I’m going to change. I’ll load the dishwasher when I get back, don’t worry about it.”

“I’ll load the dishwasher. And I’ll make my own breakfast tomorrow morning. I’m more capable than you give me credit for.” She sniffs. “And that’s all I’m going to say about it. Just know that I support you getting out there and enjoying yourself a bit more. There are things I regret in my life but having lots of wonderful sex with your grandfather and the two very kind and generous men I was intimate with before him isn’t one of them.”

“Okay!” I chirp, plastering a smile on my face as I dash from the room, still certain this is a fever dream.

But twenty minutes later, when I leave for my walking date with nothing but my purse slung over my shoulder, the disappointed look Gram shoots me from the couch makes it clear this is very real.

I’ve really been reverse slut-shamed by my grandmother.

What would that be called?

Celibate shamed? Prude shamed?

Whatever you would call it, I can’t help it.

I can’t help it if the only man in town who makes me tingle keeps pushing me away. And I can’t help tingling for him.

When he’s not being a grumpy romance killer, Matty is basically my knight in shining armor. In just the past two months alone, he’s rescued me from a very confused (and aggressive) squirrel, a cranky pirate cat, the side of the road, and a ghostly encounter at Bad Dog’s very own haunted hotel.

For a man who claims he isn’t interested, he shows up for me an awful lot.

Yes, I have a knack for getting myself into trouble, but I’ve dated men for years without having them *literally* sweep me off my feet and carry me away from danger not once, but multiple times. And my gut—and the gossip around town—assures me Matty doesn’t sweep all the ladies. He has a reputation for keeping to himself, in fact, and hasn’t had a girlfriend in years.

But somehow, whenever I’m in trouble, there he is, being sweet and brave and heroic, until the threat has passed. Then he goes back to being Mr. Walls Around His Heart again.

It’s so frustrating!

I should loathe the man.

But I don’t. And when I see his SUV parked behind The Cupcake Factory yet *again* on my way to the lake—parked there on a day when I know the bakery isn’t open and he has

no innocent reason for being there—I can't stop myself from flicking my turn signal. I have a little time left before I need to meet Sam, and Matty's unexplained lurking around here has been driving me crazy.

I'm going to get to the bottom of this mystery, once and for all, dammit.

I'll get a straight answer from this man or die trying.

But I don't really expect to die. Yes, Cassie Ann Sweetwater is a mob boss, but she's a really nice mob boss, and one of Gram's old friends from back in the day, when they were just beauty queens competing for a title and Cassie hadn't committed herself to a life of crime.

As I park behind The Cupcake Factory and swing out of my car, heading toward where Matty's SUV is nearly hidden behind the pink, fenced-in dumpster area, I'm not worried about being attacked.

The massive arm that wraps around me from behind comes as a complete surprise.

I squeal, but the sound is muffled by a man's hand slamming down over my mouth, making stars dance before my eyes as he lifts me off my feet. "I knew he had a big mouth," the guy growls into my ear as he totes me away, back toward the bakery. "Now it's going to get his girlfriend in trouble."

I squeal and struggle, but my beefy captor is enormous. There's absolutely no way I'm getting away from him without help.

Just like that, Matty appears in front of us, blocking Meaty's path to the back door of the bakery. I expect him to tell the man to let me go, but he skips that part and goes straight to decking the guy hard enough to send us both lurching to the right. The man's arm loosens around me as we fall, but it's too late for me to regain my feet.

I'm on a direct collision course with the pavement when Matty grabs my upper arms and hauls me against his chest.

Then, with our lips mere centimeters apart and our hearts racing in time, he breathes, “Get in the car. Now.”

I pull in a breath, but he cuts me off before I can speak, “I swear, if you argue with me right now, I’m going to spank you when this is all over.”

A sharp bolt of anger mixed with sizzling, electric pleasure zaps through me, and then I’m running toward Matty’s SUV, his big hand still wrapped tight around one of my arms.

He practically tosses me into the passenger’s seat and jogs around to the driver’s side, peeling out of the parking lot with a squeal of tires.

As he takes the turn leading away from town at a speed that seems unwise, he cuts a glance my way. “Scratch that. I’m going to spank you anyway. You clearly need a good spanking.”

My jaw drops again with an outraged huff.

I have no idea what’s going on, but Matty really is a raging jerk.

But unfortunately for me, kind of a sexy one...

Chapter One



NORA ANNETTE BOUDREAUX

*A woman who's pretty sure she's been kidnapped, and who realizes she should be angry about that—
kidnapping people is bad—but...she isn't.
And it's all the fault of One Sexy Jerk.*

As Matty McGuire takes another hairpin turn in the road at fifty miles per hour, I squeal and cling to the “oh shit handle” above the passenger’s door, praying I’ll live to yell at him for being such a maniac.

I pull in a breath, but he almost instantly takes another razor-sharp turn, guiding his SUV onto a narrow gravel lane. Tiny rocks spray into the air, the vehicle skids toward the ditch, and I decide now is the time to speak up.

If I don’t, I might not live to express my displeasure with all of Matty’s recent life choices.

Well, except for punching the guy who was trying to drag me into the cupcake shop with his sweaty hand over my mouth. I’m glad about that part. And the part where Matty caught me before I fell to the ground and pulled me against his chest.

I enjoy Matty’s chest.

I enjoy it way too much, considering he’s made it abundantly clear that he has no interest in me, whatsoever. He’ll rescue me when I need rescuing, sure, but after the rescuing is done, he can’t get away from me fast enough. He

doesn't want to be my friend or even a close acquaintance, let alone my hot and deeply devoted boyfriend, who doesn't mind lounging in bed on Sunday mornings looking sexy while I practice sketching the human form.

I'm great with fabric patterns and have been designing my own since I launched Bonjour Baby, my clothing design company, four years ago, but my figure drawing remains rudimentary. But that's only because I don't have a sufficiently stimulating model at my beck and call. If Matty were my man, and that sculpted body were mine to pose, light, and worship with my charcoal nub, I'm sure I'd be well on my way to mastery in just a year or two.

If I didn't kill him first.

Or vice versa.

"You have to slow down," I shout over the rumble of the rocks churning beneath the SUV's wheels as Matty careens down the narrow road fast enough to make my teeth rattle. "You're going to have an accident!"

He shoots something back that sounds like, "Says the woman whose entire life is an accident."

"What was that?" I bleat, wincing as he hits a hole in the road big enough to lift my bottom out of my seat, straining the fabric of my seatbelt.

"I said, be quiet and let me think," he says.

"That isn't what you said! You said my life was one big accident."

"You do get into more than your fair share of trouble, Nora," he shoots back without missing a beat or a hint of remorse. He didn't even *think* about apologizing, I can tell. "Why did you stop at the shop? Why are you even out of your house? It's Thanksgiving for Christ's sake."

I lift my nose into the air, holding it there as best I can as the road gets rougher. "I saw your SUV and was coming to wish you a happy holiday," I say, leaving out the part where I intended to get to the bottom of all his lurking and sneaking around Cassie Ann Sweetwater's money laundering business.

Call me crazy, but now doesn't seem like the right time to ask Matty what he's been doing, hanging around the mob's cupcake shop so much. With all the punching people and running away and driving like a bat out of hell out into the middle of nowhere that's gone down today, I'm starting to think Matty might be in some kind of trouble.

He might *be* the trouble...

I know he races stock cars and has a reputation for being the most "dangerous" McGuire brother, but they're the *McGuire* brothers. They're one of the sweetest, best families in town, and have been for as long as I can remember. Even the worst McGuire brother is about as dangerous as a debutante with her daddy's credit card set loose on my annual sample sale.

Or so I assumed...

But maybe I was wrong.

The look Matty shoots me as he guides the SUV under a gathering of trees in the center of an empty field of grass certainly isn't sweet or non-threatening. He looks like he wants to strangle me. Or, at the very least, make good on his threat to turn me over his knee and spank me.

He thrusts the vehicle into park with one angry flex of his delicious forearm and shuts off the engine before pointing a stern finger in my face. "Quiet. And don't unbuckle your belt. If they're following us, I'll have to floor it again and I don't want to worry about your face going through the windshield."

"Fine," I say softly, holding back all the other things I want to say.

The worry on his face as he turns to gaze through the back windows over my shoulder is concerning enough to make me hold my peace. Matty might be in full asshole form, but he's never given me reason to doubt his protective instincts.

When he told me to stand still while he intercepted the squirrel humping my messy bun like it's one true love, he was right. When he swooped me into his arms and carried me away from that pirate cat, seconds before the feral creature severed

my posterior tibial artery? Also, the right call. And the vengeful spirits at the haunted hotel were quickly banished by Matty's "leave us alone and don't come back" voice as he slow-danced with me in the dark before kissing me like I was the only woman he ever wanted to hold that close.

That kiss...

It only lasted for a few seconds, a few warm brushes of his lips against mine as his hands tightened on my waist, but it was by far the most intense kiss I've ever been a part of. I treasure that memory, even if it *was* followed by Matty walking away and acting like it never happened.

I still sigh a little every time I think about it.

It was simultaneously the most terrifying and romantic thing to happen to me in my entire life. My adult life, anyway. My childhood was pretty terrifying, but for not-at-all supernatural reasons.

The thought sends a fresh wave of fear scuttling up my spine on tiny scorpion feet.

My mother had a thing for dangerous men. My father was my old hometown's most notorious "bad boy." By the time I was born, however, he'd morphed into a bad man, the kind who loved his vices more than his kids and took out his frustration with the sorry state of his life on his wife. Their red-faced screaming matches are some of my most vivid early memories.

As kids, my brother and I would hide in the crawl space in the attic playing Monopoly by the light of an old camping lantern until they finally got drunk enough to pass out or one of them left for the night. As adults, we made a pact never to end up in a relationship like the one our parents had. Aaron made me swear to confront him if I saw him headed into trouble with a woman, and I made him promise the same.

I wonder what my brother would think of my situation right now, sitting in an SUV with a man with mob ties and bloody knuckles.

“Your hand,” I mutter, reaching for his wrist and lifting his knuckles gently to the gray November light.

“It’s fine,” he says, pulling away.

“No, it’s not,” I say, gently, but firmly drawing his hand back into my lap. “Your skin is totally split open. It needs to be cleaned and bandaged before it gets infected. I have a first aid kit in my purse.”

Grateful I grabbed my cross-body purse today—the only one that would have stayed with me through being attacked and nearly knocked off my feet—I release Matty long enough to guide it up and over my head. When I turn back, his gaze is fixed on mine.

“What?” I ask, arching a brow.

“Why were you at the cupcake shop?” he asks again, but in a calmer voice than before, making me think the immediate danger has passed.

“Fine, I was being nosy.” I pull out the small blue pouch containing my first aid supplies. “But not in a bad way. I just wanted to know why you were there on Thanksgiving. You have family, and I know they celebrate together.” I rip open an alcohol wipe and unfold the damp, cool paper. “Starling dropped off the pet turkeys to hang out in my backyard this morning before she and Christian headed over to your parents’ house, and she said you were going to be there. She even said you were bringing desserts, which explained why you were at the cupcake shop *yesterday*, but not today.”

I press the wipe gently to Matty’s knuckles as I ask, “So why were *you* at the cupcake shop today?”

His jaw clenches but he doesn’t flinch as I dab at his wounds. “I warned you several times, nicely, to leave this alone, Nora. But you didn’t listen. So, I’m going to tell you one more time, in a way that will hopefully make an impression.” He pauses, gazing so deep into my eyes that my brain starts to squirm a little. “Don’t ask me about the cupcake shop or the mob or Cassie Ann Sweetwater ever again. I can’t tell you anything and I *won’t* tell you anything and if you

somehow manage to figure it out on your own, you're going to wish like hell you didn't. Right now, as things stand, there's still a chance to turn this around. A slim chance, but a chance. I can tell Wimpy you came to the shop today to confront me about some cheating rumors or something."

"Wimpy?" I whisper, dread swelling progressively larger inside of me.

"The guy I punched. I'll tell him I got crazy when I saw his hands on you and threw hands without thinking," he explains. "Then, I'll tell him that we broke up because you're a goody-two-shoes, who doesn't understand the true nature of my life or business, and that you'll never interfere with our plans again. And that's what you'll do. From now on, you stay away from me and the cupcake shop. If you see me coming, you cross the street, and don't so much as swing your car by that side of town. You never say a word about the Sweetwaters or what you think you know about their organization. You forget you ever met Cassie Ann Sweetwater. If you do all of that, then maybe, *maybe* things go back to the way they were."

He leans closer, until I can feel his warm breath on my lips as he adds, "But if you keep pushing this, Nora, you're going to ruin your life and my life and neither of us will be able to go home again. Is that what you want?"

I swallow past the fear and elation glomming together in my throat as the truth hits like a lightning bolt. "Oh my God, you're in the FBI."

I know I'm right when he curses and brings his fist down hard enough on the console between us to send fresh blood sliding down his damaged hand.

Chapter Two



MATTHEW "MATTY" EUGENE MCGUIRE

*A man stuck between a
job that's sworn him to silence,
and the only woman who's ever made him
want to spill all his secrets.*

“It’s okay! I won’t tell anyone, I promise!” Nora holds up her hands, the alcohol wipe dangling between two fingers like a tiny white flag of surrender.

But that flag is stained red with my blood and my superiors aren’t going to find this breach in my cover amusing.

At all.

I have to convince Nora she’s wrong. It’s the only way to keep my operation moving forward, keep myself on track to retirement in just a few short days, and keep her safe from all the various forms of fallout that can result from interfering with a CIA investigation into the mob. It doesn’t matter that the Sweetwaters are soft and cuddly gangsters when compared to their more murderous counterparts, they’ve still been known to hurt people.

The entire Beechwood family came down with life-threatening food poisoning not once, but *five* times after challenging the Sweetwaters’ control of the region’s faux designer purse trade. It wasn’t until one of the Beechwood children almost died from a Salmonella infection that they finally pulled up stakes and got out of town.

Then there was the case of Gareth Swanson, an up-and-coming shoe counterfeiter, who thought he could cut into the Sweetwaters' illegal Canadian export business without them noticing. Gareth simply...disappeared one day, leaving behind a house full of nearly perfect imposter Gucci trainers, two hamsters, and his toothbrush.

To this day, no one knows what became of Gareth.

Did he go on the run before it was too late? Or will Bad Dog officials come across a body wearing his signature purple tracksuit someday?

Judging from what I know of Cassie Ann and her people, I'd bet on the former—they truly do seem to avoid violence whenever possible—but there's a chance it could be the latter, and I'm not willing to take any chances with Nora's safety.

Beautiful, sexy, clever, stubborn as hell Nora, the woman who, for months, has been making it hard to imagine leaving Bad Dog...

And who just made it a little bit harder...

"I'm not in the FBI," I say firmly.

Her nose twitches the way it does when she's sniffing for a story. I swear, the woman should have been a reporter, not a fashion designer. "You sound like you're telling the truth."

"I *am* telling the truth," I say, because I am.

You actually have to *work* to be recruited by the FBI. You have to be motivated to serve in law enforcement and, most of the time, politically connected in some way. But if you're a fourteen-year-old polyglot who can learn new languages in a month or less, the CIA comes to you.

I was recruited at a Model United Nations camp my junior year—an extracurricular forced upon me by my French teacher. She caught me sneaking into her classroom to make out with my date to the homecoming dance and threatened to call my parents if I didn't nerd up for her favorite after-school activity.

I've been working undercover for the Central Intelligence Agency in one capacity or another ever since.

For over fifteen years, I've hidden in plain sight at stock car races, polo matches, and everything in between, quietly absorbing life-and-country-threatening information in a wide variety of languages that I've passed on to the government without anyone being the wiser.

And yes, the Sweetwater case is the first time I've been tasked with infiltrating a criminal organization, but I was killing it. I've been fully immersed in Bad Dog's underworld for nearly a year without anyone in my life catching on. My friends, my family, even the nosy neighbors who make it their business to come poke around my house anytime I'm gone for more than a day or two—none of them suspected a thing.

And then, one day in the park a few months back, I ran back into the most beautiful girl I've ever seen and saved her from being molested by a horny squirrel.

Overnight, everything changed.

Nora sees things other people don't, sees through *me* in a way no one ever has before. Which makes sense, I guess. According to Melissa, my twin sister, Nora has been studying me since we were kids.

Stalking was the word Mel used, but that feels too intense.

If Nora had been stalking me, surely, I would have noticed.

But I didn't.

Thanks to my big brain and language skills, I skipped three grades, so even though Nora and I are the same age, we never had classes together. But she's always been breathtaking, one of those shining, perfect people who look like they're not quite real.

That's probably why I didn't pay as much attention to her in school as the rest of the male population. After skipping ahead so many grades, I was always smaller than the rest of the guys in my class. No matter how hard I tried to bulk up, I remained shorter and skinnier than most teen girls prefer when it comes to a boyfriend. I didn't put on any real muscle until I

was well out of high school, and by then I'd been sucked so deeply into the "glamorous" world of a newly minted CIA agent, I didn't have time for pretty girls.

Only that world turned out to be not so glamorous.

It's actually deeply and profoundly lonely.

There's so much I can't tell anyone, even the people I love the most. After years of keeping secrets and telling lies to ensure my family's safety, all I feel is isolated, and past ready to retire and find a job where I can just be me.

Just Matty McGuire...whoever that guy is.

Fuck, if I know.

I've spent my entire adult life pretending to be someone I'm not. I'm not even sure how to move forward from here, but I know it will be a hell of a lot harder if I botch my last mission and end up leaving Nora in need of witness protection protocols.

"So, then...you're really a criminal?" Nora's big blue eyes grow even bigger, filling with disappointment as she adds, "But Matty, why? You're so much better than that. You're not a criminal. You're a hero."

I exhale a harsh breath. "I'm not a hero."

If I were a real hero, I would have stayed the hell away from Nora and made damned sure she didn't end up in a situation like this. A horny squirrel, a pissed off pirate cat, and a ghost are all challenging things to handle on your own—especially if you're terrified of animals—but they're way less scary than the mob.

"You are to me," she says softly. "In just the past few months, you've saved me more times than I can count on one hand. *That's* who you are. Not the guy who punched Sweaty Fingers."

"Wimpy," I correct automatically.

"I hate that name," she says. "It reminds me of Popeye. Worst cartoon ever."

“Well, Wimpy is the worst Sweetwater around these parts,” I say. “He’s paranoid as fuck and not above using his fists to get what he wants. And until Cassie Ann gets back from her trip to Winnipeg, he’s in charge. If he’d gotten you into the cupcake shop today, I don’t know what he would have done to you, but I guarantee it wouldn’t have been pleasant.” I swallow, not wanting to scare her, but determined to deliver the wake-up call she clearly needs. “And I wouldn’t have been able to stop him, Nora. Not if the rest of the guys were in there with him. I’m only one man. I would have followed you in there, but I’m not sure if either of us would have walked out again. The Sweetwaters don’t make people disappear often, but it has happened before. And with Wimpy in charge, it might happen a lot more frequently in the future.”

She emits a shaky breath. “I’ve been really dumb, haven’t I?”

“Naïve is probably a better word,” I say, relieved that I seem to be getting through to her. “Which is understandable. Cassie Ann does her best to appear non-threatening. It’s what’s allowed her to fly under law enforcement’s radar for so long.”

It’s also why the CIA was finally called in. Cassie Ann has been a slippery target for years now, evading local law enforcement and probes by the Drug Enforcement Agency. But when she expanded her business into Canada, connecting with people suspected of selling both Canadian and American secrets to foreign governments, she made this an international issue, a CIA issue.

A *me* issue, since I’m the only officer working this part of rural Minnesota.

Nora perks up. “Law enforcement! We should go to them. Right now. Don’t you have a cousin who’s on the police force?”

“I have three cousins on the police force,” I say, “but that doesn’t mean they won’t arrest me if they find out I’m mixed up in all this.”

Her forehead furrows. “I still can’t believe it, Matty. Why? For money? I thought handymen made a good living. And I

see your name on the winners list for the stock car races all the time. And you live in a van and rent out your house now. Isn't that more than enough to get by without turning to a life of crime?"

I arch a brow. "So, you're stalking me?"

Nora sniffs and gives a small shrug. "No. I just notice things. That's all. I'm a noticer. One who notices. I notice lots of things about lots of people, not just you. For example, did you know that Allana Quaker has a secret addiction to rabbit sausage and buys up the entire supply at the co-op every time they restock? She waits by the Bountiful Farms freezer like a predator every Thursday morning. I've started to think she's part wolf."

I shake my head. "Why would I know that?"

"You wouldn't," she shoots back. "Because you're not a noticer. And that's okay, but it's *not* okay to accuse people who are noticers of being stalkers. That's an ugly word."

"My sister said you used to stalk me in high school," I say, the words out before I think better of them.

Nora pales. "What?"

"She didn't tell me about it when it was happening," I amend. "She didn't say anything until a few years ago. One night, I was over at her place, complaining about my shitty love life. She said it was my own fault for not noticing the quality people who have shown interest over the years. People like...you, for example." I hold her gaze as I add, "So, maybe you're right. Maybe I'm not a noticer."

"Great," she whispers, her cheeks pinker than they were before. "I never told anyone I had a crush on you. I thought that was my private, silly teenage girl secret. Apparently, I'm easier to read than I thought. How mortifying." Her lashes flutter. "Almost as mortifying as the fact that I didn't recognize you that day with the squirrel. I still haven't told Starling that I knew you back when we were kids and didn't realize it until I saw you with Christian at the Ren Faire. I'm too embarrassed."

“Don’t be embarrassed,” I say, wishing I’d kept my mouth shut. “I’ve changed a lot since high school. As far as the other stuff is concerned, Melissa is my twin. She pays a lot closer attention to my life than anyone else. And she has a sixth sense about who likes who. Except when it comes to her own love life, I guess.”

Nora’s lips turn down at the edges. “Is she still having a hard time with the divorce?”

“Her husband left her for another man.”

“But that doesn’t mean Ben didn’t love her with all his heart,” Nora says. “Love and sexuality and relationships aren’t nearly as black and white as people make them out to be. And coming out in a small town can be hard and scary. I don’t blame people for stuffing their true selves down and trying to fit in. That pressure is still very real.”

I grunt. “I know. I just wish Ben had figured it out before he and Melissa had a kid. Then, she could have made a clean break instead of being forced to interact with the man who broke her heart every day until Chase turns eighteen.”

“But Chase is the cutest little guy,” she says. “And without Ben as his dad, Chase wouldn’t be Chase. You wouldn’t want that, right?”

“How did we end up talking about my sister’s failed marriage?” I ask, irritated for reasons I can’t quite explain. Maybe it’s because she’s right. Maybe it’s because we’ve gotten off track at a time when I can’t afford to waste a second of clusterfuck containment time.

Because it’s not just the altercation with Wimpy I need to smooth over.

I also have to break into The Cupcake Factory and clone their ancient hard drive, gathering the last of the digital evidence I need to tie up this investigation. And I have to return my recently liberated hostage to his owner and convince Wimpy and the rest of the Sweetwaters that I’m *not* the one who liberated him. If they think I lost them this score, I might

be the next person they decide should contract a deadly case of Salmonella.

As if on cue, a loud belch sounds from the trunk. It's muffled by the black fleece blanket I threw over the top of the carrier, but still plenty loud enough for Nora to notice.

To notice, and to quickly put two and two together to realize we aren't alone in the vehicle...

She cringes closer to the dashboard, darting freaked-out glances into the back as she hisses beneath her breath, "Who is that? Who's back there?"

She's answered by a plaintive meow, followed by another cavernous belch, far too loud to have been made by a tiny Persian cat.

But it *was* made by a tiny Persian cat, a cat who's become insanely famous over the past year. Clyde the Belching Kitten has over a million followers on social media and the burping toy based on his uniquely tiny body, huge paws, and big blue eyes is set to be this season's hottest gift. People who were lucky enough to scoop up an early release of the Clyde doll are already making big bucks reselling the toys on the gray market.

If a person—or say, a crime family—were to gain control of an entire region's supply of Clyde dolls, they would stand to make hundreds of thousands of dollars. And said crime family wouldn't be above doing underhanded things to get their hands on those toys. With the fake purse and designer shoe market sagging in recent months, branching out into toys right before the Christmas rush is actually pretty brilliant.

Kidnapping the actual Clyde and holding him for ransom until a toy drop-off is made seems less brilliant, but I'm sure Cassie Ann has a plan for making sure Clyde's owner isn't able to track the resold dolls back to her organization.

She's a brilliant woman.

Her only mistake was leaving her idiot family members in charge of watching Clyde while she left the country.

Before I can decide how much of that to tell Nora—or whip up a believable lie about how I came to be in possession of Clyde, or what I plan to do with him—a louder, juicier belch rumbles through the SUV.

A moment later, the sickly-sweet smell of cat vomit blooms in the air.

Chapter Three



My hand flies to cover my nose as a rancid, yet somehow flowery, smell fills the vehicle. “Oh my God, Matty. What is that? What’s back there?” I demand again, but Matty isn’t listening.

He’s already out of the SUV, cursing as he circles around to the back.

I tumble out the passenger’s side, wrapping my fluffy blue cardigan more tightly around me as the winter wind rushes across the empty field. I don’t usually mind the cold, but the chaos of the afternoon is making me long for coziness more than usual.

Still, I don’t wish I were back home in front of the fire with Gram. As crazy as this day has been so far, I’d still rather be here with Matty.

Matty, who is a self-proclaimed criminal! A bad guy! He’s a bad guy, Nora, and you made a sacred promise about bad guys.

You aren’t going to mess with them. Not ever.

Not even if he’s the sexiest bad guy in the entire world, and you’re pretty sure he’s actually a really good guy, who’s somehow wandered off the straight and narrow, but who can be saved by the love of a good woman, who is you.

You are NOT that woman. You are the woman who’s going to grab a cab back to town and forget you ever had an absurdly protracted crush on this man.

The inner voice is spot on, but I don't reach for my cell to see if there's a cabbie working on Thanksgiving, who might be willing to come pick me up in the middle of nowhere.

Instead, I join Matty as he lifts the hatch, revealing what looks like a box covered by a big black blanket. But it's a small box, way too small for whatever Matty has hidden back here to be human.

I exhale, relief making my hand tremble as I drag my fingers through my hair. "Thank goodness. I thought it was a person back here."

His frown deepens as he glances my way. "A person?"

"Yeah, a person. Someone who had stowed away in your car or something." I shrug. "Or maybe someone who needed help escaping the mob or something. I don't care if you're in deep with the Sweetwaters. I know you, Matty. You wouldn't hurt a fly, let alone a person."

"Well, you're wrong about that," he says, reaching for the blanket. "I kill flies all the time, and it looks like my race car moves made the cat sick." He whips the fleece away to reveal a tiny cat with giant fluffy paws and the biggest eyes I've ever seen. Even crouched beside a puddle of its own sickness, it's so ridiculously cute, I can't stop the girly cooing sound that escapes my throat. "Oh my God, so precious."

"And dangerous," Matty mutters. "If the Sweetwaters find out I have him, I'm fucked. I'll never get back in their good graces. I'll probably have to leave town. Forever."

My heart lurches at the thought, threatening to hurl itself off the nearest cliff if such a thing were to come to pass. I can do without Matty for a few months while he gets his wanderlust out of his system roaming South America, but not for *forever*. "Why? What's the big deal about this little guy?" I glance back at his sweet face. "I mean, he's beautiful, but—"

The precious floof takes that moment to let out another bone-rattling burp, one so powerful his head wobbles from the vibration, and the pieces fall into place.

Pressing a hand to my chest, I wheeze, “Holy crap, it’s Clyde the Belching Kitten! You kidnapped Clyde the Belching Kitten! Bear, his owner has been worried sick. I’ve seen his videos on social media. He keeps raising the reward money every day, hoping someone will come forward with a lead on who took his little buddy away.”

I turn to face Matty, my jaw dropping. “*You* took his little buddy away. Or the Sweetwaters did, but you took him back. And now you’re going to collect the reward money. That’s why you did this, isn’t it? Because you need the cash? Why do you need cash so badly, Matthew?”

“So now I’m Matthew?” He crosses his arms over his chest. “Would you like to add Eugene in there, as well? That’s what my mother calls me when she’s reading me the riot act.”

“What kind of shitstorm are you caught up in Matthew?” I ask, refusing to be distracted by the reminder that his middle name is Eugene, a name I find inexplicably adorable for reasons that have a lot to do with a Rapunzel cartoon I’ve watched way too many times to be considered a fully adult human. “And how do we get you out of this shitstorm without ransoming a defenseless fluffy paw pants with the best face that was ever a face?”

Matty lets out a sound somewhere between a sigh of exasperation and a laugh. “Since when do you care so much? You hate animals.”

“I don’t hate animals. I’m scared of them,” I correct, my tone softening as Clyde emits another plaintive meow. “But I’m not scared of Clyde. He’s clearly a harmless sweetie pie who needs love.” He belches again and I add, “And acid reflux medicine. I wonder if his owner’s tried that? I know they have it for babies. My friend Brenda has to give her six-month-old a dropper full of medicine every night before bed or he screams until one in the morning from reflux pain. Surely, they have something similar for cats.”

“I don’t know, Nora,” Matty says in a tone that makes me think he’s forcing himself to be patient. “And right now, I don’t have time to worry about it. I just need to get this vomit

cleaned up and find a place to lay low while I figure out what to do next. And unfortunately, you're coming with me. I can't send you home until I'm sure Wimpy is going to leave you alone."

He pins me with a bossy look as he opens the door to the kennel and gently gathers Clyde under the ribs with one big hand. "Do you want to hold the cat or mop up the vomit with the blanket? Your choice."

I hesitate for a second, but find myself reaching for the cat, and not just because I find vomit repulsive. I actually *want* to cradle the tiny creature in my arms and promise him everything is going to be all right.

"I'll hold him," I whisper, fear and wonder churning in my chest as Matty gently passes the cat over.

As soon as he's cuddled against me, Clyde lets out another soft burp before exhaling a shuddery sigh and resting his head on my chest. Instantly, the last of my fear is banished by a wave of adoration so powerful, it doesn't entirely make sense.

But I think it has something to do with the fact that this tiny, vulnerable thing has decided to trust me.

Right away. No holding back.

"I'm never washing this boob again," I murmur as I stroke the angel soft fur atop Clyde's head. I add a few gentle scratches between his ears. A beat later, a soft rumble vibrates my ribs. Elation swelling inside, I whisper-shout, "Purring! He's purring! He likes me."

I look up to find Matty watching me with a fond, crooked smile that makes me feel things. Things like the way I felt the night we slow danced in the dark and I prayed our first kiss would never end...

"Why wouldn't he like you?" Matty murmurs. "You're very likeable. Irresistible, some might say."

Before I can work up the guts to ask him why he has such an easy time resisting me, then, he's turned his back and is mopping up cat vomit. When he's done, he closes the trunk

and tosses the ruined blanket on the grass beneath a nearby tree.

“You’re not going to leave that there, are you?” I ask, following him as he circles around to the driver’s side and pulls a bottle of hand sanitizer from a storage area in the door.

“I am.” He squeezes the liquid onto his hands and rubs it in, winching slightly as it makes contact with his raw knuckles. “I can’t drive with a puke blanket in the car.”

“But that’s littering,” I say, cuddling the cat closer when he mews in agreement. “See, even Clyde knows that’s wrong.”

“Then Clyde should have kept his breakfast inside his tiny belching body and not all over his kennel,” Matty shoots back, nodding toward the backseat of the SUV. “You can sit back there with him. Maybe he won’t get sick again if you’re holding him. The windows are tinted, so if we run into someone we know on the way out of town, they won’t be able to see that you’re with me.”

I snort and shake my head. “I can’t leave town with you. I have to get home to Gram tonight.” I curse beneath my breath as I remember what else I had on my agenda that I’ve completely forgotten about in all the hubbub. “I also have a date. Like...right now. Sam is probably already at the trailhead, wondering where the heck I am.”

“And Sam is going to keep wondering,” Matty says, his tone decidedly grumpier than it was before. He opens the back door and nods inside. “Strap in. We’ve got a drive ahead of us, and I’d like to get there in time to hike to the bunker for supplies.”

My brows shoot up. “The bunker?”

“Yes, the bunker. I’m not sure how much of the food in the treehouse has expired.”

“Treehouse?” I emit a strangled yip of a laugh. “I’m sorry, but I don’t do bunkers.”

“The bunker is only for storage. I don’t sleep there.”

“I don’t do treehouses, either,” I hurry to add. “I’m more of a climate-controlled room with a soft bed, big windows, and a pretty view type of girl. I won’t even go glamping. I tried one time, but there were no windows, so when something wild and furry started rubbing up against me through the tent in the middle of the night, I couldn’t see what it was. My friend, Sissy, said it was probably a raccoon or a possum or something harmless. But are animals that carry rabies *really* harmless? Especially if their teeth are sharp enough to pierce canvas tent material? And what if it had been a bear? We probably barely escaped with our lives, and I absolutely sustained heart damage of some kind. It literally almost beat through my chest. So, I can’t do a treehouse. Raccoons, possums, and bears can all climb trees.”

I gulp in a breath, but Matty remains unmoved by my speech. He’s still standing there, holding the door, clearly waiting for me to get my butt inside.

But maybe he doesn’t understand that, “It’s also cold, Matty. It’s late November. We could freeze to death in a treehouse.”

“We won’t freeze to death. It has walls, electricity, and a fireplace. It even has a view. You’ll be perfectly safe,” he says, pushing on before I can speak, “Much safer than if Wimpy finds you and decides to take out his frustrations with me on someone he thinks I care about.”

“Oh,” I say, studying the top of Clyde’s head as I stroke the fur behind his ears, not wanting Matty to see how much that hurt.

Someone he *thinks* Matty cares about...

But Matty doesn’t actually care. He cares enough not to let me die or get beaten to a bloody pulp by a crazed mobster, but not enough to date me or even call me a friend.

That hurts.

It hurts so much, I can’t look up when Matty adds, “It won’t matter that you aren’t really my girlfriend. Wimpy thinks you are and once he gets something stuck in his thick

head, it stays there. Which means, until I can get back on his good side, you need to stay off his radar.”

“I have to call Gram,” I whisper. “She’ll be worried. And if you think this is going to take more than a night or two, I should call Aaron, too. See if he can take a couple days off to be with her until I get back. She’s fine on her own in the house, but she can’t drive, and I’m pretty sure we need groceries.”

“You should call Aaron,” Matty says without hesitation. “In case Wimpy figures out where you live, I’d feel better knowing your Gram has someone with her. I don’t think he’d hurt her,” he hurries to add when I look up with a no-doubt terrified expression, “but he could scare her if she spotted him walking around outside or looking through the windows. If he sees your brother in there, he’ll stay away. That’s how Wimpy got his nickname. He’s massive, but he’s a coward. He only picks on people smaller and weaker than he is.”

“I think I hate him,” I say, the words making me sad. “And I don’t hate anyone.”

“Well, if you’ve decided to start, he’s a good candidate,” Matty says, before adding in a softer voice, “and I’m not ransoming Clyde. I’m keeping the Sweetwaters from ransoming Clyde and will return him to his owner as soon as possible. I don’t believe in kidnapping. Or catnapping.”

Chest tightening, I nod. “I knew it. And I’m glad.”

“Yeah, well...” He glances up as thicker clouds roll in from the west. “We should get going. Not as much light in the evening this time of year. You can call Gram and Aaron on the way, but don’t tell them who you’re with or what’s really happening. Tell them you have to go help a sick friend out of town or something.”

“I’ll tell them it’s a work emergency, and I have to go track down a shipment of sweaters in Chicago,” I say, climbing into the SUV with the now sleeping Clyde still cradled against me. I carefully shift him to my other side as I buckle in. “It’s happened before, but I keep using the same company. They’re

disorganized, but they hire actual adult workers instead of little kids to work in their factory so...”

Matty stands in the door, watching me for a beat after I’m ready to roll. “You’re a good person.”

I give a little shrug. “I try.”

“You succeed,” he says, sadness in his eyes. “I’m sorry I got you mixed up in all this.”

“You didn’t,” I say. “You tried to warn me. I didn’t listen.”

“I should have tried harder. Once this mess is smoothed over, I promise I’ll stay far away from you. No matter what.”

“Okay,” I say softly, trying not to let the fact that my stomach is bottoming out show on my face. Matty’s made it clear he doesn’t share my feelings. The quicker I wrap my stubborn head around that, the better.

But it still hurts.

It hurts the entire drive back down the gravel road, across miles and miles of smooth pavement, and back onto gravel again. But at least my calls to Gram and Aaron go smoothly—Gram clearly thinks I’m going on a spontaneous fornication vacation with Sam, no matter how many times I assure her that I’m actually headed to Chicago, and Aaron says it won’t be a problem to take leave. He has a couple days off from practice already, so he plans to fly in from Iowa tonight, rent a car, and be at our house by midnight, before the storm he says is bearing down on the region.

After I hang up with my brother, I briefly consider telling Matty about the storm, but he probably already knows. And I doubt it would change his mind about the whole “treehouse” thing anyway. Matty is nearly as stubborn as I am.

A relationship between us was doomed from the start.

It’s for the best that we’ve decided to go our separate ways.

Or so I tell myself as he winds the SUV up a progressively tinier dirt road into the forested foothills an hour from Bad Dog. But it doesn’t feel for the best. It feels like a terrible

waste of potential with a man I still believe I can save from the lesser angels of his nature...if only he'd give me the chance.

Please, Universe, he's a great guy. At least give me the chance to help him get back on the right path, even if I never see him again after all this is over.

The universe answers me immediately, with a view of a creepy-looking tunnel around the next bend.

Before I can tell Matty that I'm terrified of dark, enclosed spaces, he accelerates right into the center of it.

Chapter Four



MATTY

I'm so focused on getting to the compound before we run out of daylight and running through a mental list of things I need to grab from the bunker, that I don't realize Nora's upset until I've parked the SUV under the trees and swung out to open her door.

It's only then that I see her paper white face and haunted eyes and clock that something's wrong.

"What is it?" I ask, my brow furrowing. "Are you carsick? That last stretch is pretty rough. I could have stopped if you'd told me."

She gives a tiny shake of her head. "No, it's nothing. Just...the dark. The tunnel. Not a fan." She hands the now wakeful and mewling Clyde over to me with stiff arms. "I just need to walk around for a few minutes. Shake it off."

"Okay but stay close. In this general area. I'll come get you once I have Clyde settled in the treehouse." I gather the cat against my chest, where he promptly belches loud enough to send a flock of birds exploding from the branches of a nearby tree.

Nora flinches in response, making me worry all over again. In some ways, she's such a strong person—caring for her grandmother all alone, running a thriving business, and pushing herself to get over her fear of animals—but in other ways, she's so fragile.

Which is all the more reason to make sure she stays far away from me. Even when I leave the CIA, I don't intend to

play it safe. I want to get out in the world, test my limits, figure out who I am away from my family and my all-consuming career. I need to sort all that out before I'll be a good partner to anyone, especially a woman with as many fears and phobias as Nora.

I gather the supplies I bought for Clyde and my emergency pack from the trunk and head down the path toward the treehouse, leaving Nora walking in circles in the gravel parking area. Almost instantly, the rush of the cool breeze through the forest and the smell of fall leaves decomposing underfoot eases the tension from my neck and shoulders. I may have a big brain, but I've always been more comfortable in the woods than in an office.

This is where I belong—out in nature, off the grid, where I can hear myself think. And Nora belongs in a five-star resort with room service and staff to keep the leaves out of the pool. She'd be miserable in my van, waking up sandy and cold on some faraway beach, and I'd be miserable staying in Bad Dog, living with the legacy of all the lies I've been forced to tell.

We're a classic case of opposites attracting. The sex—if we'd gotten to that point—probably would have been fantastic, but a happily-ever-after is impossible.

Better to end it now before either one of us is scarred by the experience.

I'm still thinking about scars when Nora screams loud enough to make Clyde hiss and run to hide under the dingy couch in the treehouse's main room.

Instantly, I shut the stove door on the fire I just started and hurry down the ladder.

I don't call out to assure Nora I'm on my way—if she's being attacked by a person, I don't want to lose the element of surprise—but I run faster than I have in years, pushing myself to get to her before whatever's frightened her hurts a hair on her perfect head. And yes, I'm hoping that it's something as relatively benign as a horny squirrel or a cranky cat, but I'm ready to fight off a bear if I have to. I even have bear spray in

the glove compartment. As long as the animal isn't blocking the SUV, I should be able to get to it in a few seconds.

But when I reach the clearing, there's no bear or human predator, there's just Nora staring at her cell phone with her jaw dropped and her hand pressed to her chest. I take another scan of the area, looking for threats I might have missed, but aside from a few ominous clouds rolling in overhead, everything seems fine.

My relief quickly turning to irritation, I demand, "What's wrong? Why were you screaming?"

She looks up, blinking fast, as if she's only just realized I'm here. We're definitely going to have to work on her situational awareness. Otherwise, she'll be a sitting duck for Wimpy and every other predator down the line for the rest of her life.

And I won't always be here to help get her out of trouble.

"My grandmother," Nora wheezes, holding the phone screen out toward me. "Look what she did. *She* did this. Without asking me. Without even warning me!"

Frowning, I take the phone and glance down at an online article from the Bad Dog Daily Darling, the local paper. In it, a grinning Nora carves a pumpkin in a sexy green minidress above a headline that reads "Why the Younger Generation is Saying No to Intimacy."

"And by 'intimacy,' they mean sex, Matty," Nora says, beginning to pace back and forth across the gravel again. "My grandmother didn't just talk to her friend Debbie about my sex life, or lack thereof. She talked to a *reporter*. And now the entire town is going to know I haven't gotten laid in over two years!"

I quickly skim the story, understanding her hysteria as I glean the content of the well-written, but breathlessly condescending, article and realize she's been cast as the poster child for sexually dysfunctional twentysomethings everywhere. The line, "women like Nora perform sexuality with ease on social media, but when it comes to real-life

relationships, she seems to lack the skills to move past swiping and into real life connection,” is especially vicious.

“And now I’m going to have to kill my grandmother,” Nora says, shaking her head as she continues to pace. “I love my grandmother. She means everything to me. I don’t *want* to kill her, but now, I have no choice.”

“You’re not going to kill Gram,” I say, nodding toward the phone. “You don’t even know if she’s the one who talked to the reporter. They just cite ‘a family member’ as the source.”

