

PROMISES

WE BREAK

After

DARK

RACHEL HIGGINSON

promises we break after dark

RACHEL HIGGINSON

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*To Jenni,
For your unshaken, relentless
(and also unfounded) belief in me.
Some friendships take half your life to find,
Some friendships are worth the wait.*

one

I LOVED MY JOB.

Loved it.

I loved the people I worked with—almost without exception.

I loved the building. And the atmosphere. The nightlife. The drinks we slung. The food we served. The way we offered something unique and fun for the city I loved too.

I loved the managerial side of food service, which was a rare opinion in this usually difficult industry.

In fact, I loved every single thing about my work life except for one tiny, infinitesimal aspect: Charlie English.

Charlie English, the bane of my existence.

Sure, usually banes weren't quite so good-looking. Or funny. Or charming in that way that always got him out of trouble.

But nevertheless, a bane he was.

In fact, I hadn't even truly understood the torturous depths of that phrase until I met Charlie. It was like the definition exploded into existence with that man. I had thus survived without being fully familiar with any bane in my life. Then suddenly, there was Charlie, and it was all bane all the time.

Take right now, for example. We were supposed to be setting up for tonight's service. There were glasses to wash—which his OCD ass was usually all over. And menus to wipe down. And bar accoutrements to slice, dice, and organize. But where was Charlie?

Leaned over the bar, coaxing the new server into trying his signature shot of the night that he'd supposedly made up on a fucking whim and planned to offer on special.

It was basically a lemon drop with lime vodka instead of plain. He was calling it a Sexy 7 Up. It was so far from revolutionary I could have screamed. But the new server—who I could immediately tell was already out of her depth—was under the delusional impression he was the Picasso of bartenders.

I rolled my eyes and resisted the urge to throw a menu at his head.

“Excuse me,” I said instead, my clipboard of daily tasks held in a way that stabbed me in the kidneys. I maintained my air of professionalism. And shifted the clipboard a little to the left. “I need Ally rolling silverware, not taking shots before we open.”

Ally’s face flushed tomato red, and she backed away from the bar slowly. I could be an absolute terrorist when it came to keeping this place from tipping over the precarious cliff edge it always seemed to teeter on. She was right to be terrified of me. Maybe she was smarter than I gave her credit for.

Charlie rolled to his side so smoothly I would have thought it was choreographed if I didn’t know him. It wasn’t practiced. His charm, unfortunately, was entirely natural. He faced me, seemingly unbothered by Ally’s retreat, and rested on his elbow. “Ada,” he said, grinning. “Now *you* have to take it with me since you scared away my drinking buddy.”

Drinking buddy? I plastered on a smile and lowered my voice to a subtle hiss. “If you sleep with that poor unsuspecting woman, please know I will give her the name of a lawyer highly recommended for sexual harassment in the workplace. Okay?”

Charlie’s smile faltered, and his eyes flashed with annoyance. “I just want feedback, Ada. I’m not planning on giving her a roofie, for fuck’s sake.”

I didn’t mention that he didn’t need to roofie her in order to sleep with her. She was already caught in his trap. All he had to do was flutter his too-thick lashes, give her those green puppy-dog eyes, and lift half his mouth in a wicked smirk that promised trouble. Girls were too easily seduced by his easygoing manner and penchant for mischief.

It was a lie, though.

Well, maybe not the mischief part but definitely the easygoing part. Charlie English was the furthest thing from easygoing. In truth, he was uptight, paranoid, and vindictive when he wanted to be.

“I’m just saying, we can’t afford to lose any more because you and your brother decide to sleep with them.”

He frowned. “Will is marrying the one he slept with. It’s not the same

thing.”

“Then what’s your excuse?”

His eyes narrowed further. All right, maybe I’d gone a touch too far. I pressed my lips together, trying to ignore the surge of guilt for an unwarranted attack. He hated when I was mean for no reason. Could I blame him?

He took it on the chin when he felt like my wrath was deserved, but unmerited sass was high up his list of pet peeves. From his perspective, he’d only spoken with one of the servers and created a fun drink for this evening—both were well within his job description.

From my perspective, he was messing with the entire Craft ecosystem and was as likely to shut this place down with bad reviews due to “lack of quality service” than he was selling a record number of Sexy 7 Ups and saving Craft from some ambiguous financial ruin nobody knew about.

But instead of calling me on my bullshit, he nudged the full shot glass over with his forefinger and held my gaze in a silent dare. Liquid sloshed back and forth in the tiny glass, but somehow managed to keep from splashing over the side. “Here, you try it then. I need your approval anyway, boss. And besides, I think you could use some help calming down.”

The hell? “I know you’re not telling a woman to calm down, Charlie English.” *Did this man have no survival instincts?*

He leaned forward, closing the space between us. “I would never, Ada. Now try the damn shot before I pry your mouth open and pour it down your throat.”

Welcome to our daily shit show. “You wouldn’t fucking dare.”

He picked up the shot and wiggled it in front of my face. “Ally told me you said I was a sex predator. She said it was part of her training. So yeah, I would fucking dare.”

My cheeks turned as red as Ally’s. “I didn’t say you were a sex predator. God, you make it sound like I’m calling you a criminal.”

He raised an insolent eyebrow. “You told her I prey on every new server.”

“Okay, but I didn’t attach felonies to it.”

“I get it.” By the cold, calculating look in his eyes, I wasn’t exactly sure what he got. But he was definitely confident about it.

“What do you get?”

“It’s hard for you to see me with someone else.” His eyebrows dipped

together in a sympathetic sort of way. If sociopaths could feel sympathy. “But Ada, jealousy isn’t your color.”

Make that arrogant sociopath.

“I’m not jealous, Charlie. I’m just over having to train a new server every week because you’ve broken the last one’s heart.” I had more important things to do than watch training videos and ask background questions.

He put the shot glass to my lips. “This will help you relax. You’re going to scare away the customers.”

I bit back a scream of frustration—*he had no clue how obnoxious he was*—snatched the shot out of his hand, and tossed it back. Who could put up with this? Who could put up with *him*?

The only thing more insufferable than managing Charlie English was genuinely watching those stupid training videos that made me want to gouge my eyes out with my pen.

The shot went down smoothly, and I managed not to cough because there was no afterburn. After a second, I had to admit that it was tasty. It only vaguely tasted like 7 Up, but I understood the correlation to the original flavors, and I didn’t hate the name.

He was waiting for me with a smirk, all smug satisfaction. My stomach flipped in some latent, out of control reaction to how inhumanely sexy this man was. It wasn’t that I wanted to think he was sexy. It was that he was so universally sexy I couldn’t seem to convince my body otherwise.

At least my brain knew better. It was a veritable fortress of Fuck Charlie English.

He reached up and rubbed his thumb over my bottom lip, wiping away a rogue droplet of liquor. “You like it.”

“You can promote it tonight,” I told him, stepping back, away from his hand. “But get Ally to change the sign. Do not try to do it on your own.” I cleared my throat and took another step back. “And make sure Miles knows how to make it exactly like this.”

Charlie grinned at me. It was wild and reckless and so charming I had to take another retreating step lest I got swept up in his charismatic orbit and accidentally smiled back.

“Whatever you say, boss.”

The irony of Charlie calling me “boss” when he owned one-third of the bar and I technically worked for him was too much for me to tolerate. I spun around and retreated to the kitchen, where Case modeled prep work and what

it meant to be a competent employee.

“You good, Ada?” he asked after glancing at me.

I swallowed a riot of emotional fury. I wanted to punch something. I wanted to punch Charlie. But I settled for smacking my clipboard on the cold metal counter. The bang echoed through the small kitchen, making my heart jump in my chest and shocking me back into normalcy. “I’m good,” I said calmly. “Why?”

Case pressed a hand to his own chest. “Warn a guy next time.”

“Sure.” Looking around the kitchen, I noticed it was uncharacteristically quiet. “Uh, where’s Joey?”

He mumbled curse words at the onions he was julienning. I caught “doctor’s appointment” and “fucking could have let me know sooner” and “she better be dying.”

Smiling—because Case could easily handle prep on his own—I ducked into the office and breathed a sigh of relief when I saw Eliza sitting at her desk. She smiled at her phone as she typed out a fast text.

“Tell Jonah I say hi,” I said, smirking.

She looked up, surprised to see me. “How do you know it’s Jonah?”

“You get heart eyes for exactly one person, babe. And it’s not me.”

She tried valiantly to suppress her smile, but alas, she could not. “He’s taking me on a trip in a couple of weeks. To Charleston.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Bougie.”

She wiggled and rapidly stomped her feet in a bursting-with-excitement kind of way. Then she dropped her voice to a whisper. “I think he’s going to propose.”

“No way.”

She set her phone down and placed one hand demurely over the other. “I don’t know for sure. But he booked a hotel that overlooks the water, and we’re doing a boat ride on Sunday afternoon that’s supposed to take us out to an island for a private picnic. I mean, it sounds propose-y, doesn’t it?”

“It sounds very propose-y. Have you thought about what you’re going to say?”

Her eyes bulged. “Yes, Ada. Obviously, yes.”

I snickered, happy to see her so adamant. “I’m kidding. Your yes is so easy he could probably just plan the wedding and surprise you at the church and you wouldn’t care.”

She dropped her chin into her hand. “That’s actually true. Do you think

that's what he's doing? Have you been invited to a wedding?"

"Not yet. But I better get more than an invite when it does happen. Not saying I need to be maid of honor, but if you try to keep me out of the bridal party, I'll pick out my own dress and show up anyway. Plus, Claire, Lola, and I will throw the most epic bachelorette party."

"Speaking of, we need to plan Lola's."

"Mmm."

"We can make it fun," Eliza coaxed. "Just because she's pregnant doesn't mean we can't do anything fun."

"Mmmph."

She threw a pen at me. "You're a lush."

"I work in a bar. My life's passion is booze. I can't help it."

"Speaking of." She waggled her eyebrows. "How was the whiskey tasting the other night?"

I felt my nose wrinkle in distaste without my permission. It had been an absolute disaster. I'd tried to introduce one of my dating app matches to whiskey, thinking a tasting with multiple options would be the perfect place for him to find something he liked. I knew he'd never really had a taste for it from our texting chats, but I assumed that was just because he hadn't found the right one.

Two hours and a million minutes of him complaining about how badly whiskey burned his throat then finally confessing he doesn't ever drink, I had to call him an Uber because he was too drunk to stand.

It had been an awkward goodbye. He'd clearly been trying to impress me. But nothing was sexy about being able to drink your date under the table after only a few samples. Not to mention I'd had to sort through the guilt of feeling like I'd taken advantage of the poor guy.

For legal purposes, I stood by the fact that I didn't coerce him into anything. He got hammered all by himself. But inner Ada felt more than a little responsible.

"Uh," I said to Eliza, "anticlimactic."

She pouted. "Well, that's too bad. I had high hopes for Tinder Teddy."

Also, his name was Teddy. That should have been red flag number one. "All the good guys are obviously taken. Or a myth to begin with. Maybe something invented by the patriarchy in order to keep women willing to sleep with them in hopes of tracking one down."

"We're not a total myth," Charlie's low, sultry voice teased from the

doorway.

I hadn't noticed him walk in. Turning slowly to face him and ignoring the sudden quickening of my heart, I said, "You're exactly the problem."

His stupid eyes got all innocent and big. "Me? What did I do?"

Standing up slowly, I picked invisible lint off the front of my faux leather mini skirt and mentally mapped my escape. "You lure girls in with your sex appeal and we get all excited because we think we've found 'the one.' Only to get kicked out of bed in the morning when you can't remember our name."

Charlie's gaze hardened at my accusation. He did not like to be reminded he was a player of the worst variety.

Come to think of it, he didn't like me reminding him of a lot of his worst attributes, but this one was near the top. And worth the fight.

Okay, maybe this wasn't the exact scenario that played out between us, but it might as well have been. And not just for me. For the long list of girls after me.

And fine, I hadn't exactly hooked up with him all those years ago hoping to lock in Mr. Right. But I wasn't the same girl I used to be. I was more mature. Wiser. Specifically older. I had a biological clock that never stopped ticking in my head, reminding me that it was time to settle down or give up my dreams of having a family.

Not that I wanted a family right now. But that was why it was time to find a serious relationship. All this life planning took time. I didn't even have a boyfriend. Or serious prospects. And that seemed like a key step into getting the eventual family down the road.

I had to start somewhere. And there was no time like the present. And blah, blah, blah, I was twenty-eight years old, and well . . . it was time, wasn't it?

I met Charlie's flinty gaze and lifted my chin. I could see I'd pissed him off, but I was glad to have done so. He hadn't tempted me into his bed like some devil from mythology. I'd gone willingly.

I'd gone willingly more times than I cared to admit.

But that wasn't the point. The point was that he wasn't a serious candidate for my future. He had been very clear about that. Charlie English was the poster child for all things irresponsible and wild. He was a ride-or-die bachelor.

And I knew it better than anyone.

A muscle in his jaw ticked. "Ada, I promise you, if I ever get you back in

my bed, you won't want to leave. You don't have to worry about being kicked out. You just have to make sure I feed and water you."

My heart kicked violently in self-defense. Or because everything inside me was suddenly on fire. It was hard to tell with him because he made everything about me unreliable.

I moved to walk by him. I found it difficult being in close spaces when I was already so very tempted toward murder. Okay, not literally murder. But something on the maiming spectrum.

Charlie's hand shot out and grabbed my forearm. I glanced down at where his skin touched mine and felt my lip curl back. Instinctively baring my teeth like I was a cornered apex predator.

"Ada, we need you out front," he said, his intense gaze on my face.

I stared at our hands. "On my way right now."

He leaned in, and I was besieged with the scent of lemons and limes and whiskey. "You okay tonight?" he asked in a quiet voice. "You seem a little on edge."

I ripped my arm out of his grip a little more forcefully than necessary. *If by on edge, do you mean this wretched, cold feeling I get in my chest whenever I'm around you?* So not the energy I wanted to bring to work tonight. "I'm good."

"You're good," he repeated.

"I'm so good."

"Okay, fine. Go be so good out front."

"That's what I'm doing."

"Good."

"Great."

"Awesome."

I sucked in a sharp breath, struggling to settle my nerves. He always had to have the last word, which was fine. I was more mature than that. I didn't need to say something just to say something. Whatever.

Lunging toward the main floor, I tossed, "Fantastic," over my shoulder and then tried not to gloat when the door closed behind me before he could add something else.

"Charlie, what is going on with you two?" I heard Eliza snarl as the swinging door swung wide again before settling. "You need to fix this."

"Fix what?" Charlie replied in a mild, placid tone. "The Ice Queen doesn't care, Eliza. She doesn't have feelings."

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes, but I swallowed them down before they could surface further. That was the crux of my drama. Right there. *The Ice Queen doesn't care, Eliza. She doesn't have feelings.*

Charlie English was oblivious to everything and everyone around him. Sometimes that was tolerable. Usually, it was totally fine. Sometimes I could write it off as Charlie being Charlie.

And sometimes his oblivious behavior bowled me over. Crushed me beneath the boulder of his energy like an Indiana Jones movie gone wrong.

Sometimes he lashed out with his unawareness in a way that punched straight through my flesh and blood and landed hits on the softer, secret places of my soul and spirit.

But he'd been forgiven for so much over his lifetime. Nobody had ever expected anything from him, so nobody ever held him accountable.

At this point, he couldn't do anything to fix the chasm that had grown between us. I was as unfixable as he was unaware. But I loved this job and his family too much to walk away.

And that was probably what would kill me in the end.

two

THE NIGHT HAD BEEN . . . tense. To say the least. Ally wasn't the fastest server I'd hired, and she messed up two really big tickets. But she was also new to the job, and I knew she was smart enough to figure it out. She just needed practice.

Craft was a trial-by-fire business. Ideally, I would have loved to hire waitstaff based on competence and not simply availability and willingness not to quit before the end of the week. Introduce them to the job slowly, build up their stamina and expertise before turning them loose on all the persnickety drinkers of Durham, North Carolina and watch their performance, giving helpful criticism. I wanted to make Craft an atmosphere where they fell in love with the ethos of the small business as quickly and infinitely as I had.

But, in reality, it was the exact opposite kind of job from all of that.

Will had settled down some since he met Lola and stopped scaring off every trembling college girl who walked in looking for a job. But there was COVID-19—aka the food service mass exodus, where everyone fled the food industry when it was shut down or highly regulated. Just as we were getting back on our feet post-pandemic, employees became mythical creatures nobody could seem to find or hire. And now that people were finally returning to the blue-collar work force, they seemed excessively picky about what they were willing to tolerate as far as working conditions went.

Which was good for them.

It just sucked for us. In an already difficult industry, I was left begging for scraps and trying to convince twentysomethings that the tips were worth it.

To their point, it was hard to plan your life and bills around what you may or may not get tipped from entitled customers.

I sighed and slunk onto the nearest high-top barstool. It had been a night. And my feet were killing me. Why I thought it was a good idea to break in a new pair of Blazers was beyond me. Cute shoes but they had terrible arch support.

But the important thing to note was that I'd survived the night. I'd slung approximately one million drinks, taken twice as many food orders, nonalcoholic beverages, and random requests, pacified five angry customers for various reasons, stopped serving three customers closing in on over-the-limit, dealt with Ally's two messed-up tickets by making it rain free drinks and food coupons, and stopped one fight from happening in the bathroom.

That had been a coincidence. The two gentlemen had reached one tequila shot too many and had miscommunicated something involving one of their girlfriends. I had just happened to step out of the girls' bathroom after a routine paper towel check and was able to intervene. I offered a round of Sexy 7 Ups for the table, reminded them that they'd be banned forever and ever amen if they so much as pinched each other, and then somehow escorted them back to their table even though they were easily twice my size.

It was Friday night, and the bar was usually packed, but people weren't always so wily. There must be a full moon.

I pulled my cash from my apron and started counting my tips. If my mental tally was anywhere close to accurate, I was at close to six hundred bucks.

Ally stopped by my table, eyes wide at the fat stack of ones, fives, and tens in my hand. "Geez, Ada, I want to be you when I grow up."

I smiled patiently at her. She would be so lucky. "Keep working hard," I told her patiently. "The secret is making sure they never have to wait for you with an empty glass. Stay on top of drink orders, and this is easy."

Her mouth twisted in doubt. "There's got to be more to it than that. I feel like I already do that."

My lips puckered, trying to trap a response inside my mouth. I'd had to find her multiple times tonight when her tables had flagged me down for help. And once, when she'd stepped outside for a smoke break, I'd had to cover her ass before her table got up and walked out.

But I was desperately trying to keep servers staffed, not run them off. "Well, maybe just keep working on it," I suggested. "It gets easier as you

go.”

“But I never leave my ta—”

“Tomorrow night will be better for you. And, hey, since you don’t actually smoke, maybe you can skip the pretend smoke breaks. You’ll make your customers happy.”

She rolled her eyes. “But then I don’t get a break.”

“Yeah, me neither.” I jutted my chin toward the bar. “Charlie doesn’t either.”

“Miles gets a bunch of breaks.”

“He actually smokes.”

“Case does.”

“Case . . . has Joey.” Her expression turned hard. “What? They watch the kitchen for each other.” And since Case didn’t have help until very recently, you’d think he’d be a hell of a lot more grateful for Joey’s support.

Men.

She ground her teeth together, clearly annoyed by my suggestion.

“I get it,” I said, working hard to sound sympathetic. “This is a hard gig. But hard things can be good things.”

“That’s what she said,” Charlie said from across the empty dining room.

Ally threw her head back and laughed, then ambled over to the bar with an, “Oh, my God, you’re never going to believe this—” story meant for Charlie.

I went back to my cash. Ally, Charlie, and Miles made lewd jokes and laughed their heads off at the bar while I ticked off my managerial duties involving counting tills, making notes on inventory, and checking all the employees out.

Eliza had disappeared hours ago, and Will had taken the night off. The siblings had left Charlie in charge in an overarching sort of way to show them they trusted him.

This was a new development in their relationship. As they vigilantly worked toward a healthier family dynamic with each other, they’d listened to Charlie’s complaints about being constantly treated like a liability. It was big of them. Brave of them.

Annoying of them since the only nights they ever seemed to leave him “in charge” were the same nights I was running the show at Craft.

Not that I wasn’t usually running the show around here, but three weeks ago, I’d taken the weekend off and had they let Charlie close down even

once? No. Nope. Not even once.

We were all standing around the bar when Ally let out a frustrated groan as she stared at her phone. “For fuck’s sake,” she snarled. “Not again.”

I turned away from her to check some of the liquor bottles that had been running low earlier in the evening. Her drama was not my drama.

“My ride bailed,” she groaned. “And Ubers are surging right now.”

A sinking feeling spiraled through me.

“Ugh, that sucks,” Charlie sympathized.

I let out a slow breath. If I didn’t want the inevitable to happen, I had to take her home. At least that would save her from “accidentally” falling into Charlie’s bed tonight and losing another server with potential.

“I need better friends,” Ally groaned. I turned around just in time to catch her shoot a pleading look at Charlie. Her eyelashes fluttered seductively, and she bit her bottom lip. She stepped forward and crossed her arms so her boobs were suddenly a main attraction.

For a split second, I felt bad for Charlie. Was it his fault he was so damn attractive? Was it his fault girls tended to throw themselves at him? Girls who should know better? Girls who didn’t even seem like the throwing-themselves-at-him type? Like me, for instance.

But that was years ago.

Charlie’s gaze dropped to her fantastic boobs, and he cleared his throat awkwardly. “Uh, didn’t you tell me you live near Duke?”

Ally looked hopeful. “Yes.”

“Miles can take you home,” Charlie offered, not glancing at Miles once. For his part, Miles dropped a lemon; he was as surprised as I was to hear his name being offered up as a transportation sacrifice. “He lives over there.”

“I do?” Miles asked wide-eyed.

Charlie turned and shot him a wink. “Yeah, buddy. I bet her place is even on the way.”

“Oh.” Ally sounded disappointed. “Could you? That would be great. Thanks, Miles.”

“Uh, yeah, sure.” Miles looked totally baffled. “I guess I can do that. Wait, where do you live?”

As she rattled off her address and nearby landmarks, I watched Charlie. I was as puzzled as Miles. Ally wasn’t exactly throwing herself at Charlie, but she was clearly disappointed that he’d suggested Miles take her home.

It wasn’t that I thought Charlie was a manwhore. It was that Ally was

gorgeous and young and, well, shallow. She was everything Charlie usually went for. She was his perfect hookup. And maybe she hadn't wanted to hook up with him. Perhaps she just wanted to get to know him better . . . But I'd seen Charlie put in the groundwork many times over the years.

So what was different now?

"You could probably go now," Charlie said to Miles. "You don't need to stick around for this bit. I can handle it."

Miles looked relieved. "Oh really? You sure?"

His mild offer sounded barely sincere. He was an awesome bartender, and the customers loved him. He rarely missed a shift but always seemed to wiggle out of end-of-shift duties. The man hated cleaning.

It was a small price to pay for a reliable bartender.

"Yeah, go ahead. Ally doesn't want to stick around for this." He winked at her.

She blushed.

Now I was extra confused.

Charlie looked over at me, and I realized I stood in the middle of the floor just watching this play out like it was a sitcom. Oops.

I turned around and walked straight into the kitchen, hoping nobody noticed my odd reaction.

Case and Joey were hard at work scrubbing and sorting all the things. The after-hours music had been cranked up, and, with the constant clatter of kitchen things, I could hardly hear myself think. The cacophony was a gift. It drowned out my crazy thoughts and Charlie confusion.

Holing myself up in the office, I got to work on the managerial duties I was hired for. I was maybe more vigilant with the schedule than I needed to be at two thirty on a Saturday morning. But I was willing to ride out the night in a flurry of work and productivity until everyone else had left the building.

Eventually the sounds in the kitchen settled to a dull roar. And then to almost perfect silence. Both Joey and Case stopped by my office at separate moments to tell me good night. Then there was finally glorious peace.

I unburied myself from paperwork, powered down my computer, and systematically shut down the bar. I started at the back of the kitchen and checked the lock—I would be going out this door, but I didn't want to leave it open while I turned off the lights in the front.

I double-checked that all the kitchen equipment was off. Case and Joey were good at their jobs and genuine professionals, but I could be neurotic.

Also, there was no reason to assume even professionals didn't mess up sometimes. Or forget. I'd rather not burn down the building with Will and Lola upstairs just because I was too lazy to check some off switches.

Okay, even as I thought it, I knew that was something only neurotic people thought. But still. I made solid points.

Ahem.

Pushing through the kitchen door—

“ARGH!” I screamed. *An intruder is robbing us! Oh no, wait. Not an intruder. Just a spoiled owner up past his bedtime.*

He turned his head, barely. “It's just me.”

“I thought you left,” I panted breathlessly, pressing down over my heart to keep it from leaping out of my body. “You scared me.”

Half his mouth ticked up in a smile. “I can see that.”

Two full shot glasses were set out in front of him. Suddenly, I had the horrifying realization that he'd sent Ally home because he had another date stopping by. Which was totally within his right since he owned the bar.

But oh my God.

I felt like throwing myself under a high-top table to hide from his mystery date. The last thing I wanted was to be accused of cock-blocking Charlie English.

“What are you doing?” I asked before I did something dramatic like tuck and roll into the kitchen.

“Come have a drink with me.”

Who? Me? My tired, exhausted, neurotic brain couldn't comprehend his sentence. I jumped into fight-or-flight mode, trying to talk my adrenaline down from the firehose pressure it was spraying into my blood.

Get it together, Ada.

He looked up, hitting me with the full force of his Charlie charm. “Come on,” he coaxed with a grin. “It was a good night. Nobody went to the hospital, and everyone went home happy. We made a lot of money. Come celebrate with me.”

I carefully picked my way through the clusters of tables stacked with stools and chairs to make the floor accessible for the cleaning company arriving early in the morning. My mind reeled with timelines and weekends gone by.

“Was that really the last time you closed? When you had to have your appendix taken out?” I knew it wasn't right, but I also didn't get why he was

celebrating.

He laughed. “Not quite. But this is the first time we’ve been alone since then.” He looked back at the shot glasses. “I don’t know. I was hoping to impress you with being less of a fuck-up than usual.”

My heartbeat picked up again. This time, fight or flight was for different reasons. “I don’t think you’re a fuck-up.”

He hit me with those green eyes, his expression unrepentant. “Ada, you think everyone’s a fuck-up. I don’t take it personally.” He ticked his chin at the lone barstool he’d left out for me. “Sit.”

For some reason, my independent ass obeyed. “You make me sound like a total bitch. I don’t think that. I like most people.”

He slid the shot glass toward me, the second one of the night. “You like almost zero people.” He laughed again at my outraged expression. “Ada, come on, I’m messing with you. You’re always pleasant. Verbally. It’s your face that gives you away.” He swirled a finger in front of my face. “All those snobbish thoughts play out in your eyes and make it clear to the rest of us peons what you really think of us.”

“Maybe that’s true for you, but I’m nice to everyone else.” My dignity had landed somewhere on the sticky floor, but I was desperately trying not to let him make me feel bad.

He leaned forward on both elbows and picked up his shot glass filled nearly to the brim. “Well, if we’re going to talk about me specifically, I think we can both agree that those thoughts don’t stay in your head. Those special ones actually get said out loud.” I had just opened my mouth to defend myself when he added, “We get it, though. You’re obsessed with me. And honestly, why wouldn’t you be? If I were you, I’d be obsessed with me too.”

I snorted, despite myself. “You’re so full of shit.”

He grinned. “Come on. This is good. You’re going to love it.”

Lifting the tiny glass, I held it between my fingers. He reached his toward mine, and we clinked glasses.

“To bosses who keep your ass in line,” he said before he tossed his back.

I followed suit and sputtered a little at the strong burn of whiskey as it traveled down my throat. Raising an eyebrow at him, I tried to cover my shot shiver and said, “You know, technically you’re my boss.”

He reached for the whiskey bottle and poured another round while trying to hide his shit-eating grin. “Oh, I am well aware.”

Ah, so he was toasting himself. And making me feel like an idiot in the

meantime. “You’re full of something tonight, English. I’m not sure what it is, but it’s potent.”

Handing me the new shot, he let our fingers bump in the exchange. “Just feeling good tonight, Ade. I like it back here”—he indicated the bar—“and business is doing well. You didn’t try to stab me tonight. So many reasons to celebrate.”

“You should have taken Ally home, then.” I heard how petty it sounded as it left my mouth. *God, why did I say that?* I didn’t even care. Charlie was free to do whatever he wanted with whoever he wanted. But . . . why did I have to sound so . . . ugh.

He cocked another judgy eyebrow at me. “You know I thought about it, but a certain not-boss made it very clear I had to keep my hands off all the pretty new servers. I remember my body being threatened.”

Had I threatened bodily harm? Probably. “But she’s not your boss. So you don’t have to listen to her.”

He held my gaze. “She might not be my boss, but she is very bossy.”

My cheeks flushed, but it was obviously because of the whiskey. “Well, maybe she’s very invested in making sure your business succeeds.”

He didn’t flinch. “Maybe I appreciate that about her.” I swallowed thickly, but he wasn’t finished. “Maybe I’m willing to listen to her threats—”

“She would never threaten.”

“Maybe I’m willing to listen to her, er, aggressive advice because I realize that.”

I clinked my little glass with his and nodded my approval. “To amazing employees who have our best interest at heart.”

Before I could throw mine back, he added, “And our love lives.”

I sputtered on the whiskey again, which was too bad because I loved whiskey. I would never treat it so poorly as to choke on it—unless Charlie was throwing around inane accusations while being nice.

Then all bets were off.

“Careful.” He grinned.

I turned my head to the side and coughed into my elbow, desperate to find my cool again. “I’m good.” If I didn’t acknowledge how hard I was wheezing, maybe he wouldn’t either.

“How are you getting home?” he asked in a carefully neutral tone.

Assuming he meant because of the multiple shots we’d taken in a very short amount of time, I waved him off. “I’m walking.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“It’s literally down the block.”

“I remember where you live, Ada. But it’s after three in the morning.”

“It’s fine. I’m good.”

“I know you’re good. I’m still going to walk with you.”

“How are you getting home, Charlie?”

“I’m fine.”

“Okay, so now that we can agree we’re both fine, let’s call it good and say good night.”

He corked the whiskey bottle and slid it under the counter. It wasn’t one we usually left out for customer selection. It belonged to a very rare and expensive collection that I believe was Will’s.

“Are you ever going to stop telling me what to do?” he asked, but there was a sudden edge to his voice, a bitterness I usually fostered. Because angry, pissed-off Charlie was a whole lot easier to deal with than sweet, charming Charlie.

“Probably not. Sorry, it’s just not who I am.” I walked over to the switch near the front doors and clicked off the specialty lights, leaving us bathed in moonlight and exit lights.

I should have known how dark the space would be with the lights off. But somehow with just Charlie here, it seemed, uh, darker.

Maybe it was the whiskey.

I bumped into two separate tables trying to find the kitchen again. The chairs that had been piled on top rattled precariously. I paused to steady them, then kept moving and bumped into another table.

“You all right there, Kelly?”

“Mmm.”

He was there suddenly, reaching out his hand to me. “Let me help.”

“It’s really dark.” I put my hand in his so I didn’t somehow knock all of the tables and chairs over like a giant-size set of dominos.

He glanced out the full windows at the front of the bar. “I think there’s a full moon tonight.”

“Aha,” I gloated. “Just as I suspected.”

“How drunk did you get?” he asked with a laugh.

“I think I forgot to eat tonight. We got so busy. And.”

We stepped into the kitchen. Which was even darker. “And?”

“Hmm?”

“You said and. I thought you were going to say why you didn’t eat.”

“Oh, I just, uh, that was all. I forgot to eat supper.” Why was I so flustered? Yes, I was tipsier than I should be right now. Or maybe I was hunger deprived. Or perhaps Charlie and I hadn’t been alone in the bar together since, uh, well, since before. *But for fuck’s sake, Ada, pull yourself together.*

“That was a mistake, Ade,” he said in low tones of disapproval. “If you faint from hunger, you’re not going to be much use to us.”

I laughed. And it felt so weird that I laughed again. Oh God. I was laughing because I was laughing. And I’d only had two shots. And what?

“You’ll be fine,” I finally managed to say. “I’m replaceable.”

We’d reached the back door. Charlie unlocked it with his key and pushed it open. The warm air floated inside smelling of early summer and moonlight. “You, Ada Kelly, are one of a kind. We could never hope to replace you.”

Distantly, I realized I’d backed into a place I promised never to go again. Charlie English was dangerous all the time. But he was especially dangerous after dark. Five years ago, I’d vowed I would never get caught with him alone after close.

Ninety-nine percent of the time, I made quality, well-thought-out decisions. I was ridiculously responsible. I was self-disciplined and driven. I always—as much as I was able—chose the most foolproof path there was.

Oof, but that leftover one percent was packed with wild, wicked rebellion.

I worked hard to quash the one percent. I made rules. And promises. And plans with plan Bs. I never let the small slice of Reckless Ada out. Because Reckless Ada didn’t care about Ninety-Nine Percent Ada. Reckless Ada gave Ninety-Nine Percent Ada a long list of regrets and shame.

Reckless Ada did not have good judgment when it came to Charlie English in the moonlight. Which was why Ninety-Nine Percent Ada worked really hard to keep him distant and angry and pissed at her. Ninety-Nine Percent Ada only dealt with Charlie English in the light of day.

“You, Ada Kelly, are one of a kind. We could never hope to replace you.” He wasn’t allowed to say things like that.

“Don’t be nice to me,” I told him firmly. My hand landed on his shoulder. “I don’t know what to do when you’re nice.”

He made a face that Ninety-Nine Percent Ada would cringe at tomorrow. There was sympathy there. Regret maybe. Something so serious it hurt to

look at directly. “I think you just like to fight. I think you like it when we go to war, Ada. It keeps you on your toes.”

I wasn’t so drunk that I couldn’t keep my thoughts to myself. Like, *maybe he’s right. And war wasn’t supposed to be this fun.* And I had to stay on my toes because I might do something stupid if I was ever flat-footed. Like swoon. *So take that, English.*

“I’m going to go home now.”

He put his hand over mine that was resting against his chest now. *How did that happen?* “Eat something when you get there. You’ll feel better if you do.”

“Okay, boss.” I grinned at my joke, but his jaw ticked like he was mad about something.

“I’m going to watch you cross the street.”

“I’m fine.”

“I know.” He didn’t move. He pushed the door open wider and rested against it. Apparently, he was taking a stand.

I sighed. “You’re so weird.”

“Good night, Ada. Say hi to Adleigh for me.”

I snorted in response. I was too flustered to come up with something witty. Or sarcastic. Or mean.

Leaving Charlie in the doorway, I safely crossed the street because I really wasn’t that drunk. Maybe a little tipsy. But whatever. I lived close.

The walk home to my upper-level apartment was short and sweet, but I felt Charlie’s hard gaze on me the entire time. I obviously ignored him.

Slipping inside my building, then quietly into my apartment, I decided not to dissect the change in Charlie too much. He’d been nice at the end of the night, but so what? One night wasn’t an entire personality. Or an apology.

He liked being a bartender. So he wanted a friend to celebrate not getting fired by his siblings. It was a thing. But it was his thing.

I didn’t need to feel proud of him. Or impressed that he had learned how to take at least one thing in his life seriously. I definitely didn’t need to feel special that he wanted to share his happiness with me. Or cared for just because he watched me walk home.

He would have watched any of his employees if they lived as close as I did. He didn’t want anyone to get murdered on his watch. It was a totally normal precaution to take. *At least that’s what I convinced my brain.* Safer that way.

I ate a late-night PB and J and stopped overanalyzing all the nothings that had happened today. Tomorrow was a new day. Charlie would have unlimited opportunity to disappoint me then.

three

MY ALARM WENT off at nine the next morning. I'd gotten almost five hours of sleep and that felt like a solid amount for me. It was Saturday morning, and the urge to hit snooze and roll back over was strong, but I resisted. I had a lot to do today. Plus, Adleigh was home.

My sister was seven years younger than I was and had just finished a nursing degree at Duke. She'd moved in with me after she'd graduated from high school because my mom had kicked her out.

Well, that sounded worse than it was. Our mom was fantastic and loved us both dearly. But she'd gotten pregnant with me at seventeen and raised us girls during her early adulthood. My dad had moved us to Durham for a job when I was three. It was away from my mom's family in Florida, but he hadn't given her much choice. He split after Adleigh was born, but by then, I was in school, and we'd established a life. It was just the three of us after that.

Eventually, I moved out and tried college life for a while, but it wasn't for me. I didn't really know what I wanted to do. And I had always hated school. But I was a hard worker, so I started grinding my way through the restaurant industry. After Craft hired me as the floor manager, I felt like I'd finally landed my first grown-up job.

When Adleigh graduated from high school, my mom decided she wanted to move back home to be with her mom and sister. We visited each other often since Mom had a cute little beach house outside of Pensacola. She hated being away from us as much as she had hated being away from her mom.

She begged us to move close to her, but I loved my life in Durham. And

Adleigh had a serious boyfriend and had just gotten her first real job in a hospital. Maybe one day, but not yet.

Especially Adleigh. She finished college at an accelerated rate, having taken classes through every summer semester, and graduated with honors in May. In the past month, she'd gotten a serious job, a serious paycheck, and a serious-ish boyfriend, Shane.

I was still settling into the full-time job I'd had for over five years and had zero boyfriend prospects. It was hard not to feel a twinge of regret when I looked at how put together she was. Why couldn't I get my life on a similar track toward happily ever after? Yet, mostly, I was just proud of her. I knew what I wanted in life. Or rather, I knew what I didn't want in life. And the stress and demands of her job weren't any of them.

I crawled out of bed and stepped into my bathroom. I got busy with skin care, teeth, and getting ready for the day. Adleigh and I had a Pilates class in a little bit, then I wanted to hit my gym before it was time for Saturday errands and chores.

She was in the kitchen when I finally left the sanctuary of my room. Shane must have slept over last night because he was stretched out on the couch, scrolling his phone.

"Mmm, what are you making?" I asked as I started pulling stuff out for my daily protein shake and pre-workout greens mix. I decided I needed a piece of toast too. And maybe some of the eggs Adleigh was scrambling.

"Cottage cheese eggs," she said, sounding doubtful. "I saw the recipe on TikTok. But they're kind of runny."

"More cheese," I suggested. "When in doubt, add cheese."

She didn't look convinced, but she moved over to the fridge. "Isn't cottage cheese enough cheese?"

I laughed. "I don't know. I don't know anything about cottage cheese. It's gross."

"High in protein," she explained, her lip slightly curled back. "It's good for us."

"Sure."

Shane moved over to the kitchen island. He made it seem like he was coming over to chat, but I was pretty sure he was nervous about Adleigh's viral breakfast attempt. I didn't blame him.

She tried. I mean, she really tried. But cooking was not a natural talent for the poor girl.

Our apartment was beautiful. Open, airy, and full of natural light. Before Adleigh, I'd lived in a dingy studio that never had hot water. Adleigh and I had moved several times over the past four years. She kept getting higher-paying jobs while working toward a bachelor's in nursing. And I'd also managed to demand a livable salary from the English siblings.

We'd moved into this place a year ago. The option to renew our lease was coming up, and I knew they were raising our rent, but thankfully, Adleigh could take on more of a fifty-fifty role now that she had a reliable income stream.

"What did you guys do last night?" Before my shift, Adleigh had said they might stop by the bar, but I didn't see them. "Something fun?"

Adleigh mumbled something about her eggs. Shane said, "It was a good night." I looked up at him over my peanut butter protein shake that was freaking delicious and noticed a twinkle in his eye.

"Oh, that's cool." Sometimes he was a pervert, but I wasn't getting the double entendre vibe from him right now. "Check out any new spots?"

"Actually, Shane packed a picnic," Adleigh said flatly, sounding more stressed than her watery eggs called for. "We watched an Alfred Hitchcock movie at the park and gorged on cheese and crackers and wine. Then we went for a late-night stroll. We ended at that cute little wine bar. Uh, the one your friend Miles recommended. The Tangled Vine or something like that. Ten out of ten recommend. It was the cutest ever."

"Oh wow, Shane. I'm impressed."

He was grinning. He knew he'd hit it out of the park. Shane was a fifth-year senior because he played basketball for Duke. He wasn't one of the guys who was always on the court, but he was unmistakably an athlete. He'd red-shirted his freshman year or something, so he had one more to go to get his exercise science degree before he went on to get his doctorate in physical therapy.

Adleigh had met him at a party freshman year. They'd been good friends for a long time and then started dating two years ago. She never expected things to get serious because she'd made a lot of bad assumptions about him at first. Mainly because he was a Duke athlete, which carried a certain reputation. But he'd been smitten with her from day one.

He leaned forward and stretched out his arms. He was insanely tall, and even though he was sitting on a kitchen stool, his knees seemed to reach up to his ears. Adleigh and I were on the incredibly short side of the height

spectrum. He towered over my sister by more than a foot.

“Every once in a while, I get my shit together and impress your sister,” he said proudly. “Which is not easy to do.”

“Don’t I know it,” I said, laughing. Adleigh continued to stir her watery eggs. Their vibes were so off. Shane was like the cat who ate the canary, but Adleigh was taking her scrambled eggs very seriously. “You okay, Ad?”

“Mm-hmm,” she hummed. “Do you want any eggs?”

I glanced over her shoulder at the viral sensation fail in front of her. “I’m good. This is pretty filling.”

She dished up a couple of plates for her and Shane with toast, sliced tomatoes, a couple of slices of crispy bacon, and the eggs. Shane dove in immediately. Apparently, he wasn’t concerned about soupy eggs at all. Adleigh poked at her plate with a fork while I mixed up my green powder in water.

I hated this shit. But the internet told me it was good for my muscles. So there we were.

“Are you going to be okay for Pilates?” I asked my mopey sister. “Are you sick?”

She looked up at me with watery eyes and shook her head. She was still in her pajamas with no makeup and her hair loose around her shoulders. How did she roll out of bed and still look so stunning?

We were both shorties and very petite, but that was where our similarities ended. Where I was all edgy and back-off vibes, my sister was basically Snow White.

She had long, luxurious, flowing hair compared to my short style. My hair was longer than it had been recently. I’d let it grow out into a straight-edged bob and dyed it back to its original shade of dark brown. She was softer, curvier, voluptuous, and I was all hard-earned muscles and rigid workout schedule. She was gentle, soft-spoken, and reserved. I was opinionated, sarcastic, and obnoxiously driven.

We got on each other’s nerves often, but we loved each other fiercely. Her morning melancholy bothered me. She wasn’t usually this . . . depressed.

“I’m good,” she said, still staring at her eggs.

“Okay . . .” I glanced at Shane, but he was still grinning. What was going on? “Well, will you be ready to go in a couple minutes?”

She finally looked up at me with her big sad eyes and attempted a smile. “Yeah, can’t wait.”

She was definitely lying, but I decided to wait until I had her alone to call her out on it. “Sure. Great. I’m just going to grab my shoes and my water bottle, then we can go, yeah?”

“Yep.”

“I’ll deal with the eggs, Ad. Let’s try this recipe another day, okay?” Shane suggested. He was so good to her.

Seemed like he was picking up on her weird vibe too.

I took an extra minute to scroll through our texts and make sure I hadn’t accidentally pissed her off somehow. I didn’t find anything out of the norm, though. I wasn’t worried about her keeping something from me. We told each other everything. But it didn’t make sense how happy Shane was and how upset my sister was.

Instinct niggled in my gut, but I stomped it down. I didn’t want to think about what this could mean. I didn’t want to have to face my feelings about it.

When I left my room for the second time, Shane and Adleigh were whisper-arguing. They jumped apart when I cleared my throat, but things looked tense.

“Um, are you sure you want to go, Ad? I’m cool on my own. I’m planning on heading to Jen’s afterward anyway.”

“I’m good,” she insisted. “I want to go.”

She leaned on her tiptoes, and Shane met her halfway so they could kiss goodbye, then we headed into the hallway. We were quiet as we rode the elevator to the ground floor then stepped out into the June sunshine.

Our trendy apartment was nestled into the same cool area of Durham where Craft was located. It was all young people and nightlife over there. Almost everything we needed or wanted was in walking distance from our place, including a hip, organic grocer, a beautiful park with big trees, and a cozy amphitheater that held summer concerts by local bands or Friday night old-timey movies—like the one Adleigh and Shane had been to last night. Our Pilates studio was only five minutes away. And my Muay Thai gym was five minutes past that in an industrial building with a huge garage door they usually kept open all summer long.

Those were the reasons I stayed in Durham. Well, the non-people reasons.

On the street, I nudged Adleigh with my elbow and demanded to know what was going on. “Okay, spill it.”

“Spill what?” she asked with big, innocent eyes.

“Spill whatever’s killing you.”

“How do you know something’s killing me?”

“Are you serious, Ad?” I laughed. “You look miserable, for one. And for two, you’re literally the worst at keeping secrets. Something’s eating at you. And my guess is that it’s something you have to tell me but don’t want to.”

Her chin trembled as I hit my mark. “I just love Shane so much,” she said in a way that felt like I’d broken the dam to her thoughts wide open. “You know, I never thought things would get so serious, right? Like, I had no intentions of dating in college, let alone finding someone I actually love.” She was full-on sobbing now. It was a little awkward since the sidewalks were so busy.

“I know,” I assured her soothingly. “Shane surprised me too.”

She cried harder. “He’s just so amazing. And even though he has lots of school left, things have gotten really serious lately.” She was sucking in short, hysterical breaths as she poured out facts I already knew. “Especially now that I’m not in school.”

“Ad, calm down, babe. You’re going to pass out.”

She turned to face me on the middle of the sidewalk, next to a bench, a trash can that smelled like rotten food, and an irresponsible pile of dog shit. She grasped my hands before I could suggest we keep walking and confessed, “Shane asked me to move in with him last night. And I said yes.”

The world jerked to the side and seemed to send everything around me sliding with it. My brain felt like it been given a gravitational shove so it plastered against the inside of my skull.

“Wait, I’m sorry, what?”

She started sobbing. There were words in there, maybe. But mostly she was blubbering tears and gasping breaths.

Realizing my sweet, sensitive sister was having a hard time being honest with me, I attempted to console her. “That’s great, Adleigh. I’m so happy for you.”

“No, you’re not,” she wailed.

She was right. But just because I loved living with my sister, and her shared rent money made our apartment possible, didn’t mean I wasn’t happy for her. I was also super bummed for me.

“I am,” I tried again, this time adding a smile to my stony face. “Gosh, Ad, that is so exciting. It’s a huge step for both of you. I’m genuinely excited

for you to start your life with him. You're like a legit grown-up now."

Her public wailing subsided a little, and she wiped at her cheeks with her hands. Her nails were freshly painted and matched her Amazon workout set perfectly. She was so pretty even when she cried.

I was proud of Shane for realizing what he had. For wanting to take their relationship to the next level. I struggled with trusting men. Especially college frat boys on nationally known basketball teams. But he was genuinely sweet. And he took great care of Adleigh.

Unfortunately, my dating experience reinforced what I'd grown to believe about the entire male gender. They were unreliable. Untrustworthy. Unwilling to step up and take responsibility. And when things got hard, they left.

Moments like these, I was jealous of Adleigh's opposite experience. Not only had she found a solid man but also one she wanted to spend the rest of her life with.

So yay for them and their fairy-tale ending.

I would keep my bitter, hopeless thoughts to myself and celebrate their true love. Even if her happily ever after left me alone and roommate-less. Like a spinster.

I should put that on my Tinder profile. Ada Kelly, twenty-eight-year-old spinster. The boys will come a-runnin'.

"It doesn't have to happen like tomorrow or anything," she assured me, which was hardly any assurance. "I had just mentioned the new lease to Shane, so he wanted to ask me before you got stuck in the middle of the year paying rent you can't afford."

Oh shit, the lease. We had to make a decision within the next two weeks and have it signed with our new inflated price by the first of July.

My happiness for the happy couple shriveled into an unhappy raisin.

But to my sister, I said, "Hey, don't worry about me. I somehow survived for years on my own before you moved in. I can do it again."

Her chin wobbled again. "But your apartment sucked back then. And you love this place."

"Adleigh," I snapped sternly before she could start more waterworks. "It will be fine. I will be fine. I'm making a whole lot more money than I did back then. And even if I have to move, there are a ton of great buildings around here. Please stop worrying about me. I'm the older sister. That's my job."

Her lips twitched into an amused smile. “You are a pro at it.”

“I’m a pro at everything I do.”

She laughed, and it felt amazing to hear her happy again. “That’s true. I’ve never met anyone so naturally good at everything they do.”

I shook my head. Her confidence in me was inflated out of love. But I did have a relentless need to master everything I tried. It was like my on switch was broken, and I didn’t know how to relax. All I knew how to do was work and work and work.

It was actually obnoxious.

“Are you up for Pilates still? Because if you’d rather blow it off and grab coffee instead—”

“No,” she insisted immediately. “We’re going to Pilates.”

“Okay . . .?”

She grabbed my arm and started dragging me toward the studio a few doors down. It was a small place and the owners were best friends and the most lithe, in-shape women I’d ever met. They were well into their sixties and had retired from other jobs to do this together. Adleigh and I had decided we were going to do this too one day. Well into our sixties. After our families had grown and our lives had settled, we’d buy a little place by Mom and the beach and run a Pilates studio that was warm and welcoming and beautiful.

“I have more news,” she said, but this time instead of tears, her grip on my arm tightened to an almost painful degree. I was afraid for entirely different reasons.

“What’s going on?”

“I, uh, got an interesting email the other day.”

“Ad, just because they’re claiming to be royalty doesn’t mean they are. Do not send anyone money. No matter how many millions they promise you in return.”

“It’s worse than that.”

“Worse than a pretend prince who’s actually poor?”

“It was Dad.”

Unfortunately, the sidewalk opened up right then and swallowed me whole. And that was how I died. The end.

“Wait, what?” my un-dead mouth screeched. “Dad? Are you sure?”

“It’s Dad, Ade. For real.”

I made a choked laughing noise that sounded truly hysterical. “No, you’re wrong. It’s actually more likely that you’re emailing a real African prince.

He's a missing person at this point, babe. Totally gone with the wind."

"He's in town. He moved back to the area."

"How did he get your contact information?"

"I don't know." She shrugged, flustered. "I guess there was an article highlighting that Habitat for Humanity thing the basketball team did. The one I helped at. And there was a picture of Shane and me. My name was printed underneath. I suppose he saw it, then tracked me down through the school."

I felt like she stuffed my ears with cotton. Everything had weirdly disappeared around us. I was back in my tiny childhood home, crying on the kitchen floor because my daddy had left and wasn't coming back. I could close my eyes and see Mom pacing the floor in front of the sink, crying too. Holding a wiggling Adleigh who was also crying. *Daddy, come back*, I'd cried and cried. My mom had just shaken her head. *He won't. He won't.*

"Did you respond?"

"Not yet." She chewed her bottom lip aggressively. "He apologized. I mean, that's what the email was mostly about. He apologized for leaving us. And shared a little of where he's been over the years. He says he wants to meet me."

