

A NOVEL



Phishing for Love

LARA MARTIN

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for Love*

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

PHISHING FOR LOVE

First edition. February 1, 2024.

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To my Dad,

I Love You.

*And to all those who are
struggling to find that
flicker of light and hope
in the darkness.*

Don't stop searching.

You will find it.

I did.

CHAPTER ONE

I have the first inkling something is terribly wrong the moment I push through the glass doors and step into the lobby of my office building. My skin prickles with apprehension as I pick up a weird charge to the air, a kind of nervous energy clinging to my colleagues scurrying to the elevator bank.

I head over to Bob, the building's security guard, and hand him his three-sugar vanilla latte. "Morning, Bob."

Seated behind the security desk in the lobby, Bob reaches for the cup and clutches it to his chest. "You're a lifesaver, Tess. Thank you."

I suspect his pancreas won't thank me. I probably shouldn't be doling out sweet treats to a man flirting with diabetes, but I possess a soft spot for old Bob. Everyone in the building does.

He takes a grateful sip. "I'm gonna need my favorite drink with all that's going on today."

I tighten my grip on my own coffee cup. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," Bob says in a low voice, "but there's definitely trouble brewing."

I immediately lower my voice to match his. "What makes you say that?"

"Calvin came in first thing this morning. *Before* anyone else."

Shock ripples through me. Calvin, our CEO, doesn't do first in to work. He likes to make a grand mid-morning entrance, wanting to make sure all his minions are confined to their soulless cubicles, hard at work paying off the extensive renovations to his lakeside house.

"That's not good," I say.

"Nope." Bob shakes his shaggy gray head, his brown eyes concerned. "Good luck today."

“Thanks.” I take a fortifying sip of my coffee and make my way toward the elevator bank, where Mark from Finance is nervously shifting his long, skinny frame from one foot to the other and jabbing the Up arrow.

“Hey, Mark.”

“Tess.” *Jab, jab.* “Good morning to you.”

We stand there in silence while Mark continues to punish the button. It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him that pressing it over and over won’t make the elevator come any faster, but I know I’d be wasting my breath.

“How are you?” I ask in an attempt to distract him.

“The doctor diagnosed me with a stomach ulcer.”

“Sorry to hear that.” Judging by the pinched look on his long face, a second ulcer is already in the works.

The elevator doors open, and Mark steps inside, shooting me an agonized look that clearly communicates his aversion to sharing a small, enclosed space with me. Today’s not shaping up to be a good workday anyway, so I decide to spare him. “You go ahead. I need to send a text and I can’t get a signal in there.”

Relief softens his sharp features. “Right. Yes. Thank you.”

A couple of minutes later, I exit the elevator on the third floor, dump my empty cup in the trash, and make a beeline for Mevia, the receptionist at Amell Greetings. Also, a flagrant collector and disseminator of office gossip. “Morning, Mevia!” I muster my widest smile, my eyes scanning her short, pink hair and heavily made-up eyes, looking for something I can comment on. “Um, I love your earrings. Where did you get them?”

She pops her bubblegum and strokes the earrings that look like strips of bacon grazing her neck. They are so hideous I have to repress a shudder.

“Flea market. My cousin has a stall there.”

“They’re so...unique.”

“Yeah. Want me to get you a pair?”

I freeze. So even my harmless lies come back to bite me.
“Sure.”

I’ll gift them to my sister Kate.

I lean an elbow on Mevia’s desk. “I heard Calvin came in early this morning,” I say in a conspiratorial whisper.

Her eyes light up. “Yeah. And he wasn’t alone.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Anyone you know?”

The phone rings. We both ignore it.

“Never seen him before. Buuuuut—” Her whole body is quivering with her need to tell me. “—he’s wearing a suit and is literally the hottest guy I’ve ever seen.”

I digest that piece of information. Not the hot part, because Mevia’s taste in men is questionable, but the suit part. No one working at Amell Greetings wears a suit. Not even Calvin.

The phone continues to ring. Mevia swears under her breath. “You’ve got to be kidding me. We’re talking here.” She reaches out a rainbow-tipped nail and cuts off the call.

I feel my jaw drop. Not your problem, Tess. If Calvin wants to hire his niece, her receptionist skills—or lack of them—are his problem. Recovering, I ask, “Where’s the suit now?”

“In Calvin’s office. And the door’s closed.”

I probe some more, but this is all she knows. After thanking Mevia, I weave my way through the maze of cubicles to my workstation. Because I am fifteen minutes early, not all my writer and designer colleagues are in, but those who are at their desks spare me only a brief greeting before hunching back over their phones, thumbs flying across their screens, their anxiety suspended over the room like a heat haze.

Sofia is waiting for me at my desk, impatiently tapping her foot. Mevia must have alerted her. I take a moment to admire her outfit. A sleeveless white halter top and black leather pants accentuate her lean, athletic body, and her red heels match her

blood-red lipstick. Her smooth dark skin glows. She looks good, and she knows it.

Unlike Mevia, Sofia takes her role in Marketing seriously and dresses the part. I also have a sneaking suspicion she dresses like she does to intimidate Calvin.

“Have you checked your email?” Sofia demands, wasting no time on pleasantries. Fortunately, I am well used to my friend’s bluntness.

“No,” I say, depositing my purse under my desk. I make it a point not to check my work email before coming in each morning.

“Calvin has called an all-staff meeting for later this morning.”

“No.”

“Yep.”

That explains everyone’s wide-eyed and bewildered expressions. Company meetings are always on a Monday. Today is Wednesday.

“This can’t be good.” I collapse into my chair. “Calvin’s a stickler for routine. He doesn’t deviate from his Monday meetings.”

“Except that one time,” Sofia points out, and we both blink in remembered horror of a meeting that neither of us can scrub from our brains.

Three years ago, Calvin had summoned all of us to the conference room. In my five years working as a greeting card writer at Amell Greetings, this was the first time an all-staff meeting had ever been called outside of a Monday.

At the meeting, clutching his hanky and sniffing loudly, Calvin had broken the news that his beloved Fitzroy had died. Everyone knew Fitzroy. Calvin had made it his unfortunate habit to bring his dog to work every day. He explained that Fitzroy had been electrocuted and then he asked if anyone wanted to say something nice about him. You’d think a room

mostly full of writers would have lots to say, but we all sat there mute because we hated that dog.

Fitzroy, a mean-eyed cross between an American bulldog and a zombie straight out of *Walking Dead*, dumb as a log, would hunt down whatever lunch we were careless enough to leave lying around, deposit giant rivers of saliva all over our work clothes, and pee mini lakes under our office desks.

I love dogs, I really do, just not that dog. And I never wished him dead, only sleeping peacefully forever in a far-far-away place.

Right after the meeting, I wrote a card about Fitzroy:

He lived,

He died,

No one's sad he fried.

Sofia had laughed so hard she peed her pants and had to rush home to change, but I'd been full of remorse afterward. I was an awful, terrible person. If there was such a thing as canine purgatory, I'd be consigned to it. Before I could tear the card up, Sofia had taken it to frame for her home office. I'd made her swear, under penalty of dismemberment, to never show it to Calvin.

I startle a little as Kenzie, a senior graphic designer at Amell Greetings, squeezes herself into my cubicle. Along with Sofia, she's one of my closest friends. "You heard?" she asks. Her fine strawberry-blond hair is gathered in a claw clip and she's wearing a pretty floral maxi dress and gladiator sandals, nailing the boho chic look. She's one of the few women I know who can pull off curtain bangs. "Calvin's called a meeting in the Fitzroy."

Yes, Calvin named the company's main boardroom after his dog.

"We heard," Sofia says grimly. The three of us exchange unsettled glances. It's time for our own little meeting. Salt and sugar are urgently required.

“Vending machine,” Sofia announces in a low voice, reading my mind.

Kenzie and I nod in immediate agreement. I feel the stares of everyone on the floor as we exit the workspace area and set off down the long hallway. I’d heard the nickname given to the three of us. Team Trouble. It is not without merit.

The vending machine, tucked away in a quiet corner at the end of the hallway, is our designated gossip station. It’s Kenzie’s turn to choose. She makes her selection, taps her card, and we divvy up the salt and vinegar chips and M&Ms between us. We’d all agreed a long time ago, and not based on any sort of logic, that junk food is perfectly acceptable when shared.

“What are the rumors?” I ask.

“The usual bankruptcy ones,” Kenzie says, picking out all the yellow and orange M&Ms and giving the rest to us. “But that’s doubtful.”

She’s right. There’s very little likelihood Amell Greetings is facing bankruptcy. A couple of months ago, we caught the attention of a reality TV star who gushed about our card range to her fans. Since then, sales had soared, and we’d acquired a small celebrity following of glamour models and lifestyle influencers. Calvin is even toying with the idea of expanding our product line to incorporate other novelty items, including mugs, balloons, and notebooks.

“There’s talk of a possible merger,” says Sofia. “And we all know what comes with that.”

“Layoffs,” I state glumly. I have no merger survival plan. I’m a good writer, but good writers are not exactly an endangered species. There are way too many of us floating around. Kenzie, on the other hand, is wildly talented, her whimsical card designs consistent hits. And Sofia...well, she is a force to be reckoned with, the marketing genius who’d landed the celebrity fan club for Amell Greetings.

Kenzie squeezes my arm. “Hey, don’t be so pessimistic.”

“Ash brought me a dead mouse this morning,” I say, referring to my rescue brown tabby with the attitude of a Russian Blue. “That should’ve been my warning about the day ahead.”

“Actually, he was bringing you a present,” Kenzie explains, because she has a positive take on everything. “That’s how cats show their affection.”

Sofia snorts. “Oh, please, that’s not affection. That’s her cat saying, ‘here idiot human, this is how you hunt, now get to it.’”

It’s not that Sofia doesn’t like cats. It’s just that she insists she knows their true nature, which is to subjugate all humans and take over the world. She’s even nicknamed Ash *Thanos*.

“Well, at least if we’re being laid off, we all look good,” Sofia says, patting her dark hair.

I glance down at what I’m wearing. Calvin, for all his uptightness in certain areas, has a relaxed dress policy at the office, which we all embrace. I’d dressed for the warm May day in tight black jeans and a colorful embroidered top. I’d had my hair done over the weekend, adding caramel highlights to my long, chestnut-brown curls. My hairdresser had assured me this would “freshen up my look.” What I am most grateful for, though, are my sexy ankle boots in soft suede. Just looking at them gives me the confidence boost I need.

“You know, maybe we’re overthinking this,” Kenzie suggests, her delicate, elfin features alight with optimism. “Maybe this whole meeting is about something really trivial.”

Sofia arches a skeptical eyebrow. “Such as?”

Kenzie shrugs. “Maybe Calvin wants to push for bulldogs on the cards again. Like he tried to do after Fitzroy died.”

We all make a face. That had been a delicate time. In his grief, Calvin neglected research findings that suggested card buyers (the majority of whom were women) liked cute, relatable animals on their cards. Think kittens and rabbits, hamsters at a stretch. Certainly not bulldogs.

“All this speculation is getting us nowhere,” Sofia declares. “We need to go straight to the one in the know.”

Kenzie’s eyes widen. “Not Dana.”

“Yes, Dana.”

I shake my head. Calvin’s executive assistant is a vault. “You won’t get anything out of her.”

“Probably not, but at least I’ll have fun trying.”

Kenzie frets her bottom lip. “Don’t do it. She’s still mad at you for the last time.”

Sofia gives a no-problem flick of her hand. “That old battle axe is always mad. Okay, let’s go. We’re all in this together.”

Kenzie and I trail after Sofia as she strides ahead with an easy grace. She’s so formidable she fills me with awe. Calvin’s giant corner office is on the same floor as us, but on the opposite side of the building. Mevia, sensing where we are going and why, raises her fist in solidarity as we pass. A few feet from Dana’s desk, Kenzie bails, as I suspected she would. Any sort of confrontation stresses her out.

“Traitor,” Sofia says without heat, not breaking her stride.

I briefly consider ducking out as well, but honestly, I derive great pleasure from watching Sofia interact with Dana. It’s like my very own never-ending soap opera.

The moment Dana spots Sofia, her thick, gray eyebrows snap together, like two caterpillars squaring off. “What do you want?”

“How are you today, Dana?” Sofia asks. She’s trying to channel Kenzie’s sweetness, but she’s not pulling it off. It’s like Black Widow starring in *The Sound of Music*.

Dana glares at Sofia. “Worse for having to answer banal questions.” She shuffles a stack of papers on her desk, projecting unmistakable *busy, busy* vibes. She wears her usual no-nonsense outfit of matronly skirt and pastel blouse buttoned so tight around her neck it’s like a chokehold.

“About the meeting this morning,” Sofia begins.

Dana flashes a knowing smirk. “So that’s why you’re here disturbing me.”

“Disturbing, tormenting...tomato, tomahto.”

“You’re wasting your time.”

“Why, Dana, you’re so charming it’s never a waste of my time chatting with you.”

“Then you’re wasting my time.”

“One little hint?” Sofia persists.

“You’ll have to wait and see like everybody else.”

I swear I glimpse the hint of a smile ghosting Dana’s lips. It occurs to me then that the two of them display an odd level of enjoyment in these interactions. Before I can examine that thought further, Dana barks, “Don’t think I don’t see you skulking there, Tess!”

I jump a little. “Uh, morning, Dana.”

She makes some sort of harrumphing sound. “Nothing good about it. Not with the two of you intent on ruining it.”

Sofia taps a fingernail to her chin. “So not even Calvin’s praetorian guard has any idea what the meeting’s about.”

Dana narrows her eyes. She’s been around since the very start, the resident dinosaur of Amell Greetings. Except, where the dinosaurs didn’t survive whatever wiped them out, it’s my belief Dana would survive even nuclear fallout.

I grab Sofia’s arm and tug her away. “Enjoy the rest of your day, Dana.” When we are a safe distance away, I mutter, “You like to live dangerously.”

“What other way is there to live?”

Safely. Cautiously. Minimal risk. All the ways I prefer to live. How I’m friends with a personality like Sofia’s remains a mystery to me.

I say, “I think Dana’s still smarting over you calling her Cerberus.” Cerberus is the three-headed dog guarding the gates of the Underworld. I had to Google it.

“If you really think about it,” Sofia points out airily, “that was more insulting to Calvin than her.”

Sofia heads to the bathroom to freshen up and I return to my desk. I check my email and see I have a new assignment—a sentimental piece for a silver wedding anniversary. I bite back a groan. I am not in the right headspace for this. One of the tricks to writing cards is to put yourself into the mindset of a person sending or receiving the card. I typically relish the challenge of stepping into someone else’s mind, but not today. Not when I’m acutely aware of my status as a twenty-eight-year-old woman whose ring finger is bare. What do I know about celebrating twenty-five years of marriage?

When 11 a.m. rolls around, I join the rest of my coworkers streaming into the huge conference room, taking a seat between Sofia and Kenzie. All the chairs are quickly taken and latecomers slouch against the walls. Rick in Sales is talking loudly on his phone, picking at his teeth with a fingernail as he broadcasts to the entire company that he’s closing a deal. It’s as though he’s so enthralled with the sound of his own voice he believes everyone is equally fascinated.

“Ugh, I can’t stand show-offs,” Sofia mutters. I share her sentiment.

When we’re all assembled, Calvin enters the conference room, and the low buzz of conversation grows more animated. Calvin Amell is a short, stout man, excessively fond of his thick silver hair and ruled by his expansive ego. There’s something to be said about a man who names his company after himself. Even in an age of great egotists, there’s still no Zuckerberg or Jobs-phone or Bezoson. Yet when you exit the elevator onto the third floor of our building, the first sight that hits you is *AMELL GREETINGS* emblazoned in giant red letters on the wall behind the reception desk.

My attention veers away from Calvin to the tall, dark-suited man behind him. There’s a powerful, barely contained energy about him and I have the stomach-plunging feeling he’s about to upend my world.

I'm aware of Sofia sucking in a shocked breath and Kenzie raising a hand to her lips.

What had Mevia said? *The hottest guy she's ever seen.*

For once, she hadn't exaggerated.

CHAPTER TWO

“In the name of everything splendid and sacred,” Sofia murmurs, “look at those shoulders.”

I respond with only one word. “Matt.”

“I might be married, but I’m not dead,” Sofia reminds me in a playful whisper. “I also have a fine appreciation of art.” Her lips curve into a smile. “And that man is a work of art.”

I have to agree with her there. The dark hair, serious blue eyes, and wide shoulders make for an attractive combination.

“He just looked at me,” Kenzie whispers, her voice slightly dazed.

Staring at the handsome stranger, a scrap of an idea flutters into my brain. “I think I know why Calvin’s called this meeting.”

They drag their gazes away from the man to regard me with curiosity.

“You know Calvin’s been talking for a while about filming a tearjerker commercial to rival Hallmark’s viral ads?” They both nod. “I’ll bet you anything this pretty boy’s a male model hired for our first commercial.”

Unfortunately, it is at precisely this moment that there happens to be a lull in the general conversation and my words carry clearly across the conference room.

Calvin lifts his eyes from the stack of folders in his hand to direct a displeased frown my way.

“Oh, Tess,” Kenzie mumbles.

I swallow, my face heating up as though a dozen blowtorches are aimed at it.

Why, oh, why, don’t I test out the words in my head before I speak? I always seem to be blurting out the wrong things at the worst possible times.

In the excruciating stretch of silence, the stranger turns his clear, cool blue eyes in my direction and holds my gaze, assessing me. My breath catches in my throat. I've made a serious misjudgment. This is not a boy smoldering into a camera lens all day. This is a man who's lived through some things, and it's written all over his face.

I lower my gaze to the floor, unable to hold his stare.

In his trademark booming voice, Calvin says, "Let's get started, shall we." He pauses, and I dig my nails into my palms. I know what's coming. "I mean, if that's all right with you, Tess?"

I look up, aware of everyone's eyes on me. "It's fine," I mutter.

"Thank you." Calvin clears his throat. The man does love an audience. "I called you all in today because I've been informed we are vulnerable to an attack."

A number of people shift nervously in their seats, as if at any moment gun-toting terrorists are about to burst into the room and start mowing people down. Mark is so pale I worry his heart will give out.

Seemingly satisfied he's secured everyone's attention, Calvin gestures to the man standing silently next to him. "This is Aaron Sinclair. He's here to help us implement a security awareness plan."

"Hello, everyone," he says in a deep voice that has Kenzie curling her toes.

Before he can say anything further, Rick pipes up, "Why do we need extra security? We've got Bob down below."

I hide a wince. Bob, our sweet, sixty-something security guard, who takes five minutes to extricate himself from his chair, who cheerfully waves visitors through while using the sign-in book to jot down his shopping lists.

It's clear from Aaron's grimace that he knows exactly who Bob is. "Out of interest, why was Bob hired?"

Hannah in HR says, “He’s second cousin to Calvin’s stepsister Mabel. Mabel owns the building,” she adds.

Aaron Sinclair appears momentarily lost for words.

“Bob stays,” Calvin declares. “He’s not part of this discussion.”

I feel a spurt of pride in Calvin for standing up for Bob. He probably knows there’d be a riot (not to mention Mabel would make a eunuch of him) if he tried to get rid of him.

“I’m here to talk about cybersecurity,” Aaron says, scanning the room. “Eighty percent of small businesses have suffered a cyberattack in the past twelve months, and seven in ten businesses lack the capability to withstand a cybersecurity incident.”

A statistics man. Sofia and Kenzie let out disappointed sighs. Nothing like a dull, data-loving heart to crush any lustful imaginings.

“I’m sure you’ve all read about what happened at Fine Paper Musings,” Aaron says, referencing a greetings card competitor that had recently suffered a data breach costing the company nearly a million dollars and causing untold reputational damage.

We all nod somberly in response.

“That’s why Calvin’s brought me in,” Aaron continues. “To prevent that from happening here.”

I find it interesting that Calvin is deferring so much of the talking to this Aaron guy. Either he’s out of his depth on the subject matter or he’s in serious need of Aaron’s help.

Calvin explains that Aaron is a cybersecurity analyst and the objective of his six-month consultancy gig is to whip our security-defective company into military shape. “I will not allow what happened at Fine Paper Musings to happen to us,” he says, arms folded, his expression stern.

My heart sinks. When Calvin’s invested in something, he’s a bit like Ash with one of those laser pointers, singularly focused on chasing the red dot. It appears Calvin’s current red

dot is the company's security risk. System outages, data loss, workflow disruption, lost revenue—they're all, no doubt, doing a merry dance inside Calvin's terror-stricken brain.

I hold back a groan. It looks like we're going to be up to our armpits in all things security related for the next six months.

Calvin gestures for Aaron to continue.

With a nod, Aaron says, "What's not in the headlines is that the data breach at Fine Paper Musings was caused by a phishing attack."

Mark's hand creeps up. "I don't understand. Fishing?"

"Phishing with a p-h," Aaron explains, "not fishing with an f."

We stare at him blankly.

Our reaction doesn't seem to surprise him. "Phishing is a cybersecurity scam where hackers pose as reputable businesses or people in order to trick you into opening email attachments or clicking on malicious links so they can steal sensitive information." His gaze sweeps the room, touching every one of us with its seriousness. "Research shows that one in three employees will fall for a phishing scam. I'm here to implement a cybersecurity awareness training program that will teach you how to identify a phishy-looking email."

Cybersecurity awareness training program. What a mouthful. That means it'll probably be technical and boring, and about as enjoyable as a bikini wax.

As the significance of his words begins to sink in, there's a palpable sense of relief all around the conference room that no one's being laid off, but also a collective slumping of shoulders. None of us dare say anything, though. Not with Calvin glaring at us like we're all about to personally lower the drawbridge so cyber marauders can loot and destroy his precious company.

I don't know if it's just me, but the vibe I'm getting from this Aaron guy is that he's the big-city slicker come to educate a bunch of small-town, computer-illiterate idiots. It's not only

the expensive cut and fabric of his suit. It's the condescending tone in his voice that grates me. Honestly, I think we're smarter than he gives us credit for.

I shift in my seat. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Kenzie subtly shaking her head. *Please keep quiet*, her head shake begs me.

It's good advice. Right now, my goal should be to not draw attention to myself for the rest of the meeting, but my smart mouth has other ideas. "Instead of training," I say, "why don't we install really good security software to protect us?"

Subtext: Why does Aaron Sinclair have to be here for six long months?

Aaron narrows his eyes at me. Ah, a man well versed in reading subtext. Excellent.

I shoot a quick glance at a tight-lipped Calvin, who's showing zero appreciation for my attempt to cut expenditure (and a certain smug individual).

"A phishing email can get past a firewall," Aaron responds, his voice holding a faint edge, "and untrained staff will click on that mail. Every single one of you is a prime target for a cybercriminal. All it takes is one misclick."

Well, that sounds a touch dramatic. I must have rolled my eyes a little too violently, though, because Aaron's frown is immediate. He's clearly annoyed that I'm not nodding along like all the other well-behaved employees in the room.

"Do you disagree?" He leaves a deliberate pause.

"Tess," I supply, knowing full well he's perfectly aware of my name since Calvin mentioned it less than a minute ago. I doubt this is a man who misses details.

"Okay, Tess, so you think you would recognize a sophisticated phishing email?" There's something in the softness of his voice that makes me uneasy.

"Yes, I do," I answer, projecting a confidence I'm no longer feeling, but I'd sooner bite my tongue than back down now. He waits in silence for me to make my point and I oblige.

“Those sorts of emails are easy to spot since they’re typically riddled with poor grammar and misspellings.”

Our eyes lock in a silent contest of wills.

“Last week, I ran a number of simulated phishing attacks,” Aaron says after a moment, holding my gaze. “One person took the bait and clicked on one of the compromised emails. If this was a real cyberattack, that person would have shut down the company’s entire network.”

The tension in the room elevates. A ripple of nerves shoots through me, but at the same time I’m fairly confident it wasn’t me. I don’t just randomly click on strange emails.

Then Aaron says, “I hid the attack in a cat video.”

Horror washes over me. Wait, what? I love cat videos. They’re my kryptonite.

“Who was it?” Rick asks. “Who clicked on the video?”

Aaron is looking straight at me when he says, “Tess Miller.”

Kenzie lets out a dismayed gasp.

I feel my face freeze as heads swivel my way. In some dim part of my brain, I register Mark nearly crumpling in relief that it’s not him.

“It was a funny cat video!” I say defensively, my cheeks on fire. “Anyone would have clicked on it.”

“Not me,” says Rick. “I hate cats. Anyway, I wouldn’t be so stupid.”

Oh, the irony. If a hacker sent Rick a pic of a silicone-loaded woman in a skimpy bikini, I think he’d sprain a finger in his haste to click on it.

Sofia says under her breath, “Well, we all know what rhymes with Rick.”

“A company can possess all the technical safeguards in the world,” Aaron continues, “but if its employees are—” He pauses, and I imagine him mentally sifting through the myriad

of options available to him: Imbecilic. Moronic. Incompetent. “—untrained, then those safeguards are useless.”

Calvin nods. “As Aaron explained to me, homeowners can install an alarm system, but if they don’t activate the alarm then it’s useless.” He points a finger at us. “You will all be taught how to activate the alarm. Metaphorically speaking.”

To complete the day’s descent into the Nine Circles of Hell, Calvin adds, “The first training session starts tomorrow. I want it known that staff performance reviews will now include security awareness metrics. Aaron will be sending out regular mock phishing emails to test all of you. If anyone falls for one, they’ll have to undergo additional security training.”

That won’t be me, I resolve, my cheeks still burning. I’ve learned my lesson.

CHAPTER THREE

“I have to hand it to you,” Sofia says to me, “when you crash and burn, you do so in spectacular fashion.” She makes a gesture that mimics an explosion.

I bury my face in my hands. Honestly, I’m still reeling. An epic internal wail of *nooooooo* is fighting to be let out. “Please don’t remind me.”

Kenzie nudges my giant blueberry muffin. “Have another bite, Tess.” Her soft and soothing tone is a cool compress on my battered ego.

I break off a piece, pop it into my mouth, and chew mechanically. The sweet pastry makes me feel a little better. I break off another chunk.

As soon as the meeting ended, Sofia and Kenzie dragged me to Beth’s Bakery, our favorite coffee shop, for pity pastries. One of the advantages of working at Amell Greetings is that as long as the work gets done, Calvin’s not too bothered when we take our breaks. The three of us are huddled in our favorite spot at the back, a wall of fake palms concealing us from prying eyes.

A shudder rips through my body. “All I can think about is that moment when Aaron announces my name.”

“I’m sure it’s all anyone is thinking about,” Sofia murmurs as she scoops some of the cream from her chocolate éclair with a finger. When I cringe, Kenzie elbows her. Sofia tries to look repentant, but it’s a look she rarely adopts so it sits odd on her face.

I lower my eyes to my mauled muffin. “If only I hadn’t clicked on that stupid cat video!”

Kenzie pats my shoulder. “It’s just bad luck you were the only person in the entire company to do so.”

Which is weird, I think absently. Why would Calvin be so worried about security if I was the only one who fell for the

fake scam? Didn't that Aaron guy mention he ran a number of simulated attacks?

We lapse into silence. Although I'm comforted by their concern, I'm soon lost in the awful memory of the meeting playing in a loop inside my head. I don't know how much time passes before I'm aware of how quiet Sofia and Kenzie are. Suspiciously quiet. I look up. Their expressions are anything but concerned. Kenzie has tears streaming down her cheeks and Sofia's shoulders are shaking with suppressed laughter.

I raise my eyebrows. "Seriously?"

"I can't believe you called him a pretty boy," Kenzie manages to gasp out.

"I think it's time you work on your inside voice," Sofia says, and they both howl with laughter, Sofia with her usual gusto while Kenzie is more tempered. They're beginning to draw the attention of other customers. Exactly what I don't want.

"Keep it down," I hiss.

They make an effort. After a few seconds, however, because I'm the daughter of a mother who tries to see humor in even the most disastrous situations, a chuckle of my own bubbles up. "On a scale of one to ten?" I ask.

"Ten," they both answer without hesitation.

"To be fair," Kenzie says as she spreads a thin layer of strawberry jam on her croissant, "I was going to click on the video. I just hadn't got around to it yet."

"What this Aaron guy did was sneaky," I say. "He should've at least warned us we were being tested. I do well when I'm prepared."

Kenzie gives me a shoulder bump in commiseration. "Me too."

Sofia is silent. We all know she's magnificent under pressure. At least she's sensitive enough not to rub it in to us mere mortals.

"I hate Aaron Sinclair," I say.

“I hate him too,” Kenzie echoes loyally, but I can tell she doesn’t mean it and feels guilty for even voicing the words. I doubt she possesses a hateful bone in her body.

Sofia, who’s just as loyal a friend, but without the inconvenient attacks of conscience, declares, “I’m happy to lie and say I hate him too.”

I nod. “I’ll take it.”

We finish our food and step out onto the sidewalk to head back to the office. Main Street is the beating heart of our medium-sized town of Brown Oaks. I love the mix of restaurants, shops, and offices lining the street, cobbled walkways branching out in all directions to host vintage clothing shops and artisan eateries. Window boxes filled with purple pansies draw the eye and we’ve adopted the Parisian trend of lining the streets at neatly spaced intervals with leafy trees.

The sky feels big in Brown Oaks. I worked for a year in a large city, and honestly, I hated it. I hated the commuter bustle, construction noise always ringing in my ears, and buildings obscured by ugly scaffolding. I was eager to return to my hometown and leave behind my depressing view of a small, smog-smearred sky.

Walking along Main Street’s wide sidewalk, Sofia and Kenzie link their arms in mine and I feel a rush of love for my two friends. In our ladies-only evenings every Wednesday, we’ve been binge watching the television series *The Last Kingdom*. What sticks with me (other than Uhtred flexing his biceps while wielding a sword) are the battle scenes between the Saxons and Danes. When the Saxons fight, they form a shield wall where the soldiers stand so close together their shields overlap, protecting each other, as well as themselves. Sofia, Kenzie, and I, we are our own shield wall, fiercely protective warriors standing shoulder to shoulder in life’s battles. It’s been like that for the three of us since we started working together. I wouldn’t have it any other way.



As soon as we exit the elevator, Mevia waves me over from behind her reception desk. I say goodbye to Sofia and Kenzie, and head over. The phones are thankfully quiet.

Mevia jumps up and offers me a sympathetic arm squeeze when I reach her. “Hey, that sucks what happened to you in that meeting.”

“Thanks, Mev.” I’m not at all surprised she knows. Mevia’s the eyes, ears, and wagging tongue of Amell Greetings. Of course, she’s heard about what happened.

She makes a pouting face and her lip ring jumps out at me like a jack-in-the-box. “It’s also pretty cool because everyone’s talking about you now.”

Dismay shoots through me. “I don’t want that.”

“Really?” Mevia looks surprised. “I love it when people talk about me.” Clearly sensing my unhappiness, she whispers, “If it makes you feel any better, you weren’t the only one.”

“The only one what?” I ask, confused.

“To click on a dangerous link,” she elaborates. “There were other fake emails sent out. You know, what Hot Guy calls ‘phishing’ emails.”

I gape at her and repeat stupidly, “There were others?”

She nods, loving all this drama. “Practically everyone in the company fell for them. That’s why Calvin’s in such a state.”

“But I was the only one mentioned in the meeting!”

“I know,” she says with wide, approving eyes. “You’re famous.”

It’s definitely not the sort of fame I’m after, but Mevia appears to be a fan of any sort of notoriety. I take a moment to collect myself. Why weren’t the other phishing emails mentioned in the meeting? Why was I singled out?

Through gritted teeth, I ask, “Where is he?”

“Who?”

“Aaron.”

“Hot Guy?”

That might be Mevia’s name for him, but it’s certainly not mine. Right now, the names bouncing around in my head can’t be said out loud. “Yes.”

“Calvin’s given him Sara’s old office.”

Naturally. No menial cubicle for The Man of the Hour. “Okay, thanks.” I turn to go, but Mevia lightly grasps my arm. “Um, maybe you should calm down first, Tess, before you speak to him.”

“I’m calm! I’m super calm! I’m like a...a pond.” In reality I’m more like a raging, turbulent ocean right now, but Mevia looks so worried I make myself take in a slow, calming breath. “Okay, I’m good to go,” I reassure her and off I stomp to Aaron’s office.

The door’s closed. I knock, but when there’s no answer, I open the door and step inside. Aaron is sitting at his desk, suit jacket draped neatly over his chair back. I can’t help but observe the snug fit of his white shirt across a surprisingly muscled chest. I’m immediately annoyed at myself for the observation.

I open my mouth and he holds up a finger. *Wait*, the finger says. It’s only then that I notice he’s on his phone. He doesn’t invite me to sit in the visitor’s chair across from him. That’s fine. I’d rather stand anyway.

While I wait, I let my eyes wander shamelessly around his office. He’s made no effort to personalize the space. I’m also getting strong neat freak vibes as I stare at a desk holding only a sad, undecorated laptop, a black notebook, and an expensive-looking pen, all three items lined up neatly. I’ve sat in a tax office with more personality than this.

He needs one of Calvin’s posters in here, I think idly. Calvin’s taken all the best-selling cards Amell Greetings has produced over the years and blown them up into huge posters to make up the wall art on our third floor.

This office is starving for color. For joy. For *me*. The person who desperately wants an office over a cubicle.

Aaron seems in no hurry to cut short his call. Because I'm bored, I tune into his conversation. It doesn't sound like a work call, especially when he lets out a deep laugh and says in a low, intimate voice, "I'm glad you enjoyed yourself."

Well, this is a *workday* and I'm a *work* colleague trying to talk to him on a *work*-related matter, so I have no compunction pointedly clearing my throat and saying, "I need to speak to you about—"

Astonishment sweeps through me when he swivels his chair and presents me with his back. The absolute nerve of the man to just dismiss me as if I'm nothing. Anger starts to stir inside me. Before I do or say something I'll regret, I exit his office, not bothering to close his door.

Watching me approach, Mevia whispers, "Do you need help burying a body?"

I shake my head. "He's still breathing. Unfortunately."

I head back to my cubicle, ignoring the sidelong glances of my coworkers. I'm hoping my face conveys a clear message that they would be risking their lives if they approach me right now. One of the worst parts about working in a main area filled with cubicles is that there is no door to slam. Right now, my bruised ego is craving the satisfaction of a fierce door slam.

I sink into my desk chair and stew for a solid two minutes, rearranging my pens and aggressively stapling papers that do not require stapling.

Except the deadline for the silver wedding anniversary card I have to write is fast approaching and I can't procrastinate any longer. Blocking out all thoughts of Calvin and Aaron, I stare at my blank screen, scrunching my nose as I think. My imagination typically fills in any experiential gaps, but this time I'm stumped. How can I write about something I know nothing about?

All at once, I picture my parents. They're childhood sweethearts, married for thirty-five years. I picture my dad waking up before my mom every morning so he can bring her a cup of coffee in bed. I picture them holding hands while taking an ambling walk around the neighborhood. A lump forms in my throat and my fingers fly across the keyboard, the words pouring out of me. I tweak and polish, so the piece is not as raw, but still sweet and sentimental, exactly what Enya, my editorial manager, requested. I email it off to her. Hopefully, my words will bring a tear even to her jaded, I've-been-divorced-twice-and-seen-it-all eyes.

To combat my typical drained state after finishing a card, I take out a blank piece of paper and start sketching. It's become a relaxing habit of mine, drawing pictures as a way to unwind and boost my imagination. I don't let myself think, I simply let my hand wander.

When I eventually break out of my daze and focus on the piece of paper, I realize I've drawn a caricature of Aaron's face, elongating his nose and ears, giving him fangs and horns.

I'm impressed with myself.

"You haven't got my chin right," says a voice.

Aaron.

I whip the paper away and stuff it into a drawer.

How could I have been so focused that I didn't register a six-foot-something presence in my cubicle? Aaron's arms are folded and his eyes are regarding me with either interest or impatience, I can't quite tell. I don't know how long he's been standing there watching me. The thought makes me uncomfortable and that makes me want to fidget. I tuck my hands under my thighs. No way am I revealing my tell.

I have to lean back in my chair to look up at him, which puts me at a disadvantage. This, I'm guessing, is his intention.

"You came to see me," he says.

We're wasting no time on small talk. Good. Before I can say anything, however, I see him take in the multitude of photos and neon post-its I've tacked to my cubicle walls. He

looks appalled. “It’s like I’ve stepped into a preschool classroom.”

My middle finger twitches. *Behave*, I tell it sternly. “I’m sorry to hear that color offends you.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Poor taste offends me.”

Says the man whose office is The Ode to All Things Drab and Dreary.

“I take after Monet,” I explain airily. “He avoided using black for nearly his entire painting career.”

His eyes do another sweep of my cubicle, seemingly spellbound by my desk with its messy stacks of papers and multi-colored pens everywhere. “There is nothing artistic about this space.”

“Happy chaos,” I point out.

He shakes his head. “Oxymoron.”

“In your case, only one part of that word is true.”

When he narrows his eyes at me, I decide to hastily haul this conversation back on track. “I came to speak to you because, apparently, you sent out a bunch of those phishing emails and a number of people in the company clicked on them. Not just me. Why didn’t you include *that* information in the meeting?”

His forehead creases. “How do you know that?”

As if I’m going to reveal my source. “You singled me out!”

“Well, you were the only one to click on the phishing test email containing the cat video,” he says after a moment. “And you did make a point to draw attention to yourself in the meeting. I simply followed through on that.”

I’m struggling to keep my composure. “It’s an important detail that nearly everyone else also failed your tests. One you could have mentioned in the meeting.”

“I could have,” he says, lifting one shoulder in a dismissive shrug.

It's such an infuriating response! The man can't even be bothered to make the effort to use both shoulders when it comes to me.

"If you're worried about Calvin, he's aware of all the failed responses," Aaron informs me, looking bored. "They'll be mentioned in the first training session."

In the meantime, I'll have to endure everyone's self-congratulatory expressions, thinking they'd successfully passed while I'd failed. I shouldn't care what other people think, but unfortunately, no matter how often I pep talk myself in front of the mirror, I do care. And I think less of myself for it.

"You know, what you did was really deceptive," I accuse him. "You could've at least warned us we were being tested."

He levels an incredulous look at me. "You think hackers aren't deceptive? That they'll warn you before they try to destroy you?"

My exasperation goes up a notch. My sister would insist I'm being unreasonably stubborn here, but Kate hasn't met Aaron. I don't care what he says to justify his actions. What he did was sneaky, plain and simple. And that tells me all I need to know about the man doing the sneaking around.

"Now it's the pretty boy's turn for a question," he says.

Annoyance flashes through me. Really? He couldn't just be a gentleman and let it go?

Reluctantly, I say, "Ask away."

"Why did you click on that video?"

I frown at him. "That's your question?"

"That's my question."

"It's a cat video," I say, as if the answer is obvious.

He looks at me in incomprehension. "So?"

"So, *everyone* clicks on cat videos."

“I don’t.” He radiates silent disapproval. Well, he can radiate whatever he wants. He’s the anomaly here.

Before I can censor myself, I say, “I should have been clearer. Every person with a *beating heart* clicks on cat videos.”

His expression is unamused. “Very funny.”

“Look, I learned my lesson,” I say, making an effort to be civil, even though it’s killing me. “No more clicking on cat videos.”

He gives me a pointed look.

“Fine! No more clicking on *any* viral videos.”

Unless it’s a video of the Hemsworth brothers running shirtless on a sandy Australian beach. You’d have to be a corpse not to click on that.

“Good.” His eyes land on my laptop, which I’ve decorated with rhinestones, patterned washi tape, and flower stickers. He winces, looking mildly revolted. “It’s like you’re pimping out your laptop.”

It’s too delicious a temptation. “I have extra sheets of stickers and rhinestones if you want. Like my seven-year-old niece says, ‘sharing is caring.’”

I see one corner of his mouth twitch. “As if I’d desecrate my laptop like that.”

Well, well, underneath all that starched conformity, the man has a sense of humor.

Unfolding his arms, Aaron makes to leave. In an absent-minded move, I cross my legs and his eyes flick to my suede ankle boots. They linger there, almost unwillingly, almost as though he cannot, for the life of him, drag his gaze away.

I feel a burst of retaliatory elation. Slowly, I stretch out my legs and watch closely as he swallows. I hide a smile. Oh, yes, my sexy boots do the trick every time.

With great effort, Aaron manages to tear his attention away from my shoes. His eyes travel up my long legs (admittedly,

my best asset) in their form-fitting jeans to my chest (unfortunately, not as impressive). Then his gaze hits my face, and his eyes meet mine.

This is the moment my ploy backfires dramatically because...those eyes. They seem to see right through me, stripping me bare.

All at once, I'm the one who's deeply uncomfortable.

"Hey, babe," says a familiar voice.

Nathan.

I jump to my feet, looking swiftly away from Aaron to focus on Nathan stepping around Aaron as he squeezes into my cubicle and stands by my side, snaking a proprietary arm around my waist, staking his claim.

I watch surprise crawl into Aaron's eyes.

"Nathan, hi," I say, kissing his cheek. "This is unexpected."

"Thought I'd say a quick hello to my girl." Nathan looks from me to Aaron and back again to me. His eyebrows rise expectantly.

I clear my throat. "Uh, Nathan, this is Aaron. Calvin's brought him on to straighten out our cybersecurity."

Nathan waits for at least three awkward seconds before he hauls out a pleasant smile and extends his hand. "Pleased to meet you."

Returning his handshake, Aaron responds with an unconvincing "likewise."

I can't help automatically comparing the two men. Aaron is taller and wider in the shoulders, his face guarded and his eyes watchful, while Nathan possesses an open, boyish face, his brown eyes warm and friendly.

"I'll leave you two to it," Aaron says, his tone abrupt, and I watch him walk away.

When he's gone, Nathan turns to me. "Well, he's a bundle of laughs."

“Forget about him,” I say, as much to myself as Nathan.

“Gladly.” He keeps his arm around my waist. “You seeing Sofia and Kenzie tonight?”

I shake my head. “Ladies’ night is off. Sofia has something on.”

He stiffens. “I’ve arranged a gaming session with the guys tonight, but I can cancel if you want to do something?”

I know how much Nathan loves gaming, so his willingness to cancel for me is sweet. “No, it’s fine. I’ll pop round to see my folks.”

He gives me an affectionate squeeze. “How about dinner tomorrow night then? I’ve got an upscale place in mind so dress up.”

I rest my cheek against his chest. “Sounds good.” Sounds like the perfect antidote to Aaron’s trail of poisonous disruption. Am I being dramatic? Possibly. But today was an out-of-the-ordinary dramatic day and there’s only one person I hold responsible for that.

CHAPTER FOUR

As I drive the familiar route to my parents' house, I'm unable to shake the unsettled sensation that has gripped me ever since Nathan showed up at my work. I can't blame his unexpected visit as he often drops in to say hello. We work in the same building; his company is on the fifth floor, mine's on the third. Nathan's also on friendly terms with most of my coworkers—except for Sofia, funnily enough. I attribute their mutual dislike of one another to a personality clash, but at times I wonder if that's too simplistic an explanation. When I confront either of them about it, they tend to simply shrug off my concerns.

I pull up to a stoplight and buzz open my window, welcoming the gentle blast of spring-scented air. Maybe I'm feeling unsettled because of that intense and surreal moment between Aaron and me. Not that anything happened, I hasten to reassure my conscience, which has jumped instantly to attention. Nathan and I are solid. We've been seeing each other for a year and our relationship is moving at a steady, comfortable pace.

It's just... What on earth took place in that moment? One second I was teasing Aaron with my trusty old boots, the next second he was pinning me in place with his eyes and... No, no, there is no *and*. There is only an annoying man with his annoyingly handsome features.

Guilt stirs in my chest. I feel a little disloyal even giving Aaron a second look. Nathan is just as good-looking in a boyish kind of way with his wavy blond hair that flops endearingly over his forehead, his earnest brown eyes.

Interestingly, Nathan was full of questions about Aaron. *How long is his contract at Amell Greetings?* Six months. *Where is he staying?* I don't know. *Is he married?* No idea. It was also flattering how affectionate Nathan acted in the immediate aftermath of that brief encounter with Aaron. Normally, he's not comfortable with displays of affection at

work, but he kept touching me in a way I could only label as territorial. It was flattering, but also irritating.

I turn into my parents' driveway and park, filled with a resolve to not dwell anymore on Aaron and Nathan. Honestly, my mind is exhausting sometimes.

Easing out my car, I lift my face to the sun. I love days like this, where the air is almost syrupy and the sky looks as if it's brushed with Monet shades of blue.

My mom opens the front door, wearing her favorite cream cardigan and chinos. Happiness lights up her face when she sees me. She sounded so surprised and pleased when I phoned earlier to say I was dropping by, since I don't usually see my parents during the week. She loves it when Kate and I visit. Come to think of it, she loves all sorts of visitors. It's disturbing to think that if an escaped convict showed up at her door, she'd no doubt be delighted at the opportunity to entertain.

On the front porch, Mom pulls me in for a hug. She's a hugger, my mother, which I don't mind at all. In fact, I feel sort of twitchy and glum when a week's gone by without one of her soul-soothing hugs.

She ushers me inside and my eyes dart around the entrance hall.

"Kate's not here," she tells me.

I relax instantly.

Mom chuckles, and there's a tinge of sadness to it. "Come on, she's your sister. She's not so bad to be around."

I don't want to upset her, so I'm forced to lie. "I guess." If you don't mind the company of a drill sergeant who thinks fun is a subversive enemy attempting to infiltrate your family.

"You know, Kate might seem tough, but underneath that hard shell is a small, scared girl."

I stare at my mom in disbelief. "Did that revelation come after one too many glasses of wine?"

She swats my shoulder playfully. “Don’t be sassy.” Her tone turns serious. “Watch out for her, Tess. Please.”

“I will.” I’ll do it because I trust my mom, but it’s my belief she has a blind spot when it comes to her eldest child.

“Anyway, this is a lovely surprise,” Mom says, changing the subject as we head to the kitchen. “Don’t you usually spend Wednesday nights with Sofia and Kenzie?”

“Yeah, but Matt has a work function tonight and partners are invited. Sofia doesn’t want to miss out on the dancing and free food.”

“That woman knows how to embrace life,” she says with an approving smile. “What about Kenzie?”

“She went home with a migraine.”

“Ah, poor thing.”

When my mother heard how Sofia and Kenzie looked after me in my first week at Amell Greetings, showing me the ropes and shielding me from Calvin’s legendary temper, she unofficially adopted the two of them as her own. In turn, they both adore her, referring to her as Second Mom.

“We ate a big lunch earlier,” Mom says. “It’s just sandwiches tonight, I’m afraid.”

I wave that away. “Sandwiches are fine. I’m not all that hungry anyway.”

“Hey, Google,” I hear my grandmother ask, “what’s the weather like?”

A robotic voice replies, “Heather is a purple-flowered Eurasian heath that—”

“I SAID *WEATHER*, YOU USELESS MACHINE!”

I wince. Grandma’s voice rises several aggressive decibels whenever she’s at odds with Google.

“Hi, Grandma,” I call out when I enter the kitchen, leaning down to kiss her papery cheek. “Google giving you trouble again?”

My petite, white-haired grandmother glares at the offending machine sitting innocently on the kitchen windowsill bracketed by two small potted plants. “That thing has the hearing capacity of a teenager,” she mutters.

Nearly once a week, she threatens to drop Google into a bucket of water. It’s an empty threat because we all know she’d be lost without her connection to the outside world. They are the very definition of a love/hate relationship.

“I told you before, Mom, you don’t have to yell at it,” my mother says mildly. “Let me show you.” She adopts a formal tone. “Google, please tell us the weather.”

Grandma scowls. “Why are saying *please*, Joelle? It’s a machine. Manners are wasted on it.”

Google intones, “The weather today is sunny and mild...”

Watching my mom and grandmother interact, I have to laugh. Grandma’s been living with my mom and dad for two years now, ever since her husband died of a heart attack in her arms while they were out on a walk. Not wanting to live in a house filled with memories of my grandfather haunting her in every room, she gifted the house to me, deposited the equivalent sum of money into Kate’s bank account, packed up all her clothes, and took over my childhood room. My mom, of course, was thrilled to have the company. My builder dad, who’s a big softie under his gruff exterior, welcomed Grandma in, but also managed, in record time, to convert Kate’s room into a separate living area for my grandmother so she could have her own space without taking over his TV with reruns of *Downton Abbey*.

Abruptly, my mom catches sight of my ruined arms and gasps. “Tess! What happened?”

“Ash,” I say with a grimace, as if that’s explanation enough.

Last night, I tumbled down a YouTube rabbit hole, watching videos of cat owners walking their cats, as though they were dogs. Enthralled, I bought a vest harness and, in my attempt to strap Ash into it, I unleashed a monster. Anyone

would think I was inflicting the worst sort of torture on him the way he twisted and hissed and howled. My forearms were scratched to pieces and a furious Ash still refuses to come anywhere near me.

“Is that my girl?” my dad’s voice booms from the living room.

“Hey, Dad,” I call out.

“Let her say hello,” Grandma tells my mom. “You can doctor her later.”

“All right,” Mom relents. “I’ll make a jug of iced tea and we can sit and chat on the back porch.”

In the living room, Dad is stretched out in his special recliner, watching one of his beloved crime dramas.

I love how warm and welcoming my parents’ home is. There’s always a pair of shoes lying around that hasn’t yet found their way into a shoe cupboard. The throw pillows are often ruffled, which means they’re not props; someone has enjoyed lying on them. A soft blanket lies across the couch, inviting you to snuggle under it. It’s a lived-in and loved home.

Dad pauses the TV and I lean down to kiss him hello.

“How’s my favorite daughter?”

He says the same thing to Kate so my ego’s not too charged. “I’m good. How’s the back?”

He grimaces. “Same as always.” A lifetime in construction has pretty much ruined his back and he lives on painkillers, heat pads, and tight-lipped fortitude.

“Want to sit outside with us?”

He nods. I brace my body and help my father to stand. I don’t comment on the flash of pain that crosses his face. He’s under the mistaken assumption that his chronic pain somehow makes him less of a man. What he fails to comprehend is the fact that his literally backbreaking career paid for our education and the roof over our heads and that will forever make him a hero in our eyes.

On the back porch, Dad settles into his padded chair, and I help my mom and Grandma carry out the iced tea and a platter of assorted sandwiches. I make myself comfortable on the chair next to my father.

“Sandwich?” I ask.

“I can help myself,” he grumbles.

“I know you can, but where’s the fun in that?”

A smile tugs at his lips. Mom and Grandma keep quiet, leaving him in my arena. We all know I can cajole him better than anyone else in the family.

After handing him a pastrami and mustard sandwich, his favorite, I lean back in my chair and take a sip of the tea, soaking up my happy place.

“Anything interesting happening at work?” Mom asks, gesturing for me to hold out my arms.

“A new guy started today.” I set my tea down and extend my arms. She smears a thick layer of aloe vera on my scratches.

“Which department?” Dad asks around a mouthful of sandwich.

“He’s a consultant who’ll be handling our cybersecurity.” I’m purposefully vague on the details, especially the part about the cat video.