“What other family member do I have in town?” she asks, answering the question before I can speak. “None. And even if my brother were around, he wouldn’t talk to a reporter about me. Aaron’s trying to move up to the NHL from a feeder team. He knows the importance of the press. He wouldn’t throw me under the bus like this, especially when I can’t remember the last time he had a steady hook-up, let alone a serious girlfriend.”

She pauses to bury her face in both hands. “Oh my God, no one’s going to want to buy my clothes or accessories now. My business is going to be ruined. Ruined! Everything I’ve worked so hard to build.”

“I think you might be overreacting.”

Nora’s face pops up, her cheeks red and her eyes shining. “Fashion is all about image, Matthew. My brand is sexy sophistication with a touch of Mid-Century American Girl Lost in Paris. My brand is not timid homebody who’s afraid to date and only looks hot online.”

“You’re plenty hot in real life,” I say, scowling.

She scowls back. “Very convincing. Thanks for the pep talk. But sadly, even if you were telling the truth, it doesn’t matter. Once this article goes viral, I’m done for. I might as well start the fifty percent off sale now and try to move as much product as I can before the fallout starts.”

I arch a brow. “And why do you assume an article from a small-town newspaper is going to go viral? Who’s even going to read this?”

“Well, aside from the thousands of local subscribers who will get a copy on their doorstep tomorrow, and flip past this on their way to the Black Friday sales section, I expect my competitors will jump on this faster than a horny squirrel after a messy bun,” she says, making my lips twitch. At least she hasn’t completely lost her sense of humor. “I have enemies. Petty enemies who love nothing more than to put my name on a google alert and have their minions share every bit of negative press that comes my way. When Foxy Fashion, the top fashion blogger of our generation, called my heart-cutout knee socks a miss last season, less than twenty-four hours later, it was all over the internet. Along with posts wondering if Bonjour Baby is ‘over’ now that I’ve hit all the major Parisian tropes in my first few collections.”

She jabs an indignant finger toward the sky. “But I have *not* hit all the major tropes. Paris has a vast and storied fashion history. No designer in the world could thoroughly explore the highlights of that history in just a few collections. And I didn’t just *hit* the tropes, anyway, I *reimagined* them. I’m like a DJ sampling a track. Yes, there are some familiar elements incorporated into the presentation, but the song and the voice are uniquely mine.” She brushes her hair over her shoulder and crosses her arms with a determined clench of her jaw. “And if they think they’re going to take me down over a stupid article written by a reverse slut-shaming boomer with an axe to grind with my generation, then they are going to be very disappointed.”

I smile. “That’s the spirit. I’m sure it’ll blow over in a week or two. Everyone has such a short attention span these days.” Thunder rumbles, making my gaze flick toward the sky. “This will blow over, too, but it’s going to take a while. I should get to the bunker and stock up on supplies before the sky opens up. I’ll be sure to grab a few things for you to wear, too. Something to sleep in and extra socks and things.” I motion toward the path leading down into the forest. “The treehouse is that way. Just be careful on the ladder and make sure you don’t let Clyde out on the way in.”

I start toward the trail on the opposite side of the clearing, but Nora slips in front of me. “You have clothes in this

bunker?”

I nod.

She frowns. “Female clothes?”

I nod again.

“Why?” she asks, her eyes narrowing. “Are you planning on starting a commune or a harem or something out here? Is this a charismatic cult leader situation in the making? Because, if so, I want nothing to do with it. You’re charismatic, but not *that* charismatic.”

I step closer, unable to resist teasing her, just a little. I dip my face closer to hers, whispering, “So you don’t want to drink my Kool-Aid?”

She lifts her chin, bringing her mouth a breath away from mine, making me rethink the wisdom of flirting with this woman. Even something playful could quickly turn dangerous. The chemistry between us is one stray spark away from igniting into a fire neither one of us may be able to contain.

“No, I don’t,” she says softly, her breath warm on my lips. “I also don’t like to share.”

“I don’t like to share, either.” I clench my jaw, fighting the urge to reach for her with everything in me. “I’m strongly against it, in fact.”

She sways closer, until her breasts are almost brushing my chest and I can’t control my body’s response to her intoxicating Nora smell—like sea spray and a hint of lavender honey. My cock thickens, swelling thicker as she purrs, “So, you have a possessive side?”

“If you were mine, you’d be mine,” I hear myself say in a tone that does nothing to conceal how much I want to possess every inch of her.

Her lips part, and her breath comes faster. “You’d rip out the throats of any man who dared put his hands on me?”

“If they so much as looked at you too long,” I confirm. “But they wouldn’t. They’d take one look, see how satisfied you were, and get lost.”

“Satisfied in what way?” she asks, her fingers teasing against mine, making the situation below my belt even more uncomfortable.

“All your expectations would be met. And exceeded.” I don’t know why I’m playing this dangerous game, but I’m unable to stop myself for some reason. I guess I just want her to know how tempting she is, and how much I’d love to please her if the situation were different.

Her eyes flash with trouble and I instantly know I’ve taken things too far. Before I can backtrack, however, she whispers in the sexiest voice I’ve ever heard, “If I didn’t know better, Mr. McGuire, I’d think you were talking about making me come.”

And that’s it.

That’s the spark, the dangerous one I should have known better than to get too close to. I reach for her, but before I can wrap my arm around her waist, the sky opens up and cold rain floods down from the sky.

Nora gasps and grips my arms, but the fire of the moment has thankfully been extinguished.

For now.

“Get to the treehouse and dry off,” I shout over the increasingly loud raindrops battering the ground around us. “There are towels in a garbage bag under the bathroom sink. I’ll be back in thirty minutes or less.”

“Are you sure you don’t need help?” she asks, shielding her face from the rain as she begins to shiver.

“No, you don’t have a coat, let alone rain gear.” I turn up the hood on my own waterproof jacket. “Go. Get dry. I’ll be there soon. Remember not to let the cat out.”

“Okay, but be careful,” she says, backing toward the trail with her arms held overhead to block the worst of the storm. “Don’t get struck by lightning!”

“Too late,” I mutter beneath my breath as I turn in the opposite direction and jog toward the bunker.

A run in the cold rain should help get my head back in the right place. And if it doesn't, I can always sleep in my SUV tonight. I've slept in worse places and nothing like freezing your ass off in a cold car to keep your mind on suffering instead of pleasure.

I can't think of pleasure too much while Nora's around.

That would be a good way to ensure this situation goes from bad to much, *much* worse.

Chapter Five



One good thing about saying mortifying sex stuff to a man I'm still not sure likes me as more than a friend?

It really takes the edge off the whole "climbing a slick ladder in the freezing cold rain" anxiety that would usually have me shaking in my boots on the way up to Matty's treehouse.

Though, now that I've seen this place, "treehouse" feels like a misleading word.

"Treehouse" brings to mind visions of primitive forts in the backyard and picnics in the sweaty heat of summer, during which my friends and I spent as much time batting away mosquitos and ants as eating our peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

This isn't a treehouse like the ones I've known before. This is a cute little cottage hoisted into the air, complete with a kitchenette, a living area, and an adorable potbellied stove with a cozy fire already burning.

"And a view," I murmur as I kick off my wet shoes by the door and wander slowly across the main room toward the large windows.

The trees on this side of the structure have been trimmed to reveal an unobstructed vista of the gorge, the river valley below, and softly rolling hills on the other side. Even in the rain, it's stunning and oh-so-peaceful.

"I bet sunsets up here are something special," I tell Clyde, who's sprawled out on the old-fashioned rag rug in the center

of the space, kneading the fibers with his claws as his eyes slide shut.

He's clearly exhausted by the day's events.

So am I, but I'm too soaked and chilly to lay down for a nap.

And too embarrassed.

Why did my mouth think mentioning "coming" with a man I've only kissed *once* was a good idea? I've never said anything like that in my life! I'm not a dirty talker. I never have been, not even with old boyfriends, who I dated for a really long time. Despite what my grandmother clearly assumes, I'm not a prude, but racy banter isn't my forte. I prefer to show my spicy side in deeds, not words. It just feels less...awkward that way.

Though, considering that henceforth I'll be known around Bad Dog as The Girl Who's Afraid of Fornicating, it might be time to work on being less easily embarrassed.

"Eff my life," I mutter as I head into the bathroom to the left of the front door, a small space with a dark green sink, a blue toilet, and a tiny pink shower, all at least half a century old. This mishmash of ancient artifacts clearly needs a remodel.

Pulling a towel from the garbage bag beneath the sink, I brainstorm ways to make the space absolutely darling.

As I spread my wet clothes out to dry on the floor, I decide that's an excellent topic of conversation to pursue when Matty gets back from his cult-leader bunker. We'll talk interior design and pretend that whole "coming" comment never happened.

That will probably be easier, however, if I'm wearing something other than a towel wrapped around my body. It's a decent-sized towel, but the fact remains that I'm buck-naked underneath. The rain soaked through every stitch of my clothing, including my bra and panties, and I'm not about to walk around in wet underwear. That's not comfortable or healthy.

Deciding that locating clothing before Matty gets back is a valid excuse for invading his privacy, I tiptoe into the small bedroom off the main room. It's also the *only* bedroom, but I try not to think too much about that. There's an old couch in the main room. It's small, but the cushions are in decent shape. I can sleep there. I can sleep just about anywhere, a superpower I inherited from Gram, who I'm sure will be just fine on the recliner tonight until Aaron arrives.

Still, my grandchild guilt says I should text her and remind her that Starling's big sister, Wren, is right next door and has offered to help out any time she needs it. But in the end, the irritable voice in my head is still miffed that my grandmother talked about my nonexistent sex life in public, so I leave my cell out on the kitchen table and move deeper into the bedroom.

I'll text Gram later. Maybe.

If I can stop wanting to scream every time I think of that article hitting the streets in print tomorrow morning on Black Friday, the most popular paper day of the year.

In the bedroom, the full bed against the wall is covered with a big white sheet, but I can tell there's an interesting headboard hidden beneath it. I'm curious but force myself to leave it alone. I'm here to get clothes, not snoop on Matty's décor. I move directly to the bureau with the scarred gray paint job and the crooked mirror on top, wincing as I catch a glimpse of my hair. It's already started to dry in wild, frizzy blond curls around my face, making me look like I was struck by lightning on my way in from the storm.

I run a hand over the top, but I've lived with hair that naturally kinks like an unfortunate 1980s perm long enough to know there will be no help for it without a shower and proper wave-enhancing or eliminating products.

I avert my gaze from my reflection and start opening drawers.

In the first, I find boxer briefs and quickly close the drawer again. I've worn a guy's boxers before, but never his boxer briefs, and that feels too intimate in the context of mine and

Matty's relationship. I move on, discovering socks, shorts, jeans, and finally, a drawer with t-shirts and flannel pajama pants.

I change into a pair of red and black flannel pants paired with a black t-shirt and white athletic socks and head to the bathroom to hang up my towel. I step back out just as Matty's coming in the door, dripping rain onto the welcome mat as he pushes his hood away from his face.

His gaze rakes up and down my frame. "You found clothes."

"I hope that's okay," I say, leaning against the wall just outside the bathroom, one socked foot on top of the other. "I was chilly all wet."

"It's fine," he says, hanging his coat on one of the metal hooks nailed to the wall by the door before opening the large rucksack he acquired while we were apart. "But if you'd like something that fits better, and is a little warmer, I brought these."

He crosses to the couch and proceeds to toss out a pair of blue and white flannel pajamas in what looks like my size, a pair of jeans, a package of underwear, two sports bras with the tags still on, three pairs of socks, two white t-shirts, a black sweatshirt, and a knit sweater with a flower print around the neck. I assume he's done, but then he goes back into the bag to extract a pair of brown hiking boots with sturdy red laces.

"These are used, but still in good shape," he says. "They used to be Melissa's, but she swapped them out for something lighter last year."

I shake my head, marveling at his haul as I join him by the couch. "I don't know whether to be impressed or... concerned."

"Concern is the typical response," he says with a sigh. "The only response, so far, actually. Mel is the only other person I've shown all this. I wanted her to know she has somewhere safe to go if things get crazy. And I wanted her to be able to tell the rest of the family about the house and the

bunker if I'm not around. I realize a complete breakdown of society, or an alien invasion is a long shot, but it's not out of the question. I'd rather be ready than caught by surprise."

I fight to keep my expression neutral as I nod. "So, you're...a doomsday prepper?"

"I'm prepared. For doomsday or...whatever." He shrugs. "I just want my family to have somewhere to go if a wildfire takes out Bad Dog or the town water supply is compromised the way it was a few summers back. Building this has been good for me. Comforting. It helps me feel in control in a world that seems pretty out of control most of the time."

I nod. "I get that. The world can be scary. It seems like people are always fighting or reeling from some unexpected financial blow or recovering from a natural disaster. It can be a lot."

The thunder rumbles again and the rain continues to pour down like the heavens have opened the floodgates.

I motion toward the windows. "See? Mother Nature clearly agrees with you. You aren't a weirdo. You're just a little... extra. But in a nice way."

Matty's lips lift on one side. "Thanks? I guess?"

"It was a compliment," I assure him, though I can't help adding, "But there is a part of this that still feels strange to me."

"What's that?" He moves to the small circular table near the kitchen area and begins to unpack canned goods, pasta, and other supplies from the bag.

A part of me insists that I should let this go, but I already know I won't. That's not the kind of person I am. I can't let things go, even when letting go would be best for everyone involved.

I showed up to meet my mother at the roller rink for months after Aaron stopped caring whether she made our visits. I'd put on my cutest outfit, do my hair in the pigtails I knew she loved, and pray Mom would show up in a good mood.

After a while, I transitioned to praying she showed up at all.

I spent five consecutive months waiting in the roller rink lobby with Gram, my stomach sinking as the minutes ticked by with no sign of my mother, before Gram told me the visitations had been cancelled by the judge over at family court. I was sixteen when she finally confessed that she'd lied about that. The visits hadn't been cancelled. She just couldn't bear watching me get my hopes up every month only to have my heart broken again and again.

I wasn't mad about it. I knew she was right. God only knows how much longer I would have sat there in the lobby waiting if Gram hadn't intervened.

I never know when to give up, so I follow Matty over to the table and say, "It's strange that on the one hand you're this super prepared, thoughtful, loving family guy who's gone to such lengths to make a safe haven for the ones he loves. But on the other hand, you're choosing to do business with mobsters who could put those people in serious danger. Does that make sense to you?"

He turns to me with a sigh, but his gaze is less guarded than it was before. "I'm on my way out, okay? I'm almost done with the Sweetwaters. Then, I'm out of here, on my way to South America, and everything will be okay. My family, you, your gram—you're all going to be fine."

As if to express his doubt about all that, Clyde emits a horrendous belch, followed by a pitiful *yewowowol* that's soon echoed by my stomach.

"Agreed, Clyde," I say.

"Agreed that you're hungry?" Matty asks. "Because I have cat food for Clyde, and I can have chicken pot pies ready for us in about twenty minutes. I grabbed a few from the freezer in the bunker."

"Yes, I'm hungry," I say, before adding gently, "but I also think you should end things with the Sweetwaters now. Right now. Do not spend more time with mobsters, do not pass go,

do not get murdered for harboring a stolen cat before the people who originally stole him get what they want. Whatever that is.”

He sighs. “Noted. I’ll take that under advisement. In the meantime, you can change if you want. Or just take your new clothes into the bedroom and settle in. The bottom drawer in the bureau is empty, and I’ll be sleeping on the couch.”

“No, I can take the couch,” I say. “I don’t mind. I can sleep anywhere. Lumps and saggy cushions don’t bother me.”

“I should take it,” he insists. “I want to stay out here in case Clyde needs something in the night.” He nods over his shoulder. “And to watch the door. Just in case.”

My growling stomach cramps into a worried knot. “You don’t think someone followed us, do you? You lost Wimpy when we went down that gravel road.”

“I think I did,” Matty says. “But I don’t intend to take any chances. With you or Clyde.”

Not sure what to think about the warm, protected feeling that spreads through my chest in response to that, I nod, thank him, and wander over to collect my new things from the couch. In the bedroom, I discover the hiking boots are the perfect size but that the bras are way too small. There’s no way I’m wrangling my 36F girls into a medium sports bra and the black t-shirt I’m currently wearing hides the fact that I’m not wearing a bra a lot better than the blue and white flannel pajama top would. Besides, the fire has the treehouse feeling nice and toasty.

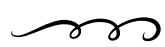
Electing to stay in my borrowed clothes, I head back into the kitchen, intending to offer my help preparing supper only to find Matty by the door, wearing nothing but a pair of dark black boxer briefs he’s just beginning to drag lower on his hips.

I spin, hoping to dart into the bedroom before he realizes I’ve caught him changing, but in my hurry, I misjudge the distance between myself and the wall behind me. I smack into it headfirst, hard enough to make stars dance before my eyes,

stumble backward, trip over the edge of the rug, and fall flat on my ass on top of poor Clyde.

The next thing I know my arm is on fire and Clyde is on top of the roof of the litter box in the corner, doing his best Halloween cat impression, his betrayed blue eyes locked on mine.

Chapter Six



MATTY

I hear a sharp thud and look up to see Nora bounce off the wall and trip over the rug. I have a beat to notice Clyde stretched out, half-asleep, behind her and realize something bad is about to happen.

But by the time I start across the room, it's too late.

Fall + Cat + Surprise + Claws have equaled Nora bleeding on the floor.

“Oh my God, I'm so sorry,” Nora says, wincing as she sits up, holding her bloody forearm away from her body. “I'm so sorry, Clyde. I didn't mean to hurt you. Are you okay?”

“He's fine.” I crouch down beside her, taking her wrist gently in hand as I survey the damage below her elbow. The scratches are deep, but already the bleeding is starting to slow. “Let me get the first aid kit.”

As I hurry over to the cabinet, Nora says, “But I fell on him.” Tears creep into her voice as she adds, “With my giant body. I could have done major damage.”

I return with the kit, kneeling next to her on the carpet. “I think he's the one who did the damage.”

“He could be bleeding internally,” she insists as I cup her chin in my hand, gently turning her cheek to the light as I wipe a smear of blood away. But she isn't scratched there, thank goodness.

“Well, you're bleeding *externally*.” I calmly wipe away the blood on her arm next, not wanting to upset her any more than

she is already. “So, I’ll take care of you first. Then I’ll check on Clyde and make sure he’s okay. But I saw it happen. He was on the move before you landed on him. He’s fine. Just scared.”

Her eyes begin to shine. “I know. I’d be scared if someone fell on me, too. I feel terrible. We were getting along so well. Now, he’ll hate me like all the other animals.”

“Animals don’t hate you,” I assure her, as I switch to an alcohol swab, cleaning her arm. She winces as I drag the cool pad across her skin. “Sorry,” I whisper.

“It’s okay. It doesn’t hurt that bad.” Her fingers touch my thigh only to flutter away again as she encounters bare skin. “Will I be scarred for life?”

“Not even a little bit,” I say, wishing I weren’t doing this wearing nothing but damp boxer briefs. I should have stepped into the bathroom to change, but Nora’s clothes were all over the floor and I didn’t want to disrupt the drying process. And I thought I’d have a chance to get dressed before she emerged from the bedroom. I’m a notoriously fast changer. Back in high school, I set my alarm for 6:55 and always made it to the bus stop by 7:10.

“Yes, they do. Take Keanu Reeves. He loves everyone,” she says, her breath beginning to hitch. “But the first time I tried looking after him, he growled at me and stole my eggs. *While* I was cooking them. And I can tell Kyle wants to peck my eyes out most of the time. The only thing stopping him is the fact that he loves Starling, and he knows Starling loves *me*, and she wants me to keep my eyes. But one of these days, Starling isn’t going to be around, Kyle’s going to snap, and then where will I be? I will be blind, that’s where I’ll be.” Her voice cracks. “Because I was stupid enough to think I could win him over, when all animals instinctively sense there’s something wr-wrong with me.”

Her sobs begin in earnest and my chest aches.

I scoot closer on the carpet, but before I can put my arms around her, Clyde is crawling over my thighs. Nora follows

my gaze, sucking in a frightened breath as the cat hesitates by her knee.

“Has he come to seek vengeance?” she whispers.

“I don’t think so,” I whisper back, smiling as Clyde maneuvers delicately into her lap to lay down, resting his chin on her flannel-covered thigh. “I think he can tell you’re upset and is trying to comfort you.”

“He is?” she asks, fresh tears sliding down her face even as her lips twitch.

Clyde begins to purr, and I make a mental note to buy the cat a lifetime supply of catnip before I drop him off at his owner’s house. “He is,” I say. “He was just scared, that’s all. He doesn’t hate you. See, you’re still buddies.”

Nora scratches tentative fingers between his ears, gaining the confidence to expand her efforts to a full back stroke when his purring grows louder. “Aw, thanks, Clyde. I appreciate it so much. I’m sorry I’m such a weirdo.”

“You’re not a weirdo,” I say. “I’d imagine there’s a good reason you’re afraid of animals. People don’t develop phobias out of the blue.”

She continues to pet Clyde, her gaze fixed on his small, vibrating body. “Sure, they do. My first boyfriend was terrified of mannequins, and he was never attacked by a plastic humanoid figure at any point in his childhood or early development. He just thought they were really creepy.”

“So, is that what it is for you?” I ask, unwrapping a Band-Aid. Thankfully the wounds have stopped bleeding, but the deeper cuts on her arms should be covered, at least for the night. “You just think animals are creepy?”

“No,” she says, watching me guide the bandage over her scratches before looking up at me through the hair curling around her face. “My dad used to be part of the dog fight circuit, back when I was really little. Like, barely more than a baby.”

I grunt judgmentally, and she smiles.

“Yeah,” she says. “He was gross. A real abusive jerk to animals and humans, alike. At one point, he had a really vicious dog that he’d trained to be a flat-out killing machine. His name was Mordor, like the evil fantasy land in *The Lord of the Rings*.” She continues to pet the still purring Clyde as she adds in a mild tone, “One day, Mordor got out of his kennel while Aaron and I were in the backyard. Either Dad was too drunk the night before to lock him up properly or my brother accidentally let him out when he was trying to get his bike or something. That part was never quite clear. But one way or another, the dog got out, saw me playing in my baby pool, and decided I was a threat. He had me in his jaws for a while before my brother fought him off with a shovel.”

She tips her head back, showcasing faint white puncture wound scars—scattered across her skin from behind her jaw to near the center of her neck.

I try to hide my horror but clearly do a shit job of it.

She laughs softly as she lets her hair fall back into place. “It’s okay. I don’t remember it, at least consciously. I was barely two. All I remember was being in the hospital after and how much I loved getting all the popsicles I could eat. The nurses were really sweet.” She shrugs and resumes petting the cat. “But, ever since then, I’ve been scared of animals.”

“Was the dog put down?” I ask, imagining the only thing worse than being attacked by a vicious dog would be being forced to continue to live with the animal afterward. Not that it was the dog’s fault, but once an animal’s that far gone, it’s often too late for rehabilitation.

She shakes her head. “No, but the authorities took him away and made Dad get rid of the other dogs he was training for the fights. I don’t remember much about that, either, but Mom later told me he was real pissed about it. He blamed my brother for letting the dog out. Screamed at him for hours. It was sad all around. For everyone, Mordor included. Who knows what kind of dog he might have been if he’d been treated well.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through all that.” I bring my hand to her back, rubbing my palm gently up and down.

“It’s okay,” she says.

“It’s not okay. I want to punch your dad in the face.”

She laughs softly. “Same. I mean, not anymore, but there were times in the past when I was really mad at him and at my mom. But now, I’m just grateful for the life I have. And for Gram. She loved Aaron and me enough to make up for all the bad times when we were little.” She looks up, her brow furrowed. “I should text her and tell her I love her. Even though I’m still pissed about the newspaper thing.”

I brush her hair from her forehead. “You don’t have to. She knows you love her, and it’s okay to be angry, even with the people we love most. I’m pissed at someone in the McGuire clan on a regular basis.”

She arches a brow. “Really? Why? For being too warm and supportive and wonderful?”

“For being nosy and intrusive and not respecting my boundaries,” I say. “Not to mention bossy. Bossiness is in the DNA and really fucking annoying. Even my younger siblings feel like they have the right to boss me around.”

She grins, a mischievous light in her eyes. “Really? Bossy? You don’t say.”

“Yeah, bossy,” I say, knowing exactly where she’s headed.

“Have you um...looked in the mirror lately, perchance?”

I fight a smile. “No, I haven’t. Someone had their clothes spread out all over the bathroom floor, so I couldn’t get to the mirror above the sink. That’s why I was changing by the front door.”

The mischief in her eyes takes on a sultrier edge. “My clothes were not on the floor. They were in the shower.”

“And spilling out onto the floor,” I say, my focus dropping to her full lips.

“Maybe the tiniest bit.” Her face drifts closer to mine. “Like...two inches. Maybe three.”

“It’s a lot more than two inches,” I whisper.

“That’s what all the guys say,” she says, summoning a startled laugh from my throat. “Sorry,” she adds. “The dirty stuff just comes out when I’m with you. I can’t help it.”

Cupping her cheek, I murmur, “That’s not dirty stuff. I could show you some dirty stuff, Nora Boudreaux.”

“I would really like that Matty McGuire,” she says. “I’d like it a lot.”

I lean in, a breath from kissing her in a way I haven’t before. I’ve never kissed her in private, in a place where the kiss doesn’t have to stop...if we don’t want it to. And I really don’t want it to.

I *should*. This isn’t what’s best for either of us.

But right now, with her sweet smell swirling through my head and the need to comfort her, preferably with my mouth all over her body, pumping through my veins, I find I’ve lost my will to resist.

Unfortunately—fortunately? Hell, if I know anymore—Clyde decides to help me out by emitting a horrendous belch before vomiting on Nora’s lap.

“Oh no,” she says, lips pulling away from her teeth as she glances down at the warm, sour mess. “Oh, you poor thing. Do you think he has a virus or something? Should we take him to the emergency vet?”

I shake my head. “I’m not sure where we’d find one open anywhere close to here. And I think he’s okay. Probably just stressed out from all the drama.” I gather the cat gently in my arms. “But I’ll make some plain white rice to mix into his food. Hopefully, that will calm his stomach.”

“That sounds smart,” she says, hooking her fingers into the top of the flannel pants she’s wearing. “And delicious. Even with cat vomit all over me, I’m still starving. I’ll take the

world's fastest shower and be out to help make supper in two seconds."

Before I can reply, she's shimmied out of the pants and scooped them carefully from the ground, cradling the mess. Standing there in nothing but my black t-shirt, the one that's barely long enough to cover whatever she's wearing underneath, she cocks her head. "What should I do with this? I'm thinking—rinse it off in the rain on the porch, then wash it with a little dish soap and hang it by the fire to dry? We're going to keep the fire going, right? I love a fire on a chilly night."

Without waiting for me to respond, she crosses to the door and steps out into the rain. She leans against the railing, reaching out beneath the overhang to get the soiled pants properly soaked, while I stand gaping at the bare curves of her ass peeking out beneath the shirt.

"Am I losing it?" I whisper to the cat in a rough voice. "Or is she not wearing panties?"

Clyde belches again, just as Nora glances at me over her shoulder, shooting me such a steamy look, I know that flash of her ass wasn't an accident.

Damn...

She's way more trouble than I was anticipating.

And I kind of fucking...love it.

Chapter Seven



*From the texts of Nora Boudreaux
and Delores “Gram” Rockport*

NORA: Okay, you asked for it, woman. Now you're going to get it...

GRAM: Get what? Are you already in Chicago? If not, you shouldn't be texting and driving. It's very dangerous. I saw a thing about it on the news. According to the research, it's six times more deadly than drinking and driving! We're all addicted to these phones and they're going to kill us.

NORA: I'm not texting and driving. And I'm not in Chicago. I'm in a cozy treehouse in the middle of nowhere with a devilishly sexy man.

GRAM: THAT'S MY GIRL!

NORA: Oh, hush. No need to shout about it.

GRAM: I knew all you needed was a kick in the pants. There's no shame in having a dry spell. But hiding your light away forever is a different thing entirely. I couldn't let that happen to you, pumpkin. Not when you've got so much love to give. That's why I pushed you a little, and why I talked to that reporter, even though Debbie told me not to, because she's suspicious of the press. But I don't have anything to hide and neither do you.

Oh, drat...I spoiled the surprise, didn't I?

Well, you would have found out about it anyway, come tomorrow morning. There's a newspaper article coming out about you in the local paper. Isn't that exciting!

NORA: I know. I don't want to talk about it.

GRAM: How do you know? And why not? What's wrong?

NORA: I have my ways. And I don't want to talk about it because I'm mad, Gram. That article was mortifying and probably bad for my business. But you can make it up to me by giving me solid advice in my moment of need and promising never to talk about me behind me back ever again.

GRAM: Wait. I'm confused. The article is supposed to be good! Very flattering. The woman promised. How could it be bad for your business?

NORA: Being a prude who's going through a dry spell doesn't sell clothes!

GRAM: I don't think that's true. I bet a lot of the women who buy your clothes are in the same boat you are, Nora. Your entire generation just isn't very comfortable with sex. I blame all the screens. They're trying to kill us in the car and in the bedroom. You kids need to do more discoing and less texting.

Disco was so much fun. There's a trend I'd like to see come back around. I told the reporter as much. Did she put that in the article?

I'm so jealous that you've already read it.

NORA: Like I said, I don't want to talk about the article right now. Focus, woman! I'm coming to you for help, and I don't have much time.

GRAM: Okay, of course, honey. I'm here any time you need me. What's on your mind?

NORA: Sex.

GRAM: WONDERFUL!

NORA: Stop. Your enthusiasm is disturbing. Let's keep this classy.

GRAM: I'm always classy. I still wear a girdle every time I leave the house. And hose. And a hat if the occasion calls for it. You know I love a hat.

NORA: I know you do. Probably as much as you loved boinking Grandpa.

GRAM: Oh no, I enjoyed boinking Grandpa much more. He was a very thoughtful and creative lover.

NORA: That's still a little traumatizing to hear, honestly, but I'm happy for you. I know you want to be happy for me, too, so, I'm going to ask your advice on my current situation. But full disclosure, I don't want any gross sex tips or anything too graphic, okay? I just need a little help getting the ball rolling.

GRAM: I wouldn't give you gross sex tips, honey. I wouldn't mean to, anyway. But I guess one woman's fuzzy handcuffs is another woman's ball gag and fisting.

NORA: Who are you? What have you done with my grandmother?

GRAM: I wasn't always an old woman with arthritis, you know. I had my first boyfriend when I was only thirteen. After I won Junior Miss Bad Dog in 1959, Daddy couldn't keep the boys away. I was pretty wild in my twenties, too, for a small town girl in the 60s. Cassie Ann Sweetwater and I painted this town red every Saturday night. I'm pretty sure both our parents thought we were going to hell in a handbasket, but we sure did have a good time.

NORA: About Cassie Ann Sweetwater... Are you two still friends?

GRAM: No, not really. We're cordial when we meet in passing, but things changed between us when her daddy died, and she took over the family business. I don't believe in judging people, but Cassie Ann was such a smart woman. She could have made a fabulous life for herself without getting mixed up in all that criminal nonsense.

And not long after she started down that road, I met your grandad and settled down. Our lives went in different directions. Why do you ask?

NORA: Just wondering. I drove by her cupcake shop today on my way to meet Sam. It got me to thinking about the old pictures of you two in your scrapbook.

She would probably let someone out of the mob, right? If they wanted to leave? She's not like one of those bosses from the movies who believes in loyalty until the day her minions die, or they get a horse head on their pillow, right?

GRAM: What's this really about? I thought you wanted sex tips not the dirt on Cassie Ann Sweetwater. If Sam's mixed up with the mob, you should stay away from him, Nora. There are other fish in the sea, fish who aren't going to get you into trouble.

NORA: I'm not with Sam. I'm with someone else.

GRAM: What? How? What happened to Sam?

NORA: I'm not sure, honestly. He never texted when I didn't show up. Maybe he isn't as interested as I thought. Or maybe he's waiting for me to text and apologize for ghosting. Which I'll do as soon as I'm through chatting with you. Though I do need to hurry and get in the shower. If I let the water run much longer, the man I'm with will know I'm doing more than showering in here.

GRAM: Who is this man and where are you? I don't like this, Nora. First, you lied to me about where you were going, then you stand up Sam and start asking questions about the mob. My phantom pinkie toe is tingling.

NORA: You don't have a phantom pinkie toe. Your pinkie toe is still very much attached to your body.

GRAM: But I almost lost it. It was separated from my body for an entire fifteen minutes.

NORA: Which is what you get for trying to mow the lawn in your 70s. You should have waited until I hired a new service, like I told you.

GRAM: But then I wouldn't have my phantom pinkie toe that tingles when trouble is on the horizon. And it's tingling big time right now. Come home, honey. Your sexual liberation has waited this long, it can wait a little longer, until you find a good, safe man with a steady job and no criminal connections.

NORA: I don't want a safe man. I want this man. He's good, too, just...a little confused. But I'm going to help him become unconfused by luring him into my web of seduction and showing him how great we could be together.

There's so much chemistry between us, Gram, and it's not all physical. There's an emotional connection, too, I can feel it, and I know he feels it too, even if he doesn't want to admit it just yet.

But he will. Soon, with the power of fantastic sex, affection, and gentle but persistent nagging, I'll have him back on the straight and narrow.

GRAM: Oh, sweet Jesus. I knew I shouldn't have let you watch soap operas when you were a teenager. Real life isn't like that, baby. You can't save the bad boys.

NORA: He's not a bad boy.

GRAM: He'll just drag you down along with him. Come home, Nora. Right now.

NORA: I'm not coming home, Gram. Not yet. I'll be back in a couple days.

GRAM: Fine. If you won't come home, I'll get Aaron to track you down and drag you home. He knows how to work that app, the one that shows where your friends are.

NORA: Yes, he does. But it won't work if I disable it and turn off my phone, which I'm going to do as soon as we're done here, Gram. I shouldn't have reached out. This was a mistake.

GRAM: It wasn't a mistake. You need help, just not the kind you think you need.

NORA: I don't. I promise you, Gram, I'm fine. I couldn't be safer. I know what I'm doing. The universe has been throwing me and this man together for months. I am cosmically obligated to see this through.

GRAM: I can't change your mind, can I?

NORA: No. But I love you for caring so much.

GRAM: I love you, too. Keep your phone charged and call me as soon as you need me. Aaron should be here later tonight, he said, but if you need help before then, I can run next door and pester Wren and Barrett.

NORA: Will do, but everything is fine. I promise. I'll touch base in a few days. Just try to enjoy the time with Aaron and don't worry. I've got this situation under control.

GRAM: Sounds like it.

NORA: Smartass isn't a good look on you.

GRAM: Naïve isn't a good look on you, baby. But I understand. I was young and horny once. I'd advise having a glass of wine, pretending you're a little tipsy, and sitting on his lap. He'll be putty in your hands in five minutes flat.

NORA: Really?

GRAM: Always worked for me back in the day.

NORA: I'll take that under advisement, but I might need something a little racier. I just flashed half my bare bottom to him before I came into the bathroom, and he still managed to resist following me in here.

GRAM: Oh, sweetheart, he must be batting for the other team, then. Thank God! You always did get confused about that. Remember when you had a crush on George Michael when you were little? I didn't have the heart to tell you he wasn't really singing about girls in any of those songs.

NORA: He's not gay, Gram.

GRAM: George Michael is absolutely gay, Nora. Or was. Such a talent. Gone too soon, God rest his soul.

NORA: Agreed, but I didn't mean George Michael. I meant the man I'm with. He's straight. No doubt in my mind.

GRAM: All right, baby. Whatever you say. I love you. Keep in touch. Send me an email if you don't want to text again. And be careful on the roads if you're out and about the next few days. The weatherman says the storm might get stuck over Minnesota and dump a dangerous amount of rain. November weather just isn't what it used to be. Back when I was young, this would have been the first snowstorm of the year. We'd be making snow ice cream, not worrying about floods.

NORA: All right. Since you've moved on to talking about the weather, I'm going to assume you're no longer worried about me, and I'm free to go. Love you, miss you, see you soon, but I will have to gently murder you if you ever talk to a reporter about my sex life again.

GRAM: Well, as long as it's gentle *smiley face emoji* Love you to the moon and back, darling and don't lose hope. You're going to find a straight one, sooner or later.

Chapter Eight



MATTY

Nora emerges from her shower in the flannel pajamas I brought her, with pink cheeks and a strange light in her eyes.

I arch a brow from the table, where I'm raking green beans onto our plates beside piping hot chicken pot pies. "Everything okay?"

She hums beneath her breath. "I'm not sure, I'll let you know," she says, mysteriously. She drifts into the bedroom to put her dirty things in the laundry basket by the bureau. When she emerges, she's still watching me like a stink bomb, she suspects might explode at any minute.

"Decided pot pies don't sound good, after all?" I ask, as she crosses to the table.

"No, they sound great." She pulls out a chair, settling in. "They smell even better. Thanks for making them. Should we dig in?"

"Sure thing. You want a beer?" I ask, motioning toward the fridge. "I have a mixed case from Ugly Dog Brewery in there."

"How about wine?" she asks in a tone that makes it feel like a trick question.

"Um, yeah. Red, good?"

"That's perfect." She pokes her fork into the center of her pot pie, sending a rush of steam rising around her face.

I fetch the wine from the small pantry and twist the top off before collecting two wineglasses from the open shelves. I pour Nora a glass and myself a smaller one before sitting down across from her.

She notices the pour difference, of course—she notices everything, that’s why we’re here right now, on the run from Wimpy and the rest of the Sweetwater crew—and asks, “Still worried about keeping watch tonight? You think we should stay sober?”

“You can have a couple glasses if you want,” I say. “I’m going to play it safe. Just in case. But no, I think we’re fine.”

“Good.” She takes a slow sip of her wine, watching me over the rim before setting it down with a nod. “That’s nice. I love Pinot.”

“I can’t take any credit for the selection,” I confess, digging into my meal. “Melissa gave me a case of a bunch of different kinds of wine for Christmas last year. She’s the food and wine expert. I’m the handy twin who builds things and likes fast cars.”

“And a genius,” she says. “Don’t you speak like...three languages?”

“Five,” I say, embarrassed by the disclosure, the way I always am. People are always so impressed, but it seems wrong to take too much credit for something that’s always come easily to me. “But that’s just because my brain is good at that sort of thing. I didn’t do much better in math or science than the other honor roll kids and not nearly as well as Barrett or Wes. They’re the real geniuses.”

“I didn’t make the honor roll a single time in high school,” she says as she delicately skewers a few green beans on the tip of her fork. “B and C student all the way. I was too busy making elaborate costumes for Halloween and every school dance to waste time studying or put too much effort into my research papers.”

I nod as I chew and swallow. “See, just goes to show making the honor roll doesn’t mean shit as far as what a

person will do in the long run. You're probably more successful than every honor roll nerd in your class combined."

"I wouldn't say that. I do okay, but only because I work like a crazy person and have always been obsessed with predicting trends." That almost...suspicious look creeps back into her eyes again. "What about you? Ever been into fashion?"

I shake my head with a soft laugh. "Um, no. I have a bespoke suit I wear when I have to be extra presentable. Other than that, I'm a jeans and t-shirt kind of guy."

She smiles, seemingly pleased by this revelation. "I like jeans and t-shirts."

I arch a brow. "I think this is the first time I've seen you in something other than a dress or an elaborate getup with matching accessories."

Her smile widens. "Right. I meant for you. I like jeans and t-shirts for you. For me, I like as much fancy as I can tastefully fit on my body at one time. Life's too short not to get as fancy as often as you want to get fancy."

"Agreed." I chew and swallow another bite, fighting to keep the rest of what I want to say to myself. But in the end, I can't help adding, "And you always look like a million bucks, so..."

She pauses with her fork halfway to her lips, cocking her head. "Really? Then why do you have such an easy time ignoring me, Matthew? I mean when I'm not in mortal danger or interrupting your drug deals, of course."

"I've never been part of a drug deal," I counter. "And ignoring you isn't easy. Trust me. You're the most stunning woman I've ever seen in real life."

She blinks, seemingly genuinely surprised by the revelation.

"But we're on different paths," I continue. "Trying to be something more than friends seemed...unwise."

“Are we even friends, though?” she asks. “I know so little about you. I wouldn’t even know you raced cars or were still planning to leave for South America before the end of the year if I didn’t keep my ears open when people talk. I don’t know what your favorite food is or your favorite color or if you’ve ever had a boyfriend.”

I look up sharply, my bite of pot pie falling off my fork. “What?”

“A boyfriend,” she repeats, pinning me with a piercing look. “It’s not a big deal if you have. I have tons of gay friends and bi-friends and friends who are only gay for Anderson Cooper.”

“Anderson Cooper?” I echo, even more confused.

“Yeah,” she says, without missing a beat. “He’s a brilliant, well-spoken, classy, hard-hitting journalist who balances being a silver fox with a slightly bitchy sense of humor. He’s the entire package and was so cute on that one New Year’s Eve broadcast where he had a few too many shots. But if I were gay, I obviously wouldn’t be gay for him. I’d be gay for Abby Wambach because she’s that magical mixture of confident athlete and squishy sweetheart, who’s also smoking hot.”

“And for a long time, she was the highest international scorer of all time,” I offer, citing the only thing I really know about the soccer star.

Nora waves a hand. “Don’t care about that. I love the swagger of athletes and how comfortable they seem in their skin. That’s the sexy part. I don’t really care about their sports ball stats, and I will never understand what ‘off-sides’ is.” I pull in a breath, but she points a finger at my face. “If you try to explain it to me, I’ll have to stuff my napkin in your mouth and pelt you with the peas from my pot pie. Don’t even try it.”

I smile. “I noticed you were pushing the peas to the side of the plate.”

“Peas are not my favorite,” she says. “But they make great ammunition.” She arches a brow. “So, are you going to answer the question or not?”

“My favorite color is sky blue, my favorite food is anything with freshly ground sausage in it, and no, I have never had a boyfriend. I’ve only had girlfriends, and I haven’t had one of those for quite some time.”

She nods but doesn’t look satisfied by my revelations. “So, you’re not even a little bit gay?”

I shake my head. “Sorry. Is that disappointing?”

“No,” she says in a tone that says ‘yes.’ “I just... Gram thought you must be. She couldn’t see any other way you could resist a butt cheek flash.”

I choke on pot pie.

When I’m finished coughing and have sucked down a gulp of water, I ask in a strained voice, “You told your grandmother about that?”