I knew she didn't intend to leave me out. He'd found her after all. Not me. But just her words alone were like a slap across the face. *What about me? Did he want to meet me?*

Ugh, I hated how much my heart pinched at the idea. How I was equal parts hope and despair. It had been so long. I genuinely never expected this day to come. As a little girl, I'd looked for him everywhere. At every supermarket. At every dance recital or game I'd ever played in. I looked for him on the street and in other cars, at gas stations and movie theaters, and in our driveway. I'd looked and looked and looked. But he never came.

When I was old enough to realize how foolish I was being, I stopped looking.

At some point, I made peace with never seeing him again. He'd vanished.

Reading my unspoken thoughts, Adleigh added, "I'm sure he wants to meet you too, Ade. I shouldn't have said it like that. He asked a ton of questions about you. He just suggested coffee. Says he'd like to apologize in person."

"No," I bit out. My thoughts were spinning wildly, and I felt barely in control of my body. I was worried I was going into shock or something. But that answer was crystal clear. "No, I don't want to meet him."

“No?”

Adleigh sounded wounded. I flinched. I hadn't meant to sound so harsh or shut down the suggestion so quickly. But how could I meet the man who had abandoned us? How could I face the man who had looked around at his family and decided he wanted something else?

God, I felt sick. I felt the sharp slice of heartbreak all over again.

It had been different for Adleigh. She was too young to remember him. She didn't have any memories of him around the table. Or playing basketball outside. She didn't catch the scent of him sometimes if the sun was hot and the grass freshly mowed. She hadn't had to witness our mom crumple and break and only pull herself together because she had two daughters to take care of. She didn't know what it was like to be tucked in tight by big hands or feel the scratch of his stubbly cheek when he kissed me good night one night and then never have that again.

She had her own pain from growing up without a dad. But she didn't know what it was like to have one then not have one.

And I didn't fault her for that. But I also couldn't go to coffee with him.

“No, I can't.” I cleared my throat. “I won't.”

Her mouth turned down. I was afraid she was going to start crying again. Quickly, I yanked her into a hug.

“But you should go,” I assured her. “I'm glad he reached out to you. Better late than never.”

“Do you really mean that?”

“Everyone should know who their dad is,” I said, struggling to swallow. “I mean, do what you want. But . . . but don't turn him down because of me.”

“I'll think about it,” she whispered. “It's been twenty-two years. He can wait a little bit longer.”

Diane, one of the owners, opened the door with a quizzical expression on her finely wrinkled face. “You ladies okay?”

“Sister moment,” Adleigh explained.

“Her boyfriend just asked her to move in with him,” I said, grinning. And ignoring the way the world had gone blurry around me. I wouldn't cry for my dad. I wouldn't. I'd spent enough years mourning his absence. I was not about to cry over his sudden presence.

We stepped into the small studio, and Adleigh was swept into conversation and congratulations. Everyone was happy for her. Everyone knew they were the most perfect couple.

I stood in the back and stretched, feeling sick to my stomach and wondering if I could slip out the door and head straight to Jen's. For the second time in twenty-four hours, I needed to punch something. *At least it wasn't Charlie this time.*

Instead, I pasted on a fake smile and crushed Pilates in a way that made my muscles burn and my brain only capable of focusing on pushing my body to the absolute limit. Then after class, I hugged Adleigh goodbye and spent the next two hours at Jen's, pushing my body even further.

Today had thus far been a total shit show. But it was nothing that couldn't be sweated out on the mat.

four

I WAS RUNNING LATE by the time I pulled myself off the mat, got home to shower, and was ready for work, which wasn't like me. I was never late. And I didn't let myself get behind.

Not only was I fifteen minutes late to work, but I hadn't done any of my to-do list items I'd planned for today.

A flustered unsettledness flapped around inside me all day. Jill, one of my trainers at Jen's, had finally banished me from the gym. She'd gotten tired of watching me get my ass kicked and pulled the "You're going to hurt yourself" card. *Whatever, Jill. Maybe I wanted to hurt myself.*

At the very least, I wanted to stop the out-of-control careening my mind had taken off in. I went to meticulous lengths to plan out my days. My nightlife job could have easily rendered the daytime useless. But early on, I had determined to still have a life during sunshine hours.

So I'd made a plan. I got up every day, no matter how late I was up, no matter how tired I got. I worked out. I ate healthy—mostly so I didn't have to feel bad about the cocktail calories I loved to imbibe.

Also I loved cheeseburgers. And milkshakes. And pork rinds. But that was neither here nor there.

I paid my bills on time. I didn't let laundry pile up. I kept a clean house.

I was a responsible adult with goals and dreams and a budget—that I stuck to like it was my religion.

It had side effects too. Unseen consequences that I welcomed.

For starters, I didn't notice things like . . . how lonely it was sometimes. I had family goals. A five-year plan, if you will. And the man who would occupy that place had to fit a certain, well-developed criteria I'd tweaked

over the years.

If you had feelings but turned them into goals with timelines and tangible steps, your more vulnerable feelings could be pacified.

Did I still sometimes feel swallowed up with loneliness? Especially, for instance, when Adleigh and Shane were all cute and cuddly on the couch, giggling about inside jokes and as comfortable as two human beings could possibly be around other human beings? No. Well, maybe. But the point was, I simply channeled those feelings into my goal, adding things like “must like to spoon” and “be taller than me so I can feel totally pulled into his massive body” to the list.

Over the years, there’d been enough bad dates and Tinder duds that I also had a clear list for everything I didn’t want too. Such as “must not pretend to drink.” Or “must not treat me like a temporary accessory.” Or “must not leave me and our precious children in the middle of the night and never come home.”

Problem solved.

Er, for the most part.

I stormed through the front doors of Craft with the hot summer sunshine chasing me. June could still be mild on occasion, but this week the weather had been blazing. And after my very intense Muay Thai grappling workout in a gym that was cooled by giant fans and no internal air conditioning, I’d struggled to lower my body temp. I’d dressed in a loose, boho mini dress with straps that tied over my shoulders and worn my hair pinned back from my face, but I was still red-cheeked and damp.

“Hey,” Will said mildly from behind the bar.

I looked up at him, but my brain was trying to figure out what to do about my apartment and if Adleigh was really going to go to coffee with our dad and would Shane get some of his basketball buddies to help move my stuff too.

Was I going to have to move away from this neighborhood? Damn, was I going to have to find a new gym? A new Pilates studio?

Oh my God, my life was going to get so complicated now. And I had just started to feel comfortable here. I mean, I really loved this section of town. But everything was so damn expensive these days.

Maybe I could get a second job. I was up most of the day anyway. Maybe just something part-time. And then I could stay in my apartment—

“Ada?” Will’s voice was sterner this time, worried.

I blinked out of my internal spiraling and tried to smile. He flinched, so I wasn't sure if I pulled it off. "Sorry," I murmured. "I've had a weird day."

His brows drew down in immediate concern. "Are you okay?"

Wrestling my face into submission, I nodded placidly. "Yes, fine. Why?"

"You look a little—"

"I'm fine," I said before he could say what I looked like. That was the last thing I needed to hear. "I'm sorry I'm late. I got caught up—"

He waved me off. "Do you even have a set schedule? I assume you're here whenever you need to be here. We trust you, Ada. You don't have to explain."

Will's gentle concern was as much of a trigger for my haywire emotions as Adleigh's announcement to abandon me and meet up with our dad. I didn't want to think of myself as hard-hearted or cold, but damn, why was it that Will genuinely caring about me messed me up so badly? Why did his kindness feel as dangerous as anything else I'd faced today?

There were sirens in my head. A whole system of internal alarms had been tripped, and I wasn't sure how to reset them. Suddenly, I wanted to go into full lockdown mode. Push everyone away. As far as they could go. Find a bunker somewhere and throw myself in it. But I had work. And responsibilities. And now I needed to figure out if I could afford my apartment or not.

"Thanks."

Will looked even more worried. "Ada, listen, if you ever need to talk to someone—"

"Please stop," I groaned. Best to deflect with sarcasm. "I'm good, Will. I'm just frazzled. And I hate feeling frazzled. So please keep your emotional interventions to yourself, yeah?"

He snorted. "Okay, yeah. Sorry. I'm not used to caring about people. Lola is fucking with my whole personality. Whatever. Er, sorry."

I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing. "I'm happy you're happy. But tell Lola to give you your balls back please."

He threw a green olive at me. I ducked out of the way and did not retrieve it. He could track it down himself.

"Ally's waiting for you in the office."

Oh shit. "Oh shit! I forgot about her."

Hurrying to the kitchen, I tried to ignore the onslaught of stress that bounced right back. This was why I was mad I was late. Not because of Will,

but because I'd asked Ally to meet me so we could finish her training. I'd dropped the ball. And I hated failing—even if it was minimal.

The kitchen buzzed with tension as I stepped through the swinging door. Case and Joey had their backs to each other using their giant knives for prep work in a violent sort of way that made me think of heads beneath guillotines.

“Hey, guys,” I greeted over the loud blare of music. Case used to keep his speaker at a pleasant volume. But there was a disagreement early on when Joey first started working here about the style of music and someone always interrupting his favorite song. And now, when we weren't officially open, the rest of us had to put up with full blast.

Eliza had stepped in and tried to mediate from her human resources boss standpoint, but I was pretty sure it had ended in Case flipping a table and threatening to walk out. So the rest of us put up with the music.

Even if I wanted to pick up his Bluetooth speaker and chuck it into the alley.

Ally was chatting Eliza's face off when I stepped into the office. Eliza was doing her best to pay attention, but I was pretty sure the glazed-over look to her expression meant she might have fallen asleep with her eyes open.

“Hey, sorry I'm late,” I breathed. I tried another smile. It was apparently so bad it broke Eliza out of her living coma, and Ally made a frightened, high-pitched squeaky sound. Note to self, stop smiling.

“You're here!” Eliza sounded ridiculously relieved. “Ally was just giving me the play-by-play of her ride home with Miles last night. I mean, every detail. Every single one. I really feel like I was there with them. Like right in the back seat.”

I swallowed back a laugh while Ally said, “Did you know Miles drives a Slug Bug? Like an old one. It's an antique.”

“Herbie,” I confirmed.

“Yeah, he named it. Miles named his car.”

“It's from an old movie,” I explained.

“And a new one,” Eliza added. “With Lindsay Lohan.”

I glanced at Eliza over my shoulder. “Ooh, Lindsay Lohan?”

“She's making a comeback,” Eliza confirmed, a sassy smile lifting one side of her mouth.

“I saw that,” I added. “Good for her.”

“Good for her,” Eliza added.

Ally blinked at us. “So you don't think it's weird that a grown-ass man

drives a yellow Volkswagen Bug, calls her a she, but named her Herbie?”

“Who am I to get in the way of true love?” I asked, then moved over to my computer so I could pull up the last of her training video. This one had to do with workplace safety.

“I was supposed to ride home with Charlie.” She pouted.

Eliza stood and started gathering her things. “Oh no. Sorry. Charlie has been banned from giving rides. It’s not you, darling. It’s him.” She cleared her throat. “Well, and us. Because we’re the ones who made the ban in the first place. But, uh, you get the picture.”

“Did he really sleep with that many servers?” Ally’s eyes were huge, her mouth slack-jawed and loose. This girl loved gossip.

Eliza shook her head. “The problem was, he *wouldn’t* sleep with servers. And that made some of them mad. And then they quit. Except there was that one with Will. And the other one with the hair . . .”

“And the one with the scarf,” I added.

Eliza looked into the distance for a minute. “Oh right. But who wears a silk scarf all summer long? This isn’t Paris. Anyway, that was a long time ago. What matters right now is that you take care of yourself. And this job. And Herbie is always available for rides. Uh, car rides. Home. After work. I have to go now.”

I repressed another giggle because Eliza was the best, and pushed play. “There’s a short quiz when you’re done. It will pull up automatically. Just use the mouse and . . .” I pulled it over toward her. “There you go.”

“You’re not going to stick around?” she asked, sounding disappointed.

Ally was clearly a full-capacity extrovert. It wasn’t that she was looking to be my friend—which might have freaked me out because, honestly, I didn’t always trust girls who thought I seemed fun or personable. Clearly, they were delusional. It was more like she just liked to be around people. She was one of those girls who probably had a hundred friends and never went to the grocery store or bathroom alone. She probably lived in a sorority house and had flexible plans scheduled in her planner every night for the next six months.

None of those things were bad. It was just that . . . well, I was an introvert by nature who was sometimes forced into public, but I would almost always rather be working out or reading. And eight out of ten times, I’d rather do those things alone.

Small talk was my actual death. The biggest ick I could ever imagine. If I

had to talk to you, fine. But don't bring the weather or shopping or any other bullshit up. Real talk only. Thank you.

"I have other work to get to," I told her. One final attempt at a smile. She tried not to react. I decided today was the day I quit smiling forever. "Just come find me when you're done. I'll have you roll silverware and check salt and peppers, ketchup bottles, all that fun stuff. Yeah?"

"Uh, okay, sure."

"Thanks, Ally. You're doing great."

On the other side of the kitchen door, I tried to suck in a deep breath, but all I smelled was good food. My stomach growled angrily at the abuse I'd put it through today, and I realized for the first time since Adleigh had told me our dad had tracked her down that I hadn't eaten anything but my protein shake and toast.

Ugh, I was starving. And now I was irritated. I usually had a better routine than this. Sure, double stacking Pilates and Muay Thai was normal for me, but when I got home, I would make a massive lunch full of fresh veggies, open-faced toast, and protein yogurt. Sometimes, I'd even splurge on an apple with peanut butter or Nutella. But not today.

I walked over to the fridge and started pulling stuff out. It wouldn't do any good to faint on the floor tonight because I wasn't responsible enough to feed myself.

Irritation crept under my skin and buzzed like a hundred angry bumble bees.

"Whatchya doing, Ada?" Joey asked from behind me.

I'd been slapping ingredients onto the butcher block without realizing it. Fuck. I consciously unclenched my jaw then my hands. Now would be a great time to get my shit together. "Oh, sorry. I just realized I forgot to eat today, and my blood sugar is dropping quickly."

Will popped his head in the kitchen. "Hey, Ada, can I get your opinion on something out front real fast?"

My jaw snapped back to tight and rigid. Sucking in a calming breath, I gave up on the idea of eating something. "Sure, Will. I'll be right there."

"What was the plan here?" Joey asked as she hopped over to my side.

"A sandwich?" I reached for a piece of sliced provolone and folded it up so I could eat it in one bite. "Or something. I don't know. I should have eaten earlier, but—"

"Hey, no worries. I regularly forget to feed myself. And I work with food

daily,” she commiserated. “It happens. Especially when you’re busy.”

Her kindness twinged something in my heart. I hadn’t been expecting empathy, especially over something as stupid as missing lunch.

I cleared my throat instead of bursting into tears. It seemed like the more responsible way forward. “Yeah, right. I’m like a neglected house plant.”

She laughed. “I got this. No worries.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. I needed some of this stuff anyway.”

“Thanks, Joey.” Our short interaction had calmed my frayed nerves, and while the piece of cheese wasn’t exactly a full meal, the calories were nice.

I hurried out to the main floor. There would be time to eat later. Possibly when the fryer was on and I could swipe some cheese curds. Or onion rings. Or . . . chicken fingers.

My stomach growled again.

Eliza was at the bar with Will and Charlie. Seeing the three of them together used to give me massive anxiety because I knew things were about to explode. All of them could be the loveliest people on the planet. All of them could also be total assholes. And nothing brought out the assholery more than interacting with each other.

But things had improved over the past couple of years. Will found Lola—who had helped him calm down. I mean, I didn’t want to say sex saved the man. But he hulked out at least seventy percent less than he used to. Eliza had found Jonah; their friends-to-lovers trope was absolutely adorable and incredibly expected. But they made a good pair. And it kept Eliza too busy to bug her brothers.

And Charlie had also maybe, slightly, possibly grown up a little over the years too. He wasn’t nearly as airheaded as he used to be. He actually contributed to the bar now that he could help out behind it. And he’d slowly but surely stopped bringing all his random friends in for free drinks or jobs.

They were hitting their sibling bonding era, and I loved it for them. Even if one-third of them still drove me to drink.

And sometimes forced me to drink.

“Hey,” Will said. His brow quirked again as he took me in, but he wisely kept his mouth shut. “Come have a seat.”

Will and Charlie were behind the bar, so I dropped onto the stool next to Eliza. She smiled brightly at me. Something was up.

“What’s going on?”

“We need to have a bigger conversation about this,” Will said, taking the lead. “But we’re thinking about opening a second location.”

“What?”

“The bar is doing pretty great right now,” he explained further, “so we’re looking into adding a second Craft on the other side of town. In that new plaza area with the green space.”

“Highland?” I guessed.

They nodded. “We’ve been working with a real estate agent, and they have some bays that haven’t been leased yet. It would obviously be a more modern look for us, but we think there could be potential.”

“Bougie,” I managed to say.

“Busy,” Eliza amended. “That whole Trinity Park area is busy and loaded.”

This was the third piece of surprise news I’d heard today. And it wasn’t that I wasn’t excited for them. I was. But my brain had started glitching. It wouldn’t get on board with being excited. I kept telling it this was good news. But it was trapped somehow. There was a spinning circle thing that indicated the information was loading, but nothing was getting fully uploaded.

“That’s great.”

“Why don’t I believe you?” Charlie asked, sounding suspicious.

“No, it is. I’m really excited. That’s, uh, awesome.” I smiled. They took a step back. I wiped the smile off quickly because how many times was it going to take before I learned my lesson. “I’m just, um, why are you telling me?”

Will cleared his throat. “Uh, well, we can’t do this without you. Ada, you’re the glue that holds this place together, and we’ve only just got our feet under us here. I, er, we realize this is a big undertaking, so we’d like to move forward with as few hiccups as possible.”

There was white noise buzzing around in my head. Nothing Will was saying made any sense. And there was a faint ringing sound in my ears. “Okay, wait, explain slower. I still don’t get where I come in.”

“We want you to help us open the new location. Help design the space. Train the staff, eventually. Work with Case and Charlie to build the menu off popular items here, but also adding new ones so it’s not an identical twin, but more like a fraternal one.”

“We’ll pay you more,” Eliza added quickly. “If it’s the money you’re

worried about. Because obviously, we'll still need you here."

"And nothing is out of the planning and thinking stage yet. So it will be a bit," Will put in. "But we wanted to pitch it to you and see what you thought."

There was silence while I wondered if I would face-plant on the bar or tip backward off the stool and hit my head on the ground.

Eliza put her hand on my shoulder. "You don't have to tell us today. Please, take your time thinking it over."

"Something's wrong with her," Charlie said flatly. "She's not okay."

His accusation cut through my brain fog, and I jumped into action. "I'm fine." I cut a glare at him. "Honestly, I'm fine. I've just had a weird day."

They exchanged a glance. Two of them looked like they believed me. One of them looked like he was happy to call me a dirty, rotten liar.

I should really eat something. But it wasn't like me to make a big deal out of nothing, and I felt stupid telling them I needed to have some crackers then I'd be able to have the appropriate amount of enthusiasm.

Or maybe the crackers were meaningless. Maybe it was more that I needed my dad to disappear again and my sister to break up with Shane so we could all go back to our regularly scheduled lives.

"I think this is awesome," I said, even while I somehow lost more touch with reality. But I was nothing if not a girl who could pull herself up by her bootstraps and muscle on. "Honestly, I think it's so cool. I would love to help you out. I'm not sure what that looks like financially. I should probably figure that out on my end, as well as get a clearer picture of how much more you're going to need from me, but—"

"We'll figure that out for sure," Will assured me, cutting me off. "Lola has a lot of experience opening franchises, obviously. So this was actually her idea."

I smiled because I didn't know what to say.

Charlie said, "You should take the week and think it over. I don't think you should make the decision today."

"I'm fine," I hissed again. I hated having to repeat myself. I hated even more trying to convince people nothing was wrong with me. I worked very, very hard to never show other people there might be something wrong. Charlie needed to back off before I found the courage to punch something else today.

"You're not fine," he argued, his perceptive eyes narrowed on my face.

Before I could argue with him, or punch him, Joey swept out of the kitchen like an angel from heaven. “Sorry to interrupt,” she said. Then set a plate of food down in front of me. “I made Ada a sandwich. She forgot to eat today.”

I should have been more self-conscious about what happened next, but the smell of grilled bread and sharp cheese hit my withering brain cells like smelling salts. I pounced on the sandwich in the same way a starved grizzly bear would attack fresh salmon out of a refreshing riverbed.

The English siblings tutted over me while I sank my teeth into the Michelin-star-worthy thing that was so much more than a sandwich. I moaned around the bite and let the delicious fat and carbs and calories go to work fixing my brain.

Honestly, I tuned them out for a couple of minutes. I had to focus on devouring the sandwich and the plate of fries and the double portion of house-made pickle spears. And then licking the plate clean.

Okay, I didn’t do that last bit. But only because they were watching me.

Charlie walked away for a second but returned with a glass of ice water he’d filled using the soda gun. He slid it across the bar without saying anything.

I would have refused the glass of water out of spite, but I had genuinely inhaled the food and it was either graciously accepting the water or choking and dying. Which would have been fine except there was an audience.

Within minutes, I started to feel light-years better. I wasn’t diabetic or even hypoglycemic. But I had burned an insane amount of calories at Pilates and Jen’s today. I should have taken better care of my body.

“Okay, we’ll keep talking about this,” Will finally said, wrapping up the meeting. “This is good. I’m glad you’re on board, Ada.”

Will and Eliza walked away, back through the kitchen door. There were only a couple minutes till open. And even if we usually started slow in the late afternoon, I didn’t want to be out here stuffing my face when customers entered. I tucked into the few bites that were left and decided to give Joey whatever days off she asked for.

She didn’t need a reason at this point. She could just have PTO whenever she wanted.

Well, maybe not quite that. But something close to it.

Charlie stood there staring at me long enough that I started to feel self-conscious. “What do you want, English?”

“What’s going on with you today?”

I immediately felt exposed. Like he could see inside my head and read all my self-pitying thoughts. “Nothing’s going on today. I just forgot to eat. I worked out too hard.”

He shook his head. “Saturday’s your light day.”

What? *How did he know that?* It was the one indulgence I gave myself in my workout schedule. Light day Saturday, rest day Sunday, beast mode every other day. “Well, it wasn’t today. I hit it too hard. And then I got too busy to eat.”

“That’s what I’m trying to get to, Kelly. Why did you hit it so hard you almost passed out at work? What’s got you all riled up?”

Now I was doubly annoyed. It wasn’t only that Charlie saw me better than anyone else today. It was that I worked really, really hard to make sure I didn’t get riled up. Or at least look like I was riled up. I was always calm. Always in control. Always poised.

Did that mean I didn’t yell at Will and Charlie to sometimes knock it the fuck off? No. Those moments would always be necessary. But when it came to my own personal shit, I kept it off the table.

There was never a whiff of Ada’s personal life out there for people like Ally to exploit. I kept that shit locked up tight. And people might get a feeling that I was annoyed with them. But that was as deep as the public perception of my emotions went. I was not a tell-all kind of girl.

I was a keep it secret, keep it safe girl. Didn’t matter if my world was falling apart or if my dad had shown up out of nowhere or if I was pending homelessness. It was not available for public consumption. It was mine to carry and mine to keep.

Now that I had some calories in me, I could get back to playing off other people’s concerns like a normal fucking grown-up. “Nothing. No reason. I just . . . felt like it.”

His mouth twitched with an almost smile. “You’re mad I got you drunk last night.”

“What?”

“Listen, you need to take better care of yourself, Ada. It’s not my fault you’re starving yourself.”

“I am not starving myself,” I snapped back. “I take immaculate care of myself. These two outlier events hardly constitute a crisis. I had a weird day, and I forgot to eat. End of story.”

His green eyes flashed. “So you did have a weird day.”

I felt like screaming. Instead, I took a steadying breath and reached into my arsenal of self-defense tactics and pulled out my favorite weapon—sarcasm. “Okay, Detective English, you caught me. I had a weird day, so I went hard at the gym, then I was running late, so I forgot to eat. And then I showed up to work and ate. Mystery solved.”

He was unamused by my tone. “Why was it weird?”

“Why do you think it’s your business?”

He shrugged one deceptively casual shoulder. “Why are you deflecting?”

God, sometimes I worried we were two sides of the same coin. Charlie was equally, if not more so, obsessed with pulling off the laid-back vibe as much as I was. But of course, for totally different reasons.

When Charlie cared about something, he usually cared about it too much. Like his obsession with clean and uncracked bar glasses. Nobody asked him to compulsively check our inventory every night. But early on, he’d watched some stupid video about how glasses can carry bacteria if not properly cared for and how cracked glasses can be very dangerous—especially if an unknowing guest were to swallow bits of glass.

So he’d taken it upon himself to make sure each glass was put away perfectly.

But somewhere in his childhood, that whole image of him caring too much had become a bad thing. So he covered it with this laid-back lie that he didn’t actually care about anything. When, in fact, he cared about everything.

I had never judged him, though, because I was just as bad. My reasons were different, obviously. But literally nobody could out cool-girl me.

One day, I’d decided I was tired of being the weird bookworm without a dad. So I’d turned my introverted-ness into cold, cool distance. I stopped reading books in public. I held eye contact with people who intimidated me so nobody ever thought they were the alpha over me. And I brushed everything off. Every insult, every underhanded comment, every inappropriate suggestion from boys I went to high school with, to college idiots not yet men, to the douche guys who came in here and got drunk and tried to hit on me.

“I’m not deflecting,” I insisted. “I’m just not in the mood to share every single detail of my personal life with my boss.”

He leaned forward, bringing us closer together. “The Ice Queen strikes again.”

I gasped like he'd slapped me. "What is that supposed to mean?"

He raised an eyebrow and stared at me. I folded my arms over my chest and refused to back down. Finally, he said, "Just so we're clear, because I wouldn't want to be misrepresented in your extensive Charlie English file, if I ask you a personal question, it's not because I also have an Ada Kelly file. It's just a question. Because I care about the answer. And you are welcome to give me as much or as little explanation as you want. That's your prerogative. But I will never use that information against you, Ada."

After all that food, I was suddenly gasping for breath again. "I didn't . . . I don't have a—"

"I'm going to open the doors."

As soon as his back was to me, I grabbed my plate and took off for the kitchen. I knew it made me look like a coward. And I hated being the loser in this particular standoff. But . . . but . . .

I bypassed the kitchen and slipped into the bathroom, dirty plate and all. It was miraculously empty. And so no one saw the single tear that slipped down the side of my face. *If I ask you a personal question, it's not because I also have an Ada Kelly file. It's just a question. Because I care about the answer.* No. He cannot be nice to me. I couldn't deal with Charlie being kind and thoughtful and . . . insightful. Ninety-Nine Percent Ada was not at her fighting best. And all that warmth and tenderness was dangerous for Reckless Ada.

Too dangerous.

What a fucking day.

five

ANOTHER END OF SHIFT. Another exhausting night. Another overwhelmingly busy dining room. We'd been through so much alcohol tonight, I wouldn't be surprised if every single adult in Durham had a hangover tomorrow morning.

It wasn't just the full moon, but that summer was in full swing. And God, I loved that. I loved the nightlife culture and the way people loved going out when the weather got warm. But also, the only way my feet might feel better was to cut them off completely. *Because owie!*

Will and Charlie were behind the bar cleaning up. Ally didn't need a ride tonight. But I would have bet anything that was because Will was around. He might not routinely shout at everyone anymore, but he was still intimidating.

I had just finished ticking off one of my many checklists and decided that was probably enough for today. Sure, there was a hell of a lot of work to do—but there always was. I'd reached some kind of mental limit, and tomorrow was my day off. So whatever was left to do could wait until Monday.

Case and Joey were still in the kitchen, so I just had to wait for them to finish up and then I was gone.

Will noticed me lounging at a high top with my bare feet propped up on the chair next to me. "Long night, Ade?"

"The longest," I said around a yawn. "Made some good money tip-wise, though."

He seemed to think about something as soon as I mentioned tips. "You know, if we move forward with the second location, we wouldn't have you continue to wait tables. These days would be over."

I smiled blearily. He'd actually been promising me that since I started. I

didn't believe him anymore. Not that I thought he was keeping me on the floor maliciously. I was just good at my job. And with all the problems we'd had with finding reliable waitstaff over the years, at least I could always count on myself.

Besides, the tips were always worth it.

Things had been marginally better recently. The staff situation was stabilizing. But it wasn't like I had a deep roster to pull from yet.

"I'm serious," Will reiterated.

"I appreciate that," I said, laughing. I sounded a little hysterical, but Will didn't push me.

After a few more minutes, Will said his goodbyes. Lola had texted him, wondering what was taking so long, and he flew out of there like the building was on fire. Charlie and I watched him go in mild fascination.

"He's apparently been summoned," Charlie said dryly.

"Apparently."

There were a couple of beats of silence when he was clearly thinking about his brother's weird behavior. Then he asked, "Do you ever picture yourself being that whipped? Like he left all the fucking lemons out." He looked around at where Will had been working. "He didn't clean up any of his shit. This can't be normal."

He made a good point. But then, I'd been observing this whole thing called love up close and personal for two years now. Shane was obsessed with Adleigh in the most adorable way. It wasn't that he was whipped. It was that he loved her so much, he prioritized their relationship, her needs, *her* over everything else.

"Me personally? Uh, no," I answered honestly. "I don't think I can be housebroken. But it happens. My sister is head over heels for the guy she's dating. They do this to me all the time."

"So you believe in love, you just don't think it's for you?"

He finally had my attention. I looked up at him and blinked. "What's with all the philosophical questions tonight, English? Are you trying to prove the Ice Queen is worthy of this raise?"

His cheeks heated with a rare blush. Shame, I realized. Charlie was embarrassed of what he'd said to me earlier. "I shouldn't have said that."

"Yeah, well it's too late to take it back now."

"Ada, I don't think you're an Ice Queen, I got frustrated. You've always been m—What I'm trying to say, is I realize our past has made it difficult for

us to have a friendship these days. But sometimes I genuinely want to be friends. There's no ulterior motive. Sometimes it's just because you mean a lot to my family, and we care about you."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, okay, whatever."

"You don't believe me?"

"I believe your sister wrote that speech out for you to try to convince me to take the job. They were worried you'd be the thing keeping me away from it, and they might not be wrong. But honestly, you showing up with empathy is too little too late."

He made a sound in the back of his throat. "Ada, this is enough. It's been five years of punishing me. My sentence is fulfilled. Please, for the love, at least move me to probation."

Was he serious? He wanted to make me the bad guy? Blame me for what happened? My feet dropped from the chair, and I sat up straight. "For fuck's sake, not everything is about you. I'm not holding some insane grudge because we stopped sleeping together." Small lie. "And that you think I'm punishing you because of something that happened a million years ago is . . . sad. I'm sorry you've been holding on to something I've basically forgotten about. And I'm really sorry that you feel like you've been wronged somehow. But maybe what you should do instead of making wrong assumptions about me and what I'm thinking is examine your own behavior. If you don't like how I treat you, Charlie, maybe there are more recent reasons I might be a little standoffish." I took a steadying breath to keep my voice from getting shrill. "Also, I wanted to point out that just because a girl, like myself, might respect herself and ask those around her to respect her too, doesn't make her an Ice Queen."

He cursed under his breath. I expected him to drop this because he didn't usually stick around to fight. Hell, he didn't usually stick around period. "I shouldn't have said that earlier. But because I did, let's talk about what I meant. I don't think you're an Ice Queen because of how you treat me. I think when other people try to get close to you, you push them away. You turn yourself into ice so nobody has access to you. Nobody can see what's behind this fake-ass persona you feed to everyone."

"I am not fake. I am always real."

"You're always this, Ada. And that's not fucking real." I sucked in a sharp, stinging breath. Those stupid tears pricked my eyes again, but I clenched my jaw and forced them back. "You want to talk about the past?"

Fine, let's talk about how I saw the real version of you. And you're not just feisty, you're passionate, Ada. You're fucking on fire with life. Or you used to be. You're not just organized and good at your job, you're *driven*. Which is so much more than clipboards and checklists. You're not just sarcastic, you're hilarious. But whoever this person is . . . this fake fucking facade you feel like people should see instead of the real you is burying you alive. You're going to lose yourself trying to be someone you're not, and I think it's stupid." He exhaled roughly and ran a hand through his hair in a way that made me feel like he'd rather rip it all out. "But sure, let's keep blaming me for all your problems. That's more convenient."

He'd said so much. *Too much*. Honestly, I wondered if this day had been hired to assassinate me. Because honestly? How was I supposed to process all this nonsense? All this . . . my thought turned into an unintelligible scream inside my head.

I took that as a sign that I might not be winning this argument. But I wasn't going to back down now.

So because I was exhausted and emotionally worn out and Charlie was the least of my problems, I grabbed at the lowest hanging fruit. "I don't blame you for anything. We slept together a million years ago. And we both happen to be adults, so we moved on. I just said that."

He rolled his eyes and looked away from me. His voice dropped, and his entire body seemed to sag. All of a sudden, the air around him was quiet and still. "I don't think you blame me because you slept with me. I think you blame me because I walked away."

The breath I sucked in scraped against my throat and rattled in my lungs. How dare he? How the fuck dare he? I jumped to my feet and prepared to run. "You're mean, Charlie English. You're fucking mean. And full of yourself. How—"

He whipped around the side of the bar and stalked toward me. "Ada, I'm not being mean. I'm being honest for once. The kid I was back then didn't deserve you. You're lucky I walked away. Five years ago, I was not a good person. I was lost. I had a grocery list of bad habits and coping mechanisms you wouldn't have been able to tolerate. Or worse, would have gotten wrapped up in. You blame me for being a dickhead, and you are fully within your rights. But I did that shit on purpose. I burned that bridge on purpose. Because even back then, with all my fucking issues, I knew you were too good for a screwup like me."

That was the closest thing I'd ever gotten to an apology from him. Honestly, as far as my battered ego went, it was better than an apology. We weren't ever an official thing. We hooked up occasionally. We had fun. Charlie was . . . magic in the bedroom. And he was too charming to resist. I'd been a different person back then too.

He hadn't owed me an apology then. And I genuinely hadn't ever expected to get one. We had never put boundaries or labels on our relationship, and he knew I knew I had no right to say anything.

That was probably what hurt the most. That he knew what he was doing. That he did it on purpose. I'd been the foolish one wrapped up in the butterflies and fun of a blossoming something. I'd been all heart eyes and making sure I stayed late in case we got to be alone. And then he'd come into the bar with a date on a day he knew I'd be working. He let her hang all over him while they sat at a table in my section and made me wait on him. He'd acted like he only vaguely knew me. And then after that, it was as if there'd never been an us at all.

He was still playful and flirty and charming, but he made sure we were never alone. I never saw that girl again, but it didn't matter. There were plenty after her.

The message had been clear. We weren't a thing. We'd been temporary. We'd had our fun. We were over. *I was replaceable. Someone easy to walk away from.*

But by that time, I'd fallen in love with the bar, with his siblings, with my manager role. By that time, I was finally making enough to live a little better than paycheck to paycheck. Adleigh was going to graduate soon and my mom was making plans to leave for Florida, and I needed a steady, stable job to help my family pursue the things they loved and dreamed about.

He'd let me get established in his life and then showed me I could have everything I wanted except him.

Which was fine since, at the time, I didn't even know if I wanted him. Like, I was having fun with what we were doing, but I wasn't obsessed with him. I didn't have real feelings for him. I just . . . I didn't want to be tossed to the side the second he got distracted by another shiny thing.

I made a growly sound, frustrated that he'd actually convinced me to let go of some of my rage. Being angry felt good. Felt safe. I couldn't afford to be soft or forgiving. "You could have said all that to me, Charlie. Didn't you think I deserved an explanation?"

His cheeks heated with shame again. “Ada, I didn’t know how to say all that back then. I can make it sound noble now, but I had no idea what I was doing. I knew that you were the quality girl who deserved someone better than me. And I knew better than to mess around and wait until things got serious before I hurt you.”

A surprised laugh bubbled out of me. “God, you’re giving yourself a lot of credit. Let’s be clear that I am not a total idiot. And I don’t think you could have tricked me into a serious relationship if you were behaving as badly as you’re claiming to.”

His smile was smug, but his face turned a brighter shade of red. “Yeah, well, we were good together, Ada.” He waggled his eyebrows. “I mean, really good together. It scared the shit out of me. Also, my brother and sister would have never forgiven me if I was the reason you quit. I mean, they loved you right off the bat. They probably would have kicked me out of the partnership and offered it to you instead. And honestly, I was too selfish for that kind of risk back then.”

My stomach flipped. It wasn’t butterflies or anything. It was the burbling feeling of eating too much junk food and then surviving a fast, spinning fair ride. I wanted to be sick.

I let out a slow breath and tried to find my bearings again. “Charlie, why are you saying all this now?”

He leaned his elbow on the table and played with the corner of the closing list I’d been checking off. “I’ve gotten some help recently. Uh, someone has been helping me put words to the things I did and said. And now, instead of feeling guilt or regret or like shit, I can—” He cleared his throat suddenly. “I can take responsibility for my behavior.”

I felt my face go slack with surprise. It wasn’t a canned speech from Eliza. Charlie was getting actual help. He could have told me he was discovered at a Starbucks and cast as the next male lead in a Marvel movie, and I would have been less surprised. “You’re going to therapy?”

“No.” He cleared his throat again and pinched the edges of the papers he was playing with. “Well, yes, but more than therapy. I’ve been hanging out with this guy. Uh, his name is Steve. And he, I don’t know, gets it or something. He’s helped me find some perspective.”

The swelling hope I hadn’t noticed until now crashed around my feet. “Oh,” I said, trying to sound positive even though I wanted to immediately slip into detective mode and figure out who this Steve guy was and what he

wanted from Charlie.

Charlie picked two kinds of friends. The first wanted money. The second wanted an accomplice for all the nefarious shit they planned on getting up to. It wasn't that Charlie was stupid. It was that he was too trusting. He believed the best in most people, and even after they'd stolen all his money, gotten him mixed up in something shady, and ruined his life, he never stopped believing the best in them.

I'd lost count of how many "Steves" I'd interviewed over the years. It always ended with a failed background check, Charlie promising everyone they'd turned a new leaf, and a massive crash when Charlie realized the rest of us were right.

"That's great," I told him while I struggled to keep my expression neutral. "Self-awareness is a big deal. I'm proud of you for reaching out to a friend."

He looked at me beneath thick lashes. His gaze was earnest, hopeful. I wanted this to be real. I wanted him to really see how much he'd hurt me and why. I wanted his reasons for behaving the way that he did then and in the years since to be true. But I was wary. I didn't know how to trust this upgraded version of him after our volatile history.

Men like Charlie didn't change overnight. They didn't go from self-absorbed to suddenly thoughtful and remorseful. They didn't regret the girls in their past. And they certainly didn't worry about any of the people they'd left behind.

Some of the light dimmed in his eyes. "Well, he's not just a friend. I don't know. It's hard to explain."

"You don't have to," I promised him. "I'm really glad we had this talk."

"Me too." He took a step back.

Suddenly, I felt like crying, but I didn't know why since we'd made actual progress tonight. Charlie said things I never expected him to say. But why did this feel worse?

Why did my heart hurt more?

Afraid I would do something stupid like break down in front of him, I quickly gathered my stuff and moved toward the kitchen. "Okay, well, I'm going to head out. Can you lock up?"

"Yeah, I can do that."

"Great, thanks, bye." I walked into the kitchen, noting it was later than I thought it was because Case and Joey were gone. An embarrassed shiver worked its way down my back when I realized they must have heard us

arguing. They always stopped to check in with me before they disappeared for the night. *Shit.*

Charlie followed me into the kitchen, but I tried to ignore him. This had already turned awkward. I didn't want to make it more so. Except he stayed close as I gathered my purse and laptop and whatever else I needed so I could get a full day off without stopping by.

"What are you doing?" I finally asked, exasperated.

"I was going to watch you go home," he explained meekly. "It's late. I just—"

"Oh."

"Sorry, wasn't trying to creep you out."

I let out a nervous laugh and talked myself out of throwing myself off the closest bridge. "No, thanks, I, uh, appreciate it. I just, um, I didn't know what you were doing."

He smiled that shy, charming, stupid smile again. We both reached for the back door at the same time. His hand landed on mine.

Startled, and because I was a neurotic freak, I jumped around to face him. He was closer than I thought. My back was to the door, my chest just an inch from his.

"Ada," he said in a deep, rumbly voice.

"Hmm?"

"I'm sorry for hurting you. I don't think I've said that before. But I am. I've done a lot of stupid shit over the years, but what I did to you might be the worst. Even if I'm glad I did it. You deserve the best, Kelly. The fucking best."

I forgot how to breathe, which was incredibly inconvenient because it turned out I needed oxygen to make my brain think of some sort of intelligible response. "No, it's, uh . . . I get it . . . er, I mean, obviously I was . . . that is to say, it sucked, but I . . . now things are . . . um . . ."

He leaned in, and for one heart-stopping second, I thought he would kiss me. I thought his mouth was going to crash against mine, and he was going to kiss away the chaotic rambling I couldn't seem to turn off. His mouth was so close. I could feel his body heat wrapping around my bare arms and neck. I could smell him—whiskey and limes and oranges and the faintest sweetness of mint.

But then he pressed against the push bar to the metal door, and I nearly tumbled to my ass at the surprise movement behind me. He wasn't going to

kiss me. He was just opening the door for me.

Oh my God, what is wrong with you, Ada?

“See you Tuesday, Ade.”

My mouth made sounds that I desperately hoped sounded like goodbye. But I was too flustered and thrown off and confused to really make much of an effort at using real words. I needed to get home stat.

I felt Charlie’s gaze on me the entire block as I hurried up the sidewalk and across the street. I threw myself in my building and stood pressed against the community mailboxes while I tried to catch my breath.

Charlie had apologized for all our past hurt, which should be enough. I should feel so good about that. I wanted to heal the brokenness between us if it meant he was taking responsibility for his actions. I loved seeing real growth in him. I had known since I met him that he was capable of so much. He just had to get out of his own way first.

But I had not expected the something sticky and warm to spread across my chest and tingle all the way to my fingers and toes. I had not expected to lean in and close my eyes when I thought he was going to kiss me. *And for me to want it.*

I had not expected to get over my years of bitterness and fury with one mature apology and puppy eyes.

Charlie and I could be friends. It would certainly make the bar a better place.

We probably should be friends, actually. For everyone’s sake. Friends. Sure. Fine. Great. *I could do friends.*

six

THE FOLLOWING SATURDAY, I looked around at my empty apartment and felt the crushing realization that things were officially not going according to plan. Well, according to my plan. Everyone else's plans seemed to be working out just great.

There was a level of disappointment that felt normal. I loved living with Adleigh. I loved having someone to come home to and share my night with. I loved how she would sometimes wait up for me just so she could hear the bar gossip or share a snack with me. I loved our little downtown life with our Pilates and fav brunch spots and the way we would spend Sundays window-shopping. I had loved helping her with homework and watching her relationship with Shane bloom from the front row.

So that she was moving out and away from me was sad. And that was normal.

But the extra layer of disappointment, the one that felt more insidious than it should, was a surprise. I wasn't just disappointed I was losing my sister; I was disappointed I was losing my entire life so she could live hers. She got to move in with Shane in his apartment close to Duke—which was full of antique charm and original woodwork—and I'd had to beg for a lease agreement extension, pay half the new rent to make sure I could have more time, and still end up moving.

I'd been looking everywhere for something affordable in this area, and unless I quit caring about my safety or health, there just wasn't an option. I could get a roommate, but that was hard too. All my friends were in serious relationships, and I didn't want to end up right back where I started when they inevitably moved in together or got married.

I could probably use a few more friends so the pool of options was larger. But that was a problem for a different day.

Will had promised I could start making more money, but that was only when and if they went ahead with opening a second location. Which might be in six months. Or it might be never.

I had enough money in savings to float me for a bit, but I didn't want to throw it all away because I was indecisive. And honestly, the economy was bad for everyone, not just apartment owners. So I was pissed my rent was going up anyway.

Adleigh was officially moving out today. Most of the furniture and necessities were mine because she'd always been in school. But the whole place felt emptier without her odds and ends. She'd packed up her books, including her extensive romantic fantasy collection I loved to borrow. Her kitchen gadgets were gone. Her room was empty as well as the bathroom she used. There was no pile of shoes by the door or empty dishes in the sink. She'd even deleted her profile on my Hulu account so I didn't have to look at it.

She'd been trying to be considerate, but it made my chest ache. *Alone again.*

Shane had apologized for taking her away from me at least thirty times today. I clearly wasn't keeping my emotions as hidden as I wanted to believe. But Adleigh was just like this apartment. I could hold her if I really tried, if I really dug in my heels and demanded my way, but it would only be a temporary solution.

Adleigh would eventually leave no matter what. Of course, she'd have to move on with her life. Of course, there were bigger things for her than living with me. But I made space for the grief in her absence. And the grief in this changing season.

I could be all the way happy for her. And I could be all the way sad for me. And that was the beauty of being an emotionally complex human being. We were never just one thing or one feeling or one thought. We were an infinite possibility of every emotion. Good or bad or a blend of both.

Adleigh walked into the apartment and immediately faceplanted on the couch. "I'm so tired." She winced, her voice muffled by the cushion. "I can't move."

"Who knew you had so much crap?" I collapsed on the loveseat and put my feet up. "Do you need help moving it in at Shane's?"

She wiggled her head back and forth, her now-messy French braids swishing over her shoulder blades. “No. I sent Shane ahead to start unloading. Some of the guys from his team are going to meet him there. My plan is to hang out here till they’re done.”

A full, real laugh burst out of me. “That’s a good plan.”

She picked her head up. “I thought so.”

“It’s exciting, though, isn’t it? Shane’s a good guy.”

She flipped up and curled into the corner of the couch. I realized how long it had been since we’d hung out alone here at the apartment. Shane had always been around lately. Maybe after she moved in with him, she and I would get more concentrated sister time. Maybe it really would be a good thing.

“I haven’t let myself get excited yet,” she confessed, her gaze on her twisting fingers in her lap. “I feel so bad about leaving you, Ade. I can hardly stand it.”

I threw a throw pillow at her, but she caught it and hugged it against her chest. “Stop it,” I ordered. “I’ll be fine. I lived alone until you showed up like poor orphan Adleigh on my front step. I’m actually looking forward to having the place to myself again.”

“You are a dirty, rotten liar.”

“No, it’s true. I can go back to walking around naked. Having guys over anytime I want. Selling drugs. I’ve got plans, baby.”

She laughed at my absurdity. “The most unbelievable part of your plans is the one where you have guys over anytime you want. I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“What? I have guys over.” Now I was feeling defensive. I hadn’t checked any of my dating apps in a while, not since Tinder Teddy. But you better bet your ass I was getting all over those things tonight.

“You used to have guys over. I don’t think you’ve brought anyone home since that guy who was obsessed with frogs.”

“Well, that’s because he gave me PTSD. I had no idea there were so many types of frogs in the Amazon.” I blinked at her. “Did you?”

“I do now.” She laughed until it turned into her high-pitched giggle. “Oh my God, remember his T-shirt had like frog facts on it.”

“I thought he was being ironic. I had no idea frogs were his life passion.”

We laughed until my stomach hurt. She had the best laughter. She laughed with her whole body. And she always cried. Tears would just stream

from her eyes. It was the best. Even if we were laughing at my terrible luck with men.

“For real, though, you need to bring someone back. It’s time to get laid, mama. You’ve been celibate long enough.” She wiped at her wet cheeks.

“It’s hard to meet people when you work almost every night.”

Her lips pursed. “I guess that’s true. I always thought you were trying to like, shield me from your whorish ways.”

I rolled my eyes but laughed too. “Well, maybe at first. I mean, when you moved in, you were a wee little babe. But I stopped worrying about protecting your innocence when Shane started staying over regularly. Not sure if you know this or not, but you’re not exactly a quiet couple.”

Her cheeks flushed tomato red. “Oh my God, Ada!”

“And why do you always bang the wall? First of all, can we talk about why you think I wouldn’t be able to hear that? Why our entire floor can’t hear that? Does Shane take you to some other realm where you forget that humans not in the midst of passion have working ears?”

She gasped and threw the pillow back at me. I caught it and hugged it against my chest.

“Stop,” she groaned.

“Second, our apartment, while spacious, is still small.”

“I hate you.”

“And I hated being woken up from a dead sleep because you were getting your jollies off.”

“You are the absolute worst.”

I snorted, and then it turned into real laughter. “I guess maybe there are perks to you moving in with Shane.”

“Well, at least he’s not into frogs.” And then we laughed and laughed and laughed.

When we finally settled down, she said, “I decided to meet Dad.”

The change of topic gave me whiplash. I couldn’t speak for a full minute. And when I finally found the ability to make sound again, all I managed was a soft, “Oh.”

She made a growly sound in the back of her throat. “I wasn’t sure if I should tell you. Fuck, Ada, I’m so sorry. I’m a traitor.”

Her genuine remorse unstuck my tongue. “Stop it, you are not. I just . . . I haven’t let my feelings about him suddenly jumping into your life develop yet. My thoughts on the whole thing are still marinating. I’m still shocked he

reached out to you after twenty-two years.”

“Thanks for the reminder of how long it’s been.” She winced.

“Well, the math is easy since he left when you were a baby.”

She paled. “Don’t you believe people can change? Obviously, twenty-two years is a crazy long time. But don’t you think he maybe grew over that time? Matured? How could you not? Two decades is a long time to think about all the things you regret.”

“I think it’s the length that bothers me. I would feel like shit after one year, five, ten. After more than two decades, I feel like you either find a way to be okay with who you are, or you’ve forgotten about the people you hurt entirely.”

“He sounds really sorry.” At my quirked brow, she confessed, “We’ve talked a few times on the phone. I emailed him my cell number because now that I’m not a Duke student, I didn’t know what would happen to my student email. He called me almost immediately, and we talked for twenty minutes. Every time he calls, it gets longer and longer.” Her eyes brightened with both tears and excitement. “Ada, he’s a funny guy. Always making sarcastic little remarks. He reminds me a lot of you actually—”

“Please don’t,” I whispered, my throat and heart and soul squeezed tight from hurt. “Please don’t compare me to him.”

She pressed her lips together but didn’t apologize. “He asked for your number too. Or email address. Whatever you might be comfortable with him having.”

“Did you tell him I wanted nothing to do with him?”

“I didn’t have to. He assumes. He just . . . he has hope. I really think he feels like the worst about how he left us. None of us can go back and change the past, but that doesn’t mean we have to be miserable now.”

Instead of arguing with her, I asked, “Have you talked to Mom?”

She cleared her throat in a dainty kind of way that reminded me of her Snow White secret identity. “Yes. I told her.”

“What did she have to say?”

“Not a whole lot. She just warned me to be careful.”

I made a mental note to call her later. Adleigh didn’t always think about our mom’s feelings. It wasn’t that she ignored them or didn’t care about them. She just expected her to be fine with everything.

The memory of my dad leaving flashed in my mind again. My mother’s face wet with tears, the sheer panic in her eyes. The days and weeks and

months afterward when she would lock herself in the bathroom while Adleigh napped so she could weep in private. The Christmases and birthdays following with hardly any presents and the way she would apologize for not being able to afford more. The exhausted shadow that followed her around everywhere as she tried to provide enough for us. The shame whenever we went to the grocery store and used our food stamps card or when my grandma would send us money in the mail and my mom would have to drive to the bank right then and deposit it.