“What’s his name?” Grandma asks.

“Aaron.”

“Strong name.” Grandma’s eyes, the exact shade of green as mine, settle on me speculatively. “How old is he?”

“Thirty-one.” Where Mevia gets all her information from is still a mystery to me.

“Is he handsome?” Grandma asks.

I shrug as casually as I can. “I suppose.”

My mom straightens in her chair, transitioning into high-alert mode. She reminds me of a hunting dog sniffing the air,

sensing something on the breeze. “What else do you know about him?”

“Not much. He seems to like his privacy.”

Grandma nods in approval. “A man who keeps to himself. Commendable. Can’t stand blabbermouths. Like Google.”

It’s an odd comparison, but when you have an obsessive feud with a machine, I imagine that’ll always be your reference point. More importantly, I have to dissuade Grandma from the worrying pedestal she’s placed Aaron on. “I find him *extremely* aggravating.”

Mom and Grandma exchange a loaded look, while my dad continues eating, oblivious to the undercurrents.

“Stop it, you two,” I admonish them. “This Aaron guy is only here for six months. And I’m seeing Nathan.”

Dad looks up from his plate. “You’ve been seeing him for a whole year and the man hasn’t put a ring on your finger.”

“We’re taking it slow,” I tell him, for what feels like the hundredth time. He opens his mouth and I hold up a finger. “Uh-uh, no sentence that begins with ‘In my day.’”

His mouth clamps shut.

Mom pats my knee. “Nathan’s a good man. Solid and reliable.”

My grandmother raises her eyebrows. “I just wish that solid and reliable man had a sense of humor.”

Dad stabs a finger in the air. “Exactly my feelings, Deanna!”

“I’m sure he’s working on it,” my mom says.

Dad lets out a disbelieving grunt. “If he doesn’t have a sense of humor now, it’s not going to magically show up one day. Humor doesn’t work like that.”

“Is it because he doesn’t laugh at your dad jokes?” I ask. “Because not even Kate laughs at them.”

A weighted silence settles on us, courtesy of the grenade I've inadvertently tossed into the conversation. None of us say out loud what we're all thinking—that Kate doesn't laugh at much anymore.

Finally, my dad says, "Remember that *Friends* episode we all watched here? Your boyfriend didn't laugh once."

Friends is the screen equivalent of comfort food in our family. Even though it's an old series, its comedy doesn't date and to be confronted by someone who's completely indifferent to our favorite series has left my folks at a loss for words.

I'm unable to mount a defense on Nathan's behalf. To be honest, I'm still struggling to understand it myself. How can anyone not laugh at *Friends*? But that one question leads to others and that's not a good thing, because it starts to feel as though something nameless is gaining a foothold in me.

"You want to talk, Tess?" my mom asks, probing gently. "You seem not yourself."

I shrug. "It's nothing."

She bites her lip, clearly wrestling with what she's about to say next. "I have to ask. Are you sure Nathan is the person you want to spend the rest of your life with?"

The sound of cicadas fills the air for a moment following her question. And what a question. It slams straight into me, a weight pressing on my chest, constricting my breath.

Am I sure? I'm not sure about anything really. I'm not sure if I want to spend the rest of my life writing copy for greeting cards. I'm not sure if I want to use my savings to travel for a bit. I'm not even sure what I'm cooking for dinner tomorrow.

It's a brutally unfair question.

I swallow. "Why are you asking me that? I thought you liked Nathan."

"I do," Mom says in a rush. "It's just, well, I'm not certain if he's the one for you. If he's your soulmate."

I glance over at my father and grandmother. Dad is examining his plate like it's the Rosetta Stone and he's been

tasked with deciphering the inscriptions there. Grandma is studying me and, for once, I can't read her usually transparent face. One thing is clear, though. This is not the first time this topic has been discussed among themselves.

I know they love me and care about my future, but it's my life. My mistakes to make.

"Nathan is the person I want to spend my time with *now*," I say at last. "It's enough."

Mom nods, accepting my answer. "As long as Nathan makes you happy. That's what counts."

"He does," I insist.

It's not a lie. I'm happy with the way things are. Neither of us wants to rush into anything. We're content to still have our own separate places, since I like my own space and so does he. Our future is loosely mapped out, but not set in stone.

Do we have the sort of intense, deeply passionate relationship that's so often portrayed in books and movies? That Kate once had? No. A big part of me is relieved and quietly grateful for that.

In a soft voice, my grandmother says, "Don't mistake safe and comfortable for happy."

I look away from her too-perceptive eyes. "I'm not."

At least, I don't think I am.

I've never told anyone why I suspect I'm really with Nathan, that it has more to do with my sister than anything else. I've kept quiet, because I don't fully understand it myself. In the rare moments I've felt pressed to tentatively explore my relationship with him, my mind senses the uncomfortable direction I'm heading in and instantly puts up cowardly roadblocks.

I take a deep, centering breath. "Actually, Nathan is taking me out to dinner tomorrow night. We're going somewhere new."

I've dropped the magic words. As I hoped, my foodie-loving family is distracted enough so that the conversation

drifts to which restaurant he'll take me. Dad delivers his customary lecture on fish and food poisoning, like I'm ten and not twenty-eight, and I nod dutifully along.

At last, when the tea is drunk and the sandwiches finished, and my grandmother's dozing in her chair, I stand. "I have to go. Ash has been alone all day and I miss him."

Mom sees me out. Before I climb down the porch steps to my car, she touches my arm to secure my attention. "You sure you're okay?"

I swallow. "I'm fine. It's just been one of those days."

She's not fooled. "I read somewhere that worry is a conversation you have with yourself about things you can't change. But when you talk to someone, it can change what's happening in your head, give you a new perspective." She wraps me in a tight hug, giving me an extra squeeze before she lets me go. "Remember that."

I nod, my throat tight. "I will."

CHAPTER FIVE

“In the next couple of weeks,” Aaron announces, “I’ll be carrying out physical penetration testing.”

Everyone in the conference room immediately sits up straighter.

The man did not just say that, I think, stunned.

But I’m aware of Kenzie fanning herself with her notebook, Sofia digging her fingers into her thighs in a desperate attempt to contain herself, and Rick dabbing at his clothes where he snort-sprayed coffee all over himself.

It’s Thursday morning, the first day of an hour-long training workshop, and everyone at Amell Greetings is mainlining Aaron Sinclair standing coolly in front of us in his tailored dark blue shirt and black trousers.

Everyone, that is, except me.

I’m still fighting the urge to not snort, too. Does the man not hear what comes out of his mouth? How is he maintaining a straight face?

So far, my one highlight of the session involved Aaron informing everyone that I wasn’t the only idiot who fell for his mock phishing attack. Looking decidedly unimpressed, he pointed out that an *alarming number* of employees had clicked on his compromised links. His clarification may have come a day late, but I’m happily soaking up the sheepish looks directed my way.

That highlight, however, took place in the first five minutes of the workshop. Since then, it’s been a slo-mo deterioration of Death by PowerPoint.

After leveling a stern glare at a few errant giggling employees, Aaron points to a slide on the screen, explaining that physical penetration testing involves assessing a company’s physical security controls, including locks, security guards, cameras, access badges, and so endlessly on and on.

“Arrogant man,” I say under my breath. “He probably charges people just to breathe around him.”

“Money well spent,” murmurs Sofia.

“It’s important to remember,” Aaron continues, “that physical security plays a critical role in any cybersecurity program.”

I’m so bored I’m ready to stab myself in the heart.

For all his paranoia about security, Calvin hasn’t bothered to descend from the mountaintop to attend the training session. Maybe he believes business owners are immune from cyberattacks.

I sneak a look at my watch. Thirty-five interminable minutes left.

Just get through this session, I tell myself. Then you can escape to your desk, write the draft of the birthday card Enya is expecting, and head home to play with Ash. I also have dinner with Nathan tonight to look forward to.

Aaron is still droning on. “Security training allows a business to reduce risk and ensure compliance.”

“He’ll have no trouble getting me compliant,” Kenzie whispers.

Sofia sighs. “Even his clothes look grateful to be on that body.”

“You’re both a disgrace to feminism,” I mutter.

They ignore me.

As Aaron continues his presentation, I glance around the conference room. All around me, eyes are glazing over. I might not be the most computer literate person here, but Aaron seems to be a surprising amateur when it comes to reading a room. Does he not notice Rick yawning so hard his jaw is in danger of cracking? What about the contorted look on Hannah’s face as she tries so earnestly to stay awake?

The only explanation I can think of for Aaron’s obliviousness is that he lives in a universe where he believes

everyone is as fascinated with all things security related as he is.

I must hand it to the man—without any medical training, he’s managed to place an entire roomful of people into induced comas. Only Mark is at DEFCON-3 alert level, sitting rigidly in his seat and taking notes like he’s preparing to sit for a quiz afterward.

Aaron shows us slide after slide, all conveying the same message about how important cybersecurity training is. (At least, that’s what I think they say since I stopped paying attention a while back.)

The AC seems to be off, and the air is so stuffy in here. I keep my eyes focused on the screen while I disappear into my head, a neat writer’s trick I’ve honed over the years. I think of Ash and how cuddly he was this morning. It’s hit and miss with him. One second, he’s rubbing himself affectionately against me, the next he’s sunk his claws into my calf because I’m taking too long to dish out his kibble.

My thoughts turn to the barbecue at my parents’ place this Sunday. Mom has instructed me to bring a salad and I let my mind wander to all possible salad options. I could do a potato salad (Dad’s favorite) or a green goddess salad which Kate is partial to, or...

“Tess! Tess Miller!”

Someone is angrily calling my name.

It sounds a lot like Aaron’s voice. But why does he sound so annoyed? On second thought, scratch that. Annoyed appears to be his default attitude when it comes to me.

Then I hear the snickers.

To my growing horror, I remember where I am (conference room), what I’m supposed to be doing (participating in a training workshop), who is here with me (nearly all my colleagues at Amell Greetings), and what I’ve done (fallen asleep in front of everyone).

My eyes snap open.

Aaron is looming over me, jaw set, eyes narrowed, oozing internal judgment. The anger streaking across his face seems out of proportion to my offense. “I believe you’ve made it abundantly clear to everyone here that you find security training dull and boring.”

I keep quiet and stare at him, wide-eyed. Any answer I give will only sink me deeper into the giant hole I’ve dug for myself. Looking like a fool in front of this man is fast becoming a habit of mine.

In a quiet, terrifying voice, Aaron then inflicts the worst sort of punishment upon me. “It looks to me, Tess Miller, like you’ll be retaking the course.”



[GROUP CHAT]

Sofia: You know you were drooling, right?

Tess: Noooooo!

Kenzie: It was a delicate trickle. Nothing to worry about.

Sofia: Drool is never delicate.

Tess: Was I snoring?

Kenzie: One or two dainty snorts.

Sofia: Like a Harley.

Tess: Do you think anyone noticed?

Kenzie: Of course not!

Sofia: Yup.

Tess: Kill me now.



I’m determined to go all out for my dinner date with Nathan.

I slip into a cream silk tank top that shows off my shoulders, a clinging black skirt with daring side slits, and ankle strap heels that ought to be certified as weapons. Elegant gold hoops finish off my outfit.

I slick on lip gloss, which I know makes my lips appear even fuller. My eye makeup is more dramatic than usual, but still in keeping with the advice my mom drilled into me—makeup should *complete*, not *compete*, with your look. A squirt of mousse has added more bounce to my curls and my highlights are on fire. I've even applied concealer to the scratches on my forearms.

I look and feel the best version of myself, sexy and confident. Far removed from the lightly snoring, delicately drooling woman who was showcased to practically the entire company today.

Following the training session, every time I left my desk to go somewhere, I'd return to find my coworkers had taken it in turns to place a variety of objects next to my laptop: A Red Bull, an adult bib, an eye mask. Juvenile, I know, but I realized no malice lay behind their gifts. They were simply doing their best to lighten the whole situation. I opt to go with the flow and embrace the humor of it all. I doubted much work was done today by anyone.

I didn't see Aaron for the rest of the afternoon. I'm unsure if he was steering clear of me, or whether I was avoiding him. Probably a little bit of both. I'm thankful I can retake the introductory session online and not have to physically sit through it again. Small mercies.

Ash rubs himself against my legs and meows for attention. It looks like my tabby has forgiven me for the harness debacle. When I bend down to stroke him, he flops to the floor and stretches out on his back, legs splayed. It's my cue to rub his tummy, which he loves. Honestly, sometimes he seems more dog than cat.

The doorbell rings. The admiration in Nathan's eyes when he sees me bolsters my confidence even more.

I've been told, many times, that I possess a girl-next-door kind of prettiness. That's not the look I'm aiming for tonight. Judging by the way Nathan can't take his eyes off me, I've achieved my objective.

“Wow, babe.” He swallows. “You look amazing. Like sexy and wild.”

I take a step toward him. “I’m feeling a little wild tonight.”

His eyes widen. My ego is enjoying the effect I’m having on him. After a year of dating, we’re the couple who are so comfortable with one another we, more often than not, opt for sweats when we hang out. I don’t always bother with makeup and Nathan clips his toenails in front of me. I like our ease with one another, but tonight, it feels like I’ve thrown him off balance a little, like he’s seeing me with fresh eyes.

I appreciate that Nathan’s also made an effort with his appearance tonight. He’s wearing chinos and a tailored blazer over a dove gray linen shirt. This smart and handsome man is my boyfriend. Happiness balloons inside me.

His eyes gleaming, Nathan pulls me up against him. “You know how much I like it when you wear lip gloss.”

I smile. “I know.”

He lowers his head to kiss me, but I pull back slightly. “Uh-uh. You’ll kiss it all off. Let’s save it for later.”

“Later seems very far away,” he grumbles, nuzzling the pulse point on my neck where I sprayed the perfume he gave me for Christmas. “You know, we can always skip going out.”

Not a chance. I didn’t get all dressed up to spend the evening at home. I place a hand on his chest and push him lightly backward. “Good things come to those who wait, Nathan Holmes. We’re going out.”

His breathing quickens. “I like this dominant side to you.”

I have to admit I kind of like it myself.

“Shall we go?” he asks.

I nod and turn to lock the front door.

Ash is sitting in the entranceway, glowering at us. In truth, his glower is directed more at Nathan.

“Your cat is kind of freaky,” Nathan says, not for the first time. “He’s like the clown in *It*.”

I give him a reproachful nudge. “Ash doesn’t go around killing children.”

“Just anyone who dares to date you.” In a falsetto voice, he calls out, “Bye, Ash.”

Ash delivers a parting hiss and walks away, tail up, presenting Nathan with a clear view of his butt. I’ll say one thing for my cat. He knows how to deliver a message.



The restaurant Nathan has chosen is gorgeous. Awestruck, I drink in the intimate tables, white tablecloths, flickering candles, and dressed-up waitstaff. The whole place exudes elegance.

We order wine and I scan the menu excitedly. I love eating out, the whole experience of sampling different dishes and experimenting with new flavors.

I’m still on the first page when Nathan closes his menu. “Steak frites,” he says.

I try not to sigh. “Are you seriously ordering steak and fries?”

“Steak frites,” he corrects me with a grin.

“Nathan, you can French it up, but it’s still steak and fries, which you have three times a week.”

“Yeah, because I like steak and fries.”

I’m sure his heart has a different opinion.

“Why not try something different?”

He frowns. “Why would I do that?”

Why, indeed. Buried in this exchange, I suspect, is a message for me, a glimpse into an unchanging steak and fries future, but it’s not a thread I want to pull right now. Not if it could unravel the foundation I’m trying to build my life upon.

With my excitement dimmed a little, I scan the rest of the menu and finally select mussels in a garlic white wine broth.

After the server takes our order, Nathan tells me about his workday, dishing out all the gossip on his colleagues. Honestly, it's like a reality dating show up there on the fifth floor. I'm totally riveted, but all too soon he switches gears and launches into an unfortunately detailed explanation about the big presentation he's working on, something to do with change management. It doesn't capture my attention in quite the same way as all the drug dealing and bed hopping in his office did, and I'm only half listening.

Nathan doesn't ask about my day. For once, I'm relieved. There's no way I want to rehash what happened in today's training session. My little sleeping incident is tucked away in a dark, padlocked room in the far recesses of my mind. No way am I allowing that memory out.

Except, to my absolute shock, a familiar face catches my eye. Aaron Sinclair, the man with the master key to that dark room, is standing at the maître d' station.

No. No. No.

Out of all the thousands and thousands of people in this town, why does it have to be *him* who chose to eat at this particular restaurant.

I feel completely ambushed.

The extremely attractive woman at his side snags my attention. Tall, blonde, leggy. A beautiful, glossy cliché in a tight black cocktail dress.

"Hey, isn't that what's-his-face from your work?" Nathan asks.

"Aaron." I let out a long-suffering sigh. "Yes, it is."

He turns and spots us. Of course, he does, because the universe is having so much fun throwing the two of us together in the ring and sitting back to enjoy the match.

The pleasurable flush I've been feeling since Nathan showed up at my house vanishes. In its place, a low-level tension hums through my blood.

At the sight of Nathan and me, Aaron's mouth tightens, as though a certain four-letter word wants to slip out and he's trying to contain it.

Yeah, I know exactly how you feel.

I watch him say something to the maître d' and then brace himself as he glances over at us again.

I stiffen in my chair and mentally transmit a message to him: *It's okay, you don't have to do the right thing here. Go ahead, be rude and ignore us. I won't hold it against you. In fact, I command you to be rude!*

My body practically vibrates with the urgency of my message.

But no, he and his blonde companion are heading straight for our table. Nathan mumbles something I can't make out, but he doesn't sound pleased. I take a large gulp of my wine as dread rises inside me. I contemplate a second gulp, but refrain. I don't want Aaron adding *possible alcoholic* to his list of grievances against me.

As I watch him approach, I realize his presence has unlocked the door to that dark room holding the memory of me falling asleep in his workshop. I'm straining and straining to keep the door closed, but that memory wants out and with every step Aaron takes toward me, it grows stronger and stronger. When Aaron finally stops in front of our table, the door is open wide enough for the memory to slip out and victory twerk through my head.

"Tess," Aaron says stiffly.

"Aaron," I respond, equally stiff.

His eyes sweep over me, taking in my changed appearance. There's a flash of a second where surprise—and something that could possibly be admiration—cross his face before he catches himself and composes his features.

I experience a strange lurching sensation in my chest. Was I imagining what I'd glimpsed there?

Into the awkward silence, I tighten my grip on my wineglass and ask, “You remember Nathan?”

“I do.”

Nathan looks Aaron up and down. I cringe inwardly when he says, almost dismissively, “You’re the cybersecurity consultant.”

“Yes.”

And you must be the idiot, Aaron’s expression seems to say.

I don’t know what it is, but in Aaron’s presence, Nathan seems somehow diminished. It could be because Aaron is standing and Nathan is seated or because Aaron is broader and slightly taller, but it feels deeper than that. Perhaps it’s the quiet confidence Aaron possesses that ensures he’s immediately noticed when he enters a room.

I can’t explain it, but I know it leaves me weirdly flustered.

Reluctantly, almost as though the words are dragged out of him, Aaron gestures to the bored-looking woman at his side. Her hair is scraped back into a ponytail so tight I feel my own scalp ache in sympathy. “This is Ashley.”

Since Aaron’s resting face is irritated with a side of bored, they make the ideal matchy-matchy couple.

“Hi!” I say, extra friendly and with my fakest smile.

I can’t help it. I flick the quickest of glances at her ring finger. It’s bare.

Interesting.

She tips her head in greeting.

Really? Would it kill her to use her words? If the research is true, women speak about twenty thousand words a day. Surely, she can spare one to say hello.

“Hey, Ashley, pleasure to meet you,” Nathan booms, looking her up and down in a way that’s vastly different to the look he gave Aaron. Annoyance takes hold of me. Must

Nathan show off like this? His posturing is vaguely off-putting.

Aaron and Ashley linger at our table. Why aren't they leaving? I hate how awkward and tense this all feels.

All at once, I wonder if the reason Aaron is lingering is to ridicule me for falling asleep in his training session. My stomach knots. I haven't told Nathan about what happened. I don't know why. Yes, we're comfortable with one another, but I don't feel comfortable sharing that mortifying incident with him. Conscious of the office grapevine, I'm sure he'll find out soon enough, but I don't want him finding out now, not when I'm feeling genuinely good about myself. There's a monstrous sink in my belly as I picture the three of them having a laugh at my expense.

Aaron turns to Nathan, and I brace myself for the taunt that will bring me down. Instead, to my bewildered amazement, he asks about Nathan's work and says nothing about today, not even when Nathan asks him directly how the training went.

Aaron doesn't look my way the entire time he's talking to Nathan, but I can't stop staring at him, trying to figure the man out.

A few minutes later, the server arrives with our food.

Ashley arches a brow at my bowl of mussels. "You don't like mussels, do you, honey?" she purrs at Aaron.

"Not particularly."

I recall his compulsively neat desk. "Too messy for you?" I ask, needling him because, well, it's just so much fun.

"Too slimy," he replies, rubbing the back of his neck. He's annoyed, I realize. This is his tell. It's a useful piece of ammunition, and I mentally file it away for future deployment.

Ashley presses herself against him. "Mussels are known for their aphrodisiac effect and Aaron needs no help in that department."

Nathan releases a self-conscious laugh, and my jaw drops in disbelief. Wow, she went there.

To his credit, Aaron doesn't appear flattered by her statement. Instead, there's a tightness around his eyes when he says politely, "We'll leave you to your food."

When they're gone, Nathan blurts, "Well, that was interesting." He keeps his voice low since they're seated only a couple of tables from us, yet I pick up a hint of insecurity in his tone that I'm currently not inclined to soothe away.

"Totally embarrassing," I say, but my misbehaving imagination can't stop thinking about her words, and I feel a flutter of something I'd rather die than admit to.

CHAPTER SIX

[GROUP CHAT]

Tess: Guess who I bumped into this evening at the restaurant?

Sofia: Ryan Reynolds.

Kenzie: Ryan Gosling!

Tess: Aaron Sinclair.

Kenzie: Oh.

Sofia: What happened? Did you fall asleep?

Tess: Hilarious. He was with a woman.

Sofia: Of course he was. A man who looks like that is not going to dine alone.

Tess: They had a big argument. She started crying, then she stormed out.

Kenzie: The poor woman.

Sofia: WHAT WAS THE ARGUMENT ABOUT?

Tess: I think Aaron dumped her.

Kenzie: In public?

Sofia: At least he's free now.



The next morning, I'm hurrying to my car parked in the driveway when Mr. Silva's bald head pops out from behind the hedge separating our two properties. "Hey, Tess, I have one for you."

I'm running late for work and the urge to jump into my car and pretend I didn't hear him is strong. Except, that would be cruel, and my conscience would never let me forget it. I stop and smile at my nosy, but ultimately benign, neighbor, who fills his days with golf and daytime soaps. His other favorite pastime? Pitching me ideas for greeting card copy.

“Hi, Mr. Silva. I can’t wait to hear it.”

It’s Friday, I tell myself. Practically everyone arrives late for work on a Friday.

Clearing his throat, he straightens and delivers his masterpiece:

*“Roses are red,
Violets are blue,
The world is big,
And so are you!”*

My smile freezes. I can’t, for the life of me, unfreeze it.

“Maybe you can use it for a graduation card?” he suggests.

“Maybe,” I finally get out. “Thank you.”

“Anytime. Shouldn’t you write it down?”

I tap my temple. “Memorized.” More like, *branded* on my brain.

“Ah, young minds. Hey, if you use it, I want royalties.”

That’s not at all how it works, but I say, as I do every time, “I’ll let Calvin know.”

“You do that. Has that boyfriend of yours had a look at your leaking tap yet?”

“Uh, it’s on his list.” A list of good intentions, but poor implementation. And I can’t ask my father because of his back.

“Tell him to get on it.”

“I will.”

“You have a good day then, Tess.”

With a wave, I climb into my car and head to work. I’m wearing cargo pants and a loose-fitting blouse. My ankle boots are safely stashed away, and in their place are sturdy slip-on shoes a nurse would envy.

Today, I’m playing it safe.



When I walk into the office, Mevia takes one look at me and raises a curious eyebrow. “Did you sleep over at your mom’s and borrow her clothes?”

I answer *yes* because any other answer is too complicated. Also, I have to be careful. Mevia’s like a cadaver dog the way she sniffs out gossip.

“Give me your credit card,” she demands.

“What? No.”

She stares at me like I’m the one who’s being unreasonable. “I’ll pop to the shops and buy you another outfit.”

“I don’t need another outfit.”

“Uh, you totally do.”

“Thanks, Mev, but I’m okay.”

I hurry over to Dana before Mevia can come up with any more insane notions. Enya is running late this morning and texted me earlier to pick up Calvin’s card ideas folder and start going through it. Apparently, the folder is with Dana.

I receive a diluted scowl when I enter Dana’s domain, which means she’s in a reasonable mood and won’t bite my head off.

“Morning, Dana,” I say in greeting.

Without replying, she holds up the folder.

“How’s Sonam?” I ask, taking the folder from her.

Sonam is Dana’s cat, a grumpy Persian who Dana plainly adores.

I watch Dana struggle for the briefest instant before I sense an infinitesimal softening in her. “She’s good. Ate all her breakfast this morning.”

“That’s great!”

Sofia asked me once why I try so hard with Calvin's bad-tempered assistant, and the answer lies in the delicate pearl brooch Dana wears to work every day. That little piece of prettiness is so at odds with Dana's armored personality and drab outfits that I can't help feeling there's more to the office matriarch than meets the eye.

Just then Sofia breezes in and says, without preamble, "I need to see Calvin."

Dana levels a frosty look at her. "Calvin's not here."

Sofia narrows her eyes at Calvin's closed office door. "Last time you said that Calvin was hiding behind his desk."

"He wasn't hiding," Dana denies, bite to her voice. "He was looking for the pen he dropped."

I have to hand it to Dana, she's fiercely, if misguidedly, protective of Calvin, and it's no huge secret that Sofia makes Calvin nervous.

Sofia taps a finger against her trousered leg and subjects Dana to a long, cool stare. An unspoken *I don't believe you* hangs in the air between them.

I'm itching to back away slowly, but I don't want to draw attention to myself.

The moment stretches out. Then Sofia, her eyes full of trouble, starts exploring Dana's office area, looking behind a potted plant, peering around a filing cabinet, checking behind the two-seater sofa where Calvin likes to make people wait.

"It must be here somewhere," she says idly.

"What are you looking for?" Dana demands in aggravation.

"Your broomstick. Where do you hide it?"

Dana snorts, not missing a beat when she fires back, "If I had one, I'd use it to cast a disappearing spell on you."

A delighted laugh bursts out of Sofia. "And here I thought humor was a recessive gene with you," she says gaily. "Say hello to Calvin for me."

With an exaggerated hair toss, she exits Dana's domain.

Clutching my folder, I make my excuses to Dana and retreat to my cubicle. I spend the rest of the morning wading through Calvin's ideas, working through my emails, and suffering through the online introductory security course, grumbling under my breath at Aaron because this is an unbelievable waste of my time.

At lunchtime, Kenzie pops her head over my cubicle to ask if I want to join her and Sofia for lunch.

"I can't," I say regretfully. Thanks to that compulsory course, I'm behind on my work and have to use my lunch hour to catch up.

Later that afternoon, I make my way to the breakroom. I need coffee, and I think I have some yogurt tubs and fruit stashed in the fridge, which will have to do for my lunch.

Aaron is there, scrolling through his phone while waiting for his coffee to brew. I haven't seen him all morning. Not that I was keeping a lookout or anything.

I come to a halt at the entrance to the breakroom. The question front and center in my mind is, how badly do I need coffee and lunch?

Aaron looks up and stiffens when he sees me, as though I'm the last person in the world he wants to encounter right now.

We stare at one another, both of us frozen in a wary tableau. The memory of last night is like a huge boulder sitting between us, a boulder that's haphazardly smashed through the thin line dividing our personal and professional worlds.

"Tess." Why is it every time he says my name, it's like there's something stuck in his throat?

"Aaron," I say, matching his formality.

His gaze skims my outfit, so different to what I wore at the restaurant. I can't read his expression, but I catch the faintest hint of a frown. It's hard to be sure, though, because he

appears to be a man who evaluates everything and, judging by the inscrutability of his expression, gives nothing away.

His coffee is ready, and he picks up his mug, preparing to leave.

I think of the two hours I've just wasted on his stupid course. I think of the unmistakable impression I'm currently receiving from Aaron: He doesn't want me to bring up what happened at the restaurant last night. Which means, of course, that I'm absolutely going to bring it up.

I take up a blocking stance in the doorway, leaning my shoulder against the jamb. I imagine Aaron is a lot of things, but I'm betting he's not a man who barges past a woman.

I'm right. Manners keep him trapped in the breakroom with me.

I give him my widest smile.

He tightens his grip on his coffee mug, like he's sensing a trap. Clever man.

I say conversationally, "Eventful night, last night."

"Was it?" he asks, keeping his expression neutral.

"*Very* eventful."

Irritation flickers in his eyes and I have to work to keep the smile off my face.

"Do you have a point?" he asks with a sigh.

Of course, I have a point. My point is to make him feel a little of what it's like to be put on the spot.

"I'm just concerned about Ashley." This is a giant lie. I'm not in the least concerned. "She looked *extremely* upset and I want to make sure she's okay."

"She's fine. She was a little upset."

"*A little?*" Nice try. I'm not falling for his feeble attempt to play it down. "I don't know, she seemed kind of devastated."

"*Devastated* is a rather strong description."

"But accurate."

Aaron scowls at me and keeps quiet. It's an obvious intimidation tactic, except it's wasted on me since I'm not in the least intimidated. In truth, my blood thrums with excitement at the challenge he's presenting.

"You obviously saw the whole thing?" he says finally.

I tap my finger to my lip. "I believe the entire restaurant witnessed it."

To my great delight, his cheekbones flare with color.

It was honestly the most interesting part of the evening, trumping even the mussels. What first drew my attention to the two of them was Ashley's rising voice and angry hand gestures. I saw Aaron try to calm her, but she was having none of it. Unfortunately, no matter how I strained, her voice was too high for me to fully make out what she was saying. I caught only scraps of sentences floating my way. *You don't mean it. Please don't do this.*

When she stormed from the table, the entertainment value dimmed a little at the realization there would be no wine flung in Aaron's face. A minute later, I watched a grim-faced Aaron pay the bill and follow her out. Not once did he glance my way.

Nathan and I had no such reservations. We unashamedly watched the whole spectacle play out with the kind of morbid fascination reserved for car wrecks. We then proceeded to dissect the entire incident for the rest of our dinner. It was our most animated conversation to date.

"So, what happened?" I ask, aware that I'm brazenly encroaching on personal territory.

"I believe you witnessed what happened."

Nothing like deliberate obtuseness to encourage me to scratch deeper. "What did you say to her?"

"You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"Probably not," is my honest answer.

I have the satisfaction of seeing his eyes narrow. Oh, I shouldn't be enjoying this so much. But I am. I truly am.

“Would it be too much to ask that you forget what you saw last night?”

“It would.”

I’m certain I’ll forget a lot of details about that night. But what I won’t forget is the fact that he made a woman cry.

And that’s what I tell him now. “You made her cry.” I’m no longer teasing or sarcastic because this feels too weighty an observation for levity.

He closes his eyes for a second. “I know.”

When he opens them again, his blue eyes are so somber I feel as though I’ve glimpsed something there I shouldn’t have, something that looks so much like pain it takes my breath away. But it’s gone so quickly it’s almost as if I’d imagined it into existence.

I have a sudden, terrible premonition that Aaron Sinclair is not at all good for me and that one day I’ll be the one crying in front of him.

Unnerved, I move out the doorway and head to the fridge, yanking the door open. I take out a yogurt tub and my cantaloupe, deposit them on the table, and start slicing up the fruit.

Oddly, Aaron hasn’t moved. I glance over at him. He’s set his mug down and is gripping the back of a chair. He looks a little pale. And, wait. Are those beads of sweat on his forehead?

“What’s wrong?” I ask sharply. “Are you sick?” I run through a mental list—low blood sugar, anemia, flu, possible heart condition, emotional constipation.

He doesn’t answer, too preoccupied with breathing in and out slowly.

Maybe he’s overheating? He’s dressed in his typical formal attire of dress pants and a long-sleeved shirt, but the air conditioning is on and it’s nice and cool in here.

“Hey,” I persist. “What’s going on?”

“Please take it away,” he says in a low voice.

Confusion barrels through me. “What?”

“The cantaloupe,” he says in a strangled voice. “Take it away.”

I have no idea what’s going on, but his distress is real. I quickly grab the plate and, with a twinge of regret, tip the melon into the trash.

“It’s gone,” I tell him since his eyes are closed.

Aaron pulls out a chair and slumps into it.

“Okay, what just happened there?”

“Give me a minute,” he whispers.

I give him thirty seconds because curiosity is eating away at me. “What was all that about?”

He grimaces. “I suppose you’re not going to forget about this, either.”

“Not a chance.”

I keep quiet, watching him fight an internal war. He’s reluctant to disclose what just happened, but he must know this is a war he’s not going to win. “I have trypophobia,” he says at last.

“I have no idea what that is.”

“I can’t stand to look at closely packed holes or dots.”

I’m silent for a second. “Is that a thing?”

“It’s a thing.” The burn of humiliation is all over his skin. “Apparently, a lot of people experience this. Took me by surprise as well.”

“When did you find out you had this dot phobia?”

“Last year. Someone gave me a honeycomb and my skin started crawling.”

I think about it for a bit. I really want to try to understand this. “For people with this condition, what stuff would freak them out?”

From the look on his face, this is not a subject he cares to discuss, but he indulges me. “For most sufferers, it’s mainly visual triggers—fruit seeds, bubble wrap, hair follicles. But they’re not all my triggers.”

“Do you take, like, anxiety medication or go to therapy or something?”

He shakes his head. “My condition is mild. I usually try to avoid any triggers.”

I frown at him. “Then why didn’t you leave when I took out the cantaloupe?”

“I didn’t realize it would be a trigger.”

Just then Rick walks into the breakroom, whistling away. “Hello, you two.”

Aaron lowers his head. I realize instantly he doesn’t want Rick to scrutinize his face, which is a little less corpse-like, but still pale.

It dawns on me then that I have in my hands a golden opportunity to expose Aaron and offer him up for ridicule, since I suspect Rick will be merciless in his reaction. This might even the playing field somewhat if Aaron is the talk of the office.

But I remember that at the restaurant Aaron had an opportunity to say something to Nathan about me falling asleep in his training session, yet he didn’t take it.

And even if Aaron had said something, I can’t do this to him. I’m not that person. More importantly, I don’t want to be that person.

I look at Aaron, who lifts his head and holds my gaze for several heartbeats. In his face is an awareness of the power I hold over him. He waits silently to see what I’ll do.

Sighing, I step in front of Aaron so Rick can’t see his face.

“I don’t think you want to be in here, Rick,” I say.

Rick juts his chin at me. “I need to warm up my pie.”

“Okay, but someone threw up in here and I’m trying to clean it up.”

“Ah, man, that’s so gross.” His florid face twists in disgust and he hastily leaves the breakroom.

I turn back to Aaron. Quietly, he says, “Thank you.”

Something inside me softens. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing.”

I sense that mixed in with his gratitude to me for shielding him is a slice of resentment too. Because now I know a weakness of his. And Aaron appears to be someone who doesn’t care to be vulnerable in front of others.

I have no idea what it’s like to live with this kind of involuntary horror toward something. I don’t want to mock what I can’t imagine, but, since I’m not entirely selfless and noble, I take a seat opposite him and give in to the impulse to needle him just a little.

“What if a hacker finds out about your phobia and sends you an email filled with dots?”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“It could,” I argue.

“Highly improbable.”

“But possible.”

“On a scale of—”

“Ugh, okay, I yield. Anything to avoid hearing you recite statistics.”

He smiles. A smile that transforms his face, blindsiding me and unfurling a warm glow inside my chest. No wonder he is so sparing with his smiles. They possess the power to snatch the breath from your lungs.

Then I remember Ashley crying. I remember who made her cry.

Disappointment bites at me again, and I welcome it. Embrace it, even. Because it’s better than feeling something I

have no business feeling.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better,” I say as I grab my yogurt and push back my chair. “But you owe me a cantaloupe!”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sunday rolls around surprisingly quickly. I carry my bowl of potato salad up the porch steps of my parents' house, while Nathan tucks a six-pack of beer under his arm. I'm admiring the bright colorful flowers in the pots lining the steps when Nathan surprises me by tugging me toward him and giving me a long, leisurely kiss.

I feel my body responding and he smiles against my mouth. "I'm lucky to have you, Tess Miller."

"I believe I'm the lucky one," I murmur.

The last couple of days with Nathan have been wonderful. He's been so sweet and attentive. Friday night, we watched an action movie at his place. The movie was forgettable, but not his tenderness toward me. He gave me a glorious shoulder massage while we watched death and destruction play out on the screen. When the movie ended, he carried me to bed, holding me close against his chest. Yes, his face looked like he was straining a little, but the romantic gesture still bowled me over.

Saturday, Nathan brought me a continental breakfast in bed, and when I left in the afternoon to go clothes shopping with Kenzie, he kept up a steady stream of text messages telling me how much he loves me.

Suffice it to say, my heart is happy.

In the entrance hall, I call out, "We're here."

A small shape comes charging toward me. I have barely enough time to pass the potato salad to Nathan before I catch my niece as she launches herself into my arms.

"Auntie Tess!"

"Not Auntie Tess," I growl. "Monster Tess!" I nuzzle her neck, pretending to eat her.

Lisset squeals and squirms in delight. Even when you're seven, getting devoured by monsters never gets old.

My mother and Kate are in the kitchen, which smells of garlic and freshly baked bread. Mom is chopping up watermelon, her go-to dessert for barbecues. Nathan deposits the potato salad on the table and kisses my mother on the cheek in greeting. He calls out a hello to Kate, but keeps his distance. He knows she doesn't tolerate overt displays of affection.

With Lisset still hanging on to me, I hug my mom and then turn to my sister. She's wiping down an already spotless counter. No one tells her not to bother. Kate's like a shark; if she stops moving, she'll die. Or, as Grandma says, if she stops moving, she'll start thinking, and no one wants to dwell in Kate's mind, least of all herself.

"Hi, Kate."

Still clutching the cloth, she stands stiffly while I wrap one arm around her in an awkward hug. I hold her for an extra two seconds, for no other reason than I simply miss touching her.

"Potato salad?" she asks, moving out of my arms and resuming wiping. "Dad wins *again*?"

"I like potato salad too." At least, I've progressed to not hating it.

Kate rolls her eyes. "Sure you do."

"Will you braid my hair later, Auntie Tess?" Lisset asks.

"Absolutely, sweetie."

"John out back?" Nathan asks.

Mom nods. "He's got the steaks on the grill."

"I'll take you, Uncle Nathan!" Lisset offers eagerly, wriggling out my arms to hold his hand.

"Save the steaks," I mouth to him as Lisset leads him outside.

He nods and throws me a wink over his shoulder.

Watching the two of them together, I feel a cautious tug on my heart.

Kate squirts moisturizer onto her hands. “I can practically see your ovaries jumping up and down.”

I give an easy shrug. “He’d make a good father.”

“Yeah, well, make sure he’s a good husband first.”

I study my sister in her faded summer dress, my throat tightening when I see how carefully she carries herself, as though her bones are as fragile as her heart.

As she so often does, Kate misinterprets my concern as pity, and her anger flares. “Of course, Nathan has to ask you to marry him first.”

“I know that,” I say evenly.

“I don’t see that happening anytime soon.”

“Nathan will ask me when he’s good and ready.”

“And if he does eventually work up the courage, I don’t see you saying yes.”

Stung, I make no effort to calibrate my reply. “It’s none of your business, Kate,” I fire back. “Anyway, you’re the last person who should be giving me advice.”

“Enough, you two!” Mom slaps her hands down on the counter and aims a steely-eyed look our way. She doesn’t often haul it out, but when she does, it’s like Kate and I are two tiny ships being hunted by a German wolf pack. We don’t stand a chance. “There will be no bickering today. I have a headache and I don’t want it to turn into a migraine listening to my two children snap at one another.”

“Yes, Mom,” we both murmur in contrite tones.

“Tess, you prepare the corn for steaming,” my mother orders in a brisk tone. “Kate, get started on the bean salad.”

We move obediently around the kitchen, following my mom’s barked instructions. A couple of minutes later, while she’s chopping up a red pepper, Kate bumps me with her hip. *Sorry*, her bump says. I give her a gentle shoulder nudge back. *It’s okay*.

We are so alike and yet so dissimilar. Although we've both inherited Mom's heart-shaped face and small nose, Kate gets her olive skin and dark eyes from Dad's side. Her hair color is the same light brown as mine, but she doesn't bother with highlights and wears it in a cute pixie cut that only accentuates her huge eyes and gorgeous cheekbones.

Kate's full name is Katherine, a soft and feminine name, lovely on the tongue. But three years ago, when her life imploded, my sister instructed all of us to call her Kate, a brisk, efficient, no-frills name. She then adopted the personality of a Kate—busy, brusque, serious. No time wasted on fun and frivolous things.

Whereas a Katherine floats through life, a Kate strides through it. Like a bowling ball headed straight for the pins, no floundering Katherine-like in the gutters.

I ache for Katherine, the sister I barely remember.

"These are for you." I hold out the earrings from Mevia.

Kate takes them gingerly from me. "What are they?"

"Earrings."

"They look like bacon strips."

"I know."

"Did you pay money for them?"

I sigh heavily. "Yes."

"Sucker."

"Yep."

"There's a woman at work I can't stand," Kate says, dropping the earrings into her pocket. "I'll gift them to her."

Grandma wanders into the kitchen, patting her hair, which she's styled especially for this family get-together. Knowing how comically vain Grandma is about her hair, Kate and I are both extravagant in our compliments. By the time we're done, she's beaming and insisting on wine to celebrate.

“What are we celebrating?” Mom asks as she pours us each a glass of red.

“My two lovely granddaughters,” she says. “I see right through their shameless flattery, but I love them anyway.”

Lisset skips into the kitchen then, cheeks flushed from the sun. She sees us all drinking and begs for her own glass. Kate’s about to launch into her wine-is-only-for-adults lecture, but Grandma waves her off, procures a plastic wine glass and pours in a hefty splash of red grape juice.

Proffering the glass to Lisset, Grandma attempts a curtsy. I hold my breath, ready to catch her if she catapults forward, but Grandma, holding onto the edge of the table with one veined hand, knees creaking loudly, manages to slowly straighten.

Mom, her face strained, takes a fortifying swallow of wine.

“Won’t you join us, my dear?” Grandma asks Lisset.

“Why thank you, GG, I believe I will.” With a regal nod, Lisset joins us around the kitchen table.

I smile indulgently at my niece, who adores watching British period dramas with her great grandmother, who she’s nicknamed GG. Lisset’s a carbon copy of Kate with her brown hair and dark eyes. Not much of her father there, thank goodness. Being around Lisset is like living in a world of unicorns and rainbows and bubbles. She’s joy and sunshine, and all I can think is, *Please, my beautiful, broken sister, don’t break the carefree spirit of your daughter.*

Mom’s next comment comes completely out of left field. “Why didn’t you tell me Aaron is not only new to Amell Greetings, but also new to town?”

I swallow a groan. Why didn’t I tell her? Because her overdeveloped hospitality instincts would have kicked in. Throughout my school years, anytime my mom found out there was a new kid in my class, she invited them over to the house. Yes, I might have made a few more friends, but it was also mortifying and exhausting.

“Who’s Aaron?” Kate asks.

“A security consultant Calvin’s hired.” I turn to my mom.
“Remember, he’s only here for six months.”

Mom’s eyebrows tip up. “Does he know anyone in Brown Oaks?”

“I don’t know,” I confess reluctantly.

And I don’t particularly care.

It’s not something I dare say aloud, though.

“Where’s he staying?” Grandma asks.

“Mevia says he’s rented a cabin on the outskirts of town.”

Mom taps a finger on the table. “What’s he doing for food?”

I sip my wine. “Hopefully, the cabin comes with a rifle and fishing equipment so he can figure it out for himself.”

Mom squints at me. “Are you being sassy with me, Tess Miller?”

Kate smirks as I quickly swallow my wine. “Um, I don’t know what came over me.”

“Too much time on TikTok,” declares Grandma. I don’t think she has any idea what TikTok even is, but she’s always eager to apportion blame to it. To be fair, though, Google is also high on her hit list.

“I’m still waiting for a straight answer,” my mom says.

“I assume he’ll go to the grocery store, like everyone else.”

“And then what?”

“Is that a serious question?”

Mom levels a look at me.

I sigh. “Then I assume he’ll cook whatever he’s bought.”

Grandma shakes her head. “Frank, as much as I loved him, was allergic to the kitchen. Couldn’t even boil an egg.”

“Hey,” I interject, “Dad’s not too bad in the kitchen.”

Lisset wrinkles her nose. “But Grandpa always burns the meat.”

We all turn to stare at her, pinning her with our gazes.

“Do we ever tell Grandpa that?” Kate asks sternly.

“Never,” Lisset replies in a whisper.

“Never, ever,” my mom emphasizes.

I hold up my little finger. “Pinky promise?” Lisset nods and wraps her pinky around mine. “Good girl.”

Potential crisis averted, we all slump in relief in our seats and grab a gulp of wine. At the rate we’re going, we’ll have killed the first bottle and be well into the second before the steaks are ready.

Mom, however, is still fretting over Aaron, who is now cast as a starving Oliver Twist in her mind.

I sigh. “Nathan is perfectly competent in the kitchen. If he can feed himself, so can Aaron.”

Throughout this exchange, Kate is silent. We all know why and leave her be.

“Be that as it may,” Mom says firmly, “Aaron is new in town, and I doubt he’s had a chance to make many friends yet. In the spirit of neighborliness, you should have invited him over today.”

The horror of her statement causes me to choke on my wine. “Absolutely not.”

“Your mom’s right.” Grandma points her glass at me. “You’ll give Brown Oaks a bad name. Next time, make sure you extend an invite.”

“What? No! Never,” I add for good measure because they don’t seem to be getting it.

Kate raises a curious eyebrow. I mentally curse myself for my mistake. I was too adamant.

“This mysterious Aaron guy,” Kate says, a new alertness to her voice, “is he good looking?”

“According to Tess, yes,” Grandma volunteers. I narrow my eyes at my sweet old grandmother, who just ratted me out. She smiles guilelessly at me and gets to her feet. “I better put the garlic bread in the oven.” She opens the oven door and places the garlic bread inside. “Hey, Google, set a timer for fifteen minutes.”

“It looks like you don’t have a timer set at the moment,” Google informs Grandma.

“I know, you moronic machine, that’s why I’m asking you to set one.” She raises her voice. “Hey, Google, set a timer for fifteen minutes.”

“Setting a timer for fifty minutes,” Google intones.

Grandma glares at the machine. “I said *fifteen*, not *fifty*.”

“Fifty,” my mom yells in a bid to avert disaster.

“You have to say, *Hey, Google, Grandma*,” Lisset pipes up.

Google comes to life at the prompt. “Here’s the definition of Grandma...”

Grandma slaps her hand on the kitchen table. “Don’t you tell us how we’re defined!”

I watch my mom reach for the wine bottle and empty the last dregs into her glass.

I stand to check on the corn and Kate follows me. “Interesting,” she says in my ear.

“What’s interesting?” I ask, although I know exactly what she’s referring to.

“This Aaron guy and your extreme reaction to him.”

“It’s not at all interesting,” I say as casually as I can, poking at the corn. “In fact, he’s the very opposite of interesting.”

Frustrating. Irritating. Annoying.

Yet I can’t stop thinking of Aaron’s vulnerability in the breakroom on Thursday. His embarrassment at having to

confess his tryphobia. It made him seem more human. More layered. More *interesting*. The very last thing I want.

Kate adds honey and a splash of cider vinegar to the bean salad. “Mom thinks this Aaron guy is lonely.”

“Not my problem,” I say dismissively.

And if he is lonely, he only has himself to blame. What do you expect when you break up with your girlfriend? In public? No woman with any modicum of sense and self-respect will go near him after that.

Nathan pops his head into the kitchen to tell us the steaks are ready. I move away from my sister, grateful to escape a conversation I have no desire to continue. Dad carries the steaks inside. Thankfully, they’re only slightly charred. I give Nathan a thank-you hug, and he tightens his arms around me, smelling pleasantly of beer and smoky barbecue.

We dish up the food in the kitchen and eat in the cool shade of my parents’ wide, back porch. The conversation is light and easy, Lisset’s chatter bubbling around us like champagne.

My father leans back in his chair and takes a sip of his beer. His back is not giving him too much grief today and he’s in a good mood. “How’s the steak?” he asks.

We all make vague, affirmative sounds.

Lisset says, too loudly, “It’s not at all burnt, Grandpa.”

Kate and I hold our breath, waiting for his reaction.

Dad’s brow creases as he looks over at her. “Of course, it’s not burnt.”

“It’s *absolutely* not,” Lisset emphasizes.

Dad taps a blackened piece with his knife. “The steak’s cooked the way it should be. Not a drop of blood in sight.”

“I smell trouble on the wind,” mutters Grandma.

“That’s just Grandpa,” Lisset declares. “He ate beans.”

We all laugh, my dad the loudest. He affectionately ruffles Lisset's hair and the conversation meanders to football, the one topic guaranteed to animate both men.

Stuffed full of corn, salad, and bread, I stifle a yawn and fade out their discussion. I'm tempted to join my grandmother, who's already dozing in her chair, mouth partly open.

Lisset asks about Ash, and I tell my niece a funny story about Ash jumping onto my laundry hamper, only the lid was up and, to his great shock, he fell right in and was soon buried under a pile of clothes.

Laughing in delight, Lisset turns to Kate. "Mom, can we get a kitten?"

"No."

"A puppy?"

"No."

"Pleeeeeeeese."

"Still no."

"Why not?" she whines.

My sister answers in true Kate fashion. "Animals are too much work. You have to feed them, clean up after them, waste time walking or playing with them. And what do they offer in return? Almost nothing."

"Ash gives me companionship," I say. "A cat would be a friend for Lissy."

"You said friends are important, Mom," Lisset points out cunningly. "I *need* a friend."

I take a moment to admire my niece's craftiness. She'll go far, this one.

"How about I think it over?" Kate says to Lisset, who nods eagerly and does a little butt wiggle of joy in her chair.

I hold my tongue. Poor thing. She'll soon learn that when adults say they'll think about something, it's usually code for *no*.

When Lisset heads inside to use the bathroom, Kate frowns at me. “Stop tempting my daughter.”

“A cat will be good for her, Kate.”

And you. Especially you.

On a long sigh, Kate says, “Do you know that if you die all alone in your house, your cat will feed on your corpse as soon as you start to decompose?”

I stare at her in horror. “You made that up.”

“Not at all. I read about it. There was a study done.”

“Kate’s right!” Nathan snaps his fingers. “I remember watching something about that on YouTube.”

Grandma stirs. Not opening her eyes, she mumbles, “Only illiterate fools watch YouTube.”