She shrugs. “I did. I was looking for seduction advice, but all she gave me was a headache and unfounded doubts about your sexual preferences.”

I choke again, this time on nothing.

Nora claps me on the back. “Are you okay? Do you need more water?”

“No, I need...” I trail off, not sure what I need except out of this tightly enclosed space with this woman, who isn’t nearly as easy to resist as she seems to think.

With the rain pouring down, a head-clearing walk in the woods isn’t really an option right now, but I can at least change the subject. “You weren’t supposed to tell your gram where you were.”

“I didn’t,” she says. “Not exactly. I didn’t tell her who I was with, either.” She motions toward where her cell sits on the edge of the table. “And I edited my settings so she can’t send my brother after me with his ‘track my friends’ app. No one will find your secret hideout, I promise.” She sighs as she stabs another bite of pot pie. “I just didn’t have anyone else to ask. I have successfully seductive girlfriends, of course, but I didn’t want to bother them on Thanksgiving.” She frowns.

“What about you? Aren’t the McGuires concerned that you missed Thanksgiving dinner?”

I shake my head. “I told them something came up and dropped the cupcakes off early this morning.”

Nora hums beneath her breath. “How’d your parents take that? I didn’t think McGuires were allowed to miss family holiday celebrations.”

“It was fine. I told them I had to help a friend.”

She arches a brow.

“It wasn’t a lie. Clyde is a friend, and I’m helping him.”

She purses her lips, clearly dubious, but she keeps her peace.

I grunt and skewer the last of my green beans, chewing and swallowing in the strained silence that follows. Finally, I can’t resist asking, “So?”

She looks up. “So what?”

“So...what did she say? Your gram.”

Pushing her nearly empty plate away, Nora says. “Scoot your chair back.”

My eyes narrow on hers. “Why?”

“Just do it. I won’t hurt you. I promise. It’ll just be easier this way.” When I’ve grudgingly pushed my chair away from the table, she reaches for her wine. “Okay. Here it is. Are you ready? This is Gram’s recipe for a foolproof seduction. First, I’m going to finish this glass of wine.”

She swallows the second half of the ruby red liquid in three slow, sexy gulps, her throat working in a way that makes the air in the room suddenly feel too warm. She sets the glass down, her tongue sweeping out to catch a bead of wine left on her lips, triggering a reaction below my belt that isn’t wise.

It’s especially unwise considering the next thing she does is stand and sway her curvy backside from her chair directly into my lap.

She loops her arms around my neck and whispers in a slightly tipsy voice, “This is it. Gram’s plan. I should have a glass of wine, get a little loose, and sit in your lap. Apparently, in the olden days, this was all it took to get a guy irrationally hot and bothered. But that was before every man had free, on-demand porn in the palm of his hand. ‘Twas a simpler time.”

“I don’t watch porn,” I say, unable to resist slipping my hand around her hip.

Her lips part. “Why not?”

“None of those women are having a good time. I can tell.” I curve my free hand around her thigh, just above her knee. “And if the woman you’re supposed to be fantasizing about is faking it, what’s the point?”

“You don’t like fake things,” she says, her head tipping closer.

“No, I don’t.”

“How about temporary things?” she asks, the tip of her nose brushing mine, even that relatively tame contact enough to transform my semi into a full-fledged hard-on.

A hard-on she’s going to feel if she shifts even an inch to her right...

“I know we probably don’t have a future, but we could have right now.” Her hand smooths up my waist to my chest, resting over my pounding heart. “We could have tonight and tomorrow and memories to keep us warm through the long, cold winter.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I whisper, my voice strained with the effort it’s taking not to drag her lips to mine.

“I don’t want to hurt you, either,” she says. “So, let’s...not hurt each other. Let’s just make each other feel good for however long we have before you leave, and then go our separate ways.”

She’s a master negotiator. Either that, or my cock has simply siphoned too much blood away from my brain for me to think clearly. I almost forget all the other reasons—aside

from my impending departure—that hooking up with Nora would be a bad idea.

I'm about to carry her into the bedroom and prove to her just how absolutely straight and Nora-obsessed I am, when my pager goes off.

My pager, the one that only beeps when my handler urgently needs to get in touch with me.

My handler at the CIA...

I stand, lifting Nora with me and setting her back in her own chair before dashing to grab my pager from my backpack. When I glance down at the small screen I see three words—*Needs More Sprinkles*—and know Nora and I won't be enjoying a night between the sheets.

Hell, we probably won't be sleeping at all.

“What's wrong?” she asks.

“We have to go,” I grit out. “Right now.”

Chapter Nine



The only thing stranger than running through the rain in the dark with a belching kitten hidden under the rain slicker Matty lent me from the treehouse's extensive coat collection, with no idea *where* I'm going or *why* Matty has a sudden, urgent appointment at seven p.m. on Thanksgiving night?

Realizing we're rolling up to his sister Melissa's catering company a little over an hour later.

"Is this a family emergency?" I ask, shifting my gaze from the Deliciously Yours sign in front of the cute Victorian cottage.

"No." Matty pulls around to the back, as chatty as he's been the entire drive.

"Oh, right. No," I echo, dipping my head closer to the top of Clyde's sleeping head. The cat didn't seem inclined to leave my raincoat when I strapped in, so I left him cradled against my chest, a decision that calmed his belching and resulted in no further motion sickness. Thank goodness. I want to make things up to Clyde after nearly crushing his sweet, fluffy self, but if I never smell cat sick again, it will be too soon. "Matty said no, Clyde," I whisper as the cat begins to blink his big blue eyes, "and that's apparently all we need to know."

"I'll explain later." He pulls into a parking spot, visibly tense as he glances through the rain-streaked window at the empty spaces all around him. "Come on, Mel. Don't let me down now."

“Why is Mel meeting us here?” I ask, proving I’m an eternal optimist. Sure, Matty’s refused to answer all the other questions I asked on the way over, but sooner or later, he’ll have to crack and give me something. “I would have thought she’d be tired after spending the day stuffing herself silly at your parents’ house.”

“She didn’t stay long,” he says, still searching the darkness around us. “Ben took their son to his parents’ house in St. Louis for Thanksgiving this year. It’s her first holiday without Chase, and she wasn’t feeling very festive.”

My lips turn down. “That sounds hard. All the more reason to leave her cozy at home instead of asking for weird favors on a dark and stormy night.”

“There’s nothing weird about asking your twin sister for a favor, no matter the time of day or night,” he says. “Mel doesn’t hesitate to reach out when she needs help. I can’t count the times I’ve been up in the middle of the night grabbing baby Tylenol or driving over to her place to make sure that raccoon who sneaks around in her attic hasn’t found a way to break into the main part of the house. And don’t even get me started on the recipes.”

“The recipes?”

“If she comes up with something new, she wants someone with a ‘layman’s palate’ to taste it right away. She had me up at two a.m. a few weeks ago to try the roasted root vegetable smash with mint gravy she—” He breaks off with a squint that becomes a relieved smile as the headlights zooming around the side of the cottage prove to be attached to his sister’s vintage VW bug. He lifts a hand before turning back to me. “Just one second. I’ll be right back.”

He swings out the driver’s side into the persistent drizzle and I waste zero seconds following him, not wanting to miss a second of his chat with his sister.

One way or another, I intend to get to the bottom of whatever’s going on, and I’m not above eavesdropping to do it.

Matty shoots me a hard look as I tail him around to open Mel's door. It slows him down enough that by the time he reaches for the door handle, Mel is already emerging from the car. She shoots a quick grin my way, saying, "Hey, Nora," before turning to glare up at her much taller twin, "What the actual fuck is going on, Matty?"

"I told you, I can't talk about it right now," he says, motioning toward me and Clyde, who is now poking his head out of my coat to sniff the air. "I just need you to keep an eye on Nora and the cat for an hour. Two at the very most. Then, I'll be back, and I'll explain everything."

Melissa snorts out a laugh as she crosses her arms. "Who do you think you're kidding?"

Matty blinks. "What do you mean?"

"I'm your sister, Matty. I know when you're lying. And you never explain everything, you haven't for years, and I'm sick of it. I want answers now, or I'm going home." She glances my way, her voice gentling again as she adds, "I can take you and your cat home first though, Nora, if you need a ride."

"Well, he's not actually my—"

Matty cuts me off with a sharp, "She can't go home. Not yet. And she can't be seen anywhere someone might think to look for me. That's why we're here. No one knows you own Deliciously Yours."

Mel's brows shoot up with a startled sound. "Yes, they do."

"No, they don't," Matty insists, before muttering, "At least, not the people I'm worried about."

"Matty, what's going on?" Mel asks, her frustration giving way to concern. "Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"That's what I'm worried about, too," I pipe up. I momentarily consider telling Mel who Clyde really is, but it feels disloyal to Matty, so I settle for, "And this isn't my cat. It's Matty's."

Melissa does a double take her brother's way. "What? When did you get a cat?"

"Just take Nora inside, make her a cup of tea and play Scrabble or something until I get back," Matty says, backing away toward his SUV. "Just don't leave the cottage and don't let anyone else know you're here, okay?"

"Matty, I—"

"Pikachu Promise," Matty says, silencing Mel, who goes still beside me.

When I glance down at her, her face is pale.

"Okay," she murmurs, nodding numbly. "Okay. We'll wait until you get back. But hurry. I'm worried."

"It's going to be okay," Matty says, holding her gaze as he reaches for the driver's side door. "See you both in a little while." He glances my way, looking like he's about to add something more, but after a beat, he slides behind the wheel without a word.

A minute later, he's gone, and Mel and I are alone in the damp.

Clyde belches, as if to remind me that he's mixed up in all this mess, too.

Mel cuts a look my way. "Was that the cat?"

"It was. He has a bit of a funny tummy."

She reaches out, rubbing the fur between his ears, making his warm body begin to rumble against my chest. "Poor little guy. Well, let's head inside. I can get him some water, at least. And we can get out of the rain. At least it's slowed down some." She sighs as she starts up the porch steps, pulling out her keys. "But it's supposed to pick up again tomorrow morning and keep going through most of the weekend. I was supposed to cater a wedding on Saturday, but the bride shot me a message an hour ago that she needs to shift the date. Apparently, her venue by the lake is already almost underwater."

“Oh, no,” I say, following her. “Does that mean you’re stuck paying for all the food?”

“No, she’s going to pay me double,” Mel says as she unlocks the door. “Which means steak and chicken for a week at my house and a massive donation to the local food pantry. But that isn’t even the best part. Come on, I’ll show you.” She motions me inside, flicking on lights as she dumps her purse on a small table inside the door. I keep mine slung across my chest, since the strap is currently under both Clyde and my borrowed coat. She moves past rows of shiny, stainless steel prep tables toward the walk-in fridge on the other wall, pausing to grin at me as she grips the handle. “Are you ready?”

I nod, stroking Clyde, who’s still purring happily. “Ready.”

She opens the walk-in with a flourish, revealing a stunning, three-tier wedding cake decorated in gorgeous red poppy flowers made of icing.

“Oh, wow,” I murmur, my mouth instantly starting to water. That pot pie was excellent, but it wasn’t cake.

Mel grins. “Right? And since Matty’s being a weirdo and we’re stuck here for at least an hour, I say, let us eat cake.”

I nod eagerly. “Yes, please, and thank you. I’ll start the kettle for tea or coffee.”

She shoots me a thumbs-up before gripping the rolling cart beneath the massive dessert and guiding it out of the fridge. “Perfect. What’s your ideal cake to icing ratio? The top layer has way more icing per bite. The second and third layers are more cake heavy.”

“The more icing the better for me, thanks,” I say. “Is it okay to put the cat down?”

She nods. “Sure. He’s too little to jump up on any of the prep surfaces, and I have my cleaners coming Saturday morning anyway. I’ll grab him some water and a little melon. I had a cat when I was a kid who loved watermelon when she had a funny tummy.”

“Perfect.” I set Clyde down and start toward the massive stove with the red kettle on the back burner. “Next question: Is this normal Matty behavior? Or something strange and unusual?”

Melissa props her hands on her hips with a sigh. “It’s not totally unheard of. Rare, but the occasional cryptic, late-night request does happen.” She casts a loaded glance my way. “But this is the first time he’s brought along a friend. Or a cat.”

Storing this information away, I add, “And this is a recent thing, or...”

She crosses to a glass-doored cupboard containing pale gray china. She fetches a stack of small plates and a bowl, which she fills with water before placing it on the tile for Clyde. “No, it’s ongoing. Since he graduated from high school. Not often, but every once in a while, he has a strange request and whips out a Pikachu Promise to get me to go along without causing a fuss.” She rolls her eyes. “Pikachu was our favorite Pokémon as kids. It became our code word for super-secret twin business.”

I smile. “I like it. So...what do you think this weirdness is all about?” I raise my voice to be heard as she ducks into the walk-in. “I had a theory, but Matty was quick to debunk it.”

“I have a theory, too. What was yours?” she asks, emerging with a Tupperware container full of chopped watermelon.

“Tell me yours first,” I say. “You obviously know him better than I do.”

Her nose wrinkles as she plucks out a few pieces of watermelon, which she places beside the water dish for the cat. “I don’t know about that. Matty has his share of secrets, even from me. But my best guess is he’s doing some kind of... politically sensitive work.”

“Like being a spy,” I say, deciding to lay it out there.

I’m gratified when Mel’s eyes widen and she hisses, “Yes! Oh my God, yes! Exactly. How are we the only people who suspect this? My parents and brothers just think Matty’s some

kind of problem child who didn't live up to his early, genius-level potential."

"When really, he's an international man of mystery," I agree, nodding along with her. "And clearly in the middle of some kind of super-secret spy mission." I glance down at Clyde, who's loudly purring as he devours the watermelon. "Which, for some reason, involves a cat celebrity."

"What?" Mel cocks her head to one side.

I briefly explain who Clyde is and how I came to be spending Thanksgiving evening with Matty and a kidnapped feline he rescued. I tell her about the Cassie Ann Sweetwater connection and the guy who grabbed me this afternoon, as well as the beeper message that had Matty running back into town. "And that's why I'm here, I think," I finish. "He didn't want to leave me alone, just in case one of the mob guys is still on his tail."

Melissa's eyes are nearly as big as the poppies on the cake slices, she's maneuvering onto plates for both of us. "Crap. This is bad, Nora. Really bad."

I pull in a breath through bared teeth. "Yeah, it isn't good. If he's telling the truth, and he's actually in deep with the mob, that's obviously bad. And if we're right and he's a spy stuck in the middle of some crazy operation with career criminals, that isn't great, either."

Mel curses beneath her breath. "I should have stepped in sooner. I knew something was up with him the past year or so. But I was so wrapped up in my own drama with the divorce and everything, I didn't stick my nose in when I should have."

"Don't blame yourself," I say. "You've had a lot going on and Matty is very secretive. He nearly had me convinced I was a crazy person for even considering the spy thing."

Her lips twist. "Yeah, he's good at that. My brother has always been an excellent liar, in any language. I used to be able to spot his fibs, even when no one else could..." She sighs. "But maybe I'm losing my touch."

“Or maybe he’s getting better at being a dirty rat,” a raspy voice croaks from the shadowed doorway leading into the front of the shop. It’s the place where clients would usually enter, to check out the menus and pay their bill.

But this man isn’t a client.

He’s a mountain of a human even bigger than Wimpy, with long, dirty blond hair tied back in a ponytail that makes his prominent nose look even more aggressive. He steps out of the shadows with a smile, revealing a mouthful of braces that seem out of place on a mobster.

But this man is definitely a mobster, a fact he proves by calling over his shoulder in a rough voice, “Come on, Wimps. Let’s get this done and get back to the house before the road washes out. Lucy’s saving me a piece of pumpkin pie.”

Another shadow materializes from the darkness behind him. It’s Wimpy. His dark eyes glitter my way, as he murmurs, “Hey there, Blondie. I knew we’d meet again.”

“Run, Nora!” Mel shouts as she grabs the whistling teapot from the stove and hurls it in Brace Face’s direction.

He ducks, causing the pot to collide with Wimpy’s chest and scalding water to spray onto his arms. He screams and Brace Face turns to see what’s happened.

That’s the last thing I see before I grab Clyde from beneath the prep table, clutch him to my chest without letting the bad guys see him, and dash for the door.

Chapter Ten



MATTY

I'm halfway to the truck stop at the edge of town where I typically meet my handler—a man in a tattered Gull Lake baseball cap named Al, who's old enough to be my grandfather—when I suddenly whip into the Country Time Buffet's abandoned parking lot and turn back the way I came.

I don't know why my tongue is snarling into a stress cramp at the rear of my throat, but I know what it means.

Something isn't right.

I've made a bad call, and I need to retrace my steps.

Every officer I've spoken to throughout the years has some version of my tongue cramp, a physical manifestation of their deep, inner knowing that the shit is about to hit the fan. Normal people have it too—that flutter in your stomach when you've neglected to lock your car or the brain tingle when you're about to forget your spouse's birthday—but for the layperson, ignoring that “something's off” feeling doesn't usually end in people getting seriously hurt.

The one time I ignored my tongue tingle, I was made by the man I was following and nearly thrown into a windowless van in Sioux City, Iowa. Luckily, I wasn't working alone that time around. The rest of my team swooped in, and the man and his accomplices were arrested before they could snatch me off the street, but the close call taught me a lesson.

Never doubt the tongue cramp.

Especially when it comes to the well-being of the people who matter most.

As I push the speed limit back toward the catering company, I curse myself for getting my sister involved in this. Nora wandered into the middle of my op, but Mel was safely at home, about to make apple pie ice cream to ease the pain of spending her first holiday away from her son. I should have left her alone and found somewhere else for Nora to hide while I learned what urgent development Al has to share.

And no, I can't think of another safe place off the top of my head, but that's no excuse. If nothing else, I should have left her in the treehouse, even if I wasn't sure I'd be able to get back to pick her up for a few days. The treehouse had food, water, plenty of wood for the fire, and the advantage of being completely off the Sweetwater crew's radar.

"Pies," I mutter, slamming the heel of my hand against the steering wheel as the reason for my tongue cramp comes rushing into my conscious mind. I told Wimpy my sister was a caterer, who made the best holiday pies. If he remembered that, it wouldn't be hard to track down Mel's catering company. There are only three in town and the other two are named after their head chefs, both of whom are men.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," I curse, pressing down harder on the gas as my heart races faster.

Praying I've reached them in time, I take a sharp left into the alley leading to the back parking lot, and nearly run head-on into a wild-eyed Nora. She's clutching an equally terrified-looking Clyde to her chest, but nearly drops the cat as Mel crashes into her from behind. She recovers at the last second, snatching Clyde around the ribs and holding him close as she squints into the headlights.

Wrenching open my door, I shout, "It's me. Get in!"

I don't have to ask them twice. A beat later, I see why.

The man with the ponytail running around the house behind them isn't someone I've met, but I've seen enough pictures of Cassie Ann's oldest grandson around the cupcake shop to know Rex on sight.

Rex, the apple of his grandmother's eye.

Rex, the only Sweetwater descendant trusted with establishing his own mini mob upstate.

Rex, the truly dangerous man the Sweetwaters call in to do their dirty work when mob life stops being cute and starts getting real.

Rumor has it Rex killed his first orthodontist, the one who spaced his teeth out so far that he looked like a deranged, slightly rotten jack-o'-lantern. Rumor also has it that he originally needed braces because he liked to beat people up by repeatedly slamming his teeth into his victims' noses so he could taste the blood when it started to flow.

I don't know how true that last part is, but I know for a fact that Rex is the one who broke into Clyde's owner's house and stole the cat in the first place. It takes a real psychopath to break into another person's home in the dead of night, having no idea what he's going to find there or how well the other person might be armed.

There's no doubt in my mind that Rex is dangerous, a fact he proves by pulling what looks like a stun gun from the waistband of his pants and aiming it at where Nora is flinging open the passenger's side door. On instinct, I slam on the horn and flash my lights, startling Rex enough, that by the time he lifts the gun again, Mel and Nora are both in the SUV.

I zoom down the driveway in reverse and spin out into the street.

Thankfully, there aren't any other cars around this part of town on Thanksgiving night. I avoid a collision and seconds later we're flying down the road away from the catering company.

"What the hell was that Matty?" Mel asks, her voice strained as she pokes her head between the seats. "*Who* the hell was that?"

"Buckle up," I say tightly, checking the rearview mirror. "We need to find a place to get out of sight before they catch up with us."

“I *am* buckled up,” Mel shoots back. “And, no, we don’t need a place to hide. We need to go to the police. Right now.”

“I second that,” Nora says. “That man had a gun.”

“A stun gun,” I correct. “Cassie Ann doesn’t let her guys carry actual firearms. Just stun guns and knives.”

“And?” Mel screeches directly into my ear. “You can kill someone with a knife! Probably pretty easily once you stun them and they’re lying helpless on the ground. I don’t care if you’re a mobster or a spy, Matty, this has to stop. Now.”

“What?” I ask, cutting a sharp look Nora’s way.

“We both think you’re a spy,” Nora says, clutching Clyde tighter as I take a sharp right, then another right, heading back the way we came on an alternate street.

“We do,” Mel pipes up. “It makes the most sense. But either way, this has gone too far.”

I sigh, my stomach balling into a knot as my thoughts race.

She’s right, this has gone too far, but I can’t take them to the police, come clean about being in the CIA, and get backup just like that. Contrary to popular belief, CIA officers aren’t all-powerful and have zero law enforcement power. We gather intelligence on foreign governments and bad actors. That’s it. The few times I’ve been part of an arrest operation, it’s taken dozens of hours of work behind the scenes to get other agencies involved, obtain the proper warrants, and sort out jurisdiction and protocols.

In the movies, being a “spy” is all glamor and zooming around in fast cars, taking out the bad guys with impunity.

In the real world, I drive a muddy SUV and am likely to end up in jail if I take this to the police. At least, unless I’m willing to blow my cover and my shot at making it out of the CIA without becoming a liability to the agency. I don’t want to live the next five to ten years under the radar in witness protection while a more competent officer takes down the Sweetwaters. I want to get this done and get out, free and clear, like I planned.

Which means continuing to lie to the people I love, but only for a little bit longer.

Assuring myself this is the best way to keep them safe—the less they know about my real job, the better—I say, “I can’t go to the police. They won’t believe I stole Clyde from the Sweetwaters to return him to his owner, and they really won’t believe I didn’t know that half the work I’ve been doing for Cassie Ann involves wire fraud.”

“Wire fraud?” Mel echoes, yipping as I take a sharp left and she clings to the back of our seats. “You’ve got to be kidding me, Matty. You can go to jail for that! For a long time.”

“I know,” I say, hating to disappoint her.

But this really is the last time. As soon as I’m out of the CIA, undercover missions and spending time with criminals will be a thing of the past. Still, I know I have to give her some reason for all this. Mel knows me better than anyone else on earth and she knows I wouldn’t sign up for trouble unless I was between a rock and a hard place.

“It was stupid to get sucked into Cassie Ann’s business,” I continue, “but after I wrecked Ken’s car on the track last spring, I couldn’t think of another way to pay off the debt without losing my house.” Mel sucks in a breath, but I cut her off. “I couldn’t have asked you or anyone else in the family for a loan. It was a lot of money, Mel, more than any of us have on hand, and you were in the middle of a divorce. So, I tried to fix the problem myself and ended up getting in too deep. But I’m on my way out now, I promise. I just have to convince Cassie Ann’s muscle that I didn’t betray them, take care of a few final items of business, and I’ll be out of their orbit for good.”

Nora makes an uncertain sound beneath her breath. “We might have made that a teensy bit harder for you.”

I catch her worried gaze for a second before shifting my focus back to the road, taking the turn that will eventually lead us onto the highway heading north. “What do you mean?”

“We might have been talking about how we think you’re a spy,” Nora says.

Officer, I silently correct for the zillionth time.

“And the bad guys might have overheard us,” Mel adds.

“They for sure heard us say that we think you’re a liar,” Nora says. “And they seemed pretty ready to believe that you double-crossed them.”

“The phrase ‘dirty rat’ was used,” Mel supplies. “Just like in an old movie.”

I clench my jaw. *Fuck*. “Okay. Fine,” I say, though it’s not fine. Not at all. But I don’t intend to give up on a clean exit until I’ve exhausted every option. “I can still change their minds. They know how it is with sisters and girlfriends. They want to believe the best about the men they love.”

“Oh my God,” Mel says, delight lifting her tone. “Are you two dating? I love that!”

“No, the Sweetwaters just think we’re dating,” I hurry to add.

“Matty thinks he’s bad for me,” Nora supplies, oversharing in a way that I’m coming to realize is very Nora. And a way I’m pretty sure I’d find charming if she weren’t talking about me. “He thinks he’ll break my heart if we date before he leaves town,” she adds, “but I’m trying to change his mind.”

“Good, you should,” Mel says, punching my arm.

“Ow,” I mutter, wincing. My sister is about half my size and has some of the smallest hands I’ve ever seen on a grown woman, but she always could land a punch.

“I know he’s being a huge idiot right now,” Mel continues, “but under normal circumstances, Matty’s the best. That perfect mixture of dependable, protective brother and spontaneous adventure buddy, who knows all the best places to explore.” She rubs my arm, soothing the spot she punched. “And he isn’t bad to look at, either. Though I’m the cute twin. Everyone says so.”

“You’re adorable,” Nora agrees, making my nose wrinkle.

“Don’t encourage her,” I say, guiding the SUV onto the highway.

“Where are we going?” Mel asks. “This isn’t the way to my house or the police station.”

“I think you should get out of town for a while,” I say, hurrying to add, “Just for a couple days, until I’ve sorted this out with the Sweetwaters. I’ll pay for the trip, and you’ll be back before Chase and Ben are home from Ben’s parents’ house on Monday.”

“Absolutely not,” Mel says. “I have shit to do for work, not to mention tons of food to donate to the food pantry.”

“I’ll coordinate the drop-off to the food pantry,” I say. “And you said the wedding you were catering this weekend was cancelled. That leaves you free until Monday.”

“No. Huh-uh.” She shakes her head stubbornly. “I’m not running away. This is my town. And Cassie Ann Sweetwater is a big old softie. She always donates cupcakes to local charity events. We run into each other all the time when I’m grilling for the Girl Scouts or dropping off casseroles for Bingo Night at the Senior Center. She’s not a bad lady. If her goons threaten me, I’ll go over their head, get Cassie Ann to call them off, and have this sorted in no time.”

“Cassie Ann is in Canada,” I say. “She won’t be home until Monday. In the meantime, it looks like Wimpy’s called in Rex, the absolute worst the Sweetwaters have to offer, to get control of the situation here. Until I’m no longer a part of that situation, I would feel much better if you were somewhere else. I’ll pay for the flight. You can head to a beach somewhere for three days and get rested up before the holiday catering madness starts up again.”

“It’s probably a good idea,” Nora says. “Better safe than sorry, and you totally deserve a break. I travel alone a lot. It’s really not so bad.”

“She won’t be alone,” I say, spotting the exit to the airport up ahead and shifting into the right lane. “You’re going with her. I’ll drop you both off at the main terminal. Take a look at

the flights leaving in the next few hours and figure out what you want me to book. I'll park and be in to pay for the tickets."

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that," Nora says, stroking the cat's head. "I have to keep an eye on Clyde. You'll need someone to watch him while you go talk to the bad guys. If they see you've got the missing cat, you're dead meat. I managed to snatch him without them noticing at Mel's, but it was close. Too close. You clearly need backup."

"Yeah," Mel says. "And I hate sunshine. It's the worst. I have enough freckles as it is. I should be in town in case you need extra backup. I'm not up for anything outside the law because I can't parent Chase from prison, but I could lightly poison a few people, if need be. Make it look like an accident. Those guys won't be able to chase you or shoot stun guns if they're busy having really fast poop."

The fact that she's unknowingly suggested a move right out of Cassie Ann's playbook is concerning. The fact that I'm quickly losing control of this situation is even more so.

It's time to pull out the big guns.

Swerving over into the passenger drop-off in front of the main terminal, I shift into park and turn to face my sister. "Please, Mel. Looking after Nora and the cat is going to be hard enough. I don't know if I have the bandwidth to look after you, too."

My sister snorts. "Good thing I don't need looking after, then."

I arch a brow. "This from the woman who regularly calls me at midnight to come help her look under Chase's bed for monsters?"

Mel wrinkles her nose. "Nighttime adulting is scary. I kick ass and take names during the day. Night is more complicated. And I'm just trying to give you ample opportunity to be a part of your precious nephew's life."

"Which I love," I say. "I love him, and I love you and if anything happened to you, I would never forgive myself. My

entire life would go down the toilet. There would be no reason to get up in the morning. The guilt would eat me alive.”

Nora sighs. “If anything happened to my brother because of me, I would feel the same way, and we’re not even twins.”

Mel’s expression softens. “I know. Me, too. But I hate the thought of running away, Matty. And of you spending money you don’t have on me.”

I pull in a breath to assure her I have plenty of cash to pay for the flight, but she cuts me off with a hand in the air.

“The only way I’ll do this is if you let me pay for the flight with credit card points,” she adds. “I have a ton saved up since travelling with an infant or toddler makes my head want to explode. I’ll get the flight, leave town, and come back on Monday, on one condition.”

“Name it,” I say.

“You have this sorted by Monday afternoon or I’m going to the police,” she says, her no-nonsense gaze locked on my face.

“Done.” I’ll either have it sorted by then or Wimpy and Rex will have put me in the hospital with a few broken bones. In the second scenario, hopefully Mel can be convinced to heed my warnings about the Sweetwaters and stay out of this, but that’s a bridge I’ll cross when I come to it.

Mel nods. “And you have to date Nora. Assuming she still wants to date you after all this.”

“No, thank you,” Nora says, scrolling through her phone. “I appreciate the support, but I like to stalk and take down my man prey on my own without outside manipulation. Like a lioness, hunting the savanna.”

Mel laughs and an unexpected grin curves my lips. Nora and I don’t have a future, but I can’t deny that I like the thought of her hunting me like a lioness.

Like it far more than I should...

“There’s a flight to Miami, connecting through Chicago in two hours,” Nora adds, her focus still fixed on her cell. “It

should be nice and toasty down there, even in November, and I've heard the art deco part of the city is fabulous."

"I've never been to Florida," Mel says, collecting her purse from the backseat. "But I've always wanted to visit a place where they eat alligator. I've been dying to see if it really tastes like chicken." She holds her bag up in the air. "You're lucky I grabbed this on my way out of the kitchen. I need you to swing back by the catering office, by the way. Make sure everything is locked up and they didn't steal anything."

"Will do," I say, making a mental note to ask Al to help me out with that.

Fuck. Al. I have to get in touch with him and let him know what's going on—the sooner the better. If he's still waiting for me at the truck stop, he's no doubt starting to wonder what's taking me so long.

"Okay, well..." Mel pauses with her hand on the door handle. "I'll see you guys in a few days, then. Please, be careful. Please, get out of this mess before it gets any worse. And please, fall madly in love and start seriously dating so Matty won't go to South America. Because I'm a selfish jerk who isn't sure she can survive without her brother for an entire year or more while he lives in a van thousands of miles away."

"Love you," I say, instead of what I know she wants to hear.

Being apart *will* be hard—we've never spent more than a week apart since the day we were born—but it's for the best. I need time and distance from Bad Dog. Time to figure out who I am without a job at the CIA, without a clan of loving, but pushy, McGuires surrounding me at all times, and without a community I've been a part of my whole life.

"Love you back," Mel says. "Bye, Nora. Keep an eye on him for me and good luck."

"Bye, Melissa," Nora says, waving as Mel swings out of the car and heads toward the sliding glass doors leading into the terminal. When she's nearly to the row of check-in desks,

Nora turns back to me, “So what’s the plan? Back to the treehouse?”

I shake my head. “I don’t think so. Not with another storm rolling in tomorrow morning. The stream we had to cross to get onto the property has a tendency to flood. We don’t want to end up trapped there.” *Especially not when I have to get this mess cleaned up by Monday afternoon*, I add silently. Aloud, I say, “I need to make a couple of calls. I’ll pull over at the diner by the exit and do that while you order food for the road, okay? I’m not sure where we’re headed, but it will probably be a bit of a ride.”

“Okay. I’ll get Clyde settled in his carrier when we stop, too,” Nora agrees. “His tummy seems to be doing better, and I don’t think I can wrangle a cat and eat waffles at the same time.”

I grunt. “Waffles. Brave choice.”

“What can I say? I’m not afraid of syrup in a moving vehicle.” She hesitates as I start the engine, studying me from the corners of her eyes.

“What?” I ask.

“Thanks for not fighting me,” she says. “About staying. You need me here with you right now. I can feel it in my bones.”

She’s right. I do need her. And I could need her for a lot longer than right now, if I gave myself the chance.

But I won’t.

I care about her way too much for that.

Chapter Eleven



By the time Matty parks at the back of the diner's sparsely occupied lot, Clyde is asleep in my arms. Matty lifts the blanket covering his carrier as I guide the cat gently inside and close the gate.

Once the blanket is back in place, I whisper, "Are you sure you don't want waffles, too? I can teach you my road waffle ways."

His lips curve, but the smile doesn't reach his worried eyes. "No, thanks. A coffee and a bacon, egg, and cheese sandwich are fine." He tries to hand me money, but I wave it away.

"I'll get it," I say, backing toward the brightly lit windows. "Text me if you think of anything else you want. I'm going to hit the bathroom first."

But I don't hit the bathroom.

I head down the hallway toward the bathrooms, but I don't turn right through the door leading to the ladies'. Instead, I keep going, pushing through the back door, and circling around a loudly roaring fan pumping the smells of fried potatoes and bacon into the cool air.

It's raining again, but not nearly as hard as before. When I tiptoe around the side of the building, Matty is still outside the truck, pacing in the tiny gravel with his phone to his ear.

After my initial peek, I flatten myself against the damp vinyl siding, staying out of sight as I strain to hear what's being said. The fan is too loud for me to have a shot at hearing

the person on the other end of the line, but hopefully Matty's side of the conversation will answer a few of my burning questions. I wouldn't normally eavesdrop on a friend, but Matty's strained the bonds of even my easygoing nature.

Easygoing? You're about as easygoing as a hurricane, the inner voice mutters as I inch closer to the edge of the wall.

I ignore it, focusing on Matty's voice as he gives a series of numbers to someone on the other end of the line.

I'm nothing like a hurricane. I'm just a little disaster prone. But when I'm not in the midst of a crisis, I'm a very cool, levelheaded person, a fact I prove by holding in my "Ah-ha! I knew it!" cry of victory when it quickly becomes clear my instincts were right all along.

By the time Matty says, "No, my cover's not blown. I told Nora and my sister that I got in too deep with the Sweetwaters after I had trouble paying off a debt. I can still pull this operation out of the fire, Al, I promise," I'm convinced he's a spier, spier, with his pants on fire.

Then, he adds—"I just need a place for Nora and the cat to hide out until I'm able to smooth things over with Rex and Wimpy. Is the safe house in Sandstone still empty?"—and the last of my doubts are washed away in the increasingly heavy drizzle.

No normal person uses words like "cover" "operation" or "safe house" in conversation. That's spy talk.

Matty's a spy! Just like I *knew* he was! I'm so ridiculously excited about it, it's probably unwise.

Matty being a spy doesn't change things. Not really.

I mean, sure, it makes him about a hundred times sexier—an undercover operative on a mission is way hotter than a bad boy who's actually in deep with the mob—but things between us still end the same way. Matty sorts this out, hopefully without getting outed as a spy or beaten to a bloody pulp by the Sweetwater thugs, and then he's on his way out of town. Potentially to handle super-secret spy stuff in South America for all I know.

There's no future for us, no matter how right it feels to be with him or how easy the conversation flows between us when he's not being vague and secretive.

I should abandon hope of anything more than friendship between us, but a part of me—the same part that isn't afraid to juggle maple syrup and a waffle in a moving vehicle—insists this isn't the time to give up. This is the time to gather my forces, engage in some creative problem-solving, and, at the very least, make sure Matty doesn't ride off into the sunset without a few steamy memories of me to take with him.

I'm not normally such a sex fiend, but Matty has always been able to make my blood fizz with just a look. And now that I know he's a secret agent and defender of the realm?

Well, now, I'll be lucky if I can make it to that safe house before my panties melt clean off.

Tiptoeing back inside, I place our to-go order at the register before dashing into the bathroom to wipe the rain from my hair. When I emerge, Matty's sitting in one of the chairs against the wall where people wait for a booth, scrolling through his phone.

My heart leaps and all the things I want to say to him surge to my lips. But I stuff the words down and pull myself together.

I'm going to come clean about what I heard...eventually. But not yet. If I fess up too soon, he might not take me to the safe house with him, and I'm not about to run that risk. Not only am I keen to spend the night alone with Matty, I'm also dying to see what a safe house looks like. I'm a sheltered woman who lives with her grandmother and has never had so much as a parking ticket (despite my horrid driving skills). This is likely the closest I'm ever going to come to real life intrigue, and I intend to soak up every moment of it.

"Phone calls go okay?" I ask in a voice that's remarkably cool considering how exciting all this is.

Matty looks up, turning his phone face down on his thigh as he says, "Yeah. Though I'm still not sure where we're

headed next. The place I was hoping to stay isn't available."

Doing my best to hide my disappointment—there goes my chance to see a real live safe house—I ask, "Do you want me to look for a hotel or something?"

He shakes his head. "No, I have a couple irons in the fire. We might just have to be—" He's cut off by a chirping sound from his cell. "Sorry, I should check on this. I might need to call someone."

I back toward the counter. "Of course. I'll wait for our food and meet you outside."

"Thanks," he says, standing and starting for the door.

At the counter, I collect sugar packets for the coffee, my thoughts buzzing.

"Big night planned?" the waitress who took my order asks as she unloads the dishwasher, setting squeaky clean glasses in a row on a brown tray.

I smile. "No, not really."

Her pale blue eyes crinkle at the edges. "Are you sure? You remind me of my kids on Christmas morning."

I bite my lip, trying to get my smile under control and failing miserably. "I kind of feel like a kid on Christmas morning."

"Girl, I would too if my boyfriend looked like that," she says with a laugh.

"Oh, he isn't my boyfriend," I say as she turns to collect the to-go boxes the cook just slid into the order-up window.

She turns back to me with a wink. "But he will be. When he first came in, he was super worried until I told him you were in the bathroom. And he's been watching you through the window for the past few minutes."

"Yeah?" I ask, my smile widening. "He's watching right now?"

She nods and slips the boxes into a bag with a rope handle at the top. "Oh yeah. He's got it bad. Mark my words, you

won't be single much longer. I mean unless you want to be.”

“I'm kind of over being single, actually,” I say. “If I never scroll through another dating app again, it'll be too soon.”

“Preach, sister.” She pushes the bag across the counter. “I hate those things. I miss the old days, when we got dressed up and flirted with boys at the local watering hole, as nature intended. If I ever break up with the guy I'm dating now, I'm going to make my girlfriends go out on weekends again. Something's gotta give, you know? The new normal is just too weird to be normal forever.”

She's so right.

The new normal is garbage in so many ways. And I bet Matty's “normal” is pretty crappy, too. It must be hard to meet women or form lasting attachments when he's up to his neck in spy secrets. He clearly isn't allowed to tell anyone about his job. If he were, Melissa would have had more than suspicions about his real line of work. She's the family member he's closest to, and she's totally in the dark.

That must have been so hard for him.

As I leave the waitress a generous tip and collect our food, a wave of empathy floods through me. Poor Matty. He's surrounded by a big, loving family, but he must still have felt so alone. So misunderstood.

It makes me want to throw my arms around him for a big hug.

Instead, I come to stand beside him under the awning outside, lifting the food into the air between us. “My mission was successful. How about yours?”

“It's a mixed bag.” He sighs, his lips pressing tight together for a beat before he adds, “But the good news is we have a place to stay, where no one is going to think to look for us.”

“Okay, that sounds promising,” I say, secretly crossing my fingers that we're headed to a safe house, even if it's not the one he prefers. “And the bad news?”

“The bad news is it’s a couples retreat.” Sliding his hand into his jeans pocket, he pulls out his wallet, fishing beneath the carefully folded bills for a moment before pulling out a gorgeous diamond ring. Meeting my gaze again, he adds, “For married couples in crisis.”

“We’re going to have to pretend to be married?” I ask, so delighted it’s becoming hard to play it cool. “And in crisis?”

“We are,” he says, sounding decidedly less thrilled.

“And you just happen to carry an engagement ring around in your wallet?” I ask, so close to spilling my guts, I have to bite my lip to keep from adding in my driest voice, *That doesn’t seem like a suspiciously spy-type thing to do at all.*

“I was supposed to pawn it for a friend a few days ago and forgot,” he lies. I can tell it’s a lie because his left eye is squinched up a little tighter more than his right eye.

It’s his lying face. I know that about him now.

And come the end of this couples retreat, I’m sure I’ll know even more.

“Isn’t that lucky,” I murmur as I hold out my left hand. “So, what’s our crisis? Do you leave the toilet seat up in the night? Do I have an online shopping problem and an addiction to collecting clown masks?”

He shudders. “Clown masks. That’s awful.”

“Horrible,” I agree. “When I was little, one of my babysitters had clown stuff all over her house. All my worst nightmares still take place in her living room on the sofa full of stuffed clowns.”

He shudders again. “Jesus. No way. That can’t be our problem. It’s too dark. We can brainstorm other options on the way. It’s about an hour to the retreat center.” He takes my hand, making my entire body tingle as he slides the ring onto my finger. “How does it fit?”

“Perfect,” I say, wiggling it back and forth with my thumb. “Snug, but not too snug.” I hold it up to the light streaming

from the diner windows. “And gorgeous. You’re good at picking out jewelry.”

“My friend is good at picking out jewelry,” he corrects.

“Right,” I say, deciding to let this blatant, poorly executed lie stand. For now. “So,” I ask, as we dash through the rain toward the SUV, “what about Clyde? Is this couples retreat pet friendly or are we dropping him somewhere else?”

“It’s pet friendly. But we should pick out a different name for him. I already have our fake names on the reservation.” He opens the passenger’s side door, holding it as I scramble in with the food. “We are Charles and Kitty Sturbridge.”

“Well, well,” I say, chewing that over as he hurries to the driver’s side. “We sound like a fancy couple.”

“Fancy as fuck,” he deadpans, making me grin. What I would once have interpreted as his jerky side, I now understand is just his bone-dry sense of humor.