By the time Adleigh could remember our lives, we had stabilized. Mom had worked her ass off to get a job as a paralegal for a law firm who appreciated her enough to give her PTO whenever we got sick and let her work from home over winter break. We'd eventually bought a house. Birthdays got better. Christmases were never huge, but they were wonderful. We'd carved out a lovely, happy life. And to this day, I was still amazed at all my mom had accomplished.

But the trauma of those first several years . . .

Some days, I had to face that I didn't just carry my own abandoned broken heart; I carried hers too.

I didn't think Adleigh had it any better than us. She still grew up without a dad. She still had to answer questions like, "Where are you going on vacation this summer?" with the same old, "Grandma's house," every single time. There were things we asked for and never got. Camps and clothes and activities we couldn't afford. But she missed the shattering. The crushing loss of losing someone who should have loved us enough to stick around.

And even if he couldn't love us enough, he should have stayed because it was the right thing to do.

"That's a good idea," I told her. "To be careful."

"I am," she insisted. "Besides, like you keep pointing out, I'm a real grown-up now. I don't need my dad anymore. Not like when I was a little girl and wished he'd surprise us at Thanksgiving or something. So whatever this is . . . it's just extra. It's nice. And exciting. But I'm cool either way. Whatever happens, I'm happy. I don't need him to make me happier."

I wanted to point out that it sounded like she was trying to convince herself. But I decided to bite my tongue. I hoped she was right. I wanted her to be right.

"So should I give him your number or . . ."

I heard her words, that she said she didn't need our dad for anything, but

there was blatant hope in her eyes, a twinkle of excitement. She truly wanted me to see him.

“He just . . . he has hope. I really think he feels like the worst about how he left us. None of us can go back and change the past. But that doesn’t mean we have to be miserable now.”

I had a feeling Adleigh was dreaming wildly because it was clear what she wanted. She didn’t just want to meet our dad, she wanted us to be a family again. It was far too late for that, but as usual, I couldn’t say no to my sister.

She wasn’t wrong. We couldn’t go back and change the past. Hadn’t Charlie and I discussed something similar last week?

Ignoring the sick feeling twisting my insides, I heard myself say, “Sure. I guess. Tell him to text me, though. I don’t answer my phone. I’m not a freak.” I winked at her. “Make sure he knows.”

She laughed a careful, fragile sound. “Noted.” Then she smiled, and it was bright and beautiful and so happy. “Maybe we could meet him together? If you decide you want to. I mean, not right away, obviously. But maybe if we went together, it wouldn’t be so awkward.”

I felt a little trapped now. Screening a text wasn’t the same as meeting him in person. I didn’t usually have issues telling people no. Unless that person was my baby sister and her heart was set on a fairy-tale family reunion.

“Well, let’s see how texting goes first,” I said, trying to pull back. “If I even answer his text.”

Her smile turned knowing. “Sure, yeah, let’s start with that.”

In a desperate attempt to change the subject, I said, “Want to come over next week and binge some bad reality TV? Everyone keeps talking about *Vanderpump Rules*, and I’m starting to feel left out.”

“I’m off Thursday and Friday. Pick a day, and I’ll bring donuts and mimosas,” she promised.

We stood at the same time, the mutual feeling of this chapter of our lives coming to a close. It hurt. Yet it felt hopeful. I wanted the absolute best for her in everything.

“I’ll walk you down,” I told her, not yet ready to say goodbye.

I grabbed my keys, and we made the trek down our four flights of stairs in a meandering, chatty kind of way we were familiar with. She checked the mailbox one last time and made a joke about the guy next to us who tried to

use his first and last name on the small placard, but instead of getting either option centered, it just read “eff Tits.”

His name was Jeff Tittle. We’d thought he’d done it on purpose. It had taken us three months to track the real Jeff Tittle down. He was a forty-eight-year-old devout Mormon, so it turned out the name was a total accident.

Which made it our favorite name in the entire building.

Who would laugh at off-color mailbox names with me now?

We stepped outside onto the busy sidewalk in the warm June night air and grabbed each other in the tightest, squishiest, longest hug.

“I hate that we have to grow up.” She sniffled into my shoulder. “I hate that we can’t just be roommates forever and have sleepovers on the living room floor and eat popcorn for every meal.”

It was our childhood in a nutshell, and it forced me to close my eyes before water started leaking out of them.

“I hate it too,” I whispered, refusing to cry. “But we had a good run, Ad. Better than most.”

“I love you more than anything in this world,” she told me—which was usually my line.

This time, a tear did sneak out. I brushed it away before it could coax any of its friends to follow it. “I love you more than even that.” I took a deep, shuddering breath. “Text me later?”

“Of course.”

Her car was parked in front of the building illegally, but she’d managed not to get a ticket or towed. I waited there, with my arms folded and my keys dangling from one finger, as she climbed into her junky Toyota and pulled away. Then I kept standing there as I tried to work up the courage to go upstairs and face my apartment all by myself.

Technically, of course, it wasn’t the first time I’d been in the apartment alone, but it was the first time it would be completely empty of Adleigh. *How was I going to do this?*

“What are you doing?”

I jumped out of my skin—and into orbit—and screamed bloody murder. Then reactively threw my keys down the block.

“What the *fuck?*” I growled in absolute terror.

Charlie smiled at me sheepishly. “I am so sorry.” But he was laughing, so it didn’t count. “Ada, I’m so sorry.” He showed this by retrieving my keys for me.

“You scared the ever-loving hell out of me,” I told him.

The planes of his cheeks turned rosy red. “I was on my way in and saw you standing here. Are you okay? I thought something might be wrong, but then you were just, uh, looking at the ground, so I wasn’t sure.”

I shook my head and wondered if I’d damaged my heart permanently. Was that possible? “Yeah, I guess I was super out of it. Sorry.” I finally managed a shaky laugh. “My sister just moved out, so I was . . . I don’t know, I was just thinking, I guess.”

“Adleigh moved out?” He sounded so surprised.

But I was the surprised one. *Why was it always so startling when Charlie knew details about my personal life?* We’d been in each other’s lives for a long time now, so I should be used to it. But for some reason, I was always caught off guard when he paid attention to me.

He was dressed for work in a muted, paisley-print collared short-sleeved button-down and a pair of olive shorts that blended nicely. He had worn-in brown loafers without any socks on his feet. And a pair of trendy sunglasses perched on top of his head, tucked in his luscious locks.

He looked like the poster child for hot guy summer.

On the other hand, I was in a pair of filthy biker shorts, a sports bra that smelled like boob sweat, and I’d tied half my hair up into two little knobs, which I was certain now looked like devil horns. *Fantastic.*

“Today,” I told him. “She and her boyfriend are getting serious. And our lease is coming up for renewal. Or is now up for renewal, but he asked her when we were trying to decide what to do about it. She said yes. Obviously.”

“They’re the real deal,” he said.

I quirked an eyebrow at him. “How do you know?”

He laughed again. “You told me last week. You said they really love each other.”

“Oh.” I laughed too. “That’s true. They do.”

I could tell he wanted to tease me more, but he held his tongue. “So you’re staying here?”

Another question that caught me by surprise. I had to admit it probably had more to do with me withholding information than Charlie’s innocent questions, but we’d avoided each other for so long, it took me a minute to remember it was okay to share things with him.

“Um, I’m not sure yet. I have approximately one week left to decide. It’s just that my rent is going up significantly, which would have been okay if

Adleigh had stayed to help me with the bills. But . . .” I exhaled a breath that moved some of my wispy flyaways out of my face. “I don’t know what to do now. I don’t want to be rent poor.”

Charlie listened intently to everything, taking it in like there would be a quiz about it later. I pressed my lips together to keep from smiling. The way he focused on whoever he was talking to so intensely was one of his most charming attributes. And not just because it made the other person feel special, but because he was so sincere about it.

It wasn’t an act. It wasn’t pretend. When he talked to you, he genuinely wanted to listen to everything you had to say.

“I bet you’re conflicted. Happy for Adleigh? Sad for yourself?”

Those were obvious feelings. Um, obviously. Anyone would have jumped to those conclusions. Just because Charlie did it so automatically did not make him sweet. Or special. Ahem. “Yes,” I admitted. “Super happy for her. But I need to figure my shit out ASAP. I already had to ask for a lease agreement extension, and it cost me two weeks’ rent. The next time I go to our landlord, I need to have an answer one way or the other. He’s super flexible, but he’s also not willing to lose money. If I decide to move, he’ll want to establish a new tenant ASAP.”

“But where would you move to?”

Charlie lived nearby too. I hadn’t been to his new apartment since he moved in six months ago, but I knew it was close because he often took alternative means of travel to get to this street. He’d been known to bike, skateboard, and once he’d even shown up on Rollerblades with two skinned knees and a mild concussion.

We’d never seen the Rollerblades again, which was probably a good thing.

“That’s the other thing I don’t know. The idea of moving neighborhoods actually feels like death. But I’ve googled every other available option in a six-block radius, and everything is out of my solo price range.” He whistled empathetically. “I could maybe get a roommate . . . but I’d rather commute from Raleigh.”

He laughed at my not-joke. “Sucks, Kelly. You’re in a real pickle.”

A surprise laugh bubbled out of me. “For real.”

“Well, let me see it.”

“Excuse me?”

“The apartment,” he clarified. “Let me see it so I can help you decide

what to do.”

“You’re serious?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Don’t you have to be at work?” I glanced at Craft, that looked beautiful in the twilight. Her garaged doors were opened wide, and her warm, golden light spilled onto the sidewalk. She was already busy. The crowd inside mingled with the rest of the buzz down the street. From fancy restaurants to dive bars to even a dog bar at the far end on the corner, it was a beautiful night to enjoy the city.

“Yeah, but they called Lola in to help out tonight since you took off.” He shrugged. “They won’t notice I’m not there.”

“I’m pretty sure they’ll notice.”

“Jonah and Eliza are there too. It’s like a horror movie, honestly. Night of the Double Dates. Not my vibe.”

I was smiling again. Absently, I touched my cheek, finding it hard to believe Charlie was making me smile. “Sounds terrifying.”

“The stuff of nightmares.”

He held up my keys and dangled them at the door. I’d forgotten he had them. “Uh, okay, I guess. It’s messy, though. Due to all the moving today. No judgment.”

He pulled the door open and held it for me after I’d used my key. “Take a moment here and imagine what my place looks like. Go ahead, take all the time you need.”

Laughing, I led him toward the elevator. “You’re just trying to make me feel better. I know you’re secretly a clean freak.”

“Lies,” he insisted. “Dirty, filthy lies. Someone’s trying to ruin my reputation.”

“Yeah, right. You come off as the devil-may-care bachelor, but I would bet twenty dollars your closet’s color coordinated.”

“Who told you that?” he demanded, sounding surprisingly mature for how playful he was being. “They’re lying.”

“I knew it,” I gloated, glancing at him over my shoulder. His eyes twinkled, and there was a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. I turned around again before I accidentally ran into the wall.

“Eff Tits? What kind of kinky motherfu—”

“It’s my neighbor,” I told him in a stage whisper. “I’m not sure he understood the whole last name concept.”

“That’s not an accident,” he insisted.

“Jeff Tittle. He’s religious.”

Charlie snorted. “You should probably tell him.”

“*You* should probably tell him,” I said. “There’s no way I’m knocking on my fortysomething neighbor’s door and explaining the birds and the bees to him.”

We were both laughing pretty hard by the time the elevator doors closed.

“Sexual deviants aside, this building is way nicer than mine.”

“We got lucky and grabbed a move-in special when they first renovated. But the rent has gone up every year since then, and now, they’re citing hardship post-pandemic. Anyway, they’re basically trying to take nonconsensual advantage of my bank account.”

“Well, Will said they were planning on paying you more.”

The elevator doors opened, and we walked side-by-side to my apartment door. Charlie was holding conversation, but he was also taking in every detail of the hallway and building.

“I need to have a conversation with you guys about what that really means. Like actual dollars and cents. But also my rent is going up next month, on the first. And I think y’all are a ways out on the second location yet. I don’t know what to do to bridge the gap.” I put my key in the door and opened it, letting Charlie into my personal space for the first time in five years. “I’ve thought about looking for a second job, but—”

“That’s a terrible idea,” he said quickly. I opened my mouth to argue, but he added, “Ada, you already work insane hours at the bar. You can’t just work all day and all night. No place, no matter how nice—and I’ll admit, this place is beautiful—is worth killing yourself over.”

I stood with my back to my front door, watching him walk around the living room, kitchen, and small eat-in space that I’d turned into a little office since Adleigh and I usually ate at the island or on the couch.

“It’s more than this place, though. I don’t want to move away from my gym. Or the farmers market. Or Taco, Taco, Taco. I freaking love their—”

“Tacos?” he guessed.

“Queso,” I said just to be contrary.

He smirked and poked his head in Adleigh’s now empty room. “Plus, it’s a bitch to drive a long way away after the bar closes. I did that for a long time, and there were several nights when I thought I would fall asleep at the wheel.”

I didn't think I would have that problem. I was too high strung to relax behind the wheel of a car. But he made a good point. "Also gas. I'd have to spend a ton more on gas. As it is, right now I use my car very rarely."

"That's good," Charlie said, still as smug as could be. "She's old. She probably doesn't like to go out. Afraid she'll catch a chill."

"She's not that old!"

"She has antique windows."

"Just because they're not automatic doesn't mean they're antiques. Besides, what if I drove off a bridge? Those windows might save my life."

He walked into the living room again. "Please don't drive off a bridge. Even if your windows are oddly practical." He walked over to my bedroom door, which happened to be closed. "What's in here?"

"My den of iniquity."

Both of his eyebrows jumped to his hairline, but I couldn't get out, "Don't!" before he'd pushed the door open and helped himself to a tour.

My cheeks turned pink while he made a quick circle of the space and walked back out. "You don't make your bed," he murmured. "I'm surprised."

I felt myself get flustered for some unknown reason. "Sometimes I do."

"No way," he argued. "That thing hasn't been made in weeks."

"I've been busy."

"I think it's cute."

Whatever words had been in my head left abruptly.

He sat down on the couch under the pretense of getting the entire experience. "Have you thought about asking my brother for more money right now?"

"What?" I moved to my usual spot on the loveseat across from him because I felt like I couldn't fully hear what he was saying from where I stood. Also, I needed to sit down for this conversation.

He grinned at me. "Ask Will for more money now. If he's planning on paying you more anyway, why is he going to make you wait for it? Sounds kind of stupid to me."

"You think your brother would just give me a raise? Because I asked for one?"

He laughed and settled in, throwing his arm across the back of the couch. He looked so gigantic across the coffee table. Like the couch was a child's play piece beneath him.

When it was just me and Adleigh, the couch seemed massive. It was a

huge cream monstrosity we'd gotten at a furniture store two years ago because it had been custom made for a rich person's house, and they decided they wanted something else. We'd been shopping backroom deals, and they literally unloaded this set in front of us. We couldn't find a sales associate for a while, and we were too afraid to leave the set unattended, so Adleigh had lain across it while I tracked someone down.

I'd paid for the whole thing, but it felt like something that belonged to both of us. Especially after she pitched in for the delivery fee. But we only had enough to get it to our building. Not enough for installation. So we'd had to move it up the four flights of stairs together. It had taken two hours and an ungodly amount of curse words before we finagled it through the door.

It was a subpoint when it came to the pros side of not moving. I was so not looking forward to lugging this thing into another apartment.

"Ada, if we haven't made it clear yet, we need you. We would literally fall apart without you. And not just because you're very good at your job, but because you're very good at navigating the three of us too."

I shook my head at him. "You're assholes, but you're not impossible assholes. Someone else could—"

He put his finger to his lips and shushed me. "No, someone could not. And you should definitely lead with that when you tell Will you need more money. Tell him how nobody else would put up with our shit. And remind him of all the trauma we've put you through over the years. Definitely throw me under the bus several times. And him. He's the biggest diva of us all, but everyone always seems to forget that. I think it's because we all like Lola so much. But either way, he suddenly has a get-out-of-jail-free card." He shook his head, refocusing on his point. "Anyway, make it a big deal, then threaten to leave. He'll come around."

"Charlie, I can't just go in there and tell your brother I'm quitting if he doesn't give me more money. He'll fire me."

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, expression so wholly lasered on my face I couldn't help but squirm under the heat of it. "I thought you weren't afraid of Will."

"I'm not." I cleared my throat. "But I'm also not usually asking him for a significant pay raise either."

"That's what I'm saying, Ada. It's already in his head to give you one. Make it clear that you can't keep working at Craft without it, and my brother will move heaven and earth to make it happen for you. He loves you." There

was a small beat. He leaned back and moved his gaze somewhere else in the room. “We all do.”

“Okay, but if it goes badly, I’m going to—”

“Do not tell them I told you to do this,” he said, laughing. “You got to make it come from you, Kelly. Tell them your needs. Tell them your goals and dreams and that you’d love to be loyally committed to the success of Craft forever and ever amen, if only it were fiscally possible.” He glanced at me quickly. “You can take me out to dinner on your new baller salary as a thank-you.”

I leaned back, thinking over his suggestion. Was he wrong? Was he onto something? It never hurt to ask. And what was the worst that could happen? If Will said not until the second location was in progress, I could keep looking for that second job. It would be temporary anyway. I could handle it.

In the meantime, why not start with the simplest solution?

While I was thinking this through, Charlie had reached for my remote. He turned my TV on and started flipping through my various streaming services.

“What are you doing?” I asked, more amused than annoyed.

“I can’t go out there,” he said easily. “I’m playing hooky, remember? I can’t let them see me.”

It was the flimsiest excuse ever. But I found I didn’t mind him taking over the big couch. Until Charlie had randomly shown up, I’d been facing a particularly depressing night alone. I’d hated the idea. In fact, I dreaded it so much I’d been staring blankly into space on the sidewalk like a crazy person.

Charlie was hardly a friend, but somehow, he made the first night alone in my apartment bearable. I was in no hurry to kick him out.

“Good point,” I finally said, conceding to this weird truce. “And I can’t be found out as your accomplice if I want that raise.”

He wagged his eyebrows at me. “Exactly. What do you have to eat?”

seven

Hi, ***baby girl. It's your dad.***

The text had been sitting on read in my messages for three days. After Charlie's surprise visit to my apartment Saturday night, I'd woken up to the text Sunday morning. Basically, my sister had left my place and immediately texted my number to our dad.

The Sunday morning crash had been real. Charlie had somehow managed to soothe the sting of being all alone during a night of random movies and scouring my kitchen until he declared I had no food and ordered too much pizza for two people.

The leftovers were still in my fridge.

He'd left after midnight, and I'd immediately fallen asleep thanks to a long day of moving and a long night of laughing and goofing off.

Surprisingly, none of our usual animosity was present. Charlie had been relaxed and easy to hang out with. *Comfortable*. More surprisingly, I had been too.

We had vastly different TV tastes, so we mostly flipped back and forth between one of his shows and one of mine. He would drag my reality TV obsession, and I would roll my eyes at all his epic fantasy action movies.

Pizza led to popcorn, which led to him Door Dashing ice cream. I opened a bottle of whiskey, and we shared some beers I had in my fridge. And I was pretty sure there were tequila shots at the end of the night.

We'd been responsible enough to avoid a hangover the next day. But it had been surprisingly fun.

And I would have preferred a hangover compared to waking up to a text from a strange number. Who turned out to be my dad.

Now it was Tuesday, and I still hadn't figured out what to do. Adleigh had texted me twice to make sure I got his message. I could tell she was starting to feel the awkward pressure of being the in-between person, but how did one respond to a man they hadn't talked to in twenty-two years? Especially when that man tried to pick up exactly where you left off as if you hadn't spent the last two decades working on healing the wound he tore open with his absence.

"Hey, baby girl," murmured after he got home from a long workday.

"Let's go, baby girl," in that sharp, growly tone when I was slow to get moving or obey.

"Night, baby girl," as he kissed my cheek and his beard scratched my skin. He smelled like the last remnants of oil scrubbed off his calloused hands and Mom's lavender soap and my childhood.

I should respond. *Should.*

That was the thought that seemed to be on a time loop in my head. *Ada, respond. Just say hi. It doesn't have to go further than that. Just say hey back. You should say hey back.*

But I'd read once that doing something because you "should" do it was the equivalent of acting out of fear, guilt, or people-pleasing. And I rejected all three of those constructs out of self-preservation.

So I decided to sleep on it for a week or so. And in the meantime, I tried to boss my feelings into being cooperative.

Spoiler alert—turned out my feelings didn't like getting bossed around. Who knew?

Ahem.

"Have you seen Will?" I asked Eliza as I put my stuff down for the day.

"Uh, I think he's in the freezer. Why?"

"Oh, I thought the three of us could chat for a few minutes." I tried to smile, but I was nauseous with nerves.

"All of us? You want me to get him?" She looked around the office as if I was surprising her with an intervention.

"Yeah, sure. Do you mind? I just wanted to go over something with you both. Get your thoughts."

She stood and headed toward the kitchen. At the door, she turned around and asked, "You're not going to quit, are you? You wouldn't like, just spring that on us, right?"

It was a good sign that she was already nervous. Maybe Charlie had been

onto something.

Five minutes later, Will—who looked a little blue from the freezer—and Eliza walked into the office wearing matching concerned expressions. Once they were seated, I stood and shut the door.

“Do you mind?” I asked since it was almost never shut all the way.

“Go for it,” Will insisted. “Is this serious, Ade? You’ve got us a little nervous over here.”

I hoped my smile was comforting, but I was a tight bundle of nerves, so it was hard to say what they saw. By Eliza’s grimace, I didn’t think it was a good thing.

“Is this about Charlie?” Will blurted. “Whatever he did, we can—”

“This isn’t about Charlie,” I assured him quickly. “Promise. I just . . . uh, my living situation has changed recently.” At their panicked looks, I added, “My sister, Adleigh, moved in with her boyfriend. All good things, except I’m suddenly without a roommate to help me with rent. And my lease is—” I was rambling, but I didn’t know how to get to the next sentence. Why was it so awkward to ask for more money? Why was it even harder when you knew you deserved more money? There was a weird stigma about knowing your worth. On one hand, society preached relentlessly about knowing our own value and demanding to get paid accordingly. And on the other hand, what business could actually afford to pay an entire staff all that it was worth by some ambiguous, inflated self-esteem standard?

I wanted to get paid more. But I also needed to keep this job. I thought it was better to understand your company than the actual dollars and cents you deserved. Because then you would know how hard to push, how much to ask for, and when to settle when things started to tip out of your favor.

I didn’t know exactly what the English siblings brought home. But I had noticed some significant changes in their personal lives. Charlie’s upgraded apartment, for one. Will and Lola looking for a house for when the baby was born. Eliza and Jonah had been taking a lot of trips lately—which was usually thanks to Jonah, but Eliza always spilled how much she spent and splurged.

Business was good, which meant their GM should be paid accordingly. Right?

“Anyway, the point is . . .” I had not been making a point in any way, shape, or form. “I work really hard for you guys. In some ways, I feel like I’m irreplaceable. Or at least, very difficult to replace. I’m here almost every

day we're open. I've weathered a lot of staff changes over the years. And the bar is flourishing. We're making more money than ever."

Will nodded seriously. "Yes, those things are all true. But, sorry, what's your point?"

Eliza smothered a smile. "Yes, Ada, other than sharing facts we already know, did you want to ask us something?"

Oh my God. I forgot the most important part. To them, I said, "I was just getting to that." I cleared my throat and stared at Will's forehead. "I think, well, um, before . . . when you were talking about the second location . . . you, uh, you mentioned a raise." I paused, just in case they wanted to start throwing money at me before I went any further. They waited patiently for me to make sense. "What I'm trying to say is that I think I deserve more money now. Like right now. I think I should get a raise now. And later, if there is a lot of work with the second location, we can maybe talk more about a fuller picture of responsibilities and earning potential. But I would also like to be paid for the work I'm doing right now."

"So you're not quitting?" Will clarified.

I smiled, finding the courage of a shark somewhere in the murky depths of my wilting self-esteem. "Not yet." I laughed, and it only sounded slightly maniacal. "To be honest, I would like to do whatever it takes to stay here at Craft, in whatever capacity you'll have me. I love the bar. I love the potential. I love my job. But I need to make a certain amount of money to make that possible. So today, I am not quitting. But depending on what you decide . . ."

I couldn't believe I'd taken Charlie's advice and let them think I would actually walk away from Craft. How could I? I loved this place. It wasn't mine. I wasn't even a part owner. But I treated it like my own baby, like I'd been here from the very beginning. And I almost had been.

I hoped they saw that in me.

"Uh, yeah, sure," Will said. I almost jumped out of my seat and squealed, but he continued. "Let me run the numbers. And talk to my partners." Eliza smothered a laugh. "Why don't you write down the exact figure you're looking for. And we'll be in touch."

"So professional," Eliza muttered.

Will shot her a dirty look. To me, he said, "We're obviously highly motivated to make this work for you, Ada. But we're also not made of money."

His insinuation that I would ask for an exorbitant amount stung a little,

but I also understood that this was business. “I’ll be reasonable,” I promised. And I was open to meeting in the middle if I had to. But I didn’t want to say that to him in case he decided to shoot for somewhere in the middle no matter what number I gave him. But since this wasn’t my original idea, I quickly added, “Also you should probably talk to Charlie. Include him in the conversation too.”

Will blurted, “Really?” before he could think better of it.

“We vote with a two-thirds majority,” Eliza explained unnecessarily. “So his vote doesn’t really count anyway. Unless there’s a tiebreaker.”

A tiebreaker was what I was looking for. Eliza already seemed on board with the raise. And I’d known she would be because we were good friends. Will was the one hyper fixated on the budget and expenses and ROIs.

I just had to hope what I’d done here so far was a good return on their investment.

“Well, thanks for chatting with me,” I told them. I wished I would have done this at the end of my shift because now I had to keep bumping into them for the next several hours. But both of them rarely stuck around till close these days.

Which they had me to thank for.

And of course, Charlie, who was finally being taken seriously. At least in small doses.

I escaped to the dining room, dodging curious looks from Case and Joey and the mystery of the closed door, and found Charlie putting his stuff down behind the bar. He must have just arrived.

I felt light, effervescent even. Like a shaken-up bottle of champagne. I hurried behind the bar and grabbed his bicep. “I did it!” I whisper-shouted. “Oh my God, I really did it.”

He turned to face me with an amused smile and quirked eyebrow. “Don’t tell me,” he ordered firmly. “I’m sensing a lot of excitement and a real smile . . . which is rare for you.” He pointed a finger at me with an expression on his face that said not to bother arguing with him. “It must mean . . . you got Taylor Swift tickets.”

I shook my head. “There would be confetti cannons if I could afford seeing her royal majesty. No.”

“Um . . . you hit a mil on TikTok?”

“Sorry, no social media for this girl. I’m an individual.”

“Being off the grid does not make you an individual,” he argued smugly.

“Fine, I’m not cool with AI algorithms following my every eye movement, finger swipe, and shopping habit.”

“Fair.” He sighed thoughtfully. “But have you ever considered Only Fans?” I pinched his nipple. Because honestly. “Ow!” He pulled back but didn’t go far. “Oh. I know, you finally decided to join me in my quest to cut out all sugar and processed foods.”

“First of all, I have yet to see you cut out any sugar or processed foods—”

“Real change doesn’t happen overnight, Ada,” he said with mock offense. “Maybe if I had an accountability partner . . .”

“I talked to your brother,” I said, leaning closer, “about the raise.”

His smile turned . . . it would be weird to say proud. I was essentially asking him for more money too. And who liked giving away money?

Not me.

Something fluttered in my belly. Low and warm and probably indigestion.

“Did you now?” he said in a slow, thoughtful kind of way. “And what did he say?”

I shrugged. “That he’d have to run numbers.” I pressed my lips together to keep from smiling too big. “I told him to talk to you.”

“Oh?” He quirked an eyebrow. “You think you got an inside guy?”

The fizzy, bubbly feeling collided with the warm, fluttering feeling and moved upward toward my heart. I cleared my throat and hoped this was all acid reflux.

“No, I just . . .” I cleared my throat again. “I just think they should include you. It’s an important decision. So. Yeah. All three of you should be involved.”

He leaned back against the bar, resting on his elbows. “What if I tell them it’s a terrible idea?”

“You wouldn’t.” I punched him in the bicep just to be sure. “You wouldn’t.”

“Ow!” He rubbed his arm. “You’re so violent.”

I rolled my eyes.

“This is abuse,” he insisted. “I’ll tell them to give you more money, but only so you can pay my medical bills.”

“You’re such a baby.”

He grinned at me. “Kiss it better?”

I looked at his muscled swath of tanned skin and forgot how to swallow.

“Um—”

He didn't wait for my rejection, which I obviously would have given him. Because kissing Charlie was bad. And wrong. And reckless. And I wasn't Reckless Ada tonight. Ninety-Nine Percent Ada was fully in control. “I need to run out to get lemons. Want to come?”

“What?”

He pulled out the plastic bin we used to store lemons. There was only one left, and it looked rather mushy. “I forgot to order lemons. So I'm going to run over to Costco before we get busy. I think Will and Ally can handle themselves.”

“Do you think anyone will care?”

“Come on, I'll buy you an ice cream.” He grabbed his wallet and phone that he'd only just stashed.

“What?”

“Wait, have you ever been to Costco?”

“I think once. Maybe. Eliza had me help her pick out a massive TV for her apartment.”

“Oh, you're definitely coming then. This is happening.” Will chose that moment to walk out of the kitchen. Before he could say anything, Charlie said, “We're out of lemons. The delivery guy forgot them.” He shot me a sneaky side-eye that told me to keep my mouth shut. I swallowed a laugh. “I'm going to take Ada to Costco and grab a box. We'll be back in an hour.”

Will looked at his watch, gauging the time. “Are you sure you can be back in an hour?”

“It's a Tuesday, man. You got Ally to help.”

“Who?” Will looked genuinely confused.

He could definitely not be left in charge of employees on his own.

“The new server,” Charlie explained, exasperated. “The one with the . . . uh . . . the blonde. The one who doesn't stop talking.”

Will's eyes widened in recognition. “Don't be long.”

“We're just getting lemons, dude. We'll be back shortly after open.” Charlie took off for the kitchen and the back entrance. But as we passed Will, he said, “We'll take your car, though, yeah? Keys in the office?”

Will watched us walk by him with a confused look on his face. “Let Ada drive!” he called as we reached the kitchen.

If anyone else had treated Will like that, they would be dead. Or if not dead, then at least fired. But for as much as the two of them fought, Charlie

could get away with anything. A few years ago, there had been tension because they'd both liked the same girl. But to this day, I thought they only liked her as much as they did because the other one showed interest.

As soon as Will backed off and Charlie "won," Charlie dropped her.

The ride to Costco was full of Charlie changing the radio, asking the most random questions, and easy conversation. I'd spent so many years mad at this man that I'd forgotten how easy our friendship was once upon a time. As we fell into natural conversation and easy laughter, I reminded myself I'd promised never to sleep with him again. Or fall for him. Or flirt with him.

Friendship was good. It was for the best. Hating him had been exhausting. A full-time commitment I didn't have the capacity for. Plus, it made me a person I didn't even like.

Yes, I could be abrasive and reluctant to let people in, but I didn't enjoy feeling bitter or angry. It was more about vetting people than being mean to them.

Just because I didn't fully trust Charlie yet didn't mean I couldn't be nice to him.

I parked Will's new Tahoe—his idea of a family vehicle—in the massive parking lot and braced myself for the bulk shopping vibe that wasn't relatable. I felt stressed out just looking at the building.

"We have to be fast," Charlie explained. "Good thing the produce is right by the alcohol."

I laughed. "What are we really doing here?"

"The lemon deficiency is real," he said seriously. "But I also heard a rumor on a whiskey forum I'm in that they might have gotten a rare bottle drop here."

"Costco sells rare whiskey?" I couldn't believe it.

"Oh, sweet baby Ada. I can't wait to blow your mind."

We jumped down from the car and headed inside. Charlie grabbed a cart and flashed his membership card at the bouncer at the door. She was an elderly woman with pure white hair and a red hat, so I wasn't exactly sure who they were trying to keep out. But she was serious about checking the ID card.

We wandered through the electronics and a surprising amount of clothes with an even more surprising number of people shopping those clothes, and finally ended up in the alcohol section.

"Holy cow, you weren't kidding." I whistled. "What?" I picked up a

massive bottle of Canadian whisky. “This is twenty dollars cheaper than the place by my house. That’s insane.” I added it to the cart.

Charlie eyed it curiously. “Ada, you sit at home drinking Canadian whisky?”

“First of all, it’s good. Second of all, I mix this one. Old-fashioned. Manhattans. Lemonade. Whatever the mood strikes.”

He shook his head, picked it up, put it back, then grabbed a similarly priced Four Roses. “You can add this to the life tips you owe me.”

I sputtered a laugh but didn’t exchange his exchange. I hadn’t noticed the Four Roses bottle. We browsed all the whiskey. The bottle he was looking for was already gone. But then there was gin. And then vodka. And then we got a little lost in the wine section.

We kept picking stuff out for each other.

“Do you drink wine?” I watched him hold a Malbec up to the light.

He didn’t look at me, but a shy smile lifted the corners of his mouth. “I’ve just gotten into it recently. My friend Steve drinks it all the time, so he’s introduced me to a few styles I like. I was thinking about getting him a bottle, but I don’t know what I’m looking for.”

I reached for a bottle next to him. “I have no idea if this is true or not, but someone once told me you can tell how good a bottle is by how deep the indent on the bottom is.”

“What?” He laughed.

I turned the bottle in my hand over and showed him the shallow concaved dome. I ran my fingers over it, and said, “See? This is like medium deep.”

Charlie made a valiant attempt at keeping a straight face. He turned the bottle in his hand over and found a deeper indent. He ran two fingers across it. “Mmm, this one is deeper.”

I snorted and reached for a different bottle. “Even deeper,” I said.

He picked up another bottle and held it out for me. “Try this one.”

I ignored the huskiness to his voice and slowly inserted my two fingers into the deep hole, then swirled them around. A giggle bubbled out of me.

“Fuck, Ada, warn a guy before you turn wine shopping into some kind of erotic affair.”

I tipped my head back, laughing. When I met his gaze again, he genuinely looked frazzled. “Oh sorry,” I teased. “Just trying to help you find the best bottle for Steve.”

He leaned in. “Definitely bringing you on more Costco trips.”

Feeling full of the fucking devil, I leaned in and said, “Next time, I’ll show you how to pick out a good whiskey bottle.”

“Do I want to know?”

“You’re supposed to see how deep the neck will go—” I opened my mouth and gestured at the back of my throat.

“Fuck me.”

I patted his reddened cheek. “Just kidding.” I took control of the cart and pushed it toward the front of the store.

“You’re evil,” he said, laughing. He put two of the bottles of wine we’d been looking at in the cart.

“For Steve?”

“For me,” he said in a low voice. “Call it a souvenir from the time I learned wine was sexy as hell.”

We laughed all the way to the checkout, making up random ways to turn basically everything in Costco into something sexy. A kayak. A giant vat of mayonnaise. Hydration packets.

When we finally made it to the front, Charlie said, “Dammit! The lemons.”

I waited in line while he sprinted toward produce to grab a couple of bags. I was slowly, very slowly, adding the many bottles of alcohol to the conveyor belt when he made it back, slightly panting.

He looked at the alcohol I’d divided for us with a plastic bar, and said, “Be honest. This is the real reason you need a raise.”

I laughed, surprised again at his sense of humor. “This is a bad habit you just introduced me to today. I’m definitely going to have to renegotiate my terms.”

He grinned, then paid for mine too. He treated me to a strawberry sundae that had me convinced I needed my very own Costco membership. He only bought one for me, but kept stealing bites on our walk back to the car.

I eventually gave up swapping the cart and the ice cream and just fed him straight from the spoon while he navigated our booze haul back to the borrowed Tahoe.

“Maybe I should add a Costco membership to my list of demands,” I said seriously.

“Nah, you can just come with me anytime you want.”

What was weird was that even though I was eating ice cream and my face felt frozen, the entire rest of my body was warm and gooey again.

Definitely indigestion.

eight

THURSDAY NIGHT, the bar was packed. Even though the temps were mild once the sun went down, the crushed bodies on the main floor were stifling. I'd dressed to impress in a strapless corset top with lightweight flare leggings, but all I wanted to do was rip off my clothes and dive into an ice-cold keg of beer.

This was too much.

My cheeks were flushed from the humidity generated by this many sweaty people, and my skin was sticky. But some guy by the bathrooms had just sloshed his drink over my shoulder, so it was either sweat or cocktail. I'd only had time to pat it dry with some thin bar napkins before one of my tables called for more drinks.

We could have easily used another two or three waitresses, but we didn't have that robust of a staff. Miles and Charlie were behind the bar. We'd pulled Will out to take orders—which he hated—along with myself and Ally. Joey had popped out for a few minutes to assist at the bar, but people were ordering so much food she had to run back shortly after and help Case survive.

I weaved between tables, trying to reach the bar. My hands were full of empty glasses, and I desperately tried not to get spilled on again.

Charlie leaned over the drip rail and started taking the glasses from me before I could set them down. "Thanks," I told him.

"Apparently, a local influencer did a write-up about us," he called over the din. "That's why we're so busy tonight. She's a big deal." He looked around. "Now we're a big deal."

"We've always been a big deal."

He laughed. “Well, now we’re bigger.”

I gave him a thumbs-up when my hands were empty and moved over to the pickup mat to grab finished drinks for my tables. I noticed Ally’s tickets were starting to back up and made a mental note to swing back around and help her out. I felt bad for her tonight. She was still relatively new, and this was insane.

I couldn’t remember another night as busy as this one.

“Do you need help with anything?” I asked Charlie as I gathered up my drinks. “Need me to grab Joey again?”

He shook his head. “I’m good.”

It was amazing how good Charlie was at bartending. He’d only tried it six months ago, and we’d all been surprised at how natural it was for him. I suspected he was good at things he wanted to be good at. When he didn’t like something, he gave minimal effort at best. So when he liked something, he went all in.

Bartending was that for him. An actual contribution to what the English siblings were doing without him.

“Oh my God!” I gasped when I turned around and saw two old friends at the door. They were looking for an open table in our seat-yourself arrangement but coming up empty. I hurried to meet them even though I had to drop the drinks off first.

April and Mark had been at the first bar I’d ever worked at. A dirty dive bar that didn’t mind I was only seventeen and not quite old enough to serve alcohol yet. The owner was always drunk but nice. And the clientele was shifty at best. April, Mark, and I had bonded over whether we would get paid that week or if Mickey, the owner, would forget again.

They were a couple of years older than me and had been friends for longer than I’d been alive. I was so happy to see them I actually squealed when I could finally jump in front of them and catch their attention.

“Oh my God!” April squealed, while Mark ripped me out of her hands and into his arms.

“Oh my God!” he mimicked, squeezing me tight.

“What are you guys doing here?” I asked them. Now the three of us were hugging. “I haven’t seen you in forever.”

“It’s been way too long,” Mark agreed.

I squeaked another excited sound. “Are you here because you wanted to see me? Or are there other reasons?”

“We read about it today,” Mark said, waving his phone between us. “It was featured on the Durham Dish. She’s in her cocktail era and made this place sound fabulous.”

“It is,” I assured them. “I’m the GM.”

Another round of hugging and squealing.

“That’s so exciting, Ada,” April gushed. “Look at you, all grown up.”

“Well, you know how much I love to yell at people.”

They both laughed maniacally. “Remember Jose,” Mark said with his eyebrows raised.

“Hey, Jose had it coming,” I insisted. “He was trying to sabotage my tables.”

They shared an amused look and then burst into giggles again. This would be a good time to note that Jose was the owner’s cat who lived at the bar.

And he was an asshole.

“Do you guys want to sit down?”

“Yes, but where?” April asked.

“I’ll clear a spot for you at the bar. Is that okay?”

“Unless you have a chef’s table,” April said slyly.

“Ha. I mean, this is a little better than Mickey’s but come on now.”

“This place is lightyears from Mickey’s,” Mark assured me.

I led them toward the bar and sat them at the end near the kitchen in a couple of spots we usually reserved for Will or Eliza. Or their significant others. Then I got to work taking their orders even though they weren’t technically in my section.

“I thought you were the GM?” April shouted over the roar of voices. “Why are you taking our orders?”

“Because I love you guys!” I yelled back. Then I confessed, “Also, this is a small family operation. I wear many hats.”

“Well, good for you because it’s supposed to be the best in town.”

Realizing she was attributing my talents to the restaurant's success, I felt my cheeks heat with the compliment.

I gave my suggestions—both whiskey drinks—and they put in their orders—both gin martinis—and then I left them for a bit to attend to my other tables. But first, I stopped by Charlie and let him know they were special guests of mine. He perked up at the prospect of being nosy in my personal life and got to making their drinks.

At least now I knew he would drop them off, and I wouldn't have to worry about them getting stale on the mat.

April and Mark stayed for a long time, drinking, eating, laughing. Their spot in the corner was quieter than the rest of the place. And Charlie was doing a great job of jumping over to refill their drinks. But it was an hour and a half before I had enough of a lull to take a seat beside them and truly catch up.

At one point, Charlie even brought me over a drink when he refilled theirs, but I nursed it because I was still on the clock. I knew he was being friendly, but honestly, it was one of the best old-fashioned I'd ever had.

Although I would probably die before I admitted that to him.

"Is this the dream job, then?" Mark asked after he'd just finished telling us about his life—his new corporate job and the upcoming adoption of his son.

I felt a little flustered. He was fifteen years older than me, but his life was so different from when I'd known him at Mickey's. April's too. She'd returned to school for her teaching degree and had just finished her third year as a full-time tenth-grade science teacher.

"It's the dream job for right now," I told them, resurrecting some of my walls. "I love being the GM. And I love this place specifically. But I'd also like not to live paycheck to paycheck. So we'll see."

Mark leaned in. "Honey, I'm going to tell you a secret about being an adult." He dropped his voice like he was giving away something truly juicy. "Doesn't matter how much you make, all us middle-class folks are living paycheck to paycheck."

"Don't tell me that," I groaned. "I want to believe there's a way for me to make enough money to pay rent, buy groceries, and spend my money frivolously. Maybe not all the time. But enough times that I stop thinking that spending money frivolously is the be-all and end-all of the human existence."

Mark sighed. "Fine, I'll keep my conspiracy theories and why I believe the government hates the middle class to myself."

"Thank you," I said primly.

"I imagine being GM of this place must mean you're not looking for more work," April said with a smile. *Little did she know.*

"Life's definitely full here, but why do you ask?"

"Because I still waitress over the summer, and we could use some part-time help if you're interested. Hours are a little wonky, but you can usually

count on something like eleven to three.”

“That would actually be perfect,” I decided. I could still get enough hours of sleep after the bar closed and get off work just in time to haul my ass over here. “What’s the name of the place you work at?”

“Salt,” April said. “It hasn’t been open that long, but it’s seriously one of the best places I’ve ever eaten. And the atmosphere is so cool. You’ll love it. Plus, the owners are lovely.”

“Oh, I know that place. I actually kind of know the Quinns. My boss is friends with them, so I’ve been to a couple of things with them.” I liked this idea more and more. It was one thing to sign onto another Mickey’s experience, but I would happily work for Vera and Killian Quinn. Not only were they some of the best chefs in the country but they were also very nice people.

“I’ll text you the application link,” April promised.

“Thank you,” I said, meaning it. Would it be fun to work two jobs just to make ends meet? No. Would I do it anyway until I figured out a better solution? Yes. At least until the English siblings could pay me more.

We hung out for a bit longer, then they paid their bill—which was miraculously half of what they actually owed, thanks to Charlie—and took off with promises to keep in touch better. I doubted we would connect beyond the job link text, but I was happy to run into them occasionally.

We’d had a great time at Mickey’s, but they were old enough to be my parents. And their friendship bond was the kind that kept other people at a distance.

I sat at the bar, finishing my drink and mentally rearranging my life to accommodate another work schedule, when Charlie leaned across the bar and slid me another cocktail.

“Hey, thanks for taking care of my friends—”

“No,” he said sternly.

I had been in a bubbly, happy mood until his attitude showed up. What in the world? “Excuse me?”

“Ada, are you seriously thinking about taking another job?”

Had he been listening to our entire conversation? “And what business would it be of yours if I was?”

His eyes glinted dangerously, and a muscle in his jaw ticked. “You’re here all the time. You don’t have time to work anywhere else.” He inhaled slowly as if he was trying to collect himself. “I thought you were demanding

a raise from us?”

“Charlie, there’s no guarantee I’m going to get one. And if I do, I don’t know if it’s going to be enough. I have to plan—”

“So fight for it to be enough, Ada. You have us by the balls. Why don’t you see that? We can’t function without you. Of course Will is going to give you what you want.”

The need to play defense crept up the back of my neck, and suddenly, I felt uncomfortably warm. “You don’t know that. You’re only guessing. I can’t just hope it all comes together, Charlie. I’ve got to take care of myself. I’m on my own.”

“No, you aren’t,” he argued without missing a beat. “Who told you that, Ada? Why do you always feel as though the rules are different for you? You take care of everyone else, but don’t let anyone stand up for you. Why is no one else allowed to take care of you?”

His question knocked the wind out of my sails. It was like conversation whiplash. “What?”

“Who told you people will only care about you if you sacrifice yourself for them? And their needs?”

Nobody told me that. I learned it. And not because I wanted to.

But even then . . . I didn’t think my mom or Adleigh only loved me because I took care of them. I didn’t think the Englishes only loved me because I took care of their business. I loved them too much to think something so dark about any of them.

But I had learned the opposite was true. That if you didn’t have anything to offer, they would leave. If you couldn’t give them anything, there was no point in sticking around. If you were just a kid and all you did was love them, it wasn’t enough to make them stay.

“Obviously, I don’t want to lose my apartment and have nowhere to go ___”

He held up his hand and cut me off before I could even finish my sentence. “It’s bullshit, Ada. You’re not going to lose your place here. You’re smart. You’re fucking brilliant. But that doesn’t mean you have to be perfect. Or make all the perfect moves to have the perfect life. You’re allowed a rather large margin to be an absolute fuck-up. And you’re allowed to just be. Without proving your worth or usefulness. You can just let people love you because of you. Not based on what you can give them.”

“I feel like we’re having two different conversations.”

His eyes flashed with disappointment as if I was letting him down. “You’re trying to keep this about the money, which is fine. That’s your prerogative. But this goes deeper than that, and you know it. It’s not about a raise or an apartment or any of that shit you barely care about. And I know that because you’ve been working for us for over six years, so if you had ever cared about making money before it was necessary to make more money, you would have asked for a raise years ago. This is about your fear of failure. You’re making contingency plans to protect yourself from failing. Hell, your contingency plans probably have contingency plans.” He pointed a finger in my face and lowered his voice. “Someone told you a long time ago that you had to go at it alone. That person is a fucking liar. Life is better shared. You’re not an island. People love having you in their lives. We want you here, in ours.” He exhaled, and some of the tension leaked out of him. “Do what you want. But before you go off applying for jobs all over the city, why don’t you wait to see what Will offers you?”

I sat in stunned silence, willing the water in my eyes to stand still. It had come out of nowhere, and I was about three seconds from letting it loose.

Someone told you a long time ago that you had to go at it alone. That person is a fucking liar.

My phone burned in my apron, searing me with the truth. I knew who told me that. Maybe he hadn’t articulated it in quite the same way, but his actions had spoken louder than words ever could.

Because somewhere along the way, I’d absorbed the message whether he’d left it for me or not. Life might be better shared, but that was impossible when people left. If you controlled who you let into your heart, you controlled how much you got hurt.

You’re not enough to make the people you love stay.

Charlie’s gaze moved over my face, taking in every unshed tear, every tight line around my mouth, every unspoken memory. He read it and digested it and seemed to analyze every nuance, every detail, every back-off vibe I was intentionally or unintentionally giving off. His eyebrows drew together, and he opened his mouth for what I thought was going to be an apology. But then he turned around and left.

I stared after him, wondering where I’d misplaced my backbone and when I’d stopped distrusting every person I expected to let me down.

The bar eventually closed, and I worked my way through paperwork and drawer counting and signing people off in a way reminiscent of a robot. My

body went through the motions, but I couldn't focus on anything but Charlie's accusations.

I wanted him to be wrong about me. I wanted him to have no idea what he was talking about so I could just laugh him off. But God, he'd hit a fucking nerve.

The thing about exposed nerves was that we went out of our way to protect them, to shield them from ever getting hit or touched or battered. I hadn't realized all the ways I had contorted myself to protect that vulnerable place inside me. I'd twisted myself into knots in an attempt to never let anyone see or touch that spot.

And it had worked. For a really long time, I'd managed to hide it away. Until Charlie English.

What he hadn't accidentally bowled over by just being his charming fucking self, he'd apparently seen all along.

The urge to scream at him, tell him off, eviscerate him with my words was so strong I nearly collapsed to my knees. But I couldn't shake that he was right. The truth kept pinballing around in my head, hitting bonuses and buttons that made optimistic casino sounds.

It wasn't that I didn't like people as a whole. I just knew that eventually they would let me down.

Do you know how hard it is to make healthy relationships when you're waiting on every single human being who has ever been in your life to epically let you down and crush your dreams and spirit and hopes for the future?

Really, really impossible.

But my brain was just stuck on that truth. I genuinely expected every person to let me down. Every circumstance to eventually disappoint. Everything I touched to wither. Every person I loved or cared about to leave.

I didn't need someone else to point out that I wasn't worth sticking around for. Sometimes it was just easier to hide. To keep the veneer of self-sufficiency. *No one can let you down that way. And you don't disappoint them either.*

Frankly, I'd had enough of this day.

I started to gather my things. I'd been staring blankly at a blinking cursor for twenty minutes or so, but now it was time to put this day to bed. I'd counted Ally and Miles out hours ago, along with Cyd, another training server. I hadn't said goodbye to the kitchen staff, but I'd assumed they'd left

at least an hour ago.

I debated whether to tell Charlie I was leaving or just leave him in the lurch when he appeared in the office doorway.

Before he could get a word out, I jumped in to say, “Hey, I’m going to take off.”

“Ada—”

I smiled aggressively at him to prove I was fine, and everything was fine, and we were fine. *Cool Girl Mode activated*. “I’m just really tired,” I explained unnecessarily. “I hope you don’t mind, but I’m going to get going —”

“Ada.” This time it wasn’t a question. He said my name like a command. I lost it a little bit. “Charlie, what?”

He flinched at my tone. “I didn’t mean to upset you earlier.”

“You didn’t.”

The apology on his face turned to smug stone. “It’s okay to get upset, Ada. You don’t have to pretend nothing bothers you.”

“God, Charlie, what is this? I’m not paying you for therapy, so back off.”

He softened again, just like that. His moods were as volatile as the . . . the . . . honestly, I couldn’t think of a fair comparison. He was just so back and forth. Angry, then sympathetic; demanding, then aggressively compassionate.