Nathan’s head jerks back in shock, but I squeeze his hand. “Pay her no mind,” I whisper.

“And Tess, you pay Kate no mind,” my mother instructs me, shooting my sister an admonishing look. “Ash is a sweetheart.”

When Lisset returns, Dad sets up the sprinkler for her on the lawn, despite Kate’s objections that she’ll get wet and traipse grass and dirt through the house.

“Let her have fun, Kate,” Dad orders quietly, putting an end to the matter.

My sister doesn’t say anything, but I know, from the stiff set of her shoulders, that she’s not happy. After fifteen minutes of us all watching a giggling Lisset run exuberantly through the sprinkler, I sneak a glimpse at Kate, noting the softening in her face as she gazes at her daughter. Relief washes over me. The old Kate is still somewhere inside there.



[GROUP CHAT]

Tess: Kate says my cat is going to eat me.

Kenzie: Why? Don’t you feed him?

Tess: Apparently, if I die in my house, he's going to nibble on my face.

Sofia: There's a reason I named him Thanos.

Tess: Thanos wanted to kill half the world's population!

Sofia: At least your cat will only go for you.

Kenzie: I think it's instinct. Don't take it personally.

Tess: Promise to retrieve my body before that happens?

Kenzie: Promise.

Tess: Sofia?

Sofia: This is why I don't have a cat.

Tess: That's what Kate said.

Sofia: Smart woman, your sister. I've always liked her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

At work Tuesday morning, Enya calls an impromptu meeting with all the writers and designers at Amell Greetings. As we take our seats around the conference table, Enya bustles in. Our forty-something editorial manager appears intimidating with her sharp brown eyes and thick black hair cut in a blunt bob, but beneath all that severity lies a zany sense of humor, which is why I get along so well with her.

She takes a seat next to Farah, the senior designer at Amell Greetings.

“Calvin’s not happy,” Enya announces.

We all know what that means. Calvin’s unhappiness will cascade down to everyone in the company.

I exchange a glance with Kenzie. She shrugs. Neither of us have any idea what’s going on.

Apparently, Farah explains, there’s been blowback from one of our Christmas Day card ranges featuring pugs on the cover. Complaints have poured in from vets all around the country, accusing Amell Greetings of promoting animals who are bred to have health problems.

Connor, a staff writer, who also writes poetry and song lyrics in his spare time, says, “Are you kidding me?”

Enya shakes her head. “I wish I was.”

“Is it only pugs?” I ask.

Farah rubs her forehead wearily. “It’s all flat-faced pets, including French bulldogs and Persians.”

“The vets claim the animals have breathing difficulties and a whole host of other problems,” Enya says.

We fall silent. The card business can be tricky. There’s always someone somewhere who’ll have a problem with our cards. Sometimes, it’s our tongue-in-cheek humor that offends. On other occasions, we’ve been accused of enforcing stereotypical ideas about motherhood and fatherhood. One

man wrote to us complaining that our Mother's and Father's Day cards reinforce the messaging that mothers are the strong ones who hold the family together, while fathers simply fart around. Literally.

"It's not the first time an animal on a card has landed us in trouble," Farah says.

Connor twirls a pencil between his fingers. "Remember the happy birthday card with the chimpanzee?"

We remember. Only because Calvin takes great pains to remind us of the time Amell Greetings attracted the outraged attention of an animal rights group after one of our happy birthday cards displayed a photo of a chimpanzee wearing a party hat. There were no more chimpanzee cards after that.

Occasionally, we run with a controversial card line and prepare ourselves for the fallout. Lately, however, Calvin's become increasingly risk averse, particularly in light of all the keyboard warriors out there. He's even moving us away from humor (my favorite genre) and leaning us more toward schmaltzy (my least favorite cards to write).

"We're going to discontinue the line," Enya says briskly. "Which means we need to come up with something else."

New designs, new copy. A whole lot of additional work.

A collective groan makes its way around the room.

All of a sudden, Calvin puts in an appearance, wanting to ensure we're all on board with the changes. Enya and Farah assure him we are, and when his steely gaze travels the room, we all nod like brainless bobbleheads.

A satisfied smile takes over his face. "Since we typically work on seasonal cards six months in advance, this shouldn't throw you out too much."

No one offers a nod in response to that ridiculous statement.

"I look forward to seeing what everyone comes up with." Calvin turns and speed walks out the conference room. It's like

watching a hobbit attempt the 100-meter dash. My eyes are forever scarred.

Farah rises from her chair. “Let’s get to work, people.”



For the past two hours, all I’ve done is stare at a blank page on my screen. I’ve typed up sentences but deleted them almost immediately. Nothing sounds right. The words aren’t flowing. It’s like there’s a creative blockage in my brain.

When I write a card, I typically visualize who I’m writing the card to. Today, however, whenever I try to picture someone, only one face pops into my head. Aaron’s mocking eyes, stubborn jawline, and cocky grin give rise to words I can’t use in a greeting card. Not unless I want the good folk of Brown Oaks to descend upon me in a storm of moral outrage.

I take a big gulp of my coffee. The other stopper on my creativity is Mark. He’s in a cubicle one over from me and crunching what sounds like a carrot or celery stick. Or a human bone. The noise is driving me insane, and I can’t concentrate.

Abandoning my coffee, I grab a notebook and pen and push to my feet. “I’m in the Creative Room,” I tell Kenzie.

She gives me a sympathetic nod. As an artist, she understands creative frustration and has spent more than her fair share of hours in the room trying to find inspiration.

The Creative Room is Calvin’s brainchild. Taking his cue from the big tech companies, Calvin wanted a relaxed and offbeat environment specifically designed to help employees free their imaginations to come up with innovative ideas and solutions, with the ultimate goal of making him more money.

Because Calvin didn’t want a collaborative or team-building space, there are no ping pong or foosball tables. It’s more of a personal creative thinking space, so there are yoga mats and exercise balls. A treadmill. In one corner, an adult coloring table; in another, a Lego table. Colorful beanbags and stuffed chairs are scattered all over.

I adore coming here. It's a break from my tiny cubicle, and I've come up with some great lines in this room. Thankfully, it's currently empty. I walk past the doodle wall where Calvin's hung a giant whiteboard, kick off my shoes, and drape myself facedown over the exercise ball, my notebook on the mat in front of me.

I don't know how much time passes as I rock back and forth on the ball, my eyes closed. Frustration swells inside me. The words for the Christmas card are still stuck somewhere in my slow-as-molasses brain, which is no doubt tired of regurgitating the same sentiments in different ways.

I hear the door open and someone step into the room. I continue my gentle rocking motion. I'm not worried about being disturbed. Everyone at Amell Greetings is aware of the unwritten rule that you don't strike up a conversation in the Creative Room. And you don't interrupt someone's unique creative process, whether it's hanging upside down from a chair, lying flat on the floor, or typing away furiously on a phone on the treadmill. The creative process is sacred and not to be questioned.

“What on earth are you doing?”

I freeze.

Of all the people in the building to walk in while I'm splayed on an exercise ball, my denim-clad butt in the air, it has to be *him*. The one person ignorant of the unwritten rule. The one person I don't want to see me like this.

I swallow a moan, wishing that someone somewhere would push that red button and end it all now.

I keep my head down, hoping he'll dig up his polite gene and simply turn around and walk back out again, but Aaron, it appears, is not in a digging mood. I can still sense his silent, unfortunate presence.

“What is this place?”

I know from his voice that he's gazing at the color-drenched space and his monochromatic soul is recoiling in horror. All the green in here will especially get to him. (Calvin

read somewhere that green has a positive effect on stress, so he went all out.)

You know what doesn't have a positive effect on my stress?

Aaron.

My blood pressure is rising by the second.

"You need to leave," I say without lifting my head.

"I'm not going anywhere." Amusement laces his tone.

I raise my head, and my eyes find his in the floor-to-ceiling mirror directly in front of me.

I can tell from his expression he's enjoying this scenario way too much.

I make no move to get to my feet. Partly because I have no dignified way to maneuver myself off the ball into an upright position. All the laws of gravity and grace are against me. I remain sprawled on the exercise ball in an exquisitely vulnerable pose, still holding Aaron's gaze in the mirror.

Except, something in his face changes. He's now looking at me with the oddest expression. Almost as if he wants to kiss me. Or strangle me. I'm having trouble telling the difference.

The moment stretches out as we continue to stare at one another, neither of us making any move to break eye contact.

Then his gaze drops to my mouth before traveling back up to my eyes.

His eyes are glittering now. Dark and hot and smoky.

Oh, he's definitely thinking about kissing me.

I hold my breath, feeling the stirrings of something in my gut. Whatever it is feels rich and warming. Dangerous.

The longest ten seconds of my life tick by while Aaron and I stare at one another.

My heart is racing too fast for me to sort out my thoughts. All I know is, Tess Miller, girlfriend of Nathan Holmes,

daughter of John and Joelle who've been married for over thirty years, needs to end whatever this is. Right now.

Furiously, I conjure up the most awful images I can think of: The hair sprouting from my great-uncle's nose. The plantar warts colonizing my aunt's foot. The skin tags behind my cousin's knees that resemble the wing flaps on an airplane.

Aaron must feel the same because he blinks and whatever emotion is there disappears. Or is smothered.

We break eye contact, and I'm left feeling a little bereft and a lot ashamed of myself for some reason.

This stance also puts me at a distinct disadvantage, which I need to remedy immediately. Abandoning any last shred of dignity, I stretch out my hands and do a crab-like roll into a standing position. I'll never win any gymnast award, but at least I'm upright.

I turn to face Aaron. Amusement is written all over his face.

"What is this room?" he asks again, and I'm thankful for a neutral topic.

"This is our Creative Room," I say. "Mevia calls it the Leprechaun Room."

A full-blown laugh tumbles out of him. I'm thrilled to be its source.

He looks around with interest. "I don't see how anyone would get any work done here."

"It's work in a different sense," I explain. "The room is designed to stimulate the creative juices."

He cuts me a sharp look, one side of his mouth quirking up. I replay what I said and hold back a sigh. Mercifully, he doesn't tease me, but gestures to the exercise ball instead. "What were you doing there?"

"I'm struggling with writer's block and I'm hoping the ball will help unleash the words."

He looks skeptical. "How?"

“I’m waking up my brain cells with the blood rushing to my head.”

The words hang between us. I don’t even have to replay the sentence because as soon as it emerges, I realize how it sounds.

Hot, betraying color floods my face.

It’s suddenly so very hot in here. The air feels thick, unbreathable.

And Aaron has this look on his face.

It’s time to leave. Before another stupidly suggestive remark spills out of me. Before I cross a line I’ll never be able to uncross.

I turn toward the door. “I better get back to my desk.” When Aaron still lingers in the room, I ask, “You coming?”

Oh, no.

I exit the room in a rush, Aaron’s low laughter chasing me all the way down the hallway to my cubicle.



My grandmother narrows her eyes at me. “Why are you insulting me?”

My head shoots up. “Me? How?”

She gestures to my largely untouched plate of spaghetti carbonara. “I put a lot of effort into that meal and you’re just picking at it.”

“You’re right. Sorry.” To appease her, I twirl some spaghetti around my fork and shove it into my mouth. “It’s good.”

“Of course, it’s good. I’ve been making this dish for over forty years.”

“It’s my favorite.”

“I know.” She squeezes my forearm resting on the table. “Why do you think I make it?”

The love behind her words wraps around me like a warm, cozy blanket and I snuggle into it. Once a month, Mom drops Grandma off at my house while she attends her local book club. Honestly, I think there's more talk of what's happening in the neighborhood than any overarching literary themes, but it gets my mom out the house and she seems to have fun.

Meanwhile, I enjoy the fact that it's just Grandma and me for the evening. She brings over the meal she's made that afternoon, and we chat over dinner. Sometimes we play cards; other times we watch a game show on TV and shout out the answers. I love our evenings together. Best of all, there's no Google so I'm spared the ongoing feud.

She dabs her mouth with a napkin. "Okay, spit out whatever's bothering you."

"How can you tell?"

"I wasn't born yesterday."

I play with my napkin. "There's a guy."

Grandma snorts. "There's almost always a guy."

"He rubs me the wrong way."

"The best ones always do."

"Grandma!"

She shrugs. "It's true." Her green eyes shine with memories. "Your grandfather used to drive me up the wall, constantly challenging my opinions, calling me on my moods. And, boy, I adored him for it."

Tears sting my eyes at the love in her voice.

It's bittersweet for my grandmother every time she visits me in her old home. She took her bed and couch when she moved in with my parents, but I've kept the rest of her furniture pretty much as she had it when she lived here. I know she's comforted by the familiarity of the house and all the memories here, but she's also saddened that my grandfather's no longer around to create new memories.

Grandma puts down her knife and fork, her expression speculative. “I’m assuming this guy isn’t Nathan?”

Shame prickles in my chest. “No.”

“Didn’t think so. You and Nathan don’t have that fire between you.”

I straighten in my chair. “That’s a good thing.”

“It can be.” She sips her water. “But it can also mean you’re not meant for one another. Only you can figure that out.”

I feel a heaviness in my chest. “Kate had that fire in her marriage.”

“She did. Unfortunately, as you know, she got burnt really badly.”

Exactly what I don’t want to happen to me.

“I’m guessing the man in question is the new guy who started at your work. Aaron?”

“Yes.”

I pick up my water glass, but don’t drink. “I mean, we haven’t done anything.”

“I should hope not,” she says sharply. “You weren’t raised to be a cheater.”

I draw in an uneven breath. “But it still feels wrong the way I feel around him.”

Grandma simply listens while I blurt out my feelings: How my skin heats up in Aaron’s presence, the fluttering that grips my stomach when I arrive at work each morning. And yet, how he also infuriates me so that I’m thinking of strangling him half the time.

“I don’t know if I’m being fair to Nathan staying with him when I’m feeling this way,” I conclude. “I don’t know what to do.”

Grandma reaches across the table and tenderly pats my hand. “Let me tell you about my watch.”

I know my grandmother favors a meandering path to her ultimate destination, so I squash the tiny flicker of impatience and spare the briefest of glances at the delicate rose gold watch on her thin wrist. “Gramps gave it to you, didn’t he?”

“Yes, he did. For my thirtieth birthday.” She smiles fondly. “I never take it off, except to shower and sleep.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“It is.” She extends her arm. “Look closely. What do you see?”

I see a rose gold mesh bracelet, a round case, stone set shoulders. “It’s just a watch, Grandma. I don’t—” I stop, frowning.

She smiles.

The hands on her watch have been removed and engraved on the face is only one word: *Now*.

“My watch has no working parts,” she tells me softly. “It’s a constant reminder to live in the now.”

I shake my head in wonder. “I never noticed.”

“When your grandfather was alive, I was always ruled by where I had to be rather than where I wanted to be. Don’t waste even one minute of your life. Make sure you’re with the right guy for the right reasons.”

I bite my lip. “I love Nathan.”

“I know you do. But remember there are all different types of love.”

I realize everything’s not perfect between Nathan and me. Our relationship has cracks, but I’ve always believed they’re hairline cracks, easy to repair over time. What if they’re fault lines, though?

I don’t know. I just don’t know.

Trying to sort out the complicated knot of emotions in my chest is so incredibly hard.

I long for the innocent simplicity of my grandmother's watch. I can't help but feel as though mine is a ticking time bomb.



Grandma favors an early bedtime, so Mom picks her up just before eight. The rest of the evening looms in front of me. I flick on the TV, but Grandma's words keep tumbling through my head, drowning out the voices on the screen. I have to talk to Nathan. I text him asking if I can see him tonight. He takes almost fifteen minutes to reply.

Nathan: I thought you were having dinner with your grandmother.

Tess: She just left. Can I come round?

Nathan: It's late.

Tess: I need to see you.

Nathan: Can't it wait til tomorrow?

Tess: Not really.

Nathan: I'm super tired.

Tess: Please. I think we should talk.

Nathan: Fine. I'll come to you.

When I open the door to Nathan twenty minutes later, he's still in his work clothes.

"Oh, did you work late?" I ask, kissing him hello.

"Yeah," he says distractedly. "Lots going on."

We settle in the lounge. He looks so smart and handsome that I feel a little self-conscious in my low-rise sweatpants and loose-fitting T-shirt.

Ash sits on the carpet at my feet and glares balefully at Nathan, who ignores him.

Nathan rests his elbows on his knees. "What did you want to talk about?"

"Us."

He groans, rubs a hand over his face. “I’m so exhausted, babe. Can we not save it for another time?”

“That’s what you said the last time I wanted to talk about our relationship.”

He exhales heavily. “Okay, fine, let’s talk. You obviously have something you want to say.”

I twist my hands together nervously in my lap. “I guess I just want to know where our relationship is headed.”

Another groan. “Do we have to do this now?”

“Yes, Nathan, I think we do.”

“I love you,” he answers, a little impatiently. “I think the two of us are pretty good together. Why rock the boat thinking about the future?”

“I love you too, but don’t you think we’re, I don’t know, stagnating a little?”

He throws me a sharp glance. “What’s brought this on?”

I bite my lip. “Maybe we should take a break from one another? Until we figure things out?”

He scoots forward in his chair. “Do you want a break?”

“I’m not really sure what I want.”

He runs a hand through his hair, mussing it up. “Look, I admit things have been a little slow with us, but every relationship goes through this. We’ll just do more stuff together.”

I can’t help but think our problems run a little deeper than simply a lack of activities and time together.

I swallow. “Nathan, do you see me as your wife one day?”

His pause is telling. “One day, yeah, sure.”

What’s more telling, though, is that he doesn’t ask me if I see him as my future husband.

He stands and gathers me in his arms. “We’ve been together a year, babe. That’s a long time. Don’t do anything drastic. Let’s just see how it goes, okay?”

And coward that I am, I agree.

CHAPTER NINE

I'm deep in the creative trenches when I glance up from my laptop to observe Aaron approaching my cubicle, dragging his annoyance around like a ball and chain. The man needs his annoyance. It's the only thing that makes him interesting. I almost believe the lie.

Aaron was in and out of meetings with Calvin yesterday, so I didn't see much of him. According to Mevia, a mock phishing email will be hitting us sometime this week. Everyone is on edge. Failing one of Aaron's phishing tests is the electrified fence no employee of Amell Greetings wants to touch.

I quickly return my gaze to my laptop and continue typing, but I've lost my train of thought. Lines and lines of *jcnfjdkshfukrvjsbvsvdhfshfkdfsjdncvjncvjsd* fill my screen.

"Tess."

At least when he says my name now, it no longer sounds as though he's coughing up a hairball. Progress, of a sort.

For the sheer pleasure of annoying him, I mentally count to five before I look up at him. "Yes, Aaron?"

His lips tighten. He's well aware of the game we're playing here. "Just reminding you of the training workshop on Thursday."

It's funny. He says *training workshop*, but all I hear is *brussels sprouts*. Both evoke the same feelings of dread and dismay.

To give myself time, I take a sip of my now lukewarm coffee while I rehearse excuses in my head. "I don't think it's necessary for me to attend the workshop," I point out in my most reasonable tone. "Just give me a policy document to read."

He folds his arms. "You wouldn't read a policy document."

“I would.” My voice lacks conviction. Even I don’t believe me.

He raises a skeptical eyebrow and I amend my words slightly. “Well, I’d skim through it. That has to count for something.”

He gives me a look that lets me know he’s on to me. Observant men are such a pain. They’re the undoing of scheming women everywhere.

I throw up my hands. “Fine! I’ll go to the workshop.”

“Be better prepared this time,” he advises. “Make a list.”

“Sure,” I get out through gritted teeth. Poison, hanging, drowning, duct taping all exits in his cabin. I’ve compiled quite the comprehensive list titled *Ways To Get Rid Of Aaron Sinclair*.

“Anything else?” *Supreme leader* hovers on the tip of my tongue, begging to be voiced. Only that wouldn’t be professional. And I’m trying very, very hard to be professional.

But it’s like he hears the sarcasm anyway, because he mumbles something that sounds a lot like “Give me strength.” Then he rubs his forearm as though I’m an uncomfortable splinter that’s dug itself deep into his skin, and no matter how much he prods and pokes, he can’t dislodge me.

When he makes no move to leave, I gesture to my laptop. “Lots of work to do here,” I say, hoping he’s smart enough to pick up on my message.

He leans a lazy shoulder on my cubicle wall, one corner of his mouth lifting, in no hurry to leave. Oh, he understood my message all right.

I let out an exasperated huff. What am I picturing right now? A guillotine. And Aaron’s head lined up perfectly.

“Don’t you have—” Children to torment, colleagues to terrify, nooses to tighten. “—work to do?”

“It can wait.”

“Well, my work can’t,” I say pointedly. Slightly waspishly.

His tone is light and conversational when he remarks, “It’s usually when people are overloaded with work that mistakes happen.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Mistakes?” Like, let’s see, spilling your coffee over the neatly pressed, pastel blue shirt of someone loitering in your cubicle.

“Mistakes like clicking on a link in a phishing email.”

I tamp down my frustration. “Look, I told you before, I learned my lesson. I think I’m now pretty on the ball with, you know, security stuff.”

“On the ball, huh?” Aaron stares down at me with a thoughtful expression. “What about the password on your laptop?”

“What about it?”

“Most passwords are weak and easy to guess.”

“Not mine.”

“Hmm.” He leaves a meaningful pause. “I bet I can guess the password to your laptop.”

I meet his gaze with interest. Finally, he’s said something to captivate my attention. “I’ll take you up on that bet.”

He straightens, excitement flickering across his face. “All right.” He indicates my chair. “Up you get.”

“Wait a minute.” I hold up my hand in the classic *stop* signal. “What’s the prize in this bet?”

My comment seems to rattle his composure. Good. The man could do with some rattling. He’s way too self-composed.

“I don’t mean a literal bet,” he explains with a frown. “It’s simply a figure of speech.”

I smile at him. “Well, let’s make it fun.”

He crinkles his brow, as if to say, *Fun? Explain this strange phenomenon.* “Security is a serious issue, Tess.”

“Yes, Aaron, I take security very seriously.” For the most part. “But come on, live a little. Let’s make it fun.”

He’s still frowning. It’s once again clear to me why his training session wasn’t the liveliest.

“How about we keep the bet small?” I propose, as though I’m dealing with a wild, skittish animal. “How about the loser has to buy the winner an iced vanilla latte?”

“An iced vanilla latte,” he echoes. “Wow, you really go all out on your bets.”

I tilt my head, considering him. Was that humor? “Did you just crack a joke, Sinclair?”

“A joke that was wasted on you, Miller,” he grumbles.

“Give me a moment,” I say with a smile. “I’m still recovering from the shock.”

He stares at me, steady-eyed. “Okay, I’ll take you up on your bet, but I don’t drink vanilla lattes.”

“Of course, you don’t,” I respond, barely restraining my eye roll. “How about a bitter long black for you then?”

Guilt pricks me as soon as the words in all their shades of meanness leave my mouth. I can tell by the way his head jerks slightly that I have wounded him. “I’m sorry, that was uncalled for.”

He nods in quiet acceptance of my apology.

“Look, the drink is beside the point,” I say. “The prize can be anything, but it doesn’t matter, because you’re going to lose.”

“You’re that sure of your password?”

“I am.”

He runs a hand over his jaw. I receive the distinct impression he’s hiding a grin. “All right, let’s raise the stakes then. The winner will get a work minion for the day.”

Curiosity settles in my chest. “Keep talking.”

“For the duration of one workday, whoever loses the bet will have to perform whatever low-level tasks the winner needs doing. Making coffee. Organizing lunch. Washing cups. Photocopying.”

I straighten in my chair. “How about waiting in the online queue for Taylor Swift tickets?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Fine.” It was worth a try. I fix my eyes on his serious, handsome face. “I think, Captain Security, you’re beginning to grasp the concept of fun.”

His lips twitch. “You won’t be saying that when you lose.”

I give up trying not to smile. I am so going to win this. The thought of Aaron doing my bidding for one whole day leaves me almost giddy with anticipation.

“Restart your laptop,” he instructs me.

I save everything I’m working on, then I click Restart in the dropdown menu and get to my feet, yielding my chair for him. He grabs another swivel chair for me and positions it next to him. I plonk myself down, tucking one leg beneath me and he drops into my chair, long legs sprawled in front of him.

I raise my eyebrows. “Make yourself comfortable.”

“I’m very comfortable, thanks.”

“Pity it won’t last,” I reply, laying down the gauntlet. “So how many password tries do you want?”

“I only need one.”

I wag a finger at him. “Your cockiness will be your downfall.”

“You’re right,” he says humbly. “How many will you give me?”

“How about three tries?” I offer magnanimously.

“Three is very generous,” he replies. “Thank you.”

I tap my fingers on my knee while I study his carefully impassive side profile. Why do I suspect he’s secretly laughing

at me?

My laptop screen goes dark and then the log-in screen displays. Aaron rests his fingers on the keyboard while he stares silently at the little box where the password needs to be entered. For nearly a minute, he doesn't move or say anything.

A surge of elation sweeps through me. He can't think of anything.

I start humming Queen's *We Are the Champions*.

"Aren't you celebrating a little prematurely?" he asks.

"Only one of us suffers from premature problems," I retort, responding with the first words that come to mind. Admittedly, this habit of mine doesn't always work in my favor.

Aaron slants me a sideways glance. "Just so you know, that's never been a problem of mine."

His slight playfulness catches me off guard. Recovering, I shrug. "Just preparing you for defeat."

He smirks. "We'll see."

Leaning back in my chair, Aaron takes his time as his eyes perform a slow sweep of my desk, absorbing whatever he thinks is important. There's a framed photo of my parents in front of a huge chocolate cake to celebrate my mom's fortieth birthday. In the corner of my desk is a potted plant I take pains to diligently water every third day and a snow globe from my trip to Italy two years ago.

His gaze cuts to my cubicle walls, drifting over the inspirational quotes I've pinned up, all the photos of my family in various holiday spots, the pictures of Sofia, Kenzie, and me partying it up.

He flicks me a look.

I flick him a smile.

Aaron thinks he's smart, but he consistently underestimates me.

Resting his hands on his flat stomach, he swivels in his chair to face me. "I need to ask you some questions."

I blink at him. “Why?”

“Because this is how hackers operate,” he says casually. “They comb through your personal info online. Some of them will even go through your trash.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Gross.”

“Yep.”

“Okay, ask away.”

“What’s your favorite food?”

“Tacos.”

Aaron looks pained. “Why am I not surprised?”

“What do you mean?”

“Tacos are messy.” He gestures to the piles of papers on my desk. “At least you’re consistent.”

I can’t think of a response to that.

“Favorite season?”

“Fall.”

“Favorite color?”

“Blue.”

Aaron’s blue eyes stare into mine. Not that color blue, I tell myself. More like another blue.

“Favorite memory?”

I swallow. “My sister and I kayaking on the lake.”

Idly, he asks, “Favorite outing for a date?”

I take a breath, let it go. “I don’t see how that’s relevant.”

He’s still watching me, but his eyes are veiled. “It’s relevant.”

Feeling self-conscious, I brush the hair from my face. “Uh, it sounds weird, but I love picnics. I just don’t get to go on them that often.”

Mostly because Nathan finds picnics unpleasant. He dislikes sitting on the ground and contending with flies and ants while eating food that's not steak and fries.

In a soft voice, Aaron says, "I don't think it's weird."

I feel oddly flushed. Aaron's questions are flippant, but there's an unnerving intensity to the way he's listening to my answers. Is he that eager to crack my password? That competitive? I'm competitive myself, so I understand the need to win but, I don't know, it feels like there's something else at play here.

Annoyed with myself for overthinking this, I ask, "What next? You want to know my favorite shoes?"

"I know what your favorite shoes are," he responds without hesitation, his voice sounding huskier than usual.

"Oh. Right." My sexy-as-heck ankle boots.

I can feel myself reddening.

We both look away.

"Any other questions?" I ask, fighting to keep my voice steady.

He turns to face my laptop. "Nope. I have everything I need."

He types something into the password input box. To my astonishment, whatever he typed is correct. My laptop opens up, baring itself to him like a shameless hussy.

He's in.

I gape at him. No. Not possible. I had my win in the bag. What happened?

"I don't understand. How did you...?" I stumble over my words.

His eyes gleam in triumph as he points to the framed photo of my parents. "Your mother's name is written in frosting on her birthday cake. You also possess more photos of your mom in your cubicle than anyone else. That tells me how close you are to her."

Okay, so that's how he got *Joelle*. "But there are also numbers after my mom's name."

"Yes," he says on a reproving sigh. "One-two-three. One of the most commonly used numerical passwords."

I shake my head in disbelief. I was so proud of my password. "I can't believe I lost the bet."

Aaron stands. "See you tomorrow, minion," he says, almost affectionately.

I stare at the back of his tall, broad-shouldered body strolling confidently through the cubicles.

A wisp of something important is hovering around the edges of my brain. For the life of me, though, I can't quite grasp what's bothering me.

Am I a sore loser? Is that it?

I stare unseeingly at my laptop, retracing the last twenty or so minutes with Aaron.

My mind rolls back to the first thing Aaron did when he sat in my chair—his gaze taking in everything on my desk and cubicle walls. I recall the way he gleaned my password from my mom's birthday photo on my desk.

I finally catch the elusive thought I've been chasing.

Aaron asked me all those personal questions *after* he guessed my password.

Confusion flicks through me.

No, that can't be right. If he'd already guessed my password, what was the point of all those questions? What was he attempting to achieve?

As my confusion mounts, I close my eyes and choke back the indignant stream of words I'm itching to hurl after him.

I have the deeply unsettling feeling I've just been expertly played.



[GROUP CHAT]

Kenzie: I heard EVERYTHING!

Sofia: WHAT? What did you hear?

Tess: Nothing!

Sofia: Ooh, it must be big.

Kenzie: The most outrageous flirting between Aaron and Tess.

Tess: Stupid, useless cubicle walls.

Tess: And there was no flirting. I have a boyfriend.

Kenzie: That man is so into you.

Tess: Nathan?

Sofia: Please. Nathan's only into himself.

Tess: Sofia!

Sofia: Sorry.

Sofia: Not sorry.

Kenzie: Tess lost a bet to Aaron and now she has to be his minion for the day.

Sofia: WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAT!!!!!!

Tess: I'm switching my phone off.

CHAPTER TEN

The moment I step into the office on Thursday morning, Mevia calls me over to the reception desk. She's wearing lime green eyeshadow and a purple glittery top. "Aaron wants an almond croissant from Beth's Bakery."

"What?" I sputter. "You've got to be kidding me." I haven't even had a chance to settle in, check my email, grab a coffee. Now I have to go right back out again for a *croissant*?

Mevia must see the argument in my eyes because her eyebrows arch. "You have no choice. You lost the bet."

I let out a deep sigh. "Does everyone know about it?"

"Pretty much."

How irritating. This is why I'd love an enclosed office, not a cubicle where all ears are attuned to any diverting conversation.

Mevia unwraps a stick of gum and pops it into her mouth. "Aaron says you can leave the croissant on my desk."

"Aaron can go shove—" I stop abruptly and peer closely at Mevia, who's busy admiring her nails. "Hmm, you know who also likes almond croissants?"

A few seconds go by before Mevia lifts her mischievous brown eyes to meet mine. "It was worth a shot."

"You're unbelievable."

"I know, right? I came so close to getting away with it." She looks over my shoulder and a wide smile comes to her bright pink lips. "Morning, Hot Guy!"

I turn to see my current nightmare exiting the elevators. My stomach doesn't know what to do with itself, getting all quivery at the sight of Aaron. I try not to notice how good his shoulders look in his suit.

He has no choice but to pass Mevia's desk if he wants to get to his office. I glimpse his easy stride falter a little at the

realization.

“For the record, my name is not ‘Hot Guy,’” he informs Mevia when he reaches us.

She gives an airy wave. Embarrassment is not a color she wears. “It’s my nickname for you.”

“I prefer not to have a nickname,” Aaron says, looking a little exasperated.

“Want to know what Tess’s nickname is?” Mevia asks.

I shoot her a quelling glare. “He’s not interested.”

Now he looks intrigued. “Actually, I am.”

“Don’t you have work you need to get to?”

“It can wait.”

Mevia leans forward. “I call Tess ‘The Mouth.’”

An appreciative chuckle rumbles out of his chest. “That fits.”

“No, it doesn’t!” I protest indignantly.

His eyes meet mine. “You’re saying your mouth doesn’t get you into trouble?”

When I remain mutinously silent, Mevia answers for me. “All the time.”

“Thought so.” Aaron turns to Mevia. “And Mevia?”

“Yup?”

“No more calling me—” He grimaces, like it pains him to say it. “—Hot Guy. Okay?”

“Got you, HG,” she says with a wink.

“Welcome to her world,” I say to him, trying not to grin when I glimpse the moment it dawns on him he’s fighting a losing battle when it comes to Mevia.

With a bemused head shake, Aaron brushes past me and heads in the direction of his office. He’s made no mention of our bet yesterday. Some of the tension in my chest eases. Maybe he’s forgotten? On a rising tide of hope, I retreat to my

cubicle and quietly congratulate myself on escaping being his lackey for the day.



[MESSAGES]

Aaron: I need coffee.

Tess: How did you get my number?

Aaron: You seem to forget I'm a security specialist.

Aaron: A security specialist in need of coffee.

Tess: Do you need it right now?

Aaron: Yes, minion.

Tess: How do you take it?

Tess: ~~Besides poured over your head.~~

Aaron: Just a little milk. No sugar. Extra hot.

Aaron: Speedily.



I walk into Aaron's office holding his cup of coffee. He looks up from his laptop and I feel a fluttering in my stomach when I notice he's wearing black-framed glasses. No one should look that cool wearing glasses. It's not fair to the rest of us.

I set his coffee on his desk and glance at the stark trappings of his office. "I feel sad and depressed every time I step in here."

Removing his glasses, he leans back in his chair. "You're welcome to step right back out."

"All this organization is frightening."

"Only a messy mind would find it frightening."

I perch my butt on the corner of his desk, which makes him frown, as I knew it would. "Some people would label you *anal*."

"Some people would care. I don't."

"I think the problem here is your decor."

He scowls. “What decor?”

I stab a triumphant finger in the air. “Exactly!”

He crosses his arms. “I don’t like color.”

Which, of course, now makes it my mission in life to drown him in color.

“I get a headache every time I step into your cubicle,” he points out. “We’re even.”

I allow my gaze to wander thoughtfully around his office. “A small potted plant, a framed picture, a knick knack or two would work wonders in here.”

The look of horror on his face grows. “Leave my office alone.”

I can barely contain my internal grin. “Don’t want me touching your things?”

“I don’t want you meddling.”

“This office is begging to be meddled with. It’s crying out for attention.”

“The only one tempted to cry right now is me,” Aaron grumbles. “Crying to be left alone.”

I nudge his coffee cup closer to him. “You enjoy your coffee now,” I tell him sweetly. “It was not made with love.”

“You’re incredibly annoying.”

“It’s a gift,” I acknowledge as I hop off his desk.

“More like a curse,” I hear him mutter.

As I turn to leave, he raises his mug in a mocking salute. I return the salute, but with my middle finger.

The rest of the morning is filled with Aaron firing texts at me. He wants ice water, another coffee, tea, more ice water. On my fourth trek into his sad excuse of an office, I ask if his excessive thirst is caused by undiagnosed diabetes. He simply gives me his approximation of a smile and instructs me to return to the breakroom to fetch the bottled apple juice he left in the fridge.

I bump into Kenzie on my way down the hall.

“You’re holding up remarkably well,” she says in admiration.

“I’m honoring this bet even if it kills me,” I respond through gritted teeth.

I’m well aware that Aaron is taking full advantage of his win, not sparing me in the slightest. In all fairness, if I’d won the bet, I wouldn’t have spared him either. I would probably be way more ruthless in my demands.

At lunchtime, I see Aaron striding toward my cubicle, no doubt ready to issue more demands.

I quickly grab my phone and pretend I’m on a call. “Uh-huh, yes, I see.” I glance up and fake surprise to see him standing in my cubicle. “On the phone,” I mouth.

He taps his watch, silently asking how long I’ll be.

“A while,” I whisper. “Work call. I’ll come to your office when I’m done.”

And pigs will fly with the fairies, I think.

Aaron nods and turns to leave, but then my stupid phone rings. I’d forgotten to put it on silent.

Aaron smirks. “Looks like you need a little more practice in deception.”

I decline the call from my mom and put my phone down. “We can’t all be experts like you.”

“Well, now that you’re free, lowly minion, I’d like one of Dusti’s famous sandwiches for lunch.”

Dusti’s is a Brown Oaks institution. Everyone in town knows the story of how Dusti, the owner, left town in her twenties to spend five years traveling and working in various parts of the world. In her travels, she observed that nearly every culture and country have their own unique take on the humble sandwich. She started collecting recipes wherever she went and when she finally returned to Brown Oaks, she

opened up Dusti's to serve iconic sandwiches from all over the world.

I'm especially fond of The Arepa, a Venezuelan favorite consisting of roasted plantains, smoky black beans, guacamole, and habanero sauce.

Tourists come from all over to sample Dusti's global sandwiches and I get why Aaron wants one, but...

"Dusti's is on the other end of Main Street," I whine.

"So?"

"That's a fifteen-minute walk."

His eyes travel up and down my legs. "You look like you're perfectly capable."

Stupid, stupid bet. "Fine! Name your sandwich."

After scanning the online menu, Aaron chooses the Philly Cheesesteak, which has its obvious roots in Philadelphia. The sandwich is filled with thinly sliced rib-eye beef and melted cheese, topped with sautéed onions and hot sauce. The Philly Cheesesteak is also Nathan's top choice and I try not to read too much into that.

It's a beautiful day and I take my time strolling down Main Street, breathing in the scented spring air and admiring the cherry blossoms. I'll have to stay late to catch up on my work, but my plan is to head straight to Sofia's house afterward for our Wednesday night get-together.

At Dusti's, I order Aaron his Philly Cheesesteak sandwich and then I impulsively take a page from Mevia's playbook and use Aaron's credit card to order The Arepa for myself. I enjoy every last bite, and I most especially enjoy the look on Aaron's face when I thank him for my treat.



Later that afternoon, when we're all staring sleepily at our screens in a post-lunch slump, Aaron carries out a maneuver that sends a shock wave through Amell Greetings.

It was no secret that a mock phishing email would be sent to everyone in the company sometime this week. Mevia had warned us, so we thought we were prepared. Aaron, however, had managed to outsmart us all.

After prying the details out of Mevia, I return to my desk, still processing what happened, when Sofia strides past my cubicle.

“VM,” she announces to Kenzie and me.

Conscious of the pall of gloom hanging in the air, I stand at the same time as Kenzie. “Coming.”

Rick pops his head over his cubicle wall and takes a wild guess. “Victory March?”

“For you, Venereal Mistake,” Sofia retorts without missing a beat, striding down the hallway.

In front of the vending machine, Kenzie and I are silent as Sofia taps her card and selects chips. Lots and lots of salty chips. It looks like the three of us are on a high blood pressure bender.

Ripping open the first packet, Sofia starts shoveling chips into her mouth. I share my packet with Kenzie, and we wait in silence for her to speak.

When she’s finished the packet, she says, “I fell for Aaron’s phishing test.”

I grimace. “So did I.”

“Me too,” admits Kenzie.

Still looking all kinds of horrified, Sofia rips open the second packet of chips and starts in on them.

“To be fair,” Kenzie says, aiming for a reassuring tone, “I think everyone in the company fell for the phishing test.”

Without thinking, I say, “There was one person who didn’t fall for it.”

Sofia freezes. “It should have been me. I should have been that one person.”

“I know,” I agree, somewhat lamely.

“Who was it?” Sofia asks.

Kenzie looks at me wide-eyed. Why did I open my big, brainless mouth? Mevia’s nickname for me is appallingly accurate.

I swallow. “I don’t want to say.”

“It’s okay,” Sofia says calmly. “You can tell me.”

Kenzie looks a little frightened. “Remember Tess is only the messenger.”

“Tell me!” Sofia orders, squaring her shoulders.

I take in a breath, let it out. “Dana.”

Hearing the name, Sofia’s eyes bulge slightly, and she rips open another packet of chips and starts devouring them.

Kenzie turns to me. “How do you know about Dana?”

“Mevia.”

Kenzie nods. “Of course.”

When Sofia reaches for the next packet of chips, it’s time for an intervention.

In my firmest tone, I say, “I think you’ve had enough.”

“I haven’t had nearly enough.”

“Come on, Sof, give me the packet.”

Sofia tightens her grip. “No.”

“You can do it,” I urge.

Sofia lets out a moan. “I need them.”

“No, you don’t,” Kenzie assures her. “You can let go now.”

“I don’t think I can,” Sofia whispers.

“You can.” Kenzie uses her Zen voice to draw Sofia away from the edge. “I believe in you.”

“All right.” When Sofia reluctantly releases her death grip on the chip packet, I pluck it from her hands and stow the

chips out of sight.

“How could I have fallen for it?” Sofia asks, pressing an incredulous fist to her chest. “I thought I was cleverer than that.”

“He took us all by surprise,” I say.

As much as I hate the fact that I fell for the phishing test, I have to admire Aaron for what he did. The sheer ingenuity behind his gambit fooled almost everyone.

Right before lunchtime, Aaron sent out his mock phishing email. The email looked as though it originated from Amazon. Aaron had even gone to the trouble of ensuring the URL domain appeared legitimate. In the contents of the email, ‘Amazon’ asked us to enter details to receive a refund. Most of us, however, were astute enough to click the Phish Alert Button to report the email. The second we did that a nice message popped up congratulating us on identifying the phishing simulation. We were so justifiably proud of ourselves. We’d anticipated a phishing test, we’d received one, and we’d passed.

But then we made the fatal mistake of relaxing and dropping our guard. Exactly what Aaron was counting on. Lulled into a false sense of security, we were completely taken in by the second, more sophisticated phishing attack that came an hour later.

“The email address really looked like it belonged to Calvin.” Sofia does a little head shake, like she still can’t believe she failed.

Kenzie slides her phone out the back pocket of her jeans and opens her email. “I mean, just look at the email Aaron sent.” She taps the screen. “He even mimicked Calvin’s writing style when he asked us to click on the attachment to update our employee details.”

The innocent-looking attachment that, if it was a real phishing email, would have installed malware on the company’s system.

“Mevia said that this type of phishing scam, where hackers impersonate the top executive, is called CEO fraud,” I explain.

Sofia takes a second to absorb this. “The email was addressed to each of us personally,” she says, a glint in her eyes. “Aaron knew a generic greeting would have raised alarm bells.”

I’m pleased to see she’s standing a little taller. Nothing knocks down Sofia for long. She’s already reassembling the pieces of her insane self-confidence, preparing herself to take on Aaron’s next challenge. I almost feel sorry for him.

“That man is diabolically clever,” Sofia admits, reluctant admiration in her voice. “CEO fraud was the perfect touch.”

I can’t help but agree with her. Employees tend to do what CEOs ask of them. After all, no one wants to upset the boss. Add a sense of urgency to the email and suddenly nearly every employee of Amell Greetings has to complete a mandatory online security awareness refresher and sit for the test afterward.

“It was a genius move,” Kenzie agrees. Abruptly, her eyes widen and she lets out a little squeak.

My stomach plummets. I turn around to see the man in question strolling leisurely toward us down the long hallway.

He’s still far enough away for Sofia to murmur, “I can’t deny it, he is definitely something.”

“Definitely,” I agree. A right royal pain in the butt.

Looking distracted, Sofia makes a humming sound in her throat.

I remind her under my breath, “Remember, you’re angry with him.”

“Mmm, so angry,” Sofia agrees in a dreamy voice.

Aaron stops in front of us. “Kenzie. Sofia,” he greets them, a slow and charming smile taking over his face, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

Huh. He’s never smiled at me like that.

When we first met, his smile was more like a grimace, as if he'd just bitten into a lemon. Lately, though, whenever he looks at me, he has this small smile playing on his lips, as if that almost smile is supposed to mean something. It's driving me crazy not knowing what it means.

"Hi, Aaron," Kenzie says.

Aaron gives her his full attention. "Calvin showed me a few of your card designs. I never got a chance to tell you how much I admire them."

"Thank you! That is so sweet of you to say," Kenzie replies, slightly breathless. She performs some strange fluttering gesture with her hands. I stare at her in astonishment. She looks like a baby bird trying to get off the ground.

Sofia regards Aaron with a contemplative expression. "Looks like congratulations are in order." Her voice drips with terseness. "You managed to dupe nearly the entire company with such a clever move."

Aaron hitches a shoulder and offers her a warm chuckle. "Your reputation precedes you, Sofia. I knew I needed to come up with something clever to catch you out."

Oh, come on, I think derisively. Sofia's not going to fall for such blatant flattery. Like Aaron pointed out, she's smarter than that.

But my jaw sags when I observe Sofia's beautiful dark eyes go all soft and shiny.

I stare in disbelief at my two closest friends. I feel the shield wall crumbling. #TeamAaron is written all over their faces.

Sofia wags a spirited finger at Aaron. "I look forward to your next mock phishing challenge."

"Don't make it too difficult," Kenzie adds coyly.

In a low, deep voice, Aaron remarks, "It's my job to keep you on your toes."

Kenzie's breath rushes out of her, and she gets this look on her face where I imagine she's picturing herself on her toes with Aaron behind her, his hands gripping her hips and...

The irrational punch of jealousy hits me hard.

"Aaron," I say in a sharper tone than I intended, desperate to eject that image from my unruly mind.

He turns to look at me and we both frown at the same time.

"What a coincidence seeing you here in this out-of-the-way spot," I say.

"A remarkable coincidence," he agrees.

I cross my arms resentfully. What is he doing here? I mean, *theoretically*, the vending machine is for everyone in the company to use. The reality, however, is that it's *our* vending machine. The amount we spend here could keep a small country afloat.

"I'm in the mood for something sweet," he says.

I tilt my head in the direction of the machine. "Knock yourself out."

He gives me that infuriating almost smile. "I'll have one of those chocolate bars." He fishes out his card from his wallet and holds it up between two fingers. "Here you go."

I take a moment to collect myself. "Something wrong with your arms?"

"Nope."

"Then get your own chocolate bar."

"It's too far."

"The vending machine is right there, Aaron."

"I'm aware of that, minion," he says, his expression daring me to renege on our wager. "Are you forgetting our bet?"

I offer him a tight smile. "Not with you reminding me every five minutes."

Sofia and Kenzie are silent, their gazes bouncing between us like they're enthralled spectators at a tennis match. They

look torn between wanting to duck for cover or greedily soak up every last second of our interaction.

Aaron raises an expectant eyebrow. “Well?”

I clench my teeth. “One chocolate bar coming up.”

Snatching the card out of his hand, I get him his chocolate and thrust it at his chest. His stupid, stubborn, well-defined chest. “Try not to choke on it.”

“Thank you.” He unwraps it slowly and takes a bite. “Tastes all the more sweeter for the challenge,” he says before he saunters away.

What the heck is that supposed to mean?

Throwing my hands in the air, I turn to face Sofia and Kenzie, who are staring at me wide-eyed.

“You see how annoying he is?”

They don’t reply, still staring at me.

“What?” I ask defensively.

My two friends trade a meaningful glance. Then Kenzie begins to fan her face, while Sofia plucks at her blouse like she’s trying to cool herself down.

“Is it hot in here or is it just me?” Sofia says at last, a wide grin breaking across her face.

“It’s definitely heated up,” Kenzie confirms, her eyes dancing.

Sofia’s still grinning. “I feel like I need to jump into one of those cold plunge pools.”

“Oh, shut it,” I say to them both, and get out of there. Fast.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next two weeks fly by. Along with Sofia and Kenzie, I'm glued to my desk for most of that time, all of us working hard on the revised designs and copy for the new pug-less Christmas Day card range.

The workspace has been particularly noisy this past week with phones ringing, the buzz of conversation, tapping of keyboards, and bursts of raucous laughter. Some days, it's so difficult to focus I leave the office early and take my work home with me, loathe to spend even another minute huddled in my cubicle.

I have the option of writing in the quiet of the Creative Room, but the memory of Aaron staring at me with such fierce heat in his eyes keeps me away.

I read somewhere that a person has about forty thousand thoughts in a day. When I realize that roughly twenty thousand of mine feature Aaron, alarm stirs inside me. Most of those thoughts involve me inflicting some sort of punishment upon him—locking him out of his office, salting his coffee, saturating his office in color, tying him up and... *No!* My wayward thoughts have veered off in a reckless direction and I have to abruptly wrestle them back in line.

I don't see much of Nathan during this time. He's busy with deadlines and has to work late most evenings. On the weekends, he's so distracted and exhausted he's not interested in venturing out, preferring to relax in front of the TV. I drive over to his place to join him, but leave after a few hours, too fidgety to sit still. I'm desperate to keep active in order to spend less time in my head, which feels like a dangerous place at the moment. I bury myself in work, and when I get home, I cook and clean, visit my family and organize get-togethers with Sofia and Kenzie in an attempt to quiet whatever it is that's so restless inside me.



One beautiful, sunny Monday morning, I march into Aaron's office with a fake green plant I purchased from IKEA and deposit it ceremoniously on his desk.

Taking off his glasses, Aaron folds his arms and frowns at it in suspicion.

"It's a plant," I reassure him. "It won't bite."

"I'll have to look after it," he grumbles.

"It's a fake plant so you don't even need to water it."

"I'll have to dust it."

"It's the most low-maintenance plant ever," I inform him. "It needs no good deeds or kindness. A little bit like your soul." My tone is light and playful to take away the sting of my words.

He shoots me an under-the-brow look.

I return it with my sweetest smile.

"Annoying woman," he grumbles.

But after three weeks of working with Aaron, I'm slowly attuning myself to all the various clues he gives off and I'm almost positive I can detect the teeniest, tiniest trace of humor in his voice.

I dig in my pocket and pull out a delicate, stained-glass hummingbird statue, which I place carefully on the corner of his desk.

He scoots his chair back, not taking his eyes off the bird.

"Relax," I say. "Color isn't a virus."

"It's contagious," he insists darkly. "When you permit a little color, more will follow."

With a hand clasped to my heart, I make an exaggerated show of surveying the new additions to his office. "So pretty," I say on a sigh.

"I don't want my space to be pretty!"

"You're welcome," I say, and with a cheery wave I exit the office I'm determined to transform.

The man inside the office, however, is another matter.



Gathering for after-work drinks at Kelly's on a Friday night is a sacred tradition at Amell Greetings. I missed last week, opting to spend the evening with Kate and Lisset instead, but tonight I'm ready to unwind with a beer after a busy workweek.

Kelly's is filled with a busier-than-usual Friday night crowd. The atmosphere is noisy and cheerful. I spot Rick, a pint of Guinness in front of him, sitting at a table with his bloodshot eyes fixed to the football game on the TV above the bar.

Avoiding his table, already too crowded with his ego and machismo occupying space there, I thread my way through the Friday-night throng. One guy bumps into me a little too forcefully and I stumble forward. A strong hand reaches out to steady me.

"You all right?" asks a deep voice.