“Which means we’re going to have to go shopping somewhere on the way,” I say, strapping my seatbelt on before plucking the top to-go box from the bag. “Fancy people don’t show up at a marriage-saving retreat in jeans and t-shirts with nothing but a spare pair of pajamas shoved into a duffel bag.”

“I put some socks and a change of clothes in there, too,” he says, accepting the sandwich box I place on his lap. “But I hear you. We should at least have something nice to wear to the first session tomorrow. Hopefully we can get something at Target before it closes. There’s one just a few miles past the airport exit.”

I clap my hands. “Yay. Target shopping. I love Target. Especially the sale section. You never know what treasure you’re going to find that was just a little too weird for normal people to buy it. Last year I scored a pair of oversized green coveralls with a snazzy collar for ten bucks. Then, I covered it with antique pins and vintage Girl Scout patches. Every time I wear it out, someone asks me where I got it.”

“Sounds cool,” he says. “But we’ll need something more conservative for the retreat, especially the first coaching

session. It's called Accepting your Mutual Marital Trauma."

I wince. "Ouch. Yeah, don't want to look too funky or fabulous for that. Trauma is no fun."

"I doubt this retreat will be, either, but we'll only have to do the first part of the sessions tomorrow. I'll be gone all afternoon." He shifts into drive, shooting me a sober look. "Rex agreed to meet with me to hear my side of the story. If all goes well, we might only have to spend a couple nights pretending to be troubled in love."

"And if all doesn't go well?" I ask.

"It'll be fine," he insists. "I'll get through to him, take you home no later than Saturday afternoon, and have Clyde back to his owner by Sunday morning. Though I will need you to be my alibi if any of the Sweetwaters want to know where I was when their hostage mysteriously found his way home."

"I should be a lot more than your alibi," I say. "I should come with you tomorrow and help smooth things over with Rex."

"No way," he says, without even taking a second to think about it.

"No, seriously." I shift to face him as he starts back toward the highway. "I can do this. I'm not a bad actress, especially when I'm really scared. Fear brings out my inner thespian. I can play the clingy, needy girlfriend who doesn't know when to mind her own business. You can assure them I'm obnoxious and stupid, but harmless, and we all part ways as friends except that we never see each other again and hopefully they all go to jail someday very soon."

"Not a chance," he says, his eyes glued to the road.

"You didn't even seriously think about it," I counter as I flip open my delicious-smelling waffle box. "You should at least think about it. There's no shame in needing help, you know. And it's not like you haven't helped me out of my share of jams. This would just be me returning the favor."

"It's never going to happen," he says calmly. "And if I can't trust you to listen to me and stay put at the retreat while I

head into town, I'll have to tie you up before I go."

I huff. "You wouldn't dare."

"Try me," he shoots back.

"Maybe I will," I say, opening the small container of syrup. "I mean, you threatened to spank me earlier today and that hasn't happened yet, so..."

"The night is still young," he murmurs in a husky voice.

I pour a bit of syrup into a crispy, waffle reservoir and smile. "Promises, promises, Charles Sturbridge."

His lips twitch. "You're incorrigible, Kitty Sturbridge."

"I'm not sure what that means," I purr around a bite of waffle. "But I think I like it."

"It means you can't be reformed," he says. "You're just an irredeemable troublemaker."

My smile grows. "No one's ever called me a troublemaker before. I've always been too boring to get lumped in with the troublemaking crowd."

"You're the furthest thing from boring," he says, making my chest fill with a warm sweetness even more delicious than my waffle treat.

"Thanks." I pour another dollop of syrup onto my next bite. "You can be very charming when you want to be."

He grunts and mutters something about "incorrigible" not really being a compliment that I ignore because I can tell he meant it as one. And I can tell he's not as closed off to the idea of having help with Rex and the Sweetwater people as he's pretending to be.

I just have to figure out a way to coax him around to my way of thinking.

Luckily for both of us, I'm very good at coaxing.

Which gives me a brilliant idea...

"I've got it," I say as I lick the last dab of syrup off my fingers. "I have the perfect couple problem for us. Wait until

you get an earful of this.”

Chapter Twelve



MATTY

Thanks to a swift swing through Target for supplies, we reach the retreat hotel just before ten. I approach the sleepy-looking woman behind the desk while Nora waits with Clyde's carrier in the lobby, the better for her *not* to see the fake ID I'm using to check in.

Though I'm not sure it matters all that much anymore...

Nora clearly suspects that I'm lying to her about a host of things, including the true nature of my relationship with the Sweetwaters, my criminal inclinations, and the reason I just happened to have an engagement ring in my wallet. (I occasionally work on joint surveillance projects with one of two female CIA officers in Minneapolis. Since we're never sure which of them will be available until the last second, we decided it was best if I held on to the fake engagement ring.)

But I can't say I blame Nora for being suspicious.

I'm off my game. I would blame the crazy day, but it's not any crazier than many of the other operations I've been involved in in the past, and I've never gotten this close to giving up and coming clean.

No, it's not the day. It's Nora.

Nora, who makes me feel like it would be safe to let down my guard with her.

Nora, who has a knack for relaxing me even as she drives me crazy.

Nora, who is going to be a fabulous Kitty Sturbridge, a fact she proves by leaning on my arm in the elevator and heaving a put-upon sigh as she takes the retreat literature from my hands. “Did you get a room with two rooms? The way I asked?”

“I did, darling,” I say as the doors slide closed, and I punch the button for the fourth floor. “The better to give my intimacy-challenged wife her space until we get our marriage back on track.”

Nora grins, but quickly slips back into character with another sigh. “Good. I can’t bear it when you touch me, Charles. Please don’t misunderstand me. I love you, I really do, but I don’t love your hands on me. Something’s shifted inside me. I’m not sure I’ll ever want sex again. It’s just so... messy and strange. All the grunting and squirming around naked. Just thinking about it is enough to give me an anxiety attack.”

I snort.

“What was that?” she asks, her blue eyes large in her shocked face. “Are you laughing at my anxiety issues surrounding sex and intimacy, Charles? That doesn’t seem like a very good way to start a retreat or the road to recovery.”

I sober. “You’re right, Kitty. I’m sorry. Of course, I’m not laughing at you. I want to fix things between us and find a path forward. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here.”

She hitches her nose higher as we exit the elevator. She drags our new rolling suitcase while I tote the duffle bag and Clyde’s carrier. “All right,” she says in a cool voice. “But don’t be disappointed if this doesn’t work. The book I was reading said that once the thought of your partner naked makes you actively want to vomit, it’s very hard to come back around to seeing them as sexually viable.” She stops in front of our room, glancing up at me as she pulls the key from her back pocket. “And the thought of you naked makes me want to vomit, Charles.”

“Is that right, Kitty?” I ask, wanting to kiss her more than ever.

“It is,” she says seriously. “And not a small amount of vomit. I’m talking prolonged, violent, food-poisoning-levels of sickness. The kind that makes your entire body convulse like you’re having a seizure.”

“That’s very descriptive,” I observe, pretty sure there’s something deeply wrong with me. Even puke talk is doing nothing to kill the urge to get Nora naked and under me.

She nods and sniffs. “Thank you. I try. I just want to be sure we’re communicating as well as we possibly can about how very, deeply gross you are.”

“All right,” I mutter, resting a hand at the small of her back. “Just open the door already.”

“I will, but you have to stop touching me first,” she says with a convincing, full-body shudder of revulsion. “It’s just too repulsive for words.”

I remove my hand with a sigh and a pointed widening of my eyes.

Her lips twitching again, Nora says, “Thanks, Charles,” and opens the door, cooing in pleasure as she reveals our room. “Oh, it’s so cute! Look, there’s a sitting room and a little kitchen before you get to the bedroom. You could even sleep here on the couch if you wanted. Then we’d be even farther apart.”

As soon as the door snicks shut behind us, I set Clyde’s carrier on the floor, dump the duffle bag beside it, and drag Nora into my arms.

Her breath rushes out as she braces her hands on my chest. “What’s wrong, Charles?”

“No more Charles,” I say. “And no more troubled couple role-playing until tomorrow morning.”

“But we should practice,” she says, batting innocent lashes my way as her body sways closer mine. “We want to be sure we’re convincing.”

“You’re plenty convincing. I promise.”

Her lips turn down in a faux expression of sympathy. “Oh no. Did I hurt your feelings? You don’t really make me want to vomit. At least not very often.”

I tighten my grip on her waist, fighting the urge to swat her ass. But she made it clear, she’d like that, and I can’t afford to do anything she likes. Not if I want to check out of this hotel without taking her on every horizontal surface in our suite.

Even that tiny coffee table is looking pretty good right now...

“You didn’t hurt my feelings,” I say. “Just giving me flashbacks to high school when I was the runt no one wanted to date.”

Her smile fades. “I wanted to date you. I thought you were gorgeous.”

“Yeah, well, you were the exception to the rule. And I had no idea you were interested.”

“Well, I’m very smart,” she says, before adding in a softer voice as her hands skim up my chest to twine around my neck. “And you’re very stupid. How could you have no idea? I practically drooled on the floor every time you walked by.”

I shrug, loving the feel of how perfectly the curve of her back fits in the crook of my arm. “I guess I just assumed you were too good for me. Too beautiful and popular and put together and always smiling. You made high school look easy.”

Her eyes widen. “Are you crazy? I was a stress case who almost failed every science class she took and had to repeat driver’s ed three times. *Three*. No one ever had to repeat it more than once before, and I still didn’t get a good grade. I’m pretty sure Mr. Peltzer passed me through with a C- out of pity. I was a mess. You were the one who was a genius with amazing hair and dreamy blue eyes that I could just tell felt all the pain in the world.” She hesitates a beat before adding in a softer voice, “Just like me. The other boys didn’t feel it. I could tell.”

I blink faster, surprised. “Yeah?”

She nods, her lips so close to mine I can smell the faint hint of maple syrup on her breath, sweet and earthy, just like her. “Yeah. You’re deep water, Matthew McGuire, and I want to dive into you.”

I want to dive into her, too. I have since that afternoon in the park, before I even realized who she was, when she was just a gorgeous stranger humanely, but hysterically, trying to get a squirrel pervert out of her messy bun. There’s just something about Nora. She just...shines.

But she shouldn’t waste her light on me. I’m still not good enough for her. Not at this point in my life. Maybe, someday, when I’ve had time and distance from the CIA, when I’ve finally figured out who I am and what I genuinely have to offer a woman like her, then maybe...

But starting something right now would be cruel. To both of us.

I brush her hair from her face, letting my thumb whisper back and forth across her cheek. “If you’re still single when I get back from South America, I’d love to take you out on a proper date.”

Her brow furrows. “No.”

“No?” I arch a brow.

Her lips curve into a sad smile. “I don’t know. The bossy, one-word-response stuff works for you. I thought I’d see if it works for me. I’d really rather not wait for you for years like a peasant girl waiting to see if her sailor will come home from sea.”

“And you shouldn’t,” I say, my chest tightening. “You should try to find someone wonderful. You deserve someone wonderful. But if the stars happen to align, I just thought... But right now, I can’t...no matter how much I might want to.”

Her lips press together for a beat before she nods. “Okay. I understand. Thank you for being so honest with me.” She takes a step back and the loss of her warm curves against me feels like a tiny death, a thing I’ll mourn when I’m alone on

the sleeper sofa tonight. “I should get Clyde’s litter box set up.”

“I’ll do it,” I say. “You didn’t sign on for dirty cat work.”

“I didn’t sign on for any of this,” she says as she moves toward the duffle bag where we arranged the cat’s supplies. “But I’m very adaptable and great at rolling with the punches. And I have fun while I do it.” She turns to pull out the litter and the plastic pan, adding as she arranges them on the tile close to the door. “Might be a good thing to remember when you’re seeing the world through the lens of someone who likes to have a firm plan for the future. Some of us don’t mind a little chaos. We actually enjoy it.” She stands, tossing her hair over her shoulder as she rolls up the top of the litter bag. “Though maybe not quite this much chaos. The resort billboard I was looking at downstairs mentioned something about required reading. And a test after breakfast tomorrow? Are we going to make fools out of ourselves if we have no idea what they’re talking about? Will there be a participation grade?”

I force a smile, appreciating what she’s trying to do. Giving us an out to move on from the awkward moment when I rejected her, yet again. But hopefully she knows it wasn’t something I wanted to do. And it sure as hell wasn’t easy. “Don’t worry about it. It’s one of those love languages books. I read one a few years ago and remember enough to fake it. It’s all bullshit anyway.”

She looks up from beside Clyde’s carrier, where she’s just removed the blanket and opened the gate. “Why? Because you don’t believe in love?”

“Because there’s no scientific data or research to back any of it up. It’s just something some guy made up.”

“Having cats in the house is something some guy made up, too,” she counters, stroking a cautious-looking Clyde as he checks out his new space. “And look how awesome this is.” She smiles as Clyde belches and pounces on a string sticking up from the carpet. “I think he’s cured me. I’m not scared of animals at all anymore.”

“Or you’re just not scared of Clyde.” I open the suitcase, extracting my clothes and pajamas, and setting them on the coffee table.

“Yes, my sensible friend, that could also be the case, but sounds much less exciting.” She stands and wanders closer. “And my love language is being told I’m good enough and smart enough and prettier than Elle Fanning or Elle Woods. In case you were wondering.”

“All true.” I close the suitcase and set it on the ground beside her.

“You don’t know who either of those people are, do you?”

I flash a guilty smile. “Um, no. But I’m still sure you’re prettier. How could you not be? Look at you.”

Her eyes narrow. “I will accept these words of flattery because I’m a little in my feels over striking out with all my best seduction moves. But next time, you’ll need to do your research.” Before I can reply, she grips the suitcase handle and breezes toward the bedroom. “Let me know if the sofa bed sucks. You can sleep in the bed with me in here. I promise I won’t interfere with you while you’re asleep. I’m very tired and have no interest in any nighttime activities aside from catching up on my beauty rest.”

Clyde belches as if in agreement and pounces on a sock hanging over the edge of the coffee table. When it falls down onto the carpet, he jumps three feet in the air, and zooms across the room to climb the drapes, belching the entire way up.

“Same, Clyde,” I mutter. “Same.”

It’s going to be a long night.

Chapter Thirteen



All my best seduction moves.
What a joke.

I have no seduction moves, at least none that work on Matty. The closest I got to breaking through his walls was when I was pretending to be his hypercritical, grossed-out-by-sex wife.

Which, honestly, tracks. That's how I came up with the idea in the first place. There's just something about being put down by the opposite sex that makes the insecure, but horny, inner sex fiend perk up and take notice. It's how I ended up dating Wendell Windham for a few months right after high school.

Old Wendell wasn't much to look at—he had a horrific name and a habit of chewing with his mouth open—but he was in my fashion-merchandizing class at the community college, so we had similar interests, and he was just so *good* at putting me down. He handed out insults like bespoke mints on my pillow before bed, always with a smile and a wink, so I wasn't sure if he meant the snarky things or not.

I found the uncertainty and the quest to prove I wasn't childish or airheaded oddly captivating. Apparently, a part of Matty finds negative feedback captivating, too.

As I wash my face, change into my pajamas, and tuck myself into bed, I consider doubling down on the tactic tomorrow. I'll have the entire morning with him. If I do a really good job, I might get him so worked up, he'll agree to

letting me tag along on his Sweetwater-soothing mission without making a fuss.

But even as the idea flits through my head, I dismiss it. I don't want to be mean to Matty. And I don't want to keep throwing myself at a man who is determined to hold me at arm's length. I just have to face the fact that this isn't going to happen. Even if it makes my heart shrivel.

I press a hand to my chest under the covers, pretty sure I can feel the shriveling getting worse with every passing second.

But then a soft whump sounds from the end of the bed. I feel the covers sink by my feet and open my eyes to see eyes shining in the darkness.

“Clyde?” I murmur. “Are you okay?”

Clyde answers with a meow-belch that makes me smile as he curls up on top of the comforter beside my hip. My smile widens as I whisper, “Yeah, you can sleep with me. Sweet dreams, buddy.”

Maybe growing old as a single human won't be so bad, after all. Now that I've conquered my fear of cats—or at least of Clyde, who is surely representative of many cats who share his sweet temperament—I can become an eccentric cat lady. I'll live alone with my cats in a tower in the woods and throw radishes out the window at any man who dares step foot on my property.

Why radishes?

It just feels like the right thing to throw at unwanted suitors, and I'm not about to cry about skipping radish in my salad. Radishes are very aggressive on the palate, and that's the last thing you want when you're trying not to think about kissing or other fun, sexy things you can do with your tongue.

I fall asleep, hoping for dreams of my charming, witchy tower.

Instead, I dream of Matty's treehouse.

Specifically, of me naked in Matty's treehouse...

And Matty doing wicked things to me with his tongue between my thighs while he tells me how much he wants to fuck me. I reach for him, pressing his talented mouth tighter to where I ache as I get closer, closer...

So very close...

“Nora!”

I wake with a gasp and a hand pressed to my heart. “I’m awake. I’m awake, Gram, I won’t miss the bus, I promise.” I blink, pulling the man standing in the doorway into focus.

Damn, Matty looks even better with dark scruff shadowing his jaw.

“Hey. Hi,” I mumble, pushing my hair from my face. “Sorry, did I sleep through my alarm?”

“No,” he says, watching me with concern. “You just sounded like you were having a nightmare. There was a lot of moaning.”

Moaning? Oh, God...

“Yeah, nightmare.” I nod so hard it summons a disgruntled meow from Clyde, who moved up to sleep on the pillow next to my head at some point during the night. “Really bad. There were so many...zombies.”

“Zombies?” His brows lift.

“Yeah. And I was a zombie, too, and I couldn’t stop moaning for brains. It was pretty wild.” I sit up, forcing a bright smile. “But I’m awake now. All’s well that ends well. How about you? How did you sleep?”

“Pretty good. I thought Clyde was going to keep me awake fighting with my socks for a while, but then he decided to find a prettier sleeping partner.” He motions toward the entrance to the bathroom. “I was going to jump in the shower. Do you need the bathroom first?”

I shake my head. “No, I’m good, thanks.”

As soon as he steps into the bathroom, and I hear the water start to spray, I turn to Clyde, drawing his drowsy body onto

my lap. “I’m not good,” I whisper as I stroke his rounded belly and his first belch of the morning turns into a purr. “I need a muzzle or something. Or a sound machine.” Making a mental note to ask the front desk if they have white noise machines—the better to sleep tonight without worrying about Matty overhearing my sexy dream sounds—I carry Clyde into the front room and fetch some of the white rice and cat food mixture we brought along from the treehouse from the fridge.

I put it into a small dish, refresh his water, and start a pot of coffee, reading up on the morning retreat activities as I wait for it to brew.

First up, is a breakfast buffet and keynote speaker, featuring a psychiatrist talking about internal family systems that actually sounds kind of cool. Then, the love languages test and discussion are next, before we split into small groups to “accept our mutual marital trauma.”

I’m seriously rethinking our backstory—do I really want to act like I find my husband sexually repulsive in front of a bunch of strangers?—when I get a text.

Glancing down at the counter, I unlock my cell to see a string of messages popping through from my brother, who is never awake before eight a.m. unless it has something to do with hockey.

But he’s not worried about hockey today.

Today, he’s worried about me.

And...Melissa?

Hey. Call me as soon as you get this. I talked to Matty’s sister, and I know everything. You need to get away from that guy.

Now. Two days ago, if possible.

You know better than this, Nora. You’re not a dumb kid with a crush anymore. You’re a grown woman with people who depend on you.

Call me. And turn the damn tracking app back on! Until you’re safe at home, I want to know where you are at all times.

I'm keeping an eye on Melissa, too, no matter how pissed she is about it. But she would have been even more pissed if that douchebag with the ponytail had managed to drag her into his windowless van at the airport last night.

Did you read that? Someone tried to KIDNAP Melissa.

You're in danger, Nora.

Call me. Now.

“Oh no,” I mutter, tugging at my bottom lip. I'm still tugging, trying to figure out the best way to calm my big brother, who's clearly entered protective beast mode, when Matty steps out of the shower in nothing, but a towel wrapped around his hips.

Luckily, I'm too busy fretting to start drooling, but it's close.

Too close.

Just like the near kidnapping of Matty's sister...

“What's wrong?” he asks, reading the distress on my face.

“Put on pants,” I say, starting toward the bathroom. “I'm going to shower. Then, we'll talk.”

Hopefully, ten minutes in the shower will be enough for me to think of a way to calm everyone's fears and get Matty's spy operation back on track.

If not...

Well, I just might have to come clean with what I heard last night behind the diner. And ask Matty to come clean to my brother before Aaron unalives him with a hockey stick...

Chapter Fourteen



MATTY

I dreamt about Melissa last night.

But it wasn't a normal dream. It was one of those eerie, life-like dreams where I can feel her hand in mine, hear her voice echoing through the air...

We were seven or eight, running through the grass by the creek near our grandmother's house, where we liked to play in the summers when we were kids. I was leading the way, urging Mel on when she wanted to jump into the water to cool off.

For some reason, despite the muggy air, I wasn't ready to stop.

I had something I needed to show her up ahead, just around the bend.

Finally, I grabbed her hand, holding on tight as I raced the last dozen feet to a nest between the roots of a gnarled old tree. There, in a pile of browning summer leaves, five creamy white, lightly speckled eggs nestled in a tight circle. Two, already cracked eggs rested a bit outside the main nest, off to one side.

I pointed to them, wanting to tell Melissa about the baby snake I saw crawl out of one of the empty shells earlier, but for some reason my voice wouldn't work. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out, not even when Mel reached for the eggs just as a mama snake slithered around the base of the tree, her fangs bared.

I tried to lunge for my sister, to pull her out of the way, but suddenly my arms and legs weren't working, either. I was frozen in place, forced to watch as the snake launched itself into the air.

Mel cried out, reeling backward as the snake continued to dig its fangs deep into her arm. She screamed, tears rolling down her cheeks as she locked her gaze on mine and croaked, "Why, Matty? Why did you do this to me?"

When Nora tells me what happened with Melissa and her brother at the airport, for a minute, all I can think about is the dream.

Right now, it feels more like a prophecy.

"Why didn't she call me?" I ask, checking my phone for the third time. But no, there's still no missed call or text from my sister from last night. And no response to my request that she call me as soon as possible sent two seconds ago.

Nora shakes her head. "I don't know. Maybe her phone's dead. All she had with her was her purse. If she didn't have a charger, her cell could be dead by now."

I drag a hand through my hair as I rise from the couch, pacing the open stretch of carpet by the door. "Maybe, but she has my number memorized. She could have called me from a landline, once she was near one. And why didn't she get on the plane? Why was she outside the airport anyway? We watched her go in. She should have been safe."

"I don't know, Matty," Nora says, the pity in her voice making me feel even worse.

I don't deserve her pity. I've screwed everything up and put my sister in danger, all because I couldn't admit that my last operation is a disaster, and I'll be leaving the CIA with my tail tucked between my legs instead of in a blaze of glory.

But fuck glory. I just want the people I care about safe.

Right now.

"I have to go find her. Then, we'll go to the police," I say, despair and relief mixing in my chest. I've never been good

with failure, but it will be a relief to have the full power of the agency and law enforcement behind me to help clean up this mess.

“But then your mission is a bust and you’ll be in trouble with the CIA,” Nora says, making me spin back to face her. She’s sipping coffee on the couch like this is any other morning, looking only slightly guilty as she adds, “I snuck around to the back of the diner and eavesdropped on your phone call last night. I know you’re a spy.”

“Officer,” I mumble numbly out of habit. “We’re officers. Not spies. And how? Where were you? I didn’t hear anything.”

She shrugs. “I can be really quiet when I want to be. And the diner’s exhaust fan was loud.”

“If you’d been one of the Sweetwaters, I could be dead,” I say, feeling even worse about myself than I did before.

“But you’re not dead,” she says. “You’re in luck. Because now you have someone to help you make this better before it’s too late, and without getting a black mark on your record that will haunt you when you’re off spying down in South America.”

“I won’t be spying in South America,” I say, deciding I might as well be honest, since the cat is already out of the bag and burping softly on the couch beside Nora.

Poor Clyde. I’m going to talk to his owner about meds when I drop him off. I’ll pay for them myself if need be.

“This is my last job,” I add. “I’m on my way out.”

Nora nods. “All the more reason to leave on a high note. So, this is what I propose...”

She proceeds to lay out a more detailed version of her plan from last night. It isn’t half bad...as long as I don’t mind putting her in the line of fire.

But I do.

I shake my head. “It’s too dangerous. We don’t know when Rex tried to grab Mel. If it was after we texted and called a

truce, then this meeting today is a set up.”

“Which is why you tell him you need to meet him at the ice-skating rink downtown,” she says, with a triumphant grin. “It opens for the season this afternoon. He wouldn’t dare make a move in front of so many people. Or on ice skates. Most people aren’t as good on skates as you are.” I frown, and she adds in a slightly self-conscious voice, “I had a teenaged crush. I noticed that you were really good at lake hockey when you’d play with your brothers.”

“I’ll see if he’s up for that,” I say after a moment, cutting off Nora in the middle of her celebratory “huzzah!” with a stern finger. “But you’re not coming along. You’ll stay here, out of town, in a hotel room under a different name, surrounded by miserable couples who will ask lots of nosy questions if they see you in trouble. Which they won’t. Since you won’t leave the room until I get back.” I shoot off a quick text to Rex and tuck my cell back in my pocket, looking up to find her watching me.

She holds my gaze, steel in her tone. “You need me.”

“I don’t,” I insist.

“Well, you need someone, Lone Ranger,” she says, setting her cup back into the saucer with a sharp *clink*. “This has clearly gotten too big for one spy.”

“Officer,” I correct.

“So, as I see it, you have two choices,” she pushes on, ignoring me. “You either go to your handler, admit you’re in over your head, and get help that way, wrecking your last assignment and all the work you’ve done to take down the Sweetwaters in the process. Or you let me help you try to pull this out of the fire before it’s too late.” She stands, turning her back on me as she heads over to put her cup in the sink. “I suggest you mull it over while we talk about our marital trauma this morning and let me know. Also let me know how much you want to tell Mel and Aaron. I’ve managed to calm Aaron down by texting him that I’m in a very public place and have no intention of leaving it, but I’ll have to tell him something when we talk on the phone this afternoon. I suggest

the truth. He's a vault, and since you're on your way out, anyway, I don't see that being honest with a few people is such a big deal."

I curse, bringing my hand to rub the tops of my eyes.

"Yes, my feeling, as well," she says. "It's a lot. But when things get to be a lot, we just have to take them one thing at a time. First, we do our best as Charles and Kitty, then we'll get lunch and solidify the next stage of the plan."

"Or we could skip the retreat part," I say. "If we stay in the room, who's going to know we're even here?"

"You checked in at the front desk last night. If the organizers ask about no-shows, they'll know we're not one of them," she says, motioning toward the retreat literature on the table beside the door. "And everyone in the hotel is supposed to be participating in at least one session per day or they'll be asked to leave. This is supposed to be a 'safe space for searching.' Remember?"

I heave a sigh. "I do. Just not looking forward to searching for a way to convince my fake wife I'm not a repulsive goblin."

She rests a hand on my arm. "I get it. Don't worry. I've thought of another trauma for us to tackle in small group."

"What's that?" I ask as she gathers her purse and steps into the purple pumps that she bought on sale last night. Against my expectations, they do in fact look amazing with her yellow skirt and rainbow-colored sweater.

"Just let me take point when we start, okay? I won't steer you wrong." She turns, wiggling fingers at Clyde, who's looking sleepy on top of one of the couch cushions. "Bye, sweet kitty friend. You were a great bed buddy last night." She shifts her attention back to me with a grin. "See? Good things are coming out of this, too. I slept with a creature who could poke holes in my face at any second with his deathly sharp claws, and I wasn't scared at all. And you're starting to relax your walls and let people in." She pats my chest. "We just

need to stay focused on staying positive and manifesting more good fortune.”

I grunt. “Christian would flip if he heard you say that. He hates the ‘manifesting’ trend with a white-hot passion.”

“How sad for him,” she says, adjusting the collar of my button-down shirt, making me want to pull her into my arms again. “I don’t hate anything with a white-hot passion. Hate is a toxic emotion.”

“I hate that I’ve made such a mess of all this,” I say softly.

Nora’s expression softens. “You didn’t. At least not all by yourself. I stuck my nose into your private business, remember? And Wimpy acted like an asshole and then invited this Rex guy to the asshole party. None of that’s your fault. It’s just bad luck. But we’re going to make better luck now.”

I arch a brow. “Make better luck. How do we do that?”

“First, we have a good breakfast. Days that start with a complete breakfast are sixty percent less likely to end in despair. I’m pretty sure that’s been proven by science. And then, we move forth into our day, presuming success. The more you expect success, the harder it tries to make its way to you. For real. That’s *actually* been proven by science.” She drops her voice as she mutters, “I’m honestly not sure about the breakfast part, I just really like breakfast.”

I frown, not completely sold, but willing to give her perspective consideration. “I can see that. You’re more likely to find what you’re looking for if you’re keeping an eye out for it.”

“Exactly,” she says, beaming.

“But what happens when the expected good fortune never arrives? What if it’s still puking cats, pushy bad guys, and shitty timing all around?”

She tips her head to one side, considering me. “Well, then you look for the silver lining and try to be grateful for the gifts you’ve received, even if there weren’t exactly what you asked for.”

Gifts like how good it feels to head toward the elevator with her arm looped through mine, pretending she's mine for keeps...

Chapter Fifteen



Maybe it's the pep talk I gave Matty on our way out the door.

Maybe it's the way he looked at me after—like maybe *I* was his silver lining.

Or maybe it's just the fact that I had an excellent night's sleep with an adorable furry friend and feel cute in the fashion-forward Target outfit I pulled together in less than twenty-minutes. That included the time it took to pick out the lemon earrings I've been complimented on no less than five times before we even make it through the buffet line.

Wherever the credit lies, I'm feeling good.

Excited, even.

Matty's going to let me help him, I just know it. I have presumed success. I'll help him soothe the Sweetwater feathers, prove I'm worth taking a chance on, even if he is leaving soon, and start looking for a kitten to adopt as soon as life returns to normal. (The kitten is a must. I can't lie, returning Clyde to his rightful owner is going to hurt. I'll need to fill that hole with something sweet and fluffy, who likes to purr on my lap—STAT.)

I'm even excited about the retreat. The other couples actually seem really nice, so far. And strangely...upbeat.

Leaning over to Matty at our circular table at the edge of the main ballroom, I whisper, "Are you sure we're in the right place? These people look happy to me. I'd never think they were in troubled marriages."

“They’re on their best meeting-new-people behavior right now,” he murmurs behind the rim of his coffee cup. “By this afternoon, everyone will be in tears.”

I frown and poke his ribs with my elbow. “Don’t be so negative.”

“Apologies,” he says. “By this afternoon *half* these people will be in tears. Fifty percent of first marriages end in divorce these days, right? Is that still accurate? And something like seventy or eighty percent of second ones?”

I frown harder and nudge his thigh under the table. “Which means half of them succeed against all odds. Glass half full. Today is a new, better, half full day.”

Thunder rumbles above us, loud enough to fill the large ballroom and rattle the utensils on our table. Matty arches a “see, the fates are on my side, we’re all doomed” brow my way. Before I can counter with a comment about how much I love staying cozy inside on a rainy day, the retreat coordinator takes the stage.

After a brief welcome speech, he introduces the keynote speaker, a soft-spoken woman who’s been a psychiatrist for decades, and who blows my mind a little with her attachment style chart.

“My last two long-term relationships,” I whisper to Matty as she’s wrapping up. “They both had anxious attachment styles. That’s why they were so jealous and controlling and why Shane had a panic attack every time I went to Chicago for business meetings.”

Matty nods. “Same. My only long-term girlfriend threatened to hurt herself if I didn’t start letting her come along on my weekend business trips. Obviously, I couldn’t do that most of the time, so I had to end things.”

My lips turn down. “I’m sorry. That’s hard.”

“It’s okay. It’s the life I chose when I was recruited in high school. I knew there were sacrifices involved.”

“But you were so young,” I say. “You didn’t understand what you were doing. I mean, yes, intellectually maybe, but

not in reality. Your pre-frontal lobe wasn't even fully developed at eighteen."

"Fourteen," he corrects, smiling when I gasp. "That's when I was recruited, anyway, though at first it was all very hush, hush, backdoor stuff. I had to wait to sign the employment paperwork and become an official officer until I was legally an adult."

I frown and huff. "Still doesn't seem kosher to me, or legal, but what do I know? I'm just a miraculously well-adjusted adult with a secure attachment style despite the tumult of my early childhood."

He grins as he murmurs, "You're a unicorn. No doubt about it."

"What about you?" I ask, absurdly pleased to be called a unicorn. "What's your attachment style? Avoidant, I'm guessing? Or is it just me?"

He shrugs, a vulnerable look in his eyes. "I don't know. I've been pretending to be someone I'm not for so long, I'm not sure who I really am. It's something I'm hoping to work on while I'm away. Maybe, if I can get some time—"

He breaks off, pausing to applaud with the rest of the room as the doctor ends her talk and leaves the stage, before turning back to me. "Should we make a break for the bathrooms and skip the love language test? Since you're absolutely good enough and smart enough and prettier than any Hollywood actress ever born, I would prefer not to engage in this bullshit."

I melt a little inside. "You remembered."

"I looked up those people on my phone last night," he adds as he scoots his chair back. "They don't hold a candle to you."

Full goo state unlocked, I scoot my chair back with him, letting him take my hand and lead me out the side door just as the tests are being distributed.

Once outside, we break into a jog, rushing down the hallway and cutting to the left, heading toward the gym and

indoor pool. I meet Matty's gaze to find him grinning and my heart lifts.

This just feels...so right. To be hand in hand with him. And I'm really looking forward to a little stolen time alone together.

But as we near the end of the hall, a man with thinning hair and a dark brown dress shirt steps out of one of the smaller conference rooms. He lifts his hand to us in greeting. "There you are!" he calls out in a Southern twang. "Lisa said she'd be sending a few couples ahead to get started on the small groups early. We don't want anyone to miss out on the one-on-one coaching. I appreciate you skipping part of the programming for the greater good." He grins as he takes in our clasped hands. "And looks like you two are reaping the benefits of our weekend together already. I'm Patrick Marsden, by the way." He extends his hand. "You are?"

"Charles Sturbridge," Matty says, taking Patrick's thicker, furrier hand and giving it a firm pump before motioning my way. "And this is Kitty."

"His wife," I say, with a goofy grin, because dammit...it's fun to say. It's fun to be someone's forever, even if it's just pretend.

I take Patrick's hand, which is warm and dry and clings to mine far longer than it did to Matty's.

His smile is also much warmer as he says, "So nice to meet you, Kitty," and nods toward the room behind him. "Shall we? We can get started with just the two of you, and if another couple joins us, we'll pause wherever we are and fill them in on the protocol. Just remember, you have nothing to be embarrassed about here, not with me or with the other attendees. We're all here to grow and learn and share." His grin widens, showcasing thick white teeth as he continues to clutch my hand. "And save marriages. That's the point, right?"

"It sure is, Patrick," Matty says, clapping the other man on the back as he inserts himself between us, severing the now oddly prolonged hand clasp. "Can't wait to get started." He

casts a wide-eyed look at me over his shoulder and mouths, “Handsy much?” making me fight a laugh.

Instantly, I decide I can’t go with the alternative “trauma,” I landed on this morning, not after what Matty shared with me at the breakfast table. It might hit too close to home to pretend he needs to “find himself” and I’m tired of waiting for him to be found.

I’ll just have to fall back on our original plan, but with one very important shift in execution.

A shift that I, for one, think could be fun...

Chapter Sixteen



MATTY

As soon as we step through the door and I get a good look at the “Trauma Pit Stop Stations” marked by cardboard signs taped to the walls around the conference room, I break out in hives.

I have no urge to explore “Childhood Trouble” or “Teen Traumas and Trials” with anyone, but especially not with Patrick. I don’t want to explore anything with Patrick except my jujitsu skills on his grabby hands the next time he drools all over Nora.

I get it—she’s a fucking knockout—but she’s also my wife, at least as far as old Patty knows. And he’s supposed to be helping us mend things, not hitting on vulnerable women who are looking for support saving their marriages.

He’s on my shit list already, and then he suggests Nora take his hand and lead him toward the “trauma pit stop” that speaks most powerfully to her, and I access a level of loathing I’ve rarely felt toward a near stranger.

“You know what, Patrick?” she says, pressing closer to my side. “I think we can skip right ahead to the finish line. I had a breakthrough last night; one I can’t wait to share with the man I love.”

Patrick’s dark, bushy brows hitch higher on his forehead. “Well, that’s great, but that’s not the way this works. You can’t go straight to jumping out of the airplane. You’ve got to learn how to put your parachute on and pull the cord first.” He nods toward me. “You might be surprised how much you don’t

know about each other. For example, do you know what Kitty's childhood was really like, buddy? The real deal? Not the pretty picture your in-laws paint for the outside world?"

"I don't know my in-laws," I shoot back, hating him for going straight for Nora's jugular, like he has some sixth sense that she had a rough time as a kid. "They aren't in Nora's life anymore."

Nora nods. "That's right. I don't have a relationship with my parents."

Patrick's broad forehead furrows and his wide, stupid mouth turns down at the edges. "Oh no. I'm so sorry to hear that. Sounds like we need a pit stop in childhood trouble."

Nora shakes her head, her smile wide and confident. "No, we don't. I dealt with all of that stuff a long time ago. I had tons of therapy as a kid and teenager. My grandmother was insistent." She loops her arm through mine, hugging my bicep. "And Charles knows all about it. We're actually wonderful communicators, at least when it comes to verbal communication. Like I said, I think we can go straight to the finish line." She gives a little shrug before adding, "Or straight to Sexual Trauma and Dysfunction. That's where we've been having trouble."

To say Patrick's eyes light up is an understatement. He starts to glow from the inside like a demented jack-o'-lantern. I think he even starts to drool a little, though he swipes his hand across his mouth before I can be sure.

Once he's done mopping up the saliva inspired by the thought of "Kitty's" sexual trauma—I want to punch the man more with every passing second—he claps his big hands together. "Sounds great. Let's put you in the pit stop, Kitty. Old Charles here can standby, ready to come in if you tag him for a refuel."

He starts toward the pit stop marked by a giant pink circle, tossing over his shoulder, "But unless Kitty tags you in, I'm going to ask you to keep your thoughts to yourself, Charles. We want Kitty to feel safe sharing for as long as she needs to share."

“Oh, I don’t think it will take that long.” Nora steps into the chalk circle drawn on the carpet—also in pink—beneath the sign. “I know exactly what I need to share.”

“That’s great, but don’t be afraid to keep going if new things come up,” Patrick says, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, like a wrestling coach cheering on an athlete from the sidelines. “And don’t be afraid to get as dark or raw as you need to feel heard. I’m comfortable with graphic content, no need to keep it PG-13 around here. I’ve been married for twelve years, and I’ve been a trauma coach for the company for almost half of that.” He nods, his eyes still gleaming with perverse anticipation. “There’s not much I haven’t heard when it comes to sexual trauma and dysfunction, and I’ve got tissues ready to go.”

Nora’s upper lip curls the slightest bit, making me think she’s as repulsed by this trauma vulture as I am, but she only lets her real feelings show for a moment before she’s smiling again. “Okay, great. So...should I just tell Charles what I want to say?”

Patrick claps his hands again, making my jaw clench. “That’s right, Kitty Cat. Speak your truth and don’t hold back. We don’t worry about hurt feelings here. Feelings can be mended, but only if the truth is out and there are no secrets festering in the marriage.”

“Got it.” Nora turns to face me, taking a deep breath. “Charles, first up, I want to apologize for all the hurtful things I’ve said the past few months. About not finding you attractive anymore and wanting you to keep as many clothes on as possible when we’re having sex.”

Fuck. So, she decided to go with Plan A. It’s fine—we agreed on this course of action last night—but I was looking forward to discussing something else.

Anything else.

Especially now that I’ve met Patrick and his oh-so-punchable face.

But she's already started down this road and there's no turning back now. I brace myself for the worst and vow to play along to the best of my ability. Nora's had zero undercover training, and she's doing great. I can't let her—or the agency that trained me to roll with conversational punches, improv style—down now.

“That was unkind,” she continues, “and I'm sorry.”

“Remember, you don't have to apologize,” Patrick murmurs in a husky voice that threatens to activate my gag reflex. “This is your truth. You don't have to apologize for the truth, not in this room.”

“But I *want* to apologize,” she says, keeping her gaze locked on mine. “Because...it wasn't true. Not any of it.”

My brows lift. “It wasn't?”

“Quiet, Charles,” Patrick pipes up. “Until you're invited into the pit stop to help Kitty refuel.”

“He's invited,” Nora says, pulling me into the chalk circle mere seconds before I lose my cool and tell Patrick to back the fuck off. “You're always invited into my pit stop.” She takes both my hands in hers with a shy smile. “To my pit stop and my bed. Even if you decide you truly never want to have children.”

My brows hitch up another half inch. “Children. That's what this was about?”

She nods, her focus dropping to our joined hands. “When you said you weren't sure you wanted to have children it just...got to me. It hurt. So much. I've always just assumed I'd have kids someday. Imagining a future without them was so painful.” She sighs before lifting sad eyes to mine. “I guess a part of me wanted to punish you for that by making you hurt, too. But that was wrong, and I'm sorry.”

“No, *I'm* sorry,” I say. “I mean, I knew you weren't happy about it, but I thought we agreed that as long as we have each other, we have everything we really need.”

She nods. “I know. And I still believe that. Watching you with Fluffy Butt last night—” She shifts her gaze to Patrick.

“Fluffy Butt is our new cat. He’s having separation anxiety, so we decided to bring him on the trip.” Before Patrick can reply, or I can fully fight off my amusement at her choice of names, she turns back to me.

“So yeah, watching you with him,” she continues, “how gentle and patient you were, even when he got sick, and it smelled terrible...” Her lips curve. “It made me realize we can be a family without having children. We can love Fluffy Butt and each other and maybe a dog someday if the condo association ever decides to allow dogs. And...it can be enough. More than enough.” She steps closer, tipping her head back to hold my gaze. “As soon as I realized that, all the sex weirdness went out the window, and I wanted to make out with you more than ever.”

I squeeze her hands as I tip my head closer to hers. “You should have.”

“You were asleep,” she says with a flirty bat of her lashes.