And what was worse was that I could handle the hard edges and tough demands. I *wanted* to fight. It was the empathy that nearly killed me. It was his stupid compassion that immediately crumbled all my hard-built walls.

“Ada.” This time, it was a whisper, a plea. “What’s going on?”

I shouldn’t have said anything. I should have kept my problems to myself. But it was the way he didn’t accuse me of always being like this. It was how he didn’t bring up my list of crimes and bad attitudes and how I was constantly on his case about everything. He saw that something was wrong now, and he wanted to know what it was.

The tears were back. And I blamed him so I could keep hating him.

Still, I said, “My dad texted me a couple of days ago. He’s back in town and wants to see Adleigh and me.” I waited for Charlie’s inquisitive nature to explode out of him. He wasn’t shy when he didn’t understand something. He asked a million questions until he understood every single angle. But tonight, with nobody else in the building and a million things unsaid between us, he just waited. He just held my gaze and waited for me to feel comfortable

enough to share.

So I did. “He left when I was seven. Adleigh was a baby, so she doesn’t remember him at all. But I do. I remember a lot. He didn’t like being a dad, though. My mom said he never felt grown up enough to be the grown-up. So one day, he just left.” My throat felt raw with the effort to hold back the floodgate of tears. “I never heard from him again. He never tried to contact us or see us. My mom tried to get child support for a while, but it was like he disappeared off the face of the planet. Eventually, she gave up because it would have hurt more than it helped. And, I don’t know, I think she wanted to prove we didn’t need anything from him. But then Adleigh was in the local paper a month ago, and he saw her name . . . and reached out to her. They’ve been chatting for a while. He wants to meet her. And he asked for my number.”

“What an asshole,” Charlie murmured.

I nodded, pressing my lips together so I wouldn’t yell. “Anyway, that’s why I’m all over the place lately. I don’t know what to make of him showing back up in my life when I finally don’t need him anymore.” A shaky laugh trembled out of me. “Maybe that’s why I’m so desperate to stay in my place. Moving out feels stupidly like losing. And I want to prove to him that I’m not a loser.”

“You’re not,” Charlie assured me quickly. “You don’t need to prove it to him. Not even a little bit. You’re not a loser, Ada. You’re amazing.”

My lips lifted in a smile, even if my brain didn’t feel it yet. “Thanks, Charlie.”

He lunged forward until he could grab my hands in his. “Ada, I’m serious. You’re the hardest-working person I’ve ever known. And you’re always right. You’re right so much I find you utterly intolerable.” I surprised us both with a laugh. “You’re quick and witty and hilarious. You’re scary smart. And perfectly intuitive. You worked your way into this job, and you’ve proven over and over and over what an incredible manager you are. And, by the way, you’re so fucking gorgeous it hurts to look at you.” He stepped closer to me, holding our grasped hands against his chest. “And if your dad can’t see that, he’s not worthy enough to be in your life.”

My smile wobbled, my eyes watered, and the little girl inside me wept. How had he dismantled decades of defenses in one—well-crafted—paragraph?

“I don’t want to care,” I confessed. Too many unmanageable truths

spiraled through me. The truth was unavoidable. “I don’t want to care about his opinion of me or my life for even a second. Why can’t I convince my brain to give up caring?”

He took one last step toward me and wrapped me in a tight hug. I collapsed against his chest and shivered at the strength and gentleness he held me with.

“Because this isn’t supposed to happen, Ade. Dads aren’t supposed to leave their little girls because they’re too broken to know how to love them. Dads aren’t supposed to hide from their responsibilities and hurt the people who love them.” His hand trailed up my back and tangled in my hair. His palm cradled the back of my head, and it was the most comforting feeling in the world. “There’s nothing wrong with you, Ada. You turned out amazing despite the shitty hand you were dealt. I’m sorry he made you feel like what happened was your fault. It wasn’t. It didn’t have anything to do with you. Even though you should have been every reason to stay.”

I hiccupped a surprised sob against his shirt. I hadn’t expected him to say any of that. I hadn’t expected him to see straight through my heavy, bulletproof armor and get straight to the heart of things.

“Dammit, Charlie.” I winced against his chest. “This isn’t fair.”

He held me tighter, crushing me against the sheer force of his compassion. “I had a shitty dad too,” he confessed. “He didn’t leave, but sometimes I wonder if we would have been better off if he had. He stayed around, but he hurt us. And he kept hurting us. And . . . what I’m trying to say is that I don’t think there’s a right answer, but there are a million fucking wrong ones. And we spend so much of our life wondering what we could have done differently as little kids to rewrite our hard, ugly stories. We think the craziest thoughts and put all the blame on ourselves, when how could we have known how damaged our parents were? How could we have known that we weren’t the reason they were so battle-scarred and weary?”

We stayed like that for a few minutes as I cried into his shirt, staining it with my mascara, and he just held me close, absorbing tears I’d been bottling up for too long.

When I could finally pull myself together and wipe away some of the wetness off my cheeks, I tried to pull back. With so much of the poison poured out on the ground around me, I was suddenly embarrassed to have used him as a human tissue.

He wasn’t having it, though. He held me closer and put his mouth to my

temple. “It’s not wrong if you want to see him, Ada. It’s normal. Natural. Not to mention, he has a lot of explaining to do. And you deserve answers. But it’s also okay to say no if you don’t have the energy or the capacity to face him again. Maybe it’s not time yet. Or maybe you know you never want to see him again. Either way, just like him leaving you and your sister was his decision, you letting him back into your life—in a way that he does not deserve—is your decision. But enough of this right here. Enough carrying around guilt that doesn’t belong to you and outcomes you had no control over. You were a baby, Ada. Innocent, unaware of the battles he was fighting, and most definitely not the reason he left. Men don’t leave their babies because of their babies. Men leave their families because they have demons too dark and too relentless to see the beauty and life-saving joy in their families. He was a grown-ass man. What he did is on him.”

I was more than a little in awe of Charlie’s matured opinions. How had he known to speak to every one of my fears and insecurities? How had he known exactly what to say to me to soothe my broken heart?

“Thank you,” I told him on a rasping whisper.

He tilted my chin up with his long pointer finger. “You’re painfully beautiful. No man should have the power to hurt you like this. You’re a goddess, Ada.”

I felt my cheeks grow warm at his direct compliment. I wanted to wiggle out of his arms and turn away, but he held me tight in his arms. How could he say that when I’d been sobbing into his shirt for twenty minutes? I was positive my nose was bright red, and mascara streaked down my cheeks.

“Who are you, Charlie English? I don’t think I’ve ever known you.”

Half his mouth lifted in a gentle smile. “Mmm, then get to know me, yeah?”

I got lost in his piercing green eyes for a moment. I must have face-planted into them because I had the sudden sensation of free-falling. “Okay.”

His answering grin was blinding. Perfect. Healing. “I’ll walk you home.”

And he did. All the way to the door of my building. He waited until I found my keys and had stepped inside the door to say, “I’m working on a plan to fix the raise. Be patient for a couple of days. I’m going to get you the things you need.”

I didn’t believe him. I wanted to. But my heart wasn’t on board with the healing experience that was Charlie English yet. Especially because it had come out of nowhere. He had been one source of some of my issues with

men just a couple weeks ago. And now he was walking me through some of the worst of my trauma? My brain couldn't make space for what was happening. So I nodded vaguely and hid just inside the door so I could watch him walk back toward Craft.

When he was out of sight, I floated upstairs and into my apartment. I wasn't skin and bones anymore. I was helium and a defiance against gravity. When I finally lay down in bed after all the skin care and hair routine, I repeated the story Charlie had only just finished telling me.

My dad had made his own decisions. They weren't based on who I was as a child. They had nothing to do with me. They were based on his issues. He was broken. And after living for several years in the adult world, I could say I truly understood that. The little girl inside me hated that he had become human. Hated that Charlie had made my dad something less than a villain. Something infinitely more deserving of my empathy and compassion.

I fell asleep to the memory of Charlie's surprise watershed therapy moment and his arms wrapped around my body. I fell asleep braced for nightmares of my dad only to be surprised by the pleasant, gentle feeling of falling.

nine

“I’VE DECIDED to text Dad back,” I told Adleigh in the middle of our Friday *Vanderpump Rules*-mimosa marathon. We were only on episode two of the first season, and I hadn’t really been paying attention. Charlie’s words from last night had made me brave this morning.

There were parts of living as a hurt, damaged person I hadn’t necessarily signed up for. The coping and defense mechanisms had snuck in over the years, slipped in through the cracks or broken spaces. I hadn’t set out to be prickly or untrusting or paranoid. I’d simply picked up those character traits as I tried to manage the gaping hole in my chest.

But just because I had heartbreak in my past didn’t mean I had to continue operating from that place of hurt and brokenness. I could meet my dad without expecting him to fix the past. And I could also meet him without giving him room to hurt me more in my present.

Was that outlook a little jaded? Maybe. But I preferred to look at it honestly. He had a lot of power to wound me. And he’d already hurt me. I wanted to try to have a relationship with him. Genuinely. So I wanted to be smart. And careful. And go in with eyes wide open.

Adleigh beamed at me. “Yay!”

“Have you met him yet?”

“Yes, we went to coffee at the beginning of the week.” Her smile turned soft. “We talked for three hours.”

“Three hours?”

She laughed. “It was awkward at first, but then there was so much life to catch up on. He works for the railroad, so he’s lived all over. He’s some kind of engineer. Or he makes sure trains don’t run into each other. I don’t know,

something like that. He actually works in Raleigh. But when he transferred back this way, he wanted to live in Durham to be close to us. Well, he hoped it would work out that he could meet us and be in our lives and stuff.”

That sounded too convenient to my ears, but I bit back the skepticism. Because I was mature and all the crap I’d just said about being healthy and having positive boundaries.

Just kidding. I came out swinging for the fences. “Oh, he decided to move back here now? When we’re grown-ass adults? Because now is the time he wants to get close to us again?”

Her dreamy smile turned into a scowl. “Ada, I don’t think he had a choice where he was stationed over the past—”

“Two decades?” She pursed her lips. “Oh, so he was a slave? Indentured servant? Adleigh, of course he had a choice. A lot of parents work *and* take care of their kids. It’s really a normal thing to do.”

“Are you going to be this salty when you meet him? Because honestly, it’s rude. I’m not saying you have to welcome him into your life with open arms, but can you not be this . . .”

“Honest?”

“Bitchy.”

I rolled my eyes and took a sip of my mimosa. “He can abandon his family, come back twenty years later, and be some kind of hero? But I question some of his terrible life choices, and I’m the bitch?”

“Everyone makes mistakes, Ada. Even you.”

I took a deep breath and tried to find inner peace or some shit. “I’m happy to go to coffee with him, Ad.” She raised an eyebrow. “Okay, maybe not happy to go. But I’m willing to go. That’s all I can do right now.”

She settled into her bubbly self once more. “You know, you’re going to hold this grudge for like five minutes before you realize how sincere he is. Then you’re going to be embarrassed by your attitude.”

I should have taken this opportunity to settle back into our harmonious morning and move on. But . . . “This isn’t a grudge. The man fucked up our entire life. And I absolutely refuse to feel bad for standard feelings of abandonment and trauma.”

Her face paled. “That’s not what I meant, Ada. I was just—”

“I know. I know you didn’t mean it like that. Sorry, I really am being a bitch. I just . . . I’m trying. It’s hard, though.”

“It’s easier once you meet him, I think. Or at least it will get easier.” She

shot a sideways glance my way. “Okay, it was easier for me. Once we’d connected in real life, navigating the other . . . stuff was easier.”

I pulled out my phone, deciding now was as good a time as ever. “What should I say?” His text message stared at me, daring me to mess this up. Dad. It was such a blatant insult. What I really wanted to text back was, *Who gave you the right to call yourself dad?*

Or something more eloquent like *the fucking audacity.*

But because I loved my sister and, no matter how much I wanted to deny it, there was some deep, buried need to make amends with the person who was at least half responsible for creating me, I decided to put a pin in those two responses and go with something more civil.

Me: *Hey, Chris. Been a while.*

“You’re too cold,” Adleigh criticized as she watched me type over my shoulder.

“I haven’t spoken to the man in more than twenty years. I’m not going to call him Dad. It’s ridiculous. Also I’m almost thirty. I usually call Mom Jane.”

“You do not,” she argued. “And last time we were in Florida, I heard you say Mommy.”

I rolled my eyes. “Not mommy like a little kid. Mami, like you’re so sexy, Mami.”

She rolled her eyes. “Please don’t call our mother sexy.”

I reached up and pinched the soft flesh of her unflexed triceps and twisted hard enough I knew she’d have a bruise. Without missing a beat, she brought her hand down and smacked me upside the head. “Ow!”

“Ow!” I yelled back.

My phone dinged and we stopped fighting to read the text from Chris/Dad. I suddenly felt sick to my stomach.

Chris: *Can’t tell you how much I regret how long it’s been, Buttercup. I don’t suppose you have time to grab a bite to eat with your old dad? I’d love to see you. If you’ll let me.*

I didn’t know what made me hesitate, a gut feeling or something, but it almost felt like he was weaponizing my empathy. “If you’ll let me.” *Gross.* I understood he was trying to give me space to decide, but it felt very much like he was accusing me of gatekeeping my own time from him. *How would Adleigh cope if I throat-punched him?*

I threw my phone on the next cushion and let out a frustrated groan. “I

can't do this. It's too hard. I'm too bitter."

Adleigh picked up my phone and handed it back to me. "You can do this, sis. Pull your big girl panties on and be a fucking grown-up."

"This from the baby grown-up?"

"You're such an asshole when you're deflecting."

"You're an asshole for making me do this."

She smacked the back of my head again. "Stop stalling."

Me: *I think I can do that. How does Sunday afternoon sound?*

Chris: *That sounds wonderful. I'll make it work for you. Pick the time and place.*

I didn't like how he said "he'd make it work," so I started to type a response that put choosing the day and time in his court, and then if I had to turn him down every single time because I was working, then so be it. But Adleigh put a gentle hand on my shoulder and shook her head.

"He said he'd make it work for you, Ade. Believe him."

"Fine." I sighed. "But I'm going to ask him if you can come."

"Only if you want to," she said evenly, although I could hear the building anticipation in her voice. This was her dream right now. Her whole family in one place. If only Mom could fly up from Florida, and they could fall in love again on the spot and reconcile and live happily ever after.

I felt more than a little nauseous. And I felt as though I was betraying Mom. He didn't just leave me. He left her. *Why does he think he can come in using Buttercup and Baby Girl as if he still loves me? As if no time has passed? What does Mom think? She might forgive Adleigh because she doesn't know better. But would she forgive me?*

I looked back at her. "Is he an alcoholic or anything? Sober? I don't want to meet him at a place that will set him back."

"I don't know," she admitted. "We met for coffee. He didn't say anything, but he did order his black."

"Um, okay. That's not really helpful, but . . ."

"Just do coffee. Don't make this harder than it already is."

Sage advice from my little sister.

Me: *Do you care if I invite Adleigh?*

I sent him the website of a local coffee shop and a question mark.

Chris: *Place looks great. Two? I'll leave inviting your sister up to you.*

Even though he'd said I could pick the time and place, he'd already done that. He was already breaking promises.

Ada, play nice . . .

Me: *Sure. Sounds great. See you then.*

Chris: *Can't wait to see you, Ada.*

I let the conversation end there. That was good enough for me. I threw my phone again and burrowed back into the plush couch. That had been a lot for me. I felt like weeping.

My little girl voice yelled, “*Daddy, come back!*” in my head on repeat, and it was all I could do not to lose it. Adleigh wouldn’t have cared. She would have been very understanding—if not initially freaked out—and stayed all day to make sure I was all right.

But I couldn’t face that kind of shame. And what was more, I didn’t want to admit to that kind of heartache. I didn’t want to relive the worst of my memories with her. Not when she was this optimistic. This hopeful.

“You did it!” Adleigh squealed, climbing over the back of the couch and plopping down next to me. She put her arms around my waist and laid her whole body against mine. “I’m proud of you, Ade.”

“You should be proud of yourself,” I told her. “You’re the only reason any of this is happening.”

“Oh, I’ll definitely take the credit. I can’t wait to tell you I told you so.”

My heart ached, like the fist of foreshadowing had closed tightly around it. “I can’t wait for that either.” But I could barely speak the words because I knew they were a lie. The past mingled with my present, and all I wanted to do was protect Adleigh from what would happen next.

Except I couldn’t. I couldn’t shield her from this. She wouldn’t let me.

She’d have to learn the hard way. And I knew, *I just knew*, the hard way would break us both this time.

* * *

By the time Adleigh left my apartment, I had an hour to get ready for work, drink a cup of coffee, and get my thoughts back into the carefully organized filing cabinets I usually kept them in. Adleigh and I had a lovely day together—Shane free. It was so nice to have my sister to myself. But her thoughts about our dad and the looming commitment to coffee with him had unsettled me.

So instead of washing my hair or spending time on my makeup, I did the

one thing I knew would ground me. I called my mom.

She picked up on the second ring. “My Ady baby.” She sighed into the phone.

My smile was instantaneous. “Hey, Mom.”

“Whatchya doing? How are things? What’s new?” My mom’s rapid-fire questions were so perfectly her, I relaxed, despite the fact that she didn’t leave me any time to answer.

“Things are good.”

She clicked her tongue. “You miss Adleigh?”

How did she know? How could all these miles and states separate us, yet she knew exactly how I felt? Moms were something else. “It’s so quiet without her,” I admitted. “It’s not that she was always home when I was or anything, but her stuff was noisy or something. Or like, added a presence that’s absent now.”

“That’s how I felt when I moved here,” she said in a gentle tone that felt as good as a hug from her. “Suddenly, it was only my stuff in the house, and you girls were nowhere to be found. It was like losing you both at once, even though I didn’t, not really. Still, I miss your shoes by the door. And your laundry all over the bathroom. I miss your mess. Even all these years later.”

I took a deep breath, inhaling her empathy. “Yeah, exactly.”

“You get used to it. It’s stupid, and I hate it, but it becomes normal after a while.”

“I’m happy for her, though,” I added quickly, lest she think I didn’t support my sister in every way.

Her voice sounded sadder when she said, “Me too.”

Jane Kelly wasn’t a believer in true love. She preferred couples willing to do the work and choose happiness. Give her two rational-thinking humans with strong values and loyalty over star-crossed lovers any day. It wasn’t that she didn’t like Shane. Or didn’t think Shane and Adleigh made a solid couple. She just couldn’t help but proceed with caution.

My mom would choose Adleigh and her happiness over her happily ever after every day of the week. She wasn’t necessarily wrong . . . she was just shaped by her experience.

“They’re good together, Mom,” I assured her. “Shane adores her.”

“Good.” Then she laughed, pulling her good nature around her like a cozy blanket. “He better.”

There was a few silent moments when I tried to work up the courage to

bring Chris into the conversation. Even after all these years, Mom still flinched anytime Adleigh or I used the D word—Dad.

She'd moved on. She'd found happiness. She was currently living her best beach life. But just the mere mention of a male parent sent her spiraling back to that awful time. The betrayal of his departure cut her fresh every single time.

“You didn't call to talk about your sister, though, did you?” *Mom-tuition strikes again.*

She was sad again. Melancholy. And honestly, so was I.

“Chris is back in town, apparently.”

She let out a long breath that whooshed through the phone. “Adleigh told me.”

“She convinced me to text him. He wants to get coffee this Sunday.”

She only paused for a second. “What do you want to do, Ade?”

“Stand him up.” She laughed. “Maybe wait till he's settled at the table, has his perfect coffee order, apologizes for being an asshole, then leave right in the middle of his speech.”

“You're ferocious, Ady baby. I love that about you.”

Tears pricked my eyes. I had wondered about Mom's feelings since Adleigh told me Chris had reached out to her. I'd wondered if she felt betrayed, heartbroken, abandoned. It felt good to stand up for her. She needed it as much as I did.

“Seriously, though, what do I do?”

She made that tsking sound again. It was one hundred percent a mom noise, and somehow could make me feel loved and cared for and like I should brace myself for bad news. “If you don't go, will you always wonder if you should have?”

“Oh, I see,” I said, laughing. “Using the whole ‘don't build your life on regrets’ argument. Classic Jane.”

She laughed too, and it was the sweetest, purest sound ever. “I'm serious, darling girl. A moment in your childhood is frozen in time because of his choice. A door trauma has locked tight. Do you think you might like to walk through it and see what's on the other side?”

Irritation fizzled in my blood. “And you think starting a relationship with the dad who abandoned me is the way to do that?”

“No.” Her answer was firm, strong. “Not a relationship. Honey, I only want you to have a relationship with Chris if that's what *you* want. But coffee

does not mean he gets a foothold in your day-to-day. Coffee means you might get to say some things you've always wanted to. Coffee means you might get answers to questions you've been asking for a long time. Coffee means coming face-to-face with a terrible memory, putting flesh and blood to a missing person flyer in your heart. Coffee means as little or as much as you want it to."

Her words sent chills skittering over my skin. I pictured Chris's face—from a seven-year-old's memory—on a tattered missing person flyer pinned to the fleshy part of my heart. She was right.

"I don't know how to be around him, though," I confessed in a voice I reserved for my mom alone. "Like maybe I can figure out what to say to him. Or yell at him . . ." I laughed because that was what polite people did. They made jokes. Their acts of violence tended to be hyperbole. "But I don't know how to exist around him."

My mom thought about it for a minute and finally landed on, "Carefully, Ada. Exist around him carefully." She let out another slow breath into the speaker. "Your sister barrels into things with her signature enthusiasm. But trust your instincts, my careful, careful child. Test the water first. Slow and steady wins the race."

My mother added clichés the same way she answered phones—in a rush and with several supporting examples.

"Good advice, Mama."

"Just because he's asked for a place in your life today doesn't mean you have to give him one. You make the rules in your life, Ada. He gave up his role in that long ago."

The tears were back. Hot and itchy. I knew she'd give good advice. Even if it was also hard to hear. Even if it was how I already felt.

"I'm sorry about this," I told her after we'd both gotten lost in our heads. "I'm sorry he's asking for attention after all these years."

Her voice sounded thick through the phone, like she was holding back tears too. "I would never keep him out of your lives," she promised. "I hope you know that. You're as much him as you are me. And I would be lying if I didn't also admit I've wanted this for a very long time. Children should know their dads. Children should never be abandoned." She sucked in a trembling breath. "But, Ada, that man burned my trust a long time ago. I just . . . I just want you to be careful. I want you to protect yourself and your sister. And most of all, if you do decide to let him back into your life, I want him to earn

it. You two are the most precious people I've ever known. And if he gets to be a part of your lives, he better goddamn work for it."

I smiled. My mother hardly ever cussed. And it was a little awkward to hear her do it now, but I liked what she was saying. "I agree with you."

She laughed. "Good."

"I need to get ready for work now."

"All right, darling girl. Go conquer the world. Call me soon."

"Love you, Mom."

"Love you too, babe."

I hung up the phone and stared at the wall for a minute. I hadn't realized how much I'd needed her blessing to move forward with coffee. But her permission unlocked something wound tight and terrified in my chest.

And more than that, she was right. If Chris wanted to come back into our lives, he better damn well earn his place here.

ten

I WAS a ghost at work that evening. A flickering phantom. Friday night was always our biggest turnout, but the gravity of the text exchange and emotional conversation with my mom weighed too heavily for me to be fully present. I missed drink orders, messed up tickets, and spilled a dirty martini, glass and all, in a way that not only splashed half the bar with olive juice and gin but also shattered the glass.

It had taken twenty minutes to clean up. I had to comp their entire ticket, which got me even further behind.

I just wanted the day to be over already.

Eliza found me near the end of the night. Pockets of guests still dotted the dining room, but we'd slowed significantly since our rush.

"Hey, gorgeous," she said, smiling brightly.

It took me a minute to figure out she was talking to me. "Hey."

"Do you have a second to talk?"

"Uh, sure."

She tilted her head toward the kitchen. "Let's go to the office."

Dread pooled low in my gut. "Uh-oh."

She glanced over her shoulder and smiled at me as she led me through the swinging door. "Nervous?"

"I've had a pretty shit night," I confessed. "If you're about to fire me, just tell me now."

Eliza didn't usually hang out this late. And poking my head into the office, I saw Will was there too. He wore sweatpants and a thin, worn-out T-shirt, so clearly, he wasn't working. But now that two of the three English siblings had assembled with the express purpose of talking to me, I wanted to

puke.

I sat down at my desk and waited for the guillotine to drop.

But then Charlie walked in too, and I stopped being sarcastic and seriously braced for my walking papers. I tried to catch Charlie's eye in hopes I could read what this was all about because his expression was usually open, but he kept his gaze fixed on Will.

On purpose.

I could tell by the smile he was desperately trying to hide.

So maybe not the sack?

Charlie reached over and shut the door, but it was Will who talked first. "We want to talk to you about the raise you asked for," he said seriously.

"Okay . . ."

"Why do you look sick?" Eliza asked, noticing my pale coloring for the first time.

There were a lot of reasons, but I picked the most obvious. "All three of you in one room? To talk to me about a raise? And the door is closed? Honestly, I'm not expecting good news."

Eliza snickered, but Will looked more solemn than ever.

"We want to give you a raise, Ada," Will said somberly. I relaxed for a full two seconds. "But we think we can offer you something better."

Anxiety splashed around my ankles and moved up my body like a flash flood. "What is better than a raise?"

"Jelly of the Month Club," Charlie said with a straight face.

"What?"

Will scowled at his younger brother. "No. Not Jelly of the Month Club. How about the loft?"

Now none of the words were making sense at all. Were they even speaking English? "I don't understand."

"Lola and I are moving this weekend. We bought a little house. We closed yesterday, and we're moving over the next week—"

"We're moving you next week." Charlie cut in, pointing his finger at the three siblings. "Lola's too pregnant to do shit."

Will sighed. "That's true. We've kept it on the down-low because, honestly, we have so much going on with the second location and the baby. And her family's business is opening like three new grocery stores. I think both of us are surprised it's even happening."

"Oh my gosh, congratulations!" I gushed. "But seriously, how did I not

know?”

Will shrugged. “It happened really fast. We put an offer in on the first house we saw in person. We did look around at others online, but Lola knew exactly what she wanted. The homeowners accepted our generous offer, and we worked through an expedited process because they had already moved out of state. Anyway, so many things are happening all at once that this has felt more stressful than fun.”

“I’m really excited for you,” I told him sincerely. “You’ll love the space with the baby.”

“That’s the goal,” he said, but he sounded tired. “Also, Lola said she’s tired of people using our bed as a couch when we have parties. Apparently, she’s not into studio living.”

Eliza and I shared a knowing look. Obviously, a pregnant business mogul might like her privacy. Me, on the other hand? I’d only been drooling over the loft since the first time I saw it.

Yes, I loved my apartment. Yes, it was beautiful and bright and lovely. But honestly, it was too big for one person. It had been perfect for Adleigh and me. But I hadn’t even put anything in her bedroom yet. And I didn’t need to.

The loft, on the other hand . . . was so cool. Exposed brick walls, insanely tall ceilings, floor-to-ceiling windows. Modern, sleek, cool girl vibes all over the place.

And I wouldn’t have to move out of the neighborhood.

“So you’re saying the loft is open?”

Will nodded. “And you’re welcome to live there. Rent free. The utilities are shared with the bar, so I doubt we’ll notice a difference. And then when the second location is up and running and we start asking a hell of a lot more from you, we’ll give you an actual, physical raise.”

I did the quick math in my head. With rent and utilities, it was around a forty thousand dollar raise. Maybe more if I considered what I would have had to pay for the loft on my own.

The generosity of these people floored me. Actually floored me. I wasn’t expecting this. Or this much kindness. I didn’t have a place for it to land in my brain.

My instinct was to turn prickly. To lash out and push them away. Who could tolerate this level of consideration? How could I process the sheer force of my gratitude? I couldn’t do it. I didn’t have it in me.

After several minutes of staring at the floor and contemplating whether I should just sprint from the building and tell them I needed to quit, because that felt easier than dealing with all these emotions, or start weeping like a baby, Will asked, “Is that okay, Ada? Or would you prefer to stay where you’re at and have monetary compensation? It won’t be as much dollar for dollar, but we can—”

“No, it’s not that.” The flash flood of anxiety had turned into a tidal wave of tears, and oh my God, this was so embarrassing. I held up a hand and looked straight up at the ceiling. *Get it under control, Kelly.*

“Are you mad?” Eliza asked, sounding nervous.

I pressed my lips together and shook my head back and forth as if I could throttle the emotions out of my brain. This was not good. I didn’t know what would happen if people saw me cry, but I knew I’d never be able to fully recover. I mean, this wasn’t a stray tear. My tear ducts were threatening a full-on emotional breakdown.

And prior to this moment, there had never been a witness to an Ada Kelly hysterical episode.

So probably, the whole fabric of society would crumble. End times apocalypse? A tear in the space-time continuum?

Probably not worth risking.

“Ada?” Will growled, sounding a little desperate.

“She’s emotional,” Charlie said evenly, not worried about the space-time continuum at all. Typical. “She feels emotions, and she’s trying not to feel emotions. It’s a whole thing.”

“Is she mad?” Will asked, apparently believing Charlie.

Charlie leaned forward and inspected my splotchy, blushing face as I held my breath and tried to pass out—which would obviously be better than crying. “She’s happy. I think.”

Eliza laughed nervously. “Ada, you’re happy?”

I nodded quickly. “Yes,” I squeaked. “Super happy.”

There was a collective sigh of relief in the office. Will said, “So we’ll be moving things out for a couple of days, and then I’ll get it professionally cleaned for you. But after that, it’s all yours. Probably by next Saturday.”

I had just gotten my emotions under control, but this new information sent them careening back to my eyeballs. I dropped my head back again and focused on the drop ceiling.

“Charlie mentioned you’re on a time crunch,” Will continued. “Does that

give you enough time?”

I hiccupped. It wasn't a muffled sob. It was a side effect of, um, acid reflux.

“Ada, go to the bathroom if you need to,” Charlie suggested in a low, gentle voice. “We'll wait for you.”

His voice was somehow the steadying presence I needed to pull it together. I didn't know why his extension of more kindness somehow put solid ground beneath my feet, but it did. Swallowing a huge lump of raw, sharp feeling, I could finally meet their concerned gazes and say, “Thank you.” My voice was barely more than a whisper, but it was something less than weeping too. “You guys, I can't . . . I don't know what to do with this. Nobody has ever . . .”

“Ever what?” Charlie pushed. His eyes were twinkling, and a smile played on his lips.

“Charlie,” Eliza hissed.

“No, come on, let her tell us how amazing we are.” He looked so incredibly smug, I immediately stopped feeling weepy and wanted to punch him in the kidneys.

His siblings rolled their eyes.

“You guys are amazing.” Whether Charlie deserved it or not, it was true.

“There are a few logistic, um, things that might make you feel less kind,” Will said. He pulled out a lease document. “We had this written up to protect both the building and our working relationship. You are free to look it over and offer suggestions if you need to. Basically, it states that as long as you're in our employ, you are welcome to the loft. If you were to get a job elsewhere —”

“Please don't,” Eliza pleaded.

Will shot her a look. “If you were to get a job elsewhere, the loft would return to us. We have required ourselves to give you sufficient time to find a new place and move out. As long as everyone is in good standing, there is also the option for you to begin paying rent instead of moving out. The lease agreement also requires you to cover repair or maintenance costs for any problem you create. As your landlords, we'll handle regular wear and tear. So basically, if the water heater goes out, we'll replace it. But if you accidentally break a window, that cost falls to you.”

I nodded. It made sense.

Will eyed me seriously. “Obviously, we're offering you this option

because we implicitly trust you. You've been with us since the beginning. You've only ever shown us integrity and responsibility, and we don't want to lose you."

"Or for you to overextend yourself," Charlie added.

"Right." Will's expression softened. "But we also don't want you to feel trapped in this job because of the loft. Ada, if you ever feel that it's time for you to move on, please don't hesitate to come talk to us. We're reasonable people. And we will forever be grateful for what you've done for us over the years. Most importantly, we want the best for you. Whether that's here and in the loft or somewhere else."

Nodding, Eliza added, "We will never stop supporting you. No matter where you work. We love you, Ade. You're like family."

The stupid tears were back. And this time, I couldn't stop them from falling. I quickly brushed them away, but they just kept coming. Where was the off switch? This was my body. I was in charge. Why couldn't I get my tear ducts to listen to me—the boss?

"This is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me," I told them while pretending I wasn't a mess of waterworks. "I don't know how to thank you enough."

"Ada, this is how *we're* thanking *you*," Charlie said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "You're not supposed to do anything except say yes."

A laugh bubbled up and came out of my body in a spray of snot. *Gross*. I grabbed a tissue and kept crying. "I've just been really stressed lately," I told them. "And I didn't know what to do. This makes everything so simple."

"And more importantly, you're going to tell Salt no." Charlie sounded dead serious.

"What?"

"Salt," he said more firmly. "They can't have you."

Will jumped in. "Listen, Killian is my friend, but if he thinks he can poach you, I'm happy to go to war."

"What?"

Will sat back in Eliza's chair and folded his arms across his chest. "What did he offer you? I mean, I feel like the loft is a solid counteroffer, but is it better than the loft? You can tell us. We can take it."

I wanted to repeat for the third time, *what!?* And maybe throw some expletives in as well, just for good measure. But that line of thinking was

getting us nowhere. So instead, I confessed the truth. “Killian hasn’t offered me anything. I don’t even think he knew I was looking. My friend works for them—”

“You mean his spy,” Charlie corrected. “Mm-hmm, go on.”

“No, she’s not his spy. She’s—”

“A double agent,” Eliza said, snapping her fingers.

The three of us looked at her. My third “What?” finally slipped past the barrier of my mouth.

“That doesn’t make sense,” Charlie said.

Thankfully, because of this bizarre line of questioning, I was able to grapple control of my emotions once again and settle into my usually annoyed-with-the-three-of-them vibe. “For real, Killian didn’t send April. She mentioned it offhand. No secret spy is trying to coerce me over there. I just didn’t want to lose my apartment. I promise I wasn’t defecting to Salt.”

They all shared a look, deciding whether they should believe me. I couldn’t help but laugh a little. It was nice to be wanted, I guess.

“Well, if he ever approaches you with an offer, you tell me right away, okay?” Will demanded.

“Okay,” I promised solemnly. “I’ll call you immediately. Put you on FaceTime. Have you turn him down for me.”

He nodded. “It’s not in the lease contract, but I would appreciate that.”

I laughed again, full of simultaneous irritation and love for these fools. “Thank you, all of you. Seriously. You’ve solved a bunch of my problems, and I’m so grateful.”

“Well, we’re grateful for you,” Eliza assured me. “And we love you. Read over the contract and make sure it’s something you can sign. We’re willing to negotiate if you notice anything weird.”

“Okay, I will.” But I knew it was fine, and I would sign it. I knew they would protect my interests as much as their own. Why? Because they were offering me the loft to do just that. Protect my peace and my time and my commitment to Craft. But mostly because they were protecting me, their friend.

These kinds of people were rare in this world. Rare and precious . . .

Mine.

“We want the best for you, Ada. Whether that’s here and in the loft or somewhere else. We love you, Ada. You’re like family.”

“All right,” Will announced, standing, “I have to get back to packing.” He

moved toward the door but put his finger in the air like he remembered something important. “By the way, Ada, you don’t have to keep your problems to yourself. If something comes up, we want to hear about it. We want to help you. That’s what friends do.”

“We’re more than friends,” Eliza insisted. “We’re family. We’re . . . family.”

That was true. They were my family. I loved my mom and Adleigh more than anything on this planet, but these people were right there too.

“Family,” Will echoed. “I like it.”

And with that, he left the office and headed to my future home. Miles poked his head in almost immediately after and asked for help with something on the computer. I stood to go, but Eliza jumped in and said she’d take care of it.

Which was nice, because I wanted to talk to Charlie.

He stood against the wall near the door, casual as can be. His hair had been freshly cut with the sides tightly shaved and the top long and styled. He was tall and gorgeous and so full of the devil.

“I can’t believe you did this for me.” The tears were back, but I managed to hold them in. Barely.

Half his mouth lifted in a smug smile. “Like Will said, next time you have problems, come to us.”

“How are you suddenly in the business of solving all my problems anyway? I feel like I’m usually the one getting you out of a jam.”

He shrugged. “Maybe I’ve turned over a new leaf.”

I shook my head. “Maybe you were never actually helpless. Maybe it was all an act.”

“It was,” he quickly agreed. “I like playing the damsel in distress.” He captured my wrist when I tried to walk by him. “I like it when you save me.”

My heart kicked against my breastbone, and a tingly shiver moved over my skin. “Oh really? I’m your version of a white knight?”

He tugged me a little closer to him. His eyes were vibrant green, twinkling with something dark and dangerous. “You’re my version of perfect, Ada.”

Suddenly, it was hard to breathe. Suddenly, it was hard to see past the fluttering of frantic butterflies erupting throughout my body. Suddenly, I wanted to throw my arms around this man and thank him for everything in a way that didn’t use our mouths. Or at least didn’t use our mouths for talking.

What was I supposed to do with this? Besides get naked and force him to get naked too?

But I remembered what it had been like last time. How good it had been until it was so, so bad. I remembered how hurt I'd been. How tossed aside I'd felt.

“Charlie, I—”

He grinned—a roguish, sly, challenging grin. Without saying a word, he lifted my arm and pressed a kiss to the inside of my wrist. Then he walked away. And I stood there trying to figure out how to resist this man who was so much more than I had ever given him credit for.

eleven

THE BEANERY WAS a spacious coffee shop about ten minutes from my apartment. It was in the corner of an odd-shaped building and wrapped around the block with the barista counter in the middle. It had a lot of booths and tables, along with a gift shop with kitschy Durham souvenirs and a whole wall of T-shirts.

They had fantastic Wi-Fi and scones.

I arrived five minutes early and scouted out the two sides of the seating area so I would have a plan where to guide us.

Neurotic? Yes. Still necessary? Also yes.

Before the whole loft proposal, I'd suggested meeting my dad on Sunday so I would have Monday to recover should I need it. Craft was closed Sunday and Monday even though I usually still worked—from home on my computer or at the bar. It was always easier to get work done when it was quiet. And empty. But I could take Monday off if I needed it. I just dreaded the workload come Tuesday.

Still, I was trying to make space for the stupid feelings plaguing all this dumb life change and the aftermath of a potentially traumatic coffee experience. It was easy to be a grown-up—one of those things that just sort of happened. But it was a hell of a lot of work to be a well-adjusted, mentally healthy grown-up.

Honestly, I didn't know what to expect. I liked to be emotionally prepared for things. Or at the very least, I didn't want to be emotionally unprepared. Friday night had been an unexpected, uh, example of why I didn't like to walk into situations without my emotions in check.

Not that I had any hope of bossing any of my feelings around that night.

But that was an outlier in my usually rigid emotional control. Ahem.

I'd spent yesterday on the phone with all the tedious companies—starting with my landlord. He'd been surly per usual. Then utilities. There was mail to redirect. Moving boxes to track down. And all the other million to-do list tasks in order to upgrade apartments.

Eliza and Adleigh had come over around lunch, bearing Thai takeout, beer, and scrubby clothes. They helped me pack up half my kitchen and all my bookshelves. This morning, I'd made good progress on my bedroom. But both days, I'd been forced to stop what I was doing to shower and get ready. Yesterday because of work. Today because of this coffee.

All I wanted was to be excited by the incredible gift the Englishes had offered me. *Stability. A stable living arrangement. The ability to squirrel money away. Options.* But even that wonder had been upstaged . . . *overshadowed* by Chris.

I had been about to put my drink order in to avoid the whole who-should-pay dilemma when he stepped in the building. My skin tingled with awareness. And a foreboding gurgle lurched in my stomach.

When I instinctively turned around, he was there. Afternoon sunlight lit up the sky behind him, and he was framed by hanging plants. He looked like a portrait. A portrait of a future version of the dad I remembered.

When I was little, I had been obsessed with worrying if I'd forget what he looked like. The idea of running into him somewhere random, like the grocery store, or a roller-skating rink, or the movies, and not recognizing him haunted me. I would make my mom print countless pictures of him. I'd tuck them into books or in the corners of my closet, pin them to my walls mingled with all the other pictures of my life and friends and present happiness. I'd stare at his face and wonder if I looked like him.

But when I got older, I realized it didn't matter if I could recognize him. He would have reached out if he'd wanted something to do with me. And that thought stayed with me year after year after year. Until I decided it was a worthless, *childish* thought.

He hadn't.

He didn't reach out.

I'd let myself forget his face so I didn't have to remember the pain.

Only now, I realized it was all for nothing anyway. I didn't have to look at pictures to recognize the current version of him. He'd hardly changed. More wrinkles around the corners of his mouth and edges of his eyes. His

hair was salt and pepper but still dark. He wore jeans and a T-shirt and black boots. And I knew without approaching him he would smell like tobacco cigarettes that he hand rolled himself, his old leather jacket, and spearmint gum.

Our gazes clashed for a moment, and he smiled politely.

I took a step back, gasping. I recognized him. Couldn't help but recognize him. But he didn't recognize me.

Maybe I looked entirely different than I did as a little girl. I'd grown a whole lot more than he had.

Or maybe he hadn't spent hours staring at my pictures. Perhaps he'd never imagined what I'd looked like grown. Maybe he hadn't thought about me at all.

There was only one way to find out.

I took a steadying breath and stepped forward. "Chris?"

He looked at me a second time and recognition dawned. "Ada?" There was a slight hesitation, and then he said, "I thought that was you, but I didn't want to bother you just in case." He chuckled. "Thought it might be awkward if I introduced myself as Dad and got it wrong."

I laughed too. Or at least I made a sound that was supposed to be a laugh. I was too nervous to really have a handle on my mouth.

"Adleigh is coming too," I told him. I didn't know what else to say. But leave it to my sister to leave me in the lurch. When I was always five minutes early, she was always fifteen minutes late. "She should be here any minute."

"Great," he said. He cleared his throat. "Well, should we get a drink while we wait?"

"Sure."

But he didn't move. Instead, he stared at me intently as if memorizing my face. "God, Ada, it's so good to see you, darlin'." He took a deep breath. "You've grown into a beautiful young lady. I just can't believe how"—he made a half-shrugging, half-pointing gesture—"old you are."

"Old?"

He laughed at himself. "Well, I wanted to say how grown up you are, but it sounded, erm, stupid."

This time when I laughed, it was more natural. "Well, telling me I look old is definitely better. Good choice."

His eyebrows lifted at my sarcasm, but he grinned. "Forgive me, I'm a little out of practice."

I wanted to ask if he meant being a parent, but I decided to save the truly grilling questions until Adleigh arrived.

We ordered drinks. He insisted on paying. So I went all out with my favorite special milk and cold foam and all the accoutrements. He got a hot black coffee—no cream.

He picked a table near the front window so we could keep an eye out for Adleigh, then we entered into a game of who could ask the other person the most inane questions. He wanted to know all about my work and living situation. He asked naive questions about boys. I asked about his work. And his move to Durham, his commute to Raleigh. And tried to figure out if he'd ever remarried or had other kids.

His answers were ambiguous at best, deflecting at worst. Which probably meant yes. Who knew how many Chris Kelly children there were out in the world. All abandoned. All forgotten.

Adleigh arrived in a swirl of hombre silk. Her maxi dress was cute and flirty. She stepped into Dad's open embrace like they'd always been close. "Hey, Dad," she said, and it sounded so natural. I felt sick to my stomach.

He hugged her in a comfortable sort of way, like he'd been hugging her for all twenty-two of her years. "Hey, baby girl."

Baby girl? I blinked at his tender greeting, the nickname he'd always used for me. I ground my teeth together and tried not to say something that would make her—or him—cry.

She squealed as she plopped down into the seat across from me. "Yay for finally all being together."

Chris and I smiled blandly at her.

"There's so much I wanted to say to y'all over the years," he started to say. "So many memories I wanted to make with you." He did that thing where he laughed at himself again. "I used to pretend to write you letters. You know, I'd have the whole thing written out before I got off work." Another self-deprecating laugh. "But I'd forget it all by morning, I s'pose."

"Why didn't you write a real letter?" I asked because I couldn't freaking help myself.

"Excuse me?" His tone sounded way more insulted than I gave him credit for. I hadn't expected him to care enough to be defensive.

"Ada," Adleigh hissed.

I smiled at my dad. He did a double take. "I'm just kidding."

He did another double take. "I get it."

“Do you?” I highly doubted that.

Chris wisely took the high road. If he hadn't, if he'd tried to justify not once trying to write to his daughters, I probably would have walked out. Adleigh wanted a family reunion, but I wouldn't tolerate a liar.

“Did you ever remarry?” I asked, shifting back to him.

“Me?” That same humble laugh. “Nah. That's the one lesson I learned fast. I'm not a marrying kind of man. Tried to work up to it a couple of times. But couldn't quite pull the trigger after your ma.”

His tone was gentle, but I didn't like how he brought my mom up. Maybe she had traumatized him as much as his departure had traumatized us . . . or maybe he was nudging all the blame on her, so we'd hate him a little less.

You're paranoid, Ada. Calm down.

“So did you have any other kids? Or just us?”

“I have a son. He's about to be a senior in high school. His name is Briggs.”

“We have a half brother?” Adleigh gasped.

I took a shaky sip of my drink. I hadn't put that together. I'd asked about his kids thinking they were his. *His* new family in *his* new life. And, if I were honest, I'd wanted to know if he had abandoned them too. If he'd run as fast as he could away from them too. Or was it just us he couldn't handle? But Adleigh was right. He was our half brother.

“Huh,” Chris grunted. “Well, I guess he would be. Nice kid. Plays football in Oklahoma. Has a couple of schools already looking at him for college.”

“Do you have a picture?” I asked, needing to put a face to the name. Briggs Kelly. A high school senior who plays football.

It had taken a random newspaper article for Chris to track Adleigh down, but with a few taps of his fingers, he knew exactly what his son was doing with his life. Did Briggs know he had two sisters in North Carolina? Had he ever heard our names before? Had he ever heard us talked about before?

I wondered about Briggs. About his life with Chris. The bitter part of my heart wanted to hate my half brother because it seemed he had more access to his dad than we had ever had. But Chris was here. In North Carolina. During Briggs's senior year of football in which he was apparently going to be scouted for college ball. Maybe they were closer than Adleigh and I had the chance to be. But Chris had still left him too.

Chris pulled out his phone and opened a social media app. He turned the

phone around and showed us one of Briggs's senior pictures, probably just taken. A fluttering of emotions brushed through me. He looked like Adleigh. Light-brown hair, tan skin, a dimple on the left side of his cheek.

"Would you let him know we want to reach out to him?" Adleigh asked gently. "Like email him or something. Do you mind asking him if that's okay?"

Chris looked startled. "You want to reach out to Briggs?"

She shrugged, then started shredding the wet napkin beneath her iced drink. "I don't know, Ada and I are so close. She's the reason I'm . . . well, I'm who I am today. She was always there for me, always willing to listen to my drama or heartbreak, always cheering me on to keep pushing and working hard and going after my dreams. It meant everything to have an older sister. I'd like to get to know Briggs and be that for him. Maybe we won't be as close because of the distance, but I'd still like to be a part of his life."

"We'd like to be a part of his life," I added.

"Uh, okay, sure. I'll email him tonight and ask him what he thinks," Chris assured us. "I'm sure he'd love to talk to his two older sisters. That's real sweet of you."

Unease sloshed in my gut again. Just like when he'd mentioned Mom before, something about his phrasing made my goodwill trip and fall. Like he was gatekeeping his son. Like he didn't want us to meet or have anything to do with each other. Chris seemed open, but something in the way he wouldn't look at us fully in the eyes made me skeptical we'd ever get to talk to Briggs.

The conversation turned to lighter topics. We talked about our tastes and the similar favorites we had in common—Flaming Hot Cheetos, Simon and Garfunkel, driving with all the windows down on the highway. He told us some funny work stories about guys he'd worked with over the years. Adleigh and I shared some childhood memories that were full of shenanigans.

Two hours passed before any of us had really noticed. Our coffees had been finished or forgotten. And the sun was dipping toward the horizon. Aside from the awkward beginning, the conversation had been easy.

Parts of me were so filled up from getting to relax and have fun with this man I'd been missing for two decades—whether I wanted to admit it. But parts were also still on high alert, wondering if this was really happening and if we could even trust him. The tension was enough to push me away, even if Chris was making me feel more at home with every kind laugh and funny

anecdote.

When there was a lull in the conversation, I said, “Well, I should probably go. I’ve still got a lot to pack tonight.”

Chris’s eyebrows shot up. “Are you moving, Ada?”

“Just across the street,” I explained. “Adleigh was my roommate until recently. When she abandoned me and moved in with her boyfriend, I had to find a new place to live so I could afford rent.”

“Well, you can afford it now,” Adleigh gloated, not at all bothered by the shade I’d thrown her way. Probably because she knew I wasn’t serious.

I kicked her shin. To Chris, I said, “I don’t officially move for another week, but I’m trying to get a jump-start on my bigger projects.”

Seeming to only hear half my answer, he asked, “What day are you moving?”

“Saturday, I think. Well, probably Saturday and Sunday.”

“Do you need help?” he asked casually.

Did I need help? I needed to hire a full-time moving company and pay them extra to package up all my shit. And then carry it down four flights of stairs and then up two more flights to reach my new loft.

My new loft. Just thinking about it made me happy.

“I could help you,” he suggested.

RIP me. Because that was when I died. “I’m sorry?”

“I could help you move,” he repeated. “I’m good at lifting heavy boxes.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Are you?”

“Well, I’m good at lifting most boxes. Although I prefer the small ones.”

“Noted.” Then my mouth betrayed me by laughing a second time. Yep, definitely time to leave. “Well, great, thanks for offering. I’ll text you the address and time. It’s not a big deal or anything, I mean, if you can’t make it. But it would be great to have you there.”

“Count me in,” he said happily.

I picked up my trash, including the small iced coffee I’d only had a few sips of, and walked it over to the trash can. “Uh, thank you for the coffee. And thank you for spending your afternoon with me. I really enjoyed it.”

“Any time, baby girl.”

My mouth went immediately dry at the nickname—the one I hadn’t heard since I was a little girl, but he’d just used with Adleigh. It was cheapened now. Worthless. It had been this thing from my little girl’s mind that was so special, so uniquely for just me. But now I knew the truth. It wasn’t

something Chris Kelly used for Ada Kelly. It was what Chris Kelly called every girl he wasn't quite sure what to do with.

Instead of tacking more awkward goodbyes onto the end of that paragraph, I decided to, well, flee. I hurried out of the coffee shop and down the block, desperately trying not to run. I was a ball of nerves and mixed energy and grief and happiness and stupid, unrelenting paranoia. I was everything all at once. I was happiness and sadness and my normal self at twenty-eight and the little girl who was seven years old and wearing pigtails and overalls.

I was past and present. Heartache and healing. Curiosity and too much knowledge.

And I had a brother. A teenage brother who may or may not know he had two sisters.

There was too much all at once. I was drowning in visceral feelings and hazy memories. I couldn't remember how to fight my emotions and hold them back. I couldn't remember how to keep my tears from falling.