Aaron. I'm surprised he's here, but I shouldn't be. Even though he's only been at Amell Greetings for three weeks, someone would've let him know about Friday night drinks.

"I'm fine." He's seated alone at a high-top table that he's managed to secure in the center of the room. His tie is gone, his top button is undone, and I don't at all notice the way his shirt stretches across his broad shoulders, wrapping his chest like a tight hug. "Thanks for the help."

He removes his hand from my elbow. "No problem."

"It's a bit crazy in here tonight," I comment, looking around. I can't spot Sofia or Kenzie or Nathan.

"Do you see any of your friends?"

"Not yet, but I'm sure they'll be here soon." I tip my head at his beer on the table. "Enjoy your drink and your evening."

"You too."

I make to move away, but a heavysset, bull-necked guy with a little too much drink inside him stumbles into me. “Hey, sorry ’bout dat,” he slurs, glassy-eyed.

“It’s okay.” I try to step back, but he moves in too close and grabs my shoulder in an effort to keep his balance.

Before I can react, Aaron is out of his chair and standing at my side. “Get your hand off her.”

The guy drops his hand. “Hey, I was just being friendly.”

His jaw tight, Aaron places his body between me and the drunken guy. I’m stunned and slightly charmed at this protective side that’s come out.

“She’s taken,” he says, the words almost a growl.

“Relax, man, I didn’t know.”

“Now you do.”

In the next second, his friends are steering him away and Aaron visibly relaxes, turning to face me. Those eyes of his zero in on mine, and it takes everything in me not to look away. This is the first time I’ve stood so close to him. His expression is a mix of concern and something else I can’t read.

He’s right in what he said, though.

I am taken.

Dragging my gaze away from his, I say lightly, “Well, that was my excitement for the evening.”

Aaron frowns. “It’s a little chaotic in here,” he points out. “You’re welcome to sit with me until your friends arrive.”

A ripple of relief moves through me. I wasn’t looking forward to fighting the crowd and trying to flag down a bartender. “Thanks. I’ll take you up on that.”

I hop onto the bar stool. I’m wearing a tight, short skirt, and I notice Aaron make a concerted effort not to stare at my legs.

“What can I get you to drink?”

“A beer, please.”

I reach for my purse, but Aaron waves me away. “I got it.”

He makes his way through the dense crowd to the bar in four long strides, people unconsciously parting for his tall, broad form.

He’s back in no time with our beers. I tap my bottle with his. “To the weekend.”

“The weekend,” he echoes, although he doesn’t sound as enthusiastic as I do at the prospect of not going into work for two days.

The cold liquid goes down smoothly. I let out a soft sigh of satisfaction, feeling my shoulders relax, the knots in my back loosen.

Aaron’s gaze flicks over me. I took extra care with my appearance today, going for a chic French look. My hair is caught up in an elegant chignon, drawing attention to my classic gold hoop earrings. I’m wearing a striped, collared shirt with my mid-thigh black skirt. A bold, red lipstick completes my look. Nathan’s been distracted for most of this week, and I’m determined to capture his attention tonight.

As though he can divine my intentions, Aaron says, “So, you and Nathan, huh?”

“Yup, me and Nathan.”

He takes a contemplative sip of his beer. His shirt sleeves are rolled up, showing tanned forearms corded with muscle. I look away.

“How long have you been seeing him?” Aaron asks.

“A year.”

“Long time.”

“It is.” I pick at the label on my bottle. “We’re really comfortable with one another.”

He raises an eyebrow. I don’t know if it’s just me, but that eyebrow looks awfully judgmental.

He seems to weigh his words before speaking again. “That’s how you describe your relationship? Comfortable?”

“Comfortable is a good thing,” I reply, feeling defensive, though I’m not sure why.

“Sounds boring.”

I roll my eyes. “Comfortable is not boring.”

“If you say so.”

“You can love something that’s comfortable. Like, uh, slippers. I love my slippers.”

Aaron sputters on his mouthful of beer. “I wouldn’t want to be described as a slipper in a relationship.”

“No, you’d be the corset.”

His lips curve into a grin. “You’re quick, I’ll give you that.”

My eyes stray to his powerful-looking shoulders. I stare at my beer, willing them back where they belong. My eyes might be bored, but at least they’re now well behaved.

“Anyway,” I say quietly, after a small silence, “boring is not the worst thing in the world.”

He leans back in his chair, taking a long sip of his beer, as though he’s waiting for me to look up at him. When I do, his stare is long and measured. “It’s not the best thing in the world, either.”

I feel myself go still. I’m not liking the direction this conversation is taking. I’m not liking the unsettling sensation of walls closing in on me.

“You know what’s boring, Statistics Man? Numbers.”

“Interesting deflection.”

“As interesting as your evasive tactics.”

“I like numbers.”

“Why?”

“Numbers are safe. They don’t lie.” Then he mutters something that sounds like, “And they don’t die,” but I think I must have heard him wrong.

I'm about to ask a follow-up question, but Aaron switches topics smoothly. "I bet you own a dog." He closes his eyes for a second, as though picturing it. "A chocolate Labrador who slobbers incessantly."

I can't help my smile. "Guess again."

"A golden retriever who adores everyone."

"I have a cat. An independent, grumpy tabby."

He's silent.

"I surprised you!"

"You did." He says it like it's not a good thing.

I'm inordinately pleased with myself. Chuckling at my mini victory, I touch my necklace, twirl the half-moon-shaped pendant between my fingers.

When I see him studying the pendant, I say, "A gift from my sister."

Love you to the moon and back, Kate had said when she'd given it to me.

"It's pretty," he acknowledges.

When he doesn't say anything else, I fill in the pause in the conversation. "What about you? Any siblings?"

His face shuts down and he holds his body utterly still, as though he's absorbing a blow. I know immediately I've said the wrong thing.

"I'm sorry." I don't know why I feel compelled to apologize. It's an innocent question, but this is not the first time I've caught the hint of something hurting inside him, a bleakness that steals over his face sometimes, like he's submerged in unhappy memories.

"It's fine," he states. Except he's so obviously not fine with whatever it is my question has stirred up.

"I shouldn't have asked."

"I said, it's fine." His voice is curt.

Hurt expands inside my chest. I lower my eyes and stare a wretched hole in the table. This is so painfully awkward. Why did I agree to join him?

I hear Aaron take a steadying breath. “Now I’m the one who should apologize,” he says softly. “I was rude and abrupt.” I look up and meet his gaze. He pushes out his next words with effort. “I had a sister. I don’t anymore.”

What does that even mean? Did they have a falling out? Did she die? I have a million curious questions, but his expression tells me I can’t ask any of them.

“Okay.” The word feels hopeless and inadequate, but what else can I say?

To roll back the strained tension I see creeping over him, I give his shoulder a playful poke. “My turn, Captain Security. I bet you have a massive, black, teeth-baring Rottweiler guarding your place.”

His face is still shadowed, but I observe him make a visible effort to engage. “Just to clarify, is this a literal bet again? With minion stakes?”

“Hah! Not a chance.”

“You don’t feel it’s your life calling to be my minion?”

“Only if I want to be charged with first-degree murder.”

“Good call. No Rottweiler,” he confirms.

“Python?”

I see his lips twitch. “You stereotyping me, Miller?”

“If the shoe fits, Sinclair.”

“Sorry to disappoint. No pets.”

“You don’t like animals?”

“I like animals just fine. But they’re a responsibility.”

“Bo—ring,” I throw back at him in a singsong voice. And finally, finally, I get the smile I’m aiming for.

Abruptly, a guy I’ve never seen before gestures to the empty barstool at our table and asks, “Do you mind if I sit?”

“Yes,” Aaron responds without hesitation.

The guy’s head jerks back in surprise, and I smother a laugh.

“You’re welcome to take the chair,” I offer.

“Thanks.” With a dirty look at Aaron, he hauls the chair away.

I scrunch my nose. “Don’t you worry about what people think of you?”

He gives an indifferent shrug. “Not really.”

“I admire that.”

I suppose that’s why Aaron is perfectly suited to his role. In the past couple of days, he’s sent out only one mock phishing email, which I managed to identify, but there were a few in the company who failed this particular phishing test. There’s now a fair bit of annoyance toward Aaron, and Mevia has hinted that one or two people even want him to leave.

Aaron must sense some of the sentiment toward him, but he’s refusing to ease up on the frequency and difficulty of the phishing tests. He’s honestly not out to secure any votes, whereas I secretly feel I spend far too much of my life quietly campaigning people to like me.

We’ve had one more in-person security training course. Thankfully, it wasn’t as tedious as the first one. Sofia and Kenzie made sure to sit on either side of me and whenever one of them picked up on any sort of sluggishness from me, I received a sharp elbow in the ribs.

I’m aware that Aaron, no doubt because of his profession, is an observant man. I notice the way he takes in his surroundings, the way he reads people and tracks their movements. Except when it comes to training sessions. Then his perceptiveness falls apart and the only thing he’s tracking is his obsession with security.

I’m nearly finished my beer so I’m a little buzzed. And that’s when I decide to do something stupid.

“Look,” I start.

A strained look immediately crosses his face.

I have to admit, even I'm a little nervous about what could emerge from my mouth. When my brain and tongue collude, there's no telling what they'll come out with.

I clear my throat. "I'm not one to tell you how to do your job."

"Yet I suspect you're about to do exactly that."

"I only want to give you some advice."

He rolls his shoulders. "Don't feel obliged."

"It's a bit of helpful advice."

"How about I judge the *helpful* part?"

"Do you want to hear it or not?"

"I do," he informs me. "Lay it on me."

"Your security intro session is overly long and boring."

"I gathered you felt that way when you fell asleep in it."

"My advice is to implement the KISS principle."

He immediately tries to disguise his laugh with a cough.

"I'm serious!"

"Yes, I can see that." He stares at me for five long seconds. "Explain to me what you mean by the KISS principle."

I lick my lips nervously. "You know what it is."

"Give me a refresher."

I clear my throat. "Well, as you know, there are variations on it."

He leans in closer to talk over the noise of the bar. The faint, masculine scent of his cologne teases my nostrils.

"Which variation do you have in mind for me?"

Keep It Simple, Stupid is the first one that pops into my head. Except we're having one of our rare, friendly conversations and I'm reluctant to derail it. Instead, I say, "Keep it simple and straightforward."

“Uh huh.”

“People taking your course would be more engaged if you kept your session shorter and maybe got them interacting more. You know, instead of doing the boring PowerPoint thing the entire time.”

His eyes narrow on “boring,” but I can see he’s taking in what I’m saying and processing my words. The gleam in his eyes, however, puts me on guard.

“Just so you know,” he murmurs, his voice brushing across my skin like velvet, “there is nothing simple or straightforward about the way I kiss.”

My eyes widen. “That is not what we are talking about!”

He taps his temple, as if to say, *But it’s what I was thinking about all along.*

In the bewildering imbalance of the moment, I’m left staring openmouthed at him as he pushes to his feet.

“Enjoy your *comfortable* evening,” Aaron says quietly, looking over my shoulder, his expression unreadable. Then he’s gone before I can say anything else.

“Tess!”

I swivel in my seat at the sound of my name.

Sofia and Kenzie spill into Kelly’s, laughing and giggling, a tumble of color and energy, and I swear I can smell their perfume from here.

Nathan is right behind them, a sweet smile lighting up his tired face when he sees me. He looks like a man who could use a drink and a hug.

I wave them over and shove Aaron out of my mind. To be safe, I build a wall around this fickle mind of mine, the tallest, thickest wall my imagination can construct.

“Hi, babe.” Nathan pulls me close and kisses me thoroughly.

Simply.

Straightforwardly.

I wind my arms around his neck, and light a fire to those words, burning them to ashes.

But all the while he's kissing me, my only thought is, my walls aren't strong enough. They need to be higher, thicker, topped with razor wire. Whatever I can think of to fortify them in order to make sure there's no way they can ever be breached.

CHAPTER TWELVE

[GROUP CHAT]

Kenzie: How's the head this morning?

Tess: I will never have another shooter again in my life.

Kenzie: I did warn you.

Tess: Why didn't you stop me?

Sofia: Because you would have taken out her eye. You were a woman on a mission last night.

Kenzie: Hmm, a mission to forget a certain man?

Tess: I was having fun with Nathan.

Sofia: You know who wasn't having fun? Aaron.

Tess: What do you mean?

Sofia: You didn't see the look on his face when Nathan kissed you.

Tess: Aaron wasn't there. He left.

Sofia: Only after the kiss.

Kenzie: It's true.

Sofia: He looked like he just lost something.

Tess: Aaron can look however he likes. Nathan's my boyfriend.

Kenzie: You and Nathan make a sweet couple.

Sofia: No comment.



For the next three weeks, Aaron and I are scrupulously polite and distant with one another. There are no more innuendos. No more verbal sparring with dangerous undercurrents. All playful bets have ceased. I've stopped bringing him fake plants and other decorative items for his office (even though it kills me to leave it in its depressing state). Our relationship

remains in the strictly professional space, which is the way it should be.

When we do speak, our conversations are superficial and perfunctory. We steer clear of any mention of Nathan. And there is certainly no more kissing talk.

I'm almost positive Aaron is trying his best to avoid me. It's a thought that would make me smile if it wasn't for the fact that I'm also trying to avoid him. But it's not as though Amell Greetings is this huge conglomerate. We are bound to cross paths, and we do. In the breakroom. The office hallways. The small, awkward confines of the elevator.

And, one rainy Tuesday morning, outside my cubicle.

On that particular morning I'm pretending to work but, in reality, I'm sneaking peeks at Aaron talking to various people in the vicinity, laughing at a shared joke, answering questions without his usual reserve, arranging to meet for afterwork drinks.

For some reason, watching him interact so easily with my colleagues makes me mad. Of course, there's no way I want him to see how ticked off I am, so when he approaches my cubicle, I paste a smile on my face.

Aaron studies me, his brow furrowed. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. Why would you think something's wrong?"

"Well, what's with the weird smile? It's like your face is frozen."

My smile does feel like it's morphed from fake to frozen, teetering on the edge of rictus territory. I do what anyone would do in these circumstances, I bluff. "It's my natural smile."

His eyes hold mine. Slowly, he says, "Your real smile lights up your whole face. It's the smile you use when you're talking to your friends."

He abruptly stops speaking, looking troubled by whatever direction his thoughts are taking.

My heart begins to pound as an awkward silence steals over us.

Aaron has taken note of my smile. And he likes it.



I tell myself the whole smile incident is a minor glitch and I shove it aside to work on improving my relationship with Nathan. We've both been neglecting one another, and I figure it's time to rectify that. I make an effort to stay awake during the action movies he loves to watch. In turn, Nathan accompanies me on my short hikes in the huge forest bordering Brown Oaks. He knows how important hiking is to me, how I crave fresh air, natural light, and open space after too many hours in my cramped cubicle breathing stale air under the glare of fluorescent lights. So even though hiking is my thing and not his, Nathan slaps on sunscreen, hauls out his dusty backpack, and grudgingly walks the trails with me.

We go out for romantic dinners, and I stay silent when he orders steak and chips. He still games with his friends Wednesday nights, and I enjoy my ladies' evenings with Sofia and Kenzie.

I've also started straightening my hair. No more curls bouncing around, doing their thing, wild and untamed. They need to stay in their lane. The first day I arrive at work with my hair all smooth and straight, Sofia throws me a knowing look. I pointedly ignore her Dr. Phil moment, as well as her follow-up text message containing only a single question mark.

It's all going smoothly.

Then Aaron sends out another phishing test.

The email is one of those alarming "we've detected unusual sign-in activity on your account." In a moment of busyness and distraction, I absently click the link to review the activity on my Microsoft account, but my heart sinks when I realize the link isn't legitimate.

Another fail. More mandatory online training.

I let out an irritable groan. Who sends a phishing test on a Monday, the worst day of the week? Mondays are painful enough to get through without a nasty phishing test being thrown in.

My irritation mounts.

From his cubicle, I hear Mark howl in a distraught voice, “I failed!” and Kenzie trying to console him.

I have four days to complete the mandatory online training.

Every day leading up to the deadline, I receive a reminder about the training, but I delete them all. Honestly, I have better things to do with my time.

Also, if I’m brutally honest with myself, it’s become my life purpose to get under Aaron’s skin. I realize I’m playing a dangerous game, but I can’t seem to bring myself to stop.



[MESSAGES]

Mevia: Uh-oh. Hot Guy’s got his angry eyes on.

Tess: Who are they aimed at?

Mevia: You’re the only one who riles him up.

Tess: How much time do I have?

Mevia: Ten seconds.

Mevia: Okay, thirty. I just told him Dana needs to talk to him.

Tess: I owe you one.

Mevia: When you and Hot Guy make a baby, name her after me.

Tess: Are you insane?

Mevia: I know chemistry when I see it.

Tess: Not happening, Mev. Not in a thousand million lifetimes.

Mevia: What if he’s The One?

Tess: The one to send me to an early grave.

Mevia: Have screenshot this convo to display on your wedding day.



Thirty seconds later, I spot Aaron striding toward my cubicle, his annoyed face back in place. I seem to be remarkably adept at reading his limited range of emotions—irritation, exasperation, grumpiness, impatience. Possibly because I tend to provoke those emotions in him.

Heads pop up like meerkats over cubicle walls and then duck back down again, as if sensing danger. No one wants to be caught in the crossfire on a Friday.

Aaron stops at the entrance to my cubicle, displeasure coming off him in waves. Taking a bracing breath, I swivel in my chair to face him.

“You didn’t do the training,” he says, keeping his voice low for all the radar ears around us.

“I forgot.”

“There were reminders,” comes his exasperated reply.

I plaster on a fake surprised face. “There were?”

He flattens his hands on his thighs, striving for control. “The training is there for a reason, Tess.”

Yes, Aaron, to put me to sleep.

My chest feels tight. Must the man take up so much space? I can’t breathe properly when he’s in my cubicle. It’s like he sucks up all the oxygen.

“You don’t understand,” he says at last. “There are monsters out there who can destroy your world. With just one scam, they can take everything from you.”

He stops abruptly, as if aware he’s revealed too much. There’s a note in his voice I haven’t heard before, one that sends a shiver skating across my skin.

Into the silence, I work up the courage to ask, “What happened to you?”

“This is not about me,” he says roughly. “This is about you. And the fact that you’re not taking this seriously.”

“I’m trying,” I say, but the lie feels big and heavy between us.

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “Why do you have to be so difficult?”

Why, indeed?

It should be easy to answer him, but nothing about Aaron feels easy.

What am I trying to accomplish by being so difficult? I wish I knew the answer. I’m like a kid acting out to secure the attention of a parent. Sure, I’m grabbing Aaron’s attention, but for all the wrong reasons.

I feel childish and silly. And now I also feel embarrassed.

I know I should apologize, but my tongue feels as unyielding as my pride.

When I don’t answer him, he lets out a frustrated sigh. “I’m giving you a verbal warning.”

I gape at him. “You can’t do that!”

“I can and I am.”

“Calvin—”

“—has given me permission to do exactly that.”

Fury rises inside me. “Are you doing this to get back at me?” The question spills out before I can think to stop it.

He stills. For the span of two held breaths, he says nothing. Then, in a tone I find terrifying, he asks, “Get back at you for what?”

The kiss you witnessed.

“Forget it,” I say.

“You brought it up,” he reminds me.

Yes, I did. Stupid, stupid me. My tongue needs a leash.

“You think I’m doing this to get *back* at you for something?” I’m pinned in my chair by the fierce anger blazing in his blue eyes. “You’re the only one here acting like a child.”

His comment stings. I shoot him an angry glare and he returns it. The air in the cubicle is charged with animosity.

In a terse voice, Aaron says, “The next time you conveniently *forget* an online training session, you’ll receive a written warning. It will also reflect on your quarterly performance review.”

I am so mad. A part of me rushes headlong into the anger, throwing my arms around it like I’m greeting a safe and familiar friend. Another part of me, however, hates how my anger throws a darkening shadow over everything, like a drop of ink polluting clear, clean water.

“Thanks for the heads up,” I spit out. “At least I know now where I stand with you.”

His mouth sets in a hard line. “Remember, you brought this on yourself. All you had to do was complete the training.”

All I had to do. Aaron doesn’t understand. Sometimes the easiest tasks feel the most difficult to complete. And sometimes we make those tasks so much harder than they need to be.



Saturday night, I’m sitting on my back porch swing, sipping lavender tea because I’m still stewing over the fact that Aaron had the nerve to issue me with a verbal warning. I spent the whole of today rage-cleaning. And while my house is now sparkling, my spirit is still quietly seething.

The lavender tea, which is supposed to induce relaxation, doesn’t appear to be working.

I force myself to take another sip of the vile tea and that’s when I hear the most awful, high-pitched screeching. Goosebumps break out on my skin. I have no idea what that

sound is. An animal giving birth? Some creature having its insides torn out?

It's dark and I'm a little terrified, but I make myself grab the flashlight and shine it into the backyard. I can't see a thing, only shadows and the silhouettes of trees.

When the horrible noise continues, I take my phone out to record it, then I send the recording to the group chat.

Tess: What on earth is this sound?

Sofia: Fox?

Kenzie: It's an owl.

Tess: An owl being tortured?

Kenzie: It's calling for its mate.

Sofia: Yes. 'Help me, mate, I'm being tortured.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ever since I started working at Amell Greetings, I've had various weird and scary work nightmares: Arriving naked at work, mistakenly thinking it's a Saturday and not showing up at the office, being unprepared for an important presentation, my sister marrying Rick in a moment of desperate madness.

None of my nightmares, though, feature my mother standing unexpectedly in my cubicle, beaming down at me.

"Mom, what are you doing here?" I ask. "We're supposed to meet at Giovanni's at one." I glance at my watch. "You're twenty minutes early."

And you're here, in my building, in my cubicle. The very last place I want you to be.

Her smile widens. "I decided to surprise you."

My jaw hangs open and I give her a you've-got-to-be-kidding-me look.

My mom gave birth to me. She's nursed me, changed my diapers, dried my tears, comforted me, suffered through my teenage mood swings, and cheered me on through college. She's known me for twenty-eight years and you'd think that after all those years she'd know that I *hate* surprises with every fiber of my being.

But here she is, *surprising* me.

She waves away my discomfort. "I love seeing where you work."

I'm going to kill Mevia for not providing me with any advance warning. She was no doubt bribed with cookies. I glance down. Sure enough, my mother is holding a Tupperware container.

"Mrs. M," calls out Sofia in delight.

"Hi, Mrs. Miller," Kenzie greets her, almost shyly.

Mom's face lights up and she gives them each a motherly hug. "Sofia! Kenzie!"

There's a lot of compliments and fussing over hair and clothes. My two friends adore Joelle Miller.

Unable to hold out any longer, Sofia eyes out my mother's container. "Please tell me you're about to brighten up our Monday with your famous oatmeal and raisin cookies."

Mom's eyes twinkle as she prizes off the lid. "I baked them this morning."

Sofia and Kenzie fall on the cookies like children. While they gush over them, I notice my mother's gaze casually trail the rabbit warren of cubicles. I stiffen. It's almost as though she's looking for something. Or someone. Realization dawns on me and my heart thumps. All of a sudden, I'm in a massive hurry to get my meddling mother out of the building.

"All right, Mom, time to go."

"Already?" my mom protests.

Sofia looks slightly panicked. "What about the cookies?"

I thrust the container at her. "Keep them. I'll return the container to my mom this week."

"Tess, are you okay?" Kenzie asks carefully. "You're acting a little strange."

"As long as we can keep the cookies," Sofia interjects, "she can act as strange as she wants."

"Of course, you can keep them," Mom says. "I'm sorry we didn't get a chance to properly catch up."

"Next time," Sofia says.

Kenzie kisses my mom on the cheek. "Nice seeing you, Mrs. Miller."

"Really, Tess, why are you in such a hurry?" Mom asks as I steer her at a brisk pace past the rows of cubicles.

"I'm really hungry. Aren't you hungry?"

We're heading down the hallway toward reception, the elevator bank in sight, when we encounter Aaron walking toward us.

Nerves stir in my stomach. I was so close.

I look straight ahead and attempt to hustle my mom past Aaron without acknowledging him, but Mom, brimming with curiosity and Brown Oaks hospitality, comes to a stop and smiles up at him expectantly.

Of course, Aaron stops too. Probably because he senses how desperate I am for him to continue on his way.

Swallowing a frustrated sigh, I make a quick introduction. "Mom, this is Aaron. Aaron, my mom."

She shakes his outstretched hand, her face practically glowing. "I'm pleased to meet you at last."

At last. Two words that will be my undoing. Thanks, Mom.

Aaron's knowing eyebrow, always vigilant, goes up. "Tess has mentioned me?"

Mom nods. "She said you're new to town."

That's not all I said, and the flicker of mischief dancing across Aaron's face says he knows it too.

"I guess I am new to town," he acknowledges. "But it's almost two months now since I arrived in Brown Oaks, so I feel like I've settled in."

Mom looks scandalized. "Two months!" She shoots me a reproving look. "And this is the first time I've met you."

And hopefully the last. I tilt my head toward the reception area. "We're eating at one, Mom, so we better get going."

She waves away my concern. "I didn't make a reservation so we can arrive anytime."

"Where are you eating?" Aaron asks, all polite charm. I'm not impressed. Snake oil salesmen had charm. So did Ted Bundy, apparently.

"Giovanni's," my mom replies. "Have you eaten there?"

“I haven’t.”

“They serve the best thick-crust pizzas in Brown Oaks. They’ve been doing so for twenty years.”

“I’ll make sure to try them sometime.”

Mom’s eyes widen in sudden animation. “Aaron, why don’t you join us for lunch?”

I nearly levitate off the carpet in shock. Did my mother just invite my mortal enemy to lunch with us? Is she experiencing some sort of medical episode? Or is this payback for my moody teenage years?

I link my arm in hers, prepared to drag her away, if necessary. “That’s so kind of you, Mom,” I lie through clenched teeth. “But I was looking forward to some mother and daughter time.”

“Oh, Tess, we can have that anytime.”

“Yes, like *now*.”

Mom gives my arm an indulgent pat. “Isn’t she sweet, wanting time with her mother?”

Aaron’s jaw flexes, as if he’s assessing his answer. “*Sweet* is the first word that comes to mind when I think of your daughter.”

Mom is still under his spell, so she fails to pick up the sarcastic edge to his words.

I match him with my own disapproving edge. “Actually, Mom, Aaron is too busy to go out to lunch.”

“I am?”

“Oh, yes, all those mock phishing emails you have to send out. So many people to trick, so little time.”

He narrows his eyes at me. I narrow mine back.

“You’re right,” he says smoothly. “I do have my work cut out for me, especially when certain individuals are unwilling to learn.”

I nod along in pretend sympathy. “I’m sure it’s incredibly difficult to learn when you’re being put to sleep.”

Mom flashes an uncertain smile, clearly sensing the tension in the air. Thank goodness. Hopefully, that will clue her into the fact I want nothing to do with Aaron Sinclair outside of work. It’s bad enough I have to put up with him at work.

“Oh, you poor man!” Mom exclaims. “You can’t go to lunch when you’re so stressed and overworked. I know the perfect solution. We’re having a family barbecue this Sunday and I insist you join us.”

I’m struck mute with horror.

To his credit, Aaron doesn’t flinch. “That’s very kind of you—” he starts to say.

“Nonsense,” my mom interrupts. “It’s not kind at all. In fact, I’m ashamed.”

I try not to roll my eyes. *Ashamed* is a pretty strong word. It’s not as if Aaron is a kitten she abandoned in the rain.

“You’ve been here two months,” Mom continues, “and I’ve failed to show you any Brown Oaks hospitality.”

I try to picture my family, Nathan, Aaron, and me all together at my parents’ house. One big, cozy, dysfunctional group. I’m nearly hysterical at the image that forms in my head.

Hastily, I say, “I’m sure Aaron is busy this Sunday, Mom.”

Aaron flicks me a lazy, dangerous look. I don’t like that look one bit. “Actually, I’m not doing anything this Sunday.”

“Are you sure?” I put on display my most concerned expression. “I’m almost positive you mentioned you have something on.” Like, I don’t know, sharpening his collection of butcher knives.

“Nope,” he says, popping the *p*. “At least, nothing that’s more appealing than spending the afternoon with your family and experiencing true Brown Oaks hospitality.”

We stare at one another for several heartbeats and conduct a whole conversation with our eyes.

Say no to my mom.

Why?

Because I said so.

Since when have I listened to you?

I can think of only two reasons why Aaron would accept my mom's invitation:

One, annoying me appears to be his favorite hobby.

Two, he relishes doing the exact opposite of what I want him to do.

"That's settled, then," Mom says. "We'll see you Sunday."

"But Mom—"

"But nothing, Tess Anne."

I feel my mom watching me carefully. Holding back a sigh, I force a shrug that is undoubtedly stiff. There's no arguing with her when she uses that tone. My mom seems intent on this unhinged course of action, and I find myself pulled helplessly and resentfully along for the ride.

Aaron smiles at my mother. "Thank you for the invite. I look forward to Sunday." The sincerity in his voice is surprising.

"Tess can message you our address."

A spark of hope ignites inside me. "Of course."

"Actually," Aaron says evenly, "why don't I grab it from you now, so I don't have to bother Tess."

I struggle to keep an impassive face as Aaron types my parents' address into his phone. The man thwarts my every move. Would I have given him another address in a galaxy far, far away? Why, yes, I would have.

We say goodbye to Aaron and make our way past reception, where Mevia is stuffing her face with a cookie. She doesn't even have the grace to look guilty. Offering me an

unrepentant wave, she points to the cookie and mouths, *So good.*



At lunch, I expect Mom to pepper me with questions about Aaron. Oddly enough, she brings him up only once. “He seems kind of sad,” she says after the waiter takes our drinks order.

“I’d be sad too if I had his personality,” I retort, and then have to endure a five-minute lecture from my mom on my *attitude*.

We don’t mention him again, neither of us wanting our time together marred by arguments. A part of me is hoping Aaron will find some reason to cancel before Sunday, that he said yes to my mom’s invitation simply to spite me. But I’m not going to think about him right now and spoil my rare, one-hour lunch with my mother, who I didn’t manage to see over the weekend.

Mom and I share a pepperoni pizza and she updates me on the latest treatments for Dad’s back and regales me with more of Grandma’s Google antics.

I tell her about my weekend away with Nathan. We’d hired a house on the far side of the lake, three of Nathan’s college friends and their wives joining us, and we’d spent the warm days paddleboarding and tanning on the docks, and the nights playing darts and drinking games. It was a welcome distraction from work.

Things got a little tense between Nathan and me on Sunday. He was drinking way more than he usually does, and when I took him aside to tell him he was becoming too crude with his jokes and too boorish in his behavior, he accused me of being straitlaced and boring. We suffered through a strained couple of hours before he apologized. And even though we’ve made up, I’m still carrying his words around like a bruise.

After lunch, my mom had shopping to do so I leave her wandering the boutique stores on Main Street while I head

back to the office. In the lobby, I deposit a takeout container of creamy chicken Alfredo on Bob's desk.

"Dinner's all taken care of for tonight, Bob."

Bob's eyes mist over. "Ah, Tess, you're so good to me."

His grateful expression puts a hard knot in my chest. Bob's wife died of cancer two years ago. I like to bring him treats whenever I can, and Sofia and Kenzie take turns showering him with leftovers, always insisting they'd cooked way too much. Dad also tries his best to pop over to Bob's house to help with any maintenance work that's needed.

As Bob peels back the lid to peer inside, Dana appears in the lobby. I'm guessing she's off to Beth's Bakery to pick up Calvin's daily donut allotment. She takes in the scene and immediately marches over to us, aiming her fierce frown straight at Bob. "Surely you're not so useless in the kitchen that you can't cook a meal for yourself?"

I swallow my retort and let Bob handle this. Dana is the only one in the building who doesn't tiptoe around him. It's as though she gets a free pass to talk to him like that because her husband died around the same time as Bob's wife.

Bob scratches his chin. "Yeah, I can cook."

"Name one dish."

"I make a mean tuna pasta."

Dana gives him a flat look. "Let me guess, you open a tin of tuna and add it to the cooked pasta."

"There's also a sauce."

"Ingredients?"

"Mayo and ketchup, and I also melt blocks of cheese into it."

Her thick brows knit in disapproval. "Sounds disgusting."

"Don't knock it 'til you try it."

"And how is that supposed to happen, Bob Legge?"

He waits a moment, then drawls, “Well, Dana Norgate, I might just have to invite you over to my place for dinner.”

I make an effort to close my gaping mouth.

Well, well. I hadn’t expected such boldness from Bob.

Judging from the spots of color on Dana’s cheeks, neither had she. She looks positively flustered and I make a mental note to confirm to Sofia that blood—and not ice water—flows in Dana’s veins.

Recovering, Dana turns to leave and mutters, “It’ll be a cold day in hell before I accept.”

“Better put on a jacket then,” Bob calls after her with a chuckle. “That woman,” he says in an admiring tone, eyeing her retreating back. “Isn’t she something?”

I scrutinize Dana’s formidable figure barreling through the lobby like a Sherman tank. “She’s something all right,” I confirm in a faint voice.

I can’t wait to analyze this new development with Sofia and Kenzie.

First, however, it’s time to tackle Aaron.



I fling open the door to Aaron’s office and step inside. The door swings back faster than I anticipate, and I have to jump forward to avoid being hit.

Aaron glances up from his laptop, showing no surprise at my presence in his office. He takes off his glasses, leans back in his chair, and rests his hands on his stomach, as though he’s settling in for a long conversation. I, however, am more than happy to keep it short.

I prop my hands on my hips. “Why did you accept my mom’s invitation?”

“Because I want to go,” he answers immediately.

I search for clues in his face, but his inscrutable mask is in place. Yet I swear I can detect an almost shy eagerness leaking

out of his voice. But that can't be right because Aaron doesn't do shy and he doesn't do eager.

"You know," he says musingly, "I think I'm going to love your mom."

I suspect he's trying to get a rise out of me, and he's succeeding. "You do not get to love my mom." I point a finger at him. "She's mine."

"What happened to 'sharing is caring?'" he asks, quoting my words back to me.

"It doesn't apply to my mom. Besides, you don't seem the kind of man who shares."

He nods slowly. "You're right, I'm not."

For an arrested moment, his eyes hold mine. In their depths, it feels as though there's a message there for me, a message that sends a shiver through my whole body.

When my phone beeps with a text, I break eye contact. "Excuse me," I say to Aaron as I pull my phone out to check it's not my mom needing my help.

Mevia: Open the door.

Tess: Why?

Mevia: I can't hear what's happening between you and Aaron.

Tess: Go away.

I put my phone away and then Aaron's phone buzzes. He picks it up off his desk and glances at the screen.

"Mevia?" I guess when he frowns.

He nods. "Is she always this...?" He waves a hand in the air, unable to find the words. Mevia appears to have that effect on people.

"Yes. Always." Then I remember why I came in here. "You need to cancel Sunday."

His frown deepens. "That would upset your mom and I don't want to upset her."

“But you’re upsetting *me* right now,” I counter. “Doesn’t that count?”

He gives a slight shrug. “You’re often upset.”

“At you, yes!”

Because this man has invaded my work environment, crept into my thoughts, intruded into my dreams, and turned them into nightmares. And now he’s trying to inveigle himself into my family. Enough is enough.

“Look,” I say, “I know you don’t really want to go Sunday.”

He regards me with what looks like genuine curiosity. “Why don’t you think I want to go?”

“Because it’ll be tense.”

“Why? Are your parents horrible?”

“Of course not!”

“You mentioned a sister. Is she awful?”

“She’s difficult,” I concede grudgingly, “but not awful.”

“Any other siblings?”

“No.”

“Then why will it be tense?” he persists.

“Nathan will be there,” I blurt out.

“Ah, the boyfriend,” he says knowingly.

“Yes.”

“Does he have a problem with me?” Aaron asks, all suspicious innocence.

I’m the one who has a problem with you, I think. For all the right and wrong reasons.

“No. I just...I don’t understand why you said yes.”

He stares at me for a beat too long. “Have you thought that maybe it would be nice for me to go out on the weekend and

socialize? That I might not know anyone in town and this is a way for me to connect?”

I’m speechless in the face of the stark picture his words have painted. I’m also deeply ashamed. No, I hadn’t once thought that. I just assumed he had a string of women and friends trailing behind him. I’m struck with the swift realization that, outside of work, I know absolutely nothing about his life.

I wish there was a way to take back my words.

“I’m sorry,” I say in a whisper. “I didn’t think.” And that, right there, is my problem.

Into the long, awkward pause, Aaron seems to give up on the games. “I’ll come Sunday because of your mom, but I won’t make trouble for you, I promise.”

No, I think as I leave his office, he won’t have to *make* trouble. His very presence will be trouble.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Every day leading up to the Sunday barbecue feels as though I'm inching one step closer toward a Tess-shaped noose hanging from a gallows. By the time Sunday arrives, my nerves are shredded.

"I don't understand why your mom invited Aaron," Nathan comments as he makes the turn onto my parents' street, his hands tight on the wheel.

You and me both, I think. "You know my mom," I say casually. "She'll invite anyone with a heartbeat."

"True," Nathan acknowledges, but he doesn't look happy.

I shift the foil-covered glass dish on my lap into a more comfortable position. I've made a cheesy potato and bacon bake for today's barbecue. It's one of Nathan's favorite dishes and feels a little like an apology for Aaron's presence today.

"You seem nervous," Nathan points out, sparing me a quick, surprised glance.

I force a laugh. "Not really. Just unsure how it's all going to play out."

He reaches across the console to give my thigh a reassuring squeeze. "I'm sure it'll be fine."

Fine. Such a bland-sounding word. Not at all what I imagine today will be like. Awkward. Uncomfortable. Tense. Those descriptions feel more apt.

Aaron has promised not to make trouble, and I'm holding him to that promise. But for two people who met for the first time two months ago, it feels as though we possess a significant amount of troubling history between us: The Cat Video. The Sleeping Incident. The Creative Room. Minion Day. Friday Night Drinks.

"Apparently, Kate's also invited a friend," I tell him.

"A friend? Like a *date*?" he asks in astonishment as he pulls into my parents' driveway.

“She insists he’s just a friend.”

None of us have met Kate’s friends. She rarely mentions her work colleagues. And she’s certainly never brought someone along to my parents’ Sunday barbecue.

Nathan cuts the engine. “Wow, Kate has a friend she hasn’t chewed up and spat out.”

My voice holds a warning note. “Hey, she’s my sister.”

“Yeah, but even you have to admit she’s a ballbreaker,” he mutters.

Gripping the glass dish, I climb out the car, unaccountably irritated. I don’t want to talk about Kate. I don’t want Nathan to talk about Kate. He should know how sensitive I am about my sister.

Nathan takes the heavy dish from me and presses a kiss to my temple in a halfhearted apology. “I take back what I said.”

“Good.”

He grins. “But at least the day has suddenly become more interesting.”

Exactly what I’m afraid of.

“You look pretty, by the way.”

I soften at the admiration in his voice. I’m wearing my usual denims and a form-fitting, burgundy T-shirt, but I took a little extra care with my makeup today and my hair is sleek and straight.

We’re the first to arrive, which is how I planned it.

On my parents’ porch, I almost trip over the Google Home device lying outside the front door.

Opening the door, I call out, “Grandma, why is Google outside?”

Her small figure comes barreling down the hallway. “Hi, Tess. Nathan.” She glares down at the offending machine. “It’s in time-out.”

“Time-out?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“It keeps testing my patience with its ‘Sorry, I didn’t get that.’ So, I’m teaching it a lesson.”

“But—”

Grandma plants her hands on her hips. “It wants the attention so don’t say any of those words that wake it up.”

I stare down at Google and then back up at my sweet old grandmother. “Google is unplugged, Grandma. It can’t respond to any voice activations.”

She pats my arm. Dear, deluded Tess, her pat says. “Oh, honey, this internet thing is everywhere. Google can still hear us.”

“You know what, I agree with Deanna,” Nathan pipes up, and I see him fighting to contain his laughter. “Google needs to learn its lesson.”

“Thank you, young man.”

Comrades-in-arms, they disappear into the house. With a resigned sigh, I trail after them.

Mom’s in the kitchen, bustling around, her cheeks flushed with excitement. With a house soon to be full of people, she’s clearly in her element.

I hug her and remove a sprig of thyme that somehow got caught in her hair.

“How are you doing?” she asks.

Nervous. Edgy. “Fine.”

She rubs my arm, as if she understands exactly what I’m not saying. “Stop overthinking this,” she whispers. “Just enjoy yourself.”

Easier said than done, but I nod to indicate that yes, I’ll try. I gesture to the potato bake that Nathan placed on the kitchen table. “It needs about half an hour in the oven.”

“Okay. Hey, Google, set a timer—” she stops abruptly.
“Mom, where’s Google?”

Grandma scowls. “Out of sight. Where it belongs.”

My mother looks so lost without her kitchen accessory that I say, “I can set the timer on my phone.”

The doorbell rings.

“I’ll get it,” Grandma volunteers and hurries away before anyone can stop her.

I hear Aaron’s deep baritone filtering down the hall as he chats to my grandmother. Taking a stabilizing breath, I pull my shoulders back, preparing myself.

Aaron follows Grandma into the kitchen. My heart stutters and has some trouble restarting. He’s dressed in faded black jeans that sculpt his legs just right. A soft black T-shirt with a small white logo stretches across his broad shoulders. Still encasing himself in monochrome, I observe. I’m starting to suspect it’s his armor.

His eyes find mine immediately. “Hi, Tess.”

I give a breezy, oh-so-casual wave. “Hey, Aaron.”

His gaze flicks to my brightly colored top and the red barrette in my hair. The tiniest hint of a smile grazes his lips.

Turning to my mom, he kisses her cheek in greeting and hands Google over to her. “It looked in need of rescuing.”

Mom melts. “Thank you.”

Aaron and Nathan exchange a stilted greeting before heading out to the garden to join my dad, who’s manning the barbecue and the cooler of beer. I’m hoping that after a beer or two, the guys will be more relaxed around one another.

“That man is so handsome,” Mom says as she reconnects Google. “And he has such good teeth.”

“Aaron’s not a racehorse, Mom,” I protest.

“I’d bet on him,” Grandma says, and they both start giggling.

I roll my eyes. Honestly, they're like children sometimes.

The front door bangs open, and I hear Lisset's excited voice. Kate's here. The three of us fix our gazes on the kitchen entrance, the air humming with anticipation. We're dying to meet Kate's friend.

Lisset skips in first, followed by a gorgeous, bearded giant of a man with legs like tree trunks and shoulder-length blond hair. His massive shoulders barely fit through the doorway.

Kate walks into the kitchen. In an offhand voice, she says, "This is Eric."

I let that sit a beat, then I burst out laughing.

Kate shoots me a withering look. No one can pull off scorn quite like my sister. In the face of her glare, I feel myself shriveling into a small, remorseful heap.

"What's so funny, Auntie Tess?" demands Lisset, who hates to be left out.

I pat my niece absentmindedly on the head and ask Kate, "Uh, you're not joking about the name?"

One glance, though, at Eric's hurt, confused expression and I already know the answer.

Kate props her hands on her hips. "Why would I joke about a name?"

"It's just...Eric is an old Norse name and..." I gesture at Eric. Tall. Blond. Muscular. Bearded. I mean, come on, can no one else see it?

But everyone is staring at me blankly.

"I'm sorry, Eric," I say, trying to look as if I'm sorry. "It's lovely to meet you."

"Yes, it is," Mom agrees, rushing over to Eric and fussing over him in an effort to make up for my rudeness. "Forgive Tess. She tends to laugh when she's nervous."

With Mom and Eric occupied, Kate asks, "Why are you nervous?"

“I’m not. I mean, I am, but that’s not why I was laughing.”

Grandma whispers to Kate, “Did you hire him?”

Kate frowns. “What do you mean?”

Grandma gives a theatrical wink. “You know, as an *escort*?”

“What? No!”

“What’s an escort?” demands Lisset.

“Never mind,” I say hastily, but it’s a red-flag response to an inquisitive seven-year-old who’s learned from the best.

“HEY, GOOGLE,” yells Lisset. “WHAT’S AN ESCORT?”

Kate lunges and unplugs Google.

I grab Lisset’s hand. “Yes, of course, I’ll *escort* you to Grandpa. Eric, would you like to join us?”

“Yeah, sure,” Eric replies in a rumbly voice, still looking slightly wary of me.

I lead Lisset and Eric out to the garden, where Dad, Nathan, and Aaron are standing around the barbecue with beers in hand. The garden is my parents’ pride and joy, bursting with color. Bird feeders hang from trees and a small pond filled with fish lies in a shaded back corner.

“Hey, everyone, this is Eric, a friend of Kate’s.”

I wait.

Dad simply beams and shakes his massive paw. Nathan, meanwhile, gets this look on his face that tells me he has a mini man crush going on.

Giving up on them, I turn to Aaron, who is trying to maintain a straight face. My heart gives an unwelcome flutter. He’s the only one who sees what I see: Eric with his Viking name and Viking looks. This shared knowledge feels too intimate, and I tuck my hair nervously behind my ear. A part of me wishes I could tuck Aaron away in a quiet, harmless corner.

While Nathan and my dad engage Eric in a conversation about how much he bench presses, Aaron asks me, “I assume this is your *sharing is caring* niece?”

I nod. “My sister Kate’s daughter.”

He hunkers down in front of Lisset, who’s pressing herself shyly against my leg. “Does this princess have a name?”

“Lisset.”

“Cool name.”

“What’s your name?”

“Aaron.”

“Are you cooking the steaks?”

Aaron seems startled by the left-field question.

I say quickly, “Grandpa’s cooking the steaks, sweetie.”

Her bottom lip juts out. “I think Aaron should cook them.”

Just then Kate, Mom, and Grandma appear in the garden. To my relief, that distracts Lisset and she runs off to call them over.

Aaron straightens. “Cute kid. Seems a little obsessed with steaks.”

I wave that away as if it’s nothing. “Yeah, she’s quite the carnivore.” Kate hands me a glass of wine, which I accept gratefully. “This is my sister, Kate.”

Kate raises an eyebrow. “You work with Tess?”

A smile tips Aaron’s lips. “I’m not sure I work with her as much as she works against me.”

Kate smirks. “Yeah, she’s famed for being a smart mouth.”

“I have firsthand experience of that.”

I sip from my glass. “How heartwarming to see you both bonding at my expense.”

Aaron’s smile widens to a grin. “And there she goes.”

“It’s a Miller family trait,” Kate informs him, like she’s testing him.

Appearing unfazed, Aaron replies, “It’s a Sinclair trait to give back as good as we get.”

Kate regards him with fresh eyes. So many men are intimidated by her that she’s always surprised when she meets one who isn’t. Nathan would never venture into this type of conversation with Kate.

“I heard you moved here,” Kate remarks.

“I did.”

“What happens when your contract is up?”

“I move on,” Aaron says bluntly.

It feels like there’s a world of information in that simple statement.

Kate presses her lips together and slants me a meaningful look. My sister puts a lot of effort into her facial gestures. If I’m reading this one correctly, it says, *Be careful*.

I’m trying, Kate.

“I wish I had a pet,” Lisset says suddenly, underscoring her words with a dramatic sigh. “Do you have a pet, Eric?” she asks slyly.

Eric shakes his head. “No, but when I was young, I had my own horse.”

“Oh, I *wish* I had a horse,” Lisset announces passionately.

In a booming voice, like he’s the town crier, Eric proclaims, “Lisset needs a horse!”

And then he drops to the ground like he’s been shot. Slowly, he gets up on all fours and a bizarre, strangled noise rumbles out of him. It takes me a second to realize he’s trying to neigh.

We all fall into a dumbfounded silence while our gazes take in the spectacle of this blond giant on his hands and knees in front of us. Disappointment streaks across Nathan’s face as

he stares at his hero snuffling the grass. Kate simply appears resigned, as though Eric's reaction is not entirely unexpected.

Lisset, on the other hand, looks positively delighted. Finally, her rapturous expression declares, an adult who's not afraid to make a complete fool of herself in the name of fun.

Staring at Eric shuffling around the garden, I realize Kate's chosen someone who's the polar opposite of her ex-husband. It also feels as though she's tipped the scales too far in the other direction.

My dad, looking appalled, glances from Kate to Eric and then back again to Kate. "You voluntarily brought him here?" Dad asks in a whisper. "Nobody blackmailed you?"

"Sssh!" Kate hisses.

Mom says, "I doubt he can hear us over all the neighing."

"Who wants a ride?" Eric bellows.

Lisset jumps up and down. "Me! Me!"

Grandma raises her hand. "Me too."

Mom levels her a stern glance. "There's no way you're getting on."

"Why not?" Grandma complains, her eyes twinkling. "It's been ages since I rode a man."

Nathan's eyes widen and Aaron chokes back a laugh.

Mom drains the rest of her wine.

Eric prostrates himself on the grass. "Up you get, Cowgirl."

Lisset launches herself onto his back. "Where are my reins?"

"We can loop a rope around his neck," Grandma suggests.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Aaron biting the inside of his cheek. "Probably not a good idea."

Always the innovator, Lisset grabs a handful of Eric's long blond hair and yanks hard. "Giddy-up, Horse!"

Eric winces, but gamely attempts a lopsided trot on all fours around the garden.

“Don’t ask,” I say to Aaron, who’s standing beside me, his shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

“I’m definitely asking.” When he regains control, he asks, “Are all your family gatherings like this?”

“This one seems to be particularly special.”

I sneak a look at his profile. This is the most relaxed I’ve seen him. His eyes crinkle at the corners as he says softly, “I wouldn’t have missed this for the world.”

My gaze is unwillingly drawn back to Eric, whose antics have captured everyone’s attention. It’s immediately clear Kate’s been feeding Lisset a steady diet of Westerns because my niece suddenly digs her heels into Eric’s ribs, urging him to go faster.

But Eric doesn’t speed up. Instead, his face goes white, and he collapses onto the grass with a soft grunt.

“Horse is dead,” Lisset proclaims, her disappointment now matching Nathan’s.

The verdict is bruised ribs. Aaron and Nathan help Eric inside and settle him on the couch in the TV room. Mom makes sure he has ibuprofen and an ice pack to press against his ribs to bring the swelling down. Kate tucks a blanket around him, and Lisset solemnly places a giant carrot on his chest.

“Poor horse,” she says sadly.

“Anything else we can get you?” Kate asks.

“Can you put on a cartoon?” Eric says. “I need to watch something comforting.”



We eat at the large wooden table on the back porch. Our plates are piled with potato bake, coleslaw, green salad, and steak. Somehow, I’ve ended up directly across from Aaron. While he’s making an effort to be friendly and engaging with

everyone seated at the table (except for Nathan, to whom he's blatantly indifferent), every now and then I catch him watching me, his expression impossible to read.

I can sense my mom and grandmother watching me as well. Oh, they're trying to be subtle about it, but I feel the weight of their curious stares. I have no idea what they're hoping to see.

Nathan and my dad are the only ones who appear oblivious to the fine threads of tension coiling around the table. Although, perhaps Nathan is not as oblivious as I initially thought, because he keeps finding excuses to touch me and lean in close, almost as though he's provoking Aaron. But then I scold myself for reading too much into the situation.