“You should have woken me up,” I say, my voice husky. “Always wake me up.”

“You needed your rest. And I didn’t want you to feel like you wasted your money on this weekend.”

“No money invested in yourself or each other is ever a waste,” Patrick says.

“Hush, Patrick,” Nora says, making me grin. “I need to tell my husband that I love him and think he’s the sexiest man alive and that I’m never going to pass up a chance to get naked with him ever again.”

“And I’m going to kiss my wife and promise to keep an open mind about having kids in the future,” I say, drawing Nora against me. “Because with a mom like you, I know they’d turn out great.”

“And until then we can always practice making babies,” she says, twining her arms around my neck. “Practice makes perfect.”

“You’re already perfect,” I say, meaning it. She’s so sweet and funny and confident and sexy as hell and suddenly I don’t

understand why I've been fighting this.

Her. Me. We just...fit.

As I cover her lips with mine, kissing her with everything in me, it's as natural as if I'd done it a thousand times.

My tongue sweeps against hers, tasting Earl Grey tea and honey and a hint of the vanilla scone she had for breakfast and...Nora. It's the Nora part of it that I know I'll crave for the rest of my life. She's as familiar as my own face in the mirror and as mysterious as the darkest depths of the ocean and I don't ever want to come up for air. The feel of her in my arms, her body soft and eager against mine, her lips saying a hundred unspoken things I haven't realized I've been dying to hear...

She's magic. And she feels the same way about me, a fact she proves when she finally pulls back with a soft, "Wow."

I exhale. "Double wow."

"You really do it for me, Charles," she whispers, her eyes dancing into mine, desire, wonder, and unspoken questions mixing in their blue depths.

"And you two both do it for me," Patrick says, throwing ice water on the moment. "I'm not a fan of romantic movies, but you could give any one of those couples a run for their money. You're both just so damned good-looking. And that was some wonderful communication."

"Aw, thank you, Patrick," Nora says. "We try. So, do you think we're ready for the finish line? I'd love to get our participation medals and get back to the coffee station before they run out of hot water for tea."

"I can make that happen," Patrick says, looking a little sad. "I wish all my sessions were this successful. There's a lot of pain out there in the world, guys. A lot of heartbreak. You're lucky to have each other."

Nora leans against my side, resting her head on my shoulder as I wrap my arm around her waist and hug her close. "We really are. I couldn't ask for a better partner."

“Me, either,” I second, meaning it.

Five minutes later, once we’ve received our medals and posed for a cheesy picture under the sparkly “Finish Line for Love” banner and are on our way back to our room, I tell Nora, “Okay. You can come with me to meet with Rex.”

She squeals and jumps into the air, making the elevator shake.

“But you stay out of his sight until you get my signal that it’s safe to come over,” I add firmly. “And you never step away from the crowd. You’ll be safe there. Bad Dog folks have their faults, but they’re not going to let you be dragged into an unmarked van.”

Nora claps her hands beneath her mile-wide grin. “We’re going to be spy partners! I can’t wait.” I pull in a breath to correct her, but she reaches out, touching her fingers to my lips. “I know, I’m not really a spy or your partner, but let me pretend. It’s fun to pretend.” Her smile fades as our eyes meet. “I liked pretending you were mine.”

And that’s it, the straw that broke the camel’s vow of chastity.

I reach for her, pulling her against me and kissing her with all the pent-up longing she’s inspired since the day she swept back into my life and set about ruining all my carefully laid plans.

Fuck the plans.

I’d rather head off into the wilderness with Nora than stay on any well-marked path, no matter where it leads.

From now on, whether it’s smart or safe or what’s best for either one of us, I have a feeling all my paths are going to lead to one place—her.

Chapter Seventeen



The elevator door dings, but we only come up for air long enough to make sure there's no one in the hallway before crashing together again. Matty grabs my ass, hauling me against his erection as we kiss our way toward our room. He half carries me while I cling to his shoulders, and it is the sexiest kiss of my life.

Then we're in the room and tripping over Clyde, who wants more water and to belchingly tell us about his day, thus far, interrupting our momentum.

But once the cat has water and a catnip ball Matty pulls out of the shopping bag from last night, we pick up right where we left off.

We won't tolerate being interrupted this time.

We're on a mission to bang each other's brains out and neither of us is the kind to give up without a fight.

"I want you in the worst way," I breathe as he kisses me hard against the wall, his mouth hot on my neck. "If we don't have wild, sweaty sex right now, I'm going to cry. For a really, really long time."

"I'd never make you cry," he says, making my blood fill with fizzy bubbles. "I don't know about the sweat, though. It's chilly in here."

"Then let me warm you up." I kiss him harder as I rake my nails down his back. I pull his shirt from his pants and dive my hands down the back of his waistband, squeezing his muscled

backside through his boxer briefs. “I’ve been wanting to do that for a long time. You have the best ass.”

“Lies,” he says, gripping my bottom in both hands and hauling me up into the air. “You have the best ass.”

I wrap my legs around him, kissing him as he heads toward the bedroom. “It’s a large ass. Much larger than yours.”

“That’s one of the things I love about it,” he says, setting me on my feet by the bed only to spin me around the second my toes touch the floor.

He tosses me onto the mattress on my stomach and covers me with his body, massaging my ass with his big hands as he knees my legs apart. “I love how round and thick it is, how it sways when you walk and strains the seams of your jeans.” His hand slides between my legs from behind, making me moan as he rubs my clit through the thick denim. “I’ve thought about being inside you this way at least two hundred thousand times.”

I suck in a breath, arching back against his hard cock. “This is it. This is where your bossy side really shines.”

There’s a smile in his voice as he whispers in my hair, “Yeah? You like it when a man tells you what to do in bed?”

“No,” I say. “I like it when *you* tell me what to do in bed. So, tell me something bossy, Matty. Tell me you want to rip my panties off and take me like an animal.”

He groans softly as his hands move to grab my wrists, pinning them to the mattress as he presses his hips harder into my ass. “I want that so much, but I want to roll you over and watch your face while I eat your pussy more.”

So much blood rushes to my head, I nearly pass out. “Yes. Please. That.”

A moment later, Matty has flipped me onto my back and slid me up to the top of the bed with one strong hand. My breath rushes out in a coo of approval. “Very manly display of strength.”

“I’m going to show you a manly display,” he rumbles in a rough voice that makes me feel sexier than I’ve ever felt before.

But no other man has ever wanted me the way Matty wants me. I can feel his hunger, his need in the way his hands tremble ever so slightly as he makes quick work of my clothes, tossing my sweater and bra to the ground before ripping my jeans and panties down my legs.

He strips his shirt off, too, treating me to a delicious view of powerful pecs and chiseled abdominal muscles before he’s on top of me again, kissing me as he cups my breasts in his hands.

“You look really good half naked,” I say, blood pumping faster as he rolls my already tight nipples between his fingers. “But I think you’d look even better *all* naked.”

“If I’m all naked, I’m going to be inside you in ten seconds,” he says. “And you deserve way more than ten seconds of foreplay.” His hand smooths down my stomach to dip between my legs. I suck in a breath as his fingers tease at my entrance and around my clit. “And I need to know what you taste like. I’ve been dreaming about it for months.”

Before my lust-muddled brain can form words, he’s kissing his way down my throat and gripping my left breast tight in one big hand as he flicks his tongue back and forth across the tip. I squirm beneath him, clinging to his shoulders, digging my nails into his back, begging for mercy as he continues to divide his attentions between my sensitized breasts, licking and sucking and biting until I’m writhing.

“Dying,” I pant. “I think I’m dying.”

Matty murmurs something I can’t make out before kissing a searing path down my stomach and between my legs. I spread my knees to make room for his broad shoulders and he grips my ass in both hands, lifting my hips off the mattress a few inches.

This is usually when I would start to feel self-conscious—the first time a man sees every intimate inch of you is always a

little nerve-wracking—but I’m too desperate for him to touch me to care. I reach down, threading my fingers into his hair and pulling him against me.

He moans his approval and digs his fingers deeper into my ass as his tongue strokes over my clit. It rolls delightfully there for a few seconds, making my head fill with a whooshing, windy sound, before dipping down to circle my entrance.

“Fuck, Nora,” he murmurs as he kisses and licks, teases, and drives his stiff tongue deep inside me. “I want to eat your pussy every day for the rest of my life.”

“Yes,” I pant, arching closer to his mouth, loving what he said for so many reasons. The pussy part, obviously, because he’s a genius at oral sex, but also the “rest of his life” part.

He might not be ready to admit it outside the bedroom, but when we’re naked, Matty can’t deny that he wants what I want. He wants to see where this goes, to see if this is really that shot at forever we’ve both been waiting for.

I come with shameless, happy sex noises I’ve never heard come out of my mouth before, noises that make Matty happy, too, if the endless stream of encouragement pouring from his lips is any indication. He tells me how beautiful I am when I come, how perfect, how fucking amazing I taste, and how he can’t wait to be inside me.

Because I can’t wait for that, either, I flap a tingling arm on the mattress. “Condom. Do we have? We need.”

“Be back so fast,” he says, bolting off the bed toward the bathroom. He returns before I can push up onto my elbows, rolling the condom on as he walks.

“Beautiful,” I announce, my gaze fixed on his thick, long, utterly gorgeous cock.

“You’re beautiful,” he says, lengthening himself on top of me. “So damned beautiful, Nora.”

I wrap my legs around his waist, sighing as he sinks inside me. It’s been a while for me, but there’s no pain, no resistance. I’m so wet and ready, he glides to the end of me like we were

made to fit perfectly together. We both sigh in a mixture of relief and joy and begin to move.

From the first shift of our hips, it's so natural. So shameless, so real. I wrap my arms around his warm body, digging the heel of my hand into the base of his spine, urging him wordlessly to get even closer. And he does, and just that small adjustment sets the whirlwind inside to spinning faster, tighter. I come again, feeling like pool balls in the middle of a perfect break, pleasure rolling and rattling through my every cell as Matty's cock begins to jerk inside me.

Afterwards, he lies heavily on top of me, catching his breath as I smile at the ceiling like a woman who's just seen her first Monty Python skit. "We're so good at that," I finally whisper.

He laughs softly and pulls back, gazing down at me. "We really are."

"We should do it again," I say, my grin widening. "Just to make sure it wasn't a first-time fluke."

His cell bleats from near the end of the bed and his forehead wrinkles. "I'd love nothing more, but sadly, we have to meet Rex in two hours and we're a good ninety minutes from home. That's probably him now. He likes to confirm meetings. He's a weirdly normal businessman in that one, particular way."

My lips push into a pout. "We have to leave in thirty minutes?"

"Twenty, to be safe," he says, making me groan, then groan again as he pulls out and rolls off the bed. "But you don't have to go. I can go alone."

I sit up, raising my voice as he pads into the bathroom to dispose of the condom. "No, you're not. I'm coming with you. But I hate crime even more than I used to. If these jerks weren't so busy crime-ing all over the place, we could have a nice relaxing afternoon of sex and napping and then more sex and room service."

Matty pops his head back into the doorway to the bathroom, an unexpected light in his eyes. “He canceled.” He holds up his cell. “The road leading out of his place is flooded and he can’t get out. We’re going to have to postpone until tomorrow. Maybe even Sunday, if the rain doesn’t stop.”

I frown, worry creeping in to taint my sex glow. “Wow, that sounds bad. Do you think our people are all okay?”

“I’ll turn on the weather, see what I can find out.” He reaches for the remote on the bureau as I snag his shirt and slide my arms through the Matty-scented fabric.

“I should call Gram,” I say, grabbing the fluffy knee socks I bought at the store last night and pulling them on to warm my suddenly chilly toes. “Make sure she and Aaron are okay.”

As if summoned by my thoughts of him, my phone begins to blare Aaron’s ringtone from my purse, which I apparently discarded in the hallway.

I hurry over, grabbing my cell and tapping the green button.

Before I can say “hello, how are you?” my brother is demanding, “Where are you? No more bullshit, the weather is getting scary, Nora, and I’m coming to get you. Now.”

Chapter Eighteen



MATTY

Nora paces in front of the wide window beside the bed, doing her best to smooth Aaron's feathers, while I divide my attention between the muted television coverage of the flood, currently doing its best to wash parts of Bad Dog off the map, and Nora.

But mostly Nora.

She's always beautiful, but in nothing but my button-down shirt with the top few buttons loose and a pair of giant fluffy socks, she's reached a level of sexiness, I'm not sure I'm prepared to handle. At least not until I've run down to the hotel shop for more condoms.

Fate stepped in to hand me a long, uninterrupted afternoon with this incredible woman, and I mean to make the most of it.

"Yes, I think that's fine," Nora says, rolling her eyes my way as she turns to pace the other direction. "The Sweetwaters can't leave their compound because Harmony Creek Road is already under water. And we know they're telling the truth because Matty called Starling. She confirmed that they evacuated all the animals from the Furry Friends shelter this morning because they have to cross Harmony Creek Road to get in and out of there, too. She said the waters were rising so fast, they didn't know how many days they'd be left without access to the facility and didn't want the animals to be left without someone to care for them. So, no one is going to be coming after Melissa or anyone else tonight and besides, Rex already apologized for that and swore it happened before he and Matty made a date to talk things through."

Aaron's voice gets louder on the other end of the line, loud enough for me to hear, "...and I don't like this," without having to strain.

Nora winces and pulls the phone away from her ear before adding, "I know you don't like it. I don't love it, either. But isn't this much better than when you thought Matty was a hooligan?"

"Criminal, not hooligan," Aaron booms, making Nora wince again.

"Okay, fine," she says. "I hear your concerns. Boy, do I hear them. I also appreciate them, and I don't intend to take any unnecessary chances. But I'm committed to helping Matty save this mission before it's too late, and no amount of yelling from you is going to change that."

Aaron mumbles something I can't make out, but that causes Nora's expression to soften. "I know you're just worried. I worry about you, too. All the time. But we're both adults now with good heads on our shoulders. We can handle problems on our own sometimes. Not like when we were kids, and the only safety was in numbers." She hums sympathetically. "I know you mean well. You always do." She cuts a look my way, her lips twitching. "Yes, I'm sure she'll realize that, too. She won't hate you forever. Probably just for a year or two and you're almost always on the road, so it should be easy to avoid further injury. Just...stay out of her face. And the squirrel's face."

I frown and she holds up a finger, indicating she'll tell me more in a second.

Aaron mutters for several moments while Nora fights to keep from laughing.

She nods, taking a deep breath. "Yes, I know exactly how stressful an unwanted rodent interaction can be. I was humped by a squirrel, too, remember?" Her eyes widen. "Dude, what if it was the *same* squirrel? The park where I was humped isn't that far from Melissa's house. It could be the same horny squirrel! Who just happens to be inexorably drawn to people with Boudreaux blood flowing through their veins. Do you

think our family might have mated with squirrels at some point way back in the family line? Are *we* part squirrel? Is that why I'm afraid of dogs and cats and all larger animals, because my squirrel instincts are warning me that I'm a prey animal and need to be on guard against potential predators?"

Her brother starts yelling again, but I can't hear a word he's saying. Nora's laughing too hard. And so am I.

Damn, she makes me laugh.

Finally, she shouts, "Oh my God, of course, I'm kidding, you weirdo. Go start a pot roast for Gram for dinner tonight. The meat in the fridge needs to be used before it goes bad." She sighs and rolls her eyes again. "Of course, you can do it. Just follow the recipe. Cooking isn't that hard, I promise. You do way more complicated things. You skate and fight people with sticks at the same time. I'll call you when I have news. Until then, sit tight and don't stress. Matty has sworn to defend me with his life, and I can tell he means it."

"I do," I call out, earning a stricken look from Nora that I don't understand until Aaron starts talking a mile a minute.

"Well, now you've done it," Nora whispers with a shake of her head. "Here," she adds, holding out the phone. "Now he's insisting on 'talking' to you, AKA threatening you within an inch of your life."

"It's okay, I can handle it," I say, smiling as I take her cell and bring it my ear. "Hi, Aaron."

"Hey," he growls. "You'd better do more than watch out for her, Matty. You'd better throw yourself in front of a bullet for her."

"I will," I promise. "But I seriously doubt it will come to that. I'm going to do everything in my power to ensure Nora is safe. And thanks for taking care of Mel last night. I appreciate it."

"Is that what she said?" he asks, a strange note I can't quite read creeping into his tone. "That I took care of her?"

"Um, no, I actually haven't spoken to her yet," I say, glancing back at the television. "I'm starting to wonder if the

cell tower near her place is down. She's not far from Harmony Creek and I know the road there is already washed out."

Aaron curses softly. "I knew I should have made her come with me to Gram's this morning. But she was determined to kick me out and go it alone."

I frown. "You stayed at her place last night?"

"I did," he says, a little defensively. "If your friends came after her again, I didn't want her to be alone. Even if she was determined to take on the entire world like some kind of one-woman army with nothing in her house but a weird, handheld blender for protection."

"She's stubborn," I say, still frowning. "But she was fine when you left, right? No one came sniffing around last night and she was feeling okay about things this morning?"

"She was feeling great," he mutters. "She seemed to really enjoy seeing me get sexually assaulted by that squirrel on the way to my rental truck." He breaks off with a considering sound. "The truck is pretty high off the ground. If she needs someone to come get her before she's trapped, I can go. I don't mind."

"Thanks," I say, my every instinct insisting there's a lot more to this than Aaron is letting on.

But I also don't know Aaron well. Thankfully, however, I have eerie twin-mind-reading-powers with my sister. Even over the phone.

All I have to do is get her on the line, and I'll have answers to all my burning questions about what went down with her and Nora's brother last night.

"I'll let her know you offered if I talk to her," I continue. "But I'm guessing she'll want to stay put. Her house is above any flood danger, she has two freezers' full of food, and I installed a generator for her last winter so she and Chase wouldn't get in trouble if the power went out. She should be fine. And Nora will fine, too. I promise."

Aaron grunts in response. "You can't promise me that. Not any more than I can promise you Melissa is okay out there at

her place all alone. She seemed sad, Matt. About her kid. And her ex. And...stuff.”

My stomach sinks and the familiar guilt sets in. I’m there for Melissa a lot, but not nearly as much as I would like to be. And when I leave, I won’t be there at all, not for things like checking the bed for monsters and setting up generators and assuring her that her latest recipe is fantastic. Phone and video chats will help us stay up-to-date on each other’s news, but it won’t be the same.

There’s no Nora in South America, either. No Nora smile or Nora laugh or Nora kiss or her incomparable, unicorn pussy...

Shaking away thoughts of Nora’s pussy—not a kosher thing to be thinking about while on the phone with her big brother—I say, “I know. It’s been a hard time. I’ll call her now. I’ll let her know I’m thinking about her and promise to check on her as soon as all this mess is sorted.”

“And tell her you’re a spy,” Aaron says.

“Officer,” I sigh through gritted teeth, pretty sure I should give up on trying to adjust the layman’s vision of the CIA.

“Whatever. Just tell her. ASAP.” Aaron makes a disgruntled noise. “It feels wrong that I know before she does. She should know. It will make her feel better. Her marriage might have gone to hell, her ex might be in love with someone else, and her kid is away for the holiday, but at least her brother isn’t a piece of shit criminal in too deep with the mob.”

I promise I will and end the call, flinching as Nora lets out a long, tortured groan. I spin in time to see her collapse onto the bed with her forearm to her forehead, Victorian-lady-having-a-fainting-spell style.

“Thank you,” she says, throwing her other arm across the mussed bedspread. “Thank you for not asking him if he wanted to talk to me again. I’m talked out.” She shifts her arm up to her forehead, peering at me beneath it with a wicked grin. “I need to do things that don’t involve any talking unless it’s dirty talk. You should give me that spanking you’ve been

threatening since this all started, and tell me what a filthy little girl I am.”

I shake my head, fighting to think straight as most of the blood in my body surges directly to my cock. “As amazing as that sounds, I have to call my sister first.” I toss her cell on the bed and pull mine out of my back pocket. “And I’m going to need a compelling *reason* to call you a filthy little girl.”

She pulls her arm all the way above her head, her big blue eyes alight with curiosity. “A compelling reason like what?”

Fighting a grin, I murmur, “You’re going to have to do something filthy.” Then, I press Melissa’s contact number to keep myself from tackling Nora right now and whispering a few filthy suggestions into her ear.

Nora mouths, “You’re bad,” and points a warning finger at me before rolling off the bed and heading to the door, where a persistent mixture of mewling and belching makes it clear, Clyde is tired of being outside our closed bedroom.

Mel answers on the second ring this time, easing my twin separation anxiety until she says, “I’m going to kill you.”

I walk toward the window, gazing out at the pouring rain. “Please, don’t. I’m so sorry, Mel. I never meant to put you in harm’s way. I swear. And I’ll never do it again.”

“Oh no, not about that,” she says with a disgusted snort. “That Rex guy is a huge wimp. I kicked his shin, and I swear he almost started crying. I was about ten seconds away from being free on my own when Aaron Boudreaux had to go and stick his big meathead nose into my business. And I hate Aaron Boudreaux, even if he does have one of the most nuanced palates I’ve encountered in a while.”

“Yeah?” My brows lift. “You cooked for him?”

“Only because he wouldn’t leave, and I needed an opinion on my smoked duck tortilla appetizer,” she says. “I’ll cook for anyone. You know that.”

I also know that she’s very fussy about who she allows to try her new recipes, but I know better than to bring that up

when she sounds this cranky. “Well, from what I heard, he was just trying to keep you safe.”

“I don’t need a man to keep me safe!” she insists. “And if I did, Jerky Jock Head Aaron Butt-Row isn’t the person I’d pick. He made fun of me all the time in high school. He’s the one who started calling me Butter Phalanges.”

“Oh, yeah,” I say, dimly remembering my sister being pissed off for most of her freshman year at some jock who made fun of her for having two left feet and a handful of thumbs. Mel is still kind of a hot mess when she’s not in the kitchen. She’s just accident prone, always has been. “That was Aaron?”

“Yes,” she hisses. “And I hate him even more now than I did then.”

“Why?” I trust the tingle in my CIA-trained tail as I add in softer voice, “Because you tapped that Jerky Jock Ass?”

“He told you!” she screeches.

“Hush, let me take this to another room,” I say, fighting a laugh as I excuse myself to the bathroom, leaving Nora rubbing Clyde’s belly on the bed. Once I shut the door behind me, I add, “No, he didn’t. I guessed. He sounded really worried about you. The sex must have been great.”

“Gag. You know I don’t talk about sex with you. We shared a uterus. It would be too weird.”

“So, it *was* good, huh?” I continue to prod. “Why did you kick him out?”

“Because I hate him.” She sighs, then mumbles, “And I hate myself for being a weak, lonely, sex-starved loser who slept with the first non-relative who stepped through my door in seven months.”

“You’re not weak. You’re one of the strongest people I know,” I say gently. “And I’m going to help you get stronger. Just a few more days and I’ll have all my crazy shit sorted and be able to devote myself to helping you get your groove back.”

She snorts. “You think getting out of the mob is that easy?”

“Not usually, but...” I explain the situation as quickly as possible, pausing to let her get in a few “I knew it!” and “I am so right! I’m literally always right! I knew you were a spy! I just knew it!” before assuring her, “I’m out as soon as I smooth Rex and Wimpy’s feathers and get the evidence I need to prove they’re behind a catnapping and...a few other crimes.”

“Out of the CIA?” she asks. “Or out of the country?”

“Well, both, I guess,” I say, guilt prickling at the back of my neck again. “But I don’t have to leave right away. I can push my departure until after Christmas, like Mom wanted.”

Melissa makes a happy sound. “Oh, that would be so great, Matty. I get Chase for Christmas, since Ben got Thanksgiving. He’s old enough to really have a blast looking for Santa Claus in the woods and ripping open presents this year. I’d love to have you there to make memories with us.”

“Then, consider it done,” I say. “And don’t be so hard on yourself about the Aaron thing. I say, take your fun and joy where you can get it. You deserve it.”

She grumbles beneath her breath, but I can tell she’s weakening.

“He offered to come pick you up in his big rental truck and carry you safely over the floodwaters to his grandmother’s house for the night,” I wheedle. “That’s pretty sweet. And you might feel safer with other people around.”

“I feel perfectly safe,” she shoots back. “The Sweetwaters are on the other side of the flood from my property, I’m pretty sure I scared that Rex guy more than he scared me, and I sleep with a very dangerous submersible blender by my bed. The person foolish enough to mess with me in my home is going to end up with a shredded face and a profound sense of regret.”

“That’s my sis,” I say with a smile. “I’ve missed your feral side.”

“Don’t worry, it’s still here,” she says, a smile in her voice. “That’s why I didn’t even think about getting on that plane. I wasn’t about to leave you alone to face whatever it was you

were facing with your better half thousands of miles away, even though I knew it would piss you off.”

I grunt. “I get it. I wish you’d left and put your safety first, but...I’d do the same thing if our positions were reversed. But please be extra careful for the next few days, okay? Not just watching your six, but with the flood, too. Are you sure you have enough supplies to get through the weekend and are okay with going it alone? If you pass on Aaron’s offer to come get you now, you might not get another chance for a while.”

“I’m sure. I’m fine,” she says. “I have everything I need and nothing I don’t—like more time with a mortal enemy who I accidentally had sex with, in a moment of weakness. I still love Nora, though, and you two should get back to banging as soon as possible. You’re perfect for each other.”

I don’t even ask how she knows. She always knows. Whether she’s legitimately psychic or this is just our twin connection, I’m not sure, but I’ve learned to accept that I can’t pull much over on my sister.

Apparently, not even the one secret I was so positive I’ve been so good at keeping...

“How long have you suspected?” I ask. “That I was working in intelligence?”

“Oh, a long time.” She sighs. “I had my suspicions not long after graduation, when I was headed to culinary school and my genius brother suddenly decided college wasn’t for him. But I started to really smell a rat about six years ago, when you kept disappearing on business trips that made zero sense for a professional handyman, stock car racer, jousting enthusiast, and jack-of-all-trades. You could have done a better job of covering your tracks, for sure.”

“No one else in the family suspected anything,” I say, a tad defensively.

“That’s because they’ve all given up on you reaching the potential they think you abandoned when you were eighteen,” she says bluntly. “I haven’t. I’m never going to give up on you, no matter what. Even if you leave the CIA and actually

do become some kind of furry hippy who lives in a van by the sea halfway around the world.”

“I’ll come back,” I promise her, knowing that’s been her fear all along. “And you like furry hippies. You know you do.”

“I love them,” she says. “And I’ll become one with you someday. But let’s wait until we’re old and gray and our husband and wife are so sick of our shenanigans, they’ll be glad to get rid of us for a few months out of the year. And let’s always come home to the people who love us.”

She pulls in a breath, continuing in a softer voice, “Because love like this is special, Matty. I know you think our family is overbearing. I used to feel the same way sometimes, but that was before Mom came over every morning right after Ben left to drag me out of bed and brush my teeth if I needed her to, if I was *that* depressed on a particular morning. Before Drew and Sarah Beth went out of their way to include me in their Sunday playground plans when they knew I was alone. Before Barrett started bringing me coffee at work on Friday afternoons to check in on me. And before you dropped whatever you were doing and rushed over to help me with toddler tantrums and bedtime monsters and whatever random home appliance I’d managed to break on a given day. We can’t do life alone, Matty. I mean, I guess we can, but it’s so much easier with people you love around to keep your head above water.”

Before I can reply, she lets out a soft bleating sound, “Oh, shit, speaking of head above water, I need to go grab my big flowerpots by the driveway, just in case the water gets that high. I’m sure I’ll kill all my plants next year, too, but at least I won’t have to buy new pots to do it. Love you. Call me if you need me and please stay safe.”

“Will do,” I promise and end the call.

Afterward, I stand in the bathroom, thinking about everything she said and wondering if maybe I’ve been wrong about needing to leave Bad Dog to find myself. Maybe the real me has been here all along, hiding in plain sight, and I just need to let down my walls and let the people I love show me

I'm still the same person I was before all the secrets and my very unusual job.

And maybe Nora could be one of those people...

Because hell, I really like her. Maybe even more than like her.

I'm about to head back into the bedroom and show her just how much I treasure her company, when she lets out a shriek. Grabbing the closest possible weapon—a hairdryer on a shelf above the toilet—I run back into the room to find Nora hovering over a panting Clyde and a pink stain on the white duvet cover.

Nora looks up, her eyes wide. “I think Clyde’s dying! He just started moaning and bleeding!”

Glancing down at the cat’s round stomach, I’m struck by the prominence of Clyde’s pink nipples beneath his thinner stomach fur. And yes, both male and female cats have nipples, but Clyde also has a swollen pink area near his tail that clearly isn’t a wang.

Which means...

“I think they stole the wrong cat,” I mutter, setting the hairdryer down on the bureau beside me.

Nora’s eyes go even wider. “Did you hear me, Matthew? Clyde is dying! We have to get him to the vet. We can worry about if he’s the right cat later.”

Fighting a smile, I tell her, “It’s okay. Clyde isn’t dying. She’s having babies.”

Chapter Nineteen



Babies...
Kittens...

Clyde is having kittens!

As soon as the news penetrates, a smile breaks across my face, and a joy I've rarely felt when not in the presence of rare vintage clothing or my loving, but obnoxious family fills my chest.

"Oh my God!" I cover my mouth with my hands to muffle my squeal of excitement—I don't want to upset Clyde now that her big moment is here.

Matty laughs, looking nearly as thrilled as I am. "Yeah. Not the best timing, but I bet they're going to be the cutest things ever." He lifts his cell. "Let me call Barrett and see if he has any advice for us. I know he's a human baby doctor, not a vet, but maybe the basics are the same?"

"Oh, I bet they're not," I say, easing off the mattress with a final gentle stroke of Clyde's panting head. "I'll call Starling and ask her. She works at an animal shelter and loves everything furry. I'm sure she'll know what we need to do next. And whether or not we should head to a vet."

"Good call," Matty says. "I'll do some googling and find the closest emergency vet practice. Just in case."

"Perfect," I say, adding in what I hope is a soothing whisper to Clyde, "Don't worry, darling. We're going to take

care of you and your babies. I promise. And you're going to be the sweetest, burping little mama there ever was."

Clyde emits a high-pitched, wobbly meow in response, making my forehead wrinkle.

"Oh, I know, sweetheart," I coo. "I'm sure it's super scary. You're about to bring new life into the world. I'd be terrified, too. But you're not alone. And Starling is a brilliant human who will tell us exactly what to do, I just know it." I wave Matty toward the bed. "Comfort her while you google. She needs to know we're here for her."

"Got it." He eases up to the bed, sinking down on his knees on the carpet closest to our expectant mama. "Hey, buddy," he murmurs as he strokes her paw. "We've got you. Don't worry."

Heart swelling at this glimpse of Matty's tender side, I ease back toward the living area, promising myself that I won't give in to the urge to girl talk with Starling. I need to get the cat birth scoop and get off the phone—do not confess that I slept with Matty, do not ask her if she thinks I have a shot at convincing him to stay in Bad Dog, do not get squealy about how amazing he is in bed and how perfect it feels to fall in love with him.

That's what's happening, after all. It's what's been happening for months. This is so much more than chemistry. Matty and I have such a real connection and so much potential, all we needed was a few days alone for it to flower. We're already so much closer than we were even this morning. By the time we spend the next day or two alone together, who knows how far we'll have come?

And if he's still determined to leave when all this is over, at least I'll have the memory of this time with him and his glorious cock.

"Best cock ever," I mutter to myself, shivering a little as I pull up Starling's number and move to the kitchen sink to splash cold water on my face.

I must focus and concentrate on bringing Clyde through the transition to motherhood, safe and sound.

But as soon as Clyde and her kittens are safe?

Well, then all bets are off.

Matty

I watch Nora leave, trying not to stare at the place where my dress shirt dangles temptingly beneath the curves of her ass like the world's sexiest miniskirt.

But who am I kidding? Nora's ass is a work of art, and I've been without a woman in my bed—or anywhere else in my life—for far too long to resist taking a beat to soak in the way her hips sway as she moves.

She's so graceful, so sexy, so fun and kind and creative and everything I've told myself I can't have.

But maybe...

My thoughts are interrupted by a low moan from Clyde as she kneads the covers with her claws, her blue eyes slitted.

"Sorry, buddy," I say, scratching her softly between the ears. "Got distracted for a minute." I cock my head, watching the small cat pant. "So, what's the story? Are you the real Clyde, and you've been a girl the whole time? Or did Wimpy steal the wrong cat?"

Clyde emits a deep belch followed by a pitiful meow that becomes a hiss and a swipe at my arm.

I pull back, holding my hands up in surrender. "Message received. I get it. I don't like anyone touching me when I have a stomachache, let alone what you're going through. Just hang tight, we'll make sure you get the help you need." I type "emergency vet" into the open search engine on my phone and see we're only about ten miles from a well-reviewed facility—one of the benefits of being in a bigger city.

Another benefit is that this area has a much higher elevation than Bad Dog. Despite the rain continuing to fall in sheets outside the window, there are no flood warnings anywhere around the hotel. We'll get soaked to the bone if we have to take Clyde to the vet, but we won't run the risk of getting swept off the road.

Unfortunately, it looks like the folks back home aren't getting as lucky.

As a familiar reporter's face appears on the screen, I grab the remote and turn up the volume.

It's Dipsy Dobbs, my cousin and cheery "girl on the street" junior reporter. Dipsy is twenty-three, with the red hair and freckles most commonly seen in my Aunt Margie's family. She usually reports on the apple pie bake-offs in the summer or ice-fishing in the winter, low-key local color stuff. She dresses in ridiculous "small-town" outfits—overalls with gingham or a giant flannel parka with fish patches—and spends most segments grinning like she just escaped from a 1950's print ad.

This is the first time I've seen my cousin in something as normal as a heavy-duty black raincoat or looking this serious.

"Thanks, Jarod, yes, that's right," Dipsy says, accepting the hand off from the anchor sitting at his cozy desk back in the newsroom. She stands in front of a bridge that's nearly underwater, blocked by a barricade with flashing red lights spinning in the gloom behind her. She squints into the rain as she adds, "Bad Dog emergency services personnel are asking that local residents stay off the roads and do their Black Friday shopping from the comfort of their homes this year. The floodwaters are rising faster than anyone expected, and as you can see, many local roadways are already impassable."

She pauses to motion to the scene behind her before turning back to the camera. "This is the most rain Bad Dog has received in a single system in the town's recorded history. We're used to snowstorms around here, Jarod, but not this much of the wet stuff. Officials are worried citizens might not recognize the danger. That's why the fire chief is calling for

mandatory evacuations of residents in the Happy Valley subdivision and is considering broader evacuations of other lakeside communities if this system doesn't move on soon."

"And where can locals get more information on those evacuations, Dipsy? As well as resources for those already displaced from their homes?" Jarod asks, his dark brows pinched in a polished news anchor's performance of concern.

As Dipsy gives out the address for the town's website and an emergency number to call for the most recent updates, Nora rushes back into the room. "Okay, I spoke to Starling. She said Clyde should be fine to deliver here, but she gave me a few warning signs to watch for. If we see any of those, we should take her to a vet."

"I found an emergency animal hospital," I say, lifting my phone. "Ten miles away. Great reviews."

Nora's shoulders sag as her breath rushes out. "Oh good. What a relief. Now, we need to find a box or something that we can line with newspaper in case things get messy with the birth."

I cast a meaningful glance toward the bed and the red stain beneath Clyde's fluffy bottom. "I think things have already gotten messy, but you're right, I'm sure they can always get worse."

Nora makes a concerned sound. "Poor thing. She's really going through it. It must be getting close. I'll dash down to the main conference room. I saw some empty cardboard boxes in there from the books they're giving away at the luncheon. Then I'll swing by the front desk and get a newspaper. Do you think you can find a dark blanket or towel to put over the top? Starling said most cats like to give birth in a place that feels cozy and dark, like a cave, and all the towels in the bathroom are white."

"I'll check the store in the lobby. It looked like they had a few souvenir type things in addition to food and toiletries." I stand, grabbing my wallet from the bureau and tucking it into my back pocket. "Hopefully they'll have an 'I Love Minnesota' fleece blanket or something."

“Perfect,” she says, fluttering her fingers at Clyde. “We’ll be right back, sweet thing. Don’t worry. You’re not alone. And don’t have those babies yet. We’ll have your kitting box ready in no time.”

She joins me as I head through the narrow hall and into the living room/kitchenette, hooking her arm through mine as I stop beside the door to step into my shoes. “They shouldn’t mind parting with a box, right?” she asks, sliding into her purple pumps, which miraculously still seem to fit, even with her giant fluffy socks still on. “Especially if I tell them that it’s for a good cause.”

I pause, grinning down at her.

She blinks. “What?”

“You aren’t wearing pants,” I say, nodding toward her bare legs. “Or a bra, not that I’m complaining.”

She glances down at herself with a breathy laugh. “Shit. I totally forgot. I was so swept up in the excitement.” She looks back at me, biting her lip. “I almost went into that conference room wearing nothing but your shirt, panties, and an unfortunate sock and pump combo.”

“Well, if you had, at least they’d feel certain our marriage is on the right track,” I say, making her snort with amusement. “I’m sure Patrick would be especially proud.” My eyes narrow. “And eager to check you out.”

“Ugh,” she says, rolling her eyes. “He was way too touchy feely for a therapist type. And in a sexist way. I mean, if he was going to fondle my hand, he should have fondled yours too. That’s only fair. I’m sorry if he made you feel left out.”

“He made me feel like punching him in the face.”

Her smile widens. “Yeah? Do you punch people in the face a lot, Matty McGuire? Or do I simply bring out the savage in you?”

“You bring out all kinds of things in me.” I draw her close, pressing a kiss to her forehead before I add in a whisper, “Like my inner disciplinarian. You’d better not run down to the front

desk like that, or you really will be a filthy girl. And you know what happens to them.”

She pulls back to meet my gaze with an expression that’s scandalized but intrigued. “I can’t. Can I? I mean, there aren’t many people in the lobby usually, but the conference room will be packed.” She glances at the clock on the microwave across the room. “They’ll have just finished up lunch and be getting ready for the afternoon keynote before they split up into small groups again.”

I dip my lips to hover near her ear as I whisper, “That’s why *I’ll* go get the box and the blanket. You get the newspaper and try not to get caught by anyone but the woman at the front desk and me.”

She shivers slightly, but nods. “Okay. I will.” She casts a heated look my way beneath her long lashes. “Because I *am* a very bad girl, a bad girl who runs around in public in nothing but her husband’s shirt, even though he’s asked her so many times not to leave the house half-undressed.” She shrugs, making her breasts shift beneath my shirt in a way that does things to my self-control. “But I can’t help myself. I like knowing that strangers can see my nipples through the fabric of my shirt, and that if I bend over too far, someone might just see my panties.”

“Filthy little brat,” I mutter, now fully, almost painfully erect. On impulse, I lift the hem of the shirt she’s wearing and slide my hands down the front of her panties. She gasps and clings to my biceps as I slide two fingers into her sweet pussy.

“Your very *wet* panties. Do you really want strangers to see that, baby?” I murmur against her temple. “I’m not kidding, Kitty. If you leave the privacy of our room like this, all wet and turned on with your nipples hard under my shirt, I’ll have no choice but to teach you a lesson. Understood?”

“Understood, Charles,” she says, a soft moan escaping her throat as I begin to rub her clit with my thumb. “But I have to go. Now. Clyde needs me. Even if that does feel really, really good.”

“Be quick.” I kiss her, deeply, thoroughly, before pulling back. “And don’t stop to talk to any creepy therapists on your way back to the room.”

“Same,” she says. “And grab more condoms while you’re in the shop. We’re going to need more. A lot more, hopefully.”

“Already on my list, sweet cheeks.” Reluctantly, I remove my hand from her panties, slapping her ass as she moves past me toward the door.

Chapter Twenty



I take the stairs down to the lobby, my pulse racing and my nipples refusing to calm down, despite the almost too-warm heat the hotel pumps throughout the building.

I've worn skirts shorter than Matty's shirt out to dinner, and I'm decently covered—especially if I cross my arms over my chest to hide my traitorous nipples as I approach the desk—but still...

I feel wicked.

Filthy.

And fabulous.

I grin, humming a little tune as I circle around and around, heading toward the ground floor. I can't wait to get back to the room, back to sweet Clyde and Matty and all the amazing things I know he's going to do to me as we wait for our brave girl to have her babies.

You'd like to have his babies...

"I think I would," I murmur, agreeing with the frisky inner voice.

I've never thought too much about having kids. I'm not opposed to it, but I've been focused on my career and finding Mr. Right. I figured the possibility of starting a family was something I should wait to discuss with the man of my dreams. If he were dead set on it, I would take it under deeper consideration. But if he would rather be a family of two, that would be fine, as well.

Deep down, I've always had doubts about whether I'd be a good mother. I certainly didn't have much of a role model, and though Gram has been a beautiful, loving force in my life, she was absolutely a grandmother, not a mom. The way she raised Aaron and me was different than what I witnessed in my friends' relationships with their mothers. Most of my friends talked to their moms like friends or even sisters. But Gram was from a different age when children were treated like children. Even after I grew into full adulthood, there's always been a layer of decorum and distance between us.

Well, until recently, and Gram's sudden, decidedly indecorous interest in my sex life.

Wouldn't she be proud of me now? If she knew what a sex fiend I'm turning out to be? Well, proud or horrified. Either way, I don't plan on changing my evil ways. I'm going to embrace my every wicked whim...starting with proving what a filthy girl I am.

At the bottom of the stairs, I open the door just a crack, peeking out into the hallway and the lobby beyond. I can't see the front desk from this vantage point, but the complimentary coffee area is empty, as are the seats clustered around the television blaring updates about the storm from the wall. I spy one older woman, reading in an overstuffed chair by the fireplace on the opposite side of the room, but she seems engrossed in her book.

This is it. My chance to earn my Bad Girl street cred without mortifying myself in front of a crowd of people.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I hurry through the door and down the hall, passing the windows that look into the shop on the way. I spy Matty already waiting in line to check out with the clerk and grin. Looks like my fake husband is just as eager to get back to our room as I am.

Blood singing with anticipation, I scurry on toward the front desk, wondering if Matty will pass by me as I'm talking to the clerk, and if he does, what he'll do. Will he settle for a glare and a silent promise to do his sensual worst to me once we're alone? Or will he start the game here at the desk, in

front of the same tired-looking woman who checked us in late the night before?