So as soon as I was safely locked behind my apartment door, I crumpled to the floor and dissolved into tears. Or rather, wracking sobs that shook my entire body and threatened to scream through the whole building.

It hurt. Everything hurt.

I had made peace with not having a dad. There had been men along the way who'd filled in that role for me—my grandfather until he'd passed away. My mom's best friend through middle school and high school was a guy named Alex. He'd been at the house to see me off to prom. He gave game day advice when I played varsity soccer. And he was still supportive and encouraging even though his job had moved him to California. He even visited my mom in Florida twice a year, and Adleigh and I always tried to make it down there at least once to see him. My Muay Thai coach, Jen, was an older man whose wisdom in all things was a special gift. Even Will often stepped in with advice or an endearing sort of gruff love.

Okay, maybe Will was more a big brother than a father figure. But still, my life wasn't lacking positive male role models.

So why now? Why after all this time, when I'd outgrown my dreams about my daddy coming home and stopped needing him for all the things dads were supposed to do for their kids . . . why was he suddenly here? And involved? And hoping to help me move?

I cried because the grief of what had been lost had finally bubbled over.

Twenty years of missed birthdays and family dinners and big accomplishments and bigger failures. I'd lived in eight different homes since he'd left. And he was only just now arriving to carry boxes.

I cried because even after all this time, the little girl inside me still wanted this to work. I loved the men who had been there for me all these years. And I was grateful for the love and support they'd sown into my life. But there was still a dad-sized hole in my heart. And I wanted it to be healed. I wanted this to work. I wanted him to be the man he said he was.

I cried because I was scared that he couldn't be that for me. Because I was scared he would leave again.

I cried because I'd quit crying because of him. Because I was tired of being sad all the time. Of feeling abandoned and unwanted and the girl without a dad.

I cried because this was more fucking stress during an already stressful time.

It didn't have to be real when it was just Adleigh telling me about him texting her or wanting to meet. It could be some distant, not real thing I never had to face.

But now he was here, in my life. He wanted to get to know me. He wanted a relationship. He wanted to help me move.

My dad was back in my life. So . . . what did I want?

twelve

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, my phone buzzed with an incoming text. I was elbows deep in cleaning out some of my bedroom drawers and rolling all my clothes into suitcases so I could save the packing boxes for other things. My face was puffy from crying earlier. And my hair was pulled back into minuscule twin buns at the nape of my neck because my blunt bob was so short. The hair around the front of my face kept escaping the hair ties and getting in my face.

Needing a break, I reached for my phone and plopped down on the edge of my bed. The text was from Charlie. I did not smile when I opened it. My lips did an involuntary twitch into something that might be misinterpreted as a smile. But it was definitely not a smile.

Charlie: *I'm bored. Entertain me.*

Me: *Whatever you're doing right now is less boring than what I'm doing.*

Charlie: *Impossible. This isn't a competition, Kelly. Tell me what you're doing, though, so I can decide for myself.*

Me (definitely not smiling at all): *Packing up my underwear drawer.*

Charlie: *I'll come over and help.*

He added the running emoji, and I actually cackled with laughter. What an irreverent flirt.

Me: *I hate to disappoint you, but I'm almost done. And I don't have any food in the house. You would hate it here.*

Charlie: *You don't know me at all, Ada.*

I was starting to worry that was true. But anyway, back to packing. I'd forgotten how much work it was. Memories of moving into this apartment with Adleigh had started to come back. Vague promises of never moving

again . . . *they'll have to carry my cold, dead body out the front door before I ever do this again . . . I would rather light the whole thing on fire and leave all my possessions behind to burn than move this shit again . . .*

Just very nebulous snapshots of promises and threats. Nothing too serious.

But here we were. I was so excited to get to the loft and make it mine. My heart practically grew three sizes like the Grinch at the end of the movie every time I thought about my life from that loft. Every time I thought about eliminating rent from my monthly expenses.

I had to keep reminding myself that it wouldn't be forever. Eventually, I'd have to figure out how to budget for it again. But for right now it felt like such a deep, satisfying breath of fresh air.

Should I feel somewhat like an indentured servant? I didn't know. My feelings were unclear on the ethics of the whole thing. But I did trust the English siblings to let me walk away from the job and the apartment should the time come.

And more than that, I trusted myself to use this time to save, rest, and listen to my instincts.

My doorbell buzzer rang its shrill alert through the cluttered apartment, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. Holy shit, I couldn't wait to be away from that awful thing.

"Hello?" I asked through the intercom, wondering who it could be.

"I brought tacos."

"Charlie?" His voice was distorted thanks to the quality of the intercom system, but who else could it be.

"And chips and salsa," he added.

I buzzed him up. Chips and salsa were my death row meal. It didn't sound like much, but if I was literally on death row, and I had to pick one final meal, I would order dozens of chips and salsas and gorge myself until I was unrecognizable.

Clearly, Charlie knew how to charm his way into my apartment.

Leaving the door propped open, I went in search of something in my kitchen not packed up. Like plates or glasses or silverware. I ended up finding paper towels and spoons.

"What if I was a serial killer?" he asked instead of saying hello when he walked through the door a couple of minutes later. "You leave the door open for anyone?"

“Only when I’m promised tacos and chips and salsa,” I called from the kitchen.

He kicked the door closed with his heel after toeing the box that had been propping it open out of the way, then met me at the island, arms laden with paper bags from the taco truck down the street and two of our resealable 750 ml glass bottles from the bar.

I quickly made space for him to set everything down. “What’s in those?”

He wagged his eyebrows at me. “Margaritas.”

“Homemade?”

“Fresh squeezed, baby,” he said with a grin.

I bumped him out of the way with my hip so I could dig into the bags. “Charlie, you saved the day.”

“Was the day in danger?” he asked, opening my cabinets in search of glasses.

I let out a deep sigh of happiness when I found the double portion of chips and the three kinds of salsa he’d brought. What had I done to deserve this feast? I immediately dug into the corn salsa before ripping the lid off the hot salsa. It was past eight, and I was just now eating for the day—aside from those few sips of iced coffee. I hadn’t realized how famished I’d gotten because I’d felt nauseous from crying so hard earlier.

“The day wasn’t just in danger,” I told him flippantly. “It had driven itself off a cliff and landed in a fiery crash with zero survivors.”

“Yikes, Ade. That sounds dramatic.” He managed to find two glasses I hadn’t packed yet on the top shelf. He filled them with ice and poured us some drinks. “What happened?”

One thing about Charlie, ever since he started bartending, the man could make a mean margarita. His shots and cocktails were all highly experimental, but he’d figured out the perfect lime juice, triple sec, and tequila ratios down right away.

I took a sip and tried not to moan. Tried and failed. “Why is it so good?”

He grinned. “Grand Marnier.”

“Ooh, fancy. What’s the occasion?”

He shrugged. “No occasion, just thought you might want help. Why did your day suck?”

I took another sip of margarita, then another bite of chip while I mulled over what to tell him. It wasn’t that I was trying to keep my private life a secret. It was just . . . I wasn’t sure how interested Charlie was in hearing the

details of my day.

To be fair, he seemed interested. He was here. And he'd brought provisions. Also, he was asking questions. But . . . the Charlie I knew from five years ago wasn't great at absorbing all the nuanced details of my stories. Historically, he hadn't been emotionally available for heavy heartache. He wouldn't know what to do if I accidentally started crying and couldn't stop.

Which was a real possibility, given my earlier reaction.

"I—"

"Ada, tell me," he encouraged, apparently sensing I was going to brush off his question. "Are you okay?"

I decided to believe him. My dad and our complicated past wasn't a secret. I just felt more than a little raw, which made it hard to be vulnerable to anyone. Let alone Charlie English.

"I saw my dad today. We met for coffee."

He stilled, his eyes turning into lasers as he moved his gaze over my face and body, absorbing my words and emotions and who knew what else. "Fuck, Ada, that's a big day."

My chin wobbled, but I held my emotions in check. "Adleigh was there too, so it wasn't like . . . just us. But yeah, we met for coffee. It was weird. And awkward. And . . . apparently, he has a son in Oklahoma who's going to be a senior in high school."

Charlie's frown was its own world of emotions. "Really? A half brother? Did you know anything about him before today?"

I shook my head. "Nope."

He put his glass down and stepped over to me, pulling me into a tight hug. I let it happen, unable to resist the warmth and comfort of his arms around me. My brain struggled to make sense of the sheer force of nature that was Charlie's empathy. It filled up the room and pushed at the seams of everything I knew about the universe and life and people. It swallowed me whole.

It wasn't just a cursory compassion. It was his heart opening up and absorbing all my feelings and hurt and heartbreak. He didn't just relate to me, he got down into the dirt and muck of my pain and felt it with me.

It was too much. Too intense. Too consuming.

I wanted to push him away and kick him out of my apartment, out of my life. Maybe out of this city. Because he didn't give it away in half measures. He poured it out in a way that cracked my brain as it struggled to process and

catch up.

But at the same time, it was a healing balm that soothed and whispered restoration over my old scars and still-broken pieces. It was life in all the places that seemed dead and barren in my heart. It was hope when I could only feel despair. It was something I couldn't name because it was only just blooming, only growing tiny baby roots that were still fragile and young.

"Are you excited about a brother? Neutral? Mad?" he asked in a gentle voice.

"I don't think I know how to feel yet," I told him honestly. "All of those things maybe? He seems to have an actual relationship with Briggs—that's his name. My, uh, brother's name. So maybe we could also add jealous? And a fresh wave of heartache I didn't know to expect."

Charlie laughed at my sarcastic tone. "Do you ever wonder why things are so hard for you when everyone else seems to have a perfectly normal existence?"

I pulled back a little, surprised at his question. "All the fucking time."

His smile was small and careful but still sincere. "That's a lie, Ada. Nobody has a normal experience. Everyone is carrying hurt and hardships. We just don't get to see it because most people don't like to advertise the things that wound them the most."

My heart twinged with a sharp pain, but it was hard to say where it was coming from. "So you're saying to get over my dad?"

He shook his head. "No, I'm saying the jealousy is unfounded. Your brother might have gotten the dad you didn't, but he isn't without his own baggage. And your dad might have grown up at a later point in his life and been able to have a good relationship with his son, but he still has plenty of regrets. So many, I bet it's hard to look at himself in the mirror."

I collapsed back into the hug, practically melting into him. "How do you know?"

"Because he left you, Ada. And speaking from experience, that's about the stupidest fucking thing anyone could ever do."

The hug suddenly felt like we'd crossed an invisible boundary I'd forgotten was off-limits. We'd been talking about my dad, but now that he'd shoved our relationship into the light, I wasn't sure what to do or say or where to put my hands.

I'd promised myself a long time ago that I wouldn't broach this subject with Charlie. It was sometime after he'd brought some date into the bar when

he knew I was on shift and before I'd fully decided he was a piece of worthless man trash I refused to waste tears on. But now it was here, out in the open, and I was too emotionally exhausted to put up much of a fight.

Plus, he'd brought me chips and salsa and told me it was okay to be emotional.

"Why did things end with us, Charlie? I mean, I get that we weren't dating. But you know, I'm a smart girl. You could have told me you weren't interested."

He flinched, apparently as surprised by my honesty as I was. I pulled away before he could and started pulling out tacos to see what he'd picked out.

I'd gotten three bites into a carne asada and cotija one before he said, "I was a fucking idiot back then, Ada. Honestly, I did you a favor."

I snorted around the taco. "Oh, I see. This is one of those 'it's not me, it's you' conversations? Honestly, Charlie, give me a little more credit than that."

He sat on a barstool and pulled a couple of tacos over in front of himself. "It's true, though." At my bug-eyed expression, he laughed. "Ada, I was into so much bad shit back then. Drugs, partying, girls. I was a fucking mess. And then you showed up. I liked you immediately, so I went after you. I had no impulse control back then. I saw something I wanted, I took it. Or I did it. Or I snorted it. Whatever. But then you weren't just this fling. You were serious. And you were good for the bar. And my siblings liked you. And before I could disentangle myself from the mess I'd made, I realized I liked you. Like actually liked you." He cleared his throat. "And that was the kiss of death for me."

I struggled to process everything he was saying. I knew he messed around with drugs, but I didn't know he was doing a lot of them. I knew he didn't have great impulse control, but I didn't know . . . I didn't know it had been that bad.

He let out a slow, measured breath. "When I was a younger man," he said this with a slight twist of his mouth, "I thought I was cursed. Or the things I loved were cursed. Everything I seemed to want or like or pursue withered. Looking back, it was likely the substance abuse. But at the time, it felt like it was me. And there you were bright and shiny and so fucking perfect. I liked you, Ada. I mean, I really liked you. But you were so good for the bar. You were too good for me. I'd just lost my dad, and Will and Eliza were already so disappointed in me . . . I couldn't be the reason you left. I couldn't be the

reason the bar failed. And things were so fragile at the beginning that it felt like if we lost you, we would lose the bar.”

My heart twisted into a knot. Now I was the one bursting with empathy. “Charlie, I didn’t know things were so bad for you back then.”

He shrugged. “I was stupid.”

“You were hurting.”

He gave me a look. “I was numbing.” I opened my mouth to push more empathy his way, but he continued. “I was in pain and uncomfortable, and I didn’t like feeling either, so I reached for the closest thing I could find that would make me forget. But it only made me a shittier person.”

“You weren’t a shitty person, Charlie. I never thought that about you. Not really. I was mad. My ego was bruised. But I’ve never thought you were a bad person.”

One side of his mouth attempted a smile but didn’t quite manage. “What I mean is, numbing only made the pain worse, only exasperated the trauma. You know? Whether it was drugs or girls or self-sabotage, the best I could ever manage was a temporary distraction. But the pain was still waiting for me.” He sucked in a deep breath. “Always waiting for me.”

We were quiet for a few moments as we thought about the past. For the first time ever, I realized Charlie and I weren’t so different. We just dealt with pain in opposite ways. Charlie pushed his away. Or had pushed his away. And I’d crashed into mine. He’d tried to delay feeling uncomfortable. And I’d wrapped my trauma so tightly around myself I wasn’t sure if I’d ever be able to trust anyone again. At least not fully. Both of us were doing it poorly. And both of us were doing it the best way we knew how.

I wished he didn’t have to go through what he did. But I also wished the same for myself. And maybe on paper, my way looked like the better way, but it still hurt. It still delayed healing. It still made me broken.

“So what changed?” I asked.

“How do you know anything has changed?” he asked, finally smiling. But it was sly, mischievous . . . dangerous.

“I don’t see you numbing anymore. I mean, I feel like you’ve been away from drugs for a while now. At least the harder ones. And I know you still drink, but . . . but not like you used to. And there have been girls, but not like, um, not since . . .”

“Not since the thing with Will. Yeah, that was a wake-up call.” He cleared his throat. “I didn’t mean to hurt him. I just . . . I wasn’t thinking

about him. Or even her. I was just thinking about me. That's probably the first time I realized how selfish I'd gotten." He laughed, but it was sad, pained. "A side effect of running away from all the real shit in your life is you stop being able to recognize real shit until it's too late. I'd become this self-gratifying, greedy, entitled creature. I didn't even notice my brother and sister were also in pain, also grieving. And if I did notice, I didn't care. I was an asshole to my mom. To you. To the only people who ever cared about me." He ran a hand through his hair, and for the first time, I noticed his eyes were glossy. There was a sudden lump in my throat I couldn't push down.

"Charlie," I whispered, wanting to weep for him.

"You know, I was a bottom-feeder for so long, I started to believe I belonged there. So I pushed everyone away who actually loved me until they believed it too. Then I was finally right. Everyone I loved believed I was a failure just like I wanted them to, and I was dumb enough to expect that to feel good. Imagine my surprise when I realized it didn't. It somehow felt worse than all the other shit."

"Is that when you started to change?" I brushed away the wayward tears. Crying by myself was one thing but showing emotions in front of Charlie was unforgivable.

He shook his head. "No. No, it was too late for me by then. I'd been doing things wrong for so long it was all I knew how to do. Also, when you teach yourself to be miserable, it's hard to want to be anything else." He shrugged and looked past me, as if he could see his former self behaving badly over my shoulder. "I believed the narrative that I didn't deserve anything good and if I tried for something good or touched something good, it would turn to ash because I was nearby. I didn't know how to trust anything differently. I didn't know how to fix my mindset. I didn't know how to move into a healthier headspace. That's when I met Steve."

"Oh, your friend."

My tone must have revealed my suspicions about Steve because he laughed again. "He's not who you think he is. He's actually been mentoring me for a while now. We met at a support group. Kind of like AA, but it's for people who aren't necessarily addicts. I wasn't addicted to anything but misery. And I needed help rewiring my brain. So it's like a group thing. We met twice a week and shared our struggles and the false things we believed about ourselves. There was a facilitator. And then they offered a mentorship program."

“Is it like group therapy?”

His cheeks flushed red, but he nodded. “Yeah, group therapy. The head guy is a therapist. He specializes in helping men be men.” He realized what he’d said and cleared his throat nervously. “I don’t mean to be chauvinistic or whatever. More like the opposite. He works with men specifically about male problems. Work stress, learning to communicate, uh, learning to shed a lot of the toxic masculinity we’ve been fed and just be comfortable in our own skin. Or whatever. Anyway, I signed up for the mentorship program because I wanted to deal with some deeper issues outside of group. And that’s when I met Steve.”

“Oh.”

“He’s really a great guy. He’s older than we are. I think older than my dad would have been. He’s in his mid-sixties. His family is grown and spread out all over. But he has a similar story to mine. Tough dad and a lot of bad mistakes in his twenties and thirties. Anyway, he has a lot of good advice. And he’s helped me pinpoint a lot of my problematic thinking. And especially coping mechanisms I reach for when I feel uncomfortable.” He fiddled with the nearest napkin, folding it into a football. “He’s been there in other ways too. He’s helped me figure out finances, for instance. And keep a budget. He showed me how to change the oil in my car. You know, stuff my dad should have done but didn’t think I was smart enough to figure out.”

I pressed my lips together, finding it harder and harder not to throw myself across the island and wrap my arms around him.

“Will likes to be the martyr when it comes to our dad, you know? And I’m not saying Will didn’t have it bad. My dad was a real piece of work. But he believed in Will in a way he didn’t with me. He, uh, he knew Will was capable, so he’d throw all kinds of shit at him because he knew Will would just fucking do it. But with me . . . well, I was always the fuck-up. The one he couldn’t trust because he knew I’d ruin it. Or break it. And then he’d have to pay to have it, whatever it was, fixed.” He cleared his throat again. “So yeah, somewhere along the way, I just started believing him. Anyway, Steve has helped me rethink some of those things.” He smiled and met my eyes for the first time in a long time. “You know, one of the first times we ever hung out, I told him I’d started an antidepressant, and I couldn’t remember to take it. Like I was always forgetting. And I felt so stupid because I knew it would help, but I just couldn’t remember to take it. And Steve goes, ‘Charlie, that’s ridiculous. Of course you can remember to take it. It’s just a pill. Set an alarm

on your phone or something. But don't quit for no reason.'" His smile widened. It was so bright. So real. So heartfelt. "It was the first time anyone had ever made doing something sound so simple. I was so used to people talking to me like I was dumb, I had never . . . I hadn't realized . . . anyway, he was right. Taking a pill is pretty simple. I never even had to set an alarm. I just had to believe I could do it."

"You've literally just blown my mind," I told him. There was more. There was so much more that I wanted to say, but I didn't know how to put everything into words. Because for as many words as I wanted to say, there were even more emotions.

I was one of those people who had been condescending. I was one of those people who was supposed to care about him but treated him like he couldn't do anything. And God, I hated myself for it.

"It's not anything to be impressed with," he said simply. "It was a lot of work on my part. But it had to be done. I couldn't stay that person. I owed it to the people I love. I owed it to myself." He met my watery gaze. "I need me to be a better person for me, you know? I'm not saying being happy is the be-all and end-all. But I am saying it's kind of up to us. Our circumstances can suck, the people supposed to love us can fail us, and we might be dealt a bad hand. But we have the ability to choose being and staying healthy in every situation. And when I'm healthy, I can also choose happy. Just like misery is a choice, so is happiness."

The truth of what he was saying punched me in the gut. It was so pure, so . . . contrary to everything I believed, I almost couldn't accept it. So instead, I asked, "Are you still on an antidepressant?"

He shook his head. "Not anymore. I weaned off it about a year ago. But I'm glad I know it's available. I'm glad I have the option. I know what to look for now. I know the signs. You know, I just said we get to choose happiness. But also, I want to acknowledge that there are moments in our life when we need help getting to that point. And that's what the prescription was for me. Just a little help until I could do it on my own."

Gosh, he sounded so different from the man I had let charm me into bed all those years ago. I saw what he confessed. I knew he had been selfish back then. But I'd been naive enough not to care. Not to think it mattered. After all, my expectations of myself—*of men*—were low as well.

"Ada," he said slowly, tenderly.

I pulled myself out of the past and met his intense gaze. "Yeah?"

“I’m sorry I was an asshole. I’m sorry I thought I had to push you away to keep from hurting you. I’m sorry I hurt you at all.”

The lump in my throat was back. But there was action in my bones. I couldn’t not touch him right now. I couldn’t let him go on thinking he was the only person to blame for the hurt that built between us.

I crossed the small kitchen and grabbed his face between my hands, holding him steady so I could stare into the fathomlessness of his green eyes. “I’m sorry I hurt you too. Maybe not at first, but definitely once I’d decided I didn’t like you. I was awful. I was one of those people who didn’t believe in you and let you know it. And I hate myself for it. I hate that I hurt you. Please forgive me.”

I’d smooshed his face between my hands, but he managed a wonky smile. Realizing how tight my grip was, I gave him some breathing room.

“I forgive you,” he said.

“I forgive you too,” I promised.

There was a heavy, intense, soul-splitting moment when we looked each other straight in the eye and let the wounds from our past fall away. We were starting fresh. We were starting over. We were starting with truth and compassion and empathy.

“I’m glad it didn’t work out between us, though,” he said when I finally pulled my hands away.

He snatched my wrists before I could retreat to my corner of the island and tugged me against his chest. Then he wrapped my arms around his waist and held my wrists behind his back, grinning down at me.

“Really?”

“Oh, for sure,” he confirmed. “I would have definitely fucked up pretty quickly, you would have quit the bar in a flurry of rage and revenge, and we would never have become friends. The bar would have absolutely failed by now without you to rein us in. And I would probably be homeless and living out of a box somewhere.”

I snorted. “That’s grim, English.”

“But true.”

“I do like the part where you give me all the credit for the bar's success.”

He grinned, and it was his true Charlie smile with all that double portion of charm and sexiness. “What else do you like, Ada? I’m happy to oblige.”

Butterflies gathered together in my stomach and launched themselves upward, fluttering, flapping, free-falling. “I like that you got me the loft,” I

told him sincerely.

“Mm, what else?”

“And that you brought me tacos. And chips and salsa. I really like that.”

He nodded seriously. “And the margaritas.”

“For sure. But chips and salsa are my favorite.”

“I know.” At my curious expression, he added, “It comes up in conversation more than a normal amount.”

A surprise laugh bubbled out of me. “That’s not true. It’s a normal amount of chips and salsa conversation.”

“Ada, you bring it up a lot. I mean, on a busy night? We’re talking one hundred chips and salsa conversations. At least. The whole city of Durham knows it’s your favorite food by now. When they talk about Craft, they mention the good drinks and that one server obsessed with chips and salsa.”

I shook with laughter. “You’re full of it.”

He glanced over at the island. The chips and salsa were gone. He poured his heart out. I ate my weight in chips and salsa. It was fine. Everything was fine.

“I’m a nervous eater,” I said, struggling to stop laughing.

“You’re not a nervous anything. You kick the shit out of anything that makes you nervous.”

“Yeah, like those chips and salsa. I was nervous for you, so I got in the ring and won.”

He tipped his head back and laughed. His chest vibrated with the sound. I got a lovely view of his tan throat. I wanted to bite it. And then suck on it.

“That you did.” He dropped his head closer to mine. His lips were just a breath away. His body so warm.

“I’m glad you came over.” I pressed against him as close as I could get. He was so tall. And I was so, so short.

“Why’s that?”

I tipped my head back so I could look into his eyes, then licked my lips. His gaze tracked the movement. “Because I can’t reach the top shelf of my cabinets.” I stepped back. “I’ll grab some boxes and packing paper. Also the top of the pantry. And my closet.”

His amused laughter chased me through the house as I hurried to find him moving supplies.

thirteen

“YOU HAVE A SURPRISING AMOUNT OF SHIT,” Adleigh whined as I set a box full of books in her arms. The box was small, so it was deceptively heavy. Her whole body drooped dramatically as the weight settled in her hands. “Oof.”

I smiled encouragingly at her. “You’re the reason I’m moving, so buck up, buttercup.”

She moved toward the door. “You can’t hold that against me forever!”

“Yes, I can!”

When she stepped out of the apartment, her massive boyfriend, Shane, stepped in. “Point me to the heavy stuff.”

I grinned at him. “Have I told you lately what a great couple you and Ad make?”

“Just today,” he said, laughing. “And about three hundred times since we got here.”

“Who knew basketball players were so useful?”

He scowled. “Me. I knew.”

“Okay, well, maybe start with the kitchen stuff? Those boxes are pretty heavy. Also, there’s a lot of books. I’m kind of a hoarder.”

He mumbled a response, but I was already moving to check on Eliza. She was in my bedroom, making sense of my closet. “You really just want to move all these clothes on hangers? Just like this?”

I explained, “I was tired of buying boxes. I think it will be easy since we’re not going far.”

She stared at my still-unpacked closet. “Should we put them in the back of my car and drive them? I can’t decide what will be easier.” She collapsed

on the edge of my bed. “Too bad Will doesn’t have an elevator. Think we can devise a pulley system up to the apartment? Like at a dry cleaner?”

“Worth a shot. No idea is a bad idea.”

She blinked at me. “Is that really the phrase? There are terrible ideas all the time. Like really, really bad ideas.” She turned back to my closet. “Cannibalism, for one. Swimming with sharks. Baseball.”

“Baseball?”

“Literally the worst idea.”

“Playing it or watching it?”

She made a sound in the back of her throat. “Ugh, both.”

“Okay, weirdo.”

“Well, I guess I’ll start moving these across the street. But if you lose something to the wind, don’t blame me.”

“I’ll help you. But I don’t have the key yet, so just hang tight for a second. Will should be here any minute.”

“Oh, I forgot to mention, Will’s not coming. Lola wasn’t feeling well this morning. Charlie ran over to grab it from their new place.”

“That’s way out of Charlie’s way,” I said. “Isn’t Jonah helping? I should have had him grab it.”

“Charlie wanted to,” she insisted. “He volunteered.”

“Oh.”

“Uncharacteristically nice of him, right?”

“I don’t know, feels pretty characteristically nice of him.”

Her face screwed up. “What?”

I shrugged. There were so many things I wanted to say and ways I wanted to defend him. He hadn’t just helped pack up the top-shelf stuff Sunday evening. He’d come back Monday during the day too. And Wednesday before work. Then he was here all day yesterday helping me finish labeling and taping boxes. He’d hung out so long, he ended up being late to Craft because he’d had to run home and shower and change.

He’d helped so much, that I told him to take today off since I had recruited everyone from the bar plus my sister and Shane to help. And my dad was supposed to be here any minute. There were plenty of hands for my surprisingly large amount of stuff. He deserved a break.

Besides, I hoped it would go fast because most of these people had to work tonight.

“I don’t know, it’s just that he’s usually helpful. He doesn’t get enough

credit for how quickly he drops everything to help out.”

Her eyes bugged. “Are we talking about the same Charlie?”

“Eliza, seriously, when’s the last time he refused to help you? He’s usually the first to volunteer.”

She thought about it for a minute and bobbed her head back and forth. “Okay, maybe you make a fair point. He has a bad rap because he’s, uh, an idiot. But you’re right. He’s always willing to pitch in.”

Satisfied with her change of heart, I started moving toward the door. “He’s not an idiot either, by the way.”

I didn’t stick around for her response. Out in the living room, Jonah had just arrived and so had Miles and Case, who was carrying a box of donuts in one hand and a massive energy drink in the other.

“I brought sustenance,” Case said with a grin. He set the donuts on the island and flipped the lid. “These are good. You’re going to love them.”

They looked good, but I was more than a little stressed trying to organize everyone. Okay, that was a lie. I was a lot stressed because my dad had promised to come, he’d even texted yesterday to confirm the time and address, and I didn’t know what to do.

Was it going to be awkward with my friends? With Charlie?

Why would it be awkward with Charlie? It didn’t matter either way because it was guaranteed to be awkward. And that was my cross to bear.

“You’re a saint, Case.” Miles grabbed one immediately.

I eyed the donuts and wished I felt up to eating one. They did look good. Plus, trust a chef to know his donuts. “Hey, when you guys finish those, do you want to start on the couch? It’s going to be a beast to move.”

Miles saluted me, and Case responded in the affirmative. We were going to look like a sitcom today as we moved all my worldly possessions down half the block and across the street. But it was pointless to drive it over, especially with the high-maintenance downtown parking situation.

Adleigh walked back into the apartment. “I set the box at the top of the stairs. I’ll move it when the key arrives and we can actually go inside. Hope no one steals it.” She seemed to think about that before she said, “Actually, I hope they do. It would be fun to watch someone try to run away with a ridiculously heavy library of books.”

I put another manageable box in her hands. “Hey, have you heard from Dad?” she asked in a low voice.

My phone was in my pocket, but I’d turned the ringer on because so

many people were coming and going today. “No, I haven’t.”

She pressed her lips together. “That’s strange. Didn’t he say he was going to stop by?”

“Yes,” I said evenly, holding back my thoughts on the matter. “But it’s still early. Maybe he wanted to sleep in.”

“That’s fair.” She left with another deceptively small box.

Jonah finished his donut and went to find Eliza before he got down to business. When he emerged from the bedroom, his shirt was slightly disheveled, and his hair mussed. I tried not to think about them making out on my bed.

Charlie walked in a few minutes later, dangling the keys from the tip of his finger. Our gazes locked as soon as he stepped into the apartment, and I couldn’t help the warm, squishy feeling he brought with him.

“I think these belong to you,” he said in a rumbling murmur.

“Eliza said you had to go all the way to Will’s new place. Sorry about that. It was so far out of your way.”

He took a step closer to me. “It wasn’t that bad. Besides, moving day is kind of pointless if you can’t move your stuff into the new place, right?”

I snatched the keys from his hand, and he somehow managed to entwine our fingers and hold mine aloft.

“You’re right about that.” I was all smiles this close to him. Head-to-toe smiles. Smiles in my eyes. Smiles in my mouth. Smiles in my freaking hair. “Well, thank you. I appreciate your participation.”

His expression turned wicked. “Anytime.”

“Good to know.”

He stepped closer. “Just call me. I’ll be there.”

“I’m for real going to. The loft has high ceilings. And cabinets. I can’t reach everything.”

“I hope you do.”

A throat cleared behind us, and I realized we were just a breath away from each other. We jumped apart like we were made of live wires.

“You guys okay?” Jonah asked suspiciously.

“Never better,” Charlie replied easily.

Eliza popped her head out of the bedroom. “Charlie, can you—?” She saw us standing there like we’d been caught in something torrid, and her face screwed up in confusion. “You guys okay?”

“What?” I gasped, breathless for two different reasons. One was Charlie.

The other was everyone watching us. “Oh, we’re not—”

“Excuse me,” Miles said as he moved around me, trying to get to a box behind me.

“Oh sorry,” Charlie and I mumbled at the same time as we were jostled apart again.

Probably for the best.

Now that all the guys were here, things started moving quickly. I handed the keys off to Eliza. Shane, Miles, Case, Jonah, and Charlie started moving the heavy furniture while Eliza, Adleigh, and I came behind them with the smaller, more manageable items. It wasn’t because we were weaker, obviously. It was because we didn’t want to deal with awkward corners and dodging cars across the street.

Plus, someone had to give the men directions.

We stopped for lunch a couple hours later when the pizza arrived. I had promised beer and was happy to run up the street to a nearby liquor store, but Eliza and Charlie grabbed it from the cooler in the bar.

Everyone had gathered in the loft. The furniture had been set down randomly, and other than my bed, nothing was put together or organized. Then all my friends grabbed paper plates stacked with pizza and sat on any available surface, making the very chaotic space even messier. I loved it.

I loved having these people in my new home. I loved feeding and taking care of people I loved. I loved feeling loved. Moving people was an irritating business, but nobody complained or mutinied. My heart was bursting with their generous support.

Adleigh plopped down next to me on the loveseat currently pushed against the foot of my bed. “Anything from Dad yet?”

I balanced my beer on the low windowsill next to me and reached for my phone tucked into the pocket of my biker shorts. I’d missed several texts, but his wasn’t one of them.

“Nope. You?”

“No.” She sighed. “I texted him two hours ago to let him know we would be back and forth between the two places. Just in case he showed up and couldn’t find anybody. But he never texted back. I hope he’s okay.”

My heart pinched with foreboding. I felt justified in keeping my expectations low. But the need to protect Adleigh was too strong to push away. “You know what? Who even likes to move other people, right? It’s the worst. And he’s old. He probably didn’t want to tweak his back.”

She snickered. “He’s not that old.”

“Oh my gosh, he’s so old,” I argued. “And feeble. We probably dodged some hospital bills.”

“You’re crazy,” she said, but she was laughing.

I bumped her shoulder with mine. “It’s one day. Don’t make a big deal of it. We’re having fun regardless.”

She brushed her hands over her dusty shorts. “This is fun to you?”

I gestured at the beautiful, open, modern, lovely place of my dreams. “I live here now, Ad. I live here.”

“I definitely said yes to Shane too soon.”

“No way. He loves you. You guys could be living on the streets and be happy. That’s better than a perfect floor plan and a thirty-second work commute.”

“Yeah, you sound really convinced about that.”

It was my turn to snicker. “Well, maybe I’ll change my mind when I fall in love.”

“Who’s falling in love?” Eliza asked from a stool near the sink.

“Ada,” Adleigh declared, grinning. “And apparently, he’s homeless.”

Everyone turned to stare at me. It was so out of context and so absolutely ridiculous, I expected everyone to start laughing. Instead, it was like I could hear them blinking, trying to figure out which homeless guy who lived nearby had stolen my heart.

“She’s joking,” I told them.

“It’s cool, Ada,” Eliza teased, finally relaxing a little. “Don’t be shy. We want to know which guy is good enough to get not just a second date but a lot of dates.”

“I go on second dates.” But I sounded too defensive for anyone to believe me. So I backed off and dropped it completely. *LIES*. I doubled down. “Sometimes I even go on third dates. And fourth dates.”

“You’re a liar!” Eliza accused, standing up and pointing at me.

Adleigh fell backward on the couch in laughter.

Traitors. The both of them.

Eliza slammed her palms on the counter. “The last guy you went out with got drunk and puked all over your shoes. You sent him home in an Uber.”

I jumped to my feet, gasping. “How dare you, Eliza English!”

The boys in the room watched us shout at each other like they had front-row tickets to a cage match. All of them were too stunned or too smart to

react visibly or audibly. Meanwhile, Adleigh cackled, and Eliza gloated. And I contemplated throwing myself out the nearest window.

The need to defend myself was stronger than ever. I looked at the men around the room, collected my dignity, and said, “Don’t listen to her. I have a very robust dating life.”

Adleigh choked on her pizza. Eliza trembled with laughter.

I decided to get new friends. And sisters. And move states. Eff these bitches.

Miles raised his hand like he was in school. I nodded regally for him to ask his question like I was the queen attending her court.

“What does it mean to have a robust dating life?” To his credit, he kept a straight face.

Shane followed Adleigh’s example and choked on his pizza.

Before I could come up with an answer to maintain my cool factor while also not turning me into a giant skank, Case turned to Miles and said, “Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answers to.”

Which was a direct quote of something I said all the time. Now I was going to have to strangle all of them.

Wasn’t I just bursting with love and adoration for these people? Hadn’t I just felt so unbelievably thankful for them and for their presence in my life?

Bastards. Every last one.

I had only one way to leave this conversation with my dignity intact. Bravado. Heaps and heaps and heaps of false bravado. “Aren’t you single, Miles? Why don’t you ask me out and find out for yourself.”

It was Jonah who choked on pizza this time.

Before Miles could close his hanging-open mouth and come up with a response, Charlie answered for him. “Nope. No. No, he’s not.”

Not the shocked gazes swiveling to Charlie. Who was less amused than the rest of us.

“What?” I asked, laughing nervously.

“Miles isn’t single,” he said gruffly. He glared at Miles, like this was his fault.

“Who are you dating?”

Miles’s face turned bright pink. “Nobody.”

Charlie glared at him.

“Uh, Ally, actually.” Miles cleared his throat and tugged on the collar of his T-shirt. “Well, we’ve been on one date.” He glared back at Charlie.

“Thanks a lot, man.”

My brain was slower to understand. “Wait, Ally, the new server? You’re dating *that* Ally?”

He looked so embarrassed, I was afraid he would be the one to throw himself out the window. “Well, I, uh, I took her home that one time.”

As if that explained everything.

“Oh.”

“I didn’t want to say anything because . . .”

“Because he knew you’d be pissed,” Case filled in for him.

“Because it’s new,” Miles bit out. “Because we’ve only been on one date, and I’m not even sure how it went. Uh, from her perspective or whatever.”

Well, this conversation had gotten wildly out of control. I didn’t want to know about Miles’s dating life. More than that, I didn’t want Miles to feel like he had to spill his guts in front of a room full of people, only half of whom he actually knew.

“It’s cool, Miles,” I said quickly. Because honestly, I didn’t care if Miles dated another server. That was Eliza’s department. I was just tired of our owners running all potential employees off. “She’s sweet. I hope it works out.”

He visibly relaxed. “Are you serious?”

Eliza echoed, “Are you serious?”

“What?”

Case was the one who stood up, though, clearly impassioned by my lack of fury. “You’re forever yelling about not dating new waitresses. You can’t honestly be sanctioning this.”

I wanted to say that I didn’t have a problem with Miles or even Case asking the servers out. I had a problem with Charlie dating everything that had legs and then blowing it up in the worst possible way. But I’d recently had a change of heart about Charlie, so I couldn’t say that.

Instead, I went with, “Don’t be an asshole. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Who are you, and what have you done with Ada Kelly?” Jonah demanded.

I pointed a finger at him. “Hey, I was your biggest fan, so you better watch it.”

He held up his hands in surrender. “Fair enough.”

“Well, now that we’ve determined that Ada’s been body-snatched, let’s

get back to it so we can all get to work on time tonight to watch the Miles/Ally drama unfold,” Eliza said cheerily.

“There’s not much left,” I assured them, deciding that moving on was the best idea.

Paper plates were thrown away in a trash bag near the door, and I handed Adleigh the keys to my old apartment so I could stay behind and put the pizza away before joining them.

Everyone filed out of the apartment fueled by pizza and craft beer, and I took a minute to breathe in the quiet solitude of my new place without anyone being in it.

“You would have been immediately irritated with Miles,” Charlie said from behind me.

“Holy shit!” I growled, whirling around and brandishing the greasy fork in my hand at Charlie. *Who was notably silent during that whole dating conversation.*

Charlie spared it a confused glance. “Awfully jumpy for a black belt, Kelly.”

I snorted a laugh. “Hardly a black belt, English. And you keep sneaking up on me. What do you expect?”

“That you could hear you’re not alone?” he said, moving closer. “A little situational awareness, perhaps? Maybe solid peripheral vision?”

“Maybe you should announce your presence,” I countered, then started looking around for something to put the pizza leftovers in. Only I hadn’t unpacked anything yet, so there wasn’t anything to find.

Charlie started consolidating the leftovers into one box. “Sorry if you’re disappointed about Miles.”

“Oh God, no. I was just joking around. I would never.”

“What?”

“He’s like five years younger than I am, Charlie. Also, we’re friends, but that’s it. Please give me some credit.”

“Oh.”

“Not that he isn’t a nice guy. I’m just . . . listen, the last guy I went out with literally threw up in the bushes—not on my shoes—and went home alone in the Uber because he’d accidentally gotten drunk at a whiskey tasting, trying to impress me. Since then, I’ve gotten excessively picky when it comes to dating. I never want to relive that ever again.”

Charlie countered with, “I don’t think Miles would do that.”

“Literally only one person on the planet would do that, and I ended up on a date with him. So I don’t exactly have the best luck. Know what I mean?” I bumped his shoulder playfully. “Besides, I tried dating guys from the bar, and it didn’t work out for me.”

He bumped my shoulder back. “Well, maybe we should try it again. See if the second time’s a charm.”

I looked over at him, turning my head sharply. “Excuse me?”

He reached over and tucked one of my shorter flyaways behind my ear. His fingers lingered against the curve of my jaw. His calloused hand was rough against the softness of my skin.

My heart jumped into a sprint, pounding against my chest as if it could beat down the door and escape. His head dipped. I licked suddenly dry lips. I wanted to rock onto my tiptoes and meet him halfway. I wanted to wrap my arms around his neck and pull him toward me.

I wanted this kiss more than I wanted my next breath.

“Ada—”

“I’m going to use this bathroom,” Adleigh announced, breezing into the apartment. “The other ones are ocupado.”

Son of a bitch.

Charlie and I jumped apart again, but I wasn’t sure Adleigh noticed us. Eliza was next through the door with a handful of clothes on hangers and a whole bunch of shoes tucked beneath her arms.

I took the opportunity to abandon the pizza and run.

fourteen

I WAS OFFICIALLY MOVED in by midafternoon. I'd taken the night off work again to unpack and organize. Well, Eliza had offered it a few days back, and I'd gratefully taken her up on it.

Everyone had been exhausted but still friendly by the end of the day, and I'd promised them all kidneys should they ever need a transplant. Hopefully no one did, as I really only had the one to spare.

I still had to turn in my keys at the other apartment, but I didn't have to do that until Monday. Tomorrow, Adleigh and I would go back and scrub it from baseboard to ceiling fan.

Once everyone left, I'd faceplanted on my freshly made bed—Eliza had insisted on making it the second it was moved in—and slept for three hours. The sounds of the bar down below awakened me.

It had started as a dull murmur, but as the night dragged on, the background sound increased to a steady roar. Especially if I had the windows open, like tonight, the sound funneled directly into my space. No wonder Will and Lola had to move before the baby arrived.

It didn't really bother me. Most nights I'd be down there working, so the noise wouldn't be a problem. Or at least, I'd be submerged in the middle of it.

Even now, though, I didn't mind it. At least in this honeymoon phase of loving my new place. Honestly, the Saturday night buzz was comforting and familiar to me. I lived and breathed the nightlife, so it wasn't a disappointment. If anything, I felt more at home in my new apartment than I did in my last one. Peace out, Eff Tits.

I heated leftover pizza—that Charlie had graciously put into my nearly

empty refrigerator, box and all—on a paper plate, sat down on my couch, and surveyed the room, trying to figure out what to put where.

There was so much to do. Packing everything up had taken me a solid week and a half, and I'd had help. Now that I was settled, I wanted to be settled in too.

The floor-to-ceiling windows let in the most golden light in the afternoon, but now it was all starlight and downtown vibes. The walls were exposed brick except in the kitchen, where drywall had been installed and painted the coolest peacock blue. The backsplash was white subway tiles. The cabinets were a paler shade of blue with glass fronts. And the kitchen island was speckled white granite. My bed, nightstand, dresser, and leather ottoman were arranged in one corner to make a bedroom. And my desk, bookshelves, yoga mat, and weights were in another. A luxurious bathroom was between the office side of the house and the kitchen. The final corner was left for my living room area.

Even though it was a studio, there was way more square footage than in my last apartment. My few things felt minuscule in the large, open space with its high vaulted ceilings. I smiled to myself, enjoying soaking up that this was where my life had brought me.

Things weren't easy or smooth, but I had worked hard. My life had produced good, beautiful things. Yes, hard things too. Traumatic things. Things I was still healing from. But also, these days of mine had turned into a gorgeous, full, happy life. And sitting on my couch with a plate of cheap pizza and the lively sounds of the place I loved so much keeping me company, I was bursting with gratitude.

My phone pinged with an incoming text. It was my dad.

Chris: *Sorry, baby girl. Got stuck at work. Let me know if you need help with anything else. Should be free tomorrow.*

Gah. Baby girl.

I genuinely hated that he called me baby girl. Thirty was just around the corner. I was a grown-ass woman with a job and a gorgeous new apartment. I didn't need the ghost of Dad past calling me by a cheap nickname he'd waited over twenty years to use.

He had no fucking right.

The text message was written before I could stop myself. *Please refrain from calling me baby girl. I am neither a baby nor a little girl. And I wouldn't have liked being called either even when I was those things.*

But before I could press send, Adleigh texted.

Adleigh: *I guess Dad got called into work today. Bummer. I really wanted him to meet Shane. I'm thinking about having everyone over here for supper. You in?*

I erased my original text to my dad and went a more neutral route.

Me to Chris: *No worries.*

Me to Adleigh: *Probably a blessing in disguise. We could be sitting at the ER instead of relaxing tonight. Do you want to be responsible for buying the man a new hip?*

Adleigh: *Supper next week?*

My heart pinched when she didn't respond to my attempt at a joke. But I also had to check my own attitude. I was already waiting for Chris to fail, which wasn't fair to Chris. Or Adleigh. Or me.

Something Charlie had shared the other day niggled at my hard wall of self-protection. And as I remembered the day and why I was so flush with gratitude, I had to acknowledge it was because I'd built a family I could count on and trust. I'd filled my life with people I cared about and who I knew cared about me too. And they showed up for me.

Today taught me that it was okay to count on people. They might not always get it right, and the people I loved the most would always have the potential to hurt me the most. But I didn't have to always do things myself.

So if Chris was going to be in my life? He needed to be someone I could count on.

He needed to be someone I could trust.

I took another bite of pizza and let myself make room for him in my brain. Obviously, these were big feelings for me, feelings I usually tried to protect and hide away. But we could work up to the more nuanced emotions over time. Today, I just decided to let him exist in my head without trying to push him away.

Was I disappointed he didn't show up today? Honestly, no. It would have added a layer of awkward to an already stressful day. Plus, I had plenty of other people to help out.

Was I disappointed that he'd volunteered to help and forced an expectation on me I hadn't asked for? Yes. Yes, I was.

But I was even more disappointed that he hadn't bothered to text until the evening. It seemed like he didn't think Adleigh and I deserved a considerate heads-up text or simple explanation. He'd assumed we were fine based on

zero evidence and acted in his best interest.

That only reinforced my belief that he only ever acted in his best interest, but I tried not to be too cynical about it. Because alas, this was only one tiny mistake. And I strongly believed people should be given room in relationships to make mistakes. It was going to happen. No one was perfect, blah, blah, blah.

But the disappointment still hurt. And Adleigh's disappointment was even harder to face.

I set my iPad up in the kitchen, turned on a Netflix binge, and unpacked the kitchen. Finding homes for dishes and pots and pans, silverware, organizing the knife drawer, and setting up my coffee bar was therapeutic. This kitchen had so much more room than my last one.

By the time I'd broken down the last kitchen box and stacked it in the middle of the floor on top of other empty boxes, it was well past two in the morning. I washed my hands in the sink and splashed water on my face because I felt covered head to toe in grime and cardboard dust.

The night had settled down. A few cars were on the street below, and distant voices and laughter could be heard as people walked down the street. But Craft and the other bars were closed by now.

I took a minute to soak in the quiet, the way even this bustling part of the city tucked itself into bed. There was a quiet humming from the refrigerator and a cricket somewhere outside.

Bolstered by my long nap, I decided to explore. The apartment came with keys to the bar, accessed by an adjacent staircase. I slid on some slides and grabbed my phone, then went to see if I could really get in without leaving the building.

Sure enough. It took me exactly thirty seconds to get from the top floor to the kitchen. The key worked. The alarm was directly to the right of the door—although it wasn't armed yet. And my commute to work was exactly—

AHHHHHHH!

"Ow!" Charlie yelled when he was hit in the head with a set of keys.

"Oh my God! Charlie! Stop creeping up on me."

I was bent in actual half, struggling to catch my breath. I'd been standing there like an idiot, and he'd popped his head out of the office like a serial killer. And then the keys—

"Oh crap! You're bleeding!"

"I'm what?" He patted his body until his hand came away wet and red.

The keys had sliced his temple right open. At least he'd had the foresight to duck from my attack. I'd been going for his eye.

He stared at the blood and swayed a little.

"You can't . . . you're . . . oh no!" I rushed to his side and grabbed his hand. "Come with me," I ordered. He listened, but he was increasingly pale, like the color was leaching out of him in waves.

I dragged him into the kitchen and pushed him against the sink, so the ledge supported his weight. I grabbed a handful of paper towels and turned on the hot and cold water until it was nice and warm.

"Charlie, I'm so sorry." I wetted a paper towel and held it against his temple, then I wet another one so I could clean his injury with soap. "I wasn't expecting to see you. I thought everyone had gone home."

"I was closing up," he said.

"I can see that." I grabbed his hand again and brought it up to his temple. "Here, hold this." He turned the exact pallor of a ghost. "Don't look at your fingers. Just hold the tissue against your head and don't look at it." He nodded weakly. "Gosh, I forgot about your thing with blood." Although I shouldn't have. We'd nearly come close to killing each other when he had appendicitis several months back. I'd had to practically drag him by the ear to the ER. He hadn't wanted to go because he had an irrational fear of seeing blood.

Not bleeding, mind you. Just seeing it.

He was planning on rolling the dice with his appendix if it meant he could avoid any risk of seeing blood.

I added a few pumps of soap to my wet paper towel, and then very carefully, so he couldn't see, tucked the bloody paper towel he was using to stanch the blood flow behind him.

It had mostly stopped bleeding by now, but the keys were dirty. It needed to be clean.

Leaning close so I could avoid getting soap in his eye, I very carefully dabbed the cut until I was satisfied he wouldn't get a staph infection. I went back in for another round because honestly, I couldn't be the reason Charlie ended up hospitalized, surrounded by his worst fear—spontaneous bleeding.

He would never forgive me.

I let out a shaky laugh when the reality of what had just happened hit me. "I'm so sorry," I said, trying not to laugh harder. "You came out of nowhere."

“I’m convinced you have no spatial awareness. It’s a miracle you haven’t been mugged before. They would probably take your purse, and you still wouldn’t notice anyone was around you.”

I was still laughing. “That’s not true. I’m not the problem. It’s you. You don’t make a sound when you walk. You’re like a declawed cat. You slink.”

“I do not slink.”

“You one hundred percent slink.” I pulled back to examine the wound again. “You’re probably a serial killer.”

“Hey, you literally almost killed me. With your keys. That makes you the killer, Ade.”

“In self-defense!”

“If I was actually sneaking up on you, you shouldn’t throw your keys at me. They’re your only weapon. I thought you were good at this shit?”

Usually, I was. “I don’t know, Charlie. Something about you just always catches me off guard.”

The air between us shifted with those words. I hadn’t meant them to be a pickup line, but they were somehow more charged than the rest of our conversation. More valuable. If the rest of my words were like paying with dollar bills. Those words were hundies.

“Is that so?”