Kate is uncharacteristically quiet. She answers questions posed to her and picks at her food, but the light has dimmed in her face. I doubt she pinned her hopes on Eric, but the dark melancholy she's always attempting to keep at bay is creeping up on her. I can see it happening right in front of me, yet I feel helpless to push it back for her.

She's dished Eric up a huge plateful of food and Eric seems content to eat it in front of the TV. Lisset wants to sit with her injured horse, and we've left the two of them happily watching cartoons together.

The conversation around the table is light and easy. Remembering Aaron's reaction when I brought up the subject of his sister, I warned my family beforehand not to ask him any personal questions about his family. Thankfully, they're heeding my warning.

Halfway through the meal, Dad skewers Kate with an interrogative expression.

Kate sighs. "Relax, Dad, I'm not walking down the aisle with Eric. He's just a friend."

I swallow my mouthful of food. "I'd argue he's more Lisset's friend," I say, and everyone laughs.

"How's the steak?" Dad asks eagerly.

"Good," Kate says.

“Great,” I reply.

Dad stares expectantly at Aaron, who is looking anywhere but at him.

“Aaron?” Dad asks.

“Really well done,” Aaron answers carefully.

“Molecular gastronomy taken to the next level,” Kate elaborates.

I wait a strategic moment. That is, when my mom disappears into the kitchen. “You know what, Dad, Aaron enjoyed his steak so much I’m sure he’d like another one.”

My dad’s face lights up. “Another one? Really?”

“I’m pretty full—” Aaron starts to protest.

“No need to be shy,” I say, cutting him off and fanning my spark of mischief into a flame. “A man like yourself needs to keep his strength up.”

“I don’t want to impose,” Aaron says weakly.

“No imposition at all.” Dad gets to his feet. “You’ve got a great appetite on you, Aaron. No one’s ever asked for seconds before.”

“I can’t imagine why not,” Aaron manages.

My dad heads to the grill to fetch another steak and Aaron shoots me a vengeful glare, which I return with a wide smile.

“It’s quite a cruel streak you have,” Kate says, admiration in her voice. “You’re fortunate Mom’s not here.”

True. She would have found some way to rescue Aaron.

Nathan is grinning. “Better you than me, man.”

Dad returns with the steak, and Aaron valiantly starts sawing into the charred meat.

After the meal is finished, we sit at the half-cleared table, the sun warm on our skins, our bellies full. A mellow, relaxed mood hangs over the table.

Aaron fights a smile as he stares at my grandmother dozing in her chair. “Hmm, she reminds me of someone.”

I narrow my eyes at him. No one in my family knows I fell asleep in his training session.

“It’s on the tip of my tongue,” he muses.

“Honeycomb for dessert?” I ask him with wide, innocent eyes.

He’s silent, staring at me. Just when I’m beginning to wonder if I pushed him too far, dangling his dot phobia before him, he throws his head back and laughs.

Pleasure blooms inside my chest. I like making him laugh. I like it way more than I should.

“What are you talking about, Tess?” Mom says, frowning. “Dessert is a cheese board, not honeycomb.”

“I forgot,” I say easily.

Stretching in my chair, I suck in a long, lazy breath. Unfortunately, I also happen to suck in something else. The bloated, black fly that’s been buzzing around our table. To my horror, I feel that sucker frantically fly to the back of my mouth and attempt to make his way down my throat.

I do what any normal person would do in these circumstances. I leap to my feet and double over, heaving and coughing and choking in a desperate attempt to eject that disgusting thing from my mouth.

“Gross,” someone—it sounds like Nathan—mutter.

“I must apologize, Aaron,” I hear my mom blurt out. “This is not how we raised her.”

Right now, I don’t care what anyone thinks of me. I have only one objective, and that’s not to swallow a giant fly. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Kate pick up a knife, and I give a frantic head shake. No way is she going all *Rosemary’s Baby* on me, slitting my throat to help me breathe.

Finally, I get that sucker out, along with copious amounts of saliva.

In between bouts of laughter, Kate wheezes, “That is possibly the most disgusting thing I’ve ever witnessed.”

“I don’t care,” I say hoarsely. At least my throat is blessedly clear.

I glance over at my parents, but they’re not looking at me, they’re both staring in wonder at Kate, their eyes misty.

That’s when it hits me.

Kate, who hasn’t laughed in years, has tears of laughter streaming down her face.

Happiness bursts inside me. It’s worth all the embarrassment in the world to see my sister laugh like this.

Somehow, even Aaron has grasped the importance of this moment. He doesn’t know Kate’s history, but it’s as though he recognizes a kindred spirit, connecting in some way to whatever is broken and damaged inside Kate.

And the way he’s staring at my sister, with such quiet hope on his face, makes my heart pinch.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The email lands in my inbox the following Tuesday, about an hour after lunch.

The subject message reads: PLEASE CONSIDER CONTRIBUTING TO THE BULLDOG SOCIETY CHARITY RUN.

I glance at the sender. It's from Calvin, but I remember the sophisticated phishing test Aaron sent out a couple of weeks ago. The one that so many of us, including me, had failed. What had he called it? CEO fraud. He'd even copied Calvin's writing style and addressed the email to each of us personally. Exactly like this email.

"The sneaky son of a..." My words drift off as I shake my head in resentment and grudging admiration.

How clever to cast out another CEO fraud phishing test so soon after the first one to see who takes the bait.

Not me. Not anymore.

I refuse to be lured in by a man who'd given me a ridiculous verbal warning. I recall Sofia's shock that I'd received a warning before her. We'd always assumed that, out of the three of us, she'd be the first. And Kenzie...well, I can't picture her receiving any sort of warning. A police officer had once reprimanded her for driving too slowly, and it had taken her a week to recover from the mortification of having suddenly acquired, in her mind, a criminal record.

I'm on the verge of clicking the Phish Alert button when a swell of righteous anger sweeps through me. Impulsively, I decide to take this one step further by replying to this email. I'll lash out at the sender, knowing I'm actually lashing out at Aaron. What a brilliant way to give him a piece of my mind while pretending not to.

And if, by some microscopic chance, the email is a real phishing scam and not just a test, then I can at least give these scammers a stinging rebuke. It feels good to be in control.

Scooting closer to my desk, I begin typing furiously. The words spill out of me. Outrage, it seems, is a creative stimulant. When I'm finished, I click *Send* and lean back in my chair in satisfaction.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm in the breakroom with Sofia and Kenzie, ostensibly making coffee, but really, we're snacking on pretzels and examining Rick's compulsion to brag about almost everything in his life.

"I wonder if he's compensating for something?" Sofias muses, making Kenzie giggle.

All of a sudden Dana materializes in front of us like the Grim Reaper, causing Kenzie to emit a startled squeak. Sofia's about to offer a snippy comment, but Dana ignores her and looks straight at me. "Calvin wants to see you in his office."

My heart rate picks up at her grim expression. "Me?"

"Yes."

"Not, um, Sofia?" I ask.

"Thanks, Tess," Sofia says, but she doesn't look put out. Instead, she seems quite pleased to wear the label of troublemaker.

Dana looks equally disappointed it's not Sofia. "He wants to see you."

"Now?"

"Now." Dana pauses. "He's spitting mad, Tess. What did you do?" Her voice drips with reproof.

My eyes go big. "Nothing!"

"Come on, Dana, give us a clue," Sofia demands. "What's going on?"

Dana shakes her head. "I honestly don't know what's made him so mad." She purses her thin lips. "But I do suggest waiting at least five minutes before you follow me. Hopefully, he will have calmed down." She marches back to her desk.

My mouth is so dry I can't swallow the piece of pretzel I have in there.

Sofia, sensing my dilemma, holds out a napkin and I take it from her and spit my pretzel into it. Disgusting, I know, but there's no way that was going down.

“Do you think Calvin's mad about the verbal warning?” Kenzie asks, looking frightened for me.

I frown. “Maybe. But it seems doubtful. He would have called me in sooner.”

“What about any of your work projects?” Sofia asks.

I rack my brain. “I'm not behind on any of my cards and I haven't stolen anyone's parking space. At least, not lately.”

“What about personal emails?” Sofia asks.

“He hasn't caught me—” I stop. The realization is swift and brutal.

No. Please, no.

I ask them, “Did either of you receive an email about a fundraising event for a bulldog charity?”

“Yep,” Kenzie confirms.

Sofia rolls her eyes. “The charity run is Calvin's latest pet project.”

I feel the blood drain from my face.

“Oh, crap,” Sofia says, noticing. “What did you do?”

“I thought the email was a scam,” I whisper.

The horror on their faces has my shoulders slumping.

“Please tell me all you did was delete it,” Kenzie begs.

“I really wish I had.”

And then Sofia asks the question we're all dancing around: “Did you reply to the email?”

I stare at her, stricken. “I did.”

“I'm too scared to ask what was in your reply,” Kenzie says.

I bury my face in my hands, speaking through my fingers. “I might have made comments like ‘moron’ and ‘ugly bulldogs’ and ‘how gullible do you think I am?’”

There were other phrases as well. *Shove your stupid charity and your stupid bulldogs up your stupid...* Oh, I can’t bear to think about it.

Both Sofia and Kenzie make a brief, feeble attempt to console me, but they seem to realize there’s little they can do to divert the impending firestorm.

“How about I set fire to the building?” Sofia offers. “That might distract Calvin.”

Kenzie bites her lip. “Calvin’s anger will blow over eventually.”

“I could kill Aaron for this!” I burst out. “He’s made me suspicious of every message I get.”

The weight of my mistake rests heavily on my shoulders. I imagine the stares, the whispers in the hallways. I release a shaky breath. “I better get this over with.”

Sofia and Kenzie hug me, and I traipse to Calvin’s office, my heart beating too fast, dead woman walking.

I can tell from Dana’s face that the extra five minutes she afforded me has not managed to calm Calvin down. She tells me to go straight in.

I square my shoulders, knock on his door, and step into his office.



Calvin looks up the moment I walk into his office, his expression thunderous. “What’s the meaning of this, Tess?” he demands, waving a piece of paper, which I assume is a printout of my ill-fated email. His face is so red I fear an imminent cardiac arrest.

Standing in front of his desk, I clasp my hands in front of me like a penitent nun. “I thought your email was one of Aaron’s phishing tests.”

“Then why didn’t you just click the Phish Alert button?” he asks testily.

Such a reasonable question. Unfortunately, my behavior was so unreasonable I lack any sort of rational explanation.

“I don’t know.”

“And why did you say those things about bulldogs?” He sounds the most hurt by that.

“I didn’t mean them.”

His eyebrows vault halfway up his forehead. “Yet you wrote them. And then you hit Send.”

“Only because I was so mad.” I make a vague gesture in the air. “You know, at the whole scam thing. And Aaron’s never-ending phishing tests.”

He looks at me like I’m deranged. I’m feeling a little deranged, to be honest.

“Your behavior was unprofessional,” he accuses me, tight-lipped. “It still is.”

His words kick me sharply in the stomach. “I’m sorry.”

“This is so unlike you, Tess.”

I know, I think miserably. I’ve become a version of myself I don’t recognize. One I don’t like too much either.

He drums his fingers on the desk. “It seems to me you’re failing to grasp how important Aaron’s role is. According to him, sixty percent of small businesses fold after a cyberattack. An attack like that can be a death blow for us. I need you to take this more seriously.”

He’s working himself up again, his voice growing louder and louder. Although his office door is closed, I have no doubt anyone lurking outside can hear every angry word. More coals added to my bonfire of humiliation.

“I will try to take it more seriously,” I offer.

I know enough psychology to realize I need to agree with everything Calvin is throwing at me in an attempt to diffuse

his anger. Any argument I put up will only further stoke the flames of his wrath.

“Try harder,” he orders, pointing an accusatory finger at me. “There are even rumors you think the training’s a waste of time.”

The sour taste of betrayal fills my mouth. I can’t believe it. Aaron ratted me out to Calvin. Funnily enough, I’d thought more of him. Yes, I admit I’ve been giving him unnecessary grief, but all this time I thought he was a man capable of handling his own problems without needing to run to the boss to sort them out for him.

Live and learn, I think, swallowing my disappointment.

“From now on,” Calvin continues, still riding his anger, “I want you to pay attention to every email you receive. You’re to attend all of Aaron’s training sessions. And you’re to stay awake in them!”

“Yes, Calvin,” I agree in a subdued tone.

He makes an abrupt motion of dismissal and I exit his office, my cheeks burning.

I don’t look at Dana. I don’t look at anyone as I make the long, lonely trek down the hallway toward my cubicle, Calvin’s words playing in my head like a background track to a horror movie.

The only people I want around me right now are Sofia and Kenzie, but they left for the afternoon to attend a training seminar.

I feel the weight of everyone’s stares as I weave my way through the maze of cubicles. Pressure wells inside my chest. I can’t do it. I can’t sit at my desk until the close of day and endure the glances and the gossip.

Trying not to think of Calvin’s displeasure and how thin the ice is that I’m currently skating on, I veer away from my cubicle and head at a fast clip to the elevator, as if I can somehow outrun the memory of Calvin’s stinging words.

Mevia calls out my name. I draw in a jagged breath and pretend not to hear her. There's no way I can talk to her right now. I'll burst into tears if I do, and that's the last thing I want. I'll connect with her later.

I jab the Down button and step into the elevator when it opens.

The doors are closing when I spot a frowning Aaron striding purposefully toward me. "Tess, wait up."

Not a chance. I press the button to close the doors, and they shut right in his face. I rest my back against the wall in relief. He's the last person I want to see or speak to right now. There's not a molecule inside me that can bear to endure his self-satisfied smirk or another tedious lecture on responsibility.

In the lobby, I hurry past Bob, offering him a little finger wave as he slouches half-asleep in the slant of the late-afternoon sun streaming through the building's glass windows.

I stumble outside and head in the direction of the park across the street. There's a blurred, unformed thought in my head that greenery and open space will help me to regather all the pieces of my shattered ego.

Main Street is humming with its regular midday crowd. I push my way blindly through the people milling around on the sidewalk.

All at once, I hear the harsh blare of a car horn and feel a strong arm circling my waist, pulling me out of the road and back against a solid body. A white van I didn't see roars past, and I glimpse the irate face of a driver shouting at me to be careful. My pulse races at the close call.

"What do you think you're doing?" demands a deep male voice in my ear.

Aaron. And here I thought I couldn't descend any farther down the ladder of humiliation. He has no right to follow me out here, I think on a wave of resentment. I mean, it's a democratic country, so yes, I guess he has the right to follow me, but this is yet another space in my life he's invading.

I try to move out of his arms, but he tightens his hold. “Let me go.”

He turns me around so I face him, but he doesn’t release me. His face is pale. “You nearly got yourself killed!”

“Why do you care?”

He looks ready to shake me. “Because life is precious. And you can lose it in a second.”

“Let me go,” I repeat, stubbornness setting in.

“Not until I’m sure you aren’t going to accidentally kill yourself.”

“At least you’ll be rid of me then.”

“What a stupid thing to say, Tess.”

My throat tightens. “It’s in keeping with my stupid actions of late.”

“Hey, come on,” he says in a voice so gentle it has tears burning my eyes.

“I need to sit down,” I whisper.

“Okay.”

Aaron removes his arm but stays close to my side as we cross the street, as if I can’t be trusted to navigate it on my own. Maybe I can’t. I’m still reeling, and my focus is off.

He bypasses the nearest bench, which directly faces the street and is way too exposed. Instead, he guides me to a more private bench set back in the trees. I collapse onto it. I’m desperately hoping Aaron will leave now, but he takes a seat right next to me.

And then, like an impending tidal wave, I feel the tears coming. I tilt my head back and blink furiously, but I’m helpless to stop them.

As I cry soundlessly, Aaron doesn’t say a word. He is simply a large, silent presence at my side, not touching me, but not moving away either. Finally, the tears stop. I fish out a

tissue and blow my nose. I sense his eyes on me, assessing me, but I stubbornly refuse to look at him.

“Are you okay?” he asks, his voice unbearably kind.

“I’m fine. Dandy. Nothing like being yelled at by my boss to brighten up my day.”

He shifts slightly, like he’s uncomfortable. Well, he should be, the traitor. “I’m sorry about what happened with Calvin.”

The noise that comes out of me is somewhere between a laugh and a sob. “That’s what you’re sorry for?”

“Calvin’s obviously having a bad day and taking it out on you.”

“I wonder why he’s having a bad day.” I turn to face him, not caring that my eyes are no doubt swollen, my nose red. “Any guesses?”

His brows knit in confusion. “Why would I have any idea?”

My hands clench in my lap. I’m angry with myself for breaking down in front of him. And I’m angry that he doesn’t have the guts to own up to what he did, instead of hiding behind fake ignorance. “You know what, you’re a jerk!”

His eyes flare in surprise. “Why am I the jerk? I didn’t yell at you.”

“You’re a jerk because you should have spoken to me directly, instead of running to Calvin.”

I ignore the inconvenient truth that he did try to speak to me on numerous occasions. I’m too busy riding my wave of righteous indignation to give that the attention it probably deserves.

Aaron looks genuinely stunned. “What are you talking about?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about!”

In a patient tone, he replies, “No, I don’t.”

I hate that my voice shakes when I say, “You went running to Calvin to complain to him about me not taking your training sessions seriously.”

He’s silent, which I take for guilt. I angle my gaze away from his handsome, lying face. That peculiar sense of betrayal still twists my stomach into an uncomfortable knot.

“Look at me.” I stare into the middle distance. Fascinating, all these green trees. “Tess,” he coaxes, “come on.”

Reluctantly, I meet his eyes, my spine still stiff with resentment.

He holds my gaze without flinching. “I didn’t tell Calvin anything.”

“You didn’t?”

“I didn’t.” His jaw grows tight. “You honestly think I need Calvin to solve my problems for me?”

“I...I don’t know.” I flounder a little. “I don’t know what you would or wouldn’t do.”

“Yet you knew enough to think the worst of me.”

“Yes,” I whisper. Tess The Hypocrite is a surprising addition to my character flaws.

His eyes burn into mine. “You’re a problem I can deal with on my own.”

I have to look away from the intensity of his gaze. “I’m a problem?”

He lets out a soft, humorless laugh. “When you’re being so unbelievably stubborn, yes.”

There’s a long stretch of silence.

“I’m sorry,” I force out, my cheeks burning. These are words I ought to have said a while ago. “I truly am sorry.”

He waits a beat then touches my forearm. The touch is so brief and light I’m convinced the very lightness of it carries weight. “Thank you.”

In a move that takes me by surprise, he silently holds out his hand. I stare at it in confusion.

“Let’s start again,” he says softly.

“Start what again?”

“Us. Our working relationship. Let’s have a new start.”

I grimace. “We can’t.”

“Yes, we can.” The look in his eyes is so self-assured I want to believe him, but it feels as though the air between us is cluttered with so many unpleasant memories neither of us can make a move without bumping into one.

He’s still patiently holding out his hand, waiting for me to shake it.

I’m still frowning dubiously at him. “So, start at a place where I didn’t click the cat video?”

He responds with a pleased nod. “And where I didn’t single you out in front of the entire company.”

“Let’s skip the part where I called you a pretty boy.”

He gives an amused head shake. “I took that as a compliment.”

Finally, I reach over and shake his hand. His grip is warm and firm. Heat curls in my stomach.

I say, “Let’s scrap the memory of you guessing my password.”

“Nope.” He offers me a smile, so tiny and fleeting I’m almost convinced I imagined it. “You as my minion is a memory worth holding on to.”

I scrunch my nose in thought. “What else do we keep?”

He holds my gaze and I realize he’s still holding my hand. “Let’s keep the reality that you’re a woman who constantly surprises me, challenges me, and makes me laugh.”

The air between us thickens with...something. I don’t dare give it a name.

Carefully, I remove my hand from his grasp.

In an attempt to lighten the atmosphere, I suggest, “We’re dumping you walking in on me in the Creative Room.”

He looks off into the distance. “No way. That’s another memory I’m definitely keeping.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

First thing I do when I get home that evening is drag my body into the shower. I'm desperate to wash away the humiliation of today. But the spray of hot water can't erase the blistering memory of Calvin's disappointed face, everyone's pitying stares, and a smirking Rick stopping by my cubicle to gleefully rub in my stupidity.

I'm in the middle of making myself a grilled cheese sandwich for dinner when a loud banging at my door makes me jump.

"Trouble, Trouble, let us in!" yells a voice that is unmistakably Sofia's.

I hear a giggle that I recognize as Kenzie's.

A wave of relief washes over me at their unexpected visit.

I open the door to find Sofia and Kenzie standing on my front porch. I'm wearing my favorite comfort pjs and they're still in their work clothes. They're each holding a tote bag.

"We're bringing the vending machine to you," declares Sofia, pulling me in for a brief, one-armed hug.

Emotion thickens my throat. "I thought our ladies' night was tomorrow."

"After hearing what happened today," Sofia says, "we decided there's no way you're spending the evening alone."

Dropping her bag, Kenzie throws her arms around me. "We're here for moral support and comfort."

"Actually," Sofia says, "we're here to drink ourselves silly and to stick pins in a Calvin doll."

She reaches into her bag and hauls out a hobbit-like doll figure that looks uncannily like Calvin.

Kenzie wears a slightly apologetic expression. "We'll only poke him with two pins."

Behind Kenzie, Sofia winks and holds up five fingers.

I feel instantly lighter. These two amazing women are not blood, but they're my people. Friends who are joyful and boisterous when I'm desperate for distraction, but who will also sit quietly with me in those dark-night-of-the-soul moments. How do people navigate life's tricky and winding roads without friends?

I usher them into the entryway. "Let's get you guys inside so we can drown our sorrows in private."

Kenzie slips her arm through mine. "Just so you know, this is not a pity party."

"There shall be no wallowing!" shouts Sofia in a Gandalf-like voice as she sashays down my hallway.

A smile takes over my face as I feel her resilience seeping into my skin.

In the kitchen, Kenzie pulls out a bottle of champagne from her bag.

I frown in confusion. "Champagne? Wouldn't wine be more appropriate?"

"We're practicing healthy coping skills," Kenzie explains as she unpacks chocolates, chips, and popcorn onto the counter.

Right. Because, yeah...healthy.

Sofia lines up three champagne flutes. She looks me square in the eye. "Have you beat yourself up about what happened today?"

I nod. "About a hundred times."

"Listen to me, Tess," she says, her tone fierce. "You beat yourself up once. That's it. That's all you allow yourself. Then you move on."

Kenzie pours champagne into the flutes. "Since you've already given yourself a beating, we're now on to the moving-on part. And that's what we're celebrating tonight."

Sofia raises her flute in a toast. "To remembering that you are not defined by your worst day."

Kenzie lifts her flute. “To acknowledging that failure is a part of life.”

The lump in my throat swells, but I manage to add, “To getting back out there with my head held high.”

We clink glasses and drink.

Ash wanders in and instantly attaches himself to Kenzie, braiding himself around her legs and purring loudly while she strokes his thick fur and talks to him in a language only the two of them can understand.

“I love this cat,” Kenzie murmurs.

I don’t have to point out that all creatures, human and four-legged, love her equally in return.

“Hey, Thanos,” Sofia calls out. “I have something for you.”

Ash blinks and stares up at Sofia alertly, as though recognizing a worthy adversary. Sofia holds up the Calvin doll and then tosses it onto the carpet in the living room. Ash immediately launches himself at the doll, kicking and clawing it with ferocious aggression.

Sofia offers an approving nod. “The Destroyer of Worlds has redeeming qualities.”

I rip open the popcorn bag. “I trained him well.”

Turning to me, Sofia performs a critical scan of my face. I know exactly what she’s seeing: Red puffy eyes, blotchy skin, and hair gathered into a lopsided bun.

When compassion fills her eyes, I throw popcorn at her. “It’s not fair,” I complain. “No one should look that pretty without makeup.”

“You tackle the hair,” Sofia instructs Kenzie, snapping her fingers. “I’ll handle the nails.”

We cart everything to the living room. The snacks are spread out on the coffee table, and I set up my girl power playlist to filter softly through the speakers.

Kenzie perches on the edge of my couch and beckons me closer. I flop down onto the carpet between her spread knees, settling back against the couch, my legs extended in front of me. She pulls out my hair tie, whips out a comb from her tote bag, and gently starts working it through my hair.

Sofia, meanwhile, sits cross legged next to me, grasps my hand, and tackles my nails with an emery board. Their chatter swirls around me while they pamper me.

“You survived a Calvin tongue lashing,” Sofia says, popping a chocolate into her mouth. “You’re now a part of greeting card history.”

“I no doubt bumped Mevia from top spot.”

“As if Calvin would dare rebuke her,” Kenzie points out.

“True,” I acknowledge.

“To living fearlessly,” Kenzie says. We raise our flutes in tribute to Mevia.

“You know,” Sofia says thoughtfully as she files my nails, “we live in a world terrified of failure. We’re so scared to mess up that we keep our own worlds small and safe and boring. We don’t take risks because we’re too scared.”

Sofia’s not looking at me, but her words unerringly hit their target, piercing all the walls I’ve carefully constructed around the secret places in my mind. I have the uneasy feeling she’s not only referring to my work, she’s targeting my personal life too.

And I have to ask myself: Is that what I’m doing? Am I playing it safe by staying with Nathan?

My head aches. It feels like a lot to process at the moment.

Kenzie snags the champagne bottle from the coffee table and tops up our flutes. “To failing fearlessly,” she says, and her gentle hand on my shoulder tells me she understands.

I take a gulp. I’m not a big drinker and my head is quickly developing a lovely, soft buzz.

With the filing finished, Sofia begins painting my nails a bright, bold red. I barely stifle my eye roll. The woman doesn't do subtle.

“Driving your point home?” I ask.

“Always,” she admits airily.

With deft, gentle fingers, Kenzie starts braiding my hair. I'm in absolute heaven, my limbs weak with pleasure.

Idly, she says, “I wonder who blabbed to Calvin about you.”

“Aaron denies it was him,” I say. “Funnily enough, I believe him.”

“My money's on Rick,” Sofia puts forward. “The man loves to schmooze.”

“We don't have proof,” Kenzie argues.

Sofia scoffs. “The man himself is proof.”

“He did make it a point to stop by my desk and gloat,” I remember.

“Blast it, I should've brought another doll,” Sofia seethes. “I saw some hideous wrestling figurines that reminded me of him.”

The three of us stare at the Calvin-like doll that Ash is still mauling with vicious abandon.

“Never mind about Rick,” Sofia orders, redirecting her attention to my other hand and carefully applying red polish to my thumb. “New topic. What did we learn today?”

“That Calvin really loves bulldogs,” I answer tongue-in-cheek.

Sofia's laugh is full and throaty. “Nah, we all knew that. What we learned today is...” She pauses, raising her eyebrows.

What is she waiting for? A drumroll? When Kenzie starts tapping away on my back, I realize that, yes, that's exactly what my drama-loving friend is waiting for.

“Today,” she declares, “we learned that Aaron really, *really* likes you!”

“Nope,” I argue. “Wrong deduction.”

Kenzie lets out a dreamy sigh. “We heard all about him chasing after you. It’s so romantic.”

I try my tipsy best to control my face heating up. I’ve replayed over and over in my head the scene where Aaron pulled me out of harm’s way, his patience and kindness toward me in the park, his desire to start our interactions afresh.

“You’ve pushed and challenged him at every turn,” Sofia says, “yet he still went after you.”

For some reason, I feel compelled to disagree. “But he always acts like he strongly dislikes me.”

A chuckle rustles in Sofia’s throat. “Tess, he only acts like he dislikes you because he likes you so much.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“When do laws of attraction ever make sense?” Kenzie suggests, resting her chin on my shoulder. “Romance is not defined or restricted by logic. That’s what makes it so magical.”

“Uh, hello, people, there is no romance,” I insist forcefully.

Sofia pouts. “Spoilsport.”

“Nathan,” I remind her. “My boyfriend.”

Sofia makes a gagging sound.

“Why are you so against him?” I ask.

“I’m not against him *per se*,” she explains. “I’m just against him *for you*.”

“Why?”

In a quiet voice, she asks, “After a really crappy workday, why isn’t Nathan here to comfort you?”

I’m silent. He’s not here, because I didn’t call him. It’s telling that he isn’t the first person to come to mind after a day like today.

“Ever since Aaron arrived,” Sofia continues, “I’ve watched you come alive.”

“There does seem to be an energy to you these last two months,” Kenzie admits, almost sheepishly. “You have a glow.”

I groan. Did she have to utter those dreaded words?

Sofia narrows her eyes at me. “Tell me you’re not pregnant.”

“Of course, I’m not pregnant!”

“Okay, then it’s Aaron,” she concludes, a touch of satisfaction in her voice.

“Your logic is nonsensical.”

“Let’s pretend, for just one moment, that Nathan doesn’t exist.”

“But he does exist.”

“I said, *pretend!*”

“No!”

“Um, Sofia, this feels like a dangerous game,” Kenzie attempts.

“In our Nathanless world,” Sofia continues, as if neither Kenzie nor I now exist, “what do you think of Aaron?”

“I don’t think about Aaron,” I say automatically, which is untrue. He seems to occupy an excessive amount of time in my head, a squatter I can’t seem to evict.

“Bull,” Sofia accuses.

“Okay,” I retort, calling her bluff, “let’s play your game. Let’s say I end my relationship with Nathan.” I ignore her delighted hand clap. “Why is Aaron now the better bet?”

She stares at me with round eyes. “Have you seen the man? He’s gorgeous!”

“Objectively, yes he is, but he’s leaving, remember? It’s a six-month contract and he has four months left.”

She waves a dismissive hand. “A minor detail.”

“If I fall for him,” I say quietly, “that minor detail could break my heart.”

“The two of you would work something out.”

“I don’t want to take that risk.”

“What happened to *living fearlessly*?”

My voice is shaking when I say, “Sofia, I will not, under any circumstances, allow myself to end up like my sister.”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Kenzie commands Sofia in the firmest tone I’ve ever heard her use.

Sofia shuts up immediately.

Kenzie slides down next to me on the carpet, her shoulder touching mine in silent support.

“Nathan might not be the most exciting boyfriend,” I say after a lengthy pause, “and we might have lost some of the spark in our relationship, but I can still see a solid, comfortable future with him.”

What I don’t say out loud is that all this time my energy has been spent building walls to keep Aaron out of my mind. Only, I realize now, the greatest threat isn’t Aaron.

Just like the Roman empire, which crumbled because of corruption and danger from within, I am my biggest threat. I’m the person I don’t trust to keep Aaron out. I’m the one in danger of knocking down the walls to let him in.

“If that’s what you want, then I’ll respect your choice,” Sofia says, and I hear her quiet apology laced in with the admission.

Kenzie points a warning finger at Sofia. “No more badgering Tess.”

Sofia looks a little sulky. “Fine.” Brightening, she retrieves a storage container full of sewing pins from her bag. “Now let’s do damage to Calvin.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A week has passed since Bulldogate (Sofia's nickname, not mine) and my punishment is to be stuck in the birthing canal. Literally. Despite receiving the severest of tongue lashings from Calvin, I knew—in the same way farmers and fishermen feel an approaching storm in their bones—that more punishment was coming my way. I was right. Three days after the ill-fated email, Calvin summoned me into his office and let me know he was pulling me from humor and assigning me to pregnancy and births. Me. A childless, twenty-eight-year-old semi-workaholic.

I know cards celebrating pregnancy and babies, along with birthdays and weddings, are our most popular categories, but they're not popular with me. Probably because Calvin likes these cards to be corny and sentimental. And while I'm a pretty versatile writer, I've always leaned more toward the sarcastic than the sentimental.

“Channel your motherly instincts, Tess,” Calvin instructs me, no doubt seeing the complaint on my face. “Write cards that will make me cry.”

I Quit.

There, that ought to do it.

But I cannot afford to make impulsive decisions when there are bills to pay, so I give my boss an I-got-this nod and trudge back to my cubicle.

I received the awful assignment Friday. It's now Wednesday, and I fear I'm about to be fired because I can't seem to overcome the dreaded blank page.

The only person I know who has a small child is Kate. I've put off messaging her, but I'm desperate for inspiration. Hopefully, she can help me.

Tess: What was the best part of your pregnancy?

Kate: When it ended.

Tess: Was giving birth a beautiful experience?

Kate: If you enjoy your vagina being ripped apart, then yes.

Tess: Your fondest memory of Lisset as a baby?

Kate: When she grew out of it.

Clearly, Kate is no help. While she's always treated Lisset like a miniature adult, I know there's a sweet mothering bone buried deep inside her. Just six-feet-under deep.

I try the Creative Room, but it's too filled with the memory of Aaron. And trying to think about a pregnancy message with Aaron filling my head feels weird and dangerous. I hightail it out of there.

I need another approach, something completely different. What if I channel some cheeky humor into the cards? Cracking my knuckles, I free my imagination from Calvin's mawkish restraints and after a couple of hours I'm able to come up with a few ideas:



Congratulations on your pregnancy! You are now a lifetime member of The Kegel Club.



Congratulations on the end of your life as you know it.



Congrats on the arrival of your mini dictator.



Welcome to a world of poo, pee, and pain.



Congratulations on your pregnancy! Now you get to experience a tennis ball passing through a straw.



I send them off to Enya, who promptly rejects them all.

“Calvin doesn’t want vulgar humor, Tess,” my editorial manager explains. “He wants serious and sappy.”

Yes, my cards have attitude. Calvin, however, wants cards that feel like a suffocating group hug from aunties overly invested in your life.

To soothe my ego, I email my ideas to Sofia. I can hear her snort laughing all the way from my cubicle. At least someone gets my snarky brand of humor, which, I’m proud to say, I inherited from my grandmother.

My mind strays, as it sometimes does, to leaving Amell Greetings and starting my own greeting card company with Sofia and Kenzie. Between the three of us, marketing, writing, and design are covered. We’d make an awesome team, no doubt about it. But the idea, while exciting, feels too daunting and overwhelming to bear serious contemplation.

I let out a silent groan. Right now, Calvin’s extending me a lot of grace in light of the fact that, since his rebuke, I’ve been close to flawless on the security front. I’ve attended and stayed awake in all of Aaron’s training sessions. I’ve succeeded in flagging most of the mock phishing emails, even the cunning one impersonating the HR department, requiring employees to click on a link to update their personal details. The memory of Aaron’s quiet congratulations and eye-crinkling smile still sends a warm rush through me.

I have no choice now but to swallow my pride and write a series of banal hearts-and-flowers messages. Despite feeling the stir of a rebellion deep down in my soul, this is my job and I just need to get it done. I’m good with words, it’s only a couple of lines for each card, but it still takes me hours. At 6:30 p.m., I text Sofia to cancel our ladies’ evening tonight.

It’s nearly 8:00 p.m. by the time I’m finished. Feeling no great sense of satisfaction, I email the final pieces off to Enya, only expecting to hear from her tomorrow. The building is empty. Most of my colleagues are only too eager to head home when five o’clock hits.

I’m hungry and grumpy, and not in the best of moods. I check my phone. No messages from Nathan, who has his usual

Wednesday night gaming evening with friends. I'm thankful he's busy because I'm craving some alone time. The only companions I'll tolerate tonight include a bubble bath, dark chocolate, and a good book.

I pack up my stuff, grab my purse, and make my way down the hallway. Given the late hour, I'm surprised to see a light on in Aaron's office. It appears he's also working late. It feels rude to simply leave without popping my head in to let him know I'm heading out. To be honest, it's actually been pretty good between us this past week. Since our mutual decision to press reset on our professional relationship, our interactions have been easy and comfortable. I'm making an effort not to press his easily pressable buttons and he's loosening up more around me.

Aaron is closing his laptop when I enter his office. He looks as weary as I feel.

"I'm done for the night," I announce from the doorway. "Just wanted to say goodbye."

Slipping his laptop into his laptop bag, he gets to his feet and rotates his shoulders. "You don't usually work so late."

I pull a face. "I was struggling to finish a few card assignments."

"The words wouldn't come?"

"Not when they involve pregnancy and babies, no."

Laughter rolls out of him. "I wouldn't have much to say about those topics either." He circles around his desk and stops in front of me. "Don't you have your ladies' night on Wednesdays?"

"I had to cancel last minute so I could get these cards out."

His tie is loosened, and the faint cedar scent of his aftershave drifts my way. "Walk you down?"

I nod. "Thanks." It's at that moment that my stomach growls. Not a classy, subdued growl. The noise sounds like a truck going past. Embarrassed, I place my hand on my stomach to quiet it.

A small smile touches his face. “Have you had anything to eat?”

I shake my head. “Just a sandwich for lunch. I was planning on grabbing a pizza on the way home.”

“A pizza?” He scratches his chin. “I can do better than that.”

I raise an eyebrow. “What beats pizza, other than tacos?”

“Thai.”

I frown. “There’s no Thai restaurant in Brown Oaks.”

Which is a source of great sadness to me. I love Thai food, and the only way I can eat it is to travel half an hour to the next town.

There’s a glint in Aaron’s eyes. “I have it on good authority there is currently a Thai food truck in Brown Oaks.”

“What?” My voice rises several octaves. “No way!”

“Yep. They’re serving Thai and Asian fusion street food.”

I feel my knees go weak. “How do you know this?”

“I have my sources.”

“Why haven’t I heard anything?”

“They’re only officially opening in a week’s time, but tonight they’re holding a soft opening at the far end of the park. It’s just friends and family on the list.”

“And you’re on the list?”

“The owner is a friend of mine.”

I fake a surprised face. “You have friends, Sinclair?”

He levels me a look. “You clearly want pizza tonight, Miller.”

I’m immediately contrite. “Ignore my runaway tongue.”

“Hard to do when it keeps making itself known.”

“I’ll try to keep it under control.”

It's funny, two months ago I would have thought the last person to trade lighthearted banter with me would be Aaron Sinclair. I assumed that the man who first walked around our office with the same pained expression my uncle adopts when he experiences a bout of trapped gas wouldn't want to indulge in teasing verbal swordplay. But he does. More so than Nathan, who doesn't always get my snarky comments.

Aaron switches off the light to his office. "I happened to mention to my friend that Brown Oaks is in serious need of good Thai food."

"Yes, we are," I confirm, offering a vigorous nod. "In dire need." I grab his upper arm, a part of my brain noting the muscles there. But the majority of my brain is too preoccupied with food right now. "I haven't had Pad Thai in ages."

He glances at my hand clutching his arm. "Nice nails."

Well, well. Aaron is noticing my red nails and liking them. Who says people can't change? "I'm glad you like my nails, but let's go!" I plead on a groan.

He unleashes a full grin at my obvious excitement. I don't care. There's no way I'm playing it cool when Asian street food is involved. Now that he's planted the seed, it's all I can think about. My taste buds are already quivering in eagerness.

As we make our way to the elevator, Aaron says, "I have it on good authority they make their curry pastes from scratch."

Saliva pools in my mouth. "I'm literally going to kill you and eat your body."

"That hungry, are we?" he asks with a chuckle.

As he presses the elevator button, I think aloud. "What do I choose? Pad Thai or panang curry?"

I bite my lip, wracked by indecision. This feels like one of life's more important choices.

"How about we share?" Aaron offers. "That way you can have a taste of both?"

I hesitate. "Actually, I was going to do takeout."

A beat of silence passes.

Now I feel awful. Aaron's invited me to a special event and I'm basically saying to him, *Thanks for the invite, but I'm not sitting down with you. I'm just using you to get the food and then I'm leaving to eat at home.*

The elevator doors open and we step inside.

"It's just..." I clear my throat. "I think it would be better if I got the food to-go."

His face takes on an unreadable look. "You think it would be awkward between us?"

"No, not awkward, but it doesn't feel right."

"We'll be eating at a picnic table in an open park. We don't have to make this something it isn't."

"I know."

He's quiet the whole way down. When the doors open and we step out into the lobby, he says, "I might not like it, but I understand."

I glance up at him, at the face I can't read. "You're not mad?"

"I'm not mad," he confirms. "Because if you were my girlfriend, I wouldn't want you having dinner alone with another man. I don't care how innocent it is."

Aaron throws it out there so casually, but my stomach flips at his words, at the possessiveness and intimacy behind them.

You know what, I wouldn't want my boyfriend having dinner with another woman either.

It's simple. We both understand one another.

Except the air between us feels more charged and heavier than it was previously.

A fresh, cool breeze drifts over my skin as we step out of the building and walk down Main Street toward the park. On a Wednesday night, there are only a few people milling about on the sidewalks.

Aaron makes an obvious effort to keep the conversation light by telling me about his friend who owns the food truck, how he quit his lucrative career in the security industry to embrace his passion for food, and how he's never been happier.

The food truck is on the other end of the park, where it's farther away and quieter, but I don't mind the twenty-minute walk. I'm actually enjoying spending time with Aaron.

I know we must be getting close to the location because I'm suddenly surrounded by the most delicious and tantalizing aromas. I spot the truck in the distance, all lit up and welcoming. Twinkle lights have been strung in the trees, illuminating the surrounding area where people are sitting and eating at wooden picnic tables. There's a vibey atmosphere, but it's not too crowded.

"Oh, can you smell that!" I say in excitement.

Without warning, Aaron steps in front of me, blocking my view with his body.

"You know what, I've changed my mind," he says in a low voice. "I'm in the mood for Italian. Let's get pizza instead."

I playfully nudge his arm. "Not a chance."

"The line's pretty long."

"I don't mind waiting."

I try to move around him, but he steps in front of me again.

"Tess, come on. Let's go."

"Look, I feel like Thai," I tell him with a frown. "We agreed on Thai."

"I know."

"So why are you changing your mind?"

He's silent.

My chest is suddenly tight. "Are you ashamed to be seen with me?"

"Of course not."

“Then what’s going on?”

He doesn’t answer me. I’m impossibly frustrated.

“Aaron!”

In a quiet voice, he says, “I only want to protect you from what’s coming.”

Confusion fills me. What on earth is he talking about?
Protect me from what?

I look up at him. There’s something in his face that lifts the tiny hairs on the back of my neck.

I push lightly at his chest. With a resigned sigh, he moves out of my way. He’s not looking at me. I follow his gaze and my frustration evaporates at the sight of Nathan in front of me.

My boyfriend is not where he usually is on a Wednesday night, gaming at a friend’s house.

Instead, he’s sitting at a picnic table with another woman.

And they’re holding hands.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It takes me a second, maybe two, to recognize the woman Nathan is with. She's a colleague of his. Melissa, if I remember right. I met her once at one of Nathan's work functions. We even chatted briefly. Afterward, I remember Nathan joking about her "trout lips."

"I'm sorry," Aaron murmurs in a quiet, unhappy voice.

"I don't understand," I whisper.

But I do. *I do, I do.*

There's a loud ringing in my ears as I feel the life I'd built with Nathan crumbling around me. I can't get over how different he looks. His cheeks are flushed with excitement and a lovesick grin has taken over his face. He appears enraptured by Melissa.

I don't know how long I stand there staring at the two of them while my heart rips in two. They're too wrapped up in one another to even notice my presence.

Next to me, Aaron is still and silent, most likely allowing me time to process what I'm seeing. And I need the time because my mind is still struggling to comprehend the magnitude of Nathan's betrayal.

At last, all I can whisper is, "This can't be happening."

The words seem to finally release me from my frozen state, and I feel a rush of rage roaring through me, eclipsing the pain of my heart breaking.

The low-lying, two-timing snake!

And Melissa. The conniving, unprincipled tramp!

Aaron must sense something of what I'm feeling, because he rests a cautionary hand on my shoulder.

I immediately shrug it off. I'm in no mood for caution. My whole relationship with Nathan I've played cautiously and look where it's got me. Standing in the dark on the sidelines

staring at my boyfriend while he holds hands with someone else. And from the desire on both their faces, they've done a lot more than simply hold hands.

"How dare he," I choke out, my voice trembling with anger. Actually, my whole body is trembling, the blood pounding in my ears, my heart racing.

How could I not have seen what was right in front of me all this time? Sure, I know Nathan has an eye for attractive women. I would often catch him stealing a second glance when a beautiful woman walked by. I simply told myself he's a man who appreciates beauty. After all, don't I admire Aaron's good looks? I can't be a hypocrite in that regard.

The difference is, I haven't *done* anything with Aaron. I certainly haven't held his hand. Oddly, this feels more of a violation of trust than anything else. Holding hands is such a *couple* thing, signaling a degree of intimacy and not just lust.

Fury digs its claws into me. I suck in a bitter breath, feeling the shackles of restraint falling away.

"Don't do it," urges Aaron next to me.

I am so doing it. Ignoring him, I storm my way over to my two-timing boyfriend—*ex-boyfriend!*—and his pouty, red-lipped floozy.

"You lying man-whore!" I yell.

Nathan's head jerks up, shock slackening his features when he catches sight of me. He snatches his hand out of Melissa's grasp, leaps to his feet, and then sits back down again, as if he can't make up his mind. "Tess," he says weakly.

"Yes, Tess, your girlfriend, you lying sack of—"

"I can explain," he begins, cutting me off.

My hands fist at my sides. "Oh, this should be interesting."

He gulps in air, floundering, then he stutters, "It's, uh, not what you think."

"How pathetically unoriginal."

My throat tightens as I stare into the face of the man I thought I loved, the man I gave a year of my life to. A whimper breaks out of my throat. The pain of his betrayal is threatening to outweigh the anger, and I can't allow that to happen.

For an instant, I imagine tipping the steaming bowl of Pad Thai sitting on the table into a very strategic spot in Nathan's lap. I tell myself I'd be doing all the Tesses and Kates of the world a favor. But I force myself to rise above my pettiness. Instead, I pick up the full glass of wine on the table and throw it into his face.

Dimly, I'm aware of the gasps and whispers and shocked stares of people lured closer by the promise of a juicy spectacle. For once in my life, however, I don't care about making a scene. I might care in the cold, hard light of tomorrow, but right now, I'm too full of hurt and rage to worry about future regrets.

I'm only vaguely aware of Aaron sticking close to my side. Why, I don't know. Maybe he senses my reckless frame of mind. Maybe he wants to stop me from doing something monumentally stupid. Which I feel fully capable of right now. Especially as I can't stop glaring at Melissa, the sniveling coward, who's crouching wide-eyed behind the picnic table. Yes, she should be scared. I'm eyeing that perky ponytail with a savage desire to lop it off.

"Tess, babe, please calm down," Nathan entreats me, wine dripping down his face, staining the blue shirt I bought him for his birthday last year.

A red mist of pain and temper descends upon me. The unbelievable gall to call me *babe* when he's with another woman. I lunge forward and aim a solid kick at my no-good, back-stabbing ex-boyfriend. Nathan yelps in pain and clutches his leg. I draw back my foot for another satisfying kick, but Aaron wraps both arms around me from behind and holds me tight against his chest.

"Okay, that's enough," he says in a low voice.

I kick out and squirm to be set free. "Let me go!"

Tightening his hold, Aaron murmurs into my ear, “You don’t want him calling the cops.”

“I don’t care. Let him call them.”

“Tess, please, let’s talk,” Nathan continues to beg.

“Now you’re interested in talking, you cheating—”

I’m still yelling insults as Aaron lifts me bodily off the ground and hauls me away from the gathering crowd of onlookers. Away from the dinner I was so looking forward to. Away from Nathan and the woman he’s replaced me with.

Then I’m no longer yelling because, to my surprise, I’m crying.

“He was eating Pad Thai,” I sob. “Did you see?”

“I saw,” Aaron confirms gently.

“That’s my dish.”

“It’s still your dish.”

“No, it’s not. Just like he’s not my boyfriend anymore.”

He’s silent as he carries my sobbing, dead weight into the quietest section of the park. In the rational part of my brain not overwhelmed by heartache, I realize Aaron had no choice but to intervene, that I was seriously losing it and he needed to save me from myself.

When we’re surrounded by trees and away from gossip-hungry eyes, Aaron loosens his hold, so my feet are able to touch the ground. He carefully turns me around and pulls me to him, his arms encircling me.

“You’ll be okay,” he reassures me, his lips pressed against my hair as I weep into his chest. “You might not believe it now, but you’ll be okay.”



Aaron drives me home in his car, insisting I’m in no state to drive. He’s probably right. He keeps throwing worried glances my way as I sit, silent and slumped, in the passenger seat of his Mustang. At one point, he assures me he’ll make a plan to

fetch my car tomorrow. I shrug. At present, I feel too numb to care about anything, least of all my car.

When Aaron pulls in front of my house without any directions from me, I ask, “How do you know where I live?”

“I’m a details man.”

He follows me inside. I head straight to the kitchen, grab the water jug from the fridge, and try to pour myself a glass of water. But my hands are shaking too much and water sloshes over the rim and onto the counter.

“Let me help.” Aaron takes the jug from me and fills up my glass. He pours water for himself as well and leans against the counter to drink it, his attention staying on me.

“Thanks.” My throat is sore from yelling and crying and the water helps soothe it. After nearly a minute of silence, I ask Aaron in a hoarse voice, “Why were you trying to protect Nathan?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t,” he says patiently. “That’s why I’m asking.”

“You didn’t want me to see Nathan with another woman, did you?”

After a pause, he says evenly, “No, I didn’t.”

Resentment prickles. “Is this some kind of boys’ club where you protect one another?”

He sets his glass down, pushes himself off the counter, and closes the distance between us. “You think I’m concerned about sparing your idiot ex-boyfriend’s feelings?” he asks, displeasure roughening his voice. “I wasn’t protecting him. I was protecting you.”

Oh.

My heart trips over itself.

His gaze is steady on mine. “I knew seeing him with another woman would hurt you, and I didn’t want to see you

hurt.”

His eyes are so blue, the look in them so tender. I didn't equate Aaron with tenderness. Then again, I didn't equate Nathan with cheating. Looks like I'm wrong on both counts.

What a turn of events. My handsome, easy-going boyfriend turns out to be a lying cheat. And my grumpy, sardonic nemesis turns out to be a protective sweetheart.

Funny, the curveballs life hurls at you.

Except I'm not laughing.

Instead, tears prick my eyes again and I try desperately to blink them back. Why can't I stop crying?

“Come here,” Aaron says softly, sighing.

As my tears escape and trickle down my cheeks, he gathers me up against him and tucks me under his chin. I let him because I need this right now. Closing my eyes, I rest my cheek against his chest, listening to the strong, steady beat of his heart in my ear. It feels good to lean on his strength. I'll be stronger in the morning. Right now, though, he's strong enough for the both of us.

“That lame excuse of a man is not worth even one of your tears,” Aaron tells me, pressing a gentle kiss to the top of my head. “He's not worth you.”

My breath catches at his words and the tightness in my chest eases a little.

I don't know how long we stay like that. Eventually, I draw in a shuddering breath and step out of his arms. All I feel is immense tiredness.

“I'm going to bed,” I announce, my shoulders sinking with fatigue. “Are you okay to let yourself out?”

“No problem.”

I feel his eyes on me as I exit the kitchen and walk through my living room. I sneak one last look over my shoulder before I disappear down the hallway to my bedroom. Aaron is still standing there, a dark, silent presence watching over me.