I'm not sure how I feel about including others in our role-playing, but I don't suppose it would be that big a deal. After all, I rarely spend any time in the northern part of the state. I'll likely never see this woman again.

And even if I do, who cares? Being all-in with Matty on this sexy adventure is worth a little embarrassment down the road.

Buoyed by my inner pep talk, I ease into line behind the large man at the desk. He's easily six and a half feet tall, if not taller, broad shouldered, thick all over, and...oddly familiar.

Even before I hear what he's saying to the attendant, something deep in the recesses of my brain is humming, trying to put the pieces together. When I catch his wobbly voice, saying, "I know she's here. I put a tracking device in her collar," my skin starts to tingle with foreboding and the certainty that our sexy afternoon has just been sacked.

And that if Matty and I don't play our cards right, we might be on our way to jail instead of O Town.

"I've been following whoever has her for days," the man who I'm now one-hundred percent certain is Clyde's owner says. His size and the cat tattoo I now glimpse on the side of this thick neck are unmistakable. "They finally stayed put long enough for me to catch up with them, but I can't tell exactly where they are in the hotel."

"Sir, I can't—" the woman starts, but Clyde's owner breaks in, "I promise, I don't want any trouble. I'm not trying to start something with these people. I just want my cat back. I miss her so much. She's pregnant, due to deliver any day now, and has terrible acid reflux. She needs special care."

The exhausted woman shakes her head. "I'm sorry, sir. I feel for you. I really do. But I can't give out private details on our guests. I could get in big trouble."

He sighs. "I understand. Could you maybe just tell me if anyone checked in with a cat? And, if so, the floor they're

on?” he asks. “Like I said, I don’t want trouble, I just want to find Clyde. I’ll give the people who took her whatever they want. Money, contracts, toys, whatever, it doesn’t matter. I won’t even call the police. I just want my little buddy back. If you can help me figure out where to start looking, I know I can handle this peacefully.”

My heart lurches and a surge of guilt makes it impossible to sneak away and alert Matty to this new development the way I’d planned.

This poor man is in pain, pain at least partially caused by me, since I didn’t make contact as soon as I realized who Clyde was to assure him I’d keep his cat safe and do my best to reunite them as soon as possible.

Pulling in a breath and wishing I didn’t have to do this dressed like a call girl with a bra allergy, I tap him on the shoulder.

When he turns, gazing down at me with surprised green eyes rimmed with red from exhaustion—or grief—I know I’ve done the right thing. He might be a giant, but his eyes are so gentle and kind, the eyes of a man who deserves a sweet floof like Clyde in his life.

“Come with me,” I say, nodding toward the elevator.

He blinks. “Excuse me? Who are you?”

“I’m Nora and my boyfriend is with law enforcement. We can help you.” It isn’t exactly true. But it isn’t exactly *un*-true, either. The CIA is law-enforcement adjacent and, most importantly, I know I can ease this man’s mind and reunite him with his best friend.

What kind of human would I be if I didn’t do that?

And Matty will probably be glad to see this guy. After all, he was planning to return Clyde to his owner this weekend, anyway. This might actually work out beautifully for everyone.

Well, everyone except Kitty, the naughty wife, who will not be getting her spanking this afternoon, after all...

Chapter Twenty-One



MATTY

When I exit the elevator, armed with an empty book box, a dark blue fleece blanket, and a pocketful of condoms, the last thing I'm expecting to see is Nora standing in front of our room with another man.

A very large man...

A very large, familiar-looking man...

I slow as I connect the dots, then walk faster, determined to convince Bear Hanson that Nora had nothing to do with Clyde's disappearance. I didn't either, of course—at least not the initial disappearance, and I planned to return Clyde to him as soon as possible—but I'll work on convincing him of that later, after I'm positive Nora isn't caught up in this.

Hearing my footsteps, she turns, her eyes lighting up when she sees me. "Hey, we were waiting for you. I forgot my key." She gives a strange little wave I don't understand until I realize she's working hard to keep her arms crossed over her chest.

Cursing myself for deciding now was a good time to indulge my kinky side, I reach into the non-condom-stuffed pocket and pull out the keycard. "Of course. No worries. And no worries about Clyde, either. I can explain everything, Mr. Hanson. If you'll just give me a few moments of your time."

Bear's eyes go wide as he glances between Nora and me. "What the hell is this about? You said that your boyfriend was in law enforcement."

“He is!” Nora says, nodding too fast. “But we also have Clyde inside our room.” She winces. “It’s a long story, but the gist of it is—there are bad guys, they took Clyde to try to blackmail you, Matty took Clyde back to *return* him to you, but then the bad guys came after us and we ended up hiding out here to regroup. And then Clyde went into labor, and we ran out of the room to get stuff for a kitting box.” She motions to the newspaper tucked under her arm. “That’s why I asked for the newspaper and why he’s carrying a box and a fleece blanket. We just want Clyde to have the most peaceful birth possible because we love her, too. She’s just a doll, even though until about fifteen minutes ago, we thought she was a boy.”

“She’s right. We only want to help.” I extend my hand. “Matthew McGuire. I’m with the CIA. I can give you a number to call and check my name and badge number if you’d like.”

Bear exhales, reaching up to rub the back of his neck, staring at my hand as if he isn’t sure whether to trust me or hit me.

“I can’t share much about the investigation. That’s classified,” I say. “But we’re primarily interested in the Sweetwater criminal organization’s international activities and how those compromise the safety of U.S. citizens. Clyde just got caught up in the other chaos. But when I saw him—” I shake my head. “*Her*, locked up in the Sweetwaters’ back storage area, I had to take her. I figured I could kill two birds with one stone—stop them from exploiting your love for Clyde for toy rights and reunite you with your pet, who you clearly care a great deal for.”

“I do,” he says, seeming to thaw a bit. “So, you’re not associated with them? The people who took her?”

I shake my head. “I promise, I’m not. And again, I can give you that number to call right now, if you’d like. Or you can do an internet search and go directly to the CIA site yourself. There’s a number listed there. I can wait here with you, if you don’t feel safe coming inside with us until you have that peace of mind.” I glance toward Nora. “But I think

someone should go check on Clyde. It seemed like things were progressing pretty quickly, and I'm sure the hotel would appreciate it if we moved her gently to the kitting box as soon as possible, to prevent further damage to the linens."

Nora pulls in a bracing breath. "Yes, let me go get her settled." She collects the rest of the supplies from me, holding them in front of her chest as she mutters, "and put on some pants."

"I'll come with you," Bear says in a steadier voice. "I'm not getting any bad vibes from the two of you, and I'm dying to see her." He nods my way. "And you don't sound like the guy who's been calling me. He clearly smokes a pack a day."

"Rex!" Nora says, casting a guilty look my way as I move past her to open the door. "Sorry. I don't know if I was supposed to say that or not, but it has to be Rex, right? He sounds like he gargled battery acid."

"Probably." I catch Bear's gaze as he follows me inside with Nora close behind. "I'd love it if you'd fill me in on all that. The phone calls, etc. After we take care of Clyde, obviously."

Hearing her name, Clyde meows pitifully from the other room. Instantly, Bear grabs the box and other supplies and goes running. "I'm coming, kiddo! Hold on. Daddy's here."

Nora turns to me, hissing beneath her breath, "Sorry, I heard him talking to the front desk downstairs about putting a tracking device in his cat's collar, realized who he was, and had to bring him up." Her lips turn down hard. "He was so sad. It was heartbreaking."

I squeeze her arm. "You did the right thing. I'm sorry I pushed you into going downstairs like that. It was stupid, immature, and I—"

She covers my lips with her hand. "Stop. It was sexy and awesome. And I'm going to need a rain check on that sexy and awesome as soon as possible." She pulls her fingers away, casting a nervous glance toward the other room before turning

back to me. “Do you think he really trusts us? He seems so kind, I don’t want him to think we’re the bad guys.”

“We’ll win him over,” I assure her, hoping I’m right. “But I should call my handler, let him know there’s been an unexpected development.”

Nora nods. “Okay. I’ll sneak into the bathroom and change, then offer Bear moral support. And tea. Or coffee. Or room service and a neck massage. I feel so terrible.”

“Don’t,” I insist. “You’re part of the solution here, not the problem.” I hesitate before adding, “But maybe go ahead and gather your things for a quick getaway? Just in case he decides to call the police? I’d rather not have to explain everything to local law enforcement. I’ve already broken cover with way too many people already.” I sigh. “My handler isn’t going to be happy.”

“Then don’t tell him,” she says with a shrug. “I’m not going to tell anyone. Neither is Melissa or Aaron. My brother is a vault. I swear. And I made sure he didn’t tell Gram this morning so you should be good. Gram’s the only one who might start telling tales out of class. Or at the senior center. They’re awful down there. I think maybe they’re just so old they’ve forgotten how mortifying gossip can be when you’ve got more than twenty years left to live with the fallout.”

I smile. “It’s a solid theory.” Pulling out my cell, I assure her, “I’ll be right in. Scream if you need help.”

She shakes her head. “I’m not worried. Like Bear said, I’m getting no bad vibes around here.” Clyde lets out a long, low moan that sends Nora moving toward the bedroom. “But definite pain vibes, poor little girl. I’ll see if I can help get her comfortable.”

While Nora hurries in to assist with cat wrangling, I call Al’s emergency line for the second time in two days. I’ve only called it four times in my entire career, a fact that underlines what an absolute shit show I have on my hands.

Al answers with a grunt and a cantankerous, “Yes?”

I give my code word and badge number, but Al's next grunt isn't any friendlier than his last. "What now?" he asks, with a sigh.

"There's been a development. Bear Hanson just showed up at my hotel room." I briefly fill him in on the tracking device in the cat's collar and the fact that one of the kidnappers, most likely Rex, has been in touch with Bear. "I'm going to get more information on that as soon as possible."

"How about now?" Al snaps. "Now is a good time, Matthew. Yesterday would have been even better. We need to wrap this up before things get any sloppier than they are already."

"I know, I know," I assure him, bracing myself as I add, "but the cat's giving birth right now."

"What?"

"The cat, Clyde, she's giving birth. She was pregnant. Bear's in the bedroom with her now, but agreed to speak with me after. I had to tell him that I was with the agency to gain his trust, so he might be calling the helpline later if he feels the need. I also had to tell Nora. I wanted her to know that she was safe and not actually on the run with a criminal."

"And the maid?" Al asks in a flat tone.

I frown. "The maid?"

"The maid," Al repeats. "Did you tell her, too? What about the civilians hanging out in the lobby? Maybe you should go make an announcement at the conference you're supposed to be attending today instead of fucking this case more than it's been fucked already."

"Nora isn't going to blow my cover," I assure him, my stomach roiling as I hope the same can be said of her brother. Mel is my ultimate ride or die, obviously, but Aaron is a bit more of an unknown quantity. But does it really matter at this point? "I'm almost out anyway," I remind Al. "As soon as this is wrapped, so am I."

"But you signed up to be an invisible asset, not an officer who works nine to five at the local field office," Al shoots

back. “If you’d wanted that life, you could have had it. But you wanted the excitement and adventure of the more covert arm of the agency. And with that adventure comes certain sacrifices. Sacrifices you agreed to make for the duration of your employment and retirement, not until it feels inconvenient for you to do so.”

My shoulders tighten as I dip my chin to my chest. “I know. I’m sorry. It’s just been one thing after another with this case. But Hanson showing up here could be the break I’ve needed. I can reunite him with his cat and hook him up with the FBI. Since the kidnapping has crossed state lines, it’s going to be in their jurisdiction.”

“Except that it’s a cat, not a kid,” Al says with a put upon sigh. “But I’ve been in touch with a few of my contacts. They’re ready to step in and offer assistance when we’re ready for a hand off.”

A bit of the tension eases from my muscles. “Great. Thank you. While the FBI is busy rounding up the lesser Sweetwaters on kidnapping and extortion charges, I can focus on getting the digital trail we need on Cassie Ann. Once we prove she’s supporting terrorist threats in Canada, we can close the book on the entire organization.” A rumble of thunder shakes the walls, giving me another idea. “The rain might even work in our favor with that. If it keeps coming down like this, I doubt the cupcake shop will be open tomorrow, and Wimpy and Rex are trapped on their compound on the other side of a flooded-out road. Hopefully, I’ll be able to get in, get the data I need, and get out without anyone noticing I’m there.”

“Don’t hope, make it happen,” Al says, but he sounds a tad less grumpy as he adds, “And stay safe on the roads if you head back into town tomorrow. The flooding in Bad Dog is already national news and it’s only supposed to get worse overnight.”

I nod. “I know. I’ll be careful and leave Nora here, since we have the room until Monday.”

“Extend through Tuesday or Wednesday if you want, on the agency’s dime,” Al says, surprising me. “You wrap this up

by tomorrow afternoon and you'll deserve a little vacation with your girlfriend."

I almost correct him, almost explain that she isn't my girlfriend, but stop myself before the words can pass my lips. Nora's not my girlfriend now, but maybe by Monday morning...

Or even by tomorrow afternoon, if I can get out of my own way and trust the certainty growing in my gut that I don't have to leave home to find what I've been missing.

"Thanks, Al," I say, touched. "I appreciate that."

"Consider it your retirement present from me," he says. "But only if you tie this up with a pretty bow for me this weekend. I have four other shit shows in progress and would like to get at least one off of my plate before December. I have a fuck ton of presents to buy. Ten nieces and nephews and Hanukkah comes early this year."

My lips curve. "Got it. I'll do my best."

"You do that," he says. "And Matty?"

"Yes?"

"Don't worry about what comes after. You'll be fine. Some guys don't thrive in the civilian life, but I doubt that will be the case for you. If anything, you should have left sooner. You were never cut out for keeping this many secrets. You've got too many siblings and people who love you up in your business, which, if you ask me, is a great problem to have. I don't regret leaving surveillance duty when I did, that's for damned sure. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have sealed the deal with my wife or be the kind of uncle my nieces and nephews know they can count on, no matter what. Sometimes the best way to save the world is just to be there for the people we love."

It's the longest speech Al's ever given me, not to mention the kindest and most vulnerable. And it couldn't have come at a more perfect time. "Thanks," I say, my voice thick with emotion. "I needed that."

"No shit, Sherlock," he says, back to his old cantankerous self. "I know when my officers need a pep talk. Now, you've

had it, so go make things happen. I'll be in touch if there are any new developments on our side and shoot you the number for my FBI contact in a few minutes."

I thank him again and end the call, heading into the bedroom to see Bear perched awkwardly on the foot of the bed, watching the silenced television. When he sees me, he lifts a hand. "Hey. Nora's changing." He motions toward the closet beside the bureau. "And Clyde's in there. I'm only letting myself check on her every eight minutes." He taps his smart watch. "I have a timer on. I think I was stressing her out, hovering over the box."

"That makes sense. I'm sure she was happy to see you, though."

He smiles, relaxing a little as he nods. "Yeah. She was. She tried to climb into my lap, but she was in too much pain." He sighs. "I don't know how women do it. My mom had four kids."

"Mine had eight," I say, making his brows shoot up. I laugh. "Yeah. She and Dad took the 'be fruitful and multiply' thing a little too seriously." I motion back toward the front room. "So, I talked to my boss, and he has an FBI contact I can connect you with once we're done chatting. They'll be in charge of this case since it's a domestic issue that's crossed state lines. We don't have to talk now if you'd rather wait." I glance toward the closet before shifting my gaze back to Bear. "But it might make the time go by faster while we're waiting."

"I think a talk sounds good." Nora emerges from the bathroom, looking gorgeous in a pair of jeans and the same sweater from this morning. She's pulled her hair into a high ponytail and applied just enough makeup to make her blue eyes pop and her lips look glossy and highly kissable. "And not to be nosy, but well, I am nosy, and I'm dying to know what Rex has been saying to you. My gut is that he's a huge, hairy liar who's been lying to everyone and isn't actually trapped at his compound today." She points a finger my way as she hops up to sit on the wide windowsill in front of the rain-streaked glass. "You owe me a Coke if I'm right."

I incline my head, granting her the Coke as I ask Bear, “So, what do you think?”

“Yeah, sure,” he says with a sigh. “Though I don’t know how much time this is going to kill. It’s a pretty short story. Five days ago, someone broke into my apartment in Chicago and stole Clyde. They disabled my main security system, but I did get some footage of them inside the living room as they passed through. For some reason that camera kept working, while the others went out. They were wearing masks, like you wear when you have a cold, so I couldn’t get a great look at their faces, but one was a massive guy with thinning brown hair. The other was shorter, but strong looking, with a blond ponytail. He seemed to be the one in charge.” Bear’s tone grows disgusted as he adds, “He’s the one who stole my hatchet on the way out.”

Nora cocks her head. “Hatchet?”

Bear nods. “It was a gift from my dad. He was a blacksmith and made all his kids something special like that the day they turned eighteen. He died four years ago so...it’s not something that can be replaced. Still not as important as Clyde, not even close, but it added insult to injury.”

“We’ll get it back for you,” Nora says passionately, before glancing my way with a more sheepish look. “Or we’ll at least try. We *will* try, right? That just makes my heart hurt. I want Bear to have his hatchet and his cat.”

“Thanks.” Bear’s smile is warmer this time. He’s clearly as charmed by Nora as everyone else who meets her. She’s just that kind of person, the kind who makes you feel like you’ve known her—and loved her—your entire life.

“We’ll give it our best shot,” I say. “And I bet the FBI will help, too. But I’m sure they’ll want to coordinate with your local police. I assume you reported the theft?”

Bear’s lips shift guiltily to one side of his broad face. “I didn’t, actually. I just went straight to social media and offered a reward myself. Chicago cops are busy with real crimes. I seriously doubt they would have wasted many man hours on a catnapping.”

“You could be right,” I concede. “But the FBI will know this is part of a much bigger criminal conspiracy and will take it seriously. I promise. So, when did the man you’ve been speaking to on the phone first contact you?”

“Only yesterday,” he said. “He warned me to quit trying to find him, almost like he knew I was tracking Clyde.” Bear’s eyes darken. “He said he would hurt Clyde if I didn’t. But I knew he wouldn’t. He won’t get the toys he wants if he gives up his leverage. I called his bluff, and he backed down. He said he would give me a chance to see Clyde, but that he’d be ‘on my ass like green on grass’ after.” His lips twist. “Direct quote.”

“Because he wants you to sign over control of the rest of your belching kitten doll supply, right?” Nora asks.

Bear nods. “Yeah. But I only have five hundred left in storage. The rest are already on their way to Target stores across the country. I signed a deal with them the day before Clyde was taken. This jerk doesn’t want to believe that’s all I have, though. He’s insisting I take him to the warehouse.” He smiles. “But I won’t be taking that fucker anywhere, because I found Clyde on my own, just like I told him I would.” He lifts a hand Nora’s way. “Pardon my French.”

She flutters her fingers. “Don’t worry about it. I speak French, too, when I’m mad at all the fucking assholes in the world.”

Unease prickles along the hollow of my spine as I guide the conversation back to his last revelation. “And when did you tell him that? That you were going to find Clyde?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe two or three hours ago,” Bear says. “I told him he wasn’t calling the shots and that I’d find Clyde and him myself and um...” He glances at Nora as he adds in an apologetic voice. “And that I’d smash his face in. I’m not a violent man, I promise, but this guy is just begging for a broken nose. And I was a boxer for a long time before I started caring more about the contents of my brain than the prize money.”

I nod, my unease blossoming into a full-blown sense of dismay. “I’m going to touch base with my handler with all of this. See if we can get backup here within the hour.” Seeing Nora’s eyes widen, I hurry to assure them both, “We’re safe here in the room, but I suspect Rex was using you to get to us, Bear.”

Bear blinks faster, cursing as he apparently connects the dots. “Shit. I’m sorry. I didn’t even think.”

“Why would you?” I say, keeping my voice calm and casual, hopefully not betraying the fact that I’m more than a little concerned we’re being hunted by Sweetwater thugs as we speak. “You had no idea someone else had Clyde. You two hang tight. I’ll go see what I can do about backup, and we’ll go from there.”

I turn and stride into the other room, praying I can get this under control before Clyde’s safe birthing haven becomes a scene from *The Godfather*.

Chapter Twenty-Two



As Matty leaves the room, Bear's shoulders sag.

"It's okay," I assure him. "Matty will figure it out."

"I just feel so stupid," he says, wiping a hand down his face.

"Don't!" I insist. "Like Matty said, there's no way you could have known. And we're safe in here. If we have to, we can stay locked up in this room until they're able to get someone here to help us. The couch folds out, and you're welcome to sleep there." I force a smile. "It will be like a sleepover with your cat, her sweet babies, and two weird strangers."

He huffs, but his lips crook up at the edges. "You're not weird. You both seem very nice, actually." His watch buzzes, and he stands, electrified with concern for Clyde all over again.

He tiptoes over to the closet, moving with remarkable stealth for such a large man, and lifts the corner of the fleece blanket ever so slightly. "Hey there, kiddo," he murmurs in a low rumble that would soothe me if I were a laboring cat. "You're doing great. Hang in there. You've got this. I'll be back to check on you again in a little bit."

He replaces the blanket and turns back to me, whispering, "Nothing yet, but I think she's close. Her stomach is definitely contracting. I could see it, even in the dark in there."

I lift my hands, crossing both sets of fingers. "Hopefully soon. I'm dying to see the babies. Are they going to look like

Clyde do you think? Did you breed her with another Persian?”

Bear clears his throat. “Um, no, it was kind of an accident, actually. I was at a cat convention and ran into a friend. She and her cat, Hambone, came back to my room for beer and pizza. We all ended up falling asleep and sometime in the night Clyde and Hambone...”

“Discovered their love for each other?” I supply, laughing as he nods. “Well, that’s wonderful for them. I take it Hambone *isn’t* a Persian?”

Bear shakes his head, a secret smile creeping across his face. “No, he’s a big, sweet orange tabby. Dumb as a box of rocks, but a real lover. Purrs the second Dipsy walks into the room.”

I perk up at the name. “Dipsy?”

He nods. “Yeah, she’s the friend I mentioned. I thought maybe we were going to be more than friends for a while there, but she never returned my texts after the convention. Even when I realized Clyde was pregnant and offered her first pick of the litter...radio silence.” He lips peel away from his teeth. “Sorry if that’s too much information. You’re easy to talk to.”

“Thank you,” I murmur, my voice hushed as I contemplate those tempting words, “Pick of the litter.”

Wow. Could I? Should I? More importantly, how can I not? When I’ve fallen so hard for Clyde in such a short amount of time?

Gathering my courage, I wet my lips and add, “I know this probably isn’t the time or place and you have so much on your mind right now, but...do you think *I* might be able to reserve a pick of the litter? It wouldn’t have to be first pick. *You* could even pick the one you wanted me to buy. I just love Clyde so much. She’s the first cat who’s ever made me feel loved and accepted—first animal, really—and I’d be so honored to raise one of her babies. And since they’re *her* babies, hopefully one of them will like me, too.”

I beam at him, hurrying on before he can reply, “Oh, and I think Dipsy lives in Bad Dog. One of our ‘on the street’ reporters is named Dipsy, anyway, and that isn’t a very common name. Chances are decent she’s your friend, right?”

Bear blinks, his jaw hanging open a bit.

“Sorry,” I apologize. “I’m a fast talker. I can repeat that at a slower and less crazy pace, if needed. I’m just so scare-cited about the thought of having my own pet.”

He frowns. “No, I got all of it, I just...” He pulls in a breath and frowns harder. “My Dipsy is a journalist, too. But she was leaving to go work as a junior beat reporter for a paper in Washington, D.C. I told her the distance didn’t matter to me. Luckily, I have enough money saved up from flipping houses and the Clyde stuff to fly out to see her a couple times a month.” He sighs. “She acted like that was a good idea, but when I tried to make contact, she never returned my calls or texts. Do you happen to remember your Dipsy’s last name?”

My forehead furrowing sympathetically, I shake my head. “No, I don’t. I’m sorry. I think it’s a short name like Smith or Jones or something?” I bite my lip, racking my brain. “Or Jobs? Like Steve Jobs? But that’s probably not right.”

“Dobbs?” His gaze sharpens on mine. “Dipsy Dobbs?”

I point one finger at my nose and the other at his face. “Bingo! That’s it.” I motion toward the television. “She was actually on the news earlier, reporting live from the flooding in Bad Dog. If we keep an eye on the screen, we might see her again. They always replay those segments over and over.”

“That would be...nice,” he says, sounding like he isn’t quite sure whether it would be or not. Thankfully, there isn’t a hint of doubt in his voice when he adds, “And you can absolutely have first pick of the litter. I haven’t offered a kitten to anyone else. I wanted to wait and see how many there were and if they were all healthy.”

With a quick, quiet clap of my hands, I gush, “Oh, thank you so much. I really appreciate it. And I don’t mind paying now and then waiting to pick the kitten up when he or she is

ready to be weaned. I know they need to stay with their mama for a good amount of time after they're born. I googled it."

He smiles. "Keep your money. You reunited me with Clyde. That's all the payment I need."

I start to argue, but Bear curses and nods toward the TV. "You're right. There she is. Turn it up? Can you?"

"Sure thing." I grab the remote from the window ledge beside me and crank up the volume. It's the same pre-filmed segment I watched earlier, so I only listen with half an ear, choosing to devote my attention to Bear, instead, as he sucks up every word Dipsy speaks like a flower desperate for rain.

The poor guy, he has it *bad*.

I know the feeling...

Clearly sensing my "You Should Give Up on Leaving the Country and Be my Adorable Boyfriend" vibes, Matty strides back into the room, "Okay, it looks like—"

"Hush," I say, bringing my finger to my lips. "Bear's watching Dipsy's segment about the flood. He knows her."

Matty's brows lift. "Really? My cousin?"

"She's your cousin?" I humph out a breath. "I didn't know that."

"Yeah, my aunt Margie Dobbs used to be a McGuire." He glances between Bear and the screen again. "Weird that we have a connection outside of the catnapping. That's pretty random."

"Not really. The cat influencer world is pretty small," Bear murmurs, his gaze locked on Dipsy's worried face. "But yeah, it is a coincidence. And if I hadn't run into you two, I might never have known that she wasn't in D.C."

"It's a sign," I say softly as the segment ends and the newsroom reporter transitions to a story about the Black Friday madness at a local department store. "You should text her. Tell her she did a great job reporting on the flood."

Bear shoots an uncertain look my way. “Yeah? That wouldn’t be creepy? Or pathetic?”

“I don’t think it would be creepy.” I shrug. “As for pathetic, who cares? I’d rather make a fool of myself in the name of love than hang on to my street cred any day. Not that I have much street cred anymore. Not since my gram told the world and a reporter for the local paper about my exceedingly lame love life.”

Bear grunts. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, me, too. But it’s okay. Gram and I will move past it. I wouldn’t really care except that I’m a fashion designer and being lame is bad for my brand.”

“She’s a very successful fashion designer,” Matty pipes up, moving to stand beside the TV. “And your brand is solid. One crap article from a tiny paper isn’t going to change that.”

“You should get Dipsy to do a piece on you for the local news,” Bear says. “More people watch TV than read anyway. Might be good damage control, and I’m sure she’d make you look great. She’s the sweetest person I’ve ever met.”

I press my lips together, but I can’t resist noting, “She seems that way, but she...lied to you. And lies aren’t great.”

Bear’s gaze darkens. “No, they’re not.”

“But there has to be a reason she lied,” I say, inspiration striking. “Maybe, if I call her about a possible interview, I can gently feel her out about cat influencing and her friend Bear while I’m at it.”

He perks up. “Yeah? You’d do that?”

“I totally would,” I say, waving a breezy hand. “And I’m a great wingwoman. I’ll keep it very classy and on the down-low. She won’t suspect I’m pumping her for information for a second.”

“I would really appreciate that,” Bear says. “I’d appreciate it enough to up that kitten offer to *two* picks of the litter. It would be nice for the little guys to have a friend around when they leave their mom.”

“Love the kitten and matchmaking vibes,” Matty cuts in. “But we should start packing up. An extraction team is on the way. They’ll be here in about half an hour. They’re going to move all of us, including Clyde, to an undisclosed location. We’ll leave Clyde’s collar here when we go, just in case the Sweetwaters have managed to lock onto the signal. Wimpy isn’t tech savvy, but I’m not sure about Rex. Better to play it safe and we can replace the tracker for you later.”

Bear stands. “What about my truck? I don’t have a pass for overnight parking.”

“We’ll talk to the hotel and make sure you’re not towed,” Matty says, motioning toward me. “Do you have your things packed, Nora?”

I nod. “Mostly. Just need to throw my toiletries in my purse.”

Matty nods. “Great. I’ll carry our things and you can help Bear with Clyde. Moving her obviously isn’t ideal. I’m sure she would rather not be disturbed, but we’ll be as gentle as we can.”

“Better disturbed by a gentle move than mobsters coming to snatch and grab her,” I say, flashing what I hope is a comforting smile Bear’s way. “Which won’t happen. She’s safe, we’re safe, everything’s going to work out fine. And yes, I will gratefully accept two kittens. Thank you so much.”

“My pleasure.” Bear glances at his watch. “I’ll do another quick kitten check.”

“Nora, could I have a word in the other room?” Matty asks, jabbing a thumb toward the hallway.

“Sure thing.” I shift past Bear and follow Matty into the living room. When we’re alone, I ask, “What’s up?”

“I actually won’t be going with you to the safe house,” he says in a softer voice. “I need to get to the Sweetwater database while they’re busy with other things and now is as good a time as any. If I head for Bad Dog as soon as you two leave with the team, I’ll get there right after the employees have closed the cupcake shop for the night.”

I exhale. “Okay. But you’ll be really careful and not go alone?”

“I’ll be alone, but I’ll have backup close by if I need it. No one wants to see this mission go south. My handler is making sure I have the support I need to close this out without any further hiccups.”

I nibble my lip. “I don’t like that. You shouldn’t go alone. Take me with you. I can be your lookout.”

“No,” he says without hesitation.

“Why not?” I prop my hands on my hips. “I’m a very observant, AKA nosy person. Who better to keep watch and make sure you’re not interrupted while you’re lurking and sneaking?”

“No,” he repeats. “You’ll attract the wrong kind of attention. I’m going to be disabling the surveillance cameras and breaking in wearing blacks and a ski mask.”

“Then, I’ll cover my face, too! And I can wear bulky clothes so no one will be able to tell if I’m a man or a woman.”

He arches a brow. “They would be able to tell. You move like a woman.”

“Oh yeah?” I lean closer, not above using my feminine wiles to sway him into letting me help.

But before I can think of something witty to say to convince him that having me along is the smart *and* sexy choice—we could celebrate our victorious mission by making out in nothing but our ski masks afterwards—the fire alarm blares.

My hands fly to my ears as a red light on the wall begins to pulse. “Oh wow, that’s loud. Should we head to the lobby?”

“Not yet,” Matty says, shouting to be heard over the sharp, screaming siren as he moves toward the door. “Let me do a quick sweep first. Make sure it’s not a false alarm or the Sweetwaters trying to flush us out.”

Bear appears in the hallway, carrying Clyde's box, looking stressed and confused.

"Wait here," Matty shouts, before sticking his head carefully outside the door. After a beat, he turns back to us. "Don't leave the room unless you smell smoke. Right now, it looks like it might be a false alarm. I'll be back as soon as I can."

He leaves and I turn back to Bear with a rush of breath. "I'm sorry! This isn't how any of us wanted Clyde's big day to go. How is she?"

"Burping. A lot," he says, his brow furrowing. "She always does when she's stressed. The acid reflux medication the vet gave us helps, but he advised against giving it to her while she was pregnant."

I nod, relieved. "Oh, that's great. I was hoping there was some way to help her feel more comfortable. She was getting really sick in the car when we first picked her up. But then, Matty was driving like a maniac to get away from the people who were following us, so no wonder, really. I was getting a little sick, myself, and I have an iron stomach."

Bear makes a noncommittal noise, clearly not in the mood to discuss gastrointestinal issues—mine or the cat's. "Are you sure we shouldn't head down to the lobby? Everyone else will be evacuating, too. Surely, we'd be safe in the crowd."

I shake my head. "No, we should stay here. I trust Matty, if he didn't smell smoke, we're still fine."

"But the fire could be on a lower level," Bear says, clearly agitated. "We might not smell the smoke for a while, and by then, it could be too late to get safely down the stairs."

I chew my bottom lip again, torn.

On the one hand, I know firsthand how scary fire can be. Aaron and I had to drag my unconscious mother out of our burning house when we were kids after she accidentally set fire to her bed. We all made it to the front lawn without so much as a minor burn, but the flames took half the house and all my toys before the firefighters put out the blaze.

I had nightmares about fires and melted dolls for years.

But on the other hand, this building is equipped with a sprinkler system, fireproof doors, and so many extra measures to keep us safe. Not to mention the fact that we're in a city with a fire station not far away and it's raining cats and dogs outside. Even if there is a real threat, the chances that the fire will blaze out of control before it's put out are slim.

"Let's give it five more minutes," I tell Bear. "And then I'll stick my head out and give things another sniff."

Bear shakes his head, sending a drop of sweat rolling down the side of his face. "I can't, Nora. I can't stay here. I was in an apartment fire a few years ago. One of my upstairs neighbors nearly died trying to get down the stairs because he waited too long. I have to go. I'm sorry."

"No, wait, Bear," I say, tailing him to the door. "I know how scary fire can be, believe me, but the Sweetwaters are scarier."

Bear throws open the door to reveal a craggy-faced blond man with his knuckles hovering in the air, mid-knock.

It's Rex.

As if to prove my point about being scarier than fire, he lifts his stun gun, aiming it at Bear's chest and says, "Out. Now. And behave yourself, big guy, or we stun the girl and do bad things to your cat."

Chapter Twenty-Three



It's a false alarm.
As I thought.

Ten minutes later, I've run up and down every staircase in the sizeable hotel, weaving my way around hordes of troubled couples fleeing toward the lobby, and haven't caught a whiff of smoke.

Which means the Sweetwaters are here, determined to flush us out.

Or a disgruntled spouse pulled the alarm to avoid going to small group therapy, or the system is on the fritz. You don't always have to assume the worst-case scenario.

But assuming the worst-case scenario and preparing to deal with it as quickly and quietly as possible is what CIA officers do. It's built into the training. I spent two years of weekends at spy school learning how to wriggle out of tight spots without causing a scene or, more importantly, getting caught.

But getting caught isn't my biggest concern anymore, not even close. Keeping Nora safe is my top priority, followed closely by Bear and Clyde. They're all under my protection and right now my gut is screaming that the hotel is no longer a safe place for them.

I head back to our room, debating whether to ask forgiveness or permission from Al to evacuate everyone before the team arrives.

In the end, I decide forgiveness will be faster and pull my keycard from my pocket.

Tapping it to the sensor, I swing into the room, calling to Nora, “Grab your things. I’ll order a car. I don’t think we should—” The fire alarm cuts off, leaving me shouting into the sudden silence. I lower my voice as I add, “take one of our vehicles.”

I clear my throat, my ears ringing as I wait for Nora’s answer. But the living space is empty and there isn’t a sound coming from the other room. But they could be focused on Clyde or crouched by her box in the closet, where it might be hard to hear me.

I start toward the hallway but freeze when I see that Nora’s tennis shoes are gone. Her purple pumps are still beside the door, but the shoes she was wearing when I tossed her into my SUV yesterday are nowhere to be seen.

Yesterday...

I can’t believe that was just yesterday. It feels like I’ve lived at least a few months since then, months I’ve spent falling harder for Nora with every passing second.

I’m in love with her, I realize, as I do a quick check of the space—finding everything as I left it except for the shoes, Nora’s purse, and the kittening box missing from the closet—my heart racing faster as I confirm that she’s really gone. She’s gone and likely in danger and if anyone harms a hair on her head, I’m going to kill them.

I’m not a violent person. I can count the number of times I’ve punched a man on one hand—three fingers, in fact, counting the fist to Wimpy’s face yesterday. I’ve had extensive firearms training, but almost never carry a gun. I’ve always been a firm believer that sticky situations are better resolved with words than weapons.

But right now, if I had my government issue with me, I would gladly press it to Rex’s temple and promise him a painful death if he doesn’t back off and leave the people I love alone.

I pace the main room, telling myself that Clyde went into distress and Bear and Nora ran to the vet. I tell myself that they decided, against my advice, to evacuate with the rest of the hotel, and are waiting for me in the parking lot downstairs. But as the minutes tick by without a text or phone call, I know that isn't the case.

Gut in knots, I place a call to Al, not even caring that I have to tell him that I fucked up again.

I just need his help finding Nora.

Now.

Chapter Twenty-Four



I drag my feet as much as possible, but it seems to take no time at all to reach the big, windowless van waiting outside the door at the end of the first-floor hallway. And thanks to the fire alarm, there's no one around to see Bear and I being steered toward it at stun gun point.

"Clyde is in labor, and things aren't going well," I say, faking courage as Wimpy emerges from the van's sliding door with a black eye he didn't have yesterday, looking pissed. "She needs to go to the vet. Now."

"Then you two had better give us what we want *now*," Rex says, mocking my bossy tone. "As soon as we have what we came for, you two can go wherever you want to go."

Wimpy shoves Bear toward the van with both hands, making him cry out and cling tighter to the kittening box.

"And how are we supposed to do that?" I say, digging my heels in as Rex flattens a palm between my shoulder blades and pushes me toward the entrance. "Bear's warehouse is hundreds of miles away in Chicago, and it's almost empty. He literally can't give you those dolls. He already sold most of them way before you stole Clyde."

"Actually, it isn't that far," Bear says from the seat by the opposite side of the van. "Just about an hour and a half, in Spring Valley, Wisconsin. It was a lot cheaper to store them there than in Chicago and it's on a distributor route for easy shipping." His eyes lock on Rex over my head. "Let Nora and Clyde go, and I'll show you where the dolls are. There are still

about five hundred left. I'll sign them all over to you and never say a word about any of this to the police. Just help me make sure Clyde gets through this. If she dies in childbirth, I won't have anything left to live for."

Wimpy snorts. "Pathetic. What kind of guy loves a cat that much?"

"A wonderful man," I pipe up. "A man with a big heart who's willing to sacrifice his own safety for the safety of the people and animals he loves. I bet you've never sacrificed yourself for anything, you big coward."

Wimpy grunts out a laugh, clearly not finding me threatening in any way. "Yeah, not for a cat. I don't fall in love with cats. That's fucking weird. Your boyfriend is a pervert."

"He's not her boyfriend, dumbass," Rex says, shoving me more firmly toward the vehicle. "*You're* the one who said she was with McGuire and has probably been helping him plot this scheme to cut us out of the take. That's how you got your cat back, right?" he asks Bear. "These two offered to return it if you gave *them* control of the toys, instead of us, didn't they?"

Thinking fast, I pipe up, "No, we were going to give Clyde back to Bear free of charge. I made Matty do it. I made him steal Clyde and give him back to Bear to prove he wasn't a bad guy and that it's okay for us to get serious and for him to finally meet my grandmother. I can't introduce Gram to a guy who aids and abets a catnapping. That would be deeply messed up."

"Just shut up and get in the van." Rex makes a frustrated sound and shoves me hard enough to make me stumble.

"Get your hands off her," Bear booms, earning a box of his ears from Wimpy, who's still crouched behind him.

"Don't hit him," I shout. "He's just sitting there, completely helpless, holding a cat in labor in a kittening box. Where's your humanity?"

"Then get in the fucking van, bitch," Rex says, digging the prongs of his stun gun into the small of my back. "Or I'll shock you and toss you in there myself. And trust me, a shock

won't kill a healthy young lady like yourself, but it'll hurt like you swallowed lightning."

I heave a sigh and cast a quick glance over my shoulder, praying to see Matty running through the door behind me. But the door is still closed and the alarm blaring. Even if I screamed for help, no one would hear me.

And I really don't want to know what it feels like to swallow lightning.

I don't even want to touch lightning, let alone swallow it.

So, with one final prayer that Matty will figure out how to find us, I surreptitiously toss one of the earrings I removed on the way down the stairs onto the ground as I spit into Rex's face, "Fine, but don't call me a bitch again. If you want to call me names, please call me an asshole or a jerk or some other non-gendered insult."

Rex rolls his eyes. "Whatever, woman, just get in the van. The longer you talk back, the longer it's going to take to get what we need and drop you and your friend here off at a vet."

My brows lift. "You'd do that?"

"Why not?" he growls, looking uncomfortable. "I don't want the cat to bite it, but I've got to get those toys or *I'm* dead meat. I've got a grandmother, too, and she doesn't fuck around." He shrugs. "But once I've got the goods, I can help you out. I like belching cat videos as much as the next guy with a sense of fucking humor."

"Okay, thank you. That would be...nice." Filing this small sign of humanity away for later, I step into the van, settling into the empty seat by the sliding door.

But I'm not going to fool myself into trusting Rex.

He's a bad guy. He's kidnapping me and Bear and Clyde. And so he uses a stun gun instead of real gun? So what? That's still a weapon, and a dangerous one at that. If I have the chance to bash him over the head with something and get away, I should take advantage of it.

Though I doubt that's going to happen in this van, speeding away from the hotel toward a warehouse far away. And Clyde will probably have finished giving birth by then—or be in such serious distress it might be too late to save her or her babies.

As the alarm suddenly cuts off, seconds before Rex slides the van door closed, I send out a silent prayer—*Find that earring, Matty. Find it and check the hotel's surveillance cameras and come find us.*

Before it's too late.

Chapter Twenty-Five



MATTY

On the way down the stairs to the front desk, I call Aaron, crossing my fingers that he'll have what I need.

And that he won't decide to beat the shit out of me for losing his sister...

I know I'd be tempted to rain down misery on him, if he lost mine.

"What's up?" he asks, answering on the second ring. "Does Melissa need a ride? I've been watching the water levels rise out by her place on the news. It's getting bad. She shouldn't wait too long to decide or there won't be a decision to make."

"She's fine for now," I say, hoping it's true. I feel like a shit brother for not checking on her again since this morning, but I've been a little busy. "I was actually calling about Nora."

His tone cools. "What about Nora? Is she okay?"

"I was wondering if she'd turned her location sharing back on?" I ask, avoiding answering his question. I don't know if she's okay. I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure she is, but knowing exactly where she's headed would help. A lot.

"Why?" he asks, worry creeping into his voice. "Isn't she with you? I thought she was with you, and you were enlisting the full help of the CIA to keep my sister safe. What the fuck happened, Matty?"