I leaned across him and wet another paper towel, then tapped his chin with my free pointer finger. “I’m going to wipe your hand off. Keep your eyes up here, okay?”

He visibly swallowed. It might have had something to do with my voice finding some kind of soft, sexy tone. Like one you’d call an nine-hundred number to listen to if you were lonely some time.

“Okay,” he murmured, keeping his gaze on my face.

I was in the middle of giving him a flirty smile when I remembered I looked like hot trash. I’d been moving all day. I was covered in cardboard dust and debris. I wasn’t wearing makeup. And my hair had been tied back at one point today but had recently sprung free and was currently sticking up all over my head.

So maybe not the sexiest version of myself.

Picking up his hand, I wiped it clean of blood, paying attention to every finger in a very thorough way. His hands were rough and callused beneath mine. Strong and dexterous. It seemed each of his fingers was almost twice the length of mine.

I'd never paid attention to his hands this closely before. Honestly, I'd never paid attention to anyone's hands this closely before.

But something was surprisingly intimate about rubbing a wet paper towel down the insides of someone's fingers while you stood between their legs.

Blood was a tricky thing. It was hard to get off. But I didn't want to hurt him more than I already had, so I kept to my gentle ministrations until I was sure every drop of blood was gone.

He kept his gaze on my face, staring at me with an intensity that felt like it could burn.

We were so close I could smell him, so close I could feel him all over me. It wasn't that I was standing over him to inspect his injury. It was more that I had plastered my body against his.

But he felt unbelievably warm and strong and safe. And I wanted to wrap my entire body around his and let him hold me like this forever.

I shook my head. That was crazy. I was crazy.

We needed to move past this weird moment and find solid ground again.

"Your hands belong to a giant. I don't actually think they're yours. They're not human. They're something other."

"Something other?" he asked with a tone of amusement.

I grabbed his hand by the wrist and held it aloft. It flopped around because he wasn't taking this seriously, but I had a point to prove.

I put my palm against his and straightened my fingers so he was forced to lengthen his too. He was supposed to start making fun of me for how small my hand was compared to his now. Then I would chime in with Bigfoot jokes. We'd laugh, push each other away, then go back to being normal.

But that was not what happened.

He stared at our pressed together palms like they hid the secrets to the universe between them. His skin was so warm against mine. I could feel his pulse beating beneath his skin. I could feel him alive and warm and so fucking close.

"See?" I said, but it was breathless, barely a whisper. "You're not normal."

His laughter was a gentle vibration all over his body. "You think I'm the not normal one? You're miniature, Kelly." He shifted his hand and closed his fingers so we were now holding hands. "If there's a sizing issue here, it's not me."

I had an amazing comeback. Somewhere. My brain had accidentally

dropped it when we'd started holding hands, but if he would give me a sec, I could find it. Eventually. Maybe.

Then I made the ultimate mistake of looking into his eyes. They were so warm and green and inviting. They were clearly a trap. And I should obviously resist falling into them. Actually, I'd promised myself I'd never fall into them again. I'd learned a long time ago that once you fell into those eyes, it was very hard to pull yourself out.

But there I was in real time, breaking all the safeguards I'd put in place to protect my stupid heart.

His free hand wrapped around my back and tugged me against him. "I'm going to kiss you now, Ada."

I licked my lips. "Why are you warning me?"

His mouth kicked up in half a smile. "I didn't want to scare you and risk getting punched in the face or something."

I laughed, despite the moment. "I appreciate the heads-up, then."

"And you're not going to punch me? Or stab me with your keys?"

Shaking my head slowly, trying to find my wits somewhere in the messy piles of abandoned comebacks and broken promises, I said, "My keys are somewhere over there." Did I point or indicate which direction "over there" was? No. But Charlie wasn't exactly asking me to be specific. "And my punches are lethal. I don't unleash them in public places."

"I believe you." He dipped his head closer to mine. "What about your kisses? Are they lethal?"

"Why don't you find out?"

He leaned into the dare—literally. His lips pressed against mine as gently as possible. To the corner first, so that I couldn't even kiss him back. Then to the other corner. The dip of my top lip. The swell of my bottom. He kissed as if he were tasting me, remembering me through touch. He kissed as if he were memorizing the moment so he could remember it forever.

Finally, after he had me trembling and ready to cry for no reason, he kissed me fully on the mouth. I kissed him back and winced at the sensory memory of his mouth. God, I'd forgotten what a good kisser he was. How soft his lips were. How full.

He brushed his tongue over my bottom lip, and I opened my mouth, falling back into the exact way I knew he liked, as he kissed me in the exact way he knew I liked.

Our mouths moved slowly at first. Tongue against tongue. My teeth

nibbled his bottom lip. We were a cresting wave at low tide. We were the slow crescendo to a symphony's first movement. We were a gentle breeze through the trees at night. We were the promise of something more, of something fantastic.

God, nobody had ever kissed me like Charlie. In the five years I'd been off him, I'd never found anyone who could kiss me like this. He paid attention to the details. And that was the problem. Nobody else responded to my every small noise, hitch of breath, and tightened muscle.

But Charlie did. He noticed, and he worked to make it more. Make it the most. Drown me in bliss and sensation.

He released my hand so he could wrap both of his around my waist. My shirt was slightly cropped, so we were skin to skin in a way that made me feel delicate, wanted, needed. I wrapped my arms around his neck and tipped my head so he could deepen the kiss.

One of his hands moved up my side until it was splayed against my ribs. The other supported my head, so he could tip me back and really have his way with my mouth. I arched against his body as it curled around mine, needing to press every inch of me against every inch of him.

His thumb brushed the underside of my breast. I was wearing a lacy bralette with almost no support. I dragged my nails over the back of his neck, through his hair, in a way I knew drove him crazy.

He palmed my breast in response, then pinched my nipple between two of his fingers. I gasped, and my mind emptied of all rational thought or suggestion of slowing down. My body shifted into touch memory. Charlie's mouth moved over my jaw, down my neck, across my collarbones.

"Do you know how long I've waited for this?" His words were a low rumble against my skin. He palmed my breast again, managing to get my nipple in that way he knew drove me crazy.

"Charlie," I whispered. Or begged?

He spun me around and picked me up to sit on the steel countertop. The metal was cold beneath my bare legs, but Charlie tugged me forward and wrapped them around his waist.

We were better suited height-wise, but he wasn't interested in my mouth anymore. He dipped his head and captured my nipple in his mouth through the thin material of my T-shirt and bra. I moaned in a way I had not moaned since I was with him. This man knew all the right buttons to push. He was a freaking concert pianist when it came to my body.

He pulled back and rested his arms on either side of me. I sensed he was pulling back, making some kind of smart decision. I hated it.

I took two fistfuls of his work shirt and pulled him closer. I tightened my legs around him, pressing us together in a way that sent shivers spiraling through me. “Don’t stop,” I whispered.

His smile was sad, retreating. He closed his eyes in a visible effort to get ahold of himself. “There were a lot of things I had to make peace with losing, Ada. Things like friendships I ruined. My brother’s and sister’s respect. Credibility. A few collectors’ baseball cards I got from my dad that I ended up selling.” He laughed, but it was self-deprecating. “I’m not sad I sold the cards. I’m just sad I sold them so soon. I think I could have gotten a better price for them.” He laughed again. “Anyway, I’ve had to let go of all these things and find a way to be okay with it. But do you know the one thing that’s never set well with me? The one thing I couldn’t stand to lose and all but refused to give up on?”

I shook my head. “No.”

His gaze met mine again, and I braced myself for something cataclysmic. He had a look that made me think he could do anything he wanted, change anything he wanted, save the fucking planet if he wanted to.

“You.”

The bottom fell out from underneath me. Not just the kitchen counter and the floor but the universe itself. It just dropped away. One minute, I’d known how to stand and walk and take care of myself, and the next, I was free-falling in a way that made me feel like it would be permanent. That I would never find solid ground again. I would just drop and drop and drop until there was only Charlie and only me and he only said that for the rest of eternity.

“What do you—”

He cradled my face with both his hands and pulled us close. “I couldn’t stomach the idea that I’d messed us up so badly. I couldn’t face losing you for real. And I was fine to put you, or the dream of you, aside while I got my shit together. But I promised myself it wouldn’t be forever. That when I reached this point of emotional and physical health, I could have you back. I could chase you again. Kiss you again. You were the big fucking reward at the end of a hard fucking road.”

“Charlie, I didn’t think you liked me back then. I thought you just—”

“As I’ve said, I pushed you away because I liked you so much. Because I knew I couldn’t lose the opportunity to make this good. Really good. The

stuff of epic romances good.”

“You can’t be serious,” I argued, trying to get his sweet confessions to land in a permanent place in my brain, but they kept flitting out of reach. Like I was too violent and chaotic to make a good home for them. Like I was too much of a cynic to make room for genuine compliments. “That was so long ago.”

“Ada, you got under my skin. You marked my body with something that belongs only to you.” His hands moved down my neck, over my shoulders, to my hips. “I want more of this. I want to see if it’s as good as I remember. I want to take you out and date you and see if this is as good as I know it can be.”

For some reason, my dad’s no-show today popped into my head. But then Charlie leaned in and kissed the corner of my mouth. “I want to see you naked again,” he whispered against my mouth. “I want to taste you naked again.”

A full-body shiver wracked through me. “Okay,” I agreed without needing to hear anything else. “Yes.”

He pulled back. “A date, then? Tomorrow night or Monday?”

Wait, what? I shook out the sexy haze in my brain and tried to make sense of what he’d just said. “Tomorrow night for what?”

“Our date,” he explained slowly. “Does it work better to go out tomorrow or Monday? If you have another night off, I can be flexible, but I wasn’t sure —”

“I meant, we don’t have to go out . . .” Now I was fully embarrassed. Might as well keep going then. “I meant, you were talking about getting naked and—”

“Sure, we can work up to that,” he agreed magnanimously—too magnanimously if you asked me. “But let’s start with a date. I’ll wine ya, dine ya—”

“We can skip straight to the next part. I promise. I’m good. I’m ready for that part.”

His chuckle did the shiver thing again. All over my dang body. “Then maybe I need to be wine and dine, yeah? Besides, this is more than sex, Ada. This is good. This has potential. This will make sex so much better.”

I wasn’t sure I believed him. I wasn’t sure I needed what he promised. In fact, I was definitely not looking for something relationship-y. I just wanted to . . . meet some mutual needs.

On an unrelated note, I had never wanted to bury myself alive more than I did after that thought. *Oh my God, what was wrong with me?*

“Charlie, I don’t—”

He kissed me again. Fully on the mouth. Fully in a way that stole all my thoughts and objections and Charlie defense systems.

“One date,” he coaxed. “One dinner. One night out with me.”

One date? And then hopefully some amazing sex. Ugh, who would turn that down? And despite his proclamation, that he’d been waiting to be healthy enough to try again with me, *with us*, I wasn’t going to go there in my head.

I planted a mental No Trespassing sign in front of it to be sure.

He could have his one date, I could scratch this suddenly very itchy itch, and then we could go back to . . . whatever we were before tonight. *Even if that meant no kissing . . .* But we’d done it before. We could easily do it again.

Easily-ish.

“Fine, Charlie. One date.”

He did that half smile that was so bewitching. “Good answer, Ada.”

“We’ll see. I don’t have a lot of room in my life for redemption arcs.”

The other side of his mouth joined the first. “I plan to prove you wrong.” He leaned forward and kissed me quickly. “Actually, I can’t wait to prove you wrong.”

When he pulled back, I instantly felt cold all over. I hopped down from the counter and headed straight for the door because how awkward was this? Time to go to bed. Stat.

“Ada,” Charlie called from across the kitchen just as I reached for the door.

My heart did an aggressive jig in my chest. “Yeah?”

“You forgot your keys.”

Face flushing the color of a ripe strawberry, I backtracked and bent over as quickly as humanly possible to grab the set of keys lounging beside the office door. I whispered curse words at them, then slammed through the exit and sprinted up the stairs to my apartment.

I was equal parts still turned on, curious, and so embarrassed I could die.

And for some reason, I knew, *I just knew*, Charlie had done this on purpose.

fifteen

I WOKE up the following day disoriented. The late morning sun streamed through the tall windows and warmed my body. I'd gone to bed with the windows open last night, but it was really too warm to be comfortable with so much access to sunlight around the room. I'd kicked my sheets off at some point and lay there staring up at the ceiling prickly with sweat but comfortable.

Sunday morning was quiet in this part of Durham. This street was mostly nightlife. So if brunchers were out and about, they were over a street or two. The occasional car whizzed by outside. The sporadic bark of a pup on a walk. Birds chirped. The hum of my gigantic refrigerator. The wheeze of old pipes somewhere in the walls.

I stretched like a lazy cat and tried to reason my way back to sleep. I'd moved yesterday, and my body was sore. I deserved a rest day. I wasn't meeting Adleigh for another two hours. I'd accidentally—or not so accidentally—made out with Charlie in the middle of the night last night.

My body contorted into the fetal position, and I buried my face in my pillow, letting out a frustrated scream. I could still feel him touching me, his hands sliding over my body, his lips working some deep, buried need to the surface.

Actually, I can't wait to prove you wrong.

Had he really said that? Or had I dreamed the whole thing? I touched my lips, which were still swollen. I closed my eyes and saw his face, eyes darkened with desire, felt his hand palm my breast.

I screamed again. Well, whimpered was more accurate. But I lived alone now so no one was around to fact check me.

When I finally decided that I'd had enough of this freaked-out spiral, I checked my phone. Of course, Charlie's name was already there with a text message waiting for me.

Charlie: *Went to the ER after you left last night. Thanks for the concussion.*

Oh shit.

Me: *What?! I barely grazed you!*

I waited a total of two seconds.

Me: *Are you serious?*

Another two seconds.

Me: *Charlie, did you really go to the ER by yourself? I don't believe you.*

Another two seconds.

Me: *God, I'm so sorry. I genuinely didn't mean to hit you in the head.*

Charlie: *Headwound emoji. Followed by a smirky face emoji. No, I'm kidding. I'm fine. It's just a scratch. Just wasn't sure if you'd answer my texts this morning.*

I stared at my phone in disbelief. How dare he? How dare he trick me like that? How dare he know me so fucking well? Now I wished I had given him a concussion.

Me: *The audacity.*

Charlie: *Tonight or tomorrow? I'm willing to respect your busy weekend and give you a day, but we work together on Tuesday. So you know, you decide.*

Me: *How magnanimous of you.*

Charlie: *I don't remember you complaining last night.*

Me: *What is this? Flirting?*

Charlie: *Don't get prickly, Ade. I want dinner. With you. And in return, I promise not to stop you next time you get handsy.*

Oh my God, I was going to kill him. If I was sweating before this text conversation, I was full-on drenched at this point. I'd sat up on my bed and pulled my knees to my chest, trying to figure out if throwing my phone out the window would make this seduction-humiliation-adorable-stupid thing stop.

It wouldn't, though. He'd probably show up at my door next, demanding a decision. When had Charlie gotten so domineering?

We'd never even been out on dates before. We'd mostly just worked together and then went home together. There had been no pursuing. Or

wooing. Or . . . dinner. There had only been desperation to get each other naked.

So why, when that was all I wanted right now, was his demand for dinner so fucking sexy?

Me: *I'm cleaning my old apartment with my sister today, so can you do a late dinner tonight? 8?*

Charlie: *No, sorry. This isn't something you get to squeeze in. I'll pick you up at 6 tomorrow.*

What? This wasn't something I get to squeeze in?

Me: *I'm busy tomorrow night.*

Charlie: *You're a dirty liar. Can't wait till tomorrow. Bye, Ada.*

Me: *Charlie, I'm serious. I have plans.*

I waited for a minute, but he hadn't replied.

Me: *Charlie, for real. I won't be home.*

Still no reply.

Me: *Well, go ahead and come by, but I won't be here.*

Charlie English put his phone on Do Not Disturb.

The fucking audacity of this man.

Good thing I didn't find it sexy in any way, shape, or form. Good thing I was totally immune to his charm. Good thing I was so good at lying to myself.

I decided to push Charlie out of my mind, which was incredibly easy because I never hyper-focused on anything. And I definitely wasn't replaying *I promise not to stop you next time you get handsy* over and over in my head.

So instead of doing any of that, I jumped in the shower and rinsed off, changed into my workout clothes, and hit Jen's for an hour. My muscles were sore and my body was tired, but kicking a bag, shadowboxing until my arms felt like Jell-O, and working on agility with a jump rope, boxes, and sprints until I thought my legs would fall off helped. I ended with ten minutes of stretching. Then I attempted ten minutes of meditation, but I gave up when all I could focus on was hitting Charlie in the head with my car keys.

Lies. It was when he'd tipped me back and ravaged my mouth in a way I would never forget.

Okay, onto the next thing.

Home. Rinse off again. Change into different workout clothes. Grab all my cleaning supplies. Meet Adleigh at the apartment. Check. Check. Check. Check. Check.

I arrived first, which was what I expected. She would show up eventually, but she'd already texted me for an apology-fueled coffee order. Here was the secret to always being a punctual person: Late people always brought guilt gifts.

Sure enough, Adleigh showed up twenty minutes later bearing a shaken oat milk espresso—my favorite—in each hand. And a grocery bag full of snacks and other various cold beverages.

“Sorry,” she said as she breezed through the door in a flurry of her chaotic but endearing energy, “I figured we needed sustenance.”

I realized I hadn't eaten anything today. I grabbed a granola bar out of the bag and shoved it in my mouth. “You're the best.”

She smiled. “I know.”

She also brought her Bluetooth speaker and quickly connected it to a playlist on her phone. It wasn't that she was late for no reason. It was that she was chronically late because she thought of everything. Everyone needed an Adleigh in their life.

We got to work. We started in our individual bedrooms, deciding we'd end with the kitchen—which would need the most cleaning—so we could tackle it together.

Two and a half hours later, we'd smashed the bag of snacks and deep cleaned both bathrooms, the bedrooms, and the living room. We were feeling pretty good about ourselves.

It helped that there was nothing in any of the spaces. Life would generally be a whole lot simpler if we decluttered everything we didn't absolutely need.

We took a short beverage break before we dove into the hard-to-reach places. Adeigh was going to wrestle the fridge into submission and I was going to scrape out the oven. We still had cabinets to wipe down and floors to vacuum. But the end was in sight.

“I think I have a date tomorrow,” I said casually as I played with the lid of my sparkling water.

Adleigh raised an eyebrow. “Another Tinder hottie?”

“Hey, not all of us can be lucky enough to fall in love with an Ivy League basketball star.”

“First of all, Duke isn't Ivy League. Merely prestigious.” She held up a second finger. “And he's more like a basketball benchwarmer than a star. But you're right, not everyone can have”—she gestured at the empty air around her—“this.”

“You live a charmed life, Adleigh Ann.”

She leaned over the kitchen island littered with our trash and met my gaze. “Seriously, who is it? Anyone I know?”

I realized I shouldn’t have said anything. She knew him too well. All the things I hated about him. And complained about him. And the history I had with him. “You do know him, actually.” I cleared my throat. “He works at the bar.”

“Scandalous, Ada. Shitting where you work? It’s a dangerous game.”

Didn’t I know it. “Well, it won’t be the first time.”

She didn’t find my dark humor funny. “And look how well that went the last time.”

I laughed nervously and decided I should sprint out of the building. And down the street. Possibly all the way to Raleigh. That would be a better idea than finishing this conversation—the conversation I’d started.

“So who is it?” she pressed, turning suspicious. “Case? He’s so hot, Ade. And the perfect solution to our height deficiencies. We could break the generational cycle of having short kids. Change the Kelly line for generations to come.”

“You’re crazy.” But she had a point. “Also I like being short. Everyone always underestimates short people. I like to prove them wrong.”

She snorted. “You would.” She was silent for a minute and then said, “You’re not really going out with Miles, are you? No offense, but I know people who know him, and he’s kind of promiscuous. Which is fine; I just worry about you.”

It was my turn to snort. “Oh my God, you sound like Mom.”

“What?” she gasped. “I do not.”

“He’s kind of promiscuous?” I raised an eyebrow and waited for her to see it.

She waved a hand in front of her face. “Bah. I’m running out of single guys from the bar.”

I pressed my lips together before admitting, “There’s one more you haven’t mentioned.”

Her brow furrowed as she tried to come up with a name that wasn’t Charlie. “Did Will and Lola break up?”

“Will and Lola are about two days away from having a baby.”

“Ada,” she growled. “Spill it already.”

I couldn’t seem to make myself say his name. I couldn’t admit it out loud

after years of whining and complaining and being a bitter shrew about him. “You know who it is, you just don’t want to say it.”

Her eyes bulged out of her head. “Ada Andrea, you can’t be serious.” I made a guilty face. “No! No, I don’t believe you. You’re lying to me.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know how it happened.”

“A date. An actual date. Did you already sleep with him?”

“Adleigh!” Now it was my turn to be outraged. “You can’t be serious.”

“Well, that’s how it went the last time. It wasn’t so much a relationship but bunnies in heat.”

“Oh my God, you were too young to know that. I regret everything.”

“Am I wrong?”

I glared at her and her self-righteous soapbox. “I was younger. Dumber.”

“You were older than I am now. And as you can see, I’ve found a nice, committed, drama-free relationship.”

She had a point. I hated that she had a point. “Listen, you’ve always been smarter than me. I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“I want you to say that you’ve thought this through,” she demanded in a voice that made her seem like the older sister. “I want you to say that you’ve thought about all possible consequences and outcome scenarios. And that you’re prepared for them.”

“Adleigh, it’s one date. It’s not like I agreed to marry the man.”

She stretched her body over the island to reach my hand. “Ade, do you remember last time? You were a wreck. I just . . . I don’t want you to get hurt again. Especially if you can avoid it.”

I bristled. “I wasn’t a wreck. I was fine. I knew we weren’t serious.”

She gave me that stern look again. “Ada, you totally shut down. You were already prone to pushing people away, but after Charlie . . . I don’t think I’ve seen you take a risk since.”

My stomach dropped from the center of my body to the basement of the building. “That’s not tru—”

“When’s the last time you’ve been on a second date?” I opened my mouth to argue. “Third? I know you weren’t in love with him, but after all that drama, you stopped letting people in altogether. Not just men, but girls too. You locked your friends into place and haven’t opened the door for anyone else since.”

“Lola,” I said smugly. “I let Lola in.”

“One person in five years? It’s not exactly something to be proud of. I

mean, you barely know Shane.”

“What? I know Shane.”

She shook her head. “What’s his major?”

“Physical therapy.” She opened her mouth to argue with me, and I realized it had been a trick question. I snapped my finger and shouted, “Exercise science!” before she could tell me I was wrong.

She didn’t look proud of me. “That’s a lucky guess. He’s a college athlete. How many siblings does he have?”

Okay, this one was harder. Had Shane ever talked about his family before? Not with me. It wasn’t like he lived with his siblings. Also, he wasn’t my boyfriend, so what did it matter? “Three,” I said confidently.

“He’s one of six.”

“Obviously, I meant three older siblings and—”

“He’s the oldest.”

“Which is what I said. Five younger siblings.”

Adleigh was not impressed with my teasing. “My point is, I’m probably going to marry this man, and you haven’t even attempted to get to know him.”

“Well, it’s not just on me, Ad. He could make an attempt too.”

“Ada, he’s terrified of you.”

“That’s ridiculous. He lives in a different air space than I do.” Her expression had turned into one of those kinds that made me feel guilty and sad for myself, and now I wanted to punch something. “Okay, fine, maybe I haven’t”—I cleared my throat, hating the words coming out of my mouth—“exactly made an effort to get to know him. But I’m not, uh, good at get-to-know-you questions. Especially around people who have the power to hurt my baby sister. I just . . . I want to be sure I can kick his ass without feeling bad about it. Should the need arise.”

She rolled her eyes. “While I appreciate the support, a date with Charlie makes me nervous. I don’t want you to shrink back anymore, Ada. I want you happy. Healthy. Out there.” She flung a hand toward the window. “All you do is work. Or work out. The bar is your entire life. If you date Charlie, and it goes badly, then what? If he takes the bar away from you, what are you going to do?”

Had I been shrinking back? I felt like I came out of the gate like an angry bull. That was my natural personality. Always willing to scrap. Always willing to stand up for what I believed in. Always willing to go to the mat.

But she was right about friends. I really had closed off access to myself. Was that because of Charlie?

Or was it an autonomous decision I'd made?

Damn, I worried she was right. Because the point Charlie had made last night had been true for me too. He'd gotten under my skin. He'd sunk into my bones, into my soul. It had been a fun fling that was easy to walk away from—or at least I'd been telling myself that narrative all these years.

If I were honest with myself—which I loathed to be—I would have to admit that he'd hurt me more than I wanted to admit. And what hurt the most wasn't the version of us that had ended, it was the potential of us that never was.

To my sister, I said, "The problem is, he's terrible for me on paper. I know that. I hear what you're saying. But I still want to go, Adleigh. I still want to explore this thing between us. Because we've changed in the past five years. Both of us have. But that something we felt all those years ago is still there. And I . . . I want to see what it is."

Her expression softened, and she stood up a little straighter. "You really think he's changed?"

"I don't think it. I know it. I see it. We had a long talk the other day, and he shared some of the stuff he was going through back then and the different ways he's coped. He's genuinely not the same. He's in a much healthier headspace. He got help. He did the hard work. He's actually inspired me to work out some of my own mess." I sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I've seen it for a while. But I don't think I wanted to believe him. I think I wanted him to stay the same screwup so I didn't have to feel worse about myself. And about what happened. But . . . Adleigh, the date is his idea. He's pursuing me. And I just, I just . . . I don't want to push him away anymore." I tucked a short strand of hair behind my ear. Or tried to. It escaped almost as soon as I let go. "I can't resist him. And I'm at a point where I don't want to. If it ends up being just sex again, I can live with that. It will be fun. I'll recover, I think. But, honestly, he had a chance to make it just sex, and he was the one who put the brakes on. He's the one who's asking for more. I'm willing to let him try."

Her expression gentled even more. "Ada, are you serious?"

"Yeah, I mean, I don't know if it will go anywhere, but—"

"I'm just happy you're trying," she gushed, tears wetting her eyes in the exact opposite reaction I would have had. "This is what I want for you. I want

you to be willing to try again. Honestly try. Open yourself up and let someone in. I'm shocked as shit that it's fucking Charlie English bringing it out of you. But God, I'm so happy you're letting it happen."

I made a face. "You make me sound like an emotionally stunted psychopath."

"You're not a psychopath," she assured me sincerely, conveniently leaving out a defense for the emotionally stunted part.

"Ad, it might surprise you that I sometimes know what I'm doing."

She shook her head. "Ada, you literally never know what you're doing. But I admire your confidence."

"You are the actual worst," I snarled, laughing.

She grinned at me. "If he hurts you again, I'll castrate him."

"I would expect nothing less."

"I hope it works out this time," she said in a soft, serious voice.

I didn't know how to respond, so I smiled and grabbed some cleaning supplies and dove headfirst into the oven.

I hope it works out this time was a very long-term perspective on a first date. I wasn't even sure if I wanted it to work out this time. I didn't mind a date or two. Or a night or ten together. But was I looking for the one? Was I hoping to settle down? Did I want Charlie to become more than Charlie?

My five-year plan jumped up and down in the back of my head, waving banners with babies on them. But was Charlie the other half of that equation?

I focused on cleaning, deciding big questions deserved big answers. And this was only a first date. Nothing more. Nothing less. There was absolutely nothing to worry about.

sixteen

I WAS SO worried about this first date I was going to make myself sick. Charlie was going to be here in ten minutes—or so he said—and I was still staring at my outfit options laid out on my bed while I walked around in my bra and undies.

Well, they could hardly be called undies, which was why it would be especially embarrassing if Charlie managed to show up early for the first time in his life.

Thankfully, I'd finished my hair and makeup. I'd started those a full two hours ago just to be safe. But the outfit decision was killing me.

Usually, this was when I'd bring Eliza in. She was my style guru. She would know exactly what I should wear. But I had about a hundred reasons to keep this date a secret. Starting with the fact that Adleigh's warning would look like a glowing endorsement after Eliza got done reminding me of all the reasons I should stay as far away from Charlie as possible.

Also, I didn't think it was fair to ask her to choose an outfit that her brother would find sexy.

Another minute went by. Panic fully settled into my gut and I picked up my phone to tell Charlie we needed to reschedule due to all my clothes being burned in the fire I was about to set. But I already had a text from him telling me he was two minutes away.

Ada, this isn't who you are. You are cool as hell. You have amazing fashion sense. You are going to make him forget his better intentions so he can ravage you before you even leave the house.

I picked the hot-pink minidress with cut-out sides that tied around the waist and small puff sleeves. It was low-cut, having a tie front too. And sexy

without being vulgar. I was slipping on some black open-toed mules when he knocked on my front door.

Too late to go back now.

I took another deep breath and let him in. His eyes bugged at my outfit, which was exactly what I was going for. I mentally high-fived myself.

“I just need to put some earrings in,” I told him, ignoring the way my panic didn’t settle at the sight of him. It launched into a brand-new level of frazzled upended that made my hands tremble.

He dressed in a crisp white short-sleeved button-up with stylish teal shorts that were very summery. He wore his leather flip-flops that I had a thing for. And styled his hair back from his face. His sunglasses were tucked into his shirt.

He was gorgeous. Too gorgeous.

I tried to abandon him in the doorway, but he caught my hand before I could get away and twirled me back to him.

Like literally right back to him. Suddenly, I braced my hands against his chest, and he looked down at me with my favorite half smile. “Hello,” he murmured.

“Hello,” I squeaked.

“You’re beautiful.”

“Oh.”

Then he captured my mouth with his. It was heated from the start. There was no slow buildup this time. Just tongue and teeth and his hands at the open part of my waist, fingers digging into my skin.

My hands brushed over the smooth fabric of his shirt until my arms twined around his neck. He didn’t push beyond kissing. But God, he did it so well.

When he finally pulled away, my lipstick was smudged on his swollen lips. And his eyes were heated and dark. He had never been more tempting.

I wanted to drag him to my bed and smear my lipstick all over his body.

“Hi,” he said again, his voice rough.

“Hi.” I blinked, forgetting what I was about to do. “Um, earrings.” I touched my lips knowing. “And let me fix this quick. Also you, uh”—I laughed a little—“you might want to wipe my lipstick off too. Although it’s a good shade on you.”

He grinned. “I’ll remember that.”

Ten minutes later, I’d locked up the apartment, and we’d walked over a

block. He'd taken my hand as soon as we were on the sidewalk. We'd meandered, soaking in the June heat that still boasted a cool evening breeze.

"Where are we going?" I asked when he'd guided us off the beaten path and onto a less noticed side street.

"There's a jazz bar up this way," he explained. "There's music later, but it's right next to this tiny Japanese place. I thought we'd grab a bite and then listen to some music."

"Jazz?" I asked, surprised.

"Are you not a fan?"

"I'm more surprised that you're a fan."

He shrugged. "My buddy Steve, the one I've told you about before, plays the bass. We don't have to stay long if it's not your thing. I just wanted you to meet him."

"Oh." This was already going so differently than I'd assumed it would. I wasn't sure what to make of all these surprises. Charlie's usual friends, or the friends he'd had in the past, weren't the kind of people you introduced to girls you were trying to impress. Also, I'd genuinely expected a night of trendy food meant to impress and a loud club with cheap drinks.

Not a hole-in-the-wall sushi place next door to an underground jazz bar meant for the AARP crowd.

Sensing my confusion, Charlie asked, "Is that okay?"

"Yeah, it's great. I love sushi."

He turned his head and smiled at me. "I know."

There were hole-in-the-wall sushi places that should be avoided at all costs unless food poisoning was on your bucket list. This place, which didn't even have a sign or a name or any way to identify what was in it, was not that place. This was the kind of place with four tables, a master of sushi chef hand rolling fresh rolls from behind an open counter, a server happy to pour generous glasses of sake, and a meal so crisp and delicious you hoped nobody else found out about it so you could keep it all to yourself.

Charlie knew the menu backward and forward and ordered what seemed like one of everything.

We started with the most perfect bite of wagyu beef I'd ever had. It was slathered in uni butter and mint chutney. Then we had yellowtail on freshly baked sourdough with a tamari spread. There were hardboiled eggs with caviar and thinly sliced Thai peppers. There was spicy edamame. And so much sake.

And this was only the appetizer course.

After I raved about the food, I asked a question that had been bugging me for a couple of weeks. “Charlie, how come you didn’t take the loft? I mean, clearly, you knew Will was moving out. So why didn’t you grab it?”

He held my gaze from across the table, and I saw the indecision flicker in his eyes. And when he explained, I realized he was deciding how honest he should be.

“I was supposed to take it,” he said. “Will made it seem like the move happened all of a sudden, but we always knew they’d move out before the baby was born. Eliza didn’t want the apartment because she wants Jonah to buy a house too. So the loft went to me by default.”

I nearly choked on my sake. “Why didn’t you say that?”

“If you knew I was going to move in, would you have taken it?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “How close were you to moving in?”

He shrugged. “I would have moved in this weekend too.” Then he laughed at my outraged expression. “Ada, it’s not a big deal. My landlord wasn’t raising my rent and was happy to work with me when I said I wanted to renew. It all worked out.”

“Except that you could have been homeless because of me.”

He waved me off. “I would have found a different place. There’s no shortage of overpriced apartments in this section of town. Or I could have crashed with Eliza. It was more important that you had a place.”

“Charlie—”

He reached across the table and grabbed my hand. “I don’t need the loft, Ade. It was a thing for Will. Like a symbol of the bar and his life and this thing that we’re doing. But it’s not that for me. I want you happy. I want you . . . settled. That’s more important.” He shrugged. “Besides, like I said, it worked out.”

My gratitude for the loft and what it meant bubbled over. His generosity floored me. And his blasé attitude about his living arrangement. “Thank you,” I told him. I’d said it before, but this time it meant more; it meant everything I hadn’t known before.

His smile was tender, warm. Intimate. “See? Worth it.”

I tried not to swoon. Then I changed the subject so I could interrupt this whole falling for him thing in a way that would keep it from being hard and permanent. “So is the sushi because of gluten?”

His brow furrowed. “Excuse me?”

“Because you gave up gluten. Is that why we’re all protein tonight?”

He laughed, and it was all straight white teeth and laugh lines around his eyes. God, he was beautiful. “No, sorry. The whole gluten-free thing didn’t last very long. Do you know how much gluten there is in the world? Apparently, it’s in everything I like.”

I laughed, too, because, yes, I had known that. “Did you notice a difference at all? Like when you did give it up?”

His expression sobered, and I watched him grow more serious, more . . . honest. He was less charming facade and more open heart and soul pouring out than I knew what to do with. “Do you know how easy it is to try something because you want it to be true? Do you know what I mean? Like there’s this promise of losing weight or being in better shape or thinking clearly attached to a product or a diet or, I don’t know, whatever it is. And you want it to be true so badly you just reach for it and hope for the best. That was gluten-free for me. I’m not even sure I believed it would help. I just wanted a quick, easy solution to something I internally knew would take actual effort.” His eyes narrowed. “I was too afraid to do the real work, so I reached for the easiest snake salesman solution.” He tilted his head. “Not that it can’t work for some people, but at some point, we need to take stock of what’s happening and fix the problem. Not just treat the symptoms.”

Was this really Charlie English? Was this really coming out of his mouth? I hardly knew what to do with him. It wasn’t that he’d managed to totally surprise me with all these mature thoughts and the personal effort he was putting into himself. It was that he was making me rethink everything I thought. All the bad habits I’d allowed in my own life. All the wrong thought patterns I’d let exist for too long.

“So what did you do?” I was transfixed at this point. Totally enthralled.

He shrugged, embarrassed. “I reached for help again. Started working on myself. Changed up some eating and workout patterns. Nothing that was so overarching as gluten-free. But basically more organized habits. I was living in chaos, right? So then I shouldn’t have been surprised when my thought life or behavior patterns reflected chaos.” He laughed. “Basically, it came down to taking responsibility for myself. Things changed significantly once I learned that things didn’t just happen to me randomly, but I had control and authority over what I allowed.”

“When?” I felt breathless at this man I had never met before. “When did you start this?”

“Initially? Oh, about four years ago. But it was a slow, permanent change. The gluten-free phase was a big moment for my eating habits, though. I didn’t need an overhaul. I just needed to be more responsible with whole foods.”

I sat back in my chair, genuinely uncomfortable with the caricature I’d made of him over the last several years. Not that he hadn’t had his moments. But God, had I ever given him any credit? Or had I always just assumed the worst?

“I feel like I have no idea who you are,” I told him honestly. “I . . . I—”

“I hurt you, Ada,” he said gently. “That gives you some wiggle room to make assumptions about me.” He brought my hand to his mouth and kissed the inside of my wrist. “But I’d like you to get to know me now. If that’s okay. And I want to keep getting to know you. I want . . . I want to give this a real shot.”

“Like dating?” I asked breathless, my heart in my throat.

He nodded, his fingers tightening against mine. “Yeah, dating.”

I grasped for sarcasm. “Well, let’s see how tonight goes first, yeah? I mean, let’s not get ahead of ourselves. I might not even like you. You clearly have terrible taste in sushi, for one.”

Which was a lie. He’d taken me to the best sushi spot in Durham. This place would literally live in infamy in my brain. And I might go bankrupt eating here every day for the next year.

A smile worked its way across his mouth. “All right. Challenge accepted.”

The sushi arrived then. Clean lines of white rice rolled with whitefish and tempura fried shrimp and more wagyu with fresh veggies and ponzu and eel sauces and one that had a spectacular sundried tomato something in the middle. Everything was to die for. We left laughing and full and light from sake.

He took me next door and down a set of dingy stairs to a basement bar that had all the egress windows open. A band warmed up on stage, and the waitstaff took orders for prohibition-style cocktails. Each table had a red candle lit in the middle and faced the stage.

He ordered us whiskey sours from a bartender who knew him by name, then took my hand and led me to a table in the corner. He tucked his chair in close to mine and pointed out some cute things about the old bar and its history. Then the band started playing, and we had to shout over the music.

But we did. We kept talking and kept enjoying the cool tones of old-school jazz. We kept enjoying our cocktails. Nothing was awkward or strained about it. He made me laugh, and he made me think about things differently. He saw the world in a different light than I did. And I loved comparing our two perspectives. I simply loved talking to him. Spending time with him. Getting to know this gorgeous, thoughtful, interesting man.

I found myself leaning into him as the night wore on. I just wanted to be as close to him as possible. He made me laugh. He made me think. He made me feel seen. He made me . . . want.

The band announced they were taking a break, and the atmosphere settled down to murmurs and tinkling laughter. The demographic here was older than Craft, which made it mellow and elegant. The drinks were refined but not showy. The servers were well-versed on the menu. And while all the tables were full, no one was crammed into corners or aisles. It was actually a really nice break from our usual chaos.

Charlie waved at someone over my shoulder, and I only had enough time to remember Steve and get nervous before he arrived at our table.

“Hey,” Charlie said with a grin. “You sound great tonight.”

As Charlie had said, Steve was a man in his sixties. He had a great head of white hair and laugh lines around his mouth. I’d noticed him immediately. Mostly because Charlie had mentioned he played the bass. But also because I caught him mouthing a conversation with Charlie. He’d asked, “Is that her?” And then given Charlie a discreet thumbs-up.

I immediately liked him.

But now he was looking at me like he was trying to figure me out. Like I was a puzzle to be solved. Like I needed his approval.

“Charlie, it’s good to see you, my boy.” Steve slapped Charlie on the shoulder before pulling a chair over to our tiny table and joining us.

“Happy to be here,” Charlie told him, then gestured to me. “This is Ada.” Then to me, “Ada, this is Steve.”

We shook hands over the small candle, and he said, “It’s nice to finally meet you, Ada. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

My cheeks flushed at the way his piercing eyes assessed me across the small space. “I’ve heard a lot about you too. Charlie’s right; you guys sound great.”

His mouth lifted into a genuine smile. “Well, make sure you mention that to everyone around you.” He tilted his head toward the stage. “Also mention

the tip jar, if you don't mind."

Charlie laughed at his joke, and I watched bemused at them both. It was clear how much they liked each other. And I had to admit Steve was likable. And not anything like the guys Charlie had brought around in the past.

"Do you have a drink?" Charlie asked Steve.

"Oh, she'll come around in a minute," he answered.

"No worries." Charlie jumped to his feet. "I'll grab us another round. Manhattan?"

Steve nodded. "If you don't mind."

I watched in horror as Charlie abandoned me for the line at the bar and left me alone with his mentor—the man I was pretty sure was tallying up my acceptable qualities to see if I met his Charlie standard.

"How long have you played the bass?" I asked before he could spit out "So what are your intentions with Charlie?"

He leaned forward so he didn't have to talk so loud. "Oh, since I was in middle school. My mom wanted me in the orchestra, but I had a thing for the girl who played piccolo in the school jazz band, so I followed her. But I fell in love with the music instead."

"What happened to the girl?"

His grin ticked wider. "Been married forty-six years come August."

My eyes bugged. I wasn't expecting that answer.

He laughed. "I should have said, I fell in love with the music first. Martha still plays piccolo for us on occasion. Not as much as she used to."

"That should be a T-shirt," I told him. "Came for the girls. Stayed for the music. You can set up a merch table at your shows."

"I like that," he said, still laughing.

"What about you? What brings you to a jazz show on a Monday night?"

Here we go. I knew we'd circle back eventually. I nodded my chin toward the bar. "Charlie."

His laser-like gaze intensified. "He's a good one, that kid. One of the best."

I glanced over my shoulder and saw him lean over the bar and tell the bartender what he wanted. The two of them talked for a minute, and Charlie started laughing, then the bartender started laughing.

"I think you're right," I finally said, turning back.

"We've spent a lot of time together over the past several years," Steve continued. "I've seen him grow up, take responsibility, and become a man."

Couldn't be prouder of him if he were my own kid."

"I'm glad to hear that," I told him honestly. "He's a special guy, but he hasn't always made the best decisions."

"Oh, I know that. But which one of us has? To err is human, Ada. Or hadn't you heard?"

I smiled gently at his assessment. He was right of course, but didn't he know what Charlie had done to me? I didn't want to sweep it all under the rug and forget about it.

I also didn't want to leave it in the sun to rot. I wanted somewhere in the middle where I could pull it out when it was convenient for me but wouldn't openly get in the way unless I wanted it to.

That seemed reasonable to me. Ahem.

"I have heard that," I told him. "Once or twice."

His smile gentled. "He wants to do right by you. I don't think I've ever seen him so determined, so set on something."

"On me?" I asked, breathless and a little dizzy.

He nodded slowly. "There's more to Charlie than the sum total of his mistakes, Ada. There's a heart and soul there I think you would be hard-pressed to replicate. Does that mean our boy will be without mistakes or mess-ups going forward?" He barked a short laugh. "Of course not. He's going to mess up. He's not going to get it all right. But he is unmatched in how hard he will try and how often he will get back up and do it again."

I was silent as I absorbed his endorsement of Charlie. Had Charlie set him up for this? Or was this something he'd decided to spearhead on his own?

Eventually, he said, "You know, he told me about you the second time we spent time together. I asked him what made him decide he needed to make a change. And he said, 'There's this girl. I want to be worthy of her.' We've worked through a lot of shit in his past, and he's gotten a lot of help making himself a whole person." He held up a hand at my panicked expression and said, "Don't worry, it very quickly became more about him than you. In fact, so much so, I'd nearly forgotten about that girl he was so worried about. But a couple of weeks back, he took me out for coffee and asked me if I thought he was ready to pursue the girl of his dreams."

I choked on air and then died. Unfortunately, I never got to hear the rest of Steve's story because of my untimely death. So I became a ghost and haunted Steve and Martha for the rest of their lives. Hoping they would just accidentally drop more details about Charlie wanting to pursue the girl of his

dreams. The end.

Just kidding.

But I really did choke on air and had to gulp my water to keep from making a scene. I had never been anyone's girl of their dreams. And I didn't know what to make of it. Or what to make of Charlie. Or Steve. Or any of this.

Steve smirked at me, knowing he'd gotten my attention. "I told him yes, I thought he was ready. But I also told him that even if he wasn't, the girl of his dreams should be willing to do that work with him. We shouldn't always have to be perfect and worthy to pursue the things we care about. Someone worthy of him would be willing to work at it with him. And together, they'd meet in the middle instead of on some impossible mountain peak."

"You're saying I'm the girl of his dreams?" I needed to make that very, very clear. I wanted precise language and lots and lots of confirmation.

"Do you know of any other girls Charlie's actively pursuing?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Well, then, you have your answer."

I was flabbergasted. Although it might have been the sake. Or the whiskey. Either way, my brain refused to accept input or produce output. The information just stayed there, right in the center of my brain, like someone had framed it and hung it on a wall.

Steve's words resonated so closely to Charlie's, and I wasn't sure what to do with it all.

"And I was fine to put you, or the dream of you, aside while I got my shit together. But I promised myself it wouldn't be forever. That when I reached this point of emotional and physical health, I could have you back. I could chase you again. Kiss you again. You were the big fucking reward at the end of a hard fucking road."

Charlie seriously wanted a future with me.

Speak of the devil, he set three drinks down on the table, then slid onto his chair with a grin. "What are you guys talking about?"

I should have stammered to add credibility to our conversation and make it seem like we were talking about normal things and not him. But honestly, I wanted to know Steve's answer. So I just blurted out, "How did you know Martha was the one?"

He shrugged and took a sip of the drink Charlie had bought him. "Honestly? I looked at my life, my past without her, my present with her, my

future. And I made a decision. I would rather have all the days with her I could get—the good, the bad, the ugly, the even uglier—than live one day without her. Her flaws and failures were infinitely more beautiful to me than one day alone ever would be.” He smiled, and it was so full of love and adoration for his wife that I instantly ached with loneliness—even though I was surrounded by people. “I’d rather have the human I love, Ada. Than a perfect life without a human or love.”

Charlie laughed. “Wow, okay. You sure you can handle another one of those?” he asked, pointing at the drink. “I think you might have had enough if you’re getting all philosophical on us, Steve-o.”

“Nah,” Steve argued. “I’m talking to Ada. You leave me alone.”

“You’re going to scare Ada away,” Charlie argued, still laughing.

I shook my head. “No, no, he’s not. I’m good.” I smiled at Charlie. “Nobody’s scaring me away tonight.”

He met my gaze and smiled back. I didn’t know if he’d figured out we were talking about him yet or if he was just happy to be here with us. But I was suddenly delighted to be here with him.

Charlie English officially won first dates. I was ruined for all other first dates, thanks to him.

seventeen

STEVE'S BAND, Sam Svoboda and the Silvers—because they were all retired men in their late sixties and early seventies—finished up around nine. We stayed and talked some more with Steve, who was an excellent time. And he even warmed up to me. And that strangely brought me joy . . . even though I wasn't sure why that mattered.

The bar, which was actually called The Red Bird, closed at ten since it was a Monday night. Charlie closed our tab with promises to the bartender to be back soon. I learned that his name was Kyle, and Charlie had helped get him a job here.

We said goodbye to Steve on the street level and wandered back toward my apartment.

I didn't want the date to be over. Besides, it was still early for us.

"Buy me an ice cream cone?" I asked as we passed a new, trendy parlor with revolving flavors of the day. Today was brown sugar brownie, and it sounded delightful.

"Is that what you want, Ada? Ice cream?" Charlie asked with his eyebrows raised.

"Hmm." I dragged him into the shop, and we leaned against each other as we picked out what we wanted.

I ordered a single-scoop waffle cone of the flavor of the day, and he got a dish of the butter pecan.

"That's an old man flavor. You've been hanging out with Steve too much," I told him as he paid.

"This has nothing to do with Steve," he told me. "It's always been my favorite." He beseeched the bored cashier with a pleading look. "Besides, it's

not an old man flavor. Butter pecan is hip, right?”

The cashier shook his head. “She’s right. Only old men get it.”

I tried unsuccessfully not to gloat while Charlie grumbled under his breath and threw ones in the tip jar.

We took our ice creams and headed back to the street, slowly meandering toward Craft.

“It’s cute,” I told him, bumping his bicep with my shoulder. “This whole retired aesthetic you have going on. Jazz, Steve, butter pecan. It’s kind of sexy, actually.”

He smiled down at his geriatric ice cream. “Steve is the coolest guy I’ve ever met. I want to be him when I grow up. You know? He hasn’t done anything extraordinary in his life. Like, he worked at a bank for over forty years, married his high school sweetheart, and raised a family. Now he spends his free time mentoring jerks like me and playing in a jazz band.” He was silent for a minute as he sorted out what he wanted to say next. “I used to feel like I needed to do something big. I needed to get my life right. And maybe I only had one chance to do it. So instead of making small steps toward something worthwhile, I just freaked out and ran in the other direction. But I think Steve figured it out. Our life isn’t supposed to be about getting it right. It should be the simple, humble pursuit of happiness.” He shot me a sidelong glance and clarified. “Not happiness in the way we see it on the surface. Not that perfect, comfortable bullshit. But the kind of happiness you feel after a really hard day’s work. You’re bone-tired but proud of what you’ve accomplished. Or you know that feeling after you fight for something you believe in, like really balls-to-the-wall go after something. And at the end of it, you’re terrified and tired and still kind of mad, but it feels so fucking good to have done something. To have moved the needle. Like that’s the happiness I want. A life I fucking fought to make beautiful. A small, good, hard-won life that’s mine.”

“I like that,” I told him. It was such a stupid thing to say. He’d opened a well of emotions in me. Emotions I didn’t know I had. But God, I resonated with every single thing. And he should know that, I decided. “My sister just graduated with her BS in Nursing. And this feeling of failure keeps creeping up on me. Especially when I couldn’t afford the apartment and didn’t know what to do. But it’s like, she knew exactly what she wanted to do since she was a little girl. And she just did it. She went out there and did it. And I am so in awe of her accomplishment. But I can’t help but compare myself to her.

She has a real job. With real insurance. And a real 401k. She has this bright future that she is already accomplishing. And what do I do? I serve at a bar.”

“Hey now,” Charlie chided. “You manage a bar. You’re the general manager of a bar.”

I laughed at his insistence. “Okay, fine. I’m a general manager at a bar that had to pay me with free rent because I couldn’t afford it on my own. And don’t get me wrong, I love my job. God, I do. I love it. I love the nightlife, I love the atmosphere, I love Craft. But I keep asking myself what’s wrong with me? Like what’s wrong with my drive that this is all I want to do?”

He looked at me as we leisurely strolled along the sidewalk, occasionally dodging the random pedestrian or bar signage. “Ada, you can’t be serious. There is nothing wrong with your drive. You’re the most driven person I know.”

“Charlie, may I remind you, I work at a bar.”

“You work at my bar,” he said, nudging me with his elbow. “And honestly, I think it’s amazing. Also, I know the owners. They wouldn’t hire just anyone.”

I smiled and took a big bite of my cone. “That’s what I’m saying. I actually love what I do. But I can’t shake this pressure that there should be more to my life. Like I want to have kids at some point. I can’t really have kids and work every night slinging drinks.”

“Who says?” He was serious. “Who says you can’t do something you love and have a family? Like why not? So what if your family life looks different from everybody else’s? Genuinely, who cares? It’s your family. Raise it how you want to.”