“Thank you for being with me tonight.”

He nods. “Goodnight, Tess,” he says softly.

“Goodnight.”

And I close my door and leave him standing there alone.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I wake up with sore and swollen eyes. The morning sun filters through my half-closed blinds, spotlighting dust motes suspended in the air. Blearily, I check the time on my bedside clock: 6:30 a.m.

I made it through the night, is my first thought. A small milestone, but one I'll take.

Sitting up slowly, I rest my back against the headboard and scrub my hands over my face. I spent most of last night staring at the ceiling. All I could see, over and over in my mind's eye, were Nathan and Melissa holding hands, the infatuated smiles on both their faces.

I still feel sick inside, I'm still angry and hurting, but the pain feels more on the scale of a low-level throb. It's not overwhelming. And that, more than anything, tells me Nathan wasn't an overwhelming part of my life. A small part of me had quietly called it quits on our relationship some time ago. The other part was hanging in there for all the wrong reasons.

My phone is face down on the bed and I don't bother checking it. Last night, I'd received a slew of missed calls and messages from Nathan. I didn't read any of his texts or listen to any of his voicemails.

I take a long shower, pull on black sweatpants and an oversized T-shirt, and open my bedroom door.

I stop in surprise, because I smell coffee.

Heart thumping, I make my way cautiously down the hallway. Nathan has a key to my place and if he's here in my house after what happened last night, trying to buy my forgiveness with coffee, I am not going to be held responsible for my actions.

But it's Aaron standing in my kitchen, still wearing the same clothes from last night, the faint shadow along his jaw giving him a rough, weary look.

"Good morning," he greets me, his voice low and gravelly.

I'm still trying to get over my surprise at his presence, so it takes me a second to find my voice. "Uh, morning."

He holds up a steaming mug of coffee. "Cappuccino, right. One sugar."

"How do you know how I take my coffee?"

"Like I said, I'm a details man."

"Thanks." I take the coffee from him. "I can't function properly without my drug."

One corner of his mouth tips up. "I thought I recognized a fellow addict."

I take a slow, grateful sip, then another one, feeling the caffeine flood my system, restoring my equilibrium.

"Rough night?" he asks gently.

"A little."

"To be expected."

I hug the mug to me. "You didn't go home? You stayed here the whole night?"

"I did."

I frown. "Where did you sleep?"

Aaron nods to my three-seater couch in the living room. The thick throw blanket I like to snuggle under while watching TV is neatly folded away and the cushions are straightened.

I bite my lip. "You couldn't have been comfortable."

"I made it work."

Now the most important question. I don't know why I saved it for last. Or maybe I do, but I don't want the strangeness of it to rest between us. "Why did you stay?" I ask in a small voice.

He takes his time answering, as though he's choosing his words with care. "Because on one of the worst nights of your life, you shouldn't be alone."

Oh, my heart. This man, with his concern and compassion, is squeezing it to pieces.

I swallow against the swell of emotion. “Thank you for staying.”

He measures me for a long moment. “I want you to know how sorry I am.”

“Me too.”

“Just to be clear,” he continues, “I’m not sorry that idiot’s no longer your boyfriend. I’m only sorry you’re hurting.”

Before I can respond—and I have no idea what I would have said anyway—Aaron asks, “You going in to work?”

I shake my head. “I’m calling in sick.”

There’s no way I can go into the office today, not when there’s a possibility I might bump into Nathan in the lobby or the elevator. I’m not ready to face him just yet.

“You know what’s funny?” I say after I finish my coffee.

He turns those serious blue eyes on me, his expression inviting me to tell him.

“Over the past couple of months, I’ve been debating whether or not Nathan is enough for me.” I swallow and drop my gaze to the floor. “Not once did I contemplate that I might not be enough for him.”

“Tess, look at me.”

Reluctantly, I raise my eyes to meet his.

“You are worth a thousand Nathans,” he says softly.

My breath hitches at the frank admission. The man knows just the words to soothe my hurting heart.

The doorbell rings. My first thought is, *Nathan*, and my stomach drops.

Some of my fear must show on my face because Aaron says in a reassuring tone, “It’s okay. It’s not him.”

On the other side of the door, I hear Sofia yelling to be let in and Kenzie admonishing her to lower her voice.

“I called them,” Aaron tells me. “I thought they should be with you. I hope that’s okay.”

I nod, my throat too thick for me to speak.

He opens the front door and Sofia and Kenzie fly to my side.

“We heard what happened!”

“That weasel!”

“He was never good enough for you!”

They throw their arms around me. I catch Aaron’s gaze over their shoulders.

You okay? his expression asks.

I’m okay, I communicate back silently. *Thank you.*

He gives me the tiniest smile and slips out the front door.

After Aaron’s gone, Sofia and Kenzie point to a kitchen stool and order me to sit. I sit. While they busy themselves in the kitchen making tea, declaring that this kind of morning calls for strong and soothing tea, they demand that I tell them every single detail about what happened last night.

“And don’t leave anything out,” Sofia commands. “Because I’ll know.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “How will you know?”

A guilty look streaks across her face. “Um, because I’m psychic?”

“Sofia,” Kenzie admonishes.

I let out a groan. “Does everyone in Brown Oaks know?”

The silence lasts maybe thirty seconds. “Well, maybe not Mr. Hastings,” Kenzie admits. “But only because he’s last on the postal route.”

“Wait, before I tell you guys what happened with Nathan, when did Aaron get hold of you?”

“Last night,” Kenzie reveals. “I was still at Sofia’s house. By then, we’d already heard some of the rumors.”

Sofia pours milk into the cups. “We were about to jump into my car and head over to you when Aaron called.”

“He told us you’d gone to bed because you were exhausted,” Kenzie continues. “And he let us know he was staying over at your place to make sure you were okay.”

“We made an executive decision to leave you in his capable hands.” Since it’s Sofia, she’s unable to resist. “And are they capable?”

I shoot her a look, but I can see she’s not serious. “You know he slept on the couch,” I point out.

She sighs in exaggerated disappointment. “I know. He’s one of the noble ones.”

Kenzie hands me my cup of tea. “Now it’s your turn.”

“Tell. Us. Everything,” Sofia demands.

And so I do, or at least everything I remember. There are chunks of the evening that remain a blur.

“What do you think everyone’s takeaway is?” I ask after I’m finished. “That Nathan’s a cheat? Or that I’m a crazy, wine-throwing girlfriend?”

Sofia blows on her hot tea. “Better to be an object of wrath than one of pity.”

“Not too many people are happy with Nathan right now,” Kenzie reassures me.

I sip my tea. “We should have called it quits ages ago. I think we both knew our relationship wasn’t really working, but I guess we were too comfortable to end it.”

Kenzie nods. “Sometimes when your lives are so entwined it’s easier to simply go with the flow. And a year is a long time.”

“It is.”

“What’s the term celebrities use when they break up?” Sofia asks. “Uncoupling?”

Kenzie wrinkles her nose. “That sounds so clinical.”

“Our break-up feels more like a ripping apart.” I bite my lip. “I never wanted it to end in such an ugly way.”

“You know,” Sofia says, over-gesturing, like she always does, “maybe it’s good it happened like this.”

I stiffen. “What are you saying? That Nathan did me a favor?”

“No,” Sofia says calmly. “I’m saying he forced your hand. You caught him cheating and you were strong enough to break it off with him. If he hadn’t cheated, maybe you would’ve just drifted along in your relationship, not really happy, but not strong enough to break it off either.”

I glare at her. “I hate it when you’re right.”

“I hate it sometimes too.”

“Are you hungry?” Kenzie asks.

“I am,” I admit, surprised to discover it’s true. “I didn’t eat dinner.”

“No surprise there,” Sofia mutters.

Kenzie glances at her watch. “It’s not even eight yet. We still have plenty of time to get to work.” She pads to the kitchen. “Let me see if I can whip up some scrambled eggs.”

I hear her opening the fridge. “Uh, Tess...”

“Yeah?”

“Why do you have at least ten takeout containers of labeled Thai food in your fridge?”

“What?” I get to my feet and stare in amazement at the stack of containers. I pull out the top one. The label reads *Pad Thai*.

“I don’t believe it,” I whisper, feeling my face redden as warmth spreads through me. “Aaron must have returned to the food truck last night and organized all this.”

“Wow,” Sofia breathes out.

“What a sweet gesture,” Kenzie says.

“What a *meaningful* gesture,” Sofia adds.

Kenzie's whole face lights up. "Meaning, we were right, Aaron really likes you."

"And now that you're no longer with Nathan..." Sofia raises her eyebrows, about as subtle as a bulldozer.

Without a word, I close the fridge. I don't want to analyze the meaning behind Aaron's gesture, which feels both simple and complicated at the same time. It also feels private, something I want to hug to my chest. Not something I feel like sharing with even my two closest friends.

Besides, I don't possess the mental or emotional energy to even think along those lines right now.

"How are you doing?" Kenzie asks softly. "I mean, *really* doing?"

"I'm sad," I say simply.

Am I sad because I've lost Nathan? Yes. Though, the more I think about it, the more convinced I am that my sadness stems more from the fact that I might have wasted a year of my life. Sure, I can tell myself that in my year with Nathan I've grown in character, learned valuable life lessons, had fun, and so on.

Still, I can't shake the feeling that I wasted my love, my affection, my secrets on someone who didn't value them enough. Who didn't value *me* enough.

When I tell my friends a little of what I'm feeling, Sofia says sharply, "That crap excuse of a human being will not make you doubt yourself. You're going to get dressed and go to work and show him you don't care."

I close my eyes, feeling more tired than I've ever felt in my life. A bone-deep ache in my body and spirit.

Sofia is still talking, but for once I tune her out.

In the boxing ring that is our life, she's always in my corner. She's my trainer wiping away my blood, sweat, and tears, yelling at me to get back into the ring and fight. Except, sometimes, like now, I long to sit quietly in my corner and give my bruised and battered spirit a moment to catch its

breath. I'm starting to understand I don't have to return to the ring right away. It's okay to rest for just a little while.

I open my eyes when I feel a warm hand squeeze my shoulder. Kenzie smiles at me. She gets it. "Tess is staying home today," she says firmly. "And we'll cover for her with Calvin and anyone else who asks."

"But—"

"No buts, Sofia."

After only the smallest hesitation, Sofia relents. "Okay, Plan B. I'm fully on board."

As my friends murmur how much they love me, how beautiful I am, how undeserving Nathan is, I think, *this* is what everyone deserves to have. And I'm so very, very grateful I have it, because when that giant tidal wave comes out of nowhere and breaks over you, threatening to drag you under, friends and family are who you cling to. People with deep, strong roots.

I close my eyes and take comfort in two truths: I am strong. I am loved.

CHAPTER TWENTY

[MESSAGES]

Mevia: A certain someone may have received a glitter bomb greeting card yesterday.

Tess: Yes!

Mevia: Happy Revenge Friday.

Tess: Should I feel guilty celebrating this?

Mevia: Nope.

Tess: I don't want you to get into trouble.

Mevia: Please. The company uses anonymous mailing addresses.

Tess: I have a feeling you've done this before.

Mevia: Yup. Lots of sparkly ex-boyfriends out there.

Tess: You're a scary woman.

Mevia: I ordered an XL card. It'll take him weeks to clean it all up.

Tess: Thank you.

Mevia: There's also the option of spraying his shirts with perfume.

Tess: A waste of my perfume.

Mevia: I use my granny's. She has a huge collection. And they all smell like a funeral home.

Tess: Any other ideas?

Mevia: He owns a car. With tires. You own a sharp knife. Do the math.

Tess: My math says one plus one equals a criminal conviction.

Mevia: Only if you get caught.



On Friday, I arrive at Amell Greetings ten minutes early. One day's grace is the extent of Calvin's goodwill, but one day is all I needed. After Sofia and Kenzie left yesterday, I spent the majority of the day comfort eating my way through some of the Thai food Aaron had placed in my fridge (the best I've ever tasted) and fielding calls from family and nosy Brown Oaks residents.

I had my mom insisting I come over this weekend and promising to make all my favorite foods. I heard Dad in the background shouting "now that Nathan's out the picture we can spend more time watching *Friends*."

Grandma managed to wrestle the phone away from Mom to say, somewhat enigmatically, "remember my watch."

Kate didn't call but sent a series of furious text messages denouncing Nathan and men in general. For my own sanity, I didn't read them, but I let her vent, knowing she needed to. Her last message apologized for all her previous messages and ended with how much she loves me.

And then, late yesterday afternoon, Mr. Silva, who doesn't appear to own a phone, knocked loudly on my door. I ignored him for at least five minutes, but he announced in a loud voice, "I know you're in there and I can stand here all day."

I opened my door. "Now's not a good time."

"I'm not here to talk about your useless boyfriend," he said gruffly. "I'm here to fix your leaking tap."

"Thank you," I said when he was done with the repair. What I really meant was, *Thank you for caring for me in your way*. "Sorry I didn't open the door right away."

"I guessed you were hiding," he replied, his eyes kind, "but I'm not one to care that you have food stains on your shirt."

Another good thing I did yesterday was to set off on an early-morning solo hike. I'd chosen a route so physically challenging it took all my mental energy to navigate it. There was no plodding Nathan holding me back, no well-meaning voices crowding my head, lamenting over my failed

relationship and telling me what to do. The physical burn drowned out even my own traitorous voice wondering if I was in any way to blame for Nathan straying.

Surrounded by the rich life of the forest, seeing the hint of clear blue sky peeking through the pines, crisp air filling my lungs, I felt my spirits slowly revive. Front and center in my mind was the thought, I'm going to be okay.

I'm still holding on to that thought when I step into the lobby of Amell Greetings.

"Hey, Tess," Bob greets me from behind the security desk.

"Hey, Bob."

"Sorry to hear what happened."

"Thank you."

I draw myself straighter, mentally preparing myself for a flood of similar exchanges throughout the day. My steps falter slightly when I see Rick standing by the elevator bank. Hopefully, that's not a bad omen for today. As soon as the doors open, I follow him inside. Nerves take hold when I realize it's only the two of us riding the elevator up to the third floor.

"I heard about you and Nathan," says Rick, wasting no time. "I think the whole town heard."

"Uh huh." It's the most neutral response I can think of.

He snickers. "Heard you also flew off the handle."

The impulse to give him a little taste of fly-off-the-handle Tess is almost overwhelming. "Is there a point to this conversation, Rick?"

He shrugs. "Just that a man doesn't go looking for meat if he's getting steak at home."

"Seriously?" My hands clench into fists at my sides. "You're one step away from me reporting you to HR."

He holds up his hands. "Hey, take it easy. I was just making a general observation."

Loathing crawls across my skin. “You can keep your disgusting observations to yourself.”

When the elevator reaches our floor, I can’t exit it fast enough. Rick is Rick, I tell myself, trying to calm my angrily racing heart. He’s always been a nasty piece of work.

I remind myself not all people are vultures eager to circle over the carcass of a dead relationship with the intention of picking it clean. I want to believe there are more Bobs and Mr. Silvas in the world than there are Ricks.

Speaking of incredible people, Mevia’s wide grin when she catches sight of me and waves me over to her reception desk immediately cheers me up.

“Looking good, girl,” she says with an approving nod. “Dressed to kill.”

My eyes widen in alarm. “Not literally.” Because it’s Mev, I feel the need to clarify.

“Sure, sure,” she says casually. She leans forward. “You look good enough to whip up massive douche bag regret.”

I smooth my hands over my dress. “That’s the intention.”

I planned my outfit and appearance this morning as though it were a military operation. I couldn’t dress too sexily, because then everyone will assume I’m trying too hard. I couldn’t go for overly casual either because the assumption will be I’m so upset I’m letting myself go. In the end, I opted to wear a form-fitting, midnight blue work dress that shows off my legs, tanned and shapely from hiking. I’m wearing black heels since I’m more confident when I’m taller. And on the off chance I bump into Nathan, these heels put me at eye-level with him, which has always made him uncomfortable.

My makeup took the better part of an hour to get right. I had to apply enough to enhance my features but apply it to look as though I’m barely wearing any.

My whole appearance is an exhausting, but joyful, middle finger to Nathan.

“You all good for today?” Mevia asks.

“Mostly.”

“Give it a couple of days and everyone will’ve moved on,” she tells me.

I nod. I know she’s right.

“In fact, old Jedediah’s poodle will probably crap all over Beverly’s petunias tonight and she’ll retaliate by scattering his trash all over his porch.” She snaps her ringed, silver-tipped fingers. “And just like that you’re no longer the talk of the town.”

I reach over the reception desk to give her an impulsive hug. “Thanks, Mev.”

The moment I’m seated at my desk, Sofia and Kenzie WhatsApp me lines and lines of fire emojis. I smile inwardly at the confidence boost.

The morning progresses with less hiccups than I feared. Nearly every one of my colleagues have made an effort to drift past my cubicle to tell me how sorry they are and how they “never saw it coming.” I’m glad I wasn’t the only one.

I bump into Dana in the hallway. She says, “Calvin mentioned this morning that he hopes your day off allowed you to fully recover from your very public breakup.”

I nod stiffly. It kills me, but I force myself to say, “Please thank Calvin for me.”

Dana’s sharp black eyes bore into me. “I will not.”

“Dana—”

“I’ll tell you what I told him,” she retorts, cutting me off. “I told him that if he can take a week off to recover from the breakup of his six-month marriage, you can take a day after a year-long relationship.”

She doesn’t wait for me to reply but turns on her heel and heads in the direction of her desk, leaving me staring openmouthed after her.

Sofia is going to be disappointed that her opinion of Dana might have to be adjusted.

The one person I haven't seen this morning is Aaron. I've casually wandered past his office, but it's remained empty. I have no idea where he is, and I can't ask anyone for fear of sparking more rumors.

I eat lunch at my desk and lose myself in work, the time passing swiftly as I find pleasure and escape in the rhythm of words, in experimenting with new phrases and coming up with the perfect message for a card.

It's just after four when a sugar craving hits. I decide to take a quick break and grab something from Beth's Bakery. Either a Portuguese custard tart or a giant slice of chocolate cake. Decision, decisions. As I walk to the elevator, I make a mental note to bring back an almond croissant for Mevia. I smile when I remember her sneaky attempt to get me to buy her one when I was Aaron's minion for the day.

When the elevator dings, I step inside, but I haven't been paying attention and now I'm heading up instead of down. I sigh. It appears I'm in for an extended trip.

I'm making notes on my phone when the elevator stops, and the doors open to reveal Nathan standing there. Surprise flashes across his face. "Tess."

I draw in a serrated breath and my heart crashes in my chest.

No, no, no.

I'm not ready to talk to him. I hastily press the button to close the doors, but I'm not quick enough. Nathan steps inside just as the doors start to close.

"Tess, please can we talk?"

"I have nothing to say to you."

"Then let me do the talking."

I straighten my spine. "Looks to me like you've been doing a lot more than talking."

He winces.

I try to reach past him to get to the control panel again, but Nathan steps in front of it, blocking me. He presses the button for the top floor and the doors close.

“Really?” I step backward until I’m pressed against the wall, as far away from him as I can get.

“I’ve been trying to call you,” he says. “I’ve left you voicemails, sent you messages.”

I fold my arms across my chest. “I know.”

“Look, I know you’re angry with me. And you absolutely have a right to be.”

“That feels a little condescending,” I point out.

“I don’t mean it to be. The glitter bomb was a bit much, though.”

“I didn’t send it.” Now that I take a closer look, I can see glitter bits dusting his hair and clothes.

“Well, one of your friends did then.”

I don’t deny it.

“Anyway, I get you’re angry. And that’s why I’ve been trying to get hold of you, to say how sorry I am.”

Sorrow hollows my chest. His apology feels meaningless and empty. Is he sorry he ruined everything? Or sorry he got caught?

When I stay silent, he says, “I want us to work through this.”

“Work through this?” I echo in amazement.

“Yes.”

“There is no working through this,” I say sharply. “We are over.”

His lips go into a flat line. “We’ve been together a year. That should count for something.”

I stare at him, speechless. Then I lash out, “Were you thinking it counted for something when you shackled up with Melissa?” Just saying her name makes me feel sick.

“You’re right, I wasn’t thinking.” A shudder moves through him. “I don’t know what came over me. It was a terrible mistake.”

He reaches for me, but I bat his hand away. He no longer gets to touch me. He forfeited that right when he touched another woman.

His brown eyes stare at me, hurt and accusing. “Are you really going to throw us away because I made one mistake? Can’t you find it in your heart to forgive me?”

The tiniest sliver of doubt cuts through my conviction. Is that what I’m doing? Throwing away our relationship without fighting for it? Surely everyone deserves a second chance after they mess up.

“One mistake,” I say softly, repeating his words. “To be clear, you cheated on me just once with Melissa?”

I’m watching him closely and I see the guilt flash across his face before he can shut it down. My eyes sting. Deep down, I’d known it wasn’t just that one time. And when you have so many *mistakes* piled on top of one another, what you have is *deception*. “I thought so,” I say when he doesn’t respond. Ironically, Nathan’s always been a terrible liar, but I have to hand it to him, he’s a first-rate cheat. “All those gaming evenings with your friends you were really with Melissa.”

“Not all of them.”

“I don’t want to talk to you anymore,” I whisper.

“Tess, please. Give me another chance.”

He glances at the control panel. For one terrible second, I think he’s going to press the emergency button, trapping me in here with him.

“Don’t,” I say, feeling my throat go dry. “We’re over, Nathan.”

I watch the realization of the magnitude of his *mistake* crash over him, his awareness that he can’t just sweet-talk his way back into my life. I ought to feel some degree of

satisfaction that he still wants me, that he's filled with regret, but mostly, I just feel sad.

When the elevator doors finally open, I rush out blindly and slam straight into a solid chest. Strong hands grip my arms to steady me.

I know those hands.

Still breathless and trembling, I look up into Aaron's concerned face.

He stares down at me, his mouth tightening when he glimpses my expression. He drags his gaze away from mine and looks at Nathan. In a too-quiet voice, he asks, "What did you say to her?"

Nathan squares his shoulders. "That's between me and Tess."

"Not anymore," Aaron snaps.

Despite how shaken I am, part of me acknowledges how foolhardy it is of Nathan to challenge Aaron. Aaron's shoulders are bunched as he takes on the look of a man wanting to put his fist through a wall. I've never seen him so angry. He's always so cool and composed. This anger on my behalf is... I don't know what it is, but it stirs something inside me.

I place a hand on his arm to calm him. The last thing I want is a scene in the lobby of my workplace. "It's okay," I reassure him.

Nathan's gaze ping-pongs between the two of us. "What's going on here?" he demands. "Why is he so protective of you?"

I hold up a warning finger. "Do not go there, Nathan."

"Have the two of you—?"

I tense up. "I have not cheated on you!"

In a chilling voice, Aaron says to Nathan, "Choose your next words very carefully."

"Hey, you don't get to tell me—"

“Tess, would you like to continue speaking with him?” Aaron asks calmly, leaving it up to me. I’ll only appreciate the full extent of that question later, when I’m alone in bed and replaying this scene over and over in my head.

I shake my head. An unequivocal no.

Aaron simply levels a look at Nathan. “You heard her.”

I can see Nathan shrinking from the threat in his voice. He lifts his hands, then lets them fall. Finally, he looks at me and in a broken voice, he whispers, “For what it’s worth, I truly am sorry, Tess. I’m sorry I messed up and I’m sorry I hurt you.”

Watching Nathan walk away, his shoulders slumped in defeat, I experience a brief, painful impulse to run after him and comfort him, but I clamp down on it. This must be the emotional equivalent of muscle memory, one I’ll have to unlearn.

I return my gaze to Aaron. “What are you doing here? Are you lost?” I ask jokingly, trying to lighten the tension in the wake of Nathan’s departure.

“Nope,” Aaron says quietly, his eyes lingering on mine. “I’m exactly where I need to be.”

A calm, restful feeling sweeps over me. This is what I need, I think. Someone to take the gloves from me, strap them on, and step into the ring to fight for me.

“Are you heading back to the office?” Aaron asks, shoving a hand through his hair. “Or do you want to take a minute to regroup?”

“I’m not ready to go back just yet.”

“Let’s find a quiet café then.”



Aaron takes a sip of his coffee. “Does Nathan want to get back together with you?” His tone is carefully neutral. “That’s what he spoke to you about in the elevator?”

I cradle my hot chocolate in my hands. “Yes.”

His fingers tighten on his mug. It's the only sign this conversation is affecting him. "Are you thinking about it?"

"I have no desire to get back together with him," I answer firmly.

Beth's Bakery has a seating area in a pretty courtyard that's accessed from the back of the store. Mevia's almond croissant is in a takeout box next to me and my custard tart is sitting in front of me. I haven't touched it, though. Not when my stomach is so full of knots.

"What about when your hurt and anger die down?" he persists. "You might want to work things out with him then."

I raise an eyebrow. "Are you playing devil's advocate here?"

"Seems like an appropriate role to play right now."

"To be honest, I think our relationship was dying before I discovered Nathan cheating. But neither of us had the courage to pull the plug."

My words hang in the air.

He takes another sip of his coffee. "I kind of picked up on that vibe when you described your relationship with him as *comfortable*."

I keep my eyes on my hot chocolate when I say in a small voice, "I can't let the blame for our breakup fall fully on Nathan's shoulders."

Aaron sets down his coffee cup and frowns at me. "He cheated on you. He's to blame. End of story."

"He cheated on me physically," I concede, feeling the pang in my chest, "but I wonder when he started straying in his mind."

Aaron is quiet for a few beats. "You consider that cheating?"

"I think so. I mean, I haven't given it much thought, but when you start having fantasies about another person isn't that mental infidelity?"

“There’s a school of thought that says having fantasies is normal,” Aaron points out. “Still, if you’re in a committed relationship it can be a thin and dangerous line.”

It’s like we’re both tiptoeing our way through landmine territory, wondering which step will be the one to set off an explosion.

“Maybe everyone’s mind wanders,” I say after a moment, “but the important part is not to act on those thoughts.”

“What are you trying to say here, Tess?”

It takes everything in me not to flinch from the intensity on his face.

I swallow. My words come out in a whisper. “I’m saying I’m not much better than Nathan.”

He goes absolutely still. “Was your mind wandering?”

“A little.”

His throat works. “Who did it wander to?”

I don’t answer. Instead, I stare at my hot chocolate like I can read my future in the dark liquid.

Aaron rubs a hand down his face. “There’s a difference between thinking about something and actually doing something.”

He’s steered us away from the landmine. Relief and disappointment war within me.

“I didn’t *do* anything,” I reiterate.

“No, you didn’t.”

“Still, I can’t help feeling it was wrong. *I* was wrong.”

He doesn’t respond right away. Finally, he says, “I get it.”

“You do?”

“Yes.” His eyes capture mine. “If you’re with me, I don’t want you thinking about another man.”

The air leaves my throat.

We’ve moved right back into danger territory.

It alarms me that we've reached this point in the conversation so quickly. I've broken up with Nathan, but I can't shrug away the feeling that talking like this is wrong. That I'm betraying Nathan in some way. The feeling is illogical, but it lingers.

And then Aaron takes a deliberate step onto the landmine.

"My thoughts have wandered too," he admits quietly.
"And there's no way Nathan would have liked what I was imagining."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

[MESSAGES]

Aaron: 🐬

Tess: Is this text for someone else?

Aaron: Nope.

Tess: I think you used the wrong emoji.

Aaron: I didn't.

Tess: You meant to send me a dolphin emoji?

Aaron: I did.

Tess: What are you trying to say?

Aaron: Figure it out.

Tess: Keep on swimming?

Aaron: Deeper, Tess.

Tess: ... [typing]

Tess: ... [typing]

Tess: Irritating, confusing man. That deep enough for you?



I arrive in the breakroom Monday morning to discover Aaron already stationed in front of the coffee machine.

“Morning,” I say in greeting. I smile and hold up my mug. “Looks like we both have the same idea.”

Aaron simply grunts.

“It is a truth universally acknowledged that caffeine is needed for our weekly Monday staff meetings.”

He pops a pod into the machine and presses the button.

Well, the *Pride and Prejudice* reference fell flat. What a waste of a gem. “How was your weekend?” I ask, raising my voice to be heard over the noise of the machine.

“Fine.”

When he doesn't say anything else, I say cheerfully, “Mine was good, thanks for asking. I tidied the house. Went on a hike. Grandma didn't take a hammer to Google so that's one piece of good news.”

He does another grunt, his gaze fixed on the rich brown liquid dripping at a snail's pace into his mug, his hands fisted at his sides as though itching to shake the machine into hurrying things up.

I lean against the counter and stare at his bad-tempered profile. Oh, how very interesting. The uncaffeinated version of Aaron is next-level grumpy. Which means I get to enjoy next-level fun. Especially since, two days ago, I fell for one of his simulated phishing emails. This one was a devious “your Facebook account has been hacked,” prompting me to panic and click the link. Now I've been assigned mandatory cybersecurity training to “help reinforce my security awareness skills.”

The only thing that's being reinforced, though, is my desire for some mild revenge.

“Mmm-hmm, smell that coffee,” I say loudly, taking a deep breath of the bitter and beautiful aroma filling the breakroom.

I watch his jaw flex. “I must be a masochist to still be talking to you,” he grumbles.

“Technically, you're hardly talking, mostly grunting.”

His forehead pinches. “Tess, please.”

I take pity on him and keep quiet while he adds milk and moves away from the machine to rest a hip against the opposite counter. He takes his first sip and closes his eyes in what looks like pure pleasure. By the time I step in front of the coffee machine, he's nearly finished his cup and appears ready for round number two.

It's been two weeks since the elevator encounter with Nathan. He's been texting me, pleading for a second chance, but with every passing day, I feel more and more certain I

made the right decision to break up with him. There's a lightness to my steps now, as though I've shrugged off a weight I didn't realize I was carrying.

Yes, I miss Nathan sometimes. I miss snuggling with him while watching a movie. I miss Taylor Swift blasting out of the speakers while we share a glass of wine and cook dinner together. Nathan, for all his faults, was a great listener and I miss stretching out on the couch with my feet in his lap and offloading to him after a particularly bad workday.

But my current feelings of freedom and contentment outweigh all the parts I miss.

While I might be clear on how I feel about Nathan, when it comes to Aaron my emotions are all over the place. On the one hand, I'm more relaxed around him now that I'm no longer seeing Nathan. Our conversations are natural and comfortable, full of playful teasing and flirty banter. I've recommitted myself to rescuing his office from his gloomy touch and while he's valiantly resisting my efforts, I'm slowly wearing him down.

On the other hand, though, Aaron is a constant, distracting presence. I'm hyperaware of every move he makes, every instant his eyes meet mine and linger a fraction too long. I find myself thinking about him way too much. When I eat, when I drive into work, when I sit at my desk pretending to work.

Basically, I'm in a state of confusion. I know Aaron likes me and I like him, but neither of us are doing anything about it. The rational part of me acknowledges it's wise not to jump into another relationship after I've only just emerged from a long-term one. Aaron is clearly giving me space. Which is good. I need it. But, come on, not *that* much space. He's attracted to me, I know he is, but for whatever reason, I sense he's wary. And he's holding back.

I'm definitely frustrated. At myself. At Aaron. At this stupid coffee machine that's taking so long to brew one cup of coffee. I mean, how hard can it be? It has one purpose in life.

Aaron smirks. "Now who's grumpy?"

“I’m not grumpy,” I snap, glaring at the offending machine as it painfully squeezes out one minuscule drop. Every caffeine-deprived cell in my body is groaning in protest. “Did you sabotage it?”

Ignoring my question, Aaron drains the last of his coffee. “Mmm-hmm,” he mimics me in a mocking tone. “Delicious.”

I start tapping my foot.

His gaze travels down the length of my skinny jeans. I glimpse his knuckles tighten around the mug he’s holding. “You’re wearing those boots,” he says, an edge to his voice.

I glance down. Well, would you look at that. I am wearing my sexy suede ankle boots. Time to poke the bear. “Something wrong with these boots?” I ask, all innocence.

He swallows, looks away. “No.”

“You sure? You look bothered.”

“You can wear whatever shoes you want.” His eyes hold mine. “Just like I can send whatever emojis I want.”

An ill-defined warning sounds in my brain. I ignore it. “Your stupid dolphin reference is driving me crazy.”

A smile curves his lips. “Still having trouble working it out?”

“I’m tempted to send you an emoji you’ll have no trouble deciphering.”

He makes a tsk-tsk sound. “Giving up so quickly?”

“Argh, sometimes I want to strangle you!”

His eyes gleam with sudden interest. “So that’s your kink.”

For a second, I’m too astonished to reply. “What?” I finally sputter. “No!”

He gives a rueful head shake. “It’s always the shy ones.”

At last, the machine finishes, and I grab my coffee and take a desperate gulp. “First off, I’m not shy.”

He winks. “Not where it counts.”

I'm frozen in place. I don't understand. How did the tables turn so quickly? "Stop misinterpreting my words."

"It's okay," he reassures me, nudging me out the way so he can brew a second cup. "You don't have to hide from me. I can take whatever you throw my way."

This conversation is like a runaway train. I'm trying my best to jump off, but I keep missing my opportunity.

"I'm going now," I announce, aiming for a dignified exit.

"Off you go." He dips his head to murmur in my ear, "I'm keeping an eye on you, my shy little strangler."



Despite all the people piled in the conference room, I'm aware of only one. Aaron fills the room with his presence, looking so big and capable and handsome he knocks the breath from me.

My stomach is still fluttering from our conversation this morning. His words are spinning in my head like the swing ride at a fair, leaving me dizzy and off-kilter.

It's the last month of summer and the sun is streaming through the conference room windows. The air conditioner is on full blast, but I can't shake my hot and flustered feeling. Only I don't think I can blame my flushed state on the weather.

As inconspicuously as I can, I track Aaron moving around the conference room. I'm aware of the deep rumble of his laugh. The way his hand hangs loosely at his side, those long, capable fingers. The man moves with such a sureness and ease in his own skin, it gives me almost painful pleasure to watch him.

Sofia, seated next to me, pokes me with her elbow. "Blink."

"I can't seem to. My eyelids are immobilized."

"You're giving off serial killer vibes."

"He's worth looking at," Kenzie agrees, "but don't make it so obvious."

“You’re right.” I’m about to look away but, in that moment, Aaron turns his head slightly and his eyes catch mine. Awareness crackles between us.

Slowly, everything around me fades away. Enya slurping her coffee, Mark gnawing his cuticles, Hannah tapping her fingers on the table. All of that becomes background noise. Unimportant. Uninteresting. In this pocket of silence, only the intense blue of Aaron’s gaze holds my attention. It’s that bottomless part of the ocean you’re tempted to dive into, not knowing what’s beneath the surface but knowing your feet will never touch the bottom.

“I think I’ve just tuned into Passionflix,” Sofia says under her breath.

Kenzie lets out a long exhale. “The two of you are turning this room into a fire hazard.”

Aaron takes a seat directly across the table from me.

“Knight to Queen Four,” Sofia murmurs in a gleeful voice.

“Okay, team,” Calvin booms, starting the meeting the way he normally does. “What’s our mission?”

“Connect, communicate, celebrate,” everyone replies dutifully.

“Make money,” Sofia whispers.

I have to stuff a knuckle in my mouth to stop myself laughing out loud.

I’m almost a hundred per cent certain Calvin has filched the *connect, communicate, celebrate* slogan straight from Hallmark, but I don’t dare point it out to him. It’s not anywhere on our web site, it’s only the unofficial rah-rah cheer Calvin uses to galvanize his employees.

Clearing his throat, Calvin dives straight into which card lines are our most successful this month. Then he starts talking about... In truth, I have no idea what his next topic is about because Aaron has leaned back in his chair and laced his hands behind his head.

My mind empties itself of anything greeting card related. The only image in my head right now is a shirtless Aaron leaning back against a headboard, legs stretched out in front of him, his fingers interlocked behind his head while I crawl—

Rick snaps the tab on his Coke, and I jump a little in my seat, my guilty fantasy fading to black.

Why is it getting hotter in here?

It appears Aaron is also feeling the heat because he unbuttons a shirt sleeve and slowly rolls up the cuff, exposing his forearm, the muscles there tensing with every movement. I'm mesmerized. He shifts to his other arm and rolls up that shirtsleeve too. How can a simple gesture be such excruciating torture to watch?

He looks up at me. The expression in his eyes does something to my insides. The air separating us feels weighted, loaded with anticipation.

"Tess!" Calvin barks. "You still up for it?"

I straighten in my seat. Up for what?

"Well?" he demands.

I respond with what I hope is the safest answer. "Absolutely."

What the heck am I up for?

Calvin narrows his eyes at me. "Are you certain?"

"Of course," I reply, at the same time that Sofia shakes her head and mumbles something out the side of her mouth that sounds like, "Sensitive."

"Actually, no," I amend. "I'm not up for it."

"Why not?"

"It's too...sensitive."

His frown is ferocious. "What?"

"Um, not *it*, me. *I'm* too sensitive," I correct hastily.

Sofia is making weird noises next to me.

“Tess Miller,” Calvin begins, his frown deepening so it looks in danger of carving itself into his brain.

Hastily, Kenzie pipes up, “Tess is sensitive about working on pregnancy cards because babies make her cry.”

Still frowning, Calvin shoots me a suspicious glance and I immediately manage an impressive sniffle and pretend to wipe away a tear with my knuckle.

I glimpse Aaron pressing his lips together, trying hard not to laugh.

Enya, taking pity on me, says to Calvin, “I don’t mind pulling Tess from pregnancy. I need her back in general and humor. We’re a little behind.”

“Fine,” Calvin concedes, and my shoulders slump in relief.

Calvin continues with the meeting, and I force myself to pay attention, determined not to be caught out again. After an hour, Calvin casts one final benevolent eye around the room and brings the meeting to a close. Everyone files out.

In the hallway, Rick materializes at my side. “Hey, you want your own baby I’m happy to help.”

Before I can respond, Aaron is suddenly there. “I’m happy to help you hit the floor if you talk to her like that again.”

“Just making a joke,” Rick grumbles, moving away quickly. “Sheesh, no one has a sense of humor anymore.”

“Thank you,” I murmur to Aaron.

He gives my arm a gentle squeeze before Calvin calls him over to another meeting in his office.

After he’s gone, I turn to Sofia and Kenzie. “Vending machine.”

Standing in front of the machine, my hands on my hips, I glare at Sofia’s sheepish face. “What the heck, Sofia? Sensitive?”

“I said *negative*, not *sensitive*,” she argues.

“Negative!” My voice rises. “Why couldn’t you have said *no*! It’s easier, shorter, and I wouldn’t have misinterpreted it!”

“Matt’s making me watch a lot of military movies, and it just came out.”

“On a different note,” Kenzie remarks, playing peacemaker, “Aaron was totally checking you out.”

“No, he wasn’t,” I deny. On the inside, though, I’m whispering joyously, *oh yes, he was, he totally was.*

“He couldn’t take his eyes off you,” Kenzie insists. “He definitely has the whole brooding, mysterious thing going for him.”

Sofia taps her lip. “I’ve heard rumors.”

My interest stirs. “What sort of rumors?”

“Some kind of tragedy.” She gives an elegant shrug. “I don’t know, it’s all hush-hush.”

“Something to do with his sister?” I ask.

Sofia’s brow crinkles. “I don’t think so. A fiancée was mentioned, not a sister.”

Fiancée? Sofia must have heard wrong.

“Who told you this?” Kenzie asks Sofia.

“Mevia picked up on something.”

“Mevia’s always picking up on something,” I say. The woman is in the wrong line of work. She’d make an excellent detective.

Kenzie says, “You know, now that I think about it, Aaron has that look.”

“What look?”

“The look of a man touched by tragedy.”

Curiosity churns inside me. “What makes you say that?”

“It’s the expression he gets sometimes. It’s just sad.”

I know what she means. On the rare occasions Aaron’s stern facade has slipped, I’ve glimpsed what seems to be a

terrible weight behind his eyes.

“If you want, I can try to find out more,” Sofia offers, but I shake my head.

Although I have so many burning questions, it feels wrong to snoop around behind his back. It also feels dangerous. For me. Aaron has three months left of his contract. After those three months are up, I have no idea what’s going to happen. He hasn’t volunteered any information and I’ve been too afraid to ask.

Something sharp twists in my chest. I can’t escape the feeling there’s a version of him he’s hiding from everyone. Maybe even from himself.

Aaron is not my business. He can’t be, no matter how attracted I am to him.

All I know is, I’m an idiot woman playing with matches. And when the fire is lit, guess who gets burned? The idiot.



[MESSAGES]

Tess: I figured it out!!!

Aaron: I’m waiting.

Tess: I just read that dolphins are one of the world’s smartest animals. They have HUGE brains. Is that your message to me? That I’m smarter than you?

Aaron: Nice try. Keep reading.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

[MESSAGES]

Tess: I got it! It's the dolphin dance.

Aaron: I'm sorry, what?

Tess: On TikTok, the dolphin emoji refers to the dolphin dance. You hop up and down with your arms out in front of you like fins.

Aaron: In what world am I on TikTok?

Tess: You said go deeper!

Aaron: Now you're just burying yourself. I'm disappointed.

Tess: Not as disappointed as I am that I won't get to see you do the dolphin dance.



“I am going to kill you, Sofia,” I mutter to myself as I rush around my house, straightening cushions, collecting stray mugs, and stacking dirty plates in the dishwasher. “Actually, killing is too merciful. A more appropriate punishment is to make sure you never taste one of my mom’s cookies again.”

It's six-thirty on a Friday night. I arrived home from work roughly an hour ago and the evening I had planned—horror movie, nachos, popcorn, pistachio ice cream—is out the window because Aaron is coming over.

And I am *not* panicking.

It's been almost a week since the staff meeting and the tension between Aaron and me has ratcheted up from a heated awareness to a kind of simmering suspense. We're not boiling over, not yet, but we're hovering on the brink. I can feel it and so can he. I have no clue what's going to push us over. The anticipation is killing me, but I'm grateful we're not rushing into anything. This, whatever *this* is between us, doesn't feel

light and easy. My heart isn't built for a reckless, forgettable fling, and I can't afford to be careless with my heart.

I see Aaron at work every day so I shouldn't be nervous seeing him after hours, but he's coming to *my house*. The last time he was here I was still reeling from Nathan. Now, he'll be in my home, alone with me, after our innuendo-filled week.

Who do I blame for this? Calvin's bulldog charity run and a meddling, opportunistic friend.

On Tuesday, Calvin tasked me with handing out flyers this weekend to promote his bulldog charity run. He specifically chose me for this task because he hasn't fully forgiven me for my less-than-charitable reply to his email. Assigning me to write pregnancy and parenting cards wasn't enough of a punishment, it seems, so my weekend will be taken up with pounding the streets and distributing flyers to coffee houses, libraries, retail shops, and community centers.

I did draw the line, however, at wearing a bulldog costume while handing out flyers. Even Dana backed me on this.

Calvin put Sofia in charge of the flyers. They were supposed to be ready yesterday, but there were printing delays. Sofia promised to drop the flyers off at my house this evening. Instead, she texted me:

Sofia: Can't drop the flyers off. Matt has plans for me.

Tess: No details please. I'll collect them from the office tomorrow.

Sofia: I arranged for Aaron to drop them off.

Tess: At my place?

Sofia: Yes.

Tess: When?

Sofia: You probably have half an hour before he arrives.

Tess: WHAT?!

Sofia: I told him you were expecting him.

Tess: I am going to kill you. Slowly.

Sofia: He volunteered.

Tess: After you asked him, I bet!

Sofia: Semantics.

Tess: Stop playing matchmaker!

I manage to tidy most of the house before the doorbell rings. Aaron stands on my porch wearing the suit he wore today, minus the jacket. I'm still in the forest-green jumpsuit I wore to work.

I step aside to let him in. "Thanks for dropping these off," I say, gesturing to the box of flyers he's carrying.

"No problem. Where do you want them?"

"Dining room table's fine."

After he's placed the box on the table, I nervously smooth my hands over my thighs and move to the kitchen. Playing casual and collected has never felt so difficult. "Uh, would you like a drink? Coffee? Water?" We're not doing alcohol. Not tonight.

"Water sounds good."

I pour him water from the jug in the fridge.

"Thanks." Leaning against the kitchen counter, he takes a sip and eyes me over the rim of his glass. "By the way, I like your hair curly like that."

I touch my hair self-consciously. "I prefer it straight, but it's a lot of effort."

"I like the curls."

I resist the urge to touch my hair again. "Thank you."

He looks around my living room. "Your decor is interesting."

"How so?" I ask, even though I know what he means.

"It feels like a retirement home in here," he elaborates. "It's just so at odds with your personality."

“This was my grandma’s house,” I explain. “She gifted it to me after my grandfather died. She lives with my folks now, but she still visits, and it comforts her to see her stuff here, to be reminded of him.”

Aaron briefly closes his eyes, looking pained. “I apologize.”

“It’s okay,” I start to say.

“No, it’s not,” he interrupts. “It was crass and thoughtless of me. And now that you’ve told me why you keep the house as your grandma had it, well, I’m seeing it with fresh eyes, and I was wrong. The kindness here totally reflects your personality.”

I swallow past the lump in my throat. “Family’s important,” I say simply.

“Yes, it is.” His expression clouds and I wonder if he’s thinking of his family. Of his sister. “Speaking of family,” he says lightly, “where’s Ash? I took a liking to him when I was here last.”

“You like him?” I ask, surprised. “He doesn’t trust people so he’s not too friendly.”

“That’s why I like him. We have something in common.”

“He was sleeping earlier. Maybe he’s awake now. Ash,” I call. I notice his basket is empty and his bowl of food in the kitchen is untouched. I frown. “That’s strange. He hasn’t eaten his dinner. He normally loves his food.”

I call his name again, feeling the first stirrings of unease.

Aaron follows me to the dining room, one of Ash’s favorite places to hide when he wants some alone time. I pull out a dining room chair to peer under the table and that’s when I see him lying there.

“Hey, Ash, I brought you a visitor.”

He doesn’t move.

I stare up at Aaron, who takes one look at my face and asks instantly, “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” I reply a little shakily. “He’s not usually lethargic like this.”

Aaron pushes aside another chair and hunkers down next to me. Ash doesn’t even lift his head to check out Aaron.

Worry seeps into me. “This is not like him at all.”

“How long has he been like this?”

“This morning he was playful. When I came home, he was sleeping, but he still responded to me.” I stand. “I have the number of an after-hours vet. I think I’ll call them.”

Aaron stands too. “Probably a good idea.” He looks around the dining room, rubbing the back of his neck. All at once, he stills.

“Tess, pick Ash up,” he orders in a low, urgent voice. “We’re taking him to the closest emergency clinic.”

I stand there, frozen. “What?”

“Move, Tess!” Aaron grabs a blanket out my wicker basket and shoves it into my hands. “We need to get him to a vet.”

The urgency in his voice finally penetrates. I’m flooded with fear and confusion, but I don’t ask Aaron any more questions.

As gently as I can, I pick Ash up and wrap him loosely in the blanket. There’s no time to fetch his cat carrier, which I keep in a box at the back of my cupboard.

Aaron opens the front door for me. My heart is pounding as I force my feet to walk out the house, trying my best not to jostle Ash, who’s lying limply in my arms, eyes half closed.

Please be all right, I find myself whispering over and over again.

Aaron pulls the front door shut behind me. His Mustang is parked in my driveway. There’s a grim set to his jaw as he strides swiftly past me to open the passenger door. I climb in carefully and he reaches across me, buckling me in. He glances briefly at Ash and something frightening crosses his face.

Suddenly, it's hard for me to breathe.

"Aaron," is all I can get out.

Behind that one word is a raspy plea, *Please save him.*

"I'll get there as fast as I can," he assures me grimly before closing my door and jogging to the driver's side, sliding in, and starting the car.

"What's wrong with him?" I ask unsteadily.

Aaron doesn't immediately answer. He's concentrating on backing out of my driveway. From some dim part of my brain, I register Mr. Silva's head popping out from behind his hedge, eyes wide at how fast Aaron is reversing.

"Which way?" Aaron asks.

I stare at him numbly, my mind fuzzy with all kinds of terror.

"Tess!" His brusque tone snaps me out of my frightened trance. "I need you to direct me."

"Yes. Okay." I take a deep breath and give him directions to the vet clinic.

He floors the accelerator, following my directions. He's driving fast, but not recklessly.

I know he needs to concentrate, but I have to know. "What's wrong with Ash?"

"I spotted the bouquet of flowers on your dining room table," he says in a grim voice. "There are lilies in the bouquet."

I stare at him in incomprehension.

"Lilies are poisonous to cats."

I absorb his words numbly, trying to make sense of them. "What?"

"All parts of the lily plant are toxic to cats."

"In what way?"

“If they ingest even a small amount, it can cause rapid kidney failure.”

“How do you know this?”

His jaw tightens. “You don’t want to know.”

Fear swells in my chest, pushing on my lungs, making it hard for me to breathe.

As Aaron speeds down the street, I look down at Ash so limp in my arms. I can’t lose him, I just can’t. I’ve had him since he was a kitten. Since Mr. Silva spotted him cowering behind a dumpster, wrapped him up in his jacket, and brought him over to me. One look at that tiny, bedraggled face and those hopeful green eyes staring up at me, and that was it. He was mine.

“Please, hurry!” I beg, even though I realize Aaron can’t possibly drive any faster than he is.

The traffic light in front of us changes to amber. Aaron doesn’t slow down but drives straight through.

“Hang in there, Ash,” I murmur brokenly, tears burning my eyes. “Please hang in there.”

I stare blindly out the windshield. A massive lump of terror has lodged itself in my throat. I’m gulping down breaths.

“Tess, slow down your breathing,” Aaron instructs me in a calm voice.

I realize then that I’m breathing too fast. I make a conscious effort to take in slow and even breaths.

“That’s it.” He spares me a brief, concerned glance, his lips tightening when he glimpses my tears. Looking away, he keeps his eyes fixed on the road.

Not once does he promise me Ash will be okay. I don’t want him making promises he can’t keep, yet I’m also desperate for reassurance, however false.

The emergency clinic is fifteen minutes away. Aaron gets us there in ten.

There are no parking spaces so Aaron double parks right outside the entrance. He puts on his hazards, leaps out the car, and runs around the front to yank open my door.

“Get him inside. I’ll join you as soon as I can.”

I nod, my throat too tight for me to speak. I clamber out the car holding Ash and then I’m rushing through the doors, begging for help. The receptionist and a vet wearing surgical scrubs rush toward me and relieve me of Ash, while I tearfully explain what happened. The vet rushes Ash down the hallway and the kind-faced receptionist steers me to a chair, which I collapse into.

And then Aaron is there, a big, strong presence in the chair next to me.

“He’s with the vet?” he asks.

“Yes. They didn’t say how bad he is.” My voice cracks on the last two words and he places an arm around my shoulders. I lean into him.

“I’m so stupid,” I berate myself. Why didn’t I throw that bouquet away? Why didn’t I know lilies are poisonous to cats? What kind of cat owner am I, anyway?

“Stop blaming yourself,” Aaron says evenly. “You weren’t to know.”

“You knew,” I whisper.