I bite the inside of my lip hard enough to draw blood. He isn't saying anything I haven't said to myself, but it cuts deeper to hear it from her brother. "I'm not sure right now, Aaron. I went to do a sweep of the hotel. When I got back, she was gone. But I'm working on finding out where she went as quickly as possible."

Aaron curses colorfully.

"I know," I cut in, pushing through the stairwell door into the lobby. "I'm going to ask the hotel to check their surveillance video for signs of what happened right now. But I thought, if she'd turned on location sharing with you again, that might speed things along."

"No, she didn't," he bites out. "Fuck! I knew I should have made her tell me where she was and picked her up this morning. You McGuires can't be trusted. All you care about is each other. No one else in town matters, at least not as much as your clan of inbred assholes."

I swallow a retort, reminding myself that he's upset and has every right to be. And he's correct, my family can be insular at times, though, to my knowledge, we've always been careful not to inbreed. "All right. Well, let me know if that changes. I'll keep you updated."

"You'd better keep me—" I end the call and shift my phone to silent mode when he immediately calls back.

I'll do my best to make things better with Aaron later, *after* Nora is safe.

At the front desk, the woman manning the computer is on the phone, checking on an upcoming reservation for a guest. I shift to one side, glancing behind her at the small office partially concealed by fake ivy hanging over the door. But it doesn't look like anyone is inside, and I can't afford to waste time waiting my turn today.

Embracing my jerk side, I reach over the desk, pressing down on the black tab to end the call.

The clerk looks up, her jaw dropping. "I was with a customer."

“I’m so sorry, but I urgently need your help,” I say, shifting into “sad puppy dog eyes, please help me” mode, which isn’t hard. I *am* a sad puppy and bound to get even sadder if I can’t make this right. “My wife disappeared while the fire alarm was going off. I’m afraid something terrible has happened. Her brother is a violent man, who’s threatened her numerous times in the past. I was just wondering if you could call someone to help me go through the surveillance footage near our room? The sooner I can see what happened, the faster I can get the right kind of help.”

The woman’s outrage softens with empathy. “Oh no. Of course. I’m so sorry. That’s awful. I’ll get our IT person down here for you.” She reaches out, tapping the receiver again before punching in three numbers on the keypad. When the person on the other end answers, she says, “Hello, Kate, I have a guest at the front desk whose wife is missing. She disappeared during the alarm malfunction. We need your help checking the surveillance cameras from the past thirty minutes or so for suspicious activity in the hallway near his room.” She pauses, nodding. “Okay, great. See you in a few.”

She hangs up and shifts her attention back to me. “Kate is on her way. If you want to wait just there,” she says, motioning toward the end of the desk, “she’ll be with you in a moment.”

“Thank you so much.”

“Of course,” she says. “I hope this turns out to be a misunderstanding and everything is fine.”

“Me, too,” I say, drifting to the end of the desk as she answers another call—probably the person I hung up on a few minutes ago.

I fight the urge to clap my hands and demand everyone hurry the fuck up. The staff is under no obligation to go through their security footage for me. They could tell me to get lost and take this up with the police if I want access to their files.

I have to be patient, even if every second that passes feels like an eternity and the fear that Nora is in serious danger is

starting to feel like a vice slowly tightening around my neck.

Finally, Kate appears—thanks to her name tag, there’s not a moment of confusion—and I hurry through the introductions and explanations as quickly as possible.

She nods, her gray-streaked ponytail bobbing. “Got it. Pulling that footage shouldn’t be a problem. We did a system wide check a few days ago and the cameras were working perfectly.”

In a few more minutes, we’re in a concrete box of an office tucked behind the catering kitchen in the basement, and Kate is pulling up the logs on an ancient desktop.

“You said you were on the fourth floor, right? And what was your room number?” I tell her and she deselects several camera feeds. “Great. This should get us the view outside your room and down the hallway in both directions. We’ll start there, and if we see something, we can always add more cameras into the search. It’ll just be faster if we start small. The system is in solid working order, but the software is older than I’d like.” She glances up at me as the results load with painful slowness. “But we rarely have any reason to look at these logs, so I understand why management is reluctant to update the infrastructure. We’re in a very safe area. The worst crimes we usually see around here are kids skateboarding in the halls or guests stealing cutlery off other guests’ room service carts. You’d be shocked by how many people will snag a used fork or spoon. Not to mention those cute little bottles of ketchup.”

I nod, fighting to keep a pleasantly neutral expression on my face as my beeper begins to buzz with the same frequency as my cell.

The cell is Aaron, threatening to pull my brains out through my nostrils if I don’t call him back and tell him where I am so he can come join the search for Nora. The beeper is Al, no doubt telling me to get my ass over to the cupcake shop and finish this job while his team looks for Nora.

That’s what he told me on the phone earlier, and by now, he’s probably realized that I have no intention of doing so.

At least not until I know Nora is safe.

I could get in a lot of trouble for disobeying a direct order. I'm not sure how much, but I'm pretty sure jail time is on the table. But that's okay. I'll gladly serve a year or two behind bars to make this right.

"Okay, here we go," Kate says as the results finally load. "Let's see what we've got."

She fast forwards for a while, until the doors to the rooms around ours open and people start to emerge. Then, she slows the footage to normal speed. "This is the start of the alarm." She watches as the screen empties without any sign of movement from our door. After a moment, she glances over her shoulder at where I'm hovering beside her chair, arching a brow.

"Our cat was in labor, and we thought it was just a drill," I explain, pointing back at the screen as the grainy, black and white version of me pokes his head out the door to glance both ways. "But I eventually decided I should check to make sure there wasn't a fire. I left my wife and a friend of ours in the room to keep an eye on the cat and went to look around."

Kate hums low in her throat. "I'd advise evacuating immediately in the future. Better a few minutes of inconvenience than a lifetime of regret if things go wrong."

And things *have* gone wrong, just not in the way Kate was referring to.

About seven minutes after I leave the room, Kate slows the footage again as two men approach the door. Rex and Wimpy. I recognize them instantly, of course, but I know Nora would have, too.

So why did she let them in?

I get my answer a beat later as Rex lifts a fist to rap at the door only for it to open before he can knock. Bear steps out with the kittening box in his arms and is immediately threatened by Rex, who appears to be armed with his weapon of choice, a high-powered stun gun capable of doing serious

damage without breaking his grandmother's rule about bringing guns into the community.

“Oh no,” Kate murmurs, her spine stiffening in her chair as Bear and Nora are brought outside, clearly against their will. “I think we should call the police.”

“Absolutely,” I say, making a mental note to have Al reach out to the local police before they receive Kate's call. “But first, can we see where they went? I'd love to be able to give the authorities a vehicle description or, even better, a license plate number.”

“Right,” Kate says, clicking back to the search screen. “I'll do a wider search for more cameras during the ten minutes after they left the room.”

She does and five more agonizing minutes later, she opens several preview screens and we're able to watch Nora and Bear forced down the stairs and out a side door leading to a less trafficked section of the parking lot. Thanks to the outdoor camera, with its wide-angle lens, we get an excellent view of an old white van and Nora arguing with Rex as he tries to push her inside.

Bile churns in my stomach at the sight of his hands on her, but thankfully, he doesn't get rough. Eventually, Nora concedes to entering the vehicle, but not before casually dropping something on the ground that Rex doesn't seem to notice.

My heart jerks in my chest, but I resist the urge to run to the door in question and see what she left behind. I wait until Kate freezes the video as the van turns, giving us a clear shot at the license plate. I text it to Al, along with a quick description of the van and a heads-up that Kate is going to be alerting the authorities.

“Thank you so much,” I say, backing toward the door.

She turns in her chair. “Aren't you going to stay while I call the police? Help me explain what happened and who that man is? Is that her brother? The one you said had threatened her before?”

“I have to go find her,” I say, reaching for the door handle. “But thank you. Again. I’m so grateful.”

I escape into the hall, ignoring her calls for me come back, and sprint toward the place where Nora was last seen. I race down the stairs to the first floor, nearly running into a man carrying an ice bucket on my way out into the hall. But I only spare a second to shout a quick, “Sorry,” before picking up speed again.

I crash through the exterior door and scan the ground, spotting Nora’s breadcrumb instantly. The bright yellow of her earring stands out like a beacon against the gray concrete.

I pick it up and reach for my buzzing cell at the same time, answering Al on the first ring as he begins to shout for me to get my ass to Bad Dog.

“I can’t,” I say, my voice rough with emotion. “I have to help find her, Al. I have to. If she’s hurt, I’ll never forgive myself. Or you. Forget the extra days at the hotel, this is all I want for my retirement gift. Help me. Help me find that van and help me help her.”

He exhales an irate sigh. “Christ, you’ve become high maintenance in your old age. Five years ago, you would never have been this much of a pain in my ass.”

“Guess it’s a good thing I’m retiring,” I say, before adding in a softer voice, “Please, Al. Please. I love her. But I haven’t had the chance to tell her yet and—”

“Fine, fine,” he cuts in brusquely. “You don’t have to give me the full sob story. Just get in your car and head south. I’ll get you more details as I have them.”

“Thank you, Al. Thank you so much.” I end the call without waiting for his response and sprint toward my SUV.

Chapter Twenty-Six



We pull up to the warehouse complex just as it starts pouring again, making it almost impossible to see out the front windshield. I can't tell if there are any other people around or not, but I doubt it. Aside from the poor retail workers forced into work for Black Friday, most people have the entire Thanksgiving weekend off.

"Which bay?" Rex demands, leaning forward to squint through the rain-smearred glass.

"That's right, you did great, Mama," Bear murmurs to Clyde, who answers with a meow and a series of belches. "Yeah, you did. And we'll get you some medicine soon, I promise."

"Which bay?" Rex repeats, turning to shoot Bear a frustrated look. "The faster you cooperate, the faster you and your cat family can get out of here, man. I'm trying to make this as painless as possible, but you gotta pay attention."

Bear looks up from the kitten box, where our champion of childbirth has managed to deliver five perfect kittens during the drive. Three of the sweet babies are white with gray accents like their mama, one is gray all over like a tiny storm cloud, and one is a mix of orange and white like its daddy.

In my mind, I have already claimed the gray and the orange babies, who I desperately want to name Sunshine and Rainn—after Rainn Wilson who played Dwight on *The Office*, one of my favorite comedians of all time—but I haven't said that out loud. This isn't the time or place, and I don't want to

distract the babies as they're trying to find their way to Clyde's nipples to nurse.

I'm also not one hundred percent sure Bear will still want me to be a kitten adoptive parent after all this. He might want to put today, and everything that reminds him of the time he was kidnapped and forced to sign over thousands of dollars' worth of product to a criminal organization, behind him.

"I'm not sure," Bear says. "I always find it by sight, and I can't see shit. Can you? Shouldn't we pull over and wait until the rain slows down enough for the windshield wipers to actually work?"

"Right or left?" Wimpy curses as he slams on the brakes too hard at a stop sign, and the van hydroplanes a few feet into the thankfully abandoned intersection. "Fuck this rain. I'm so fucking over it. It never seemed to rain this much when I was a kid."

"It didn't," Rex says. "The ten warmest and wettest years in the history of Minnesota have been recorded in the past twenty-five years. It's climate change, man. Warmer oceans mean more water in the air and more intense precipitation on land."

Wimpy snorts. "What are you now? A weatherman?"

"No, but I read Scientific American, dumbass," Rex says. "Not all of us want to stay uneducated just because we dropped out of high school our senior year to join the family business."

"I don't believe in that stuff," Wimpy says with a sniff. "I probably just didn't notice the rain when I was a dumb kid because I was a dumb kid."

"You're like the human embodiment of that meme," Rex says, sounding increasingly annoyed with his cousin. "The one where the dog is sitting in a building that's burning down all around him, sipping a coffee, saying, 'this is fine.' This ain't fine. Ross just texted that there's three feet of water in the basement in his house on the west side of the property. If this

keeps up, our entire compound is going to be underwater by the time we get back to town.”

Wimpy shoots him a sharp look. “No shit? But my baseball card collection is in the cabinet at Nana’s. Should I call and ask someone to take it up to the attic, just in case?”

“Yeah, Wimps,” Rex says in a sarcastic tone that seems to go right over Wimpy’s head. “You should. We should take a time-out in the middle of our criminal enterprise here, and call home about your baseball card collection.”

Wimpy pulls out his cell. “Okay, it won’t take—”

Rex slaps the phone out of his hand with a disgusted sound. “You’re not calling anyone, you dumbass. We’re in the middle of a job and we’re going to finish it and get rid of these people before this gets any messier than it has already.”

A shiver runs up my spine at the phrase “get rid of these people.”

That didn’t sound like he plans on dropping us at the nearest emergency vet...

I shift my gaze Bear’s way. Our eyes meet and I can tell he’s worried about that phrase, too. I give a small nod, he nods back, and a silent understanding that we’re going to make a run for it the first chance we get passes between us.

I turn back to our kidnapers, pulse jittery as I say, “Maybe you should let Bear drive. If that’s how he usually finds the warehouse, then—”

“Shut it, Blondie.” Wimpy glares at me over his shoulder, the eye Matty blackened for him a little narrower than the other. “We’ve got this under control. This ain’t our first rodeo.” To Bear he says, “Look up the address. In your email or whatever. I’m sure you’ve got a record of it somewhere.”

Bear subtly perks up. “Sure, give me my phone, and I’ll see what I can pull up.”

They took our phones and turned them off as soon as we left the hotel parking lot, obviously concerned about us texting

for help or our movements being tracked by loved ones or the police.

Rex snorts. “Yeah, no, my man. You can sign into your email on my phone.”

“I’m not sure I can,” Bear says. “I don’t have my password memorized and in order to get it reset, I’ll have to send a code to my cell phone.”

“Fuck it, I’m going left,” Wimpy says, continuing to prove that patience and impulse control are not in his wheelhouse. “Left feels right. The warehouses are smaller over there, and why would he need a big warehouse for a bunch of toys?”

“Yeah, I think it’s left, too,” Bear says. “But I don’t know where. I usually turn by the taco truck and the entrance is behind that and to the right a little bit. But I doubt the taco truck is out today.”

“He could just use his phone for a minute or two,” I say as Wimpy creeps along the road at fifteen miles per hour through the torrential downpour. “That wouldn’t be long enough for anyone to track it and you could—”

My words end in a squeal as the van dips sharply down in the front. I grip the door handle with one hand and brace my other against the back of Rex’s seat. The rear of van bobs into the air for a second before sliding forward, driving the front of the van even deeper into one hell of a ditch.

I can see it now through the front windshield, a gully filled with brown grass, rushing water, and a faded red soda can, trapped in a nest of leaves.

As Wimpy cusses a blue streak and Rex demands to know where the fuck he learned to drive and how they’re going to finish the job now, I glance over at Bear, who nods quickly. I reach for the door, pulling up the old-fashioned nob lock before ripping it open and spilling out into the rain.

Rex lets out a surprised shout, but I hold the door for Bear, who jumps out into the soggy grass beside me a beat later, kitten box still in hand.

“This way, come on,” he says, moving past me and running hard toward the line of warehouse buildings on the other side of the street. “I know a place where we can call for help.”

I dash after him, grateful I put on my tennis shoes instead of my new purple pumps. I’m not an athlete by any means, but I make decent time in proper footwear.

But will I be fast enough to get inside before Wimpy or Rex grab me and drag me back to the van?

I risk a quick glance over my shoulder to see Wimpy knee-deep in water outside the drivers’ side. I can’t see Rex from this angle, so I’m guessing he isn’t out of the vehicle yet.

We’ve got a solid head start!

Buoyed by this victory, I push harder, doing my best to keep pace with Bear. But even carrying a box full of cats that he’s doing his best not to jostle, he’s way faster than I am. His legs are at least six inches longer and he’s clearly in amazing shape. When I finally catch up with him under a small awning in front of a door marked “Bays 11-16,” he’s barely breathing hard at all.

I, however, am panting so much I can’t hear what he says to me at first.

“What?” I gasp, my hand pressed to my chest, where my heart hammers my ribs.

“The code is 5-4-4-6-7-8,” he says. “Just in case you need it.” The lock buzzes and he leans into the door, holding it open as he jerks his head toward the long, shadowed hallway. “All the way down at the end, there’s a little office. We’ll break in if we have to and call from there.”

I glance over my shoulder one last time, my already racing heart pounding triple time as I see Wimpy and Rex racing after us through the rain. I dash through the door and Bear follows, using his foot to push it firmly closed behind him. “The lights turn on automatically,” he says, leading the way down the hall. “They’re on motion sensors.”

“Okay,” I say, swiping the water from my face as I follow him. Overhead, the lights hum on with a creepy flicker that makes me feel like I’m in a horror movie. I keep one eye out over our shoulder, so I’m not surprised when Rex and Wimpy slam into the door, but I jump and yip anyway.

“They won’t be able to get in,” Bear assures me. “That door is solid and that’s not the kind of lock that’s easily forced open.”

“Right,” I say, starting to shiver as the adrenaline rush fades. “My nerves are just a little shot. I thought being part of a spy operation would be fun and exciting, but I’m ready to go back to my normal life now. I would pay a thousand dollars to be bored at home, wishing Aaron would stop watching sports and Gram would stop jabbing me in the stomach with her giant knitting needles. She’s had to start using giant ones because her arthritis is so bad.”

Bear glances over my head, glaring at the door as Rex and Wimpy slam fists into the glass and shout things I can’t make out over the sound of the rain loud on the metal roof. “We’ll both be home soon. We’ve got this.” He glances down at me, adding with a smile, “Though I doubt you’ll be bored. You’ll be too busy getting ready for the kittens to move in in a couple of months.”

I brighten, smiling despite the increasingly intense shivers making my teeth chatter. “Oh, yay! Thank you. I’m in love with the orange and gray ones. I want to name them Sunshine and Rainn.”

“Perfect,” he says. “And I’ll keep the three mini Clydes, and name them something fun that comes in threes. But this time, I’ll make sure I know if they’re boys or girls before I start handing out names. I wasn’t so good at sexing a cat when I adopted Clyde.”

I laugh, stopping beside him as we arrive at the small office at the end of the hall. “I wondered about that. But I’m glad she’s still Clyde. Claudia the belching kitten wouldn’t be the same.”

“Agreed,” Bear says, peering through the glass door into the office before turning back to me. “Can you hold Clyde and the kiddos while I see if I can get in?”

“Sure.” I accept the box, fighting my shivers as best I can. I don’t want to give the babies shaken kitten syndrome, but I’m *so* cold. If there’s heat in this building, they don’t have it cranked up very high, and I’m soaked to the skin.

Bear punches at the keypad for a while before he mutters, “My code doesn’t work. And this door is about as thick as the one keeping those idiots locked out in the rain.”

I peer back down the hall, where the lights have now flickered off again. But there’s still enough illumination to see that Wimpy and Rex aren’t there anymore. “They’re gone,” I whisper.

Bear looks up before turning back to the door. “It’s okay. They can’t get in anywhere else, either. Unless someone lets them in, but I didn’t see any other cars outside. And we’re warned when we sign the rental contract not to let anyone in other than ourselves and our guests. Each code is tracked. If a thief gets in on our code, and they find out about it by looking at the security feed later, we’ll be held liable for it.”

“That’s it!” I look up at the high ceiling, where little round glass balls are fixed to the metal at regular intervals. “We should do something bad! Something they’ll notice on the cameras. And when they come to yell at us, or, even better, send the police, we can explain what happened and they’ll go after Wimpy and Rex.”

Bear follows my gaze. “That might work. But I don’t know if anyone is monitoring the cameras in real time.”

“Surely, they are,” I say, adjusting the weight of the box, grateful Clyde and her kittens seem to be sleeping through the worst of this. “I mean, your products are worth a lot of money, and that’s only one of the bays. I bet there are valuable things in the rest of the building, too, that the management wouldn’t want to leave unprotected. Even on a holiday.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Bear says, seeming encouraged as he glances around the hall. He pauses, pointing at a bright red fire extinguisher in the corner. He glances down at me, mischief in his dark green eyes as he asks, “Run down the hall, spraying foam? Or use that to break the glass and get into the office?”

I bite my lip, torn between my rule-following side and the part that’s willing to go to extremes to make sure this nightmare is over as soon as possible. “Break the glass,” I blurt out. “I’ll help pay for the damages. And that way, even if no one’s watching, we can use the phone in the office to call for help.”

He nods and heads for the extinguisher. “I agree. Move back a little. I don’t want to risk hitting you or the cats with shattered glass.”

“What about you?” I ask, as I pad down the hall, to what feels like a safe distance. “Do you want my sweater to wrap around your face or something? I have a t-shirt on underneath.”

“No, I’ve got it,” he says, gripping the red tube tightly in both hands. “I’m pretty sure the glass will break in thick chunks, like glass from a windshield, but I just want to be extra careful with you guys.” He pulls in a breath. “Here we go.”

He draws the cannister back and slams it forward. But just as the extinguisher makes contact with the glass—bouncing harmlessly off the apparently indestructible surface—the lights go out in the hallway.

A beat later, I hear squealing tires from not far away.

There isn’t time to figure out what that means—or ask Bear if he hears it, too—before a semitruck crashes into the end of the hall, just past the office, bending the metal walls and sending the solid door shooting through the air.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



MATTY

I reach the warehouse minutes after the FBI agents. They happened to be closer to the complex when Al managed to get a lock on the signal from Clyde's collar and launched into action right away.

Now, they're gathered around the same van from the surveillance video, but it's nose-down in a ditch, with no sign of Nora, Bear, or the Sweetwater cousins.

I pull up beside them, rolling down my window to shout my credentials into the rain, but I don't stop to check out the van. I jab a thumb toward the warehouses behind me, and say, "I'm going to check Bear's unit. Pretty sure that's where they were headed."

One of the agents says something about waiting for backup and understanding this is an FBI operation now that it's crossed state lines, but I pretend I can't hear him over the rain. I turn into the parking lot, zooming toward the entrance to Bay 12.

But at the last minute, I cut to the left, my wheels skidding in several inches of water as I shift direction. Something deep in my gut says to drive around to the back of the building. After all, there's nothing to see here—no sign of the Sweetwaters or of a forced entry. If they're still here, they're probably around back, trying to get in without being noticed by people on the road.

Or maybe they made a run for it on foot.

Maybe wrecking the van was the sign they needed to abandon this mission and let Nora and Bear go. Maybe I'll make this final turn and see my girl huddled under an awning in a loading bay, waiting for rescue.

Even as the thoughts race through my head, however, I know not to get my hopes up. Rex is too stubborn, and hell-bent on impressing his grandmother, to give up so easily. And Wimpy is too stupid.

I know this. Still, I'm surprised when I clear the side of the building and see a red semitruck without a load barreling toward the warehouse without any sign of slowing.

The rain is coming down too hard to see who's behind the wheel, but I'd bet my pension it's the Sweetwaters and Wimpy's driving. Who else is dumb enough to floor it full speed at a building, risking debilitating whiplash or death in the name of gaining access to a warehouse full of toys?

I slam on my horn, alerting them to the fact that they're not alone.

I'm hoping it might get them to turn the truck and make a run for it, but they don't. Whoever's driving slams on the brakes at the last minute, but it's too late. The semi is going too fast to stop before impact.

I watch in horror as the man behind the wheel flies over the steering wheel and through the windshield. I'm no fan of the Sweetwaters, but I don't want to watch a man die. I shove the SUV into park a few dozen feet from the crash and throw open my door. A beat later, I'm running toward the semi, which is emitting an impressive amount of smoke from the engine, especially considering how hard the rain is coming down.

I reach the passenger's door just as Rex shoves it open, coughing hard as he clings to the seatbelt tight across his chest.

"Are you okay?" I ask, stepping up on the metal grate on the side of the truck.

“Fucking idiot. What the fuck was he thinking?” he wheezes between coughs. “I told him not to go so fast, but he didn’t listen. He never fucking listens.” Rex looks up, seeming to realize who I am for the first time. His shocked expression narrows with anger. “And it’s your fault. You sneaky shit. You were trying to steal our payday. As soon as this seatbelt stops biting me in half, I’m going to pound your face in.”

“Shouldn’t you be more worried about your cousin?” Shifting my gaze to where Wimpy lies unconscious, sprawled across the front of the truck, bleeding profusely from a cut on his forehead, I shake my head. “He might be dead, Rex. I can’t tell from here.”

Rex curses and strains to reach across his body. “Fuck, get me out. Get me out, so I can check on him! My shoulder’s too fucked to pop the belt.”

“I’ll check on him,” I say, deciding against freeing a man who wants to pound my face in. I close the door enough to swing around and climb out on top of the smoking hood.

Only then do I realize how hot the metal is.

It feels like there’s more than smoke under here.

It feels like the engine’s on fire...

Out of the corner of my eye, I suddenly see it, the hint of flames licking at the crumpled metal near the front of the semi. I’m not sure where the fuel tank is on one of these things, but there’s probably enough oil under the hood for the makings of a decent explosion.

“Matty, catch!”

I look up to see Nora standing in front of the truck, in the hole created in the side of the warehouse when the semi slammed into the structure and rebounded from impact. She’s holding a fire extinguisher and is soaking wet, but otherwise seems to be in one piece.

And I intend to keep her that way.

“Throw it fast and get away from the truck, Nora,” I shout. “There’s a fire.”

“That’s why you need this!” she says, winding up and throwing the extinguisher with all her might.

Unfortunately, upper body strength isn’t one of my girl’s many gifts. The cannister only goes a foot or two before it collides with the pavement, making Nora flinch and her hands fly up to cover her face.

But the extinguisher doesn’t explode. It only rolls across the ground.

Nora chases after it, bringing her precious head closer to the front of the truck.

My heart catapulting into my throat, I shout in a booming God-on-high-voice I’ve never heard come from my mouth in all my twenty-nine years, “Get away from the truck right now, Nora, I love you!”

Her head pops up, just visible above the steaming edge of the engine. “I love you, too. And *you* get away from the truck! I’m not getting away until you’re away. I’m a fucking hero, dammit, and I’m going to save you.”

Cursing, I cut a glance toward Wimpy, who is still unconscious, but appears to be breathing. Deciding that gently removing this asshole from danger isn’t worth putting Nora at risk for one more second, I curl my knees into my chest and shove his limp, but very heavy body, off the hood.

As soon as he starts to fall, I turn and slide off the other side of the truck. My feet hit the asphalt, and I stumble, but find my balance a second later. I’m on my way to drag Nora out of danger—and kiss her and promise her I’m never going to let anyone even think about hurting her again—when something heavy lands on me from behind, knocking me flat.

I hear, “That’s what you get, traitor,” and then misery slams into my skull, making lights flash behind my eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



Cursing our failing public school systems and the patriarchy and Cassie Ann Sweetwater for employing stone-cold idiots and everything else that could have possibly contributed to creating Rex and Wimpy, I snatch the fire extinguisher off the ground with a growl.

I slosh through several inches of water, past the flaming engine that's probably going to explode and send pieces of me and the man I love splattering all over the place before I've even had the chance to hear him say he loves me more than once.

When I reach where Rex is punching Matty in the back of the head like the dirty-fighting jerk he is, I shout, "Stop being a dick!"

When Rex turns my way, I swing the canister, striking him on the side of the head hard enough to send him falling off Matty with a groan.

But he's not unconscious, just stunned. After a moment or two, he staggers to his feet, reeling toward us as Matty pushes himself up onto his hands and knees.

"May I?" Matty asks, reaching for the fire extinguisher.

"Please, do," I say, releasing it.

A beat later, he's in motion, spiraling up from the ground as he swings the bright red tube up between Rex's legs so hard, even *I* wince on impact, and I have no idea what being punched in the nuts feels like.

But clearly, it's no fun. Rex emits a strangled, "Fucking shit," and his eyes go comically wide before he sags slowly back to the ground, clutching his wounded family jewels.

Before his knees make impact, Matty has my hand, and we're running through the rain toward his SUV as a flock of black vehicles with tinted windows peel around the side of the warehouse.

"The CIA?" I shout as we near the vehicle.

"The FBI," Matty says over his shoulder. "Rex and Wimpy crossed state lines with people this time. A lot easier to get action on a human kidnapping than a feline one."

I start to smile, but then I remember Bear and the kitties and try to turn back. Thanks to the torrential downpour, however, I don't stop, I simply go sliding along on my heels in the water as Matty pulls me the last few inches to the still-running SUV.

He must have jumped out without even bothering to shut off the engine.

I crash into him with an, "oof," and wrap my arms around his neck when he turns to steady me. "Bear was hurt when the door flew off the hinges," I say, holding onto him after I have my balance. He feels too good to let him go a second before I absolutely have to. "I think his kneecap might be shattered. He's in the hallway with Clyde and the kittens. Luckily, they weren't hurt. I was holding them when the truck hit, and we were back far enough away from the door to be safe."

Matty nods, hugging me tight. "Stay here, I'll go tell them. Don't move. I don't want you anywhere near that truck until we know it's not going to blow."

"Promise me," I say, clinging to his neck for another beat. "You, too. Promise me. Nowhere near the truck. I need to hear you tell me you love me again."

His expression softening, he says, "I love you. I've loved you since I helped you off that kissing booth at the Ren Faire, and you told me I was your hero."

"You *are* my hero," I say. "And I'm yours."

“You sure are.” He bends, pressing a kiss to my forehead before he whispers, “Now get in the car and warm up. You feel like a Nora-shaped ice sculpture.”

“Don’t have to ask me twice,” I say, reaching for the passenger’s side door. Now that the adrenaline rush is starting to fade, my body is doing its best to remind me how cold I am.

Inside the car, I turn the heat up all the way and huddle in front of it, but it barely takes the edge off. What I really need is a hot shower, some dry clothes, and Matty on top of me—preferably naked.

I feel a little guilty for thinking about Matty naked while two men are being arrested, the newly arrived fire department puts out a fire, and a team of EMTs carry Bear out on a stretcher with the box of cats balanced on his belly, but not too bad. In those few moments while I was fighting bad guys in front of the burning engine, when my life flashed before my eyes, I only regretted a few things and one of them was not having more excellent sex—especially with Matty.

Gram was right. Sex is one of the great gifts of being in a human body, just like lemon gelato and cupcakes with extra icing, and from now on, I’m not skipping dessert.

Not in any of its forms...

But I’m also not going to be such a sex-pervert that I don’t know when to stop thinking about Matty going down on me while he squeezes my ass tight in both hands and step in for a friend in need.

As Bear’s stretcher is carried past the SUV, I swing out, shouting to be heard over the storm, “Wait! I’ll take the cats!”

The two beefy EMTs stop, blinking in the pounding rain as I hurry over to meet them.

“Thank you,” Bear says, relief flooding his features. “I’m not sure if they’ll let me keep them at the hospital. And Clyde’s upset, and I’m starting to feel dizzy.”

“Of course, you poor thing,” I say, brushing his hair from his forehead before gathering the box containing a belching and yowling Clyde from his lap. “I’ll take care of everything,

don't worry. Is there anyone you want me to call for you? Your parents? A friend? Someone who can meet you at the hospital?"

"I'll call my friend Jace when I get there," he says, looking sleepier now that the stress of the cats' fate is off his shoulders. "But thank you. I'll be in touch as soon as I can."

"Matty and I will call and check on you," I assure him as the EMTs resume their course toward the waiting ambulance and Matty comes striding back toward me through the downpour under a large black umbrella he's acquired somewhere along the way. I call after Bear, "Don't worry about anything, I'll take care of our little mama and her babies!"

Matty stands beside me, shielding the cats and I from the worst of the rain. "Al's going to be here in five minutes. He'll take you back to the hotel, and I'll be there as soon as I can."

My brows pinch together. "No. You have to come with me. No more danger, no more mission, no more CIA. You're done."

"Almost. I promise." He sighs, looking tired, but determined and in love with me. The last part is the only thing that keeps me from crumpling into a puddle on the ground with all the other puddles when he adds, "But I have to finish this. Now. Before the Sweetwaters get wind of the fact that Rex and Wimpy were arrested. I'll get down to Bad Dog, get the information we need, and get back to you as quickly as I can. The good news is, once I meet you at the hotel tonight, I'll be done. For good. The rest of the team can finish everything else."

I want to argue. I want to ask why they can't do the lurking and sneaking in Bad Dog, too, but his mind is made up. I can see it in his face. And it seems Al is already here. The man with the weathered face and battered ball cap emerging from a nondescript beige sedan a few yards away just looks like an Al.

He also has kind eyes and seems to care about Matty.

His voice is brusque as he says, “Get going, kid. No rest for the wicked tonight,” but his gaze is filled with compassion. He claps Matty on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure she has everything she needs.”

“And the cats,” Matty murmurs. “Bear was hurt, so we’re back on cat duty.”

“Of course, you are,” Al says flatly. “It wouldn’t be this mission if there wasn’t cat herding involved.” To me, he adds, “You ready, ma’am?”

Casting a quick glance Matty’s way to see him watching me with a hopeful look, clearly needing me to play nice with his handler, I nod, “Sure. But call me Nora. I’ll sit in the back and try to dry out the cats while you drive.”

“I have towels,” Al says, taking the umbrella handle from Matty. “And a clean sweatshirt for you. Don’t want you to catch a chill.”

As we walk away, I look over my shoulder to see Matty standing in the rain, watching us go, and pray it isn’t the last time I see him. I’m suddenly positive we can overcome any of the obstacles still standing in our path—I’ll take my business on the road in his van if I have to—as long as he comes home to me tonight.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



MATTY

By the time I get to Bad Dog, break into The Cupcake Factory to clone their ancient hard drive, meet with Al at a truck stop diner for my final debriefing, and get back to the hotel, it's nearly one in the morning.

But when I trudge into the lobby in the soggy clothes I changed back into after ditching my black sweatsuit in the trunk, there are still several couples in the lobby. Some sip coffee while they play board games, others chat softly over a wine or beer, but they all look starry-eyed and happy to be there.

This conference seems to be doing some real good for these people.

Even a few days ago, I might have cynically thought the changes won't last once they get home. Bad habits are hard to break, and relationship issues run too deep to be solved in a day or two.

But now...

Now, I'm ready to give up the dream I've been meticulously planning for nearly two years, store my traveling van, and see if Nora wants to get a place together. In just a little over thirty-six hours with this woman, I've realized this is where I belong. Not in Bad Dog or Minnesota, but with Nora. Wherever she is, as long as I'm with her, I'll be home.

And I know she feels the same way. The connection between us is earthy and real, but also a little mystical, a fact

she proves by opening the door just as I'm emerging from the elevator, even though I didn't call to tell her I was on my way.

The moment I see her in the doorway—hair fluffy around her shoulders and the rest of her cozy in the flannel pajamas I gave her at my treehouse—all the stress and pain of the day fades away. I no longer feel the tightness in my shoulders or the ache in the back of my head from where Rex's ring bounced off my skull.

I only feel...joy.

This is what joy feels like.

In the increasing isolation of the past few years and all the pressure from my family to quit dicking around and make something of my life, I'd nearly forgotten. But now, it hits me so hard, it sucks the air from my lungs. In a world filled with so much suffering, it's so easy to get lost in the darkness and forget that this is also part of being human. This ease and light and beauty.

And she is the most beautiful thing of all.

At the door, I don't say "hello" or "thank you" or "don't ever leave me." I don't say anything at all. I just dump my wallet and keys on the entry table, pull her into my arms, and kiss her with everything in my heart, closing the door behind us as we sway together into the room.

When we finally come up for air, she whispers, "The cats are asleep in a fresh box behind the sofa. Housekeeping changed our sheets for us while you were gone. Come to bed with me?"

"Nothing in the world I'd love more," I whisper back, taking her hand and letting her lead me down the shadowed hall toward the bedroom.

"Say that part again," she says as she stops beside the bed and reaches for the bottom of my shirt.

"What part?" I ask as my head emerges. I toss the fabric to the ground and reach for the top of my jeans, but Nora's already popping the button through the hole.

“The love part, of course,” she says. “I need to make sure it wasn’t a dream.”

“Right, the love part,” I say, smiling in the darkness. “I’m wildly, completely in love with you, Nora Boudreaux. I’ve been fighting it, but sometime in the past day and a half, I realized that was not only stupid but an exercise in futility.”

“Absolute futility,” she agrees, dragging my zipper down. “We’re bananas and chocolate, baby.”

“Two things that shouldn’t go together,” I agree, starting to work on the buttons on her pajama top.

“But that totally do,” she says, her voice soft and filled with wonder. “You’re staying, aren’t you?”

“Putting the van in storage ASAP.” I push the flannel down her arms, revealing the lacy camisole she’s wearing beneath.

As soon as her arms are free, she wraps them tight around my neck and kisses me, hard and deep. “Oh, Matty, I’m so glad,” she murmurs against my lips. “I would have gone with you, but I really don’t want to live in a van. And even if I hire a caretaker for Gram, I still don’t want to be too far away. She might need me, and I’ll always need her. She’s so wise and was so right about sex. I really need to have more of it. Lots more.”

“I think I can help you out with that,” I murmur as she draws me toward the bed.

“Can you?” she teases, eyeing me like *I’m* a chocolate-covered banana she can’t wait to take a bite of as I quickly dispose of my damp jeans and socks. She reaches out, caressing my cock through the strained fabric of my boxer briefs, and answers her own question, “Oh yes, you absolutely can. Let’s never sleep.”

I smile against her lips as we kiss. “Maybe a little sleep. Later.”

“Much later,” she says, drawing me down on top of her, the only place I want to be. I shift to one side, quickly drawing her flannel pants down her legs, revealing those giant fluffy socks. I linger by her feet, kneading her calves through the soft

knit as I ask, “Is it wrong that these socks make me want to do filthy things to you?”

She props up on her elbows, watching me slowly work my way toward her ankles. “No. I’ll order ten more pairs first thing tomorrow morning.”

“You’re good to me.”

“I can be even better,” she murmurs in a sexy as fuck voice that leaves me helpless to resist as she rolls me over onto my back and demands. “Out of the rest of those clothes. Now.”

“Your wish is my command,” I assure her, holding her gaze as I drag my boxer briefs slowly down, revealing the top of my swollen cock.

She watches me with a hungry look I love nearly as much as I love her. “I’m going to do wicked things to your cock, Matty. I can’t help it.”

“I wouldn’t want you to try,” I assure her as she settles between my thighs and grips the base of my cock firmly in her hand. She glides her fingers up and down my length with the perfect pressure, twisting her fist just a hint at the top, sending electrical shocks of pleasure rocketing across my skin. Then she lowers her mouth over me and proves she’s the most talented woman in the world.

“The best,” I mutter, half out of my mind in the first few seconds. “The fucking best. You’re everything, Nora. Everything.”

She hums around my cock, and I nearly lose control.

Instead, I grip her by the upper arms and drag her up my body in one smooth motion. I kiss her protest away, fisting my hand in her hair at the base of her neck and whispering, “Ride me, baby. Ride your cock until you come.”

She reaches down, fitting me to her dripping pussy and I curse, pulse jittering as I realize we nearly forgot the condom. “Wait, condom,” I say, shifting my grip to her hips. “I have more in my wallet.”

She exhales a tortured sound and I agree, “I know. Never again. We’ll keep them by the bed. Our bed.” I kiss her hard and then leap up before she can speak. I dash into the other room, moving so fast, I must scare Clyde.

She belches and hisses softly from her box, and I whisper, “Sorry, didn’t mean to scare the babies, just trying not to make any babies.”

She grumbles something that sounds approving—as a new mother, she understands what a big responsibility it is to bring new life into the world—and I tiptoe out of the room.

Back in the bed, Nora is waiting for me on her knees in the center of the covers.

She reaches for me, whispering, “Did you mean that? About our bed?”

“Every word,” I promise, rolling the condom on and tossing the wrapper on the bedside table. “I told you. I want to shack up with you as soon as possible. I have so many things I want to do with you, and only half of them are sexual.”

“Maybe sixty percent for me,” she says, pulling me on top of her, sighing as I slide my fingers between her legs. “Or maybe that’s just because I want you so much right now. Can we build a life on sixty percent sex and forty percent driving each other crazy?”

“You don’t drive me crazy,” I say, kissing her as I fit my cock to where she’s so hot and wet. “Loving you is the sanest thing I’ve ever done.”

Her eyes shine into mine as I push slowly inside her, this woman I’m so glad I don’t have to learn to live without. “Oh, Matty. That’s the sweetest thing. I love you so much. You’re my favorite.”

“And you’re mine.” Words fall away as we begin to move, making love in that same easy, unselfconscious way we did the first time, proving this is just how it is with us.

We don’t have anything to hide or anything to prove.

We just needed to get out of our own way and let the pull we both feel work its magic. And magic it is...



Later—probably much too late, but I can't keep my hands off this woman—we fall asleep in each other's arms.

The next day, we sleep in, fuss over the cats, order room service, and spend a lazy afternoon watching movies in bed and talking about everything and nothing. And every bit of it is perfect. The night is more of the same.

More of Nora, more of her sweetness, her sexiness, more of wishing we could stay frozen in time like this forever.

Sunday morning, I wake up to what feels like a paw on my cheek. I open my eyes to see Clyde asleep between us, a paw on each of our faces and soft snores rumbling from her pink nose.

On her other side, Nora's already awake and grinning.

"She loves us," she whispers. "Do you think the babies I'm adopting will love us, too? Once they can open their eyes and see us and everything?"

"How could they not?" I ask in a sleep rough voice. "We're amazing."

She giggles. "We are. I like us. And I think we've earned this vacation. Do we really get to stay here until Tuesday like Al said we could?"

I gently move Clyde's paw from my face to the pillow. "I don't see why not. Just let me call Mel and make sure she and the rest of the family are okay without me for a couple more days. That they don't need me to come back and help with flood clean-up or anything."

I reach for my cell, and Nora reaches for the TV remote. Just ten minutes later, through a combination of Mel's updates and the shocking footage on the news, we learn my cousin Theo and his ex-girlfriend, Macy, had to be rescued from a

flooded cabin in the woods this morning. A good chunk of the town is also underwater, and the state police are asking no one come in to or out of Bad Dog for the next twenty-four hours unless they have absolutely no other choice.

Considering all my family members are now safe and sound and Mel has plenty of food and fuel at her place, Nora and I decide we *do* have other choices. We decide to stay until Tuesday, at which time we'll meet Bear at the airport with the cats on our way home.

Then, we'll start apartment hunting for us and aide hunting for Gram.

But when we arrive back in Bad Dog on Tuesday afternoon, Gram isn't alone, and Aaron is traumatized by what he calls all the "old folk fornication" going on in his childhood home. Apparently, Gram's had a boyfriend for a while now and they're ready to go public and move in together.