His words settled anxious pieces of my heart. I hadn’t even known how freaked out I was until I’d verbalized my fears. Yet Charlie was right there with peace, waiting for me.

“You make a good point,” I told him.

“Yeah? Do I?”

“Yeah, you do.”

“We worry about a lot that hasn’t happened, you know? So much bullshit that probably won’t ever happen. If you’re happy with your life, Ada, why would you let anyone or anything steal that from you?”

“Ugh, when did you get so right about everything?”

He held out his spoon with a big bite of butter pecan on it. “I’m pretty sure it started somewhere around this. Let’s go. Give it a try.”

“No,” I said, laughing. “The flavors will clash.”

He brought it closer to my mouth. “Come on. I want to go two for two.”

When the ice cream actually bumped into my lips, I gave in and took the bite. Damn. It was so buttery. So pecan-y. So utterly comforting and nostalgic.

“I don’t know that you’re right,” I told him.

“Ada . . .”

“But you’re not wrong. At least.”

“Let’s write that down,” he teased. “Ada Kelly admitted that Charlie English is never wrong.”

Laughing, I elbowed him this time. “I didn’t say never wrong. I said you’re not wrong this one, very small, very insignificant time.”

“I heard never wrong,” he countered. “In fact, I’m very confident you said never wrong.” He stretched his neck and made a show of looking around. “Does everyone agree? Ada said Charlie is never wrong. Okay great.” He looked at me, his face as serious as could be. “They agree. You’re outnumbered.”

“You’re crazy.”

We finished our ice creams and tossed what trash we had into a nearby street bin. Then we were at the side entrance to the bar, and my hands and lips were sticky from the melted ice cream.

My keys were in my crossbody purse, but I wasn’t in a hurry to get them.

“I had fun with you tonight, Charlie.” It was the understatement of my life. I’d had the best night with him. The best first date with him. It wasn’t that he was a totally new person than the guy I’d had such a big crush on five years ago. It was that he was more of that person. More settled into who he was and what he believed and the small feelings I’d had for the man he was back then had burst into bright, overwhelming feelings for the man he was today.

“I had fun with you too, Ada.” He stepped closer. “I think we should do it more often, actually. Maybe make a regular habit of it.”

I leaned back against the brick of the building, the uneven surface scratching at the exposed skin on my back. I needed some support, though. The butterflies in my belly threatened to take flight—and take me with them. I needed something to hold on to. Something to keep me grounded. “Charlie English, are you asking me to be your girlfriend?”

Half his mouth kicked up into a sweet smile. “Yeah, let’s label it. Good

idea. It will be harder for you to wiggle out of it.”

“If I said yes to being your girlfriend, I wouldn’t want to wiggle out of it.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I’m not so sure. You’re already trying to wiggle out of it, and you haven’t even said yes yet.”

My cheeks flushed at his accusation. “That’s, uh, not true. I just want clear boundaries, you know? What does being a girlfriend even mean these days? Are there girlfriend expectations I should know about? Duties to perform? Is this because you want someone to do your laundry? Because you should know, I hardly ever do mine, so I’m probably not—”

He shushed me with his lips, kissing my questions away. And with them, all my sanity and reason too.

I responded without a single objection. My arms wrapped around his neck, and I kissed him back in a way that continued to shove away whatever I was talking about before. Far, far away.

His hands found the skin where the dress was cut out, and he dipped his fingers beneath the ties so he could be fully flush, skin to skin. “I’ve wanted to do that all night,” he breathed against my lips. “You’re too fucking sexy, Ada.”

I kissed him harder, bruising my lips against his. My fingers curled into his crisp shirt, wrinkling it, disheveling it. Charlie wasn’t the kind of guy who was all clean lines and smooth edges. I liked him unkempt. Messy. Rough and rugged, like uncharted terrain. Or the Wild West.

“Come up,” I invited, tugging him closer.

He smiled against my mouth. His fingers inched higher, pulling the ties of my dress loose. “I want to build something with you, Ade. Commitment. We’re not messing around this time. We’re going to know where we stand.”

I pulled back, utterly surprised. “You need to know where we stand?”

He nipped my bottom lip with his teeth and pressed me impossibly closer to his body. “Yeah. I do. And you do too. We don’t have to take the next step. If you want time. If you want to date for a while. Whatever you want, you can have it. But, Ada, if I go upstairs with you, this is a relationship. Officially. It’s you and me, and we’re working toward a future.”

Unfortunately, I forgot how to breathe. “Charlie, you want to think about a future? *Now?*”

He smiled, undeterred by my obvious freak-out. “Ada, I’ve *been* thinking about it. For longer than I’m willing to admit right now. So what I want you

to do is catch up.” He dropped his head, kissing the corner of my mouth. Then he trailed kisses along my jaw to my ear. He nibbled my lobe and dragged his tongue over the shell. I shivered against him, my fingers tightening their hold.

Keep him, my brain whispered.

Say yes, my body begged.

You promised yourself, my heart warned.

“There are other girls out there,” I reminded him. “Girls who make better girlfriends.”

“I already told you. I don’t want easy. I want happy.” He pulled back to meet my gaze. His eyes were glittering emeralds. “Ada, I want you.”

Then he kissed me again. But this time, it wasn’t desperate. It was slow and gentle and too deep. It was too much. He wasn’t kissing my mouth; he was worshiping it. God, he was savoring it.

I felt the difference. I felt the way it wasn’t desperate and needy like all the times before. It was . . . intentional. He wanted me to say yes to him. To his crazy demands. To a future I had never once considered.

But maybe, if I was really honest with myself, I’d wanted it too. Perhaps in the distant recesses of my mind, the locked boxes and secret places I preferred to avoid, maybe there I’d hoped . . . I’d daydreamed . . . I’d longed for something like this too.

We should definitely keep him, I told my brain.

Forever, I told my body.

We can trust him, I whispered to my heart. But oh, how I meant it.

“Okay,” I whispered, hardly believing myself. “Okay, Charlie. Yes.”

He smirked, but his eyes still searched my face. “All of it, Ada? The relationship. The sleepovers. The future?”

“You didn’t say anything about sleeping over before—”

He wrapped his arm around my back and lifted me off the ground. “You like it when I sleep over,” he reminded me. “Big spoon, little spoon.”

“Yeah, but I thought you hated being the little spoon.”

He pinched my side, and I squeaked in surprise. “She’s got jokes.”

“I have immunity,” I taunted. “Girlfriends get to say whatever they want.”

He hauled me toward the staircase door. “Fine, but boyfriends get to do whatever they want.”

A flutter spiraled through me. “Oh really?”

“Let me show you.”

He didn't have to invite me twice. I unlocked the door, and we hurried up the stairs, a tangle of hands and groping and stripping off clothes.

We kicked our shoes off inside the door and came together like opposite-facing magnets. I could have sworn sparks flew. Fireworks exploded. Stars were born in the universe somewhere.

God, why did this feel so right? So perfect?

There was no fumbling around with Charlie. He knew. Oh my God, he *knew*. My dress was already loosened, and with a deft tug at the sleeves, it fell to my ankles. I held out my hands, and he helped me step out of it. Then he pulled back to admire my body in the moonlight.

I was stronger than I had been five years ago. Fit and muscled in places I hadn't been before. His eyes darkened as he took me in, lingering on the still-full swell of my breasts and the small scrap of lace I called underwear.

His finger dipped inside the thin band and swept toward the apex of my thighs. I struggled to breathe evenly.

He was still dressed.

Stepping toward him, I unbuttoned his shirt slowly, savoring each new reveal of his chest, lightly sprinkled with a dusting of hair. When it was fully opened, I pushed it back from his shoulders, admiring that he was more muscled too. Firmer. Broader across the chest.

We'd been young before, early twenties. Now we were full-grown adults. And it showed in the best way.

He reached for the clasp of my bra and flicked it open. I let it fall off, tossing it aside.

“I shouldn't tell you how many times I've wanted to do this,” he murmured, his eyes lingering in a way that made my cheeks heat.

I licked my lips and reached for the button of his shorts. “Oh really?”

“Only every night we closed together.” He circled my nipple with his thumb. I shivered at the rougher-than-expected touch. “And every afternoon we opened together.” He tugged at my thong and pushed it down over my thighs, kneeling to help me step out of it. He stayed there, brushing sweet kisses over my hip. “And every time you used that smart mouth to tell me off.” His kisses moved lower. “And every time you laughed at one of my jokes or smiled at me when you forgot you hated me.” He gently pushed my hips back against the kitchen island and hooked my leg over his shoulder. “You've made me suffer, Ada.”

I trembled with anticipation, with desire . . . with nerves. “Charlie . . .”

He looked up at me. One of his hands gripped my ass in a way that was very familiar, very intimate. The other wrapped around my hip and held me still. “So I’m going to take my time.” His tongue drew a line along my inner thigh. “I’m going to fucking savor you.”

And then he did. His mouth found my most intimate place and sucked and licked and kissed until I could hardly stand. He supported my weight with his tight grasp, or I would have collapsed. He was too good at this.

No man should be this good at this.

I dug my hands into his hair, clutching the strands in a desperate kind of way as if he could help me find the ground again, help me find a center again. His tongue moved in lazy strokes, then delved inside. He adjusted my leg so he could go deeper. He knew what to do with his teeth in a multitasking kind of way that literally blew my mind.

He tipped me closer and closer toward an edge I was desperate to jump off. But he refused to let me rush. My legs were jelly by the time he finally released my hip and slowly, oh, so fucking slowly, slid two fingers deep inside. Then he sucked tightly on my bundle of nerves, and the darkness behind my closed eyelids exploded with a full-on fireworks show.

Every muscle in my body tightened and flexed. And my muscles shook with the hardest, fiercest release of my life. Charlie pumped his fingers into me slowly still, dragging out this free fall off the cliff for as long as my body could stand.

When I finally relaxed, I looked down to see him grinning up at me. “Girlfriend privileges,” he gloated, his mouth glistening.

“Is that so?” I asked, breathless.

He stood, and I thought we might be done for the night. Honestly, I was fine to go to bed after that.

Just kidding.

I wanted to order about twelve more, please and thank you.

But he was only just starting. He grabbed my ass with both hands and yanked me off the floor. I wrapped my legs around him to steady us both and felt his hardness beneath his unbuttoned shorts.

His mouth was on mine before I could ask any questions, and we were kissing and walking and groping all the way to the bed.

“I just got tested,” he said between dirty kisses I wouldn’t have allowed with any other man. “If you’re wondering. I’m clean.”

“Same,” I told him quickly since he hadn’t asked.

“Eliza, uh, mentioned you went together. So I assumed.”

I pulled back, trying not to smile. “Bold of you.”

He shrugged. “I’m a bold kind of guy.” Then he dropped me on the bed.

I squeaked, but he landed on top of me before I could make a full sound. His shorts had disappeared somewhere in the half second it took him to follow. And I felt the silky length of him against my thigh.

A delicious shiver of anticipation ran through me. I hadn’t let myself remember how good this was with him. It had been there in a detached kind of way. But memories of our nights together before flooded my mind. God, no wonder I’d been so disappointed things had ended. Charlie was good at this.

So fucking good.

He started with his fingers again, his thumb massaging just the right way. His mouth found my nipple and sucked and bit and tasted until my back arched off the bed. Then, just when I’d started to get close, he reached for a condom and slid it on.

“Where did that come from?” I asked, eyebrow raised.

He suppressed a smile. “Oh you know, I thought I better come prepared. I know how demanding you get.”

“How demanding I get?” I raised a second eyebrow. “Did you assume I’d say yes to the girlfriend shit all along? Did you plan this, Charlie? Did you seduce me into commitment?”

He covered me with his body, holding his weight above me with his arms. His biceps bulged. His stomach muscles rippled. God, he was too much.

Grinning down at me, he managed to shrug. “Better get it out in the open right now, I guess.” His knee nudged my left thigh to the side so he could position himself at my entrance. I shivered again. I was too sensitive. Too stimulated. He was going to make me come just like this. He leaned down and kissed me again.

“Get what out in the open?” I asked, eyes fluttering closed.

“I plan on seducing you whenever I want to get my way.”

My eyes snapped open. “You honestly think that will work?”

He plunged inside me, and my back arched off the bed as I adjusted to his full length. My fingers curled into his shoulders, and I cried out in pleasure and surprise.

He grinned again. “Yeah, Ade,” he said with his mouth pressed against

my temple. “I think it will work.”

And then we stopped talking because he started moving. He pushed my knee up toward my hip and kept me spread open to him. I was thankful for Pilates because fuck, he was turning this into the best kind of workout.

I was so close, but he made me wait for him. And by the time he was ready, I was whimpering and begging and gasping for breath.

We came together in a skydiving sensation—as if we’d just jumped out of a plane. I let the fall take me, wrapping my body around him as tightly as I could. He absorbed my tremors, and I absorbed his. And then we continued to lay like that while the ecstasy rolled off our bodies in waves of bliss and satisfaction.

When the pleasure had fully receded, we continued to stay like that. Holding each other. Holding on to each other.

I didn’t want to let go. My heart had never felt so whole as it did right this second. I had never felt so fully at peace. So completely myself. So . . . completely somebody else’s.

This hadn’t just been sex. Or the start of a relationship. This was something like healing. Something like putting broken pieces back together.

A tear leaked out of the corner of my eyes, but I didn’t acknowledge it. I couldn’t be bothered with it.

My feelings for Charlie were suddenly out in the open. Things that had been bottled up for years and years had been dumped out on the floor of my heart, accidentally spilled, or purposely emptied. And I was left gasping for breath because I didn’t know how potent they were. How strong and consuming and sharp.

Oh my God, I didn’t know I cared for him this much. I didn’t know I felt so strongly. Had needed this so badly. Wanted this so completely.

And now what? I’d agreed to a relationship with this man. I’d told him yes to everything he’d demanded.

But how could anyone survive feelings this intense?

How could one heart hold this much . . . this much . . . *fuck*, I didn’t know what word to use.

He pulled back eventually to look at me, and I stupidly realized I hadn’t leaked one tear; I’d leaked a goddamn river of them.

“Are you okay?” he murmured, his finger reverently tracing a line of tears down my temple.

I nodded. My stupid chin trembled. I cried harder. I hated my tear ducts.

They were actually trying to sabotage me. *The bastards.*

“Then why are you crying?”

I realized I had become one of those people who cried after sex. So the only thing left to do was throw myself out the window. Goodbye, pretty loft. Goodbye, happy life. Goodbye, stable boyfriend I’d had for less than an hour.

“I’m happy,” I told him in a whisper so my voice didn’t betray me too. “I think I’m really happy.”

His face lit with the most beautiful smile I’d ever seen. “Ada, you don’t cry ever. Let alone when you’re happy.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think I’ve ever been this happy before. It’s uncharted territory. So my body is being stupid.”

“Your body is perfect. Tears and all.” Then he kissed them away, and I could feel his gentle smile the entire time.

After another long while, he pulled back again and held his hand out to me. “I’m spending the night,” he announced. “In case you’re confused.”

“You already told me,” I said, finally getting a hold on my traitorous feelings. “Big spoon. You promised.”

He stood and pulled me with him. We stood at the edge of my bed with our arms wrapped around each other like we couldn’t let go for a second.

“I did promise,” he agreed. “And it’s not one I’m willing to break.”

We cleaned up and dressed in as little clothes as possible. He only had his underwear, and I found a tank and some undies that were a little more substantial than what I’d worn earlier. We crawled back into bed together, under the milky moonlight, in the loft he’d given up for me. And he kept his promise.

He held me against him the whole night. And in the morning, he rolled me on my back and reminded me how good he was at being a boyfriend. Then he held me again. And kissed me again. And my heart became something more than it was the night before. Something more solid. Something more whole.

Something that didn’t belong to me anymore.

eighteen

THE FOLLOWING SUNDAY AFTERNOON, I dragged Charlie with me to Adleigh's. She didn't know Charlie was coming with me, but I hoped he would be a pleasant addition to dinner with Dad.

One thing about Charlie, he could talk to anybody. He was going to upgrade all future parties for me or any situation where small talk was involved. I'd be able to introduce him to anyone who tried to talk to me and then fade into the background while he did his extrovert thing.

It was amazing.

And one of the many perks of being in a relationship. Which was still fucking weird.

As the week progressed, we'd kept our groping to a bare minimum at work—aka made sure no one was around before we attacked each other like horny bunnies in the walk-in, supply closet, and once . . . the girls' bathroom—I'd had to face the facts that Charlie had somehow convinced me to give him everything he wanted. Which was me and a big, old, committed relationship.

Oh! There was also last Thursday, when we'd been the last two at the bar and figured out other uses for my desk.

God, he was so hot.

Anyway, since being in a one-week-old relationship, I'd had to come face-to-face with how few relationships I'd actually had. Especially post Charlie. It wasn't that I'd been a total recluse. But Adleigh had been right. I hadn't let anyone get close. I hadn't opened my heart up to anyone.

It was becoming increasingly clear that this was all Charlie's fault. But not in the way I'd previously thought. He hadn't destroyed my heart and

ruined my trust in all men like I'd thought. Rather, some sick, stupid, but also weirdly wise part of me had been holding out for him.

And now I had him. And . . . and . . . I just wanted to keep having him. Not only physically but like this. More of our relationship. More sleepovers. More quick kisses at work. More flirty texts and secret smiles.

I wanted more of the way he brushed his fingers against mine every time we walked by each other. I wanted more of the way he backed me up with employees and his siblings. I wanted more of his late afternoon knocks on my door when he knew I was home from my workout and brought me lunch. I wanted more hugs that seemed to wrap my entire body up in his arms along with my soul and spirit and all the unseen parts of me. I wanted more Charlie. All the time Charlie.

But what was I supposed to do with this?

How did I survive liking someone this much?

What would I do if this didn't work out? If he showed up to work with another date just to send a message? If he decided I wasn't as great as he originally thought and would be better off without me?

The thought, *just the thought*, stole my breath. I wished I had a Steve I could talk to. I wished I had anyone I could talk to. But I was scared to tell Eliza. And Adleigh hadn't exactly been supportive the last time I brought it up. And my mom had never been able to see someone romantically again after what happened with Chris.

"Does your sister know I'm coming?" Charlie asked as I knocked on the apartment door.

"Nope."

He turned white. "Does she know we're dating?"

"Nuh-uh."

"Ada," he hissed.

"The wine will help," I assured him. "It's good that you brought the two bottles."

"I'm going to k—"

The door opened, saving me from imminent death apparently.

Adleigh was stunning as she stood in the doorway. She'd done her longest makeup routine and straightened her hair. She looked adorable in her short-sleeved white crop top beneath one of those flowy, stretchy jumpsuit things. She was precious.

"Adleigh, you look so pretty!" I tried to pull her into a hug, which was

probably her first red flag. I wasn't exactly an enthusiastic hugger.

She put her hands on my shoulder, stopping me. "Hi, Charlie."

He held up the wine caddy we'd picked up at the trendy shop around the corner. "I brought wine."

Her laser eyes swiveled back to me. "So the date went well?"

"Uh—"

"We're dating," Charlie said in a voice that sounded suspiciously like a gloat. "Boyfriend and girlfriend," he added. In case she didn't understand what dating meant. Smart.

Her eyes narrowed. "How mature of you."

I felt Charlie grinning behind me. I forgot the flipside of his extroverted personality was the actual devil. He loved to antagonize. And poke. He generally liked to aggravate people until they wanted to pull their hair out.

Of course, as his girlfriend, I found it adorable as long as it wasn't aimed at me. But, having been the recipient of that behavior before I was his girlfriend, I empathized with Adleigh's frustration.

"The date went very well," I told her, giving her the kind of puppy-dog eyes I hoped would convince her to hold off her full-scale interrogation till we were alone. "And yeah, we're together now. Hope it's okay I brought him. I want him to meet Chris."

Her eyes narrowed further. They were basically slits. Like an iguana. "You want a buffer."

"Guilty." I pushed by her. "Can we come in? It smells delicious."

"I brought wine," Charlie repeated.

Adleigh smothered a surprised laugh but finally stepped back and let us inside. The apartment she shared with Shane still bore strong signs of the single guy life, but she was slowly making her mark. Her cute kitchen equipment was making a home on the counters. And I noticed the table was set with real plates tonight.

The last time I'd been here, Shane only had paper plates. And the silverware had been a Solo cup stuffed with wrapped plasticware he'd stolen from various fast-food restaurants.

"Wow, Sis, you went all out." I picked through the kitchen, lifting lids and poking around. Adleigh had made berry and arugula salad, something with orzo and summer squash, and she'd grilled steaks. There was a sliced baguette and bruschetta I knew would be homemade on the table for an appetizer. And a homemade cheesecake cooling next to the refrigerator.

“I wanted it to be nice,” she said, slightly embarrassed.

“You should have let me help you.” I snagged a strawberry from the salad.

She raised her eyebrows. “Next time.”

She was a liar. She loved to cook. And my usual routine of protein shakes and microwavable Kodiak cakes was repulsive to her. In my defense, I drank a lot of whiskey. So it was more about balance than it was a healthy routine.

“Charlie, have you met Shane?” Adleigh asked when Shane emerged from the bedroom.

“Maybe once? Moving day? Although I’m not sure we were officially introduced,” Charlie said. He stuck out his hand, and Shane shook it. “Nice to see you.”

“Hi,” Shane said, sounding confused.

Adleigh filled in the blanks. “This is Charlie, Ada’s boyfriend, apparently.”

Shane’s eyes widened, and he looked at me like I’d performed a real-life miracle before him. “Ada, a boyfriend?”

I swiped another strawberry. “I know. Hard to believe.”

“No, it’s not that,” Shane said quickly. “I just didn’t know you were seeing anyone.”

“She got tricked into it,” Charlie explained, moving to stand next to me. I thought he wanted to be close to me, but he moved the salad out of reach. Rude.

“Tricked into it?” Shane echoed, more confused than ever.

Charlie put his hand to his heart. “Listen, she’s got needs. You know? But I’m not some floozy. If I’m going to put out, I deserve commitment.”

“Oh my God.” Well, it was a fun night, but probably time to go. And never see these people again. Which was too bad since one of them was my sister.

I tried to move away from him, but he grabbed me around the waist and buried his face in my neck until I was squirming, laughing, and struggling to breathe. When we came up for air, Shane and Adleigh stared at us like a sideshow at a circus.

“I’ve never seen your sister laugh before,” Shane said to Adleigh in a quiet, awed voice.

That wasn’t true.

But Adleigh looked just as confused. Hmm. Maybe it was true.

Charlie slid his arm around my waist and asked Shane what he did for a living. Shane slipped into the universal college pitch where college students immediately rattled off their future degree and their delusional hopes and dreams for their idyllic grown-up lives that never seem to consist of bills, budgets, or inflation. But Charlie was mildly into Duke basketball, so they hit it off immediately.

Eventually, Adleigh moved to the kitchen to open the wine we'd brought, and Charlie and Shane moved to the living room to look at . . . something related to sports.

I followed Adleigh because I would rather do anything else than talk basketball.

"So this is really happening?" she asked in a low murmur while she poured us both a glass of red. "You and Charlie are really a thing?"

"Yep." I took a sip to hide my dopey smile.

She made a face. "I want to be mad at you for being so stupid, but you look so damn happy."

"Do I?"

She gave me a pointed look. "You haven't stopped smiling since you came in the door."

"He's different, Ad. He's . . . really committed."

"Honestly, it's kind of obvious." Her expression relaxed some, and she turned thoughtful. "I mean, let's be honest, there's always been something between you two. But now, I don't know, instead of the constant tension, there's a strong bond or something."

My cheeks flushed with the compliment. And I didn't even know if she meant it as one. But she was right. There had always been something between us, but now, we finally got to put a name to it. We finally got to treat it with the respect and dedication it deserved.

"I like him, Sis. I mean, I really like him. I think I always have."

She hid her smile behind a sip of wine. "I think you more than like him, babe."

Before I could deny her subtle accusation, our phones dinged with a simultaneous text. I pulled mine out of my pocket to find a group text to both of us from Chris. My stomach dropped to my toes. And one look at Adleigh's pale face sent it nosediving to the basement of this building.

I knew what was coming. My entire body braced for it before I'd even opened the text.

Adleigh's face crumpled with disappointment, and I was injected with the sick, crushing feeling of being right.

Chris: *Hey, girls. Wish I could make it tonight, but I've been called up to Indiana for a few months. Job starts tomorrow morning, so I had to get going. Was good catching up with you. I'll reach out next time I'm in town. Stay safe . . .*

Stay safe? *Stay safe?*

I wanted to chuck my phone against the wall and punch something. But one look at Adleigh's tear-streaked face made me pull it together.

I wasn't a hugger, but fuck this. I stepped up to Adleigh and pulled her into a tight embrace. She wept on my shoulder, sobbing and shaking and grieving in a way I was unfortunately well acquainted with.

"What happened?" Shane demanded over my shoulder.

Adleigh attempted to explain but only managed high-pitched squeaking sounds that didn't make sense.

"What?" Shane demanded.

I turned us both around and said, "Our dad left town. Again. He texted to let us know he couldn't make it. Which was actually more thoughtful than usual."

Adleigh cried harder.

The boys looked at us with real fear in their eyes. What were men supposed to do with hysterical women, after all?

"Do you mind if we hide out in the bedroom for a bit?" I asked Shane, already tugging Adleigh along with me.

"By all means," he said, gesturing toward the door.

"Okay, take your time," Charlie called from behind me. "I'll just be out here . . . with your sister's boyfriend."

I didn't bother responding. He would be fine. He lived for this stuff.

Adleigh and I collapsed on their tidy bed. We immediately moved into sister positions. Her head resting on my outstretched bicep, tucked into my side like she was the smaller human. I played with her hair. And she cried into my side until she had no tears left to shed.

Then she sniffled.

Adleigh and I had done this countless times before. When mean girls excluded her from a pool party in middle school. When a boy had broken her heart her junior year of high school. And then again her senior year. When Mom moved away. When she'd failed out of her first biology class in college

and had to retake it over the summer. When she and Shane had fought the first time. And now this. When her dad had left her the second time. With only a “stay safe” to keep her heart warm at night.

I was so angry. *So fucking angry.*

My heart wasn't particularly dented, especially given how low my expectations of him were, but Adleigh's? She deserved so much more, and Chris's *sadly expected* behavior totally pissed me off. *How. Dare. He.*

“He's broken, Ad,” I said after a long time of lying there, thinking about the right thing to say. I trembled with fury and half-cocked plans for revenge, but she needed me to hold it together. And so I was going to do that for her. This was the revenge I was going to mete out—I was going to help my sister recover, walk her through the worst of this trauma, and then make sure she knew how to fill up her life with people worthy of her love. “This is what he's done. What he's always done. He doesn't know how to be different.”

“But I don't understand why he doesn't want us in his life.” Her voice was muffled behind her hands, thick with raw emotion. “We're awesome, Ade. We're like the coolest. Why wouldn't he want to be around us?”

I pulled on something Charlie had said to me. Something that had healed me more than anything else. “Because it's not really about us at all. We're disposable to him because there's something wrong inside him. It has nothing to do with us. It never has, and it never will. His choices are his own. And while we have to carry the weight of them and make them somehow fit in our own lives, they were his to make, his to regret. He didn't leave town because he met his two daughters and realized he would never be as cool as them. He left town because he doesn't know how to fix the brokenness inside him.”

She relaxed next to me, melting into the bed and my arm and the gentle grace of those words. Uncovering her face, she threw an arm around my middle.

“When did you get so smart?” she whispered.

I breathed a little deeper now that she sounded less fragile. “I've been on a weird healing journey lately. Honestly, I wasn't even looking for it. But . . . here we are.”

She laughed lightly. “Is that why Charlie's okay now?”

“Yeah,” I said carefully. “Yeah, actually. I think it is why.”

We were quiet for a couple more minutes before she let out a watery sigh. “I hate that you were right about him. God, I wanted you to be so fucking wrong.”

Tears pricked at my eyes, but I decided to save them for later. “Just so you know, I hate that I was right too. God, I would have given anything to be wrong about him.”

Another few minutes of silence. Another few soul steps toward shedding this horrible hurt. “What now?”

Taking a deep, settling breath, I said, “Well, you get to decide that on your own. For me? I’m going to treat Chris with the same consideration he’s shown me. And I will think about him as much as he’s thought about me.” I looked down at her and gave her a tiny, sad smile. “I’ve made room in my life for the people I love and who love me back. And since he doesn’t do either, there’s not room in my life for him. And I’m okay with that because I have the best tribe and people surrounding me. My life is whole, full, and so happy without him. And I don’t think I’m willing to upset that peace by shoving him into it when he has so clearly shown me he is not interested in being a part of it.” I leaned over and kissed the top of her head. She wasn’t only the big, bad grown-up with a real job and amazing talent in the kitchen. She was my little sister who needed me and looked up to me and sometimes still wanted to be me. Or at least borrow my jeans. “But, Ad, you have to figure that out for yourself. You’re the only person who gets to decide how much room he takes up in your life. If he reaches out to you again, and you want to continue a relationship with him, do it. Make space for him. But also know who he is and what he’s like. And if he never reaches out to you again, I’ll help you be okay with that too. It would have been nice to have a present dad who loved us and wanted good things for us. But it’s okay that we don’t have that too. Because we have each other. And Mom. And everyone else. We’re so loved, Ad. And if you ever forget that, I’ll be delighted to remind you. As many times as you need to hear it before you believe it.”

She sniffled next to me and squeezed me in a tight hug. “I love you too, Ada. So much. You’re the most amazing person I know. And I would be lost without you.”

“I know,” I told her, laughing lightly.

We emerged from the bedroom a few minutes later. We decided to forget Chris and feast without him. Charlie and I stayed late, sharing the bottles of wine and laughing over good food and even better conversation.

By the time we called an Uber, Shane and Charlie were old friends, and Adleigh and I got to laugh at their antics. We hugged goodbye and promised to do it again soon. Charlie rode back with me to the loft, where I asked him

to come upstairs.

Not to fool around, though. I asked him to stay the night because I didn't want to be alone.

And when we crawled into bed and he scooped me up in his warm, strong arms, I finally let go of trying to hold it together. I cried and wept and grieved the truth I knew and the truth I didn't want to face until I had to.

Charlie held me the entire time. He whispered encouraging, healing words and reminded me of all the good and solid people in the world. And for the first time in my life, I realized that Chris and Charlie were nothing alike.

They'd both left me. But Chris had left a little girl who didn't deserve to be abandoned. He'd walked away from his family because he was too selfish to see they needed him.

Charlie had walked away from me because he'd seen how his selfishness would hurt me. But then he'd worked on himself until he was a man worthy of my time and commitment. And when he'd come back, he'd done it with the intention to stay.

Chris had refused to face himself. He'd refused to mature. He'd refused to make anyone else a priority other than himself.

Charlie had faced himself head-on and hated the man that he'd let himself become. So he'd spent every day since putting that old self to death. He'd stepped into a better life, a better wholeness, a better happiness.

Charlie wasn't anything like Chris.

And as I lay there in his arms while the fresh betrayal settled in my heart, I let fresh healing wash over me too. Charlie wasn't Chris. And he wasn't going to leave me because he got bored or scared or inconvenienced.

Charlie was here to stay. And I realized I was going to let him.

nineteen

“HEY.” Charlie’s smooth, settled voice met me as I walked into the bar from the kitchen. The tone was so intimate, so . . . sultry . . . so . . .

“Hey, Ada.” Eliza’s voice was the opposite and so chipper it actually hurt my ears.

I blinked back to life from the puddle of useless goo I’d accidentally melted into when I saw Charlie standing behind the bar smiling at me like he couldn’t believe I was real and attempted a smile for Eliza.

She flinched.

Do you know what I loved about Charlie? He didn’t act like my expressions were jump scares.

Shit, did I just say loved?

“Hi.” Eliza flinched again. But to be fair, I’d shouted at her. “Hey.” A little bit softer now. “Hi.” Okay, finally a normal volume. Nothing to see here, Eliza. Everything was totally fine and platonic.

“Are you okay?” She clearly did not need my response. It was obvious, at least to her, that I was having a stroke.

“I’m great.” Why did that sound so suspicious? “Fantastic, actually. Never better.”

“Okay, what is going on with you?” she demanded. “Like for real, are you okay? Is Adleigh okay? Are you quitting?”

“What? No. I’m just . . . uh . . .” Sleeping with your brother. “Nervous. For Lola.”

Eliza puffed out her cheeks and then released a slow breath while her eyes bugged out. “Right? Will stayed home tonight. He says he’s on baby watch. Pretty sure he’s playing video games while Lola snores her way to the

finish line. But it's so crazy. A baby will be here any day now."

"It's so exciting. I love babies."

She raised an eyebrow. "You do?"

"No. I don't know why I said that."

She laughed. "Probably because we're supposed to love babies. It's like the social norm or something."

"You don't love babies, either?"

She put her hand protectively on her stomach while she thought about it. "I suppose I'll love my baby."

Huh. I supposed I would love mine too. I looked at Charlie, who was watching me interact with his sister with an amused half grin on his face. What if we had a kid? What if I had Charlie English's baby?

Would I tolerate that baby?

My hands were suddenly resting on my stomach too. Oh my God, I wouldn't just tolerate that baby. I would love that baby.

Maybe I *was* having a stroke.

"What are you ladies talking about?" Charlie asked. We'd lapsed into silence, both of us standing there with our hands protectively over our empty wombs. Like total freaks.

I let Eliza answer because I was not about to tell Charlie I was thinking about having his baby. Knowing him, I'd probably be pregnant by morning.

"Lola having the baby," Eliza said. She was a champ at conversation. Good for her. "It's weird, no?"

Charlie laughed. "It's happening."

"Wait, what?" Eliza and I asked in unison.

"It's literally happening. Right now. Will just sent a text to the group chat. They're on their way to the hospital. Lola's water broke."

"Oh my God!" Eliza squealed.

I reached across the bar and grabbed Charlie's hand. "Oh my God, you're going to be an uncle!" He grinned at me, which made me remember Eliza for some reason. I turned and threw my arms around her. She reciprocated by stiffening and not hugging me back. "And you're going to be an aunt!"

That was when I remembered we'd never hugged before.

I let her go and jumped back.

She looked back and forth between Charlie and me. But landed on me. "Seriously, Ada, are you okay?"

I opted for a thumbs-up. Because nothing said mentally stable more than

a stalwart thumb in the air.

She shook her head. “Okay, well, I’m going to get as much done as I can so I can go see the baby as soon as we’re allowed up.”

Once she was in the kitchen, I skirted the bar and threw my arms around Charlie’s neck. We didn’t open for thirty minutes, so we had a minute alone.

He rubbed my back with his hands and held me close. “Good job playing it cool,” he murmured against my hair.

I pulled back and scowled at him. “It’s so weird because I’m so good at everything else.”

He laughed a real, deep, lovely sound. “I know. I love it. I’ve never seen you do something so badly before. It’s the best gift I think you could have ever given me.”

“We should tell them, yeah?”

He nodded. “Sure. As soon as you’re ready.”

A spiraling feeling of dread brought out goose bumps all over my skin. “Let’s just not like . . . I don’t want to overshadow the baby or anything. We’ll just let it simmer for a bit. We can tell them . . .”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he reminded me. “You’re not going to get out of this because you think we’ll break up and you’ll be able to avoid the whole conversation.”

“No, yeah, I know.” I was really bad at lying. *I mean, gosh, Ada, can’t you tell just one little half truth?* For Pete’s sake.

“You sound really confident.”

I kissed him. It was the fastest way to shut him up.

When I pulled away, he held my hands, reluctant to let me go. “Want to ride to the hospital together? Either tonight after work or tomorrow morning?”

“You’ll have to spend the night then, probably,” I said, sounding thoughtful. “I mean, it only makes sense.”

He nodded, blinding me with his full breathtaking smile. “You’re right. It does make sense.”

When I turned around to track down Eliza again and actually do work this time, he slapped my ass so loudly the sound reverberated through the bar. Or at least it felt like it did.

I screamed a sound I was not proud of.

“Charlie!”

He just kept smiling.

I would have his handprint on my butt for a week, which was probably what he wanted.

The baby arrived a little after midnight. We got the text along with a squishy-faced picture of an adorable baby girl named Eloise Edison English.

The alliteration was a little much for me, but it was cute that they'd named the baby after Lola's brother.

We'd celebrated at Craft with a free round of champagne for everyone. And we'd all taken a moment as a staff to toast the happy family in the kitchen.

Eliza had been hanging around so we could celebrate together, but as soon as the baby was announced, she took off for the hospital. Will had mentioned they'd hoped for privacy for a while. But Lola's family was basically circling the birthing suite like vultures at this point, so Eliza planned to sneak in with them.

Charlie and I closed down the bar together. We'd really become the best team Craft had. I wasn't sure Will and Eliza had noticed. But we'd gotten so good at closing together that they'd stopped sticking around for it.

So even though they didn't notice how good we were at our jobs, the fact that they could spend so much time with their significant others was proof enough for me.

"Maybe you should text Will before we head up. It's super late," I suggested as I climbed onto the back of Charlie's vintage motorcycle. I'd only been on the back of this thing a couple of times, but I knew it was special to him. And one of the only things his dad had left him that he actually liked.

Aside from the money for the bar.

"I already did," Charlie said, handing me a helmet. "He asked me to bring him food."

Ah. The packed saddlebag with sandwiches, sides, and a bottle of whiskey made sense now.

The hospital was quiet when we arrived. Visiting hours were definitely over. But leave it to Charlie to charm the night nurse at the reception desk and get us a badge. He also handed over one of Case's gourmet sandwiches. So that helped.

We crept through the sleeping maternity ward with quiet nurses tiptoeing from room to room only to find Lola's suite alive with activity. Her brother was there along with Eliza. Her dad was tucked into a chair in the corner,

snoring. But the lights were on, and Lola was wide awake with Will at her side holding baby Eloise.

The nurse at the computer in the room seemed exasperated by the circus of loved ones.

“I brought food,” Charlie declared.

The nurse looked at us and rolled her eyes. “How did you people get in here?”

Lola laughed. She seemed delirious but oh, so happy. Actually, they both did. It kind of hurt to look directly at them. They were glowing. Radiant. There was so much love and joy between them it leaped off their bodies and infected the rest of the room.

“We own a bar,” Will explained to the tired nurse. “We live odd hours.”

She turned to him with her hand on her hip. “You’re talking to a night shift regular. But that doesn’t mean I throw parties in the middle of the night.”

Will shrugged. “We just had a baby. It’s the first on both sides.”

She pointed her freshly sanitized finger at him. “All right, but if you get too loud, I’m kicking all these people out and banning them from this ward. Then they’ll have to wait till you go home to see you again.”

“Noted,” he told her.

Once she left, Eliza, Edison, Charlie, and I all crept quietly over to the bed to admire the sweet newborn. She looked so perfect as she slept in her daddy’s arms. Perfect long, dark lashes against ivory skin. Perfect little button nose. Perfect rosebud lips. Perfect shock of dark, curly hair.

I had never had baby fever before, so I was unprepared for the potency of a brand new baby. I had to lean against Charlie to keep from falling face-first into her sweet, pink perfection and demanding one of my own.

Charlie put his arm around my shoulders and reached out with his free hand to lightly brush her swaddled toes. “She’s perfect, brother.”

“Isn’t she?” Lola echoed.

Will had never looked this happy before. “I didn’t know it was possible to love someone so much. I mean, I only just met her.”

We laughed. “Well, yeah, but you made her. So that probably means you can skip over the formalities,” Edison suggested.

“Good point.”

We moved to wash our hands so we could all take turns holding her. Eliza went first before passing her to Edison. And then Charlie, who only held her

for a couple of minutes before he handed her off to me.

I sat down on the vinyl couch and tucked her into the crook of my arm. Life was so amazing. This tiny little human didn't exist nine months ago. And now she was here, in the world. She had a whole big life ahead of her. She would grow up, get a job and family, and be a part of history. But right now, she was tiny and precious, and everything lovely about life and love and family.

Charlie sat down next to me and put his arm around me again. He slid close to admire the baby. I could tell he was uncomfortable holding her, but he was trying. And that made me want to give him his own to practice with.

Oh my God, what was wrong with me?

"She's so small," he whispered. "I didn't know anything could be this small."

"And so perfect," I agreed.

He leaned closer still and pressed a kiss to my temple. The kiss said so much. It reminded me of the future he'd promised me. It reminded me of how far the two of us had come. Of how sweet things were between us. Of how good they were going to get.

And of the entire room full of people who had stopped talking and moving and doing anything but watching us as we forgot they were here at all.

"What the fuck is going on?" Eliza whisper-hissed in the calmest but maddest voice ever. "What is this, Charlie? What are you doing to our poor Ada?"

Charlie and I slowly looked from Eloise to his two very angry siblings. Lola and Edison were only slightly bemused. And Lola's dad continued to snore in the corner.

"Uh . . ." Nobody could say I wasn't eloquent. Honestly, I could have been a politician in another life. Silver-tongued, some might say.

Charlie's hand flexed against my shoulder. I could tell he was nervous, but he kept his voice soft and confident. "We're seeing each other." He glanced at me, a ghost of a smile playing on his lips. "We're seeing each other a lot actually."

Will stomped over and took Eloise out of my arms. As if what was happening here was too offensive for his baby to witness.

"Charlie, I'm going to kill you," Will threatened. Lola sat up and took the baby back from him. To be fair, he was threatening murder. "Dude, you

fucking know better.”

“You know we can’t lose Ada,” Eliza hissed, still whisper-shouting. “How many times have we asked you to leave her alone? How many times have we made it clear that we can’t run the bar without her?”

“You just have to stick your foot in it, don’t you?” Will growled. “You have to fucking step in it. You can’t help yourself.”

Charlie’s jaw ticked, but he kept his cool. I couldn’t, though. I couldn’t let this go on.

“Wait,” I said quietly, holding up a hand. I’d never had to whisper to argue with people before. It added a super strange dynamic to the conversation and forced everyone to listen closely instead of jumping into speak over everyone else. “Charlie didn’t like . . . trick me into dating him. I know what I’m doing. I chose this.”

“Ada,” Eliza said, sounding as disappointed as humanly possible. “You, of all people, know better.”

I shook my head, feeling foolish for how I’d behaved in the past but also knowing there wasn’t this thing until we’d become these people. Charlie and I couldn’t have stood by this decision five years ago. Even one year ago.

“I did know better,” I confessed, taking Charlie’s hand and holding it tightly. “For a long time, I knew better. I stayed away from Charlie. I let him do his own thing. I . . . I kept my distance. But Charlie isn’t the same guy he was five years ago. He’s not even the same guy he was eighteen months ago. And I think if you guys paid attention to him at all instead of just writing him off because you think you know everything, you would see the kind of man he’s become. You would see how amazing and capable he is. You would see that I’m not settling for someone who doesn’t deserve me . . . I’m lucky enough to be with a man who makes me want to be worthy of him.”

Eliza and Will blinked at me. Even Lola looked like she was struggling to understand what I was saying.

“Ada,” Will pleaded. “Please don’t—”

“And please,” I said, cutting him off in a voice just above a whisper, “don’t assume I don’t know my own mind. Or that I’m not perfectly capable of choosing what’s best for my life and the bar. I have never abandoned Craft. No matter how bad it’s been.” I pointed a finger at Will. “And trust me, it hasn’t always been Charlie’s fault. So don’t make assumptions about me or about Charlie or about what I will or will not do based on totally fictional outcomes you’ve made up in your own mind.” I took a settling breath and

met each of their sincere gazes. Then I dropped my voice to a whisper again. “I’m happy. Like really, really happy. Happy in a way I genuinely didn’t know was possible. So back off and let Charlie and me figure this out on our own.”

Eliza looked wounded, and Will still looked disoriented. It was a big day for him, though, so he deserved an extra layer of empathy.

“We’ll go,” I told Lola. “I’m so sorry about—”

She laughed. “Oh, you don’t have to explain them to me. I super get it.”

I laughed too, then. “Noted.”

Edison stepped forward and waved goodbye. “Well, I’m personally rooting for you guys,” he said, reminding me so much of Charlie I could only shake my head. “And hey, I don’t know you at all”—he looked at Charlie—“but you sound like a really great guy. Congrats on the, uh, girlfriend.”

“Thanks,” Charlie told him, shaking his hand. “She’s a big deal. I’m a lucky guy.”

“I’ll call you later,” I told Eliza. “Please don’t stay mad at me for this.”

“I’m not mad,” she pouted, sounding mad. “I’m processing.”

“Love you guys,” I told them. “Congrats again.”

“Don’t call me tomorrow,” Charlie warned them. “Unless I’m FaceTiming my niece, I don’t want to hear from you assholes. Listen to Ada and get your shit together.”

Eliza’s face contorted with anger, and she lunged at him. “Oh, that’s real rich, Ch—”

We closed the door behind us before she could whisper him into submission. Not that she could have, but she wasn’t likely to run out of steam anytime soon.

We slunk back outside and stayed quiet all the way home. Not that there was a lot of space to chat on the motorcycle. But the quietness felt more than atmospheric. It was bone deep. Heart deep.

Charlie stayed the night again, although I felt his tug to leave me be. To give me space. But I held his hand as he walked me to my door and tugged him inside.

It was after four in the morning. We were tired. And overstimulated. And there was a lot to process from the night.

But I threw my arms around his waist and held him for a long time. Just like that. Just in my kitchen. Just the two of us.

“The only regret I have is that I didn’t trust you sooner,” I told him, still

whispering. “Don’t let your brother and sister get in your head. They don’t know anything.”

His rumble of laughter vibrated through me. “I’m used to their shit. I was worried they’d gotten in your head.”

I shook my head against his chest. “You’re more to me than their opinions.” I looked up at him and smiled. “You’re more to me than anything else I’ve ever known. I don’t know how you did this, Charlie, but it’s not even a conversation for me. I choose you. I want you. For now. And the future. And however long this lasts.”

He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear and looked down at me with the same kind of adoration and wonder Will had stared at his baby with. Only obviously, it was a little different because I wasn’t his child. Weird. Moving on.

“Forever, Ada,” he murmured. “This lasts forever. I love you, if you haven’t figured that out yet. I am in love with you. I have been for almost as long as I’ve known you. I loved you through being an asshole. I loved you through you knowing and treating me like an asshole. I loved you through figuring my shit out. And I love you still.” He swallowed, and his gaze intensified. “I will live my whole life loving you if you let me.”

I nodded. Tears started falling again. And I tried not to hate him because we were currently confessing our love to each other, but the waterworks were consistently his fault.

“Yes,” I begged, pleaded, commanded. “Yes, I’ll let you. I love you too. I don’t know when it happened or how it happened. But dammit, it did happen.” I sniffled. He hugged me closer. “And it’s the best thing that has happened to me.”

He kissed me then. In a way that he had never kissed me before because his lips had just confessed love. They’d promised forever. They’d given me a future I wanted but hadn’t known to ask for.

It was different from when we’d throw caution to the wind when we were younger. It was different from recently, when we were testing the waters and seeing how close we could get without spooking the other.

This was the kiss of permanent, solid, eternal things. The kind of kiss that promised there would be hard moments and good moments and growth moments, but in the end, it would always lead us back to a whole, infinite kind of happiness.

Because that was what Charlie was to me. He was my pursuit of

happiness. My life worth living. My whole heart.

And I was that safe, gentle landing place for him too.

It wouldn't be perfect. Could never be perfect. But it was beautiful. He was beautiful. And together we would create a life that was beautiful.

We fell together onto my bed and got lost in all the ways we could bring each other bliss. And then, when it was over, and my body was weak from release and joy and the long day, I crawled into his arms and let him hold me.

And I knew I would end every long day like this for the rest of my hard, happy, beautiful life.

twenty

THE FOLLOWING WEDNESDAY, I braced myself for work. Over the past week, Charlie and I enjoyed running the show by ourselves. Will had taken several weeks off to stay at home with Lola and baby Eloise, and Jonah and Eliza had been gone over the weekend for their trip to Charleston.

We made a fantastic pair. I couldn't remember the bar ever running this smoothly before. In fact, the atmosphere had gotten so chill that Ally recruited two of her college friends. Our waitstaff roster was starting to fill out. I'd conducted both interviews yesterday, and both ladies had been on time and seemed competent.

The optimistic side of my brain—which was admittedly small and only barely fit the description—had started to realize if these girls worked out, I might be able to get out of waitressing a few nights a week.

I could fill more of a manager role. I could do the job the English siblings had hired and paid me for. I could focus on the second location without feeling so overwhelmed I wanted to puke.

I didn't want to say that love healed everything because that was terribly cheesy, and I was nothing if not staunchly anti-cheese, but when it came to this family . . . love had healed a lot of festering wounds.

These three siblings weren't the same people who opened this bar. They'd grown up over the years, fallen in love, softened, found new priorities, and learned to stay out of each other's way. I wasn't so naive to believe they'd never have problems again, but for the first time since I'd started working here, Craft felt like a positive work environment.

Now I just had to fix things with Eliza. We hadn't spoken since our whisper fight in the maternity ward. I cringed every time I thought about it.

Eliza and I had never gotten in a fight before. Never really disagreed about anything.

There had been times when I'd stepped between her and one of her brothers, but she'd always understood why I was willing to throw myself between their punches. And she'd never gotten mad at me.

Charlie was at the bar when I walked out of the kitchen. We were the first ones here. He'd texted to let me know exactly where he'd be so he didn't accidentally scare the bejeezus out of me.

Sure, he was being one hundred percent sarcastic, and I could already tell he was full of the devil tonight, but I couldn't help but smile anyway.

I liked when he was mischievous. I liked when he teased me. I liked when his flirty barbs turned to bedroom eyes and secret smiles and then became something hot and naked and just the two of us.

I hoped he always flirted with me like this.

"Hey," he said with one of those just-for-me smirks.

I walked right up to him and threw my arms around his neck. He'd slept over last night, and we'd only been apart for an hour or so, but the hug felt necessary. So did the subsequent kisses. And the lip biting. And the boob grab he snuck in.

"You're beautiful tonight," he murmured.

I wasn't wearing anything special—a black ruffly miniskirt and a black crop tank with a white collar. I looked like a goth tennis player, but I was living my Wednesday Addams era.

"You always say that," I told him, fixing the collar to his shirt I'd just messed up.

His green eyes captured my gaze. "It's always true."

Just then, music from the kitchen drifted onto the main floor. Case was here. But instead of screaming death metal, it was tolerable alt-rock at an even more tolerable decibel.

Charlie's eyebrows rose. "What's going on with him?"

"Maybe he realized how much we hated his music?"

Charlie shook his head. "That's not it. He's known for a long time how much we hate his music."

He had a point. "I better go investigate. Make sure everything's okay."

I turned around, and Charlie took the opportunity to smack my ass. I'd been expecting it, though, so he got my hand instead of my butt.

"You're no fun," he called after me.

“You’re going to have to get faster than that, English.” My smile was gloating because, honestly, he thought he could outsmart me? Not a chance.

In the kitchen, Case and Joey leaned over a Styrofoam freezer box I knew would be full of one of their various protein orders. They were talking in low tones and laughing. Sure, it was about flank steak, but . . .

“Hey, guys,” I greeted loudly since they hadn’t heard me come in. They jumped apart and whirled around. Joey clutched her heart. Case scowled at me.