“I know too many things,” he says after a loaded pause. “Trust me, you don’t want what I have in my head.”

I tilt my face to stare up at him. Whatever grisly knowledge he carries around, it’s carved in the bleak lines around his mouth, the haunted shadows in his eyes. For a second, his gaze is unfocused, as though he’s fallen into a dark crevasse of memories, but then he blinks and says softly, “Stay as you are.”

Don’t become like me, are his unspoken words.

I look away.

“From what you’ve told me, Ash is a fighter.”

“He is,” I confirm with a wobbly smile.

“Don’t give up on him.”

“I won’t.” I realize suddenly that in the rush I left my purse and phone behind. “Can I borrow your phone?” I ask. “I left mine at the house.”

“Sure.” Aaron passes me his phone. I open Google and type “cats and lilies.” I receive hundreds of search results, but one phrase grabs my eye: *There is no antidote to lily poisoning.*

I let out a gasp, and Aaron plucks his phone from my grasp. “Okay, we’re not doing that.”

“I have to know what could happen.”

“No, you don’t,” he argues. “That kind of knowledge will only freak you out. He’s in good hands. There’s nothing more you can do for him, except be strong.”

Resentment rises, but I push it down. I know he’s right. “You don’t have to stay. You can go if you need to.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he says quietly.

An hour or so later, the doors open and the vet emerges, glancing around the waiting room.

I jump to my feet and Aaron joins me. His hand settles on my shoulder, firm and comforting. “Breathe,” he says softly.

Before I can ask, the vet tells me, “He’s going to be okay.”

I let out a whimper and sag against Aaron in relief.

“We’ve given Ash activated charcoal to absorb most of the poison,” the vet continues. “We’ve also started IV fluids.”

“What about his kidneys?” Aaron asks, and I’m grateful he’s here to ask the questions my stunned brain is struggling to think of.

“I’ve taken bloodwork to monitor them, but I believe you brought him here in time,” the vet assures us.

“No permanent damage?” I manage to ask.

“If treatment starts within six hours of the cat eating the lily, the prognosis is good.”

He continues to talk, telling us they’ll keep Ash at the clinic for at least forty-eight hours to monitor him, but it seems he’s out of the woods. We can go home.

I’m so exhausted I’m operating on autopilot. I’m only dimly aware of Aaron opening the car door for me, buckling me in before he slides into the driver’s seat.

“You’re crashing from the adrenaline rush,” he says. “Sleep and I’ll wake you when we arrive at your place.”

What I hear is, *You’re safe with me, I’ll take care of you.*

I do feel safe with him.

Without a second thought, I mumble an exhausted “thank you,” close my eyes, and flake out.

A deep voice brings me out of my stupor. I’m aware of cool air on my skin and a warm hand on my shoulder, shaking me gently. “Tess, wake up. You’re home.”

Wearily, I rub the heels of my hands over my sore eyes and exit the car. Aaron walks me to my front door.

“Thank you for being with me today. If it wasn’t for you...” I can’t say out loud the alternative ending.

He pulls me to him and presses a soft kiss to my temple. “I’m glad I was here for the little guy. And for you.”

That gesture, so tender and sweet, and his words, so weighted with meaning, undo me.

“Before I forget.” He slips into my house and emerges with the box of flyers tucked under his arm. “I’ll take care of this. Get some sleep, okay.”

And he climbs into his car and drives away.



[GROUP CHAT]

Sofia: My Thanos! Is he ok?

Kenzie: Poor kitty.

Tess: I checked in with the vet this morning. Ash is doing well.

Sofia: Nothing can keep him down for long.

Kenzie: How are you doing?

Tess: Shaken but fine.

Kenzie: You should have called us.

Tess: It's ok. Aaron was with me.

Sofia: Oh.

Kenzie: Oh.

Sofia: I have to hand it to your cat. He's willing to risk death to bring the two of you together.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

[MESSAGES]

Tess: Google just informed me dolphins have a layer of blubber to help them maintain their body temperature!

Aaron: Step away from Google.

Tess: Are you saying I have a layer of blubber?

Aaron: No.

Tess: Are you sure?

Aaron: Very sure.

Tess: I mean, I could.

Aaron: You don't.

Tess: How do you know?

Aaron: I know.



[MESSAGES]

Tess: This will sound weird but I have food for you.

Aaron: It definitely sounds weird.

Tess: My mom wants to thank you for saving Ash's life last weekend, so she's cooked up a storm.

Aaron: That's nice of her.

Tess: She's also secretly convinced you're not eating in your cabin in the woods.

Aaron: I'm surprisingly competent in the kitchen.

Tess: Can I drop the food off today? Will you be home?

Aaron: I'm pretty much always home on a Sunday.

Tess: Okay, I'll swing by and drop it off.

Aaron: I'll accept the food if you join me for dinner.

Tess: Probably not a good idea.

Aaron: It's just dinner.

Tess: It's never just dinner.

Aaron: It is with me.

Tess: I'll accept if you tell me what you mean by the dolphin emoji.

Aaron: Looks like I'll be eating alone.



When I pull up to Aaron's cabin on the far side of town later that Sunday afternoon, it's pouring with rain. This kind of four-seasons-in-one-day weather is so typical of Brown Oaks. When I left this morning, the sun was shining and now a full-on thunderstorm is wreaking havoc in the sky.

I stare at the sad, stunted oak in Aaron's front yard and let out a sigh. I'll have to make a run for it. My gaze takes in the three large shopping bags laden with heavy casserole dishes on the backseat. Make that two trips since there's enough food here for a battalion. Then I remember I lent my umbrella to Kenzie a few days ago and a groan escapes my lips.

Drawing in a deep breath, I unfold myself from my car and step into the pouring rain. I grab two bags and hurry up Aaron's front porch steps. The door opens and Aaron steps out. He must have heard me pull up.

"Anything else still in the car?" he asks, raising his voice to be heard over the storm.

"One more bag, but I can get it. I'm already soaked."

"I've got it." Grabbing an umbrella, he heads to my car to retrieve the bag.

When he returns, he ushers me inside and I stand on a mat in his entrance hall shivering, water dripping from my hair, pouring down my face. Of course, I'm wearing white linen pants and a cream-colored T-shirt that are soaked through and molded to my skin.

As if he can't help himself, his eyes travel the length of my body before he quickly averts his gaze to some point over my

shoulder.

“I’ll get you a towel,” he offers and disappears down the hallway.

I might be cold and uncomfortable, but that heated look I glimpsed in his eyes has warmth pulsing through my body, my skin still feeling the residual effects of it.

He returns with a large towel, and I wrap it around myself. My teeth start chattering and he frowns.

“You need to get out of your wet clothes.”

“You need a better line than that.”

He gives a slight head shake. “Still sassy even when you’re waterlogged.”

“A serious character flaw, I’m told.”

“I wouldn’t call it a flaw,” he comments with a wry grin. “I’ll find you some clothes to wear while yours are drying.”

“Thanks.” I hug the towel tighter to my body. Please don’t let it be female clothing he just happens to have lying around.

He returns with a blue T-shirt and gray sweatpants that can only be his. “They’ll hang off you,” he says apologetically, “but a belt should help.”

In the guest bathroom, I strip off my wet clothes and change into his. I’m a fan of oversized T-shirts, but his shirt is way too big for me. A brainwave hits, and I gather the fabric in front and tie it so now I have a crop top. The gray sweatpants require some innovative engineering with his belt to keep them from falling around my ankles.

My hair will be a wild mess when it dries, so I use the emergency scrunchie that’s permanently around my wrist to scoop my hair up into a ponytail. A glance in the mirror reveals my mascara has smudged, which I try to fix by wetting bathroom tissue and wiping under my eyes. My cheeks are flushed and my green eyes are wide and overly bright, but I’m not sure I can blame the rain for that. I look fresh-faced and a little vulnerable, and for an instant, even I’m scared for me.

I emerge from the bathroom to find Aaron in the kitchen unpacking the casserole dishes from the bags. His eyes flick to the sliver of stomach I'm showing, and I watch him falter a little. "I like what you've done to my shirt," he murmurs, and I can see him physically willing his eyes back up to my face.

I'm distracted from torturing Aaron further when I spot the cup of hot, strong coffee waiting for me on the kitchen counter. "It's like you're a mind reader," I say approvingly as I settle onto a stool at the kitchen island and wrap my hands around the toasty mug.

Aaron moves deftly around the kitchen. Now that I'm dry and comfortable, I'm able to fully register his appearance. Work Aaron is ridiculously attractive, but Cabin Aaron is on another level. His weekend casual look includes two days' worth of stubble, slightly mussed dark hair, black sweatpants, and a fitted black T-shirt that pops the blue in his eyes.

The heat that flared in his eyes earlier is now rushing through my bloodstream, the jolt of desire so strong my fingers tighten around my mug.

"Your mom is incredible," he says, taking out another dish, this one labeled *shepherd's pie*.

"She is." I don't tell him I shopped for the ingredients and cooked the meals with my mom. Nor do I tell him that every time I look at Ash, I'm so overcome with gratitude I have the urge to thank Aaron in some way. The safest way is to feed him.

"All this will keep me fed for at least two weeks."

"You'll probably want to put some of the food in the freezer."

"I was planning to."

I take a sip of my coffee. "I'll head out as soon as my clothes are dry."

He pauses in his movements. "You're welcome to stay here until the storm passes."

"It's okay. I'll drive slowly."

His eyebrows knit together. “It’s too dangerous to drive in this weather.” I open my mouth to argue, but he adds, “Please stay.”

Only two words, but they somehow pack a punch. There’s a note in his voice that stops the argument in my throat. He truly is worried. And he has a point. The rain is bucketing down. I won’t be able to see even three feet in front of me. It’s safer to wait out the storm here. Besides, there’s something cozy about being trapped in a warm cabin on a rain-soaked night.

“Okay, I’ll stay.”

Relief flashes across his face. He holds up a labeled dish. “You up for red lentil curry later? We’ll call it a late lunch, since dinner, apparently, has connotations.”

I feel a grin break out. “I accept your offer of a late lunch.”

“Red curry it is,” he says, setting the dish aside. “Let’s sit out on the back porch.”

I take my coffee with me and follow him through a living room with dark wood beams, two comfy couches, and a large-screen TV to a covered back porch. Two Adirondack chairs look out onto a fenced backyard. The cabin backs onto woods, and all I glimpse in the distance are huge trees.

After we settle into the chairs, I arch an eyebrow at him. “A rented cabin in the woods?”

“Yup.”

“Why not an apartment in town?”

“Too many people. I like the solitude here.”

“You’re all about security and this feels like the most insecure location.”

He shrugs. “I’m not worried about security.”

“Why? You don’t think this town has any crime? I’ll have you know someone took Mrs. Gardner’s dog only a few weeks ago.” *That someone was her own son, who wanted to show off*

the prized Cavoodle to a date, but Aaron didn't need to know all the details.

“I know this town has crime,” he says.

Now I'm offended on behalf of Brown Oaks. “Hey, it's not a hotbed of—”

“Brown Oaks has people,” he interrupts me evenly. “And where there are people, there's crime. Petty crime, perhaps, but crime nonetheless.”

A valid point. “You're not worried out here?”

“I can handle myself.”

“No offense, but you deal with threats in the—” I wave a hand to indicate the air around us. “—digital world. How will you handle an attacker with a gun?”

He rubs a palm down his jaw. “I have security training in all fields.”

“Self-defense?”

“Yes.”

“Can you handle a gun?”

“Yes.”

My eyes widen. “Do you own a gun?”

“I do.”

We watch the rain for a while and listen to the wind howling through the trees while I absorb his words and the world he moves in.

After a while, he stands and stretches. “You hungry?”

“I am, actually.”

We head back inside. He heats up the curry while I take out the salad my mom and I made. He locates a bottle of red and pours himself a glass. Knowing I'll be driving later, I ask for only half a glass. We plate up and eat at the dining room table, the conversation light and easy.

Toward the end of the meal, I spot his laptop on the dining room server. He must have moved it there so we could eat.

“Were you working when I arrived?”

“Yes.”

“You often work weekends?” I ask.

“Most of the time.”

“Hmm.”

His brows draw together. “Sounds like a fairly judgmental ‘hmm.’”

“No judgment,” I reply, when in actual fact I should don a robe.

“Hmm,” he retaliates, in much the same tone I used.

I take a sip of my wine, savoring it. I enjoy Playful Aaron.

“Looks like the storm’s easing,” he says casually.

“Is that a hint?”

One corner of his mouth goes up. “No.”

Looking at his laptop again, an ingenious idea pops into my head. “I bet I could guess your password.”

His look is confident. “Never.”

“I’m sure I could,” I lie.

“I *know* you couldn’t.”

“Well,” I say, all coy, “I’m going to try to crack it.” And then I reveal my hand. “Of course, I need to ask you some questions.”

His entire body stills, and I have to fight my grin. He no doubt hears the echo of his own words in mine.

“It seems only fair,” I point out. “Since you asked me personal questions in order to guess my password.”

He sips his wine, clearly stalling. “All right,” he agrees, the words dragging out of him. “In the interest of fairness, you

can ask your questions.” He cracks his neck, like he’s preparing to enter a boxing ring.

So as not to scare him off, I start easy, beginning with the same questions he asked me. “What’s your favorite food?”

“Steak.”

“Really?” I wrinkle my nose. “Cabin in the woods? Steak? You’re a walking cliché.”

“Ah, so your questions come with commentary.”

I point my glass at him. “Point taken. I’ll try to refrain.”

The hint of a smile pulls at his lips, as if he knows the impossibility of my loose promise.

“Favorite season?”

“Summer.”

“And here I thought it would be winter.”

He throws his head back and laughs, the rich, deep sound drifting on the air to mingle with the sound of the rain outside. When he laughs, it’s like being handed an unexpected gift. One you appreciate all the more because it’s such a delightful surprise.

“Stereotyping me again, Miller?” he asks, still chuckling.

“It’s just so easy, Sinclair. Favorite color?”

“Green.”

He’s staring straight at me when he says it.

Huh. My eyes are green. Do I read something into it? His expression gives nothing away. I feel the thrum of nervous excitement.

“Favorite memory?” I ask, breaking the silence that’s engulfed us.

Aaron takes his time responding. I see his throat work as he fights whatever emotions are rising up. “A three-day road trip with my sister,” he answers at last.

My chest feels tight. Both our favorite memories include our sisters, both of them lost to us, just in different ways.

It hasn't escaped my attention that there are no pictures of family or friends anywhere in the living room. I wrestle back the words hovering on my tongue: What about your family? Your mysterious sister who I can't mention because it puts a terrible look in your eyes? The parents you never talk about? Your entire backstory I know nothing about?

For a fraction of a second, Aaron's guard slips and I see something hurtle across his face. He shuts it down before I'm able to define it, but it's as though, in that instant, he drew back the curtain to reveal something so raw and agonizing I feel the pain of it even from where I'm sitting.

And I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, I've seen that expression before, on someone else. The knowledge hovers on the edge of my subconscious, a fragment of a memory I can't quite capture.

In an effort to pull us both away from all that sadness, I ask, "Favorite outing for a date?"

He takes another sip of his wine, sets the glass down, but continues to toy with the stem. "How is this relevant?"

How interesting that he recalls the details of our previous exchange as meticulously as I do.

I parrot his answer. "It's relevant."

A slow, lazy smile shapes his lips. A smile that feels like a cool finger tracing a leisurely path down my exposed skin. I shiver.

Softly, he says, "Why don't you ask me the question you're dying to ask?"

I fall into a fleeting moment of speechlessness. It's disturbing how well he knows me. "What happened with Ashley at the restaurant? Why did you break up with her?"

His broad, tanned hand continues to play with his wine glass. I imagine that hand playing with me. With my heart.

“She wanted to take our relationship to the next level. I didn’t,” he replies in an even voice. “She asked if she could move in with me. I said no.” His eyes lock on mine. “It wasn’t my intention to break up with her in public, but she demanded an answer, so I gave her one.”

“And she freaked out.”

“She freaked out,” he confirms. “Unfortunately, you were there to witness it.”

Now I’m the one playing with my wine glass. I still have one burning question—*Was it just her or are you taking no relationships to the next level?*—but even my tactless self acknowledges Aaron’s tolerance can only be pushed so far before he puts up a wall. Unfortunately, my too-personal line of questioning has hit that wall.

“My turn.” There’s a strange tension in his voice. “Did Nathan send you the bouquet of flowers?”

“Yes.”

A pulse jumps in his throat. “Is he trying to get back together with you?”

“Yes.”

He falls silent, as if he’s preparing himself for his next question. “Do you want to get back together with him?”

“No.”

His gaze roams my face, testing my answer, his eyes touching me in a way that makes my skin burn.

“A definite no,” I add quietly.

Without a word, he pushes back his chair and strides around the table to me. Still not saying anything, he reaches for my hand and pulls me to my feet so I’m standing only inches away from him. His thumb traces slow, explosive circles against the sensitive skin of my palm. Heat builds up in my belly, hot and achy.

I hold my breath and close my eyes as his fingers trace the dip of my collarbone. It’s the lightest of touches, but my body

trembles all over. It feels both too much and not enough.

My lips part and my head tilts back as his fingers skim the base of my throat and glide up my neck to cradle my jaw. I hear his breathing quicken.

I open my eyes to see that his are so dark with longing they're almost black. He wants me as intensely as I want him.

He leans in until his mouth is nearly an inch away from mine. But he doesn't kiss me.

Instead, he rests his forehead against mine and I feel a shudder go through him.

"I can't," he whispers. "I won't be your rebound guy."

His words are like a bucket of ice water over me. "What?"

"I won't be the guy you use to get over your ex."

"You're not," I whisper fiercely.

With a hard swallow, he shakes his head, his expression unhappy but resolute. "You were with him for a year. Even if you don't realize it, you're still emotionally recovering from him."

I want so many things from him in this moment, but the last thing I want is his pity.

Snatching my hand out of his grasp, I stumble backward, putting space between us. "You are *not* a rebound guy!" I bite out. "But you certainly are gutless!"

Aaron watches me silently, hands thrust into his pockets, as I collect my stuff. Our dirty plates catch my eye, sorry remnants of a meal that ended on such a disastrous note. I hesitate. The innate sense of manners my mom and grandma drilled into me rears up, prompting me to help clean up. But I angrily bat the urge away. After what he did, he can clear the whole mess up himself.

I march furiously toward his front door, yanking it open.

Aaron follows me outside and I deliver my parting shot as I reach my car. "Do not use me as an excuse because you're too scared to step up to the plate."

I'm too mad and too hurt to think about how weary, how
impossibly sad he looks standing on his front porch watching
me drive away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

[GROUP CHAT]

Sofia: Okay, what's going on between you and Aaron? Because it's like we've had a transfer to the bomb squad. All this tension. Tiptoeing around. Waiting for the explosion.

Kenzie: You were getting along so well with him. Now you're barely speaking.

Sofia: Everything was fine up until the weekend. The two of you were setting the conference room on fire. He saved your cat. And now this?

Kenzie: Did something happen on the weekend?

Sofia: We've given you time. But it's Thursday. We've had to endure three days of suspense. WHAT HAPPENED?

Kenzie: Is there anything you want to tell us? But no pressure.

Sofia: Yes pressure!

Sofia: Do I need to take out a contract on him?

Tess: No!

Sofia: She lives. She breathes. Is she going to talk?

Tess: He's leaving in less than three months. It's for the best. Really.

Kenzie: Oh, Tess.



It's nearly dark by the time I finish a particularly difficult message for a birthday card. Most of the office has cleared out with everyone leaving promptly at five. I don't blame them. No one should be working late on a Friday night. No one except the person who procrastinated all week and who is now playing catch up.

The halls are empty. The only light on is the one in Aaron's office. Which I'm steering clear of. I know he often

works late, which doesn't surprise me. With no friends or family in town, at least none as far as I'm aware of, there's nothing else for him to do but work. I don't even know if he has any hobbies. And I don't particularly care. At least, I'm trying not to particularly care.

The building feels eerie and quiet, and I feel a little depressed thinking of my colleagues relaxing at home with their families or gathering for the traditional Friday after-work drinks at Kelly's. And here I am, chained to my desk by choice.

Something has to change, I think with a sigh.

Sofia and Kenzie are under the impression I'm angry with Aaron. And while some part of me is harboring anger toward him, especially when I think back to Sunday and how desperately I wanted him to kiss me, how he led me on and then pushed me away, my anger is tempered by the fact that I now know what that terrible look in his eyes is and where I've seen it before.

It's the look that survivors of tragedies have. A look of raw, unbearable pain. What they've suffered is too big to be hidden away, and it spills out of their eyes and into whatever's left of their lives.

It's the same look that crept into Kate's eyes after her life detonated in her face and all but broke her spirit.

I can't help but wonder what tragedy Aaron experienced to put that look in his eyes. But there's also a part of me that doesn't want to know. Because if I know, I might start to care, and caring about someone always comes at a cost.

On Sunday, I assumed Aaron was leading me on, and there's a part of me that still thinks that, but I'm starting to suspect not even Aaron knows what he wants. As far as I'm concerned, he can keep his lonely life, nurse his painful secrets, work alone in his office on a Friday night.

After emailing the card off to Enya, who probably won't look at it until Monday, I push back my chair and stand. My joints feel stiff after sitting for so long. When I'm in the zone,

I sometimes forget to move around, and my body pays the price. I go up on my tiptoes, link my fingers, and lift my arms above my head, stretching out the kinks in my back and shoulders. A groan escapes my lips at the sweet feeling of release.

I'm tired and hungry, but at least all my assigned tasks are completed. I deliberately wore my favorite stretchy T-shirt and tight denims today, since I planned on going out after I finished the card, maybe for drinks at Kelly's, but all I'm really in the mood for now is to grab a pizza and head home.

I turn to tidy my desk. That's when I suddenly notice Aaron standing at the entrance to my cubicle. I let out a shriek and press a palm to my thumping heart.

"What the heck, Aaron!" I say when I finally find my voice. "You scared me half to death."

"I need you to stop," he says, his voice sounding strained. He does not look happy.

I frown at him. "Stop what?"

He looks at me for three, maybe four, heartbeats without saying anything. Then he clears his throat and makes an impatient gesture. "Just stop what you're doing."

My confusion mounts. My irritation too. "You'll have to be more specific, Aaron."

His mouth clamps shut, and he looks away. "Never mind."

"No, seriously, what do I have to stop?" I fold my arms, my voice rising. "Breathing? Existing?"

"Forget it." Jaw tight, he marches back to his office.

I stare at his retreating back, too astonished to speak. How dare he? How dare he come in here and demand—? My brain judders to a halt. Demand what, exactly? I still have no idea.

Exasperation sets in. Now there are two annoyed people in an empty building.

I storm down the hallway after him, the air not parting fast enough to accommodate the momentum of my aggravation. I

find him standing in the middle of his office, looking a little lost, as though he has no idea what to do next.

“What exactly is your problem?” I demand.

He looks at me then, his eyes burning into mine. “*You* are my problem, Tess.”

My stomach does a peculiar little flip. This is not the cool, calm Aaron I’m accustomed to. This Aaron radiates heat and hunger. Oddly enough, I’m not at all intimidated. If anything, excitement stirs inside me.

“You better leave,” he says, his voice low and guttural.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll get out of this office now.” His eyes are glittering, and his hands are fisted at his sides, as if he’s barely restraining himself.

I don’t move. My pulse thuds in my ears.

Aaron hasn’t laid a finger on me, but his eyes are touching me everywhere.

Before I lose courage, I ask the question that I somehow *know* is going to tumble us over the edge into the abyss. “What do you want me to stop?”

“I want you to stop scrunching your nose when you’re deep in thought,” he says in a rough voice, taking a sure and measured step toward me. I hold my ground. “I want you to stop stretching so that your shirt rides up.” Another step. “I want you to stop biting your lip when you’re nervous.”

He closes the remaining distance between us until he’s only a breath away.

I stare up at him, my heart hammering in my chest. I can’t move. I can’t speak.

“But most of all,” he says huskily, backing me up against the wall with his hard body, caging me in with his arms on either side of me, “I want you to stop wearing those damn boots.”

I hold his gaze. “Why do you think I wear them?”

“Tess.”

It gives me ridiculous pleasure to hear him say my name like that. Like I’m someone special to him. Like I’m one of those chocolates you keep in your mouth as long as possible to experience maximum pleasure.

A surreal feeling rolls over me as I watch him lower his head and frame my face with his hands.

He stares at me for what feels like the longest minute of my life. On a harsh, defeated exhale, he says, “I knew you were going to be trouble the moment you called me a pretty boy.”

Then he crashes his mouth down on mine.

My lips part and he slides his tongue inside.

The moment I taste him, my knees give out and he has to hold me up. I’m surrounded by his heat and power and strength. It’s intoxicating. All I crave is him.

“I’ve wanted to do this the first time I laid eyes on you,” he murmurs against my lips. “The first time you opened that sassy mouth of yours I wanted to teach it a lesson.”

I arch against him. My words come out all throaty. “Teach me then. Make it a lesson I’ll never forget.”

With a groan, Aaron slants his mouth over mine and takes complete charge of the kiss. Exactly as I imagined he would. What wasn’t in my imagination is how fierce and consuming and desperate the kiss is. And how completely it steals my breath away. I’m throbbing with my need for him.

That night in the bar, when I brought up the KISS principle in what feels like a thousand lifetimes ago, Aaron hadn’t lied. There is nothing simple or straightforward about the way he kisses. The man kisses like it’s his calling. He’s possessive and tender and fierce all at the same time.

“I can’t get enough of you,” he rasps, his fingers threading through my hair and his tongue tangling with mine. I can’t get enough of him either.

One hand moves to the nape of my neck to anchor me, while his other hand slides under the hem of my shirt to press his palm against the small of my bare back, urging my body closer. I let myself melt against him.

“You’re killing me here,” he murmurs.

“What a way to die,” I murmur back, biting his lip and digging my nails into the muscles of his back. He groans into my mouth. The sound of his pleasure drives me insane. Our bodies are pressed so close there’s not an inch of space between us.

I feel singed. And completely overcome.

Somewhere in his office, I hear a phone ringing. It stops and then rings again.

We break apart and stare at one another. We’re both breathing hard.

Aaron makes no move to answer his phone. His hands press against his thighs, as though he’s calling on every ounce of willpower to stop himself from backing me up against the wall and kissing me senseless again.

When he frowns, I say, “Don’t you dare apologize. I’m not sorry this happened.”

He watches me steadily, then he takes my hand and tugs me toward him, pressing a soft kiss to my lips. “I’m not sorry either.”

I close my eyes in relief. “Good.”

His thumb brushes my cheekbone. “I tried to stay away from you, but you’re an impossible woman to stay away from.”

I open my eyes. The intensity in his gaze makes my stomach flutter. “Maybe this was inevitable between us.”

A shadow moves across his face, and I know what he’s going to say. “It’s already August. I’m leaving in two months.”

“I know.” November the third. It’s marked with a thick red circle in the calendar of my brain. I think I’ll forever hate

November because of that date.

“Where do you live?” I’m almost holding my breath because it’s probably the most personal question I’ve ever asked him.

He names a place that’s a three-hour flight away. My heart sinks. We could maybe sustain a relationship for a while, but long-distance doesn’t work forever. Someone or something will eventually have to give. But it feels too soon to talk about any of that.

“This can’t get serious,” he says in a quiet voice.

It’s already serious, I think, but I nod to placate him. And maybe to delude myself.

He offers a small smile of relief. And that’s when I realize he wants to pretend, as much as I do, we can be casual and not hurt one another.

His eyes linger on my lips, and I grab his shirt with both hands and yank him toward me. “Enough talk about tomorrow and the future. Let’s just live for today.”

And I pull his head down to mine and lose myself in our kiss. In our foolish promise that we will not break each other’s hearts.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The whole weekend is ours. I cancel Saturday shopping plans with Sofia and Kenzie and Sunday lunch plans with my family. In response to the concerned messaging blitz, I assure everyone I'm fine, but I tell no one about Aaron. Not yet. I don't want an avid audience while we take the first, stumbling steps toward trying to figure *us* out. And spending an entire weekend together seems the perfect opportunity to do just that.

During that time, I make a concerted effort to switch off my busy, busy mind, always overanalyzing and overcomplicating everything and I simply soak up every second I have with Aaron. By unspoken agreement, knowing we have only two months left before his contract ends, we throw ourselves into this weekend, neither of us holding back. Too much time has been wasted already.

We steer clear of public places and most of our time is spent at Aaron's cabin, away from Mr. Silva's kind but nosy eyes and loose tongue.

On Saturday morning, when I impulsively suggest a hike in the forest, Aaron agrees without hesitation. His response surprises and pleases me so much I launch myself at him with a whoop of excitement, throwing my arms around his neck and wrapping my legs around his waist.

He catches me with a chuckle. "I take it someone loves to hike."

"My favorite pastime. But I haven't gone as much as I would've liked."

"I take it Nathan isn't a hiker?"

I shake my head. "He's more of a gamer."

"Ah."

Such an abundance of information and implication in that one little word. Except I don't want to talk about my ex-boyfriend when my legs are wrapped around my current one.

“So is Aaron Sinclair a hiker?” I ask, raising my eyebrows.

“He is now.”

I giggle and nuzzle his neck. “It’s nice to know you’re not all work and no play.”

“Oh, I’m all about playing with you.”

I trail kisses along his jawline. “I approve of that philosophy.”

His arms tighten around me. “You better stop that, woman, or else this hike is not going to happen.”

Aaron changes into shorts and I take a moment to admire his impressively well-defined legs.

He catches my eyes wandering appreciatively over him and color rises adorably to his cheekbones. “I feel objectified,” he grumbles good-naturedly.

On the hike, I insist he walks ahead of me so I can ogle his legs. In retaliation, when we hit the top of a particularly steep hill, he insists I tie a knot in the front of my T-shirt to expose my stomach.

“That drove me insane when you did it the first time at my house,” he murmurs huskily. “I haven’t looked at my shirt the same way again.”

Without taking my eyes off him, I slowly lift the hem of my T-shirt and take my time tying a simple knot. When I’m done, he makes a hoarse sound and drops to his knees in front of me, gripping my hips and pressing a kiss to my stomach. My hands knot in his hair and I tilt my face to the clear blue sky as heat spreads over my skin.

On Sunday, we make a pancake breakfast together and play cards at the dining room table. Late in the afternoon, we curl up on the couch and watch *The Proposal*, a classic romantic comedy I’ve seen before, but I love it so much I want to watch it again, especially when I discover Aaron hasn’t seen it. I fall asleep somewhere near the end and when I wake up, I’m alone.

“Aaron?” I call out, yawning and stretching, wondering how long I’d slept.

There’s no answer. He’s nowhere in the house so I wander out to the back porch. When I look out on to his backyard, I stop dead, stunned. My hand presses against my chest in an effort to contain the swell of emotion threatening to spill out.

Aaron has laid out picnic blankets on the grass with a vintage picnic basket in the middle. Lit lanterns edge the rugs, with citronella candles scattered between them to keep the mosquitoes away. There are even twinkle lights strung in the bushes. It’s a fairytale wonderland.

“Welcome to a sunset picnic,” he says softly, his eyes holding mine.

My voice comes out in a whisper. “You remembered what I said, what my favorite outing is for a date.”

“Uh huh.”

“And you did all this while I was sleeping?”

“Yes.”

“But how? I mean, all this stuff...” Confusion fills me. Who has lanterns and twinkle lights and a picnic basket just lying around? Particularly in a rented place?

“I’ve been planning this for a while. Ever since you told me.”

I stare at him. “But we weren’t together. I was seeing Nathan.”

Something deep and tender flashes in his eyes. He allows several seconds to slip by before he says quietly, “I knew we were meant to be together.”

The air rushes from my lungs and a strange thrill stirs inside me at the powerful certainty behind his statement.

I descend the porch steps slowly, still absorbing the scene. I’m abruptly so grateful I’m wearing my favorite floral sun dress that matches all the prettiness around me.

I sit next to Aaron on the blanket and tuck my legs beneath me. Then I lean over, frame his face with my hands, and kiss him deeply.

“Thank you for this,” I say against his lips.

He casually brushes a strand of hair away from my face, tucks it behind my ear. The intimacy of the gesture hums through my body.

“You ready to eat?”

I nod.

Aaron opens up the picnic basket. I didn’t think he could surprise me more, but I’m flabbergasted when I see what’s inside. Instead of the usual sandwiches, chips and dips, crackers and cheese, there are Japanese bento boxes, rice paper rolls, spring rolls, Gyozas, and Thai curry puffs.

Seeing my astonishment, Aaron explains that he’d asked his friend, the owner of the Thai food truck, to put together an Asian-themed picnic box of all my favorite foods. His friend had dropped it off this morning. I can’t believe Aaron organized all this for me. I feel...*known*.

Surrounded by his thoughtfulness, I fall just a little bit more.

I really, really like this man.

We eat, occasionally feeding each other some of the finger food. Aaron produces wine and pours us each a glass. And we talk and laugh, and I can’t remember when last I was this happy.

After we’ve eaten our full, Aaron lies on his side, head propped up on his elbow. I’m facing him, mirroring his position.

“You liked me from the start, admit it,” he says.

“What is this, high school?”

“Trust me,” he responds with a gleam in his eyes, “what I’m imagining doing to you is definitely not appropriate for high school.”

I feel my face flush, but I say boldly, “Now I’m interested in whatever it is you’re imagining.”

“It’ll scare you away.”

I look directly into his eyes. “You should know I don’t scare easily.”

His face tightens. Leaning over, he lowers his mouth to hover just above mine. I hold my breath, but he’s in no hurry, seeming to take great pleasure in drawing the moment out. It’s the most exquisite torture.

Desire pools, low and hot, in my belly. “Stop teasing me.”

“I love teasing you.”

There’s only one way to put an end to this.

I put my hand on his shoulder and push him so he’s lying flat. I crawl on top of him and coax his mouth open. I kiss him softly, playfully, pulling him in before I deepen the kiss in a way that lets him know teasing me is a mistake.

He can’t help himself. His hands close on either side of my waist, and he flips us, so he’s the one on top. I smile inwardly. I wondered how long it would take before he had to be in charge.

He strokes my hair back from my face. “I can watch you all day,” he murmurs, and I can hear the smile in his voice. “I love the way you talk, the way your lips move when you enunciate your words. I love how you tip your head back a little when you laugh, exposing your throat.”

My blood sizzles in my veins and I wind my arms around his neck. My fingers trail the hard muscles of his back, his lean waist, the width of his shoulders. We are so close it’s almost as though we share a heartbeat.

Aaron smiles down at me. His smile is wide and unguarded, his face relaxed and happy. My breath catches. I take a mental snapshot of him in this moment, so that whatever happens between us, I’ll always have this picture of him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

[MESSAGES]

Aaron: Looking a little tired today, Miller.

Tess: It's Monday morning, Sinclair.

Aaron: Is that the only reason?

Tess: A certain individual kept me awake for most of the weekend.

Aaron: Are you complaining?

Tess: Not at all.



Mondays are typically my least favorite day of the week. This Monday, however, after my weekend with Aaron, I'm exploding with so much happiness it's like the whole world is coated in glitter. I woke up early this morning and helped Mr. Silva with the weeds in his front garden. I bring Bob a vanilla latte and encourage him to invite Dana around for dinner. I'm smiling at everyone, especially a very grumpy looking Dana, because, come on, no one can be grumpy when I'm this happy.

I barely have time to deposit my purse on my desk before Sofia and Kenzie drag me to an emergency meeting at the vending machine.

"We'll forgive you for dumping us Saturday," Sofia says, "but only if you tell us *everything*."

"You and Aaron," Kenzie breathes, making a heart with her fingers.

My gaze jumps between the two of them. "I don't want anyone to know about us just yet."

They mime locking their lips and throwing the key away.

"But you know it's only a matter of time before Mevia finds out," Sofia reminds me.

I sigh in equal parts frustration and acceptance. "I know."

Kenzie clutches my arm. “Tess, please, the suspense is not good for my blood pressure.”

In the face of their excitement, I surrender and relay the events of the weekend.

“You took him on a hike?” Sofia confirms.

“One of my longer ones.”

“How’d he do?”

“Good.”

Sofia’s eyebrows vault up. “Promising.”

I shoulder bump her. “Mind out of the gutter.”

Then I tell them about Sunday’s backyard picnic.

“That is soooo romantic!” Kenzie gasps. She’s completely swooning over the lengths Aaron went to. The awed look on her face is the look Rapunzel wore in the animated classic *Tangled* when she was let out of the tower and saw the world for the first time.

“Nathan hated hikes and picnics,” Sofia points out with a Freudian head tilt. “Interesting.”

“Yes, Sofia,” I acknowledge with a smile, “you were right. Aaron suits me better.”

She nods in satisfaction while Kenzie peppers me with more questions and dreamy sighs.

Then Sofia asks, “What happens when his contract ends?”

“I’m not sure.”

Kenzie says slowly, “But you have spoken with Aaron about it.”

I fidget with the hem of my blouse. “Not yet.”

They both fall silent.

“I will,” I reply defensively. “But we’re still at the beginning stages. There’s time enough to talk about the future.”



At lunchtime, I'm striding through reception, my focus on the elevator bank, when I hear Mevia call out my name. My steps falter. The plan is to meet Aaron at his friend's food truck in the park. We both agreed to leave the building separately and at different times. I was hoping Mevia would be too busy to notice me, but that was a misguided hope.

"Going out for lunch?" she asks when I reluctantly drag myself over to the reception desk.

"Yep. I'm pretty hungry."

"Do you want company?"

"I'm good, thanks. Just craving a bit of alone time."

"You look really pretty today."

"Thanks, Mev." I clear my throat and smile at her. "Can I get you anything?"

"Yes, please." Mevia props her chin up in one pink-tipped hand. "I'd like all the details of your fling with Hot Guy."

I briefly bow my head. "You know."

"I do. I'm frankly insulted you think I wouldn't know." She taps her fingers on the table's surface. "You suck at deception, Tess."

"So I've been told."

"Anyway, I'm happy for you both," she says briskly. "Although I am surprised Aaron's managed to move past everything that happened to him. There was talk he wouldn't, but for your sake I'm glad he did."

Her words stir a sinking feeling inside me. Hesitantly, I ask, "Move past what?"

For the first time since I've known her, Mevia is thrown. Recovering, she waves away my question. "Oh, don't mind me. No brakes on my mouth or my brain." She glances over my shoulder. "Hey, HG!"

There's a hitch in Aaron's stride when he spots me standing at the reception desk with Mevia. He attempts a

casual wave and a step in the direction of the elevator, but Mevia shakes her head and crooks a *come here* finger at him.

With a resigned set to his shoulders, he heads over to us.

“I take it she knows.”

“Of course, she knows,” Mevia responds archly. “Never doubt it.”

“I can’t help feeling I should hire you.”

“Not a good idea. I’m brilliant, but I’m also super lazy.” Turning serious, she skewers Aaron with a look. “I have to warn you, HG, that I expect you to treat Tess right.”

“I plan to.”

“Good, because I have a friend of a cousin I’ll unleash on you if you hurt her in any way.” She gives us a wide, happy smile. “Now you two lovebirds enjoy your lunch!”



That evening, Aaron pays me a surprise visit at my house after work. “I know we hadn’t planned on seeing each other tonight,” he tells me, stepping into the entrance hall and pulling me into his arms, “but I miss you already.”

I slide my arms over his shirt and entwine them around his neck. I notice he’s wearing his glasses. He must have been looking at his phone outside my house and forgotten to take them off. They match the whole office vibe he’s got going for him.

“I know why you wear a suit to work every day,” I murmur against his lips.

“This should be interesting.”

“It’s your armor,” I tell him. “Your way of keeping people at arm’s length.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Shall I lie on your couch, Doctor Tess?”

“Now you’re hiding behind sarcasm,” I say. “Poor, scared Aaron with all his walls.”

He nips my bottom lip. “Neither my sarcasm nor my suit seem to be working at keeping you away.”

“Your sarcasm I can match. And your suit.” I offer him a sly smile. “That’s easy enough to dispose of.”

I loosen the knot on his tie.

A flush rises on his cheeks. “Uh, we’re in the entryway.”

“Sshh, it’s okay, you’re safe with me,” says Mischievous Tess who’s come out to play.

“I don’t feel very safe.”

I smirk at the pulse beating visibly in his throat. “Nervous?”

“Justifiably so. You’re unpredictable.”

“Just the way you like me.”

“Your cat is staring at me.”

“I like to stare at you too. We both appreciate a fine male form.” I hold his gaze as I tug at his tie and throw it to the floor. Ash immediately pounces on it.

Aaron winces. “That’s an expensive tie.”

“We’ll put it to good use later.”

“Okay, that’s enough of your teasing.” He pushes me against the wall and crushes his mouth to mine, kissing me senseless until our verbal exchange is only a wisp of a memory. Now I’m the one all hot and bothered and achy.

He lifts his head and reaches to take his glasses off, but I bat his hand aside with a grin. “The glasses stay.”

His answering grin is wicked. “So, they do it for you?”

“You have no idea.”



By the time Friday arrives, pretty much everyone knows Aaron and I are seeing one another. They all seem to have accepted it and moved on. Calvin was a little taken aback at first, but Dana soon made him aware that an employer can in

no way ban their staff from having a relationship with a colleague. I suspect Calvin's secretly hoping Aaron will somehow keep me in line.

All I know is, Aaron is my drug. I'm high on the deep timbre of his laugh, the sensation of his oh-so-talented fingers feathering a path across my skin, the way his slow smile ignites a fire deep inside me. The more time I spend with him, the more I crave him. If anything, my addiction is growing, not easing.

Friday night, we're all in Kelly's for after-work drinks. The jokes are flowing along with the alcohol. The bar is so packed it's standing room only. Aaron has his arm around my waist and his hand occasionally drifts up my back to play with the nape of my neck. I love how at ease he is with my friends. While Kenzie is still a little tongue-tied around him, Sofia seems to delight in engaging with Aaron and their back-and-forth banter is entertaining. I sip my drink and let myself enjoy the company of some of my favorite people.

Three-quarters through my first drink, I excuse myself to head to the restroom. As usual, the line outside is long. On the way back, I stop in a dark alcove to adjust my bra. I'm just about to leave when I make out two voices having a heated conversation. I feel a jolt of adrenaline when I recognize the voices as belonging to Aaron and Nathan.

"You and Tess, huh?" I can tell by the way Nathan's slurring his words he's had a little too much to drink. "You won't last. You'll make the same mistake I did."

This is the moment I should either slip away or awkwardly announce my presence, but I do neither. I stay silent and listen, helpless not to, my heart thumping.

"I won't make your mistake," Aaron tells him in a steely voice.

"So, Mister Perfect, you think you're above any mistakes?"

"I'm sure I'll make many of them," Aaron replies. "But sleeping with another woman is not a mistake. You were dumb

enough to throw her away. I'm not that dumb."

I draw in a silent, thrilled breath.

"Tess wants serious, man. That's what she said to me."

Shut up, Nathan, I think, digging my nails into my palm.
Shut up, shut up.

"I wasn't ready to get serious with her," Nathan continues, because the universe is not merciful enough to drop a ceiling slab on his head. "Or at least I thought I wasn't. But what about you? You ready and willing to get serious with her?"

I'm holding my breath, waiting for Aaron to say something, but when there's only silence from him, my stomach dips painfully.

"Thought so." Even from where I'm standing, I can hear the sneer in Nathan's voice.

That's what you get for eavesdropping, Tess Miller.

I don't wait to hear anymore. I return to my friends and when Aaron rejoins us and smiles at me, I smile back and say nothing of what I overheard. And when, sometime later, the ghost of some emotion drifts across his face, casting a shadow over his features, I take another swallow of my drink and I tell myself he'll change his mind. It's not lost on me that I had the exact same assumption about Nathan.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

It's Aaron's first family lunch at my parents' house as my... I'm not certain what to call him. Date? Boyfriend? He seems to be resisting any sort of label.

The moment we step into the garlic-scented kitchen, Grandma grabs Aaron's arm. "Let me show you the G spot."

"Mom," my mother pleads in a faint voice. "Please."

Grandma scowls. "What, Joelle? What's wrong with showing Aaron the special spot I have for Google?"

"Nothing's wrong with that, Grandma," I say hastily. "But you mean G's spot, right?"

"That's what I said," Grandma huffs. "What's wrong with the two of you?"

I glimpse a small smile playing on Aaron's lips. "I would love to see the special place you have for Google," he says to my grandmother, winking at me over his shoulder as he follows her into the dining room.

Dad wanders into the kitchen, scooping up a handful of nuts from the table.

"How's the back?" I ask him.

He grimaces. "Playing up a bit today."

"Want a heat pack?"

"That'll be good. Thanks, Tess."

I'm busy warming up the wheat bag in the microwave when Kate and Lisset arrive. There's a flurry of hugs and Lisset is hopping up and down as she chats excitedly about her school week.

Mom ushers us out the kitchen and we all spill to the back porch, seating ourselves around the large table. Aaron sits opposite me. While I pour Lisset a glass of apple juice, I feel his eyes tracking my every move, full of promises for later.

Heat races along the surface of my skin and my breath catches. His mouth tips up, as if he knows his effect on me.

“You two might want to keep it PG in front of the family,” Kate advises us in a sardonic whisper as she takes a seat next to me.

I straighten guiltily and Aaron snorts out a laugh.

Lisset pats the chair closest to her. “GG, sit next to me!”

“Great grandmother,” I explain, seeing Aaron’s brow lined with confusion.

We help ourselves to the snacks of cheese, olives, and crackers Mom’s placed on the table.

“By the way,” Aaron says to my mom, “thank you for the food you sent over with Tess. It was delicious.”

“It was Tess’s idea,” she informs him with a pleased smile. “She shopped for the ingredients and helped me cook.”

“Really?” Aaron directs a probing glance my way. “She neglected to mention her involvement.”

Kate’s eyebrows flick up at me. “It’s not like you to miss an opportunity for praise.”

I match her raised eyebrows. “It’s not like you to miss an opportunity for a dig.”

“Girls!” Mom barks.

We both jump a little. Kate and I could be in our fifties, and we’d still be the girls who jump at their mother’s bark.

Mom points a warning finger at us. “Behave yourselves.”

“Yes, Mom,” we both mutter.

Lisset takes a gulp of her juice and stares curiously at Aaron. “Are you Auntie’s boyfriend?”

An awkward silence unfurls as everyone’s attention settles on Aaron, awaiting his answer.

“He’s a special friend,” I clarify quickly.

“Like Google and GG?” Lisset asks.

“Google is no one’s friend,” Grandma says darkly.

“Definitely not like that,” I say to Lisset.

“A special friend like Eric and Mom?”

Kate bites her lip as she struggles to keep a straight face. “Eric is special to, um, Eric and horses,” she tells her daughter.

Thankfully, Dad interrupts Lisset’s budding career as a lawyer by offering to show Aaron the squirrel obstacle course he’s rigged up in the garden. Aaron slides back his chair, and Lisset leaps to her feet, asking if she can go with them.

“Sure, pumpkin.” Dad ruffles her hair and the three of them meander off into the garden.

Mom pushes to her feet. “Guess I better put the finishing touches on the lunch.”

“I’ll help,” Kate offers.

I make a move to stand, but Grandma says, “Stay, Tess. I wouldn’t mind a chat.”

Mom assures me she has everything under control, and she and Kate retreat to the kitchen.

“How’s work going?” Grandma asks.

I shrug, take a sip of my water. “Oh, you know.”

“No, I don’t, dear. That’s why I’m asking.”

I think of the years stretching ahead of me, arriving at nine to sit in my cubicle to write messages that will undoubtedly be changed, leaving at five like a good little soldier. I think of the stifled feeling that comes over me sometimes, much like how I was feeling with Nathan.

I trail a finger around the rim of my glass as I form my words. “I thought working at a greeting card company, my days would be like cappuccinos. You know, light and foamy. Warm and satisfying. A sprinkling of chocolate as the finishing touch.” I let out a sigh. “Instead, most of my workdays are like lukewarm flat whites. No hint of sweetness. Just...meh.”

“Why don’t you do something about it then?” Grandma asks.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve made some hard changes already, moving on from Nathan, starting a new relationship.” Grandma’s eyes turn speculative. “Maybe it’s time to do something about your job.”

My inner voice has occasionally whispered this very same idea to me, and I tell my grandmother what I tell that voice, “I’m lucky to have a job. I have benefits, a regular paycheck. My friends are there. Those are all blessings.”

“They are,” she acknowledges. “Doesn’t mean you should be trapped by them.”

“It’s scary to make such a drastic change.”

“It is,” Grandma admits. “But for so long you plodded along in your relationship with Nathan. Don’t do the same with your job.”

My brow crinkles. “Are you saying I should aim higher? Work for one of the large greeting card companies?”

“Not at all.” She’s quiet for a minute as she frames her reply. “Some people would say I lived a little life. I wasn’t a CEO of a large corporation. I didn’t invent anything. I’m not famous on the internet thing.” Her eyes take on a faraway look. “But I lived big in my so-called little life. I raised three children. I loved fiercely and was loved fiercely in return. I’m kind to people and try my best to help where I can. I did change lives, just not in a way that’s celebrated nowadays.” I reach across the table to gently squeeze her frail hand. “The most important part, though, was that I was happy.” She rests her other hand on top of mine and squeezes back. “Choose happiness, my dear. If your work isn’t making you happy, find work that will.”

I’m turning Grandma’s words over in my mind as everyone slowly filters back to the table.

Before retaking his seat, Aaron plants a brief kiss on my lips and whispers, “You okay?”

I smile up at him. “I’m okay.”

Kate and Mom bring out the food, and in between mouthfuls of salad and lasagna and garlic knots, the conversation jumps from Dad’s genius obstacle course to the latest Brown Oaks gossip to the antics of the naughtiest boys in Lisset’s class.

I notice Kate directing one-too-many questioning glances at Aaron. An uneasy feeling slips over me. What is she searching for?

We finish the meal, and Aaron tells my mom it’s the best lasagna he’s ever eaten. Mom beams, basking in the compliment. When he insists on helping her clear the table, I can tell from her misty-eyed expression she’s already picturing the grandchildren she’s hoping Aaron and I will one day produce, a von Trapp family troop of dark-haired, blue-eyed boys and girls cavorting on green hills.

After they disappear into the kitchen, Grandma’s eyes fall to half-mast and Dad and Lisset withdraw to the far end of the table to work on some math problems she’s having trouble grasping.

I turn to Kate. “What’s going on? Why do you keep looking at Aaron?”

Her brow furrows. “It seems serious between the two of you.”

“It is. Or at least I think so. I really like him.”

Her frown deepens. “Why have you told us not to ask him any personal questions?”

“He doesn’t like to talk about his family or his past.”

She stares at me incredulously. “You don’t think that’s a red flag?”

I could point out that she refuses to talk about certain aspects of her past, but I don’t. I don’t want to ruin family lunch.

“Do you know anything about his family?” Kate demands.

“Not much.”

“So it’s ‘serious’—” She does sarcastic air quotes. “—but you hardly know anything about him.”

“He’ll tell me about his family when he’s ready.”