Aaron can't get to the airport fast enough, and Nora seems stunned.

"*That's* why she wanted me to go on more dates," she says after we've shaken the nice, heavily tattooed older man's hand and he and Gram have headed into the living room. "Because she wanted to get rid of me so she could shack up with her secret man."

"I'm sure she didn't want to get rid of you," I say, drawing her into my arms by the back door. "She just wanted you to get the love you deserve."

She crosses her wrists behind my neck, a wicked twinkle in her eyes. "So, you should sleep over, right? Come on, you can't leave me alone with the geriatric perverts on parade."

"I heard that," Gram calls out from the other room. "I have my hearing aids in. And I'm not a pervert. I'm sexually liberated."

"Amen," her man calls out with a rumbly laugh.

"Or we could get another hotel," I whisper, making Nora snort.

“Yes, please, extended stay, please,” she says. “I’ll go pack my things.”

But due to the families displaced by the flooding, we can’t find an extended stay hotel right away. And my house is already rented out for the year, so that’s not an option. We end up shacking up in the cottage in Starling’s backyard for a while, plugging in an extra space heater when the temperatures drop sharply at the start of December.

But we’re happy in our tiny love nest, so happy I’m actually a little disappointed when we finally land a one-bedroom apartment in a cookie-cutter complex not far from the airport. Cookie cutter or not, I’m grateful that I don’t have to spend a day (or night) apart from my girl.

It might have taken me a while to see the writing on the wall, but it’s so clear to me now that wherever Nora is, that’s where I belong.

For now and always.

Chapter Thirty



Two and a half months later...

The Super Bowl holds no interest for me.

I have too much empathy to enjoy smashy sports. I can't even watch my brother play hockey, and that's a lot less violent than football. Well, it usually is, anyway. As the new guy on the Minnesota Midgets NHL team, it seems like Aaron gets picked on a lot more than the other forwards. His first game was so rough that I excused myself halfway through the first period and spent the rest of the viewing party playing with the cats.

Sunshine and Rainn are the light—and chaotic storm cloud—of my life. They are the sweetest, funniest, craziest little fluff balls and every day is better with them in it.

I can't believe I thought I was anything resembling complete before they came into my life.

Though, the fact that Matty and I moved in together before the kittens came home *might* have something to do with my off-the-charts happiness levels. Not only is my man the sweetest, sexiest, most heroic newly minted high school French teacher in the world, he's also every bit as obsessed with our little monsters as I am. When I asked him to run out at nine p.m. last night to buy more fabric for the kittens' cheerleader and football player costumes for the Super Bowl party, he didn't bat an eye, and he's proudly posed for pics with the kittens with all his family members.

Even Matty's brothers, who live to tease Matty about how he's gone from Problem Child to Probably Asleep by Nine P.M. in the blink of an eye.

But Matty doesn't care. He lets the teasing roll off his back with a smile. He knows that we might be in bed by nine p.m., but rarely are we sleeping. We're too busy making up for lost time.

Which reminds me...

I lean closer to Matty on the couch, whispering, "I had some leftover fabric last night. You know what I did with it?"

He arches a brow. "What did you do with it?"

"I made an extra cheerleader skirt," I murmur, snuggling closer to his side. "A very short one. In just my size."

He hums low in his throat, a hungry sound I know has nothing to do with food, considering we've both eaten our weight in nachos since arriving at Mel's house. "Any plans to model it for me later?"

"If you play your cards right," I say, reaching out to pet the kittens, who are both currently out cold on a pillow on Matty's lap, exhausted by their first McGuire family party. "Though there is one problem."

"What's that?" he asks, his hand sliding down my back to curl around my waist.

"I didn't have time to make the little panties you're supposed to wear underneath," I say, innocently batting my lashes. "So, I guess I'll have to wear the skirt without anything on underneath."

"I'm going to get the car, meet me at the side door in five minutes," Matty says, starting to rise from the couch.

I grab his arm, giggling softly as I pull him back down onto the couch. "No, we can't. We have to stay for at least a little longer. I need to see the halftime show."

He scowls. "The boy band?"

“No, silly,” I say, glancing up at the screen as the announcer introduces the boy band in question, a group I dimly remember thinking were overrated when I was a kid. Now, I can admire how well the members of the band have held up in middle age, but not nearly as much as I admire puppies.

“Shh! It’s time! The puppy bowl is about to start!” I shout to the rest of the party, which I swear gets louder with every passing minute.

Every McGuire in town is here, and all of them were allowed to invite a plus one in addition to their significant other. Mel is trying to expand her social circle post-divorce, which is great, but at this rate, she’s also going to need to expand her home. Her adorable two-story cottage is filled to bursting and about to overflow the wraparound porch outside.

“Guys, come on!” I call out again as a group of McGuire men loud-laugh at the punch bowl not far behind us. “Puppies! And Christian and Starling are going to be on TV!”

Starling organized the first annual Bad Dog Puppy Bowl as a fundraiser for the animal shelter with Christian, her fiancé. They’re serving as “coaches” for the two opposing teams and have all kinds of silly puppy games planned. I’ve been looking forward to the show all day, even if it is going to be broadcast on public access, not in high def.

Laughing, Matty grabs the remote from the couch cushion beside him. “I don’t think we need to hear it to enjoy it, but we’ll crank the volume anyway. These clowns have had way too much beer to stay quiet for more than thirty seconds.”

I cast a judgmental glance over my shoulder at our friends and family. “Beer or not, I don’t understand this lack of interest in puppies.”

Keanu Reeves, Barrett and Wren’s dog, lets out a rusty bark from the recliner on my other side, where he’s also been napping, proving that animals are way smarter than people. Animals realize that football is about as much fun as watching paint dry.

All the pets in our vicinity passed out long ago and Bella, the de-scented skunk, simply...vanished sometime after kick-off and was discovered playing in the sandbox outside with the older kids, though no one can remember letting her out. Starling didn't even try to bring Kyle the turkey and his wife, Penny. She said that turkeys have a notoriously short attention span for anything that isn't food or playground-equipment related and dropped them off in Gram's backyard to zoom down the toddler slides for a few hours.

Gram elected to stay home from the party, too. She's not a fan of football and she and her boyfriend, Slasher, wanted to spend their Sunday re-watching Spinal Tap. Slasher was a drummer in a metal band for thirty years, and Gram loves a mockumentary. She also still loves getting it on with Slasher, a thing I try not to think too much about. When I found their stash of Viagra while packing up my things, I simply put it back on the medicine cabinet shelf and backed away.

I wish my grandmother a spicy last act of her beautiful life, but I want to know as little about it as possible.

"Damn, that's crazy cute," Matty murmurs, gaze fixed on the screen, where the cameraman is weaving in and out of a pack of puppies in matching football jerseys. Some are wrestling with dog toys, some chase each other in circles, and a few are as dead to the world as the kittens, but they're all the most adorable beasties ever.

I emit a girly squealing noise that is any red-blooded woman's response to that much cuteness on a screen at one time and squeeze Matty's arm. "Oh my God, they're precious. Let's adopt them all."

He chuckles. "I think we have our hands full with Curtain Shredders One and Two right now, but I'd be up for a puppy in a year or so."

I sigh and lean my head on his shoulder. "That sounds perfect. I'm so glad I'm not scared of animals anymore."

"Me, too." He kisses my forehead. "You're a badass."

“Thanks. You, too,” I say, kind of loving that no one knows what a badass Matty is but me.

His family, aside from Mel, still thinks he was just a stock car racer, handyman, and troublemaker before he settled down and started using his mad language skills for the betterment of the high school kids of Bad Dog.

They don’t know that he’s a hero or that he single-handedly shut down the Sweetwater crime organization or that the reason The Cupcake Factory is under new management is because Cassie Ann fled the country, and her grandsons are in prison awaiting trial on a laundry list of criminal charges. They don’t know that Matty is now retired CIA, has a nice pension for a thirty-year-old, or spent years keeping secrets in order to keep them safe.

But there are no secrets between us, a fact he proves when he whispers as soon as the puppy bowl ends, “I have a confession to make. I found that thing you were hiding in the pantry.”

“Oh, yeah?” I ask, trying to play it cool, even as my heart speeds. I know what he’s found, but for once I’m not sure what he’s going to say.

Most days, I feel like I’ve known Matty forever, like he’s always been a piece of me, even before we fell in love. But despite his wild, adventurous past, Matty’s a cautious person in many ways. He looks before he leaps, and this might be way too big a leap after only living together for a couple months. I might have intruded upon turf that isn’t mine to intrude upon.

“Yeah,” he says, his gaze locked on mine. “And so I called the number on top, the furniture place.”

“Uh-huh.” I press my lips together and nod, fighting to remain calm. If he’s seen the final product before I’ve had a chance to put on the finishing touches, I’m going to be sick to my stomach. I worked so hard to keep this renovation a surprise for the past month, in advance of a Valentine’s Day unveiling, and now... “Just tell me,” I blurt out. “If you hate it,

it's fine, I can put it back the way it was. Or whatever way you want it, just don't leave me in suspense."

He shrugs a non-committal shoulder. "I haven't seen it yet. But the furniture delivery company has. So has the paint guy and the plumber and the woman painting the mural. That's roughly half of Bad Dog that now knows the location of my top-secret prepper hideaway. Which means, it's no longer a hideaway. It's a hunting camp. A 'weird and kind of girly' one, if the plumber is to be believed."

My jaw drops with an outraged sound. "What? It is not! It's gender neutral. If anything, it's more manly than girly. I wasn't trying to take over, I was trying to make your space a more welcoming, comfortable place to call home. I know you hate the apartment we're in right now and I thought..."

His brows lift. "You're seriously considering moving out to the woods with me?"

"Well, not for forever," I say, with my own non-committal shrug. "But maybe for a year or two, until the sex haze wears off and I come to my senses. I know you love it out there, and I love you and so I stuck my nose into your business. Again. If it was the wrong thing to do, I'm sorry."

"There's only one way to find out," he says, rising with the kitten-topped pillow in his arms.

I blink up at him. "What? Now?"

"Now," he says. "I packed a bag for both of us and since it's Goober Mullens' Day, I don't have work tomorrow."

I wrinkle my nose. "They still give kids Goober Mullens' Day off from school? They proved that he didn't actually invent the pogo stick. He stole the idea from that other guy who stole it from the German guy."

"The Bad Dog school system doesn't care," he says. "They just want an excuse to take off work and eat candy covered peanuts and walk backwards around downtown all day."

My brow furrow deepens. "And what does that have to do with anything? I never did understand how that came to be

part of the celebration. I get that ‘goober’ is another word for peanut in some circles, but—”

“I’m taking your pillow, Mel, the cats are sleeping on it, I’ll bring it back. Thanks for a great party,” Matty calls out, miraculously not waking the kittens as he hollers and then strides toward the door.

“Okay, bye!” Mel calls out from the kitchen where she’s been whipping up batch after batch of delicious food all day. Having a professional chef as a future sister-in-law really is a huge bonus.

And she *will* be my sister-in-law. Even if Matty hates what I’ve done to his treehouse—and the fact that I’ve told everyone and their mother about it—he’ll forgive me. He knows that being nosy and a tiny bit bossy are my toxic traits, and he loves me anyway. And if I hadn’t been both of those things, he’d be halfway around the world alone and sad in a van right now instead of having the “best winter of his life.”

Those are his words.

Words I intend to toss gently into his face if he opens the treehouse door and starts screaming.

But when we tromp through the leafless winter woods around an hour later and the newly renovated exterior reveals itself to us like a fairy cottage in an enchanted forest, he doesn’t scream. He takes in the fence made of wrought iron leaves, the spiral staircase leading to the top, and the fresh coat of dark blue paint that pops beautifully against the gray sky and black roof, then turns to look at me with a delighted grin that goes straight to my heart.

“You like it,” I say.

“It’s beautiful. Like something out of a movie.”

I clap my hands together over my mouth, hiding my smile. “Wait until you see the inside. It’s the cutest thing ever, and I added a dishwasher.”

His eyes widen. “A dishwasher?”

“I’m only going to rough it so much, McGuire. I need a dishwasher. And a sewing room. I added one of those, too.”

He laughs. “Where?”

I point a bit farther back, behind the main structure. “In the addition. It’s just a shell and some plumbing right now. But there’s going to be a sewing room and guest suite two trees down, connected to the main structure with a swinging bridge, which is going to be adorable. Aaron’s friend Tony is working on it. He said it should be finished by the end of June, right when our six-month lease is up.”

He sets the suitcase down and shifts the cat carrier to one hand, drawing me against him with the other. “You’re diabolical.”

I bite my lip. “Is that a bad thing?”

“No, it’s a perfect thing,” he says. “You’re going to keep me on my toes. But I have a little something up my sleeve, too.”

My eyes widen. “What? A puppy? We’re getting one sooner than you said?” My excitement turns to concern as I add, “Though potty training a puppy might be hard in a treehouse. We might want to wait until we’re a little more settled and have time to install a patch of grass up there somewhere.”

“A patch of grass,” he echoes. “In the tree.”

“If we can put a human toilet in a tree, we can put a platform with some grass on it up there for the puppy,” I say. “You’ve gotta think outside the box, McGuire.”

He grunts. “Speaking of boxes, there should be something waiting for you on the new kitchen table. The furniture delivery coordinator said she’d personally make sure it was in place before she locked up on Friday.”

I hug him tighter, so happy I could break into a spontaneous musical number. “You’re diabolical, too. I love that about you. About us.”

“I love you more than is decent or sane,” he says, brushing a kiss across my lips.

I hum against his warm skin. “Decency and sanity are lame.” I shiver. “So is this wind. I’m so tired of winter.”

He pulls back with a wry smile. “Good thing you installed a new heating system then, isn’t it?”

I grin. “It is! Race you to the top. Last one in has to set up the litter box.” I dash for the treehouse, leaving Matty laughing behind me. We both know I’m going to win. I have a head start and I’m only carrying a backpack full of toiletries, my small purse, and the grocery bag with the litter and a few groceries inside. Matty has the cat carrier, his backpack, and a large suitcase.

I easily reach the top of the staircase before him and unlock the door, hurrying in to make sure all the furniture is in the right place before he arrives. But Teensy, the coordinator, arranged everything perfectly, from the overstuffed mustard yellow couch with the blue pillows, to the small farmhouse table, to the rug and coordinating artwork on the walls.

It’s gorgeous, a work of art that makes me wonder if maybe I should start designing a line of home goods for my shop. I’m so busy admiring the final result that I almost forget about my surprise.

But then Matty steps inside, setting down the cat carrier and I turn, spotting the pale blue box out of the corner of my eye. “Tiffany’s?” I ask, my pulse leaping in my throat, making it ticklish to swallow.

“Tiffany’s,” Matty confirms absent-mindedly as his gaze sweeps the space. “Wow, Nora. This is...phenomenal. I knew you’d make it special, but this is...beyond anything I imagined.”

And an engagement ring is beyond what I imagined, I think as I drift toward the table. I mean, I’m ready—I’ve been ready since the night we moved in together and Matty hung all the toilet paper the right way, surprised me with fancy new sheets, and finally gave me that spanking he’d been teasing me

about for weeks—but I never imagined he'd want to move this fast.

The thought gives me pause...

Is he doing this to please me? Is he forging ahead before he's ready because I mentioned the other day that I'd like to start having kids before I'm too much older? Should I have kept that to myself so our love story could evolve naturally, without him feeling rushed?

"It's not *that*," Matty says, just as a kitten runs over my foot, making me jump into the air. I was so deep in thought, I hadn't realized he'd released the tiny beasts. "I'm saving that for the summer. I have an elaborate plan in the works that I can't share, but I think you'll like, and..." He stops in front of me, his gaze troubled. "You're not upset, are you?"

I smile, my heart lifting as I shake my head. "No, I'm over the moon. I was just thinking that I didn't want you to feel rushed."

He snorts. "Rushed? Really? I was worried July might be too soon. That you'd think I was rushing. I just...don't want to wait much longer. I want you to be mine. For real. Forever."

Heart melting into a blissful puddle in my nacho-filled tummy I wrap him up in my arms, resting my head on his strong chest as I promise, "Me, too. And I'm going to say yes."

He hugs me tight with a happy sigh. "I'm so glad. I thought you might, but...so glad. Now open your gift while I fill the litter box."

Pulling back with a laugh and a happy mist in my eyes, I head over to the table, opening the lovely blue box to reveal a precious little pin featuring two cats twined together in an elegant and timeless silhouette. "Oh, Matty. It's perfect."

"It's to celebrate how far you've come," he says. "Less than a year ago, you never would have been able to pet a cat, let alone sleep with two of them."

"Two of them who wake me up at least twice a night belching or putting a paw on my forehead, always the

forehead,” I murmur, not missing that uninterrupted sleep one bit. I love my fuzzy sweeties, who thankfully only belch about half as much as their mother. “Oh, Bear wants to meet for a beer this week while they’re in town, by the way.”

“Sounds good,” Matty says. “Did he say when?”

“No, but I’m guessing Tuesday, once Aaron’s in town for a couple days,” I say. “He’s a huge Minnesota Midge fan. He’s so psyched that my brother’s a forward for them now.”

Matty sighs. “I wish Melissa were. Or just psyched about anything about Aaron. He’s still at the top of her shit list. I wonder if they’re ever going to kiss and make up.”

“Or just make up,” I agree. “I mean, they’re both going to be in the wedding. It would be nice to have them on civil terms before then.”

Matty wraps his arms around me from behind, kissing the top of my head. “Wedding. I like the sound of that. Maybe we could have it here.”

I spin so fast that I knock his chin with the back of my head. “Sorry,” I say, as he laughs. “It’s just so perfect! We could use the swinging bridge as the aisle! We open the connecting doors, clear the furniture to one side in here, and fill it with small chairs. And the small size means we’ll only be able to invite our nearest and dearest, and I won’t have to stress about having a tiny family compared to your giant one.”

“My family is already your family,” Matty says. “I’m pretty sure my mother loves you more than me at this point. She’s so happy you turned my life around.”

I wince. “I’m sorry. I wish they knew the truth.”

“That is the truth,” Matty says, brushing gentle knuckles across my cheek, making my chest tight. “You turned my life around and I don’t ever want to turn back.”

“Want to see the bedroom?” I ask, mesmerized by the heat in his gaze.

“Very much,” he murmurs. “Very, very much.”

We disappear into the bedroom, closing the door behind us to protect the innocent eyes of our fur babies, and get naked in our new queen-sized bed with the gauzy white canopy hanging down all around, sheltering us from the outside world.

Here, in this bed, it's just me and Matty and the world we create together.

As he rolls me on top of him, spreading my legs wide as he enters me from behind, I know without a doubt that I'm home. I reach back, running my fingers through his hair as he grips me tight under the thighs, using the leverage to bounce me up and down on his cock.

"My forever cock," I murmur as pleasure ripples through my sensitive inner walls, making every nerve in my body tingle. "I'm so glad this is my forever cock."

"He's really happy about that, too," Matty says. "Now, rub your clit for me, Nora. I need to feel you come on me, baby."

I need that, too. So, I do just as my dirty-talking man suggests. In just a few minutes, I'm drowning in pleasure and coming so hard I don't realize why Matty's cursing softly into my hair until we're catching our breath and I feel the telltale trickle down my thigh.

"Oh, shit," I whisper. "We forgot the condom."

"I'm sorry," he says. "The place was so nice, and your eyes looked so pretty in the gray light, and then you were naked and...fuck, I'm sorry."

I shift gently off to his side, propping up on one elbow as I gaze down at him. "It's okay. Maybe we just get a baby before we get a puppy. Or a baby instead of a puppy. I'm okay with that, too. What about you?"

He cups my cheek, that wonder-filled expression creeping across his features again. "Yeah. That sounds pretty amazing. Maybe we should just start trying for a baby. Every time."

"All the time," I agree, turned on again just thinking about it.

His eyes dance. "Pervert."

“Takes one to know one.”

“Think the cats will let us keep that door closed for another hour?” he asks, rolling on top of me.

“If I know them, they’ll be too busy exploring their new space to worry about Mom and Dad.”

“Mom and Dad,” he says, kissing me softly. “I like the sound of that.”

“I love you,” I whisper, wrapping my arms around his ribs and digging my fingers into his muscled back. “Let’s always be in love?”

“Always,” he says. “And a day.”

I sigh.

That sounds like just about enough.

Melissa McGuire

Always.
Aaron is *always* an asshole, even when he’s trying to be a nice guy.

That interview he gave about volunteering to be a big brother in Minneapolis almost made me vomit, even though he said all the right things. He’s just repulsive. It’s in his DNA, I guess.

Thankfully, Nora didn’t inherit that particular Boudreaux family strand of genetic material.

Nora is lovey.

Her brother is a steaming pile of hot human garbage.

But he is hot. You can’t deny that, the inner voice says as I aggressively wipe down the dining table and do my best to ignore the fact that my last few lingering party guests—my brother Wesley, my little sister, Binx, and my cousin, Jacob—are glued to the hockey game.

It's what everyone else in Bad Dog is probably watching right now, too, since our "hometown hero" Aaron Boudreaux is *finally* playing in the NHL.

No one's talking about the fact that it took *ten years* for him to make the jump from the minors to the big leagues after college, or that he's one of the oldest rookies on record. It's all sunshine and rainbows and "wow, isn't he the greatest! What a star!" Life is so easy when you're a handsome man. It makes me want to stab Aaron in his gorgeous eyeball.

"Spearing!" Binx cries out in her husky voice, the one that makes it sound like she smokes a pack a day, though she's never touched a cigarette in her life. "What the hell, ref? Open your fucking eyes. Oh shit, sorry." She turns to me, wincing. "I did it again. I'm the worst auntie ever."

"It's okay," I assure her. "I put Chase down twenty minutes ago. He was worn out from the party."

Her shoulders sag. "Oh good. It isn't going to be safe around here for little ears."

"Because the refs are clearly on Wisconsin's side," Wesley agrees, even my notoriously sunny, happy brother looking irritated. "This is some dirty hockey."

"Our boys are getting beat to shit," Jacob mutters, wincing.

"Spearing!" Binx shouts again, flapping an exasperated arm at the screen. "Again! What is wrong with these people?"

Spearing...

I have no idea what that is, but I'm pretty sure Aaron and I did it in November.

We banged on every surface in this room, including the table I'm currently scrubbing. And it was fucking incredible, and I do my best not to think about it.

Even if Aaron weren't the boy who bullied me in high school and an arrogant alpha male man beast who thinks he's better than everyone else, he doesn't live in Bad Dog. He was in Iowa in the minors for years. Now, he's a Minnesota Midge, but they're based in Minneapolis and NHL teams travel all the

time. A relationship with a man like that would be impossible and that's what I want, a *relationship*.

I want someone to share the good times and the bad times and the parenting duties. I want someone who wants more kids, before I get too old to have as many as I'd like, and who loves the idea of a big happy family as much as I do. I don't know what I'd do without all my brothers and sisters. I want Chase to have that, too, a whole pack of siblings who will have his back for the rest of his life.

"Holy shit," Binx breathes, sounding more shocked than angry. "That's Aaron, isn't it? He's the one down on the ice."

My focus whips toward the screen just as the cameraman zooms in on Aaron's body, lying flat by the boards, his shoulder wrenched up at an unnatural angle over his head and blood on his helmet. He's unconscious and clearly badly injured, the kind that's going to require a lot more than some ice in the locker room.

Before I realize it, I'm on the move, running for my cell in the kitchen and calling Aaron's grandmother.

Delores answers on the first ring with a strained, "Hello?" that makes it obvious, she's seen the injury.

"Hey, Delores, it's Melissa McGuire," I say, my heart racing. "I saw what happened. If you need someone to take you to the hospital, let me know. I have family here who can watch my son while I drive you to wherever they're taking him. Matty took Nora and the kittens out to the treehouse for a surprise, and they might not be reachable on their cells. Service is sketchy out there."

She exhales a ragged breath. "Oh, thank you, Melissa. I was about to call Nora, but I don't want to bother her if she's on a date. Not until we know what's happened to Aaron, anyway. But my boyfriend can't drive at night, and I haven't been safe behind the wheel for nearly a decade."

"I'll be over in twenty minutes," I assure her. "Do you have a contact number with the Midges? Someone to call in case of an emergency?"

She says she does, I encourage her to call it and get more information about where they'll be treating Aaron, and we end the call. Then, I sprint through the living room and up the stairs to my bedroom, ignoring my brother's worried, "What's wrong, Mel?"

I throw clothes in a bag just in case, and race back down the stairs. "I have to take Aaron's gram to the hospital because Nora is out of town with Matty. Which one of you is staying over to watch Chase and take him to daycare in the morning?"

"Me," Wesley says immediately, making me love my sweet, generous brother even more. "Don't worry about it."

"I'll open up the catering office for you tomorrow and tell your assistant manager what's up before I go to work," Binx adds.

"I'll finish cleaning," Jacob says, rising to his feet. "Tell Aaron we're rooting for him. He can get past this. Even gnarly injuries can't keep a Bad Dog boy down. Drive safe."

"I will," I say, grabbing my keys and heading for the garage, grateful I was too busy cooking to have more than one beer during the party. I'm sober and fine to drive, though even as I back out of the driveway, I'm not sure why I feel so compelled to make sure Aaron has family waiting for him when he gets to the hospital. I truly loathe the man.

Maybe it's because I believe everyone, no matter how obnoxious, deserves to be surrounded by the people who love them in times of trial.

Or maybe it's because I know what it feels like when a dream starts to die, and don't want even Aaron to face that alone. He may be a turd burglar, but he's also worked his ass off to make it the NHL. To be taken out in his third game, right as people are starting to notice what an amazing player he is, because some Wisconsin cheesehead thought it would be fun to play rough, would be...heartbreaking.

My heart literally hurts for him, burning in my chest all the way to his gram's house and the drive to Minneapolis. It's still

burning when we reach the ER doors just as they're wheeling Aaron in on a gurney.

He looks rough, banged up, and in a lot of pain, but relief floods his eyes when he sees his grandmother standing just inside the lobby. "G-mom, you came," he murmurs, love thick in his voice. Then his gaze lands on me and his smile grows even wider. "And you do love me, Mel. I knew you did, you little hot mess. I love you, too."

And then he's gone, whisked deeper into the bowels of the hospital while I stand there, torn between feeling terrible for the man and wanting to shoot a spitball into his face.

Gram pats me on the back, "He's had a head injury, honey. And hot mess is a term of endearment in our family. It means he likes you as much as you like him."

"I don't like him, Delores," I say. "At least not in that way."

"Right," Gram says, nodding as she starts toward the check-in desk. "And I hate it when Slasher does that thing with his tongue."

My head rears back. That was...unexpected from Aaron's eighty-two-year-old grandmother.

This entire night is unexpected.

My phone chirps in my purse and I pull it out to see a text from my ex, Ben, asking me where I am. He and his boyfriend, Radcliffe, have been waiting outside the pub where they watched the Super Bowl for nearly an hour. That's when I remember that this is the start of my ex's twice monthly Monday through Wednesday visitation with our son.

The son I put to bed and left with my brother...

Who I will now have to call and beg to pluck my toddler out of bed, dress him, and tote him over to the beer hall before Ben has more ammunition for his accusations that I'm doing too much and can't keep up with my schedule anymore.

"Shit," I mutter.

Maybe Aaron's right.

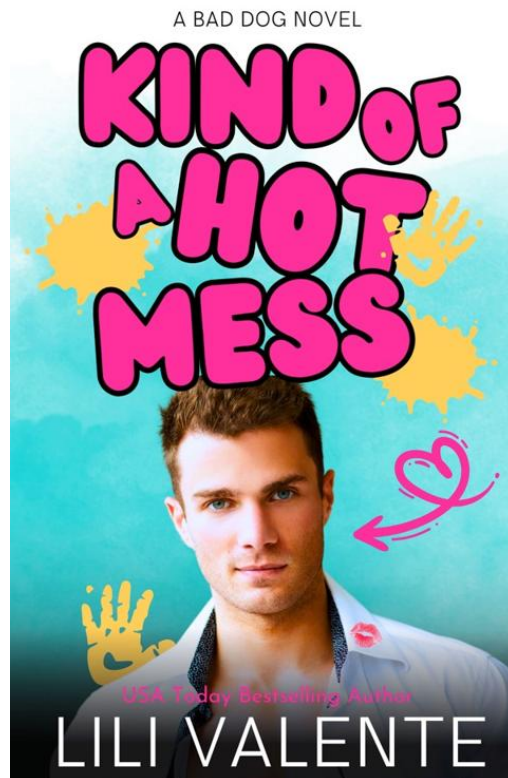
Maybe I am kind of a hot mess.

The thought makes me determined to find a spitball, so I'm properly armed the next time my nemesis tells me he loves me.

Because I don't love him back. Not one little bit.

KIND OF A HOT MESS,
Aaron and Melissa's story,
is headed your way winter 2024.

Order [HERE](#).



In the meantime, grab the holiday novella

[WHEN IT SHINES](#)

Bear and Dipsy's story.

Keep reading for a sneak peek!

Sneak Peek



WHEN IT SHINES

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CHAPTER ONE

Rose “Dipsy” Dobbs

*A woman running through the airport in elf shoes,
regretting several of her recent life choices...*

Through my cell phone speaker, my mother’s tinny voice frets, “You’re never going to make it! These days, you have to get to the airport five hours before take-off, Dipsy. Five hours!”

“It’s two hours before a domestic flight, Mom, and I’m not checking luggage. I’ve got this.” I grab my rolling suitcase and zoom away from security, bells jingling on my curled elf shoes. “Just don’t forget to feed Hambone. He’ll be upset if has to wait for me to get there. He likes dinner promptly at six.”

“I know that.” She sounds offended. “I never forget to feed my grand kitty.”

“Of course, not,” I say, though she forgets all the time.

But that’s partly Hambone’s fault. Most cats will meow for their dinner, making such a ruckus they’re impossible to ignore. My sweet orange tabby just lays down on the ground on his back, stretches his arms over his head, and sticks out his

pink tongue, playing dead until you notice he's being dramatic and put out some wet food.

Unfortunately for him, Mom has a habit of ignoring living things that don't make noise. Our living room window is where houseplants go to die, and we don't talk about the ill-fated goldfish Dad thought would keep Mom company when I left for college...

"I'll put some catnip in it for a special Christmas Eve treat, too," Mom adds. "Your dad picked some up while he was out getting bulbs to fix the lights on the tree."

"Amazing," I say. "You're the best. I appreciate you guys."

And I do. After the disaster in D.C., my parents graciously welcomed both Hambone and me to the basement apartment in my childhood home, no questions asked.

Like...literally no questions.

They still have no idea what went down during my east coast failure to launch.

But that's typical Dobbs family dynamics for you. If a situation seems fraught or messy, my parents don't want to hear about it. They'd rather pretend I went to D.C. on vacation, not to start my first serious job, and that moving into the basement was always the plan.

It wasn't.

Continuing to build my "scrappy girl reporter most likely to dress up in a goofy outfit and make the news fun again!" brand wasn't either. I wanted to be a serious, hard-hitting journalist. I wanted to make a difference, not a list of the best places in St. Louis to catch a glimpse of Santa's sleigh.

But that's the way the cookie crumbles, and in a field as competitive as television journalism, beggars can't be choosers.

Hence the reason I'm currently dashing down a moving walkway in full elf gear, my carryon clattering along behind me as my mother continues to list a dozen reasons I'm probably going to miss my flight.

A skintight green velvet dress, elf shoes with bells on the curled toes, and green-and-white striped tights wouldn't have been my choice for a "flying home on Christmas Eve" outfit, but there was literally no time to change. We finished filming my segment for St. Louis News at Five thirty minutes ago, seconds before it was set to air.

As soon as we wrapped "Ten Elf Tips for Spotting Santa's Sleigh Tonight," I jumped in a taxi, waved good-bye to my producer and cameraman through the back window, and prayed to the sweet baby Jesus for deliverance as the cabbie skidded out into the swirling snow.

I love a white Christmas as much as the next girl, but is it too much to ask that the white stuff hold off until I'm safely home for the holidays?

Apparently so...

Outside the floor-to-ceiling windows on either side of the moving walkway, the snow is coming down so hard I can barely see the airline workers zooming around in their little carts, loading luggage and snacks into the waiting planes.

It's gnarly out there, but the flight hasn't been cancelled. I checked on my way through the security line, seconds before putting my mother on speaker and tucking my cell into the breast pocket of my elf dress—the better to assure her I'll be home for our family's annual Christmas Eve cocoa party and run like the wind at the same time.

In hindsight, I wish I'd waited to call her once I'd boarded the plane.

Her endless stream of doom and gloom is making the race to gate 54B even more stressful.

"The weatherman said they already have six inches of accumulation at our airport," she says, her voice pinched with worry. "Six inches, high winds, and the chance of thunder snow!"

"And a partridge in a pear tree," I sing-pant.

"This isn't the time for jokes, Dipsy," Mom chastises. "Thunder snow is no laughing matter."

“No, of course not, Mom,” I wheeze, muttering a quick, “Excuse me, on your left,” to the family in front of me before squeezing past the mother and her two young children.

“Mommy! It’s one of Santa’s elves!” the little boy shouts.

I glance over my shoulder, grinning and waving as my mother continues to foretell disaster.

I didn’t choose the elf life, but the elf life chose me, and I don’t want to let any Santa-loving kids down by being anything less than jolly—even while sprinting through the airport.

“And your father’s worried about the air traffic control situation when you’ll be landing,” she says. “The last time we had a snow storm this bad, there was nearly a head on collision between two incoming planes. It was all over the news. Garrison Cranston should have been fired years ago. No man with glasses that thick should be in charge of a fleet of flying death tubes.”

“We talked about this, Mom. We don’t call them flying death tubes when I’m about to get on one of them. And I’m pretty sure it’s fine for air traffic controllers to wear glasses as long as their distance vision corrects to 20/20. Now, I have to go. The walkway’s about to end, and I have to run for real. See you in a couple hours!”

“Okay, but don’t forget to throw salt over your shoulder before you board. You did bring salt, didn’t you?” she shouts, loud enough to earn me a strange look from the businessman gaining ground beside me.

“Sure did, and will do. Bye, Mom!” I shout back, before adding in a voice for the businessman’s ears only, “She’s superstitious. In a weird way. As far as I can tell, she made the salt thing up, then forgot that she made it up, and it somehow became one of our crazy family traditions. But that’s part of the fun of family, right?”

“Go ahead,” he says, slowing his pace, clearly not in the mood to share in my frazzled breed of holiday cheer.

“Thanks! Happy holidays!” I cruise off the end of the moving walkway and break into a proper jog, my heart hammering in my chest as I careen toward gate 54B.

It’s a little regional gate, tucked into a circle of smaller gates at the end of the terminal.

And it’s clear from the moment I dash into the abandoned boarding area that I’m too late.

“No,” I wheeze, waving a frantic arm at the flight attendant closing the heavy door leading to the jet way. “I’m here! I’m here! Don’t close it yet. Please, my mother will kill me if I don’t make it home for—” My words end in a panicked screech as I trip over one of my elf shoes and go flying into the air.

Time slows and it feels like I have a full minute to realize I’m on a collision course with the recycling bin.

I have time to note the overflowing plastic bottles at the top, the happy rabbit on the side encouraging folks to recycle, and the wad of gum stuck to the rabbit’s nose by some jerk of a passerby. I have time to think about how gross people can be and how gross gum is and wonder if the gum I swallowed in middle school really stuck around in my intestines for seven years, the way Molly Rapper said it would, and then I make impact.

Thankfully, my shoulder glances off one side of the bin, avoiding the mess on the rabbit’s nose, but that’s the only bright side. As the heavy blue container tips over and sticky plastic bottles rain down on my head, dislodging the elf cap my producer secured to my hair with industrial strength hair clips, I lift my arms and squeeze my eyes shut, pretty certain the Dobbs’ family Christmas is going to have to go on without me.

Then, I open my eyes to see the flight attendant standing over me, her brow furrowed above her blue eyes, and cross my fingers that I’m wrong.

Maybe she’s here to tell me that she’ll hold the door for that extra minute.

Maybe there's still a way to get home and soothe my mother's ruffled feathers before she declares the holiday a disaster and lays the blame for the wreckage at my jingly feet.

"Are you okay, ma'am?" she asks.

"I'm fine," I pant, flicking a bottle off my chest and forcing a bright smile. "And I can be on that plane in five seconds flat. I promise."

Her frown deepens as she pulls the recycling bin back into an upright position. "I'm sorry, ma'am. The flight to Bad Dog Regional has been canceled. Thunder snow."

"Thunder snow," I echo, my stomach sinking.

So that wasn't another one of my mother's weird weather predictions.

She nods. "Yes, and the chance of a bomb cyclone. All flights headed west are cancelled, and I'll be sleeping in the staff room tonight. No way I'm getting all the way back to Imperial in this storm. If you have a lounge membership, I'd suggest you head there now, before they fill up with other travelers looking for a comfortable place to spend the night."

"Okay. Thank you." I fight the tears pressing against the backs of my eyes as I push into a seated position, wincing slightly at the pain in my left shoulder. "Sorry you won't make it home for Christmas Eve."

She flashes a sympathetic smile. "You, too. It was nice to meet you. You're as sweet in person as you are on the news. I love your segments. They're so funny and they always make me feel seen." She laughs. "I think you're about as accident prone as I am."

My lips tremble into a curve. "Thanks. Though in my defense, the outfits they make me wear don't help much." I waggle my jingle belled toes back and forth. "I'm at least fifty percent more graceful in normal shoes, I swear."

"I bet. Here, let me help you up." She reaches out a hand.

I take it, letting her haul me to my feet, before releasing her fingers and smoothing my short elf skirt down over the

fluffy red crinoline and decorative shorts beneath. The shorts are like those diaper covers toddlers wear under their skirts, opaque and covered with tulle. They're cute, relatively modest, and help make my skirt stand out like a holiday bell.

They also itch like crazy after my run through the terminal.

Even through my thick tights, it feels like the lower part of my bottom is covered in swarming fire ants.

"Thanks so much," I say, giving the affected area a discreet scratch that does nothing to alleviate the skin-crawling sensation. I motion to the empty bottles strewn across the carpet. "Should I put these back in the bin?"

She waves a slim hand. "Don't worry about it. I'll put a call in to the maintenance team. They need to empty it anyway."

"Are you sure?" I ask, barely resisting the urge to scratch again. "I feel terrible for making a mess."

"It's fine," she assures me. "I promise. We've all seen way worse. As long as no bodily fluids are involved, it doesn't even register on our yuck scale."

"Okay, thank you," I say. "And happy holidays."

"Happy holidays," she echoes, backing toward the wide entrance leading into the main part of the terminal. "Make sure to sign up for a shower as soon as you get to your lounge. On nights like this, shower slots are the first things to go."

My jaw clenches at the sides of my forced grin. "Will do."

As soon as she turns her back on me, I reach down with both hands and claw at my ass, squirming my fingers beneath the tight shorts and scratching my bootie through my pantyhose.

I emit a soft groan as my head falls back, relief spreading through the aggravated area.

But my respite is only temporary. As soon as I start walking, the chafing and fire-ants-loose-in-my-undies sensations will resume. If I'm going to be spending the night in the airport, I need to get out of these clothes. And since I

don't have a lounge membership—starving reporters don't spend enough on their credit cards to qualify for fancy perks—I'll be changing in a yucky airport bathroom.

For a moment, I consider putting it off until after I call my mother, but dealing with her inevitable “Christmas is ruined” meltdown will be even more miserable in elf wear.

Bending down, I collect my carryon, chucking a few stray bottles into the bin before dragging it a few feet away and lifting it onto an empty row of seats.

I unzip the side and splay it open to reveal...beef jerky.

No, not *beef* jerky. This jerky has a holiday theme.

“What the...” I reach down, moving one of the plastic bags of Rompin' Reindeer Jerky to one side to reveal more jerky beneath. There have to be at least fifty packages squeezed into the small gray suitcase that looks exactly like *my* gray suitcase.

But it isn't my suitcase.

Sometime during the hectic rush through security, I must have grabbed someone else's bag by mistake. And now, that person has my change of clothes, my reading material, my iPad, and all my toiletries.

“Rats,” I curse, scratching at my ass again with both hands.

I'm really digging in there, rummaging around in my fluffy panties like the Grinch after WhoVille's Christmas presents, when a deep voice murmurs from behind me. “I think you have my bag.”

I spin, my cheeks already flushing from the shame of being caught mid-ass-scratch.

And then I see whose bag I managed to steal and want to sink through the floor.

It's Bear Hanson.

Bear, the rock star of the pet influencer world.

Bear, my former best cat world friend, and the last man I kissed.

Bear, a guy I'm pretty sure would like to turn *me* into jerky for treating him the way I have.

Luckily for me, he also appears to have a broken leg, so if I decide to make a run for it, there's no chance he'll be able to catch up with me.

I'm assuming that's the reason for the cast that stretches from above his knee, down to his sock-covered foot, and the little red scooter he's currently driving. But even injured, Bear is an intimidating figure. His broad shoulders dwarf the motorized vehicle, his thick arms strain the seams of his dark green sweater, and his head is nearly level with mine, even though he's sitting down.

He's deliciously enormous, like a big sexy teddy bear, with a cat tattoo on his neck that gives him a bad boy edge my inner good girl can't resist.

Truly. I can't resist him. At all.

Which is why I ghosted him. I had to. I never would have had the internal fortitude to say "No, I can't date you," like I meant it if Bear and I were in the same room. Even a phone call felt dangerous.

I can't trust myself with this man. When I'm with him, I forget all my rules and my very good reasons for remaining single. As long as I'm a single career girl, I'll never make the same mistake my mom made, the one that left her wondering "what if I'd chosen another path" for so long.

So long that there was no way her very perceptive daughter could miss the fact that sometimes her mom didn't seem so happy to be a mom...

"Dipsy?" Bear's emerald green eyes meet mine, widening slightly in recognition before narrowing in a way that makes me feel like prey.

Very small, very itchy prey, with nowhere to run...

When It Shines
is [Available Here](#).

About the Author

Author of over forty novels, *USA Today* Bestseller **Lili Valente** writes everything from steamy suspense to laugh-out-loud romantic comedies. A die-hard romantic, she can't resist a story where love wins big. Because love should always win. She lives in Vermont with her two big-hearted boy children and a dog named Pippa Jane.

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