Okay, I got the appeal. Charlie wasn’t a total sadist.

“Fuck, Ada,” Case growled. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“You guys good?” I asked, waiting for them to confess their undying love for each other.

“We’re good,” Case bit out.

Joey laughed. “Yeah, we’re good.”

“Eliza will be back tonight,” I told them placidly. “In case there’s anything you need to share with HR.”

Case leaned back against the stainless-steel counter and shot Joey a smirky look. “I think something’s in the water here. Everyone seems to be infected.”

She rolled her eyes, but her cheeks blushed bright red. “We’ve barely moved from hostile territory to friends. Don’t let him fool you.”

“Sure, sure,” I offered magnanimously. “Friends. That’s wise.”

Case’s entire expression seemed to glitter like there was a sparkly filter over his face. If they were friends, they were friends with benefits.

“Don’t let him get away with anything,” I told Joey. “Case better work his ass off for this *friendship*.”

Joey laughed. “Noted.”

Some of the sparkle disappeared off his face. “Oh, I’m the one who’s gotta work?” Then he stood up taller. “I’ll have you both know I’m a prize. She would be so lucky.”

“To have your friendship,” I filled in. Because he’d forgotten that detail.

Case and Joey nodded in unison. “Right, for my friendship.”

I headed for the office. “You guys make a great pair of friends. I’m really happy for you.”

“I blame the water,” Case called after me.

As I settled into some new hire paperwork, an hour went by while I listened to the friends flirt in the kitchen. Maybe something was in the water.

When had we all fallen in love?

And to be fair, Case and Joey might be only friends for now. But something had happened between them since she started. Plus, they were well-suited. Not only professionally but personality-wise too.

Also, when did I just sit here and stare at my goofy reflection on the computer screen? And when had I started smiling like this? It was . . . more normal looking than ever.

I shut my laptop and shivered. Yikes. The Ice Queen was in there somewhere. I needed to let her resurface. *Ugh, could you imagine if I was suddenly sweet and likable?*

Gross.

Charlie suddenly burst into the office with a cocktail in one hand and his phone in the other.

“Here,” he rushed to say. “Try this.” He shoved the creamy orange cocktail with an egg white froth in my direction.

“What?”

“It’s an orange creamsicle,” he explained. “For summer.”

“Uh . . .”

He poked his head into the kitchen, suddenly agitated. I sipped from the glass to ease his nerves.

“It’s delicious,” I told him quickly because it was. But also because he seemed more nervous than usual over my cocktail opinion. I took another drink. “Okay, more than delicious. Oh my God, that’s so good. Charlie, we need to put this on the permanent menu.”

“I know,” he agreed, then poked his head into the kitchen again.

“Wait, are you nervous about the drink?”

He spared the cocktail a confused look before shaking his head. “Oh, sorry, no. The drink is for you. I thought you might like it. Also, I’m adding it to the menu tonight, so I thought you should know. Don’t worry, Ally’s changing the sign.” He seemed to settle into himself a bit more and some of the nervous energy buzzing around him dissipated. “You were right about that by the way. She’s a natural. Way better than I am.”

“I’ve seen you sign your name,” I told him. “It’s startling.”

He grinned at me.

“So was this all you’re worried about?”

His expression sobered. “No. Will is on his way. So is Eliza. They’re calling a sibling meeting to discuss”—he pointed between the two of us

—“what to do about this.”

I narrowed my eyes. “They’re going to fire me, aren’t they? And I only just moved in.”

He laughed. “They’re not going to kick you out of the loft, Ade. And if they did, I would just move in, and then what could they do? Nothing.”

He wasn’t doing anything but solving a hypothetical problem, but he’d said it so confidently. So . . . easily. “I’m sorry, what?”

“What?”

“Wait, what?”

His low rumble of laughter wrapped around my skin like a tight hug. “Oh, the moving-in thing?”

I gripped the armrests with both hands, trying to keep my balance even though I was sitting down. “Yeah, I mean, you just threw it out there.” Like a baseball. But I hadn’t been expecting it, so I didn’t try to catch it. And it hit me in the face. Of course, I didn’t tell him that last part because I didn’t think he’d appreciate having our relationship future compared to a fastball to the face.

He walked over to me, shifting his energy from nervous and aggressive to gentle, tender, and careful. Setting his hands on my hands, he leaned over me and pressed a sweet kiss to my forehead.

“When we started dating, and I told you I wanted it to be for real, what did you think I meant?”

I leaned back so I could meet his serious gaze. “That you were serious about trying this out with me. If I remember correctly, you made a big deal about being boyfriend and girlfriend.”

His smile was soft, adoring. “And when I said I wanted this to last, how long did you expect to indulge me with your presence?”

I bit back a laugh at his tone and his words and the nervousness bubbling up inside me. “How was I supposed to know, Charlie? I was trying to seduce you. I wasn’t exactly paying attention to the fine print.”

He kissed the corner of my mouth. “You probably should have read the contract all the way through. Maybe gotten a second opinion. Maybe taken a cold shower instead of agreeing to all my demands.”

I scowled at him. He used to run away from this expression, but now his eyes sparkled, and he kissed my frown lines instead. “Tell me already.”

“Forever, Ada Kelly.” He kissed the corner of my eye. “Forever. I love you. I can’t wait to keep loving you. You are my pursuit of happiness.”

“I love you too,” I whispered, my words choked by emotion and tears I held back with my bare mental hands.

He kissed me fully on the mouth. He tasted like creamsicle and whiskey, and I wanted to tear his clothes off right here. When he pulled back, his expression was alive with love. With forever. With happiness. “I signed a six-month lease. I have about five months left. We can talk again then.”

Before I could figure out how to respond or how to close my mouth, Will walked into the office with a baby strapped to the front of him in a light-pink wrap. In contrast, he wore baggy gray sweats, a thin black Craft T-shirt, and slides. His hair was mussed, and his usually short-cropped beard was longer and unkempt. Also, he was wearing glasses—which I had never seen him wear. They looked like those drugstore readers you could pick up next to the pain meds and feminine hygiene products.

Eloise’s smoochy face was peaceful as she slept against his chest. She was the picture of perfection. Will was . . . not.

And there, on his shoulders, was a streak of white something I identified as a spit-up stain.

Charlie spun around, equally as shocked to see Will like this as I was. He crossed his arms smugly and said, “Oh, how the mighty have fallen.”

“Shhh,” Will snapped, looking slightly manic. “Don’t wake her. She’ll want to eat. And I don’t have the right parts.”

“Where’s Lola?” I asked in a gentle voice.

“Sleeping. She hasn’t . . . uh, we haven’t . . . slept in a—” His words were cut off by a violent yawn. Then he collapsed in Eliza’s chair and scrubbed his face awkwardly, careful not to bump Eloise.

“She’s so precious,” I cooed.

“She’s a devil,” Will croaked. “And she hates us. And sleep.”

Charlie and I shared an identical smile.

Eliza walked in next. Her gaze fell straight on Will. “You have a baby. In a bar.” Then she looked at me, and we both said, “*Sweet Home Alabama!*” referencing Reese Witherspoon’s iconic line.

Before Will could respond, she turned to me, held up her left ring finger newly adorned with a gigantic diamond, and beamed.

I pounced on her. Our argument be damned. “OH MY GOD!”

We hugged. And it wasn’t awkward or weird or anything but wonderful. She was engaged to the man she loved most in the world. And who cared what she’d said before because this was the most perfect moment of her life,

and I couldn't help but be over the moon for her.

She started crying. Then I started crying. Then she said, "I'm so sorry, Ada. I shouldn't have said any of that. I love you so much, and I want the best for you, and I was just surprised—"

"No, I'm the sorry one," I gushed back. "I should have told you first. I should have come straight to you. But I was nervous you wouldn't understand. And I—"

"Will you forgive me?" she pleaded. "I need you to be my maid of honor, and if you're mad at me, I know you'll plan the most vindictive bachelorette —"

My gasp cut her off. "I would never." We pulled back from each other and burst into laughter. "Okay, maybe I would. But no, I'm not mad. I love you. I want the best for you. I am so freaking happy for you!"

Her eyes watered again, and she pulled her ring finger from my admiring grip and laid her palms on my shoulders. "I'm so happy for you too. And don't worry, Charlie will never hurt you. Because if he does, I will personally murder him. So I know, I just know, you guys will have the best happily ever after." Her grin widened, but in a psychotic kind of way, and her gaze moved to Charlie. "Mostly because he should be very, very afraid of me."

Charlie held up his hands in surrender. "I am."

"Wait," Will said, seeming to have just woken up. Had he dozed off while Eliza and I were hugging and squealing? "You're not mad at Ada anymore?"

Eliza laughed. "How could I be? They've loved each other forever. We tried to keep them apart, dear brother, but here we are. And honestly, who are we to stand in the way of true love?"

He blinked at her. "If you're not mad at her anymore, then why am I here?"

Eliza wiggled her ring at him. "I'm engaged. I want to celebrate with the people I love. Jonah's parking the car, but we brought champagne."

"We have champagne," Will said, still not fully understanding. "We're a bar."

"This is better champagne," she said confidently.

"I can't drink it," Will explained groggily. "I have a baby who didn't come assembled right. She doesn't know how to sleep through the night. Why is she like this?"

"Well, too bad for you," Eliza said, not sounding sad at all. "More for the

rest of us, then.”

Charlie said, “What about you, Will? You okay with Ada and me? It doesn’t matter if you’re not, but now’s the time to say something.”

Will had slunk back in the chair again so his head rested on the back. He’d already closed his eyes, but he managed a drowsy, “Ada, no matter what happens, you’re not allowed to quit. And Charlie, don’t be an asshole.”

Charlie laughed. “You know, if I marry her, she’ll be tied to the bar forever.”

Eliza and I shared a bug-eyed look, but Will just stuck his pointer finger in the air, kept his eyes closed, and mumbled, “That’s a great idea. Do that.”

The rest of the night was all celebration and laughter and fun. Jonah followed through with great champagne, and he and Eliza hung out at the bar while Charlie and I managed everything, and Will and Eloise slept in the office.

Hours later, after Charlie and I had closed everything down and turned off the lights, I grabbed his hand and led him back to the loft. My heart was so big and so full and so bursting with happiness, I hardly recognized it.

Was this really my life?

Had I really filled it with people I love and a man I adored and a job I was passionate about? Had I really healed from past pain and forgiven Charlie and learned how to be a better, more whole version of myself?

Did this great big smile really belong to me?

Charlie pulled me into his arms the second the loft door closed behind us. We stood there hugging each other while moonlight spilled in through the tall windows and the refrigerator hummed hello.

“I love you, Ada Kelly,” he said against my mouth.

And even now, after I’d said it so many times, I still marveled in the promise of, “I love you too, Charlie English. Forever.”

epilogue

Six Months Later . . .

“SHE’S FUCKING BEAUTIFUL.” The high praise came from Will. And he was not talking about his new bride of three months or his wiggly daughter who was home with Grandma tonight. Nor was he talking about his engaged sister who was set to be married in nine months. Nor was he talking about me—although I deserved most of the credit.

Or at least *some* of the credit.

No, Will had set his eyes on the brand-new, second location of Craft Cocktails and Beer. He’d been busy lately with his new baby, recent wedding, honeymoon, and travel commitments as Lola tried to breastfeed a growing human, help Will grow the Durham bar empire he was set on, and help her family run their very successful, very time-consuming multimillion-dollar business.

Eliza too had been off planning her wedding, helping Jonah grow his liquor rep business, and trying to hide that she was in the early stages of pregnancy. But the girl couldn’t keep water down at this point, so I wasn’t sure who she was trying to hide it from.

Charlie and I had been left to do most of the grunt work. And managed to keep the original location thriving. Not that we minded the autonomy or workload. Maybe the other couples could have handled both responsibilities by themselves, but I doubted they would have been as seamless and efficient

as we were.

It was a teensy bit ironic that Charlie was now the hardest working Craft sibling of the three. He woke up early, he got to work, and he did the damn thing. Every single day. Even when the bar was closed, Charlie still hustled to make it as successful as possible.

I mean, did he have me to thank for his success? Maybe not. Maybe he'd already been doing the work on his own. But I would never tell him that.

Besides, we were better together. Which was so natural and obvious yet somehow still surprising too.

Like a gift I got to open every single day.

He linked our hands together and tugged me toward the bar. Tonight, we were opening the second location doors for the first time and hosting an intimate gathering. The real soft opening was slated for next weekend, but this evening, we were gathering our closest friends and breaking in the taps, opening the good booze, and celebrating success, friendship, and the love of family.

“Isn’t she?” I said to Will as I slid onto a barstool while Charlie moved to his favorite spot—behind the bar.

“She’s fucking expensive too,” Charlie grumbled. “She better make a lot of money.”

“She will. Of course she will. She’s got us behind the wheel, doesn’t she?” Eliza sat down next to me, her face tinged green beneath her expertly applied makeup that did nothing to hide how sick she felt. “Can I just have a tonic with lime?” she rasped doing her best not to gag. “I think I’m coming down with something.”

Jonah took a seat on the other side of her doing his best not to hide the fact that he was totally freaking out about the pregnancy. He was the one who wanted a baby close in age to Will and Lola’s little girl—Eliza had told me. But parenthood was no joke. And poor Jonah didn’t know what to do with Eliza. Especially since she was apparently insisting on keeping it a secret.

“Good thing what you have isn’t contagious,” I murmured beneath my breath.

She shot me a knowing side-eye. “That’s what you think. Be careful out there, Ade.”

I accepted the old-fashioned from Charlie made just the way I liked it, and took a big gulp, enjoying the burn and my pregnancy-free life. “Mm-hmm.”

Case and Joey walked through the doors next. Case whistled at the shiny new digs but kept his arm firmly around his girlfriend. “Do we get to pick where we want to work?” he asked.

“You do,” Will told him. “But ladies first and Joey already called dibs.”

Case glared at her, offended. “You what?”

She put her hand to her heart. “What? You don’t want me to have the best?”

Caught between his relationship rock and a hard place, he narrowed his eyes. “I want you to be comfortable, baby. Change can be stressful. Also, this clientele is going to be a bitch. I can already tell.” He made a show of looking out through the giant glass garage doors that led to iced-over patios that would one day look out on a lake, green space, and walking trails. “This whole side of town smells gluten free and oat milk-y.”

Joey laughed. “You might be right about that.”

Miles and Ally walked in next. Then a few of our other servers, along with friends from all the different couples. Soon, the place buzzed with friendly chatter. We’d catered our favorite barbecue restaurant and a whole variety of cheesecakes, and there were plenty of drink stations around the space.

Charlie and I had spent the day setting up, and I could see on his face how proud he was to have pulled it off. He leaned across the bar and smiled at me.

“They seem happy,” he said.

“Yeah, free food and booze tend to do that.”

“Good point.” He reached for my hand. “It looks nice, though, Ade. We did a good thing.”

“We did a great thing,” I assured him.

“I like working with you,” he added.

“Yeah, I like working with you too.”

“I like sleeping with you too.”

I felt myself get warm all over. “There are perks to sharing a bed.”

“Maybe we should—”

Before he finished his sentence, Steve walked in with his wife, Martha. We waved at them while they worked their way toward us. We’d gotten close as couples over the last several months. They were often our double date partners, and they’d even convinced us to start playing pickleball with them on Saturday mornings.

Martha was as lovely as Steve. And I loved spending time with them.

Charlie couldn't have picked better friends.

We said our hellos, and Charlie made them drinks. They marveled at the similarities between the two bars. Charlie and I had enjoyed nearly free rein on the design choices, and we'd gone with dark woods and golden sconces that complemented the crystal chandeliers. The walls were covered in very cool wallpaper—all dark navy blues with insect patterns, such as beetles, honeybees, and dragonflies—in muted pinks, purples, reds and greens. The chairs and barstools were covered in matching velvet tones and the bar itself was detailed with inlaid crystals and gold fixtures.

There were obvious differences between the two bars, but the dark wood and old-school ambiance tied them together. They were clearly siblings but not identical twins.

Like the Englishes themselves.

Eventually, we sent Steve and Martha off to explore the bar. And once they were gone, Charlie took my hand again and pulled my attention back to him.

“Like I was saying—”

My sister walked in with Shane at her side. Her face lit up the moment she saw me, and she started hustling over to us.

“Oh, she has news,” I told Charlie.

She threw her arms around me the second she got close enough. Shane and Charlie greeted each other with a fist bump, but Adleigh kept my attention held hostage.

“Briggs just texted,” she said in a rush.

“Did he decide?” My heart dropped to my stomach. I'd told myself over and over since we'd reached out to our half brother in Oklahoma that I would be okay with wherever he chose to go to college. He was late in deciding, and I knew this was a big deal to him. He wanted to play football at the collegiate level. And he was good enough that he had several options.

But Adleigh and I had been cheering for one of those choices in particular.

“He's going to be a Tarheel,” she gushed, tears filling her eyes. “He's moving here. This summer.”

Now my eyes were full of pesky tears. “A Tarheel? Really? Is he excited?”

She nodded. “He says he can't wait.”

“Can you believe that?” Shane asked, sounding disappointed. “Chapel

Hill over Duke?”

Charlie clasped him on the shoulder. “At least it’s not basketball, man.”

Shane eyed him. “Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

Charlie shrugged. I pulled out my phone and sent dancing GIFs to Briggs in quick succession to show him how excited I was.

As soon as Adleigh and I had come to terms with Chris exiting our lives for a second time, we decided to reach out to our half brother. We’d had a hunch he didn’t know we existed, and we’d been right. Chris had never mentioned us to his son or Brigg’s mom, Andrea.

They were a little standoffish at first. They’d confessed later they had expected us to want something from them—the way Chris always did. It took several months to build trust between us.

Then in November, Adleigh, Shane, Charlie, and I had flown to Oklahoma to cheer Briggs on for his quarterfinal playoff game. We’d burned off some of our awkward edges, spent quality time together, and cheered him on for the win. It had been the best weekend, and we’d only grown closer since.

His college choice meant he cared as much about our relationship as we did. Not that UNC at Chapel Hill was a bad choice, but he’d had options. I had a hunch Andrea had something to do with it too. She was nervous about him heading off to college. Landing only twenty minutes away from his doting, protective, North Carolina-native older sisters would ease her fears.

Charlie pulled out champagne, and we sent Briggs a selfie of the four of us toasting him and his choice. It was still weird to think about this adorable kid being my brother. Like, it still hadn’t fully settled into my brain yet. But it was a good surprise. A good gift from Chris. He might not have meant for it to be this way, but he didn’t get a say in any of our lives anymore. We’d shut that door. And it felt surprisingly good to be able to close it with certainty.

Of course his choice still hurt. Some days it was a dull roar. And others a shiv straight to my gut. But I knew what it was to be well loved. And I knew how to fill my life with people I could love well. His betrayal would always hurt, but my life was so very good without him in it. And that was the reality I chose to celebrate.

Plus, despite him, the three of us had all turned out to be pretty decent people.

When Adleigh and Shane had wandered off to explore the rest of the bar,

it was an hour later. Our vision for a small, intimate gathering of all the people who loved and supported Craft had turned into quite the party. Mostly because there were so many people who loved and supported Craft. And the English siblings. The people the English siblings loved.

This wasn't just a bar scene, it was a family. A good, wonderful, chosen family who sometimes had issues, but all the time loved each other.

I turned back to Charlie, ready to shout over the din and suggest that maybe we sneak out early. But words failed me. Literally fled my brain. Straight-up evacuated.

There was a box sitting on the bar top. It was robin's egg blue. And square. And it had a hinge. And it was a very recognizable size. And was I hyperventilating?

Somebody had started sweating. But it couldn't be me. I would never sweat at a moment like this.

Charlie nudged the box toward me with his pointer finger, the way he'd nudged a hundred shots and cocktails across the bar over the years. "Do I need to seduce you into saying yes?" he asked, half his mouth lifted in a smirk. "Because I'm willing to do the work if I have to. No matter how many hours, nights, weeks it takes, I'm happy to—"

"Yes," I whispered. Yelled? Shrieked? "Yes."

The other side of his mouth joined the first. "You haven't even looked at it yet."

I shook my head. "Doesn't matter. It's a yes, even if it's a Ring Pop."

His eyebrows drew down. "Well, that would have been cheaper. I probably should have asked your opinion first."

My eyebrows went the opposite direction, straight into my hairline. "How much was it?"

His eyes were twinkling and his smile was as wide as I'd ever seen it as he opened the box. "I mean, I can't afford my apartment anymore, if that tells you something."

I lost my breath at the sparkling blue diamond ring glimmering in the box. "That's okay," I told him quickly, unwilling to part with the ring now that I'd seen it. "You can move in with me."

He laughed and slid the ring onto my finger. Then he came around the bar and pulled me into his arms. "I was hoping you'd say that."

The party—who I now realized had turned to watch the entire show, record us, and release celebratory balloons into the tin ceiling—erupted in

cheers and congratulatory shouts.

“I love you, Ada Kelly,” he whispered against my temple while our friends clapped and whistled. “You are the thing that makes me the happiest. And I know our life together will be one endless pursuit of the best happiness.”

Tears leaked out of my eyes and for the first time in, well, forever, I couldn't find enough cares to be worried about them. “I love you too, Charlie. Always.” And of course, I meant I always had. And I always would.

Then, there was nothing left to do except spend the rest of the night, and the rest of our lives, celebrating this simple, hard, easy, incredible, beautiful happiness we built together.

coming soon

Look for Rachel's next contemporary romance, *Wild Black Briar*, coming 2024.

Cassidy Tate fell in love with Beau Lawson when she was sixteen-years-old. He was the dreamy cowboy she grew up admiring. She was the sweet wildflower he wanted to make his wife.

Until she left him without a goodbye or an explanation. She disappeared without a trace, leaving him heartbroken and jaded.

Not that she was any better off herself. But what Beau didn't know couldn't hurt him. Or at least that's what Cassidy told herself as she ran away to build a life somewhere—anywhere—else and bury her secrets as deep down as possible.

Now, almost a decade later, Cassidy has been called home to Black Briar Ranch. Her family needs her and she can no longer come up with excuses to stay away. If only she can avoid Beau while she's home. If only she can keep the past buried. If only she can keep those secrets from spilling out and ruining everything.

Cassidy is at peace with losing the love of her life. If only Beau was willing to let her go.

Wild Black Briar is a stand-alone, small-town, second chance contemporary romance.

thank you

To the reader,

Thank you for reading Promises We Break after Dark! In 2019, I stepped away from writing for a bit to deal with some personal issues. The first book in this series, Decisions We Make after Midnight, is the book that got me back into writing after a hard season of being away. And now this book, the third and final book in the series, made me feel at home again. It's the kind of story I love to tell. The kind of story that reminds me how much I love writing and publishing. The kind of characters who make me want to keep creating and telling stories. Thank you for taking this journey with me. And thank you, especially, if you've stuck with me since before 2019, during my time away, and as I worked to gain my footing once again. Your support, your encouragement, your love for these characters and the love stories I tell mean everything to me. I wouldn't be here without you.

dear bloggers

To the bloggers,

I will forever be moved by the kindness of others—but most especially when that kindness effects me so personally. Thank you for taking time out of your life to love these characters and this story. Your support is a beautiful gift I won't take for granted. Thank you for putting up with me, for using your platform to share my stories with others, and for your selfless consistency that is the foundation of the publishing industry. I can't wait to work with you again soon.

everyone else

To everyone else,

Zach, my kids, my mom, and my girl gang who constantly love and support me when I try to juggle too many responsibilities and end up dropping them all. Thank you to Zach especially, who for some crazy reason, continues to believe in me and push me toward my dreams. And to my kids who put up with so much—forgotten permission slips, takeout suppers for weeks at a time, pushed sleepovers “until I’m done with this deadline,” and always, always, always being late. You guys are the absolute best. But if you’re actually reading this book and these acknowledgments, I’ve done something wrong. To my mom and my mother-in-law, who are always up for swooping in and saving the day at the last minute when I’m supposed to travel and have totally forgotten I need someone to stay with my kids. (and dogs.) And to my girl gang who is always there with an encouraging text, a genuine prayer, and a Taco Tuesday when I need to breathe. I am embarrassingly rich with good people in my life.

To Marion, Jenny, and Karen, thank you so very much for all your insights, edits and senses of humor. This story is what it is today because of you. You push me to write better, make fuller, more complete heroes, and give these characters the best possible story. You are all so incredibly smart. I am blown away by all that you see and catch, and especially, all that you fix. Thank you for continuing to put up with my justs, and evens, and bigs. And my total incompetence with ellipses.

And to my great, gracious God. I don't understand Your plans. Or Your ways. And I don't need to. Because I understand that You are good. And that Your plans for me are good. This life I've been given is total chaos. And joy. And the greatest gift. Thank you for relentless riches that look like people I love deeply, a dream job that continues to push me, and a life that is so bubbling over with joy.

about the author

Rachel Higginson was born and raised in Nebraska, but spent her college years traveling the world. She fell in love with Eastern Europe, Paris, Indian Food and the beautiful beaches of Sri Lanka, but came back home to marry her high school sweetheart. Now she spends her days raising their growing family. She's obsessed with *The X-Files* and Cherry Coke.

Other Books Out Now by Rachel Higginson:

Love and Decay, Season One

Volume One

Volume Two

Love and Decay, Season Two

Volume Three

Volume Four

Volume Five

Love and Decay, Season Three

Volume Six

Volume Seven

Volume Eight

Love and Decay: Revolution, Season One

Volume One

Volume Two

Volume Three

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The Reluctant King (The Star-Crossed Series, Book 5)

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Crown of One Hundred Kings

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City of Never

Bet on Love Series

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Bet on Me (An NA Contemporary Romance)

Every Wrong Reason

The Five Stages of Falling in Love

Trailer Park Heart

Never Fall in Love with a Rockstar

The Opposite of You (Opposites Attract Series)

The Difference Between Us (Opposites Attract Series)

The Problem with Him (Opposites Attract Series)

The Something About Her (Opposites Attract Series)

Decisions We Make After Midnight (Decisions in Durham)

Secrets We Whisper in the Moonlight (Decisions in Durham)

Promises We Break After Dark (Decisions in Durham)

Constant (The Confidence Game Duet)

Consequence (The Confidence Game Duet)

Connect with Rachel on her website at:

<http://www.authorrachelhigginson.com/>

Or on Instagram:

[@mywritsdntbite](https://www.instagram.com/mywritsdntbite)

Or on her Facebook page:
[Rachel Higginson](#)

sneak peak

Please enjoy this excerpt from *The Five Stages of Falling in Love*, a stand alone, second chance, contemporary romance.

the five stages of falling in love

“HEY, THERE SHE IS,” Grady looked up at me from his bed, his eyes smiling even while his mouth barely mimicked the emotion.

“Hey, you,” I called back. The lights had been dimmed after the last nurse checked his vitals and the TV was on, but muted. “Where are the kiddos? I was only in the cafeteria for ten minutes.”

Grady winked at me playfully, “My mother took them.” I melted a little at his roguish expression. It was the same look that made me agree to a date with him our junior year of college, it was the same look that made me fall in love with him- the same one that made me agree to have our second baby boy when I would have been just fine to stop after Blake, Abby and Lucy.

“Oh, yeah?” I walked over to the hospital bed and sat down next to him. He immediately reached for me, pulling me against him with weak arms. I snuggled back into his chest, so that my head rested on his thin shoulder and our bodies fit side by side on the narrow bed. One of my legs didn’t make it and hung off awkwardly. But I didn’t mind. It was just perfect to lie next to the love of my life, my husband.

“Oh, yeah,” he growled suggestively. “You know what that means?” He walked his free hand up my arm and gave my breast a wicked squeeze. “When the kids are away, the grownups get to play...”

“You are so bad,” I swatted him- or at least made the motion of swatting at him, since I was too afraid to hurt him.

“God, I don’t remember the last time I got laid,” he groaned next to me and I felt the rumble of his words against my side.

“Tell me about it, sport,” I sighed. “I could use a nice, hard-”

“Elizabeth Carlson,” he cut in on a surprised laugh. “When did you get

such a dirty mouth?”

“I think you’ve known about my dirty mouth for quite some time, Grady,” I flirted back. We’d been serious for so long it was nice to flirt with him, to remember that we didn’t just love each other, but we liked each other too.

He grunted in satisfaction. “That I have. I think your dirty mouth had something to do with Lucy’s conception.”

I blushed. Even after all these years, he knew exactly what to say to me. “Maybe,” I conceded.

“Probably,” he chuckled, his breath hot on my ear.

We lay there in silence for a while, enjoying the feel of each other, watching the silent TV screen flicker in front of our eyes. It was perfect- or as close to perfect as we had felt in a long time.

“Dance with me, Lizzy,” Grady whispered after a while. I’d thought maybe he fell asleep; the drugs were so hard on his system that he was usually in and out of consciousness. This was actually the most coherent he’d been in a month.

“Okay,” I agreed. “It’s the first thing we’ll do when you get out. We’ll have your mom come over and babysit, you can take me to dinner at Pazio’s and we’ll go dancing after.”

“Mmm, that sounds nice,” he agreed. “You love Pazio’s. That’s a guaranteed get-lucky night for me.”

“Baby,” I crooned. “As soon as I get you back home, you’re going to have guaranteed get-lucky nights for at least a month, maybe two.”

“I don’t want to wait. I’m tired of waiting. Dance with me now, Lizzy,” Grady pressed, this time sounding serious.

“Babe, after your treatment this morning, you can barely stand up right now. Honestly, how are you going to put all those sweet moves on me?” I wondered where this sudden urge to dance, of all things, was coming from.

“Lizzy, I am a sick man. I haven’t slept in my own bed in four months, I haven’t seen my wife naked in just as long, and I am tired of lying in this bed. I want to dance with you. Will you please, pretty please, dance with me?”

I nodded at first because I was incapable of speech. He was right. I hated that he was right, but I hated that he was sick even more.

“Alright, Grady, I’ll dance with you,” I finally whispered.

“I knew I’d get my way,” he croaked smugly.

I slipped off the bed and turned around to face my husband and help him

to his feet. His once full head of auburn hair was now bald, reflecting the pallid color of his skin. His face was haggard showing dark black circles under his eyes, chapped lips and pale cheeks. He was still as tall as he'd ever been, but instead of the toned muscles and thick frame he once boasted, he was depressingly skinny and weak, his shoulders perpetually slumped.

The only thing that remained the same were his eyes; they were the same dark green eyes I'd fallen in love with ten years ago. They were still full of life, still full of mischief even when his body wasn't. They held life while the rest of him drowned in exhaustion from fighting this stupid sickness.

"You always get your way," I grumbled while I helped him up from the bed.

"Only with you," he shot back on a pant after successfully standing. "And only because you love me."

"That I do," I agreed. Grady's hands slipped around my waist and he clutched my sides in an effort to stay standing.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, but didn't allow any weight to press down on him. We maneuvered our bodies around his IV and monitors. It was awkward, but we managed.

"What should we listen to?" I asked, while I pulled out my cell phone and turned it to my iTunes app.

"You know what song. There is no other song when we're dancing," he reminded me on a faint smile.

"You must be horny," I laughed. "You're getting awfully romantic."

"Just trying to keep this fire alive, Babe," he pulled me closer and I held back the flood of tears that threatened to spill over.

I turned on *The Way You Look Tonight*- the Frank Sinatra version- and we swayed slowly back and forth. Frank sang the soft, beautiful lyrics with the help of a full band, while the music drifted around us over the constant beeping and whirring of medical machines. This was the song we thought of as ours, the first song we'd danced to at our wedding, the song he still made the band at Pazio's play on our anniversary each year.

"This fire is very much alive," I informed him sternly. I lay my forehead against his shoulder and inhaled him. He didn't smell like himself anymore, he was full of chemo drugs and smelled like hospital soap and detergent, but he was still Grady. And even though he barely resembled the man I had fallen so irrevocably in love with, he still *felt* like Grady.

He was still *my* Grady.

“It is, isn’t it?” He whispered. I could feel how weak he was growing, how tired this was making him, but still he clung to me and held me close. When my favorite verse came on, he leaned his head down and whispered in a broken voice along with Frank, “There is nothing for me, but to love you. And the way you look tonight.”

Silent tears streamed down my face with truths I wasn’t ready to admit to myself and fears that were too horrifying to even think. This was the man I loved with every fiber of my being- the only man I’d ever loved. The only man I’d *ever love*.

He’d made me fall in love with him before I was old enough to drink legally, then he’d convinced me to marry him before I even graduated from college. He knocked me up a year later, and didn’t stop until we had four wild rug rats that all had his red hair and his emerald green eyes. He’d encouraged me to finish my undergrad degree, and then to continue on to grad school while I was pregnant, nursing and then pregnant again. He went to bed every night with socks on and then took them off sometime in the middle of the night, leaving them obnoxiously tucked in between our sheets. He could never find his wallet, or his keys, and when there was hair to grow he always forgot to shave.

And he drove me crazy most of the time.

But he was mine.

He was my husband.

And now he was sick.

“I do love you, Lizzy,” he murmured against my hair. “I’ll always love you, even when I’m dead and gone.”

“Which won’t be for at least fifty more years,” I reminded him on a sob.

He ignored me, “You love me back, don’t you?”

“Yes, I love you back,” I whispered with so much emotion the words stuck in my throat. “But you already knew that.”

“Maybe,” he conceded gently. “But I will never, ever get tired of hearing it.”

I sniffled against him, staining his hospital gown with my mascara and eye liner. “That’s a good thing, because you’re going to be hearing it for a very long time.”

He didn’t respond, just kept swaying with me back and forth until the song ended. He asked me to play it again and I did, three more times. By the end of the fourth, he was too tired to stand. I laid him back in bed and helped

him adjust the IV and monitor again so that it didn't bother him, then pulled the sheet over his cold toes.

His eyes were closed and I thought he'd fallen asleep, so I bent down to kiss his forehead. He stirred at my touch and reached out to cup my face with his un-needled arm. I looked down into his depthless green eyes and fell in love with him all over again.

It was as simple as that.

It had always been that simple for him to get me to fall in love with him.

"You are the most beautiful thing that ever happened to me, Lizzy." His voice was broken and scratchy and a tear slid out from the corner of each of his eyes.

My chin trembled at his words because I knew what he was doing and I hated it, I hated every part of it. I shook my head, trying to get him to stop but he held my gaze and just kept going.

"You are. And you have made my life good, and worth living. You have made me love more than any man has ever known how to love. I didn't know this kind of happiness existed in real life, Liz, and you're the one that gave it to me. I couldn't be more thankful for the life we've shared together. I couldn't be more thankful for you."

"Oh, Grady, please—"

"Lizzy," he said in his sternest voice that he only used when I'd maxed out a credit card. "Whatever happens, whatever happens to me, I want you to keep giving this gift to other people." I opened my mouth to vehemently object to everything he was saying but he silenced me with a cold finger on my lips. "I didn't say go marry the first man you find. Hell, I'm not even talking about another man. But I don't want this light to die with me. I don't want you to forget how happy you make other people just because you might not feel happy. Even if I don't, Lizzy, I want you to go on living. Promise me that."

But I shook my head, "No." I wasn't going to promise him that. I couldn't make myself. And it was unfair of him to ask me that.

"Please, Sweetheart, for me?" His deep, green eyes glossed over with emotion and I could physically feel how painful this was for him to ask me. He didn't want this anymore than I did.

I found myself nodding, while I sniffled back a stream of tears. "Okay," I whispered. "I promise."

He broke out into a genuine smile then, his thumb rubbing back and forth

along my jaw. “Now tell me you love me, one more time.”

“I love you, Grady,” I murmured, leaning into his touch and savoring this moment with him.

“And I will always, always love you, Lizzy.”

His eyes finally fluttered shut and his hand dropped from my face. His vitals remained the same, so I knew he was just sleeping. I crawled into bed with him, gently shifting him so that I could lie on my side, in the nook of his arm and lay my hand on his chest. I did this often; I liked to feel the beat of his heart underneath my hand. It had stopped too many times before, for me to trust its reliability. My husband was a very sick man, and had been for a while now.

Tonight was different though. Tonight, Grady was lucid and coherent, he'd found enough energy to stand up and dance with me, to tell me he loved me. Tonight could have been a turn for the better.

But it wasn't- because only a few hours later, Grady's heart stopped for the third time during his adult life, and this time it never restarted.

stage 1

Stage One: Denial

Not every story has a happy ending. Some only hold a happy beginning.

This is my story. I'd already met my soul mate, fallen in love with him and lived our happily ever after.

This story is not about me falling in love.

This story is about me learning to live again after love left my life.

Research shows there are five stages of grief. I don't know what this means for me, as I was stuck, nice and hard, in step one.

Denial.

I knew, acutely, that I was still in stage one.

I knew this because every time I walked in the house, I wandered around aimlessly looking for Grady. I still picked up my phone to check if he texted or called throughout the day. I looked for him in a crowded room, got the urge to call him from the grocery store just to make sure I had everything he needed, and reached for him in the middle of the night.

Acceptance- the last stage of grief- was firmly and forever out of my reach, and I often looked forward to it with longing. Why? Because Denial was a *son of a bitch* and it hurt more than *anything* when I realized he wasn't in the house, wouldn't be calling me, wasn't where I wanted him to be, didn't need anything from the store and would never lie next to me in bed again. The grief, fresh and suffocating, would cascade over me and I was forced to suffer through the unbearable pain of losing my husband all over again.

Denial *sucked*.

But it was where I was right now. I was living in Denial.

six months after grady died

I SNUGGLED BACK into the cradle of his body while his arms wrapped around me tightly. He buried his scruffy face against the nape of my neck and I sighed contentedly. We fit perfectly together, but then again we always had his big spoon nestled up against my little spoon.

“It’s your turn,” he rumbled against my skin with that deep morning voice I would always drink in.

“No,” I argued half-heartedly. “It’s always my turn.”

“But you’re so good at it,” he teased.

I giggled, “It’s one of my many talents, pouring cereal into bowls, making juice cups. I might just take this show on the road.”

He laughed behind me and his chest shook with the movement. I pushed back into him, loving the feel of his hard, firm chest against my back. He was so hot first thing in the morning, his whole body radiated warmth.

His hand splayed out across my belly possessively and he pressed a kiss just below my ear. I could feel his lips through my tangle of hair and the tickle of his breath which wasn’t all that pleasant first thing in the morning, but it was Grady and it was familiar.

“It’s probably time we had another one, don’t you think?” His hand rubbed a circle around my stomach and I could feel him vibrating happily with the thought.

“Grady, we already have three,” I reminded him on a laugh. “If we have another one, people are going to start thinking we’re weird.”

“No, they won’t,” he soothed. “They might get an idea of how fertile you are, but they won’t think we’re weird.”

I snorted a laugh. “They already think we’re weird.”

“Then we don’t want to disappoint them,” he murmured. His hand slid up my chest and cupped my breast, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“You are obsessed with those things,” I grinned.

“Definitely,” he agreed quickly, while continuing to fondle me. “What do you think, Lizzy? Will you give me another baby?”

I was getting wrapped up in the way he was touching me, the way he was caressing me with so much love I thought I would burst. “I’ll think about it,” I finally conceded, knowing he would get his way- knowing I always let him have his way.

“While you’re mulling it over, we should probably practice. I mean, we want to get this right when the time comes.” Grady trailed kisses down the column of my throat and I moaned my consent.

I rolled over to kiss him on the mouth.

But he wasn’t there.

My arm swung wide and hit cold, empty mattress.

I opened my eyes and stared at the slow moving ceiling fan over my head. The early morning light streamed in through cracks in my closed blinds and I let the silent tears fall.

I hated waking up like this; thinking he was there, next to me, still able to support me, love me and hold me. And unfortunately it happened more often than it didn’t.

The fresh pain clawed and cut at my heart and I thought I would die just from sheer heartbreak. My chin quivered and I sniffled, trying desperately to wrestle my emotions under control. But the pain was too much, too consuming.

“Mom!” Blake called from the kitchen, ripping me away from my peaceful grief. “Moooooom!”

That was a distressed cry, and I was up out of my bed and racing downstairs immediately. I grabbed my silk robe on the way and threw it over my black cami and plaid pajama bottoms. When the kids were younger I wouldn’t have bothered, but Blake was eight now and he’d been traumatized enough in life. I wasn’t going to add to that by walking around bra-less first thing in the morning.

He continued to yell at me, while I barreled into the kitchen still wiping at the fresh tears. I found him at the bay windows, staring out in horror.

“Mom, Abby went swimming,” he explained in a rush of words.

A sick feeling knotted my stomach and I looked around wild-eyed at what

his words could possibly mean. “What do you mean, Abby *went swimming?*” I gasped, a little out of breath.

“There,” he pointed to the neighbor’s backyard with a shaky finger.

I followed the direction of his outstretched hand and from the elevated vantage point of our kitchen I could see that the neighbor’s pool was filled with water, and my six-year-old daughter was swimming morning laps like she was on a regulated workout routine.

“What the f-” I started and then stopped, shooting a glance down at Blake who looked up at me with more exaggerated shock than he’d given his sister.

I watched her for point one more second and sprinted for the front door. “Keep an eye on the other ones,” I shouted at Blake as I pushed open our heavy red door.

It was just early fall in rural Connecticut. The grass was still green; the mornings were foggy but mostly still warm. The house next to us had been empty for almost a year. The owner had been asking too much for it in this economy, but I understood why. It was beautiful, clean-lined and modern with cream stucco siding and black decorative shutters. Big oak trees offered shade and character in the sprawling front yard and in the back, an in-ground pool was the drool-worthy envy of my children.

I raced down my yard and into my new neighbor’s. I hadn’t noticed the house had sold, but that didn’t surprise me. I wasn’t the most observant person these days. Vaguely I noted a moving truck parked in the long drive.

The backyard gate must have been left open. Even though Abby had taught herself how to swim at the age of four- the end result gave me several gray hairs- there was no way she could reach the flip lock at the top of the tall, white fence.

I rounded the corner and hopped/ran to the edge of the pool, the gravel of the patio cutting into my bare feet. I took a steadying breath and focused my panic-flooded mind long enough to assess whether Abby was still breathing or not.

She was, and happily swimming in circles *in the deep end*.

Fear and dread quickly turned to blinding anger and I took a step closer to the edge of the pool while I threw my silk robe on the ground.

“Abigail Elizabeth, you get out of there right this minute!” I shouted loud enough to wake up the entire neighborhood.

She popped her head up out of the water, acknowledged me by sticking out her tongue, and promptly went back to swimming. *That little brat.*

“Abigail, I am *not* joking. Get out of the pool. *Now!*” I hollered again. And was ignored- again. “Abby, if I have to come in there and get you, you will rue the day you were born!”

She poked her head back up out of the water, shooting me a confused look. Her light brown eyebrows drew together, just like her father’s used to, and her little freckled nose wrinkled at something I said. I was smart enough or experienced enough to know that she was not on the verge of obeying, just because I’d threatened her.

“Mommy?” she asked, somehow making her little body tread water in a red polka dot bikini my sister picked up from Gap last summer. It was too small, which for some reason infuriated me even more. “What does *rue* mean?”

“It means you’re grounded from the iPad, your Leapster and the Wii for the next two years of your life,” I threatened. “Now get out of that pool right now before I come in there and get you myself.”

She giggled in reply, not believing me for one second, and resumed her play.

“Damn it, Abigail,” I growled under my breath but was not surprised by her behavior. She was naturally an adventurous child. Since she could walk, she’d been climbing to the highest point of anything she could, swinging precariously from branches, light fixtures and tall displays at the grocery store. She was a daredevil and there were moments when I absolutely adored her “the world is my playground” attitude about life. But then there were moments like this, when every mom instinct in me screamed she was in danger and her little, rotten life flashed before my eyes.

Those moments happened more and more often. She tested me, pushing every limit and boundary I’d set. She had been reckless before Grady died, now she was just wild. And I didn’t know what to do about it.

I didn’t know how to tame my uncontrollable child or how to be both parents to a little girl who desperately missed her daddy.

I focused on my outrage, pushing those tragic thoughts down, into the abyss of my soul. I was pissed; I didn’t have time for this first thing in the morning and no doubt we were going to be late for school- again.

I slipped off my pajama pants, hoping whomever had moved into the house, if they were watching, would be more concerned with the little girl on the verge of drowning than me flashing my black, bikini briefs at them over morning coffee. I said a few more choice curses and dove into the barely

warm water after my second born.

I surfaced, sputtering water and shivering from the cool morning air pebbling my skin. “Abigail, when I get you out of this pool, you are going to be in so much trouble.”

“Okay,” she agreed happily. “But first you have to catch me.”

She proceeded to swim around in circles while I reached out helplessly for her. First thing I would do when I got out of this pool was throw away every electronic device in our house just to teach her a lesson. Then I was going to sign her up for a swim team because the little hellion was too fast for her own good.

We struggled like this for a few more minutes. Well, I struggled. She splashed at me and laughed at my efforts to wrangle her.

I was aware of a presence hovering by the edge of the pool, but I was equally too embarrassed and too preoccupied to acknowledge it. Images of walking my children into school late *again*, kept looping through my head and I cringed at the dirty looks I was bound to get from teachers and other parents alike.

“You look hungry,” a deep masculine voice announced from above me.

I whipped my head around to find an incredibly tall man standing by my discarded pajama pants holding two beach towels and a box of Pop-Tarts in one arm, while he munched casually on said Pop-Tarts with the other.

“I look hungry?” I screeched in hysterical anger.

His eyes flickered down at me for just a second, “No, you look mad.” He pointed at Abby, who had come to a stop next to me, treading water again with her short child-sized limbs waving wildly in the water. “*She* looks hungry.” With a mouth full of food he grinned at me, and looked back at Abby. “Want a Pop-Tart? They’re brown sugar.”

Abby nodded excitedly and swam to the edge of the pool. Not even using the ladder, she heaved herself out of the water and ran over to the stranger holding out his breakfast to her. He handed her a towel and she hastily draped it around her shoulders and took the offered Pop-Tart.

A million warnings about taking food from strangers ran through my head, but in the end I decided getting us out of his pool was probably more important to him than offering his brand new neighbors poisoned Pop-Tarts.

With a defeated sigh, I swam over to the ladder closest to my pants and robe, and pulled myself up. I was a dripping, limp mess and frozen to the bone after my body adjusted to the temperature of the water.

Abby took her Pop-Tart and plopped down on one of the loungers that were still stacked on top of two others and wrapped in plastic. She began munching on it happily, grinning at me like she'd just won the lottery.

She was in so much trouble.

I walked over to the stranger, eyeing him skeptically. He held out his remaining beach towel to me and after realizing I stood before him in only a soaking wet tank top and bikini briefs, I took it quickly and wrapped it around my body. I shivered violently with my dark blonde hair dripping down my face and back. But I didn't dare adjust the towel, afraid I'd give him more of a show than he'd paid for.

"Good morning," he laughed at me.

"Good morning," I replied slowly, carefully.

Up close, he wasn't the giant I'd originally thought. Now that we were both ground level, I could see that while he was tall, at least six inches taller than me, he wasn't freakishly tall, which relieved some of my concerns. He still wore his pajamas: blue cotton pants and a white t-shirt that had been stretched out from sleep. His almost black hair appeared still mussed and disheveled, but swept over to the side in what could be a trendy style if he brushed it. He seemed to be a few years older than me, if I had to guess thirty-five or thirty-six, and he had dark, intelligent eyes that crinkled in the corners with amusement. He was tanned, and muscular, and imposing. And I hated that he was laughing at me.

"Sorry about the gate," he shrugged. "I didn't realize there were kids around."

"You moved into a neighborhood," I pointed out dryly. "There're bound to be kids around."

His eyes narrowed at the insult, but he swallowed his Pop-Tart and agreed, "Fair enough. I'll keep it locked from now on."

I wasn't finished with berating him though. His pool caused all kinds of problems for me this morning and since I could only take out so much anger on my six-year-old, I had to vent the rest somewhere. "Who fills their pool the first week of September anyway? You've been to New England in the winter, haven't you?"

He cleared his throat and the last laugh lines around his eyes disappeared. "My real estate agent," he explained. "It was kind of like a 'thank you' present for buying the house. He thought he was doing something nice for me."

I snorted at that, thinking how my little girl could have... No, I couldn't go there; I was not emotionally capable of thinking that thought through.

"I really am sorry," he offered genuinely, his dark eyes flashing with true emotion. "I got in late last night, and passed out on the couch. I didn't even know the pool was full or the gate was open until I heard you screaming out here."

Guilt settled in my stomach like acid, and I regretted my harsh tone with him. This wasn't his fault. I just wanted to blame someone besides myself.

"Look, I'm sorry I was snappish about the pool. I just... I was just worried about Abby. I took it out on you," I relented, but wouldn't look him in the eye. I'd always been terrible at apologies. When Grady and I would fight, I could never bring myself to tell him I felt sorry. Eventually, he'd just look at me and say, "I forgive you, Lizzy. Now come here and make it up to me." With anyone else my pride would have refused to let me give in, but with Grady, the way he smoothed over my stubbornness and let me get away with keeping my dignity worked every single time.

"It's alright, I can understand that," my new neighbor agreed.

We stood there awkwardly for a few more moments, before I swooped down to pick up my plaid pants and discarded robe. "Alright, well I need to go get the kids ready for school. Thanks for convincing her to get out. Who knows how long we would have been stuck there playing *Finding Nemo*."

He chuckled but his eyes were confused. "Is that like Marco Polo?"

I shot him a questioning glance, wondering if he was serious or not. "No kids?" I asked.

He laughed again. "Nope, life-long bachelor." He waved the box of Pop-Tarts and realization dawned on me. He hadn't really seemed like a father before now, but in my world- my four kids, soccer mom, neighborhood watch secretary, active member of the PTO world- it was almost unfathomable to me that someone his age could not have kids.

I cleared my throat, "It's uh, a little kid movie. Disney," I explained and understanding lit his expression. "Um, thanks again." I turned to Abby who was finishing up her breakfast, "Let's go, Abs, you're making us late for school."

"I'm Ben by the way," he called out to my back. "Ben Tyler."

I snorted to myself at the two first names; it somehow seemed appropriate for the handsome life-long bachelor, but ridiculous all the same.

"Liz Carlson," I called over my shoulder. "Welcome to the

neighborhood.”

“Uh, the towels?” he shouted after me when we’d reached the gate.

I turned around with a dropped mouth, thinking a hundred different vile things about my new neighbor. “Can’t we... I...” I glanced down helplessly at my bare legs poking out of the bottom of the towel he’d just lent me.

“Liz,” he laughed familiarly, and I tried not to resent him. “I’m just teasing. Bring them back whenever.”

I growled something unintelligible that I hope sounded like “thank you” and spun on my heel, shooing Abby onto the lawn between our houses.

“Nice to meet you, neighbor,” he called out over the fence.

“You too,” I mumbled, not even turning my head to look back at him.

Obviously he was single and unattached. He was way too smug for his own good. I just hoped he would keep his gate locked and loud parties few and far between. He seemed like the type to throw frat party-like keggers and hire strippers for the weekend. I had a family to raise, a family that was quickly falling apart while I floundered to hold us together with tired arms and a broken spirit. I didn’t need a nosy neighbor handing out Pop-Tarts and sarcasm interfering with my life.