Kate taps her fingers on the table. “How long have you known Aaron?”

At least I’ve confirmed where Lisset’s gleaned her interrogative skills. I let out a heavy sigh. “Since May.”

“It’s September now,” she says slowly, as if I’m just not getting it. “Four months you’ve known him, and yet his family and his past remain a mystery. It’s not right he’s so secretive.”

“We only started dating two weeks ago, Kate,” I say, forcing the words past the knot in my throat. “Give us time.”

Translation: Please don’t do or say something to wreck this for me.

Kate’s face softens. “Your Pollyanna outlook will be your undoing.”

I notice my grandmother sitting silently, watching the two of us. “Grandma, help me out here.”

She regards me for a long moment. Finally, she says, “Kate’s right.”

I blink at her in shock, but I’m unable to follow up with her because Aaron returns with my mom and retakes his seat. My chest is tight wondering how far Kate will push this. She’ll insist she’s doing it out of concern for me, that she has my best interests at heart, but I wish she wouldn’t feel compelled to interfere in my life.

With nerves filling my stomach, I place my napkin on the table and half-rise from my chair. “Mom, lunch was lovely, but I’m pretty tired, so we should probably get going.”

“Noooooo, Auntie Tess!” wails Lisset.

“We haven’t had dessert yet!” Mom interjects, scandalized. “Of course, you can’t leave.”

Aaron stares at me with a quizzical frown, sensing something is off, but clearly conflicted between wanting to appease me and not wanting to be rude to my folks. “Let’s stay for dessert,” he coaxes.

Seeing my mom’s devastated look, I fall back into my seat. This is a battle I have no chance of winning.

Mom places a pecan and pear tart I recognize from Beth’s Bakery on the table. She dishes us each a slice, along with a dollop of whipped cream. Kate, the little she-devil, waits until we’re nicely sweetened up before she turns to Aaron and asks, “What about your parents, Aaron? Do they live nearby?”

Aaron’s fork pauses midair. “No,” he answers shortly.

I glare at her. *Enough.*

Grandma glares at her too. But her glare is more like, *Stop asking yes-or-no questions!*

Unperturbed, and evidently a quick learner, Kate continues, “Where do they live?”

He names a location that, yes, is far from here, information I already knew, but Kate is on a mission to hammer her point home. In anticipation of her next question, Aaron adds, “A fifteen-minute drive from my house.”

“Do you see much of them?”

Aaron’s jaw flexes but still he answers her. “When I’m home, I try to see them as often as I can, at least twice a week.”

I set my fork down a little harder than I intended. “Okay, that’s enough, Kate,” I warn. But what I’m also furtively thinking is, his parents live nice and close and he sees them often. That doesn’t sound like his family possesses a dark underbelly or a deathly hallows secret.

I’m hoping that’s the end of the interrogation, but Aaron and Kate are locked in some silent exchange that has disaster written all over it.

Mom gives a nervous laugh and asks if anyone wants more dessert. No one does. Tension creeps up on the table.

Dad clears his throat. “Kate,” he begins.

That’s when Grandma, à la Brutus, says, “We should meet your folks sometime, Aaron. Would they be interested in coming round for lunch?”

I shoot her a scolding look. She’s shamelessly taking advantage of the fact that when you’re over a certain age you’re liable to get away with so much more.

I glance at Aaron and feel a slow sinking in my stomach. There’s no visible change in his expression, but I know him well enough to glimpse the strained tightening under his skin.

I’m about to haul us out of there when I hear him exhale a resigned breath. He flicks a glance Lisset’s way. Kate, grasping his concern, hustles Lisset to the TV room and settles her in front of a movie.

When Kate returns, Aaron draws in a steady breath and says, “When I was at college, my dad lost everything—our house, their life savings—to a scammer. The devastation and embarrassment nearly broke him. He was never the same after that and some of his brokenness bled over to my mom.”

“Is that why you work in cybersecurity?” I ask, suddenly understanding so much.

“Yes.”

Shame washes through me when I think of my flippancy toward Aaron’s security concerns. His phishing tests were a game to me. I didn’t take them seriously. Now I’m hit with the revelation that phishing scams have ruined real people’s lives. People like Aaron’s parents.

“I’m sorry to hear about your folks, Aaron,” Dad says, sympathy etched in the lines across his face.

Aaron blinks at the table. “Thank you.”

“But that’s not everything, is it?” Grandma says softly.

“No, it isn’t.” Aaron’s face is carefully blank, but I suspect it’s so blank because he’s feeling so much and trying to keep it contained. I reach across the table and take his hand because it

feels like the next story is going to be worse than the first and I can't bear not to touch him while he dredges it up.

"I had a twin sister," he says.

And then he tells us how, five years ago, his adventurous and fun-loving sister climbed Mount Everest but never made it back down. She froze to death and ended up in Rainbow Valley, her bright red jacket joining the other colorful jackets of climbers who'd died climbing the treacherous slopes. There are over two hundred bodies there, Aaron tells us, and his sister is one of them, the multicolored jackets belonging to the perfectly preserved bodies giving the place the incongruous name of Rainbow Valley.

"I don't understand," Mom says, lowering her voice to a whisper, her hand pressed to her chest in horrified disbelief. "Your sister's body is still up there?"

Aaron nods. "It's too dangerous to retrieve the bodies so that's where they remain." And he tells us that that was the final straw for his parents. It destroyed them that they couldn't have a proper burial for their only daughter. "They live in a nursing home now," he says, "and they no longer communicate with anyone. I sit with them and hold their hands."

We are all stunned into silence. My throat swells with unshed tears for what he's endured. What his poor parents, now shells of their former selves, have endured.

But my family aren't gawkers in the face of someone else's tragedy. And they don't revel in salacious details.

Dad gets to his feet and rests a hand on Aaron's shoulder. "I'm so sorry, son," he says simply.

It's the perfect thing to say. With those four words, my dad is letting Aaron know he still has family left. That we're his family now.

Aaron nods, swallowing hard.

"I think it's time to watch some *Friends*," Dad announces.

We all stand. Mom and Grandma hug Aaron, firm, comforting hugs to show their support. Even Kate, who is in no way a hugger, embraces him with a slightly stricken, guilty look on her face.

I wait until last because I know that when I do hug him, I won't want to let go. Wrapping my arms around him, I rest my head against his chest and whisper, "I'm so very, very sorry."

"I know."

"I wish you never had to experience all that."

"So do I."

"You should have told me."

"It's such a hard thing to tell," he says after a moment. "And I didn't want you to pity me."

"I don't."

We keep our arms around one another as we wander into the TV room and settle on the couch, everyone else finding their spots. Kate and Lisset leave, since Lisset has school on Monday.

My dad plays one of his favorite *Friends* episodes. I keep my eyes on the screen, but I'm acutely aware of Aaron sitting next to me, his thigh pressed against mine, his body still tense. I take his hand and squeeze it, and he squeezes back.

I wish he'd told me this before. I still don't understand why he hadn't wanted to tell me. I realize it's not something you haul out to fill in conversational gaps, but still. We'd been dating for two weeks. I'd dropped a few hints about his family. Why couldn't he have told me then?

I shrug it away. I know now, I tell myself.

Except I can't help feeling there's still more to his story. More he hasn't disclosed.

Only I don't want to dwell on that now because the most beautiful thing has happened: Aaron is laughing. He started off with a small smile, moved to a grin, then graduated to a

chuckle. We're now three episodes in and Aaron's whole body is vibrating with the force of his laughter.

I am suddenly so thankful for my genius dad and the comedic genius that is *Friends*. How wonderful to be able to escape your life for a little while and immerse yourself in another world, even if it's only on the screen.

I'm watching the show and laughing at the appropriate moments, but I'm overcome with the staggering realization that Aaron has slowly and surely hacked his way into my heart by the stealthiest means possible. By simply being himself.

And then I surrender to an inescapable and breathtaking truth: I am in love with this beautiful, broken man.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

[MESSAGES]

Kate: Aaron seems like a nice guy, but he's going to break your heart.

Tess: He is a nice guy and he won't.

Kate: Now look who's lying to herself.

Tess: Give him a break. Look what happened to him.

Kate: You don't walk away from all that unscathed.

Tess: I guess you're speaking from experience.



Aaron grabs my hand, entwining his fingers in mine. "There's no need to be nervous."

"It's my first time."

"You'll be fine," he assures me. "You just need to relax."

"I can't relax!"

"Yes, you can," he says soothingly. "It'll be fun. And it'll be over before you know it."

I press a hand to my stomach to calm the flutterings there. "What if they don't like me?"

Aaron abruptly stops walking, requiring me to stop too. He places his hands on my shoulders and turns me to face him. Then, in the middle of the sidewalk, in a pretty town called Barracat, right in front of everyone, he leans down and kisses me, a deep, sensual kiss that drives out my nerves and stirs a new kind of fluttering inside me. Which, I guess, is his objective.

Lifting his head, he murmurs, "Of course they'll like you. Everyone likes you."

"You didn't at first."

He grins. “Only because I was fighting my attraction to you.”

“This is my first time meeting your friends,” I say. “I want to make a good impression.”

“You will. Lucas and Nina are just ordinary people, super easy to get along with.”

Ordinary people? Not quite. Lucas, apparently, is a bodyguard—apologies, security agent—who’s been on the protection detail of various politicians and big-name celebrities. Nina is the owner of Soul Fare, a wildly successful restaurant with a menu that’s won a slew of awards. That’s where we’re meeting them for lunch and, despite Aaron’s assurances, I’m still intimidated.

Two weeks have passed since the lunch at my parents’ house, where we learned the awful details of what happened to Aaron’s parents and sister. Since then, I’ve observed a change in him, almost as though something has loosened up inside him. Four days ago, he asked if I wanted to join him for lunch on Saturday to meet Lucas, a close friend he used to work with in the security field, and Nina, Lucas’s wife. I said yes, of course, trying not to show my shock and pleasure at the invitation.

It’s the first time Aaron’s invited me into his life, to meet people from his past.

It feels like a big step. It *is* a big step.

We drove for an hour to get to Barracat, a quaint town where Soul Fare is located.

“You look amazing,” Aaron says now, his gaze roaming admiringly down my body, “but that dress is pure torture.”

I wanted a summery but sophisticated look. The green floral midi dress with tie straps gives off casual, summer vibes and highlights my green eyes. I’m hopefully pulling off the sophisticated part with my hair, which I opted to straighten, and which now hangs like a silky caramel curtain down my back.

Aaron, though, is not fully appreciating my hair, because he's still caught up in the wonder that is my dress. "One tug on those straps and the entire dress falls down," he points out with a how-can-you-do-this-to-me groan.

"No tugging then," I reply cheekily.

"There'll be tugging later," he promises under his breath.

As we step through the glass door of Soul Fare, Aaron places his hand on the small of my back and everything inside me melts. If ever there's a gesture designed to undo me, it's that one. So intimate and protective and possessive, all at once.

A beautiful woman with dark hair, dark eyes, and a ready smile greets us as soon as we enter. "Aaron!"

"Hey, Nina."

"It's been far too long," she gently scolds him, giving him a hug. "What's kept you away? The awful jokes Lucas feels compelled to pass on?"

"Watch it, wife," growls a deep male voice belonging to a man I can only assume is Lucas. He possesses the same tall, wide-shouldered build as Aaron, but his eyes are green and his hair a rich brown.

"Hey, buddy," Aaron greets him, doing the hearty back slap men do.

Lucas, however, doesn't appear satisfied with that greeting, because he pulls Aaron in for a prolonged hug, his eyes concerned. "Good to see you, man. It's been a while."

"It has," Aaron agrees without elaborating.

How interesting that both Lucas and Nina have mentioned Aaron hasn't visited in a while. I can see their point. He works only an hour's drive away and his weekends are free. Well, they were, I amend. Now I happily occupy most of them.

"You must be Tess," Nina says warmly, turning her attention to me. Without hesitation, she steps forward to offer me a brief but welcoming embrace.

Yes, she's a hugger. My favorite kind of person. I only have to look at her to sense a kindred spirit. She's wearing a dusky pink, belted dress with tulip sleeves, chunky jewelry, and vibrant lipstick. Everything about her—from her dress to her smile to the mischievous light in her eyes—radiates color and joy and fun.

“You two together are going to be trouble,” Aaron declares with a small head shake.

“Nina's always been trouble,” Lucas says. He holds out his hand to me and I shake it. “Nice to meet you, Tess. Aaron hasn't told us much, but I did hear you're decorating his office.”

I let out a laugh. “It needs it.”

“I tackled Lucas's home office,” Nina says. “You'd swear he was an aspiring chess grandmaster with the black and white vibe he had going there.”

“Aaron's office is the same,” I say. “My soul stages an uprising every time I step into it.”

Aaron and Lucas share a pained glance. “Told you,” Aaron says ruefully.

“Careful,” I warn him with a playful chest poke. “I might be tempted to buy you one of those solar powered dancing flowers to put on your car dashboard.”

“Please, no,” Aaron begs on a shudder. “They give me the creeps.”

Nina links her arm in mine. “Ooooh, I like you already.”

We sit at a private table at the back of the restaurant. My gaze sweeps Soul Fare's interior, admiring the abundance of natural light, rich wood, and splashes of greenery. “Your restaurant is beautiful.”

“Thank you,” Nina replies. “It was old-fashioned and dreary looking when I first started working here.”

“You've done wonders. It feels so warm and welcoming.”

“It was an uphill battle,” Nina admits. “The staff hated me when I first arrived.”

I gape at her. “That’s so hard to believe.”

“I had to work really hard to bring them around.”

“She’s captured the heart of everyone here, including mine,” Lucas says, lifting her hand to his lips and pressing a tender kiss there.

My chest cinches at the devoted look in his eyes. Maybe one day Aaron will look at me like that, as though I’m his world and he can’t imagine living in any other one.

I discover that Lucas and Nina have a toddler, a dark-haired mini Lucas, and they’ve left him in the care of her brother and his wife.

“My little terror is busy ransacking Ryan’s premium Lego collection,” Nina says with satisfaction. “My brother will have spent the last hour chasing Michael around the house. Suitable punishment for making me drink that vile charcoal latte.”

“Fortunately, I managed to escape that one,” Lucas says in relief.

At my confused look, Aaron explains, “The three of them have this crazy drink dare thing going on.” He shakes his head. “I still can’t believe you guys haven’t dropped it.”

“Never,” Nina says, looking shocked he would even suggest it.

“When I’m eighty,” Lucas grumbles, “she’ll be daring me to drink prune juice.”

“When you’re eighty,” Nina retorts, “you’ll be begging me for prune juice.”

“What’ll everyone have to drink?” asks a dark-haired, elegant server I soon discover is named Jeena.

An impish look crosses Nina’s face. “You game?” she asks me.

“Hey, don’t involve Tess in your weird dares,” Aaron protests.

“Bring it on,” I say to Nina, who cheers and gives me an excited fist bump. I glimpse Jeena rolling her eyes, but she’s smiling, as though she’s used to these antics.

“You don’t have to,” Aaron says with a small frown.

“Oh, but I want to.” Also, I’m not one to back away from a challenge (unless it involves running), and I want to impress Aaron’s friends, a truth I admit only to myself.

Nina raises her eyebrows at Lucas. “You know the drill, bodyguard.”

He winces. “You test my patience, wife, with that name.”

“Yeah, yeah, punish me later,” Nina says, not at all intimidated. “You in?”

“Of course, I’m in,” Lucas says on a long-suffering sigh. “Aaron?”

“Not a chance. Someone has to be the grown-up here.”

Jeena calls the barista over, a sweet guy named Frankie with an adorable Australian accent, and there ensues some serious consultation involving experimental lattes. Frankie is almost salivating with excitement and I’m becoming increasingly nervous as the conversation progresses. At last, much to my horror, the drink chosen is a mushroom latte, which Frankie will put together.

I swallow. “First time making it?”

“Yeah,” Frankie answers cheerfully. “Should be interesting.”

Aaron pats my hand. “Don’t worry, I’ll hold your hair while you puke.”

“Something Nina and I have experience in,” Lucas says, and they exchange a smile full of shared secrets that, frankly, I don’t want to know about, not if it involves puking.

After they’re gone, Nina turns to Aaron. “What attracted you to Tess?” she asks, not wasting time and not mincing her words.

I find myself leaning forward slightly, wanting to hear his answer as eagerly as Nina does.

Aaron leans back in his chair and folds his arms across his chest. “I knew I wouldn’t escape this interrogation.”

Lucas holds up his hands. “Sorry, man, I can’t stop her.”

“This is one question I don’t mind answering,” Aaron says. His eyes hold mine and he says softly, “Tess reminds me of my favorite animal—dolphins. They’re beautiful creatures, friendly, funny, cheeky, and entirely unpredictable. Everyone loves them. They have their pod, which Tess has with her family and friends, and they’re fiercely loyal.” He pauses. “And you enjoy spending time in their company.”

Tears prick my eyes. At last, I know the meaning behind his dolphin emoji.

“So, it’s not the blubber,” I say on a watery laugh.

“It was never the blubber.”

“You could’ve just told me all that.”

“Dolphins are also curious creatures, and I wanted to have some fun with that.”

“You two have inside jokes already,” Nina says, looking a little tearful herself.

Aaron leans in close. “Look away, children,” he orders Lucas and Nina, and then he captures my mouth with his.

In the tender thrill of the moment, I forget about everything except the warm press of his lips against mine.

Except, when the kiss ends, all I can think is, I’m falling so hard for this man. My desperate hope is for a cushioned landing, but when I remember that Aaron’s leaving in just over a month’s time, a strange pang fills me. He has a life in another town, with parents who need him. We’re both ignoring this reality for the moment, but the date of his departure is looming closer and closer, and I feel a wrenching in my chest at the thought of having to say goodbye to him.

I don't know, maybe we can work something out. He can move to Brown Oaks. Or I can move (away from my family and friends and work) and relocate to where he is.

That's when it hits me. While I'm planning our future, Aaron hasn't even told me he loves me.

Jeena arrives with our mushroom lattes, pulling me from the disturbing direction of my thoughts. I smile my thanks, but then I spot the weird bubbles on top of the latte, and I remember.

"Aaron, look away," I say urgently.

"What?" But he trusts me enough to quickly avert his head. Both Lucas and Nina, realizing immediately the problem, cover their glasses with their palms.

"You know about Aaron's trypophobia," Nina says wonderingly. "He makes it a point not to tell anyone."

I put a hand on Aaron's arm. "You okay?"

"Yeah, you warned me in time," he answers, still keeping his face averted. "Thanks, sweetheart."

I can feel my eyes widen and my heart galloping at the endearment. Does he realize what he said?

"Let's get this over with," Lucas advises. "For Aaron's sake, as well as ours."

"On the count of three," Nina instructs.

I scrunch up my face and drink. There's no way to disguise that you're drinking mushrooms, but it's not as bad as I feared, testimony to Frankie's barista skills.

When Aaron stands and heads to the restroom, Nina gives Lucas a look.

"Really?" he asks.

"Really," she replies sweetly.

With a heavy sigh, he pushes to his feet and wanders over to Frankie, leaving us alone.

“It makes my heart glad to see Aaron so happy,” Nina says. “You like him?”

“I do.”

“A lot?”

Wow, she wastes no time. “Yes,” I admit softly, “I like him a lot.”

“Good. Because I see the way Aaron looks at you.”

“How?”

“Like a man who has definitely fallen for you.”

A frisson of excitement darts through me. “You can tell?”

“Trust me, I recognize that look. I saw it in the mirror every day for years when I was pining for Lucas.”

I recall the way Lucas couldn't take his eyes off Nina. “Years?”

“Yep.”

“It's hard to believe Lucas didn't return your feelings for so long. He's so in love with you now.”

“Yeah, it took a while for his brain to catch up with his heart.”

“Are you talking about me?” Lucas asks as he slips back into his seat. “It better be good things.”

“I'm telling Tess how blind you were for all those years.”

Lucas winces. “Please don't remind me. If ever I get a do-over of my life, that's where I'll start.”

Aaron takes his seat. “All those years of not seeing what was right in front of you all along.”

“I'm still making it up to her,” Lucas says, squeezing Nina's hand.

“Foot rubs every night,” she whispers to me.

Just then, a tall man wearing a white chef's jacket and a black bandana arrives at our table. Nina introduces him as

Ano, the head chef at Soul Fare. He looks intimidating, but his voice is gentle and mellifluous as he recites the specials.

“Surprise us, Ano,” Nina suggests.

“Happy to,” the chef says. “I’m assuming no mushroom dishes?”

“No!” we all exclaim.

He lets loose with a deep rumble of a laugh and disappears into the kitchen.

It’s clear to me the respect Nina commands from her staff and the affection they have for her. What a wonderful, tight-knit work family.

“One piece of advice,” Nina tells me. “Choose your friends wisely.”

I nod. “I have great friends.”

“Good. I had a toxic friendship I held onto for far too long. Kayla really helped me move on from that.”

“Kayla?” I question. “Is she a friend of yours?”

I don’t know what I’ve said, but the atmosphere at the table is suddenly thick with tension.

I look over at Aaron and I see he is frozen, an awful look on his face.

Nina, seeming to realize her mistake, freezes too. We’ve become a bizarre table of frozen people, except for Lucas, who turns to Aaron and asks evenly, “You haven’t told Tess?”

Aaron shakes his head wordlessly.

“I’m sorry,” Nina whispers, looking so stricken even I want to comfort her.

“Well, it’s out there now,” Lucas says, so practical and calm.

Aaron glances over at Nina and releases a harsh breath. It’s obvious he’s upset. Lucas must see it too because he stiffens and I realize that wife always trumps friend, and he’ll do what he needs to in order to protect Nina from Aaron’s anger.

Fear starts to bubble up, but when I look more closely at Aaron I glimpse anguish, not anger, engraved on his face.

“It’s okay,” he says to Nina, who still looks upset.

Into the strained silence, I ask the question. “Who is Kayla?”

A long pause. Aaron’s shoulders sink. “Kayla was my fiancée,” he says, his voice hollow. “She was on her way to a bridal store to try on wedding dresses. A truck went through a red light and smashed into her car.” He swallows, visibly collecting himself. “She was killed instantly.”

I feel the blood drain from my face. My next question comes out in a whisper. “When was this?”

“Three years ago.”

I’m reeling. Sofia was right. There was a fiancée.

The food arrives and we eat. Or try to. I can only pick at my risotto, even though it tastes delicious. Aaron’s face and his movements are stiff with strain. I can feel him looking at me, but I avoid eye contact, my thoughts tumbling over one another, my stomach churning with confusion.

We don’t touch one another. We need to be alone, but we’re not.

Lucas and Nina make a valiant attempt to lighten the atmosphere, but it’s too far gone to be recovered. The rest of the lunch is a write-off, and we all know it. The meal is finished quickly, and I head to the restroom before the drive back. Nina accompanies me.

“I’m sorry for bringing Kayla up,” she says, wringing her hands together. “I assumed you knew.”

“I didn’t know.”

Almost tentatively, she asks, “But you know about his parents and sister?”

I nod. “He told me a few weeks ago. He was kind of pushed into revealing it.”

By unspoken agreement, we stop in a quiet alcove outside the restroom.

“Aaron hates talking about his past,” she says after a moment. “Especially Kayla.”

“I’m still taking it in,” I confess in disbelief. “To be honest, I feel hurt he didn’t tell me.”

Nina’s eyes fill. “He’s been through so much heartbreak.”

“I can’t believe he’s had so many awful things happen to him.” My voice is shaking. I can’t even imagine what the last five years have been like for Aaron.

Nina bites her lip. “Aaron believes tragedy follows him around. That it has something to do with him.”

“That’s silly.”

“It is,” she says carefully. “But tragedy can affect people in different ways, and this is how it’s affected him.”

I frown. Nina’s trying to tell me something, but it’s clear she doesn’t want to betray Aaron’s confidence and say too much.

“Just be careful,” she says, closing the discussion.

At first, I think she’s warning me to be careful with Aaron, warning me not to hurt him because he’s been through so much.

Except, judging from her expression, I have the strangest feeling it’s not Aaron she’s trying to protect. It’s me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Aaron maintains a careful silence while we walk through the parking lot. When we're finally alone in the car, driving back to Brown Oaks, he says in a low voice, "You're mad at me."

I let my head fall back as I blink up at the roof of his car. "Honestly, I don't know what I'm feeling. I'm so mixed up. Yes, I'm a little angry. It seems like you're keeping so many secrets from me that I can't help wondering what else you're hiding." I let out an unsteady sigh. "But mostly I'm sad."

"Sad," he repeats flatly.

"Yes, *sad*." I look over at him. "For you. For what you've had to go through."

His hands clench on the wheel. "This is why I didn't want you to know about Kayla," he says. "I don't want you feeling sorry for me. I don't want to be an object of pity in your eyes."

"So, your solution was to keep it from me? For how long?"

He's quiet, jaw taut, looking fixedly ahead.

Then I get it. In a soft, bitter voice, I answer my own question. "You were never going to tell me. You were just going to keep it from me and leave." That, I realize, is Aaron's precious, insulating strategy, how he stops himself from getting too close. He simply steps away to create a necessary distance. "And you leave in just over a month." My voice is mocking, slightly cruel. "You were so close to keeping your secret."

"It's not like that, Tess."

I turn in my seat to face him, staring at his side profile, which looks both grim and terribly vulnerable in the late-afternoon light. "What is it like, Aaron? Because I really want to know. I'm tired of being kept in the dark."

"I meant to stay away from you," he tells me gruffly, his grip on the steering wheel tightening. "I tried."

My eyes widen as comprehension dawns. “Is this why you move around all the time? Why you only take on short-term contracts? So you don’t get close to anyone?”

He doesn’t reply, but his silence is answer enough.

My mind flashes to the very public scene in the restaurant when Aaron shut down his girlfriend’s proposal to move in with him. “I’m just another Ashley, aren’t I?” I say dully.

“You are not another Ashley!”

His voice is fierce, but I’m not listening to him. The realization that I’m probably one of the many faceless, forgotten women he’s left scattered across the country settles like a cold, hard stone in my chest, blocking out anything else.

“At least you won’t have to worry about me creating a scene,” I whisper. “It looks like our ending will be just the two of us alone in a car, all discreet and civilized.”

“You think I’m a player?” he asks, incredulity sharpening his tone.

“I don’t know what to think.”

In a low, rough voice, he says, “We are not doing this while I’m driving, where I can’t even look at you.” With a quick movement, he makes an abrupt left into a sideroad and pulls over, cutting the engine. He twists in his seat to face me. “You are *not* Ashley. Not by a long shot. The way I felt about her doesn’t even come close to what I feel for you.”

You could drive a truck through that opening. The obvious question—*how do you feel about me?*—hovers between us. I can’t ask it. Not yet. Not when I’m feeling so exposed and vulnerable. And I need to confirm something else first.

I stare straight into his eyes. “Do you deliberately take on short-term contracts so you don’t form attachments?”

He lets a beat pass. “Yes.”

I look down at my hands twisted together in my lap. They’re as twisted as my emotions. I take in a shaky breath. I can’t look at him when I ask my next question. “Is it because you haven’t gotten over her, the woman who was your fiancée,

Kayla?” I force my next words out past the tightness in my throat. “I guess, what I’m asking is, are you still in love with her?”

“Tess, look at me.”

I shake my head, still staring into my lap.

“Please.”

I lift my head, my eyes meeting his.

“I want to come clean with you. And I want to apologize,” he tells me, regret bleeding from his voice. “I should have been honest with you.” He squares his shoulders, as though preparing himself for his next words. “Kayla and I were a whirlwind romance. We’d known each other for only eight months when I asked her to marry me. She died two weeks later.” He stops for a moment, then carries on. “I think Kayla will always hold a piece of my heart and I want to be honest with you about that. But I’m not still in love with her. Because, even though I’m fighting it with every fiber of my being, I’m falling in love with you.”

I am utterly and completely still. I think the only part of me that is in motion is my pulse, which is going crazy.

I open my mouth, but he shakes his head. “I’m not finished. I don’t want to be in love with you. Not at all. It goes against my better judgment, against all the policies I’ve put in place for my life.”

“Well, I’m in love with you too,” I tell him. “And I don’t want to love you either. You’re too secretive. Your life is too complicated.” And I’m truly terrified you’re going to break my heart.

Without taking his eyes off me, he reaches across the center console and gathers my hands in his. His smile holds a bleak edge, but he doesn’t let go of my hands. “As declarations of love go, ours takes the cake.”

I swallow. “The way you live now, jumping from place to place, not forming attachments, it’s not a life you’re living. It’s a shadow of a life.”

It's not the kind of life I want to be living with you is the subtext here.

And then, so very casually, he drops his bomb. "But at least the people around me get to live."

Alarm sets in. "I don't understand. What are you saying?"

He watches me for a long moment. "There's something about me," he says, his voice ragged. "People die around me. My sister. My fiancée." He lets go of my hands, drags his palms down his face. "My parents are alive, or at least their bodies are, but their minds are gone. I only ever owned one pet, a cat, and I couldn't keep even her alive."

I bite my lip in sudden understanding. "She died of lily poisoning, didn't she? That's why you knew how to help Ash."

"Yes."

I'm thinking frantically, trying to gather my scattered thoughts. "You said Lucas and Nina are your closest friends?"

"Yes."

"Nothing's happened to them," I point out. "They're still alive."

His gaze pins me. "Because I purposefully keep my distance from them. I stay away to protect them and that's why they're still alive."

"No, you can't think that." My throat is raw with pain for him. "You're not, like, Doctor Death or something. You're not cursed." When his face tightens, I press, "Is that what you believe? That you're somehow cursed?"

It takes him a while to answer. "Yes." At my indrawn breath, he says in a low voice, "Not in the sense that someone's placed a curse on me, just...generally. It's like there's a darkness around me that consumes whomever I'm close to."

I stare at him. The torment in his eyes. The pain etched in the lines bracketing his mouth. The soul-deep belief he holds that whoever he loves will die.

Fear presses itself against me, whispering insidiously in my ear that I will never reach him. Never convince him to take a chance on us.

No, I won't believe that. I can't.

How is one person so touched by tragedy?

With a fierceness that steals my breath, I wish I'd known Aaron before life ruined him. Before tragedy hollowed him out and snatched away his hope of love and happiness.

"You can't blame yourself. These things happen." It's the lamest explanation and I feel ashamed I had the gall to even offer it to him, but what do you say to a man who believes that anyone he loves will be taken from him? Who believes that if we're in a serious relationship he's handing me a death sentence?

Life doesn't work like that.

I sit for a moment considering my response. At last, I say in a hushed voice, "Even if something happens to me, I'd rather have a year with you than nothing."

He shakes his head, rejecting my declaration. "I want you to live a rich, full life," he says, the words sounding as though they're torn from his throat. "I want you to grow old and be happy and play with your grandchildren."

I close my eyes against the pain of his statement. The irony. He thinks that by leaving me he's giving me all that, but he doesn't grasp how bleak life will be without him. He doesn't understand that I'll spend the rest of my life living in the shadow of a great and consuming love.

I know, with every fiber of my being, Aaron is my soulmate, the one who completes me.

"I love you," I say.

"I love you too. And I never thought I'd love someone that way again."

He leans over the console and cradles my face in his palms, his thumbs gently stroking my cheekbones. He's looking at me like he's trying to memorize every detail of my

face. While it makes me feel seen and special, it also leaves me worried. You only try to memorize something if you think you're leaving.

Lowering his head, he touches his lips to mine, so soft and light. I close my eyes as he deepens the kiss, like he can't get enough of me. I match him hungrily because I can't get enough of him either.

Only a fool would fall for someone like him. Broken. Damaged. Off limits.

Looks like I'm the biggest fool of all.



In the days and weeks that follow, as we inch closer and closer to November when Aaron's contract ends, my feelings for him grow deeper, not less. I'm hopeless at protecting myself. Whenever I'm in his presence, I feel an invisible tug, my eyes seeking him out, my body turning to him like a plant straining for the sun.

We're in a strange kind of blissful limbo, avoiding any discussions that involve the past or the future. We are two people living manically and desperately in the present.

I know Aaron has the capacity to love big. In truth, I think that's why he hurts so much. Because he had loved so hard and now he's left with a heart held together with duct tape. And the tape is peeling.

I want that big, beautiful heart. I want to tape up whatever needs taping to prevent any pieces from tearing away. I want to somehow make that heart whole again.

When I tell Grandma this at our Tuesday evening dinner, she looks at me with compassion shining out of her eyes and says gently, "It sounds like Aaron needs saving from himself, but you can't do the saving, honey. You can throw him a life preserver, but he's the one who has to grab it and hold on. He's the one who has to have the strength and the will to pull himself out of the water and into the boat."

CHAPTER THIRTY

On a Friday night, with a little over a week left in October, I open my front door and make my way down the hallway to find Aaron sitting in my living room in the dark, holding a tumbler of what smells like whiskey, staring at a blank wall. It's no surprise to see him in my house. I've given him a key and he sometimes lets himself in to wait for me, especially if I'm working late.

What's different about this time, though, is the defeated slump to his posture that immediately tells me something is wrong.

He must hear me approach, but he doesn't turn to look at me. He tips his head back and drains the whiskey.

With dread radiating through my body, I deposit my purse on the kitchen island, draw in a jagged breath, and switch on a table lamp. The room is thrown into shadows. Ash is nowhere to be seen. He probably senses what's coming and is hiding.

"Hey, what's going on?" I ask Aaron, my voice trembling. "Why are you sitting in the dark?"

Looking up, he gestures to the couch opposite him. "Sit, Tess. Please."

In the half light of the room, the air is so thick with his sorrow it's choking both of us.

I perch on the edge of the couch, clasping my hands in my lap to hide their shaking. I allow my eyes to wander over him. He's tired and sad, and I love him. Sometimes, I feel as though I know him better than I know my own body. But sometimes, like now, he's a stranger to me.

I knew the first time I laid eyes on him that this man was going to upend my world. I just didn't know he was going to break my heart doing so.

"Just tell me," I say evenly.

He turns his empty glass round and round in his hands and I can see his throat working. It's clearly killing him to utter the words he feels he needs to say. And I know, with a kind of sick, awful certainty, it's going to kill me to hear them.

His voice, when it comes out, is low and ragged. "I can't do this anymore."

The words drop heavily into the space between us.

I can barely breathe for the pain fanning out in my chest.

For days now, I've known these words were coming.

I have to take a moment to let the tightness in my chest ease before I can speak. "What do you mean?"

I know precisely what he means. But I want to force him to say it.

He sets his glass on the table and leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees and staring at the carpet, as though he needs a moment. Then he lifts his eyes to meet mine. He looks so defeated. I ache with frustration because the only person who's defeating Aaron is himself. The tragic irony of that almost breaks me.

"We should stop seeing each other," he says simply.

A whimper escapes my throat. I hate myself for what the sound reveals.

"At least you're considerate enough to break up with me on a Friday," I say, my tone brittle. "That at least gives me the weekend to get over you so I can be back at work on Monday. Calvin will appreciate that."

There's a grim set to his mouth. "Stop it, Tess."

"Oh, apologies. Am I being too analytical? Am I not going gently into that good night?"

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

Slowly and heavily, he pushes himself to his feet.

I stand too and we face one another. Then I shove at his chest. Hard. He braces himself to absorb the impact. "How

dare you come into my world and be so unexpectedly kind and funny and amazing that I can't help but fall in love with you! Why didn't you stay away from me if you knew you were going to leave?"

"I tried."

"You should have tried harder!"

Anger engulfs my pain. I pummel his chest with my fists, and he lets me, making no move to defend himself. "I was doing fine until you came along!"

"You're right," he admits, his skin pale beneath his tan, his eyes ravaged. "I should have been stronger. I should never have kissed you. Never have started anything with you. And I should have been stronger to end this sooner."

"Why am I not worth the risk?" I ask, my eyes blurry with tears. There's chaos in my chest when I glimpse the weariness in his eyes. I want him to fight for us. To fight for our chance at happiness.

"If anyone is worth the risk, you are," he tells me, his voice hoarse. "But I can't."

"You can't? Or you won't?" I demand, throwing it at him like a slap to the face. A challenge.

I watch him battle for an impassive face. "Both."

I know he loves me. I can see it so clearly in the agony on his face. In his anguished tone.

"Take a chance on us," I plead with him. "Love me. Let me love you. I'm willing to risk my life if you're willing to risk your heart."

But he's already shaking his head. "When I got that knock on the door and they told me Kayla was dead, it was one of the worst nights of my life. I survived that loss, but Tess, if I lose you, if you're taken from me like everyone else, like my sister, my parents, my fiancée...that would cut me off at the knees."

"Aaron—"

“You think it wouldn’t ruin my life if something happened to you?” he continues roughly. “That I’d survive the guilt of knowing you died because I was selfish and wanted you with me? That me loving you caused your death?”

“We’re all going to die at one point, but you don’t know for sure I’ll die early,” I argue desperately. “You can’t know that. It’s not written in stone. I might live a long and amazing life.”

With you, I add silently.

But I can see, from the look in his eyes, that he doesn’t glimpse a future where the two of us sit in our rocking chairs on an ivy-covered porch and watch the sun go down.

All he sees is a future where I’m in a grave and he’s left alone and broken, felled by grief once again.

“Tess,” he says miserably. “Enough.”

I wrap my arms around myself, as if that can somehow keep me from shattering into a million broken pieces. He’s right. I’ve done enough begging. I want to keep whatever shreds of dignity I still have left. Even if they’re scraps, they’re my scraps.

“You are a coward, Aaron Sinclair,” I say flatly and watch him flinch. “It’s just so much easier for you to walk away.”

He shakes his head in denial. “The hardest thing in the world is to walk away from you.”

“No,” I say, my voice and my heart breaking. “The hardest part is staying. Because then you’d have to be brave enough to take the risk of losing everything for the sake of love.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

[MESSAGES]

Mevia: ~~Hot Guy.~~

Mevia: Stupid Guy, didn't I warn you to treat Tess right? Now you've gone and broken her heart. I'm holding off on unleashing my cousin's friend on you in the hope you'll wake up and grovel your way back to the woman you are meant to be with.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

[MESSAGES]

Sofia: Get your head out of your ass.

Sofia: Tess is your soulmate.

Sofia: Make it right.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

[MESSAGES]

Kenzie: You're hurting and Tess is hurting. The only way for you to both stop hurting is to be together.

Kenzie: You're better and stronger together than you are apart.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

[MESSAGES]

Grandma: Aaron, there's a reason the front windshield in a car is a lot bigger than the rearview mirror. It's because we should spend more time looking out the windshield with its big, bright future. The rearview mirror is small because it has to be small. It's not good to dwell too long there.

Grandma: Google wouldn't give me your number because of privacy issues. I got it from Tess.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

[MESSAGES]

Aaron: Tess.

Aaron: Please help me heal my mind.

EPILOGUE

A year later...

We did wind up taking the plunge and starting our own greeting card company. Spurred on by my grandma, I approached Sofia and Kenzie with my idea. Two bottles of Pinot Grigio later, they were all in. We then psyched ourselves up and told Calvin. For an hour, he ranted and raged, threatened, and pleaded. When he calmed down, Sofia floated the idea of him becoming a silent partner. After sulking for a few days, he agreed, no doubt realizing it was better to have us as partners than competitors. Calvin still sometimes struggles with the ‘silent’ aspect of his role, but Sofia is comically skilled at keeping him in line.

For six months, we lived on caffeine and takeout, worked ridiculously late nights, and took it in convenient turns to plunge into meltdowns. One minute, the three of us would be laughing hysterically, the next, one of us would be in tears and lamenting over what on earth we’d done. It felt a bit like college days when you’re surviving on adrenaline, dreams, and hysterical hope.

Thanks to Sofia, who attended countless trade shows and blew people away with the force of her personality and the ingenuity of her ideas, our cards are now in hundreds of retail stores. Kenzie designs our card lines and is in charge of our artistic vision. She’s accumulated a bunch of well-deserved awards for her creations.

What makes our cards different? Humor. The one attribute Amell Greetings lacked. It’s also how we differentiate ourselves from them. We decided, from the start, to celebrate humor as the ultimate way to connect people, using laughter to help them pull through hard times.

Our cards have been described as “sophisticated, innovative, and funny.” It’s this brand of unique humor, as well as the fact that there’s nothing corny or clichéd about our

messaging or designs, that has gained us recognition in a highly competitive market.

Although we have the freedom to work from home, we also have our own offices now, and there's not a single cubicle in sight. We're planning to take on additional staff soon to help with demand.

The best part about starting our own greeting card company is that I have free rein to unleash my version of casual, ironic humor. I keep our messages edgy, but not cruel or degrading. I've come up with some great one-liners, and the sass and snark I pour into our messaging has gained us a dedicated following, particularly with millennials.

Aaron often complains I have a tendency to practice my one-liners on him and that the sassiness I employ to such great effect at work is spilling over into our personal life. Personally, I think the arrangement works superbly. I sass, he complains; I sass some more, and then he feels he has to punish me. Win-win.

Which is the case at the moment. We're both working from home today, sitting at the dining room table with our laptops in front of us. Aaron has relocated permanently to Brown Oaks and often works from home.

"Honey," I say to him now, pert and provoking, "just checking if you've passed the Turing Test yet?"

Aaron's lips twitch as he fights a grin. "Are you still comparing me to a machine?"

I tap my finger to my chin. "Are you capable of exhibiting intelligent behavior equivalent to that of a human?"

He stands. "You don't look like you're in the mood for intelligent behavior."

I stand too and stare him down. "What am I in the mood for?"

"Caveman antics," he murmurs, backing me up against the wall and pressing his body flush against mine. The authoritative tone of his voice electrifies my nerve endings. Our eyes lock.

“You look like you need to be dragged into the Creative Room,” he says, referencing the nickname I’ve given to our bedroom because all greeting card companies ought to have a Creative Room. Many ingenious ideas have originated from ours.

“I think you’re right,” I say, trying to look suitably chastised.

“I’m always right, wife.”

Yes, we were married on a cold winter evening in February, eight months ago. Aaron didn’t want a long engagement. Not after Kayla’s sudden death while they were still engaged. While the night was bitterly cold, there was nothing cold about our wedding. It was full of warmth and laughter, with all our favorite people celebrating with us. Sofia and Kenzie were my bridesmaids, Kate my maid of honor, and Lisset proved to be the most adorable flower girl.

Lucas was Aaron’s best man and remained glued to his side in the weeks leading up to the wedding, talking him away from the ledge whenever Aaron was convinced something would happen to me.

I invited everyone at Amell Greetings to the wedding. I even, reluctantly, extended an invitation to Rick, but Mevia informed me the day before that Rick was hit with an inconvenient bout of diarrhea and wouldn’t be able to attend. There were rumors she’d spiked his coffee, but no evidence was ever found.

Dana agreed to be Bob’s date for the wedding, having been won over by his tuna pasta. And when I tossed the bouquet over my shoulder, Dana caught it, much to Bob’s delight. I have a sneaking suspicion Sofia somehow engineered it, since Kenzie informed me all the single ladies stood weirdly frozen while the bouquet sailed through the air and landed straight onto the floor, where Dana was able to easily pick it up.

Mom, Dad, and Grandma cried openly during the ceremony. Happy tears, they assured me. And Kate, she didn’t cry, because she’s not a crier, yet a cloak of sadness shrouded her throughout the day. Of course, being Kate, she tried to

disguise it by making sure every aspect of the wedding ran smoothly, which it did. I can only hope one day she'll find the happiness she deserves.

Aaron is slowly healing. It's a long, tricky road, but he's making progress.

I received Aaron's text asking me to help him heal on the last day of his contract at Amell Greetings. The instant my phone beeped and I read his message, I jumped into my car and drove as fast as I dared to his cabin.

And I held him while he broke down in my arms.

He told me the utter desolation he'd experienced after we broke up, as though he'd thrown away something precious and valuable. It gave him a glimpse into his future and it was horrifying and bleak, because he realized he was slowly morphing into his parents. Alive but not living. Functioning but dead inside.

His sister and Kayla would have been furious he'd chosen to live like that.

And that's when he texted me.

We cried and hugged and kissed and cried some more. But I had an unwavering stipulation: If we were to get back together, he had to agree to therapy. I didn't want to continually live on tenterhooks waiting for him to leave me again and breaking my heart each time.

Aaron didn't fight me. Deep down, he knew he needed help.

And there's no doubt therapy is helping him. Although he still worries, he seems calmer, more at peace. I've come to accept that worry will always be a part of him, but he's learning to temper it. Whenever I go out, I still have to text him to let him know I've arrived safely. I always try to answer his calls, because if I don't, he can spiral and suddenly I'm lying dead in a ditch and he's planning my funeral.

I don't resent having to allay his fears. It's a small inconvenience to me for a huge easing of his anxiety. I believe there will always be a part of him holding his breath, waiting

for tragedy to strike. Waiting for something to happen to the people he loves.

That's where my family comes in. They surround him with so much love and joy the worry becomes distant and blurry in their company. Initially, Aaron tried to keep his distance, worried something would happen to one of them because they were creeping into his heart, but they assured him he was worth the risk. Besides, there's no stopping my family when they're determined to love someone.

Kate, especially, has been the biggest surprise. She's rallied around Aaron, checking in with him and cheering him on. Maybe there's a part of her hoping that if he can rebuild his life after tragedy, so can she. I know one day she'll find love. Real love. Not the brutal imitation she endured.

Aaron and I have discussed having children, but we're both aware of how huge a step that is. Aaron, in particular, is painfully conscious of how fragile children are, of everything that can go wrong. Therapy is helping him not to always anticipate the worst and to stop seeing death around the corner, but it's still baby steps. And I'm right there with him, holding his hand with each step as we try to live out our lives not in fear but in love.

I'm grateful I had the opportunity to meet Aaron's parents before they died. Although it was upsetting watching Aaron smile into their blank faces and conduct a heartrending one-sided conversation, I was proud of him for still trying to reach them after all these years, still actively looking for hope even in the midst of tragedy.

After our visit, they went to bed as they usually did and never woke up. They died in each other's arms. Their minds had given up a long time ago and their hearts finally caught up. It was the perfect way for them to leave this world and try to find their daughter and their peace in the next.

One night, as we were walking down Main Street holding hands, Aaron turned to me and said, his voice slightly choked, "Thank you for bringing beauty and color back into my life. I

want to live the rest of my days in technicolor. With you. Forever.”

And that’s what we’re doing. Living each day in full technicolor. Savoring every precious moment: Waking up together in the mornings. Our first cup of coffee which we drink on the back porch while we watch the sun come up. Eating tacos in the park. Sunday family lunches which, according to Aaron, never get old, not when Grandma and Google are still battling it out. Our weekly hikes. Board game nights with Sofia, Matt, and Kenzie, and Lucas and Nina. Falling asleep with the feel of Aaron’s warm, strong body pressed against mine.

All the little moments.

All of them important.

Even the moment we’re currently in, with my back against the wall and Aaron’s hands on my hips, holding me in place.

He leans down and grazes his lips over mine. A whisper of a kiss. Teasing me as I teased him earlier.

Abruptly, I turn the tables in our little game by curling my fingers into his shirt and yanking him closer so he kisses me the way I want to be kissed, deeply and without restraint.

“Looks like you’re the one who’ll be dragging me to the Creative Room,” he murmurs when he lifts his lips off mine.

“I miss you wearing a tie,” I grumble. “How am I supposed to drag you anywhere without a tie?”

“You and Ash ruined my last tie,” Aaron points out.

I slant him a mischievous look. “And now I’m about to ruin your shirt.”

“All for the sake of art,” he says on a sigh.

“All for the sake of love,” I correct him.

Suddenly, our playful mood slips away and we’re staring at one another, the intensity of our emotions coiling around us.

“We came so close to losing one another,” I whisper with a shudder, my fingers tightening in his shirt.

He cradles my jaw in his palm. “I would have found my way back to you.”

I stare into the face of the man I’ve given my heart to. “Whatever happens in the future, no regrets.”

His knuckles feather their way across my cheekbone. “No regrets.”

We’ve both learned that you can’t have a life unless you’re prepared to fully live it, and to live it is to open yourself up to heartbreak. But you’re also opening yourself up to joy and happiness. And most of all, love.

DON'T MISS KATE'S STORY,
COMING SOON!

Acknowledgments

Phishing for Love would have been so much harder to write without the following people:

My husband, Craig. My other half, first in my acknowledgments and first in my heart. You're the eyes I trust to first read my words and the voice keeping me going when the days are hard. Thank you for believing in me and for always being in my corner.

My beautiful family. We may be living on different continents, but our bonds transcend geography. Thank you for your support and love, for cheering me on and sharing in all the excitement. Kayla, thank you for the teaser video for *Phishing for Love*. I love you all so much.

My two children, Aidan and Paige. Thank you for brightening my world and teaching me what sacrifice is all about.

My newfound UK friends, Liz and Lucy, and their other halves. Thank you for motivating me, checking in with me, and plying me with wine when I desperately needed a break from hunching over my laptop.

My sweet, delightful friends from church, who surround me with love and gentle encouragement. It's been so much easier living and writing in a new country because of you.

My amazing editor, Karen Block. You are talented and blunt, exactly what this book needed. And when you compliment me, I soar because I know you mean it. Working with you has been a dream.

Sarah Hansen, from Okay Creations, for another gorgeous and unique cover. Your talent is limitless.

Fiona, my gifted friend, who kindly beta read my book and offered invaluable insights. I can't wait to read your book of poetry.

My sister, Karina, for *again* giving me the spark of an idea that eventually grew into this book. You have the most incredible stories. Keep on living your crazy, eventful life.

Jill Sullivan's inspiring *While We're Waiting* podcast, which not only helped me on my own grief journey, but also provided inspiration for many of Grandma's words of wisdom.

My bookstagram friends! What an incredible community you are. I am beyond grateful to have found my tribe. Thank you for championing my books. You are all so incredibly talented and passionate, as well as kind and welcoming.

To my readers, thank you for taking a chance on an unknown author and for all your messages. Just hearing how much you love my characters is the fuel I need to keep writing.

Lastly, but never last in my heart and mind, the One who walks with me every minute of every day, who rescued me when I was in my darkest hour, thank you Jesus.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

While *Phishing for Love* is a standalone novel, there is a small crossover link with my previous book, *All the Lost Pieces*. In Chapter 28, you meet Lucas and Nina, my hero and heroine from *All the Lost Pieces*. This chapter is their epilogue, which so many readers asked for. If you want to read Lucas's and Nina's love story, *All the Lost Pieces* is available worldwide from retailers.

Thank you for reading *Phishing for Love*! I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. Won't you please consider leaving an honest review? Even a few words would help others decide if the book is right for them.

Thank you!

Lara xx

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All the Lost Pieces

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About the Author

Lara Martin writes books about imperfect people living messy lives, falling in love and getting their perfect happily-ever-after. She's lived in South Africa and Australia and now calls the UK her home. She's tried a variety of amazing and awful jobs: video game reviewer, graphic designer, insurance claims agent (she has no idea how she landed this one), proof reader, feature writer, and magazine editor. She lives with her husband (always the first reader of her novels), two slightly terrifying teenagers, and the requisite psychotic cat. When she's not writing, she can be found haunting local coffee shops.

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